Driving Symbolic Consumption Through Imagined Vertical Movements

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Drawing on theories of embodied cognition and compensatory consumption, we provide evidence that merely imagining oneself moving upward or downward affects preference for symbolic products. Altogether, two studies show that imagining taking an elevator down, as opposed to up, decreases self-worth and, in turn, increases preference for symbolic products.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consider Mary and John, who are prompted by an advertisement to imagine taking an elevator ride. Mary imagines going 20 floors up, whereas John imagines going 20 floors down. After this imagery exercise, both report their willingness to pay for a symbolic product, such as an expensive car. Can the imagined scenario affect their responses? We show that this is indeed the case, and, in particular, that symbolic consumption can be affected by imagining oneself moving upward or downward.

Past research shows that status and symbolic products can be consumed to reaffirm one’s positive self-view (e.g., Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Sivanathan and Pettit 2010). For example, receiving feedback that threatens one’s sense of worth leads to higher willingness to spend for status/symbolic products such as exclusive watches and prestigious cars (Sivanathan and Pettit 2010). We extend this research, by showing that merely imagining moving downward or upward affects self-worth and, in turn, preference for symbolic products.

Our predictions draw on theories of embodied cognition suggesting that concepts that cannot be perceived through the senses might be mentally represented with sensory-experiences that are metaphorically associated with them (e.g., Barsalou 2008; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Johnson 1999). As a result, brain circuits dedicated to the processing of sensory-motor experiences, such as vertical movements, might become interconnected with brain circuits that process abstract concepts (Gallese and Lakoff 2005). According to this stream of the literature, vertical movements (e.g., moving up or down) become associated with the notion of “more or less.” A metaphorical association between “moving up” and “more” might be created when a child repeatedly observes how adding/removing a substance to/from a container, such as water to a cup, increases/decreases its level (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Through this process, the concepts of “more” and “less” become mapped to upward and downward movements (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Furthermore, quantity is also associated with “better,” as indicated by the metaphorical association “more is better” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). As a result, an object that moves up might be associated with higher (i.e., better) evaluations, as indicated by expressions such as “the stock market went up.”

Drawing on this reasoning and the literature on compensatory consumption (e.g., Sivanathan and Pettit 2010), we propose that merely imagining oneself moving downward, as opposed to upward, increases preference for symbolic products. This prediction is tested in two studies.

Study 1 investigated whether imagined vertical movements drive status consumption. Participants were informed that they would hear a story scripted to evoke mental images as part of a study to measure imagery ability. After being instructed to relax, they were guided by an audio to imagine entering an elevator and going either up from the 10th to the 30th floor, or down from the 50th to the 30th floor. The destination floor was the same in both conditions to avoid confounding effects from the height of the final destination. The two scripts were identical with the exception that the words indicating upward movements were replaced with words indicating downward movements and the sequence of floors was inverted. After listening to the audio and answering a few questions about it, participants were introduced to a series of supposedly unrelated studies, including a “Car Study” adapted from Sivanathan and Pettit (2010) where they considered two pre-owned cars: a BMW sedan (high-status option) and a Kia sedan (low-status option). A manipulation check confirmed the BMW had higher status than the Kia. Participants were informed of the pre-owned Kia’s price and asked to report how much more they were willing to pay for the BMW. As predicted, participants who imagined going down were willing to pay more to buy the BMW than those who imagined going up.

Study 2 tested whether the effect of imagined vertical movements on preference for symbolic products is mediated by changes in self-worth. Following the procedure described in Study 1, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two elevator scripts and then introduced to a supposedly unrelated study that included two target measures of self-worth. After a series of filler studies, all participants were asked to report their preference for appropriate prize rewards for an upcoming study. The target product choice was between a $20 gift certificate for “movie theater tickets” and a $20 gift certificate for “books.” Previous research (Gao et al. 2009) suggests that books offer greater ability to re-affirm a positive self-view than similarly priced movie tickets, as confirmed in a separate pretest we ran. Therefore, we expect that imagining downward movements increases preferences for books over similarly priced movie tickets.

As predicted, people who imagined going 20 floors down reported greater preference for books over movie tickets than those who imagined going 20 floors up. Furthermore, those who imagined going down reported lower self-worth than those who imagined going up. We suggest that imagining moving down decreases self-worth which, in turn, leads to higher preference for books (the option that offers greater ability to re-affirm a positive self-view). A mediation analysis (Baron and Kenny 1986) and a significance test of the indirect effect (Preacher and Hayes 2008) supported the hypothesis that changes in self-worth mediate the effect of imagining vertical movements on preference for books over movie tickets.

Our results extend research on symbolic consumption and embodied cognition by showing that imagining moving downward, as opposed to upward, decreases self-worth and, in turn, increases preference for symbolic products. This finding has important implications for decision making and advertising. In particular, advertisements often include scenes where people experience vertical movements (e.g., taking an elevator, taking off or landing in an airplane) which might prompt the imagination of vertical sensory motor experiences. As an example, consider the television commercial for Gillette Venus (a line of women’s razors) showing a woman taking an elevator up a few floors. Our results suggest that these scenes might affect consumers’ self-worth as well as subsequent preference for products, such as symbolic ones, that can restore a positive self-view.

REFERENCES


