

Word-of-Mouth Endorsements and Goal Type in Service Advertising

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the effectiveness of advertising messages that highlight abstract versus concrete goals and of consumer endorsements varying in strength in the context of services with various levels of risk. The results show that, for services of low risk, consumers exposed to concrete goal-oriented messages in advertisements have a more positive ad attitude and purchase intention towards the service if the ad message is accompanied by strong-tie word-of-mouth (e.g., family or friends) versus weak-tie word-of-mouth (e.g., reviews from typical consumers). No such difference is observed if consumers see advertisements with abstract goals. In the case of high-risk services, abstract goals in advertising are more effective when ad messages are accompanied by weak (versus strong)-tie word-of-mouth. By priming consumers to think of low-risk services as having relatively higher risk (and vice versa), we show that the results are not merely driven by the type of service but by the level of perceived risk that consumers associate with the service. We conclude with implications for academics and practitioners.

Keywords: Word-of-Mouth, Abstract and Concrete Claims, Advertising

INTRODUCTION

In the process of looking for new car insurance, Leila was browsing the Internet for information on insurance companies and came across a few ads from All State and Geico. The ads for All State emphasised protection and being “in good hands,” whereas those for Geico highlighted the money-saving aspect (i.e., “save 15% or more by switching to Geico”). In the consumer behaviour literature, the former messages are classified as abstract goal-oriented, tapping on individuals’ terminal values (e.g., self-esteem or safety) (All State), and the latter ones as concrete goal-oriented, emphasising preferred attributes or features of a product (e.g., low price) (Geico) (see Ratneshwar et al., 1996). In addition to these marketing communications, consumers oftentimes look for recommendations, which could come from close reference groups (strong-tie word-of-mouth (WOM)) or through online media, such as consumer reviews or ratings (weak-tie WOM). Leila, for example, may ask

for a recommendation from her Facebook friends (i.e., strong-tie WOM), as well as browse through customers’ online reviews (weak-tie WOM). How will her decision be influenced by the information she received from advertising and WOM? Will she choose All State because the recommendation came from her friend (strong-tie WOM) rather than online ratings (weak-tie WOM)? Or will she choose Geico because of the concrete (versus abstract) goal-oriented message in the ad she saw? Or, is it a specific combination of advertising claims and the source of WOM that influences her decision? Also, would she have reacted differently if this had been a relatively higher-risk service, such as choosing an oncologist, instead of a low-risk service, such as car insurance?

Advertising, a marketer-controlled variable, as well as word-of-mouth (WOM), a non-marketer-controlled variable, are widely accepted as playing a very influential role in consumers’ purchase decisions. Whereas previous research has recognised the importance of

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understanding the relationship between advertising and word-of-mouth (see Keller & Fay, 2009; Hogan, Lemon & Libai, 2004), research that has examined their joint impact on consumers' decision-making is very limited. Most of the studies in this area have examined how one communication tool affects the other (e.g., how online reviews affect advertising spending (see Feng & Papatla, 2011; Hollenbeck, Moorthy & Priserpio, 2019; Hogan, Lemon & Libai, 2004; Keller, 2007)) or how they differentially affect consumers' attitudes (Wei & Lu, 2013), with few empirical investigations of their joint effects on consumers' evaluations (see Gopinath, Thomas & Krishnamurthi, 2014; Hu et al., 2019).

Thus, our main contribution is the investigation of the integrative effects of word-of-mouth and advertising on consumers' evaluations of low-risk versus high-risk services. Our findings provide practical insights for marketers in formulating specific advertising claims focused on abstract versus concrete goals and encouraging WOM from friends versus general consumers when promoting services varying in their level of perceived risk. Whereas previous research examining the role of WOM on consumers' evaluations has incorporated risk in various forms (see Casaló, Flavián, Guinaliú, Ekinci, 2015; Jensen & Pizzamiglio, 2016; Ravoniarison & Benito, 2019), no research to date has examined its effects on low- versus high-risk services in the same research study for comparison purposes. Understanding the role of risk is important to marketers as they attempt to create advertising messages and encourage WOM to overcome the increased risk perceptions associated with services.

A number of authors have argued that the intangible nature of services requires marketers to deploy unique marketing solutions (Day, 1992; Hill & Gandhi, 1992; Grove, Pickett & LaBand, 1995). The most common advice offered in the service literature for overcoming intangibility is to help consumers perceive an abstract service offering in a more tangible manner (Cutler & Javalgi, 1993; Murray & Schlacter, 1990; Mittal, 1999; Pickett et al., 1994; Stafford, 1996). For example, marketers can help reduce consumers' uncertainty through more cognitive, factual, and concrete (versus abstract) advertising messages (see Stafford & Day, 1995), which in turn reduces the perceived risk associated with the service.

However, we argue that the effectiveness of concrete versus abstract messages varies based on the information

that consumers also receive from other sources. Indeed, consumers are exposed to a variety of sources of information before purchasing a service. Apart from advertising as a traditional form of communication, practitioners and scholars alike are recognising the critical role that WOM plays in the communication mix, which is even more pronounced today given that WOM interactions are readily available through online platforms and consumers have become more resistant to firm-generated messages (Trusov et al., 2009). Therefore, there has been an increase in calls to view WOM as an integral part of every company's communications mix (see Chen & Xie, 2008; Keller, 2007). Especially within the service context, WOM is unarguably important due mainly to service intangibility, which results in pre-purchase evaluation difficulty and ultimately a relatively higher perceived risk.

We draw upon the heuristic-systematic information processing model (Chaiken, 1980) to develop our hypotheses. Then, we discuss the methodology, including experimental procedures and measurements, as well as the findings of two experiments in which we examine consumers' attitudes and intentions after exposure to concrete versus abstract goal-oriented messages and endorsements generated by strong versus weak ties. Specifically, in Study 1 (A and B), we examine services varying in their level of perceived risk associated with the decision-making process, and in Study 2 (A and B), we further test our underlying process assumption. We conclude the paper with discussions and managerial implications.

Conceptual Underpinnings: Key Concepts

Tie Strength

Based on the strength of the relationship that consumers have with the source of the recommendation, researchers have identified two types of word-of-mouth, namely, strong versus weak-tie word-of-mouth (e.g., Duhan et al., 1997; Granovetter, 1973). In describing tie strength, Duhan et al. (1997) state that "WOM recommendation sources can be classified according to the closeness of the relationship between the decision-maker and the recommendation sources [...] the tie strength of a relationship is defined as strong if the source is someone who knows the decision-maker personally" (p. 284).

WOM seems to be more prevalent and valued when people generating the message are friends or family members (strong ties) versus customers rating a product online (weak ties) (see Baker, Donthu & Kumar, 2016; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Choi, Seo, & Yoon, 2017; Gilly et al., 1998). However, in an online shopping context, research shows that consumer reviews (i.e., weak ties) can be used to reduce consumers' uncertainty by confirming their purchase decisions with comments from peer consumers about product-related information (Brumfield, 2008; Hogg, 2000; Hu et al., 2008). Moreover, testimonials from an ordinary or typical consumer with product experience can be very persuasive (Ahn & Bailenson, 2014; Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Wu & Shaffer, 1987), and the inclusion of endorsers in advertisements leads to favourable attitudes towards products (Raju et al., 2002). Although these findings have certainly increased our knowledge base, additional research is needed to better determine when and how purchase decisions for services are influenced by strong-tie versus weak-tie endorsements, especially when accompanied by advertising featuring concrete versus abstract claims.

Abstract versus Concrete Messages

Goals play a crucial role not only in our daily lives but also in our day-to-day activities. Marketing literature provides extensive research on goal-directed behaviour, with a specific focus on how consumer goals influence decision-making (see Lee & Ariely, 2006; Peterman, 1997; Ratneshwar et al., 1996). In this regard, it has been seen that goals can vary in the level of abstractness; they can be higher-order or abstract (e.g., life themes like 'I want to be comfortable and secured in life') versus lower-order or concrete (e.g., product preferences like 'I prefer to buy MacBook Air because it's thin'). Further, research shows that an abstract versus concrete mindset can be activated by manipulating the focus of the persuasion messages into messages with abstract versus concrete goals, achieved by varying the information provided in the advertising claims (White et al., 2011). For instance, Chen and Chiu (2015) indicate that a message highlighting "ways to go green" activates a concrete "how" construal level mindset, whereas a message emphasising "reasons to go green" activates an abstract "why" construal.

Existing research strongly suggests that a concrete appeal is typically more influential than an abstract appeal

in affecting consumers' responses to advertising. For example, Darley and Smith (1993) find that compared to subjective appeals, objective appeals with a concrete description of product characteristics produce more favourable perceptions of brand attitudes and thus more favourable purchase intentions. Stafford and Day (1995) show that, in the retail service advertising context, rational appeals containing factual information lead to more positive ad attitudes than emotional appeals, which include subjective, evaluative properties, for both utilitarian and hedonic services. However, Choi et al. (2017) show that the effectiveness of concrete versus abstract messages (in increasing sharing behaviour) is dependent on the purchase situation. Specifically, senders are motivated to share information with their strong-tie audiences according to whether the concreteness of a message is congruent with their perceptions of temporal distance (i.e., higher likelihood to share concrete pictorial messages with their friends if they expect the purchase to occur in the near future).

Hypotheses Development

Whereas research has in general found that WOM between strong ties is more powerful than that between weak ties, we argue that tie strength cannot fully explain consumers' purchase decisions of services varying in levels of risk. We instead propose that tie strength affects consumers' decision-making depending upon consumers' level of mental representation of the service activated by the type of goal (abstract versus concrete) emphasised in advertising as well as the level of risk associated with the service. We draw upon the heuristic-systematic information processing model (Chaiken, 1980) to develop our hypotheses.

Based on this model (Chaiken, 1980), individuals process information from persuasion messages either heuristically or systematically. Systematic processing involves a relatively high amount of cognitive capacity and processing effort and is generally controlled and intentional. In contrast, heuristic processing involves relatively little cognitive capacity and processing effort, resulting in people focusing "on that subset of available information that enables them to use simple inferential rules, schemata or cognitive heuristics to formulate their judgements and decisions" (Chaiken et al., 1989, 212).

Building on this distinction between concrete and abstract goals, we argue that consumers engage in different types of information processing depending on which conceptual level is made salient via the advertising message (see also Bülbül & Menon, 2010). Specifically, if concrete thinking is primed via advertising, people are more likely to engage in systematic processing, which is most conducive to the processing of concrete messages such as service details and service attribute descriptions (Chaiken, 1980). On the other hand, if abstract thinking is primed, people are more likely to use heuristic processing, which involves the use of cues rather than a step-by-step rational decision-making process.

Further, heuristic processing, characterised by the use of cues for ease of decision-making and less cognitive effort (Chaiken, 1980; Trumbo, 1999; Griffin et al., 1999), has been associated with low-risk situations (Trumbo, 1999). Systematic processing, on the other hand, characterised by greater motivation, effortful scrutiny, and comparative evaluation of given information (Chaiken, 1980; Trumbo, 1999), has been associated with decisions involving high perceived risk.

Thus, a good match seems to exist between low-risk service decisions and abstract goal-focused messages due to the heuristic nature of information processing, as well as high-risk service decisions and concrete goal-focused messages due to the systematic nature of information processing.

However, there are many situations in which there is a mismatch between the goal-focused message in advertising and the level of risk associated with the service (e.g., low-risk services promoted with concrete goals or high-risk services promoted with abstract goals). In such situations, we argue that word-of-mouth can work to alleviate the discrepancy between a service's level of risk and the type of goal promoted in advertising, based on whether it comes from strong ties or weak ties, which in turn should result in higher behavioural intentions.

With regard to the mode of information processing, friends and family recommendations (strong-tie WOM) seem to be a good fit with heuristic processing, whereas online customer ratings (weak-tie WOM) seem to be more compatible with systematic processing due to its more rationalistic approach. Indeed, Duhan et al. (1997) find that if affective (instead of rational) evaluative

cues are important in decision-making, people rely more on strong-tie (versus weak-tie) recommendations. Furthermore, weak-tie WOM sources appear to be more conducive to the flow of information (Brown & Reingen, 1987) and are more likely to be sought when instrumental cues, which require systematic processing of information, are involved in decision-making.

Therefore, based on these findings, we postulate that, in high-risk situations, priming an abstract thinking style via advertising will result in a 'risk level – goal type' mismatch in information processing style, making consumers unable or unwilling to process the information heuristically in a context that would normally imply systematic information processing. Weak-tie endorsements involve a concrete and systematic processing style that matches that of high-risk services and thus should reduce the negative effect of the mismatch on the service evaluation. By contrast, when concrete-focused messages are used to promote high-risk services, people will not experience any mismatch in processing style, and thus their evaluation of the service should be unaffected by the endorsement's tie strength.

Following the same rationale, if lower-risk services are promoted using concrete goal-focused messages, creating a 'risk level – goal type' mismatch in the processing style, encouraging strong-tie endorsements (WOM) with advertising should alleviate the discrepancy and result in better service evaluations than weak-tie endorsements. By contrast, if a low-risk service is promoted using abstract-focused messages, customers should not experience any mismatch in processing style, and thus consumers' evaluation of the message should be unaffected by the endorsement's tie strength.

Thus, we posit that:

H1: For low-risk services, there is a message goal by tie-strength interaction, such that for concrete (but not abstract) goal-focused messages, individuals' (i) attitude, (ii) expectations, and (iii) willingness to purchase are higher for messages with strong-tie (versus weak-tie) endorsements.

H2: For high-risk services, there is a message goal-by-tie strength interaction, such that for abstract (but not concrete) goal-focused messages, individuals' (i) attitude, (ii) expectations, and (iii) willingness to purchase are higher for messages with weak-tie (versus strong-tie) endorsements.

Study 1

In Study 1, we examine consumers' responses to advertising messages including concrete versus abstract goals as well as strong-tie versus weak-tie endorsements in the context of low-risk (Study 1A) and high-risk (Study 1B) services.

Method

Stimuli Development

To select service domains with varying levels of risk, we conducted a pretest with twenty participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk who rated seven service-related decision scenarios (e.g., You are trying to make an airline reservation for your next vacation) on a Likert-type scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), measuring the risk they associate with each scenario (e.g., I am concerned about the possibility of making a wrong choice; I worry about the risk involved with a wrong choice, etc.). Based on the results, we chose airline and car insurance as low-risk services and medical services as high-risk. The average scores of the seven services tested were significantly different for all three combinations of pairs ($p < .05$; medical ($M = 5.93$) and airline ($M = 3.75$) with highest and lowest means).

Next, 103 undergraduate students participated in a post-hoc test to check for goal type as well as tie-strength manipulation effectiveness. For the tie-strength manipulation check, respondents were asked to assume that, when making a purchase decision about a service, they browse through several online customer reviews about the brand (weak ties) or talk to some of their friends and family members for recommendations about the brand (strong ties). On a scale of 1 (weak connection) to 7 (strong connection), they indicated their level of connection with the individual sources was significantly stronger in the case of recommendations from the family ($M = 6.18$) versus customer ratings ($M = 5.36$, $t(102) = 7.28$, $p < .001$), showing successful manipulation of tie-strength.

Further, for the goal type manipulation check, participants were randomly exposed to the abstract versus concrete goal ads promoting low- versus high-risk services. For goal manipulation, the focus of the advertising message was

on higher-order goal characteristics like life themes (e.g., health, safety) (see Ratneshwar et al., 1996) in the abstract goal condition and on lower-order goal characteristics like product attributes (e.g., customer service, pricing strategy) in the concrete goal condition. To rate the ad on its level of abstractness or concreteness, participants responded to a 1–7 semantic differential question, with 1 being abstract claims or 'higher order themes like overall life goals and meanings' and 7 being concrete claims or 'lower order themes like specific product attributes'. As expected, irrespective of the type of service portrayed in the ads, there was a main effect of goal type. The abstract ads were considered to portray significantly higher order themes ($M = 2.57$) than the concrete ads ($M = 3.27$; $t(99) = 4.49$, $p < .05$), indicating a successful manipulation of goal type.

Dependent Variables

We measured three dependent variables: (i) attitude towards the ad, a global affect measure, (ii) expectancy, a cognitive measure and (iii) purchase intention, a conation measure. Attitude towards the ad was measured by three 1–9 point semantic differential items: "What is your attitude towards this ad?" (9/ Really like: 1/ Really dislike, Favourable: Unfavourable, Positive: Negative; Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$). Expectations towards the services in the ad were measured by two 9-point semantic differential items: "How would you describe your expectations regarding the service in this ad?" (9/Very High: 1/Very low, Expect a lot: Do not expect much; Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$). Willingness to buy the service/product was measured by five semantic differential 7-point items focused on purchase regarding the service (e.g., If I were going to buy an air ticket, the probability of buying this brand would be: 7/ Very high: 1/ Very low; Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$). For all the dependent variables, measurement items were averaged to obtain a single score.

Study 1A (Low-Risk Service)

Method

One-hundred and fifteen students from a southwestern university participated in a 2 (goal: abstract versus concrete) \times 2 [WOM tie strength: strong (friends and family recommendations) versus weak (customer ratings)]

online experiment “about insurance” (a low-risk service). Participants first viewed the assigned insurance print ad, which included either abstract goals (safety) or concrete goals (money saving). Then, they were randomly assigned to either a strong-tie or a weak-tie WOM condition. In the strong-tie condition, they were presented with the following scenario: “Before making the final decision of whether or not to purchase this insurance, you also want to talk to someone you trust for such a decision. Thus, you decide to call your cousin, your uncle, and your best friend,” which was followed by quotes from the conversations with them. In the weak-tie condition, participants were asked to imagine that, “before making the final decision of whether or not to purchase this insurance, you also want to read some customer reviews to help with your decision.” Next, they were presented with three customer reviews, which were identical to the family and friends’ recommendations (see Appendix I for the tie strength manipulation). Finally, the participants answered the dependent variable questions.

Results

We ran 2 (abstract versus concrete goal) X 2 (tie strength) ANOVAs with attitude towards the ad, expectations towards the service, and willingness to buy the service as the dependent variables. We found a significant goal type by tie-strength interaction for two of the three dependent variables and one marginally significant interaction for one dependent variable ($F_{Attitude} (1, 111) = 3.51, p < .1$; $F_{Expectation} (1, 111) = 4.67, p < .05$; $F_{Willingness} (1, 111) = 8.09, p < .01$). Further, follow-up analyses showed that, in the concrete goal advertising condition, participants exposed to strong-tie WOM (friends and family recommendations) had higher positive ratings than those exposed to weak-tie WOM (customer ratings). Specifically, seeing recommendations from friends and family as opposed to customer ratings led to more positive attitudes ($M = 6.23$ versus $M = 5.35$; $t (51) = 2.77, p < .01$), higher expectations towards the service ($M = 6.50$ versus $M = 5.56$; $t (51) = 3.11, p < .01$), and greater willingness to purchase the service ($M = 5.82$ versus $M = 4.44$; $t (51) = 4.55, p < .001$), if people were first exposed to concrete goal claims in advertising. However, if they were exposed to abstract goals in advertising, no such differences were observed for any of the three dependent

variables (see Table 1). Thus, this supports our H1 (see Fig. 1 in which attitude towards the ad is used as the illustrative dependent variable).

Table 1: Study 1A (Low/Moderate Risk Service) Results (Means and Statistical Differences)

	<i>Strong-Tie WOM</i>	<i>Weak-Tie WOM</i>	<i>t (df)</i>
Concrete Goals			
Attitude towards the ad	6.23	5.35	2.77 (51)**
Expectations towards the service	6.50	5.56	3.11 (51)**
Willingness to purchase	5.82	4.44	4.55 (51)***
Abstract Goals			
Attitude towards the ad	5.72	5.64	< .1 (60)
Expectations towards the service	6.27	6.17	< .1 (60)
Willingness to purchase	5.46	5.24	< .1 (60)

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

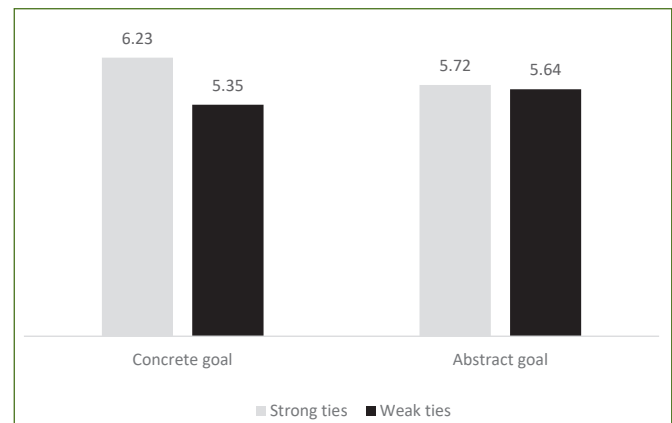


Fig. 1: Attitude toward the Ad for Low/Moderate-Risk Services (Study 1A) (Means)

In addition to this, not germane to our hypotheses, there was also a main effect of tie strength across all three dependent variables: (i) attitude towards the ad ($F (1, 111) = 4.91, p < .05$), (ii) expectations towards the service ($F (1, 111) = 7.11, p < .01$), and (iii) willingness to buy the service ($F (1, 111) = 15.57, p < .001$), with strong-tie endorsements resulting in more positive responses than weak-tie endorsements. No other effects in the ANOVAs were significant.

Study 1B (High-Risk Service)

Method

Eighty students from a northeastern university participated in a study “about medical services,” a high-risk service. Participants first viewed the assigned medical print ad, which emphasised either a concrete goal (“for things that matter most, get the most *sophisticated mechanism*”) or an abstract goal (peace of mind). Next, they were randomly assigned to either a strong-tie or a weak-tie scenario condition, which was identical to the one in Study 1A (see Appendix I), and then answered the dependent variable questions.

Results

We ran 2 (abstract versus concrete goal) \times 2 (tie strength) ANOVAs with attitude towards the ad, expectations towards the service, and willingness to buy the service as the dependent variables. The results showed a significant goal type by tie-strength interaction for two of the three dependent variables ($F_{Attitude} (1, 76) = 4.24, p < .05$; $F_{Expectation} (1, 76) = 4.13, p < .05$; $F_{Willingness} (1, 76) < 1, p > .3$). Follow-up analyses show that, in the abstract goal advertising condition, participants exposed to customer ratings (weak-tie WOM) had more positive ratings than those exposed to friends and family recommendations (strong-tie WOM) on two out of the three dependent variables. Specifically, seeing customer reviews as opposed to getting recommendations from friends and family led to more positive attitudes ($M = 6.23$ versus $M = 5.41$; $t (38) = 2.53, p < .05$) (see Fig. 2) and marginally higher expectations ($M = 6.15$ versus $M = 5.45$; $t (38) = 1.72, p < .10$), if people were first exposed to abstract goal claims in advertising. The effect on purchase intention was non-significant ($M = 5.72$ versus $M = 5.56$; $t (1, 38) < 1, p > .5$) (see Table 2). In the case of concrete goal-focused ads, there were no significant differences between the two tie-strength conditions. Thus, H2 is partially supported.

Table 2: Study 1B (High Risk Service) Results (Means and Statistical Differences)

	<i>Strong-Tie WOM</i>	<i>Weak-Tie WOM</i>	<i>t (df)</i>
Concrete Goals			
Attitude towards the ad	5.88	5.60	< .1 (38)

	<i>Strong-Tie WOM</i>	<i>Weak-Tie WOM</i>	<i>t (df)</i>
Expectations towards the service	6.31	5.79	1.18 (38)
Willingness to purchase	5.92	5.67	< .1 (38)
Abstract Goals			
Attitude towards the ad	5.41	6.23	2.53 (38)*
Expectations towards the service	5.45	6.15	1.72 (38) ^a
Willingness to purchase	5.56	5.72	< .1 (38)

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

^a Difference marginally significant at $p < .10$

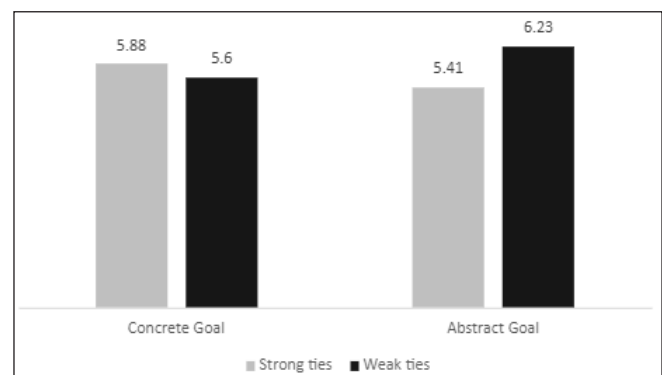


Fig. 2: Attitude toward the Ad for High-Risk Services (Study 1B) (Means)

Study 1 Discussion

Across two different types of service industries, our studies show how ads framed with different goal types match the levels of risk associated with various services. Specifically, we show that for low-risk services, consumers exposed to concrete goals in advertisements have a more positive response to the ads if the ads are accompanied by strong-tie versus weak-tie endorsements. No such difference is observed if consumers see advertisements with abstract goals. On the other hand, in the case of high-risk services, abstract goals in advertising are more effective when accompanied by consumer reviews or weak-tie endorsements instead of friend and family recommendations or strong-tie endorsements. However, there is no difference between the two types of endorsements when concrete goals are presented in ads for high-risk services. Overall, the results indicate that the endorsement’s tie strength differentially affects consumers’ evaluation of the ad message and

purchase intentions based on the match (or lack thereof) between perceived risk level and goal type emphasised in advertising. In the next study, we will explore the underlying process of perceived risk variance.

Study 2

Study 2 investigates the underlying rationale behind such uniquely different results across low-risk services (Study 2A) and high-risk services (Study 2B).

Study 2A

In Study 2A, the main objective was to artificially elevate the perceived risk level for an otherwise low-risk service (airline). Thus, we primed consumers to think about airlines as a high-risk service and hoped to replicate the effects found for high-risk services in Study 1B. Further, we only considered ads with abstract goal-oriented messages, as concrete goal-oriented messages did not yield tie-strength effects in the high-risk service context decision scenario used in Study 1B.

Procedure

One hundred and fifty-three respondents selected from Amazon Mechanical Turk participated for monetary incentive in a 2 (no priming versus increased level risk priming) \times 2 (tie strength: strong tie versus weak tie) online experiment where respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. Participants were first primed (versus not primed) about the growing danger of airline travel (see Appendix II), and then they viewed the assigned abstract goal-oriented ads claiming that “Nobody thinks about your safety like us,” that were accompanied by the text: “4 (out of 5) star Customer Ratings [304 ratings]” in the weak-tie WOM condition and “Recommended by 87% of your friends and family” in the strong-tie WOM condition.

A post-hoc test was run on Amazon Mechanical Turk with 143 participants to examine whether the risk priming manipulation was successful. Respondents were presented with the risk scenarios and asked to respond to

a 1–4 point scaled question regarding choosing an airline service (1-Almost no risk, 4-High risk). As expected, choosing an airline service posed significantly more risk in the increased risk (versus no risk) priming condition ($M = 2.67$ versus $M = 2.26$; $t(141) = 3.32$, $p = .001$), indicating the effectiveness of the additional risk priming manipulation.

Results

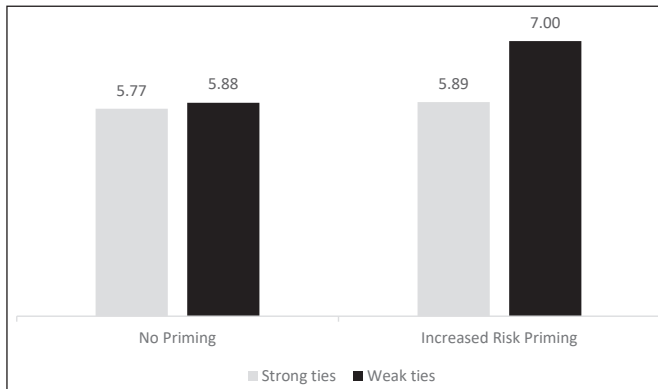
We ran 2 (no priming versus increased risk priming) \times 2 (tie strength: strong tie versus weak tie) ANOVAs with attitude towards the ad, expectations regarding the service, and willingness to purchase the service as the dependent variables. Results showed a significant increased risk priming by tie strength interaction for two of the three dependent variables ($F_{Attitude}(1, 149) = 3.8$, $p = .05$; $F_{Expectation}(1, 149) < 1$, $p > .3$; $F_{Willingness}(1, 149) = 5.95$, $p < .05$). As expected, if participants were primed to perceive airlines as high risk, the results replicated those found in Study 1 for the high-risk service. Specifically, when being exposed to abstract claims in advertising, participants seeing the customer reviews (weak-tie WOM) versus those receiving recommendations from friends and family (strong-tie WOM) had a significantly more positive attitude towards the messages ($M = 7.00$ versus $M = 5.89$; $t(70) = 3.49$, $p = .001$) (see Fig. 3), and a higher willingness to purchase ($M = 4.83$ versus $M = 4.28$; $t(70) = 2.08$, $p < .05$). The effects on expectations of the service were not significant (see Table 3). Thus, H2 is supported for two of the three dependent variables. Further, when risk level was not manipulated (no priming condition), there was no difference between weak-tie and strong-tie WOM on any of the three dependent variables, replicating the results from Study 1A and providing support for H1.

In addition to this, not germane to our hypotheses, (i) for attitude towards the ad, there was also a main effect of tie-strength ($F(1, 149) = 4.39$, $p < .05$) and risk priming ($F(1, 149) = 5.63$, $p < .05$), (ii) for expectations, there was a main effect of risk priming ($F(1, 149) = 10.13$, $p < .01$), and (iii) for willingness to buy the service, there was a main effect of risk priming ($F(1, 149) = 7.31$, $p < .01$). No other effects in the ANOVAs were significant.

Table 3: Study 2A (Increased Risk Priming) Results (Means and Statistical Differences)

	<i>Strong-Tie WOM</i>	<i>Weak-Tie WOM</i>	<i>t (df)</i>
Increased Risk Priming			
Attitude towards the ad	5.89	7.00	3.49 (70)***
Expectations towards the service	6.66	6.74	< .1 (70)
Willingness to purchase	4.28	4.83	2.08 (70)*
No Priming (Low Risk Level)			
Attitude towards the ad	5.88	5.77	< .1 (80)
Expectations towards the service	5.90	5.44	< .1 (80)
Willingness to purchase	4.23	3.76	1.30 (80)

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

**Fig. 3: Attitude toward the Ad for Increased Risk Priming Condition (Study 2A) (Means)**

Discussion

Study 2A shows that priming consumers to think about a low-risk service, such as an airline, as relatively riskier replicates the results found in Study 1B for high-risk services, namely, medical services. Indeed, priming consumers to consider airlines as high-risk services results in a more positive ad attitude and a greater willingness to purchase the service when weak-tie (as opposed to strong-tie) endorsements accompany abstract, goal-focused ad messages. Further, as expected, the abstract ads did not elicit tie strength effects when the risk level of airlines was not manipulated (i.e., under normal conditions or low-risk service). This is an indication that the results are driven by the level of perceived risk that consumers associate with the service.

Study 2B

The main objective of Study 2B was to try to replicate the tie-strength effects found in Study 1 for low-risk services by artificially attenuating the perceived risk level associated with the medical service, which is normally perceived as high-risk. Further, we only considered ads with concrete goal-oriented messages, as abstract goal-oriented messages did not yield tie strength effects in low-risk service decision scenarios in Study 1.

Procedure

One hundred and five respondents selected from Amazon Mechanical Turk participated for monetary incentive in a 2 (no priming versus decreased level risk priming) \times 2 (tie strength: strong-tie versus weak-tie) online experiment where respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. Participants were first primed (versus not primed) about the decreasing risk of engaging in medical services (see Appendix II), and then they viewed the assigned concrete goal-oriented ad with the following claim: “For things that matter the most, get the most sophisticated mechanisms.” Tie strength was manipulated by adding the claim that the medical service had “4 (out of 5) star Customer Ratings [304 ratings]” in the weak-tie WOM condition or that it was “Recommended by 87% of your friends and family” in the strong-tie WOM condition. A post-hoc test was run with 159 participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk to examine whether the risk priming manipulation was successful. As expected, the participants responded that choosing a medical service posed significantly less risk in case of the decreased risk priming versus no priming condition (2.98 versus 3.29; $t(157) = 2.20$, $p = .05$), indicating the effectiveness of the additional risk priming manipulation.

Results

We ran 2 (no priming versus decreased risk priming) \times 2 (tie strength) ANOVAs with attitude towards the ad, expectations towards the service, and willingness to purchase the service as the dependent variables. The 2 \times 2 ANOVA with attitude towards the ad as the dependent variable showed a significant risk of priming by message type interaction ($F(1, 101) = 4.47$, $p < .05$). Follow-up analyses showed that, when primed to think about medical

services as low-risk, participants had a significantly more positive attitude towards the concrete goal advertising claims when accompanied by strong-tie (versus weak-tie) WOM ($M = 7.16$ versus $M = 6.26$; $t(63) = 2.14$, $p < .05$) (see Fig. 4). No results for the two other dependent variables were significant, so H1 is only partially supported (see Table 4). No differences existed for the no priming condition between strong-tie and weak-tie WOM on people's reactions to concrete goal advertising claims. This replicates the results of Study 1B and is consistent with H2.

Table 4: Study 2B (Decreased Risk Priming) Results (Means and Statistical Differences)

	<i>Strong-Tie WOM</i>	<i>Weak-Tie WOM</i>	<i>t (df)</i>
Decreased Risk Priming			
Attitude towards the ad	7.16	6.26	2.14 (63)*
Expectations towards the service	7.40	6.66	1.60 (63) ^a
Willingness to purchase	5.09	4.59	1.28 (63)
No Priming (Low Risk Level)			
Attitude towards the ad	7.03	7.61	< .1 (38)
Expectations towards the service	6.86	7.47	1.03 (38)
Willingness to purchase	4.98	5.07	<.1 (38)

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

^a Difference marginally significant at $p = .10$

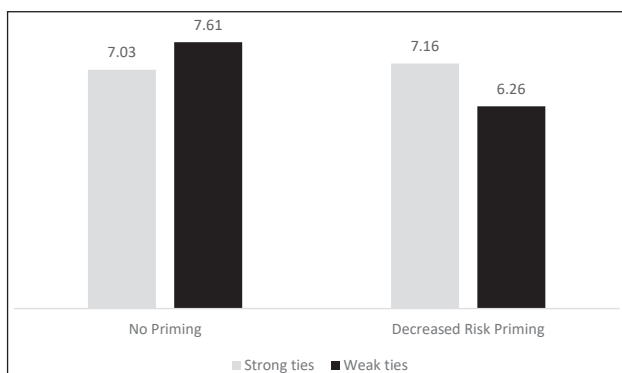


Fig. 4: Attitude toward the Ad for Decreased Risk Priming Condition (Study 2B) (Means)

Discussions

In Study 2B, we aimed to replicate the results of Study 1A by artificially attenuating the risk level associated with a

service that is normally perceived as high-risk (medical service). Specifically, priming consumers to consider medical services as relatively lower risk services (instead of high-risk) resulted in a positive attitude towards strong-tie endorsements (as opposed to weak-tie endorsements) when concrete goals were featured in advertising. Further, the concrete ads did not elicit tie strength effects in the “no priming” condition, which replicated the findings from Study 1 for high-risk services. This is again an indication that the results are driven by the level of perceived risk associated with the service. However, non-significant results for two of the three dependent variables, expectations and willingness towards the service, indicate that although the perceived risk from the ad could be decreased, decreasing the perception of risk associated with a service that is otherwise high-risk, like medical services, might be challenging.

General Discussions and Managerial Implications

In this research, we focus on WOM as an integral part of a company's communication efforts. Specifically, we examine how goal-oriented messages emphasised in advertising for services varying in their level of perceived risk and WOM's tie strength influence the effectiveness of the communication. In a set of two studies, we found that both tie strength and type of goal influence consumers' responses to advertising. However, more important was the differential effect of tie strength and goal type based on the perceived risk of the service. Based on our assumption that a good match exists between low-risk service decisions and abstract goal-focused messages, with both involving heuristic processing, as well as between high-risk service decisions and concrete goal-focused messages that employ systematic processing, we find intriguing results for the mismatched conditions.

Specifically, for low-risk services associated with heuristic processing, consumers have little motivation to process the information in-depth and thus prefer those messages accompanied by strong-tie (versus weak-tie) WOM when presented with concrete information in advertising. However, for high-risk services associated with systematic processing, consumers prefer messages accompanied by weak-tie WOM such as consumer ratings (versus recommendations from friends and family) when faced with abstract information in advertising. Finally, in

Study 2, we empirically manipulated our assumptions that the perceived risk associated with the service is indeed explaining the differential effect of goal type and tie strength on ad effectiveness and were able to replicate the results from Study 1 by artificially increasing (decreasing) the risk of a low-risk (high-risk) service. These results make a significant contribution to the service literature and have important managerial implications.

From a theoretical standpoint, our research indicates a rather intricate relationship among goal abstraction (concrete versus abstract), WOM (weak ties versus strong ties) and the risk level (low versus high) of the service. Our findings illustrate that conceptual fit explains why consumers express diverging attitudes towards an ad highlighting concrete versus abstract goals. Indeed, when there is a lack of congruency between the types of information processing related to the goal type and risk level of the service, WOM's tie-strength would restore the balance towards the "right" information processing type based on the service's perceived risk level. Thus, we extend the WOM (and its associated tie strength) research by including the heuristic-systematic information processing model (Chaiken, 1980).

As goals are frequently woven into marketing communications, it is important to be cognizant of their effectiveness based on the perceived level of risk of the service as well as other sources of information, such as WOM from strong or weak ties, that consumers may incorporate into their decision. Our findings indicate that, if marketers need to include concrete goals in advertising for services with low levels of risk, such a "concrete goals – low-risk service" mismatch would be balanced by the "right" endorsement tie-strength, that is, recommendations coming from friends and family (strong-tie WOM). On the other hand, if abstract messages need to be promoted in advertising in a high-risk setting, the "abstract goals – high-risk service" mismatch would be balanced if the ad would also include information about customer ratings and reviews (weak-tie WOM).

In support of these implications, we next provide several examples of how various companies approach their brand communication via advertising and suggest ways in which word-of-mouth could be incorporated to increase advertising effectiveness. To illustrate, Allstate, an auto insurance company, may want to promote its services by

incorporating abstract messages (e.g., you are in good hands) or concrete messages (e.g., drivers who switch save \$498 per year on average...). Although the former message provides the best match for this type of service (i.e., low risk) with regard to how the information is processed (i.e., heuristically), Allstate may decide to use the latter message in advertising, which results in a "concrete goals – low-risk service" mismatch. To restore balance and increase the effectiveness of the advertising message, Allstate can encourage consumers to get more information from their strong-tie sources. Although that may seem like a difficult goal to achieve, in the online environment, digital marketers could encourage the spread of electronic WOM by developing stronger interpersonal relationships among consumers, perhaps by fostering online communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia 2006) and considering cultural congruency (Ko et al., 2015). In addition, companies can incorporate referral programmes into their promotional mix. Capital One, for example, is promising up to \$500 for "referring your friends and family" to open a QuickSilver credit card. The referral person sends a link to his or her friend, who can start the application by clicking on the link. Given that a credit card is a low-risk situation, the strong-tie endorsements (i.e., Your friend ____ thinks you'll love a Capital One Quicksilver Rewards card) should increase the effectiveness of the message on the landing page promoting concrete features of the credit card, such as 1.5% cash back and no annual fees.

On the other hand, for a high-risk service industry, the relatively abstract Yale-New Haven's 'No comparison' TV commercial can be further improved upon by adding some additional information in advertising, such as customer ratings and reviews, or by encouraging consumers to seek information from weak-tie sources.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although our study offers novel contributions, it has several limitations, some of which can provide scope for future inquiry. In our research, we argue that the effects of goal-oriented advertising messages and WOM on consumers' evaluations of services can be explained by whether consumers engage in heuristic or systematic processing when receiving information from these various sources. Future individual difference variables that make

individuals more or less prone to heuristic versus systematic processing, thus interacting with the variables included in this research, should also be examined in future research. For example, high (versus low) need for cognition (Cohen et al., 1955) consumers may be more likely to engage in systematic processing as opposed to heuristic processing. High self-efficacy individuals (Bandura, 1986) express greater confidence in their ability to process information; thus, they may not trust consumer reviews when deciding on a service. Consequently, research could examine such variables, which may provide more insights into the effects observed in our study.

Our study shows that the differential effect of customer endorsements for ads promoting either abstract or concrete goals is not due simply to the type of service being promoted but to the level of risk associated with the service. Although we manipulate the service's level of risk to test our assumptions, we have not directly measured heuristic versus systematic processing. Thus, future research could include protocols for measuring the type of information processing that individuals engage in. It will also be interesting to investigate the role played by different types of WOM content (text, video, pictures, etc.), as textual versus pictorial information may involve different types of information processing (see Choi et al., 2017). Moreover, we hope that future research will test our findings in other product categories as well (such as those with a higher level of tangibility), to extend the findings of the present work.

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APPENDIX I

Tie-Strength Manipulation (Study 1A)

Exposure to a Concrete or Abstract Ad followed by the instructions below:	
Weak-tie: “Before making the final decision of whether or not to purchase this insurance, you also want to read some customer reviews to help with your decision. Here is what you find online: ”	Strong-tie: “Before making the final decision of whether or not to purchase this insurance, you also want to talk to someone you trust for such a decision. Thus, you decide to call your cousin, your uncle, and your best friend. The following are direct quotes from your conversations with them: ”
An illustration of a customer review (accompanied by a 5/5-star rating by ‘Lori from Fairfield, CT’) in the concrete condition: <i>‘I have this insurance for my car for the last 11 years. We are very pleased with it, and our daughter just bought her first car and we highly recommended our insurance company to her. It gives us the protection we need during the most difficult times. Thanks for all you do!’</i>	An illustration of a friends and family direct quote (by ‘Rik, your best friend’) in the concrete condition: <i>‘The insurance provider was outstanding on a hail damage claim on our auto earlier this year. Their auto adjuster Brad visited our house at 7.45 am to accommodate my 9.00 am office meeting! Customer service is simply excellent.’</i>
Note: 3 customer reviews or 3 direct quotes were provided in each case. The customer review comments and direct quotes for friends and family recommendations were exactly the same, except for the customer name, location, with a star rating versus friend or family member name and relationship.	

APPENDIX II

Risk Priming Manipulation (Study 2)

Increased Level of Risk Priming (Study 2A)

In order to make airline decision scenarios riskier in nature, additional risk priming was in the form of a news flash. The goal was to make individuals aware of the hazards of airline travel and thus increase the level of perceived risk associated with air travel. An illustration:

The text of the news flash started with:

“A study in the Journal of Environmental Health Research found that colds may be more than a hundred times more likely to be transmitted on a plane than during normal daily life on the ground... Tests on seat belts showed that they were filthy, containing bacteria that live in our gut and our intestines. These are dangerous bacteria that cause serious infections,” Today News.”

Then, the news flash text also contained recent instances of airline fatalities:

“Quite a few Fatal Passenger Plane Incidents recently.... Some recent plane crashes across the world: August 2016; Emirates 777-300; near Dubai, UAE; July 2016;.....”

Decreased Level of Risk Priming (Study 2B)

In order to make medical decision scenarios less risky in nature, decreased level of risk priming was in the form of a news flash focusing on some uplifting developments regarding breakthrough, relatively more powerful and individualized cancer treatments. The idea was to make individuals aware of some of the positive aspects of critical health issues, with the aim of deemphasizing the worry or anxiety associated with healthcare choices, if possible at all.

The news flash incorporated text like:

“Precision medicine, immunotherapy, clinical trials ... Cancer treatments are becoming more powerful, less toxic, and increasingly individualized by patient and by tumor - new drugs and new therapies. ...Brain cancer 2016: Using CAR-T cell therapy to fight tumors.... ...NATIONAL CANCER INSTITUTE UPDATE: In the United States, cancer survivors have increased....”