Affecting Choice and Desire: Hedonic and Utilitarian Feature Presentation Sequences

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Many products possess both hedonic and utilitarian features. When a consumer learns about these features, does starting with the hedonic, versus utilitarian, features affect her desire for the product? Our evidence suggests presenting hedonic features before utilitarian features produces greater behavioral desire, except when consumption interest already exists.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The modern consumer is regularly exposed to countless advertisements for products they may not have considered purchasing. Despite the lack of consumer intent to purchase, these ads exist for the pragmatic reason that they increase sales. What makes these appeals most effective? Rather than asking what type of information makes an appeal effective, we explore how the positioning of the information in an ad can best mesh with the consumer’s natural attention and comprehension processes. Consumer products are often conceptualized and marketed to fulfill either utilitarian needs or hedonic desires (Dahrt & Wertensboch, 2000). In reality, most products possess multiple attributes, some of which are utilitarian, and others that are hedonic. When assessing the value of something novel, people generally process information sequentially, that is, one feature at a time (Johnson, Häubl, & Keinan, 2007). Therefore, this project investigates whether the order in which people learn about hedonic and utilitarian features of a product affects their desire.

We present evidence from four experiments to suggest that, in general, a hedonic-to-utilitarian—i.e., hedonic primacy—sequence (versus a utilitarian primacy sequence) is more effective at generating desire for the product. This effect is mediated by the rated importance of utilitarian—but not hedonic—elements, suggesting a use of utilitarian information to rationalize desire resulting from hedonic engagement. We rule out unobserved differences between hedonic and utilitarian features using a single set of attributes for a given product where each attribute can be framed as hedonic or utilitarian. Furthermore, we observe this effect for both branded and unbranded products and across durable and consumable products. We also test this hypothesis when either including or omitting brand information to reveal that brand associations do not account for the effect. Ultimately, we identify a moderating condition whereby, when baseline interest is sufficiently high, utilitarian primacy allows motivated consumers to begin justifying their desire immediately with utilitarian information, resulting in greater overall desire. Together these findings provide evidence that beginning a message with hedonic information induces greater desire for the product, which is then justified using practical, utilitarian information.

In experiment 1, online participants learned serialized information about a pair of unbranded headphones. Participants were randomly assigned to view headphone features in hedonic primary order (n = 40) or in utilitarian primacy order (n = 40). After exposure to the product attributes, participants were surveyed on their global attitude and their hypothetical willingness-to-pay (WTP) for a raffle ticket for the headphones. WTP was significantly higher for individuals in the hedonic primacy condition (t(78) = 2.00, p = .049).

In experiment 2, students already participating in other in-lab surveys were also asked to rate a brand of chewing gum. Half of the participants saw the features in the hedonic primacy order (n = 50), while the others saw the utilitarian primacy order (n = 51). Participants were asked to rate the importance of each feature as it was presented and they were then given the opportunity to indicate their preference for a pack of the gum (retail value $1.79) versus $1.00 cash (1-7 scale, 1 = $1, 7 = gum). Those exposed to a hedonic primary order were more likely to choose the pack of gum over the dollar (t(100) = 2.04, p = .044). Furthermore, although the features had been pretested to be of equal importance, when the features were presented in a serialized fashion, the perceived importance of utilitarian features was heightened when those features were presented after hedonic features (versus before them), which mediated the effect of order on desire in a bootstrapped mediation model using 1000 iterations (bias corrected 95% CI: -0.483 to -.006).

These findings were replicated in an online context in experiment 3, where brand information was included or omitted when learning about lattes. There was no main effect of brand information presence, nor was there an interactive effect with order of feature presentation, so these cells were collapsed. This suggests that brand information is not a driver of the effect. However, associations with the brand could produce differential initial levels of interest in the product, which we tested in experiment 4 by including a measure of liking for the brand (Apple) of the focal product (iPod Touch).

In experiment 4, we therefore predicted a replication of the effect for people low on liking for Apple because they are likely to have low involvement and interest would therefore be generated through exposure to hedonic information. On the other hand, for those who reported high liking for Apple, we predicted an attenuation of the greater ability of the hedonic primacy to increase desire. A spotlight analysis (Aiken and West, 1991) revealed that at one standard deviation below the mean of pre-existing brand liking, hedonic primacy led to greater desire than did utilitarian primacy (b = 0.62, t(97) = 2.77, p = .007). However, at one standard deviation above the mean of pre-existing brand liking, hedonic primacy produced less desire than utilitarian primacy (b = -0.40, t(97) = -1.81, p = .073). As in the previous experiments, importance of utilitarian attributes (but not hedonic attributes) mediated the effect of condition on desire in a bootstrapped mediation model.

To summarize, across four experiments, we provide evidence that—holding information constant—simply affecting the ordinal position of hedonic and utilitarian information is sufficient to affect behavioral desire for a product, with hedonic primacy generally producing greater desire. Not only is desire affected, but it would appear that practical, utilitarian information is processed and integrated differently depending on whether involvement (i.e., product desire) exists before utilitarian information presentation. This is true regardless of whether involvement results from exposure to hedonic information or from pre-existing desire. Because the information presented for a given product was the same across conditions, explicit attitudes for each product did not differ between presentation orders across experiments. This work has substantive applications for consumers and marketers alike by suggesting practical methods for directing choice and desire by ordering product and decision information to reflect natural attention processes.

REFERENCES:
