

Non-Commitment in Mental Imagery

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The authors wish to thank M. Bar-Hillel, L.A. Paul, D. Spurrett, and S. Bhatia for helpful discussions. TDU is supported by NSF Science Technology Center Award CCF-1231216, the DARPA Machine Common Sense program, and the Jacobs Foundation. All studies were pre-registered, and the data is publicly available on OSF. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Non-Commitment in Mental Imagery

We examine non-commitment in the imagination. Across 5 studies ($N > 1,800$), we find that most people are non-committal about basic aspects of their mental images, including features that would be readily apparent in real images. While previous work on the imagination has discussed the possibility of non-commitment, this paper is the first, to our knowledge, to examine this systematically and empirically. We find that people do not commit to basic properties of specified mental scenes (Studies 1 and 2), and that people report non-commitment rather than uncertainty or forgetfulness (Study 3). Such non-commitment is present even for people with generally vivid imaginations, and those who report imagining the specified scene very vividly (Studies 4a, 4b). People readily confabulate properties of their mental images when non-commitment is not offered as an explicit option (Study 5). Taken together, these results establish non-commitment as a pervasive component of mental imagery.

Keywords: Mental Imagery, Imagination, Vividness, Non-Commitment

Statement of Relevance

People have the impression that their imagination is rich and detailed, but we find that there is less to our mental images than meets the mind's eye. In five pre-registered studies, we asked people to vividly imagine various scenes. We then asked whether they had imagined various properties of the scenes, ones that would be easy to see if people were looking at a picture (e.g., what clothes a person in the scene was wearing). Many people did not imagine basic properties of the scene. This included people with a very vivid imagination in general, and people who said that they had imagined the given scene very vividly. But, when asked to freely describe an aspect of the scene (without the explicit option of not having imagined it), people provide detailed descriptions. Our findings inform an ongoing debate in philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience about the nature of mental images.

Introduction

Please imagine the following scene, as vividly as you can:

A person walks into a room, and knocks a ball off a table.

Once you’ve imagined it, read on.

Consider the scene that you imagined. Did you imagine the color of the ball? What about the ball’s size? Did you imagine the color of the person’s hair, or the pattern of their clothes? Can you trace with your finger the trajectory that the ball took?

If you’re like most people, you imagined some of these properties, but not others. Perhaps you can confidently say the ball was red, and moved from left to right, but did not imagine the person’s hair color, or clothes, or gender. You could fill in such details if needed, but they were not there to begin with.

In this paper, we study non-commitment in mental imagery. That is, we investigate the possibility that people do not represent basic properties of an imagined scene. Non-commitment in the imagination has been discussed in philosophy of mind, and has played a theoretical role in debates about mental imagery, but there has been little empirical study of this topic.

In philosophy, Descartes suggested that mental images are similar to rough engravings, (Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, Kenny, et al., 1985), in that they directly capture some aspects of an actual scene, but leave out crucial details. More recently, philosophers have discussed non-commitment (without empirical evidence), using a zoo of thought experiments that examined non-commitment to different properties in mental images, from speckled hens (Ayer, 1940) to bald men (Shorter, 1952), striped tigers (Dennett, 1986), and purple cows (Dennett, 1993).

The notion of non-commitment in mental imagery has also played a small role in the ongoing debate over the format of mental images (the ‘Imagery Debate’), although the phenomenon of non-commitment was not itself empirically established and studied.

Researchers on one side of the imagery debate have argued that mental images are propositional in nature, and that the subjective phenomenon of seeing images in the mind is epiphenomenal (Z. Pylyshyn, 2003; Z. W. Pylyshyn, 1973, 1978, 2002). On the other side, researchers have argued that mental images have a depictive, picture-like format (Kosslyn, Pinker, Smith, & Shwartz, 1979; Kosslyn, Thompson, & Ganis, 2006; Pearson, 2019; Pearson & Kosslyn, 2015). Non-commitment has been used to argue against the pictorial-depictive view (Z. W. Pylyshyn, 1978, 2002). Defenders of the pictorial view, however, have countered that the possibility of non-commitment need not rule out a depictive format for mental images. For example, Kosslyn et al. 2006 has claimed that supposed non-commitment is due to inattention or other cognitive limitations when reporting on mental images (which are themselves highly detailed), and Block 1983 has argued that mental images are more like sketches than photographs, in which various details can be left unspecified. Outside of the mental imagery debate, it has recently been suggested that the default values of properties in imagined scenes explain why people fall prey to ‘stumpers’ (Bar-Hillel, Noah, & Shane, 2018), riddles whose solution falls outside the dominant construal of the scene set up by the riddle.

Regardless of the format of mental images, people vary in the self-reported vividness of their imagery, and various measures have been developed to study these individual differences (e.g. Andrade, May, Deeprose, Baugh, & Ganis, 2014; Hall, Pongrac, & Buckholz, 1985; McKelvie, 1995; Reisberg, Pearson, & Kosslyn, 2003; Sheehan, 1967). Here, we are concerned with non-commitment to the properties of a mental scene that should be readily apparent in a perceptual image depicting that scene, although we also examine the relationship between non-commitment and the self-reported vividness of a mental image.

But beyond reports of very low vividness, some people report that they lack a subjective experience of visual imagery entirely. This condition is known as ‘aphantasia’ (Dance, Ipser, & Simner, 2022; Galton, 1880; Keogh & Pearson, 2018; A. Zeman et al., 2020; A. Z. Zeman, Dewar, & Della Sala, 2015). Non-commitment in mental imagery is

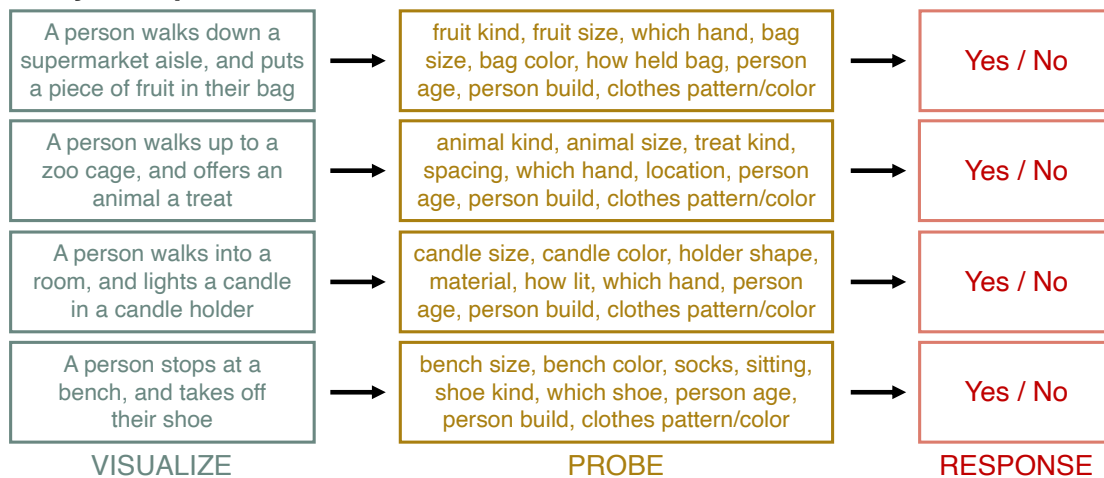
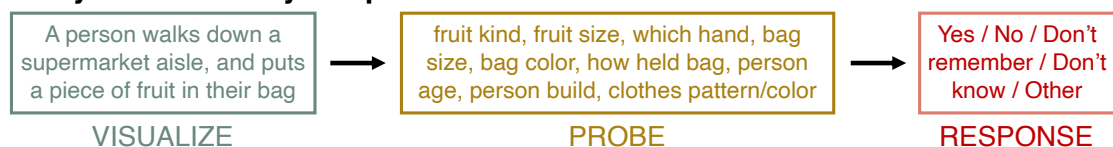
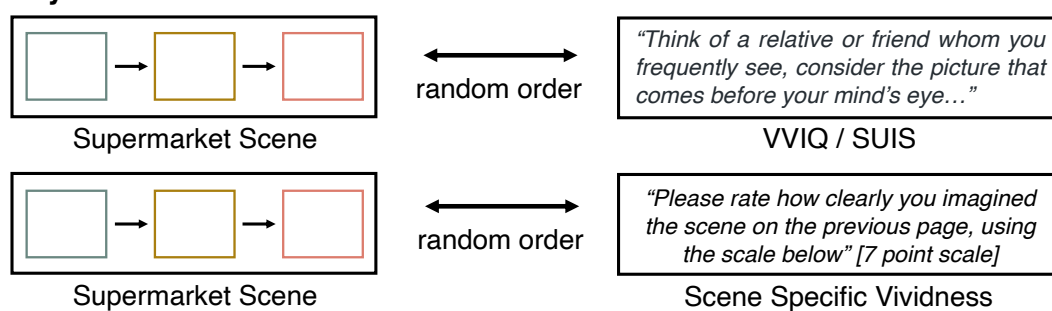
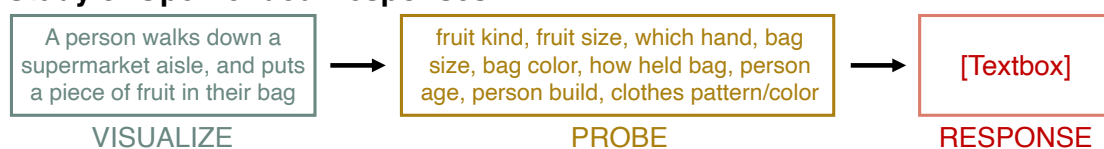
different to aphantasia: in principle, a person may experience a visual mental scene of a ball rolling off a table without being committed to the color of the ball, while another person may know the ball is red, without the subjective experience of a mental image.

To empirically examine non-commitment, we conducted a series of studies similar in structure to the opening example of this paper. That is, people imagined a described scene, and were then asked whether specified properties were part of their mental image. Our first study establishes the basic phenomenon of non-commitment, using a single scene and set of properties. People report that their imagined scenes lack basic details and properties, ones that would be readily available in real images. Our second study replicates and extends the first study with four additional scenes. Our third study examines the possibility that people's apparent non-commitment may instead reflect forgetfulness, uncertainty, or some other factor. Our fourth study examines the relationship between individual variation in non-commitment and individual differences in vividness. Our final study finds that when they are not given the explicit option of reporting non-commitment, people confabulate details of their imagined scenes.

Overall Procedures and Methods

In each study, participants were asked to imagine a specified scene, and were then queried, in various ways, about whether particular properties were part of their mental image. The procedures for the five studies are summarized in Figure 1. All studies, including experimental procedures, number of participants, exclusion criteria, and analyses, were pre-registered.¹ All data is available at the following OSF repository: https://osf.io/mzg42/?view_only=d0d4dfef289e42758825a77a4e63b2e9.

¹ AsPredicted registration numbers: 78265, 84737, 89932, 93941, 93942, and 96082

Study 1: Do people report not imagining basic properties?**Study 2: Replication with Additional Scenes****Study 3: Non-Binary Responses****Study 4: Individual Differences****Study 5: Open-ended Responses****Figure 1**

Experiment flow for all studies. Participants visualized a scene, then probed about various items/properties and whether they were part of the mental image.

In the *visualize* phase of the studies, participants saw the instructions: “Please pause, and take a moment to imagine the following scene. Visualize it in your mind’s eye, as vividly as you can”, followed by a one-sentence scene description. Next, in the *probe* phase, participants saw, for studies 1 through 4, the prompt (on a separate page): “When you imagined the scene on the previous page, was the following part of your mental image?” followed by nine properties in random order. The probe in Study 5 was phrased differently.

All of the scenes involved a person taking a simple action (e.g., “puts”), the primary object of the action (e.g., “a piece of fruit”), and a secondary object (e.g., “bag”). The nine questions for each scene were chosen such that three questions asked about the person, three asked about the primary object, and three asked about the secondary object. The properties probed for each scene are shown in Figure 1.

Participants for all studies were recruited online via Prolific, with the following qualifications: live in the United States, speak fluent English, and have completed at least ten studies with an acceptance rate of at least 98%.

At the end of each study, participants were asked, “Please describe, in a few words, what you were asked to do in this experiment?” As pre-registered, we excluded participants who did not answer with any variant of “imagine a scene and answer questions about it”, which included the exclusion of participants who gave responses such as “I don’t know”, “do an experiment”, or “give input”. If participants were excluded from analysis, we recruited additional participants so as to obtain the pre-registered sample size.

Study 1: Do people report not imagining basic scene properties?

Our first study used a simple scene to demonstrate the phenomenon of interest: after being asked to vividly imagine a specified scene, many people report not having imagined properties of the scene that would be easily distinguishable in a real image.

Participants and Methods

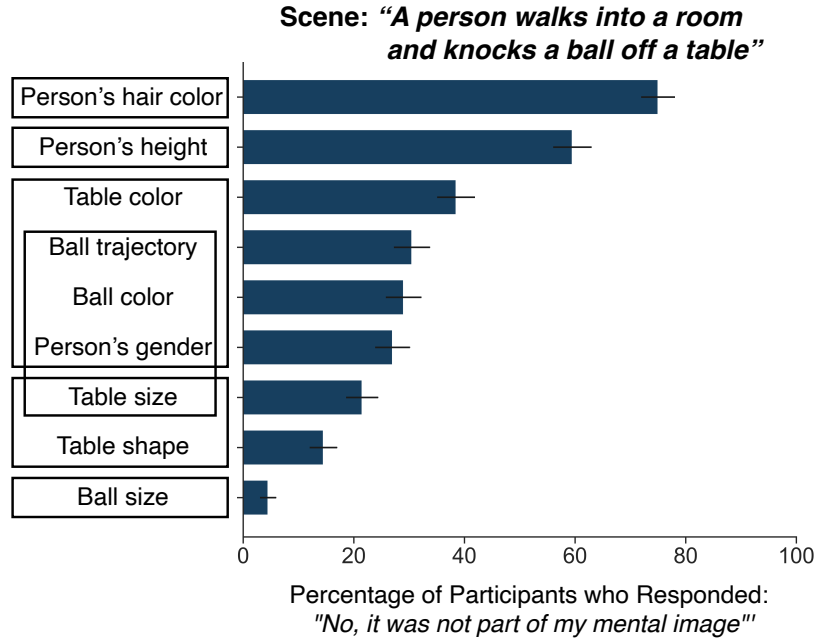
In Study 1, we recruited 200 participants. The average age of participants was 34. Of the participants, 129 participants identified as female, 70 identified as male, and one did not identify a gender. No participants were excluded.

Participants were asked to visualize the following scene as vividly as they could: “A person walks into a room and knocks a ball off a table.” Next, on a separate page, participants were asked to consider the scene that they had imagined. For each of nine properties, participants selected either “Yes, it was part of my mental image”, or “No, it was not part of my mental image”. For example, participants were asked whether the color of the ball, the shape of the table, the trajectory of the ball, the hair color of the person, and so on were part of their mental image (see Figure 1 for the list of nine properties).

Results

Figure 2 shows the proportion of participants who reported that each property was not part of their mental image. For every property, the proportion of participants who reported that it was not part of their mental image was significantly different from 0.0 by a one-sided z-test of proportions (all $p < .001$, except for ball size, $p = .0011$). In Figure 2, we group together properties that do not have a significantly different proportion of participants answering ‘No’ (using a McNemar test with $\alpha = .05$). For all z-tests of proportion and all McNemar tests, we correct for multiple comparisons with the Holm-Bonferroni method, as pre-registered.

For several of the properties, the proportion of participants who reported that the property was not included in their mental image was considerable. For example, only one in four participants reported that the person’s hair color was part of their mental image. For all studies, the Supplemental Material reports the proportion of participants who report not imagining each property, the standard error, and the p-value when comparing each proportion to 0.

**Figure 2**

Results of Study 1. Participants imagined the scene: “A person walks into a room and knocks a ball off a table”, then reported whether various properties were part of their mental image. Bars show the proportion of people who answered “No, it was not part of my mental image”. Error bars show standard errors. Properties for which the proportions are not significantly different are grouped together.

As Figure 3 shows, most participants answered ‘No’ to at least some properties. Specifically, 78% of participants answered ‘No’ for at least two properties. Moreover, the variation within participants suggests that they are not simply answering, with little effort or thought, ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ to all properties. Only one participant responded ‘No’ to all nine properties, and only one participant responded ‘No’ to eight properties.

There was no effect of the order in which properties were asked about on whether a participant reported that a property was not part of their mental image ($\beta = 0.01 [-0.03, 0.05]$, $p = 0.50$). We will return to this result in our discussion of the possible impact of memory on non-commitment.

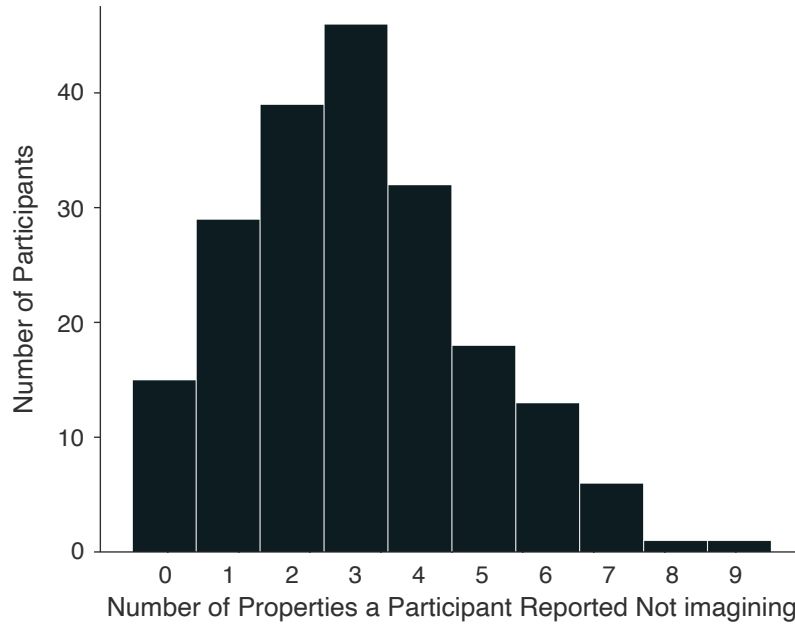


Figure 3

The number of “No, it was not part of my mental image” responses across participants in Study 1.

Study 2: Replication with Additional Scenes

To confirm our hypothesis that people do not imagine basic properties of their mental images, we replicated Study 1, using four additional scenes.

Participants and Methods

We recruited 800 participants, each one randomly assigned to one of four scenes (zoo scene: $N = 201$, candle scene: $N = 201$, supermarket scene: $N = 198$, bench scene: $N = 200$). Two participants were excluded for failing the attention check. The average age of participants was 34. Of the participants, 531 identified as female, 262 identified as male, and 7 preferred not to indicate a gender.

Our second study used the same paradigm as Study 1, with each participant imagining one of four new scenes (see Figure 1). The scenes were: (i) “A person walks up to a zoo cage, and offers an animal a treat”, (ii) “A person walks down a supermarket aisle,

and puts a piece of fruit in their bag”, (iii) “A person walks into a room, and lights a candle in a candle holder”, and (iv) “A person stops at a bench, and takes off their shoe”. For each scene, participants were asked about nine simple properties.

Results

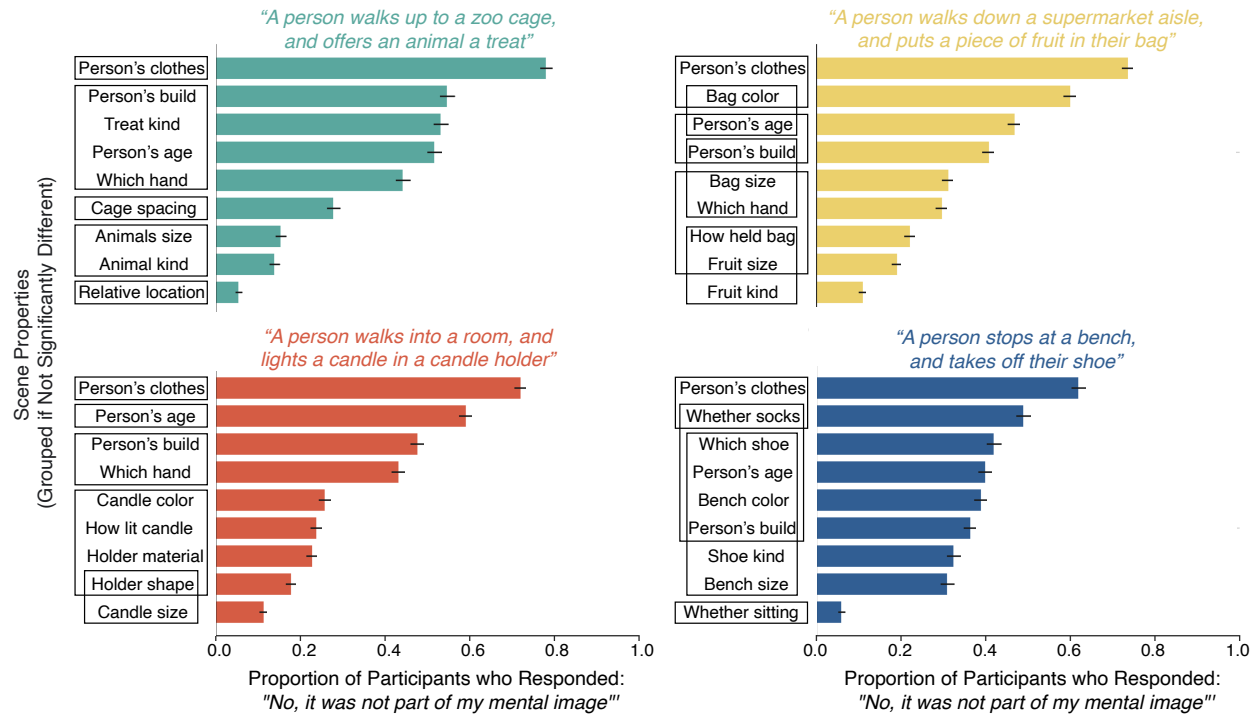
As shown in Figure 4, participants reported not imagining basic properties in all four scenes. The proportion of ‘No’ answers was significantly different from 0.0 for every property in all four scenes, by a one-sided z-test of proportions (all $p < .001$). In Figure 4, we group together properties that do not have a significantly different proportion of participants answering ‘No’ (using a McNemar test with $\alpha = .05$). Across all scenes and properties, 37% of responses were ‘No’. There was no effect of question order on whether a participant reported that a property was not part of their mental image ($\beta = -0.01 [-0.03, 0.004]$, $p = 0.12$). As in Study 1, most participants answered ‘No’ to at least some properties, and participants did not simply answer ‘No’ to all of the properties.

Study 3: Probing for Uncertainty and Forgetfulness

In Studies 1 and 2, participants reported that they did not imagine basic properties of different scenes. However, it may be that when given a binary choice, participants opted for the “No, it was not part of my mental image” response, when they actually meant something else. Feelings of uncertainty, vagueness, and so on may lead participants to favor the ‘No’ response. In our third study, we gave participants multiple response options, to examine whether they selected the ‘No’ response due to the lack of adequate alternatives.

Participants and Methods

We recruited 200 participants. Two participants were excluded due to failing an attention check. The average age of participants was 34. Of the participants, 137 identified as female, and 63 identified as male.

**Figure 4**

Results of Study 2. Participants imagined one of four scenes, and reported whether various properties were part of their mental image. Bars show the proportion of people who answered 'No, it was not part of my mental image'. Error bars show standard errors. Properties are grouped together if the proportions of participants answering 'No' are not significantly different.

Study 3 used the supermarket scene and properties from Study 2. In contrast to the previous studies, participants were given multiple possible response option for each property: ("Yes, it was part of my mental image", "No, it was not part of my mental image", "I don't know whether it was part of my mental image", "I don't remember whether it was part of my mental image", and "Other").

Results

Even when given multiple options (including a blanket “Other” option), participant responses were similar to those in Study 2: 34% of the responses were “No”, and 62% were “Yes”. Participants made little use of the additional options: “I don’t know” accounted for only 3% of responses, “I don’t remember” for 1%, and “Other” for 0.1%.

At the property level, participant responses were also similar to those in Study 2 (see Supplemental Materials). For all properties, the proportion of participants who answered ‘No’ was significantly different than 0.0 (all $p < .001$). There was again no effect of question order on whether a participant reported that a property was not part of their mental image ($\beta = -0.02 [-0.06, 0.02]$, $p = 0.31$).

Study 4: Non-Commitment and Existing Mental Imagery Metrics

We next study the relationship between how vividly people report imagining mental scenes, and the extent to which people do not commit to properties of their mental scenes. In particular, we examine whether even people who report most vividly imagining mental scenes also report non-commitment. We used both established measures of individual differences in overall vividness for mental imagery (Study 4a), and a direct measure of self-assessed scene clarity for the specific scene people imagined (Study 4b).

Participants and Methods

Studies 4a and 4b again used the supermarket scene and properties from Study 2. In addition, participants answered questions either about the vividness of their imagination in general (Study 4a), or the clarity of the supermarket scene in particular (Study 4b). Since Study 3 demonstrated that participants seldom chose options other than ‘Yes’ and ‘No’, we used only binary response options.

For Study 4a, we recruited 300 participants. Two participants were excluded for failing an attention check. The average age of participants was 36. Of the participants, 194

identified as female, and 106 identified as male. For Study 4b, we recruited 201 participants. One participant was excluded for failing an attention check, and data for an extra participant was collected due to an error. The average age of participants was 34. Of the participants, 139 identified as female, and 62 identified as male.

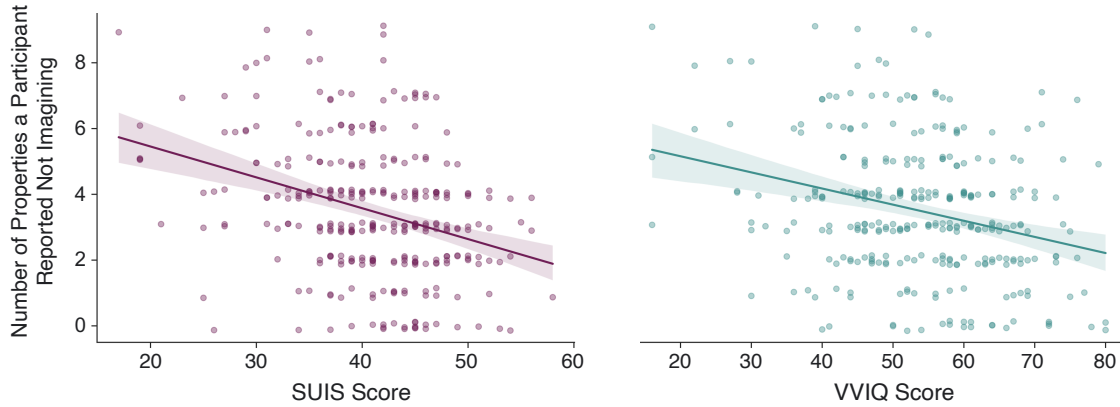
In Study 4a, participants answered the Visual Vividness in Imagery Questionnaire (VVIQ) (Marks, 1973), and the Spontaneous Use of Imagery Scale (SUIS) (Reisberg et al., 2003). The order of VVIQ and SUIS was randomized, as was whether participants first answered the individual difference measures, or first imagined the scene and answered questions about its properties. The standard VVIQ scale consists of 16 questions on a 5-point vividness scale to give a minimum of 16 and a maximum of 80. Scores below 25 are sometimes taken to indicate aphantasia, and scores above 75 to indicate hyperphantasia (A. Zeman et al., 2020). The SUIS scale consists of 12 questions (each on a 5-point scale) about the frequency of imagery experiences in everyday life, for a minimum of 12 and a maximum of 60.

In Study 4b, after being asked to imagine the supermarket scene as vividly as they could, participants were asked “Please rate how clearly you imagined the scene on the previous page, using the scale below”, and responded on a 7-point scale, from “Not clearly at all” to “Very clearly”. Participants were asked this question on a separate page before being asked about properties of their imagined scene.

Results

Figure 5 shows the relationship between the number of properties a participant reported that they did not imagine, and their SUIS and VVIQ scores (SUIS: $\rho(298) = -0.25, p < .001$; VVIQ: $\rho(298) = -0.32, p < .001$). There was a low correlation between the number of ‘No’ responses and the scene-specific clarity rating ($\rho(298) = .18, p = .01$).

We analyzed whether participants with high scores on one of the individual

**Figure 5**

Study 4a Results. The relationship between the number of properties a participant reported not imagining in a scene, and their SUIIS score (left), or VVIQ score (right). Lines show best linear fits.

difference measures reported not imagining properties of the scene. As pre-registered, we examined participants in the top quartile of SUIIS scores ($SUIIS \geq 46$, 75 participants) and those in the top quartile of VVIQ scores ($VVIQ \geq 61$, 81 participants) in Study 4a. We also examined participants who rated the scene clarity as a 6 or 7 (142 participants) in Study 4b. As Figure 6 shows, even such participants report not imagining properties of the scene: the number of their ‘No’ responses was significantly different from 0.0 across all nine questions ($p < .001$) by a one-sided z-test of proportions.

For both Study 4a and Study 4b, there was again no effect of property order on whether a participant reported that a property was not part of their mental image (Study 4a: $\beta = 0.01 [-0.02, 0.04]$, $p = 0.35$, Study 4b: $\beta = 0.01 [-0.02, 0.05]$, $p = 0.50$). In Study 4a, VVIQ scores were lower when the VVIQ questionnaire was presented after participants imagined the supermarket scene ($t(298) = -3.2$, $p = 0.002$). No order effect was found for SUIIS scores ($t(298) = -0.13$, $p = 0.9$), or the number of ‘No’ responses ($t(298) = 0.76$, $p = 0.45$).

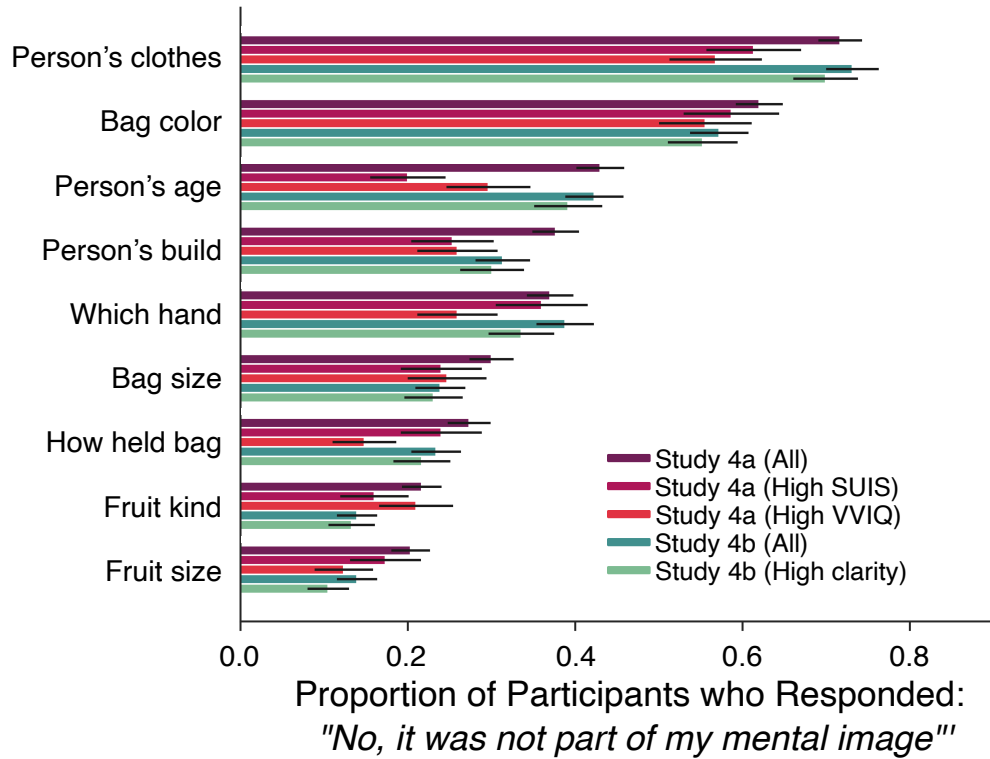


Figure 6

Results of Studies 4a and 4b. The proportion of 'No' responses for each property from all participants in each experiment, as well as from the top SUI quartile, top VVIQ quartile, and those with high self-reported scene clarity. Error bars show standard errors.

Study 5: Open-ended Responses

In all the studies so far, many participants reported non-commitment when explicitly given the option to do so. This is in contrast to the intuition that people can often report rich details of their mental scenes. To probe this contrast, we asked people to describe aspects of an imagined scene in an open-ended way. In principle, people may use this open-ended format to report non-commitment. But, the pragmatics of being asked to describe a given property may instead lead people to confabulate many of the details of a scene.

Participants and Methods

We recruited 150 participants, and excluded one due to missing data. The average age of participants was 34. Of the participants, 98 identified as female, and 52 as male.

Study 5 again used the supermarket scene and properties from Study 2. Participants were asked to visualize the scene as vividly as they could. On a separate page, participants were instructed, “When you imagined the scene on the previous page, please describe the following aspects of your mental image”. Participants responded using open text boxes for each of the nine properties.

We coded participant responses by whether or not they gave a specific description of the property. Answers such as “none”, “I don’t know”, “I can’t remember”, “N/A”, “I didn’t think about it”, and so on were coded as non-specific.

Results

As Figure 7 shows, participants overwhelmingly gave specific descriptions of the scene properties. For the person’s clothes, 144 of the 150 participants described a specific color, pattern, or article of clothing. For five of the properties, 149 of the participants gave a specific answer, and for the remaining three properties all 150 participants gave a specific answer.

Discussion

After being asked to imagine scenes such as a person knocking a ball off a table, or a person putting fruit into a bag, participants were asked whether they had imagined various basic properties of the scenes, such as the color of the table, or the shopper’s clothes. The questions were about simple scenes, and properties that would be easily perceivable in real images. Many participants reported that, in fact, such properties were not part of their mental images. We suggest that this non-commitment is pervasive (unlike aphantasia, which is present in only approximately 4% of the population (Dance et al.,

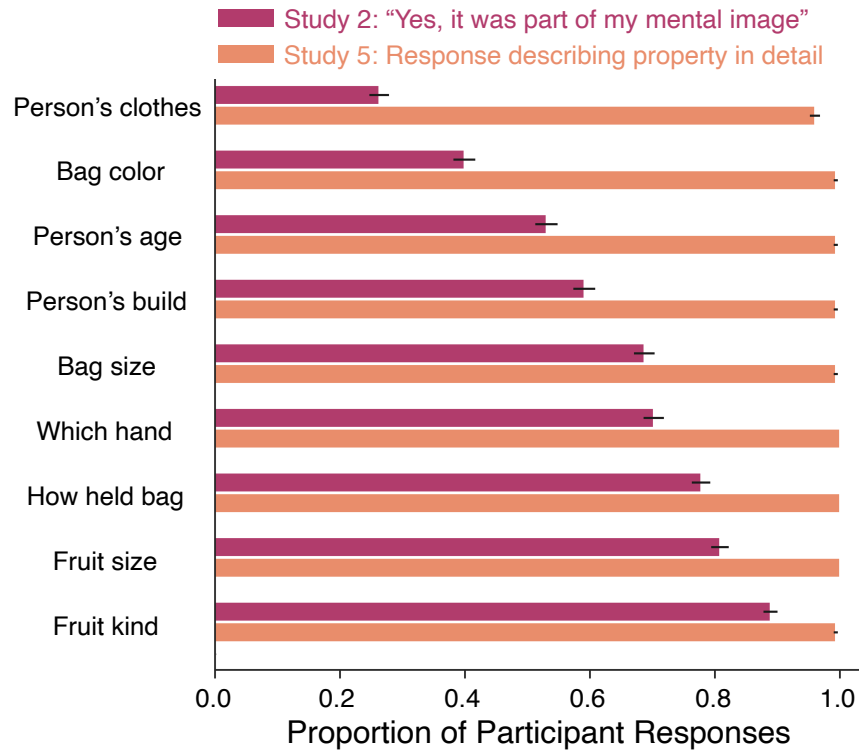


Figure 7

Results of Study 5. Participants imagined the supermarket scene, and were asked about different properties with an open-ended question. For each property, the lower bars (coral) show the proportion of responses that included specific descriptions of the property, as opposed to “not sure”, “none”, “didn’t think about it”, and so on. The results of Study 2 for the same scene are included for comparison: the upper bars (maroon) show the proportion of participants that reported “Yes, it was part of my mental image”. Error bars show standard errors.

2022)). Giving participants options beyond a “Yes/No” response for whether a property was part of their scene (“I don’t know”, “I don’t remember”, and “Other”) made little difference: only a tiny fraction of participants chose these other options².

² We’ve also often asked non-commitment questions in-person. Mostly these were posed to other psychologists, as they’re the ones willing to put up with us. Anecdotally, people do not seem to notice their own non-commitment until it is pointed out. When asked about a basic property that they didn’t imagine,

Non-commitment is not driven by a small subset of participants: almost everyone reports that there are properties of the scene that they do not imagine. This includes participants in the top quartile on standard scales that measure individual differences in the overall vividness of one’s mental imagery (Marks, 1973; Reisberg et al., 2003), and participants who rated the clarity of their specific imagined scene as a 6 or 7 (on a 7-point scale) before they were asked questions about it.

When asked to describe particular properties of a mental scene, without the explicit option of non-commitment, essentially all participants offer rich descriptions. This is in stark contrast to Studies 1-4. For example, only approximately 25% of participants in Studies 1-4 report that they imagined the person’s clothes. However, when instead given an open prompt (in Study 5) to “describe the clothes”, nearly 100% of participants give descriptions, ranging from “solid red shirt, blue jeans” to “long trench coat type jacket that’s tan, button up pink blouse underneath, waist-high jeans and black boots with a zipper on the sides and decorative corset-type string pattern on the fronts”. We suggest that when people are not given the explicit option to report that they did not encode properties of the scene, they confabulate details. These results are in line with the confabulation found in other research, for example on false memory and on the post-hoc reasons people give for their decisions (Hirstein, 2009; Johnson & Raye, 1998; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

We next consider three alternative explanations that do not assume non-commitment, and point out challenges to such alternatives. One alternative account is that when some participants answer “No, it was not part of my mental image” they actually mean something else, for example that they do not understand the task. This is unlikely, since even when provided with options that would let them express confusion and

a common reaction is “Huh!” followed by a snicker, rather than something like “Obviously there are lots of properties I didn’t imagine”. This sentiment was echoed by a participant who commented, “So when I saw that some details you asked about I didn’t even think about, that kinda blew my mind a bit.”

the like (Study 3), participants reported that they did not imagine the property.

Another alternative account is that participants did imagine the properties, but then forgot them. While we cannot definitively rule out such a memory account, various factors argue against it. First, only about 1% of responses were “I don’t remember whether it was part my mental image” when given this as an option (Study 3). This suggests that people at least do not have awareness that they may have forgotten. Second, we note that the time between imagining a scene and reporting on its properties was very short. Finally, a memory account would suggest that properties asked about later are less likely to be remembered, and so more likely to be reported as non-committed. However, the order in which the properties were presented had no effect on the size of non-commitment in any of the studies.

A third alternative is that the results are due to survey answering biases or carelessness. However, much research on acquiescence bias shows that when asked ‘Yes/No’ question people tend to answer ‘Yes’ as the default answer (Schuman & Presser, 1996), whereas in our studies it is ‘No’ that reflects non-commitment. Furthermore, an analysis of our results at the participant level shows that individual participants do not simply answer all ‘No’, but rather respond ‘No’ for particular properties across studies and scenes.

While our studies have demonstrated pervasive non-commitment, more people committed to some properties than others. For example, across our studies, few people committed to the clothes of a person, whereas most people committed to properties such as size and shape. This raises several interesting questions for future research. What kind of properties do people commit to, and why? For example, are people more likely to commit to an entity that is active rather than passive, or to spatial properties rather than texture? How do factors such as scene complexity and the specific imaginative task affect non-commitment? More generally, how are models of the imagination informed by non-commitment? In answering this last question, a possible source of inspiration is work in computer science on ‘lazy evaluation’ (Henderson & Morris Jr, 1976, e.g.). In this

computing paradigm, expressions are evaluated only when needed, rather than when first presented. Such a model of computation is more efficient in many situations, and similarly the mind may take advantage of such efficiency when constructing mental images.

Mental images fill our daydreams, fuel our fancies, and color our memories. People often experience these images as richly detailed, making the imagination seem like a talented artist quickly painting a lifelike scene before our mind's eye. Our results suggest that while the imagination may indeed be a good artist, it's on a deadline, and stingy about paint.

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