

## Review of Article on Attributes Versus Benefits

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### **Introduction:**

This is an abridgement of the article by José Mauro da Costa Hernandez, Scott A. Wright and Filipe Ferminiano Rodrigues that recounts the four studies conducted on *Attributes Versus Benefits* which investigate the role of construal levels and appeal type on the level of persuasiveness that marketing messages have. The reason I have been drawn to this article is because I have always found interest in the analytical side of marketing. Marketing as a whole is the cohesion of both creative and technical fields, and the persuasive effectiveness of marketing is maximized when the two angles are equally utilized. This article evaluates the best methods, backed by theories of social influence and social cognition, in terms of marketing strategies by experimentally imposing different strategies on participants. The hypotheses in these studies are based on past studies as well as general concepts of social psychology. Past studies on this topic have not been completely generalizable since situations are never constant and messages are relayed most effectively when they are personalized to the context in which they are delivered. However, what makes the studies in this article unique is that they evaluate appeal types within different context variables in order to make the results more generalizable.

### **Study One:**

It is understood that there is a significant relationship between construal levels and temporal distance. Construal level simply refers to the degree of abstraction that a concept holds in one's cognition. In exploring this concept, what has been found is that people create abstract

representations when concepts are distant, whereas on the other hand people create concrete representations when concepts are proximal. Looking at appeal types from a lens of concreteness it can be stated that the advertisement of benefits, or the ways in which the life of the consumer is bettered by a product, is associated with more abstract cognition, whereas the advertisement of attributes, or the surface level qualities of a product, is associated with more concrete cognition.

This first study examines the impact of temporal distance, or how far in the future a product will be purchased, on the persuasiveness of benefit and attribute appeals. It was conducted with the expectation that when construal levels are high, a benefit appeal will be more persuasive than an attribute appeal, meanwhile when construal levels are low, an attribute appeal will be more persuasive than a benefit appeal. The predictor variable being the appeal type and construal levels and the dependent variable being the way in which the participants interpret the advertisement.

### **Procedure:**

Study one consisted of a between subjects experimental design where participants evaluated the advertisement of a laptop. The participants of this study consisted of 150 adults that were a part of an evening course. The study was introduced with the statement that “planning is an effective technique to ensure correct purchase decisions”. Participants were randomly assigned to construal levels which were manipulated by the participant being told to either imagine themselves purchasing this laptop in six months or next week. The participants were also randomly assigned to an appeal type condition by being exposed to either the four attributes or the four benefits.

After being exposed to these manipulations the participants were asked what their overall evaluation of the laptop was as well as how they think the laptop compares to others on the

market. To ensure that the appeal type manipulation was validly categorized as either attributes or benefits, the last question that the participants were asked was to what extent the language of the advertisement was concrete or abstract. Every question was answered by the participants on a scale from 1 to 7.

### **Study Two:**

The second study in this article is quasi experimental, similarly to study one, it examines the impact of temporal distance on the persuasiveness of benefit and attribute appeals with the same hypotheses. However it differs in the sense that it utilizes a direct measure of construal levels as well as provides participants with real advertisements and implements a different measure of persuasion.

### **Procedure:**

In the pretest of this study 50 random adults were asked to interpret real ads of a handheld tablet in terms of appeal type and efficiency. This was done to ensure that the conditions used in this study are externally valid and agreed upon. The pretest was followed by the procedure where 352 adults were recruited through an online panel and were randomly assigned to evaluate either a benefit or an attribute appeal. The participants relayed their attitude toward the appeal through the 9 point scale measures of *good-bad*, *positive-negative*, *favorable-unfavorable*. Subjects also reported their construal levels using a multi-item Behavior Identification Form that uses the selection of action words as a form of analyzing a participants' cognitive construal level.

### **Results Integration:**

In study one it was found that when consumers plan to make a purchase in the distant future, benefit appeals are more persuasive. However, when consumers plan to make a purchase in the near future, appeal type has no effect on product evaluations.

In study two it was found that participants with high construal levels reported more favorable attitudes toward the benefit appeal, but this effect was no longer significant for participants with low construal levels.

The reason why I focus on the first two studies of this article is because they both explore the same hypotheses through different methods. What allows the results to be somewhat generalizable is that the two conclude the same finding; when construal levels or temporal distance is low there is not necessarily a better appeal type until other variables are introduced, increasing complexity, however, when construal level or temporal distance is high benefit appeals are found to be more persuasive.

Basic concepts of social cognition are what allow researchers to make sense of these findings. What is looked at primarily is automatic information processing, the involuntary and unconscious processing that takes place as individuals interact with the world. In order to conserve energy the cognitive mind is always making an effort to take the path of least resistance. When applied in the context of advertisement this concept implies that in order to market a product efficiently processing fluency is necessary, which requires the matching of appeal type that allows for such. Any appeal can be conceptualized at any construal level but what these studies evaluated is which appeal type allows for the most fluency when being conceptualized.

The mind processes, with the most ease, what it believes to be most relevant, thus utilizing the parallelism between appeal type and processing style allows for an enhancement of processing fluency. Temporally near events are constructed in terms of concrete and detailed

features, while distant events are constructed in terms of abstract and decontextualized features. It makes sense that what allows for the smoothest processing is the congruency between appeal and construal level. These studies proved this revealing that it is beneficial to match benefit appeals with the abstract cognitive processes that are already taking place due to construal levels.

### **Methods Integration:**

Automatic information processing in social cognition is a topic that has been studied extensively over the years. The concept of the cognitive miser, or the mind taking shortcuts in processing in order to conserve energy that is observed in these studies is also found in studies exploring the concept of the primacy effect. Primacy effect is the phenomenon in social cognition where information presented first has a disproportionate influence on subsequent judgments. This effect carries into the halo effect, which is error in reasoning through which impressions are formed from a single trait and influences other judgments on unrelated factors.

American Psychologist Edward L. Thorndike was one of the first to explore these ideas. He studied it by looking at military men and the ratings that officers give their subordinates on intelligence, physique, leadership, and character, without having spoken to the subordinates (Neugaard). From this study he determined that people generalize unrelated personality traits in ways that align with their one outstanding trait.

This study is important because it inspired the well known study of psychologist Solomon Asch in 1946 where he investigated the primacy effect for how individuals form impressions of one another based on the information processed initially, concluding how impactful first impressions can be. Participants in Asch's experiment were read two lists of adjectives describing a hypothetical person. The lists both contained all of the same adjectives, the difference was that the words were reversed. One list began with positive traits and ended

with negative traits while the other list presented the opposite. What allowed Asch to conclude the importance of first impressions and the primacy effect was how he observed participants rating the hypothetical person based on which list that was read to them. The participants that rated the person more favorably were those that were presented with positive traits initially.

Asch's study connects to those discussed in this article because, as in most studies investigating the subconscious cognitive processes, they both have similar methods where participants are exposed to slightly different presentations. The methods are utilized to expose the way in which they process the different presentations, observed through some form of self report that reveals the interpretation of the participant.

### **Critique and Future Directions:**

The studies outlined in the article by José Mauro da Costa Hernandez, Scott A. Wright and Filipe Ferminiano Rodrigues contribute significant findings to the research of persuasion, however, regarding application, there are limitations. The only processing fluency explored was that related to perceptual fluency, accomplished through matching construal level to the abstraction of a marketing message. There are many more types of processing fluency to take into account, for example, the ones noted in the article are conceptual fluency, semantic fluency, and linguistic fluency. Due to these, as well as any others, the application of the study's results is not so black and white. These studies also consisted of participants from, for the most part, academic or professional settings, thus the ways in which each participant cognitively processes are fairly similar, which is not the case in the outside world. When marketing to people with fewer similarities it would be beneficial to take into account as many forms of fluency as possible, in order to effectively match the appeal type. The only way to research this further would be to conduct further studies similar to this one, exploring one form of fluency, and then

with those findings conduct a study that incorporates many types of fluency, in order to observe the interacting relationship between them.

On a separate note another direction in which this study could be taken is into the exploration of digital marketing. In order to maximize advertisement the effects of interacting with advertisements digitally must be explored because it is increasingly becoming the place where the majority of people obtain their information. The study of digital marketing could be investigated as an extension of these studies, inspecting how interactions through a device affect processing fluency. The prediction could be made that attribute marketing would perform better digitally since devices lead to shorter attention spans of users due to the fact that they allow for the ease to have any information at one's disposal instantly. When one is interacting with a device, it may be assumed that they are already in the state of mind of processing information concretely and simply. As traditional marketing shifts rapidly through this digital age there are a multitude of studies that could stem from those relayed through this article in order to further develop the existing knowledge on digital marketing.

Works Cited

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