There Are Many Reasons to Drive a BMW: Does Imagined Ease of Argument Generation Influence Attitudes?

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The effects of imagined versus actual ease of self-generating product-related information were investigated. An ad invited recipients to name either one reason or 10 reasons for (against) choosing a BMW over a Mercedes. Participants who complied with the task experienced the retrieval of one reason as easier than the retrieval of 10 reasons. Participants who did not comply nevertheless imagined the former as easier than the latter. Independent of whether ease was actually experienced or merely imagined, participants evaluated BMW more (less) favorably and Mercedes less (more) favorably when the retrieval was easy rather than difficult.

A classic notion in the persuasion literature holds that arguments that are self-generated by the targets of influence are especially effective in attitude change (see, e.g., Janis and King 1954; King and Janis 1956). In product communication, a frequently used strategy of exploiting this phenomenon is to let consumers generate relevant brand information.

However, recent research suggests that the effectiveness of self-generation may be moderated by the experienced ease or difficulty with which relevant material comes to mind. For example, in a study by Wänke, Bless, and Biller (1996), participants listed either three or seven self-generated reasons why to use (“pro”) or why not to use (“contra”) public transportation. Listing three arguments felt easy, while listing seven arguments felt difficult. As a result, participants who had listed seven pro reasons reported less favorable attitudes toward the issue than participants who had listed only three pro reasons. Conversely, listing seven contra reasons led to more favorable judgments than listing three contra reasons. Other participants who had not generated arguments themselves but were exposed to the arguments the former participants had generated showed the reverse effect. These mere receivers of arguments were more persuaded by seven than by three arguments. These studies suggest that experiencing difficulty in generating supportive arguments or counterarguments may reduce or, depending on the strength of the effect, even reverse the impact of their valence on attitude judgments (for similar findings on judgments regarding the self, see Schwarz et al. [1991b]).

Individuals seem to derive informational input from the experienced ease or difficulty with which relevant material comes to mind. A number of explanations for this effect seem possible (for a detailed discussion, see Wänke et al. [1996]). According to the availability heuristic, difficulty may lead individuals to infer that the amount of information is rather limited (Tversky and Kahneman 1982; Wänke, Schwarz, and Bless 1995). That is, from the lack of positive information they may derive a negative judgment. Alternatively, the lack of informational evidence may cause individuals to use the information conservatively or to correct for its implications (Wänke and Gierke 1995). Other evidence suggests that retrieval difficulty may result in perceiving the quality of the information as unconvincing (Werrmann 1996), which may also contribute to a reduced impact.

On the basis of these results regarding the moderating effect of subjective experience in information retrieval, we may assume that an ad prompting consumers to retrieve supportive arguments by themselves is successful only if consumers experience the task as easy. However, the available studies differ from a typical advertising situ-

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IMAGINED EASE IN GENERATING BRAND BENEFITS

Ation in many respects. Thus, it is unclear whether infer-
ences based on these studies are valid in an advertising
context. First, in extant studies, participants were asked
to write down the generated arguments, whereas ads ask
consumers only to think of relevant benefits. Second, in
these studies, careful control was exercised to make sure
that participants in the difficult condition actually com-
pleted the task even though it was difficult. In a realistic
setting of ad exposure, consumers may simply stop gener-
ating product benefits once the task turns difficult. Thus,
they may never actually experience difficulty. In addition,
the short time span and low involvement that consumers
usually devote to the processing of advertising may in
fact interfere with any argument generation at all. Thus,
the question remains as to what extent ease or difficulty
in generating product benefits in response to an ad may
play a role in product evaluation.

It has been suggested, however, that “it is not neces-
sary to perform the actual operations of retrieval. . . .
It suffices to assess the ease with which these operations
could be performed” (emphasis added; Tversky and Kah-
neman 1982, p. 164). In other words, consumers’ anticipa-
tion that the retrieval of product benefits will be difficult
may be sufficient to elicit an unfavorable inference about
the product. The notion of anticipated difficulty or imag-
ined difficulty as an elicitor of the inferences triggered
by actual experiences, though untested so far, seems plau-
sible for several reasons. The ability of individuals to
judge the difficulty of tasks before they begin them seems
highly functional. An estimation of the difficulty would
allow appropriate allocation of resources to the task, judg-
ment of the rate of success, and an assessment of the time
needed for completion. In addition, it seems unlikely that
such a system evolved without the estimates being func-
tionally equivalent to actual experiences. Indeed, evi-
dence from other experiential domains has shown that
merely imagining experiences suffices to induce the cor-
responding mood states (see, e.g., Strack, Schwarz, and
Gschneidinger 1985).

The notion that imagined ease or difficulty may trigger
the same effects as the actual experience is particularly
interesting for advertising purposes. Because ad recipients
usually devote limited attention to the processing of ad
information, consumers frequently may not engage in in-
formation generation. Nevertheless, ads that ask consum-
ers to do just that may be effective by way of imagined
information retrieval. This perspective poses a shift re-
garding the necessary conditions of how available in-
formation influences attitudinal judgments. The classical
assumption in social cognition (for reviews, see Higgins
[1989]; Wyer and Srull [1989]) and consumer cognition
(see, e.g., Kisielius and Sternthal [1984]; for a review,
see Kardes [1994]) suggests that judgments reflect the
content of the information that is accessible at the time of
judgment. According to much recent work, such as
described earlier by Schwarz, Wänke, and their colleagues
(Schwarz et al. 1991b; Wänke et al. 1996), the impact of
the content of accessible information is moderated by the
subjectively experienced ease of accessibility. Although
judgments reflected the valence of information for which
retrieval was experienced as easy, this was less the case
for information for which retrieval was experienced as
difficult.

In the present article, we develop this perspective one
step further and argue that, rather than actual experience,
the mere anticipation of how easy or difficult it would be
to retrieve relevant information may suffice to affect the
judgment. Thus, a judgment requires neither access to
actual information content nor any actual experience ac-
companying the retrieval process; rather, the cognitive
appraisal of the ease of retrieving particular information
may suffice.

Goals of the Study

Our study has two purposes. One is to test the moderat-
ing role of ease in an advertising context as described
above. Within this framework, our second goal is to investi-
gate whether anticipated ease is functionally equivalent
to actually experienced ease, as proposed by Tversky and
Kahneman (1982). Support for our hypotheses would sug-
gest an interesting twist to the traditional persuasive com-
munication in advertising, namely, that positive attitude
change can be enhanced by inducing difficulty in retriev-
ing negative arguments. Thus, it may be worthwhile for
a campaign to ask consumers to generate negative argu-
ments. It if can be ensured that consumers experience or
at least anticipate difficulty at this task, they may actually
develop a more positive attitude toward the product.

Overview and Hypotheses

In our study, participants were presented with an ad
that proposed that recipients should generate either one
or 10 reasons why one should drive a BMW or why one
should not drive a BMW. We assumed that in the one-
reason condition participants would actually retrieve one
reason, experiencing ease. For the 10-reasons condition,
we assumed that participants would either (a) experience
failure or high difficulty in attempting retrieval or (b)
anticipate to experience difficulty or failure and thus de-
cide not to engage in retrieval at all. Comparing the two
groups of participants (described by a and b) would shed
light on the untested proposition that actual and anti-
picated ease are functionally equivalent.

The ads were presented as comparative BMW versus
Mercedes ads. We chose these two brands because they
are the major competitors in the market of upper-middle-
class and luxury cars in Germany and are often seen as
substitutes for each other, much like the Coke and Pepsi
rivalry in the United States. Presenting comparative ads
allowed us to test our hypothesis regarding the retrieval
of negative information, which otherwise may not have
seemed credible.

We expected that ease would moderate the impact of
information content on brand evaluations and preferences.
More specifically, we expected that in the one-reason
condition, ad recipients who are asked to think of a pro
reason would evaluate BMW more positively than recipients who are asked to think of a contra reason, because both groups would use the accessible information. In the 10-reason condition, this difference between ads asking to generate pro reasons and those asking to generate contra reasons should be diminished, because retrieval difficulty—experienced or anticipated—would interfere with the impact that the implications of the ad content would otherwise have. For attitudes toward BMW’s competitor Mercedes-Benz, we expected the opposite impact of argument valence. That is, ad recipients should arrive at more favorable attitudes toward Mercedes after retrieving contra-BMW reasons than after retrieving pro-BMW reasons. Again, retrieval difficulty should weaken the influence of information content, resulting in diminished differences between the ads requesting pro reasons and those requesting contra reasons in the 10-reason condition.

Pilot studies with respondents from the same population as used in the main study had shown that both brands are evaluated favorably, with a slight advantage for BMW. Applying this observation to the above predictions, we expected BMW’s advantage to be affected by the content of retrieved information and the ease of this retrieval. BMW’s advantage over Mercedes should be more pronounced when the ad asked for one pro-BMW reason than when it asked for one contra-BMW reason, but this difference should diminish for the retrieval of 10 pro and contra reasons.

METHOD

Participants and Design

One hundred sixty male business students at the University of Mannheim voluntarily participated in the study. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (argument generation task: easy vs. difficult) × 2 (valence of arguments: pro vs. contra) × 2 (order of dependent measures: BMW rating first vs. Mercedes rating first) factorial design. The latter variation was introduced to control for possible order effects.

Stimulus Materials

Four different advertisements were created. Valence of the to-be-retrieved material was varied by using ads that either asked for the retrieval of reasons why to choose a BMW or asked for reasons why not to choose a BMW. Within each of these valence conditions, ease of retrieval was varied by the number of reasons to be retrieved: the easy version asked participants to retrieve one reason, whereas the difficult version asked participants to retrieve 10 reasons. Depending on experimental condition, the ads read: “There are many reasons (not) to choose a BMW. Can you name one (10)?” Each ad contained a headline saying “BMW or Mercedes?” This headline was created to present the ad as comparative advertising in order to make our negative valence condition appear more plausible.

To rule out the possibility that the ads evoked differences in liking that might pose an alternative explanation for the predicted effects, we ran an independent study. In a between-subjects design, 40 participants evaluated one of the four ads, indicating how much they liked it and how “annoying,” “witty,” “well done,” “clever,” and “convincing” they considered it to be. We found no differences (all F’s < 1). Moreover, we asked these participants to indicate for which brand they thought the ad was. Again, the presumed brand did not differ between the ads (F < 1), with about half of the participants attributing each of the ads to either brand.

In addition to the target ads, four filler ads were presented that also featured comparative ads (lifestyle magazines) or ads in which two brands advertised their complementary function (sunglasses and jeans; champagne and aspirin; frying pan and frozen fish). All filler ads consisted only of a slogan (e.g., “Where do Iglo fish fingers feel best? In Fissler frying pans, of course”).

Procedure and Dependent Variables

The experiment was run in groups with four to six participants. The sessions were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions of ease and valence. Both order conditions were distributed randomly in each session. Participants were recruited for participation in a study on the evaluation of advertising. They were asked to read newly created slogans for various products and later to answer some questions. All ads were projected by an overhead projector. Each ad was presented for 10 seconds. The target ad was the third ad in a series of five ads.

After the last ad was shown, the experimenter distributed questionnaires that contained the dependent measures, which participants completed at their own pace. Depending on the order condition, participants gave a general evaluation and purchase interest for BMW followed by the respective ratings for Mercedes, or vice versa. They then stated their preference for BMW versus Mercedes. All ratings were made on a graphic rating scale consisting of seven equal-sized boxes with labeled end points. The scale ends were labeled “highly favorable” and “highly unfavorable” for the brand evaluations, “very high” and “very low” for purchase interest, and “BMW” and “Mercedes” for the direct preference. After this task, participants’ immediate reaction to the ad was assessed. They indicated whether they had thought

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¹In principle, it may also be possible, however, that the evaluation of BMW would be transferred to Mercedes because of the similarity of the two brands. This would likely be the case if the arguments retrieved were generalizable to the whole category of luxury cars, e.g., “waste energy,” “look nouveau riche,” etc. A comparative ad, however, should induce subjects to think in terms of distinctive advantages or disadvantages of the respective brand compared to the competitor. We therefore did not expect such generalization in the present experiment.

²Iglo and Fissler are real brands in the respective product categories.
they could think of one (10) reasons (1 = “Yes, I’m absolutely confident I can retrieve one [10] reason[s]”; 7 = “No, I’m absolutely confident that I cannot retrieve one [10] reason[s]”). Moreover, participants indicated with a yes or no response whether they had actually tried to retrieve reasons. This question served to divide participants into those that had actual retrieval experiences and those that had only anticipated retrieval experiences. The former also indicated on a seven-point scale (with end points “very easy” and “very difficult”) how easy or difficult this retrieval felt. Finally, those respondents who had retrieved reasons were asked to list those reasons.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

Respondents in the easy (vs. difficult) condition were more confident that they could retrieve the requested number of reasons ($\bar{X} = 2.6$ vs. $\bar{X} = 5.6$, $F(1, 152) = 186.63$, $p < .001$; all other effects $p > .16$). In the easy condition, 49 percent of the participants actually attempted to retrieve one reason, but only 30 percent began to retrieve reasons in the difficult condition ($\chi^2 (1) = 5.89, p < .05$). Although not predicted by any hypothesis, participants in the pro condition (47 percent) were more likely to search for arguments than participants in the contra condition (31 percent; $\chi^2 (1) = 4.42, p < .05$). Those participants that actually retrieved arguments found this task easier in the easy condition than in the difficult condition ($\bar{X} = 3.3$ vs. $\bar{X} = 4.4$, $F(1, 55) = 7.02, p < .02$).

We had initially expected that all participants in the easy condition would attempt to retrieve information and that comparing actual and anticipated experience would only be possible for the difficult condition. As it turned out, only half of the participants in the easy condition actually attempted to retrieve information. This enabled us to compare the effects of experienced versus imagined ease or difficulty in both conditions by using attempted retrieval (yes [$N = 63$] vs. no [$N = 97$]) as a factor in the following analyses of brand evaluation and preference.

Brand Evaluations

The graphic rating scales were coded as seven-point rating scales, with higher numbers reflecting a more positive attitude or purchase interest. An ANOVA with these scores using ease, valence, order, and attempted retrieval as between-subjects factors and brand as a within-subjects factor revealed the same pattern of findings for the attitude scale and the purchase interest scale. Because of the relatively high correlation between the two scales ($r = .63$ for BMW and $r = .57$ for Mercedes), they were averaged into a compound score. The same ANOVA was then conducted with the compound score, yielding a significant three-way interaction of ease, valence, and brand ($F(1, 144) = 52.07, p < .001$). All effects of equal or higher order were nonsignificant ($F < 1.32, p > .25$). As Figure 1 reveals, the combination of ease and valence resulted in oppositely directed effects on the evaluation of BMW and Mercedes. Univariate analyses with ease, valence, order, and attempted retrieval as the independent factors revealed that the crossover interactions of valence and ease were significant for the evaluation of BMW ($F(1, 144) = 43.06, p < .001$) and for the evaluation of Mercedes ($F(1, 144) = 11.05, p < .001$).

The fact that experienced versus anticipated retrieval did not interact with the other factors suggests that the impact of experienced and anticipated ease is similar. In fact, separate analyses document that the predicted three-way interactions between ease, valence, and brand are significant for actual experience ($F(1, 144) = 17.04, p < .001$) and for anticipated experience ($F(1, 144) = 42.56, p < .001$; see Table 1 for the means and univariate ANOVAs).

The brand evaluations depicted in Figure 1 were further analyzed for simple comparisons.

**BMW Evaluation.** On the basis of a one-way ANOVA with the ad type as the independent variable ($F(3, 156) = 16.92, p < .001$), simple comparisons were tested by a one-tailed modified least significant difference test. As predicted, participants evaluated BMW more positively when the ad suggested they retrieve one reason for choosing a BMW rather than retrieve one reason against choosing a BMW ($p < .001$). Furthermore, as predicted, in the pro-BMW condition the evaluation became less favorable for 10 reasons ($p < .001$), while in the contra-BMW condition the evaluation became more favorable in case of 10 reasons ($p < .001$). This countervalue effect of the ad that asked for 10 reasons was so strong that the impact of valence not only diminished but reversed. Participants reported less favorable attitudes toward BMW following an ad that suggested they retrieve 10 pro reasons as compared to one that suggested they retrieve 10 contra reasons ($p < .001$).

**Mercedes Evaluation.** The effects of the different ads on the evaluation of Mercedes ($F(3, 156) = 5.48, p < .001$ for the one-way ANOVA) were generally smaller than the effects on the evaluation of BMW. Evaluations for Mercedes following ads that suggested the retrieval of one reason for or against BMW did not differ significantly from each other. However, according to expectations, compared with the respective one-reason conditions, evaluations for Mercedes became more favorable when 10 pro-BMW reasons were requested ($p < .02$) and less favorable when 10 contra-BMW reasons were requested ($p < .03$). In fact, ads suggesting the retrieval of 10 reasons led to significantly more positive Mercedes
FIGURE 1
MEAN EVALUATION OF BMW AND MERCEDES AS A FUNCTION OF AD TYPE

![Graph showing mean evaluation of BMW and Mercedes as a function of ad type.]

TABLE 1
MEAN EVALUATION OF BMW AND MERCEDES AND DIRECT PREFERENCES AS A FUNCTION OF AD TYPE AND ACTUAL VERSUS ANTICIPATED EXPERIENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ad type</th>
<th>Easy</th>
<th>Difficult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro BMW</td>
<td>Contra BMW</td>
<td>Pro BMW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual experience:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 63</td>
<td>N = 22</td>
<td>N = 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of BMW</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of Mercedes</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct preference</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>-.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated experience:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 97</td>
<td>N = 18</td>
<td>N = 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of BMW</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of Mercedes</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct preference</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>-.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.—Brand evaluation scales range from 1 to 7, and higher ratings reflect a more positive evaluation of the respective target brand. Direct preferences scales range from −3 to +3, and positive numbers reflect a relative preference for BMW.

Evaluations when the reasons were for rather than against BMW (p < .01).

Comparisons between Brands. On the basis of pilot studies, we had expected an advantage for BMW over Mercedes. However, we had expected the size of the advantage to be moderated by the experimental conditions. Differences between brands were tested by subtracting the Mercedes evaluation from the BMW evaluation for each participant and submitting the difference score to one-way ANOVA with ad type as the independent variable (F(3, 156) = 21.85, p < .001). On the basis of this, a modified least significant difference test was conducted. These comparisons revealed that an ad that asked why to
choose a BMW led to an advantage for BMW over Mercedes only if one reason was requested but not if 10 reasons were requested \( (p < .001) \). In fact, in the latter condition, BMW was rated less favorably than Mercedes. For reasons why not to choose a BMW, Mercedes enjoyed an advantage over BMW when one reason was requested but not when 10 reasons were requested \( (p < .001) \). Again, a reversal emerged and BMW was rated more favorably than Mercedes in the latter condition.

Possible Mediators

As was mentioned in the introduction, there are several possible mediators of the impact of ease of retrieval (for a more detailed account, see Wänke et al. [1996]). According to the availability heuristic (Tversky and Kahneman 1982), individuals infer a scarcity of pro arguments and arrive at a less positive evaluation if the retrieval of pro-BMW arguments is difficult rather than easy. Alternative accounts suggest that difficulty may reduce the perceived diagnosticity of the information. Whether the notion of difficulty is experienced personally or merely inferred from other sources should not affect its impact on subsequent judgments.

The present study does not allow us to distinguish whether or not the observed effects are due to imagined failure rather than imagined difficulty. However, in the absence of an actual experience and actual outcome, individuals may not distinguish between success with difficulty and failure. After all, whether one succeeds with difficulty or does not succeed at all is mainly a function of invested effort. In this respect, we argue that imagined difficulty and imagined failure are merely different facets of the same picture.

It may be argued on the one hand that failure, difficulty, or the mere thought of engaging in cognitive activity may cause negative affect. However, this would not explain the differential impact of difficulty for pro versus contra reasons. On the other hand, experience-elicited affect may have served a mediating function by affecting the processing of the information rather than directly affecting the judgments. Previous research has shown that, compared with a happy mood, a sad mood leads to more systematic processing of persuasive arguments and thus to a decreased impact of weak arguments (see Schwarz, Bless, and Böhner 1991a). Assuming that the reasons retrieved by ad recipients were not extremely compelling, negative affect may have caused less attitude change than positive affect. Unfortunately, we did not include measures of affect. Although one may assume that experiencing ease contributes to positive affect (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi 1975) and difficulty to negative affect, the only “ease” study of which we are aware that assessed affect found no effect of manipulated difficulty on assessed mood (Werrmann 1996). This does not preclude the emergence of mood effects in the present study, but mood effects on the processing of information would not explain the effects of anticipated experience where in fact no information was retrieved.

DISCUSSION

Our hypotheses were supported. Whereas previous research (Schwarz et al. 1991b; Wänke et al. 1996) manipulated the subjective experience that accompanies actual retrieval, the present study demonstrates that imagined experience can lead to identical effects. Experienced as well as imagined difficulty in information retrieval served to discount the implications of information content. An ad that employed recipients’ self-generation of product benefits resulted in a more favorable attitude toward the target brand and a more unfavorable attitude toward the competitor brand when recipients either experienced or merely imagined this generation task as easy. An ad that asked recipients to retrieve negative brand information resulted in a more favorable attitude toward the target brand and a more unfavorable attitude toward a competitor brand when this retrieval task was difficult rather than easy.

Applied Implications

Three aspects of our findings are especially noteworthy for applied purposes. First, our results recommend that advertisers encourage consumers to generate brand benefits only if consumers can do so easily. Should consumers experience or merely imagine difficulty, they are likely to arrive at a more negative evaluation. Second, the effects of retrieving negative product information suggest a new
NOTE.—Positive numbers indicate a preference for BMW, and negative numbers indicate a preference for Mercedes.

strategy. Because difficulty in retrieving negative product information can result in rather positive attitudes toward a product compared with its competitor, asking consumers to retrieve negative information may provide a useful strategy for brands or products that lack both distinctively positive and negative features. Even when little positive product information can be presented, the experience of difficulty or failure in coming up with any negative information may exert a positive influence on attitudes toward the product. Third, if ad recipients do not engage in information retrieval but rather imagine their experience, this imagination process itself may be subject to external influences. For example, certain cues in the situation might evoke the impression that the thought generation would be easy or difficult. At present, this assumption is still highly speculative, and further research is needed to provide evidence both for the proposed dynamics and for the nature of the cues that would trigger them.

Relation to Previous Findings in the Advertising Literature

Having ad recipients self-generate product benefits is not the only advertising strategy that employs recipients’
active input. Other studies have shown that, at least for highly involved consumers, forming their own conclusions is more effective than being presented with conclusions (Sawyer and Howard 1991). Although many different processes may contribute to this effect, we would also suggest that the ease with which a particular conclusion springs to mind may moderate this finding. If recipients arrive at a conclusion only with difficulty, they may have less confidence in that conclusion and rely less on it (see Wänke et al. 1996).

At present, our study and other research has only investigated the effects of subjective ease in information generation on judgments assessed shortly after the information generation. Asking ad recipients to self-generate product benefits may, however, also prove to be an effective strategy because self-generated information is recalled better than externally presented information (Slamecka and Graf [1978]; see Moore, Reardon, and Durso [1986] for research in an advertising context).

CONCLUSIONS

We suggest that the experienced and the imagined subjective experience with which ad recipients process brand information is an important factor in determining recipients’ brand attitudes. Both actual and imagined experience may thus be worthwhile targets of brand or product communication. More generally, our results confirm earlier findings on the mediating role of experienced ease in attitude change. In addition, they complement the earlier findings insofar as merely imagined as opposed to experienced ease is a sufficient mediating variable. Although the processes underlying the impact of subjective experience are not yet fully understood, we believe that our findings offer insights for the theoretical understanding of ease effects and for their application in the advertising context.

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