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Attributes Versus Benefits: The Role of Construal Levels and Appeal Type on the Persuasiveness of Marketing Messages

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When should marketers emphasize attributes or benefits in their communications? Grounded in construal-level theory, the results of four studies suggest that when a purchase is planned for the distant future or when construal levels are high, benefit-based appeals are more persuasive than attribute-based appeals. By contrast, when a purchase is planned for the near future or when consumers are predisposed to low construal levels, attribute-based appeals are equally as persuasive as benefit-based appeals. However, when low construal levels are temporarily induced using a mind-set manipulation, attribute-based appeals are found to be more persuasive than benefit-based appeals. Moreover, we demonstrate how these effects occur only when processing fluency is uninhibited. This research establishes an important link between these appeal types and construal levels, subsequently demonstrating when marketers should use these appeals.

Marketers often promote the benefits or attributes of their product offerings. For example, in September 2002, Burger King introduced its Value Menu using the tagline, "Now you can pay rent and eat," thus emphasizing a core benefit (Pacific Business News 2002). More recently, though, Burger King launched ads emphasizing the price of its Value Menu, "Items starting at $1" (Brand Eating 2012). While both tactics strive to win over target consumers by promoting the affordability of its Value Menu items, the former tactic emphasizes a benefit, while the latter a specific attribute. In particular, the benefit-based appeal boasts the end or result of purchasing and consuming the offering (i.e., cost savings). By contrast, the attribute-based appeal highlights the price, with no acknowledgment of cost savings. Thus, two interesting and important questions for which marketers want answers are these: Which tactic is more effective? Should companies implement benefit appeals or attribute appeals?

Extant literature provides mixed evidence regarding the relative persuasiveness of these appeal types. For example, Graeff (1997) concludes that, compared to inferences about concrete attributes, inferences about self-relevant product benefits have stronger effects on consumer brand attitudes. Similarly, in a comparison of preference models, Wu, Day, and MacKay (1988) found that compared to preference models based on attributes, preference models based on benefits exhibit superior predictive accuracy. By contrast, there is evidence supporting the persuasive advantage of attribute appeals over benefit appeals. For example, Lautman and Percy (1984) find that consumers report higher purchase intentions after watching a 30-second attribute appeal than after watching an analogous benefit appeal.

The objective of this research is to examine more closely the persuasiveness of attribute appeals versus benefit appeals. In accordance with construal-level theory (CLT; Trope and Liberman 2010), any appeal can be conceptualized at varying levels of abstraction, from low levels, emphasizing details and means to an end, to high levels, emphasizing goals and end results. Drawing on CLT, we posit that benefit appeals are more persuasive when construal levels are high (versus low), with the reverse being true for attribute appeals. In the context of appeal exposure and processing, the elements emphasized by a benefit appeal (e.g., values, abstraction, and ends) match

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the information accentuated when processing occurs at a high construal level, whereas the elements emphasized by an attribute appeal (e.g., details, concreteness, and means) match what is accentuated when processing information occurs at a low construal level. This matching of appeal type with processing style facilitates cognitive processing (Alter and Oppenheimer 2007), enhancing persuasion.

Thus, the explanation advanced for similar matching effects is that the parallelism between appeal type and processing style enhances processing fluency (White, MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011; Lee, Keller, and Sternthal 2010; Wright et al. 2012), the metacognitive experience of ease or difficulty associated with cognitive processing (Alter and Oppenheimer 2007). We therefore posit that the persuasive advantage of matching construal levels with appeal type can occur only under conditions when fluent processing of the appeal is permitted and uninhibited.

Although previous studies have examined the relationship between construal levels and various appeal types (e.g., Fujita et al. 2008; Lee, Keller, and Sternthal 2010), no study has examined attribute appeals and benefit appeals in this context. The current research, therefore, provides an important contribution to this literature by identifying the parallelism of attribute appeals and benefit appeals with construal levels. In doing so, this inquiry offers a new theoretical perspective explaining conflicting evidence on the relative persuasiveness of these appeal types. Finally, this study contributes to a relatively small body of work on the fit between construal level and appeal type (White, MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011; Lee, Keller, and Sternthal 2010; Wright et al. 2012). We provide additional evidence demonstrating that the fit between construal level and appeal type enhances persuasion. Last, whereas previous research measures fluency (as a mediating variable), we demonstrate its moderating role. Thus, we contribute to this literature by showing how processing fluency is a necessary condition to allow for persuasive matching effects to occur.

This research presents four studies demonstrating the persuasiveness of attribute appeals and benefit appeals as a function of construal levels. As is typical in the construal-level literature (Trope and Liberman 2010; Liberman and Trope 1998), across different manipulations and measures of construal levels, all four studies establish that when construal levels are high, benefit appeals are more persuasive than attribute appeals; whereas, when construal levels are low, attribute appeals are equally persuasive as, and in some cases more persuasive than, benefit appeals. Specifically, Study 1 tests this proposition by manipulating construal levels indirectly via temporal distance, while in Study 2 construal levels are measured (Behavioral Information Form, Wallacher and Wegner 1987) rather than manipulated. Study 3 provides a more rigorous test of the proposition by manipulating construal levels directly via a mind-set manipulation and generalizes the findings across different product categories. Finally, Study 4 manipulates construal levels and establishes an important boundary condition to this effect, namely conditions allowing fluent processing.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Construal-Level Theory

A growing body of research in marketing has drawn on CLT to explain how differences in construal levels influence consumer judgment and behavior (Liberman, Trope, and Wakslak 2007; Kardes, Cronley, and Kim 2006). CLT refers to the degree of abstraction at which events, objects, or people are represented in the cognitive hierarchy. According to CLT consumers form abstract representations when events, objects, and people are distant and concrete representations when they are proximal (Trope and Liberman 2003). More specifically, temporally near events are mentally construed in terms of concrete, low-level, detailed, and contextualized features, whereas distant events are represented in terms of abstract, high-level, and decontextualized features. Therefore, the greater the temporal distance, the more distant the object or event appears cognitively and the more abstractly it will be represented (Trope and Liberman 2003). Research has shown that different temporal distances affect mental construal and that these construals, in turn, guide prediction, evaluation, and behavior (Liberman, Trope, and Wakslak 2007). Moreover, the relationship between temporal distance and construal level is bidirectional, such that as construal levels increase, inferred temporal distance increases, and vice versa (Trope and Liberman 2010). The association between construal levels and temporal distance is fundamental to construal-level theory. Given this association we expect increases in temporal distance or construal levels to have similar effects on the relative persuasiveness of attribute and benefit appeals. We test this proposition, and our theoretical account, by manipulating temporal distance and construal levels.

Attribute Versus Benefit Appeals

Consistent with Lancaster (1971), product attributes are the intrinsic properties and characteristics attached to a product that are characterized as being measurable, concrete, observable, and relevant in discerning alternatives. Alternatively, benefits are the conceptually distinct values that consumers derive from the consumption or possession of a product (Lancaster 1971). Therefore, attributes are concrete and observable features assignable to the product offering, whereas benefits are the services, functions, or utilities obtained by the possession or consumption of the product (Wu, Day, and MacKay 1988). Thus, a marketer implementing an attribute appeal would promote the product in terms of its physical features, details, and quantitative characteristics. By contrast, a benefit appeal would emphasize the result of owning or using

the product in terms of happiness, beauty, status, convenience, value, and the like.

This is also consistent with Gutman's (1982) means-end chain concept, which presents marketing managers with a model directing product positioning strategy by associating means (the physical aspects of products) with the achievement of ends (desired values). For advertisers, understanding this model is fundamental to persuading consumers to purchase product offerings that satisfy their needs and desires.

Means are objects (e.g., color, size, weight) or activities (e.g., reading, consuming, driving) while ends are valued states of being, such as happiness. The means-end chain establishes a link between the tangible attributes of a product and the beneficial aspects of product use, which contribute to values satisfaction (Hofstede, Steenkamp, and Wedel 1999). In sum, benefits are different from attributes: Benefits are what people receive from the consumption of products and services while attributes are characteristics of products or services. For example, "mobility" is a benefit that can be obtained from purchasing a "two-pound notebook computer."

The Relationship Between CLT and Appeal Types

According to Dhar and Kim (2007), CLT suggests that to enhance persuasiveness a message has to emphasize higher level aspects and de-emphasize lower level aspects, if it refers to decisions about more distal entities (e.g., future times). Matching psychological distances enhances persuasion (Wright et al. 2012) and confers value from fit (Higgins 2000). In fact, previous studies have found that a match between construal level and regulatory focus (Lee, Keller, and Sternthal 2010) and between construal level and message frame (White, MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011) increases persuasion.

Previous studies have also found support for the hypothesis that the congruency between temporal distance and values-based messages enhances persuasion. For example, Fujita and colleagues (2008) examined the effect of matching temporal distance with message appeals featuring either values-related elements or values-neutral elements. As expected, product evaluations made by participants considering the purchase in the distant future were more positive when the message included values-related arguments than when the message included values-neutral arguments. By contrast, when participants considered the purchase in the near future, evaluations did not differ between the two conditions. Therefore, one could hypothesize that matching attribute appeals with low construal levels may simply attenuate (versus reverse) the persuasive benefit of matching this particular appeal type with low construal levels.

However, because attributes highlight concrete, detailed, and means-end cognitions which enhance low-level abstraction, and benefits highlight abstract, global, and end-state cognitions which enhance high-level abstraction (Gutman 1982), we hypothesize an interactive effect of appeal type and construal levels on the persuasiveness of an appeal:

> **H1:** (a) When construal levels are high, a benefit appeal will be more persuasive than an attribute appeal; whereas (b) when construal levels are low, an attribute appeal will be more persuasive than a benefit appeal.

Processing fluency is the ease or difficulty consumers experience when evaluating a product, watching a commercial, or reading a print ad. Because attribute appeals are concrete and benefit appeals are abstract, increased temporal distance should result in the disfluent processing of attribute appeals and the fluent processing of benefit appeals. Therefore, consumers process information more efficiently when there is a congruency between the portrayed distance and the presentation medium (Stewart and Nandkeolyar 2006).

If the match between construal level and appeal type enhances persuasion, and if this is driven by processing fluency (White, MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011), then its persuasive effect should occur only when processing fluency is uninhibited. In summary, on the basis of theory and prior findings, we anticipate that the benefit of matching construal levels with appeal type (high construal/benefit appeal and low construal/attribute appeal) on persuasion will be moderated by disfluency:

> **H2:** (a) When fluency is high and construal levels are high, a benefit appeal will be more persuasive than an attribute appeal; (b) when fluency is high and construal levels are low, an attribute appeal will be more persuasive than a benefit appeal; (c) when fluency is low, a benefit appeal will be as persuasive as an attribute appeal independently of construal levels (high and low).

STUDY 1: TEMPORAL DISTANCE AND APPEAL TYPE

Given the bidirectional relationship between construal levels and temporal distances (Trope and Liberman 2010; Liberman and Trope 1998), Study 1 addresses hypotheses 1a and 1b by examining the impact of temporal distance on the persuasiveness of benefit and attribute appeals. Specifically, a 2 (appeal type: attribute versus benefit) $\times$ 2 (temporal distance: near versus distant) between-subjects design was conducted where participants evaluated a notebook computer.

Stimuli

To pretest the stimuli used in this study, 30 participants were asked to allocate 100 points among 14 attributes based on their relative weight in determining which notebook to purchase. The most important attributes were memory, type of processor, size, and weight. A follow-up pretest was implemented to determine the benefits associated with these four attributes. The most frequently cited benefits were used in the benefit-appeal stimuli. The attribute appeal was built

based on the characteristics of a typical notebook (see Online Appendix 1). Each description featured four characteristics of the notebook (processor, memory, dimensions, and weight) emphasizing either product attributes (e.g., "The notebook features an Intel Core i3 2.26 GHz processor") or benefits (e.g., "Intel's most recent processor allows this notebook to perform multiple tasks simultaneously, in an efficient and reliable manner").

Procedures, Participants, and Measures

A total of 150 adults (51% males, $M_{age} = 30.1$ years) enrolled in an evening course took part in the study. Participants completed a paper-and-pencil questionnaire in which they were instructed that planning is an effective technique to ensure correct purchasing decisions. Then construal levels were manipulated by asking participants to imagine that they were going to buy a new notebook in six months (versus next week). Participants were arbitrarily assigned to conditions by the interviewer. Next, they were asked to examine a notebook appeal emphasizing either four benefits or four attributes and to judge the product described according to two items: "What is your global evaluation of Notebook *X*?" (1 = *Terrible*; 7 = *Excellent*) and "Comparing Notebook *X* with others sold on the market, would you say that this notebook is…" (1 = *Much worse*; 7 = *Much better*). These two items were averaged to create a global evaluation index ($r = .73$, $p < .01$). Similar product evaluation measures have been used in prior studies assessing ad persuasiveness (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983; Peracchio and Meyers-Levy 1997) and are highly correlated with other measures of persuasion (e.g., purchase intentions, perceived quality, value). To check the manipulation of the advertisement appeal, participants were asked to indicate on a 7-point scale to what extent the language of the advertisement was concrete or abstract (1 = *Very concrete*; 7 = *Very abstract*). Finally, participants completed a series of demographic measures.

Results

Manipulation check. As expected, an ANOVA on the abstractness of the appeal revealed only a main effect for the type of appeal ($M_{attribute} = 2.8$, $SD = 1.3$, $M_{benefit} = 3.9$, $SD = 1.7$; $F(1, 146) = 20.7$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .12$). Thus, the benefit appeal was considered more abstract than the attribute appeal.

Product evaluation. An ANOVA on the global evaluation index revealed a main effect of appeal type ($F(1, 146) = 12.7$, $p < .01$, $\omega^2 = .08$), a main effect of temporal distance ($F(1, 146) = 5.9$, $p < .05$, $\omega^2 = .04$), and a marginally significant interaction effect ($F(1, 146) = 3.4$, $p = 0.07$, $\omega^2 = .02$). The notebook described using a benefit appeal was evaluated more favorably ($M = 5.6$, $SD = 1.0$) than the notebook described using an attribute appeal ($M = 5.0$, $SD = 1.2$, $t(148) = 3.5$, $p < .01$). In addition, evaluations were more favorable when temporal distance was near ($M = 5.5$, $SD = 1.0$) than when it was distant ($M = 5.1$, $SD = 1.2$, $t(148) = 2.4$, $p < .05$).

However, and more importantly, in support of hypothesis 1a, when the notebook was to be purchased in the distant future, evaluations were more favorable when a benefit appeal was implemented ($M = 5.5$, $SD = 1.0$) compared to an attribute appeal ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 1.2$; $t(74) = 3.6$, $p < .01$). By contrast, when the notebook was to be purchased in the near future, no significant differences emerged between appeal types ($M_{benefit} = 5.6$, $SD = 1.0$ versus $M_{attribute} = 5.3$, $SD = 1.0$; $t(72) = 1.3$, $p > .20$). Thus, hypothesis 1b was not supported.

The results of Study 1 provide support to hypothesis 1a. When consumers plan to make a purchase in the distant future, benefit appeals are more persuasive (i.e., they result in more favorable product evaluations) than attribute appeals. By contrast, when consumers plan to make a purchase in the near future, appeal type has no effect on product evaluations. We hypothesized that the opposite would occur for attribute appeals; however, in the near future condition both appeal types were equally persuasive. Therefore, decreasing temporal distance attenuated but did not reverse the persuasive benefit of matching benefit appeals with temporally distant marketing messages.

The findings of Study 1 are consistent with previous studies of temporal distance (Fujita et al. 2008; Trope and Liberman 2000). As discussed in the introductory section, prior studies have tested the persuasiveness of matching temporal distance with values-based messaging. For example, similar to our findings, Fujita and colleagues (2008) also found that when participants considered their purchase in the near future, evaluations did not differ between a message appeal featuring a values-related feature and an appeal featuring a values-neutral feature.

Increasing the temporal framing from "next week" to "six months" increased construal levels and de-emphasized the relevancy of the contextual and concrete attribute information (Trope and Liberman 2000, 2010). However, given that benefit appeals emphasize values, their effectiveness increased with construal levels. These effects were only marginally significant. One explanation could be that temporal distance is simply an indirect manipulation of construal levels. We address this issue in Study 2 by measuring construal levels and in Studies 3 and 4 by manipulating construal levels directly.

Despite extensive pretesting, one limitation to this study is that the notebook descriptions may have varied along other dimensions (e.g., number of words), beyond their emphasis on benefits or attributes, and these dimensions could have explained the observed results. To address this issue, we conducted a posttest ($n = 43$) of the descriptions with the objective of assessing 12 such dimensions using the following semantic differential scales (*Likeable-Dislikable*, *Specific-General*, *Trustworthy-Untrustworthy*, *Informative-Uninformative*, *Explicit-Ambiguous*, *Long-Short*, *Vivid-Vague*, *Simple-Complex*, *Only a specialist could*

understand-Anyone could understand, *Concise-Elaborate*, *Hedonic-Utilitarian*, *Attributes-Benefits*). Each subject evaluated only one description along the 7-point scales.

First, and as expected, the results show that participants agreed that the benefit appeal emphasized benefits ($M_{\text{benefit}} = 4.2$, $SD = 1.8$), whereas the attribute appeal emphasized attributes ($M_{\text{attribute}} = 2.0$, $SD = 1.6$, $t\ (41) = 4.2$, $p < .001$). The only other significant difference that emerged referred to the description's level of complexity. The attribute appeal was considered more complex ($M_{\text{attributes}} = 3.2$, $SD = 1.6$) than the benefit appeal ($M_{\text{benefits}} = 2.2$, $SD = 1.2$, $t\ (41) = 2.3$, $p < .05$). Therefore, the posttest results rule out multiple alternative explanations, lending further support to our theoretical account.

STUDY 2: CONSTRUAL LEVELS AND APPEAL TYPE

Study 2 has four objectives: (1) to test hypotheses 1a and 1b using a direct measure of construal levels; (2) to leverage real advertisements; (3) to implement an alternative measure of persuasion; and (4) to rule out additional alternative accounts for the observed effects. In Study 2, we asked participants to evaluate a handheld tablet advertised using a benefit appeal or an attribute appeal and measured their current construal levels.

Pretest

To pretest the advertisements used in this study, 50 adults, recruited via an online panel (35% male; $M_{\text{age}} = 33.1$ years), were randomly assigned by the online survey software to evaluate either a benefit ad or an attribute ad, both adapted from a real, print ad. The primary pretest objectives were to identify advertisements that vary according to their emphasis on benefits or attributes, demonstrate equivalency on all related variables, and exhibit a high degree of external validity.

Participants answered a series of questions evaluating the ad. First, participants responded to a three-item measure of whether the ad emphasized benefits or attributes, using a 7-point scale. The first item asked, "In your opinion, does this specific advertisement focus more on the benefits one would gain by using this product or on specific product attributes?," where 1 = *Attributes*, and 7 = *Benefits*. The second item asked participants to agree or disagree with the following statement: "The ad focuses on benefits over attributes"; whereas the third item was reverse coded and asked participants to agree or disagree with the following statement: "The ad emphasizes product attributes over benefits," where 1 = *Strongly disagree*, and 7 = *Strongly agree*. The third item was reverse coded and all three items were standardized and averaged to form a benefits index ($\alpha = .94$). Each ad was also evaluated according to the following 9-point semantic differential scales: *likeable-dislikable*, *specific-general*, *believable-unbelievable*, *informative-uninformative*, *explicit-ambiguous*, *big-small, hedonic-utilitarian*, *pleasant tone-harsh tone*, *vivid-vague*, *abstract-concrete*, *a lot of text-very little text*, *colorful-colorless*, *good-bad*, *high quality-low quality*, and *real ad-fake ad.*

According to the benefits index, the benefit ad emphasized product benefits ($M_{\text{benefits}} = 0.71$, $SD = .54$), whereas the attribute ad emphasized product attributes ($M_{\text{attributes}} = -.65$, $SD = .75$; $t\ (48) = 7.33$; $p < 0.001$). Both means were also significantly different from the neutral point of the scale (ps $< .05$). Moreover, the attribute ad was evaluated as being more specific ($M_{\text{attribute}} = 6.00$, $SD = 2.12$; $M_{\text{benefit}} = 4.08$, $SD = 2.26$; $t\ (48) = -3.09$; $p < 0.05$), explicit ($M_{\text{attribute}} = 5.46$, $SD = 2.0$; $M_{\text{benefit}} = 3.96$, $SD = 1.94$; $t\ (48) = -2.69$; $p < 0.05$), and informative ($M_{\text{attribute}} = 6.46$, $SD = 2.06$; $M_{\text{benefit}} = 5.17$, $SD = 1.97$; $t\ (48) = -2.27$; $p < 0.05$) than the benefit ad. Participants spent an equal amount of time evaluating each ad and they were equivalent according to all of the other measures (all ps > 0.05). Last, both ads were higher than the neutral point on the "real ad/fake ad" semantic differential measure ($M_{\text{attribute}} = 5.58$, $SD = 2.1$; $M_{\text{benefit}} = 5.73$, $SD = 2.55$; ps < 0.01), thus demonstrating that participants found the ads to be highly realistic.

Procedures, Participants, and Measures

A total of 352 adults, recruited via an online panel (32% male; $M_{\text{age}} = 36.6$ years), participated in this study. Participants were randomly assigned, using the online survey software, to evaluate either the benefit appeal or the attribute appeal. Both appeals were based on real advertisements featuring the same Samsung tablet (see Online Appendix 2). Participants were asked to examine and report their attitude toward the appeal (Mitchell and Olson 1981) via three measures (*good-bad*, *positive-negative*, and *favorable-unfavorable*). These measures were averaged to create an attitude toward the appeal index ($\alpha = .96$). Subjects were also asked to report their construal levels using the multi-item Behavior Identification Form (BIF; Wallacher and Wegner 1987). This scale ($\alpha = .9$), which asks participants to identify 25 actions (e.g., "eating") as either a low-level means (e.g., "chewing and swallowing") or a high-level end (e.g., "getting nutrition"), has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure of chronic construal levels (Ülkümen and Cheema 2011; Labroo and Patrick 2009).

Results

Attitude toward the appeal. To test hypothesis 1, a spotlight analysis was conducted (Hayes 2013). This technique is preferred so that full information value is retained from the continuous independent variable (Fitzsimons 2008). Specifically, construal levels (high versus low) were plotted at one standard deviation above and below its mean, which enabled us to observe the simple effect of appeal type (benefits versus attributes) on attitudes toward the appeal. The spotlight analysis revealed a significant two-way interaction, ($\beta = .22$, $t = 2.08$, $p < .05$), with no main effects. In support of

hypothesis 1a, participants with a high construal level reported more favorable attitudes toward the benefit appeal, compared to the attribute appeal ($\beta = .29$, $t = 1.97$, $p < .05$). However, this simple effect was no longer significant for participants with a low construal level ($p = .32$). Thus, hypothesis 1b was not supported. Please see Figure 1 for mean values across conditions.

As predicted, the results of Study 2 reveal that benefit appeals are more persuasive when paired with high construal levels. These results are consistent with Study 1 results but using an alternative persuasion measure. In Study 3, we manipulate construal levels directly via a mind-set manipulation task inducing either a high or low construal level mind-set. The primary objective is to test the generalizability of our theoretical account by observing whether similar effects occur for construal level mind-set manipulations and for different product categories.

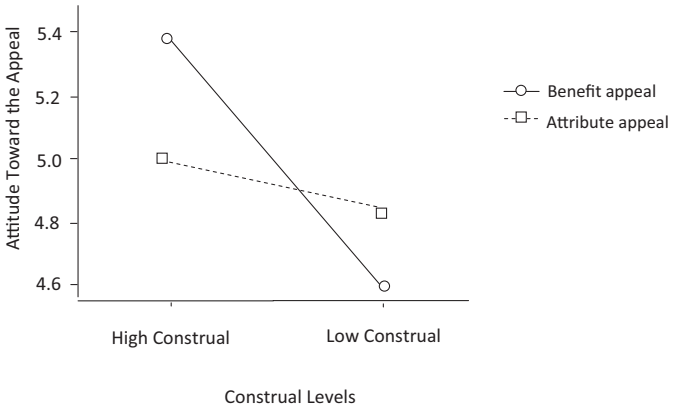

FIG. 1. Attitude toward the appeal as a function of construal levels and appeal type (Study 2).

STUDY 3: CONSTRUAL LEVEL MIND-SETS AND APPEAL TYPE

In Study 3, a 2 (appeal type: attribute versus benefit) × 2 (construal level mind-set: high versus low) between-subjects experimental design was employed, where participants were randomly assigned to conditions using online survey software. As in Study 1, product descriptions were used as stimuli and product evaluations as the persuasiveness measure. According to Trope and Liberman (2010), construal levels operate at the level of mind-sets and can be induced using priming tasks completely unrelated to the judgment. We expect that participants in a high (versus low) construal level mind-set will evaluate the products more favorably when presented with a benefit appeal (versus attribute appeal).

Stimuli

Similar to Study 1, 40 adults participated in a pretest assessing the most important attributes and benefits associated with a global positioning system (GPS) and a smartphone device. For each product, the four most important attributes were selected for the study stimuli. A follow-up pretest was implemented to determine the four most important benefits associated with these attributes, which were also selected for the study stimuli. (Please see Online Appendices 3 and 4 for details.) The attribute appeal was built based on the characteristics of a typical GPS or smartphone. Extra care was taken to develop appeals that were equivalent on all other aspects.

Procedures, Participants, and Measures

In this study, 116 undergraduate students (73% females, $M_{age} = 18.8$ years) took part. Participants completed an online questionnaire consisting of two ostensibly unrelated tasks. In the first task, a high or low construal level mind-set was induced following the procedures employed by Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope (2004). Specifically, participants assigned to the high-construal condition were directed to consider "why" they would like to maintain a good appearance, whereas participants assigned to the low-construal condition were directed to consider "how" they would maintain a good appearance. The thoughts were structured through a diagram that required participants to think either more abstractly about the activity (high construal) or more concretely (low construal) about the activity (for details please see Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope 2004). Prior research demonstrates the effectiveness of this task in manipulating construal levels (Agrawal and Wan 2009; Wright et al. 2012). In the second task, participants were asked to examine two product descriptions and to judge the products described. Each subject saw only attribute appeals or only benefit appeals, and their order of presentation was counterbalanced such that the GPS evaluation appeared first for half of the participants and second for the other half.

Global evaluations of the products were assessed using the measures described in Study 1. The measures were averaged to create a global evaluation index ($r = .79$ and $r = .77$, for the GPS and smartphone, respectively). Subjects were also asked to indicate on a 7-point scale to what extent the language of the advertisement was concrete or abstract (1 = *Very concrete*; 7 = *Very abstract*) and ended the questionnaire with a series of demographic measures.

Results

Manipulation checks. An ANOVA on the abstractedness of the appeal revealed only a main effect for the appeal type (GPS: $M_{attribute} = 3.4$, $SD = 1.6$, $M_{benefit} = 4.2$, $SD = 1.8$; $F(1, 112) = 7.6$, $p < .01$, $\omega^2 = .05$; smartphone: $M_{attribute} = 3.8$, $SD = 1.6$, $M_{benefit} = 5.0$, $SD = 1.5$; $F(1, 112) = 15.3$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .11$). Thus, the benefit appeals were considered more abstract than the attribute appeals.

GPS global evaluation. As predicted, an ANOVA on the global evaluation index of the GPS revealed only the predicted interaction effect (F (1, 112) = 12.7, $p < .01$, $\omega^2 = .09$). In support of hypothesis 1a, under the high construal level mind-set condition, evaluations of the GPS were more favorable when paired with a benefit appeal ($M = 5.3$, $SD = 1.1$) compared with an attribute appeal ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 1.5$; t (55) = 2.1, $p < .05$). In support of hypothesis 1b, under the low construal level mind-set condition, evaluations of the GPS were more favorable when paired with an attribute appeal ($M = 5.2$, $SD = 1.0$) compared with a benefit appeal ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 1.6$; t (57) = 3.0, $p < .01$).

Smartphone global evaluation. An ANOVA on the global evaluation index of the smartphone revealed only the predicted interaction effect (F (1, 112) = 17.7, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .12$). Although only marginally significant, participants in the high construal level mind-set condition provided more favorable evaluations of the smartphone when paired with a benefit appeal ($M = 4.7$, $SD = .8$) compared with an attribute appeal ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 1.2$; t (55) = 1.8, $p = .08$), thus lending marginal support to hypothesis 1a. By contrast, and in support of hypothesis 1b, under the low construal level mind-set, evaluations of the smartphone were more favorable when paired with an attribute appeal ($M = 5.1$, $SD = 1.3$) compared with a benefit appeal ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 1.5$; t (57) = 3.9, $p < .001$).

As predicted, the results of Study 3 reveal that benefit appeals are more persuasive when paired with a high construal level mind-set, while attribute appeals are more persuasive when paired with a low construal level mind-set. These results are consistent with our hypotheses, but not entirely consistent with our Study 1 and Study 2 results. What is consistent across all three studies is the persuasive advantage of benefit appeals paired with a high construal level mind-set (distant future in Study 1). What is inconsistent is the persuasive advantage of attribute appeals paired with a low construal level mind-set (near future in Study 1). In the next study, we test the robustness and generalizability of these matching effects. In addition, we investigate the moderating effect of fluency to test whether the effects demonstrated in our previous studies are explained by a fit between appeal type and construal levels.

A posttest ($n = 41$ for GPS; $n = 43$ for smartphones) was conducted to rule out the possibility that the attribute and benefit appeals differed on the same 12 dimensions described in the Study 1 posttest. As expected, participants reported that the benefit appeals emphasized benefits and the attribute appeals emphasized attributes ($M_{\text{attributes}} = 3.0$, $SD = 1.8$, $M_{\text{benefits}} = 5.4$, $SD = 1.7$, t (41) = 4.5, $p < .001$ for GPS; $M_{\text{attributes}} = 2.7$, $SD = 2.0$, $M_{\text{benefits}} = 4.9$, $SD = 1.8$, t (41) = 3.7, $p < .001$ for smartphones). The appeals were equivalent on all other dimensions, except their level of ambiguity. For the GPS descriptions only, the benefit appeal was considered more ambiguous ($M_{\text{benefit}} = 3.9$, $SD = 1.9$) than was the attribute appeal ($M_{\text{attribute}} = 2.6$, $SD = 1.4$, t (40) = 2.6, $p < .05$).

STUDY 4: THE MODERATING ROLE OF FLUENCY

Study 4 has two objectives: (1) to generalize and test the robustness of the results found in Studies 1 through 3 using a service rather than a consumer product and (2) to test whether the matching effect is moderated by processing fluency. According to previous research, construal-level value-from-fit effects are driven by increased processing fluency (Lee, Keller, and Sternthal 2010; White, MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011). To test if this account explains our appeal type by construal-level effect, we manipulated the fluency of the appeal (Novemsky et al. 2007). Because objects and events in the distant (versus near) future are construed more abstractly (versus concretely) (Liberman and Trope 1998), we induced temporal construal by manipulating temporal distance and asking subjects to describe several products. Thus, a 2 (appeal type: attribute versus benefit) × 2 (temporal construal levels: high versus low) × 2 (fluency: high versus low) between-subjects experimental design was employed. Similar to Studies 1 and 3, product descriptions were used as stimuli and product evaluations as the persuasiveness measure. In accordance with hypothesis 2, we expect that the fit effects observed in our previous studies will emerge when fluency is high and disappear when fluency is low.

Stimuli

Using the same procedures as Studies 1 and 3, two versions of a gym description were developed (refer to Online Appendix 5) featuring either an attribute appeal or a benefit appeal. The characteristics of the gym were chosen based on a pretest. Next, similar to the procedure described in Study 1, participants were randomly assigned, using the online survey software, to either high or low temporal construal-level conditions similar. Across conditions participants were instructed that planning is an effective technique to ensure correct purchasing decisions. Then participants in the high (versus low) temporal construal-level condition were asked to imagine that they were going to purchase some products in six months (versus that day) and asked to describe the characteristics that they which the products possessed. All participants completed the task for seven different products (smartphone, apartment, notebook, TV set, digital camera, tennis shoes, and idiom school).

Processing fluency was manipulated by presenting the questionnaire in a clear, easy-to-read font (12-point, Arial font: sample) or an unclear, difficult-to-read one (16-point, Edwardian Script TLC: *sample*). Presenting information in an unclear font renders processing more difficult without changing the content of the information (Tsai and Thomas 2011). Contrary to the manipulation employed in other studies, in which only part of the questionnaire was presented with a special font (Tsai and Thomas, 2011, refer to Study 1), we followed Alter and Oppenheimer's (2008) procedure and used the same font for the entire questionnaire, strengthening the manipulation of fluency.

Participants, Procedures, and Measures

For this study, 268 undergraduate students (58% females, $M_{age} = 20.0$ years) took part. Participants completed an online questionnaire consisting of two ostensibly unrelated tasks. In the first task, the appropriate temporal construal was induced. In the second task, participants were asked to evaluate a gym advertisement and to judge the product described using the measures given in Studies 1 and 3. As before, the two items were averaged to create a global evaluation index ($r = .70$). Subjects were also asked to indicate on a 7-point scale to what extent the language of the advertisement was concrete or abstract (1 = *Very concrete*; 7 = *Very abstract*) and on a 7-point scale to what extent the questionnaire was easy or difficult to read (1 = *Very difficult*; 7 = *Very easy*). Finally, participants completed demographic measures.

Results

Manipulation checks. An ANOVA on the abstractedness of the appeal revealed only a main effect for the appeal type ($M_{attribute} = 3.5$, $SD = 1.5$ versus $M_{benefit} = 4.0$, $SD = 1.6$; $F(1, 260) = 7.8$, $p < .01$, $\omega^2 = .02$), demonstrating that the benefit appeal was considered more abstract than the attribute appeal. The same analysis performed on the perceived ease of reading the questionnaire revealed only a main effect for font ($M_{difficult\text{-}to\text{-}read} = 3.4$, $SD = 1.6$ versus $M_{easy\text{-}to\text{-}read} = 5.0$, $SD = 1.5$; $F(1, 260) = 67.8$, $p < .01$, $\omega^2 = .20$), demonstrating that the difficult-to-read font was in fact more difficult to read than the easy-to-read font. It is important to note that the mean value for the difficult-to-read condition was statistically lower than the neutral point of the scale ($t(132) = 4.0$, $p < .001$) but statistically higher than a value of 3 ($t(132) = 3.0$, $p < .01$). Thus, participants in this condition simply found the questionnaire "slightly difficult" to read and not very difficult or illegible.

Gym global evaluation. As predicted, an ANOVA on the global evaluation index of the gym revealed a marginally significant interaction effect among the three factors ($F(1, 260) = 2.8$, $p < .10$, $\omega^2 = .01$). In support of hypothesis 2a, when fluency was high, participants in the high temporal construal level condition reported more favorable evaluations of the gym when paired with a benefit appeal ($M = 5.6$, $SD = 1.2$) compared with an attribute appeal ($M = 5.0$, $SD = 1.0$; $t(64) = 2.0$, $p < .05$), while participants in the low temporal construal level condition reported similar evaluations of the two appeals ($M_{benefit} = 5.3$, $SD = 1.0$ versus $M_{attribute} = 5.3$, $SD = 1.1$; $t(67) = .1$, $p > .90$). In support of hypothesis 2c, when fluency was low, no differences were observed across the groups (all ps $>.50$). Please see Figure 2 for mean values across conditions.

These results suggest that when temporal construal level and fluency were high, the benefit appeal was more persuasive than the attribute appeal, but that both appeals were equally persuasive when temporal construal level was low. These results confirm those observed in Study 1 and Study 2 but not those reported in Study 3. As predicted, fluency moderated this effect. Under low fluency, we did not observe differences across conditions, which reflects the difficulty respondents experienced in processing the information (Alter and Oppenheimer 2009; Tsai and Thomas 2011; White, MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011). Thus, the moderating effect of fluency supports our fit account.

To rule out the possibility that the attribute and benefit appeals differed on dimensions other than abstractness, again we conducted a posttest ($n = 42$) with the objective of assessing the two descriptions on 12 different dimensions (see Study 1). Each subject evaluated only one description along the 7-point scales. As expected, the results show that the descriptions of each product are significantly different along the dimension attributes benefits ($M_{attribute} = 2.4$, $M_{benefit} = 4.5$, $t(40) = 3.9$, $p < .001$). No other significant different along the attributes-benefits dimension.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across four experiments, this research highlights the conditions under which marketing messages will be more persuasive. Providing support for our matching hypothesis, we show that construal levels and temporal distances determine the persuasiveness of attribute appeals and benefit appeals. Compared to attribute appeals, benefit appeals are more persuasive when a purchase is to take place in the distant future or when construal levels are high. This effect was observed in all four studies, using unique samples, stimuli, measured and manipulated construal levels, and persuasion measures. However, when purchasing in the near future or when construal levels are low, attribute appeals are either more persuasive than (Study 3) or equally as persuasive as benefit appeals (Studies 1, 2, and 4). More importantly, the moderating effect of fluency suggests that the persuasive gain of matching a benefit appeal with abstract processing is in fact a fit effect (Study 4). When processing fluency is inhibited, temporal construal level and appeal type have no impact on message persuasiveness. By contrast, when processing fluency is uninhibited and temporal construal levels are high, benefit appeals are more persuasive than attribute appeals.

It is important to note that great care was taken to ensure that the stimuli used in the appeals differed only in their emphasis on benefits and attributes but were equivalent in all other ways. Although some idiosyncratic differences were observed (e.g., ambiguity, explicitness), when taking all four studies into consideration, the results lend strong support to our theoretical account that matching construal levels with appeal type explains the observed effects on persuasion.

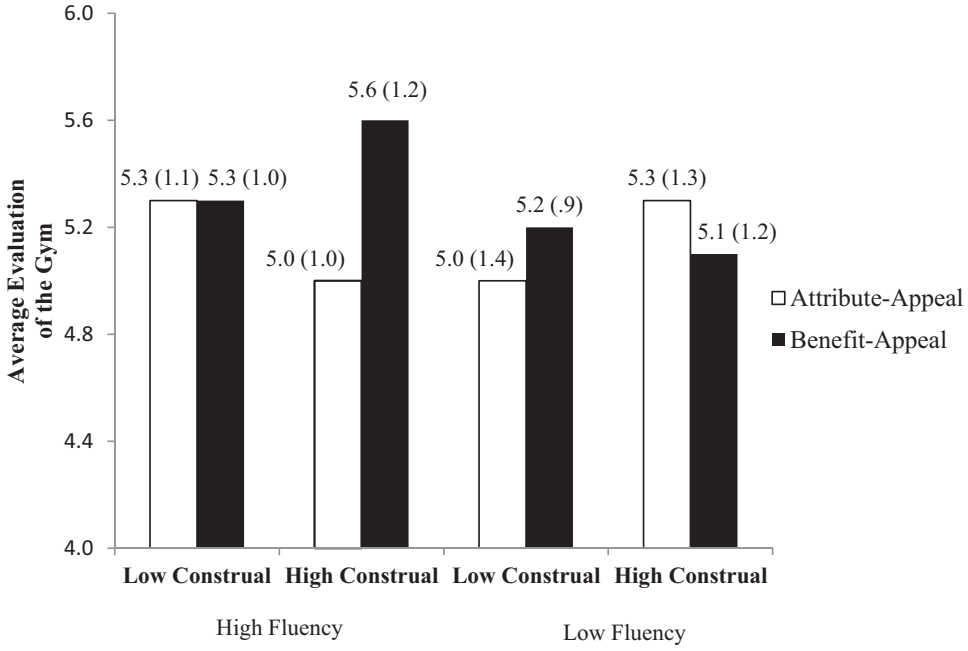

FIG. 2. Average gym evaluation as a function of temporal construal levels and appeal type (Study 4).

Theoretical Contributions and Future Research

This article makes several advances to the literature. Whereas previous research has identified that a marketing message's emphasis on attributes or benefits influences its persuasiveness (Graeff 1997; Maheswaran and Sternthal 1990; Lautman and Percy 1984), the current research establishes boundary conditions for these persuasion effects by considering construal-level theory. These conditions help reconcile conflicting evidence as to when and under which conditions marketers should implement these appeal types. As an example, Graeff (1997) concludes that, compared to inferences about concrete attributes, inferences about self-relevant product benefits have stronger effects on consumer brand attitudes. Our research suggests that disentangling the social distance of these inferences (i.e., the self-relevancy of the product benefits) may be an important moderator to this effect. Similarly, construal levels or psychological distances may explain the conflicting results presented by Lautman and Percy (1984) and Maheswaran and Sternthal (1990), where both conclude that attribute appeals are more persuasive than benefit appeals. Such a topic may offer a fruitful avenue for future research.

Our research also contributes to recent work on the effect of assortment organization type (by attribute or benefit) on construal levels (Lamberton and Diehl 2013). Lamberton and Diehl (2013) conclude that relative to attribute-based organizations, benefit-based organizations encourage higher construal levels. These findings are consistent with our own results demonstrating the association of benefits with higher construal levels. Whereas this prior research examines assortment organization (by attribute of benefit), our work extends this literature to the persuasiveness of appeal types (attribute or benefit appeals).

Our research also contributes to the relatively small body of research demonstrating the persuasive advantage of matching appeal types with construal levels (White, MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011; Lee, Keller, and Sternthal 2010; Wright et al. 2012). Consistent with this literature, we find that matching the construal level with the appropriate appeal type enhances persuasion, but only when fluency is high. Thus, we extend this literature in two ways. First, we explain when marketers should employ this commonly implemented appeal type (i.e., benefit versus attribute appeals). Second, whereas previous studies have established the mediating role of perceived fluency by measuring this construct, we manipulate fluency directly and demonstrate its role as a moderator of this matching effect. One limitation to these findings, however, is that we manipulated only one form of processing fluency (i.e., perceptual fluency). According to Alter and Oppenheimer (2009), processing fluency can be further subdivided into multiple, more aptly defined categorizations. These include conceptual fluency, semantic fluency, and linguistic fluency. Beyond that of perceptual fluency, future research can better define what type or types of processing fluency moderate this particular effect, as well as other matching effects. Although benefit appeals were perceived as more abstract than attribute appeals across all four studies, benefit appeals were not always independently assessed as being high in abstractness. As such, this also serves as a limitation to our research.

Our results clearly support our hypothesized relationship between construal levels and benefit appeals (i.e., that increasing construal levels bolsters the persuasiveness of benefit appeals) but show mixed results regarding the relationship between attribute appeals and construal levels. In Study 3, we found that consumers induced with a low construal level mind-set found the attribute appeal to be more persuasive; however, in the other studies, we did not observe the same effect. The results of Studies 1, 2, and 4 are consistent with similar research on temporal distances (Fujita et al. 2008; Trope and Liberman 2000). However, the results of Study 3 are consistent with research manipulating construal levels using mind-sets (White, MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011). Further research could examine these discrepant results in more detail.

Implications for Marketers and Consumers

The findings reported in this article have several important managerial implications. Our research suggests that for those consumers predisposed to or induced with a higher construal level, marketing communications should focus more on benefit appeals, whereas marketing communications targeting consumers predisposed to or induced with a lower construal level can use either appeal type. Moreover, given the bidirectional relationship between construal levels and psychological distances (Liberman, Trope, and Wakslak 2007; Trope and Liberman 2010; Liberman and Trope 1998), the same logic may also apply to other psychological distances (e.g., social distance, spatial distance, and probability).

To enhance appeal persuasion, marketing managers or advertisers could (1) manipulate construal levels prior to appeal exposure, (2) assess chronic-level construal, or (3) manipulate construal levels within the appeal. There are numerous ways of manipulating construal levels that can easily be implemented. For example, emphasizing the near (versus distant) future in the appeal (Wright et al. 2012; Liberman and Trope 1998), using pictures (versus words; Amit, Algom, and Trope 2009), emphasizing how (versus why) to comply (White, MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011), using color (versus black-and-white; Lee 2014), emphasizing store location as near (versus distant; Khan, Zhu, and Kalra 2011), and implementing language that involves more actions and verbs (versus traits; Semin and Smith 1999). All of these techniques are established methods of instilling low, as opposed to high, construal levels. Alternatively, marketers can measure chronic or situational construal levels and accordingly expose consumers to benefit appeals or attribute appeals. As was demonstrated in Study 2, chronic construal levels can be measured using the Behavior Identification Form (Wallacher and Wegner 1987), which could be offered to consumers in a survey.

Our findings could also apply to research on goal fulfillment and compliance. For example, Ülkümen and Cheema (2011) found that consumers who set specific goals to save money (e.g., setting a specified amount) exhibited greater goal progress when construal levels were high, and that nonspecific goals to save money (e.g., not setting a specified amount) exhibited greater goal progress when construal levels were low. We suggest that specific interventionists, such as financial advisors, could leverage these findings to help consumers reach their financial goals. Our research suggests that emphasizing benefits or attributes either in a business-to-consumer (B2C) or business-to-business (B2B) context may result in similar effects. Subsequently, marketers, managers, and salespeople could leverage this information to increase compliance.

Our study provides the seed for several research opportunities. The current research is an important first step toward showing that the persuasiveness of attribute appeals and benefit appeals is more complicated than previously understood. By considering construal levels and psychological distance dimensions, marketers can harness the persuasive power of these, and similar, marketing communications.

SUPPLEMENTAL DATA

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at http://www.tandfonline.com/ujoa.

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