

# Message Framing Strategy for Brand Communication

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Extant research has been conducted on *message framing* as an advertising strategy for brand communication, but discoveries are inconclusive and even conflicting. The current study, integrating theories of self-construal, prospect, and involvement as well as knowledge structure, proposes the Message Framing for Brand Communication (MFBC) model. As empirical examination of the MFBC model proves, *self-construal*, *consumer involvement*, and *product knowledge* are the three consumer characteristics moderating the persuasiveness that message framing generates at the dimensions of *advertising attitude*, *brand attitude*, and *purchase intention*. Applying the comprehensive framework of the MFBC model, brand communicators may find it more possible to maximize the persuasive function of message framing.

## INTRODUCTION

Message framing, a strategy of advertising message construction, is widely adopted in various forms of brand advertising campaigns. The hedonic principles of approach (happiness) and avoidance (pain), well established in motivation psychology, lay down the theoretical foundation upon which the core concept of message framing is developed (Wedell, 1997). The positive framing, centering on pursuit of positive outcomes of the product brand (such as monetary or psychological advantages), is underpinned by the approach principle to maximize happiness. In contrast, the negative framing, centering on departure from negative outcomes of the product brand (such as monetary or psychological losses), is based on the avoidance principle to minimize pain. A meat product brand, advertised as "75 percent lean" (positive framing) or "25 percent fat" (negative framing), is illustrative of how this strategy is used.

Despite its popularity, message framing has long been a controversial strategy in the academic and practical fields of brand communication. In recent years, a host of advertising researchers have con-

ducted empirical studies on its persuasive function, but discoveries are either inconclusive or conflicting from one another (e.g., Buda and Zhang, 2000; Shiv, Britton, and Payne, 2004). Obviously, there is a need to seek out a comprehensive framework to investigate message framing.

As Shiv, Britton, and Payne (2004) suggest, when examining the effects of message framing it is imperative to take into full account the major differences in fundamentally determining characteristics of the target audiences. Such approach helps brand communicators avoid getting stuck in episodic factors, and then go straight to investigate key factors and make judicious decision as to what type of framed advertising messages should be communicated to whom under which conditions. In response to this suggestion, the current study integrates theories of self-construal, prospect, and involvement as well as knowledge structure, proposing the Message Framing for Brand Communication (MFBC) model. With an elaborately designed research process to test the hypothesized premises according to the conceptual model, it is hoped that the current study may achieve the following objectives:

**Only when brand communicators comprehensively consider the major differences in fundamentally determining characteristics of the target audiences will they be able to make judicious decision as to what type of framed advertising messages should be employed.**

- (1) developing a comprehensive framework to investigate the persuasiveness that message framing generates;
- (2) adopting a multiple-phase experimentation method to verify the applicability of the proposed framework;
- (3) yielding research findings that may help to enhance our understanding of message framing; and
- (4) providing strategic implications that brand communicators may utilize to maximize the persuasive function of message framing.

#### CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

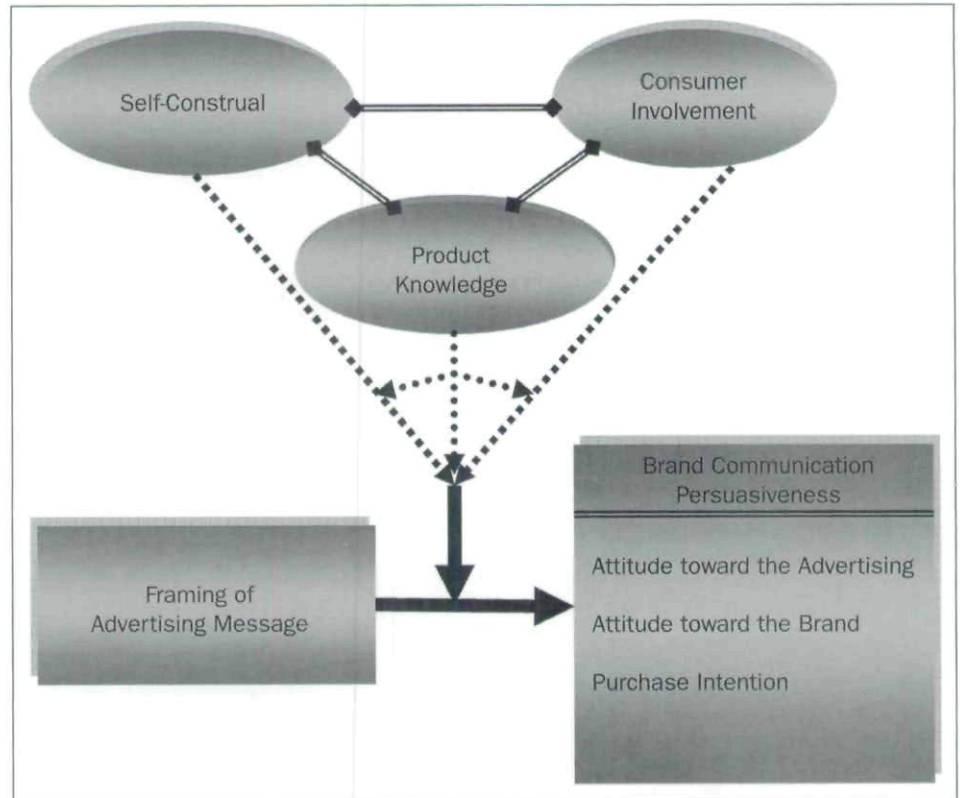
First, the current study proposes a conceptual model of MFBC, as shown in Figure 1. According to the model, without fully considering the moderation effects engendered by consumer characteristics, it is hardly possible to carry out an accurate examination on how and why framing of advertising message persuades consumers. The three consumer characteristics of self-construal, consumer involvement, and product knowledge are conceptualized as the key constructs, which moderate the persuasiveness that framing of advertising message generates at the dimensions of attitude toward the advertising, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention. The conceptualization of the MFBC model, along with six research hypotheses, is analyzed in detail in the next sections.

#### Brand communication persuasiveness

To define brand communication persuasiveness, researchers in general conceptualize attitude toward the advertising (*Aad*), attitude toward the brand (*AB*), and purchase intention (*PI*) as the three main dimensions of communication for a brand (e.g., Bruner and Hensel, 1992; Lafferty, Goldsmith, and Newell, 2002; MacKenzie

and Lutz, 1989; Tripp, Jensen, and Carlson, 1994). Message framing, widely used for brand communication, is meant to manipulate the advertising message into positive or negative frames in the hope that the audiences respond more favorably at these dimensions.

Brand communicators are advised by some researchers to present the advertising message in as positive a manner as possible to improve persuasiveness. However, this advocacy, attributable to a highly intuitive premise that people prefer the bright side to the dark side of things, does not receive sufficient empirical support (e.g., Chebat, Limoges, and Gélinas-Chebat, 1998). In contrast, several scholars contend that a negatively framed message elicits more cognitive elaboration, so negative framing can be more effective



**Figure 1** Message Framing for Brand Communication (MFBC) Model



than positive framing in leading the audience to process deeply the advertising appeal. This premise, as Shiv, Britton, and Payne (2004) evidence, also fails to be empirically supported when put to rigorous scrutiny. It was noted that the persuasive function of negative framing becomes pronounced only in the scenario in which the audiences are under condition of high processing motivation; under conditions of high processing motivation, negative framing is more effective than positive framing, irrespective of the level of processing opportunity.

Although message framing is popular among advertising planners, to decide in what ways it properly functions as a brand communication strategy can be a very difficult task. Numerous studies demonstrate that in terms of generating brand communication persuasiveness, positively framed and negatively framed messages are not necessarily significantly different from each other under many circumstances. Besides, in some cases neither type of framing proves persuasive to the target audiences (e.g., Menon, Block, and Ramanathan, 2002; Woodside and Singer, 1994; Zhang, Mittal, and Feick, 2003).

Shiv, Britton, and Payne (2004), in a research project based on a holistically formed theoretical foundation coupled with rigorous experiments, suggest that the persuasive function of positive versus negative framing very much depends on what message is communicated, to whom, and under which conditions. Researchers are called upon to first identify the consumer characteristics that may moderate the response to message framing and then enter them into the process examining the persuasiveness that message framing generates.

It is essential to recognize the fact that message framing is only an execution technique, which in itself does not serve a per-

suasiveness enhancer. As a review of literature indicates, self-construal, consumer involvement, and product knowledge are possibly the three consumer characteristics that moderate the response elicited from the audiences when they are exposed to positively or negatively framed messages of the brand advertisement. With none or just a part of these characteristics being considered as key moderators, chances are researchers may encounter serious difficulty in coming up with a framework theoretically sound enough to facilitate comprehensive investigation of message framing as a brand communication strategy.

H1: *Self-construal, consumer involvement, and product knowledge are three key moderators of the persuasiveness that framing of advertising message generates at the dimensions of Aad, AB, and PI.*

H1a: *The exact pattern in which framing of advertising message functions as a persuasiveness enhancer at the dimensions of Aad, AB, and PI is not examinable without self-construal, consumer involvement, and product knowledge being totally entered into the examination process.*

### **Self-construal**

According to social psychologists, there are two types of self-construal: independent and interdependent (e.g., Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee, 1999; Gudykunst and Lee, 2003; Lam, 2006; Oetzel, 2001). Independent self-construal refers to the view of the self as defined by attributes and characteristics that are personally unique and in contrast to social contexts, so the self is distinguished from others. Interdependent self-construal refers to the view of the self as defined by attributes and

characteristics that are not personally unique and in assimilation with social contexts, so the self is not encouraged to separate and distinguish from others. The two types of self-construal are found exerting systematic influence on consumer behavior, in terms of product choice and response to brand communication (e.g., Aaker and Lee, 2001; Hamilton, 2001; Roggeveen, Grewal, and Gotlieb, 2006; Tsai, 2005, 2006).

Empirical research shows that the behavioral propensity toward promotion or prevention focus in part extends from different types of self-construal, and such propensity impacts on one's decision-making strategy. Decision makers, whose behavioral propensity toward promotion is salient, tend to use the rejecting strategy focusing on the prevention-goal (negative) aspects of the options, and then reject among the undesirable ones. As for decision makers whose behavioral propensity toward prevention focus dominates, they prefer to use the choosing strategy focusing on the promotion-goal (positive) aspects of the options, and then downplay negative consequences these options may incur (e.g., Crow and Higgins, 1997; Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee, 1999; Zhang, Mittal, and Feick, 2003). Because the behavioral propensity toward promotion or prevention focus in part extends from different types of self-construal and preference for choosing or rejecting strategy is determined by such behavioral propensity, it is logical to theorize that there is causality between self-construal and message framing.

The theorization that self-construal and message framing are causally related has received empirical support from works of Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee (1999), Higgins et al. (2003), and Zhang, Mittal, and Feick (2003), among others. Specifically, the behavioral propensity toward



promotion focus, which in part extends from independent self-construal, prompts individuals to use the choosing strategy to seek positive consequences of actions; this propensity is exactly what positive framing should stand for. The behavioral propensity toward prevention focus, which in part extends from independent self-construal, prompts individuals to use the rejecting strategy to avoid negative consequences of actions; this propensity is just what negative framing aims to represent. People with independent self-construal can be more receptive to positively framed message featuring the choosing strategy to seek positive consequences derived from buying a product. As opposed to those with independent self-construal, people with interdependent self-construal are expected to be more receptive to negatively framed messages featuring the rejecting strategy to avoid negative consequences resultant from not buying a product.

H2: The consumers with *independent self-construal* respond more favorably to *positive framing of advertising message*, while those with the *interdependent self-construal* respond more favorably to *negative framing advertising message*

### Consumer involvement

Consumers are influenced by psychological schemas, which consist of specific concepts, beliefs, attitudes, lifestyles, and knowledge that develop and solidify in their evaluation system. These schemas serve as criteria for consumers to evaluate personal relevance to a product category, and then they apply these criteria to judging the potential risk in using or not using a certain product that belongs to the given product category. The extent of personal relevance and perceived risk that individual consumers feel toward a product category

is termed *consumer involvement*. Different psychological schemas lead to varied extent of personal relevance and perceived risk, so the same product category can also vary in the level of consumer involvement to different individuals (e.g., Gainer, 1993; Hornibrook and Fearne, 2003; Jia, Dyer, and Butler, 1999; Zaichkowsky, 1994).

As premised by prospect theory, personal relevance and perceived risk may moderate the ways people calculate gains and certainty of things. Ordinarily, individuals are more responsive to losses than to gains, while overweighting certainty and underweighting uncertainty. Because in many decision-making conditions uncertainty (the prospect of losses) more or less exists, the phenomenon of risk-averse for gains and risk-seeking for losses is often seen, which means people usually choose a smaller but certain gain rather than a larger but uncertain gain (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984; Levin, Baggerman, and Gaeth, 1991). But, the prospect theorists further indicate personal relevance and perceived risk can make people either less risk-averse for gains or less risk-seeking for losses (e.g., McCusker and Carnevale, 1995). Individuals of high personal relevance and perceived risk in a particular situation pay more attention to the issue of losses instead of gains and have a stronger tendency to show lower sensitivity to any type of gains, concentrating on minimizing any type of losses (less risk-seeking for losses). On the contrary, individuals of low personal relevance and perceived risk pay more attention to the issue of gains instead of losses and have a stronger tendency to show lower sensitivity to any type of losses, concentrating on maximizing any type of gains (less risk-averse for gains).

Scholars, including Levin and Gaeth (1998) and Martin and Marshall (1999),

applied the prospect theory to the topic of message framing effectiveness. In their research findings, to the consumers of high involvement (high personal relevance and perceived risk), negative framing of advertising message that places emphasis on the losses in the absence of the focal product is more effective; but to the consumers of low involvement (low personal relevance and perceived risk), positive framing of advertising message that highlights the gains in the presence of the focal product proves more persuasive. That consumer involvement plays a key moderation role also receives strong support from discoveries presented by such researchers as Jayanti (2001) and Menon, Block, and Ramanathan (2002), who verify the premise that negative (positive) framing evokes better response from highly (lowly) involved consumers.

H3: At the dimensions of *Aad*, *AB*, and *PI*, the consumers of *low involvement* respond more favorably to *positive framing of advertising message*, while those of *high involvement* respond more favorably to *negative framing of advertising message*

### Product knowledge

Product knowledge has been recognized as a crucial variable that affects how consumers receive marketing messages (e.g., Alba and Hutchinson, 2000), and it is definable as the number of product-related experience and information that has been accumulated, composing two dimensions: behavioral knowledge (i.e., operations related to actual choice, purchase, possession) and usage of the product and mental knowledge (i.e., the mental operations related to search, exposure, treatment, and information usage of the product). High or low product knowledge can cause different perceptions of



**The exact pattern in which message framing functions as a brand communication persuasiveness enhancer is not examinable without self-construal, consumer involvement, and product knowledge being entered in totality into the examination process.**

brand communication. Knowledge structure theorists, including Chebat, Limoges, and Gélinas-Chebat (1998), and Chatterjee, Heath, Milberg, and France (2000), find that high product knowledge reduces or even cancels the effect of message framing. Such discovery is interpreted according to the principle of information integration effect: knowledgeable consumers have accumulated a higher number of information pieces, so the relative weight of any new information is reduced no matter in what format it is presented, if that information does not provide any further substantive content.

The phenomenon that framing strategy exerts much less influence on the highly knowledgeable consumers than on those who are lowly knowledgeable is also explainable by the expert/novice cognition theory, proposed by scholars including Spence and Brucks (1997), Selnes and Howell (1999), and Doh (2001). The expert, who is often a highly knowledgeable consumer, is lowly responsive to extrinsic cues. The novice, who is often a lowly knowledgeable consumer, is more responsive to an extrinsic cue such as that created by message framing of advertising messages. Empirical evidences prove that product experts and novices differ in terms of decision making and information acquisition. Experts have the motivation and cognitive resources, enabling them to better search for sensory (or intrinsic)

information content. In contrast, novices lack the motivation and cognitive resources, so they are more likely to base their evaluation and subsequent choice on extrinsic descriptions.

The works of scholars including Blackwell, Miniard, and Engel (2001), Capraro, Broniarczyk, and Srivastava (2003), Chatterjee, Heath, Milberg, and France (2000), Cowley and Mitchell (2003) also show that the more substantive knowledge that knowledgeable consumers acquire about a particular product category, the less interest they have in its extrinsic information. In terms of message framing, which is basically an execution technique, its effect is pronounced only when consumers do not seriously process the message's arguments and use heuristic processes to form response. As for the relationship between message framing and product knowledge, it is reasoned that highly knowledgeable consumers elaborate their response to the advertisement on the basis of their own product knowledge. They assess the quality of the advertising arguments as coherent with what they already know, with less regard to the execution technique.

When highly knowledgeable consumers build their product knowledge structure not only through product usage experiences, but also a central route of processing information, they may have a larger number of cognitive components

relative to a host of product categories. In a general sense, these consumers are apt to taking systematic instead of heuristic approaches to process marketing information. If they are exposed to peripheral elements such as message framing, the systematic processing approach is bound to render message framing even lower in its impact (e.g., Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 2004).

H4: *Framing of advertising message impacts more significantly on the consumers of low product knowledge than on those of high product knowledge at the dimensions of Aad, AB, and PI.*

H4a: *High product knowledge dilutes the moderation effects of self-construct and consumer involvement on framing of advertising message.*

#### MULTIPHASE EXPERIMENTATION

The procedure of the experiment, arranged in step-by-step manner, was divided into four phases: choice of product category and participants, stimuli production, pilot experiment, and principal experiment. This arrangement, intended to enhance the validity and reliability of research results, was assisted by five consumer data banks, two marketing consultancies, and one team of advertising academics and practitioners, aimed to implement the experiment in line with the guidelines for a comprehensive investigation of message framing as a brand communication strategy.

#### Choice of product category and participants

Pretests were conducted on 15 product categories, including automobile, personal computer, cosmetics, health food, soft drink, insurance policy, and home



care. Consumers of these categories were measured in terms of their consumer involvement and product knowledge, and then the choice of an appropriate product category for experimentation was made. In comparing all the pretest scores, the health food product category was found as the best choice, with its scores illustrating the most satisfactory rate of relative distributional balances in high/low involvement (51 versus 49 versus) and high/low knowledge (38 versus 62 percent). The product category being targeted, a pool of health food consumers was screened, and 566 experiment participants were recruited via purposeful sampling. The participants, who are aged between 30 and 40 and evenly distributed in gender, have college educational backgrounds with similar annual income level (ranging from US\$65,000 to US\$70,000). Besides, the measurement administered on their individual differences in self-construal, consumer involvement, and product knowledge was also indicative of the representative nature of the samples.

#### Stimuli production

A team composed of advertising academics and practitioners was responsible for producing the experiment stimuli, which were manipulated into the positive and negative framing of print advertisement for a fictitious health food product brand. The positively framed message emphasizes the advantage a consumer may gain by using the advertised food product brand, and the main line is: "Imagine what bliss good health can bring to your life; when you keep remaining in the condition of good health, chances are you find it a lot easier to confront even the toughest challenges and then often enjoy the sense of achievement induced by success." The negatively framed advertising message highlights the disadvantage of not using the brand, and the main line is:

"Imagine what misery poor health can bring to your life; when you get stuck in the condition of poor health, chances are you find it a lot harder to face even the smallest challenges and then often suffer the sense of embarrassment caused by failure." To enhance the visual effect, there appears a spokesperson with the look of good health in the advertisement of positive framing and one with the look of poor health in the advertisement of negative framing. In addition, in both advertisements a brief description about the features of the brand is properly presented alongside the main line of copy. It was made sure that the two versions of copy and visual are similar in semantic and syntactic complexity, so that the research results would not be contaminated by variations in comprehension.

#### Pilot experiment

A four-way factorial design was arranged for the pilot experiment, using a between/within subject design with two treatment levels for each factor in the experiment: 2 (framing: positive versus negative) by 2 (self-construal: independent versus interdependent) by 2 (consumer involvement: high versus low) by 2 (product knowledge: high versus low). With everything being ready, 128 chosen participants were exposed to the produced stimuli in a laboratory setting. Data were analyzed by the statistical technique of MANOVA, which calculated the moderation effects of the consumer characteristics on the persuasiveness that message framing generates for brand communication.

#### Principal experiment

Another experiment, based on the pilot experiment, but more elaborate than it, was conducted as the principal experiment. The researcher applied the same methodology adopted by the pilot experiment to administer experimentation on

438 subjects, who had been recruited via purposeful sampling in the pretest phase previously described. They were exposed to two print advertisements identical in the copy and visual design with those of the pilot experiment; the only difference is that the brand advertised in the principal experiment was a real one, which had not existed in the market before, but planned to launch a campaign at the time the principal experiment was carried out. In addition to MANOVA statistical technique, structural equation modeling (SEM) was also run to analyze the data, estimating the model fit of the MFBC model. Specifically, the MFBC model is classifiable as a hierarchical full-moderation model structure, entering self-construal, consumer involvement, and product knowledge as moderators in totality. Its model fit was also compared with those of six alternate partial-moderation model structures. On the whole, the principal experiment yielded results further confirming the applicability of the MFBC model.

#### Measurement instrumentation

**Brand communication persuasiveness.** In accordance with the operational definitions proposed by Tripp, Jensen, and Carlson (1994) and Lafferty, Goldsmith, and Newell (2002) among others, the persuasiveness that message framing generates for brand communication was measured at the dimensions of attitude toward the advertising (*Aad*), attitude toward the brand (*AB*), and purchase intention (*PI*). Three 7-point bi-polar scales, anchored by good/bad, favorable/unfavorable, and pleasant/unpleasant (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.93$ ), serve as indicators of *Aad*. Three 7-point bi-polar adjective scales, anchored by good/bad, favorable/unfavorable, and satisfactory/unsatisfactory (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.91$ ), were used to measure *AB*. As for *PI*, its indicator is a single 7-point question



item, which goes: I would consider buying the product when a need arises.

**Self-construal.** The self-construal scales proposed by Singelis (1994) and then modified by Gudykunst and Lee (2003) and Tsai (2005) were used as the basic guidelines for measuring self-construal. In the measurement of independent self-construal, there are eight 9-point question items, such as: I should be judged on my own merits; I prefer to be self-reliant rather than depend on others; I take responsibility for my own actions; being able to take care of myself is a primary concern for me; I enjoy being unique and different from others. As for the measurement of independent self-construal, it also contains eight 9-point question items, such as: I consult others before making important decisions; I respect decisions made by my group; I depend on others to help me solve difficult problems; I try to abide by customs and conventions; I care a lot about what others think of me. A confirmatory factor analysis, which was run on data from both the pilot and principal experiments, proved the two measurements satisfactory for measuring the samples of the current study, with the standardized loadings ranging from 0.66 to 0.85 and item reliabilities ranging from 0.72 to 0.92.

**Consumer involvement.** Kaplan's scale of consumer involvement (Kaplan, 1990), a revised version of Zaichkowsky's (1985) personal involvement inventory, formed a part of the basis on which consumer involvement of health product category was measured. Besides, the methods to gauge perceived relevance and perceived risk proposed by Hornibrook and Fearn (2003), Jia, Dyer, and Butler (1999), and Mittal (1995) were also integrated into the measurement instrumentation. Specifically, nine indicators, which consist of important/unimportant, means much/

little to me, highly/lowly necessary, worth much/little time to consider, worth high/low monetary cost to buy, easy/difficult to make a right choice, certain/uncertain to make a right choice, many/few benefits to be derived from using a comparatively high-quality product, and much/little harm to be done by using a comparatively low-quality product, were used in the measurement of consumer involvement. To confirm the validity of the measurement, a confirmatory factor analysis was run on data from both the pilot and principal experiments, and the measurement model fit statistics showed satisfactory fit of all the indicators, with the standardized loadings ranging from 0.68 to 0.83 and item reliabilities ranging from 0.75 to 0.94.

**Product knowledge.** Mitchell and Dacin (1996) and Laroche, Cleveland, Bergeron, and Goutaland (2003) combined subjective product knowledge (consumers think they know about a product category) and objective knowledge (consumers actually know about a product category) into a composite variable of product knowledge and came up with high validity and reliability. Following this approach, the current study first employed a self-report 10-point scale to gauge the subject knowledge of health category in terms of familiarity degree, knowledge level, and usage frequency. The substantive knowledge possessed by experiment participants was then measured, and three independent judges determined the score on the definition responses in terms of the features, functions, and basic ingredients that average health food products may have. Incorrect or nonresponses scored zero. Respondents demonstrating low knowledge scored one, while those demonstrating high knowledge scored two. The coders agreed on 97 percent of the responses, and differences were resolved by discus-

sion. A factor analysis, assessing both the objective and subjective measures, yielded only one factor with an eigenvalue greater than one. Hence, the combined sum of the two measures was used to gauge product knowledge.

## FINDINGS

### Manipulation check

The manipulation check of positive/negative framing manipulation was carried out in this way: respondents were asked to indicate to which degree they agreed with the following statements: "The message in the commercial makes me think of what I will gain/lose if I buy/do not buy the marketed product." On a 7-point scale, the positive framing scored 6.3 and the negative framing scored 6.5. This difference is almost completely nonsignificant ( $t = 0.62, p = 1$ ), so the success of experiment stimuli manipulation was validated.

### Statistical analysis

The positive framing and the negative framing groups were subdivided respectively into independent/interdependent self-construal (cell size: 235/258), high/low consumer involvement (cell size: 232/226), and high/low product knowledge cells (cell size: 178/260). Both separate and covariate impacts of the independent variables on the attitude toward the advertising (*Aad*), the attitude toward the brand (*BA*), and the level of purchase intention (*PI*) were assessed, thus explicating how message-framing persuasiveness can be created for brand communication. Results of this MANOVA analysis are summarized in Table 1.

In addition, as shown in Table 2, SEM was run to estimate the model fit index statistics of the MFBC model as a hierarchical full-moderation model structure (with framing of the advertising message moderated in totality by self-construal, consumer involvement, and product knowledge), and



**TABLE 1**  
MANOVA of Brand Communication Persuasiveness

	Source					
	Aad		BA		PI	
	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F
<i>Main effects</i>						
Message framing (MF)	4.12	3.95	3.86	3.13	2.98	2.31
Self-construal (SC)	22.02	21.13***	18.31	17.98***	13.25	12.87***
Consumer involvement (CI)	16.03	15.94***	11.25	10.58**	7.42	6.91*
Product knowledge (PK)	9.07	8.49**	6.96	6.18*	5.02	4.63*
<i>First order of interaction</i>						
MF × SC	27.24	23.71***	23.93	18.35***	18.31	13.64**
MF × CI	20.47	19.14***	15.58	14.91**	10.97	9.04**
MF × PK	10.42	9.76**	7.27	6.39*	4.92	4.25*
<i>Second order of interaction</i>						
MF × SC × CI	29.02	28.32***	24.26	23.97***	17.51	15.08**
MF × SC × PK	19.15	18.22**	13.86	12.17**	8.59	7.38*
MF × CI × PK	12.18	11.73**	9.94	8.19*	5.32	4.82*
<i>Third order of interaction</i>						
MF × SC × CI × PK	22.56	20.75***	17.83	16.71**	12.04	11.48**

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

the statistics were compared with those of six partial-moderation model structures (with framing of the advertising message moderated only in part by self-construal, consumer involvement, and product knowledge).

#### Hypothesis testing

According to the MANOVA analysis, positively and negatively framed messages do not differ significantly in eliciting responses at the dimensions of *Aad*, *AB*, and *PI*, with *Aad*:  $F(1, 416) = 3.93, p > 0.1$ ; *BA*:  $F(1, 416) = 3.03, p > 0.1$ ; *PI*:  $F(1, 416) = 2.76, p > 0.1$ . Besides, the SEM model fit comparison indicates only the model that fully includes the moderation effects of self-construal,

consumer involvement, and product knowledge has the best fit index statistics:  $\chi^2(497) = 524$  with  $p < 0.05$ , GFI = 0.934, AGFI = 0.927, CFI = 0.913, CFI = 0.905, RMSR = 0.077. As for the alternate partial-moderation model structures, their fit index statistics are all below the acceptable level. These results demonstrate that self-construal, consumer involvement, and product knowledge have to be entered simultaneously as moderators into the examination process of persuasiveness generated by message framing for brand communication, so Hypotheses H1 and H1a are fully supported.

To the consumers with independent self-construal, the positive framing of the ad-

vertising message is more persuasive than to those with interdependent self-construal, with *Aad*:  $F(1, 416) = 24.01, p < 0.001$  (*INDSC M* = 5.82, *INTSC M* = 3.43); *BA*:  $F(1, 416) = 21.06, p < 0.001$  (*INDSC M* = 4.98, *INTSC M* = 2.65); *PI*:  $F(1, 416) = 13.17, p < 0.01$  (*INDSC M* = 3.34, *INTSC M* = 2.37). On the contrary, to consumers with the interdependent self-construal the negative framing of the advertising message is more persuasive than to those with independent self-construal, with *Aad*:  $F(1, 416) = 23.13, p < 0.001$  (*INTSC M* = 5.78, *INDSC M* = 3.36); *BA*:  $F(1, 416) = 20.26, p < 0.01$  (*INTSC M* = 4.89, *INDSC M* = 2.71); *PI*:  $F(1, 416) = 10.08, p < 0.01$  (*INTSC M* = 3.29, *INDSC M* = 2.18). Thus, Hypothesis H2 is fully supported.

To the consumers of low consumer involvement, the positive framing of the advertising message is more persuasive than to those of high consumer involvement, with *Aad*:  $F(1, 416) = 23.31, p < 0.001$  (*LCI M* = 5.83, *HCI M* = 3.27); *BA*:  $F(1, 416) = 9.83, p < 0.01$  (*LCI M* = 4.25, *HCI M* = 2.83); *PI*:  $F(1, 416) = 9.92, p < 0.05$  (*LCI M* = 3.47, *HCI M* = 2.41). On the other hand, to the consumers of high consumer involvement, the negative framing of the advertising message is more persuasive than to those of low consumer involvement, with *Aad*:  $F(1, 416) = 20.53, p < 0.001$  (*HCI M* = 5.81, *LCI M* = 3.26); *BA*:  $F(1, 416) = 9.76, p < 0.01$  (*HCI M* = 4.19, *LCI M* = 2.74); *PI*:  $F(1, 416) = 5.61, p < 0.05$  (*HCI M* = 3.29, *LCI M* = 2.36). Therefore, Hypothesis H3 also receives full support.

Exposure to neither the positive framing nor the negative framing makes a significant difference among the consumers of high product knowledge, with *Aad*:  $F(1, 170) = 3.06, p > 0.05$ ; *BA*:  $F(1, 170) = 2.22, p > 0.05$ ; *PI*:  $F(1, 170) = 1.53, p > 0.05$ . On the other hand, the participants of low product knowledge display a significant difference in response to the two



**TABLE 2**  
Model Fit Comparison\*

Model Structure	Fit Index Statistics					
	$\chi^2$	GFI	AGFI	CFI	NFI	RMSR
Moderation of SC/CI/PK	524 (df = 497) $p < 0.05$	0.934	0.927	0.913	0.905	0.077
Moderation of SC/CI	389 (df = 444) $p < 0.01$	0.898	0.882	0.874	0.867	0.136
Moderation of SC/PK	438 (df = 255) $p < 0.001$	0.829	0.813	0.805	0.784	0.189
Moderation of CI/PK	216 (df = 115) $p < 0.001$	0.794	0.787	0.772	0.768	0.295
Moderation of SC	397 (df = 214) $p < 0.001$	0.806	0.793	0.785	0.774	0.204
Moderation of CI	295 (df = 88) $p < 0.001$	0.763	0.751	0.742	0.733	0.327
Moderation of PK	58 (df = 11) $p < 0.001$	0.682	0.671	0.663	0.657	0.438

\*GFI = goodness of fit, AGFI = adjusted goodness of fit, FI = comparative fit, NFI = normed fit, and RMSR = root mean square residual.

types of message framing, with *Aad*:  $F(1, 252) = 17.12, p < 0.001$  ( $PF M = 5.52, NF M = 3.17$ ); *BA*:  $F(1, 252) = 10.04, p < 0.01$  ( $PF M = 4.33, NF M = 2.71$ ); *PI*:  $F(1, 252) = 5.92, p < 0.05$  ( $PF M = 3.23, NF M = 2.28$ ). Hence, full support is sup-

plied to Hypothesis H4, which posits the level of product knowledge impacts the framing effect, i.e., both the positive and negative framing generates stronger persuasiveness with the consumers of *low product knowledge* than those of *high*

*product knowledge*. Moreover, Hypothesis H4a, stating that high product knowledge dilutes the moderation effects engendered by self-construct and consumer involvement, is also fully supported by the dilution effect estimate of high product knowledge shown in Table 3.

## DISCUSSION

### Comprehensive investigation

Based on the comprehensive framework of the MFBC model as well as the multiple-phase experimentation method, the current study has investigated the persuasive function of message framing for brand communication in a holistic way. Generally, the result verifies the premise that the main characteristics of the target consumers are supposed to be taken into full account. Whether message framing is suitable to be viewed as a strategic option for brand communication does not pose a question. The real concern lies in what message is communicated to whom under which conditions. Only with the constructs of *self-construal*, *consumer involvement*, and *product knowledge* being entered in totality into the examination process, the exact pattern in which a message framing may serve as a persuasiveness enhancer is possible to be detected, and then brand communicators are able to use message framing more effectively.

A further analysis of the research result demonstrates that the best scenario for *positive framing* is *independent self-construal*  $\times$  *low consumer involvement*  $\times$  *low product knowledge*, with the mean scores of 5.98, 5.02, and 3.98, respectively, in *Aad*, *BA*, and *PI*. However, advertising planners need to give up *positive framing* if the consumers are characterized by *interdependent self-construal*  $\times$  *high consumer involvement*  $\times$  *high product knowledge*, which rank lowest in responsiveness, with the mean scores of 3.13, 2.24, and 1.75. When it comes to *negative framing*, the

**TABLE 3**  
Dilution Effect of High Product Knowledge

Predictor/Effect Size	<i>Aad</i>		<i>BA</i>		<i>PI</i>	
	$\eta$	<i>F</i>	$\eta$	<i>F</i>	$\eta$	<i>F</i>
Self-construal	0.398	19.33***	0.315	11.64***	0.271	7.61**
Diluted by <i>HPK</i>	0.323	14.79**	0.282	10.35**	0.235	7.13*
<i>Consumer involvement</i>	0.287	10.83***	0.214	10.95**	0.162	6.72*
Diluted by <i>HPK</i>	0.133	6.32*	0.132	5.17*	0.114	4.35*

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$



**Using framed messages in wrong scenarios can lead to waste of marketing money and also cause damage to brand image, so evaluating the pros and cons of various possible scenarios is required of brand communicators who intend to use message framing as a major strategy for brand advertising campaigns.**

consumers in the group of *interdependent self-construal*  $\times$  *high consumer involvement*  $\times$  *low product knowledge* prove to be the best audiences, showing the mean scores 5.93, 4.96, and 3.88. In the scenario of *independent self-construal*  $\times$  *low consumer involvement*  $\times$  *high product knowledge*, brand communicators should avoid *negative framing*, because such a scenario is least receptive with the mean scores of 3.15, 2.27, and 1.68.

There is an obvious danger of using framed messages in wrong scenarios, which can lead to waste of marketing money and in the meantime cause damage to brand image. Evaluating the pros and cons of various possible scenarios is a requirement for brand communicators who intend to plan a brand advertising campaign with message framing set as a major strategy. To minimize the potential harm and maximize the potential utility of this strategy, brand communicators may have to first measure main characteristics of the target consumers in totality. The obtained data are essential for constituting a yardstick by which the persuasive impact of message framing becomes predictable.

**Influence of chronic self-view**

The effect size of *self-construal* is bigger than that of *consumer involvement*, as shown in Table 3. More noteworthy, the dilution

effect of *high product knowledge* is comparatively marginal on *self-construal*. The variance attributable to *self-construal* is only cancelled by 19 percent when counting in *high product knowledge*. In a sharp contrast, the variance attributable to *consumer involvement* is cancelled by 42 percent with *high product knowledge* entered into the interaction. Why is *self-construal* more influential than *consumer involvement* in moderating the persuasiveness that message framing generates for brand communication? This question, having direct bearing on the basic strategic consideration of message framing, needs an in-depth theoretical analysis.

First, it is necessary to point out that *self-construal* reflects a person's chronic self-view with regard to the fundamental principles of interacting with the outside world. Hence, *self-construal* also reflects the general orientation of the primary value embedded in one's value system (e.g., Lam, 2006; Oetzel, 2001; Tsai, 2005, 2006; Yum, 2004; Zhang, Mittal, and Feick, 2003). In combining the *self-construal* theory with the goal-hierarchy theory, we may come up with an interpretation about *self-construal* being a more influential moderator than *consumer involvement*. Scholars, including Lawson (1997) and Martin and Folkes (2001), contend that there is a hierarchy of goals in the context of consump-

tion. This hierarchy, which ranges from abstract concept to concrete action, is divided in sequence into (1) the principal goal in the value system, (2) the program goal in evaluation of existing product categories, and (3) the purchase goal of a product brand in a suitable product category. In an empirical study, Lawson (1997) verifies the applicability of goal-hierarchy theory to the brand-choice behavior research. As the result shows, consumers carry out their purchase decision in a hierarchical goal-driven mode of process. The principal goal represents the fundamental tendency in their inherent value system, the program goal guides their product category evaluation, and then the purchase goal is materialized in acquiring a product brand out of the chosen product category.

The core assumption of goal-hierarchy theory is also supported by Martin and Folkes (2001), who demonstrate that consumers do not passively accept marketer's mandates about how to use or not to use product brands; rather, they actively classify products purposefully with the principal goal as guidance to acquire the product better fitting their program (usage) goals. For example, if a consumer's principal goal is to impress others whenever possible (the value of self-expressiveness), he or she may choose a prestigious brand in the apparel category that stands for wealth and career success. But to a person whose principal goal is to seek personal satisfaction rather than impressing others (the value of self-sufficiency), a brand in the apparel category that is emphatic on functionality instead of symbolism may seem much more desirable, even though he or she is very rich and highly regarded by others.

Using the goal-hierarchy theory to interpret the roles that *self-construal* and *consumer involvement* play in message framing, it is easy to see how these two



constructs may differ in exerting influence. The principal goal of consumers, as the goal-hierarchy theory premises, is a chronic inclination to guide brand choice. The program and purchase goals, as extension from the principal goal, represent rather contingent implementation tactics to make brand choice. In terms of message framing, positively and negatively framed messages cause chain reactions to the advertisement, then to the advertised brand, and lastly to the purchase intention of the brand. This process of causing chain reactions is comparable to the hierarchical order of goal-driven mode proposed by the goal-hierarchy theory. When the chain reactions induced by message framing are traceable back to *self-construal* reflecting the primary value embedded in a person's value system, they are supposed to be directly linked with the principal goal and thus indicative of a chronic inclination to guide brand choice. When the chain reactions induced by message framing are traceable back to *consumer involvement*, which is contingent on the episodic factors of personal relevance and perceived risk in a given context, they are probably only linked with the program and purchase goals and thus indicative of contingent implementation tactics to make brand choice. Consequently, the independent or interdependent type of *self-construal* leads to the chain reactions being stronger both in intensity and stability than those formed by high or low level of *consumer involvement*.

Briefly, the principal goal of consumers is better predicted by *self-construal* than *consumer involvement*, so *self-construal* impacts to a larger extent than *consumer involvement* on the response to message framing. Even in a scenario where *high product knowledge* threatens to dilute the persuasiveness generated by message framing, *self-construal* is less susceptible than *consumer involvement* to the dilution effect.

#### Canceling agent to persuasiveness

The finding that *high product knowledge* can be a canceling agent to the message-framing persuasiveness deserves particular attention. As mentioned earlier, knowledge structure theorists prove that the consumers of *high product knowledge* are usually indicative of strong motivation and extensive cognitive skills to better search for intrinsic information content. Extrinsic information, derived from the execution technique of message framing, exerts comparatively less impact on this segment of consumers (e.g., Doh, 2001; Selnes and Howell, 1999). Moreover, when highly knowledgeable consumers build their product knowledge structure through both product usage experiences and central route information processing, they are prone to taking systematic instead of heuristic approaches to process marketing information in a general sense, thus message framing becomes even less influential to them (e.g., Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 2004).

The current study, following the measurement method suggested by Mitchell and Dacin (1996) and Laroche, Cleveland, Bergeron, and Goutaland (2003) to measure subjective product knowledge (consumers think they know about a product category) and objective knowledge (consumers actually know about a product category) of the experiment participants, so the two groups respectively representative of highly knowledgeable and lowly knowledgeable consumers are identified. Another measurement method, using the question items according to the work of Alba and Hutchinson (2000), was run on the actual choice, purchase, possession as well as the search, exposure, treatment, and information usage of the experiment participants relative to the studied product. In the result, highly knowledgeable consumers manifest apparent tendencies to taking systematic approaches to pro-

cessing marketing information in a manner just like Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran (2004) describe.

The specific pattern with which the product knowledge structure is constituted distinguishes the highly knowledgeable consumers from those of lower product knowledge. With an active information-acquisition pattern and bigger size of cognitive components, the former is more sophisticated and tends to seek out intrinsic information. With a passive information-acquisition pattern and smaller size of cognitive components, the latter is less sophisticated and easily affected by extrinsic cues. In summary, it is no wonder that *high product knowledge* is discovered to be a canceling agent to the persuasiveness generated by message framing.

#### Information processing motivation

Another noteworthy discovery reported by the current study points to the phenomenon that the consumers of *low product knowledge* respond more favorably to positively framed messages. This discovery, in conflict with some arguments and findings relative to message framing, requires a further discussion.

There are several message framing researchers, such as Hawkins and Hoch (1992), who argue that negative (positive) framing is better received by lowly (highly) knowledgeable consumers. For example, a cleaning product brand that is positively framed is said to be appealing to those who are already very aware of the problem that the cleaning product category can solve and then like to hear pleasant (positive) instead of unpleasant (negative) messages. But that brand, when presented in a negatively framed message, is said to be better received by those who are not familiar with the cleaning product category. The rationale is: a positively framed message fails to refer to the



**Strong (weak) motivation to process the advertising content explains why the consumers of high (low) product knowledge segment are more receptive to (negatively) positively framed message.**

consumption problem for the lowly knowledgeable consumers, so it does not evoke their deeper thinking.

In the past few years, information processing theory has been applied to theoretical and practical exploration of message framing, and insightful outcomes are emerging. Empirical results, reported by scholars including Ahluwalia (2002), Loken (2006), and Shiv, Britton, and Payne (2004), prove that the construct of *information processing motivation* (the impetus to process given information) impacts on how the audiences perceive positively or negatively framed messages. In short, the strong or weak motivation to process marketing information mediates the audience's preference for different types of framed messages. Under the condition of high processing motivation, *negative framing* is preferable to *positive framing*. On the other hand, *positive framing* is perceived a better way of communication than *negative framing* under the condition in which the consumers are lowly motivated to process the content of advertising.

The current study, integrating the core concept of the information processing motivation into that of the knowledge structure theory, conducted a measurement on the experiment participants of the *low product knowledge* segment. Their motivation to process the content of the experiment stimuli was tested, on the basis of a 7-point scale for the five dimensions of *attention catching*, *perceived usefulness*, *perceived uniqueness*, *desire for perusal*, and *curiosity*

*arousal*. As expected, lowly knowledgeable consumers in average displayed weak motivation to process the content ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 0.07$ ), which explains why in both the pilot and principal experiments of the current study the *low product knowledge* segment was found more receptive to positively framed message.

**Alignment with consumer characteristics**

Advertising planners are advised to exercise precaution against considering only episodic factors to use message framing as a brand communication strategy. Testing the audiences on their self-construal, consumer involvement, and product knowledge proves to be a much more effective way to identify appropriate occasions in which message framing is adoptable to enhance marketing effectiveness. Positively or negatively framed messages should be properly chosen for the advertising campaign in accordance with the best possible scenario. All in all, through seamless alignment with the fundamentally determining characteristics of the target consumers, brand communicators may find it a lot easier to maximize the persuasive function of message framing. **JAR**

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