Unleashing the Imagination Through Priming: Prompting and Facilitating Effects of the Imagery Mindset

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This paper investigates how the effectiveness of imagery-evoking messages may be enhanced through priming procedures. Two studies suggest that performing a task that elicits mental imagery (e.g., reading imagery-evoking product descriptions), as opposed to an abstract one (e.g., reading product ratings), may activate an imagery mindset that increases the persuasiveness of imagery-evoking advertisements subsequently presented. Two additional studies provide evidence that this effect may be moderated by one’s ability to imagine (i.e., dispositional imagery vividness) and the presence of imagery instructions.

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EXPANDED ABSTRACT

Imagery-evoking advertisements (i.e., ads that prompt and/or facilitate the generation of mental images) are often used to promote products and services. The widespread use of these advertisements is justified by empirical evidence suggesting that imagining consumption-related behaviors can lead to favorable product evaluations (e.g., MacInnis & Price, 1987; Petrova & Cialdini, 2005, 2007; Thompson & Hamilton, 2006) and increase purchase behavior (Gregory, Cialdini, & Carpenter, 1982).

Imagery-evoking ads, however, are not always effective. Their persuasiveness depends on both a consumer’s propensity to imagine and ability to generate vivid mental images (e.g., Keller & McGill, 1994; Petrova & Cialdini, 2005; Thompson & Hamilton, 2006). Propensity to imagine can be increased through imagery instructions (Keller & McGill, 1994; Thompson & Hamilton, 2006), whereas one’s ability to imagine is influenced by individual differences and, in particular, by one’s dispositional imagery vividness (Petrova & Cialdini, 2005). Since the persuasiveness of imagery-evoking advertisements is ultimately determined by the information processing mode used by consumers and their dispositional imagery vividness, these types of ads may be a risky option from an advertiser’s point of view: Asking to imagine the content of an imagery-evoking ad may be an effective means of persuasion when dispositional imagery vividness is high, but it may backfire when dispositional imagery vividness is low (Petrova and Cialdini, 2005).

We propose that the persuasiveness of an imagery-evoking ad also depends on the tasks a consumer performs before encountering the ad and, in particular, on the amount of mental imagery these tasks elicit. We draw on the literature on procedural priming (e.g., Klopfer, 1975; Klopfer & Roediger III, 1984; Shen & Wyer, 2007; Xu & Wyer, 2008) to suggest that tasks evoking mental imagery (e.g., reading a narrative) may prime an imagery mindset—defined as a state of enhanced accessibility of an imagery processing mode—which affects the evaluation of advertisements subsequently presented. More specifically, we suggest that priming an imagery mindset may simultaneously prompt a consumer to imagine—i.e., read an intriguing ad—select the word with more vowels: Camel/Cow (Paivio, 1975)—and facilitate imagery processing—i.e., read the ad. This prompting effect activates an imagery processing mode, as imagery instructions do, whereas the facilitating effect increases the ease of imagery processing, as dispositional imagery vividness does. Thus, the combined effect of the prompting effect and the facilitating effect may increase the persuasiveness of imagery-evoking advertisements.

The first two studies supported this proposition by showing that performing a task that elicits mental imagery can increase the persuasiveness of imagery-evoking advertisements subsequently presented. In Study 1, participants who read imagery-evoking, as opposed to abstract, descriptions of an apartment and a restaurant had higher (lower) purchase intentions toward a tropical resort whose description was imagery-evoking (abstract). In Study 2, participants who made 20 size judgments (e.g., select the item that is larger in real life: Camel/Cow)—a task that evokes mental imagery (Paivio, 1975)—as opposed to 20 vowel judgments (e.g., select the word with more vowels: Camel/Cow)—a task that does not elicit mental imagery—, had more favorable evaluations of a tropical resort described in an imagery-evoking way.

We also propose that the impact of an imagery mindset on persuasion may be moderated by both the presence of imagery instructions and a person’s dispositional imagery vividness. In the absence of imagery instructions, the prompting effect activates an imagery processing mode that may increase the persuasiveness of imagery-evoking ads for individuals high in dispositional imagery vividness—who can easily generate mental images—but it may decrease the persuasiveness of imagery-evoking ads for individuals low in dispositional imagery vividness (Petrova & Cialdini, 2005)—who cannot easily generate mental images. The facilitating effect, on the other hand, may have a null impact for individuals high in dispositional imagery vividness—who can easily generate mental images regardless of the activation of an imagery mindset—and a positive impact for individuals low in dispositional imagery vividness—who otherwise would not easily generate mental images. Thus, in the absence of imagery instructions, priming an imagery mindset may have a positive net effect on the persuasiveness of imagery-evoking messages for individuals high in dispositional imagery vividness and a null effect for individuals low in dispositional imagery vividness (since the positive facilitating effect may neutralize the negative prompting effect). Study 3 supported this prediction by showing that, in the absence of imagery instructions, priming an imagery mindset through size judgments increased preferences toward a cell phone with positive vivid attributes (i.e., imagery-evoking product option), as opposed to positive abstract attributes, but only for participants high in dispositional imagery vividness. As expected, priming an imagery mindset had no significant effect on preferences when participants were low in dispositional imagery vividness.

In the presence of imagery instructions, consumers’ propensity to imagine is high regardless of the activation of an imagery mindset. Therefore, the prompting effect may be influential. The facilitating effect, however, may increase the ease of imagination for individuals low in dispositional imagery vividness and, in turn, the persuasiveness of imagery-evoking messages. On the other hand, the facilitating effect may have a null effect for individuals high in dispositional imagery vividness—who can easily generate mental images regardless of the activation of an imagery mindset. Thus, in the presence of imagery instructions, priming an imagery mindset may have a positive net effect on the persuasiveness of imagery-evoking messages for individuals low in dispositional imagery and a null effect for individuals high in dispositional imagery vividness.
imagery. Study 4 supported this prediction by showing that activating an imagery mindset by memorizing and retrieving a series of pictures, as opposed to performing a numerical task, increased attitudes toward an imagery-evoking restaurant review preceded by imagery instructions for individuals low in depositional imagery vividness, but it had no significant effect on individuals high in dispositional imagery vividness.

From a managerial point of view, this work suggests implications of interest for the placement of print advertisements. For example, an advertisement that asks consumers to imagine enjoying a Caribbean vacation may be more persuasive when presented after an imagery-evoking narrative than after, for example, a Sudoku puzzle (a low imagery-evoking task).

REFERENCES


