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Abstract versus Concrete Product Information:

Theoretical and Practical Considerations

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When describing a product to consumers, should marketers use abstract or concrete product descriptions? When marketing headphones on a brand’s webpage, for instance, should marketers simply describe the headphones as “durable” or should they include more concrete details and describe the headphones as “durable due to the headphone’s aluminum covering?”

Prior research suggests that a consumer’s level of product expertise (Graeff 1997; Maheswaran & Sternthal 1990) or brand awareness (Raimondo et al. 2019) may affect their preference for abstract versus concrete product information. Drawing on the classical means-end chain model (Gutman 1982) and the concept of consumer mindset (Lee & Ariely 2006), we propose that product evaluation mode (i.e., whether product alternatives are presented separately or jointly) will affect consumer preference for abstract versus concrete product-related information.

We present an overview of our conceptual model and we outline an empirical study to test our hypotheses. Our findings should have direct relevance for the marketing of products on brand and retailer websites. Based on our findings, marketers should have greater insight on how to describe products based on whether products are individually (e.g., Apple.com) or jointly (e.g., Amazon.com) presented to online shoppers.

Abstract vs. concrete product-related information

In the consumer context, the abstractness of product-related information typically refers to the language used in marketing communications (de Angelis et al. 2017, Miller et al. 2007). Abstract product-related information refers to interpretive statements about unobservable product characteristics (e.g., comfort). Concrete product-related information, on the other hand, refers to descriptive statements about observable product characteristics (e.g., aluminum frame).

Depending on their level of construal, consumers may perceive products differently. Consumers that are inclined to have high-level or abstract construal will tend to perceive the general, superordinate, and essential features of products or events. Whereas, consumers with low-level or concrete construal will tend to perceive the specific, subordinate, and incidental features of products and events (Trope & Liberman 2000). In addition, abstract construal tends to focus on the goals or motivations behind actions rather than details of the actions themselves (Dhar & Kim 2007). In this way, a consumer's construal level may affect their interpretation of product-related information, such that consumers with an abstract construal may be more inclined to aggregate concrete product descriptions to achieve an abstract perception or judgment of the product (Houston & Walker 1997).

In addition to product characteristics, product-related communications also often refer to the consumer and their goals—and such communications can also vary in their level of abstractness. For example, a product-related communication, such as “These headphones will

help you relax while listening to your favorite jazz during your commute on the noisy subway,” provides much in the way of concreteness, however, this concreteness is being used to describe consumer goals and motivations, rather than product-specific characteristics. In this way, marketing communications can be lexically concrete, while still abstract in their description of product characteristics. In this paper, we focus on the latter type of abstractness.

How people respond to abstract vs. concrete product information

The role of self-relevance

In line with construal level theory, the classical means-end chain model (Gutman 1982) proposes that consumers perceive products by aggregating related information to more abstract levels according to their goals (e.g., Graeff & Olson 1994; Heinze et al. 2017; Lin et al. 2019; Lin & Fu 2018; Pimenta & Piato 2016; Snelders & Shoormans 2004). In other words, more abstract concepts related to a product should relate to consumer self-knowledge (cf., Claeys et al. 1995). Using this framework, previous research suggest that when consumers are focused on themselves, they evoke more abstract concepts when thinking about products—for example, when a product category is more or less self-relevant (Houston & Walker 1996), involving (Mulvey et al. 1994), emotional (Claeys et al. 1995), or risky (Barrena & Sanchez 2010).

However, previous research has not addressed whether self-focus affects consumer preference for abstract versus concrete product information. Thus, there exists the question of whether consumer self-focus, apart from leading consumers to *evoke* abstract product-related information, may also lead them to *prefer* abstract (vs. concrete) product-related information. Prior research on product-related expertise and brand awareness provides some initial, though mixed, guidance on addressing this question. For example, consumers with high product-related expertise are more likely to prefer concrete over abstract product-related information

(Graeff 1997; Maheswaran & Sternthal 1990). However, consumers with high brand awareness may find more abstract product-related descriptions more persuasive than concrete information (Raimondo et al. 2019).

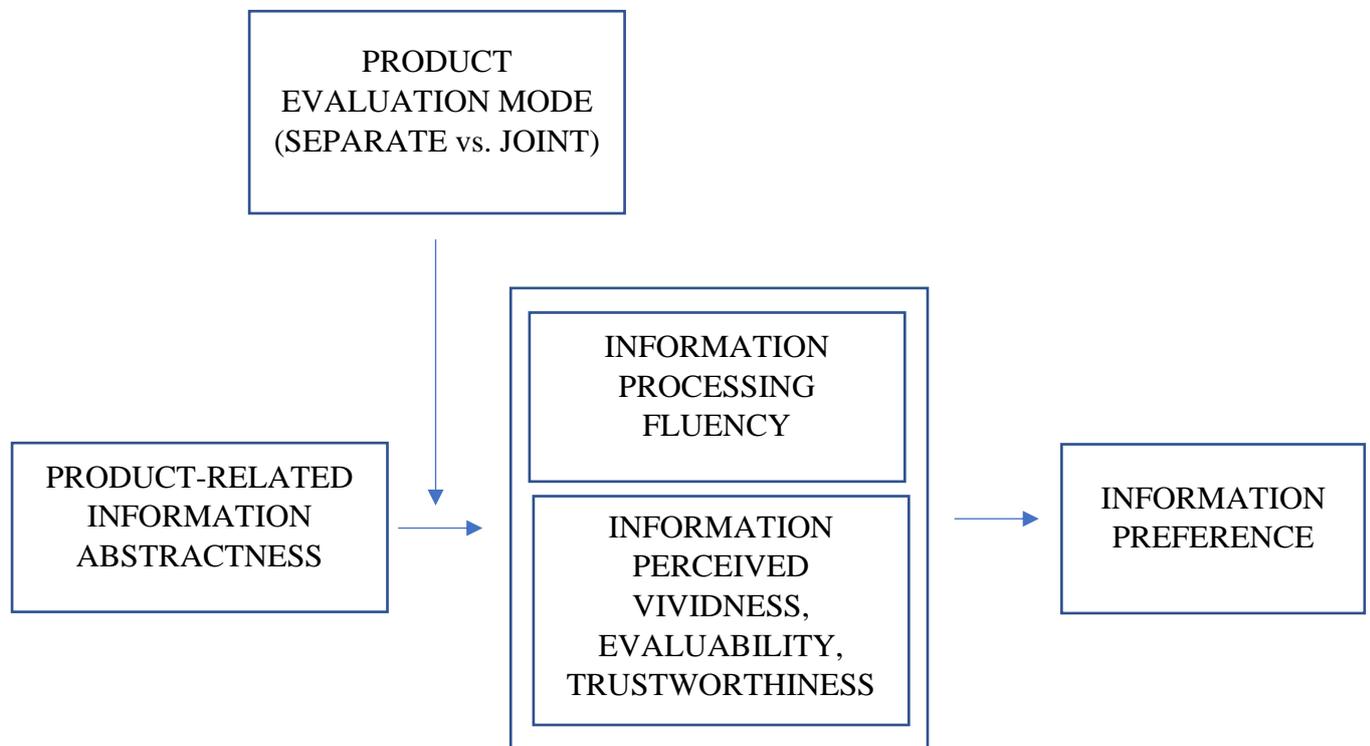
The difference between evoking product-related information and responding to it may depend on the information's perceived value, which emerges in the latter case: even if consumers tend to evoke more abstract information, an abstract message provided by someone else might be perceived as less valuable. Indeed, many studies demonstrate that concrete information appears to be more objective, authentic, truthful (Feldman et al. 2006, Perez et al. 2020), clear (Elliott et al. 2015), vivid (Burns et al. 1993, Walters et al. 2012), trustworthy (Miller et al. 2007, Robinson & Eilert 2018) and important (Mackenzie 1986). Concrete information may also sound more technical (Wu et al. 2019), which may be positively perceived as consumers may show "lay-scientism" (cf., Hsee & Tsai 2008). Given the above, the amount of self-relevance consumers have with a product may result in a preference for concrete information, thereby reversing the otherwise positive means-end effect of abstract information.

The role of product evaluation mode

To overcome the aforementioned ambiguities, we investigate an aspect of the means-end concept that is related to consumer mindsets (Ginkel-Bieshaar 2012; Lee & Ariely 2006). When considering a product, consumers typically shift from a goal-related mindset to a comparative mindset, especially when choosing between product alternatives. Evaluability theory (Hsee & Tsai 2008; Hsee & Zhang 2004 2010) distinguishes between a separate evaluation mode (i.e., a consumer is exposed only to a single product alternative) and a joint evaluation mode (i.e., a consumer perceives at least two alternatives simultaneously). In a joint evaluation mode, consumers tend to evaluate products based on product attributes that are difficult to evaluate in isolation, as the comparison supports their evaluability.

Based on this distinction between modes of evaluation, we propose that evaluation mode will affect consumer preference for abstract (vs. concrete) product-related information (Figure 1). Specifically, in the separate evaluation mode, consumers will be in a more goal-related mindset, to which the abstract information is more congruent. In addition, unlike with self-relevance, the separate evaluation mode should not increase risk perception, so the proposed effect should not be suppressed. Instead, we propose that the comparative mode will make concrete product-related information more congruent with a consumer mindset. Consequently, concrete information will be processed more fluently, perceived as more vivid, evaluable, trustworthy and, in general, perceived as more positive (cf., Elliot et al. 2015; Lee & Labroo 2004). As a result, shifting from a separate to a joint evaluation mode will make consumers prefer concrete (vs. abstract) product-related information.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



An empirical approach

To test our conceptual model, we planned and are currently conducting an exploratory experiment. We chose headphones as a product category, as it is relatively simple, gender-neutral, and widely known. We use two product alternatives, and manipulate evaluation mode between-subjects. Similar to Hsee & Zhang (2004), we use three conditions: one for the joint mode (in which the alternative presentation order is counterbalanced) and two for the separate mode (presenting the first or the second alternative, respectively).

To reduce possible disturbances resulting from differences in meaning between abstract and concrete information, the latter is presented as a mere concretization of the former. Both alternatives are depicted using abstract and concrete information, as otherwise, the concrete description would be more abundant, leading to an additional difference between the two alternatives.

In addition, our descriptions contain a trade-off: the first alternative is superior in terms of abstract attributes, and the second one is superior in terms of concrete attributes. We also manipulate the degree to which the concretization is comprehensible, applying two conditions. In the comprehensible condition, the concrete information refers to an attribute which is instrumental to the abstract one (e.g., “shape” as a concrete attribute, and “comfort” as an abstract one). In the incomprehensible condition, we inform the study participants that headphones may operate in three operation modes (denoted as A, B, and C), but we do not explain the difference. Then we concretize the abstract attribute by specifying the operation mode (e.g., “comfort in the mode A”).

The participants are European students and are recruited by our marketing research students as part of their course completion. Participants are asked to evaluate each product alternative (in terms of general attitude, willingness to buy, willingness to pay, information

seeking, and value perception), and then – separately for abstract and concrete information – report its perceived trustworthiness, processing fluency, evaluability, and vividness. Finally, to check the effectiveness of the evaluation mode manipulation, we measure declared self-thought and product-thought while evaluating the alternatives.

To test our model, we will check if the abstract-superior alternative is more highly evaluated in the separate mode condition, and if the concrete-superior alternative is more highly evaluated in the joint mode condition. In the incomprehensible condition, the concretization should not provide any additional meaning versus abstract information, reducing related possible disturbances, and thus we expect evaluation mode to have a larger effect in this condition. Finally, we will assess whether the effect of evaluation mode on the evaluation of abstract versus concrete information is mediated by processing fluency, vividness, evaluability, and trustworthiness.

Concluding remarks

The proposed exploratory study should offer initial insight on the relationships between evaluation mode and consumers' subsequent evaluation of abstract versus concrete product-related information. Based on our initial findings, additional studies will be needed to assess the robustness of the effects and their applicability to various marketing contexts. In addition, there is an opportunity for future research to incorporate additional factors in our proposed conceptual model. The predicted effect of abstract versus concrete information on evaluation may also be affected by the number of product attributes in the product description, the degree of inter-attribute trade-off, and the number of within- versus between-category comparisons, the level of consumer immersion with the information, and the total amount of information provided in the product description. Such factors may prompt a comparative mindset, leading consumers to prefer concrete over abstract information. Field

data can also be collected to determine the extent that firms are using abstract versus concrete product descriptions, and the effects of this choice on downstream consumer and firm outcomes, such as loyalty and sales.

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