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## **Mental Ownership As Important Imagery Content**

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Previous research has shown that mental imagery influences consumer experiences. Most research on mental imagery has focused on imagery vividness. What people actually imagine has hardly been assessed. We propose mental ownership as a powerful imagery content. An online experiment with 613 participants supports this proposition. Path models show that mental ownership partially mediates the effect of imagery vividness on attachment and attitudes, which in turn influence behaviour. In particular, mental ownership strongly predicts attachment, which significantly increases intentions towards getting the mere-mentally owned product.

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## Mental Ownership as Important Imagery Content

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### Abstract

Previous research has shown that mental imagery influences consumer experiences. Most research on mental imagery has focused on imagery vividness. What people actually imagine has hardly been assessed. We propose mental ownership as a powerful imagery content. An online experiment supports this proposition. Path models show that mental ownership partially mediates the effect of imagery vividness on attachment and attitudes, which in turn influence behaviour. In particular, mental ownership strongly predicts attachment, which significantly increases intentions towards getting the mere-mentally owned product.

Phrases such as "Yes, I can see myself driving that car" indicate that mental imagery is present in consumers' everyday language, and it seems that consumers use their imagination to decide on what to buy. Indeed, marketing scholars and practitioners are well aware of the importance of mental imagery for consumer behaviour (e.g., MacInnis & Price, 1987; Phillips, 1996; Schroeder, 2005).

Several studies have shown that the more vivid and strong mental imagery, the more attitudes towards an ad or a product improve (e.g., Babin & Burns, 1998; Gregory, Cialdini, & Carpenter, 1982). Interestingly, whereas we know quite well that vividness matters, we know much less about what people actually imagine. This paper aims at contributing to our understanding of the importance of imagery content by proposing mental ownership as a particularly powerful imagery content

There are at least three criteria that a powerful and marketing-relevant imagery content needs to meet. Ownership meets them all: First, consumers must be able to experience or feel what they imagine. People are able to develop a "sense" of ownership (e.g., Heyman, Orhun, & Ariely, 2004; Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2003), and experiences of psychological ownership are clearly not restricted to factual possessions (e.g., De Dreu & van Knippenberg, 2005; F. W. Rudmin, 1994).

Second, a powerful imagery content needs to be something that frequently preoccupies consumers and is hence able to come to one's mind spontaneously or "naturally". Ownership considerations and consequences clearly impact everyday life and differentiating between "mine" and "not mine" is a routine practice in most cultures.

Third and in order to be relevant for marketing, a powerful imagery content must be able to influence how consumers feel and behave towards an object. As indicated by several theoretical streams rooted in economics (endowment effect; e.g., Thaler, 1980) and psychology (mere-ownership effect and attachment; e.g., Beggan, 1992) ownership has the capacity to significantly influence how consumers feel about and behave towards an owned object.

To deal with the specific case of a sense of ownership in situations where there is no actual ownership we coin the term 'mental ownership'. Mental ownership is defined as a sense of ownership for a factually not owned product. The phrase 'a sense of ownership' denotes that mental ownership is more than merely imagining a situation of possession. It requires a shift in the person-product relation (or reference point), thus, that not getting a mentally owned product feels like a loss instead of a non-gain.

Our research model proposes that vivid mental imagery about an object can lead to mental ownership which, in turn, leads to the typical consequences of actual ownership: an increase in attachment and attitudes. Subsequently, attachment and attitudes are supposed to influence behavioural intentions and behaviours aiming at making the mere mentally owned object actually available to the imaginer.

To test the research model, 613 participants were presented with the information that either a new coffeemaker or a new car was being introduced to the market. Participants were then shown depictions of the same product in three different colours in an online experiment. To manipulate the degree of mental ownership, participants either had to actively choose a model in a particular colour (experimental group, EG), or they were simply informed that the product was available in three different colours (control group, CG). The rationale behind this manipulation was that the act of choosing can create an ownership like association between the chooser and the chosen object