

## Ads can influence 'smart' false memories

March 19 2014, by Ashlee Mcgandy

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(Medical Xpress)—It is commonly believed that false memories – recollections that are factually incorrect – occur because something goes wrong in the brain. However, recent research shows that some false memories are formed by overthinking rather than deficient processing. In a new study, Cornell researchers examined how advertising can result in these "smart" false memories, where consumers who have a propensity to think more about decisions produce more false memories than those who process information at a more superficial level.

The study was published in the January/February issue of the *Journal of Advertising*.

"I've been researching false memories for 15 or 20 years. The assumption is always that false memories happen because something goes wrong – some deficiency in processing. The research shows that is not necessarily true," said co-author Kathy LaTour, associate professor of services marketing at the School of Hotel Administration (SHA).

"The same deficiency assumption dominates the law's view of the memory errors that witnesses often make," added co-author Charles Brainerd, professor and department chair in [human development](#) in the College of Human Ecology.

The "smart" false memories examined in the study are explained by fuzzy-trace theory (FTT), which was developed by Brainerd and Valerie Reyna, Cornell professor of human development and psychology, in response to the assumption that people who process experiences

superficially or have deficient processing abilities due to age are more likely to succumb to false memories. FTT, instead, suggests that false memories can occur when there is greater processing involved, and individuals elaborate on what they actually see and hear.

"This is the first time 'smart' false memories have been studied in an advertising context," said Michael LaTour, visiting professor of services marketing at SHA and the third author of the study. "Dr. Brainerd's fuzzy-trace theory provides a rich foundation for tackling these complex phenomena."

In three experiments, the authors identified several implications for the advertising industry.

Consumers who are more likely to form "smart" false memories use cues to build stories and better understand their experiences. "Advertisers then might consider using abstract messages that engage consumers with their elaborative processes and providing cues that direct how they want their consumers to interpret their experiences," the authors write.

For example, a soda company might use cues to reinforce the experience of holding a cool glass bottle of effervescent soda in an ad that shows a fun family experience. Consumers may not remember the specific cues, but those with a tendency to form "smart" false memories will come to associate the soda with the cool freshness involved in opening the bottle.

Conversely, simpler and more direct advertising messages should be used for consumers who may be too distracted to engage with the ads, such as consumers surfing the Internet. In these cases, showing the soda company logo could be a more effective than trying to get consumers to engage with a deeper experience.

Finally, in the past, there have been calls for public policy actions to

protect particularly vulnerable consumers – such as young children, the elderly or mentally disabled – from deceptive marketing practices that can create false memories. The new research on "smart" [false memories](#) finds that these groups are actually less susceptible than [consumers](#) who overthink the advertising messages. In practice, advertisers do not necessarily want to suggest [false information](#) but rather implant cues that can help reshape the conversation about their brand.

"False memories are not necessarily a bad thing. The reconstructive process of memory is natural, and ads influence that process. Memory is not a video tape, and advertising is not mind control," said Kathy LaTour.

**More information:** "Fuzzy Trace Theory and 'Smart' False Memories: Implications for Advertising." Kathryn A. LaTour, Michael S. LaTour, Charles Brainerd. *Journal of Advertising*. Vol. 43, Iss. 1, 2014 [DOI: 10.1080/00913367.2013.811706](#)

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