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Different types of explanations and their effect on persuasion.

BACHELOR THESIS COMMUNICATION INFORMATION STUDIES

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Abstract

Can an explanation help with persuading others? This study investigated that very question. By testing participants on their attitude towards a persuasive message, their attitude towards the behavior, and their intention to perform the behavior, an experiment was conducted to find out if explanations can affect these three types of attitude. This study manipulated the persuasive message by using two different types of explanation, a *how* and a *why* explanation, with no explanation as the control group. The context of the advertisement was environmentally friendly behavior. No evidence was found that an explanation could strengthen a persuasive message in the context of environmentally friendly behavior. These results suggest that explanations do not contribute to persuasion, regarding environmentally friendly behavior. These results may be applied to advertisement campaigns and other non-profit goals.

Introduction

Explanations play an important role in our social lives, as they help us understand our fellow humans. When someone is late to an appointment, explaining to his colleagues why he failed to arrive on time, can help reduce the gravity of such mistake. Knowing that someone had a flat tire makes both parties feel better about the situation. Explanations support the understanding of physical events (Zacks & Tversky, 2001) and can explain the behavior of others (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Taylor, Landy & Ross (2012) describe that most work on explanation as additional information that explicates the connection between an observation and prior knowledge. In other words, an explanation can provide a link between what one already knows and what one observes.

Research on explanations has been done in both spoken and written interaction. In spoken interaction explanations can add strength to a request. Explanations, or more often referred to as reasons in spoken language, are often given in the case of a noticeable absence of a preferred response (Baranova & Dingemanse, 2016). The reason then gives extra context for the request. It makes compliance easier, as it gives the requestee an opportunity to reconsider the response and comply after all. Reasons and explanations can also serve as a pre-request (Baranova & Dingemanse, 2016), providing an introduction to a certain request by explaining the situation that someone is in, as well as a post-request, justifying the initial request after the compliance has been performed.

Explanations of certain instructions are also of didactic value. Explanations can emphasize that it is not only important to do something once, in a local instance, but to adhere to the instructions in the future because their repeated performance is crucial (Atkinson et al, 2000). Explanations show the global importance of specific actions. These actions can be unpleasant or difficult to perform. This is often used in physiotherapy (Parry, 2013), where a patient must understand the benefit of, for example, stretching a muscle every day, compared to stretching it only once directly after his appointment. On smoking package, explanations of the consequences are also given for this reason. This suggests that explanations play a vital role in communication, especially persuasive communication.

Written explanations can have a significant effect on decision making, even in elementary, non-social tasks. In the research of Taylor, Landy & Ross (2012) participants were asked to predict one of two outcomes. In one condition, they were simply told one of the two outcomes of a binary task is more likely to happen. In the other condition, participants

were told *why* one of the two outcomes was more likely to happen. Their study showed that participants were more likely to predict the outcome with higher likelihood, in the condition that included an explanation. These findings suggest that explanations do not only serve as information deliverers, but also affect performance significantly (Taylor, Landy & Ross, 2012). The information carried by the explanation does not change the knowledge of the participant, and yet they performed better. Furthermore, in Koo et al. (2015), it has been shown that explanations increase feelings of trust in self-driving vehicles, because the user can identify and anticipate upcoming events.

Thus, it appears that explanations can affect human decision making significantly. A domain where this effect can be crucial, is persuasion in a commercial setting. If explanations create a proclivity towards certain decisions and behaviors, then they can be used to make a message more convincing. Wang & Benbasat (2007) have researched the effect of explanations on consumer beliefs. In doing so, different types of explanations have been identified. Three types of explanations have been established by Wang & Benbasat (2007): a *how* explanation, a *why* explanation and a *trade-off* explanation. A *how* explanation aims to offer the consumer with information that they can use to understand how something, theoretically or practically works. For example, “Sit straight by pulling your shoulders backwards and your chin up” is a *how* explanation. A *why* explanation explains why the consumer should answer a certain question, or why they should do something. For example, the phrase “You should sit up straight to avoid backpain in the future.” is a *why* explanation. Both explanations justify the importance of a certain action (Wang & Benbasat, 2007). *How* and *why* explanations both address the information asymmetry between the subject of the message and the institution. Lastly, a *trade-off* explanation provides decisional guidance to the subject. This means it shows why certain decisions are made with regard to quality, price or other properties of a product. For instance: “our decision to use environmentally safe products slightly increases the price” is a *trade-off* explanation.

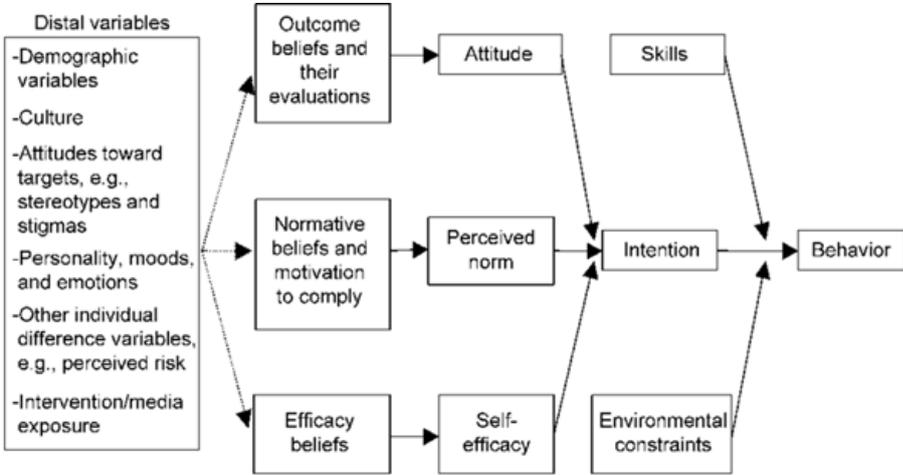
Wang & Benbasat (2007) also suggest that these types of explanations have a different effect on consumers. According to Wang & Benbasat (2007), *why* explanations increase the perceived benevolence of the institution that gives the explanation. Furthermore, *how* explanations are suggested to increase the perceived benevolence and competence of the institution. In Koo et al. (2015), *why* explanations, have shown to improve trust and are preferred by users of self-driving cars. In a situation where a self-driving car is braking, *How* explanations, such as “the car is braking now” have shown to increase stress levels in users, and therefore lead to more reckless behavior. Their findings suggest that users felt confused

about the *how* explanation, because it questions who is responsible for the vehicle. A *why* explanation in this situation: “There is an obstacle ahead”, leads to calming of the user, as it shows them why the car does something. This study emphasizes that these types of explanations have significant effects.

Although the effect of these different types of explanations on consumer beliefs have been investigated, the question whether the types of explanations affect persuasion for a non-commercial goal remains largely unanswered. As present study focuses on a setting where trade-offs with regard to price are not made, this type of explanation was excluded to focus on *how* and *why* explanations.

To operationalize persuasion, Fishbein & Yzer (2003) have combined several factors that influence behavior change into the integrative model of behavioral prediction (see figure 1). From this model, which is a compilation of multiple scientific studies into persuasive texts, argue that skills, intention and environmental constraint are the three main predictors of a certain behavior. Out of these three, intention can be manipulated most easily. Intention is also subdivided into three determinants: attitude, perceived norm and self-efficacy. Present research focuses on the determinant attitude and intention. Although Fishbein & Yzer (2003) include three main determinants, attitude is central in this definition (Hoeken, Hornikx and Hustinx, 2019) and is used in most other models of persuasion. Self-efficacy and perceived norm are therefore not tested.

Figure 1: The integrative model of behavioral prediction (Fishbein & Yzer, 2003).



The context that was presented to the participants of this research was environmentally-friendly behavior. This area was chosen as it is only about persuasion where there is no direct

visible sacrifice and gain from producing the behavior. If a monetary setting had been chosen, there would have been a price and a product involved, with the purchase of the product. This makes the current study different from previous studies, as it focuses on persuasion, but does not include any financial element.

A setting that requires persuasion, without the acquisition of goods through purchase, is environmentally friendly behavior. The deterioration of the environment is a topic that has been gaining significant attention over the past decades, as climate change seems to become more and more present. It has also acquired a more prominent position in society. Green products can be found in every supermarket nowadays and many political parties have the climate on their agenda. It has been shown that the decision to buy green products tends to depend on the attitude and values of the buyer rather than the actual properties of the green product (Chen, Chen, & Tung, 2018; Schuitema & de Groot, 2015). Therefore, knowing how to optimally affect the attitude on climate change can have both a societal and, perhaps in the long run, commercial effect. Environmentally friendly behavior will therefore be targeted in present research.

Given the fact that explanations create more perceived benevolence and trust in the institution, alongside the fact that messages or options that contain explanations seem to be preferred by participants of previous research, the following hypothesis can be formulated: A significant effect of explanation type on the persuasiveness of a message promoting environmentally friendly behavior.

Both previously mentioned types of explanations were tested in a persuasive message regarding this environmentally friendly behavior, which leads to the following research question: To what extent does an explanation type - *how*, *why* and none - influence persuasiveness of a message in the context of environmentally friendly behavior? Persuasiveness is understood as the cumulation of the attitude towards both the message and behavior, and the intention to implement the behavior.

Method

Material

In this study, an experiment was conducted. The persuasive message was included in an advertisement, which shown to the participant after which they were asked to fill in a number of questions about their attitude towards the advertisement, towards the behavior described in the advertisement, and their intention to perform this behavior. The ad concerned the plastic use of the participants, in which they were asked to decrease their plastic use for

environmental reasons. The independent variable, type of explanation, was divided into three conditions: a *why* explanation, a *how* explanation and no explanation. Only one condition was shown to the participants. Three different ads were designed to create this manipulation.

The first ad (see Appendix A), which had no explanation, simply featured the sentence “use less plastic” on a grey background which featured a globe in a plastic bag. The ad was kept simple in order to avoid other factors from influencing the participant. The second ad, belonging to the second condition, features a *how* explanation. Under the text “use less plastic” the participant is explained how exactly they can do that. Therefore “By bringing your own shopping bag, using your own drinking bottle and saying no to plastic straws” is added under the header. The third ad, belonging to the third condition, contained a *why* explanation. Under “use less plastic” the line “Because one million seabirds and 100.000 marine mammals are dying annually from plastic in our oceans” is added.

The three ads were different in the sense that they offered no explanation, a *how* explanation or a *why* explanation to the participant. They are kept identical in other aspects, such as background and font to avoid previously mentioned side-effects. The no-explanation ad has a slightly larger font for “use less plastic” to make it more aesthetically pleasing, by filling the empty space where the explanation is located in the other ads. The ads can be found in Appendix A.

Participants

A total of 137 participants completed the experiment. The population of the study was acquired through convenience sampling. The sample consisted of students or working people from the Netherlands, Germany and Vietnam, with multiple nationalities, as the international researchers working on present study distributed the experiment in their respective countries. The participants needed to be over 18 and give consent to participating in the experiment.

The most common nationality was Dutch ($n = 68$). Of the participants 89 were female (65.0%) and 48 were male (35.0%). A Chi-square test between gender and condition showed an insignificant relation ($\chi^2(2) = .071, p = .965$), implying that the different genders were distributed evenly over the conditions.

The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 59, with a mean of 25 years old ($M = 24.89, SD = 10.16$). A one-way analysis of variance between condition and age showed an insignificant effect. ($F(21, 115) < 1, p = .693$), implying that the different ages were distributed evenly over the conditions.

The large majority of the participants lived with their parents ($n = 54$) or with other housemates ($n = 49$). A Chi-square test between living situation and condition showed an insignificant relation ($\chi^2(10) = 7.322, p = .695$), implying that the different living situations were distributed evenly over the conditions.

The English proficiency of the participants ($N=137$) was mostly advanced ($n = 49$) and proficient ($n = 47$). A Chi-square test between English proficiency and condition showed a significant relation ($\chi^2(10) = 19.747, p = .032$). The amount of proficient English speakers was relatively high in the condition no-explanation (48.8%) compared to the amount in the condition *why* explanation (23.3%). Furthermore, the amount of upper-intermediate speakers was relatively high in the condition *why* explanation (25.6%), compared to condition *how* explanation (7.5%). Table 1 shows the distribution of the Chi-square analysis.

Table 1: The results of a Chi-square analysis between English proficiency and condition.

			Condition		
			No explanation	<i>Why</i> explanation	<i>How</i> explanation
English proficiency	Advanced	<i>n</i>	11	13	25
		%	26,8%	30,2%	47,2%
	Beginner	<i>n</i>	0	0	1
		%	0,0%	0,0%	1,9%
	Elementary	<i>n</i>	0	1	2
		%	0,0%	2,3%	3,8%
	Intermediate	<i>n</i>	2	8	4
		%	4,9%	18,6%	7,5%
	Proficient	<i>n</i>	20	10	17
		%	48,8%	23,3%	32,1%
	Upper-intermediate	<i>n</i>	8	11	4
		%	19,5%	25,6%	7,5%
Total		<i>n</i>	41	43	53
		%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

The most frequent education level was high school degree, with the large majority ($n=85$) giving this response. A Chi-square test between education level and condition showed an insignificant relation ($\chi^2(8) = 7.13, p = .523$), implying that the different education levels were distributed evenly over the conditions.

The variable persuasiveness was calculated by adding up the three variables attitude towards the advertisement, attitude towards the behavior, and intention to perform the

behavior. No participants were excluded from the sample, as no contradictory results were discovered.

Design

The study has a between-subject design with one factor: explanation. The independent variable, explanation, is divided into three levels, including one control group. These three levels are no explanation, *why* explanation and *how* explanation. The dependent variable, persuasiveness was measured by three categories of questions, testing attitude towards the ad, attitude towards the behavior described in the ad, and intention to implement behavior.

Instruments

The dependent variable persuasiveness was based on three components: attitude towards the ad, attitude towards the behavior presented in the ad and intention to implement the behavior. Attitude has previously been operationalized by Fishbein & Ajzen (2010) and is mentioned in Hoeken, Hornikx & Hustinx (2019). The questionnaire used in present research was based on this book. The first component of persuasiveness is attitude towards the advertisement. This was measured by seven statements anchored in a seven-point Likert scale. An example statement of this is:

I think this is an interesting advertisement: Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree.

The reliability of ‘attitude towards the advertisement’ comprising eight items was good: $\alpha = .885$. Consequently, the mean of all eight items was used to calculate the compound variable ‘attitude towards the advertisement’, which was used in the further analyses.

The second component of persuasiveness is attitude towards the behavior described in the ad. This is also measured by seven statements anchored in a seven-point Likert scale. An example statement of this is: *The idea of using less plastic sounds interesting:* Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree.

The reliability of ‘attitude towards the behavior’ comprising seven items was good: $\alpha = .845$. Consequently, the mean of all seven items was used to calculate the compound variable ‘attitude towards the behavior’, which was used in the further analyses.

The third component of persuasiveness is the intention to implement the behavior. The participants were asked to answer 5 statements anchored in a seven-point Likert scale, which looked into their intention to implement this behavior. This third component has used the questions of Chen, Chen & Tung (2018). An example statement is: *In the future, I definitely*

intend to choose alternative materials instead of plastic: Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree.

The reliability of ‘intention to perform behavior’ comprising five items was good: $\alpha = .879$. Consequently, the mean of all five items was used to calculate the compound variable ‘intention to perform the behavior’, which was used in the further analyses.

The full questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

Procedure

After the participants had been approached by our researchers online, no clues were given regarding the goal of the research. It is only made clear to the participants that they have to report their opinion on an advertisement. They were then automatically and randomly assigned to one of the three conditions.

After a short introductory text, in which we introduced ourselves and thanked them briefly for participating, they were asked to agree to take part in the research. They filled in their gender, age, nationality, living situation and level of English proficiency. After this, the advertisement was shown. They then reported their attitude towards the ad, their attitude towards the behavior presented in the ad and their intention to perform the behavior. When these questions are answered, gratitude was expressed for taking part in the experiment and the results were processed digitally by the website Qualtrics.

Statistical treatment

In this research a one-way ANOVA was used to investigate the relationship between the types of explanation and persuasiveness of the advertisement. The latter was calculated as the sum of the scores of the attitude towards the ad, attitude towards the behavior and intention to perform the behavior.

Results

A one-way analysis of variance between condition and persuasiveness showed an insignificant effect. ($F(2, 134) = .844, p = .432$). This means that there is no effect of the different types of explanations on the persuasiveness of a message. In table 2 the means and standard deviations per condition are presented.

Table 2: The means and standard deviations per condition.

Condition	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
No explanation	41	16.18	2.86
<i>Why</i> explanation	43	16.31	2.38
<i>How</i> explanation	53	16.78	2.01
Total	137	16.45	2.40

Conclusion and discussion

The research that was conducted shows that there is no significant effect of explanation type on persuasiveness of a message promoting environmentally friendly behavior. Although a significant effect was expected between the different types of explanations and their persuasive appeal, as well as a difference between an explanation at all versus no explanation, no such significant relation was found. This suggests that explanations do not contribute to persuasion in environmentally friendly settings.

Previous research has shown that explanations have persuasive power in casual interaction, as well as commercial advertising. The asymmetry between the effect of explanation in casual interaction compared to this study, could be attributed to the fact that casual interaction handles information differently, compared to the environmentally-friendly advertisement. In conversation for example, one is required to respond immediately to the information that is given. Explanations increase the information given and therefore can have a significant effect. For our ad, the information in the advertisement may not have been viewed as equally important as in conversation. Future research could dive into the difference between these two fields.

In comparison to commercial advertisement, the difference in effect may have two reasons. First, the monetary value is the most obvious difference between a commercial setting and the setting that was used here. This has both a different effect on consumer beliefs, as they know they are being persuaded for financial gain, as well as a different effect on their decision making, they have to make an investment. In this study the latter was not the case. There is no clear investment in which one needs weigh the advantages and disadvantages compared to the price. In this weighing an explanation can make a significant difference, as

has been shown in the introduction. Second, it is easier to measure a difference in purchase behavior, than in non-monetary behavior. The purchase behavior can be measured in numbers, i. e. number of products sold, whereas environmentally friendly behavior (or lack thereof) is much harder to grasp.

In order to reduce the impact of such issues, future research could conduct a longitudinal study, instead of a short experiment, with regard to environmentally friendly behavior. In a longitudinal study, participants could be exposed to different conditions from an equal starting point, after which they would be monitored over a longer period of time. The effect of explanations with regard to their behavior could then be measured more effectively.

Furthermore, a more extensive persuasion technique could be used to have a stronger effect on the participant. The image used in this research, one of which only contained one sentence, could have fallen short on its persuasive effect given its simplicity. Although it did minimize the chance of confounding variables influencing the participant, it may have not given enough stimulus to fill its role as persuasion.

Another limitation, albeit uncontrollable, is the current pandemic that led to social restrictions. Ideally, the experiment would have taken place in a physical setting, where the participant is more engaged in the experiment. Unfortunately, we had to do it online. This may have resulted in a decreased level of attention of participants, which is crucial to experiments such as this one. Future research should therefore always attempt to conduct the experiment in person.

As mentioned in the method section, the level of English was, at least in two subcategories, distributed unevenly. This suggests that the people with the highest level of English were distributed unevenly. Although the advertisement made use of fairly simple English, this could still have affected their understanding of the advertisement or the questions that were presented. Future research could therefore attempt to distribute the English speakers evenly over the conditions. More participants could also help solve this problem.

In conclusion, the research that was conducted investigated the effect of explanations and their types in persuasive messages. No significant results were found that suggested an effect of these explanation types, or explanations in general. In practice, one may suggest that it is therefore of no apparent use to implement explanations in advertisements regarding environmentally-friendly behavior. This study has proven that there is no immediate effect of it in advertisements. Advertisements concerning environment may therefore omit explanations, and focus on other aspects such as visual appeal, humor, etc. It is however too

early to say if this effect can be generalized into other fields, which can be investigated in future research.

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Appendix A

The ad with no explanation, a how-explanation and a why-explanation.



Appendix B

The questionnaire used in the experiment.

The introductory text:

Thank you very much for your participation in this study! We are a group of International Business Communication students at Radboud University, and this survey is conducted as part of our Bachelor Thesis research. In this study, you will need to complete a questionnaire,

which aims to gather insights towards pro-environmental advertisements. There are no right or wrong answers. All the responses will only be used for scientific research and will be treated anonymously. The questionnaire will take approximately 3-5 minutes to complete.

Should you have any concerns or complaints regarding the survey, please send an e-mail to camiel.hendriks@student.ru.nl.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Participants have the right to stop the questionnaire at any point. Please confirm that you have been sufficiently informed and give consent to continue with the study by choosing the appropriate option below:

I read the information above and I agree to take part in this experiment:

- I agree
- I disagree

I declare that I am 18 or older

- Yes
- No

My gender is:

- Male
- Female
- Other

How old are you?

What is your nationality?

The highest degree of education I have completed is:

- No schooling completed
- Elementary school
- High school degree
- Trade/technical/vocational degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree

- Doctorate degree

What is your living condition?

- I live alone
- I live with a partner
- I live with a partner and children
- I live with children without a partner
- I live with my parents
- I live with other housemates (not applicable to any options above)
- Others

What is your level of English proficiency?

- Beginner
- Elementary
- Intermediate
- Upper-intermediate
- Advanced
- Proficient

The start of the questionnaire:

Please observe the advertisement carefully and fill in the following questions.

1. Questions regarding attitude towards the ad

I think this is a good advertisement

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

I think this is an interesting advertisement

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

I think this is a boring advertisement

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

I think this is an effective advertisement

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

I think this is a stupid advertisement

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

I think this is a pleasant advertisement

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

I think this is a clear advertisement

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

2. Questions regarding attitude towards the behavior described in the ad

Using less plastic is a good idea

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

I think that using less plastic is unpleasant

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

Using less plastic is harmful

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

The idea of using less plastic sounds interesting

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

Using less plastic is a wise choice

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

I like the idea of using less plastic

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

It is convenient to use less plastic

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

3. Questions regarding intention to implement the behavior.

In the future, I definitely intend to choose alternative materials instead of plastic.

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

I plan to use less plastic in the future.

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

I am willing to advise others to cut down on their plastic consumption

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

I will buy environmentally-friendly products in accordance with government advice.

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

I am very likely to buy less plastic-made products in the future.

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly disagree

Appendix C

Statement of own work

Sign this Statement of own work form and add it as the last appendix in the final version of the Bachelor's thesis that is submitted as to the first supervisor.

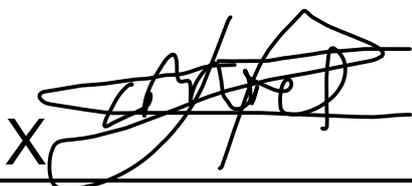
Student name: Camiel Hendriks

Student number: s1029249

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