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The use of imagery is a widespread practice for influencing consumers’ choices. Television commercials induce viewers to immerse themselves in the imagery of product experiences. Print advertisements use phrases such as “imagine yourself”, “picture yourself here”, or “imagine how it would be”. Existing research indicates that such practice should be highly effective (Escalas 2004; Keller and McGill 1994; McGill and Anand 1989; Keller and Block 1997; Burns, Biswas, and Babin 1993). However, the present investigation reveals circumstances under which asking consumers to imagine their future experience with the product may be not only ineffective but can decrease the persuasiveness of the message.

Complementing the traditional approach toward attitude change as determined by the amount and favorability of the information that comes to mind in response to a message (Greenwald 1968; Higgins 1996; Meyers-Levy and Malaviya 1999), a growing body of research demonstrates that consumer judgments are also likely to be impacted by the ease with which one generates or processes this information (Wänke, Bohnen, and Jurkowitsch 1997; Reber and Schwarz 1999; McGlone and Tofighbakhs 2000; Hawkins and Hoch 1989). Yet, while the existing research on fluency effects has been focused on discursive processing of information, there is lack of research investigating the impact of the fluency experiences associated with imagery processing. By examining the effect of ease-of-imagery-generation on product preferences, the present research is a step toward filling this gap.

In three experiments, we varied the ease of consumption imagery generation through factors pertaining to the audience or the product depiction and provided converging evidence for the ease-of-imagery-generation effect across: 1) different contexts, 2) measures of product attitudes, purchase intentions, and actual product choice, and 3) different manipulations of the fluency of imagery generation. We further revealed circumstances under which these effects are likely to occur and examined the underlying processes.

Study 1 examined the effect of imagery appeals for individuals high and low in their dispositional ability to create vivid mental images. We created a print advertisement that either did or did not contain imagining appeals. The design of the study also included dispositional imagery vividness (Marks 1973) that was measured in an omnibus questionnaire at least one week before the experiment. The results revealed that the imagery appeals had a positive effect on brand attitudes and purchase intentions for high imagers but a negative effect for low imagers.

Study 2 examined the vividness of the pictorial depiction of the product as a variable that could enhance or undermine the effect of imagery appeals. Using the stimuli from Study 1, two additional versions were created that manipulated the vividness of the pictorial product depiction. The results from this 2 (presence of imagery appeals) by 2 (vividness of the product depiction) design revealed that when the product was depicted in a vivid way, imagery appeals resulted in more positive product attitudes and purchase intentions. However, when the product was described in an abstract way, asking individuals to imagine the product experience decreased product preferences. Further analysis revealed that the interaction between presence of imagery-inviting appeals and vividness of the ad was mediated by the subjective accessibility of the consumption imagery.

Study 3 manipulated the vividness of a description of a recently open restaurant by presenting easy-to-imagine verbal information or factual information. In addition, we examined the effect of presenting both vivid and factual information simultaneously. Participants were presented with one of the three types of restaurant description and were asked to process information using either an analytical strategy or imagery; in a control condition no specific instructions were given. Study 3 also examined the subjective nature of the ease-of-imagery-generation effect by assessing the possibility that the effect would be stronger for individuals who are attuned to their internal experiences. This resulted in a 3 (type of information) by 3 (type of processing instructions) design with private self-consciousness as a continuous variable.

The results from Study 3 revealed a significant 2-way interaction between type of processing instructions and type of product description for participants high in private self-consciousness, but not for those low in private self-consciousness. That is, for individuals who were more attuned to their internal experiences, the imagining instructions had different effects on product preferences depending on the vividness of the product description. When the product was depicted in a vivid way, imagining instructions increased product choice. However, this pattern was not observed when in addition to the vivid information the message included factual information. Furthermore, when the product was presented only via factual information, asking participants to imagine the product experience decreased their likelihood of choosing the product.

These results provided evidence that consumers use the fluency of consumption imagery generation as a basis for product-related judgments and revealed conditions under which inviting consumers to imagine using the product may decrease purchases. In a more general framework, the present research suggests that a mismatch between the type of information and the type of processing utilized by the consumer can impact the fluency of processing the product information and hamper the effectiveness of persuasive communications.

REFERENCES


