The Counterproductive Effects of Fantasies: How Visualizations of Goal Attainment Demotivate Consumer Behavior

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While previous research generally emphasized the merits of mental imagery in marketing, we argue that imagery-inducing persuasion tactics should be used with caution, as they can backfire and potentially demotivate consumers from buying advertised products. Our findings reveal that abstract (versus concrete) goal visualizations demotivate subsequent goal-congruent choices and behaviors.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Self-regulation theory proposes that people are motivated to engage in behaviors that aim to achieve specific standards (Carver and Scheier 1982), and continue to engage in these behaviors until the desired end-state is achieved (Forster et al. 2005). In this paper, we examine consumer self-regulatory tendencies within a context that has recently emerged in the consumer literature, namely mental imagery. To date, consumer research has predominantly examined how visualizing product use and benefits aids persuasion in various ways – e.g., visualization of product benefits enhances product evaluations (Escalas 2007; Zhao et al. 2011), improves recall (Petrova and Cialdini 2005), and impacts the ability to discern between strong and weak argument claims (Escalas and Luce 2004). While these findings reliably demonstrate that mental imagery can have beneficial effects on consumer judgment, we show such imagery can ironically produce negative motivational effects, namely visualization can result in premature goal disengagement. We also reveal an affect-based mechanism for this effect, which was not examined in previous mental imagery research.

Study Hypotheses

In the present research, we provide evidence that visualizing the achievement of a self-relevant goal can impair consumer self-regulatory tendencies by inducing weakly arousing emotions that fail to further motivate goal-congruent behaviors (Hull 1943). However, this ironic effect is contingent on how the goal is visualized – namely it is only apparent when envisioning goals in abstract not concrete terms. More specifically, envisioning the attainment of goals in an abstract way (e.g., achieving one’s ideal body appearance in a general sense) triggers an assimilation mechanism that emphasizes desirability rather than feasibility concerns (Trope et al. 2007), whereby the individual vicariously experiences the end state (e.g., life as a beautiful individual) rather than focus on how to achieve the goal. This assimilation process leads to vicarious goal satiation, evoking low arousal positive emotions (i.e. contentment), which no longer energizes goal-congruent action. Conversely, envisioning the attainment of the same goal in a concrete way (e.g., achieving one’s ideal body appearance by losing 10 lbs.) focuses attention on feasibility issues and makes individuals aware that more work is required to achieve the goal. This contrast effect emphasizes the discrepancy between one’s actual and ideal self-states, evokes highly-arousing negative emotions (i.e. anxiety), which ultimately stimulate goal-congruent behavior. In sum, we propose that fantasies can have a counterproductive effect. Namely, envisioning goal fulfillment abstractly (concretely) generates positively-valenced low (negatively-valenced high) arousal feelings which in turn leads to goal disengagement (pursuit).

Study Methods and Results

We completed five experiments to test our propositions. In studies 1A and 1B, results revealed that participants who envisioned the attainment of their ideal body appearance in a general way subsequently spent less time engaging in a second goal-related exercise task (e.g. visualizing doing sit-ups, push-ups, etc.) (Study 1A) and reported lower intentions to purchase healthy food items (Study 1B) compared to control and concrete-goal conditions. This confirmed that visualizing goals abstractly can demotivate goal-congruent activities. On the other hand, mental imagery of goal attainment viewed in concrete terms marginally encouraged participants to spend more time (compared to controls) on the subsequent mental exercises and enhanced their desire of healthy food items. In study 2, moderation and mediation approaches were used to provide preliminary evidence for the proposed affect-based mechanism. The findings showed that visualizing achieving professional goals in an abstract sense reduced intentions to look for internships and participate in case competitions (i.e., goal-relevant behaviors). Importantly, this finding was only present when subjects focused on their feelings during the visualization task, not when they instead focused on the content of the mental simulation. This suggests that affect plays a critical role in reducing goal congruent behavior. Further, mediational evidence revealed that (low) positively-valenced emotional arousal underlies this effect. On the other hand, concrete visualizations of goal fulfillment increased participants’ interest in goal-congruent behaviors when focusing on feelings rather than imagery content, however this effect was non-significant. In study 3, we provided a direct replication of the main findings in study 2, and demonstrated that the effects produced by abstract goal visualizations do not carry-over to other domains. For instance, if you fantasize about achieving professional success in an abstract way, while this might demotivate goal-congruent behaviors, it does not impact behaviors associated with other goals (e.g. eating healthy). Finally, in study 4, we employed a standard manipulation of processing style (abstract versus concrete) and further validated our findings: those that were initially induced with an abstract mindset and then asked to visualize attaining their ideal body appearance reported less interest in goal-congruent goods (i.e. gym membership, running shoes) than participants who were initially primed with a concrete mindset.

Contributions

This paper contributes to the literature in at least three ways. First, while past consumer research typically examined how visualizations of product use and benefits influence consumer judgments, we show that mental imagery has motivational effects on consumer self-regulatory behaviors and decisions, and that these effects are largely negative. In fact, unlike most visualization studies which advocate the merits of mental imagery, visualizing goals in abstract terms can ironically harm goal pursuit initiatives. Second, we show that this effect is at least partially driven by an affect-based process. Using a moderation approach, we showed that abstract goal visualizations impaired self-regulation only when participants’ focused on their emotions while imagining achieving their goals. There was also mediational evidence that highlighted the role of positively-valenced low arousal feelings. More specifically, when consumers visualized themselves attaining an ideal self-state in an abstract fashion, they experienced a state of pleasantly relaxing emotions that no longer motivated goal-congruent behaviors. Finally, this study contributes to the self-regulation literature by providing preliminary evidence that (integral) affect not only derives from imagined goal completion, but also influences subsequent goal-congruent behaviors. Further, we provide initial evidence that emotional arousal, an affective dimension often omitted in consumer research, should be considered in conjunction with emotional valence when examining the role of affect in self-regulation.
REFERENCES