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Less is More When Learning By Analogy: The Disruptive Impact of Attribute Information on Consumers’ Benefit Comprehension of Really New Products

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ABSTRACT

The presented study had two purposes. First, it pursued to demonstrate that it is more effective to use analogies in advertisements for really new products to increase consumers’ comprehension of the new product’s benefits than not to use analogies. Second, it aimed to test the (counterintuitive) assumption that inclusion of product attribute information in the advertisement in addition to the analogy would actually frustrate benefit comprehension. The results of the experiment showed that advertisements with an analogy lead to greater benefit comprehension than advertisements without an analogy. Further, it is more effective in print advertising in managing consumer learning of the benefits of really new products to use an analogy without than with additional product attribute information. We discuss these findings and outline directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

New product marketers are constantly seeking ways to ensure that their advertisements not only attract consumers’ attention and generate interest, but educates them about their new products’ benefits as well (cf. Aaker, Batra, and Myers 1992). Educating consumers is especially relevant in the case of really new products, because such products are relatively complex and often combine several functionalities. As a result, advertisements for really new products typically contain a lot of information. Moreover, this information is likely to consist of technical features and language that consumers are unable or unwilling to understand (Bradley and Meeds 2004; Meeds 2004). In interviews with prospective consumers of several really new products, Veryzer (1998) found that “quite often customers had no experience with the technologies underlying these products and thus they had little or no frame of reference for understanding them” (p.143). Therefore, the communication objective for such really new products should not be on emphasizing the product’s new technologies and innovative features. Rather, a more effective communication objective would be to persuade consumers of the new benefits that the new product provides to them (Lee and O’Connor 2003). The question is how marketers should do this?

Recent research in marketing and consumer behaviour has suggested that analogies may be useful to enhance consumers’ comprehension of really new products (Ait El Houssi, Morel, and Hultink 2005; Gregan-Paxton, Hibbard, Brunel, and Azar 2002; Moreau, Lehmann, and Markman 2001a; Roehr and Stenrhal 2001). Analogies are believed to be effective learning aids because they provide consumers with a familiar frame of reference that helps them to comprehend the unfamiliar product (Gregan-Paxton and Roedder John 1997). These studies, however, have provided interesting but inconclusive results. Roehr and Stenrhal (2001) compared the use of analogy with literal similarity in advertising and demonstrated that messages containing an analogy are better comprehended and are more persuasive, but only when the recipient has expertise with regard to the base. They further found that the effectiveness of an analogy is not only moderated by consumers’ ability to map structural relations, but also by the availability of cognitive resources to perform the comparison task. In another study, Gregan-Paxton et al. (2002) showed that the use of analogy directs consumers’ attention to the corresponding relations between target and base. Although it is suggested that the structural relation between the base and the target is more informative about what benefits a product offers (Gregan-Paxton and Roeder John 1997), this assumption has not been empirically tested by Gregan-Paxton et al. (2002). Hence the important question remains whether a focus on corresponding attributes actually enhances consumer’s comprehension of the key benefits of a really new product. Answering this question constitutes the first objective of the present study.

Gregan-Paxton et al. (2002) have also shown that analogy triggers selective processing of new product information. They have suggested that analogy can effectively direct consumer’s attention to some attributes and away from others. Having said this, we believe that one reason why the use of analogies in previous research (see e.g., Ait El Houssi et al. 2005; Hoeffler 2003; Gregan-Paxton et al. 2002) has not worked as well as expected, may be that the investigated advertisements used attribute information in addition to the analogy. It is proposed here that the inclusion of technical attribute information in an ad copy is likely to prevent consumers from paying sufficient attention to the analogy and thus from forming a concrete representation of the new product and the benefits it offers (Bradley and Meeds 2004). The second objective of the present study is to investigate the plausibility of this proposition by means of an experiment in which consumers’ comprehension of a new product’s benefits advertised through both an analogy and attribute information is compared with consumers’ comprehension of a new product’s benefits advertised through an analogy only.

COMPREHENDING NEW PRODUCT BENEFITS THROUGH LEARNING BY ANALOGY

How do analogies assist consumers in comprehending a really new product and in particular its distinctive benefits? In order to answer this question, we first explain how analogical learning is understood to take place.

Analogical Learning

Analogical learning takes advantage of the structural similarities that exist between something that a consumer already knows (i.e., the base domain) and something new to the consumer (i.e., the target domain). It is essential for analogical learning to take place that the knowledge that is transferred from the base to the target domain is predominantly related to a common relational structure (i.e., how the base and target relate to each other) and not to physical resemblance (i.e., how many surface properties the base and target share). Comparing a PDA (target) to a secretary (base), for instance, helps consumers to understand what a PDA does (i.e., performing routine tasks for the individual) in spite of the fact that there are no physical similarities between a PDA and a secretary.

Learning by analogy occurs through a series of three stages: access, mapping and transfer (Gentner 1989; Keane, Ledgeway, and Duff 1994). In the access stage, a relevant base domain becomes active in a person’s memory and serves as a source of information about the target. Access is likely to occur spontane-
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ously when the target shares a number of surface properties with the base (Gentner, Ratterman, and Forbus 1993). It is characteristic of analogies that the base and target do not share (many) surface properties. This lack of common surface properties makes spontaneous activation of a relevant base less likely (see, e.g., Gick and Holyoak 1980; Reed, Ernst, and Banerji 1974). Therefore, the base is usually prompted by an external source such as a print ad in a marketing communications setting (Gregan-Paxton et al. 2002; Moreau et al. 2001a/b). Once the base has been activated, its content and structure are compared with the target domain in the mapping stage. Unlike access, mapping is characterised by a preference for relation-based rather than attribute-based comparisons between domains (Clement and Gentner 1991; Gentner et al. 1993). Finally, in the transfer stage, the base and target domains are aligned based on the relational commonalities between the two. It is in this stage that learning occurs when knowledge is moved from the base to the target along the paths that have been created during the mapping stage.

Beneficial Effects of Analogies

The basic premise of our study is that using analogies in appeals for really new products may be the most effective tool to direct consumers' attention to and increase their comprehension of the benefits of a really new product. When processing an analogy, cognitive effort is likely to be allocated to the structural relations between the base and the really new product rather than to attribute similarities between them. Hence, an ad containing an analogy will generate greater attention to structural relations than an ad containing merely attributes. Recent research in marketing confirmed that the use of analogies in product descriptions causes consumers to focus on corresponding relationships between the target and the base and to disregard feature similarity (Gregan-Paxton et al. 2002). The focus on structural relationships enhances comprehension of the distinctive benefits of the really new product because structural relations are thought to be more informative than attributes about the benefits that a new product offers (Gregan-Paxton and Roeder John 1997). Support for this hypothesis is found in studies showing that analogies, rather than literal similarity or mere-appearance comparisons, are generally perceived to be more sound (Gentner et al. 1993) and more goal-relevant (Read 1984). An analogy permits the consumer to focus on the shared data structure (between the base and the target) that is sparse enough to allow the learner to isolate the key principles (Gentner 1989). Continuing with our example, a secretary is known for performing many routine tasks and a comparison with a PDA highlights the shared commonalities implying that like a secretary the PDA also performs many routine tasks. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that an analogy increases the salience of the distinctive benefits of a really new product via corresponding relationships with the base domain thereby simplifying the new product. Separate attributes, on the contrary, may complicate encoding relevant information about a really new product in a coherent way. A really new product described by merely attributes will be difficult to understand since it involves complex relationships between largely unfamiliar attributes, technologies and benefits (Menon and Soman 1999). In sum, the use of analogies is likely to promote understanding of the main benefits of a really new product due to an increased focus on and an enhanced elaboration of the key benefits. We therefore hypothesise:

**H1:** Consumers will better comprehend the distinctive benefits of a really new product from ads featuring an analogy than from ads not featuring an analogy.

**Attribute Information as a Disruptive Factor**

In practice, companies often communicate attributes when introducing new products (Hoeffler 2003). Since really new products are relatively complex, advertising of these products is especially prone to technical features and language (Bradley and Meeds 2004; Meeds 2004). Including attribute information to an ad containing an analogy may be very demanding for consumers, because most consumers do not have the knowledge to evaluate such technical information. Previous research has demonstrated that even consumers with expertise in the domain of a really new product experience difficulties with comprehending and appreciating the benefits of this type of products (Moreau et al. 2001). The inclusion of technical characteristics of a really new product may induce consumers to focus on what is not known (Lee and O’Connor 2003) and thus impose significant learning requirements upon the consumer (Lehmann 1997).

Roehm and Sternthal (2001) offered evidence that the processing of an analogy is a resource-demanding task. This is because analogies rely on the mapping of structural relations that can be difficult to detect and resource demanding to map. When technical attribute information is presented in an ad that also contains an analogy, consumers’ cognitive resources are used to search memory for representations that are capable of making sense of the highly unfamiliar product attributes. Simultaneously, however, substantial resources must be allocated to the processing of the analogy if the analogy is to be successful (Roehm and Sternthal 2001). In other words, consumers’ cognitive resources must be divided over the task of comprehending the technical characteristics of the really new product on the one hand, and the task of comprehending the analogy on the other. When the former task demands a great percentage of the available resources, comprehension of the analogy may be compromised. If this happens, the merits of using an analogy are likely to be reduced or even nullified. In support of this account, Gregan-Paxton et al. (2003) found that consumers who processed advertisements containing an analogy recalled significantly fewer new product features than those who processed advertisements without an analogy. In short, we hypothesize that the positive effects of the use of analogies on benefit comprehension will be weakened by the inclusion of attribute information in the advertisement. Hence, hypothesis 2 reads:

**H2:** Consumers will better comprehend the distinctive benefits of a really new product when it is advertised through an analogy only than through an analogy plus attribute information.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants were 122 students from a Dutch high school who participated voluntarily. Sixty-one percent was female and the average age was 16.6 years. They were recruited at the school during breaks and free periods. High school students were selected as they were likely to be interested in the new products examined and they are less likely to have a special interest or expertise in advertising.

**Design and Stimuli**

The study employed a single-factor (message type: attributes only, analogy only, analogy plus attributes) between-subject design. The design was applied to two really new products. The experimental treatment consisted of exposure to one of the message types for one of the two products. The PH 530 is a mobile phone
TABLE 1
LIST OF THE PRODUCT CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PH 530 AND RP 530

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The PH 530...</th>
<th>The RP 530...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. is made of synthetic materialf.</td>
<td>is made of synthetic materialf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. has a talk time of 6 hrs maxd.</td>
<td>has a microcomputera.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. makes it possible to create your own musicb.</td>
<td>translates wordsb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. has a melody editoram.</td>
<td>has a scanneram.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. has an audio recorderam.</td>
<td>has a speech functionam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. makes it possible to create your own ring tonesb.</td>
<td>spells wordsb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. has exchangeable coversa.</td>
<td>has a dictionary Dutch-English / English-Dutcham.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. has a standby time 300 hrs maxa.</td>
<td>has a summary functiona.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. makes it possible to mix musicb.</td>
<td>gives the correct pronunciation of wordsb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. has FM radioam.</td>
<td>comes with a headsetb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. is for sale onlinef.</td>
<td>is for sale onlinef.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Attribute of the product not mentioned in the body copy text.
am Attribute of the product mentioned in the body copy text.
b Benefit of the product.
f Filler.

with music functionality to mix and create music and ring tones. The RP 530 is a portable pen-like reading device that provides definitions, spelling and pronunciation of words. These two products were selected because they were unfamiliar to participants and because sound analogies were available.

Six different print ads were developed corresponding to the experimental conditions for the two really new products (see Appendix). All versions of the ad were constructed to be as similar as possible to eliminate the lay-out of the ad as a possible confound. No brand names were provided because we did not want participants’ judgments to be based on such peripheral cues (Ozanne, Brucks, and Grewal 1992). The original product names (i.e., ReadingPen and Philips 530) were changed to fictitious names (i.e., RP 530 and PH 530, respectively) in order to minimise associations regarding the brand or product name. The ad for the attribute condition and the analogy plus attributes condition consisted of a headline at the top of the page, a coloured picture of the new product at the centre of the page, and a body copy text at the bottom of the page. The analogy was manipulated in the headline (i.e., PH 530: “Be your own DJ”; RP 530: “With the RP 530 you always have your language teacher close at hand”). The body copy text described general features of the new product. The ad version for the analogy only condition lacked the body copy text containing the product attributes.

Procedure
Each participant received a booklet containing the instructions, stimulus and measures. To stimulate realistic viewing conditions, participants were asked to view the ad as they would normally do when reading a magazine. They were allowed to examine the ad at their own pace and they could freely turn back to the ad while filling out the questionnaire. After participants completed the questionnaire, the purpose of the experiment was explained. The whole procedure took less than 10 minutes.

Measures
Benefit comprehension. Inspired by the measure of Roehm and Sternthal (2001), participants were given a list of 11 characteristics of the advertised products presented in random order (see table 1). This list resulted from a literature search into the attributes and benefits of both new products. Participants were asked to tick the three main characteristics that were clarified by the ad for the new product from the list. To reduce possible primacy and recency effects, the first and last characteristic on the list were fillers. Apart from the fillers, the list included three distinct benefits of the new product, three attributes that were presented in the body of the text, and three attributes that the advertised product possessed but that were not mentioned in the ad. The number of benefits from the list marked by participants, ranging from zero to three, determined the degree of participants’ comprehension of the new product benefits.

Product familiarity. The use of an analogy is thought to be more effective when consumers have limited or no prior knowledge of the target product. Therefore, participants rated their familiarity with the really new product on a two-item scale (r=.64, p<.001) as additional check that product familiarity was indeed low, as was observed in the pretest: “How familiar are you with the [product]?” (1=“not familiar at all”; 7=“highly familiar”), and “Have you ever read, seen or heard anything about the [product]?” (1=“never”; 7=“very often”).

Product interest. To ensure the relevance to the sample group participants were asked to rate the extent to which they were interested in the new product presented in the ad on three items (α=.84): 1=“not interesting at all”; 7=“very interesting”, 1=“dislike it very much”; 7=“like it very much”, and 1=“does not interest me at all”; 7=“interests me very much”.

Results
To ensure the selected products were relevant to high school students interest in the advertised product was measured. Results show that participants were equally interested in both products (PH 530: 4.5, RP 530: 4.5; F(1,121)=.04, p=.85). Product familiarity was measured to control for the degree of participants’ familiarity with the new product and an insignificant relationship with benefit comprehension was found (PH 530: F(1,62)=2.26, p=.14; RP 530: F(1,58)=.75, p=.39). Product familiarity was therefore not included as a covariate in testing the hypotheses. In order to test whether ads
containing an analogy generated higher understanding of the benefits of the really new products than ads not containing an analogy (H1), an ANOVA was run separately for both products with message type as the independent variable and benefit comprehension as the dependent variable. Table 2 presents the means of the dependent variable for the experimental conditions for both the PH 530 and RP 530. The analysis yielded a significant main effect for message type for the PH 530 (Attributes: \(M=24\); Analogy plus attributes: \(M=1.05\); Analogy: \(M=1.76\); \(F(2,62)=25.63, p<.01\)) and for the RP 530 (Attributes: \(M=.56\); Analogy plus attributes: \(M=.73\); Analogy: \(M=1.32\); \(F(2,58)=4.55, p<.05\)). For the PH 530, a Tukey post-hoc comparison test showed that all differences were significant (Analogy plus attributes vs. Attributes: \(mean\ difference=.81, p<.01\); Analogy vs. Attributes: \(mean\ difference=1.52, p<.01\); Analogy vs. Analogy plus attributes: \(mean\ difference=.71, p<.01\)). For the RP 530, the Tukey post-hoc comparison test revealed a significant difference between the analogy only condition and the attributes only condition (\(mean\ difference=.76, p<.05\)). The difference between the analogy only and analogy plus attributes conditions was marginally significant (\(mean\ difference=.59, p=.06\)). In short, for both really new products, ads featuring an analogy increased benefit comprehension significantly more than ads not featuring an analogy, confirming hypothesis 1. In addition, for the mobile phone, the ad featuring only an analogy boosted benefit comprehension significantly more than the ad featuring an analogy plus attributes. A similar, but not-significant difference was observed for the ReadingPen. Hypothesis 2, therefore, needs to be rejected for the RP 530, but not for the PH 530.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The presented study had two purposes. First, it pursued to demonstrate that it is more effective to use analogies in advertisements for really new products to increase consumer comprehension of the distinctive benefits of the new product than not to use analogies. Second, it aimed to test the (counterintuitive) assumption that inclusion of product attribute information in the advertisement in addition to the analogy would actually frustrate benefit comprehension. The rationale for this assumption is that inclusion of relatively complex technical attribute information in an advertisement requires consumers to spend a disproportional part of their available processing resources to it in order to comprehend it. As a result, limited attention is dedicated to comprehension of the analogy, decreasing its potential beneficial effects on product benefit comprehension.

With respect to the first purpose, the results showed that advertisements with an analogy lead to greater benefit comprehension than advertisements without an analogy. These findings provide support for our argument that consumers who process an analogy focus on the relational structures that exist between a base and a target, and that these relational structures are more informative about what benefits a really new product offers than attribute information. Regarding the second purpose, the results showed that ads featuring only an analogy had a stronger positive effect on benefit comprehension than ads featuring an analogy plus attribute information, especially for the mobile phone. This effect may be explained by the availability of cognitive resources theory (Roehm and Sternthal 2001). These authors argue that combining attribute information with an analogy distracts attention away from an analogy, thereby leaving less cognitive resources available for elaborating on the analogy. Indeed, in their study, Roehm and Sternthal found that experts only showed greater comprehension of an analogy and were more persuaded by it when they were able to devote substantial cognitive resources to it. When insufficient cognitive resources were made available for processing the analogy, its beneficial effects were absent.

Although the cognitive resources theory seems a likely candidate to explain our findings, we cannot be too sure about it as participants in our experiment could spend as much time as they liked on processing the ads. Under these conditions, participants had ample opportunity to pay attention to the analogy in spite of the presence of attribute information. Of course, the question remains whether participants will spend as much attention to an analogy when presented with attribute information as they would in the alternative situation where there is only the analogy to process. In the latter situation, participants confronted with the line “Be your own DJ” in the ad for the PH 530 mobile telephone, for instance, would be forced to come up with their own inferences regarding the meaning of this claim. Given the nature of this claim, such inferences would most probably constitute common relations between the base (i.e., a DJ) and the target (i.e., the PH 530) rather than specific attribute information. The fact that participants have to come up with these inferences themselves without any additional help, in contrast to the situation in which attribute information is available, may cause them to experience greater comprehension of the distinctive benefits. Future research is necessary to establish which explanation is most appropriate for our findings.

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1 In a pilot study similar to this experiment with a different sample (\(n=123\)), we also found significantly higher benefit comprehension for the ads featuring only an analogy than ads featuring an analogy plus attributes. This finding thus appears to be rather robust.

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**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>PH 530 (n= 63)</th>
<th>RP 530 (n=59)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benefit comprehension</td>
<td>(M= .24^a)</td>
<td>(M= .56^a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.05^b)</td>
<td>(1.76^c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.73^a,b)</td>
<td>(1.32^b)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Ratings on benefit comprehension ranged in score from 0 to 3. Higher means indicate higher scores on the variable.

\(a, b, c\) Different superscripts indicate which means differ significantly from each other.
An interesting finding that has not been reported earlier, but that should be mentioned here is that although the ads containing an analogy only scored higher on consumer benefit comprehension, consumers found this ad less informative than the ad containing an analogy plus attributes. This finding is surprising because it suggests that while consumers perceive attribute information to be informative, inclusion of such information in an ad with an analogy actually leads to lower product benefit comprehension. This finding may be the result of a kind of ‘more is better’ heuristic that consumers apply and that, as is the case with most heuristics, is generally effective. In case of the particular circumstances that were investigated in this study more information appears to be worse.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING AND NEW PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT**

This research contributes to a better understanding of consumer comprehension of new product benefits in the context of really new products. Specifically, the results suggest that the use of analogies in ads for these products improves consumer comprehension of really new product benefits, and that adding attribute information to an ad containing an analogy lowers rather than improves consumer comprehension. These results have important implications for marketers responsible for the launch process (or the marketing communications) of really new products. As really new products tend to be complex and consist of several technical features that consumers often do not understand, managers should resist the temptation to communicate the product’s new technologies and innovative features to consumers as this communication strategy will only confuse consumers and makes them less likely to adopt. A more appropriate launch strategy will focus on the really new product’s distinctive benefits. Our study shows that analogies can be helpful in conveying these benefits to consumers. In order for such a strategy to be successful, companies should spend sufficient time on identifying an analogy that is sound; i.e., a comparison that is strong enough so that the consumer can infer relevant benefits from the base to the really new product. The choice of such an appropriate analogy is not easy. The soundness-rating task of Gentner et al. (1993) and the task that we employed may help companies to identify such strong analogies.

When companies have identified a sound analogy it may be better to only include this analogy in the ad for the really new product without adding attribute information as the results in our experiment show. Although it may seem intuitively more logical that analogies will serve as the “the explanatory context” for the complex attributes (Bradly and Meeds 2004), our findings tell another story. Consumers usually spend little time on processing an ad. According to Chisolm (1995) newspaper ads are looked at for an average of 0.84 seconds. It may therefore be more useful when consumers spend this limited time and their available cognitive resources on processing the analogy, rather than be distracted by the often long list of technical features.

Overall, our research provides valuable information for marketers on how consumers react to really new products. The results reinforce a broader strategic lesson that marketers should prepare the customer cognitively for really new products (Hoeffler 2003; Moreau et al. 2001b). This cognitive preparation can, for example, be achieved by visualisation exercises (Dahl and Hoeffler 2004) but also by the use of sound analogies as our results show. Although the last word has surely not been written on the use of analogies in communicating really new product benefits, our results showed that a DJ and a language teacher were helpful in comprehending the distinctive benefits of a mobile phone with music functionality and a portable pen-like reading device that provides definitions, spelling and pronunciation, respectively. We are looking forward to new research that will investigate if and when other analogies such as, for example, a guardian angel or a sheep are helpful in explaining the distinctive benefits of a car safety protection system or an autonomous lawn mower to consumers, thereby hopefully improving the market success of such innovative products.

**REFERENCES**


APPENDIX A
Example of the ad for the PH 530

Attributes only condition

![PH 530](image1)

The PH 530 is a new mobile phone with a built-in audio recorder, melody ring tones and it contains samples of radio songs. The display is a 65K color TFT screen (128 x 128 pixels).

Analogy plus attributes condition

![PH 530](image2)

The PH 530 is a new mobile phone with a built-in audio recorder, melody ring tones and it contains samples of radio songs. The display is a 65K color TFT screen (128 x 128 pixels).

Analogy only condition

![PH 530](image3)

Be your own DJ

The PH 530 is a new mobile phone with a built-in audio recorder, melody ring tones and it contains samples of radio songs. The display is a 65K color TFT screen (128 x 128 pixels).


