Does Imitation Benefit the Imitated Brand?
The Effects of Stimulus Ambiguity and Processing Mindset on Judgment

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Contribution Statement

Previous research suggests that when consumers process at a global level, they assimilate contextual information into evaluations of a stimulus, but when they process at a local level, they contrast contextual information with the stimulus. Given the limited amount of research in this area, we provide an extensive investigation of this phenomenon and its applicability to the product imitation domain (i.e., knockoffs, counterfeits, me-too products). We also demonstrate that global and local processing are not uniquely associated with a specific effect on judgment. More specifically, we present a theory showing that the level of ambiguity of the stimulus being evaluated (i.e., an imitated brand) is a key determinant of the effect of processing mindset on judgment. Thus, this research offers a theoretical contribution to the domains of processing level and assimilation/contrast and also a managerial contribution by identifying the conditions under which inferior imitators can help or harm imitated brands.

Abstract

It is generally assumed that when consumers process at a global level, they assimilate contextual information into evaluations of a stimulus, which shifts judgment toward the context. When consumers process at a local level, they contrast contextual information with the stimulus, which shifts judgment away from the context. This research demonstrates that global and local processing are not uniquely associated with a specific effect on judgment. In seven studies, we demonstrate that both global and local processing can result in assimilation and contrast effects depending on the level of ambiguity of the stimulus being evaluated. We show that when a stimulus is ambiguous, global processing results in assimilation and local processing results in contrast. When a stimulus is unambiguous, global processing results in contrast and local processing results in assimilation.

Companies frequently encounter situations where their products are imitated by the competition. Imitation can take many forms including me-too products, legal knockoffs, and illegal counterfeits. While many products are imitated in some form or another, imitation often occurs when a product with high quality, innovative design or luxury status is emulated by a competitor with inferior brand equity. For instance, the Chrysler 300c has been referred to as the "poor man's Bentley" because its exterior looks like the more exclusive car brand (Naughton 2004). Successful retail chains like H&M and Zara have enjoyed success by mastering fast-fashion, which refers to the process of quickly churning out lower quality knockoffs of styles found on high-end fashion runways (Kenna 2011). Perhaps the most obvious form of imitation occurs when counterfeiters produce nearly identical versions of genuine luxury brands (Lai and Zaichkowsky 1999). Despite the prevalence of imitation as a strategy (Van Horen and Pieters 2012), only a limited amount of research has examined how inferior imitators affect perceptions of the brand or product that is imitated.

Research suggests that contextual information, such as an imitator, can influence judgments of a stimulus, such as an imitated brand. Law (1995) finds that prior exposure to an advertisement for an imitator brand can serve as a context for evaluating an imitated brand advertisement. Wilcox, Kim, and Sen (2009) demonstrate that simply knowing a counterfeit product is available leads consumers to compare the counterfeit to the genuine brand. One important determinant of the effect of contextual information on judgment is processing mindset (Förster, Liberman, and Kuschel 2008). When consumers process at a global level, they assimilate contextual information into their evaluation, which shifts evaluations of a stimulus toward the context. When consumers process at a local level, however, they contrast contextual information with the stimulus, which shifts evaluations of a stimulus away from the context

(Förster et al. 2008). The implication is that depending on a consumer's processing mindset an inferior imitator may decrease (via assimilation) or increase (via contrast) the evaluation of an imitated product.

In this research, we propose that global and local processing are not uniquely associated with assimilation or contrast. We argue that both global and local processing can result in assimilation and contrast depending on the level of ambiguity of the stimulus being evaluated. In seven studies, we examine how the presence of an inferior imitator (i.e., the context) affects the evaluation of an imitated brand (i.e., the stimulus). When the imitated brand is ambiguous, the presence of an inferior imitator lowers evaluation of the imitated brand when people process at a global level (i.e., assimilation) and increases evaluation when people process at a local level (i.e., contrast). We also show that when the imitated brand is unambiguous, the effects reverse. Global processing results in higher evaluations (i.e., contrast), while local processing results in lower evaluations (i.e., assimilation). Thus, we show that the effect of contextual information (i.e., the imitator) on the evaluation of a stimulus (i.e., the imitated brand) is contingent on both processing mindset and stimulus ambiguity.

PROCESSING MINDSET AND JUDGMENT

Numerous studies have demonstrated that the evaluation of a stimulus depends on the contextual information that is accessible at the time of judgment (Helson 1964; Herr 1986; Mussweiler 2003). Assimilation occurs when evaluations of a stimulus shift toward contextual information, such as when a person judges themselves to be less hostile after being primed to think about a non-hostile person (e.g., the Pope). Contrast emerges when evaluations of a stimulus shift away from contextual information, such as when a person judges themselves to be

less hostile after being primed to think about a hostile person (e.g., Charles Manson; Herr 1986). Thus, when a product is imitated by an inferior imitator, assimilation will result in lower evaluations of the product, whereas contrast will result in higher evaluations.

One factor that determines whether contextual information, such as an imitator, results in assimilation or contrast is a consumer's mindset at the time of judgment (Förster 2009; Förster and Dannenberg 2010; Förster et al. 2008). When people attend to stimuli they may focus on the stimuli at an abstract level, adopting a global processing style, or focus on the concrete details of the stimuli, adopting a local processing style. Such differences in processing mindset can lead consumers to make different comparisons between a stimulus and the context in which it is judged. When people process at a global level, they search for similarities between a stimulus and the context (Förster and Dannenberg 2010), which makes information that is consistent with the context accessible. This shifts evaluation toward the context, resulting in an assimilation effect (Mussweiler 2003). When people process at a local level, they search for dissimilarities between a stimulus and the context (Förster and Dannenberg 2010), which leads them to focus on information that is inconsistent with the context. This shifts their evaluation away from the context resulting in a contrast effect (Mussweiler 2003). For example, Förster et al. (2008) found that when people compare their ability to a low standard and are primed to process globally, they evaluate themselves lower on the dimension being judged; thus, assimilating their ability with the context. Those primed to process locally contrast their ability with the context, evaluating themselves higher on the dimension being judged. Assimilation and contrast was mediated by the accessibility of information that is consistent or inconsistent with the context (Förster et al. 2008). We propose that global and local processing are not exclusively associated with

assimilation or contrast, but both global and local processing can result in assimilation and contrast depending on the level of ambiguity of the stimulus being evaluated.

THE ROLE OF AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity refers to the feeling of confidence in judgment based on the information is available at the time of judgment (Ellsberg 1961; Muthukrishnan, Wathieu, and Xu 2009). Perceptions of ambiguity can be influenced by the attributes of a stimulus, the context and individual differences (Bagchi and Li 2011). Ambiguity is often influenced by the presence or absence of relevant information (Ellsberg 1961). Consumers may experience ambiguity when reading online reviews when they are missing information about the reviewers (Norton, Lamberton and Naylor 2011). Ambiguity can also be determined by the preciseness of the information that is presented. Consumers may perceive a product to be ambiguous when its attributes are presented in a wide range (e.g., costs $200 to $600) and unambiguous when its attributes are described more precisely (e.g., costs $400; Bagchi and Li 2011; Van Dijk and Zeelenberg 2003). It is important to note that while ambiguity can be influenced by the amount or type of information that is available, it is the degree of confidence in judgment that determines ambiguity. To illustrate, consider a consumer judging the exclusivity of a luxury product who only knows the brand of the product. Although he may judge the product to be exclusive, the brand alone is an imprecise signal of product exclusivity. While the person may believe the product is expensive, and thus exclusive, he may be uncertain in his judgment since the brand is associated with many different products at a broad range of price points. That is, he may know the product is exclusive, but may not know exactly how exclusive. If he had known the price of the product, he would have experienced less ambiguity in judging its exclusivity.

Importantly, previous research on the effect of processing mindset on judgment has focus on evaluations of stimuli that are ambiguous. Förster et al. (2008) had participants evaluate how hostile a person was after reading a purposefully ambiguous description of him performing a number of aggressive behaviors. Other studies had participants estimate the number of knee bends and pushups they can perform (Förster et al. 2008); judgments where they were unlikely to know the precise answer, unless they had recently performed a similar task. Hence, it is unclear how processing mindset influences judgment when a stimulus is unambiguous.

The evaluation of ambiguous versus unambiguous stimuli does not necessarily differ in magnitude (i.e., how exclusive a brand is perceived to be), but in the extent to which their evaluation is open to interpretation. Ambiguous stimuli are open to interpretation so their evaluation is highly subjective, flexible and uncertain (Mussweiler and Damisch 2008). When people judge an ambiguous stimulus, they are more likely to include contextual information into its evaluation (Schwarz and Bless 1992), which shifts the judgment toward the context. For instance, when consumers read online reviews written by ambiguous reviewers they incorporate accessible information about the self and infer that the reviewer has similar tastes as them (Norton, Lamberton and Naylor 2011). Alternatively, the evaluation of unambiguous stimuli is less open to interpretation; their evaluation is more objective, less flexible and more certain (Mussweiler and Damisch 2008). When people judge an unambiguous stimulus, contextual information is more likely to be excluded from its evaluation, which shifts the judgment away from the context (Herr, Sherman, and Fazio 1983; Trope and Liberman 1993). For example, priming people with ferocious animals leads them to judge unambiguous animals to be less ferocious (Herr et al. 1983).

Based on this reasoning, we propose that the influence of an imitator (i.e., the context) on the evaluation of an imitated brand (i.e., the stimulus) will depend both on a consumers' processing mindset and whether the imitated brand is ambiguous versus unambiguous. We contend that processing mindset will determine what information is accessible when people initially compare the stimulus and context (i.e., during the comparison stage). However, when consumers actually form their evaluation (i.e., during the evaluation stage), the level of stimulus ambiguity will determine whether this information is included into or excluded from the evaluation and result in assimilation or contrast.

Specifically, we propose that during the comparison stage, when people initially compare the stimulus (i.e., imitated brand) to the context (i.e., the imitator), global processing will lead them to test for similarities between the two and increase their focus on information that is consistent with the context. The effect of this increased focus on context-consistent information on judgment during the evaluation stage, however, will depend on whether the stimulus is ambiguous or unambiguous. When the stimulus is ambiguous, the currently accessible context-consistent information will be included in its evaluation (Schwarz and Bless 1992), which will shift judgment toward the context (Förster et al. 2008). When the stimulus is unambiguous, the currently accessible context-consistent information will be excluded from its evaluation (Herr, Sherman, and Fazio 1983; Mussweiler and Damisch 2008). Notably, when relevant contextual information is excluded from the evaluation of the stimulus, the information can still affect evaluation by serving as a frame of reference against which the stimulus is judged (Markman and McMullen 2003). In such situations, judgment shifts away from the contextual information. These predictions are presented on the left side of figure 1. Consider a person evaluating a luxury brand (i.e., the stimulus), who finds out that a similar-looking, but inferior, knockoff (i.e., the

context) is available for purchase. Global processing increases their focus on context-consistent information such as low exclusivity. If the imitated brand is ambiguous, the person will include this information into their evaluation, which will lead the person to judge the brand as less exclusive than if the knockoff was not present. If the imitated brand is unambiguous, the person will exclude this information from their evaluation. This will shift judgment away from the information, leading the person to judge the brand as more exclusive.

When people process at a local level during the comparison stage, searching for dissimilarities between the stimulus and the context will increase focus on context-inconsistent information. When the stimulus (imitated product) is ambiguous, the currently accessible context-inconsistent information will be included in the evaluation of the stimulus, which will shift judgment away from the context (Förster et al. 2008). When the stimulus is unambiguous, the currently accessible information is excluded from the evaluation of the stimulus (Herr et al. 1983), which will shift the evaluation away from the context (Trope and Liberman 1993). These predictions are presented on the right side of figure 1. If a person is evaluating a luxury brand and a knockoff is available, local processing would increase their focus on context-inconsistent information such as high exclusivity. If the stimulus is ambiguous, the person will include this information into their evaluation, leading the person to judge the luxury brand as more exclusive. If the stimulus is unambiguous, judgment will shift away from this information, leading the person to judge the luxury brand as less exclusive.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

In summary, we propose that different processing mindsets are not associated with a specific effect (i.e., only assimilation or only contrast), but that the effect of processing mindset

on judgment will depend on the level of ambiguity of the stimulus that is being judged. Consistent with previous research (Förster et al. 2008), we argue that when a stimulus is ambiguous, global processing will result in an assimilation effect and local processing will result in a contrast effect. When the stimulus in unambiguous, however, global processing will result in a contrast effect and local processing will result in an assimilation effect.

This conceptualization is investigated in seven studies where participants evaluated a product (i.e., the stimulus) while priming an inferior imitator as the context. We selected imitators that were exemplars of inferiority along the dimension being judged. For instance, we used counterfeits as an exemplar of low exclusivity and a Chinese electronics manufacturer as an exemplar of low quality. Because only a limited amount of research (Förster et al. 2008) has examined the role of processing mindset in assimilation and contrast, we sought to extensively investigate its applicability to the context of luxury and high equity brands in the first two studies. In study 1a, we show global processing results in lower evaluations (i.e., assimilation) and local processing results in higher evaluations (i.e., contrast) of an ambiguous product (a Louis Vuitton watch) when an inferior imitator (a counterfeit Louis Vuitton watch) is available. We replicate these findings in study 1b using a different imitated brand (Apple), imitation domain (me-too product) and judgment (evaluation of quality). In studies 2 and 3, we show that the effect of processing mindset on judgment reverses when the stimulus description is unambiguous. In study 4, we replicate previous findings using a different manipulation of ambiguity, while providing evidence that processing mindset leads to differences in similarity versus dissimilarity focus. In study 5, we show that the inclusion (exclusion) of context-consistent versus context-inconsistent information mediates the effect of processing mindset on judgment when the stimulus is ambiguous (unambiguous). Finally, in study 6 we provide

additional support for our process using more implicit accessibility measures. We end with a discussion of the theoretical implications of these findings and how the presence of an imitator will determine whether advertisers should expose consumers to ambiguous or unambiguous ads.

STUDY 1A

The first two studies focus on understanding whether processing mindset can influence perceptions of ambiguous stimuli in a common industry context, the imitation of brands offering superior products. In study 1a, we primed different processing mindsets before showing participants an ambiguous description of a luxury watch, which they evaluated with or without the knowledge that a similar looking counterfeit version was available. We expected perceptions of the luxury watch's exclusivity to decrease when participants were primed with a global mindset (i.e., assimilation to low-exclusivity) and to increase when participants were primed with a local mindset (i.e., contrast away from low-exclusivity).

Method

Participants and Design. One-hundred forty-four people from an online panel participated in the study (M_{Age} = 37; 67% female). The study employed a 2 (Processing Mindset: Global vs. Local) by 2 (Imitator: Absent vs. Present) between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants were instructed that they were participating in two unrelated studies. The first study purportedly was designed to gain a better understanding of people's health, but actually served as a manipulation of processing mindset (Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope 2004). Participants in the global (local) processing mindset condition were told to spend several minutes writing about all of the things they think about when they consider why (how)

they will improve their health. Similar "why vs. how" tasks have been shown to encourage a global versus local processing, respectively.

The second study was a product preference study. Participants were told to imagine that they were shopping for watches and came across one that they really liked. They were then given a picture and an ambiguous description of a Louis Vuitton watch (see appendix). The picture was cropped so that only the face of the watch was visible, making it a gender neutral picture of the watch. Those in the imitator present condition were then instructed that, as they contemplated the purchase, it occurred to them that they could probably purchase a similar-looking counterfeit version of the watch on the Internet. Those in the imitator absent condition did not receive these instructions. To measure exclusivity, all participants indicated how exclusive they perceived the watch to be on a two-item scale (1 = "Not exclusive", 7 = "Exclusive"; 1 = "Not prestigious", 7 = "Prestigious"; r = .79).

Results

Pretests. Twenty people from the same population as the main study participated in a pretest to ensure that the description of the watch was ambiguous. Participants were shown the same description of the watch as in the main study and asked to indicate how exclusive they perceived the watch to be (1 = "Not exclusive", 7 = "Exclusive"). Afterwards, they were asked to indicate, based on the information provided, how subjective their prior evaluation was (1 = "Not subjective at all", 7 = "Very subjective"). As expected, participants perceived their evaluation to be very subjective (M = 6.00), with a mean that was significantly higher than the midpoint on the scale, four ($t(19) = 6.50$; $p < .001$). A second pretest (N = 50) was conducted to validate our processing mindset manipulation. Participants were told to spend several minutes writing about all of the things they think about when they consider why or how they will improve their health.

Afterwards, they were administered the 25-item Behavior Identification Form (Vallacher and Wegner 1989; α = .85). The Behavior Identification Form measures differences in processing mindset by having people indicate their preference for how a behavior ("reading") should be described, with one option corresponding to a higher level alternative ("gaining knowledge) and the other corresponding to a lower level alternative ("following the lines of print"). The responses were coded such that higher numbers on the scale corresponded to a global processing mindset. As expected, participants who wrote about why they will improve their health processed at a more global level than those who wrote about how they will improve their health (M_{Why} = 17.81; M_{How} = 13.54; $F(1, 48) = 9.24$, $p < .01$).

Exclusivity. An ANOVA revealed a processing mindset by imitator interaction on exclusivity (F (1, 140) = 13.11, $p < .001$). As expected, when the counterfeit was present, participants perceived the watch to be less exclusive when they were primed with a global mindset compared to when they were primed with a local mindset (M_{Global} = 5.35, M_{Local} = 6.49; $F(1, 140) = 15.21$, $p < .001$). No difference was observed when the counterfeit was not present (M_{Global} = 6.16, M_{Local} = 5.79; $F(1, 140) = 1.54$, NS). Consistent with an assimilation effect, participants who adopted a global mindset perceived the watch to be less exclusive when the counterfeit was present compared to when it was not present (M_{Absent}= 6.16, $M_{Present}$ = 5.35; $F(1, 140) = 7.56$, $p < .01$). Consistent with a contrast effect, participants who adopted a local mindset perceived the watch to be more exclusive when the counterfeit was present compared to when it was not present (M_{Absent} = 5.79, $M_{Present}$ = 6.49; $F(1, 140) < 5.62$, $p < .05$).

STUDY 1B

In study 1b, we wanted to replicate the previous findings in a different industry context (i.e., lower quality competitors), using a different category. We changed the imitated product to a high quality tablet computer and the imitator to a lower quality tablet computer. Accordingly, we changed the judgment dimension in this study to perceptions of quality. We expected the presence of the inferior imitator to lower perceptions of the imitated product's quality when participants processed globally, and increase perceptions of the imitated product's quality when participants processed locally.

Method

Participants and design. One-hundred seventy-six people from an online panel participated in the study (M_{Age} = 36; 60% female). The study employed a 2 (Processing Mindset: Global vs. Local) by 2 (Imitator: Absent vs. Present) between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants were instructed that they were participating in two unrelated studies. The first study was the same processing mindset manipulation from study 1a. In the second study, participants were told that they were considering purchasing a tablet computer and they came across one that they really liked. They were then shown a picture of an iPad 2 (see appendix). Those in the imitator present condition were then instructed that as they contemplated the iPad, they noticed that "Hisense, a Chinese manufacturer," was selling a tablet computer with similar functionality. Those in the imitator absent condition did not receive these instructions. All participants indicated their perceived quality for the iPad on a two-item scale (1 = "Poorly made", 7 = "Well made"; 1 = "Poor quality", 7 = "High quality"; r = .87).

Results

Pretest. Participants were shown the same description of the iPad as the main study and asked to indicate their perceived quality for the iPad (1 = "Poor quality", 7 = "High quality").

Afterwards, they were asked to indicate, based on the information provided, how subjective they felt their prior evaluation to be (1 = "Not subjective at all", 7 = "Very subjective"). As expected, participants perceived their evaluation to be very subjective (M = 5.86), with a mean that was significantly higher than the midpoint on the scale, four ($t(20) = 5.98$; $p < .001$).

Perceived Quality. There was a processing mindset by imitator interaction on perceived quality (F (1, 172) = 11.96, p = .001). As expected, when an inferior tablet was present, participants perceived the iPad to be lower in quality when they were primed with a global mindset compared to a local mindset (M_{Global}= 5.68; M_{Local} = 6.41; $F(1, 172) = 11.43$, p = .001). No difference was observed when the inferior tablet was not present (M_{Global}= 6.27; M_{Local} = 5.93; $F(1, 172) = 2.37$, NS). Consistent with an assimilation effect, participants who adopted a global mindset perceived the iPad to be lower in quality when the imitator was present compared to when it was not present (M_{Absent}= 6.27; $M_{Present}$ = 5.68; $F(1, 172) = 7.19$, $p < .01$). Consistent with a contrast effect, participants who adopted a local mindset perceived the iPad to be higher in quality when the imitator was present compared to when it was not present (M_{Absent} = 5.93; $M_{Present}$ = 6.42; $F(1, 172) = 4.88$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

The findings of studies 1a and 1b support the results of prior studies on the effect of processing mindset on social judgments (Förster et al. 2008) in consumer situations where there is a superior brand that is copied by an inferior imitator (i.e., the context). The results were shown in an array of imitation situations, using different product categories, manipulations, and dependent measures. When participants processed at a global level, the presence of an inferior imitator resulted in an assimilation effect on the evaluation of an ambiguous stimulus. When they processed at a local level, the presence of an inferior imitator resulted in a contrast effect on the

evaluation of an ambiguous stimulus. The next set of studies extends a theory of the influence of processing mindset on stimulus evaluation by examining the moderating role of stimulus ambiguity in contrast and assimilation effects.

STUDY 2

The prior studies demonstrate that when people evaluate ambiguous stimuli, global processing results in assimilation and local processing results in contrast. The purpose of study 2 was to show that when the stimulus is unambiguous the effects will reverse. We manipulated stimulus ambiguity by varying the amount of information that is presented to participants at the time of judgment. In the ambiguous conditions, as in previous studies, participants were given the brand name and shown a picture of a product. In the unambiguous conditions, participants were also told the price of the product. Thus, they were given precise information regarding the product's exclusivity.

When people processed globally, having an ambiguous stimulus should lead them to integrate the accessible context-consistent information into the evaluation of the stimulus, leading to lower perceptions of exclusivity. Having an unambiguous stimulus, however, should lead people to shift away from the accessible context -consistent information when evaluating the stimulus, leading to higher perceptions of exclusivity. When people processed locally, having an ambiguous stimulus should lead them to integrate the accessible context-inconsistent information into the evaluation of the stimulus, leading to higher perceptions of exclusivity. Having an unambiguous stimulus, however, should lead people to shift away from the accessible context-inconsistent information when evaluating the stimulus, leading to lower perceptions of exclusivity.

Method

Participants and Design. One-hundred eighty-seven people from an online panel participated in the study (M_{Age} = 33; 57% female). The study employed a 2 (Processing Mindset: Global vs. Local) by 2 (Imitator: Absent vs. Present) by 2 (Stimulus Ambiguity: Ambiguous vs. Unambiguous) between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants were instructed that they were participating in two unrelated studies. The first study was the same manipulation of processing mindset from studies 1a and 1b. The second study was an advertising evaluation study. We measured perceptions of exclusivity for an imitated brand (i.e., Gucci sunglasses) when an inferior imitator (i.e., counterfeit Gucci sunglasses) was or was not present. In the ambiguous condition, participants were shown an ad for Gucci sunglasses that simply showed a male and a female model wearing sunglasses and the word Gucci in large letters underneath (see appendix). In the unambiguous condition, participants were shown the same ad, except that at the bottom it stated "Starting at $499." Our rationale is that although luxury brands signal exclusivity, these signals are imprecise since the brand is associated with a range of products at different price points. Thus, participants may believe the product is exclusive, but may not know exactly how exclusive. Thus, including the price of the product would make the evaluation of the product less ambiguous (see manipulation check below). After reviewing the ad, participants in the imitator present condition were told that as they were evaluating the ad it occurred to them that they could probably purchase a similar looking pair of sunglasses on a "replica" website. Those in the imitator absent condition were not told about the "replica" website. All participants indicated how exclusive they perceived Gucci sunglasses to be on the same scale as that of previous studies.

Results

Pretests. Two pretests were conducted to ensure that our price manipulation (price vs. no price) influences perceptions of ambiguity. In the first pretest, participants were shown the same two ads (price vs. no price) as in the main study and asked to indicate how exclusive they perceived Gucci sunglasses to be (1 = "Not exclusive", 7 = "Exclusive"). Afterwards, they indicated how subjective they felt their prior evaluation to be (1 = "Not subjective at all", 7 = "Very subjective") and how certain they were in their evaluation (1 = "Not certain at all", 7 = "Very certain"). As expected, participants perceived their evaluation to be less subjective when the price was included compared to when it was not (M_{Price} = 3.94, M_{Noprice} = 5.72; $F(1, 34)$ = 9.81; p <.01). They also were more certain in their evaluation when the price was included compared to when it was not (M_{Price} = 6.22, M_{Noprice} = 5.17; $F(1, 34)$ = 8.19; p <.01). Additionally, there was no difference in their perceptions of exclusivity (M_{Price} = 5.44, M_{Noprice} = 5.56; $F(1, 34)$ = .05; NS). Thus, adding the price to the ad affected how confident people were in their judgment, but not the magnitude of the judgment.

Our rationale for why presenting consumers only with brand information results in ambiguity, is based on the idea that brands are associated with a wide range of different price points, which makes it a less precise indicator of exclusivity. To support this assertion, we conducted a second pretest where we showed seventy-two participants from an online panel the same two ads as in the main study and asked them to indicate what they expected the price range of Gucci sunglasses to be on a scale that had seven different price ranges (1 = "$149 to $849", 7 = "$449 to $549") with larger numbers corresponding to smaller, more precise ranges. As expected, participants perceived the range to be smaller, when the price was included compared to when it was not (M_{Price} = 4.05, M_{Noprice} = 2.77; $F(1, 70)$ = 7.24; p <.01).

Exclusivity. The processing mindset by imitator by stimulus ambiguity interaction on exclusivity was significant (F (1, 179) = 20.99, $p < .001$; see figure 2). When the stimulus was ambiguous, the results were consistent with previous studies. When the counterfeit was present, participants who processed globally perceived Gucci sunglasses to be less exclusive than those who processed locally (M_{Global}= 4.48; M_{Local} = 6.13; F(1, 179) = 14.47, $p < .001$). No difference was observed when the counterfeit was not present (M_{Global}= 5.60; M_{Local} = 5.12; F(1, 179) = 1.04, NS). Consistent with an assimilation effect, participants who adopted a global mindset perceived Gucci sunglasses to be less exclusive when the counterfeit was present compared to when it was not present (M_{Absent}= 5.60; $M_{Present}$ = 4.48; F(1, 179) = 6.29, $p < .05$). Consistent with a contrast effect, participants who adopted a local mindset perceived Gucci sunglasses to be more exclusive when the counterfeit was present compared to when it was not present (M_{Absent} = 5.12; $M_{Present}$ = 6.13; F(1, 179) = 4.89, $p < .05$).

When the stimulus was unambiguous the opposite pattern emerged. When the counterfeit was present, participants who processed globally perceived Gucci sunglasses to be more exclusive than those who processed locally (M_{Global}= 5.89; M_{Local} = 4.41; F(1, 179) = 10.11, $p < .01$). No difference was observed when the counterfeit was not present (M_{Global}= 4.98; M_{Local} = 5.48; F(1, 179) = 1.40, NS). Consistent with a contrast effect, participants who adopted a global mindset perceived Gucci sunglasses to be more exclusive when the counterfeit was present compared to when it was not present (M_{Absent}= 4.98; $M_{Present}$ = 5.89; F(1, 179) = 4.70, $p < .05$). Consistent with an assimilation effect, participants who adopted a local mindset perceived Gucci sunglasses to be less exclusive when the counterfeit was present compared to when it was not present (M_{Absent} = 5.48; $M_{Present}$ = 4.41; F(1, 179) = 5.20, $p < .05$).

Discussion

Study 2 supports our theory that the effect of processing mindset on judgment is contingent on whether the stimulus is ambiguous or unambiguous. As in previous studies, when the stimulus was ambiguous, global processing resulted in assimilation (i.e., lower evaluations of the stimulus) and local processing resulted in contrast (i.e., higher evaluations of the stimulus). When the stimulus was unambiguous, global processing resulted in contrast (i.e., higher evaluations of the stimulus) and local processing resulted in assimilation (i.e., lower evaluations of the stimulus). The next study provides evidence that the effect of processing mindset on judgment is due to a differential focus on similarities and dissimilarities between a stimulus and the context.

STUDY 3

So far we have demonstrated that the influence of processing mindset on judgment is contingent on stimulus ambiguity in the domain of counterfeiting. In study 3, we sought to generalize the findings to a different domain where the exterior design of a car is legally copied off by an inferior competitor. The main objective of study 3, however, was to investigate the initial stage of our model, the comparison stage (see figure 1). Our theory predicts that during the comparison stage, processing mindset leads people to engage in similarity or dissimilarity testing. When individuals engage in similarity (dissimilarity) testing, this focus often carries over to subsequent tasks that are unrelated to the initial evaluation (Mussweiler 2001; Smeesters, Mussweiler, and Mandel 2010). To demonstrate that individuals indeed perform similarity (dissimilarity) testing, people who process globally (locally) should be more focused on similarities (dissimilarities) in an unrelated task performed after the evaluation of the stimulus. We expected this relationship to hold both when the stimulus is ambiguous and unambiguous. This will demonstrate that stimulus ambiguity does not stop similarity or dissimilarity testing,

but only influences whether information made accessible during the comparison stage (similarities vs. dissimilarities) is included or excluded from the evaluation. The effect of accessible information on evaluation, the second stage, is investigated subsequently, in study 5.

A second objective was to replicate our findings using a different manipulation of processing mindset. Previous research finds that the distant future is associated with a global mindset and the immediate future is associated with a local mindset (Trope and Liberman 2010). Thus, to manipulate processing mindset in this study, we had participants indicate their intention to purchase the imitated brand in the immediate (local processing) or in the distant future (global processing).

Method

Participants and Design. Ninety-six people from an online panel participated in the study (M_{Age} = 35; 52% Male). The study employed a 2 (Processing Mindset: Global vs. Local) by 2 (Stimulus Ambiguity: Ambiguous vs. Unambiguous) between-subjects design. Because we were interested in differences in similarity focus activated by the presence of the imitator, we only looked at conditions where the imitator was present.

Procedure. Participants were instructed that they were participating in two unrelated studies. In the first study, participants in the global processing mindset conditions were instructed that the lease on their car was ending next summer and that they were considering purchasing a Lexus next summer. Those in the local processing mindset conditions were instructed that their lease was up and that they were considering purchasing a Lexus this weekend. In the ambiguous stimulus conditions, participants were shown a picture of the Lexus. In the unambiguous conditions, participants were shown the same picture, but at the bottom of

the image it had the price, "Starting at $49,999." All participants indicated their likelihood of purchasing the car (either this weekend or next summer). They also evaluated how exclusive they perceived the car to be.

The second study was designed to provide evidence of similarity versus dissimilarity testing. We adopted a procedure from previous research (Mussweiler, Ruter, and Epstude 2004) where people participated in a pretest for a later survey on visual perception, requiring them to compare two pictures unrelated to the earlier study. The pictures were sketches of two scenes: one depicting a woman leaning over a table with a Christmas tree in the back and the second one depicted a man reaching for a bowl. After comparing the pictures, participants were asked to indicate how similar they perceived the pictures to be (1 = "Not at all similar" and 9 = "Very similar"). Consistent with previous research (Mussweiler 2001), if a global (local) mindset leads to similarity (dissimilarity) testing, then we would expect those who adopted a global mindset to view the two pictures as more similar than those who adopted a local mindset.

Results

Exclusivity. Perceptions of exclusivity are presented in figure 3a. The processing mindset by stimulus ambiguity interaction on exclusivity was significant ($F(1, 92) = 8.89$, $p < .01$). When the stimulus was ambiguous, the results were consistent with previous studies. Participants perceived the Lexus car to be less exclusive when they processed at a global level compared to when they processed at a local level ($M_{Global} = 5.40$; $M_{Local} = 6.17$; $F(1, 92) = 4.27$, $p < .05$). When the stimulus was unambiguous, participants perceived the Lexus car to be more exclusive when they processed at a global level compared to when they processed at a local level ($M_{Global} = 6.13$; $M_{Local} = 5.38$; $F(1, 92) = 4.65$, $p < .05$). These results suggest that the level of processing may lead people to focus on similarities or dissimilarities between the two products, but that

stimulus ambiguity determines whether the accessible information will be used (ambiguous stimuli) or not (unambiguous stimuli) during the evaluation stage (see analysis of "similarity" below).

Purchase Intent. Participants' intentions to purchase the Lexus are presented in figure 3b. There was a main effect of ambiguity such that participants were less likely to purchase the car in the unambiguous conditions ($M_{\text{Ambiguous}}$= 4.76; $M_{\text{Unambiguous}}$ = 3.90; $F(1, 92) = 4.34$, $p < .05$). Thus, not surprisingly, when the price was present people were less likely to purchase the car. More importantly, the processing mindset by stimulus ambiguity interaction on purchase intent was significant ($F(1, 92) = 9.12$, $p < .01$). As in previous studies, when the stimulus was ambiguous, participants were less likely to purchase the Lexus when they processed at a global level compared to when they processed at a local level (M_{Global}= 4.05; M_{Local} = 5.27; $F(1, 92) = 4.79$, $p < .05$). When the stimulus was unambiguous, participants were more likely to purchase the Lexus when they processed at a global level compared to when they processed at a local level (M_{Global}= 4.41; M_{Local} = 3.33; $F(1, 92) = 4.32$, $p < .05$).

Mediation. We tested whether perceived exclusivity mediates the effect of processing mindset on purchase intent in a moderated mediation analysis (Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007; model 2). The analysis shows that the processing mindset by imitator interaction predicted exclusivity ($\beta = 1.53$, $p < .01$) and purchase intent ($\beta = 2.29$, $p < .01$). When exclusivity was added to the dependent variable model, it significantly predicted purchase intent ($\beta = .80$, $p < .001$) while the interaction became nonsignificant ($\beta = 1.06$, NS). Conditional indirect effects analyses using a bootstrap method revealed that exclusivity mediated the effect of processing mindset on purchase intent when the stimulus was ambiguous ($z = -.63$, $p = .05$) and when the stimulus was unambiguous ($z = .60$, $p < .05$).

Similarity. The processing mindset by imitator interaction was not significant ($F(1, 92) = .30$, NS). As expected, there was a main effect of processing mindset on perceptions of similarity ($F(1, 92) = 4.37$, $p < .05$). Those who processed globally ($M = 5.63$) perceived the pictures to be more similar than those who processed locally ($M = 4.76$). These results demonstrate that similarity and dissimilarity testing was present independently of stimulus ambiguity, and that stimulus ambiguity must influence assimilation and contrast by other processes other than switching the focus on (dis)similarities during the comparison stage (see study 4)

Discussion

The results replicate the findings in study 2 while also providing evidence for the initial stage of our model. Specifically, we showed that global (local) processing leads to similarity (dissimilarity) testing and that this relationship is not affected by stimulus ambiguity. One limitation of studies 2 and 3 is that we manipulated stimulus ambiguity by including or not including the price of the product. Thus, it could be argued that our findings are due to the amount of information that is presented, as opposed to how ambiguous the stimulus is based on the presence or absence of the price. Thus, the purpose of the next study was to manipulate stimulus ambiguity while holding the amount of information that is presented to participants constant.

STUDY 4

Previous research has manipulated ambiguity by presenting people with a wide range of values (e.g., $200 to $600; high ambiguity) or more precise values (e.g., $400; Bagchi and Li 2011; Van Dijk and Zeelenberg 2003). In study 4, we manipulated stimulus ambiguity by varying the range of the pricing information that is presented to participants. We presented

participants with either a large range (ambiguous), small range (unambiguous) or precise estimate (unambiguous). When the pricing information was large range (ambiguous), we expected to replicate the findings in the ambiguous (brand only) conditions in previous studies. When the pricing information was a small range or precise range (unambiguous), we expected to replicate the findings in the unambiguous (brand and price) conditions of prior studies. Additionally, to rule out the possibility that our findings were due to prior brand knowledge, we used a brand that was unfamiliar to participants.

Method

Participants and Design. One hundred ninety-four people from an online panel participated in the study (M_{Age} = 30; 47% female). The study employed a 2 (Processing Mindset: Global vs. Local) by 2 (Price Range: Large vs. Small vs. Precise) between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants were instructed that they were participating in three unrelated studies. The first study was similar to the health study in prior studies, except participants were asked to list three goals the intended to pursue and then indicate either "why" (global) or "how" (local) they intend to pursue these goals. The second study was a product preference study. We selected Handlove watches as the imitated brand because it was a Swiss brand that would be unfamiliar to people in the United States. Nine (4.6%) participants who indicated they had heard of the brand before were removed from the analysis. Participants were told to imagine that they were shopping for watches and came across one that they really liked by Handlove watches. In the large range condition (ambiguous), participants were told that Handlove watches were priced between $395 and $5,195. We selected this range because it approximated that of Movado watches. In the small range condition (unambiguous), participants were told that Handlove

watches were priced between $2,295 and $3,295. In the precise range condition, (unambiguous), participants were told that Handlove watches were priced at $2,795. Thus, in all condition participants were given pricing information and the mean price provided was $2,795. After receiving the pricing information, participants were shown a picture of male and female versions of Handlove watches (see appendix) before being told that they could purchase a similar-looking counterfeit version of the watch on the Internet. Exclusivity was measured on the same two-item scale as previous studies (r = .81). The final study was the same test of similarity versus dissimilarity focus as study 3.

Results

Exclusivity. Perceptions of exclusivity are presented in figure 4. The processing mindset by stimulus ambiguity interaction on exclusivity was significant ($F(1, 179) = 5.98$, $p < .01$). When the range was large (i.e., ambiguous stimulus), the results were consistent with the ambiguous conditions in previous studies. Participants perceived Handlove watches to be less exclusive when they processed at a global level compared to when they processed at a local level (M_{Global}= 4.45; M_{Local} = 5.29; $F(1, 179) = 4.43$, $p < .05$). When the range was small (i.e., unambiguous stimulus), participants perceived Handlove watches to be more exclusive when they processed at a global level compared to when they processed at a local level (M_{Global}= 5.67; M_{Local} = 4.90; $F(1, 179) = 3.56$, $p < .10$). When the range was precise (i.e., unambiguous stimulus), participants perceived Handlove watches to be more exclusive when they processed at a global level compared to when they processed at a local level (M_{Global}= 5.79; M_{Local} = 4.83; $F(1, 179) = 5.32$, $p < .05$).

Similarity. The processing mindset by stimulus ambiguity was not significant ($F(1, 179) = .27$, NS). As expected, there was a main effect of processing mindset on perceptions of

similarity ($F(1, 179) = 5.24$, $p < .05$; see figure 4b). Those who processed globally ($M = 5.56$) perceived the pictures to be more similar than those who processed locally ($M = 4.96$). These results are consistent with those in study 3.

Discussion

The results replicate the findings in study 3 using a different manipulation of stimulus ambiguity and an unfamiliar imitated brand. Thus, the results provide stronger support for our theory that stimulus ambiguity determines the influence of processing mindset on judgment. The purpose of the next study is to provide evidence for the rest of our model. Specifically, we seek to show that the effect of processing mindset on evaluation is due to inclusion/exclusion, in the evaluation stage, of the information accessible from (dis)similarity testing, which results in a differential focus on standard-consistent versus standard-inconsistent information.

STUDY 5

Our theory proposes that when people initially compare a stimulus to the context, similarity (dissimilarity) testing, due to global (local) processing, increases their focus on context-consistent (context-inconsistent) information. Whether people continue to focus on this information during the evaluation stage will depend on stimulus ambiguity. When the stimulus is ambiguous, the information will be included in the evaluation so people will maintain their focus on the information. When the stimulus is unambiguous, the information will be excluded from the evaluation, which should decrease people's focus on the information.

To demonstrate this process, we measured participants' focus on concepts associated with low exclusivity (context-consistent) versus high exclusivity (context-inconsistent) either before

they evaluated a stimulus product (right after the comparison stage) or after they evaluated the product (right after the evaluation stage). Before the evaluation stage, we expected processing mindset to determine information focus such that global (local) processing would be associated with a greater focus on low (high) exclusivity. This should hold both when the stimulus is ambiguous and unambiguous because it is measured before the inclusion or exclusion of information that occurs during evaluation. When information focus is measured after evaluation and the stimulus is ambiguous, information from the comparison stage is included in the evaluation. Thus, we expected global (local) processing also to be associated with a greater focus on low (high) exclusivity. When the stimulus in unambiguous, however, the information from the comparison stage is excluded from the evaluation. Consequently, we expected global (local) processing to be associated with a decreased focus on low (high) exclusivity.

Method

Participants and Design. Two hundred people from an online panel participated in the study (M_{Age} = 36; 65% female). The study employed a 2 (Processing Mindset: Global vs. Local) by 2 (Stimulus Ambiguity: Ambiguous vs. Unambiguous) by 2 (Timing of Information Focus Measurement: Before Evaluation vs. After Evaluation) between-subjects design.

Procedure. The procedure for this study was similar to that of study 2 with a few exceptions. The first task was the same processing mindset manipulation from studies 1a, 1b and 2. In the second task, participants evaluated the same ambiguous and unambiguous advertisements for Gucci sunglasses as those of study 2 with the knowledge that they could purchase a similar looking pair of counterfeit Gucci sunglasses on a "replica" website. Then participants were asked to take a moment to compare the genuine sunglasses to the counterfeit sunglasses. In the "information focus measurement before evaluation" condition, but not in the

"information focus measurement after evaluation" condition, participants indicated on a two-item scale whether they focused on information associated with low exclusivity (context-consistent) or high exclusivity (context-inconsistent; 1 = "Low prestige", 9 = "High prestige"; 1 = "Low exclusivity", 9 = "High exclusivity"; r = .84) when comparing the stimulus to the imitator version. Afterwards, because our goal was to understand perceptions of stimulus-imitator consistency as a function of the information participants used, participants evaluated the genuine sunglasses by indicating how consistent with the genuine sunglasses they perceived the counterfeit sunglasses to be (1 = "Very inconsistent", 7 = "Very consistent"). In the "information focus measurement after evaluation" condition, participants indicated how focused they were on information associated with exclusivity after evaluating the genuine sunglasses.

Results

Focus on low vs. high exclusivity. The processing mindset by stimulus ambiguity by timing of information focus measurement interaction was significant (F (1, 192) = 7.86, $p < .01$; see figure 4). As expected, when information focus was measured before evaluation, participants were more focused on low exclusivity (context-consistent information) when they processed globally compared to when they processed locally, both when the stimulus was ambiguous (M_{Global}= 5.28; M_{Local} = 6.19; F(1, 192) = 2.68, $p < .10$) and when the stimulus was unambiguous (M_{Global}= 5.32; M_{Local} = 6.46; F(1, 192) = 4.29, $p < .05$).

When information focus was measured after evaluation, participants were more focused on low exclusivity (context-consistent information) when they processed globally compared to when they processed locally when the stimulus was ambiguous (M_{Global}= 4.45; M_{Local} = 5.89; F(1, 192) = 6.17, $p < .05$). This implies that they focused on the previously accessible information when making their evaluation. When the stimulus was unambiguous, however, participants were

more focused on high exclusivity (i.e., less focused on low exclusivity) when they processed globally compared to when they processed locally (M_{Global}= 5.63; M_{Local} = 4.20; F (1, 192) = 7.18, p < .01). This implies that they did not focus on (i.e., shifted away from) the previously accessible information when making their evaluation. These findings are consistent with our theory that when people evaluate unambiguous stimuli, they exclude salient information from their evaluation.

Stimulus-imitator consistency. The processing mindset by stimulus ambiguity by timing of information focus measurement interaction on perceived stimulus-imitator consistency was insignificant (F (1, 192) = .25, NS). This was expected given that the position in which we asked the question about information focus should not influence these evaluations. However, the predicted processing mindset by stimulus ambiguity interaction was significant (F (1, 192) = 11.17, p = .001). As expected, when the stimulus was ambiguous, participants who processed globally perceived the genuine product to be more consistent with the counterfeit than those who processed locally (M_{Global}= 4.86; M_{Local} = 4.25; F(1, 192) = 4.41, p < .05). When the stimulus was unambiguous, participants who processed globally perceived the genuine product to be less consistent with the counterfeit than those who processed locally (M_{Global}= 4.17; M_{Local} = 4.93; F(1, 192) = 6.96, p < .01). These results are additional evidence that, in the presence of an unambiguous stimulus, global processing makes people focus on context-inconsistent, rather than context-consistent information, while the opposite is true for local processing.

Mediation. Our theory suggests that information focus during the evaluation stage mediates the effect of processing mindset on stimulus-imitator consistency judgments when the stimulus is ambiguous and unambiguous. This was tested using a moderated mediation analysis (Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007; model 2) on the responses when information focus was

measured immediately after evaluation. The analysis shows that the processing mindset by stimulus ambiguity interaction predicted information focus ($\beta = 2.86$, $p < .001$) and perceived consistency ($\beta = -1.37$, $p = .001$). When information focus was added to the dependent variable model, it significantly predicted perceived consistency ($\beta = -.36$, $p < .001$), while the interaction did not ($\beta = -.56$, NS). Conditional indirect effects analyses revealed that information focus mediated the effect of processing mindset when the stimulus was ambiguous ($z = 2.27$, $p < .05$). The positive coefficient indicates that participants included in their evaluation the information that was accessible. Information focus also mediated the effect of processing mindset when the stimulus was unambiguous ($z = -2.40$, $p < .05$). The negative coefficient indicates that participants excluded from their evaluation the information that was accessible.

Discussion

The results provide strong support for our proposed process. During the comparison stage, global processing is associated with a greater focus on low exclusivity (context-consistent information), whereas local processing is associated with a greater focus on high exclusivity (context-inconsistent information). This relationship holds when the target is ambiguous and unambiguous. During the evaluation stage, however, information focus is contingent on target ambiguity. When the target is ambiguous, and information is included in the evaluation, global (local) processing is associated with a greater focus on low exclusivity (high exclusivity). When the target is unambiguous, this information is excluded from the evaluation, and global (local) processing is associated a greater focus on high exclusivity (low exclusivity). One limitation of this study is that we relied on explicit self-report measures of information focus. This was particularly an issue in the information focus after conditions since responses could have been

confounded the measurement of stimulus-imitator consistency. In the next study, we sought to provide results consistent with those in study 5 using a more implicit measure of accessibility.

STUDY 6

The previous study demonstrates that processing mindset and stimulus ambiguity interact to determine whether people are more or less focused on exclusivity after evaluating a stimulus. In this study, we measured the extent to which people were focus on concepts associated with exclusivity using an implicit measure of accessibility after participants indicated how consistent with the imitated brand they perceived the imitator brand to be. Consistent with the findings in the previous study, we expected concepts associated with exclusivity to be more accessible when people process locally (vs. globally) and the stimulus was ambiguous. We expected concepts associated with exclusivity to be less accessible when people process locally (vs. globally) and the stimulus was unambiguous.

Method

Participants and Design. One-hundred-three people from an online panel participated in the study (M_{Age} = 33; 51% female). The study employed a 2 (Processing Mindset: Global vs. Local) by 2 (Stimulus Ambiguity: Ambiguous vs. Unambiguous) between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants were instructed that they were participating in three unrelated studies. The first study was the same processing mindset manipulation from study 4 where people list three goals and then wrote about "why" versus "how" they intend to pursue the goals. In the second study, participants evaluated the same ambiguous and unambiguous advertisements for Gucci sunglasses as those of studies 2 and 5 with the knowledge that they could purchase a similar looking pair of counterfeit Gucci sunglasses on a "replica" website. Then participants

were asked to take a moment to compare the genuine sunglasses to the counterfeit sunglasses and indicate how consistent with the genuine sunglasses they perceived the counterfeit sunglasses to be (1 = "Very inconsistent", 7 = "Very consistent").

The third study was purportedly a test of the participants' verbal ability, but was actually a word completion task designed to measure the accessibility of concepts associated with exclusivity. Participants were given 12 words with missing letters. They were instructed to complete the words as fast as they could while also trying to maintain accuracy. Participants were presented with five neutral words and seven word associated with exclusivity ("exclusive", "prestige", "elite", "private", "special", "superior" and "limited"). The presentation order of the words was counterbalanced. The words were constructed so that they were easy to complete (97% were completed correctly). We recorded the average time it took to correctly complete the word associated with exclusivity as a measure of accessibility with faster completion times corresponding to greater accessibility. We did not include the time to complete incorrect words in our measure of accessibility.

Results

Accessibility measures. Because the accessibility measure was not normally distributed, we transformed the variable using a natural log transformation. The processing mindset by stimulus ambiguity interaction was significant (F (1, 99) = 8.83, $p < .01$; see figure 6). As expected, concepts associated with exclusivity were more accessible when participants processed locally compared to when they processed globally when the stimulus was ambiguous (M_{Global}= 2.08; M_{Local} = 1.80; F(1, 99) = 4.29, $p < .05$). Concepts associated with exclusivity were less accessible when participants processed locally compared to when they processed globally when the stimulus was unambiguous (M_{Global}= 1.87; M_{Local} = 2.13; F(1, 99) = 4.57, $p < .05$).

Context-imitator evaluations. The predicted processing mindset by stimulus ambiguity interaction on perceived stimulus-imitator consistency was significant (F (1, 99) = 7.16, $p < .01$). As expected, when the stimulus was ambiguous, participants who processed globally perceived the genuine product to be more consistent with the counterfeit than those who processed locally (M_{Global}= 5.41; M_{Local} = 4.75; F(1, 99) = 2.86, $p < .10$). When the stimulus was unambiguous, participants who processed globally perceived the genuine product to be less consistent with the counterfeit than those who processed locally (M_{Global}= 4.94; M_{Local} = 4.93; F(1, 99) = 5.70, $p < .05$). These results are consistent with those in the previous study.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Marketers, particularly of valuable brands, spend billions of dollars every year battling the escalating proliferation in imitations, legal and otherwise (Horen and Pieters 2012; Phillips 2005). The basic premise underlying such efforts is that the typically lower-priced, lower-quality imitations can adversely influence consumer demand for the imitated brands. This research delves into this premise to demonstrate that the effect of consumers' awareness of imitation availability on their desire for the imitated brand depends on whether it is assimilated towards the imitation brand, which becomes designated as the evaluative reference, or contrasted away from it. In addition, this perceptual comingling or separation of the two versions of the product in the minds of consumers depends on both the level of abstractness at which consumers think about these products (Förster et al. 2008) and the extent to which the imitated product information is ambiguous (Herr et al. 1983). Specifically, we show that when consumers think about the purchase of an ambiguously described imitated brand at a global (local) level, the presence of an imitation brand decreases (increases) preference for the imitated brand.

Interestingly, when the imitated brand is more unambiguous (consumers are aware of its price), the effect of the imitation brand reverses: now, a global (local) mindset causes the presence of an imitation brand to increase (decrease) preference for the imitated brand. As importantly, we provide evidence for the two-step (comparison and evaluation) process theorized to underlie these effects: the comparison stage is similar for both ambiguous and unambiguous imitated brands, but level of ambiguity leads consumers to either include or exclude the imitation brand information in their judgments of the imitated brand, causing these to diverge.

This research has theoretical implications. A very limited amount of research has demonstrated that processing mindset can influence assimilation and contrast (Förster et al. 2008). These studies have focused on the influence of processing mindset on social judgments, such as having people compare themselves to high or low standards. We extend these findings by showing that processing mindset results in assimilation or contrast when people compare two products, even when they are not told to make explicit comparisons. That is, simply knowing that an imitator is available influences preference for the imitated brand. These findings suggest that researchers should take into consideration the level of processing at which people are making judgments in typical assimilation and contrast studies. The pervasiveness of the influence of processing level, demonstrated in an array of different domains and procedures, suggests that many assimilation and contrast effects might occur as a function of processing mindset in addition to commonly claimed processes.

Importantly, we show that the direction of the effect of processing mindset on judgment is contingent on stimulus ambiguity. While previous research finds that global processing results in assimilation and local processing results in contrast when people judge ambiguous stimuli (Förster et al. 2008), our research demonstrates that processing mindset can have the opposite

effect on judgment when people judge unambiguous stimuli. By demonstrating this, our findings also extend our knowledge of the role of stimulus ambiguity in assimilation and contrast effects. While previous research suggests that the evaluation of ambiguous stimuli may result in assimilation or contrast, judgments of unambiguous stimuli often result only in contrast (Herr et al. 1983; Mussweiler and Damisch 2008). We show that the evaluation of unambiguous stimuli can result in assimilation and contrast depending on consumers' processing mindset at the time of judgment. These findings suggest that theories of assimilation and contrast based on a single process should consider how these processes may interact and change the direction of people's judgments. Many of the mechanisms responsible for assimilation and contrast effects are based on the utilization, or not, of salient contextual information. It might be the case that information made salient by one process will become more, or less, salient, as a function of an alternative process, and ultimately determine judgment. The current research is an initial attempt to offer such an integrative approach. Of course, level of ambiguity is an especially relevant factor as it is inherent to any judgment stimulus about which objective, or subjective, information is presented. We hope future research on assimilation and contrast effects will build up on these findings to understand how other factors may align with stimulus ambiguity to influence judgment.

This research also has practical implications. At the most basic level, this research tells marketers of imitated products that the presence of imitations need not, as is pervasively assumed, necessarily diminish consumer demand for their products. Imitations can actually enhance consumer judgments of, and preference for, imitated brands, particularly when these are based on information consumers consider to be ambiguous. In all our studies, judgments of an ambiguous imitated brand were highest when consumers adopted a local mindset and *were aware of an imitation brand*. While there may be other reasons for the positive influence of

imitation brands on imitated brands (experience with an imitation may familiarize consumers with the imitated brand, increasing their desire for the genuine version of the same product), our research also points to some fundamental psychological processes that marketers can try to control in their efforts to battle the potentially deleterious effects of imitations. Specifically, marketers of imitated brands can try to ensure that when thinking about their brands consumers adopt a local rather than global mindset. This is most easily done through both personal and mass communication campaigns, which could try to encourage consumers to focus on the "how" of tasks related to the product purchase, such as how to evaluate the brand, buy it, use it, and care for it. Interestingly, this runs counter to how most luxury brands are promoted, but our research suggests that a "why" focus can actually lower consumer preference for the former. Of course, our research suggests that another option for such brands would be to provide consumers with greater, more unambiguous, information about their brands, including price. In this case, as in the case of customer segments who are intimately familiar with the product specifications on an imitated brand, marketers should foster a global mindset. When threatened by formidable imitations, a global mindset (focus on "why" or distant time frame) not only provides stronger protection against the erosion of brand desirability judgments but may in fact enhance such judgments. While high-end brands may balk at the notion of highlighting their prices, attempts to do so in ways that are in keeping with the brand's overall positioning, might prove effective.

Our research also has implications for legitimate imitators, such as later entrants into a market that challenge an established brand head on by imitating, with the goal of eventually becoming superior on, the latter's strengths. For such brands, the recommendations of our work are, naturally, the converse of that for the imitated brands. Challengers first need to ascertain the level of ambiguity about the imitated brand and then encourage consumers to adopt a global (in

the case of high ambiguity) or local (in the case of low ambiguity) mindset in their evaluations of the imitated brand. Of course, the challengers also need to understand the impact of such actions on their own brand, something we did not examine in the present research. Depending on which way, if any, the effects of mindset and imitation brand ambiguity steer consumer evaluations of the imitation brand, marketers of such brands will have to deploy their comparative communications in ways that ensure that their brands do not end up being evaluated unfavorably.

A basic premise, based on prior research (Nia and Zaichkowsky 2000; Wilcox et al. 2009), guiding our theorizing is that imitations are considered to be of lower quality and exclusivity, thus being less desirable by consumers than are the brands they aspire to imitate. However, given the growing consumer-specific differences worldwide in not just attitudes towards luxury brands and their imitational counterparts but also their availability, affordability and social acceptability, our premise is worthy of further investigation. Specifically, it would be interesting to examine how consumers with positive attitudes toward cheaper imitations might categorize and therefore compare the imitated and imitation brands, and how these comparisons might be influenced by goals, both consumption and social, as well. For instance, in some segments (e.g., in Asian cultures), consumers might purchase luxury goods, or even their imitation versions, to fit in with their social milieu rather than stand out from it. At the same time, many consumers in such cultures know that the quality of many imitations, including counterfeits, is often very good, as they are often made by the same producers making the genuine products. An examination of how mindsets would interact with both social goals and attitudes towards such imitations across cultures would contribute to a comprehensive understanding of consumer reactions to imitated brands in the presence of imitations. If consumers bring multiple motives to their status or luxury brand purchases, how these interact

with mindsets and information ambiguity to influence the effect of imitator availability on imitated brand preference would be valuable to understand.

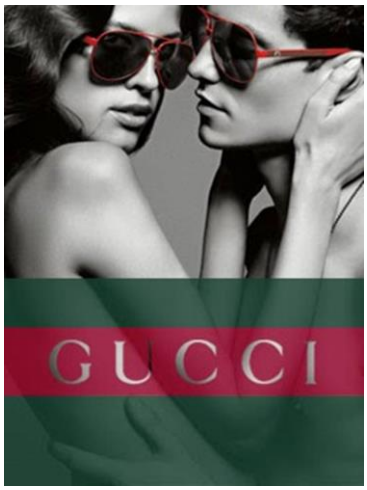
APPENDIX

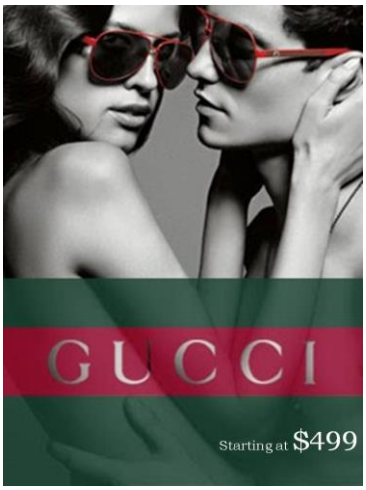
STUDY 1A PRODUCT DESCRIPTION

Imagine that you are shopping for watches. You happen to see one that you really like. It is the *Tambour* watch by Louis Vuitton. Its description and picture are below.

STUDY 1B PRODUCT DESCRIPTION

STUDY 2 & 4 ADVERTISEMENTS





STUDY 3 PRODUCT DESCRIPTIONS

STUDY 4 PRODUCT IMAGES

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FIGURE 1
THE INFLUENCE OF PROCESSING MINDSET AND STIMULUS AMBIGUITY ON JUDGMENT OF WHEN AN INFERIOR IMITATOR IS AVAILABLE

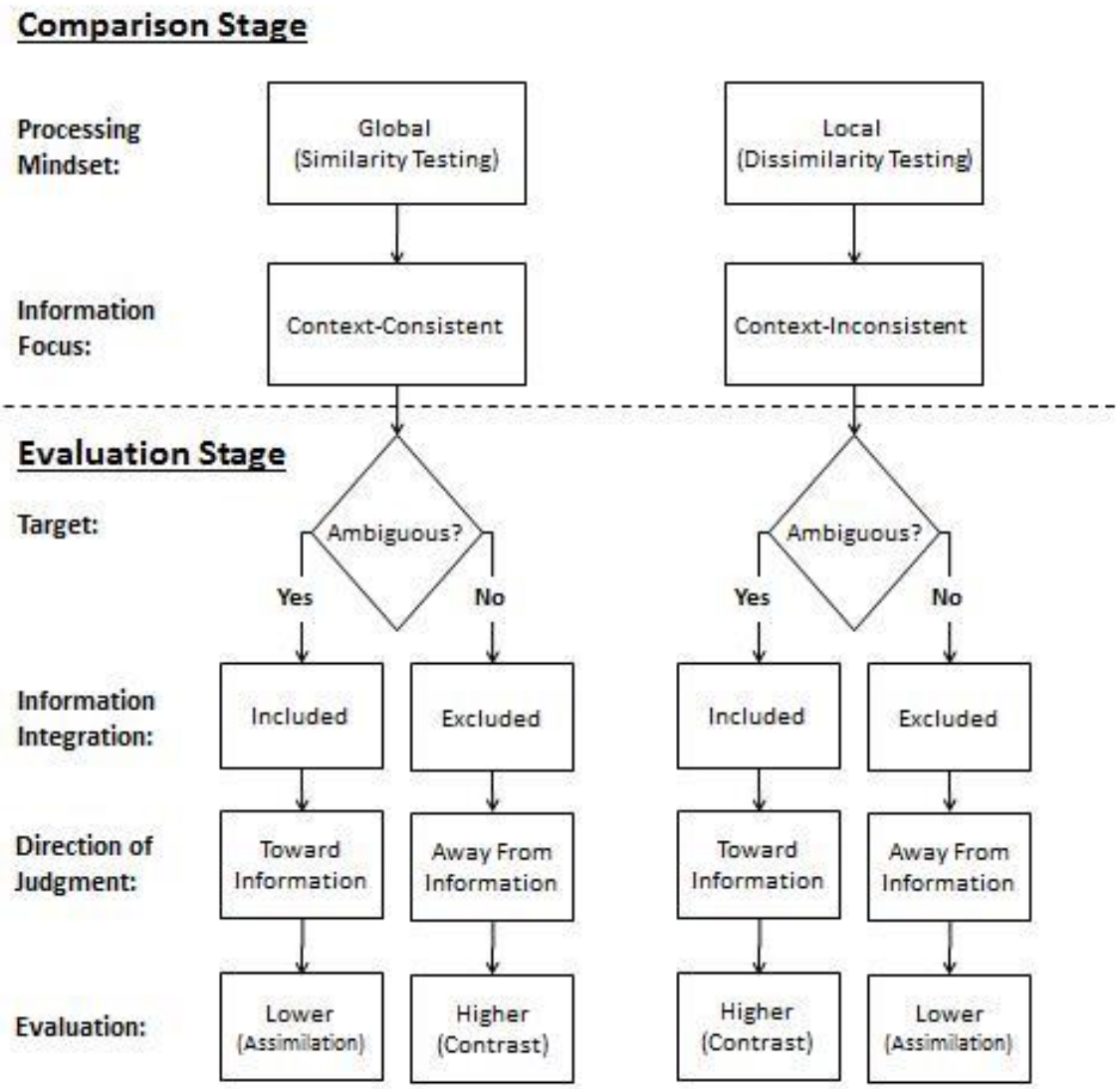
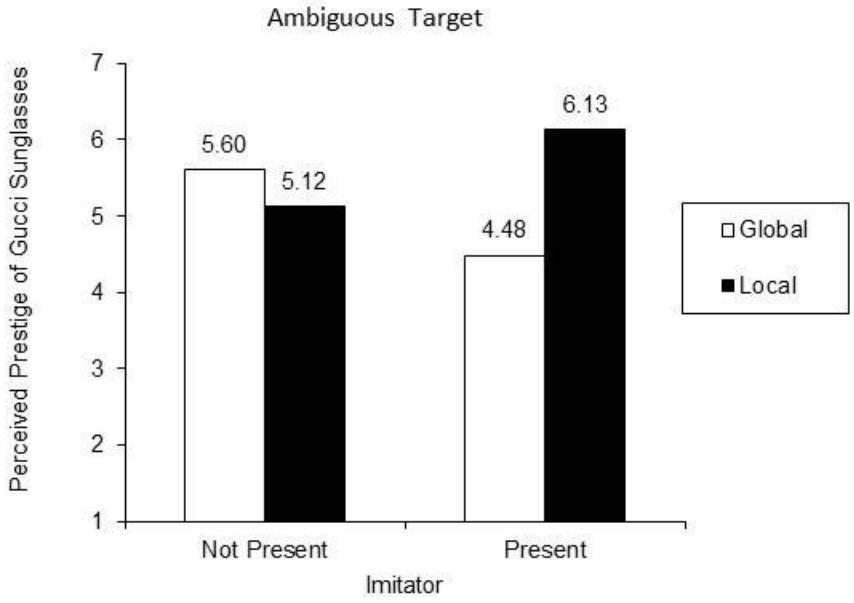


FIGURE 2

STUDY 2 RESULTS



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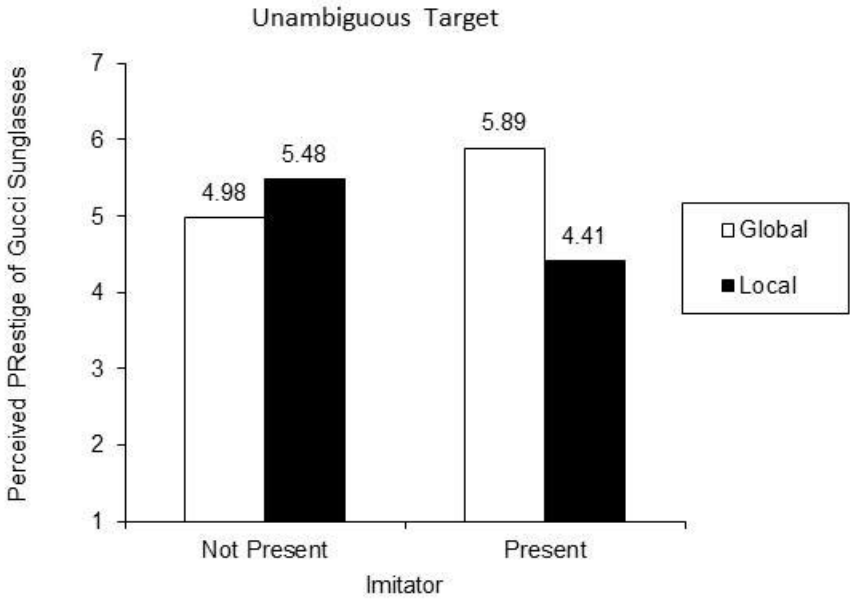

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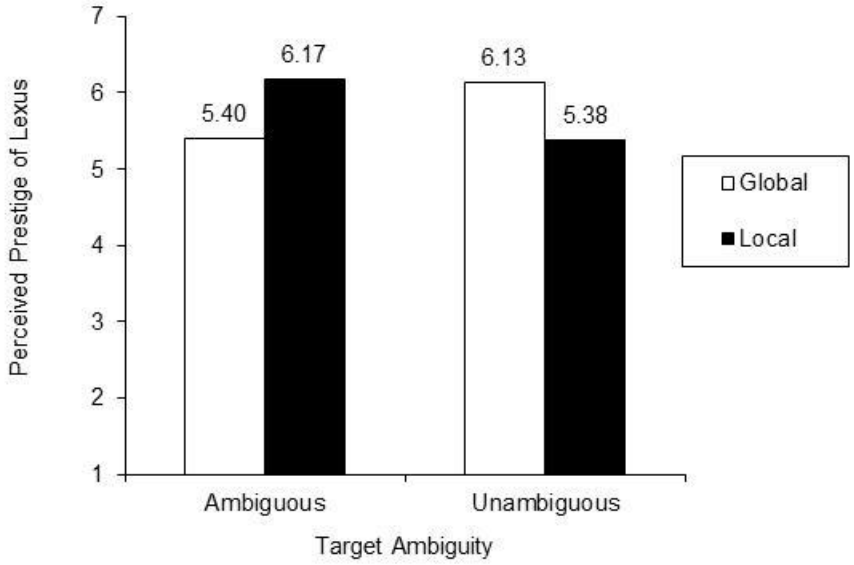
FIGURE 3

STUDY 3 RESULTS



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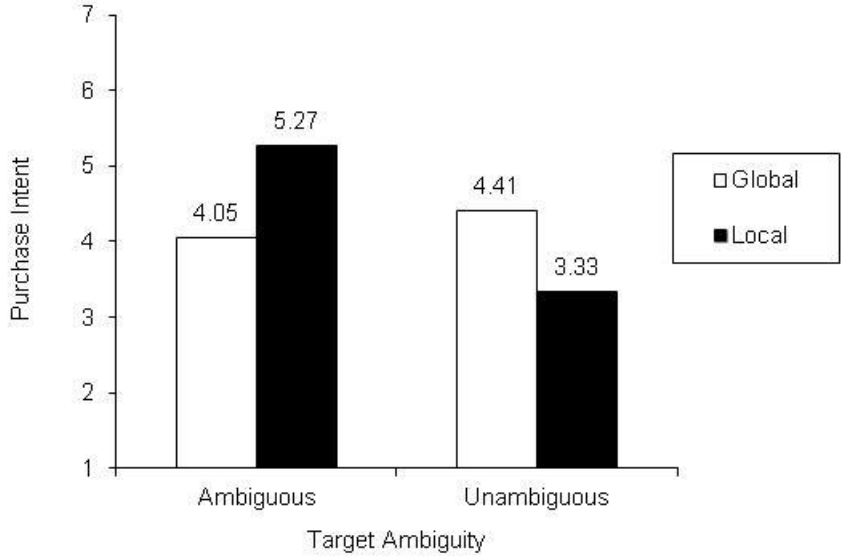

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FIGURE 4
STUDY 4 RESULTS

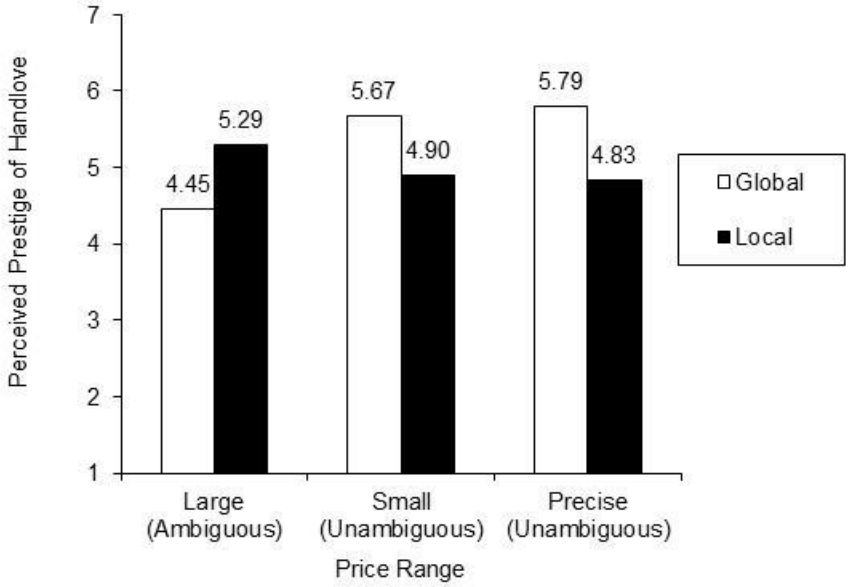
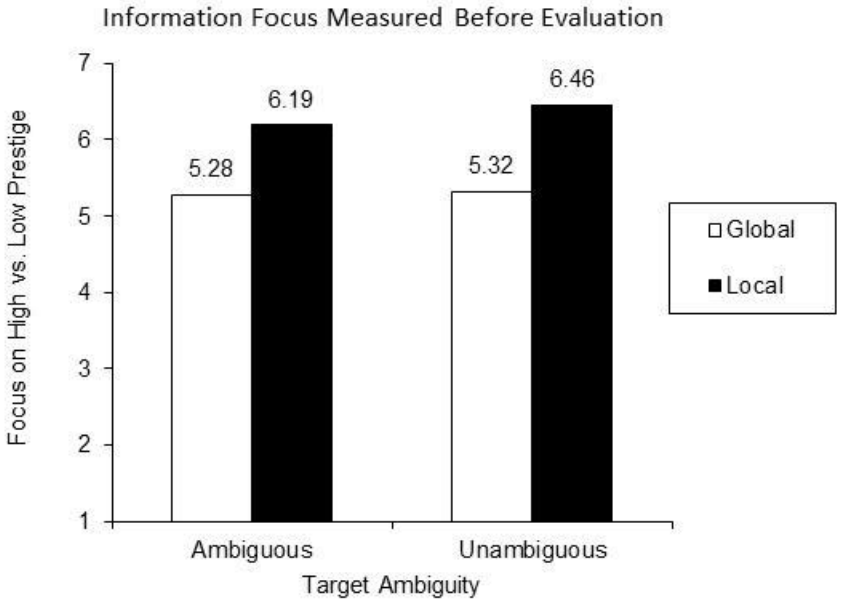


FIGURE 5
STUDY 5 RESULTS



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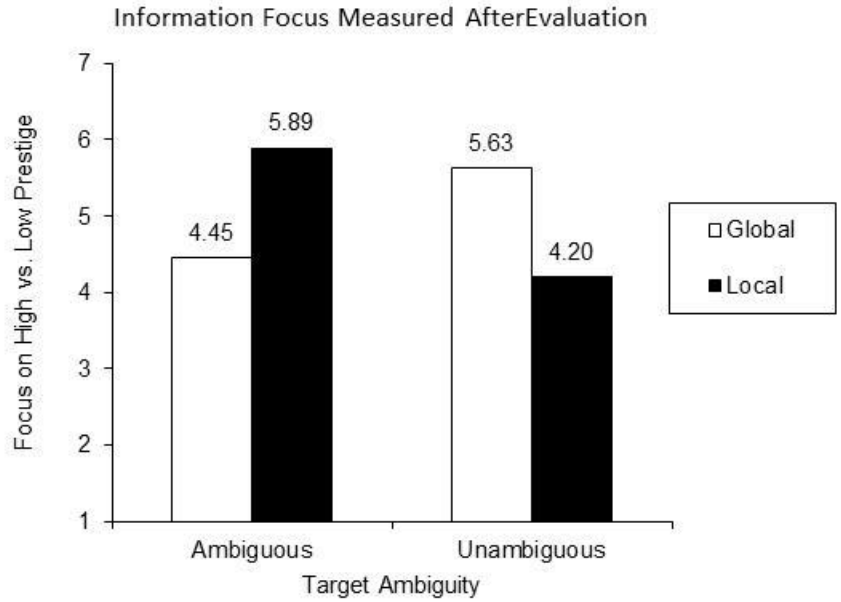

(b)

FIGURE 6
STUDY 6 RESULTS