

When you don't know what you want

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How is it possible that you were not planning on going shopping, but that you still end up going and even return home with four new pairs of trousers?

Apparently you really did want to go shopping but were not consciously aware of it. Dutch researcher Martijn Veltkamp has demonstrated that you can motivate people with subliminal messaging: quickly flashing words onto a screen without their noticing. This is only successful, however, if the subliminal message matches a biological need and if the behaviour is associated with a positive effect.

To get people to behave in a certain way, the idea for such behaviour must first be planted in their minds. Once the idea has been planted in your mind (so-called 'priming') then either a lack of something (deprivation) or a positive association with a certain action can ensure that you are actually motivated to carry out that action. These three factors have previously been investigated independently but Veltkamp has now shown for the first time how the three factors work together to trigger unconsciously motivated behaviour.

Drinking when you're not thirsty

Veltkamp studied this interaction in a series of experiments. He flashed the words 'drinking' and 'thirsty' onto a computer screen very quickly so that they could not be consciously perceived. This priming is what researchers call 'making the representation of the behaviour accessible'. In one group of participants this was combined with deprivation - they

were thirsty. In another group the word 'drinking' was combined with positive words which led to a positive association. Veltkamp combined the three factors in different ways and then registered how willing the participants were to have a drink.

The results of the experiments showed that [motivation](#) for carrying out certain actions (such as drinking) occurs when the action matches an existing deprivation or has a positive association. These two motivational states both independently indicate that carrying out a certain action is worth striving for. However, if both states issue a signal simultaneously then this does not lead to higher motivation.

Another of Veltkamp's experiments demonstrated the strong influence of positive association. He let the participants eat cucumber to alleviate fluid deprivation. As expected, those participants that had only been deprived of fluid were less motivated to drink later on, but the motivation stayed high in those people whose motivation to drink was partly due to positive association.

Large glasses of water

Veltkamp's research shows that, without being aware of it, besides being motivated by influences from our surroundings, the way in which we perceive the world around us can change. Earlier research had shown that people perceive objects of worth to be larger than objects that are worthless. Veltkamp's research demonstrates that it is not so much the actual worth of the objects which is important but the motivational worth; if an object is relevant for attaining your goals then you will perceive it to be bigger than it actually is. In one of Veltkamp's experiments, glasses of water were estimated to be bigger, if the participants had not had a drink for some time.

Martijn Veltkamp's research was financed by a Vidi grant which his

supervisor Henk Aarts received from NWO in 2003. In his Vidi project, Aarts is trying to find out how people can be unconsciously motivated.

Provided by NWO

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