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Getting consumers to generate their own ad content: The impact of imagine instructions on persuasion

Some recent advertisements have attempted to increase the persuasiveness of their communications by directly asking consumers to imagine arguments supporting the ad's message. This research provides a critical test of the effectiveness of this "imagine strategy," while also identifying some specific situations in which this technique can be most effective in increasing persuasion. Three studies reveal that imagine instructions are most effective in cases of regulatory non-fit between consumers' regulatory orientation and the ad content, when consumers are more dispositionally oriented toward high need for cognitive closure, and when consumers are at a high construal level. These results are consistent with the possibility that the imagine strategy works best when it can enhance the motivation level of otherwise unmotivated consumers.

Keywords: Implicit arguments; Explicit arguments; Need for cognitive closure; Construal level; Regulatory fit; Imagine instructions; Imagine strategy

JEL Classification code: M31

1. Introduction

In 1998, the state of Florida launched an expansive anti-smoking advertising campaign focused on bringing out some of the negative information underlying the success of the tobacco industry. Many of the ads in this campaign, referred to as *The Truth*, revealed a few specific facts about cigarettes and the tobacco industry (e.g., many cigarettes contain geraniol, which is also an active ingredient in some pesticides), then asked viewers to imagine other negative information the tobacco industry might be hiding. This campaign was very effective (e.g., by reducing smoking among teens; Farrelly, Davis, Haviland, Messeri, & Healton, 2005), and the technique of asking consumers to generate their own information supporting the advertising message has subsequently been employed by numerous print and television ads for products as diverse as automobiles, water filtration units, and political candidates. Nevertheless, research has yet to examine whether this "imagine strategy" in which consumers are asked to imagine their own evidence to support the advertising message, is an effective persuasion technique. The present paper seeks to empirically demonstrate that the imagine strategy can be effective, as well as to identify conditions under which the imagine strategy will be more or less successful.

2. Literature Review

The unique feature of the imagine strategy is that, rather than the conventional approach of explicitly providing complete arguments in the ad, the imagine strategy takes the implicit approach of providing partial arguments in the ad and asking consumers to generate additional supporting arguments for themselves. Early persuasion research suggests that this is a poor strategy by demonstrating that messages are more persuasive when presented explicitly rather than implicitly (e.g., Hovland & Mandell, 1952). More recent research suggests that explicit messages might only be more persuasive for low motivation consumers (Sawyer & Howard,

1991), but this still does not bode well for the imagine strategy because consumers in realistic ad exposure settings are typically low in motivation and involvement (Wanke, Bohner, & Jurkowitsche, 1997).

An important consideration with respect to the research on explicit vs. implicit arguments is that after providing a partial argument, the implicit approach leaves it up to the consumer to decide whether to pursue that argument further. The imagine strategy has a potential advantage relative to this type of implicit argument because it directly asks consumers to generate additional information supporting the ad argument. At least one study suggests that this potential advantage might be important. Linder and Worchel (1970) presented participants with a series of seven sequential logical arguments leading toward the target conclusion that cigarettes cause cancer. Participants were given between one and five of these arguments and asked to generate the remaining arguments. Although the research context was considerably different from real-world ad exposure because the experimenters provided corrected versions of any erroneous participant-generated arguments, participants who generated more arguments did show greater agreement with the target conclusion.

2.1. The Power of Self-persuasion

Several research streams support the proposition that self-generated arguments should increase persuasion. First, for self-generated arguments there is less reason to doubt the credibility or motivations of the source, and thus belief in the message should increase (Walster & Festinger, 1962). Second, although the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion predicts that elaboration can have positive or negative effects of persuasion depending on the type of elaboration that occurs (e.g., generation of counterarguments vs. supporting arguments), supportive elaboration such as that encouraged by the imagine strategy can result in increased

attitude strength and persistence of attitudes over time relative to shallow processing (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983).

Third, research examining the impact of subjective ease of recall on judgments (Schwarz, 2004) suggests that self-generated arguments should be effective. In this research, participants who generate few attitude-supporting arguments (e.g., positive characteristics of BMWs) typically rate the target object (e.g., BMWs) more positively than participants who generate many supporting arguments. This result occurs because generating few arguments is easy, and the subjective feeling of ease is a metacognitive cue that supports the attitude (e.g., it was easy to generate positive characteristics of BMWs, so they must be good cars). This research suggests that ads prompting consumers to generate their own arguments should be successful to the extent that consumers perceive the task of imagining supporting arguments as easy. Because the imagine strategy doesn't specify the number of supporting arguments to be generated, an important question for the imagine strategy is what happens when consumers generate as many arguments as they want?

Research suggests that people terminate open-ended memory search when various indicators of difficulty (e.g., time since the last item was retrieved, number of retrieval failures) exceed some threshold (Raaijmakers & Shiffrin, 1981; Young, 2004). Wänke et al (1997) argue that in realistic ad exposure settings consumers typically set these difficulty thresholds very low in order to avoid having to devote substantial attention and effort to processing ad content. In other words, consumers are likely to stop generating information before the generation task becomes difficult, and thus metacognitive cues associated with ease of processing should typically result in more ad-consistent attitudes.

2.2. Potential Limitations and Boundary Conditions to Imagine Effects

The preceding analysis suggests that (a) if consumers engage in the effortful cognitive processing needed to generate additional ad-consistent information, the imagine strategy should be effective, but (b) consumers will often be passive and fail to generate such information, in which case the imagine strategy will be ineffective. Based on previous research suggesting that motivation and capacity must both be present for individuals to engage in effortful cognitive processing (e.g., Fazio, 1990), variables that determine motivation and capacity are logical candidates for factors that determine the effectiveness of the imagine strategy.

We propose that imagine instructions function as a motivational cue for consumers to engage in the generation of ad-consistent information. Although there is no direct evidence for this proposition, directive instructions like "imagine what else the tobacco industry might have done to harm consumers" are similar in character to manipulations used in previous research to enhance motivational states such as need for accuracy or need for cognitive closure (e.g., Kardes, Cronley, Kellaris, & Posavac, 2004). Based on this reasoning, we propose that imagine instructions will interact differently with motivation and capacity variables. For variables related to consumer motivation, a sufficiency effect should be observed such that when at least one source of motivation is present, either from imagine instructions or other sources, ad persuasiveness should be increased; however, sources of motivation beyond the first should have minimal if any impact on persuasiveness. A different pattern should be observed when imagine instructions interact with capacity variables. In this case, a necessity effect should be observed such that relatively little persuasion should occur unless both motivation (via imagine instructions) and capacity are high. In principle, the proposed patterns of results should occur when imagine instructions are combined with any motivation or capacity variable present in the advertising context, either in relation to the consumer, the environment, or the ad itself. The

present research examines two motivational variables (regulatory fit and need for cognitive closure) and one capacity variable (construal level) that are commonly studied in advertising and consumer research as support for our theory regarding the effectiveness of the imagine strategy.

Regulatory focus theory identifies two distinct regulatory orientations: prevention focus and promotion focus (Higgins, 1997). Prevention focus is associated with increased sensitivity to the presence or absence of negative outcomes, whereas promotion focus is associated with increased sensitivity to the presence or absence of positive outcomes. People experience regulatory fit when their regulatory orientation matches aspects of the task they are performing (Higgins, 2000; Hong & Lee, 2008). For purposes of the present research, the most relevant source of regulatory fit is the match between the individual's regulatory orientation and the content of the advertising message, which previous research has shown leads to an increased tendency to generate message-consistent arguments (Lee & Aaker, 2004). Hong and Lee (2008) argued that regulatory fit induces an intensified motivational state, whereas regulatory non-fit results in reduced motivation. Based on our previous reasoning regarding the interaction between imagine instructions and motivational variables, this leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: When regulatory fit occurs or imagine instructions are present, persuasion will be greater than when neither of these conditions are met (regulatory non-fit and no imagine instructions).

Need for cognitive closure (NFCC) (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996) refers to a desire to quickly form a definite opinion ("seize") and to maintain that opinion once it is formed ("freeze"). NFCC was developed as a motivational variable, such that low NFCC consumers are intrinsically motivated to consider all relevant information before forming an evaluation and to actively adjust their evaluations in light of new or additional information (Webster & Kruglanski,

1994). Conversely, high NFCC consumers are intrinsically unmotivated to think carefully about advertising messages, they desire immediate answers over ambiguity, and they prefer to form evaluations quickly even when additional relevant information might be available (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). We expect that low NFCC individuals will show a similar motivation to generate ad-supporting arguments, while high NFCC individuals will not show this motivation. Based on our previous reasoning regarding how imagine instructions interact with motivational variables, this leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: For low NFCC consumers or when imagine instructions are present, persuasion will be greater than when neither of these conditions are met (high NFCC and no imagine instructions).

Rather than functioning as a motivational variable like regulatory fit or NFCC, construal level influences the capacity to perform different types of information processing. Construal level theory proposes that construal level, or the level of abstraction with which decision alternatives are mentally represented, increases with psychological distance (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). For example, distant future or distant past events, events affecting others, and hypothetical events are construed at a higher, more abstract level, while near future or near past events, events affecting the self, and specific events are construed at a lower, more concrete level. Low construal levels facilitate low-level, detail-oriented processing (Deval et al., 2012), whereas higher-level construal facilitates creativity and generation of new ideas (Henderson, Trope, & Carnevale, 2006). Thus, high level construal enhances the consumer's capacity to engage in the type of generative information processing needed to make the imagine strategy effective. Based on our previous reasoning regarding how imagine instructions interact with capacity variables, this leads to the following hypothesis:

H3: Persuasion will be greater when imagine instructions are present and consumers are at a high construal level than when either of these conditions is not met (i.e., no imagine instructions or low level construal).

2.3. Overview of Studies

Three studies and a pilot study were conducted to test the aforementioned hypotheses. The pilot study demonstrates that imagine instructions increase consumers' motivation to generate additional ad-consistent information. The studies then examine regulatory fit (study 1), NFCC (study 2), and construal level (study 3) as moderators of the persuasive effectiveness of imagine instructions. In each study, participants were presented with a fictitious advertisement and asked to evaluate the advertised product. In conjunction with the fictitious advertisements, participants were either asked to imagine further information that supported the advertisement's message (e.g., "Imagine what else Special K can do to improve your health") or provided with no instructions other than to examine the ad.

3. Pilot study

The goal of the pilot study was to demonstrate that imagine instructions specifically increase motivation to generate ad-consistent information but do not impact motivation to think about the ad in general. Seventy-five participants were asked to view a print ad for Special K cereal containing a picture of the product accompanied by two specific health benefits of Special K (provides essential vitamins and minerals, is a powerful antioxidant). In the imagine condition, the ad contained additional text asking the reader to imagine what else Special K can do to improve your health; this additional text was not included in the advertisement in the no imagine condition. After viewing the ad, participants were asked three questions about their motivation to think about the content of the ad (I was motivated to think carefully about the ad; I was

motivated to think carefully about the health benefits of Special K described in the ad; The ad motivated me to consider the importance of the health benefits of Special K that were presented; α = .88) and 3 questions about their motivation to generate information beyond the ad content (I was motivated to think carefully about health benefits of Special K beyond those described in the ad; The ad motivated me to generate my own ideas about the health benefits of Special K; The ad motivated me to consider health benefits of Special K that were not specifically presented; α = 0.79). All of these questions used 7-point scales with 1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree, and no other semantic labels on the remaining scale points. As expected, one-way ANOVAs (imagine instructions: yes or no) showed that the imagine manipulation had no effect on general motivation to think about the ad in general, $F < 1$, but did increase motivation specifically to generate ad-consistent information that was not presented in the ad, $F(1,73) = 4.30$, $p < .05$.

4. Study 1

4.1. Sample and procedure

One hundred and ninety-nine undergraduate students at a large southwestern university participated for course credit. The study used a regulatory focus x imagine instructions two-factor design, where imagine instructions were manipulated as a between-subjects factor and regulatory focus was measured as an individual difference factor.

After arriving at the lab, participants viewed a promotion-oriented advertisement about Special K focusing on the health benefits of Special K. This was the same ad that was used in the pilot test, including the manipulation involving the presence or absence of imagination instructions. Participants were then asked to report their attitudes toward Special K on seven-point scales (overall evaluation of Special K, liking for Special K, and reported attitude toward Special K, α = .88). Participants then completed an 11-item regulatory focus scale (Higgins,

Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994; promotion focus α = .62; prevention focus α = .82). Regulatory fit was determined based on the participants' level of promotion focus – high promotion focus was treated as regulatory fit based on correspondence with the promotion oriented advertising message, and low promotion focus was treated as regulatory non-fit.

4.2. Results and discussion

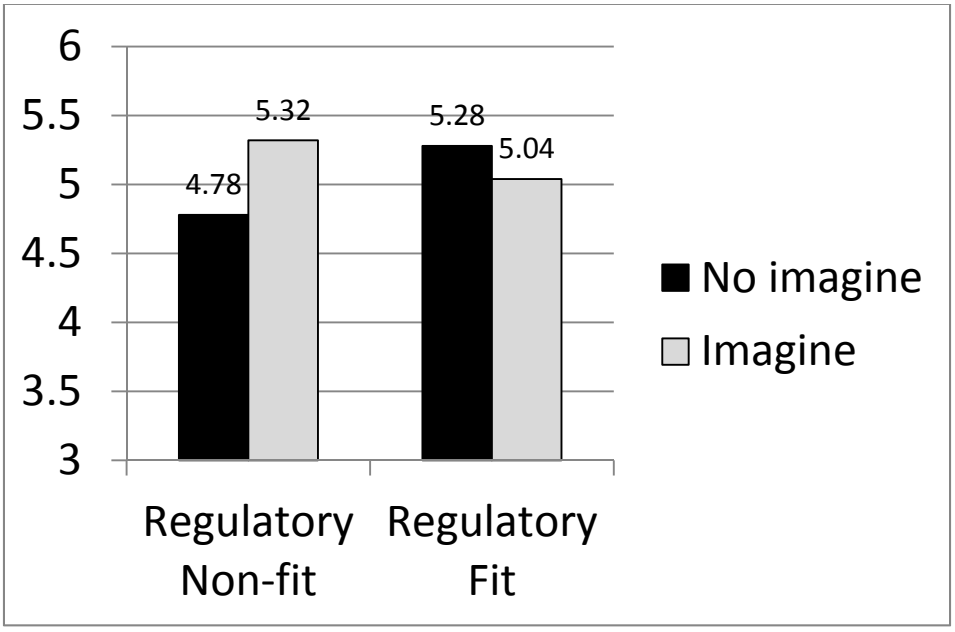
The theoretically derived predictions in our studies involve comparisons between high motivation (intrinsic motivation due to regulatory fit, extrinsic motivation due to imagine instructions, or both) and low motivation (regulatory non-fit and no imagine instructions) participants. Such predictions are most appropriately tested using orthogonal set planned comparisons (Keppel, 1991), because contrast analysis provides increased statistical power and interpretive clarity (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985). Thus, we tested the significance of our predicted pattern of evaluations by subjecting participants' evaluations to a planned contrast with the low motivation condition (regulatory non-fit/no imagine) assigned a weight of -3 and the three high motivation conditions assigned weights of +1. We predicted greater persuasion for high motivation participants than for low motivation participants. The two additional planned comparisons in the orthogonal set allow for a test of the reasoning behind the main prediction as described in the hypothesis development section. The comparison between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation was tested by assigning a weight of -2 to the low intrinsic/high extrinsic motivation (regulatory non-fit/imagine instructions) condition and weights of +1 to the two high intrinsic motivation (regulatory fit) conditions. The low motivation condition (regulatory non-fit/no imagine instructions) was assigned a weight of 0. It was predicted that in the case of regulatory non-fit, imagine instructions would provide the necessary motivation to increase persuasion to a level similar to that obtained by regulatory fit. Sufficiency of a single type of motivation was

tested by assigning a weight of -1 to the high intrinsic/low extrinsic motivation (regulatory fit/no imagine instructions) condition and a weight of +1 to the high intrinsic/high extrinsic motivation (regulatory fit/imagine instructions) condition. The remaining two conditions were assigned weights of 0. It was predicted that a single source of motivation should be sufficient to increase the persuasiveness of the ad, and thus that imagine instructions are ineffective when combined with regulatory fit. Because planned contrasts use error terms from an ANOVA (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985), we also report corresponding ANOVA results even though significant ANOVA results are not a necessary precondition for performing planned contrasts (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1995).

A planned contrast analysis was conducted as described in the preceding paragraph with attitudes toward Special K as the dependent measure; participants' scores on the prevention subscale of the regulatory focus measure were included as a covariate in this analysis because of the possibility that prevention focus could influence information processing in relation to the health-oriented advertising message. Participants were categorized as having regulatory fit or regulatory non-fit based on a median split on the promotion subscale of the regulatory focus measure. Consistent with hypothesis 1, this analysis revealed that high motivation participants (regulatory fit or imagine instructions) reported significantly more positive attitudes toward Special K (M = 5.21, SD = 0.96) than low motivation participants (M = 4.78, SD = 1.25; t (194) = 2.39, $p < .02$). Further, in support of this prediction, when participants with regulatory non-fit (low intrinsic motivation) were presented with imagine instructions, this resulted in equally positive attitudes as the regulatory fit (high intrinsic motivation) conditions (M = 5.32, SD = 0.85 vs. M = 5.17, SD = 1.01; t (194) = -1.13, *n.s.*). Lastly, when consumers were intrinsically motivated (regulatory fit), imagine instructions had no additional positive impact on attitudes (M

= 5.28, *SD* = 0.93 vs. M = 5.04, *SD* = 1.09; *t* (194) = -1.10, *n.s.*), indicating that a single source of motivation is sufficient to enhance the persuasive impact of the ad (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Brand Attitudes as a Function of Imagine Instructions and Regulatory Fit.



A 2 (regulatory fit: fit or non-fit) x 2 (imagine instructions: imagine or no imagine) ANCOVA with prevention focus as a covariate was also run. This analysis did not indicate main effects for either promotion focus or imagine instructions (*p*'s > .20), but did indicate a significant interaction between regulatory fit and imagine instructions (*F* (1, 194) = 7.05, *p* < .01).

The results of Study 1 are consistent with the possibility that consumers who experience regulatory fit are inherently motivated to generate additional information to support an advertising message, but that consumers who experience regulatory non-fit require a source of extrinsic motivation (e.g., imagine instructions) to generate such information. As predicted, the most negative attitudes were observed for participants with both poor regulatory fit and no

imagine instructions, suggesting that these participants were least likely to generate additional evidence supporting the advertising message.

Study 2 examines the generalizability of our motivational account for the effects of imagine instructions to a negative advertising context and using NFCC as a motivation measure. We predict that high motivation consumers (low NFCC, imagine instructions, or both) will form attitudes that more closely agree with the advertising message than low motivation consumers (high NFCC and no imagine instructions).

5. Study 2

5.1. Sample and procedure

One hundred and thirty-seven undergraduate students at a large southwestern university participated for course credit. The study used a NFCC x imagine instructions two-factor design, where imagine instructions were manipulated as a between-subjects factor and NFCC was measured as an individual difference factor.

Participants were asked to view a negative ad about McDonald's. The negative message featured an obese child accompanied by textual information about McDonald's exploiting children (McDonald's advertising is aimed at children, children think of a burger every time they see a clown with orange hair). For participants in the no imagine condition, this ad was the only thing presented on the screen. For participants in the imagine condition, the following instructions were added below the ad: "This is what we know McDonald's has done to our children. Imagine what we don't know…."

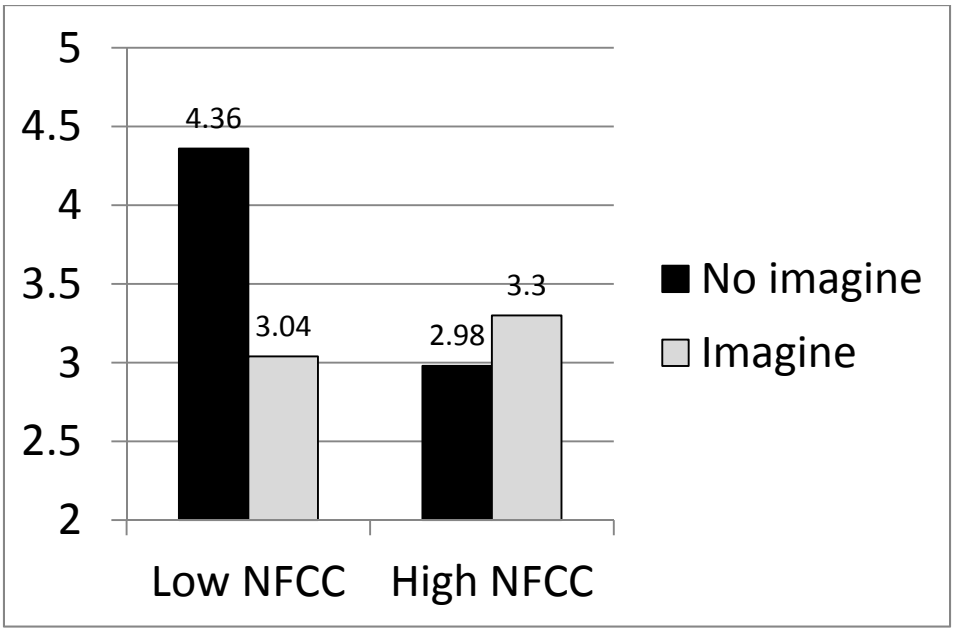
After viewing the ad, participants were instructed to indicate their attitudes (overall evaluation of McDonald's, liking for McDonald's, and reported attitude toward McDonald's; α = .91), purchase intentions (likelihood of eating at McDonald's in the future) and recommendation

intentions (likelihood of recommending McDonald's in the future) toward McDonald's. The purchase and recommendation intention measures were strongly correlated (r = .90) and were thus averaged to form a single index of behavioral intentions. Lastly, participants completed the 42-item NFCC scale (Webster & Kruglanski 1994; α = .73).

5.2. Results and Discussion

Similar to Study 1, the theoretically derived predictions between high motivation (low NFCC, imagine instructions, or both) and low motivation (high NFCC and no imagine instructions) participants were tested using planned contrast analyses. Participants were categorized as high or low NFCC based on a median split. Consistent with hypothesis 2, the planned contrast analysis revealed that high motivation participants reported significantly more negative attitudes (consistent with the negative argument in the ad) toward McDonald's (M = 3.13, SD = 1.50) than low motivation participants (M = 4.36, SD = 1.65; t (133) = -3.88, p < .001). Further, in support of this prediction, presenting high NFCC participants (low intrinsic motivation) with imagine instructions resulted in equally negative attitudes as the low NFCC (high intrinsic motivation) conditions (M = 3.04, SD = 1.42 vs. M = 3.17, SD = 1.55; t (133) = .31, *n.s.*). Lastly, for consumers with low NFCC (high intrinsic motivation), imagine instructions had no impact on attitudes and were thus ineffective (M = 2.98, SD = 1.36 vs. M = 3.30, SD = 1.66; t (133) = .87, *n.s.*; see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Brand Attitudes as a Function of Imagine Instructions and NFCC.

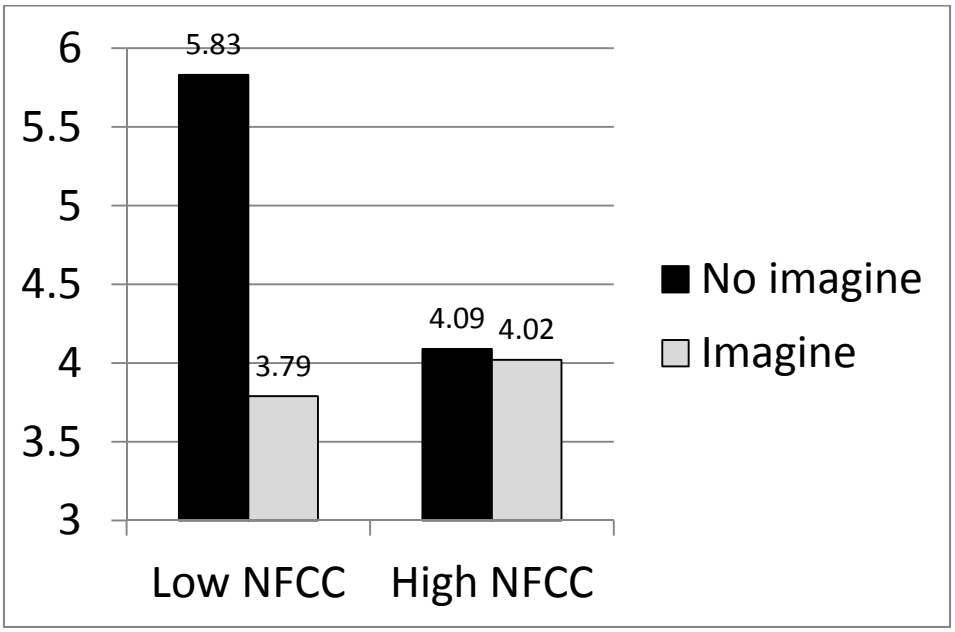


A 2 (imagine instructions: imagine or no imagine) x 2 (NFCC: high or low) ANOVA was also conducted. In addition to a significant main effect indicating that low NFCC participants had more negative attitudes toward McDonald's than high NFCC participants (F (1, 133) = 4.44, $p < .05$), and a marginally significant main effect for imagine instructions such that participants in the no imagine condition had more negative attitudes toward McDonald's than participants in the imagine condition (F (1, 133) = 3.44, $p < .07$), this analysis revealed the expected significant interaction between NFCC and imagine instructions (F (1, 133) = 9.46, $p < .01$).

Similar results were observed for behavioral intentions. Consistent with hypothesis 2, the planned comparison indicated that high motivation participants (low NFCC or imagine instructions) had more negative behavioral intentions toward McDonald's (M = 3.96, SD = 2.24) than low motivation participants (M = 5.83, SD = 1.99; t (133) = -4.02, $p < .001$). Further, presenting high NFCC participants (low intrinsic motivation) with imagine instructions resulted in equally negative behavioral intentions as the low NFCC (high intrinsic motivation) conditions (M = 3.79, SD = 2.29 vs. M = 4.05, SD = 2.23; t (133) = .60, *n.s.*). Lastly, for consumers with

low NFCC (high intrinsic motivation), imagine instructions had no impact on behavioral intentions and were thus ineffective (M = 4.09, SD = 2.22 vs. M = 4.02, SD = 2.27; t (133) = -.12, *n.s.*; see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Behavioral Intentions as a Function of Imagine Instructions and NFCC.



The ANOVA indicated main effects such that imagine instructions (F (1, 133) = 7.56, p < .01) and low NFCC (F (1, 133) = 3.87, p < .06) were associated with more negative intentions toward McDonald's, and as expected, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between NFCC and imagine instructions (F (1, 133) = 6.65, p < .05).

The results of Study 2 are consistent with the proposition that imagine instructions serve as a motivational cue. Participants with either high intrinsic motivation (low NFCC) or imagine instructions showed the greatest agreement with the advertising message, reporting more negative attitudes and more negative behavioral intentions toward McDonald's. Conversely, participants with low intrinsic motivation and no imagine instructions reported relatively positive attitudes and behavioral intentions toward McDonald's, indicating that the ad was relatively

ineffective for these participants. Study 3 examines the effectiveness of imagine instructions in relation to a variable (construal level) that is an indicator of capacity rather than motivation. Construal level is manipulated rather than measured to demonstrate the effectiveness of contextual cues, in addition to dispositional cues, in influencing the impact of imagine instructions on consumers. We expect the motivational influence of imagine instructions will be greater for consumers who are in high-level, abstract mindsets than for consumers who are in low-level, concrete mindsets because these consumers will have a greater ability to engage in the type of creative processing necessary to generate arguments beyond what is explicitly stated in the ad.

6. Study 3

6.1. Sample and procedure

One hundred and fifty-seven undergraduate students at a large southwestern university participated for course credit. The study used a construal level x imagine instructions two-factor design, where both construal level and imagine instructions were manipulated as between-subjects factors.

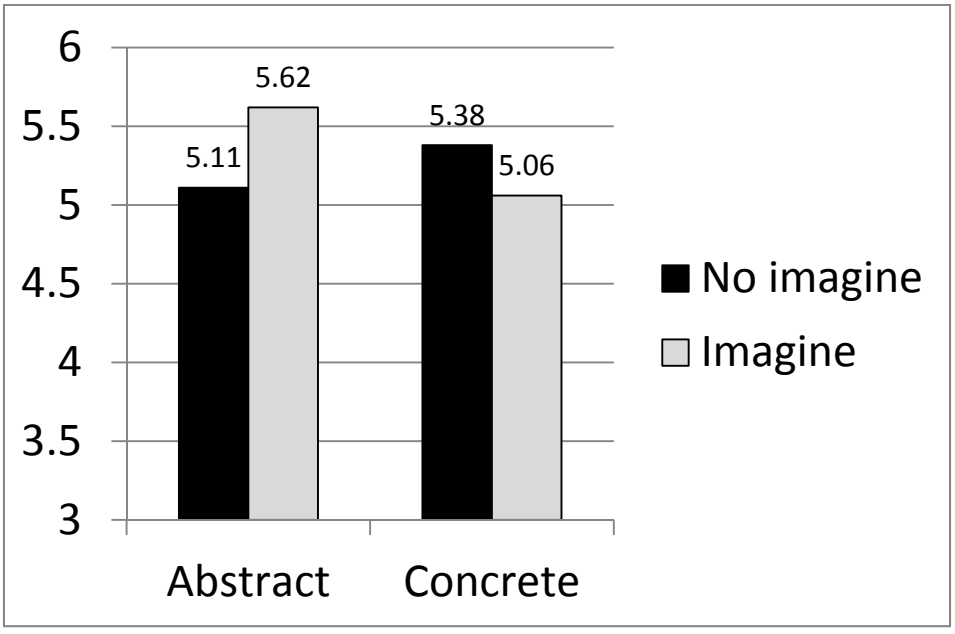
Construal level was manipulated via a prime adapted from McCrea, Liberman, Trope, and Sherman (2008) in which participants were asked to view a painting by Seurat that drew their attention either to the overall effect of the painting (abstract condition) or to the details of the technique of pointillism used to make the painting (concrete condition). Participants were then asked to view an advertisement with a positive message about Subway: "At Subway, Jared achieved a healthy weight and lifestyle; he is living proof that eating at Subway can help you lose weight and improve your health." Individuals in the imagine condition were asked to imagine additional health benefits of eating at Subway, whereas individuals in the no imagine

condition were not given any additional instructions. Participants were then instructed to provide their evaluations of Subway (overall evaluation of Subway, liking for Subway, and reported attitude toward Subway, α = .89).

6.2. Results and Discussion

A 2 (imagine instructions: imagine or no imagine) x 2 (construal level: high or low) ANOVA did not indicate main effects for either construal level or imagine instructions (*p*'s > .35), but did reveal the predicted interaction between imagine instructions and construal level (*F* (1, 153) = 6.39, *p* < .05). Planned comparisons were consistent with hypothesis 3. For high-level construal participants, imagine instructions (*M* = 5.62, *SD* = 1.08) resulted in more positive attitudes toward Subway than no imagine instructions (*M* = 5.11, *SD* = 1.01; *F* (1, 73) = 4.43, *p* < .05). For low-level construal participants, imagine instructions did not significantly influence attitudes toward Subway (*F* (1, 80) = 2.07, *p* > .15). See Figure 4.

Figure 4. Brand Attitudes as a Function of Imagine Instructions and Construal Level.



These results are consistent with the hypothesis that increasing participants' motivation to think about the ad via imagine instructions is only effective for participants with a high capacity to generate supporting arguments. For participants whose abstract construal level enhanced their capacity to engage in the type of creative thinking needed to generate ad-supporting arguments, imagine instructions induced more ad-consistent attitudes than no imagine instructions; conversely, for participants whose concrete construal level impaired creative thinking, imagine instructions had no effect.

7. Discussion and implications

Three studies and a pilot study were conducted to examine the effectiveness of imagine instructions in influencing consumers. Imagine instructions enhanced persuasion for consumers with low motivation (regulatory non-fit or high NFCC) and for consumers with a high capacity to engage in generative processing (abstract construal level), but had no effect on consumers with high motivation or a low capacity for generative processing.

These results, together with the results of the pilot study, suggest that (a) imagine instructions serve as a motivational cue, (b) any positive motivational factor is sufficient to encourage deeper ad-related processing, and (c) deeper ad-related processing only enhances persuasion when consumers are in a creative state that facilitates generative processing. Both NFCC (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996) and regulatory fit (Hong & Lee, 2008) are primarily motivational variables, and in each of the studies using these variables, we observed a sufficiency effect – low NFCC, regulatory fit, or imagine instructions were sufficient to induce participants to form stronger ad-consistent evaluations. In other words, imagine instructions increased the persuasiveness of the ad for low motivation participants but had no additional persuasive impact on high motivation participants. This is consistent with the possibility that

imagine instructions might provide an extra motivational boost to help ads reach disinterested consumers.

While study 1 and study 2 investigated motivation, study 3 focused on the importance of capacity. It demonstrated that, although imagine instructions can provide the necessary motivation, the ability to generate supporting arguments is dependent on abstract and creative processing. Consumers at an abstract construal level were more influenced by imagine instructions than those at a concrete construal level.

8. Conclusion

A great deal of time and money was spent in *The Truth* campaign employing the imagine strategy to reduce smoking. Although the success of that campaign has been documented (Farrelly et al., 2005), the present research provides the first empirical demonstration of the effectiveness of the imagine strategy as a persuasion technique. The present research also identifies two conditions under which the imagine strategy is likely to be most effective. The first of those conditions is that the imagine strategy works best when consumers have low motivation prior to viewing the ad. Fortunately, this is unlikely to be a major limitation because consumers in realistic ad exposure settings typically have low motivation (Wanke et al., 1997). We would go so far as to contend that this is a strength of the imagine strategy – it overcomes low motivation to persuade consumers more effectively.

The second condition is that consumers must have the capacity to generate the ad-supporting arguments they are asked to imagine. At first glance, this might seem like a significant obstacle. For example, the present research used construal level to operationalize generative capacity, and it might seem problematic to get or find consumers who are at the abstract construal level needed to enhance the effectiveness of the imagine strategy. However,

although construal level was enhanced with an artificial external task in the present research, it is quite possible to achieve a similar outcome using the content of the ad itself. Previous research has identified a variety of ways to induce abstract construal levels, some of which could be incorporate into ads to enhance the motivating effect of imagine instructions. Increased temporal distance (e.g., cigarette executives knew about this problem 30 years ago), increased social distance (e.g., using similar vs. dissimilar others in ads), less descriptive detail (e.g., Special K provides important health benefits, as opposed to Special K has 23% more fiber than the leading competitor), and verbal vs. pictorial representations have also been associated with abstract construal levels (Trope et al., 2007), and could thus be expected to enhance idea generation in response to the imagine strategy. Further, research has indicated that considering "why" one does something activates abstract construal while considering "how" one does something activates concrete construal (Freitas, Gollwitzer, & Trope, 2004). For example, White, MacDonnell, and Dahl (2011) successfully manipulated abstract vs. concrete mindset in an advertisement promoting recycling by framing the ad copy in terms of either "how" to make a difference (concrete) or "why" to make a difference (abstract), while Hong and Sternthal (2010) manipulated construal level in an advertisement for an MP3 player by focusing on either "why" the features were valuable (high-level) or "how" the features operated (low-level). These are just a few illustrations of techniques advertisers can use to create an advertising context in which the imagine strategy can be persuasive; imagine all the other techniques that might be even more effective.

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