The Influences of Consumer Mood State on Mental Imagery Processing of Advertisement and Brand Evaluation

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This paper explores the influence of consumers’ mood state on their use of mental imagery to process marketing communication messages. Initial results from a controlled experiment indicate that the extent of mental imagery that consumers employ during message processing depends on their affective state: The more positive the participants’ mood state is the more extensively they use mental imagery during message processing, and the more positively they evaluate the advertised brand.

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Advertising appeals that encourage imagined consumption imagery are well known to be effective marketing communication tools to enhance brand attitudes and behavioral intentions. However, our understanding of the effectiveness of using mental imagery of consumption is still far from clear. This research focuses on exploring the influence of consumers’ mood state on the generation of consumption mental imagery and product and brand evaluations.

Mental imagery processing is defined as a process by which sensory information is represented in working memory during encoding, processing and retrieving of information (McNamis and Price, 1987). According to this definition, imagery processing is a processing mode, not a knowledge structure (e.g., specific schemas or scripts). The instantiation of a schema or script generates imagery. In consumer research, the availability-valence hypothesis directly addresses the persuasion effects of message evoked imagery on judgment and evaluation (Kisielius and Sternthal, 1986). It suggests that sensory imagery information is more available than semantic information at the time of judgment, and more likely to activate existing information structures. Therefore, effects of imagery processing on learning, evaluation and judgment are stronger than the processing of non-vivid, pallid or abstract information (Anderson and Bower, 1980; Kisielius and Sternthal, 1984, 1986; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). Furthermore, the availability-valence hypothesis postulates that whether vivid information enhances, undermine or has no effect on persuasion depends on the relative valence (or “favorability”) of the information in relation to the message advocacy. When the valence of thoughts in working memory is positive toward message advocacy, it will enhance persuasion. (Kisielius and Sternthal, 1986).

Recently in psychology, the influence of mood state on information processing has drawn a lot of attention. It has been shown that mood state can significantly influence how people process incoming and self-generated information (e.g., Forgas, 1995; Schwarz, 1990). However, little research has investigated the influence of mood state on consumers’ use of mental imagery in processing marketing communication messages. Two theoretical frameworks suggest great potential to predict how different consumer mood states can affect the way consumers use mental imagery in processing brand information and forming brand evaluations.

The “cognitive capacity view” (Mackie & Worth, 1989) contends that positive affective state renders people less able to process incoming information because happy affect activates many positive thoughts in memory, and these thoughts occupy people’s attentional capacity. In contrast, negative affect is less likely to generate thoughts to the extent that could take up much cognitive capacity. This view is consistent with the findings in current consumer behavior literature involving the use of positive consumption imagery in advertisement to induce greater extent of mental imagery processing, and reduce cognitive scrutiny and counter-arguments of message claims (Escalas, 2004). From this view, positive mood provides more resources for consumers to engage in imagery generation, and thus facilitates the generation of mental images regarding positive consumption experience, and reduces consumers’ critical scrutiny and analytical examination of the message argument.

The “hedonic contingency view” suggests that people in a negative mood state are motivated to process information. They think that such processing can have hedonic value to their mood state (Wegener and Petty, 1994). This view renders support for the use of positive consumption imagery: when consumers are in a negative mood state (versus positive mood state), they are more likely to be motivated to engage themselves in the hedonically pleasant experience of imagining the future consumption. The motivation to change negative mood should be higher than the motivation to keep the positive mood state. Based on the hedonic contingency view, it would be expected that the ease of imagery generation in response to imagery appeals in the ad message will depend on the hedonic consistency of the mood state in regard to the valence of the imagery. When consumers are in negative mood, there is a heightened hedonic value to engage in positive consumption imagery processing. When consumers are in positive mood, such hedonic value to engage in positive consumption imagery processing should be diminished.

The two theoretical frameworks suggest different predictions in regard to the generation of consumption mental imagery and brand evaluations. The “cognitive capacity view” suggests that positive mood state (versus negative mood state) will provide more resources for the generation of mental imagery of consumption by reducing the resource allocated on message scrutiny. The “hedonic contingency view” predicts that negative mood state provides heightened motivation to use of mental imagery of future consumption. This research aims to test these two seemingly competing views.

An experiment involving 254 subjects was conducted to test the influence of mood state on consumers’ use of mental imagery to process advertising information. The experiment was a 3 (mood state: negative vs. neutral vs. positive) x 2 (imagery appeal: present vs. absent) between subject factorial design. Results support that mood state influences the extent of mental imagery processing and brand evaluations. Specifically, the more positive consumer’s mood state is, the more extensive mental imagery is used in the processing of advertisement, and the more positively consumers evaluate the advertised brand. Results also suggest that the extent of imagery processing mediates the influence of mood state on brand evaluation. In short, results indicate that processing resources seem to play an important role in determining the impact of consumers’ mood state on mental imagery processing and brand evaluation.

References