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Laurier study shows that dog owners prefer Puma shoes, and iPhone owners like oranges

WATERLOO – Forgot your orange at home? Seek out a co-worker with an Apple iPhone. There's a good chance he or she might have one to swap, according to research at Wilfrid Laurier University's School of Business and Economics (SBE).

Tripat Gill and Monica El Gamal took a fresh look at how priming — a sort of psychological nudging — influences the choices people make. Their study is soon to be published in *The International Journal of Research in Marketing*.

"We did find that those who owned the Apple iPhone were much more likely to say that orange was their favourite fruit," said Gill, an associate professor of marketing at SBE. "They were almost twice as likely than those who did not own the Apple iPhone."

Similarly, dog owners had a significantly higher preference for Puma, a footwear brand named after a type of cat, than people who don't own dogs.

Gill and El Gamal, a Psychology doctoral student at Laurier, sought to replicate the effects of priming on product and brand preferences.

Primes are of interest to researchers who seek to understand human thinking, and marketing executives who want to draw attention to their brands.

Priming occurs all the time, whether we're aware of it or not, says Gill. A lunch-hour special scrawled on a sidewalk sign primes a passerby to choose the item at the adjacent restaurant.

Primes mostly work at the non-conscious level. Previous research has found that exposing participants to health-related words — in a word scramble, for example — can activate health goals and increase the preference for healthy items.

The Laurier study took the interest in non-conscious priming to a new level, examining whether a preference for an object or concept might be primed by something that bears only a remote connection to it.

For instance, does priming people with dogs increase the preference for brands related to the cat family? Dogs should activate cats in the mind, which in turn should make brands associated with the cat family easier to process and favour.

From a survey of a representative sample of the U.S. population (nearly 1,200 participants), the study found dog owners to be significantly more likely to own Puma sports shoes than people who didn't own dogs (18.5 per cent versus 11.7 per cent, respectively).

The field study also found that owners of Apple iPhones were nearly twice as likely to name the orange as their favourite fruit than people who don't own iPhones (14.4 per cent versus 7.5 per cent).

These results from the field were similar to the findings of a 2008 study that found that priming images of dogs does increase the preference for Puma. The field results, however, were not replicated in the lab.

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"For distant concepts, we think frequency of exposure is important," Gill says. "It may not be easy to do it in the lab unless you expose them for a long time."

Gill offers a word of caution should marketers feel inclined to pounce, cat-like, on using remotely connected concepts as priming tools. The research needs more testing, he says.

But there are certainly indications, he adds, "that companies should think about not just related, but distantly related cues, which can be linked to their product or brand."

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