

What Makes Consumers Buy: A Study of Go–Stop Psychological Signals in L'Oréal's FMCG Marketing

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Abstract

The fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) beauty market, as part of the beauty industry, is marked by short purchase cycles, high brand competition, and consumer behaviour characterized by alternating states of impulsive and deliberate consumption. The need to grasp the underlying psychology of consumer behaviour in the FMCG beauty market has emerged as an essential marketing strategy for global brands. The following review paper aims to investigate the relationship between go-signals, consisting of approach-based psychological drivers such as promotional cues, scarcity appeals, promotion focus, and positive affect, and stop-signals, consisting of avoidance-based drivers such as risk perception, prevention focus, and cognitive resistance, in the FMCG beauty marketing arena. The paper is based on peer-reviewed scholarly articles on consumer psychology, regulatory focus theory, neuromarketing, and brand management and draws on the theoretical frameworks to discuss the documented marketing practice adopted by the global brand, L'Oréal. The gaps in the literature are also discussed, revealing the need for cross-cultural comparative and longitudinal studies on the go-stop signal relationship in the digital FMCG arena.

Keywords

approach–avoidance conflict, regulatory focus theory, FMCG marketing, consumer psychology, L'Oréal

1. Introduction

One of the most psychologically complicated classes of products of the fast-moving consumer goods industry is the global beauty and personal care market, whose value is estimated to be more than USD 580 billion as of 2023 [1]. FMCG beauty products are placed in an interesting psychological place: their unit price is low, symbolically rich, bought as a habit, motivated by aspiration, and advertised to both conscious rational thought and deep emotional desire at the same time. In the case of multinational corporations like L'Oréal the largest cosmetics corporation in the world, it is a question of multi-billion dollars to know the precise mental state that causes a consumer to pick up a product, place it in a cart, or leave it on a shelf.

Finding out what motivates purchase is never the key issue, but rather it is the dynamic tension between forces driving the consumer to make a decision and those drawing them out of it. Such a tension has been theorised in various forms in the psychology and marketing literature: as approach versus avoidance motivation [2], as promotion versus prevention regulatory focus [3], as Systems 1 versus System 2 cognition [4], and as go signals versus stop signals in the larger consumer decision-making process [5]. In a way, each of those

frameworks represents the varying aspect of the same underlying phenomenon that purchasing is not a unidirectional cognitive process but the result of the contesting psychological forces at the conscious and subconscious levels.

In this review paper, three main research questions are covered. To start with, what are the psychological cues that serve as go triggers, i.e. what factors in the environment trigger approach motivation and drive consumers to make a purchase in the FMCG beauty setting? Second, what are the signals that serve as stop triggers i.e. what stimuli trigger avoidance motivation and lead consumers to be hesitate, disengage or reject? Third, what is the relationship between the marketing strategy documented by L'Oreal and the ways it reinforced, capitalized upon or otherwise exploited these psychological mechanisms? To answer these questions, this review combines evidence provided by twenty scholarly and peer-reviewed articles on the regulatory focus theory, neuromarketing, scarcity studies, experiential marketing, and brand psychology, and L'Oreal is used as a prime example to do so.

2. Theoretical Background

The analysis of go-stop psychological signals of FMCG marketing is founded on three key theoretical frameworks. The initial and most basic one is Approach-Avoidance Theory, which was developed within the field of environmental psychology. [2] have determined that environmental stimuli produce emotional states that are based on the dimensions of pleasure, arousal, and dominance, and that the emotional states directly predict approach (engagement, exploration, spending) or avoidance (withdrawal, disengagement) behaviours. This model was applied by Donovan and Rossiter [6] to the retail context, where the authors showed that variables of store atmosphere such as lighting, music, spatial/store layout moderate the emotional state and consequently influence purchasing. This framework was also generalised by Hopkinson and Hogg [5], who indicated that approach-avoidance conflict occurs when a product elicits both positive desire (hedonic appeal) and negative resistance (moral concern, price anxiety or perceived risk).

The second one is the Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT) outlined by Higgins [3, 7] that suggests the introduction of motivational orientation as a major mediator of the approach-avoidance relationship. RFT is the view that people work with either one of two basic self-regulatory systems: a promotion focus, which directs their behaviour towards gains, aspirations and ideal outcomes, and a prevention focus, which directs their behaviour in terms of safety, loss avoidance and normative obligations. More importantly, RFT postulates that marketing messages have the most persuasive effect when they produce regulatory fit that is, when the framing of a message is consistent with the regulatory orientation that the consumer has chronic or situationally induced. In a series of experiments Werth and Foerster [8] showed that consumers rated products positively when the product features were similar to their regulatory focus orientation. In the case of luxury brands like L'Oreal, which are involved in the sale of FMCG beauty products, it means that different messaging architectures could be needed to promote the product to the promotion-oriented and prevention-oriented consumer groups.

The third model is the dual-process model by Kahneman [4], which identifies two systems System 1 (fast, automatic, emotional processing) and System 2 (slow, deliberate, analytical processing). System 1 processes are overpowered in the case of FMCG where purchase cycles are short, and products are low-involvement. This observation has been operationalised by neuromarketing studies demonstrating that the emotional assessments triggered by packaging, advertising and price cues are largely mediated by quick, subconscious emotional judgements that are rapidly triggered prior to conscious thought [9, 10]. These three theories, the Approach-Avoidance Theory, the Regulatory Focus Theory and the two-process cognition, present a comprehensive conceptual jargon to the study of the go-stop architecture of consumer buying.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Go Signals: Approach-Oriented Psychological Triggers

An established body of work analyses the role of emotional and environmental stimuli as go signals that drive consumers into purchase. Taking the PAD (Pleasure-Arousal-Dominance) model proposed by Mehrabian and Russell [2] as a basis, Donovan and Rossiter [6] established that retail settings with a high degree of

pleasure and a moderate degree of arousal stimulated approach behaviours containing unplanned buying as well as time-consuming shopping behaviours.

A complementary explanation of go signals is provided by Regulatory Focus Theory, which is an account of regulatory level go signals. Higgins [3] revealed that promotion-oriented persons are particularly sensitive to the advertising frames which highlight the achievement, aspiration and gain. Specifically, Werth and Foerster [8] demonstrated that consumers in a promotion focus were more likely to prefer product characteristics that are over comfort and consumers in the prevention focus preferred over safety characteristics. In the case of L'Oreal, whose core slogan, 'the reason we are worth it,' is a textbook promotion-based appeal, this study details why the core consumer franchise of the given brand has been historically biased towards the aspirational self-improvement discourse. Peng et al. [11] furthered these studies to online contexts and discovered that promotion-oriented consumers formed larger consideration sets and positively reacted to rich information stimuli, and prevention-oriented consumers favoured focused and concise information.

A special but very powerful type of go signal is scarcity appeals. Barton et al. [12] have systematically reviewed 77 studies across 17 countries and found that both quantity-based (limited stock) and time-based (limited offer) product scarcity signals had a significant positive relationship with purchase intention across product categories and that the effect size was enhanced when consumers were in higher arousal states. Chen et al. [13] also showed that perceived scarcity mediated by urgency to purchase directly in live-streaming e-commerce environments, which are becoming more and more applicable to the digital sales strategy of L'Oreal, and mediated the impact of perceived scarcity by increasing impulse purchase through aroused emotions.

Xia et al. [14] presented direct evidence of the use of go signal in the documented marketing practice of L'Oreal through a case study of the experiential marketing programme of L'Oreal with the Chinese female university students. The authors applied the five SEM experience modules proposed by Schmitt [15] which are Sense, Feel, Think, Act and Relate and discovered that the in-person and online experiential activations of L'Oreal were found to produce strong positive emotional reactions and translated into brand preference and purchase intention.

3.2 Stop Signals: Avoidance-Oriented Psychological Forces

Similar to the go signal literature, there is a rich body of research on the literature that has been conducted in the area of research concerning the forces that produce avoidance motivation and interrupt purchase. Wang et al. [16] examined the processes through which the advertising avoidance is triggered by the perception of risk based on the SOR theoretical framework. They discovered that, the privacy risk, performance risk, time-loss risk, and freedom risk yielded different profiles of negative emotional response, which consequently forecasted advertising avoidance behaviour. This suggests that an identical amount of the objective risk of a product could generate radically different levels of stop signal in the face of an emotional baseline of a consumer- a fact that has major implications on how L'Oreal can position its dermatologically active skincare lines in the marketplace, in which ingredient communication has a paradoxical influence on the development of risk perceptions.

The conceptual model of the approach-avoidance conflict in consumer behaviour by Hopkinson and Hogg [5] indicated that there are four types of product-level stop signals: functional avoidance (product does not work), social avoidance (product conflicts with social identity), moral avoidance (product conflicts with ethical values), and hedonic avoidance (product is associated with guilt or negative self-image). Social and moral avoidance are especially relevant to the case of beauty products. A consumer can want a luxury L'Oreal serum (approach) but she is at cross-purposes knowing that its cost is more than she thinks she should spend on herself (moral-prevention stop signal).

The Regulatory Focus Theory provides a mechanized explanation of prevention-oriented stop signals. Vriend et al. [17] presented a very restrictive empirical division of RFT distinguishing between minimal goals (the prevention-seeking ought self) and prevention strategies (vigilance). They discovered that prevention-oriented vigilance systematically yielded risk averse, conservative choice models and decreased readiness to adopt new items- a crucial factor to the L'Oreal innovation channel, where new formulations must surmount customer habitual inertia. Wang et al. [16] ensured that information overload was negatively applied to prevention-oriented consumers in the digital environment, where processing rich product information was perceived as a threat instead of a reassurance. Combined, these results indicate that stop signals do not simply

occur because there were go signals, but are triggered independently by certain marketing stimuli, especially those perceived as uncertain, confusing or socially or morally dangerous.

3.3 The Go–Stop Interaction and Brand Implications

The most advanced branch of the literature looks at the interactions of go and stop signals as opposed to viewing them as independent additive forces. The somatic marker hypothesis developed by Damasio [18] is used extensively in consumer neuroscience and suggests the attachment of valence tags to later moments of decision-making, based on the emotional memory of a previous experience with a brand, which is a sort of pre-programming of either a positive or a negative response prior to the involvement of deliberative thought. In the case of a well-known brand like L'Oreal, decades of advertising may have created rich somatic marker networks in millions of consumers: the L'Oreal packaging, the hearing of the recognisable slogan, even the touch of a recognisable cream texture can all be automatic go-cues. On the other hand, a negative product experience will create a stop signal which will be just as persistent as the first negative experience [18].

Tversky and Kahneman [19] determined that when consumers are facing uncertainty, they do not make systematic judgments but instead use cognitive heuristics, which are availability, representativeness, and anchoring. This implies that go and stop signals do not process equally in FMCG beauty situations. The discovery that losses are feared about twice as much as the same amount of gain, loss aversion, occurs, predicts that stop cues can be smaller than go cues to have the same effect on behaviour.

The synthesis of the role of scarcity marketing tactics with the overall brand equity, where Hamilton et al. [20] posit that scarcity cues as go signals have no threat of activating reactance and brands with lesser trust capital have a risk of triggering avoidance, is proposed by Roux et al. [21] through the synthesis of the work of Hamilton et al. [20] on the nature of scarcity marketing tactics in the marketing mix. The neural value of the same product was found to be modified by brand identity as in the largest-known fMRI study by Montague et al. [22]: the same beverage caused really different reward circuit activity when the brand label was present or not. In the case of L'Oreal, where the brand base ranges through both entry-point mass-market products and high-end luxury brands like Lancome or Yves Saint Laurent, this observation suggests that the same product formula in different brand packages can evoke oppositely distinct go-stop neural processes in the consumers.

4. Discussion and Synthesis

Considered collectively, the literature reviewed leads to one obvious general conclusion they are not the positive and negative ends of one motivational dimension, but are quite different mechanisms with different neurological bases, different sensitivities to marketing stimuli, and asymmetric influences on behaviour. This has far-reaching consequences on the conceptualisation of the campaign design of such FMCG brands as L'Oreal. The paradigm of the current approach to marketing strategy views persuasion mainly as an issue of the amplification of go signals by appealing imagery, aspirational messages, and campaigns. According to the reviewed literature, this is not enough: an effective campaign should also switch off stop signals, not increase go signals, since loss aversion and negative affect asymmetries imply that an effective stop signal can cancel the collective action of multiple positive stimuli.

Regulatory focus, approach-avoidance and neuromarketing literatures are widely consistent in that emotional signals rather than rational signals prevail in FMCG purchase situations. Kahneman [4], Ariely and Berns [9], and Damasio [18] take similar positions by agreeing that the bulk of FMCG buying decisions are made prior to the involvement of conscious deliberation. This practical implication, that feature considerations by System 2 are less decisive than emotional considerations by System 1, is echoed in L'Oreal long-standing emotional-based advertising campaign which is always based on how the product makes the consumer feel above what it does or doesn't do. The success reported in the case study analysis of L'Oreal because we worth it campaign that has been in circulation since 1973 can be viewed as a masterpiece in chronic promotion-focus activation that the slogan directly appeals to the ideal self of the consumer and that purchasing is a self-affirmation process and not a self-indulgence and the stop signal of prevention mode is neutralised.

The place where the literature review shows some significant tension and contradiction is where scarcity and digital marketing are concerned. Barton et al. [12] and Chen et al. [13] and Zhang et al. [23] all find positive impacts of scarcity on purchase intention, but conceptualisation of Hopkinson and Hogg [5] point to

the risks of over-dependence on scarcity, decreased post-purchase engagement, and diminished quality of brand relationships. The tension is especially relevant to the digital approach of L’Oreal, in which AI-based consumer insights are used to detect trends and determine the most effective time to make an offer. The danger is the risk that hyper-personalised, urgency-driven digital marketing will transform promotion-oriented consumers into prevention-oriented ones in the long run as they become aware and resistant to the manipulative practices a phenomenon that is not yet properly considered in the literature examined.

One of the significant weaknesses of the current literature is that it is necessarily Western and East Asian. The data presented by Xia et al. [14] and Dang et al. [24] is also valuable when it comes to L’Oreal-specific data on the Chinese market, however, there is virtually no research that analyses the functioning of go-stop signal dynamics in the context of African, Latin American, or Middle Eastern consumers. This is not just an academic gap but a commercially essential one considering that in its strategy, L’Oreal has clearly set out one billion new consumers in the emerging markets. Also, most of the studies reviewed are cross-sectional in nature, and such a study is not able to establish the longitudinal relationship between repeated brand exposure, somatic marker formation, and the progressive change in go-stop signal sensitivity that transpires through the lifespan of a consumer with a brand. Both of these limitations should be solved in future researches using multi-cultural longitudinal designs.

5. Conclusion

The marketing behaviour L’Oreal recorded in the form of its iconic promotion-driven slogan and structure of the brand hierarchy, its AI-powered consumer analytics and experiential marketing programmes, demonstrates advanced, though not always explicitly theorised correspondence with the psychological principles defined in the observed literature. The successful ability to master the go signal architecture intuitively and types of architecture can be described as one of the reasons why the brand continues to dominate the market. However, with the new digital conditions, especially live-streaming commerce and hyper-personalised targeted advertising, there are new stop signal hazards, namely, psychological reactance, that have not been properly described in the current literature in the context of FMCG beauty.

The three key contributions of the review include the three finally integrated theoretical frameworks that have hitherto existed in silos; the systematized application of the theoretical framework to the actual marketing strategy of L’Oreal; and the identification of specific gaps that can be filled by future empirical research, such as cross-cultural comparison studies, longitudinal research on signal interaction, and experimental research on reactance threshold in the digital FMCG setting. By taking consumer motivation as a system of competing signals, dynamic, and not a linear role of positive stimuli, researchers and practitioners will be in a better position to create marketing that is not only persuasive but one that is sustainable.

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