

# Selling a juicy burger with a photo: The effect of induced positive consumption simulations on purchases

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Researchers from Yale University and University of Southern California have published a new *Journal of Marketing* study that synthesizes and

evaluates over 50 studies conducted over four decades to determine when mental simulation prompts heighten consumers' purchases.

The study is titled "EXPRESS: From Mentally Doing to Actually Doing: A Meta-Analysis of Induced Positive Consumption Simulations" and is authored by Gizem Ceylan, Kristin Diehl, and Wendy Wood.

Enticing people to buy a juicy burger or the new Apple Vision Pro spatial headset computer can involve the same marketing approach: prompting consumers to mentally simulate future [purchases](#) or consumption.

Marketers often prompt mental simulations via visuals or via verbal calls to action. For example, restaurants try to entice patrons with mouthwatering photos on their Instagram accounts or menus. The Apple Vision Pro launch video shows people using the new headset computer in a hope that consumers will simulate how they would use the device. A commercial for EasyJet, a leading European airline, asks people to "Imagine Where We Can Take You" along with visuals of flying over clouds and of different holiday locations from beaches to cities.

The question is: How effective are these mental simulations? Mental simulation has been shown to improve action readiness and is thus used in advertisements and other communications to facilitate purchase and consumption. "However," note the researchers, "although some studies have noted positive influences on behavioral intentions and behavior, others have found minimal or even negative effects. It is difficult to interpret these findings given how the modality of simulation, frequency of induction, type of consumption experience, and target populations vary widely in research and practice."

## **Behavioral impact**

This new study synthesizes and evaluates over 50 studies conducted over four decades (from 1980 to 2020) to analyze when [mental simulation](#) prompts heighten consumers' purchases. It produces several important findings for the industry:

1. Mental simulation increases behavioral responses; however, the average effect is small, suggesting that while mental simulation works in general, marketers must identify ways to strengthen its impact.
2. The study identifies more powerful mental simulation prompts—such as dynamic visuals with augmented reality (AR) or 360-degree videos, along with verbal instructions to go along with visuals—and guides marketers how to use such interactive media.
3. The frequency and spacing of the mental simulation determines its effect on [consumer behavior](#) and the study offers guidance to managers for effective ad planning and delivery. For example, when marketers place the same message across different platforms, consumers may be exposed to the same content over and over again within a single episode of mental simulation. In addition to repetition being annoying in general, mass repetition is not just ineffective but it also reduces consumption, likely due to habituation.
4. Simulation has limited impact on behavior in online samples in which participants may not be sufficiently motivated to engage in mental simulation.

"While mental simulation inductions are a common approach found across many industries and product categories, our systematic, large-scale analysis suggests that marketers should carefully consider the right approach, context, and frequency of prompting mental simulations," the researchers say.

## Real-world implications

This study offers the following lessons for Chief Marketing Officers:

- Using more interactive and engaging simulation prompts, such as 360-degree videos and AR tools, is especially effective in increasing behaviors. Investing in such technologies and approaches could be particularly important for companies that rely on consumers simulating a future experience or outcome.
- Some existing technologies and channels—such as animated graphics and email marketing—can be leveraged for simulation-based communications. Luxury brands already employ unboxing videos on TikTok and Instagram to stimulate viewers' imagination and influence their future purchases.
- Marketers must consider combining visual and verbal prompts. For instance, in the case of online reviews, consumers find it easier to process the review when the photo and text convey similar aspects of one's experience, which, in turn, increases the review's perceived helpfulness.
- For marketers employing mental simulation in their campaigns, controlling—especially limiting—daily exposure is particularly important. For instance, Hulu has taken steps to ensure its viewers can encounter the same commercial only twice per hour, four times per day, or 25 times per week. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram now allow marketers to place limits on daily or weekly exposure, which we recommend should be set even lower than those employed by Hulu.
- The online studies yielded non-significant results as opposed to in-person studies, which produced significant effects. Mental

simulation prompts were ineffective for online respondents, possibly because they were not sufficiently involved or engaged in the simulation process. This finding may be particularly alarming for managers because a large chunk of advertising spending is on TV and digital channels that may be consumed during distracting activities and can lead to active disengagement from ads. As a workaround, ads that include mental [simulation](#) may better fit into channels in which consumers initiate the marketing activity, such as search ads that ensure greater consumer attention and engagement based on declared interests.

**More information:** Gizem Ceylan et al, EXPRESS: From Mentally Doing to Actually Doing: A Meta-Analysis of Induced Positive Consumption Simulations, *Journal of Marketing* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00222429231181071](#)

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