



When *not* to accentuate the positive: Re-examining valence effects in attribute framing



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ABSTRACT

While the expanding body of attribute framing literature provides keen insights into individual judgments and evaluations, a lack of theoretical perspective inhibits scholars from more fully extending research foci beyond a relatively straightforward examination of message content. The current research applies construal level theory to attribute framing research. The authors conduct a meta-analysis of 107 published articles and then conceptually expand this knowledge base by synthesizing attribute framing research and construal level concepts. Results suggest that attribute framing is most effective when there is congruence between the construal level evoked in a frame and the evaluator's psychological distance from the framed event. A follow-up experiment confirms that the congruence between a frame's construal level and psychological distance—not simply its valence—appears to be driving attribute framing effects. This research proposes to shift the focus in attribute framing research from that of message composition to a more complex relationship between the message and the recipient.

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Introduction

"4 out of 5 dentists surveyed would recommend sugarless gum..."

This now infamous advertising tagline for Trident gum has been used for nearly 50 years and is a prime example of how marketing managers successfully use framing in persuasive messages. Parallel to its use in practice, research on framing effects and their impact on decision-making continues to proliferate and bears tribute to the interest level in the subject area. In line with [Krishnamurthy, Carter, and Blair \(2001\)](#) we define *framing*, in general, as presenting individuals with logically equivalent options in semantically different ways. Framing scholars traditionally focus their research on one of three frame types: attribute, risky choice, or goal framing. While each of these focal areas provides insight into various facets of choice, [Levin, Schneider, and Gaeth \(1998\)](#) warn that the three different types of framing should be examined independently to avoid unnecessary complexity and confusion that can result from their idiosyncratic characteristics. In this current research, we therefore focus our attention on the effects of *attribute framing*, wherein the object of the frame is an attribute of the decision option.

Extant empirical works overwhelmingly indicate that people are more receptive to positive (e.g., 4 out of 5 dentists recommend Trident sugarless gum) vs. negative (e.g., Only 1 out of 5 dentists does not recommend Trident sugarless gum) attribute frames. [Krishnamurthy et al. \(2001\)](#) explain that positive framing is more effective because it "generates more positive associations and thus seems more attractive than negatively framed options" (p. 383). [Levin et al. \(1998\)](#) support this contention, stating "even at the most basic level the valence of a description often has a substantial influence on the processing of that information" (p. 184). Given this, one could view knowledge of attribute framing as *fait accompli*, concluding that attribute framing effects are so straightforward that the results are, statistically speaking, nearly always positive and that any differences in outcomes are simply a matter of degree or a result of study artifacts.

While valence effects in attribute framing are "a reliable phenomenon" ([Levin, Gaeth, Schreiber, & Lauriola, 2002, p. 413](#)), viewing them as straightforward is problematic. Research regularly reveals that seemingly straightforward relationships are often more complex when viewed from different levels of analysis. Toward this end, researchers have identified various moderators of valence effects including the nature of the product ([Khan & Dhar, 2010](#)), personal involvement with the framed issue ([Chan & Mukhopadhyay, 2010](#)), and processing motivation and opportunity ([Shiv, Edell Britton, & Payne, 2004](#)). Together, these studies suggest

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that something more than valence could be driving attribute framing effects.

Since the publication of seminal works in this area (Krishnamurthy et al., 2001; Levin et al., 1998), there has been a continued expansion of published research. Thus, the first goal of this manuscript is to conduct a meta-analysis of the research stream to update the empirical base of knowledge on attribute framing. While much of the early work on attribute framing involved exploring the impact of positive vs. negative message attributes (i.e., valence effects), a growing trend toward investigating other issues such as differing frames of reference and temporal contexts has developed. It is our view that this is an impactful and meaningful research evolution. The second goal of this manuscript is therefore to determine if components of construal level theory constitute important structural determinants of framing effects that could possibly encompass both earlier generalizations focusing on valence and more recent work. We believe that a theory-driven, micro-focused examination of the attribute framing literature will yield insights that build upon and extend existing research.

Construal level theory (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2010; Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007) is a useful and relevant conceptual lens through which to view attribute framing effects. This is due to its treatment of events and issues as differing in terms of construal level and psychological distance, which together can impact resulting evaluations. The dimensions of both construal level and psychological distance map favorably with key variables manipulated in attribute framing research. Furthermore, by incorporating construal level theory into the extant attribute framing literature, we are better able to meaningfully understand the nuances of concomitant effects. While much of the framing literature has focused on message construction, using a construal level perspective to guide our investigation allows us to examine the interaction between the message and the recipient, thus providing a richer understanding of the phenomena. This approach makes the subsequent findings relevant for any individual in an organization who is responsible for crafting persuasive messages in a host of managerial, negotiation, selling, evaluation, or promotional situations.

In the following section, we discuss the conceptual foundations that underpin existing attribute framing research. We then conduct a meta-analysis designed to both update the current base of attribute framing research knowledge and expand that knowledge with a fine-grained theoretical perspective using construal-level theory. Building on the meta-analysis, we advance the attribute framing literature by conducting an experiment that investigates the outcome effects emanating from the congruency between the evoked construal level of a message frame and the perceived psychological distance of intended message recipients. The manuscript concludes with a discussion of the results and implications for framing scholars and practitioners responsible for developing persuasive messages.

Conceptual development

Attribute framing

Kahneman and Tversky (1979) were the first researchers to demonstrate that framing (i.e., different wording of formally identical problems) makes individuals code decision outcomes as gains or losses relative to a reference point. Since that groundbreaking work, empirical research on framing effects has flourished across multiple research domains including cognition, psycholinguistics, perception, social psychology, health psychology, clinical psychology, educational psychology, and marketing (Kühberger,

1998). While the term “framing” includes all of the various ways decision situations are presented that lead decision-makers to construct markedly different representations of such situations (Kühberger, 1995), we focus exclusively on *attribute framing*, in which a single attribute within a given context is the subject of the framing manipulation (e.g., describing ground beef as “80% lean” or “20% fat”).

We distinguish attribute framing from two other types of framing identified by Levin et al. (1998): *risky choice framing*, which describes the outcomes of a potential choice involving options differing in level of risk (e.g., presenting two programs differing in risk level for reducing cholesterol described in terms of either positive or negative outcomes); and *goal framing*, where the goal of an action or behavior is framed (e.g., stressing either the positive consequences of reducing red meat in one's diet or the negative consequences of failing to do so).

Levin et al. (1998) cogently assert that research exploring these different types of frames is qualitatively different because attribute, goal, and risky choice framing involve different mechanisms and consequences, and vary in terms of the information that is framed, the presumed outcome of the frame, and the manner in which effects of the frame are measured (see Table 1, p. 151). Levin et al. (2002) empirically corroborate these theoretical propositions using a within-subjects framing manipulation in a study conducted across two sessions in which each subject saw both framing conditions and all three types of frames. Among other key insights, Levin et al. (2002) demonstrate significant effects for attribute and risky choice framing, but not goal framing and conduct direct test of dependency suggesting the three types of framing are governed by difference processes that are independent of each other. These results provide further empirical support for the decision to solely concentrate on attribute framing in this meta-analysis.

Another contribution of Levin et al. (1998) is their identification of a “valence-consistent shift” that is found in most attribute framing studies, wherein a positive description of attributes leads to more favorable evaluations than a negative frame. A classic demonstration of this valence-consistent shift is provided by Levin and Gaeth (1988), where ground beef was rated as better tasting and less greasy among subjects exposed to a “75% lean” frame compared to those in a “25% fat” frame. In other attribute framing studies, subjects evaluate issues described in terms of “success” or “survival” rates vs. “failure” or “mortality” rates (Davis & Bobko, 1986; Dunegan, 1993; Levin, Schnittjer, & Thee, 1988; Linville, Fischer, & Fischhoff, 1993; Marteau, 1989), or assess gambling contexts that are portrayed in terms of probability of “winning” or “losing” (Levin, Snyder, & Chapman, 1989; Levin et al., 1986). In such studies, the alternative framed in a more positive light is routinely rated more favorably than when described negatively.

While this valence-consistent shift has been amply demonstrated in the literature, the body of work on attribute framing has tremendously expanded since Levin et al.'s (1998) article and warrants a new review and synthesis. Interestingly, much of the recent attribute framing research foregoes a valence manipulation and explores the effects of presenting numeric information in different formats (e.g., dollars vs. cents), providing different frames of reference (e.g., self vs. others), or varying the temporal context (e.g., now vs. in the future). While earlier attribute framing research primarily assessed effects in terms of evaluations, many recent studies use alternative criterion variables such as behaviors, behavioral intentions, estimates, and predictions. To explore and better understand these important qualitative differences, we draw upon construal level theory (CLT) to integrate previous attribute framing research findings into a theoretical framework that allows us to make specific predictions about when effects should be stronger across different types and contexts of attribute framing.

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