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The Right Angle: Visual Portrayal of Products Affects Observers' Impressions of Owners

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ABSTRACT

Consumer products have long been known to influence observers' impressions of product owners. The angle at which products are visually portrayed in advertisements, however, may be an overlooked factor in these effects. We hypothesize and find that portrayals of the same product from different viewpoints can prime different associations that color impressions of product and owner in parallel ways. In Study 1, automobiles were rated higher on status- and power-related traits (e.g., *dominant, powerful*) when portrayed head-on versus in side profile, an effect found for sport utility vehicles (SUVs)—a category with a reputation for dominance—but not sedans. In Study 2, these portrayal-based associations influenced the impressions formed about the product's owner: a target person was rated higher on status- and power-related traits when his SUV was portrayed head-on versus in side profile. These results suggest that the influence of visual portrayal extends beyond general evaluations of products to affect more specific impressions of products and owners alike, and highlight that primed traits are likely to influence impressions when compatible with other knowledge about the target. © 2012 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Imagine that a love-struck friend is excitedly telling you all about a new boyfriend and happens to show you a picture of his automobile, a gleaming sport utility vehicle (SUV). The SUV is portrayed head-on, its headlights pointed directly toward you. As you attempt to integrate the varied information into a coherent impression of this new beau, it seems unlikely that you would pause to consider how your nascent impression might differ had his SUV been portrayed otherwise (say, in side profile). After all, why should it? No matter the angle at which the SUV is portrayed, the majority of the information you know about its owner, including his SUV, would remain unchanged.

This article argues that, to the contrary, the ways in which products are visually portrayed may indeed affect observers' impressions of owners. The article begins by reviewing empirical evidence that products themselves can influence impressions formed about their presumed owners. Whereas this work typically emphasizes the role of general, context-independent knowledge about products and brands, an alternative social cognitive framework that we advance emphasizes the role of relatively temporary, context-dependent representations. In light of growing interest in the role of

visual design in consumer psychology (Hoegg & Alba, 2008; Wedel & Pieters, 2007), this article suggests that different visual portrayals of the same product, from the same brand, can activate different trait concepts that influence impressions of product and owner in parallel ways. Two studies find support for this prediction: Study 1 examines whether head-on and side profile portrayals of the same automobiles result in different impressions of those products, and Study 2 tests for parallel effects on observers' impressions of an automobile owner.

PRODUCTS AND THEIR OWNERS

As consumer researchers are well aware, products can influence observers' impressions of product owners, and consumers' choice of products often reflects considerations of identity expression and impression management (for discussions, see Belk, 1978, 1988; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993; Oyserman, 2009; Schembri, Merrilees, & Kristiansen, 2010)—moreover, marketers draw on these considerations in their branding efforts (Allen, Fournier, & Miller, 2008). A tacit assumption

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1 in much of this work is that products and brands come
 2 with associated trait concepts and related knowledge,
 3 and that these associations themselves are relatively
 4 stable and context independent (Aaker, 1997; Allen,
 5 Fournier, & Miller, 2008; Fennis & Pruyn, 2007). Re-
 6 cent research in social and cognitive psychology, on the
 7 other hand, emphasizes the constructive and context-
 8 sensitive nature of knowledge representations (e.g.,
 9 Schwarz, 2007; Smith & Semin, 2004; Wyer, 2008; Yeh
 10 & Barsalou, 2006); it highlights that even the represen-
 11 tation of common objects, like a chair, varies markedly
 12 by context (Yeh & Barsalou, 2006). In this vein, we sug-
 13 gest that the *same* product from the *same* brand may
 14 prime distinct meanings and trait concepts depending
 15 on its visual portrayal, a variable that has been largely
 16 neglected in social, cognitive, and marketing research.
 17 Drawing on findings from social psychology and con-
 18 sumer research, we predict that even apparently mun-
 19 dane choices about visual portrayal, such as the angle
 20 at which to depict products, can foster different impres-
 21 sions of products and their owners alike.

22 23 24 25 VISUAL PORTRAYAL AND PRODUCT 26 IMPRESSIONS

27
28 Marketers routinely make decisions regarding how to
 29 portray products in visual advertisements, and yet, rel-
 30 atively little research has examined the effects of vi-
 31 sual portrayal on product impressions. Suggestive find-
 32 ings come from research on the effects of verticality on
 33 judgment. For example, research finds that people are
 34 judged as more powerful when they are depicted higher
 35 in visual-spatial displays (Giessner & Schubert, 2007;
 36 Meier & Dionne, 2009; Schubert, 2005), and that prod-
 37 ucts are evaluated more favorably when viewed from
 38 upward-looking or eye-level camera angles relative to
 39 downward-looking angles (Meyers-Levy & Peracchio,
 40 1992). These effects are thought to reflect a learned
 41 association between height and superiority that func-
 42 tions as a heuristic, guiding impressions of people and
 43 objects. These and related findings (e.g., Peracchio &
 44 Meyers-Levy, 1994, 2005) suggest that concepts as-
 45 sociated with the way a product or brand is visually
 46 portrayed—not simply concepts associated with a prod-
 47 uct or brand itself—can markedly affect impressions of
 48 products. Visual portrayal may matter most for prod-
 49 ucts that reveal different features when viewed from
 50 different angles (cf. Kraft, 1987), features that may un-
 51 derlie the activation of different trait concepts, which
 52 in turn may differentially affect impressions.

53 Multiple lines of research suggest that the auto-
 54 mobile is one such product. Research into anthropo-
 55 morphic aspects of product perception demonstrates
 56 that consumers readily perceive faces in the fronts of
 57 automobiles, including specific facial structures such
 58 as “eyes” (e.g., headlights: Aggarwal & McGill, 2007;
 59 Ichikawa, Kanazawa, & Yamaguchi, 2011; Landwehr,
 60 McGill, & Herrmann, 2011; Windhager et al., 2008).

Moreover, humans show a tendency to think about
 products and people in parallel ways (Chandler &
 Schwarz, 2010), and research has long found associ-
 ations between direct eye gaze and high status and
 power in human social interactions (cf. Chiao et al.,
 2008; Dovidio, Ellyson, Keating, Heltman, & Brown,
 1988; Kleinke, 1986; Mignault & Chaudhuri, 2003).
 Building on these findings, if people readily perceive
 faces and direct eye gaze in the fronts of automobiles,
 then head-on portrayals of automobiles may facilitate
 impressions of high status and power for the automobile
 itself. Furthermore, since traits associated with prod-
 ucts have been shown to color observers’ impressions
 of owners (Fennis & Pruyn, 2007), these temporary,
 portrayal-based impressions may extend to the auto-
 mobile’s owner as well. If so, impressions of products
 and their owners are not merely a function of traits as-
 sociated with a product *per se* but crucially depend on
 the product’s visual portrayal, a point that—beyond its
 clear practical implications for marketers and visual
 communication—would carry theoretical implications
 for the prevailing view that the meaning of products
 and brands is relatively context independent and ro-
 bust to such subtle manipulations.

TRAIT APPLICABILITY

Although social cognition research suggests that sub-
 tle changes to the way that products are visually por-
 trayed may activate distinct trait concepts capable of
 influencing impressions, it further suggests that the
 extent of their influence depends on their applicabil-
 ity to the target. For instance, when participants were
 unobtrusively primed with trait concepts before form-
 ing an impression of a person planning to sail across
 the Atlantic, traits that were highly compatible with
 this knowledge (e.g., “*adventurous*,” “*reckless*”) affected
 impressions more so than did valence-matched traits
 that were less compatible (e.g., “*kind*,” “*hostile*”: Hig-
 gins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977; for reviews, see Higgins,
 1996; Wyer, 2008). Hence, it is unlikely that status and
 power concepts primed by head-on portrayals will af-
 fect impressions of all automobiles equally. Instead,
 their influence may be larger for automobiles with a
 preexisting reputation for dominance, such as SUVs
 (Vanderheiden, 2006), compared to automobiles with-
 out this reputation, such as sedans.

THE PRESENT WORK

Building upon recent work showing that traits associ-
 ated with products can influence impressions of their
 owners (Fennis & Pruyn, 2007), the present studies ex-
 amine whether different visual portrayals (i.e., varying
 angles) of the *same product* (i.e., an automobile) will
 differentially affect the impressions formed about its
 owner (Study 2). To set the stage, we first consider
 whether these different visual portrayals can affect

impressions of the automobile itself (Study 1). Because these effects should be most pronounced when traits are highly applicable to the target, Study 1 examines the effect of visual portrayal on impressions of SUVs versus sedans. Given that SUVs have been stereotyped as dominant, unnecessarily large, and even aggressive (Vanderheiden, 2006), head-on portrayals are expected to heighten status- and power-related impressions of SUVs in particular. Study 2 then examines the influence of visual portrayal on status- and power-related impressions of an automobile owner. Holding the product constant, the owner is expected to receive higher status/power ratings when his SUV is portrayed head-on.

STUDY 1

Method

Participants. A total of $N = 492$ participants were recruited for a study about “impressions of vehicles” using advertisements posted on the community Web site Craigslist.org in various U.S. cities. Two separate but similar experiments were conducted. One hundred and thirty-seven individuals participated in an earlier experiment (August–September, 2007) and 355 participated in a later experiment (March, 2008). The experiments used different automobile stimuli (see below) and were largely similar except for some slight differences in wording and measures (e.g., different filler items). Analyses were conducted on the combined sample, offering increased statistical power and inclusion of more automobile stimuli. Mean age of participants was approximately 37 years ($SD = 13$ years); over 80% reported having some college education and nearly half (49%) held a bachelors degree; women outnumbered men two to one, and nearly 80% reported Caucasian/European ancestry.

Automobile Images. Eight different automobiles, four sedans and four SUVs, were randomly selected from lists of the top 10 most researched models in their categories on the Kelley Blue Book Web site (www.kbb.com) during the year of the study.

Portrayal angle (head-on vs. side profile) and automobile type (SUV vs. sedan) were between-subjects factors in the experimental design. Participants in the earlier experiment viewed the Honda Pilot (SUV) or Honda Accord (sedan); those in the later experiment viewed the Chevy Tahoe, GMC Acadia, or Jeep Wrangler (SUVs), or the Acura TL, Toyota Corolla, or Toyota Camry (sedans). Kelley Blue Book’s 360° viewing tool was used to generate head-on and side profile images of each automobile (see Figure 1 for example images).¹

¹ For purposes of ecological validity, automobiles were presented in their original color (ranging from white, to gray, to burgundy).

Procedure. Participants consented, provided some personal background information, and then rated their randomly assigned automobile on various 7-point semantic differential scales. Four semantic pairs represented traits related to status and power (namely, *submissive–dominant*, *weak–strong*, *powerless–powerful*, and *feminine–masculine*); these ratings were averaged to form a composite variable, “status/power” ($\alpha = 0.85$). Remaining semantic pairs were related to general favorability ratings of the automobile (namely, *undesirable–desirable*, *not stylish–stylish*, and *not sexy–sexy*) and were averaged to form a composite variable, “favorability” ($\alpha = 0.80$). Whereas we expected visual portrayal of these products to uniquely influence status/power impressions because the fronts of automobiles contain dominance-related visual characteristics (e.g., “eyes”) absent in side views, no effect on favorability was expected. The semantic differential scales were presented on a single page in a randomized order, with the automobile image appearing directly to the left of each rating scale to maintain image visibility throughout the ratings task. Finally, participants completed filler questions about their driving habits and were debriefed. The questionnaire typically took less than five minutes to complete.

RESULTS

Collapsing across automobile models, the main analysis took the form of a 2 (portrayal angle: head-on vs. side profile) \times 2 (automobile type: SUV vs. sedan) between-subjects ANOVA. Given gender’s association with status and power in society (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000), we tested whether gender significantly moderated any effect of portrayal angle on ratings. No such effects emerged and gender was dropped from the analysis ($F_s < 1$, *ns*).

Status- and Power-Related Trait Ratings

Consistent with the main prediction, automobiles were rated significantly higher on status/power traits when depicted head-on ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.17$) compared to in side profile ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.19$), $F(1, 473) = 6.02$, $p = 0.02$. In addition, SUVs were rated more highly than sedans on status/power traits overall ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.14$ vs. $M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.11$; $F(1, 473) = 49.81$, $p < 0.001$), consistent with the SUV’s reputation for dominance. Importantly, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between portrayal angle and automobile type ($F(1, 473) = 5.35$, $p = 0.02$): whereas head-on portrayals increased the status/power ratings of SUVs ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.08$ vs. $M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.15$; $F(1, 249) = 11.91$, $p < 0.01$), they did not influence the ratings of sedans ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.05$ vs. $M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.17$; $F < 1$, *ns*; Figure 2). Follow-up analyses examining whether the effect of depiction angle varied by specific SUV model found no evidence



Figure 1. Example stimuli used in Study 1, a sedan (Acura TL) and an SUV (Chevy Tahoe), portrayed at different visual angles (head-on vs. side profile).

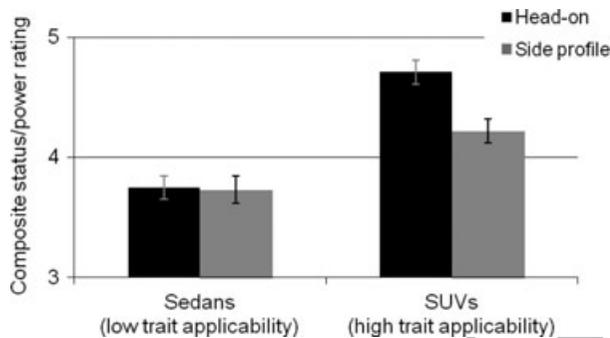


Figure 2. Graph displaying mean status/power ratings of the product as a function of portrayal angle and product type in Study 1. Error bars represent standard errors of the means.

for this (interaction $F < 1, ns$). Finally and as expected, no effects of visual portrayal on favorability emerged (F s $< 1, ns$).

DISCUSSION

The finding that head-on portrayals of automobiles garnered higher status/power impressions extends the literature on visual marketing in several ways. First, it identifies a basic element of visual communication that can affect product impressions but has previously received little attention, namely head-on versus side profile portrayal angles. Compared to more unusual visual perspectives, such as steep camera angles (e.g., Meyers-Levy & Peracchio, 1992), viewers may be less likely to notice and correct for the influence of this variable when forming a judgment (Wilson & Brekke, 1994). Second, whereas consumer research into visual product presentations has typically assessed general evaluations, such as aesthetic appeal and product favorability (cf. Hoegg & Alba, 2008; Reber, Schwarz, & Winkielman, 2004),

these results suggest that visual portrayal can foster more specific product impressions as well, here related to status and power. Third, the choice of a head-on versus side portrayal angle had a stronger influence on impressions of SUVs. That is, angle only affected status and power ratings under conditions where these activated trait concepts were compatible with consumers' preexisting associations with the product (Vanderheiden, 2006). This echoes findings from numerous impression formation studies, in that concepts activated by the visual portrayals of products exerted their greatest effect when easily applicable and compatible with other knowledge about the target (Higgins, 1996; Wyer, 2008).

In light of these findings, Study 2 examined whether the differential associations evoked by head-on versus side profile portrayals of automobiles also colored impressions about automobile owners. Building on prior work suggesting that traits associated with products can influence impressions formed about owners (Fennis & Pruyn, 2007), our Study 1 findings suggest that how the product is portrayed—not just the product itself—may matter for these impressions, given that the same product (an SUV) evoked different impressions as a function of its visual portrayal. In short, might an SUV owner be perceived differently depending on a variable as mundane as whether his SUV is facing forward or to the side?

STUDY 2

To examine whether different visual portrayals of products can affect impressions of owners, participants completed a laboratory experiment in which they read a brief description of a target person (Adam), viewed a couple of pictures from his daily life which included a picture of his SUV, and reported their impressions of

1 him. Only the SUV's portrayal angle was manipulated.
 2 Given that head-on SUVs activated status and power
 3 concepts in Study 1 and that primed trait concepts can
 4 affect impression formation in person perception (e.g.,
 5 Higgins, Rholes, & Jones 1977; Srull & Wyer, 1979),
 6 we expected participants to rate the target higher on
 7 status- and power-related traits when his SUV was por-
 8 trayed head-on.

10 Participants

11 One hundred and six students from the introductory
 12 psychology subject pool at a large Midwestern univer-
 13 sity participated in this lab experiment in exchange for
 14 partial course credit; 64 were female, 32 were male, and
 15 10 did not report their gender.

18 Procedure

19 Participants were told they would complete a se-
 20 ries of unrelated tasks, including one on impres-
 21 sion formation. Participants consented, provided some
 22 background information, and then read the following
 23 bio-sketch:

24 Adam grew up in Wilmington, Delaware, and he
 25 graduated from the University of Arizona with a
 26 business degree in 2004. While he was still an under-
 27 graduate, Adam was recruited by a mid-sized com-
 28 puter software firm based in Chicago, where he has
 29 worked ever since. Adam typically works full-time
 30 (approximately 45 hours) during the week (Monday
 31 to Friday), and he occasionally works on the week-
 32 ends when necessary. In his free time, Adam enjoys
 33 watching Alfred Hitchcock movies, cooking, and hik-
 34 ing. During the winter season, Adam spends his va-
 35 cation time skiing in the western states of Colorado
 36 and Wyoming.

37 **Automobile Images.** Beneath this description were
 38 two black-and-white "snapshots from Adam's everyday
 39 life." One photo showed his apartment building. The
 40 other photo showed his automobile, an SUV (namely,
 41 the 2007 Ford Expedition), which served as the critical
 42 manipulation: participants were randomly assigned to
 43 view either a head-on or side profile (facing right) im-
 44 age of the automobile. The descriptions were identical
 45 in every other respect. The SUV image was presented
 46 last, directly above the rating scales, to maintain image
 47 visibility throughout the ratings task.

48 **Trait Ratings.** Participants rated their impressions
 49 of Adam on 7-point scales (1 =not at all; 7 =very
 50 much) featuring six status- and power-related traits.
 51 Three traits were carried over from Study 1 (*dominant*,
 52 *powerful*, and *masculine*); the others (*hardworking*,
 53 *professional*, and *serious*) were included to capture ad-
 54 ditional status/power traits relevant to the (business-
 55 professional) context conveyed in the bio-sketch. We

56 predicted that Adam would be perceived as higher sta-
 57 tus/power when his SUV was portrayed head-on.

58 RESULTS

59 As in Study 1, gender did not moderate any effect of
 60 portrayal angle on impressions and was dropped from
 the analysis ($F_s < 1$, *ns*).

The main analysis took the form of a one-way ANOVA testing for the effect of visual portrayal (head-on vs. side profile) on the six status- and power-related ratings, which we averaged to create a composite variable, "status/power" ($\alpha = 0.73$). Consistent with our hypothesis, Adam received higher status/power ratings when his SUV was depicted head-on ($M = 5.30$; $SD = 0.63$) rather than in side profile ($M = 5.03$; $SD = 0.63$); $F(1, 104) = 4.74$, $p = 0.03$, for the main effect of portrayal angle. Thus, head-on portrayals heightened perceptions of status and power for both the product (Study 1) and its owner (Study 2).

61 DISCUSSION

The present findings extend work showing that traits associated with different products can affect observers' impressions of their owners (e.g., Fennis & Pruyn, 2007) by demonstrating that traits associated with *different portrayals of the same product* matter as well. Holding all other information constant, the owner of an SUV was rated higher on status- and power-related traits when his SUV was portrayed head-on versus in side profile. Thus, the prevailing view that products and brands carry relatively stable associated traits appears to be oversimplified; instead, the meaning of products may shift with subtle context manipulations, such as portrayal angle in visual communications, resulting in different impressions formed about product owners.

62 GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Together, results from these two experiments contribute to the literatures on visual representation in consumer judgment, product anthropomorphism, and person perception by demonstrating that merely portraying one side of a product versus another can facilitate different impressions of products and owners alike. In Study 1, SUVs were rated higher on a composite measure of traits related to status and power when those SUVs were portrayed head-on versus in side profile. This observation is consistent with the tendency to see faces in the fronts of automobiles (Windhager et al., 2008) and the relationship between direct eye gaze and dominance in human interactions (cf. Kleinke, 1986). That the effect was only observed for SUVs and not sedans is compatible with the general observation that

1 primed concepts exert more influence when they are
 2 readily compatible with existing information about the
 3 target (Higgins, 1996; Wyer, 2008), facilitated by SUVs'
 4 widely-held reputation for dominance (Vanderheiden,
 5 2006). In Study 2, the influence of portrayal angle ex-
 6 tended to the owner of an SUV, who was rated higher
 7 on status- and power-related traits when his SUV was
 8 portrayed head-on. These findings suggest that the as-
 9 sociations brought to mind by products and brands are
 10 highly sensitive to subtle and mundane context manip-
 11 ulations and influenced by variables that themselves
 12 may appear to be "content free," such as the angle at
 13 which a product is portrayed in visual media. Such ef-
 14 fects may seem surprising from the standpoint of ratio-
 15 nal information processing models given that the prod-
 16 uct itself, the target person, and the social context in
 17 which it was presented remained constant across con-
 18 ditions; however, such effects can often be predicted
 19 on the basis of metaphors (e.g., "staring you down")
 20 grounded in the social world (cf. Barsalou, 2008).

21 Whereas prior work in visual marketing has typi-
 22 cally examined general evaluations, the present find-
 23 ings highlight that very basic visual marketing deci-
 24 sions can carry consequences for specific impressions as
 25 well. As marketplaces become increasingly transacted
 26 in complex online environments, illuminating the role
 27 of visual marketing cues in the consumer experience is
 28 increasingly critical (e.g., Darley, 2010); and for com-
 29 panies seeking to foster more specific impressions in
 30 order to remain competitive, we suggest that greater
 31 attention to trait-context congruence may allow for
 32 more nuanced predictions regarding the influence of
 33 visual portrayal on product impressions. For instance,
 34 as previously discussed, verticality is thought to cue
 35 superiority, with research finding that upward-looking
 36 visual angles increase ratings of favorability (Meyers-
 37 Levy & Peracchio, 1992). An emphasis on trait-context
 38 consistency suggests that these effects should be more
 39 pronounced for traits closely associated with the verti-
 40 cality metaphor (e.g., powerful) and among products to
 41 which those traits are easily applied (e.g., high-status
 42 goods). Future research may fruitfully address such
 43 predictions.

44 In the present work, we focused on the product
 45 category of automobiles because of the category's promi-
 46 nence and because different portrayal angles of au-
 47 tomobiles were expected to differentially activate the
 48 status/power traits examined here. However, these
 49 findings are likely relevant to other product categories
 50 as well. Given that people readily see faces where they
 51 do not exist (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007), any
 52 number of products in the marketplace with vaguely
 53 face-like features—from houses to wristwatches and
 54 smartphones—may be judged differently depending on
 55 portrayal angle. Yet importantly, as our findings sug-
 56 gest, it is unlikely that all products will be perceived as
 57 having higher status/power when portrayed head-on.
 58 Just as direct eye gaze may prime dominance when it
 59 comes from a military commander but not an infant,
 60 consumers' preexisting knowledge about products is

likely to matter. For example, head-on depictions may
 increase status/power impressions of exclusive luxury
 watches (e.g., a \$28,000 Patek Philippe) but not of their
 less-expensive counterparts (e.g., a \$28 Timex).

There are some limitations to the present work. Par-
 ticipants were not representative of the consumer pub-
 lic, given that both samples were predominantly white,
 female, and college educated. In addition, these data do
 not speak to the presumed mediating process for these
 effects, that is, the perception of metaphorical eye gaze
 in the fronts of automobiles. Although the present ef-
 fects on status and power impressions converge with
 previous findings to suggest metaphorical eye gaze as
 a likely mediator (cf. Kleinke, 1986; Windhager et al.,
 2008), future research employing direct measures of the
 mediating process (e.g., Ichikawa, Kanazawa, & Yam-
 aguchi, 2011) or diagnostic situational manipulations
 (e.g., anthropomorphic priming) is required to rule out
 alternative mechanisms (e.g., that forward-facing ob-
 jects with motor capabilities prime status/power be-
 cause they can collide with and injure the self).

More generally, these findings highlight a short-
 coming of information processing models that have
 traditionally focused on verbal as opposed to visual
 stimuli even though print advertisements commonly
 contain both types of information (Wyer, Hung, &
 Jiang, 2008). This focus on verbal information process-
 ing may miss how meaning shifts with visual represen-
 tation. Although the influence of visual variables has
 long been recognized in the interpretive tradition of con-
 sumer research (for a discussion, see Allen, Fournier,
 & Miller, 2008), visual variables need more attention
 in information processing experiments as well.

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