

Depersonalization versus Personalization: The Effect of Blank versus Sample Displays in Highly

Personalized Consumer Products

Samantha Nicholas and Natalie Kent

Hanover College

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Abstract

Anecdotal evidence from home stagers suggests that depersonalizing products make them more appealing to buyers; however, a large body of contradicting evidence suggests that using human models in products advertisements increases the likability for the product. This study was designed to examine which strategy most successfully targets buyers: the blank slate versus the “example” model. We used a 3 (insert condition: landscape/nature, human, or frame dimension) by 6 (picture frame) completely within-subjects design. Participants ($N=25$, 80% female) reported their liking for the picture frames using a 6 point Likert scale; they also completed a set of demographic questions. A 3 X 6 (condition: human/ landscape-nature/control X frame: 1 through 6) analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant main effect for frame, $F(5,120) = 6.46, p < 0.001$. The main effect for condition was not significant, $F(2, 48) = 1.69, p > 0.05$. Although the main effect for condition was not significant, the general trend suggests people tended to like the example condition better than the blank slate condition, with the exception of frame 5.

Depersonalization versus Personalization

During the home selling process, stagers emphasize the idea of depersonalizing homes for sale. Stagers are people who prepare a house so that it is aesthetically pleasing to potential buyers. Barb Schwarz, a Concord, Calif., real estate broker said, “Staging is preparing a home for sale so the buyer can mentally move in (Romano, 2008).” Stagers claim that making a house as neutral as possible is crucial. The neutralizing process includes actions such as removing books from shelves, painting the walls neutral colors, and even removing personal items such as photos (Holmes, 2010.). The photos could make potential buyers have a more difficult time envisioning themselves living in the home because the home is portrayed as an expression of the current residents (Carisa, 2008.). By not displaying photographs of families, the house can be seen as an empty slate that buyers could customize to fit their own preferences (Parker, 2009). The buyers may feel like they are invading the current residents’ personal space because of the pictures (Snoonian, 2008). This idea that a blank slate is preferable could apply to various products other than houses. For example, when going to pick out a birthday cake at the bakery, blank cakes might be more alluring to the customer than a cake that had someone else’s name on it. Another example for this strategy can be extended to personal technological devices. Advertisers may be unlikely to sell devices such as cell phones and computers that already have a significant amount of personalization. Instead, many leave the settings for these devices very generic to give the customer freedom to personalize them to their liking.

If personalization in home selling is thought to discourage buyers, then this theory should hold true for other products. However, there are goods that emphasize personalization to attract buyers. These goods range from monogrammed items (items containing initials on them) to clothing store mannequins. Home stagers would probably try to avoid the former of these

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products when trying to sell a home. The reasoning is similar to why they are against personal pictures in homes. The mannequins are not directly related to home staging, but the strategy in accordance with the stagers would be to not place clothing on mannequins. Another example of a product that emphasizes personalization is picture frames. In any store that sells them, photos of families are often found displayed in the picture frames on the shelves. If buyers are hoping to customize the frames, then there should not be much variability in the way picture frame companies advertise. Contrary, there are several different ways picture frame companies advertise. Some portray pictures of people, others portray nature, and even some only portray the frame dimensions. If depersonalization is supposed to aid in sales, then why is there this variability?

We are interested in examining which strategy most successfully targets buyers. Picture frames are generally bought with the intention of personalizing them. Therefore, the picture frames containing inserts displaying humans provide an example for how the product can be personalized. The example approach may work because buyers can identify with the humans displayed in the pictures. This explanation relies on the idea that the buyers have been given an example to imitate. Kanungo and Pang (1973) claimed that the central reasoning behind using human models for advertising was that they provide a more meaningful social context for the product. They claimed that using human models led to more emotional reactions from buyers to the product. Essentially, this makes sense because humans should relate to humans more than they relate to other animals or objects in nature. This finding may not entirely relate to picture frames, however, simply because picture frame advertisements do not normally portray people using picture frames.

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For those companies who lean toward personalization when marketing picture frames, many choose to use families. Kanungo and Johar (1975) conducted a study that examined which strategy for using human models attracted the most buyers. In this study, there were four model conditions: a single male model, a single female model, a male-female model pair, and a no model control group. The products were randomly paired with model conditions for the subjects to view. Subjects then rated how much they liked various products. The results indicated that the use of male-female model pairs drew the most attraction from participants. This could explain why many picture frames have inserts with couples and families inside of them. Perhaps the pairing of male and female models was liked most because subjects could always identify with the models. If there was a pair, there was always one model for the subject to identify with.

Another reason that buyers may prefer advertisements with human models is that humans are more attention grabbing than some other alternatives. Various studies have examined the impact of using human models in advertising. One study found that the subjects looked at advertisements containing pictures of humans more often than they looked at advertisements of other objects. They also gazed at the human advertisements for longer periods of time. In one series of experiments, subjects looked at the human advertisements 11 per cent longer, on the average. In another series, subjects looked at the human advertisements 25 per cent longer (Kitson, 1925). Perhaps the people advertising picture frames learned this trick and used it to their advantage

In another study, Klapp (1941) set out to examine the increasing amount of advertisements using pictures of humans. He pointed out that from 1900-1940 the use of advertisements with pictures of humans (with relevance to use of product) increased from 16.2% to 67.1%. Relevance to the use of the product describes an advertisement that shows “use,

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demonstration, purchase, enjoyment, benefit, discomfort from non-use of the product, but without words, symbols, gestures, or any manner of direct suggestion from the person depicted in the advertisement. For example, a man is shown simply driving a car (Klapp, 1941, pg. 244).” Although the relation to picture frame inserts is not identical, there is similarity. Advertising humans in the picture frame does not depict a human physically using the product. However, it does show the relevance of the product. It helps to indicate how the product can be used. It also demonstrates the enjoyment buyers can feel when they look at the picture frame containing some of their own memories.

Human models have been shown to be more attention grabbing, but perhaps this does not extend to all products sold. Klapp’s (1941) and Kitson’s (1925) research may have only been relevant to products that actually had to be manipulated by buyers every time they are used. Picture frames are different in the sense that they do not require buyers to interact with them multiple times. Only one interaction is really necessary—placing a picture inside of the frame. Since the frames do not require buyers to be in constant contact with them, the findings of previous research may not extend to the picture frames.

We were curious to see if depersonalizing picture frames made them more appealing to the subjects. We decided to compare picture frames with inserts in three conditions: pictures of humans, pictures of nature/landscapes, and inserts that simply display the picture frame’s dimensions. We predicted that the empty slate explanation presented would fall short of the explanation in favor of personalization. Although many stagers would claim the opposite, little empirical evidence is available to support their claim. There are anecdotal approaches, but no solid statistics. If the explanation in favor of personalization is supported, subjects should have favored the example conditions (human and landscape inserts) collectively more than they

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avored the control condition (dimension size insert). We predicted that participants would favor the frames in this descending order: picture frames displaying humans, picture frames displaying landscapes, and lastly, picture frames only displaying the dimension sizes. However, if the blank slate explanation is more prominent, the prediction would be reversed. If subjects demonstrated higher favorability for the control condition, it would support the hypothesis that depersonalization is beneficial. In order to examine which hypothesis was best supported, we conducted a study in which we asked participants to rate how likely they would be to buy various picture frames. The picture frames were randomly filled with inserts from the three previously mentioned conditions.

Method

Participants

We had 25 participants. Most participants received extra credit in an undergraduate psychology course for their participation at Hanover College, a small liberal-arts college in Indiana, in order to gather participants. Participants were 92% Caucasian, 8% African American, 80% female, 20% male, and had an average age of 20.

Materials

We used a six point Likert scale to measure favorability toward each picture frame. Rather than using the actual picture frames, we chose to copy the images from several different websites and manipulate their sizes in a photo editing program known as GIMP so that all the frames were 570 X 631 pixels in dimension. Next, we selected a total of thirteen inserts to display in the previously mentioned frames. The websites for all of these picture frames and inserts can be viewed in the appendix. There were a total of six variations of each of the three conditions: human inserts, landscape/nature inserts, and standard white inserts. The inserts for each

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condition were very similar within condition; we used black and white images across all conditions aside from the standard white inserts, as well as images that were 381 X 253 pixels in dimension for the human condition and the landscape condition (see Figure 1 for an example of two frames with pictures in the human condition).

Figure 1. Frames in the Human Insert Condition



These inserts represent a comparison of two of the six inserts shown to subjects in the human insert condition. As stated previously, subjects saw a total of six different human inserts. Here we can see that the humans depicted in the inserts are both black and white, there are four humans, and two adults and two children all similar ages. The two picture frames displayed in this comparison we tried to keep similar enough that no one picture frame would dramatically stand out over another.

The dimensions for the standard white insert condition were slightly different than that of the human condition and the nature/landscape condition at 342 X 422 pixels in dimension as to keep the insert from looking distorted within the frame. Each image within the picture frames were displayed in the center of each frame. We had six different inserts for each condition, aside from the white insert condition, trying to keep them as similar as possible. For instance, in the picture frames containing human inserts we stayed consistent using black and white photos, with people about the same age.

Procedure

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Before beginning this experiment, participants provided informed consent. We told participants that this was a study designed to examine advertising techniques for various picture frames.

Participants were told all the picture frames they will be evaluating are listed at the same price—twenty dollars. We explained that the study would involve indicating their preferences for several picture frames using a Likert scale. After participants completed their informed consent forms, they filled out a demographics sheet asking their age, gender, and race.

Each participant was exposed to all 6 picture frames in all three conditions: picture frames containing inserts displaying humans, picture frames containing inserts displaying landscape/nature, and finally picture frames containing a plain white insert indicating the size of the picture frame (a standard insert). More simply, we used a 3 (insert condition: nature, human, or frame dimension) by 6 (picture frame) completely within-subjects design. Frames were displayed one after the other in a random order, except we ensured that two different frames were placed in between images, so that the same frame was not seen back to back. We randomly displayed picture frames, labeled from one to eighteen, from each condition on a projector screen. We asked participants to indicate on a scale of one to six how much they liked each particular picture frame. Indicating a one suggested dislike for the frame, whereas indicating a six suggested a strong liking for the frame. It took participants, on average, 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Finally, the participants were debriefed and dismissed. Participants were offered a copy of the debriefing form following dismissal.

Results

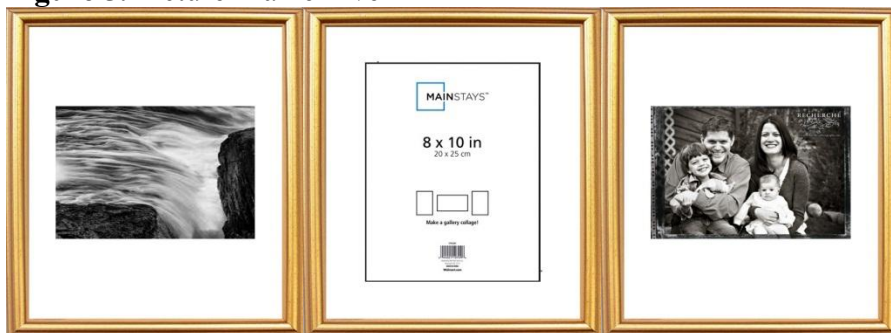
A 3 X 6 (condition: human/ landscape-nature/control X frame: 1 through 6) analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant main effect for frame, $F(5,120) = 6.46, p < 0.001$.

Figure 2 reveals the results. The portrayal in Figure 2 exemplifies the significance of frame on

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participants' preferences. This indicates that participants were not in fact answering randomly, but that they were discriminating between each frame and making deductive decisions for each frame. For ease of presentation, we split Figure 2 into two separate plots. The first sub-plot (Figure 3) shows the mean ratings of frames. The second sub-plot was constructed to portray the mean ratings of condition (human, landscape/nature, control). The main effect for condition was not significant, $F(2, 48) = 1.69, p > 0.05$ (see Figure 4). We had anticipated that participants would prefer the frames in the "example" conditions (e.g., human inserts and landscape/nature inserts) over the standard/control condition. Although the main effect for condition was not significant, the general trend suggests people tended to like the "example" condition better with the exception of frame 5 (see Figure 5). Comparisons of means using Fisher's Least Significant Difference indicates the preference for the landscape/nature insert was significantly higher ($M = 3.12$) than both the standard insert ($M = 2.72$) and the human insert ($M = 2.68$), $p < 0.05$ (refer back to Figure 2).

Figure 5. Picture Frame Five



These images represent picture frame five in all three conditions (landscape/nature, standard, and human). We have placed them in descending order of favorability; meaning that participants liked the landscape/nature insert better than the standard insert, and both the landscape/nature and the standard insert better than the human insert.

Discussion

Although our results portrayed the preference for example conditions over a control condition to be insignificant, they did show the general trend. However, there was one oddity in our results. This was found in the results of picture frame 5. Participants significantly preferred the nature/landscape condition over the human condition and over the standard condition as well. What is odd is that previous research (Kitson, 1925) has indicated that human stimuli were looked at significantly longer and more often than stimuli that did not contain humans. This would lead us to believe that participants should have always favored the human stimuli over the others (landscape/nature and standard/control). A few explanations for the oddity of favorability in the results of frame five should be explored.

First, it is possible that the landscape/nature insert looked best out of the inserts in that specific picture frame. One way to have corrected for this would have been to use the same set of inserts in other frames; however, doing this most likely would have increased suspicion in the participants. Second, it is possible that the human insert in this frame was just disliked by the participants. The way to test this is the same as just described—place the same inserts into a different frame. When choosing which inserts to use for the human condition, we tried to limit the variability. All human inserts contained a family of four, were gray-scaled, and contained people who appeared to be in the same age group. Therefore, the most accepted explanation is that the frame made the pictures look more appealing (landscape/nature) or less appealing (human).

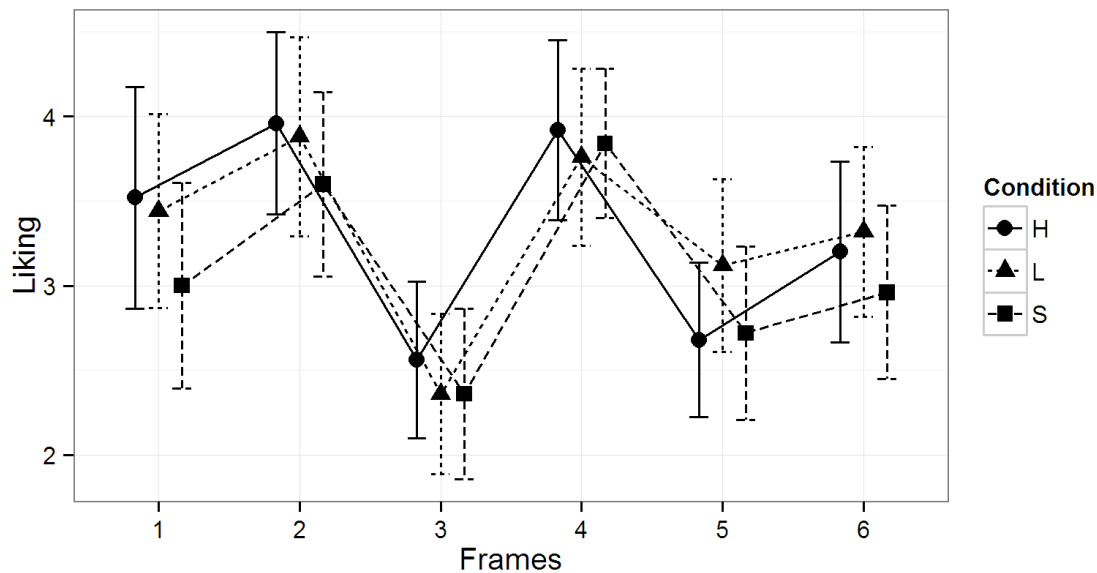
When running our pilot study, the participants claimed that they recognized the frames when they were repeated. This increased suspicion. In order to correct this, we could add more

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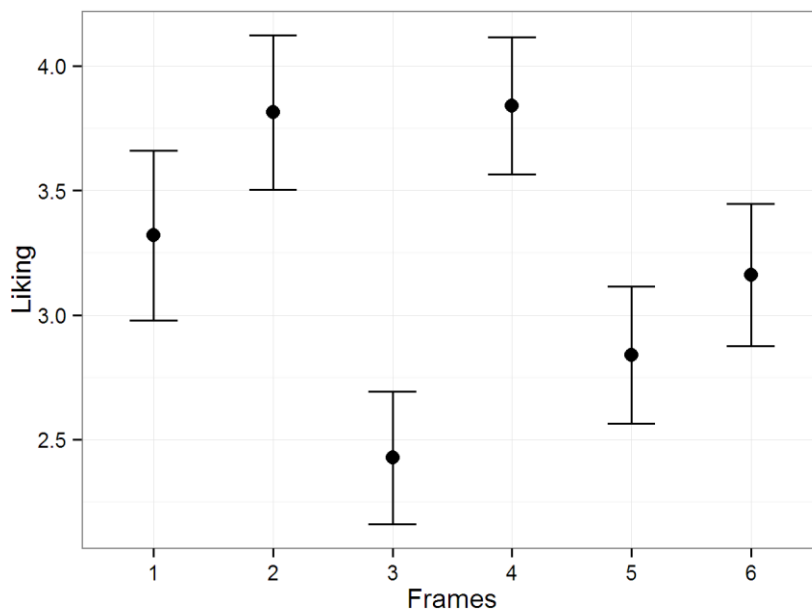
frames to the experiment. For example, if there were 10 frames, subjects might be less likely to remember whether they had seen the frame when it was repeated. The reason that remembrance is frowned upon is because participants were thinking back to what they had rated the frame before, rather than basing their rating off of what they would have rated it if it were the first time they were exposed to it.

Next, it is important to note that in general, the blank slate condition was not supported. Most of the time, the standard insert was favored less than the example conditions. These findings would suggest that home stagers have the wrong idea when it comes to favoring depersonalization. However, perhaps they are still not that farfetched. Picture frames and houses are two very different products. The findings may not be generalizable to houses. Depersonalization may be more successful with houses because buyers could feel like they were invading others' property. Not only are picture frames in the house portraying the current owners' personalities, but even the furniture and carpets could make potential buyers feel like they are being too invasive. This is not the case with picture frames. When a buyer purchases picture frames, those frames are not currently someone else's property. Therefore, the buyer should not feel invasive.

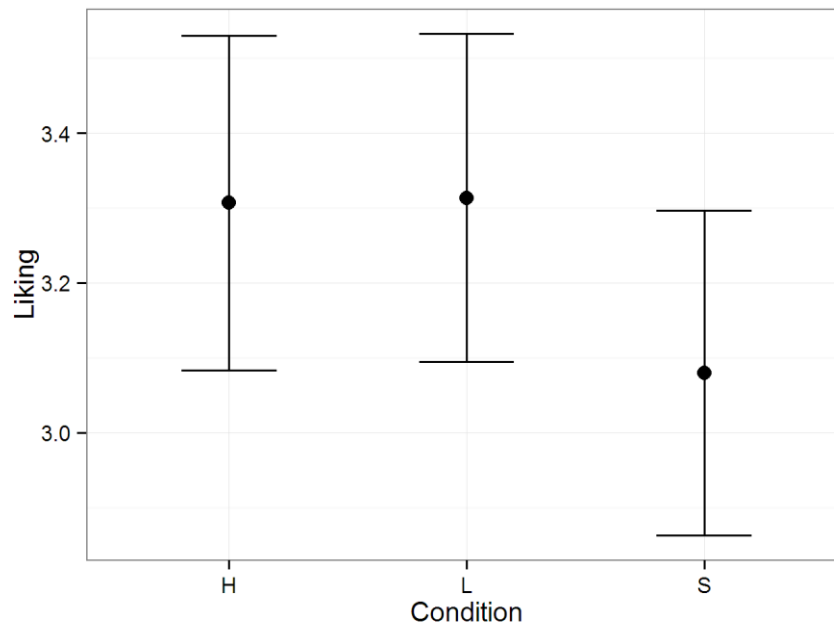
In conclusion, we did find that participants generally favored picture frames with examples (humans and landscape/nature) over picture frames with inserts that displayed dimension sizes (control). This opposes the blank slate hypothesis that home stagers have so commonly advocated. Further research could be done to examine how our results could be generalized to various products, such as houses.

Figure 2. 3 X 6 ANOVA Displaying Preferences for Picture Frames and Inserts

This plot shows participants' preferences for the picture frames, along with the preferences for the inserts within each picture frame. Generally, example (human and landscape/nature) conditions were preferred over the blank slate condition (standard).

Figure 3. Participants' Preferences for Frames

Participants rated the frames on how much they liked them (1 indicating dislike, 6 indicating strong like). The 3 X 6 ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for frame, $F(5,120) = 6.46$, $p < 0.001$.

Figure 4. Participants' Preferences for Inserts

Participants were asked to rate how much they liked each frame. In doing so, we compiled a mean score for favorability of condition (human, landscape/nature, and control). The 3 X 6 ANOVA revealed that the main effect for condition was not significant, $F(2, 48) = 1.69, p > 0.05$.

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Appendix

Websites for Picture Frames and Inserts:

<http://ab.pbimgs.com/pbimgs/ab/images/dp/wcm/201307/0017/img77i.jpg>

<http://ab.pbimgs.com/pbimgs/ab/images/dp/wcm/201236/0036/img70u.jpg>

<http://www.adorama.com/images/300x300/MU66130WM114.jpg>

<http://www.monstermarketplace.com/decoupage-and-paper-tole-supplies/special-gold-shadow-box-frame-size-8x10-with-free-paper-tole-kit-5-8135>

http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I/51wUiCYYviL._SL500_SS500_.jpg

<http://xrayskd2000.wordpress.com/2009/05/25/photo-and-picture-frames/#jp-carousel-693>

<http://globeattractions.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/serpentine-black-and-white-mountains-landscapes.jpg>

<http://nikonites.com/attachments/weekly-photo-challenges/9961d1334156856-weekly-challenge-april-8-april-15-rural-landscape-bw-barn-black-n-white.jpg>

<http://wednesdaysinmhd.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Long-Exposure-Waterfalls-in-Marblehead1-726x900.jpg>

http://24.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_m6nht0TLpK1qzy1ato1_1280.jpg

http://t1.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcQF9_B_rJptl9BE9I05VRxB5Z8fpX6aNCeA0WbCAnYvOxrJnfhY

http://farm4.staticflickr.com/3198/2731850527_b10e3cb400_z.jpg?zz=1

<http://marcellatreybigblog.com/2011/12/one-of-my-favorite-family-photos-irvine-california-family-portraits/>

http://stepkaphoto.com/blogimages/IMG_9771bw.jpg

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<http://kariphotography.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/family-photo-black-and-white-Minnesota.jpg>

http://kariphotography.com/blog/2011/07/meet-caylee-newborn-photography-mn/img_7713-1/

<http://www.recherche-photography.com/babies-children-infants/2493/attachment/02newborn-family-portraits-louisville-colorado-meyers-0511/>

<http://leahjentphotography.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/jentfam1bw.jpg>