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The Effect of Creative Mindset on Consumer Information Processing

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Framing of persuasive messages is an important topic for researchers and managers. To resolve the contradictory findings regarding the effectiveness of “matching” versus “mismatching” appeals (whether messages are framed in a way consistent with consumers’ natural mode of processing), we posit that consumers’ mindset will determine the effectiveness of message framing. Across two studies, we find that with a creativity mindset, consumers will be more susceptible to messages framed in a way inconsistent with their natural mode of processing (“mismatching appeals”), while with a thoughtfulness mindset, consumers will find messages framed in a way compatible with their natural way of processing appealing (“matching appeals”).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Framing of persuasive messages becomes an important topic for researchers and managers alike in recent years (Lee and Aaker 2004; Wheeler, Petty and Bizer 2005). However, there are disagreements in the literature regarding the effectiveness of message framing. Many researchers (Edwards 1990; Lee and Aaker 2004; Wheeler, Petty and Bizer 2005) maintained that messages framed in a way that is consistent with consumers' natural mode of processing (as determined by their personality, processing motivation etc.) are more appealing ("matching effect" of persuasion). By contrast, some other researchers found the reverse to be true ("mismatching effect" of persuasion). That is, sometimes consumers are more susceptible to messages that are framed in a way that is inconsistent with their natural mode of processing (Aaker and Williams 1998; Millar and Millar 1990). We posit that consumers' mindset at the time of processing messages will determine the effectiveness of message framing. Specifically, we expect that a creativity mindset could reverse the commonly observed "matching effect" of persuasion.

Existing literature reveals that when there is a match between the framing of the message and consumers' personality schemata, consumers are likely to feel comfortable when processing incoming messages because these messages are consistent with how they naturally think about issues. This has been described as "processing fluency (Lee and Aaker 2004)" and "processing readiness (Thompson and Hamilton 2005)." This subjective experience of processing fluency could in turn influence subsequent evaluations. Thus, more positive evaluations are formed. By contrast, when the framing of the message is inconsistent with how they naturally process information, consumers are likely to feel frustrated and thus negative evaluations about the issue will result. Another explanation for this "matching effect" is elaboration-based. For instance, Wheeler, Petty and Bizer (2005) found that if the message framing is compatible with one's self-schemata, consumers will scrutinize the message more carefully.

We posit that this "matching effect" is likely to occur when consumers are in their "normal/natural" processing mode, without some sort of internal or external disruptions. Prior research (Sassenberg and Moskowitz 2005) has demonstrated that priming people with "thoughtfulness" mindset can trigger their common associations with the target issue. In these circumstances, consumers automatically relate the messages in a way that is consistent with how they "naturally" process information. Under this logic, when there is a mismatch between the two (i.e. message framing and how consumers naturally think), consumers will find the message more difficult to process and thus form less favorable evaluations. Thus, mismatching appeals would be ineffective.

We expect the reverse to be true when consumers are in a creativity mindset. By definition, being "creative" implies that consumers should stay away from common solutions to an issue, and avoid activation of typical associations related to the issue at hand. Once primed to think "creatively", we posit that this activated mindset will affect consumers' subsequent information processing activities—we expect that consumers will prefer something different and novel from how they naturally process information. Since mismatching appeals are framed in a way that is inconsistent with how consumers naturally think about the issue, consumers may be

attracted to these novel and different appeals (Aaker and Williams 1998). Thus, we expect consumers should be more likely to elaborate on these "novel" messages, which ultimately affect their evaluations of the brand.

We examined this hypothesis across two studies in the context of mental construal (i.e., abstract vs. concrete thinking; see Trope and Liberman 2003). In both studies, we asked respondents to view an ad with different level of abstraction (abstract claim vs. concrete claim). We expect and found that when inducted with creativity mindset, abstract thinkers should find concrete (vs. abstract) ad claims more appealing, while concrete thinkers should be more susceptible to abstract (vs. concrete) ad claims, revealing a "mismatching" pattern. By contrast, when primed with thoughtfulness, abstract thinkers should find abstract (vs. concrete) ad claims more appealing, while concrete thinkers should be more susceptible to concrete (vs. abstract) ad claims, showing support for a "matching pattern."

Together, the results of study 1 and 2 indicate that consumers' mindset at the time of information processing is an important predictor of the "matching" or "mismatching" effect of persuasion. In line with conventional wisdom, when primed with thoughtfulness, consumers' common processing mode is reinforced and thus a "matching" effect of persuasion is observed. Specifically, respondents find messages that are consistent with their natural way of processing, as dictated by such factors as their personality, motivation or processing goals etc., more persuasive. By contrast, when we primed creativity, we found a "mismatching" effect of persuasion. That is, respondents are more susceptible to incoming messages that are inconsistent with their natural way of thinking.

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