

SPINNING FANTASIES INTO CONSUMER ATTITUDES: A FANTASY
REALIZATION PERSPECTIVE OF ATTITUDE FORMATION

by

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ABSTRACT

Fantasy Realization Theory (Oettingen 1996) states that people can dwell on their negative reality, fantasize about a positive future, or mentally compare each. When individuals mentally compare, commitment to the goal of achieving their fantasy is influenced by expectations for goal attainability. Consistent with the attitude literature, such expectations can be influenced by the quality of arguments within an advertisement. Merging these ideas, we predicted and found that participants' attitudes toward purchasing a car were influenced by the quality of arguments presented in an advertisement for a car dealership, but only if they mentally compared fantasies and reality.

INTRODUCTION

“There are some people who live in a dream world, and there are some who face reality; and then there are those who turn one into the other.”

--Douglas Everett

Everyone fantasizes about obtaining better things or experiencing more positive life events, such as a new job, a better car, a dream vacation, or fame and fortune. Yet, as ubiquitous as such fantasies are, they are often times not realized. One reason individuals' positive fantasies become “doomed to the limbo” of the mind is that individuals' may lack the knowledge, skills, or abilities required to spin fantasies into reality. For example, an individual may frequently fantasize about becoming a famous comedian yet possess Dick Cheney's wit and ability to relate to the masses. In this case, the individual is simply unable to become an adored comedian; he or she lacks the skill or innate qualities required to make people laugh. Another reason individuals' fantasies do not manifest in reality is that they do not possess the goal, or at least a strong enough goal, to make their fantasies into reality. For example, one may possess the capacity for physical humor equivalent to Chevy Chase, the wit and creativity of George Carlin, and the gift to turn political injustice into knee slapping hilarity as does John Stewart. However, this person might believe that his or her chances of actually becoming a famous comedian are slight, and therefore never adopt the goal to achieve his or her fantasy. The current thesis addresses this latter possibility by exploring the factors that influence the extent to which individuals adopt goals to make their fantasies into reality.

Past goal research has focused on goals being completed once they are set (Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996). Relatively little empirical study has been conducted to determine how or why people set goals and how committed they become to those goals. A common, and reasonable, assumption is that people first and foremost set goals that are attainable (Oettingen, 1999). For example, an individual who possesses comedic talent and fantasizes about becoming a comedian is more likely to set a committed goal toward becoming a comedian if he or she assesses that there are few, rather than many, obstacles thwarting that goal. Progress has been made in understanding such a phenomenon.

Goal Commitment

Researchers have neglected the complicated issue about what kinds of processes account for strong and weak goal commitment (Oettingen, Pak, & Schnetter, 2001). Still, some initial progress has been made in this area. For example, Brandstadter and Rothermund (1994) investigated the processes that account for the weakening commitment to previously set goals. As well, some research has investigated the emergence of goal adoption. Emmons (1996) found that whether a new goal is adopted depends on whether that goal fits into the hierarchy of preexisting goals. For example, for me, adopting the goal to go snowboarding at least three days a week does not fit very well into my current goal hierarchy dominated by the goal of finishing my thesis in a timely fashion. Additionally, Bandura (1991) has found that individuals tend to adopt goals to a greater extent when they expect they can attain those goals (e.g., feel efficacious). Importantly, all of the aforementioned research has addressed the

circumstances under which individuals' commitment to a pre-existing goal weakens, or the setting of a goal might arise. However, until the introduction of the Fantasy Realization Theory (FRT; Oettingen, 1996), no effort had been made to demarcate both the processes leading up to the setting of, and commitment to, individual binding goals. As elaborated in the next section, FRT suggests that the particular mindset in which individuals find themselves can influence whether they will adopt a goal, and to what extent.

Fantasy Realization Theory

Oettingen (1996) has suggested that how we think about the future may be important in understanding how we come to set goals and commit to them. Individuals can think about the future in two ways—by generating or considering expectations about what outcomes are likely to occur in the future, or by indulging in free fantasies. Expectations reflect how things have gone for an individual in the past; they are a reflection of one's performance history or previous information learned by observation. Free-fantasies, on the other hand, are imaginings about what it would be like to attain a desirable future (e.g., winning the lottery, buying a new car, or marrying the person of your dreams). Importantly, free-fantasies can occur independently of individuals' expectations that the events about which they fantasize are likely to occur. For example, a person can fantasize for hours about what they would do if they won a 360 million dollar lottery jackpot, yet all the while recognize that there is remarkably little chance of winning the jackpot. Unlike expectations, free-fantasies do not require reflection on the

past; a person can imagine winning a lottery jackpot without ever having won the lottery before.

In her Fantasy Realization Theory, Oettingen (1996) offers three ways individuals might deal with fantasies about the future and relate them back to their current situation as a means toward realizing the fantasy. That is, FRT offers three ways by which individuals' fantasies may influence goal formation and commitment. Two of the possibilities create a readiness to act that is independent of expectations that the fantasy is attainable, whereas the third entails an expectancy-based readiness to act.

First, individuals may largely disregard positive fantasies about the future and instead dwell on the negative reality that stands in the way of attaining a desired future outcome. When individuals engage in this type of thinking they are left without the compulsion or need to act, because there is nothing to act toward in the absence of a fantasy. Such ruminations on a negative reality inhibit thoughts of a positive future. As a result, expectations that a desired future is attainable are not considered because the outcome that would demarcate success has not been consciously entertained. As a result, goal commitment is only influenced by the negative aspects of the current reality. Therefore, regardless of whether individuals think that the likelihood of achieving their potential goal should they adopt it is high or low, their goal commitment will be moderate because it is independent of any expectations of success.

Second, individuals can think about positive fantasies without considering current situations that may impede their fantasy-realization. In this case, individuals merely fantasize about the future, while in the present. Therefore, they do not encounter any

information in the present reality that would cause them to reflect on the fact that their fantasy of the future cannot be realized. They do not form a necessity to act. That is, like individuals who only focus on negative realities, individual who only engage in positive fantasies will not consider very thoroughly, or perhaps even form, expectations regarding the likelihood of achieving the fantasy. As a result, the positive incentive of the desired future outcome supplies the only motivation to act. So, again, strength of commitment to the goal of making the fantasy a reality is moderate.

Last, individuals may indulge in an expectation-based type of thinking in which a positive fantasy is evaluated in the context of negative realities that blocks the realization of a fantasy. Further, because fantasies and negative realities are simultaneously considered in this case, the need to act will be determined by an individual's consideration of whether or not reality can be overcome and the fantasy attained. That is, this determination will be based on whether the individual has expectations that achieving the desired future is likely or unlikely. If the individual expects the fantasy is attainable, even after considering the reality standing in the way, a goal to attain the fantasy will be formed and the commitment to achieving this goal will be strong. Conversely, if one feels that there are too many obstacles in the way of attaining the fantasy then a goal will not be formed (for a review, see Oettingen et al., 2001; Oettingen, 1999; Oettingen, 1996), or if it is, commitment to that goal will be very weak. Research supporting the FRT comes from domains involving achievement and interpersonal-life management, and will be addressed in the following two sections.

Developmental Fantasies—Achievement

Developmental fantasies, or fantasies about bettering oneself, were first investigated in the achievement domain. Importantly, the influence of generating such developmental fantasies should be predicted by the FRT. Noting this, Oettingen, Hoenig, and Pak (1999) investigated from an FRT perspective the influence of German children's achievement fantasies about learning English during a semester of their English class. The researchers investigated each child's expectation of success by asking how well each child thought he or she would do in their English class. The students were then placed in three experimental conditions. The first condition was a *mental contrast* group in which children were told to name and elaborate two fantasies they had about learning English and two possible realities that stood in their way of learning English. Participants in the *positive fantasy only* group were asked to name and elaborate four fantasies they had about learning English. Finally, participants in the *negative reality only* group named and elaborated four negative realities that stood in their way of learning English well. Two weeks after the experiment each child was asked how much time he or she had spent learning English. Specifically, they were asked how much free time they had given up in order to pursue learning English. The results indicated that students in the *mental contrast* group spent more time studying when they perceived their chance of success as being good (i.e. they had a positive expectation) than if they perceived their chance of success as being poor (i.e. they had a negative expectation). Participants in both the positive fantasy only and negative reality only conditions spent a moderate amount of time studying regardless of whether they perceived their chance of success as being high

or low. Further, these outcomes were also reflected in the students' grades for the English course. Students in the *mental contrast* group scored higher than did students in the *positive fantasy only* and *negative reality only* groups when their expectation of success was high, but lower than these two groups when their expectation of success was low. Consistent with the FRT, these data indicate that participants in the mental contrast group with high expectations of success showed stronger commitment toward learning English than either of the other two groups, whereas those in the mental contrast group who showed low expectations of success showed weaker commitment.

Similar evidence was found by Brinkmann, Holder, Hurler, and Schultz-Gambard (1998). They investigated the performance of young adults participating in a vocational program training them to become social workers. In this study, two experimental groups (a mental contrast group and a positive fantasy only group) were used employing a similar methodology to that used by Oettingen et al. (1999). Consistent with Oettingen et al.'s results, participants in the *mental contrast* group received good performance ratings when their expectations of success were high and poor performance ratings when their expectations of success were low. However, participants in the *positive fantasy only* group received average ratings regardless of their expectation of success.

Essentially, in the studies reported by Oettingen et al. (1999) and Brinkmann et al. (1998), participants who engaged in some form of mental contrasting between positive fantasies and negative realities had stronger goal commitment when they felt their chances of success were high, but weaker goal commitment when they felt their chances of success were low. Participants who did not perform a mental contrast had moderate

goal-commitment regardless of whether they thought they had a high or low chance of success.

Developmental Fantasies—Interpersonal and Life-Management

Oettingen et al. (1999) has applied FRT to interpersonal domains. Specifically, using a design similar to the one they used to investigate children's achievement goals, they investigated how university students formed goals regarding interpersonal problems. Participants were asked to report their most important interpersonal issue (e.g. issues pertaining to peers, partners, etc.). They were then asked to describe whether they thought this was a resolvable issue. Following this, participants in all conditions were asked to write four positive fantasies and four negative realities about their most important interpersonal issue. At this point the key manipulation differentiating the three groups was introduced. Specifically, participants in the *mental contrast* group were asked to elaborate on two of each of the positive fantasies and negative realities, participants in the *negative reality only* group to elaborate only on the four negative realities, and participants in the *positive fantasy only* group to elaborate only on the four positive fantasies. After this procedure, two dependent variables were assessed. The first dependent variable measured participants' readiness to act by asking participants how energetic and active they felt. This question was based on the results of Gollwitzer and Moskowitz (1996) which suggest that acting without delay and feeling energized are signs of strong goal commitment. The second dependent variable measured the immediacy of relevant action by asking participants the number of days it took them to

implement their fantasy. For both variables, the same pattern of data was found.

Participants in the *mental contrast* group felt more energized and acted more immediately when their expectations of success were high, but felt less energized and were slower to act when their expectations of success were low. For the other two groups, goal commitment was moderate and independent of participants' expectations of success. Oettingen et al. (1999) offer that these results indicate that when mental contrasting occurs, binding action goals emerge, given that the expectation of achievement is high. Identical results were found in a study investigating fantasies about finding a romantic partner (Oettingen, 2000).

FRT has also been investigated in regard to life management, defined as individuals taking an active role in determining how their life will unfold. This is becoming an increasingly important area of research, especially in Western culture where individuals are more responsible for themselves and are less regulated by cultural norms (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oettingen, 1997). Oettingen (2000) investigated the FRT within the domain of life-management goals by studying family planning among female doctoral students. Participants in the study were over 30 years old and, thus, reached a critical stage in their lives regarding family planning. In this experiment, all participants were asked to imagine their lives ten years from now in regard to both career and family as a way to get them thinking about a positive future. They were then confronted with negative realities that stand in the way of achieving their fantasy of being able to balance work and family. The negative realities were presented in the form of testimonials from working mothers detailing the difficulties of leading a professional and family life. Then,

participants in the *mental contrast* group were asked to elaborate on their positive fantasies of the future and contrast them against the impeding realities presented by the working mothers. In the *positive fantasy only* condition the experimenter downplayed the accounts of the working mothers by telling the participants that the working mothers had used these difficulties as a self-defense to downplay other issues they had in their personal lives. By downplaying the accounts, mental contrasting was prevented. In the *negative reality only* condition the participants were asked to focus exclusively on the difficulties of being a working mother, again to prevent mental contrasts between the negative realities and potential spontaneously generated fantasies. The results of this study were consistent with all of the previously mentioned FRT studies. Specifically, participants in the mental contrast group exhibited both the highest and lowest commitment levels toward the goal of balancing a family and professional career depending on their expectation for successful goal attainment. Participants in the other two groups showed moderate levels of commitment independent of whether they thought their goals were attainable.

Tying together all these findings, a study was conducted by Oettingen et al. in 2001. Strength of commitment to a goal was identified in three separate studies covering cognitive, affective, and behavioral terms. According to Oettingen et al. (2001), the extent to which one plans the implementation of potential goal (i.e. a possible goal, not an actual goal) indicates his or her strength of goal commitment. Experiment 1 is an example of how this assumption was investigated (Oettingen et al., 2001). Participants were randomly assigned into three conditions: a mental contrast condition, a positive

fantasy only condition, and a negative reality only condition. In part one of the study participants were asked to name their most important interpersonal problem at the time. To measure expectations, participants were then asked to identify how likely it would be for the named problem to have a happy resolution. Participants were also asked to identify how important it would be for the problem to have a happy resolution. Finally, participants were asked to list four positive fantasies about resolving the problem and four negative realities that stand in the way of achieving a happy resolution to the problem. Participants in the mental contrast condition then elaborated on two items from each of their lists. Participants in the other two conditions either wrote only about negative realities or positive fantasies. As a dependent measure participants completed four out of a set of eight sentence stems to measure whether they planned on resolving the goal, and were instructed to complete the four that most pertain to their current, most pressing, interpersonal problem. The results of this experiment were consistent with previous FRT findings. In the mental contrast group, when expectations of success were high, participants formulated more plans than the other two groups, whereas the opposite finding emerged when participants in the mental contrast group had low expectations of successfully resolving their interpersonal issue.

A similar pattern of results emerged in three other related experiments (Oettingen et al., 2001). Importantly, these findings were present regardless of how participants' strength of commitment to achieving a newly formed goal was assessed. Specifically, results consistent with the FRT were obtained by measuring the extent to which participants made plans and took on responsibility, anticipated feelings of

disappointment, or felt energized. For all of these measures, the mental contrast group with high expectations of success for a variety of goals showed the highest strength of commitment.

The Fantasy Realization Theory and Persuasion

So far I have demonstrated that when high expectations for the attainability of potential goals are present mental contrasting induces a stronger commitment to satisfying anticipated achievement goals, interpersonal goals, and life management goals. That is, mental contrasting has been demonstrated to influence the extent to which individuals commit to goals that are fulfilled by the creation of new contexts or situations (e.g., completing a task or mending a relationship). As a result, commitment to goals was measured by variables such as making plans and taking responsibility, feeling energized, and the ability to cope with thoughts of failure. Yet, as noted in the very beginning of the Introduction, individuals often develop goals to acquire objects and consumer goods, such as electronics, houses, and cars. These types of goals can introduce to FRT new variables as indicators of goal strength, such as the development of more polarized (i.e., extreme) attitudes toward the object, thoughts about the object, and intentions to acquire the object. Thus, investigating FRT using object goals, as opposed to context goals, may introduce new, psychologically and theoretically, important variables such as object attitudes that may be influenced by mental contrasting. As a result, investigating FRT within a potential attitude formation/change setting may demonstrate novel ways by

which individuals' attitudes may be altered, as well as resulting intentions toward the attitude object.

Further, the attitude formation/change literature can provide insights as to how psychologists and marketing executives might go about altering individuals' expectations that obtaining an object is possible. In all FRT studies to date, individuals' expectations for potential goal fulfillment were measured, but not manipulated. However, in the persuasion literature, psychologist commonly manipulate individuals' expectations toward a particular object by presenting cogent or specious arguments favoring the approach (or in some cases, avoidance) of the object. That is, psychologists often present arguments that instill a weak or strong expectation that approaching (avoiding) an attitude/object will be favorable. Thus, it seems that the persuasion literature can inspire a useful way to further test FRT, by experimentally manipulating individuals' expectations toward an object via persuasive communications. These possibilities will be discussed in the following three sections.

Argument Quality

In the persuasion literature, participants are often presented with messages that contain either strong or weak arguments favoring the approach or avoidance of an attitude object. As will be elaborated below, it is often the case that when individuals think about messages, they form favorable attitudes toward the topic of the message when it is supported by strong arguments, but relatively unfavorable attitudes about a topic if it is supported by weak arguments. But what makes an argument strong or weak?

Importantly, several theorists (e.g., Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Areni & Lutz, 1988; Petty & Wegener, 1991) have argued that our attitudes result from our beliefs that encountering an attitude object will produce particular consequences. In particular, arguments that present the consequences of encountering an attitude object as being either favorable or unfavorable, and highly likely, tend to heavily influence attitudes (i.e., are strong). Alternatively, arguments that present the consequences of an attitude object as being either favorable or unfavorable, but unlikely, tend not to influence attitudes in the direction on the advocacy (i.e., are weak). That is, one key component determining whether an argument is strong or weak is the expectation communicated by that argument that favorable or unfavorable consequences are likely. Thus, the persuasion literature can introduce to FRT one important way by which expectations toward an object can be manipulated, by presenting strong or weak arguments regarding a particular attitude object about which one might form a goal. When expectations are manipulated in this way, FRT can be used to predict goal commitment, as indicated in the reported experiment by object attitudes and behavioral intentions (see next section). Specifically, consistent with the FRT, the prediction was developed that when individuals consider positive fantasies concurrently with negative realities (i.e., are in a mental contrasting mindset), they should form more favorable attitudes and intentions toward an object if it was supported by strong arguments which presented likely positive consequences than by weak arguments which presented positive but unlikely consequences. However, such an effect of argument quality should not manifest for individuals in positive fantasy only or

negative reality only mindsets because they have not weighed in their expectations due to a lack of comparison.

The Links between Attitudes, Behaviors, and Goals

Importantly, looking at the FRT and object goals introduces attitudes toward obtaining an object as a potential outcome variable indicating goal commitment. Consistent with this idea, considerable evidence indicates that attitudes, so long as they are appropriately measured, are correlated with behaviors (see Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995, for a review). That is, knowing individuals' attitudes about a particular object allows researchers to predict people's actions toward that object. Put in a FRT context, then, individuals' attitudes should serve as an indication of their intentions to act toward achieving the goal of obtaining an attitude object, and of their future goal-relevant behaviors. There are a number of dispositional and situational factors that increase the consistency of attitudes with behaviors (Petty & Wegener, 1998; Kraus, 1995). Attitudes are highly predictive of behavior under many conditions, such as when the participants possess a certain personality type (e.g., low self-monitoring, Snyder & Swann, 1976; or high need for cognition, Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Rodriguez, 1986), when the attitudes are consistent with underlying beliefs (Norman, 1975), when the attitudes are of high personal relevance (Verplanken, 1991), and when attitudes are high in accessibility (Fazio, 1995). Participants in the mental contrast group who perceive their desired future as attainable will have weighed their positive fantasies versus their negative realities giving them better accessibility to an attitude and a more accurate strength of

commitment. In fact, several researchers (see Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005, for a review) suggest that we hold attitudes so that we know how to act towards various objects in our environment; attitudes serve the function to inform behavior. Thus, if one is committed to achieving a goal, then intentions to behave, and actual future behaviors in the service of obtaining that goal should be predicted by individuals' attitudes toward the object. That is, attitudes, behavioral intentions (e.g., plans; Oettingen, 1996; and Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996), and actual future behaviors are all related and should indicate goal commitment. Thus, individuals who simultaneously consider positive fantasies and negative realities should form more extreme responses to these measures of goal commitment in response to their expectations of goal attainability than will individuals who only consider fantasies or realities.

Fantasy Realization Theory and Attitudes

Common models of persuasion such as Petty and Cacioppo's (1981, 1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion (ELM) suggest that when individuals are motivated and able to think about a message (e.g., the message is personally relevant, or individuals simply enjoy thinking) they will be persuaded by strong arguments, but not by weak arguments. However, when individuals are not motivated or able to process a message (e.g., the message is not personally relevant, or individuals do not like to think) they should not be more persuaded if they read strong arguments than if they read weak arguments. Rather, in such situations, individuals will use tangential cues (e.g., the

attractiveness of the communicator) or heuristics (“agree with an expert”) to determine their attitude about the topic of the message.

Interestingly, the FRT could be used to suggest alternative ways by which attitudes might be changed by strong or weak arguments. In particular, people who mentally contrast should be more heavily influenced by argument strength because they weigh their negative reality versus their desired future and consider expectations about the feasibility of achieving a fantasy. Therefore, they might form favorable or unfavorable attitudes based on their considerations of the arguments they encounter (which should influence their expectations of achieving a potential goal). However, this should not happen for individual who only entertain positive fantasies or dwell on negative realities because they will not weigh their current reality against a fantastic future, and thus will fail to consider their expectations that a positive fantasy is attainable. According to the FRT, participants in positive fantasy or negative reality mindsets will have moderate commitment to a goal regardless of their perceptions that their fantasy is attainable. That is, in a persuasion context, they will have a neutral attitude regardless of the argument they are presented.

Importantly, these predicted differences in the extent to which individuals might be differentially persuaded by strong or weak arguments should be independent of their motivation to process the arguments within a message (cf. the ELM, Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986). That is, FRT simply suggests that in some conditions individuals’ expectations are more heavily weighted in determining goal commitment, not that the information that produced the expectations was more carefully analyzed. Further, buying

a product should be equally relevant to all participants regardless of condition due to random assignment. Also, it seems unlikely that the manipulations of positive fantasy only, negative reality only, and mental contrast should lead one group to think more carefully about the arguments or find the message more personally relevant.

(Nevertheless, measures were included in the reported experiment that could shed light on any potential differences in processing motivation between the groups.)

Thus, investigating the FRT within the persuasion domain could demonstrate effects that would not be predicted from prevalent models of persuasion such as the ELM. The ELM suggests that individuals will form attitudes in line with strong arguments, but contrary to weak arguments, so long as they are motivated and able to think about the message. However, the FRT suggests that *holding motivation and ability constant* across individuals, differences in the extent to which they are persuaded by message arguments may also be due to the ways they think about the future. Only when individuals mentally contrast positive future fantasies and negative realities will strong and weak arguments be more or less persuasive. That is, although motivation and ability are clearly important factors determining the extent to which individuals are persuaded by strong and weak arguments (Petty & Wegener, 1998), another factor, how individuals imagine their futures and grapple with the present, may also determine argument persuasiveness. This novel possibility was examined in the current study.

The FRT, Attitudes, and Argument Quality – a Synopsis

How does the strength of arguments presented in a message impact expectations, attitudes, and behavioral intentions when individuals consider their future? Based on the information presented above, it is reasonable to predict that argument strength will have an impact on these constructs for participants who mentally contrast their fantasies with reality. Specifically, such participants presented with a strong argument about an object are more likely to form favorable expectations, attitudes, and intentions to enact goals to attain that object, whereas participants presented with a weak argument will do the opposite. Alternatively, participants who focus only on reality or fantasies should not be affected by argument strength as they do not consider expectations that negative realities can be overcome, and positive fantasies attained, in determining goal commitment.

To this point, FRT has only manipulated the type of thinking in which participants engage (i.e., their mindset; see Oettingen et al., 2001 for a review). No research conducted on the FRT has thus far attempted to manipulate individuals' expectations for the attainability of a goal. Rather, prior research has relied on measuring individuals' own pre-existing expectations toward a personal issue. As discussed above, one way to manipulate individuals' expectations regarding a particular attitude object is to present them strong or weak arguments in support of a given attitude object. Thus, a second question posed in this thesis is whether or not manipulating expectations via argument quality produces comparable results to those observed in other FRT experiments. Further, based on extensive prior research it can be predicted that varying argument strength will influence participants' expectations that attaining the attitude object is feasible, which, in

turn, should influence participants' attitudes about an object, and finally their strength of commitment to and intention of attaining that object.

Finally, a consideration of FRT points to the possibility that the extent to which individuals' attitudes and intentions are influenced by argument quality is sometimes independent of their motivation and ability to thoroughly process arguments. Again, prevalent persuasion models such as the ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986) suggest that argument quality only influences individuals' attitudes when they are motivated and able to think about those arguments. FRT, on the other hand, suggest that holding motivation and ability constant, individuals may be more or less influenced by argument quality manipulations depending on how they think about the future. Thus, a final question is whether the ELM or the FRT better-predict the influence of argument on attitudes.

Experiment Overview

An experiment was designed to test the above questions. In this experiment, participants were assigned to one of the three mindset conditions by having them focus on positive fantasies about owning a new car (positive fantasy condition), the negative realities standing in the way of them owning a new car (negative reality condition), or both (mental contrast condition). After this mindset induction, participants were presented an advertisement for a car dealership that either contained strong or weak persuasive arguments. The strong arguments were designed to convince participants that purchasing a car from this dealership is feasible, whereas the weak arguments were

designed to convince participants that purchasing a car from this dealership is much less feasible. Participants were then presented questionnaires that investigated their expectations that attaining a car is feasible, their attitudes about attaining a car, and their intention to implement a plan to obtain the car.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Participants in the mental contrast condition will expect that the potential goal of purchasing a car is more feasible when they are presented with strong arguments, and less feasible when they are presented with weak arguments. This difference should not be observed for participants who think only about positive fantasies or negative realities.

Much research and theorizing suggests that strong arguments are those that lead individuals' to expect that an attitude object will produce particular consequences (e.g., Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). That is, arguments that convince individuals that an object is likely to produce favorable consequences are strong, whereas arguments that do not convince individuals that an object is likely to produce favorable consequences are weak. In the present experiment, participants encountered an advertisement for a car dealership that contained arguments designed to convince participants that purchasing a car (i.e., obtaining a favorable outcome) is feasible or less feasible. According to the FRT, individuals who simultaneously consider positive fantasies and negative realities consider their expectations that a positive fantasy is attainable (i.e., purchasing a car is or is not feasible) in their determinations of goal commitment. However, individuals who only

think about positive fantasies or negative realities tend not to consider their expectations for fantasy attainability in determining goal commitment. Thus, the former individuals should be especially sensitive to the expectations planted by strong or weak arguments, and form expectations accordingly. The expectation of attainability does not have to be a predisposed feeling as was the case with previous studies. Argument strength can serve as a manipulation of one's attitudes.

Hypothesis 2: Participants in the mental contrast condition will have more favorable attitudes, intentions, and show more planning when presented with strong arguments as opposed to weak arguments, indicating stronger commitment to buying a new car in the mental contrast/strong argument condition.

In all, this is the most relevant hypothesis to the current research. As mentioned in the discussion of Hypothesis 1, individuals who simultaneously consider positive fantasies and negative realities determine goal commitment by consulting their expectations that a fantasy is attainable. Thus, such individuals who read strong arguments and therefore expect that purchasing a car is feasible should form positive attitudes about buying a car, greater intentions to buy a car, and even develop plans to ultimately purchase a car. Alternatively, such individuals who read weak arguments and therefore expect that purchasing a car is not feasible should not commit to that goal, and therefore form less positive attitudes about buying a car, lower intentions to buy a car, and not develop plans to ultimately purchase a car. Such a finding would be significant as it would extend the FRT into new a new domain of predicting attitude formation and change.

Hypothesis 3: Participants' attitudes toward buying a car, intentions, and goal-relevant planning in the positive fantasy only and negative reality only conditions will not be influenced by argument quality.

Participants who are not induced to undergo mental contrast will think about their current reality if they are in the negative reality only condition or fantasize about a desirable future in the positive fantasy only condition. Consequently, these individuals will not consider their expectations that a negative reality can be overcome to achieve a desired reality, because they think myopically about reality or fantasies. Thus, they will only have moderate commitment toward achieving the positive fantasy, independent of whether they view the attainment of that goal as being likely or unlikely (i.e. receive a strong or weak argument). Merely thinking about reality does not supply the initiative to change because the positive, more desirable future is not considered. Conversely, fantasizing about a better future is only motivational when the implications of one's negative reality are considered. In this situation, goals are not produced, one is merely daydreaming.

METHOD

Participants and Design

University undergraduates participated in the experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 3 (Mindset Type: Positive Fantasy vs. Negative Reality vs. Mental Contrast) X 2 (Argument Quality: Strong vs. Weak) between-subjects design.

Procedure

All experimental procedures were conducted with computers using Medialab software (a program designed for presenting stimuli, presenting instructions and questions, and recording participants' responses; Jarvis, 2004). Participants were told that the purpose of this investigation was to help gain a better understanding of how individuals respond to information they see. The experiment was executed in three phases.

During the first phase of the experiment, all participants were asked to name a car they would be interested in buying in the future. Participants were then asked to list four *positive outcomes* that may result from purchasing and owning that particular car. Subsequently, they were also asked to list four *negative realities* that stand in the way of obtaining the car. To prevent mental over-elaborations, participants were instructed for both lists to write down only keywords (e.g., "look cool," "too expensive;" see Oettingen et al., 2001).

The next phase of the investigation served to manipulate participants' mindset. Participants in the *Positive Fantasy* only condition were instructed to rank-order their four positive fantasies about owning a new car (one being the best and four being the worst) and then elaborate on all four of the fantasies. In contrast, participants in the *Negative Reality* condition were instructed to rank-order their four negative realities standing in the way of obtaining a car and then elaborate on all four of these realities. Participants in the *Mental Contrasting* (i.e., *Positive Fantasy and Negative Reality*) condition were instructed to independently rank order their four positive fantasies and four negative realities. Similar to the other conditions, the participants were then instructed to write in more detail about the fantasies and negative realities. However, in this condition participants were asked to focus only on the top two items of each list.

In the final phase, participants were presented with an advertisement for a car dealership (see Appendix A). Depending on condition, this advertisement contained arguments of either a *weak* or *strong* quality. The *weak* advertisement offered incentives that were not very enticing (e.g., only \$3000 down, discounts for students maintaining a 3.9 GPA or better, etc.). Conversely, the *strong* advertisement offered enticing incentives for buying a car from the dealership (e.g., no money down, discounts for students maintaining a 2.5 GPA or better, etc.).

Independent Variables

Mindset.

As mentioned above, participants were randomly assigned to elaborate on either four positive fantasies regarding the imagined purchase and ownership of a desired car, the negative realities that stood in the way of them purchasing and owning this car, or both. To do this, all participants first listed four positive fantasies and four negative realities in short phrases. Then, depending on which condition they were assigned, the participants either elaborated on two positive fantasies and two negative realities (mental contrast), four positive fantasies (positive fantasy), or four negative realities (negative reality) by writing more in-depth descriptions of each of their thoughts. For this task participants were given instructions that asked them to think deeply about their thoughts. Specifically, participants read the following instructions: “Think about your 1st MOST IMPORTANT POSITIVE OUTCOME [NEGATIVE REALITY] as intensely as possible. Let mental images pass through your thoughts and do not hesitate to give your fantasies [negative realities] free reign. Take as much time as you need to write down whatever it is that comes to mind while you are thinking about this outcome [obstacle].” The computer then provided a text box into which participants could write their elaborations.

Expectations.

As previously stated, participants encountered an advertisement for a car dealership that, unbeknownst to participants, was fictitious. Before the computer

presented this advertisement to the participants, they were told that our research lab was testing advertisements for an area dealership, set to open in the near future. Participants were then shown a magazine-like ad in which the dealership name (Fillmore Motors) appeared on the top, a picture of a chassis appeared in the middle along with the appeal to “insert your favorite car here” under which four arguments appeared to sway readers to consider purchasing a car from this dealership. Depending on condition, these arguments were either weak (“only \$3000 down,” discounts for students maintaining a 3.9 gpa or better,” “payment plans as low as \$400 per month,” “10% discount on oil changes for a year”) or strong (“no money down,” “discounts for students maintaining a 2.5 gpa or better,” “payments as low as \$200 per month,” and “free oil changes for a year”). The manipulation of argument quality served to manipulate participants’ expectations that purchasing a car from this dealership was feasible. In particular, participants who received the weak arguments should come to expect that purchasing a car from this dealership will be difficult (e.g., they will have to accumulate \$3000 for a down payment and maintain a high GPA to receive a discount). Alternatively, participants who received the strong arguments should come to expect that purchasing a car from this dealership will be quite possible (e.g., they will not have to accumulate money for a down payment and only have to maintain a 2.5 GPA to receive a discount).

Manipulation Checks and Dependent Measures

After reading the advertisement, participants completed several questions to assess their reactions to the advertisement, personality dimensions, and demographic

information. Most important, participants were presented items to measure their expectations about the feasibility of owning a car in the near future, attitudes towards purchasing a car in the near future, and then intentions to purchase a car in the near future.

Argument Quality Manipulation Check.

An argument-quality manipulation-check index was created from summing participants' responses to the stem "The arguments in the ad were:" which were made on to scales anchored by 1 (*weak; not compelling*) to 9 (*strong; compelling*). The two items were highly correlated, $r = .831, p < .001$.

Expectation Manipulation Check.

After reading the advertisement, participants answered an expectation item ("I expect to be in a position to buy my first/next car in the near future.") created to measure their near-term expectations for how feasible it would be to purchase a new car. The question was answered on a scale anchored at 1 (*not at all true*) to 9 (*very true*).

Attitudes.

After reading the advertisement, participants answered 2 items created to measure their attitudes about buying a new car. Specifically, participants responded to the stem "buying my first or next car before I graduate is:" on two scales anchored by 1 (unfavorable; bad) to 9 (favorable; good). Participants' responses to these items were highly correlated, $r = .725, p < .001$, and therefore summed to create an attitude index.

Intentions and Goal Commitment.

Participants' intentions and plans to purchase a new car were also measured. Examples of intention stems are, "My desire to buy a new car is:" responses to which were made on a scale anchored at 1 (very weak) to 9 (very strong), and "In order to purchase a new car I would save extra money each month," responses to which were made on a scale anchored from 1 (highly disagree) to 9 (highly agree). Examples of goal-commitment stems are "I intend to implement my plan to own my first/next car" and "I will likely buy a new car in the future," responses to which were made on a scales anchored from 1 (highly disagree) to 9 (highly agree).

Motivation.

Prevalent models of persuasion such as the ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986) suggest that individuals form more favorable attitudes if they encounter strong, relative to weak, arguments so long as the individuals are *motivated* and *able* to process a message carefully. In the current study, it was predicted that individuals will form more favorable attitudes if they encounter strong, relative to weak, arguments only in the mental contrast conditions. It is possible that manipulating mental contrast in individuals increases their motivation to process a message carefully relative to manipulating other mindsets. If this is the case, the expected results would be predicted by the ELM and investigating attitude formation/change from the perspective of FRT would not add to our understanding thereof. Rather, mental-contrasting manipulations would just be another of several ways to increase processing motivation (cf. personal relevance, importance) rather than being a unique mindset by which attitudes are influenced by argument strength.

To examine this alternative possibility, two items were measured to assess individuals' motivation to process the advertisement. Specifically, participants were asked, "To what extent did you make an effort to think about the ad while reading it?" anchored from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*), and "How much were you able to concentrate on the ad you read?" anchored from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*). If participants in all mindset conditions report comparable motivation to process the advertisement, then the ELM would not serve as a viable explanation for the predicted effects of argument quality within the mental-contrast conditions. That is, these individuals will be more swayed by strong arguments, but not because they are more motivated than participants in the other conditions to process the advertisements. Rather, they will form attitudes in line with the arguments because, for them, expectations derived from the arguments are critical in determining goal commitment.

RESULTS

Argument Quality

To test whether participants who read the advertisements containing strong arguments found those arguments more compelling than did participants who read the weak arguments, the argument-quality manipulation-check index was entered into a 3(mindset: mental contrast vs. positive fantasy vs. negative reality) x 2 (argument quality: weak vs. strong) between-subjects Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Importantly, only the main effect of argument quality attained significance, $F(1, 131) = 13.81, p < .001$, all other $F_s < 2.33$ and $p_s > .10$. This effect indicates that participants who received the strong arguments viewed the ad as stronger and more compelling ($M = 9.91, SD = 4.33$) than did participants who received the weak arguments ($M = 7.35, SD = 3.76$). That is, the argument-quality manipulation was effective for participants in all mindset conditions.

Expectations

Participants' responses to the expectation item were entered in to the same ANOVA used above, but yielded no significant effects. Importantly, however, ANOVAs test for crossover interactions, whereas a different interaction pattern was predicted for this experiment. To more precisely test for the predicted interaction pattern, a focused contrast following Rosenthal and Rosnow (1985) was constructed to determine if participants in the mental contrast group, but not in the other groups, who received strong

arguments ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 2.83$) differed in their expectations from participants who received weak arguments ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 2.62$). This contrast (with weights of -1, 1, for participants in the mental contrast-strong and mental contrast-weak conditions, respectively, and weights of 0 for all other conditions) was marginally significant, $t(131) = 1.62$, $p = .054$ (one-tailed). A subsequent contrast to see if the other condition differed in regard to argument strength was not significant, $t < 1$. Thus, these findings provide some support for hypothesis 1.

Attitudes

Participants' responses to the attitude index were entered into the same ANOVA used above, but yielded no significant effects. Again, a focused contrast was used to test whether participants in the mental contrast group, but not in the other groups, formed more favorable attitudes toward purchasing a car if they read strong ($M = 10.59$, $SD = 4.71$), as opposed to weak ($M = 10.18$, $SD = 4.84$), arguments in the advertisement. To do this, weights of -1 and 1 were given for participants who respectively read weak or strong arguments in the mental contrast conditions, whereas weights of 0 were assigned to all other conditions. Supporting Hypothesis 2, this contrast was significant, $t(131) = 2.07$, $p = .04$. Supporting Hypothesis 3, subsequent contrasts comparing attitudes of participants who read strong versus weak argument in the positive fantasy and negative reality conditions were not significant, $t < 1.02$ and $p > .31$.

Intention/Commitment

The 10 items created to measure participants' intention to purchase a car were individually entered into ANOVAs identical to those conducted above. None of these analyses yielded significant results, all $F_s < 2.32$ and $p_s > .103$.

Motivation

The two items created to measure participants' motivation to think about and concentrate on the advertisement car were individually entered into ANOVAs identical to those conducted above. None of these analyses yielded significant results, all $F_s < 2.09$ and $p_s > .133$. The lack of results for these measures indicates that participants in all mindset conditions were comparably motivated to process the arguments within the advertisement.

DISCUSSION

FRT suggest that individuals can consider the future in one of three ways. Specifically, individuals can simply focus on a positive future fantasy (e.g., owning a car), a negative reality standing in the way of achieving that fantasy (e.g., not having enough money), or individuals can consider both concurrently, comparing the fantasy with reality (and think, for example, “Maybe I *can* earn enough money to buy a car”). Further, much research suggests that when individuals engage in this later comparison process, they form a strong goal to achieve the fantasy if they expect this goal is attainable, but abandon this goal if they expect it is not attainable. However, individuals who consider only fantasies or reality will form goals to achieve the fantasy that are only of moderate strength, and independent of their expectations that the goal is attainable.

This thesis investigated several possibilities stemming from a consideration of FRT along with ideas found in the persuasion literature. First, I suggested in the Introduction that it should be possible to change individuals’ expectations about achieving a goal via argument-quality manipulations and still obtain effects consistent with the FRT. Importantly, all research on the FRT to date has measured preexisting expectations and has not demonstrated that manipulated expectations produce comparable results. Second, and related, I suggested that expectations manipulated via the quality of arguments individuals encounter should influence their commitment to achieving a goal (as indexed by their attitudes toward achieving that goal and intentions to achieve that goal) only when they mentally contrast fantasies with reality.

Testing these ideas, a study was designed and conducted in which individuals were induced into one of the three mindsets suggested by FRT then encountered an advertisement for a car dealership which contained either strong or weak arguments. This experiment yielded support for the notion that argument quality manipulations can influence expectations (see also many similar findings reported by Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Areni & Lutz, 1988; Petty & Wegener, 1991), particularly for individuals in the mental contrast condition (Hypothesis 1). Specifically, participants in the mental contrast condition who received strong arguments expected it was more feasible to purchase a car in the near future than did participants who received weak arguments. Participants in the other conditions did not differ in their expectation of being able to buy a car in the near future, regardless of the strength of argument they received. Importantly, although these results are not very strong, they provide support for the idea that participants in the mental contrast group are more sensitive to their expectations that a future goal is attainable, per the FRT. In particular, participants in the mental contrast groups had varying expectations of whether they would be able to buy a car in the near future based on the quality of the arguments contained within the dealership advertisement they read.

The reported experiment also yielded data that supported the idea that expectations created by argument quality manipulations influence goal commitment for participants in the mental contrast conditions, at least as indicated by these participants' attitudes toward purchasing a car (Hypothesis 2). Specifically, individuals in the mental contrast condition had more favorable attitudes toward buying a car before graduating if they read the advertisement containing strong arguments than weak arguments. Just as

importantly, no significant results of the attitude index were obtained for either the positive fantasy only or negative reality only conditions. Likely, participants' attitudes in those conditions did not differ based on argument quality because this manipulation influences expectations, which these participants do not consider when forming goals or goal commitment.

Unfortunately, effects of mindset and argument quality were not found for other measures of goal commitment. That is, no significant results indicated that participants' intention to enact the goal of buying a new car, or plans to buy a car, depended on argument quality or mindset. The lack of results for these measures may be the result of the high cost of buying a new car. Thus, perhaps irrespective of participants' expectations and attitudes, realistically, as a college student, buying a new car is just out of the question. Maybe giving testimonies of college students who are struggling to make car payments or are having an easy time affording a car would augment the argument strength manipulation. It is interesting to consider, however, that attitudes may be the most sensitive measure of goal strength because they are formed from expectations. Having a positive attitude toward owning a car in the near future is the first necessary step toward buying that car. Further, attitudes are likely of primary importance because behavioral intentions should follow from attitudes (see Petty et al., 1995, for a review). In the case of this study, although the positive attitude was present in the mental contrast/strong argument condition, buying a new car before graduation is just entirely unfeasible. Thus, although participants showed positive attitudes and expected it would

be possible to buy a car when they were in the mental contrast condition/strong argument condition, they lacked intention.

A final possibility following from the consideration of FRT along with ideas found in the persuasion literature is that the FRT may introduce predictions not made by current models of persuasion (e.g., the ELM). The ELM suggests that individuals form more favorable attitudes if they encounter strong, relative to weak, arguments so long as the individuals are motivated and able to process a message carefully. The FRT can be used to predict differences in attitude formation based on mindsets rather than motivation. Consistent with this idea, there was not a difference in participants' motivation to process the advertisement among the conditions of this study. Nonetheless, only individuals in the mental contrasting condition formed more favorable attitudes following the reception of strong, relative to weak, arguments. Thus, evidence is consistent with the current theorizing extrapolating from FRT which suggest that argument quality can at times influence attitudes without increasing processing motivation. This is a novel prediction that is not made by the ELM.

Finally, the current experiment demonstrated that attitudes about object goals, in addition to attitudes about context goals, can be influenced by the FRT. Specifically, consistent with the FRT people form or reject goals toward an object in just the same way Oettingen et al. (2001) showed they can form or reject cognitive, affective, and behavioral goals.

Implications and Future Directions

It is intriguing that one advertisement can influence participants' attitudes towards making a sizable purchase in the near future, at least in the mental contrast conditions. This finding has huge implications for consumer behavior researchers. Essentially, if advertisers present a marketing scheme that causes one to contrast a positive fantasy against a negative reality, and then demonstrate that is feasible to attain that fantasy, people will be more inclined to initiate goals to purchase a product. These results hint at the idea that when forced to think about positive fantasies and contrast them against negative realities, participants shown an optimistic advertisement are more likely to think positively about the future. In essence, it appears that in performing a mental contrast, the participants are primed to go either way, and their attitude about the future matches the strength of the argument in the advertisement (i.e. if the advertisement is strong and positive, then so will be one's attitude).

These positive results were reaffirmed by the absence of a significant effect of argument strength on attitudes for the other two conditions. This effect was not present in those conditions because the participants were not induced to fantasize about a positive future while also considering their negative reality. Without performing a mental contrast, it appears that expectations of attainability are not really considered. Participants fail to connect their mindset to their expectations.

It would be very beneficial to demonstrate with future research different behavioral intentions to pursue a goal as well as differing attitudes between the mindset groups. Ideally, in future research, participants in a mental contrast condition who receive

advertisement containing strong arguments will show greater intention to enact a plan and more positive attitudes than participants in the other two conditions; whereas the mental contrast participants who receive an advertisement containing weak arguments will show less favorable attitudes and intention than the other two conditions. Doing so would bring the evidence one step closer to demonstrating that mental mindsets can influence individuals' actual behaviors. One possible way to glean these effects is to present advertisements for a more affordable object (e.g., an iPod, a new computer, a stereo system, etc.). This way, the possibility that the item is just too expensive to buy will not be present, and therefore behavioral intentions may show more variability. Further, by adding thought measures, and asking how the participants feel about the product being presented in the advertisement I will be able to pinpoint why some participants do lack intention.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that argument strength is marginally related to expectations and, thus, manipulations of argument quality can be used to investigate the FRT. Further, I have expanded the types of goals influenced by the FRT to include object goals as well as context goals. It is also imperative to note that the results obtained in this study seem independent of individuals' motivations to process arguments, an idea separate from the Elaboration Likelihood Model. I was able to show that mental contrasting is not just another way to increase processing motivation.

I feel that the continuation of the work of Oettingen (1996, 1999) and Oettingen et al. (2001) is very important in that FRT can provide evidence to help better understand consumer decision making. If a method for applying FRT to advertising can be identified, business will have a much more efficient and successful time selling their products. By confirming argument quality's relation to expectations I have shown manipulations of argument quality can be used in FRT research, allowing the research to expand into the realm of consumerism.

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APPENDIX A

DEALERSHIP ADVERTISEMENTS

Fillmore Motors

Insert your favorite car here:



We have dozens of makes and models to choose from!

- Only \$3000 down!
- Discounts for students with a 3.9 GPA or better!
- Payment plans as low as \$400 per month!
- Save 10% on oil changes for a year!

Fillmore Motors

Insert your favorite car here:



We have dozens of makes and models to choose from!

- No money down!
- Discounts for students maintaining a 2.5 GPA!
- Payment plans as low as \$200 per month!
- Free oil changes for a year!