The Effect of Construal Level and Type of Message on Persuasion

Autoria: José Mauro da Costa Hernandez, Filipe Ferminiano Rodrigues, Rafael Pontes

Propósito Central do Trabalho:
A critical issue in conceiving a persuasive advertisement is determining what product characteristics to emphasize in the message and how to communicate them. In this particular regard, one question that is still not resolved is whether to emphasize product attributes (e.g., “the notebook weighs only 5.4 pounds”) or benefits to the consumer (e.g., “the notebook is small and easy to be carried anywhere”) in the message. Drawing upon the perspective of Construal Level Theory, this research hypothesizes that when construal levels or temporal distance is high, appeals emphasizing product benefits are more effective than appeals emphasizing product attributes. Further, when construal levels or temporal distance is low, attributes-appeals are more effective than benefits-appeals. The research also hypothesizes that these effects hold only when fluency is high. Although, previous studies have examined the relationship between construal level and type of appeal, to the best of our knowledge, no study has examined the interaction effect of construal level and messages featuring either attributes or benefits. Our study, therefore, has an important contribution for advertisers since attributes and benefits appeals are extremely common in advertising. This study also advances the knowledge on the relationship between construal level and fluency by providing additional evidence that fluency decreases persuasion of advertisement messages.

Marco Teórico:
Construal level theory (CLT) refers to the degree of abstraction at which events, objects, or people are represented in the cognitive hierarchy. High-level construals are general, relatively abstract, schematic, decontextualized, and superordinate mental representations, while low-level construals are specific, detailed, concrete, unstructured, contextualized, subordinate mental representations (Trope & Liberman, 2010). One of the basic premises of CLT is that the more psychologically distant an event is, the more it will be represented at higher levels of abstraction. An event is psychologically distant as it takes place farther into the future, as it occurs in more remote locations, as it is less likely to occur, and as it happens to people less and less like oneself (Liberman & Trope, 2003). According to Cesario, Grant, and Higgins (2004), matching the content of a persuasive message to some aspect of the message recipient’s cognitive, motivational, or affective system can enhance persuasion. Dhar and Kim (2007) noted that CLT suggests that in order to enhance persuasiveness, a message has to emphasize higher-level aspects if it refers to decisions about more distant entities. Because psychologically near events tend to be represented concretely and psychologically distant events tend to be represented abstractly, psychological distance should impede the processing of concrete event representations and facilitate the processing of abstract representations. Therefore, the information processing is more efficient when there is a congruency between the portrayed distance and the presentation medium (Amit, 2006). Matching psychological distances enhances persuasion (Wright et al., 2012) and confers value from fit (Higgins 2000; Higgins et al. 2003). Previous studies have found that a match between construal level and regulatory focus (Lee, Keller, and Stermthal, 2010) and between construal level and message framing (i.e., a gain or loss frame; White, MacDonnell, and Dahl, 2011) increase persuasion. Product attributes highlight concrete, detailed, and means-end cognitions that enhance low-level abstraction, whereas product benefits highlight abstract, global, and end-state cognitions that enhance high-level abstraction (Gutman 1982). Thus, it is anticipated that matching construal level with type of appeal can increase persuasion. Specifically, appeals emphasizing product benefits will be more effective when psychological distance is high or when paired with a higher level, abstract mind-set, whereas appeals emphasizing product attributes will be
more effective when psychological distance is low or when paired with a lower-level, concrete mindset. One of the explanations advanced for the match effect is that the match enhances processing fluency (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2007). Previous studies have shown that people consider fluent stimuli more likeable, familiar, frequent, true, and intelligent than similar but less fluent stimuli, and those feelings of fluency affect consumer evaluations, purchase intentions, and choices (Lee & Aaker, 2004; Lee & Labroo, 2004). If the match between construal level and type of appeal enhances persuasion and if this mechanism is mediated by processing fluency (White, MacDonnell, & Dahl, 2011), then decreased fluency will influence negatively persuasion and evaluations will be similar across conditions.

Método de investigação se pertinente:
Three experiments were conducted to test the hypotheses developed in the research. Study 1 One hundred and fifty people took part in a 2 (appeal type: attributes vs. benefits) x 2 (temporal distance: proximal vs. distant) between-subjects design. Two versions of a notebook advertisement were designed, each featuring four characteristics of the notebook. Each version emphasized either product attributes or consumer benefits associated to each of the attributes. The temporal distance was manipulated by varying the period in which the notebook would be purchased (next week vs. six months). Participants judged the product described on two items: “What is your global evaluation of Notebook “X” (1=terrible; 7=excellent) and “Comparing the Notebook “X” with others sold in the market, would you say that this Notebook is …” (1=much worst; 7=much better). A global evaluation index \( r^2=.73, p<.01 \) was created by averaging the two items. Study 2 One hundred and sixteen people took part in a 2 (appeal type: attributes vs. benefits) x 2 (mind-set: concrete vs. abstract) between-subjects experimental design. Four versions of advertisement were developed for two products (GPS and smartphone) as in study 1. Construal level mind-set was induced asking participants to complete a structured task in which they should consider why or how to maintain a good appearance (Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope, 2004). Focusing on the why’s of things direct one’s thoughts to more abstract, higher-level representations while focusing on the how’s direct one’s thought to more concrete, lower-level representations (Liberman et al., 2007). Next, participants completed the same measures of study 1. Study 3 Two hundred and sixty eight people took part in a 2 (appeal type: attributes vs. benefits) x 2 (construal level: abstract vs. concrete) x 2 (fluency: low vs. high), between-subjects experimental design. Two versions of a gym advertisement were developed as in studies 1 and 2. To induce the construal level mind-set, participants were asked to describe 7 products that would be purchased in the next week or in about 6 months. 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). Participants completed the same measures of studies 1 and 2.

Resultados e contribuições do trabalho para a área:
First, we present the results of each study and then the general conclusions and implications. Study 1 Results The results of study 1 suggest that evaluations of the notebook were more favorable when distant temporal distance was paired with a benefits-appeal compared to an attributes-appeal but evaluations were not different when temporal distance was proximal. Although our hypothesis has been partially rejected, these results are consistent with previous studies of temporal construal level (Fujita et al., 2006; Trope & Liberman, 2000). Study 2 Results As predicted, the results of study 2 revealed that benefits-appeals are more effective when paired with an abstract mind-set while attributes-appeals are more effective when paired with concrete mind-set. It seems that a direct induction of a concrete or abstract mind-set surmounted the limitations of study 1 when the hypothesized effect was observed only for the
distant temporal construal. Study 3 Results The results suggest that under high fluency, the benefits-appeal was more effective when paired with an abstract mind-set compared to an attributes-appeal but both appeals were equally effective when paired with a concrete mind-set. These results confirm those observed in study 1. As predicted, the fluency moderated the effect observed in studies 1 and 2. Under low fluency, we didn’t observe differences between the conditions which probably reflect the difficulty of respondents in processing the information (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Tsai & Thomas, 2011; White, MacDonnell, & Dahl, 2011). General conclusions Across three experiments, this research highlights the conditions under which advertisement appeals will be more persuasive. In consonance with our match hypothesis, we show that under abstract mind-set or distant temporal distance, benefits-appeal are more effective than attributes-appeal and that under concrete mind-set or near temporal distance, attributes-appeal are as effective or more effective than benefits-appeal. Further, we show that under low fluency, both of these effects vanish. To date, no previous research has examined the effect of construal level mind-sets or temporal construal level on the persuasiveness of messages featuring either attributes or benefits. Theoretical contributions Theoretically, this research gives support for the match effect described in previous studies of construal level (Fujita et al., 2006; Martin, Gnoth & Strong, 2009; Trope & Liberman, 2000; White, MacDonnell, & Dahl, 2001). Furthermore, this research also demonstrates that fluency serves as a strong moderator of the interaction between construal level and appeal type. Managerial contributions This research also has important managerial contributions for those involved in crafting advertisement messages. If advertisers and marketers want to influence consumer behaviors occurring in the distant future or consumers with an abstract mind-set, benefits-appeals are more likely to persuade consumers than attributes-appeals, leading to better evaluations of products and services. On the other side, if consumer behaviors are occurring in the near future, both appeals are equally effective, although the results also suggest that for consumers in a concrete mind-set, attributes-appeals are more effective. Consumers can also benefit from this study by increasing their comprehension of the tools and strategies that advertisers and marketers employ to persuade consumers and, based on this knowledge, make more assertive and conscious purchase decisions. Society at large can also rely on studies like this to develop and implement public policies that constrain the adoption of unethical persuasion techniques.

Referências bibliográficas: