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Marketing Science Institute
1000 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA
02138-5396

Phone: 617.491.2060
Fax: 617.491.2065
www.msi.org

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Consumer Testimonials as Self-Generated Advertisements: Evaluative Reconstruction Following Product Usage

Terence A. Shimp, Stacy L. Wood, and Laura Smarandescu

Testimonial solicitations represent a popular marketing practice, and this report offers more evidence of their persuasive power. In three studies, the authors find that the act of writing a testimonial can cause a consumer to judge the product more favorably than otherwise.

Terence A. Shimp is Distinguished Foundation Fellow and Professor of Marketing, **Stacy L. Wood** is Associate Professor of Marketing, and **Laura Smarandescu** is a Ph.D. student, all at the Moore School of Business, University of South Carolina, Columbia.

Report Summary

Testimonial solicitations—in which firms solicit consumers' personal endorsements of a product or service—represent a popular marketing practice. Testimonials are thought to offer several benefits to firms, among them that participating consumers may strengthen their positive attitudes toward a brand, through the act of writing testimonials.

Here, Shimp, Wood, and Smarandescu conceptualize a testimonial as a *self-generated advertisement*. Prior research finds that exposing consumers to advertisements after they have used a product influences their memory-based evaluations of the usage experience and inflates their product judgments. In their study, the authors investigate whether this effect exists for testimonials.

Two laboratory studies demonstrate that the act of writing testimonials can enhance product evaluations beyond the actual experience of using the product. That is, the act of writing a testimonial caused participants to evaluate the product—a special, watery formulation of orange juice presented as a delicious new brand—more favorably than its formulation warranted. In addition, writing a testimonial about a product in conjunction with a special person (e.g., the Brawny paper towel "Who is your Brawny man?" contest) enhanced product evaluations over writing a testimonial about a product per se.

Because of the context in which testimonials are generally solicited (as part of a promotion with the incentive of a potential prize), consumers may write exaggeratedly positive testimonials. In a third study, the authors find that when consumers exaggerate in their testimonials, their evaluations of the product are lower than when they do not exaggerate—that is, exaggeration results in a discounting effect.

These results support the solicitation of testimonials as a marketing tool but indicate that the testimonial must be designed carefully in order to have a positive effect. It is incumbent on brand managers to develop testimonial programs that encourage consumers to offer genuine commentary so as to avoid the backlash effects of subsequent discounting. ■

Introduction

The solicitation of consumer testimonials is a popular marketing practice. Testimonials are used for products as diverse as oil heat (in Canada) and money orders (in Latin America) (Dietrich 1999; Fuel Oil News 1999) and for services such as the UPromise college savings plan (Anderson 2002) and the Fandango movie ticket service (Goldrich 2003). Consumer goods marketers often feature consumer testimonials as the centerpiece of their advertising or promotions efforts; recent examples include the campaigns for Advanced Micro Devices' computer chips, Arby's restaurants, Victory motorcycles, Brawny paper towels, Aleve analgesic, OxiClean stain remover, and Hungry Jack food products.

Brand managers often tie consumer testimonials to the possibility of winning prizes through contests or sweepstakes. Managers offer promotional prizes to elicit testimonials because they believe, at least tacitly, that testimonials provide any of several benefits. One is that testimonials can be used as copy input for advertising campaigns or other forms of marketing communications. A second is the addressable information that is acquired about households when consumers submit testimonials. A third benefit is that participating consumers' positive attitudes toward a brand are presumed to be strengthened by the act of writing testimonials. It is this third benefit that we investigate in this research.

One might consider a testimonial (solicited after product trial) to be conceptually similar to postexperience advertising. In essence, a testimonial may be understood as a self-generated advertisement, that is, as an ad framed in the consumer's own words. However, unique characteristics associated with testimonial solicitation may obviate the potential positive effects of testimonial writing. In this research, we explore the postexperience influence of testimonials and examine whether consumers' natural tendencies to exaggerate testimonial statements may diminish testimonials' otherwise positive effects.

Further, marketing expenditures continue to deemphasize traditional advertising media in the quest to harness new techniques that will be effective with more persuasion-savvy consumers. Many companies have embraced practices that have a personal, interactive, or grassroots quality; the use of testimonials and testimonial solicitation is highly characteristic of this emerging trend. Thus, while testimonials are a niche technique, this research can offer insight into the benefits and dangers of the broader use of personally interactive marketing messages.

Postexperience Influence of Testimonials on Attitudes

Testimonials, by their nature, occur after consumers have tried and gained firsthand product experience. Experiential information has been shown to be seductive (Hoch 2002) because consumers (1) learn experiential information quickly (Wright and Lynch 1995), (2) view their personal experiences as highly diagnostic (Hoch 2002), and (3) weigh experiential information heavily in choice (Shapiro and Spence 2002). Yet experiential information—even taste—is ambiguous (Hoyer and Brown 1990; Levin and Gaeth 1988), and ambiguous information is especially open to advertising influence (Ha and Hoch 1989). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that advertising shapes postexperience brand attitudes through a reconstructive memory process (Braun 1999). We return to this point shortly.

Positive postexperience influence

There are several ways in which consumer attitudes can be enhanced through the exercise of writing a personal testimonial. First (though not in order of importance), writing a testimonial can promote positive brand-related cognitive elaboration (that is, connection of the brand to the testimonial writer's own life).

Attitudes have been shown to polarize simply through elaboration (Tesser 1976). Second, as a personal endorsement, a product testimonial is also an expression of brand commitment, and elaboration-induced attitude change is more likely to occur if people are committed to their judgments (Millar and Tesser 1986). Third, a testimonial is an expression of a consumer's positive attitude. Attitudes have been shown to become more accessible with repeated expression, and one result of their increased accessibilty is more attitude-consistent behavior (Fazio 1989). Fourth, for those consumers who have ambiguous attitudes at the time of testimonial writing, listing positive brand features may create a schema that allows for confirmatory processing in subsequent product evaluation, and consumers are known to interpret uncertain product information in a manner that supports their prior expectations (Deighton 1984; Hoch and Ha 1986).

Finally, and most relevant to our undertaking, it has been demonstrated in the case of food products that exposure to advertising following a tasting experience with a brand can serve to induce positive perceptions of that experience through a process of reconstructed memory; in turn, this memory adjustment engenders a more positive evaluation of the brand than had existed following the actual tasting experience (Braun 1999). It might be expected that such an effect would be even stronger in the case of consumers' writing testimonials about their brand usage experiences inasmuch as testimonials typically are framed in positive terms and consumers' uncertainty regarding source credibility would be low, as they themselves would be the source.[1]

The reconstructive memory outcome described by Braun (1999) can be accounted for by either of two similar theoretical processes. First, extensive research dating back more than 25 years has demonstrated that misinformation received *after* a direct perceptual experience becomes part of individuals' memories and distorts recall of the direct experience. This has been dubbed the misinformation effect (Loftus 1977), or, when particularized to an advertising context, the advertising misinformation effect (Braun and Loftus 1998). For example, Braun and Loftus (1998) presented research participants with a candy bar packaged in a green wrapper, exposed them subsequently to an advertisement claiming that the bar was wrapped in a blue package, and later observed a tendency among participants to recall that the candy bar they had originally seen as having been wrapped in a blue or bluish-green wrapper.[2]

Verbal overshadowing is a related theoretical mechanism that can also account for distorted memory following direct perceptual experience (e.g., Meissner and Brigham 2001; Melcher and Schooler 1996; Schooler and Engstler-Schooler 1990). Overshadowing occurs when individuals attempt to capture verbally a nonverbal experience: the act of verbal reflection induces deliberation and fragmentation of perceptual memories (Schooler 2002). When individuals provide memory-based descriptions of complex nonverbal stimuli (e.g., features of a person's face or sensory characteristics of wine), such verbalizations appear to impede individuals' subsequent ability to correctly identify the initially processed stimulus from among a set of foils. Verbal overshadowing is, in other words, a form of memory illusion in which initial perceptual memory is inhibited by a subsequent verbal representation (Melcher and Schooler 1996).

In a marketing context, Braun (1999) conducted a test in which participants sampled an unfamiliar orange juice brand that was formulated to be of mediocre quality. Participants were subsequently exposed to postexperience advertisements. The results indicated that participants' memories regarding the initial tasting experience were reconstructed such that, when asked to choose the juice they had tasted from five choices, they identified a better-tasting juice as the one they had sampled. She interpreted her results as demonstrating verbal overshadowing, though a misinformation effect offers an alternative explanation. Whichever

the correct theoretical explanation, the implications of postadvertising memory reconstruction are profound for advertising practice (e.g., Hall 2002).

Can testimonials similarly enhance postexperience product evaluations? We suggest they can. As Melcher and Schooler (1996) state, "Of all the sources of memory illusions, our own language may be the most insidious" (p. 231). This emphasis on "our own language" leads us to consider the efficacy of consumer testimonials. Testimonials are an inexpensive alternative to advertisements, yet the academic marketing literature is silent on the topic of testimonial effects.

We conceptualize testimonials as self-generated postexperience verbalizations that typically are framed in positive terms and hold the potential to promote or enhance positive aspects of product experience. However, given the self-generated status of testimonials, this positive influence may be moderated by how sincere consumers are when writing testimonials. Related to the issue of sincerity, there is a risk of discounting with testimonials, as discussed below.

Negative postexperience influence

While self-generated testimonials have the potential to positively impact memory reconstruction, we hypothesize that their unique characteristics allow for potential negative effects. One way in which self-generated testimonials differ from more traditional advertising messages is the manner in which they are solicited. Often testimonial solicitations are coupled with promotions to motivate consumers to participate. For example, in a sweepstakes promotion called the "WOW! Challenge," the maker of Wow! potato chips (Frito-Lay) designated an area for a personal "tastemonial" on the mail-in sweepstakes form. The instructions included on the entry form read as follows: "Thanks for taking the WOW! Challenge. Now that you've tried WOW! Chips, let us know what you think by giving us your 'Tastemonial.' Just mail us your thoughts on WOW! Chips, and you'll be entered into the WOW! Challenge Sweepstakes. You could win some great WOW! Prizes: [prizes listed]." In smaller print at the bottom of the form the consumer was directed to official rules and informed that a "tastemonial" was not required to win.

In such situations, consumers may infer (based on their mental schemas regarding requirements for being selected a winner in marketing contests) that they must be complimentary in order to have a winning chance. Even with the clear reference to the fact that the exercise is a probability-based game (a sweepstakes), the consumer may naturally believe that a negative statement has little chance of being selected a winner. Other testimonial contests are explicitly judged based on content (for example, the annual Brawny paper towels contest that asks consumers to write an essay about a loved one who is a "real-life" Brawny man, relating the contest to the brand's icon, the Brawny lumberjack).

When consumers' motivation for writing a testimonial is a prize, they may exaggerate their brand-related positive evaluations and suppress their negative evaluations. Consumers may write overly favorable evaluations in hopes of increasing their odds of winning; if so, they may be aware that their glowing praise was motivated not by their true reaction to the brand but rather by the promise of a reward (cf. Scott 1976; Scott and Yalch 1978; Tybout and Scott 1983). Recognizing that fact, consumers may realize that their testimonials are essentially untruthful, although this may vary in degree from mere exaggeration to outright lying.

In the following studies, we investigate the potential of consumer testimonials to serve as effective postexperience advertising by eliciting favorable product evaluations. We also examine potential discounting effects, whereby testimonial writers' awareness of their insincerity may mitigate favorable product evaluations. We use Braun's (1999) research protocol for conducting these studies.

Study 1

Participants first tasted a sample of an allegedly new brand of orange juice, which, unbeknownst to them, was actually a watered-down mix of a popular national brand. Subsequent to tasting this new orange juice and performing an unrelated intervening task, participants either wrote a testimonial or provided their thoughts about the new brand in nontestimonial terms. Two forms of testimonial experience were manipulated: A first version requested participants to write a testimonial focused simply on the new orange juice; the second manipulation had a different group of participants write a testimonial in the form of an explanation of how the orange juice brand was similar to a special person (e.g., parent, grandparent, sibling, or friend). This second form is commonly used by consumer packaged-goods companies, which ask contest participants to write about a special person in relation to the brand (they may ask participants to write about how their husband is a "Hungry Jack" or "Brawny Man," for example). The key objective of this study was to determine whether a testimonial written after a tasting experience influences participants to remember that experience as more positive than it actually was and to inflate their evaluations of the tasted product.

Method

Participants and Design. Undergraduate students (N = 119) participated for course credit. A single, experimental factor was manipulated at three levels: a no-testimonial (baseline) condition (N = 42), a product-based testimonial (N = 39), and a person-based testimonial (N = 38). Respondents were randomly assigned to one of these conditions.

Stimuli and Procedure. Participants initially tasted an orange juice product that was formulated to be of mediocre quality, and in a subsequent memory test they chose from among three formulations that included this quality level along with better and worse options.[3] The three levels of orange juice quality were formulated based on Braun's (1999) use of a recipe developed by Pechmann and Ratneshwar (1992); however, whereas participants in Braun's memory identification test (Experiment 1) chose from among five levels of orange juice (labeled 1-5, with 1 being the worst and 5 being the best), we limited the options to three. These options equated to Braun's bad, medium, and good levels, which she labeled 2, 3, and 4, respectively. We chose not to include the two extreme options (1 and 5) on grounds that 1 was never selected by subjects who had initially tasted the medium-quality orange juice and that 5 was selected by fewer than 10% of her participants.

Participants were informed upon entering the research room that their task was to taste and evaluate a new orange juice. The study commenced with the experimenter providing each participant with a 2-ounce sample of the medium-quality (Braun's level 3) orange juice. Like Braun (1999), we called our juice Orange Grove. Participants were advised to sample as much as desired and to "think about your taste experience with this juice." They then were instructed to eat a cracker as a palate cleanser while waiting for the next part of the study. The experimenter next provided them with a mock-up of the packaging graphics for the Orange Grove container, the purpose of which was to solidify the study ruse that the juice was actually a new brand being launched as part of a real marketing effort. This graphic, which was identical to that used in Braun's (1999) study, had "Orange Grove™" at the top and included a colorful drawing of a young woman in a summer dress holding a bowl of oranges over her head. Copy stated: "100% Pure Florida Orange Juice. Experience the taste Florida's been talking about." Participants were informed that the graphic was a rough mock-up that was serving as a preliminary concept for testing the appropriate packaging graphic for Orange Grove orange juice.

Also in adherence to Braun's procedure, participants were told they would be recording their

judgments about the juice later in the session but first needed to complete a survey for another instructor. That task, which was unrelated to the current experiment, lasted about 10 minutes and was designed to remove the tasting experience from working memory. Subsequent to this distractive task, the experimenter distributed a booklet labeled, "Orange Grove, Part Two." The first page of the booklet had the heading "Contest!" in large bold letters, along with this explanation:

Orange Grove is planning a contest to introduce the new orange juice that involves having people who buy the juice write a testimonial. The company is testing this contest by having you participate in it. Please note that participants in this study who are chosen as winners will not win the "Grand Prize" described below but will win one of the $50 prizes. *After all sessions of this study have been run, two entries will be chosen by the company, and those students will each receive $50.*

This description served both to rationalize why participants were being asked to write a testimonial and to announce that the marketers of Orange Grove would be awarding two $50 prizes. A graphically highlighted box followed the above general description and explained to participants exactly what they had to write about in order to participate in the contest. This box also served to manipulate the two testimonial conditions. Participants randomly assigned to the product-based testimonial were told to "describe why Orange Grove is a very special orange juice." Participants assigned to the person-based testimonial were to "describe why someone who means a lot to you (a parent, friend, or relative) is very special in a way that is similar to why Orange Grove is a special orange juice."

Following these directions, participants were informed that "Winning entries will be used in Orange Grove commercials, so b*e creative* in describing how the taste of Orange Grove (how your loved one and Orange Grove) makes (make) your day sunnier!" A series of blank lines followed on which participants were to write their testimonials. Beside these lines was a highlighted note that declared "This is a *real* contest you could win. Take your time and imagine your words are part of an ad!" These procedures were designed to make participants take the task seriously. We wanted them to spend time thinking about Orange Grove and crafting what would amount to a self-generated advertisement for the brand. Finally, participants who were randomly assigned to the no-testimonial condition also participated in a writing exercise so as to control for the effects of writing or possible cognitive fatigue on subsequent evaluations of the target brand. This condition was manipulated by instructing participants to "Recall in your own words the taste experience of drinking Orange Grove orange juice. Please take your time in remembering this experience." To control for the effect of the prize opportunity available to participants in the two testimonial groups, subjects in the no-testimonial group also were informed that they had an opportunity to win one of two $50 prizes if their name was randomly drawn.

Hypotheses. As explained above, the experiment was designed such that all subjects tasted a putatively new brand of orange juice formulated to be of mediocre quality. They then engaged in a writing experience in which they either merely described their tasting experience (no-testimonial condition) or else wrote either a product-related or a person-related testimonial for Orange Grove. We expected that subsequent evaluations of Orange Grove would be more positive in the combined testimonial groups than in the no-testimonial group. We also expected that the person-related testimonial would not be as likely to be discounted as would the product-related testimonial and that evaluations of the juice in the former group would be more positive than in the latter. This expectation is based on the idea that people are less likely to discount what they have written when directed to write about a brand in conjunction with a person who is special to them (compared with when they are directed to write about the brand alone) because they presumably believe at least

the positive things said about the loved one. Stated formally, the two hypotheses are:

H1: The two testimonial groups (product- and person-related testimonials) will individually and collectively evaluate Orange Grove more favorably than the no-testimonial control group.

H2: The person-related testimonial group will evaluate Orange Grove more favorably than the product-related testimonial group.

Measures. After writing their testimonials or, in the case of the nontestimonial condition, describing their experience of drinking Orange Grove, participants tasted three samples of orange juice (labeled Juice A, Juice B, and Juice C) and then were asked to identify which of the three was the Orange Grove brand they had initially tasted. The three juices were transitive in quality, with the last-tasted juice (Juice C) being the highest quality, the first-tasted (Juice A) the lowest, and Juice B being equivalent in formulation to the sample of Orange Grove tasted earlier.[4]

Participants next provided two forms of evaluative judgments. They first used 7-point scales to rate Orange Grove in terms of four specific taste features that were anchored with sour/sweet, watery/pulpy, stale/fresh, and artificial/pure (cf. Braun 1999). Next, they evaluated the brand with respect to two overall taste items (poor tasting/excellent tasting and low quality/high quality). The latter two items were averaged to form an overall taste scale. Finally, analysis of responses to a measure of hypothesis guessing indicated that no participants correctly identified the research hypothesis.

Results

We present findings for participants' perceptual judgments (their ability to identify Orange Grove from among the set of two foils correctly) and evaluative judgments (how they rated Orange Grove for specific taste attributes and their overall taste ratings) separately.

Perceptual Judgments. After tasting the three juices, participants selected the juice they believed was the Orange Grove brand they had tasted at the beginning of the session. Results indicate that participants were accurate in taste identification irrespective of testimonial condition. That is, the proportion of participants selecting the better-tasting juice (Juice C) was not significantly higher in the two testimonial groups than it was in the no-testimonial group ($\chi^2 4 = 1.95, p = .75$). Hence, unlike Braun (1999), who found that the advertising experience overshadowed the perceptual experience and impaired memory to the benefit of Orange Grove, we found that taste identification was not swayed by the act of writing testimonials any more than it was by merely providing thoughts about the Orange Grove tasting experience. We offer an explanation subsequently.

Evaluative Judgments. As noted, we had participants evaluate Orange Grove in terms of four specific product attributes and also with respect to two overarching taste-related features. With respect to the four attribute ratings, we expected testimonial writing would have the greatest effect on participants' evaluations of Orange Grove's wateriness (or pulpiness) because we had formulated the brand to be significantly more watery than normal, full-strength orange juice.

The analysis revealed a significant effect of testimonial writing on participants' perceptions of Orange Grove's wateriness ($F_{2,116} = 5.02, p = .008$). With higher numbers representing perceptions that Orange Grove is less watery (more pulpy), the means for the no-testimonial, product-, and person-related testimonial groups were 2.38, 2.62, and 3.24, respectively. Planned contrasts revealed that the combined testimonial groups perceived the brand as less watery than the no-testimonial group ($t_{116} = 2.29, p_{1\text{-tailed}} = .012$), that the person-related testimonial group perceived Orange Grove as less watery than both the no-testimonial group ($t_{116} = 3.09$, $p_{1\text{-tailed}} = .002$) and the product-related testimonial group ($t_{116} = 2.2, p_{1\text{-tailed}} = .015$), but that,

contrary to H1, the product-related testimonial and no-testimonial groups did not differ significantly in their ratings of Orange Grove's wateriness ($t_{116} < 1, p_{1\text{-tailed}} = .2$).[5] There were no significant differences among the three groups on the remaining taste attributes (sour/sweet, stale/fresh, artificial/pure), though all sets of means were directionally consistent with the ratings for the watery/pulpy attribute; that is, the person-related and product-related testimonial groups judged Orange Grove as somewhat less sour, stale, and artificial than did the no-testimonial group.

The overall pattern of results for the specific attribute ratings was corroborated by analysis on a variable created by averaging participants' ratings on the two general taste items (poor tasting/excellent tasting and low quality/high quality; $\alpha = .90$). The means for the no-testimonial, product-, and person-related testimonial groups were 3.81, 4.14, and 4.75, respectively ($F_{2,116} = 4.56, p = .012$). Planned contrasts mirrored results on the watery/pulpy attribute, with the combined testimonial groups perceiving Orange Grove as tasting better than the no-testimonial group ($t_{116} = 2.36, p_{1\text{-tailed}} = .01$), the person-related testimonial group judging Orange Grove more favorably than the product-related group ($t_{116} = 1.9, p_{1\text{-tailed}} = .03$) and the no-testimonial group ($t_{116} = 2.99, p = .002$), but the product-related testimonial group not perceiving the overall taste significantly more favorably than the no-testimonial group ($t_{116} = 1.06, p_{1\text{-tailed}} = .15$).

Discussion

Study 1 was designed to test whether having people write testimonials about Orange Grove orange juice would alter their memories and make them think they had tasted a more flavorful juice than they actually had. Braun (1999) obtained a postexperience (overshadowing) effect when she exposed her subjects to advertisements after they had tasted a mediocre "new" orange juice named Orange Grove. Using similar procedures but a different form of postexperience stimulus (i.e., self-generated advertisements in the form of solicited testimonials instead of company-generated advertisements), we obtained results that indicated that evaluative judgments were influenced by the postexperience task but that perceptual memories were not. In particular, participants in the combined testimonial groups judged Orange Grove to be less watery and better tasting than did a control group that did not write a testimonial for Orange Grove but simply provided their thoughts about this supposed new brand of orange juice. Moreover, participants assigned to the person-related testimonial group evaluated Orange Grove more favorably than did those in the no-testimonial group and, to a somewhat reduced extent, those in the product-related testimonial group.

Thus, in contrast to Braun's (1999) findings and those produced in the original verbal overshadowing work (e.g., Melcher and Schooler 1996; Schooler and Engstler-Schooler 1990), our participants' *perceptual memories* of the tasting experience were not reconstructed. Rather, most participants correctly identified the medium-quality juice (Juice B) as the one they had originally tasted. However, our results do not necessarily refute Braun's (1999) findings or those of Schooler and colleagues.

First, nothing in this line of research suggests a singular metric by which to gauge the effects of verbal overshadowing. Second, a methodological factor provides a plausible reason why we did not obtain evidence of overshadowing. In particular, where we provided subjects with only three choice options (Juices A, B, or C), Braun provided five options. If choice is a mere random act, then subjects in Braun's experiment had an 80% chance of selecting an option other than the one they had originally tasted, whereas our subjects had only a 67% chance of picking an incorrect option. Of course, both the overshadowing hypothesis and the advertising misinformation effect predict that choice is not a random act. On the contrary, both theories predict that exposure to advertisements in Braun's experiment should have increased the odds that subjects would select a better-tasting option

rather than the option they originally tasted. With two better-tasting options, there should have been 67% odds that a better-tasting option would be selected. Our procedure provided participants with only a single better-tasting option, thus establishing only 50% odds that this option would be selected over the mediocre version originally tasted. Any direct comparison of perceptual memory effects between Braun's (1999) study and ours must be qualified by this methodological difference.

It also is noteworthy that the findings from Study 1 might be confounded by the fact that subjects assigned to both testimonial groups (but not to the no-testimonial group) were encouraged to be effusive in their positive appraisal of Orange Grove. In other words, their more positive evaluations of Orange Grove may represent little more than their responsiveness to that suggestion rather than a postexperience effect resulting from writing positive product testimonials.

We were able to test this possibility by including a measure of testimonial exaggeration. Participants in all three groups rated the extent to which they had exaggerated their testimony about Orange Grove (from 1 = a little to 6 = a lot). The analysis revealed a significant difference in exaggeration among the three groups (F_2, 117 = 9.81, p = .000) with the no-testimonial group exaggerating the least (M = 1.48), and the person- and product-related testimonial groups self-reporting more exaggeration (M's = 2.95 and 3.23, respectively). However, when exaggeration was included as a covariate in ANCOVAs with ratings on wateriness and overall taste judgments, the effect of the manipulated factor remained significant in both analyses (p-values = .006 and .001, respectively). Further, exaggerated testimonials could not account for the fact that the person-related group evaluated Orange Grove more favorably than the product-related group, especially in the light of the fact that the product-related group exaggerated their responses more than the person-related group did, though not to a significant degree ($t_{76} < 1, p = .58$).

It thus appears that the act of writing a testimonial for Orange Grove as a means of entering a promotional contest effectively inflated participants' evaluations of the orange juice. The underlying process appears to be a postexperience reconstruction of memory related to the tasting experience, which demonstrates that not only transformational advertisements (as in Braun's 1999 experiment) but also consumers' own written testimonials can distort memories and lead to brand-related judgments beneficial to the brand eliciting the testimonial.

Perhaps most interesting among our findings is the fact that the person-related testimonial generated more favorable evaluations of Orange Grove than the product-related testimonial. We surmise this occurred because participants in the product-related group merely extolled Orange Grove, whereas those in the person-related group were also extolling a loved one. One's beliefs and feelings about a loved one are held firmly—even fervently—in memory, and one is unlikely to doubt the credibility of those feelings. Thus, by linking one's thoughts about Orange Grove to those unassailable memories, one reduces the likelihood of subsequently discounting one's praise of the orange juice. By comparison, a product testimonial that does not benefit from association with thoughts and feelings about a loved one is more readily discounted at a later time when arriving at an evaluative judgment about the brand. Marketers show signs of understanding this at least at an intuitive level when they design contests that require participants to describe a loved one in relation to the promoted brand. These descriptions likely serve to form a union—probably at a subconscious level—in the describers' minds between the brand and the loved one and thus to improve brand evaluations.

This first study thus demonstrates that person-related testimonials augment postconsumption, product-based evaluative judgments. However, one limitation of Study 1 was that it allowed participants to write about any relative or friend

for whom they felt affinity. It would be good to manipulate the nature of the relationship between the testimonial writer and the person about whom he or she writes to see if the strength of postexperience evaluations is a function of the nature of the person-to-person relationship. With that in mind, we designed Study 2.

Study 2

While Study 1 demonstrated the overall efficacy of person-related testimonials, we predict that not all such testimonials are equal in their influence on product evaluations. This study explores how the nature of the relationship between the testifier and the person whom the testifier writes about (the "testifiee") in connection with the product testimonial influences the testifier's postexperience evaluations of the product. In Study 1, participants in the person-related testimonial group wrote about a variety of loved ones (close friends, siblings, parents, and grandparents) in connection with Orange Grove orange juice, but meaningful post-hoc analyses of possible differences among those categories of loved ones was infeasible because of disparate group sizes. Study 2, by contrast, was designed to control for the form of relationship and thus to test how the type of relationship between testifier and testifiee influences postexperience product evaluations. The theoretical rationale for expecting differences in product evaluations extends from Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love and the associate network theory of memory (Anderson 1983), described below.

Sternberg's (1986) theory conceptualizes interrelations among three components of love termed intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. Intimacy represents the warm, emotional basis of relations between people and includes feelings of closeness and connectedness. Passion reflects the drives leading to romance, physical attraction, and sexual consummation. Decision/commitment embodies the cognitive aspect of loving relations and the intention to maintain that love. Sternberg's theory conceptualizes eight forms of love derived by all the possible combinations of presence or absence of those three components. For example, "nonlove" describes the absence of all three components, whereas "consummate love," at the other extreme, represents the presence of all three components.

It is our expectation that postexperience product evaluations made after tasting a product and then writing a testimonial that links the product with a person who is important to the writer will vary in favorability as a function of the nature of the relationship between the testifier and testifiee. Three relationship forms seem most relevant. First, a *liking* relationship is defined by the presence of intimacy between two people but the absence of any romance; many friendships are of this nature. A second form, *romantic love*, involves passion in addition to intimacy; in this category would fall most boyfriend-girlfriend relations. In a third form, *companionate love*, there is intimacy and commitment without passion, as would be the case between parents and children or grandparents and grandchildren.

The associate network theory of memory (Anderson 1983) suggests that the act of writing a testimonial about a product in conjunction with a liked or loved individual should create an associative bond between the product and the liked or loved person in the mind of the testimonial writer. Because the liked or loved person is well known to the testimonial writer but the product is unknown, when the testimonial writer thinks about the product, he or she should then be sparked to think about the person with whom the brand has been linked through the process of writing the testimonial. Further, because the testimonial writer has positive feelings toward that person, the product should benefit from the association; the testifier should evaluate the product positively in proportion to the strength of his or her positive feelings for the testifiee. Hence, it is our prediction that when the testifier writes a testimonial that links

Orange Grove with someone with whom the testifier has a romantic or companionate relationship, the testifier will end up rating Orange Grove more positively than will be the case for testimonial writers who link the brand with persons only liked. Additionally, we expect that the combined testimonial groups will judge Orange Grove more favorably than will a control group that does not write testimonials. Stated formally:

H3: Both individually and collectively, the groups that link Orange Grove with someone who is connected to the testifier romantically or companionately will judge Orange Grove more favorably than the group that links Orange Grove with someone who is merely liked.

H4: Individually and collectively, the two testimonial groups will evaluate Orange Grove more favorably than will a control group that does not write a testimonial.

Method

Participants and Design. Students ($N = 122$) participated for course credit. As in Study 1, Orange Grove, an orange juice that was formulated to be mediocre, was the focal product. All participants tasted it, took part in a distractive task, engaged in a directed writing experience, and then responded to measures of dependent variables. A single experimental factor was manipulated at four levels: a no-testimonial (baseline) condition ($N = 30$) and three testimonial-writing conditions in which participants were instructed to write a testimonial linking Orange Grove to a friend (a liking relationship, $N = 29$), a boyfriend or girlfriend (a romantic relationship, $N = 33$), or a loved relative (a companionate relationship, $N = 30$). Respondents were randomly assigned to the control group or one of the three testimonial conditions.

Stimuli and Procedure. In accord with the protocol in Study 1, participants tasted Orange Grove, performed a distractive task, wrote a testimonial (or, in the control group's case, performed a nontestimonial writing task), attempted to identify the brand they originally tasted from among three formulations that included the medium level along with better and worse options, and then evaluated Orange Grove.

Participants were informed upon entering the research room that their task was to taste and evaluate a new orange juice. The procedure was the same as for Study 1, with minor alterations. As before, an opening description of a contest served both to explain why participants were being asked to write a testimonial and to announce that the marketers of Orange Grove would be awarding two $50 prizes. A graphically highlighted box followed the above general description and explained to participants exactly what they were to write about. This box also served to manipulate the four conditions, descriptions of which appear in Appendix 1.

Measures. After writing their testimonials or, in the case of the control group, describing their experience of drinking Orange Grove, participants tasted three samples of orange juice (labeled Juice A, Juice B, and Juice C) and were asked to identify which of the three was the Orange Grove brand they had initially tasted. Participants next rated Orange Grove in terms of the same taste features and overall taste judgment items used in Study 1. As in Study 1, analysis of responses to a measure of hypothesis guessing indicated that no participants correctly identified the research hypothesis.

Results

Writing testimonials about Orange Grove did not have any greater effect on participants' ability to correctly identify Orange Grove than merely providing thoughts about the tasting experience did. As in Study 1, participants' perceptual memories of the tasting experience were not reconstructed ($\chi^2 6 = 8.52, p = .20$).

As in Study 1, we expected that the manipulations would have the greatest effect on participants' evaluations of Orange Grove's wateriness (or pulpiness) because we had formulated the brand to be significantly more watery than

normal, full-strength orange juice. With higher numbers representing perceptions that Orange Grove is less watery (more pulpy), the means for the four groups are as follows: no-testimonial control (M = 2.20), liking-friend testimonial (M = 2.69), romantic-partner testimonial (M = 2.82), and relative testimonial (M = 2.57). A priori contrasts are an appropriate test of H3 and H4 because these hypotheses concern subgroup differences rather than overall effects (Rosenthal and Rosnow 1991). Our data showed no significant difference between the combined romantic-partner and relative testimonial groups on the one hand and the liking-friend group on the other ($t_{118} < 1$). However, an a priori contrast in support of H4 reveals that the combined testimonial groups evaluated the brand as significantly less watery ($t_{118} = 2.33$, $p_{1\text{-tailed}} < .012$) than the no-testimonial group did. In comparison to the no-testimonial group, the romantic-partner ($t_{118} = 1.84, p_{1\text{-tailed}} < .036$) and liking-friend ($t_{118} = 2.21, p_{1\text{-tailed}} < .016$) testimonial groups evaluated Orange Grove as less watery than it really was, but the relative testimonial group did not ($t_{118} = 1.19, p_{1\text{-tailed}} > .12$).

The overall pattern of results for the ratings of wateriness or pulpiness was corroborated directionally by analysis on the variable created by averaging participants' ratings on the two general taste items (poor tasting/excellent tasting and low quality/high quality; $\alpha = .86$). The means for the no-testimonial control and the liking-friend, romantic-partner, and relative testimonial groups were 3.78, 4.31, 4.18 and 3.88, respectively. However, a priori contrasts did not achieve statistical significance. The contrasts revealed that when combined, the three testimonial groups did not have significantly more positive taste perceptions of Orange Grove than did the no-testimonial group ($t_{118} = 1.1, p_{1\text{-tailed}} = .137$). The contrast comparing the liking-friend group with the combined romantic-partner and relative groups also was insignificant ($t_{118} < 1, p_{1\text{-tailed}} = .2$). These results thus fail to support either H3 or H4.

Discussion

The expectation going into this study was that the act of writing a testimonial that related Orange Grove either to a relative (companionate relationship) or to a boyfriend or girlfriend (romantic relationship) would produce more positive evaluations of the brand than would the act of writing a testimonial that related Orange Grove to a friend (liking relationship). We found no support for that hypothesis, however. In fact, evaluations of Orange Grove were significantly lower when testimonials were linked to relatives than they were when testimonials were linked with lovers or friends. Further, the relative testimonial group appears to pull down the *combined* testimonial groups' average evaluations of Orange Grove compared with the no-testimonal group's evaluations. Although a statistically significant contrast obtained with perceived wateriness as the dependent variable, the result only approached significance with the overall taste judgment as the DV. An inspection of the means on this variable for the three testimonial groups compared with the control indicates that it was the relative testimonial group that reduced the combined mean of the testimonial groups and thus prevented achieving statistical significance.

Why might testimonials about relatives lead to smaller effects than testimonials about lovers? Cognitive dissonance offers a straightforward explanation. Because individuals (in this case, college students) choose their boyfriends and girlfriends but do not choose their relatives, they are more prone to view the former more positively. Participants may find it easy to write strong (even gushing) accounts of their beloveds' strengths. Conversely, participants may be better able to think of both positive and negative aspects of a relative and, if so, the act of writing a positive testimonial about that relative would require actively selecting positive traits for inclusion and the active exclusion of negative ones. This practice of "ignoring the bad" may make the testimonial seem less accurate or more exaggerated to the writer.

This supposition is readily testable with a post-hoc analysis that compares participants' reports of perceived exaggeration. Results support our explanation: participants who wrote about a romantic partner reported significantly less exaggeration in their testimonies (M = 2.48) than participants who wrote about relatives (M = 3.33; t_{89} = 1.78, $p_{1\text{-tailed}}$ = .035). The mean for exaggeration for friends (M = 2.93) falls between those for romantic partners and relatives. Again, college students choose their friends, and often friendships formed during college are among the strongest relationships people develop during their lifetimes.

Given these results, it is interesting to examine the overall effect of exaggeration on participants' evaluations of Orange Grove. After they had responded to the dependent variables, participants in the three testimonial groups provided self-report exaggeration ratings on a six-point scale anchored with "I believe my testimonial was not exaggerated at all in order to win the prize" (= 1) and "I believe my testimonial was exaggerated a lot in order to win the prize" (= 6). The mean score on this rating for the 92 participants in the three testimonial groups was 2.9; accordingly, we reclassified respondents who rated their degree of exaggeration as 3 or lower as low exaggerators (N = 56) and those with scores of 4 or higher as high exaggerators (N = 36). With exaggeration scores blocked in this fashion, t-tests were performed between the two groups on each of the four taste attribute ratings (including the key feature of perceived wateriness) and on the overall taste score. These results revealed significant differences between the low- and high-exaggeration groups on all five tests (all t-values > 1.65). Considering just the overall taste rating, the mean score for the high exaggerators (who would be more likely to discount their evaluations) was 3.65, compared with a mean of 4.43 for the low exaggerators (t_{90} = 2.54, $p_{2\text{-tailed}}$ = .013). It is apparent that participants evaluated Orange Grove less favorably if they had exaggerated their statements about Orange Grove than if they had not.

These findings, taken together, lead to interesting hypotheses about the link between testimonial efficacy and the writer's perceived sincerity. However, because it is post hoc, we cannot know whether testimonial exaggeration causes discounting of brand evaluations or whether the degree of self-reported exaggeration is perhaps confounded with uncontrolled and unknown factors. We designed Study 3 to clarify whether participants truly believe their testimonial statements. Study 3 should provide a direct and definitive test of the role exaggeration plays in affecting judgments.

As a side note, like Study 1, Study 2 failed to demonstrate verbal overshadowing of perceptual judgments. The same artifactual explanation offered to explain why that was so for Study 1 applies here as well. It also is notable that producing evidence of verbal overshadowing is notoriously idiosyncratic to study procedures and that effect sizes in this research tradition are small and difficult to capture (Meissner and Brigham 2001; Meissner, Brigham, and Kelley 2001). Of further note is the fact that studies in the verbal overshadowing tradition have had research participants verbalize about the physical features of the target stimulus (such as a face). Our procedure, by comparison, required participants to verbalize about their feelings for Orange Grove rather than about its physical features; it follows, then, that we would obtain evidence of overshadowing on the evaluative judgment but not the perceptual judgment. More will be said about this in the General Discussion section.

Study 3

Study 3 examines how consumers' brand evaluations are affected by whether consumers truly believe the testimonials they write (about both the brand and a person whom they write about in connection with the brand) when the object of writing the testimonial is to win a contest. We expect that consumers who write exaggerated testimonials are likely to discount what

they have written and subsequently make less positive evaluations of the brand than those who do not exaggerate their testimonials. Thus, formally stated:

H5: The exaggerated-testimonial group will discount their puffed-up claims about Orange Grove and thus evaluate the brand significantly less favorably than either the unexaggerated-testimonial group or a control group exposed to an attractive advertisement for the brand.

H6: The unexaggerated-testimonial group will evaluate Orange Grove just as favorably as the group exposed to an attractive advertisement for the brand.

Method

Participants, Design, and Stimuli. Students (N = 115) participated in this study for extra course credit. A single factor was manipulated at three levels. Two groups of participants were randomly assigned to one of two testimonial conditions; both groups composed testimonials about Orange Grove orange juice in conjunction with a very special relative, which corresponds to the companionate love relationship in Study 2. The exaggerated-testimonial group (N = 37) was instructed to write anything that entered their minds about the relationship between Orange Grove and their special relative, whether they believed it or not. The unexaggerated group (N = 38) was instructed not to include anything in their testimonials that they did not believe. Appendix 2 presents the specific instructions provided to each group.

A third group (N = 40) was exposed to an advertisement for Orange Grove and subsequently asked to share their thoughts about the brand. This ad-exposure group provides a more rigorous test of testimonial effectiveness compared to the nontestimonial groups used in studies 1 and 2. The advertisement to which this group was exposed was a full-page, four-color mock-up of a magazine ad. An attractive scene of luscious oranges in a grove was placed prominently in the center of the ad, with body copy stating, "Imagine the taste of fresh-squeezed orange juice … it's sweet, pulpy, and pure." Below the visual was an artistically pleasing rendering of the name Orange Grove placed over a line drawing of a woman holding a basket of oranges above her head. A concluding tagline stated, "Experience the taste Florida's been talking about." The advertising control group was instructed simply to describe their ad-related thoughts and feelings (see Appendix 2). It is noteworthy that participants in the control group were provided with information related to the two dependent variables: they were informed that Orange Grove is pulpy (not watery) and that its taste is newsworthy—"the taste Florida's been talking about." That being the case, the group provides a challenging control against which to test the effectiveness of testimonials in influencing brand evaluations following a product usage experience.

Procedure and Measures. This study closely adhered to the protocol in studies 1 and 2, with minor exceptions. First and most important, participants were not asked to taste three different juices and to select which of those was the one most like the juice originally tasted. This procedure was eliminated because in neither of the previous two studies did testimonial writing have any impact on perceptual judgments. Instead, following a 10-minute distractive task, participants in all three conditions evaluated Orange Grove on the same taste-attribute items and overall taste items as used in the prior studies. Following these measures, participants provided positive and negative mood ratings (PANAS items; Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988) and indicated the degree to which they had exaggerated their testimonial statements, as measured by a two-item bipolar scale anchored with not exaggerated/exaggerated and inaccurate/accurate (α = .83). As with studies 1 and 2, a measure of hypothesis guessing revealed that no participants correctly identified the research hypothesis.

Results and discussion

The mean levels of perceived wateriness in the

exaggerated-testimonial group, the unexaggerated-testimonial group, and the control group were, respectively, 2.59, 3.0, and 3.2 ($F_{2,112}$ = 2.00, p = .14). Corresponding mean evaluations on the overall taste scale were 4.12, 4.82, and 4.72 ($F_{2,111}$ = 2.78, p = .066). Though neither of these omnibus F-values achieves conventional significance, a priori contrasts again are an appropriate procedure for testing H5 and H6. On the wateriness rating, the combined unexaggerated-testimonial and advertising-control groups had significantly more favorable evaluations of Orange Grove than the exaggerated-testimonial group (t_{112} = 1.88, $p_{1\text{-tailed}}$ = .032), and each group individually also evaluated the brand more favorably than the exaggerated-testimonial group did (unexaggerated-testimonial group vs. exaggerated-testimonial group: t_{112} = 1.30, $p_{1\text{-tailed}}$ = .098; control group vs. exaggerated-testimonial group: t_{112} = 1.97, $p_{1\text{-tailed}}$ = .026). Similarly, on the overall taste scale (α = .89), the combined unexaggerated-testimonial and control groups evaluated Orange Grove significantly more favorably than the exaggerated-testimonial group (t_{112} = 2.34, $p_{1\text{-tailed}}$ = .011), with each group individually evaluating Orange Grove more favorably than the exaggerated-testimonial group (unexaggerated-testimonial group vs. exaggerated-testimonial group: t_{111} = 2.18, $p_{1\text{-tailed}}$ = .017; control group vs. exaggerated-testimonial group: t_{112} = 1.79, $p_{1\text{-tailed}}$ = .039). These results thus support H5, though the difference between the unexaggerated-testimonial group and the exaggerated-testimonial group on perceived wateriness is only marginally significant.

Turning to the test of H6, which compares the unexaggerated-testimonial group with the control group, a priori contrasts on the wateriness and overall taste scales reveal that, as predicted, these two groups' mean scores were not significantly different (both t-values < 1, p-values > .5). It is clear from these results that participants who wrote an unexaggerated testimonial about Orange Grove subsequently evaluated the brand just as favorably as participants exposed to an attractive advertisement for it. As noted above, both these groups evaluated Orange Grove significantly more favorably than participants who wrote exaggerated testimonials about the brand.

The pattern of results in this study demonstrates two key findings: First, all testimonials are not created equal in terms of their ability to positively influence the writers' evaluations of the brand about which the testimonial was written. Rather, in convincing support of the post hoc evidence produced in Study 2, the present study establishes that testimonials serve to enhance brand evaluations only if testimonial writers feel that they have not exaggerated in their writing about the brand. A second pertinent finding is that a testimonial-writing group that had tasted the brand and was then instructed to provide genuine, truthful, unexaggerated commentary about the brand in conjunction with a loved one subsequently evaluated the brand just as favorably as a control group exposed to an attractive advertisement for the brand. To the extent that these laboratory findings hold true in the field, this study establishes that testimonial writing offers a potentially valuable alternative to advertising.

A remaining possibility is that the above pattern of results might reflect a general mood effect rather than demonstrating anything substantively important regarding testimonials. We addressed this possibility by measuring participants' positive and negative mood states (PANAS; Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988) and assessing whether the groups' moods differed from one another. The mean positive (negative) levels of mood for the exaggerated-testimonial group, the unexaggerated-testimonial group, and the control group were 2.66 (1.30), 2.76 (1.23), and 2.75 (1.20), respectively. Contrast tests among all three groups revealed no statistically significant differences between any two groups on either the positive or negative mood states. We may therefore attribute the results of Study 3 to substantive differences among the groups arising from their manipulated states rather than from the

level of positive or negative mood resulting from these manipulations.

General Discussion

The results of our three studies show that the act of writing testimonials can improve people's evaluations of a product beyond what is to be expected based on their actual experience of the product. Participants who tasted Orange Grove and then were asked to write a testimonial about it judged it more favorably than did participants in a control group who simply wrote about their tasting experience (studies 1 and 2). Also, the act of writing a testimonial about a product in conjunction with a special person enhanced product evaluations more than did the act of writing a testimonial about a product alone (Study 1). Last, those who wrote exaggerated testimonials evaluated the product less favorably than those who wrote unexaggerated testimonials (Study 3).

This work expands our understanding of post-experience marketing messages. It appears that the evocative language used in testimonial writing may serve to sway the writer's memory about the product-usage experience in the direction of the written comments, an effect that is similar to Braun's (1999) reconstructive memory effect and Braun and Loftus's (1998) advertising misinformation effect. Our effect may be construed as a form of affective verbal overshadowing or as a self-generated misinformation effect; however they are interpreted, post-experience testimonials generate product evaluations that are more positive than the actual product objectively deserves.

The act of writing a testimonial differs from the more passive act of viewing an advertisement in one key way: it opens up the potential for exaggeration. Consumers may inflate the benefits of the product or their own positive experience of the product in order to satisfy normative expectations of what a testimonial should be. This exaggeration may be especially salient to consumers when a prize or other explicit incentive is offered to elicit the testimonial. Tietje (2002) has suggested that rewards need not undermine future behavior when they exist in conditions that maximize freedom of behavior. Interestingly, Study 1 suggests that behavioral freedom may be largely a matter of perception. One group of participants in Study 1 were motivated by a prize incentive to write about a loved one in conjunction with the promoted product. Participants in this group gave the product significantly higher evaluations than did participants who wrote testimonials about the product alone. Participants may have been more willing to write positive things about a friend or family member and therefore less likely to see the prize as the solitary motivator of their positive testimonials.

Brand managers who promote their products through testimonial solicitation can avoid consumer discounting by employing either of two strategies. First, they can solicit testimonials without offering a prize. It is unlikely, however, that many consumers would write a testimonial unless enticed with a prize, so this strategy may represent an unacceptable solution. A second strategy is to make it abundantly clear to prospective testimonial writers that their odds of winning a prize are independent of what they have to say. Under these conditions it would seem that consumers would still have a strong incentive to write a testimonial, but discounting would be avoided because the consumers would be free to write whatever they wished without concerns that frank feedback might lower their chances of winning the prize.

Limitations and Future Research

This research investigates memory reconstruction processes conceptualized as advertising misinformation effects. We think that testimonial writing can be conceived as a form of self-generated misinformation that works very much along the lines of advertising-imposed misinformation (Braun and Loftus 1998; but for an exception, see Cowley and Janus 2004).

This process may also be related to verbal overshadowing effects. Recall that studies 1 and 2 compared the product evaluations of the testimonial groups with the evaluations of a control group that wrote about the Orange Grove tasting experience. Only in retrospect did we realize that the control group in those two studies engaged in a type of task (i.e., describing stimuli features) that actually is required to create verbal overshadowing. In other words, we structured a situation that was unlikely to produce evidence of verbal overshadowing because our control group itself was susceptible to verbal overshadowing.

We can only wonder how Braun (1999) was able to detect evidence of verbal overshadowing, given that her control group was similar to ours. In discussing the results of Study 1, we offered one potential explanation. In any event, we have produced evidence of a form of verbal overshadowing (affective, rather than perceptual, overshadowing), or of a self-generated misinformation effect. Future research needs to test verbal overshadowing better by employing a control group that engages in a task other than describing stimuli features. MacLin (2002), for example, studied verbal overshadowing by having participants assigned to the verbal overshadowing condition write detailed descriptions about the facial features of a perpetrator shown stealing a purse in a three-minute video. The control group, by comparison, spent the same amount of time (5 minutes) writing down as many of the fifty U.S. states as they could recall. Hence, only participants in the overshadowing condition were susceptible to overshadowing when later they attempted to identify the perpetrator from among a group of six faces. In sum, neither Braun (1999) nor we have established appropriate controls for testing verbal overshadowing of taste perceptions.

This research was conducted under laboratory conditions with college student participants. Though the product category (orange juice) is one frequently used by this group, one might question the generalizability of our results in view of the research procedures. It could be argued that consumer information processing and the formation of evaluative judgments under real-world conditions differ from the laboratory environment in our research. Indeed, under actual, in-home usage conditions a consumer tries a new brand that is contained in a package (absent from our research), which likely is used in conjunction with other products (not the case in our research procedure), and is consumed in the milieu of the home with surrounding noises, scents, and other natural stimuli (again, unlike the conditions in the lab). It is important to keep in mind, however, that the issue examined in our research is one not of taste testing per se but rather how writing a testimonial subsequent to that experience influences postexperience evaluations. Writing a testimonial at home is not substantively different from writing one in a laboratory. Granted, consumers at home are probably not asked about their attitudes immediately after writing a testimonial, but nevertheless, the act of writing one surely plays some role in crystallizing or polarizing the attitude formed during the initial tasting experience. This is what we measured in the laboratory. It is our belief, therefore, that while this research lacks some of the "mundane realism" (Aronson et al. 1990) of the home environment, the findings are nonetheless valid.

It also could be argued that our findings simply capture the short-term effects of testimonial writing. That is, where we detected that writing a testimonial after a taste test can have a salubrious effect on consumer attitudes toward the brand tasted, a counterclaim might contend that the initial positive reaction we encountered would dissipate over time. Although we did not test the longevity of the effect, we might point out that inference-based attitudes have robust and lasting effects (Kardes 1988). Although future research may be needed to examine this specific issue, we think there is reason to believe that the effect of writing a testimonial would be enduring rather than transitory.

Conclusion

Hoch (2002) developed a compelling argument that consumers' product experiences are seductive because consumers think firsthand experience is more diagnostic than it oftentimes actually is. In the present research we have established that postexperience testimonial writing may be doubly seductive in the sense that writing testimonials may result in judging previously experienced products more favorably than they otherwise would be. Braun (1999) set the stage for this research by demonstrating a similar effect in an advertising context. Our research demonstrates that testimonial writers are capable of seducing themselves!

Although widely used, testimonials represent a marketing communications tool that possibly deserves even wider usage. These self-generated advertisements represent an economic bargain compared with mass media ads. Moreover, testimonials may serve as a platform for wider buzz-generating efforts. If consumers believe what they write, they may be inspired to share their views with friends and relatives with whom they are strongly tied or even with casual acquaintances to whom they are only weakly linked (Brown and Reingen 1987; Goldenberg, Libai, and Muller 2001). Another potential advantage of testimonials over traditional advertising is that whereas advertising is especially susceptible to consumers' efforts to protect themselves from attempted persuasion (Friestad and Wright 1994), testimonials are written by consumers themselves and are therefore less likely to suffer rejection from negative cognitive response activity. Testimonials as self-generated advertisements do suffer the prospect of being discounted if they are exaggerated, so it is incumbent on brand managers to develop testimonial programs that encourage consumers to offer genuine, heartfelt commentary so as to avoid the backlash effects of subsequent discounting. ■

Appendix 1

Descriptions of Manipulated Conditions: Study 2

Liking-Relation Testimonial
To enter, just describe why a *close friend* (not a family member or boyfriend/girlfriend) means a lot to you in a way that is similar to why Orange Grove is a special orange juice. Winning entries will be used in Orange Grove commercials so *be creative* in describing how your *close friend* and Orange Grove make your day sunnier! Take your time and imagine your words as part of an ad!

Companionate-Love Testimonial
To enter, just describe why a *very special relative* (parent, grandparent, sibling, or other relative) means a lot to you in a way that is similar to why Orange Grove is a special orange juice. Winning entries will be used in Orange Grove commercials so *be creative* in describing how this *very special relative* and Orange Grove make your day sunnier! Take your time and imagine your words as part of an ad!

Romantic-Love Testimonial
To enter, just describe why a *boyfriend or girlfriend* with whom you have been romantically involved means a lot to you in a way that is similar to why Orange Grove is a special orange juice. Winning entries will be used in Orange Grove commercials so be *creative* in describing how your *boyfriend/girlfriend* and Orange Grove make your day sunnier! Take your time and imagine your words as part of an ad!

No-Testimonial Control Group Writing Experience
Recall in your own words the taste experience of drinking Orange Grove orange juice. Please take your time in remembering that experience.

Appendix 2

Descriptions of Manipulated Conditions: Study 3

Exaggerated Testimonial
To enter, just describe why a **very special relative** (parent, grandparent, sibling, or other relative) means a lot to you in a way that is **similar to why Orange Grove is a special orange juice**. Winning entries will be used in Orange Grove commercials so try to **be as creative as you can be** in describing how this **very special relative and Orange Grove** make your day better! Particularly, to increase you chances of winning **feel free to exaggerate** in describing **some of the attributes** of Orange Grove orange juice in order to make the product sound more desirable to the target audience. Take your time and imagine your words as part of an ad!

Unexaggerated Testimonial
To enter, just describe why a **very special relative** (parent, grandparent, sibling, or other relative) means a lot to you in a way that is **similar to why Orange Grove is a special orange juice**. Winning entries will be used in Orange Grove commercials so try to **be as creative as you can be** in describing how this **very special relative and Orange Grove** make your day better! However, in order for the advertisement to sound genuine, it is essential that **you are very truthful** in writing your testimonial and that **you do not exaggerate** in describing **the attributes** of Orange Grove orange juice. Take your time and imagine your words as part of an ad, but do not write anything that you do not truly believe!

Control
Thinking back to the Orange Grove orange juice advertisement you just examined, please provide your immediate reactions to that ad. Specifically, tell us your thoughts and feelings as they relate to this advertisement.

Notes

1. Conventional marketing messages, by contrast, impose a framing on the consumer (e.g., Grewal, Gotlieb, and Marmorstein 1994; Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy 1990).

2. Cowley and Janus (2004) detected a limit to the advertising misinformation effect and demonstrated that memory of a perceptual feature (or observation, as they termed it) is not necessarily influenced by misinformation in the same way as is memory of an evaluation.

3. Packaging instructions for concentrated Minute Maid specify mixing 12 ounces of frozen concentrate with 36 ounces of water, which means that the concentrate represents one-fourth of the ounces in full-strength Minute Maid orange juice. Pursuant to Braun (1999), we formulated a mediocre, watered-down version of Minute Maid (which we called Orange Grove) that was 32% more watery than full-strength orange juice.

4. It is notable that this lettering convention is conservative toward the research hypotheses. In particular, students' natural preference for the letters A and B over C would have resulted in their not choosing the better-quality juice (Juice C) if choice were based on "brand name" preference rather than actual memory of the tasting experience or inflated judgment resulting from having written a testimonial.

5. One-tailed *p*-values are presented in accord with the hypothesized results.

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