IRIS W. HUNG and ROBERT S. WYER JR.*

Consumers' attraction to a product can often be based on the subjective reactions that they imagine they would have if they personally used it. Three experiments examine the effects of self-focused attention on the use of this criterion and the conditions in which it is applied. When features of the judgment (social or nonsocial) context are similar to those of the situation in which the products are normally used, self-focused attention increases participants' disposition to imagine themselves using the products they evaluate, and in turn, these imaginings increase both their evaluations of these products and their likelihood of choosing these products as a gift for taking part in the experiment. The effects occur when features of the judgment context are manipulated both by incidental background music and by the presence of others in the situation at hand. However, when either self-focused attention is low or features of the judgment context are dissimilar to those in which the products are normally used, these effects are not apparent.

Keywords: self-focused attention, self-awareness, imagery, imagination, context effects

Shaping Consumer Imaginations: The Role of Self-Focused Attention in Product Evaluations

Stimulating consumers to imagine themselves using a product they are considering can be a powerful persuasion tool in marketing communications. This stimulation can be provided in different ways. Advertising appeals sometimes instruct recipients to "Imagine ..." or "Think back to your experience of...." Such appeals presumably encourage consumers to construct a mental representation of themselves using the product they are considering. Other techniques are more subtle. For example, retail store environments often contain features that are similar to those in which a product is used, based on the assumption that customers will imagine themselves using the product in this context. However, these strategies call attention to two questions of interest to both marketing practitioners and marketing researchers. First, under what conditions do consumers spontaneously imagine themselves using the product they are considering *without* being explicitly instructed to do so? Second, what factors shape the content and implications of their imaginings for consumer judgment?

In this regard, consumers who contemplate a purchase decision could employ several strategies. For example, they might consider the product's individual attributes and base their evaluation on the utility or intrinsic attractiveness of these attributes, combining their evaluative implications to form a judgment in the manner implied by information integration theories (Anderson 1971); they might retrieve a previously formed global impression of the product as a whole and base their judgment on the affect this impression elicits (Pham 1998; Yeung and Wyer 2004); or they might imagine themselves using the product in a relevant situation and base their judgment on the subjective reactions this image elicits. The effectiveness of this latter strategy has typically been investigated when participants are explicitly instructed to imagine themselves using a product (Baumgartner, Sujan, and Bettman 1992; Escalas 2007; Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993). However, consumers are unlikely to

*Iris W. Hung is Assistant Professor of Marketing, Department of Marketing, NUS Business School, National University of Singapore (e-mail: iris.hung@nus.edu.sg). Robert S. Wyer Jr. is Visiting Professor of Marketing, Department of Marketing, Chinese University of Hong Kong (e-mail: mkwyer@ust.hk). This research was supported in part by grants HKUST6053/01H, HKUST6194/04H, and HKUST6192/04H from the Research Grants Council, Hong Kong, and by grant R-316-000-079-112 from the National University of Singapore. Jeff Inman served as associate editor for this article.

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receive such instructions outside the laboratory. The conditions in which consumers spontaneously imagine themselves using the products they consider, without being asked to do so, and use the feelings elicited from these imaginings as a basis for judgment have not been identified.

Our research examines these conditions. We hypothesize that consumers' tendency to imagine themselves using a product they are evaluating is particularly evident when features of the judgmental context are similar to those of the situation in which the product being evaluated is normally used and are likely to activate concepts associated with this situation. To use this criterion, however, consumers must also be attentive to their internal thoughts and subjective reactions. If neither of these conditions arises, consumers may not think about using the product. Instead, they may base their evaluations on an assessment of the product's individual features (Anderson 1971) or on their affective reaction to the product as a whole independently of the context in which it is used (Yeung and Wyer 2004). In this case, features of the judgment context have little influence.

To evaluate these hypotheses, we had participants in three experiments evaluate products either (1) while listening to incidental background music that was associated with social or nonsocial situations (in Experiments 1 and 3) or (2) in the presence or absence of others (in Experiment 2). One product they considered was typically used in social situations, and another was typically used in nonsocial situations. When features of the judgment context were similar to those of the situation in which the product was typically used, drawing participants' attention to their subjective thoughts and feelings increased their disposition to imagine themselves using the product in this situation and to base their evaluations of the product on this criterion. Thus, they evaluated a social product more favorably when they either listened to social music or participated in the presence of others, and they evaluated a nonsocial product more favorably when they either listened to nonsocial music or participated alone. When participants' attention was not drawn to their subjective reactions, however, these differences were not evident.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Imagery and Self-Focused Attention

The role of imagery in information processing is well established both theoretically (e.g., Kosslyn 1976) and empirically (Hung and Wyer 2009; Petrova and Cialdini 2005; Wyer, Hung, and Jiang 2008). However, the construction and use of images as a basis for judgment is not foreordained. For one thing, people differ in their disposition to form visual images (Childers, Houston, and Heckler 1985; Jiang and Wyer 2009). In addition, the tendency to form images can depend on the format in which information is presented (Adaval, Isbell, and Wyer 2007; Adaval and Wyer 1998) and the order in which it is conveyed (Wyer, Adaval, and Colcombe 2002).

Furthermore, the construction of an image does not guarantee that the image is *self-relevant*. In the conditions we investigated, however, participants evaluated products in the absence of specific information about them. In this case, imagery can enter into consumer judgments in at least two ways. First, consumers might form a mental image of the product itself independently of the context in which the product is considered. Second, they might construct a narrative-based image of themselves using the product in the sort of situation in which it is normally found. The type of image that is constructed may depend in part on whether consumers' attention is focused on themselves, thereby increasing their sensitivity to their internal thoughts and feelings and leading them to take these subjective reactions into account (Duval and Wicklund 1972; Scheier and Carver 1977). If consumers' attention is directed outward, they may form an image of the product they are judging without thinking about how they would feel if they were to use it.

The disposition to focus attention on oneself can vary among people (Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss 1975; Gasper and Clore 2000). However, it can also be induced situationally. Duval and Wicklund (1972; see also Scheier and Carver 1977) show that placing people in front of a mirror, which directs their attention to themselves as an object, sensitizes them to their emotions and increases their reliance on previously acquired concepts and knowledge for use in making a judgment or decision. Consequently, it increases attitude–behavior consistency (Pryor et al. 1977) and resistance to persuasion (Hutton and Baumeister 1992; Scheier and Carver 1980).

In our research, we consider an additional effect of self-focused attention. We posit that when consumers are asked to evaluate a product, stimulating them to attend to their subjective thoughts and feelings increases the likelihood of them constructing an image of themselves using the product and of basing their evaluation of it on their reactions to this imagined experience. However, self-focused attention may not be *sufficient* to stimulate the formation of such an image. Other factors may come into play as well.

Situational Determinants of Self-Relevant Image Formation

To the extent that consumers imagine themselves using a product, the content of this image and its evaluative implications might depend on the type of situation they imagine. (Participants might evaluate herbal tea more favorably if they imagine drinking it while listening to classical music at home rather than at a football game.) In turn, the nature of this situation could be influenced by the context in which the product is considered at the time of judgment. Research on knowledge accessibility (for reviews, see Förster and Liberman 2006; Wyer 2008) suggests that if features of the situation in which people find themselves activate concepts and knowledge that are relevant to a judgment they are making, these features can influence this judgment. However, this is true only if the concepts are applicable (Feldman and Lynch 1988; Higgins, Rholes, and Jones 1977). Thus, if the features of the situation in which people evaluate a product are similar to those in which the product is normally used, these features may activate thoughts about using the product in this situation. However, if the features of the judgment context are irrelevant to the situation in which the product is used, people may evaluate the product on the basis of its attributes or the intrinsic attractiveness of the product as a whole, independently of the context in which it is used.

In summary, two conditions are necessary for people to imagine themselves using a product they are evaluating. First, people must be sensitive to their feelings and subjective reactions. Second, the situational context in which they consider the product must activate concepts that are appli-

cable to the situation in which the product is typically used. Formally,

> H_1: Consumers evaluate a product more favorably when their attention is focused on themselves and contextual cues activate concepts associated with the conditions in which the product is used. If the contextual cues are irrelevant to the product's use, however, consumers' self-focused attention has relatively little effect.

An alternative possibility requires consideration: In contrast to our assumptions, people who attend to their subjective thoughts and feelings might *generally* imagine themselves using a product independently of the judgment context and its similarity to the situation in which the product is used. If the features of the judgment context are similar to features of the situation in which the product is used, consumers might find it easy to construct this image, and this ease of processing might increase the evaluations they base on this image (Schwarz 2004; Winkielman and Cacioppo 2001). If these features differ from those of the situation in which the product is used, however, people might encounter difficulty in constructing the image, and this could decrease their evaluations of the product. (For that matter, people might simply evaluate a product less favorably when they imagine using it in an inappropriate context, independently of the difficulty of forming the image.) This possibility contrasts with the implications of H_1 that self-focused attention has no effect on people's product evaluations when features of the judgment context are dissimilar to those of the situation in which the product is normally used. Rather, it indicates that self-focused attention will decrease evaluations in this condition. The experiments we report allowed for these alternative possibilities.

Preliminary Experiments

We conducted pretesting (see Web Appendix A at http://www.marketingpower.com/jmrapril11) to identify contextual factors that were associated with different types of situations and products that were typically used in these situations. On the basis of this pretesting, we selected two pieces of music: one that was associated with social situations and one that was associated with nonsocial situations.

In addition, we confirmed our assumption that directly inducing people to imagine themselves using the products would have the effects that we hypothesized to result from self-focused attention. Participants in two preliminary experiments evaluated a series of 15 target products while listening to either social music or nonsocial music. These products varied in terms of both the situation context in which they are typically used and their hedonic quality. We varied the hedonic quality of the target products so that we could examine whether the role of self-focused attention in the construction of self-referent images depends on the hedonic quality of products. In one experiment (see Web Appendix B, Experiment B1 [http://www.marketingpower.com/jmrapril11]), participants were explicitly asked to imagine themselves using the products, and in the second experiment (Web Appendix B, Experiment B2), participants' self-focused attention was induced using procedures employed by Duval and Wicklund (1972). The studies yielded virtually identical results. Self-focused attention increased participants' evaluations of hedonic products (which were presumably judged on the basis of the affect they elicited; Pham 1998; Yeung and Wyer 2004) but not utilitarian products, confirming that self-focused attention increases participants' sensitivity to their subjective (i.e., affective) reactions. More important, regardless of the hedonic quality of the target products, stimulating participants to imagine themselves using the products they considered increased their evaluations of products that were typically used in the type of situation with which the incidental background music was associated but had no effect on their evaluations of products that were normally used in other types of situations. Inducing self-focused attention had comparable effects.

EXPERIMENT 1

The design of our preliminary experiments precluded a direct evaluation of the factors that mediate the impact of self-focused attention on product evaluations. Experiment 1 provided a more direct test of the influence of participants' imagined use of the individual products on their evaluations. Participants evaluated two target products: an apartment and a television. For each product, we created two different attribute descriptions. One pertained to a socially relevant attribute and the other to a non–socially relevant attribute. Participants evaluated one product described by each type of attribute. Thus, the criterion used as a basis for judgment was not confounded with the type of products being judged.

Data we obtained in this study enabled us to distinguish between the alternative processes that underlie the effects. As we noted previously, self-focused attention might generally increase participants' tendency to imagine using the products they evaluate in the situation called to mind by the judgment context. However, the image might be easier to construct when features of the judgment context are similar to those of the situational context in which the product is typically used, and this difference in difficulty may influence participants' evaluations (Schwarz 2004). In contrast, we hypothesize that although self-focused attention increases people's attention to themselves in general, it does not stimulate them to imagine themselves using the product unless features of the judgment situation call this situation to mind. Supplementary data we collected enabled us to evaluate the relative merits of these interpretations.

Method

Pretesting. We created two alternative attribute descriptions for both a television and an apartment. The television was described by either a socially relevant attribute ("specifically designed for multiple-player television games") or a non–socially relevant attribute ("specifically designed for a personal movie theater"). Correspondingly, the apartment was described by either a socially relevant attribute ("a spacious clubhouse for recreation") or a non–socially relevant attribute ("a spacious bathroom and private Jacuzzi").

To confirm the implications of these descriptions, 59 undergraduate students were asked to consider a product of each type (one described by a socially relevant attribute and the other by a non–socially relevant attribute) and estimate (1) the importance of the attribute described and (2) the extent to which they would prefer to use the product in both a "social environment" and a "nonsocial environment" on scales from 0 ("not at all") to 10 ("very"). They were also

asked to indicate the extent to which they based their evaluation of the products on usefulness or feelings on a scale from 0 ("usefulness") to 10 ("feelings"). Social and nonsocial attribute descriptions did not significantly differ in either importance (7.05 vs. 6.85, respectively) or the extent to which they were evaluated on the basis of feelings (4.76 vs. 5.83, respectively). However, the two descriptions differed substantially in the extent to which they elicited preferences for using the product in a social situation (6.72 vs. 4.75, respectively) or a nonsocial situation (4.78 vs. 7.46, respectively) (in each case, $p < .01$).[1]

Procedure. One hundred eighty-eight undergraduate students participated for course credit. They were randomly assigned to conditions of a 2 (self-focused attention) × 2 (situational context) × 2 (product attribute type) mixed design, with the first two serving as between-subjects factors and product attribute type serving as a within-subject factor. Participants were seated at small desks separated by partitions. In high self-focused attention conditions, a 16 × 16 centimeter mirror was placed on each table along with a note reading, "Please do not move the setup. Save for experiment conducted by the Department of Social Science." The experimenter reinforced this request, indicating that the mirrors were being used in another experiment and not to move them. In low self-focused attention conditions, the mirrors were not present.

Participants were told that they would take part in several allegedly unrelated studies, the first of which was ostensibly intended to investigate the effect of music on reading comprehension. Under this pretense, participants were given a 250-word passage about animals and were asked to read it while listening to one of the two pieces of music. After four minutes, participants were told to stop reading. They were then told that judgments are often more reliable when the information on which they are based has had time to "settle" and that they would be asked to complete a short, unrelated task before answering questions about the passage they had read.

While the music continued, the participants evaluated three products. A filler product (shampoo) was common to all conditions. The other two products—a television and an apartment—were used to construct two stimulus replications. Specifically, half of the participants in each experimental condition evaluated a television described by a socially relevant attribute and an apartment described by a non–socially relevant attribute. The remaining participants rated a television described by a non–socially relevant attribute and an apartment described by a socially relevant attribute. The order of presenting the products in the questionnaire was counterbalanced. Thus, pooled over participants in each experimental condition, each target product was associated with a socially relevant and a non–socially relevant attribute the same proportion of times.

[1]We also added a filler product, shampoo, which was described by a context-irrelevant attribute ("contains an effective cleansing agent"). This product did not differ from the two target products in the extent to which it was evaluated on the basis of feelings (M = 5.21) and importance (M = 6.81). However, it differed from the target products in the extent to which the product attribute description elicited preferences for using the product in a social situation (M = 4.32, $p < .01$) or a nonsocial situation (M = 3.58, $p < .01$).

Product evaluations. Participants reported their liking for each product and then made several other ratings that were intended to assess the factors that might mediate their evaluations. Participants assessed all items on a scale from 0 ("not at all") to 10 ("very"). (The exact wording of all measures in all experiments appears in Web Appendix C [see http://www.marketingpower.com/jmrapril11].)

Imagined use of products. Participants indicated the extent to which they imagined themselves using the products. In addition, participants completed Burnkrant and Unnava's (1995) four-item measure, which was composed of items pertaining to the extent to which participants (1) thought about their experience with the product, (2) thought about what it would be like to use the product, (3) thought about the product's relationship to themselves, and (4) were reminded of their own experience with the product. We averaged these four items to provide a single score for each product being judged ($\alpha = .93$). Factor analyses of the two measures of imagined use yielded a one-factor solution that accounted for more than 78.43% of the variance in judgments of both social and nonsocial products (in Experiments 1 and 2). Therefore, we averaged the two indexes.

Imagination difficulty. Participants indicated the extent to which they found it difficult to imagine themselves using each of the products.

Involvement. Participants indicated both how involved and how careful they were in evaluating the products.

Reactions to music. Participants indicated the extent to which they felt they were (1) in a social environment in which they were interacting with other people and (2) in an environment in which they were by themselves without other people around. They also indicated how relaxed they felt. Next, they evaluated the music with respect to three sets of attributes pertaining to arousal (upbeat, arousing), pleasantness (pleasant, happy, joyful), and sadness (sad, depressing). Finally, they indicated the extent to which they personally experienced these feelings. We averaged responses to items in each set to provide a single index of each reaction.

Self-focused attention. Participants completed a sentence construction task similar to that employed in previous research to assess self-consciousness (Briley and Wyer 2002). They were told that the researcher was interested in how people construct meaningful English sentences. Twenty-five items were provided (e.g., "take taxi I a They"), and participants were asked to underline four words that could form the first sentence that came to their mind. We used the number of sentences in which participants used a personal pronoun as an index of self-focused attention.

Results

Manipulation checks. We analyzed the data as a function of self-focused attention and music conditions. The manipulation of self-focused attention was successful. Participants constructed a larger number of sentences with self-related pronouns when the mirror was present than when it was not (14.26 vs. 12.78, respectively; $F(1, 184) = 19.58$, $p < .001$). No effects of music were significant ($Fs < 1$).

The manipulation of situational contexts was also successful. Relative to participants who listened to nonsocial music, those who listened to social music reported that they felt they were in a social context to a greater extent (6.38 vs. 4.52; $F(1, 184) = 17.62$, $p < .001$), that they felt they were

in a nonsocial context to lesser extent (4.20 vs. 5.61; F(1, 184) = 13.10, $p < .001$), and that they felt less relaxed (3.54 vs. 6.01; F(1, 184) = 75.66, $p < .001$). No effects of self-focused attention were significant (in all cases, $p > .10$).

Participants did not differ in their perceptions that the two pieces of music were pleasant (for social vs. nonsocial music, 6.56 vs. 6.26) or sad (1.16 vs. 1.28) (in each case, $p > .10$). Their personal feelings of happiness and sadness also did not differ (in the case of happiness, 6.25 vs. 5.84; in the case of sadness, 1.28 vs. 1.37; in each case, $F < 1$). Furthermore, although participants judged the social music to be more arousing than the nonsocial music (2.33 vs. 3.37; F(1, 184) = 20.21, $p < .001$), their personal *feelings* of arousal were not significantly different in the two music conditions (2.34 vs. 2.77; F(1, 184) = 2.45, $p > .1$). No other effects were significant. Finally, analyses of participants' involvement yielded no significant effects at all ($F < 1$), suggesting that the extent to which participants carefully elaborated their answers and were involved in the task was not influenced by the situational context and self-focused attention.

Product evaluations. The effects of our manipulations on product evaluations were consistent with our predictions. An analysis of these evaluations as a function of self-focused attention, situational context, and attribute descriptions yielded a three-way interaction of these variables (F(1, 184) = 15.29, $p < .001$). Data relevant to this interaction (see the first section of Table 1) indicate that self-focused attention significantly increased the evaluations of products whose attribute descriptions were compatible with the situation called to mind by the music. That is, self-focused attention increased evaluations of social products when social music was played (when self-focused attention was high vs. low, 8.54 vs. 7.11; F(1, 184) = 14.79, $p < .001$) and increased evaluations of nonsocial products when nonsocial music was played (8.83 vs. 7.84, respectively; F(1, 184) = 7.99, $p < .01$). However, self-focused attention had little effect on evaluations of products whose attributes were incompatible with the situation called to mind by the music (in both cases, $Fs < 1$). The interaction of music and self-focused attention in analyses of evaluations pertaining to each type of product separately was significant in each case ($F(1, 189) > 6.76$, $p < .01$). Supplementary analyses of evaluations of the filler product (shampoo), which we assumed to be ambiguous in terms of the situation to which it pertained, yielded no significant results ($p > .30$).

Imagined use of products. As we noted previously, the effect of self-focused attention might be due to two somewhat different processes. First, it might increase people's tendency to imagine themselves using the product they are evaluating *independently* of the judgment context and its similarity to the situation in which the product is used. In this case, we would expect a main effect of self-focused attention on participants' tendency to imagine themselves using the product. A second possibility, however, is that self-focused attention increases people's attention to themselves in general (as the manipulation check indicates) but stimulates them to imagine themselves using the product only if characteristics of the judgment situation call attention to the type of situation in which it might be used. In the latter case, we would observe an interactive effect of self-focused attention, music, and product attribute type on participants' tendency to imagine themselves using the product.

Data shown in the second section of Table 1 support the latter possibility. Analyses of these data revealed a significant three-way interaction of music, self-focused attention, and attribute type (F(1, 184) = 11.51, $p < .001$). When social music was played, self-focused attention increased participants' tendency to think of themselves using products described by socially relevant attributes (for high vs. low self-focused attention, 7.29 vs. 6.15; F(1, 184) = 7.54, $p < .01$) but not products described by non–socially relevant attributes (5.97 vs. 6.11; $F < 1$). When nonsocial music was played, self-focused attention increased participants' tendency to think of themselves using products described by non–socially relevant attributes (for high vs. low self-focused attention, 8.03 vs. 6.51; F(1, 184) = 17.25, $p < .001$) but not products described by socially relevant attributes (5.42 vs. 5.07; $F < 1$).

Further analyses confirmed the mediating effect of imagined use of the product being judged. Although the three-way interaction of self-focused attention, music, and attribute type on product evaluations was significant (b = .87, SE = .24, $p < .001$), its magnitude was reduced when the interactive effects of these variables on imagined use was taken into account (b = .54, SE = .22, $p = .02$). A Sobel test confirmed that the mediation effect was significant ($z = 2.68$, $p < .01$). Separate analyses of data for each attribute type showed that the interaction of self-focused attention and music had an effect on evaluations of both products described by socially relevant attributes (b = .71, SE =.20, $p < .001$) and

Table 1

EXPERIMENT 1: PRODUCT EVALUATIONS AND EXTENT OF IMAGINED USE OF PRODUCTS AS A FUNCTION OF ATTRIBUTE TYPE, TYPE OF MUSIC, AND SELF-FOCUSED ATTENTION

	Socially Relevant Attribute		*Non–Socially Relevant Attribute*	
	Social Music	*Nonsocial Music*	*Social Music*	*Nonsocial Music*
Product Evaluations				
High self-focused attention	8.54 (1.47)	6.64 (2.09)	6.80 (1.70)	8.83 (1.04)
Low self-focused attention	7.11 (1.54)	6.67 (2.02)	7.11 (2.04)	7.84 (1.93)
Difference	1.43*	–.03	–.31	.99*
Extent of Imagined Use of Products				
High self-focused attention	7.29 (1.38)	5.42 (2.50)	5.97 (1.47)	8.03 (1.22)
Low self-focused attention	6.15 (2.10)	5.07 (1.83)	6.11 (2.19)	6.51 (2.09)
Difference	1.14*	.35	–.14	1.52*

*$p < .05$.

Notes: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

products described by non–socially relevant attributes (b = .56, SE = .19, p = .003), but these effects were reduced when the interactive effect of these variables on imagined use was taken into account, and this was true of both products described by socially relevant attributes (b = .51, SE = .18, $p < .01$) and products described by non–socially relevant attributes (b = .24, SE = .18, p = .18). Sobel tests confirmed that the amount of mediation was significant in analyses of products described by both a socially relevant attribute (z = 2.39, $p < .02$) and a non–socially relevant attribute (z = 3.41, $p < .001$).

Imagination difficulty. Music and attribute type had interactive effects on participants' estimates of the difficulty of imagining themselves using the products ($F(1, 184) = 18.60$, $p < .001$). Participants reported having less difficulty imagining themselves using products described by socially relevant attributes when social music was played than when nonsocial music was played (2.46 vs. 3.27; $F(1, 184) = 4.88$, $p < .05$). The reverse was true for products described by non–socially relevant attributes (3.76 vs. 2.31; $F(1, 184) = 6.20$, $p < .01$). However, these differences did not depend on self-focused attention; the three-way interaction of music, self-focused attention, and attribute type was nonsignificant ($F < 1$). Thus, differences in imagination difficulty cannot account for the effects of self-focused attention on product evaluations.

Involvement. Finally, analyses of participants' involvement (in all conditions, $M > 5.59$) yielded no significant effects ($F < 1$), suggesting that the extent to which participants carefully elaborated their answers and were involved in the task was not influenced by the situational context and self-focused attention.

Supplementary Data

A follow-up study confirmed our assumptions pertaining to the content of participants' thoughts about the product. One hundred fifteen undergraduate students were randomly assigned to cells of a 2 (self-focused attention) × 2 (music: social vs. nonsocial) × 2 (product attribute type: social vs. nonsocial) × 2 (product replication: television vs. apartment) between-subjects design. (Thus, participants in this study considered only a single product rather than two.) The procedure was similar to that used in Experiment 1; however, after evaluating the product, participants wrote down what they were thinking about when evaluating the product. Participants reported the nature of their thoughts along a scale from –5 ("thought more about attributes of the product") to 5 ("thought more about how they might enjoy using the product").

The results confirm the findings of Experiment 1. These variables affected product evaluations in a similar manner, as an interaction of self-focused attention, music, and product attribute type confirms ($F(1, 99) = 9.75$, $p < .002$), regardless of the product replicate ($F < 1$). Self-focused attention increased evaluations of the social product when social music was played (from 6.50 to 8.46) but not when nonsocial music was played (7.20 vs. 6.83), and it increased evaluations of nonsocial products when nonsocial music was played (from 7.00 to 8.56) but not when social music was played (6.82 vs. 6.36). The interactions of self-focused attention and context were significant in analyses of social product evaluations ($F(1, 99) = 5.20$, $p < .05$) and in analyses of nonsocial product evaluations ($F(1, 99) = 4.23$, $p < .05$).

Moreover, participants' thought listing varied similarly. Each participant's thought protocol was scored for the number of thoughts that pertained to using the product. Analyses of these data revealed an interaction of self-focused attention, music, and product attribute type ($F(1, 99) = 11.75$, $p < .001$). Inducing self-focused attention increased the number of thoughts about using a social product when social music was playing (from .28 to .91; $F(1, 99) = 14.26$, $p < .001$) and increased the number of thoughts about using a nonsocial product when nonsocial music was playing (from .46 to .88; $F(1, 99) = 6.05$, $p < .02$). However, its effects on the thoughts that participants generated in the other two conditions were negligible (.23 vs. .28). The interaction of self-focused attention and context was significant in analyses of nonsocial product evaluations ($F(1, 99) = 10.37$, $p < .01$) and was marginally significant in analyses of social product evaluations ($F(1, 99) = 2.74$, $p < .10$).

Participants' ratings of how much they thought about using the product in these conditions confirmed our conclusions. Specifically, self-focused attention increased the extent to which participants imagined using a social product when social music was played (from –.17 to 4.18; $F(1, 99) = 14.41$, $p < .001$) but had no effect when nonsocial music was played (–.77 vs. –.90, respectively). Correspondingly, it increased the extent to which participants imagined using a nonsocial product when nonsocial music was played (from –1.70 to 3.94; $F(1, 99) = 21.88$, $p < .001$) but not when social music was played (–.53 vs. –.43). The interaction of self-focused attention, music, and product type was again significant ($F(1, 99) = 17.14$, $p < .001$), as was the interaction of self-focused attention and music in analyses of data for each type of product separately ($F(1, 99) > 6.50$, $p < .01$).

When we added the extent of thinking about how a person might enjoy using the product as a covariate to the analysis of self-focused attention, situational factors, and attribute type on product evaluations, the interactive effect of these variables was reduced to nonsignificance ($F(1, 99) = 2.13$, $p > .15$), whereas the impact of the covariate remained significant ($F(1, 99) = 9.73$, $p < .01$). Follow-up analyses of covariance on evaluations of each separate product yielded similar results (the effect of the covariate: $F(1, 99) > 4.12$, $p < .05$; the interactive effect of self-focused attention and situational factors: $F(1, 99) > 1.08$, $p > .30$, for each product separately).

Discussion

The results of Experiment 1 confirm the prediction that self-focused attention increases participants' evaluation of products that are typically used in the type of situation called to mind by the music being played. Furthermore, this increase was mediated by the effects of self-focused attention on participants' tendency to construct images of themselves using the products being described. If the situation that was called to mind by the music was irrelevant to the product being evaluated, self-focused attention did not stimulate participants to think of themselves using the product, and its effect on evaluations of the product was not evident.

We also ruled out alternative explanations for our findings. For example, we speculated that inducing self-focused attention might lead people to imagine themselves using the

product they are evaluating in all conditions and that their judgments might be influenced by the difficulty of doing so (Schwarz 2004; Winkielman and Cacioppo 2001). Self-focused attention had no impact on participants' reported tendencies to imagine themselves using the product under different judgment context conditions. Thus, this alternative interpretation of our findings is called into question.

In addition, self-focused attention might increase the amount of cognitive elaboration, and its effect on product evaluations might be a reflection of this increased amount of processing. However, participants' reports of their involvement in the experiment (a determinant of cognitive elaboration) did not vary over conditions. Furthermore, if the effects of self-focused attention on product evaluations were driven by its effects on cognitive elaboration, the effects should have been evident in the evaluations of all products regardless of whether the products were used in the situation with which the music was associated. This was not the case.

Finally, it is possible that idiosyncratic differences between the two pieces of music we played drove the observed effects. For example, the social music was more upbeat and less relaxing than the nonsocial music, and in general, participants judged it to be more arousing. However, the arousal that participants reported personally experiencing did not depend on the type of music that was played. (The role of arousal is further called into question in Experiment 2.)

EXPERIMENT 2

To ensure that our results are generalizeable, we sought to demonstrate that contextual factors other than music could have similar effects. To this end, participants in Experiment 2 took part in the study either in the presence of others or alone. We expected that this manipulation would have effects similar to those of social and nonsocial music, respectively, that we observed in Experiment 1.

Method

Participants and design. One hundred nineteen business majors participated in this study for course credit. They were randomly assigned to cells of a 2 (self-focused attention) × 2 (situational context) × 2 (product attribute type) mixed design with the first two as between-subjects factors and the third as an additional within-subject factor.

Procedure and measures. The experiment was conducted in a room with ten nonpartitioned seats. In nonsocial context conditions, participants were run individually with no one else in the experimental room. In social context conditions, eight to ten participants were present in each experiment session. We again manipulated self-focused attention through the use of a mirror.

Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to investigate how people process information of the type encountered in daily life. Participants evaluated the same three products considered in Experiment 1 (a television, an apartment, and shampoo), and the attributes were varied in the same manner. That is, participants first indicated their liking for the products in counterbalanced order. Then, for *each* product, they indicated the extent to which they imagined themselves using the product and the difficulty of doing so along scales identical to those used in the first experiment. Finally, they completed the same manipulation checks of self-focused attention and situational context employed in Experiment 1 and reported their feelings of arousal, happiness, and sadness.

Results

Manipulation checks. The manipulation of self-focused attention was successful; participants constructed more sentences with self-related pronouns when a mirror was present than when it was not (13.61 vs. 11.61, respectively; $F(1, 115) = 14.22$, $p < .001$). No other effect was significant. Participants reported feeling that they were in a social situation to a greater extent when they participated in the experiment with others than when they participated alone (7.08 vs. 5.97; $F(1, 115) = 5.37$, $p < .02$), and they reported feeling that they were in a nonsocial situation to a greater extent when they participated alone than when they participated with others (4.75 vs. 3.21; $F(1, 115) = 9.66$, $p < .01$). No other differences were significant. Participants' feelings of arousal, happiness, and sadness also did not vary over experimental conditions (in all cases, $F < 1$).

Product evaluations. We summarize product evaluations in the first section of Table 2 as a function of self-focused attention, the presence of others, and product description. The interaction of the presence of others and attribution type was significant ($F(1, 115) = 41.09$, $p < .001$) but was qualified by a three-way interaction of these variables and self-focused attention ($F(1, 115) = 15.68$, $p < .001$). The form of

Table 2

EXPERIMENT 2: PRODUCT EVALUATIONS AND EXTENT OF IMAGINED USE OF PRODUCTS AS A FUNCTION OF ATTRIBUTE TYPE, SOCIAL CONTEXT, AND SELF-FOCUSED ATTENTION

	Socially Relevant Attribute		*Non–Socially Relevant Attribute*	
	Social Context	*Nonsocial Context*	*Social Context*	*Nonsocial Context*
Product Evaluations				
High self-focused attention	8.88 (1.19)	5.79 (2.27)	6.47 (2.37)	8.97 (1.14)
Low self-focused attention	6.85 (1.39)	6.13 (2.37)	7.00 (1.62)	7.59 (1.70)
Difference	2.03*	–.34	–.53	1.38*
Extent of Imagined Use of Products				
High self-focused attention	7.81 (1.07)	5.75 (1.88)	6.29 (1.73)	7.97 (.77)
Low self-focused attention	6.01 (1.53)	5.68 (2.04)	6.24 (2.34)	6.50 (1.60)
Difference	1.80*	.07	.05	1.47*

*$p < .05$.

Notes: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

this interaction is identical to that obtained in Experiment 1 under comparable conditions (see Table 1). Self-focused attention increased participants' evaluations of products described by a socially relevant attribute (when self-focused attention was high vs. low, 8.88 vs. 6.85; $F(1, 115) = 13.60$, $p < .001$) when they were with others but not when they were alone (5.79 vs. 6.13, respectively; $F < 1$). Correspondingly, self-focused attention increased participants' evaluations of products described by a non–socially relevant attribute when they were alone (when self-focused attention was high vs. low, 8.97 vs. 7.59; $F(1, 115) = 10.50$, $p < .01$) but not when they participated with others (6.47 vs. 7.00, respectively; $F < 1$). The interaction of self-focused attention and situational context was significant in analyses of each type of product separately (in each case, $F(1, 115) > 8.20$, $p < .01$). (Analyses of evaluations of the filler product again yielded no significant results [$p > .14$].)

Imagined use. Analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction of the presence of others, self-focused attention, and attribute type ($F(1,115) = 12.39$, $p < .001$). Data summarized in the second section of Table 2 indicate that when others were present, self-focused attention increased the extent to which participants imagined using the social product (when self-focused attention was high vs. low, 7.81 vs. 6.02; $F(1, 115) = 14.99$, $p < .001$) but not the nonsocial product ($F < 1$). When participants were alone, however, it increased the extent to which they imagined using the nonsocial product (when self-focused attention was high vs. low, 7.97 vs. 6.50; $F(1, 115) = 13.29$, $p < .001$) but not the social product ($F < 1$). The interaction of self-focused attention and the presence of others was significant in analyses of each type of product separately (in each case, $F(1, 115) > 5.44$, $p < .02$).

Regression analyses confirmed the mediating effect of imagined use. The interactive effect of self-focused attention, the presence of others, and attribute type on product evaluations was significant ($b = 1.41$, $SE = .38$, $p < .001$) but was reduced when the effect on imagined use was taken into account ($b = .81$, $SE = .32$, $p < .01$). Sobel tests confirmed that the mediation effect of self-referencing was indeed significant ($z = 2.69$, $p < .01$). Follow-up mediation analyses of the two-way interactive effects of self-focused attention and situation context conditions on evaluations of products described by each attribute type separately also confirmed that these effects were significantly mediated in part by their effects on imagined use. Although the two-way interaction had an effect on evaluations of both products described by socially relevant attributes ($b = 2.14$, $SE = .38$, $p < .001$) and products described by non–socially relevant attributes ($b = 1.63$, $SE = .34$, $p < .001$), this effect was reduced when its effects on imagined use were taken into account, and this was true of both products described by socially relevant attributes ($b = 1.51$, $SE = .37$, $p < .001$) and products described by non–socially relevant attributes ($b = 1.18$, $SE = .32$, $p < .001$). Sobel tests confirmed that the amount of mediation was significant in both cases ($z > 2.72$, $p < .01$).

Imagination difficulty. The effects of self-focused attention were not a result of differences in ease of processing. Analyses of imagination difficulty yielded no significant three-way interaction of self-focused attention, situational context, and product attribute type ($F(1, 113) = 2.17$, $p > .10$). A two-way interaction of situational context and attribute type was revealed ($F(1, 115) = 25.36$, $p < .001$). Participants reported that it was less difficult to imagine themselves using the nonsocial product in nonsocial context conditions than in social context conditions (2.57 vs. 4.15, respectively; $F(1, 113) = 11.26$, $p < .001$) and that it was less difficult to imagine themselves using the social product under social context conditions than under nonsocial context conditions (2.94 vs. 4.42, respectively; $F(1, 113) = 9.57$, $p < .002$). However, no effects involving self-focused attention were significant ($p > .10$).

EXPERIMENT 3

Experiment 3 provides evidence that the variables we manipulated affect consumers' actual choices of products. Participants were asked to choose one product as a free gift to take home among three different ones (a social, a nonsocial, and a filler product) while they listened to either the social or the nonsocial music. As we show, self-focused attention increased participants' disposition to choose a nonsocial product as a gift when they listened to the nonsocial music but not when they listened to the social music. Correspondingly, it increased their disposition to choose a social product as a gift when they listened to the social music but not when they listened to the nonsocial music.

Method

Participants and design. One hundred fourteen undergraduate business students were randomly assigned to conditions of a 2 (self-focused attention) × 3 (music: social vs. nonsocial vs. none) between-subjects design.

Product choice task. Instructions to participants and the procedure for inducing self-focused attention were identical to those in Experiment 1. That is, participants listened to social, nonsocial, or no music while reading a passage about animals as a test of reading comprehension. This was done in either the presence or the absence of a mirror. Participants were told to stop reading after four minutes, although the music continued to play.

Before participants continued, the experimenter made the following announcement: "[W]e have some materials ... left over from a previous experiment. We would like to give you one of these as a gift. Please indicate your preference by ranking these items so that I can obtain the right number from another room while the rest of the study is being completed." Under this pretense, the participants rank-ordered three products: potato chips (a product associated with social situations), a tea bag (a product associated with nonsocial situations), and a ballpoint pen (a product associated with neither social nor nonsocial situations).[2] After completing this, they answered questions similar to those we used in the prior studies to assess the extent to which participants felt like they were in a social or nonsocial environment and their affective reactions to the music in terms of happiness, sadness, and relaxation along a scale from 0 ("not at all") to 10 ("very much").

[2]We confirmed the associations of products and contexts in a separate pretest. Sixty-one participants indicated the situations (social, nonsocial, or neither of the two) in which the use of each product was preferred: A proportion of .67 of the participants preferred to use potato chips in a social environment, a proportion of .73 of participants preferred to use tea bags in a nonsocial environment, and a proportion of .91 of participants chose neither of the situations for using a ballpoint pen.

Results

Manipulation checks. Analyses of participants' reactions to the music as a function of music conditions and self-focused attention yielded no significant effects involving self-focused attention ($p > .10$). Participants reported that they felt that they were in a social environment to a greater extent when they listened to social music (M = 5.13) than when they listened to nonsocial music (M = 3.46; $F(1, 72) = 7.28$, $p < .01$), and they reported that they felt that they were in a nonsocial environment to a lesser extent in the former case than in the latter (5.40 vs. 6.60, respectively; $F(1, 72) = 4.02$, $p < .05$). Correspondingly, participants reported that they felt more relaxed when nonsocial music was played (M = 7.64) than when social music was played (M = 6.18; $F(1, 72) = 8.22$, $p < .01$). However, exposure to the music did not affect their feelings of either happiness (when the music was social vs. nonsocial, 5.45 vs. 5.59) or sadness (1.39 vs. 1.06; in each case, $F < 1$). More important, participants did not significantly differ in the extent to which they imagined themselves performing the activities they rated in the two self-focused attention conditions (when self-focused attention was high vs. low, 5.93 vs. 6.41; $F(1, 108) = 2.47$, $p > .10$).

Product choices. Table 3 shows the proportion of participants who chose the two target products as a function of music conditions and self-focused attention. When self-focused attention was high, 75% of the participants chose potato chips when social music was played, as opposed to only 40% when no music was played and 15% when nonsocial music was played. When self-focused attention was low, however, these differences were much less pronounced (40%, 39%, and 25%, respectively). Correspondingly, 65% of the participants chose a tea bag when nonsocial music was played, as opposed to 25% when no music was played and 15% when social music was played. When self-focused attention was low, however, these differences were not evident (25%, 33%, and 20%, respectively).

We conducted cumulative logistic regression analyses to verify the effects of music conditions, self-focused attention, and product type on participants' ranking of preference for the products. To examine whether the effects we observed were driven by self-reported feelings of relaxation, which varied across conditions of music, we added feelings of relaxation as a covariate in the analysis. The interaction of music conditions, self-focused attention, and product type was significant ($\chi^2(12) = 25.99$, $p < .01$), even after we controlled for effects of feelings of relaxation ($p > .29$). Follow-up analyses of preference ranking separately for each product yielded a marginally significant interaction of music conditions and self-focused attention in each case (in analyses of potato chips and a tea bag, respectively, $\chi^2(2) = 5.30$, $p < .07$, and $\chi^2(2) = 5.00$, $p < .08$). These variables had no significant effect on preferences for the filler product ($ps > .11$). When social music was played, self-focused attention increased preferences for potato chips (choice: 75% vs. 40%; $\chi^2(1) = 5.13$, $p < .02$; ranking: $\chi^2(1) = 4.35$, $p < .04$). When nonsocial music was played, self-focused attention increased preferences for a tea bag (choice: 65% vs. 25%; $\chi^2(1) = 5.90$, $p < .02$; ranking: $\chi^2(1) = 5.86$, $p < .02$). However, self-focused attention had virtually no effect on preferences for products when no music was played (choice: 65% vs. 72%, pooled over the two product types; ranking: $\chi^2 < 1$) or preferences for products that were used in conditions with which the music was not associated (choice: 30% vs. 45%, respectively; ranking: $\chi^2 < 1$).

Table 3

EXPERIMENT 3: PROPORTION OF PRODUCT CHOICES AS A FUNCTION OF SELF-FOCUSED ATTENTION AND MUSIC CONDITIONS

	Social Music	*No Music*	*Nonsocial Music*
Social Product (Chips)			
High self-focused attention	.75	.40	.15
Low self-focused attention	.40	.39	.25
Difference	.35*	.01	–.10
Nonsocial Product (Tea)			
High self-focused attention	.15	.25	.65
Low self-focused attention	.20	.33	.25
Difference	–.05	–.08	.40*

*$p < .05$.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

In the few existing studies that demonstrate the role of consumers' imagined use of products on judgment (e.g., Baumgartner, Sujan, and Bettman 1992; Escalas 2007; Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993), participants were explicitly instructed to imagine themselves using the product they were evaluating. Our research identifies conditions in which people might construct these images in the absence of explicit instructions. However, these conditions are limited. First, characteristics of the judgment situation must be similar to those of the situation in which the product is typically used, thereby activating concepts that call the latter features to mind. Second, consumers must be sensitive to their internal thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, these conditions must exist in combination. If either (1) people's self-focused attention is low or (2) features of the judgment situation are irrelevant to the situation in which the product is used, people are likely to apply other judgment criteria.

The three experiments we report in this article support these theories. Experiments 1 and 2 showed that self-focused attention led participants to imagine themselves using the product they evaluated when the context in which the product was normally used was brought to mind by the judgment situation (either incidental background music or the presence of others). Experiment 3 demonstrated that similar effects of self-focused attention are generalized to participants' real product choice. We also clarified the process underlying the effects we observed. As we noted previously, two rival effects of self-focused attention are possible. One possibility is that inducing self-focused attention generally disposes consumers to imagine themselves using the product they are considering independently of the judgment context and its similarity to the situation in which the product is typically used. As we noted previously, however, this was not the case. Instead, self-focused attention only stimulated the construction of self-referent images when characteristics of the judgment situation called this situation to mind. Supplementary data (in Experiment 1) provided further support for the *type* of thoughts participants had when evaluating the product in the conditions we considered. These data indicate that self-focused attention led participants to think

most about how they might enjoy using the product in the latter conditions. However, if characteristics of the judgment situation did not call this situation to mind or self-focused attention was low, participants were more likely to think most about the specific product attributes when evaluating the product.

When features of the judgment situation do not activate product-relevant situational features, participants' self-focused attention can have other effects. If the products are hedonic and thus elicit affective reactions, self-focused attention may increase people's sensitivity to these reactions and increase their likelihood of using them as a basis for judgment independently of features of the judgment context (Pham 1998; Yeung and Wyer 2004; for more general evidence of the use of affect as an informational basis for judgment, see Schwarz and Clore 1996). Analyses of the data obtained in our preliminary experiments (see Web Appendix B at http://www.marketingpower.com/jmrapril11) indicate that self-focused attention increased evaluations of hedonic (affect-eliciting) products but not products that were judged on the basis of utilitarian criteria.

We ruled out several alternative explanations of our findings. First, it might be speculated that people with high self-focused attention spontaneously imagine themselves using the products they evaluate in a situation in which the products are typically found and that their evaluations depend on the ease of constructing this image. However, although participants reported that it was easier to imagine using a product when features of the judgment context were similar to those in which the product is normally used, this difference did not significantly depend on self-focused attention. Second, although the effects of background music on judgments in the situation we considered might be attributed to differences in the feelings of arousal or relaxation elicited by social and nonsocial music, self-reported feelings of arousal did not depend on the type of music being played. Moreover, we obtained nearly identical results when we manipulated the context by varying the number of participants present in the experimental situation, which also did not differ as a function of arousal. Finally, there was no evidence that self-focused attention influenced the amount of processing in our studies. Rather, it affected the *type* of processing that underlies product evaluations.

The role of ease of processing in image formation should not be dismissed entirely. When people are explicitly asked to construct images, differences in processing fluency may play an important role (Hung and Wyer 2009; Petrova and Cialdini 2005). Furthermore, its effect might sometimes differ from the effect we postulate. In our research, the images that participants constructed of themselves using the product presumably had positive implications that led to favorable evaluations. However, if the imagined use of a product in a context in which it is applicable has negative implications, our conceptualization indicates that constructing this image would decrease evaluations of the product regardless of how easy the image is to construct.

Our work extends the literature on imagery. Although previous research has identified the factors that facilitate the formation of images (for a review, see Wyer, Hung, and Jiang 2008), these factors do not imply that the images that people construct are self-related. Our work is among the first to examine situational factors that facilitate consumers' formation of self-relevant images and the factors that shape the content of these images. Further research might examine other factors that might facilitate or undermine self-relevant image formations, or it could examine the role of self-focused attention in the formation of these self-relevant product experiences.

Although our research is primarily concerned with the effects of self-focused attention, its implications for the role of incidental music in consumer judgment are also important. The effect of music on product evaluations has often been attributed to the tendency for the affective reactions it elicits to generalize to the products that it accompanies, thereby increasing evaluations of these products (i.e., simple affect transfer, e.g., Gorn 1982). More recent studies (Zhu and Meyers-Levy 2005) have indicated that the semantic meaning associated with music can produce effects, the nature of which depends on both (1) the amount of processing that is involved in comprehending the information that accompanies it and (2) the resources required to engage it. Little processing was likely to underlie the effects we observed in our research. In addition, participants' involvement did not vary across conditions. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that the affective reactions elicited by music do not automatically transfer to the products that accompany it. The music we played in this study was equivalent in terms of evoked feelings and mere liking. However, it had an impact only on those products that were typically used in the type of situation with which the music was associated. Furthermore, its impact was restricted to conditions in which participants' attention was focused on themselves as well as on the products being evaluated. These findings offer new insight into the use of background music in stores and shopping malls. Music may have a positive influence on purchase behavior only when (1) consumers imagine themselves using the product they are considering and (2) the music being played is associated with the type of situation in which the product is normally encountered.

Marketing Implications

Stimulating consumers' imagination of product experiences has been widely used by practitioners. Marketers often try to encourage consumers to imagine themselves using a product by exposing them to features of the context in which the product is used. This stimulation is usually provided in a subtle way in retail store environments, including playing background music that can be associated with the product usage contexts and incorporating retail store designs that simulate product usage contexts (e.g., Cabela's, a retailer of hunting and outdoor merchandise, made large investments in retail store designs that match the usage contexts of their products). Our research indicates that these features might not always be sufficient to stimulate customers to construct their own product usage experiences. Customers must be disposed to paying attention to their internal thoughts and feelings as well. Situational factors that predispose self-focused attention may need to be present for these strategies to be effective. Thus, marketers might consider enhancing customers' self-focused attention (e.g., by using self-referenced messages with self-related pronouns such as "I" and "my") in retail stores as well. Nevertheless, there might be conditions in which increasing self-focused attention does not benefit marketers. Studies

on the effect of visualization on evaluations of completely novel products (e.g., see Dahl and Hoeffler 2004) show that forming images about product experiences that consumers have never had before has no effect on evaluations of products (e.g., novel products) because of consumers' difficulty in imagining those experiences. In this case, we speculate that increasing self-focused attention, which stimulates product usage images when features of judgment context are similar to the product usage context, might have little effect on evaluations of novel products.

Our results also place constraints on the effects of the types of promotional strategies that are often used in advertisements and television commercials. Although stimulating consumers to imagine themselves using a product can influence evaluations of the product at the time the marketing communications are processed, this strategy might not have enduring effects unless consumers are disposed a priori to attend to implications of their feelings at the time of judgment.

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