

Research Article

Revealing obstacles to the consumer imagination

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Abstract

The research proposes that the consumer imagination combines information about a current sensory stimulus (product) with triggered episodic memories to use as inputs in making product evaluations. Two studies reveal that the consumer imagination can be suppressed when preferred haptic sensory information is missing and when a situation is unambiguous, reducing the need for relying on episodic memory. The research findings support the general notion that the consumer imagination enhances purchase intentions compared to considering product attributes because the imagination enables consumers to integrate the information in a more efficient way. In both studies, perceived ownership mediates the effect. Contributions to theory and practical implications are provided.

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Introduction

The human imagination has long fascinated scholars and practitioners alike (Escalas, 2004; Feuchtl & Kamleitner, 2009; Jenkins, Molesworth, & Eccles, 2010; Phillips, 1996; Schau, 2000; White, 1990; Zhao, Hoeffler, & Dahl, 2009). Through the years, researchers such as Schau (2000), Escalas (2004), and Zhao et al. (2009) have challenged the academic community to deepen our understanding of how the imagination works. While previous scholarship has suggested that the consumer imagination creates new knowledge by combining incoming sensory information with information contained in memory, little is currently known about how this elaborative process occurs (Schau, 2000).

Thus, the present research seeks to make several contributions. First, the study proposes that the consumer imagination combines information about a sensory stimulus (product) and triggered episodic memories to use as inputs in making product evaluations. Second, the study investigates how knowledge

creation in the consumer imagination compares to an alternative structure in which the consumer considers product attributes (Biehal & Chakravarti, 1986; Schau, 2000). Third, the research investigates two obstacles for the enhancing effects of the consumer imagination by suppressing either incoming sensory information or information from episodic memory. Specifically, the findings reveal that: (1) when the consumer prefers haptic product information but that information is missing, the effect of the imagination on purchase intentions is thwarted (study 1); (2) an unambiguous rather than an ambiguous situation functions as an obstacle for the consumer imagination, because it reduces the need for relying on episodic memory (study 2); and (3) perceived ownership provides a viable mediating explanation for the observed effects (studies 1 and 2).

Literature background

Imagining future consumption

In the present investigation, the consumer imagination is conceptualized as imagining future consumption of a yet-to-

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be-purchased product. The process joins incoming sensory information with information stored in episodic memory. The following example illustrates this process. When a consumer imagines how he/she will appear at a future event wearing an advertised apparel item, information flows from memory (Rawlings & Rawlings, 1974; Sackett, 1953; Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977; Sweller & Sweller, 2006). This preexisting information is used to create a mental rehearsal of that future event and consists of relevant prior personal experiences, stories, and accounts (episodic memory) that also contain contextually related facts, such as type of clothing worn or food served (semantic memory) (Baumgartner, Suja, & Bettman, 1992; Brewer, 1986; Tulving, 1972). Stored episodes deemed useful for the current imaginings flow from episodic memory to be combined with incoming sensory information. These ideas are supported by those of MacInnis and Price (1987), who conceptualized imagery as a process that represents sensory information in working memory. Later, Schlosser (2003) linked mental experiential simulations with sensory imagery objects.

In the consumer imagination, information from episodic memory flows concurrently with accompanying, contextually related semantic details and is combined with incoming sensory information about a stimulus (i.e., product) to create an imagined future event (Leahy & Sweller, 2008; Schau, 2000). In a similar vein, according to Pezzulo and Castelfranchi (2009), mentally generating future events joins episodic long-term memories and the current situation, and it is the simulative ability of the imagination that meshes the current context with long-term memories to envision future scenarios. These ideas are in line with those of previous scholars who contended that the imagination combines past memories with the reality of the present (Martin, 2004; Pezzulo & Castelfranchi, 2009; Samuelsen & Olsen, 2010; Schau, 2000).

In sum, we conceptualize the consumer imagination as a flow of information where incoming sensory information about a product is combined with preexisting episodic and contextually related semantic information in a yet-to-be-experienced event with a not-yet-purchased product. We further propose that the consumer imagination can be thwarted by either suppressing incoming sensory information or information from episodic memory. Thus, the first obstacle was selected because it should hinder the flow of incoming sensory information the consumer prefers and therefore thwart the consumer imagination (study 1). The second obstacle for the consumer imagination, level of ambiguity of the context, was selected because it should reduce the need for relying on information from episodic memory (study 2).

Considering product attributes

The elaborations of the consider condition join existing and incoming sensory information in a different manner from the consumer imagination. In this approach, the consumer compares incoming product attribute information (for example, facts from an ad about the style or cut of a sweater) with useful facts retrieved from existing semantic memory (such as height, weight, and torso length) (Baumgartner et al., 1992; Brewer,

1986; Leahy & Sweller, 2008; Sweller, 2004; Tulving, 1972). Unlike the consumer imagination, this approach works by comparing incoming product information with existing personal facts that flow from semantic memory (Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977). As illustration of this process, suppose a consumer considers an advertised garment. The consumer may first compare the garment color with his/her skin tone, then proceed to compare his/her height with the length of the garment, and so forth. Semantic facts help the consumer to complete the comparison task at hand. To further illustrate this approach, assume that four information units are considered (for example, color, fit at the waist, length, and fabric). Assume also that the consumer considers four information units about his/her body type (for example, weight, height, width of shoulders, and hair color). In total, eight units of information may be combined. Mathematically, $8! = 40,320$ ($8 \times 7 \times 6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1$) permutations are possible.

In sum, we conceptualize the consider elaborative approach as semantic information flowing from memory to be combined with incoming sensory information about a product through a comparison of points of parity. Unlike the consumer imagination, this elaborative process is not vulnerable to obstacles that hamper the flow of episodic memories or to preferred semantic information that is missing because other information units are used for the purposes of comparison. The discussions that follow clarify this line of reasoning.

Comparing imagining to considering

The consider elaborative process problem-solves to reduce or handle differences between incoming product features and semantic information about personal features (Foley, Wozniak, & Gillum, 2006; Sweller, 2003, 2004; Sweller & Sweller, 2006). All told, integrating separate and unorganized sequential pieces of information is likely to exceed the limitations of working memory (Leahy & Sweller, 2004). If this is the case, consumer attitudes may be diminished (Shaw, McClure, & Wilkins, 2001). On the other hand, the flow of information in the consumer imagination requires less effort and does not require the points-of-parity comparison of features that characterizes the consider elaborative approach. This argument is supported by the findings of Escalas (2004).

In sum, the consumer imagination enables the consumer to determine a response to the sensory environment (i.e., product information) and organize appropriate actions with greater confidence that the imagined scenario with the product will occur (Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977; Sweller & Sweller, 2006). Thus, purchase intentions were selected for study as they are key responses to the sensory environment in the more actionable stage (Bagozzi, 1981; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Koehler, 1991; Triandis, 1977). Likewise, asking consumers to imagine an advertised product in a future event should influence confidence in the likelihood of owning that product in the future event and thus confidence in product judgment (Peck & Childers, 2003a). Because purchase intentions and product confidence in the present investigation are closely related constructs and predicted to

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