When Images and Words Don’T Agree, Images Win: the Shielding Effect of Imagination on Attitude Change

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This study proposes that imagery-provoking product descriptions, compared to pallid ones (e.g., ratings of a product), lead to attitudes that are more resistant to opposing analytically-presented information. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a study in which participants were presented with two conflicting pieces of information about a product. A significant primacy effect was found when the first evaluation was imagery-provoking and the second analytically-presented but not when both evaluations were presented in an analytical format. This effect appeared to be mediated by the greater amount of cognitive elaboration generated by the imagery-provoking message.

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themes and included articles pertaining to (a) hedonic and utilitarian value, (b) experiential products, (c) shopping, (d) ritual and symbolic consumption, (e) multisensory stimuli, and (f) qualitative methodology. The supportive themes was comprised of articles related to (a) hedonic choice, (b) buyer behavior, (c) service experience, and (d) advertising.

The core theme articles are considered to be the ongoing conversations that distinctly define hedonic and experiential consumption research. A solid base of research aimed at the differentiation and measurement of hedonic and utilitarian value support the initial conceptualization of hedonic consumption and forms the basis of subsequent research in hedonic choice and service experience. Consistent with the original propositions regarding product classes, a substantial body of research has accumulated regarding experiential products that include vacation and travel, performing arts, entertainment, and high culture products.

Surprisingly, shopping was highly represented in the literature citing the two seminal articles. Shopping occupies a boundary position in that it is both an experiential activity and an antecedent to product purchase. Shopping topics include shopping motives, hedonic shopping value, satisfaction, and retail experience and satisfaction. Contexts for shopping include malls and retail outlets, mail catalog shopping, and online shopping. Also included in this group of articles are the dark-side consumption topics of uncontrolled, compulsive, and addictive shopping habits.

Ritual and symbolic consumption represents a significant and unique contribution to experiential consumption research. Ritual consumption is rich with social and life meanings (Rook 1985). Articles in this group are associated with conspicuous or lifestyle consumption. Symbolic consumption, on the other hand, is more focused on the relationship between a consumer and a target object or experience (Fournier 1991; Mick 1986). Further, social and self-identity were inextricably associated with ritual and symbolic aspects of consumption (Meng 2005; Richins 1994). Included in this theme are articles detailing the dark-side consumption topics of gambling and addiction.

A predominance of postmodern and qualitative methodologies was also strongly represented in research originating from Hirschman and Holbrook (1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Techniques designed to study hedonic consumption include hermeneutics, semiotics, and ethnography. Grounded theory was the basis for many of the studies in this category. Many of these methods were useful for understanding subjective and symbolic meaning, but also echoed the original limitations noted by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) about inadequate empirical methods that would be needed to study many imaginal or subjective aspects of hedonic experience. Finally, multisensory research was greatly underrepresented in this area of research within consumer research.

The four supportive themes provide a conduit from hedonic research to theory and application in consumer behavior and marketing. In many instances, hedonic value was used as an affective predictor of choice, intentions and decisions, behavior, and ultimately linked to satisfaction. It is evident in this group of articles that hedonic and experiential consumption research has direct application to service, retail, and advertising. Services are experiential products by definition and thus highly relevant to service management and marketing. Similarly, the experiential nature of the retail experience was also well represented by articles in this category. Interestingly, no discernable pattern was found for advertising articles citing the two seminal articles by Holbrook and Hirschman.

Finally, we examined the research gaps based on the original propositions posited by Hirschman and Holbrook. Progress has been made on all substantive areas and propositions stipulated by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982), albeit progress has been unevenly distributed. Looking forward, our understanding of consumers would benefit with a greater research emphasis on multisensory stimuli and emotive post-purchase processes related to ownership, usage, and disposition.

References

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Imagine a consumer who comes across an imagery-provoking critique portraying the excellent attributes of a new restaurant and, after having spent some time mentally savouring the elegant atmosphere and the delicious food of the restaurant, finds a customer survey rating the restaurant as a wretched 3 out of 10 stars. How would the consumer use the two contradictory pieces of information to arrive at an overall evaluation of the restaurant?

One approach to resolve the inconsistency between contradictory evaluations of the same target is to weigh each argument and express a judgment that takes into consideration each piece of information (e.g., Anderson 1971). We expect that integrating contradictory pieces
of evidence processed through distinct mental codes (i.e., pictures and numbers) is more difficult than integrating equivalent pieces of information processed within the verbal code (i.e., different ratings of the same product). We suggest that this greater difficulty, in turn, makes the inconsistency between the two evaluations more salient, thus motivating a consumer to favour one of the two arguments. Since mental imagery generally leads to greater message-relevant elaboration than verbal processing does (Kisielius and Sternthal 1986) and greater elaboration increases the strength with which an attitude is held (e.g., Haugtvedt and Wegener 1994; Petty, Haugtvedt, and Smith 1995), we propose the existence of a “shielding effect” of imagination to indicate that attitudes generated through mental imagery, compared to those derived from information processed through the verbal code, are more resistant to contradictory analytically-presented information.

We test this hypothesis through a 2 (type of information: imagery-analytical vs. analytical-analytical) x 2 (presentation order: positive-negative vs. negative-positive) between-subject experimental design. Sixty-five (37 females, average age=20.27 yrs) participants were presented with an evaluation of a restaurant, supposedly made by a food critic, unexpectedly followed by a second evaluation of the restaurant, supposedly made by five customers of the restaurant whose age happened to range between 50 and 60. The food critic’s review was presented either in an imagery-provoking (i.e., vivid critique preceded by imagery instructions) or in an analytical format (i.e., ratings of the restaurant along different dimensions preceded by instructions to be careful and well-reasoned), whereas the second evaluation was presented always in an analytical format. The order in which positive and negative information was presented was also manipulated; in one condition the food critic’s review was positive and the customer survey was negative and vice versa. A pre-test conducted on 69 participants from the same population as the main study, revealed that, given the valence of the review, the evaluations of the imagery and analytical versions were statistically indistinguishable (Mimagery_positive=7.39, Manalytical_positive=7.66; t27.5=1.00, p=.326; Mimagery_negative=2.43, Manalytical_negative=2.97; t30=1.51, p=.143). After being exposed to the first message, participants were asked to describe the images (thoughts) experienced while reading the food critic’s review and answer few questions about them; self-reported evaluations of the extent to which participants imagined (thought) what it would be like to be in the restaurant were used as a measure of message-relevant elaboration. Finally, before reporting their attitude toward the restaurant on a semantic differential scale (α=.96), participants were shown again both evaluations on the same page. In all cases, we used 9-point items.

Results from ANOVA showed a significant main effect of presentation order (F(1,59)=12.91, p<.001) and a non-significant main effect of type of information (F(1,59)=1.09, p=.300) qualified by a significant interaction (F(1,59)=4.21, p=.045). When the first evaluation was presented in an analytical format, presentation order had only a minor effect on attitude (Manalytical_pos/analytical_neg=5.59; Mimagery_negative=2.43, Mimagery_positive=2.97; t30=1.51, p=.143). After being exposed to the first message, participants were asked to describe the images (thoughts) experienced while reading the food critic’s review and answer few questions about them; self-reported evaluations of the extent to which participants imagined (thought) what it would be like to be in the restaurant were used as a measure of message-relevant elaboration. Finally, before reporting their attitude toward the restaurant on a semantic differential scale (α=.96), participants were shown again both evaluations on the same page. In all cases, we used 9-point items.

To investigate whether elaboration mediated the interaction effect between type of information and presentation order on attitude (mediated moderation), we followed the procedure proposed by Muller and colleagues (2005) which requires testing three regression models. The first model showed that the type of information/presentation order interaction effect on attitude was significant (est.=.35, p=.045). The second model showed that the effect of type of information on elaboration was significant (est.=.54, p=.046), whereas the effects of presentation order and the type of information/presentation order interaction were non-significant (all p’s>.26). Finally, the third model showed that, controlling for the effects of elaboration (est.=.04, p=.668) and the marginally significant effect of the elaboration/presentation order interaction (est.=.16, p=.0795), the effect of the type of message/presentation order interaction on attitude became non-significant (est.=.28, p=.122). Sufficient conditions to demonstrate mediated moderation entail that the effect of type of message on elaboration and the presentation order interaction effect on attitude are significant and the effect of the type of information/presentation order interaction is significant in the first but not in the third model (Muller et al. 2005). In this view, the analysis provided preliminary evidence that elaboration moderated the effect of the information type/presentation order interaction on attitude.

Although much attention has been paid to the effect of mental imagery on decision-making, little is known about the strength of attitudes generated through mental imagery; we address this gap in the literature by proposing that mental imagery increases attitude resistance to contradictory analytically-presented information. In addition to replicating the present findings, future research should address more specifically the mechanisms (e.g., generation of counterarguments, attitude accessibility, etc.) underlying this effect and whether the order in which different types of information are presented affects the final judgment.

References

¹The restaurant review created by Pham and colleagues (2001) was used in the imagery-positive condition, whereas a modified version of the rating scheme proposed by Petrova and Cialdini (2005) was used in the analytical-positive condition. Although the consumers’ surveys and analytical reviews provided the same evaluation of the restaurant’s attributes, the former did not present further details about each rating (e.g., atmosphere: intimacy and elegancy). Since all descriptions included meat dishes, observations from two vegetarian participants were not included in the analysis.