

EXTERNALITY EFFECT

Authored by
mohammad looti

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1. Core Definition and Phenomenological Description

The **Externality Effect** refers to a robust and highly specific pattern of visual scanning observed primarily in human infants under the age of one month, although its influence may extend slightly beyond this neonatal period depending on the complexity of the visual stimulus presented. This effect dictates that when neonates are presented with visual figures--such as geometric shapes, schematic drawings of faces, or complex objects--their gaze tends to be restricted almost exclusively to the external contours or the perimeter of the figure, largely ignoring the complex internal features that define the stimulus. This limitation in scanning behavior is fundamental to understanding the early stages of visual system development and perception. The phenomenon highlights a critical developmental milestone where the infant visual system is not yet mature enough, either neurologically or sensorially, to systematically process and integrate high-resolution information located within the center of a configuration, forcing a reliance on the high-contrast edges where figures meet their background.

This perceptual bias is significant because it directly contrasts with the sophisticated visual processing employed by older infants and adults, who typically engage in efficient, detailed scanning of internal features--such as the eyes, nose, and mouth in a face--to extract meaning and identity. For the neonate experiencing the externality effect, the defining characteristics of an object are reduced to its boundaries. If, for instance, a baby is shown a large circle containing two smaller internal squares, the majority of the visual fixation time will be spent tracking the outer curvature of the large circle, with minimal saccades directed toward the enclosed squares. This finding was crucial in shifting early psychological models away from the idea that infants were simply passive recipients of visual input, demonstrating instead that their visual exploration is governed by innate, though immature, physiological and neural constraints.

The duration of the **Externality Effect** is relatively brief within the lifespan, typically dissolving by the time the infant reaches two to three months of age. The rapid cessation of this effect marks one of the most important transitions in early cognitive development, signaling a fundamental shift from boundary-based, low-resolution processing to high-resolution, feature-based processing. The persistence of scanning the outer boundary during this period suggests that the mechanisms responsible for initiating scanning behavior are either tethered to the highest contrast areas or are simply unable to decouple the scanning pathway from the immediate edge detection system. Studies utilizing infrared eye-tracking technologies have meticulously mapped these scanning paths, confirming that the fixations of one-month-olds often 'catch' the edge and then follow the trajectory of that edge, providing compelling empirical support for this definition.

2. Historical Context and Empirical Discovery

The empirical foundation for the **Externality Effect** originates from pioneering research conducted in the mid-20th century, particularly the work of Robert L. Fantz and his contemporaries, who first employed systematic methods to study infant visual preferences. Fantz's classic studies, often using the preferential looking paradigm, established that infants possessed innate visual capabilities and preferences, disproving earlier notions that the visual world of the newborn was an undifferentiated "blooming, buzzing confusion" as proposed by William James. While Fantz primarily focused on preference (showing that infants preferred complex patterns over simple ones), the detailed analysis of scanning patterns was later significantly advanced by researchers like Philip Salapatek.

Salapatek and others used high-speed filming and subsequently, electronic eye-movement recording to precisely track where infants directed their gaze. In key experiments involving geometric shapes like triangles and circles, researchers confirmed that newborns exhibited highly restricted scanning. When viewing a large triangle, for example, the one-month-old would typically fixate on only one vertex or corner and repeatedly scan back and forth along the adjacent edges, rarely venturing into the internal space of the shape. This restricted, boundary-bound scanning pattern was definitively labeled the **Externality Effect**. This discovery provided a critical window into the maturation of the visual cortex and its control over oculomotor systems, suggesting that the initial organization of the infant's visual world is primarily defined by contours and borders, rather than holistic feature integration.

Furthermore, this research was pivotal in developmental studies concerning face recognition. When presented with schematic faces (e.g., an oval containing feature dots), one-month-olds largely concentrated their attention on the external hairline or the jawline, neglecting the internal features (eyes, nose, mouth) which are crucial for adult face recognition. This finding directly contrasted with the behavior of two-month-old infants, who, in the same conditions, demonstrated a rapid transition, shifting their focus inward to systematically scan the eyes and mouth. The historical establishment of this effect therefore provided a baseline metric against which subsequent visual development could be measured, solidifying the first few months of life as a period of profound restructuring in visual processing strategies.

3. Mechanistic Explanations of the Effect

The **Externality Effect** is not merely a behavioral quirk but is deeply rooted in the immaturity of several interconnected physiological and neurological systems that govern visual processing and control eye movements in the neonate. Primarily, the effect is attributed to the developmental status of the visual pathways, particularly the interaction between subcortical and cortical structures.

One primary explanation involves the maturation of the visual cortex. At birth, the visual system relies heavily on subcortical pathways, such as the superior colliculus, which are excellent at detecting rapid movement, high contrast, and large, peripheral stimuli. These subcortical mechanisms drive reflexive, often obligatory, attention toward salient, high-contrast boundaries--the perimeters of objects. The cortical pathways, particularly those responsible for detailed, foveal processing (conscious, sustained attention and integration of internal features), are still highly immature, undergoing massive synaptogenesis and myelination during the first few months of life. Thus, the visual input is effectively filtered by a system that prioritizes the most easily discernible information (edges) over the complex, centrally located details.

A second, related mechanistic explanation focuses on the control of eye movements, specifically the ability to initiate and terminate saccades. In neonates, the control over saccadic eye movements--the rapid jumps of the eye used to shift fixation from one point to another--is poor. Saccades are often imprecise, and once the eye lands on a boundary, the neonate's visual system may struggle to initiate a new, internally directed saccade. Furthermore, the overall visual acuity is low (estimated to be around 20/400 at one month), meaning that internal features, which often possess lower contrast or finer detail than the external boundary, are less compelling visual targets. This combination of subcortical dominance, poor oculomotor control, and low acuity reinforces the tendency to fixate on and track the most salient, high-contrast external perimeter, making the internal scanning process functionally unavailable until cortical control matures.

4. Key Characteristics of Visual Scanning in Neonates

The scanning behavior associated with the **Externality Effect** can be characterized by several distinct features that differentiate it markedly from the visual exploration strategies of older infants and adults. These characteristics collectively define the operational limits of the neonatal visual system:

Restriction to High-Contrast Contours: Neonates overwhelmingly prioritize areas where there is a sharp difference in luminance or color, specifically the boundary between the figure and the ground. This reflects the reliance on primitive visual detection mechanisms that respond strongly to sudden spatial changes in light intensity.

Limited Scanning Breadth: The visual exploration is narrow and focused. Instead of scanning the entirety of a figure, the infant often locks onto a specific, local region, such as a corner or a single side, and repeatedly tracks along that single boundary path. The overall area of the stimulus that is analyzed is a small fraction of what an older individual processes.

Difficulties in Initiating Internal Saccades: The ability to disengage fixation from an external boundary and redirect the gaze to a point internally located within the figure is impaired. This limitation contributes significantly to the persistence of the external focus, as once the eye is

captured by an edge, the system appears unable to efficiently execute the motor command needed to break away toward the center.

Asymmetrical Fixation: When viewing symmetrical stimuli, neonates often exhibit a bias towards one side of the perimeter (e.g., the right side or the top-left corner), rather than distributing attention equally across the entire contour. This asymmetry may reflect initial hemispheric dominance or simple inefficiency in systematic visual search.

These characteristics indicate that the visual processing of a one-month-old is largely data-driven but constrained by severe processing limitations. The infant is attending to the most basic spatial information possible--the outline--because the neural machinery required for holistic integration and detailed, feature-based analysis is not yet fully functional. The shift away from these characteristics around two months signifies the successful integration of cortical control, allowing for more strategic and goal-directed visual exploration.

5. Developmental Transition: The Shift to Internal Features

The disappearance of the **Externality Effect**, typically occurring between six and ten weeks postnatally, represents one of the most critical transitions in infant visual development. This transition involves a complex interplay of neurological maturation and environmental experience, resulting in the development of sophisticated internal feature scanning. By two months of age, when presented with the same schematic face or complex geometric shape that previously elicited perimeter-only scanning, infants demonstrate a marked shift: their fixations move inward, focusing specifically on the internal configurations.

This shift is particularly dramatic and important in the context of face processing. As the infant begins to scan internal features, they start dedicating significant visual resources to the high-information regions of the face--the eyes and the mouth. This change is vital for social development, as these features convey emotion, identity, and communicative intent. The transition is thought to be driven by the rapid myelination and functional development of the visual pathways connecting the primary visual cortex (V1) to higher-order association areas, which are essential for processing complex patterns and recognizing configurations. As cortical influence strengthens, it overrides the reflexive, subcortically controlled scanning habits of the newborn, allowing for strategic control over eye movements.

Furthermore, the maturation of the fovea, the central region of the retina responsible for sharp, detailed vision, plays a supporting role. While the fovea is present at birth, its density and functional efficiency improve dramatically in the first few months. This improved ability to resolve fine detail makes internal features more salient and rewarding targets for fixation. Thus, the developmental transition is a convergence of improved sensory input, enhanced oculomotor control, and the rising dominance of cortical systems capable of directing attention based on

learned or intrinsic relevance, rather than merely relying on physical contrast at the border.

6. Significance in Theories of Object and Face Recognition

The **Externality Effect** holds profound theoretical significance, particularly within the study of innate versus learned components of visual processing and the development of specialized modules, such as those hypothesized for face recognition. The existence of the externality effect challenges early nativist views that assumed fully formed, specialized recognition mechanisms are present at birth. Instead, it suggests a structured, maturational sequence where specialized abilities emerge from general, low-level processing constraints.

In the context of object recognition, the effect demonstrates that infants initially segment their visual world based purely on physical boundaries. The recognition of complex objects is first dependent on perceiving their overall shape or silhouette, with internal detail contributing little to early identification. This perimeter-based strategy provides the necessary scaffolding upon which more sophisticated, feature-based recognition systems are built. When the infant matures, the ability to scan internally allows them to differentiate two objects with the same perimeter (e.g., a circle with internal stripes versus a circle with internal dots), thus exponentially increasing the complexity of recognizable stimuli.

Regarding face recognition, the externality effect supports a two-process model of development. Initially, subcortical mechanisms (often termed CONSPEC) draw the infant's attention to face-like configurations due to their high-contrast, high-spatial frequency properties (i.e., the external boundary and the eyes/hairline contrast). However, true, specialized face recognition (requiring the analysis of internal feature relationships, or CONLERN) cannot begin effectively until the **Externality Effect** wanes. The transition allows the infant to shift from a general preference for high-contrast patterns to the systematic analysis of configuration and identity, providing strong evidence that while some biases toward faces are innate, the sophisticated mechanisms for recognizing individuals are experience-dependent and emerge following neurological maturation.

7. Methodological Considerations and Stimulus Parameters

Research confirming the **Externality Effect** relies heavily on rigorous methodological control, particularly regarding the visual stimuli presented. The robust nature of the effect means that it can be observed across a variety of shapes, but its intensity and duration can be modulated by specific stimulus parameters, leading to ongoing methodological considerations in research.

One critical parameter is the complexity and size of the stimulus. If a stimulus is extremely large, the infant may have greater difficulty processing the entire contour, potentially leading to fixation on only a limited part of the perimeter. Conversely, if the stimulus is very small, the internal features may fall within the limited range of the neonate's initial fixation, potentially blurring the distinction

between external and internal scanning. Researchers must carefully calibrate the visual angle and distance to ensure the stimulus is optimal for eliciting the expected scanning behavior while remaining visible within the neonate's limited focal range.

Another key methodological debate centers on the contrast between face stimuli and non-face geometric stimuli. While the **Externality Effect** is observed with both, some studies suggest that even one-month-olds show a slight, fleeting preference for the internal features of a realistic or inverted face compared to a non-face configuration of equal complexity. However, the dominant finding across the literature confirms that the *pattern* of scanning remains boundary-bound regardless of the stimulus type at one month, solidifying the idea that the constraint is systemic (physiological) rather than specific to a certain class of object (like faces). Methodological advancements, particularly the use of high-resolution, head-mounted eye-trackers, continue to refine the precision with which the initiation and termination of saccades are measured, allowing researchers to track the subtle dissolution of the externality effect over time.

Further Reading

[Infant Vision and Visual Development \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Salapatek, P. \(1975\). Pattern perception in early infancy. In L. B. Cohen & P. Salapatek \(Eds.\), Infant perception: From sensation to cognition. Vol. 1. Basic visual processes. Academic Press.](#)

[Fantz, R. L. \(1961\). The origin of form perception. Scientific American.](#)