

How does imagery in interactive consumption lead to false memory? A reconstructive memory perspective

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Abstract

Consumers are often exposed to information that may contradict their consumption experience, leading to “false memory” for aspects of the consumption. We develop a theory suggesting why false memory may be heightened due to imagery processing. We subject this theory to a rigorous test in three experiments. We find that post-consumption imagery makes it more difficult to discern between consumption and misleading information thereby boosting false recall. Yet, imagery that is more consumption-based helps reduce consumers’ susceptibility to false memory. Consistent with this notion, we explicate the role that attention plays at different stages of consumption in affecting false memory.

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Consumers often encounter information that contradicts their consumption experience. Contradictory information may be seen while answering surveys or participating in message boards, online discussion groups and/or social networking sites. Even conversations with other consumers or salespeople may expose us to misleading information. Conventional wisdom suggests that consumption experiences lead to lasting impressions that are impervious to misinformation. Yet, anecdotal evidence offers evidence to the contrary. The commotion surrounding “unpatchable” flaws in the Firefox browser during an industry conference highlights this problem (Lyman, 2006). Although untrue, the speed with which news about this “problem” spread and the outpouring of concern among users—even after retraction of the report—underlines the potential effect of post-consumption misinformation on consumer memory.

Academic research demonstrates that exposure to misleading information leads to a post-consumption misinformation effect (Braun, 1999). Findings suggest that while evaluations are susceptible to misinformation, facts—especially those central to the consumption—may be immune (Braun, 1999; Cowley & Janus, 2004). However, conclusions about the immunity of facts centrally related to consumption are based on two implicit

premises that may not generalize to a significant chunk of modern consumption. The first premise is that consumption is largely underpinned by reasoning-based or “discursive” information processing (e.g., ELM, Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Schlosser, 2003, p. 184). The second, stemming from the first premise, is that when facts are judgments about the product, the centrality of a fact might even sharpen memory—possibly due to greater thought (e.g., Cowley & Janus, 2004).

Both these premises are subject to challenge when consumption-related information processing is seen from a broader, more inclusive viewpoint. Modern consumption spans both products that may be viewed from a discursive processing lens (such as food products, financial services, and consumer durables) and those that implicate imagery processing (e.g., Green & Brock, 2002; Wyer, Hung & Jiang, 2008) such as movies, video games, leisure parks and many forms of internet usage. With such products, imagery is not only an integral part of the consumption, but is also intertwined in various post-consumption behaviors. For instance, narrating the experience to a friend, posting on blogs, or responding to market research in these contexts would involve imagery. Indeed, previous research on web-based consumption suggests that inferences using a discursive lens may not readily generalize to imagery-rich environments (Schlosser, 2003). When consumption involves imagery, the centrality of a fact may not accord it any particular benefit (in terms of greater thought). This raises the question of memory resilience in such environments.

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In this paper we investigate the false memory problem using the misinformation experimental paradigm with interactive consumption as the imagery-based consumption context. We find that key facets of consumption may not only be susceptible to false memory, but—when post-consumption imagery is explicitly encouraged—also be heightened because it is difficult to monitor the true memory of consumption versus the images generated via imagery. Yet, imagery that is more focused on the consumption itself may help reduce consumers' susceptibility to false memory due to additional opportunities to discern between competing sources of information. Consistent with this notion, we find that attention devoted to the consumption at retrieval may help reduce false memory. Fig. 1 summarizes our conceptual model.

Reconstructive memory and the role of source monitoring

The broad theoretical framework guiding false memory research is the idea of reconstructive memory (Bartlett, 1932). This framework suggests that we do not necessarily retrieve our memories about previous events in a manner similar to replaying a video recording. Rather, our seemingly veridical memories are *reconstructed* from different pieces of information accessed on the basis of retrieval cues. Thus it might include pieces of the picture that have been inferred from the rest of the information available to us. The false memory effect is one specific manifestation of this process whereby post-consumption stimulus information is integrated into the memory for the consumption event during (a later) reconstructive process.

Source monitoring theory (Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993) may help explain how misinformation seen after consumption becomes integrated with consumption memory. This framework has been used to explain misidentification of event sponsors or brands in advertisements (Johar & Pham, 1999; Pham & Johar, 1997). Johnson et al. (1993) define source monitoring as the set of processes involved in making attributions about the origins of memories, knowledge and beliefs. A failure in source monitoring leads to misattribution between information remembered from a consumption episode versus post-consumption information (such as ads, word of mouth or even erroneous questions). This, in turn leads to the merging of post-consumption information into consumption memory leading to the misinformation effect. Thus, the mix-up between post-consumption information and memory for the

consumption occurs because of failure to accurately monitor the *source* of each piece of information.

Experiment 1: Imagery processing and reconstructive memory

Imagery-based consumption and source monitoring

Mental imagery has been the subject of inquiry in numerous consumer contexts. A core finding is that imagery enables consumers to generate, interpret and manipulate information through spatial representation (Dahl, Chattopadhyay, & Gorn, 1999). According to Dahl et al. (1999), mental images can stem from past experience or from our imagination. Given that the experienced and the imagined share high levels of perceptual detail, imagined experiences may appear as real as true ones (Dahl et al., 1999; Mitchell & Johnson, 2000). Further, the presence of mental images sharing a high level of similar perceptual detail should enhance the likelihood of source misattribution (Schacter, 1996).

In most consumption, discursive and imagery processing occur in parallel (Epstein, 1991). However, in non-interactive consumption, discursive processing may be expected to dominate (Schlosser, 2003). In such situations, a central either/or fact—for example, whether a juice is grapefruit or orange—is salient and easy to monitor while less tangible observations (such as how sweet or “orangey” a juice was) are more difficult to pin down. When customers encounter contradicting information after consumption, source misattribution is less likely for the fact. Indeed, presentation of misinformation may in fact, lead to a sharpening of memory—a pattern found by Cowley and Janus (2004).

This situation, however, changes quite dramatically when processing is imagery-based as in many interactive contexts (e.g., Holbrook & Hirschmann, 1982) or evaluation of new products (e.g., Zhao, Hoeffler, & Dahl, 2009). In such contexts, consumers generate vivid mental images during consumption. When new target relevant (albeit misleading) information is presented afterwards, the availability of a vivid and embellished mental record of the consumption episode allows for easy integration of this new information with the experience (Jacoby, Hessels, & Bopp, 2001). This integration is the basis for possible source attribution errors during recall (see Fig. 2). Further, the eyewitness testimony literature suggests that in situations where the memory of an imagined event contains a wealth of detail about the context, individuals are more likely to believe that it is a real memory of a true event (Schacter, 1996, p. 116). Thus, source monitoring errors are more likely in richer, more embellished, rather than impoverished contexts since it is easier to “fill in” missing pieces (Bartlett, 1932). Combining the above:

H1a. In imagery-rich consumption contexts, exposure (versus no exposure) to misinformation leads to higher false recall of consumption-related facts.

Extended imagery and source monitoring

Consider now when imagery processing is explicitly encouraged after consumption. The process of generating

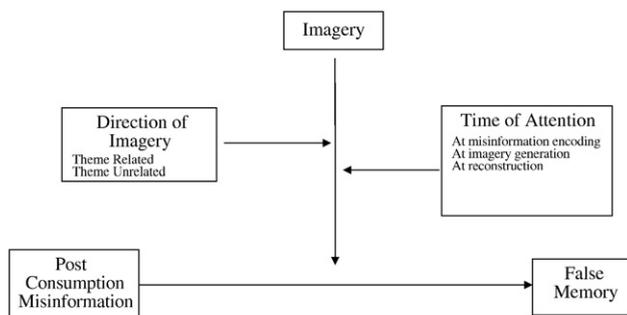


Fig. 1. Conceptual Model.

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