Imagining the Self: the Effect of Self-Focus and Visual Perspective on Persuasion

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Three studies show that future being-selves (the imaginations of what a person can become in the future [e.g., a better student]), are more persuasive when visualized through a third-person perspective (i.e., imagining through the eyes of an external observer) than a first-person perspective (i.e., imagining through one’s eyes), whereas the opposite holds for future experiencing-selves (the imaginations of the feelings that can be experience in the future [e.g., the excitement of a snowboard downhill]). Moreover, it is shown that unfamiliar consumption situations tend to be visualized through a third-person perspective, thus suggesting that new products are more effectively promoted by prompting consumers to imagine their future being-selves rather than their future experiencing-selves.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When evaluating products, consumers often imagine future consumption-related behaviors (e.g., MacInnis & Price, 1987; Shiv & Huber, 2000). Drawing on James’s (1982) classical distinction between the “Me” and the “I”, we suggest that when projecting themselves into the future, consumers can focus either on their future being-self, by reflecting on what consumption can make them become (e.g., a better student, an expert, a caring parent), or their future experiencing-self, by anticipating the thoughts, feelings, and emotions they will experience in a consumption episode (e.g., the excitement of a snowboard downhill, the relaxation of a spa).

To persuade people to engage in the imagined behavior, images of future being-selves have to successfully convey how the scene pictured enhances one’s sense of self, whereas images of future experiencing-selves have to transmit the feelings and emotions that could be experienced in a particular situation. We propose and provide evidence that the persuasiveness of being-selves and experiencing-selves is moderated by visual perspective in imagination.

Future selves can be imagined through a first-person perspective, when people visualize the scene through their own eyes, or a third-person perspective, when people visualize the scene through the point of view of an external observer (e.g., Nigro & Neisser, 1983). Empirical findings indicate that the adoption of a specific vantage point can determine the inferences people make about their future selves. In particular, the third-person perspective leads to more dispositional attributions (e.g., Frank & Gilovich, 1989) and highlights the broader meaning of an imagined situation (Libby & Eibach, 2004 cited in Libby et al., 2005; Vasquez & Buehler, 2007). On the other hand, the first-person discloses more information about future states of mind (i.e., affective reactions and psychological states) experienced by a person (McIsaac & Eich, 2002).

We propose that the third-person perspective, by highlighting the broader meaning of a behavior and its dispositional consequences, is more suitable to imagine future being-selves, whereas the first-person perspective, by disclosing more information about one’s state of consciousness, is more suitable to imagine future experiencing-selves.

Moreover, although people can deliberately decide to adopt a specific visual perspective (Nigro & Neisser, 1983), we suggest that unfamiliar scenarios, being imagined through a constructive process that focuses attention on the spatial relation between the self and its surrounding environment, tend to be visualized through a third-person perspective. This, in turn, increases the persuasiveness of future being-selves over experiencing-selves.

Three studies were conducted to test our hypotheses. Study 1 had a 2 (visual perspective: first vs. third) x 2 (self-focus: being vs. experiencing) between-subjects factorial design. Participants were presented with a short description of a new book that provided techniques to improve performance at school and imagined either themselves having a better way of studying, mastering course material, and becoming an expert in a subject domain (being-self) or the feelings of getting a good grade on a difficult exam (experiencing-self). The visualization task was performed either through a first- or a third-person perspective. As expected, future being-selves led to to significantly more favorable attitudes toward the book when imagined through a third- as opposed to a first-person perspective, whereas the experiencing-self-focus led to directionally (although not significantly) more favorable attitudes when the scene was visualized through a first-person as opposed to a third-person perspective. Further analysis suggested that vividness of imagination, but not ease of imagination, mediated the interaction effect between self-focus and visual perspective on attitude.

Drawing on empirical evidence suggesting that near-future events are more likely imagined through a first-person perspective than distant-future events (Pronin & Ross, 2006), Study 2 replicated findings from Study 1 through a naturalistic manipulation of visual perspective. Participants imagined enjoying an exotic vacation (experiencing-self) either in the near-future (a week later) or in the distant-future (three years later). As expected, the vacation was more likely imagined through a third-person perspective in the distant-future than in the near-future condition. Moreover, participants who adopted a third-person perspective liked significantly less the vacation destination than those who adopted a first-person perspective. A distribution of products test (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002) showed that temporal distance had a significant indirect effect on attitude via visual perspective, although its direct effect on attitude was not significant.

Study 3 analyzed the impact of scenario familiarity on visual perspective and future selves’ persuasiveness. The experiment had one between-subjects factor (scenario: familiar vs. unfamiliar) and one within-subject factor (self-focus: being vs. experiencing) design. Participants were asked to imagine either incorporating the product into their daily routine (familiar scenario) or an original use of the product (unfamiliar scenario) and evaluated the product by focusing either on their being- or experiencing-selves (within-subject factor). In the being-self-focus, respondents were first asked to consider the extent to which the e-book reader made them more efficient/effective and then rate the product attractiveness by focusing on that particular aspect of their imagination. In the experiencing-self-focus, respondents were asked to consider the extent to which they experienced positive emotions and feelings while using the product, and rate the product attractiveness by focusing on that particular aspect of their imagination. As expected, the unfamiliar scenarios were more likely imagined through a third-person perspective than familiar ones. Moreover, the e-book reader was evaluated significantly more positively in the being-self-focus than in the experiencing--self-focus when the scene was visualized through a third-person perspective but no significant differences was found when the scene was visualized through a first-person perspective. This finding suggests that the attractiveness of future being-selves over experiencing-selves was enhanced by the adoption of a third-person perspective. Although the direct effect was not significant, a distribution of products test (MacKinnon et al., 2002) showed that familiarity had a significant indirect effect on attitude via visual perspective.

This work has two main implications for product positioning and advertising. First, marketers can manipulate visual perspective to match future self-focus; situations that draw attention on one’s being-self (e.g., future achievements, symbolic consumption) are more attractive when visualized through a third- rather than a first-person perspective, whereas the opposite is true for future experiencing-selves (e.g., the excitement of a snowboard downhill). Second, marketers can draw attention on either being- or experiencing-self to match the visual perspective in imagination. As shown
in Study 3, unfamiliar consumption imaginations, such as the use of a radical new product, are more effectively promoted by drawing consumers’ attention on their being-selves (e.g., becoming more efficient) rather than on their experiencing-selves (e.g., experiencing positive feelings).

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