

# CONSUMER IMAGINATION: AN EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION OF THE IMPACT OF NEED FOR HAPTIC INFORMATION

Nancy Spears, University of North Texas  
Atefeh Yazdanparast, University of Evansville

## ABSTRACT

The human imagination has long fascinated scholars and practitioners. Some researchers argue that imagination enables consumers to construct stories in which they are the main characters in a future consumption situation. Schau (2000 p. 50) defined imagination as the “site of knowledge creation” and suggested that the imagination has two key functions: (1) imagination unites incoming or newly presented information with what is already known to create knowledge; and (2) imagination provides an avenue for identity construction as the consumer situates him/herself relative to the product or service. In fact, in the imagination, incoming sensory knowledge is combined with what is already known through thought structures and processes to create knowledge that links identity and consumption.

In spite of these important contributions, there remains little consensus among scholars about how the consumer imagination is structured (White 1990; Zhao, Hoeffler, and Dahl 2009). The present research has the central purpose of advancing our understanding of this issue. Drawing from extant literature, the present research identifies and investigates the impact of constraint imposed on imagination stemming from missing information in working memory and the constraint imposed by the elaborative approach. Moreover, the study tests the role of perceived ownership as a potential process mechanism of imagination.

A 2 (NFT–instrumental: +/1 Std. Dev.) X 2 (elaborative approach: imagine or consider) between subjects design was employed in which NFT–instrumental was measured and imagine vs. consider elaborative approaches were manipulated. Respondents read a cover story about an online purchase situation of a sweater for attending an upcoming event. The information on the target product (i.e., sweater) overview, fabric, care, and sizing were provided. Next, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the two manipulated scenarios instructing them to either use their imagination to form a picture of what they will look like in the sweater or consider the features of the sweater and think about how those features go with their body.

The results demonstrate the boundary influence that missing product information imposes on imagination when the consumer prefers the type of information that is missing. Thus, imagining consumers who prefer to touch products prior to purchase have lower purchase intentions and product confidence. Moreover, the results indicated that consumers’ imagination leads to higher product judgment confidence and purchase intention through an elevated sense of ownership, identifying perceived ownership as the underlying mechanism for the imagination effect.

References available upon request