On Believing Our Imagination: the Role of Mental Imagery in Belief Generation and Resilience

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We propose that imagery-provoking messages (e.g., narrative) induce both deliberate beliefs—due to the strength of the arguments and/or the credibility of the source—and implicit beliefs—due to the experience of mental images generated by the message—, whereas abstract messages (e.g., product ratings) induce only deliberate beliefs. Consistent with this proposition, three studies show that i) imagery-provoking product claims are considered more believable than abstract ones, ii) mental imagery generated by a message weakens the effect of source credibility on product evaluation, and iii) attitudes generated by imagery-provoking messages are stronger than those generated by abstract ones.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Theoretical evidence suggests the existence of a deliberate and an implicit route to believing. Deliberate beliefs are purposively held through a validating frame (e.g., explicit argumentation or source credibility), whereas implicit beliefs are derived from spontaneous and nonconscious inferences generated by perceptual-like experiences (Sperber, 1997). This distinction is akin to the one discussed by Gilbert and colleagues (e.g., Gilbert, Krull, & Malone, 1990) concerning the Cartesian approach—which suggests that people mentally represent ideas and then decide whether to accept them as true or false—and the Spinozan approach—which suggests that, once encoded, ideas are automatically endorsed as true and deliberation is needed to discard them.

Drawing on this literature, we propose that imagery-provoking messages (e.g., narrative, imagery instructions) induce both deliberate beliefs—due to the strength of the arguments and/or the credibility of the source—and implicit beliefs—due to the experience of mental images generated by the message—, whereas abstract messages (e.g., product ratings, abstract messages) induce only deliberate beliefs. For example, an abstract consumer review stating that “dialing with this cell phone is a tiring, error-filled process” might be believed only deliberately (e.g., I trust the reviewer, therefore I believe that the phone is bad), whereas an imagery-provoking one, such as “the buttons of this cell phone are too small so our fingers are always pushing the wrong button” can, in addition to deliberate beliefs, lead to the generation of implicit beliefs due to the experience of mental images (e.g., a person experiencing difficulty while dialing a phone number).

Moreover, we propose that beliefs derived by abstract messages, being held deliberately, should be relatively easy to discard. Once the credibility or the arguments of the message has been questioned, there is no reason to purposely maintain these beliefs. However, implicit beliefs generated by mental images should be less affected by deliberate attempts to discard the content of the message. That is, once generated, the mental images of a product will affect product evaluation even when the message has been discounted as unreliable.

The advantage of imagery-provoking messages, however, holds to the extent that consumers are able and motivated to generate mental images. Therefore, factors undermining an individual’s willingness (or ability) to imagine might reduce the resilience of beliefs induced by imagery-provoking messages. One of these factors might be represented by consumers’ expectations about the credibility of a message. Being suspicious about the trustworthiness of a message should reduce consumers’ willingness to imagine product-related behaviors (e.g., why should I imagine something that is not true?). For this reason, the resilience of beliefs generated by imagery-provoking messages should be lower when discrediting cues (e.g., information about the credibility of the message) are provided before, rather than after, the encoding of the message.

Three studies were conducted to test our propositions. In Study 1, respondents judged imagery-provoking product claims as more believable than abstract ones, despite the fact that they were told that there was no “objective” reason to infer the believability of the product claims. Interestingly, almost 60% of the variability in claim believability was accounted for by the average imaginability rating of product claims. Study 2 examined how product evaluation was affected by mental imagery generated by a message that was afterwards declared either credible or non-credible. Results showed that source credibility had a stronger effect on product evaluation among participants reporting low mental imagery than among those reporting high mental imagery. This finding suggests that respondents who reported high mental imagery kept holding positive beliefs about the product despite knowing that the message was unreliable. In Study 3, participants evaluated a restaurant after being presented with two contradictory reviews presented either in an imagery-provoking (i.e., narrative) or an abstract manner (i.e., product ratings). Results showed that impressions formed by imagery-product reviews were more resilient to subsequent challenges than those formed by abstract ones. Study 3 also suggested that the resilience of imagery-provoking messages was lower when the contradictory review was provided before, rather than after, the encoding of the message.

By suggesting that imagery-provoking messages induce beliefs that are more resilient than those generated by abstract ones, this work contributes to the literature on beliefs generation and correction (e.g., Gilbert & Ebert, 2002; Gilbert, Gill, & Wilson, 2002; Johar & Simmons, 2000; Schul & Burnstein, 1985; Schul & Mazursky, 1990). Our findings have significant implications for marketing practice given that people often imagine consumption-related behaviors (e.g., MacInnis & Price, 1987; Petrova & Cialdini, 2007; Shiv & Huber, 2000) to form product impressions that might need to be adjusted or even discounted. Our results apply not only to the case of mental images prompted by messages that are later found to be unreliable, but also to cases in which consumers need to integrate contradictory evidence presented either in an imagery-provoking or abstract format (e.g., imagery-provoking ads vs. consumer reports).

REFERENCES


