



Exemplars' impacts in marketing communication campaigns



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ABSTRACT

This study expands upon research on exemplification persuasiveness by examining advertising messages. Using the issue of organ donation, Study 1 compares the effect of exemplar versus base-rate information on credibility, emotionality (arousal, pleasure, and dominance), and the intention to donate. Results show that participants exposed to exemplars demonstrate higher behavioral intention, emotional arousal, and credibility than those exposed to statistical arguments. Study 2 evaluates the effect of two stylistic characteristics of exemplars, the use of photographs and quotations, on the same dependent variables. The findings illustrate that the use of only the exemplar's pictures has a significant impact on the intention to donate and emotional arousal.

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1. Introduction

Although media outlets frequently use base-rate data as a way to provide credible, factual, and hard information, they increasingly rely more on the use of personal experiences or “exemplars” as a source of information to persuade an audience (Callison & Potter, 2000). In fact, data from the United States and Germany show that approximately half of the TV reports and more than one third of the TV commercials contain a “man in the street” viewpoint (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000).

Exemplars are illustrative short quotations or case reports that depict the typical characteristics of a group of events or people (Brosius, 1999). Journalists, media producers, and advertisers commonly use exemplars because of their authenticity and attention-getting power (Gibson & Zillmann, 1994). In the literature, a vast majority of contemporary communications, marketing, and psychology scholars support this use because they find that consumers do not make great efforts to attend or process media messages. In this vein, the limited capacity approaches largely develop the idea that a person's processing of messages is not infinite but restricted, and that the processing depends mainly on his or her interest and the nature of the message's structure and complexity (Gunter, 1987; Lang, 2000; Nisbett & Ross, 1980).

Exemplars are usually easier to attend to, code, remember, and comprehend than base-rate information even under low-involvement circumstances (Zillmann, 2006). Cognitive scholars conceptualize the

automatic information processing associated with exemplars in terms of heuristics that are shortcuts or automatism performed in a nonconscious way to reduce the mental effort in decision making (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

Two kinds of heuristics explain the use of individual examples in the formation of beliefs: the representativeness and availability heuristics (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). The representativeness heuristic posits that judgments about events or people are frequently extrapolations based on the scrutiny of a few individual examples. This technique allows people to make inferences and to create or modify their attitudes regardless of the size of the sample. The availability heuristic claims that individual examples can greatly affect the judgments about people and events basically because people can access and retrieve examples from memory more quickly (Zillmann, 2006).

Base-rate information, which is usually in the form of quantitative data about an issue, tends to be less powerful in the formations and changes of attitudes and beliefs (Zillmann, Gibson, & Sargent, 1999). Researchers explain this phenomenon as the information tending to be less attention-getting because of its more pallid and complex character. But another proposed hypothesis is the *base-rate fallacy*. This hypothesis proposes that although one can consider numerical information to be more reliable than exemplars, people tend to base most of their decisions on the characteristics of specific examples (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000).

Assuming that the exemplars exert greater influence on audiences, several studies explore the specific characteristics of this feature, particularly in the fields of news packaging and “persuasive messages” (but not advertisements). Gibson and Zillmann (1994) examine people reading news stories about carjackings that contain either base-rate information or exemplars depicting different levels of distortion. They

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conclude that people exposed to more extreme exemplars rated that problem more serious than those who read news stories with lower levels of distortion. Furthermore, respondents exhibited stronger affective reactions towards stories illustrated with exemplars.

Similarly, *Kopfman, Smith, Yun, and Hodges (1998)* compare the use of statistical information versus testimonial storytelling. Although they detect that base-rate messages are more persuasive, they also observe more intense affective reactions and higher credibility associated with exemplars. *Aust and Zillmann (1997)* examine the way in which the degree of emotionality of victim exemplification in news stories affects the perception of social issues. The authors demonstrate that exemplars can amplify the magnitude of these events. In a similar fashion, *Zillmann et al. (1999)* use an article about accidents in which they manipulate the text and a picture with an injured person being moved into an ambulance. They find that regardless of the level of vividness of the text, the image of the ambulance increases the perception of risk.

Paradoxically, few studies analyze the power of exemplars in the context of marketing communications. *Callison and Potter (2000)* is an exception; the study examines the effect of exemplars on audience recall in the print advertising of fictitious products. They observe that audiences attend to exemplars more than to base-rate information when asked to recall advertising claims of product effectiveness. *Limon and Kazoleas (2008)* investigate the power of exemplars to reduce the generation of counterarguments and overall responses to a message compared to statistical evidence by using public service announcements (PSA). Although they do not detect differences in terms of persuasion, they demonstrate that participants exposed to exemplars produce significantly fewer counterarguments than those exposed to statistical evidence.

Due to the scarcity of evidence in the field of marketing communications and particularly in investigating the features of exemplars in advertising, this paper seeks to expand the understanding of the use of exemplars in marketing campaigns. *Study 1* examines the differential effect of base-rate information and exemplars in terms of emotional impact, credibility, and persuasion. *Study 2* analyzes two relevant features of exemplars: the effects of pictures and the person used in the narrative (first versus third person) in terms of the same dependent variables.

2. Study 1

This study asks whether or not exemplars actually exert a more powerful effect on people's experiences, beliefs, and behavioral intentions than base-rate information in the context of marketing messages. Using the case of organ donation (similar studies also use this case), the study explores three areas of effects on audiences: emotional impact, credibility, and the behavioral intention to donate. The study's sample comprises university students from Santiago, Chile, the main city of that country, who range in age from 18 to 23 years old (mean = 20 years old, SD = 1.5). The sample also breaks down into 43% women and 57% men.

The study uses an experimental design with a pretest–posttest randomized group in order to check the degree of comparability of the control and experimental groups before the treatment. The pretest asks 210 respondents to rate their intention about organ donation and evaluates their answers by using *Kopfman et al.'s (1998)* six-item scale. The posttest interview takes place one week later, and contacts 202 respondents again (final sample). At this stage researchers randomly assign respondents to one of the three conditions of this study. One condition is the control group. The control group is retested using a short survey that comprises only the scale to measure the intention to donate. The other two groups are experimental ones: the first group gets a persuasive piece of print advertisements regarding organ donation with statistical evidence, and the second experimental

group sees the same print advertisement but illustrated with an exemplar.

Researchers ask these two experimental groups to answer a survey assessing the three dependent variables: (1) emotional impact, using the PAD abbreviated scale that *Russell and Mehrabian (1977)* created; (2) the perception of the credibility and effectiveness of the message using the scale of *Kopfman et al. (1998)* and *Feeley, Marshall, and Reinhart (2006)*; and (3) the intention to donate by using *Kopfman et al.'s (1998)* scale (see *Appendix A* for the questions used in each scale).

An exploratory factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha were estimated to learn whether or not all of the measures used in this study are reliable and one-dimensional (*Cronbach, 1951; Malhotra, 2004*). The study loads intention into one factor ($\alpha = 0.75$), the PAD into three factors, and credibility and effectiveness into one factor ($\alpha = 0.78$). A subsequent factor analysis confirms that each one of the PAD factors actually loads into one single factor that explains over 50% of the variance, with alphas of 0.71, 0.74, and 0.70 respectively.

Then, the study performs the analysis of the influence of the exemplars and the base-rate information. Using a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the differences between the control group and each of those with a treatment, the research team examines this analysis, and subsequently compares the effect of the stimulus on both experimental groups.

The results show no differences between the pretest and the posttest evaluations in the control group. This result means that no environmental changes (news agenda's influence) exist during the study. Furthermore, the pretest detects no differences among the three groups analyzed with respect to the intention to donate organs (in other words, homogeneity exists in the sample for organ donation).

Further analyses show that the experimental group exposed to exemplars ($F = 20.44, p = .000$) but not to base-rate information significantly increases their intentions to donate (within subject comparison). The comparison between the two experimental groups detects that the group exposed to exemplars demonstrates greater intentions to donate than the group exposed to statistical information ($F = 9.64, p = 0.000$). In the case of emotionality, advertising that contains exemplars produces significantly more arousal ($F = 3.31, p = 0.04$) than those that provide numerical support. The scales of dominance and pleasure show no differences. Finally, the analysis of credibility also shows a higher performance for messages that contain exemplars ($F = 7.48, p = 0.000$).

3. Study 2

Assuming the persuasive power of exemplars, *Study 2* aims to evaluate the differential effect of two stylistic characteristics of this message feature on advertising: the use of pictures and quotations (first-person narrative). This study conducts a 2×2 (with or without a picture in the exemplar, first or third person narrative) subject factorial experiment by using print advertisements for organ donation. Again the study develops a pretest to verify respondents' tasks and the quality of the advertisements.

The sample comprises 160 university students from Santiago, Chile. The students comprise 41% women and 59% males with ages that range from 18 to 25 years old (mean = 21 years old), who rate one of the four experimental conditions in terms of the following dependent variables: emotional impact as PAD (*Russell & Mehrabian, 1977*), perception of credibility, and the intention to donate an organ (*Kopfman et al., 1998*). Again, researchers check all the scales in terms of reliability and unidimensionality, and all perform well. In fact, the exploratory factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha demonstrate that intention ($\alpha = 0.75$) and credibility ($\alpha = 0.88$) load into one factor and PAD into three factors. Again, a subsequent factor analysis confirms that each component of PAD actually loads

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