



Fluent contextual image backgrounds enhance mental imagery and evaluations of experience products

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Product images
Contextual background
Mental imagery
Imagery fluency
Experience products

ABSTRACT

Online shoppers rely on product images to gain information about products. Helpful product images allow a detailed mental imagery of the product and its use. Product images with a fitting contextual background, as opposed to a plain white background, increase such mental imagery and in turn product liking and purchase intent. This effect, however, is preceded by imagery fluency—the ease with which mental images come to mind in the first place. As a result, effective product images need to facilitate fluent perceptions, while also evoking fitting mental imagery. Two experimental studies confirm this pathway which links research on mental imagery with research on imagery fluency. Moreover, the experiments show that this effect of contextual backgrounds works for fitting but not for non-fitting backgrounds, better for ambiguous than unambiguous products, and for experience products, but not for search products. Online retailers could leverage contextual backgrounds in product images to enhance consumers' evaluations of their merchandise as long as the beneficial effects via mental imagery outweigh the added photography costs.

1. Introduction

In e-commerce, products cannot be directly touched (McCabe and Nowlis, 2003) and remain intangible (Laroche et al., 2005), rendering product evaluation more difficult and risky compared with offline settings (Dai et al., 2014). Visual information from product images provides important information in this context, because it helps consumers to imagine future use (MacInnis and Price, 1987). While product videos (Orús et al., 2017) or virtual reality (Huang and Liao, 2015) offer alternatives for overcoming the intangibility of products online, the simplest means for online retailers remain product images. In contrast to products photographed on white background, contextual backgrounds in product photography (Chang, 2013) can not only help to reduce the product ambiguity (Maier and Dost, 2018) but also allow consumers to imagine what a product or service would physically feel like and how they might use it in the future (Lee and Gretzel, 2012). But contextual background images come at a cost to the online retailers: while a professionally produced product image on white background might start at \$10, contextual product images in real settings cost a multitude of that amount (e.g., from set construction and product styling, Weilmeier, 2017).

This study, therefore, aims to identify under which conditions contextual background images can improve product imagination and

evaluation. Specifically, using product images to foster customers' imagination of future use may not be as straightforward as intuitively expected. The present research addresses three limitations of extant research through an integration of two research streams. First, although research has established the process of *mental imagery*, in which contextual images of the product and its future use in consumers' minds (MacInnis and Price, 1987) create positive emotions and increases purchase intentions (Petrova and Cialdini, 2005), we do not know under which conditions this mechanism arises.

Second, although we know the positive evaluative consequences of *imagery fluency* from contextual images (Maier and Dost, 2018), that is, the ease with which mental images come to mind and its positive affective consequences (Chang, 2013; Petrova and Cialdini, 2005), fluency has not been investigated as input in other perception processes (e.g., mental imagery, where its effect needs to be explored: Yoo and Kim, 2014). This research makes the novel suggestion that both research streams should be combined, as imagery fluency serves as prerequisite for mental imagery. This is managerially relevant, because if both streams are taken separately, conflicting advice for product image selection might arise. For instance, the image of a bottle of wine in the contextual setting of a wine cellar requires more processing effort than the processing of the same bottle on white background. The literature on imagery fluency would recommend using the white background to

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lower processing effort; the literature on mental imagery would recommend the wine cellar background to stimulate imagery of future use. As a result, different recommendations would emerge if the background effect on fluency is independent from, or related to the effect on mental imagery. If they are related, then product pictures with contextual backgrounds need to strike a balance that satisfies both mechanisms, allowing imagery fluency as well as eliciting mental imagery.

Third, extant research on mental imagery has widely disregarded the moderating role of product category (focusing instead on interpersonal moderators, e.g., non- vs. visualizers: Yoo and Kim, 2014) and calls for an investigation of product-related boundary conditions of the effect (Yoo and Kim, 2014). Because mental imagery in an online context is particularly important for products which have to be experienced in use, we make the novel suggestion that experience (vs. search) products benefit more strongly from mental imagery. This distinction matters for online retailers, because products cannot be touched in e-commerce, hence retailers have to rely more on mental imagery (McCabe and Nowlis, 2003). As contextual product images are more expensive to create, online retailers may need to decide upfront for which product categories they want to make that investment.

The present article contributes to these gaps and the wider related literature by, linking research on mental imagery and imagery fluency, establishing imagery fluency as a prerequisite for mental imagery. This disentangles the effects of fluency and mental imagery on consumers' evaluations and answers calls for research on the antecedents of mental imagery (Orús et al., 2017). The present article replicates existing (product ambiguity) and introduces novel moderating effects (search vs. experience goods) as boundary conditions, which help strike the balance between imagery fluency and mental imagery. Finally, we utilize realistic stimuli and settings close to the actual e-commerce environment (e.g., a webstore with purchase funnel and shopping cart), following calls for fluency research with nonartificial, realistic stimuli (Lee and Labroo, 2004) such as images (Albrecht and Carbon, 2014), the understanding of which is still "incomplete and fragmented" (Larsen et al., 2004, p. 102) to date.

2. Literature review, theoretical background and hypotheses development

Extant literature has investigated the evaluative and behavioural consequences of two mediators related to imagery: mental imagery and imagery fluency, which so far have been assessed in two separate streams of literature (see Table 1). Our core proposition is that both need to be integrated to develop a comprehensive understanding of mental imagery and to identify novel moderators.

2.1. Extant research on mental imagery from contextual images

MacInnis and Price (1987) were the first to propose that "mental imagery" (p. 487) can evoke perceptual and sensory product representations in consumers' memories that are used similarly to actual stimulus perception. That is, although consumers cannot directly touch a product as in a brick-and-mortar store, they can imagine the actual stimulus "in their mind's eye" (Lee and Gretzel, 2012, p. 1270). Moreover, consumers mentally simulate usage experiences in enactive imagery (Goossens, 2003, p. 134). For instance, consumers envision themselves at a vacation destination (Walters et al., 2007), such as a Caribbean beach (Miller and Stoica, 2003), or how comfortable they feel walking in their new travelling shoes (Chang, 2013). Extant research finds a dominance of visual over verbal cues as antecedents of mental imagery (White et al., 1977), termed the "picture superiority effect" (Unnava and Burnkrant, 1991, p. 226). This dominance rests on the greater experiential value of visual vs. verbal information (Jeon et al., 2009).

The two most common product image types in e-commerce differ in the degree to which they elicit mental imagery. Products can either be

Table 1 Overview of extant research with empirical investigations on imagery fluency and mental imagery: relationships examined, dependent variables and moderators investigated.

	Relationships examined			Dependent variables		Moderators unrelated to the image or text		Stimuli
	Stimuli → Imagery fluency	Stimuli → Mental imagery	Imagery fluency → mental imagery	Evaluations (e.g., liking)	Behaviour (e.g., purchase intent)			
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Bone and Ellen (1992)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Radio ads
Babin and Burns (1997)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Print ads
Miller and Marks (1997)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Radio ads
Bolls and Muehling (2007)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Radio ads
Walters et al. (2007)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Images and text
Lee and Gretzel (2012)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Images and text
Krishna et al. (2014)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Imagined (vs. real) food scent
Yoo and Kim (2014)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Interpersonal (non- vs. visualizers)		Images and text
Lowe and Haws (2017)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a		Acoustic pitch in voice/music
Petrova and Cialdini (2005)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Interpersonal (self-consciousness)		Images and text
Chang (2013)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a		Images and text
Roy and Phau (2014)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Interpersonal (regulatory focus)		Print ads
Orús et al. (2017)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a		Product videos
Maier and Dost (2018)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Product ambiguity		Contextual product images
This research	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Product ambiguity, product category		Product images

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