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MEASURING SOFT-SELL VERSUS HARD-SELL ADVERTISING APPEALS

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ABSTRACT

The terms "soft sell" and "hard sell" are well known to advertising scholars and practitioners. Despite widespread use of these terms, generally accepted definitions do not exist. Attempts to measure soft-sell and hard-sell appeals have typically been unsophisticated, relying on a single item that classifies an ad into one category or the other. This study is designed to provide a deeper understanding of the concepts "soft sell" and "hard sell," and to examine whether they are better measured on a single dimension than on two distinct dimensions. The main objective of the study is to develop and validate a method for measuring soft-sell and hard-sell appeals. To this end, candidate items were generated via a review of prior literature, supplemented by content analysis, a free-association task, expert judgment, and focus groups. The measurement instruments were then purified and validated using a pretest with a sample of student participants, and further validated using a general consumer sample. Results indicate that soft-sell appeals can be measured using a 12-item, 3-factor index, whereas hard-sell appeals can be measured using a 15-item, 3-factor index.

The concepts of soft-sell versus hard-sell advertising and related ideas have been discussed in the U.S. advertising trade literature for nearly a century (Beard 2004). Generally, advertising scholars and practitioners, as well as consumers, have a sense that "hard sell" refers to a more direct approach to selling, with the focus on encouraging a quick sale, whereas "soft-sell" approaches are more subtle and indirect. In spite of the widespread use of the terms "hard sell" and "soft sell," the academic literature to date has no widely accepted definition of either "hard sell" or "soft sell."

Although some commonly used definitions appear to accurately reflect what academics and practitioners have in mind when they refer to "hard sell" and "soft sell," at present no adequate instrument to measure these appeal types has been developed. This is unfortunate because these appeal types have been employed in numerous academic studies and are described in many advertising textbooks. These appeal types have been particularly prominent in cross-cultural studies comparing advertising appeals. In spite of the ubiquity of the "soft-sell" and "hard-sell" concepts, major handbooks of marketing and advertising scales, including Bearden and Netemeyer (1998) and Bruner, Hensel, and James (2005), do not list a scale for measuring these appeals.

The study is designed to contribute to the literature in multiple ways. First, as indicated above, the study proposes a clear conceptualization of "hard-sell" and "soft-sell" appeals, and how they are distinct from other types of appeals. A second contribution of the study is an assessment of whether hard-sell and soft-sell appeals should be considered as a single appeal type with two end points or as two distinct types of appeal. This has not been addressed by prior

literature. Third, the study contributes by developing a measurement scheme to capture hard-sell and soft-sell appeals. The goal is to develop an instrument with sound statistical properties, which subsequent researchers can use to compare the effectiveness of these appeals and other appeal types with regard to national culture, product category, or media type, and in specific instances.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The general concepts of "hard-sell" and "soft-sell" appeals have a long history. Beard (2004) notes that as early as 1911, "leading U.S. automotive advertisers met head on in the industry's foremost trade journal, *Printer's Ink*, to debate the merits of 'reason why' versus 'atmospheric' or 'impressionistic' advertising" (p. 141). Over the decades, the definitions of these two concepts have remained surprisingly constant. For example, in the early 1920s, the author of an unsigned article in *Printer's Ink* offered the following definition of reason-why copy: "It simply tells the informative news about a product, and gives those facts that are necessary to make its purpose, use and operation clear. It does not excite the reader or create sensations" ("*Reason Why Comes Back*" 1921, p. 18).

In 1973, John Caples, a prominent copywriter, defined reason-why copy as "attempts to focus on functional aspects in presenting arguments for buying a product or service" (p. 60). In contrast, the soft-sell school of the early 1900s was represented by the artistic styles of Ernest Elmo Calkens and Theodore MacManus. These practitioners of the soft-sell tradition tended to "create ads that appealed to the images associated with the use of the product, rarely making any explicit mention of the quality of the product" (Homer 2008). And, in a 1997 issue of the dominant industry publication *Advertising Age*, proponents of rationally oriented "advertising that sells" debated with advocates of emotionally oriented advertising, which entertains consumers and creates bonds with them (Grain 1997; Vagnoni 1980, 1997).

In recent years, the concepts of hard sell and soft sell, along with such related concepts as rational versus emotional appeals, direct versus indirect appeals, and degree of informativeness, have been widely explored in academic research. The authors conducted an extensive review of both the national and international advertising literature, and found more than 75 investigations related to these appeal categories. One issue that became readily apparent from the literature review was that "hard sell" and "soft sell" are, in a sense, broader concepts than some other appeal classifications. For example, the notion of an emotional appeal, while potentially consistent with that of a "soft-sell" construct, does not capture the idea that "soft sell" incorporates a level of indirectness and subtlety, and often focuses on building a mood or image. Similarly, a hard-sell appeal will generally be direct, but typically it also informs and makes a rational appeal.

Many studies that have focused on these concepts have not explicitly attempted to measure "hard-sell" and soft-sell appeals, but have used a variety of related concepts. For example, in an effort to draw conclusions about the most used general appeal types, some researchers have attempted to distinguish rational, factual, and informational advertising from imaginative, emotional, and transformational advertising (Laskey, Day, and Crask 1989; Puto and Wells 1984). The goal of informational appeals is to focus directly on the features or benefits of the product. In contrast, transformational appeals emphasize the experiences that consumption of a good or service will provide the

consumer. While the concepts of emotional/ rational and informational/transformational appear to have some overlap with soft sell/hard sell, our literature review found that they do not capture the full meaning of hard sell and soft sell as these terms are understood by practitioners and academicians.

It is interesting to note that cross-cultural research has been especially prone to analyze the concepts of soft-sell versus hard-sell appeals, or rational versus emotional appeals. Examples of the countries explored include Japan (Johansson 1994; Mueller 1987, 1992), China (Lin 2001), Korea (Bang et al. 2005; Jeon et al. 1999), Taiwan (Tsao 1994; Wang et al. 1997), the United Kingdom (Bradley, Hitchon, and Thorson 1994; Cutler and Javalgi 1994; Nevett 1992), France (Biswas, Olsen, and Carlet 1992), and Israel (Hetsroni 2000), as well as multicountry investigations (Albers-Miller and Royne Stafford 1999; Zandpour and Harich 1996). Notably, a significant number of these studies have made an explicit attempt to measure hard-sell and soft-sell appeals, perhaps as a result of these conceptual frameworks being based on underlying cultural differences more likely to be captured by the broader soft-/hard-sell classifications. Several studies have employed Mueller's (1987) definitions of hard-sell and soft-sell appeals, or some variation of them (Bradley, Hitchon, and Thorson 1994; Johansson 1994; Lin 2001; Mueller 1992; Nevett 1992; Wang et al. 1997). In each case, the measurement of these appeals was nominal: "yes" or "no" was simply checked off to indicate that the appeal was either present or not present. Mueller (1987, p. 53) defined a soft-sell appeal as one in which "mood and atmosphere are conveyed through a beautiful scene or the development of an emotional story or verse. Human emotional sentiments are emphasized over clear-cut product-related appeals." Meanwhile, she defined a hard-sell appeal as follows: "Sales orientation is emphasized here, specifying brand name and product recommendations. Explicit mention may be made of competitive products, sometimes by name, and the product advantage depends on performance."

In exploring global consumer positioning strategies, Alden, Steenkamp, and Batra (1999) operationalized the overall sales appeal of an advertisement by labeling two contrasting approaches: the soft-sell/image approach (image-oriented content that does not emphasize reasons to buy but, rather, conveys general associations with the brand), and the hard-sell/direct approach (sales-oriented, verbal, strong message arguments, comparative content). It is of interest to note that their research suggested that the features of the soft-sell approach (subtlety, implicitness, and abstractness) make it more suitable than the hard-sell approach for a global consumer culture positioning strategy. Indeed, over half of the global consumer culture positioning ads surveyed employed such a soft-sell approach.

Although these definitions, along with those of Mueller, represent an improvement in measuring hard-sell and soft-sell appeals, they remain limited in that (1) the nominal nature of the definitions may lead to a loss of information pertaining to variations in the degree to which an ad is "hard sell" or "soft sell," (2) it is not clear that either set of definitions fully captures all the underlying dimensions that have been associated with these concepts, and (3) the derivation of these definitions was not designed to produce a measurement instrument with sound statistical properties. Thus, it appears that no research to date has developed an adequate means of formally measuring soft-sell and hard-sell appeals.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our review of the literature has enabled us to analyze the types of dimensions considered by prior studies of hard-sell and softsell appeals. In general, we believe that prior studies of these appeals and related constructs have not captured the full implications of hard-sell and soft-sell appeals. We therefore propose that three aspects, which are frequently touched on by prior research on hard-sell/soft-sell advertising appeals and related issues, need to be considered in developing a comprehensive method for measuring these types of appeals: (1) the degree to which the appeal attempts to induce feeling and thinking, (2) the level of implicitness and explicitness, and (3) the degree to which image versus fact is expressed in the ad. Because of their close relationship with prior definitions of hard sell and soft sell, we propose that each needs to be considered in developing a reliable and valid technique for measuring hard-sell and soft-sell appeals. These dimensions and their relationship to hard sell and soft sell are described below.

To guide the specification of the dimensions of hard-sell and soft-sell appeals, we suggest and adopt the following modification to Mueller's (1987) definitions:

* A soft-sell appeal is one in which human emotions are emphasized to induce an affective (feeling) reaction from the viewer. These appeals tend to be subtle and indirect, and an image or atmosphere may be conveyed through a beautiful scene or the development of an emotional story, or via some other indirect mechanism.

* A hard-sell appeal is one in which the objective is to induce rational thinking on the part of the receiver. These appeals tend to be direct, emphasizing a sales orientation, and often specifying the brand name and product recommendations. There is often explicit mention of factual information, such as comparisons with competing products or specific distinguishing features of the product that give it an advantage in performance or some other dimension relevant to consumers.

Below, we discuss the three components that will be used to operationalize hard-sell and soft-sell appeals.

Feeling Versus Thinking

The first set of dimensions proposed are feeling and thinking. Many prior studies have examined the degree to which an ad aims to induce feelings or emotions rather than rational thoughts, and several theories support the notion that persuasive communication is influenced by both feelings and thoughts. Cognitive response theory, for example, suggests that thoughts and feelings, labeled "cognitive responses," are thought to affect attitude formation and change (Petty, Ostrom, and Brock 1981). Thus, it follows that the type of cognitive response an ad attempts to induce is relevant to an attempt to persuade the consumer. Similarly, the theory of reasoned action proposes that there is both a cognitive and an affective component to persuasive communication (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980).

The Foote, Cone, and Belding (FCB) Matrix, a well-known framework for product classification, classifies products according to whether the purchase decision is high or low involvement and involves cognitive (thinking) or affective (feeling) information processing (Vaughn 1980, 1986). The FCB grid was extended by Rossiter and Percy (1997),

who argued that product and brand attitude classifications should be based on underlying purchase motives-both informational and transformational. With both of these frameworks, there is a recognition that some ads attempt to convey information to consumers to help them develop a preference, while others appeal to emotions, or "transformational motives."

Clearly, prior discussions of soft sell and hard sell have touched on the notion of the appeal being related to inducing either cognitive processing (thinking) or affect (feeling). Intuitively, it makes sense that hard-sell appeals rely more on the "thinking" aspect than the "feeling" aspect. Conversely, soft-sell approaches rely more heavily on the emotive aspect, appealing to feelings.

Implicit Versus Explicit

Prior discussions of hard-sell appeals clearly suggest that the degree of directness of such messages is a feature that distinguishes them from soft-sell appeals. A primary characteristic of hard-sell appeals is that they are direct and designed to induce action, whereas soft-sell appeals are less direct. Thus, the second set of dimensions proposed is implicitness and explicitness.

Advertisements can create either overt meaning or latent meaning (Williamson 1978). When attempting to create overt meaning, advertisers convey the message very directly via explicit communication. According to McQuarrie and Mick (1996), rhetorical approaches can be used to determine how to express a thought most effectively in a given situation. In advertising, messages can be designed, either through the use of rhetoric or by other means, to emphasize objective product features. This type of advertising message tends to offer explicit meaning.

In contrast, latent meaning is created less directly. One of the most effective means of creating latent meaning is by using metaphors. McQuarrie and Phillips define a metaphor as "a type of indirect claim because claims are made in a figurative way rather than in a literal way-the advertising message is not stated outright but only implied" (2005, p. 8). In indirect persuasion, illustrations are often used to convey figurative claims. The use of advertising illustrations has increased even more rapidly than the use of verbal aspects in commercial messages (Phillips and McQuarrie 2003). Pollay's (1985) research revealed that in the course of the twentieth century, illustrations came to occupy an ever-increasing portion of magazine ads, while at the same time, the number of words decreased steadily. Pollay proposed that this was suggestive of a move toward a more soft-sell approach.

Image Versus Fact

The third set of dimensions proposed is image and fact. According to Leiss, Klein, and Jhally (1997), there are two basic advertising formats: product-information format and product-image format. In the former, which is consistent with a hard-sell approach, the product is the center of attention, and the focus of the ad is on explaining the product and its function. Thus, factual and objective elements are the essence of this format. In contrast, in the product image format, "brand name and package play an important part, but the product is given special qualities by means of a symbolic relationship that it has to some more abstract and less pragmatic domain of significance than mere utility" (Leiss, Klein, and Jhally 1997, p. 244). The product image format is consistent with the soft-sell approach.

Here, the product becomes embedded or "situated" in a symbolic context that imparts meaning to the product beyond its specific elements or benefits. In essence, this dimension suggests that hard-sell approaches will rely on more objective, factual information, whereas soft-sell approaches will attempt to build an image to help convey meaning.

MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENT DEVELOPMENT PROCEDURES

As outlined in Figure 1, we established a formal procedure for the development of the measurement instruments. We attempted to seek synergy between the traditional psychometric method and recent criticism of this approach (Rossiter 2002). The resulting procedure is a combination of qualitative exploration and quantitative validation.

Development of Definitions

The primary objective of this first phase of the investigation was to establish operational definitions of soft-sell and hard-sell advertising appeals, and the most appropriate statistical specifications. To achieve initial construct definitions, as noted previously, we conducted an extensive review of the advertising literature, which revealed over 75 investigations related to these appeal categories. As mentioned previously, we adopted a modified version of Mueller's (1987) definitions of hard sell and soft sell. On this basis, we identified three primary dimensions of soft-sell appeals: feeling, implicitness, and image. Similarly, for hard-sell appeals, we also identified three distinct components: thinking, explicitness, and fact. It should be noted that this measurement model does not portray soft sell and hard sell on a continuum, but as separate constructs.

The observed indicators can be treated as reflective or formative. In the case of reflective measures, the underlying constructs are hypothesized to cause changes in the indicators. In contrast, in formative measures, changes in the indicators are hypothesized to cause changes in the underlying construct (Jarvis, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2003). This approach assumes that the indicators, as a group, jointly determine the conceptual and empirical meaning of the construct, although they do not need to be highly correlated with one another. According to Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer (2001), the choice between a formative and a reflective specification should be based primarily on theoretical considerations. Based on previous theoretical discussions, we concluded that when a soft-sell or hard-sell appeal is modeled as a multidimensional construct, a formative measurement approach should be used, because causality flows from the indicators to the construct.

Thus, in our soft-sell appeal measurement instrument, the three dimensions of feeling, implicitness, and image are relatively independent sources of appeal that, together, share the characteristic of being "soft sell" (Figure 2). Similarly, we conceptualize the hard-sell appeal measurement instrument as a second-order factor, whose formative indicators-thinking, explicitness, and fact-are measured by a series of formative measures (Figure 3).

As formative measures, our appeal dimensions do not need to be highly correlated with one another, either within each of the dimensions specified in our framework or between them (Jarvis, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2003). That is, our formative measurement approach assumes "trade-offs" between the dimensions within an appeal. For example, in an ad employing a soft-sell appeal, the message may score high on the feeling dimension, but low on

the implicitness dimension. Similarly, in an ad employing a hard-sell appeal, the message may rank high on the thinking dimension, but the same ad may be perceived lower on the fact dimension.

Item Generation

The goal of the second phase of the investigation was to develop measurement items useful in determining the three components of soft-sell (feeling, implicitness, and image) and hard-sell appeals (thinking, explicitness, and fact). The primary basis for the development of the items was the literature review, supplemented by the use of a free-association task, in which the participants looked at real ads using hard-sell or soft-sell appeals, and listed adjectives to describe them.

We conducted a content analysis of print ads to identify realworld ads that could be used for the free-association task. All 2005 issues of four nationally circulated U.S. magazines (news, women's, sports and business) were collected. Every third ad was selected from each issue, resulting in a total of 899 usable sample advertisements. Content analysis was undertaken by two coders. Both received extensive training in which they coded a different group of ads from the main sample until it became apparent that they understood the task and were able to code the ads reliably. To make it possible to check reliability for the main sample, both coders coded all the ads.

The coders were given a list of operational definitions of 10 appeal types, including hard sell and soft sell (Mueller 1987). They independently applied the operational definitions of soft sell and hard sell. Operational definitions consistent with the theoretical definitions of hard sell and soft sell were developed to guide the coders in terms of what to look for in the ad. Drawing on our previous theoretical discussion of soft sell and hard sell, the following operational definitions were adopted.

Soft-sell appeals were defined as follows: "mood and atmosphere are conveyed through a beautiful scene or the development of an emotional story or verse. Verbal and visual metaphors not directly related to the product are employed. Human emotional sentiments are emphasized over clear-cut, product-related selling recommendations. Product-focused messages are not considered soft sell." Hard-sell messages were defined as: "sales-oriented advertising messages making explicit or implicit mention of competitive products. Product advantage depends on performance that is superior on some particular criterion. The category also includes such statements as 'number one' and 'leader.' Mere mention of product benefits is not sufficient." Following Lin's (2001) approach, sample ads were coded on a four-point scale, ranging from "nonexistent" (coded as 0), to "weak" (coded as 1), to "medium" (coded as 2), to "strong" (coded as 3). Reliability was measured by Perreault and Leigh's (1989) formula for both the hard-sell and soft-sell appeal types, and was very high: close to 97% for soft-sell appeal, and 98% for hard-sell appeal when "medium and strong" and "nonexistent and weak" were grouped together.

As one output of the content analysis, six ads-one soft sell and one hard sell from each of three product categories (automobiles, cell phones, and alcoholic beverages)-were chosen (see Figure 4). The selected ads had been coded as containing a soft-sell or hard-sell appeal, and they were also judged by the researchers to be appropriate choices. A free-association task was conducted with 109 student participants recruited from a U.S. university. Participants

were exposed to the six ads and asked to write down their impressions and perceptions using adjectives (Aaker 1997). The results of this task, combined with the items generated by the literature review, produced a list of 27 nonredundant adjectives (items) for the soft-sell appeal measurement instrument, and 27 nonredundant adjectives (items) for the hard-sell appeal measurement instrument (see Tables 1 and 2).

Seven experts in advertising/marketing were recruited and were asked to assess the 54 items using a three-point scale: appropriate, indifferent, and inappropriate. All agreed that the measurement items were appropriate in light of our definitions of soft sell and hard sell.

Initial Measurement Instrument Validation

To further validate the six selected ads as representative of hard-sell and soft-sell appeals, nine focus group sessions were conducted—seven with business professionals, and the remaining two with student subjects. Each group consisted of five or six participants. Results indicated that the sample ads were indeed representative of hard-sell and soft-sell appeals. The student groups were asked for their level of familiarity with the product categories that were chosen, and they indicated that they were very familiar with the product categories.

The resulting soft-sell and hard-sell measurement instruments were pretested with 220 undergraduate students at the same U.S. university. The students were advertising and communications majors and were primarily seniors. A structured questionnaire was developed. The six advertisements were again employed in the instrument validation. The use of multiple ad samples improves the generalizability of the results (Rossiter 2002). Following exposure to either the soft-sell or the hard-sell ad, the students were asked to indicate which of the 54 items (27 soft-sell items and 27 hard-sell items) applied to the ad on a seven-point scale ("not at all applicable" to "fully applicable"). Because of our desire to test six ads and the associated implications for sample size, a within-subjects design was used. Repeated observations on a single subject also produce less variable data than do observations collected from different subjects, thus improving control (Greenwald 1974; Pearson et al. 1984). To guard against potential bias, the sequence of the ads was counterbalanced (rotated), so that respondents did not simply see a series of one type of appeal followed by a series of the other. Measures were taken to minimize the risk of demand artifacts, including giving instructions that did not hint at the purpose of the study and asking participants what they felt the purpose of the study was on completion. In general, it was clear that the respondents had not realized the purpose of the study. All responses were pooled and randomly divided into an equal number of two subsamples.

Based on the first subsample, we conducted a principal component analysis for the soft-sell appeal measure. The items were converged into the three proposed components, explaining 76% of total variance. The same procedure was repeated for the hard-sell appeal measure, in which the three proposed components captured more than 70% of the variance.

Second, a second-order formative measurement model was examined with partial least squares (PLS). PLS was preferred over covariance-based structural equation modeling because it works with measurement models that consist of formative indicators and provides better flexibility than covariance-based methods (Falk and Miller 1992).

In this model, formative first-order indicators were optimally weighted and combined using the PLS algorithm to create latent variable scores (Chin 1998). To examine a second-order model, we employed the hierarchical component model suggested by Wold (1982). The software used was SmartPLS version 2.0 M3 (Ringle, Wende, and Will 2005), which applies a bootstrapping method (500 cases, sample size 200).

The model fit was assessed in light of (1) the estimation of individual item reliability, (2) individual item weight, (3) correlations between the items, and (4) indicator multicollinearity (Chin 1998; Hulland 1999). Prior research indicates that internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity are not meaningful in the assessment of constructs having formative indicators (Bagozzi 1994; Bollen 1989; Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer 2001). Individual formative item reliability according to the loadings of the items on their respective constructs was examined. Following the generally accepted recommendation, attempts were made to retain items higher than .70 (Hair et al. 2006). Some items did not meet this criterion. With regard to the item weights, we found some negative figures in the model results, which may have been caused by the existence of multicollinearity between the items. Analysis of both Pearson product-moment correlations and variance inflation factor (VIF) revealed that some of the items were highly correlated, which complicates assessment of the indicators' validity. Furthermore, an excessive number of highly correlated indicators are undesirable "because of both the data collection demands it imposes and the increase in the number of parameters when the construct is embedded within a broader structural model" (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer 2001, p. 272). Therefore, these items were eliminated, reducing the number of items to 15 for soft-sell appeals and 18 for hard-sell appeals. The model fit in terms of the loadings and weights was very similar to the preceding validation.

Second Measurement Instrument Validation

A nonstudent sample of respondents took part in the second measurement instrument validation. In total, 193 participants were approached on city streets, on public transportation, and in cafés. Trained interviewers explained to the participants that the investigation dealt with consumer responses to advertising. Participants examined the same six ads as the student sample. Again, within-subject design was used to extract maximum and consistent perceptions of the appeals from the sample.

Following exposure to the first ad, the participants were asked to indicate which of the items applied to the ad on a seven-point scale ("not at all applicable" to "fully applicable"). Following assessment of the soft-sell versus hard-sell items, participants were asked additional questions (again on a seven-point scale) regarding their attitude toward the ad, ad believability, ad irritation, and intent to purchase the advertised product. Thereafter, the participants were exposed to the second ad. This section of the instrument again consisted of questions exploring which items (soft versus hard sell) best described the advertisement, as well as questions regarding their attitude toward the ad, ad believability, ad irritation, and purchase intent. The ads were shown in rotating order. The survey concluded with questions regarding basic demographic information.

To minimize concerns about potential effects associated with responses generated by repeated measures (i.e., the within-subjects design), we decided to treat separately the responses from the 193 respondents based on the first ad

for each appeal type. That is, we analyzed our proposed measurement scheme on the first soft-sell appeal ad that the respondents saw, and repeated the same for the first hard-sell appeal ad that the respondents were exposed to. Both were automobile ads.

For the first ad of each appeal type, the second-order formative measurement model was examined using the same procedure as in the student sample: the hierarchical component model with PLS (Wold 1982). Based on the results obtained from a bootstrapping method (500 cases, sample size 200), rigorous examinations of item weights and multicollinearity were conducted. As a result, the number of items was reduced to 12 for soft-sell appeals (four items for each second-order factor), and to 15 items for hard-sell appeals (five items for each second-order factor). All item loadings were statistically significant at $p < .0001$, exceeding .50 for soft-sell appeals and .60 for hard-sell appeals. In addition, the item weights were both statistically significant and relatively uniform for both appeals (Tables 3 and 4).¹ As shown in the tables, all VIFs are less than 2.33 for soft-sell appeals and 2.49 for hard-sell appeals, which strongly indicate no multicollinearity. Hair et al. (2006) suggest that VIFs up to 10 are acceptable. Thus, we concluded that the final proposed set of soft-sell and hard-sell advertising appeal items was sufficiently cross-validated by the two sets of data (the student sample and the general consumer sample).

Nomological Validity

In an effort to establish nomological validity, we conducted an additional test to examine the impact of hard-sell and soft-sell measures on various dependent measures used in prior studies. Nomological validity refers to the degree to which the construct, as measured by a set of indicators, predicts other constructs that past theoretical and empirical work suggests it should predict (Netemeyer, Bearden, and Sharma 2003).

Prior theory provides some evidence on impacts of variables associated with hard-sell and soft-sell appeals on response to advertising. In this light, we examined the impact of soft-sell and hard-sell appeal scores on four variables that reflect the outcome of successful advertising execution: attitude toward the ad, ad believability, ad irritation, and intention to purchase the advertised product. The scales used to measure these variables are shown in the Appendix. We propose that soft-sell versus hard-sell appeals should differ in their impact on some of these variables and have similar positive impacts on others.

One variable that is very much of interest is the degree to which an appeal type has an impact on attitude toward the ad. As indicated in our literature review, hard-sell appeals focus on specific information, whereas soft-sell appeals focus on the more general goal of creating a positive feeling (Mueller 1987). As soft-sell appeals are focused more directly on building positive affect, it is, thus, reasonable to predict:

H1: Soft-sell appeals are associated with more positive attitudes toward the ad than are hard-sell appeals.

On the other hand, Deighton (1987) observed that informational advertising can change cognitive expectations about the brand's performance. Similarly, Yoo and MacInnis (2005) found that the primary outcome from informational ad execution concerns favorable evaluative thoughts regarding the ad's believability. Because hard-sell appeals focus on specific, factual information in messages whereas soft-sell appeals are more diffuse and general, hard-sell

appeals are more likely to be believed. With soft-sell appeals, there isn't anything specific to be believed. Following this logic, we expect:

H2: Hard-sell appeals are associated with higher levels of ad believability than are soft-sell appeals.

Prior research has established that one of the most important causes of ad irritation is an advertisement's execution, such as tone, style, and format (Fennis and Bakker 2001). An ad may be perceived as especially irritating when it provokes, is argumentative, or causes displeasure (Aaker and Bruzzone 1985). Thus, it is likely that hard-sell appeals will be more irritating than soft-sell appeals due to the more direct, confrontational nature of hard-sell appeals. Thus:

H3: Hard-sell appeals are associated with higher levels of advertising irritation than are soft-sell appeals.

Attitudinal research unanimously suggests that attitude is a strong, direct, and positive predictor of intention, and this link has been supported in various settings (Bagozzi 1981). As the ultimate goal of most advertising is to increase sales, we believe that both soft-sell and hard-sell appeals will be associated with a positive increase in purchase intention. However, it is soft-sell appeals that would lead to stronger intentions, because, in line with our H1, it is soft-sell appeals that would create more favorable attitude. Therefore:

H4: Soft-sell appeals are associated with higher levels of purchase intention than are hard-sell appeals.

All responses were pooled, and the smart PLS approach applied a bootstrapping method (500 cases, sample size 200). Both models fit the data reasonably well in terms of individual weights, loadings, and explained variance, while composite reliability and average variance extracted for the reflective measures were satisfactory. Regardless of the type of appeals, the path coefficients were all statistically significant with high t-values (see Figures 5 and 6). Thus, the initial evidence of nomological validity was established.

Next, following Chin's (2000) procedure, we tested the significance of the difference between two paths. The path coefficient from advertising appeal to attitude toward the ad was stronger for soft-sell than for hard-sell appeals, supporting H1. In contrast, the path from advertising appeal to ad believability was also stronger for hard-sell than for soft-sell appeals. Thus, H2 is supported. Similarly, hard-sell appeals were found to be more irritating than soft-sell appeals. This supports H3. Finally, H4 is also supported because soft-sell appeals led to higher purchase intention. Thus, the hypothesis tests provide evidence of nomological validity.

Index Construction

In the final phase of measurement instrument development, we calculated index values for soft-sell and hard-sell advertising measures. An index is a value that represents the degree to which the audience perceives some latent trait. It makes it possible to integrate and summarize several variables into a single value, which allows for simplification of judgment regarding the extent to which consumers perceive a specific advertising appeal, particularly in a comparative sense. The use of PLS has been recommended in the past (Diamantopoulos and

Winklhofer 2001; Fornell and Cha 1994), and was thus employed here. The resulting indices are shown in Tables 5 and 6.

The scores in Tables 5 and 6 show the extent to which the ads employed soft-sell and hard-sell appeals, respectively, based on the pooled responses. It should be noted that index values are available not only for the overall appeals, but also for each dimension of the respective appeal. This is derived from our second-order formative specification. In this way, firms are better able to understand which dimension is more relevant in increasing consumers' acceptance or likability.

Finally, the Stone-Geisser test was applied to assess the measurements' predictive power (Wold 1982). The procedure results in the Q2 test statistic, which represents a measure of how well observed values are reconstructed by the model and its parameter estimates (Chin 1998). A Q2 score greater than zero suggests that the model has sufficient predictive ability, whereas a score smaller than zero means the contrary. In this investigation, the Q2 scores for soft-sell and hard-sell appeals were .40 and .44, respectively, both of which indicate reasonable predictive relevance.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to provide a better understanding of the nature of hard-sell and soft-sell appeals in advertising. Based on an extensive review of the literature, we proposed theoretical and operational definitions of these constructs that can be considered by future investigators. In addition, we proposed that three fundamental dimensions underlie soft-sell and hard-sell appeals: feeling versus thinking, implicit versus explicit, and image versus fact. A large number of items were generated and tested to create and validate two indices (one for soft sell and one for hard sell) that can be used to measure these appeal types. It was found that these appeals are best measured separately. The 12-item (3-factor) index shown in Table 3 can be used to measure soft-sell appeals, and the 15-item (3-factor) index shown in Table 4 can be used to measure hard-sell appeals.

These findings have both theoretical and managerial implications. At a theoretical level, this study developed formative indices for advertising appeals. An extensive review of the literature indicates that recent explorations of formative measurement instruments have primarily centered on service quality and performance research, but have paid little attention to advertising appeals. In addition, research on second-order formative constructs is relatively scant, while Wold's (1982) hierarchical component model has rarely been applied.

The construction of index values also facilitates alternative means of measuring soft-sell and hard-sell advertising appeals, which have traditionally been rather ambiguously defined concepts. These indices (see Tables 3 and 4) serve as an indicator of the extent to which specific advertising appeals are perceived by consumers. In other words, a hard-sell appeal should not be simply considered as present or not present: It can be viewed as either being not present or present to a given degree.

In addition, the indices provide researchers with a parsimonious measure of advertising appeals that can be used to investigate the relationships between consumers' overall perceptions and their possible antecedents and outcomes.

Subsequent researchers could undertake a deeper exploration of the circumstances in which hard-sell and soft-sell appeals are effective and analyze which components of these appeals contribute most to effectiveness under various circumstances (e.g., by product category, target market characteristics, advertising medium).

At the managerial level, our general consumer survey validated the measurement by testing a nomological network of advertising appeals, including attitude toward the ad, ad believability, ad irritation, and ultimate intent to purchase. The results reveal that soft-sell and hard-sell appeals both had a positive influence on attitude toward the ad and ad believability, although hard-sell appeals appear to lead to lower attitude toward the ad but higher believability. Hard-sell ads were also found more likely to be irritating than soft-sell ads, although neither was correlated with high levels of ad irritation.

It is of interest that the relationship between hard-sell appeals and attitude toward the ad was extremely weak, whereas that between hard-sell appeals and ad believability was somewhat strong. This suggests that hard-sell appeals may strengthen the intent to purchase the advertised good or service, although not directly through the creation of a favorable attitude, but rather through the formulation of convincing ad content. In contrast, soft-sell appeals led both to a more positive attitude toward the ad and to increased ad believability, indicating that this appeal type has dual effects in strengthening intention to purchase.

The measurement instruments proposed here allow marketers to evaluate consumer perception of the soft-sell versus hard-sell appeals used in commercial messages, as well as their attitudes toward such appeals. These tools enable advertisers to examine whether a soft-sell or a hard-sell appeal is more appropriate for a given product category (e.g., utilitarian versus value-expressive), audience (based on gender, age, ethnicity, or even nationality), or perhaps advertising medium (print, broadcast, or other).

The index provides researchers as well as practitioners with broad measures of soft-sell and hard-sell appeals that are general enough to be comparable across firms, industries, sectors, and even nations. The indices may serve as useful instruments in examining the relative importance of soft-sell and hard-sell appeals for specific products, audiences, and media. They allow for the manipulation of the strength or degree to which such appeals are utilized. Specifically, these indices may enable advertisers and marketers to control the extent to which the dimensions of soft-sell and hard-sell advertising appeals are employed in commercial messages.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A few important limitations of this investigation must be addressed, and it is hoped that these may be overcome in future explorations. First and foremost, soft-sell and hard-sell advertising measures were validated using PLS, which is a "soft modeling" technique (Wold 1982). Future research should employ more rigorous covariance-based structural equation modeling to cross-validate the measurements (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer 2001). In the same token, this study used only three types of products (automobiles, cell phones, and alcoholic beverages) as stimuli. Future researchers should employ a broader variety of products for greater generalizability. Second, ads for different brands of these products were used in this study. Future researchers may wish to craft soft-sell/hard-sell

versions of advertisements for the same brand. A related issue is that the instruments were pretested on a sample of student participants. Although we tried to ensure that the students had sufficient experience with the product categories examined, follow-up tests on a broader sample would be advisable to improve generalizability.

Third, the measurement instruments were validated only in the United States and thus did not take into account the role that culture may play. As previous investigations have suggested, the degree to which practitioners employ soft-sell versus hard-sell appeals, and consumer responses to the usage of such appeals, may indeed be culture-specific. Specifically, research has shown that soft-sell appeals are more likely to be used in advertising messages in Asian countries. An interesting extension of this study would therefore be to cross-culturally validate these measurement instruments.

CONCLUSION

Our study suggests that hard-sell and soft-sell appeals represent broad, multidimensional concepts that should not be thought of as a continuum, but rather measured individually. Essentially, we theorized that multidimensional properties determine whether an ad is classified as hard sell or soft sell. In addition, each dimension can vary in the degree to which it is perceived-ranging from high to low. This investigation fills an important gap in advertising scale literature, as to date no instrument has been available to formally measure the extent to which an ad employs a soft-sell versus a hard-sell appeal. From a managerial standpoint, the measurements enable firms to understand better the nature of soft-sell or hard-sell appeals in advertising strategy. The instruments may assist in identifying those dimensions of soft-sell versus hard-sell appeals that consumers perceive more or less positively. Those dimensions that do not lead to a more positive attitude toward the ad, greater believability, or an increased intent to purchase should then be avoided, ultimately leading to the development of more successful commercial messages.

Sidebar

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Footnote

NOTE

1. One of the reviewers suggested this procedure to establish the independence of observations. We repeated the same analysis for the remaining data sets based on the second and third ads for each appeal. The resulting model fit in terms of the loadings and weights, which were similar to those obtained from the preceding validation based on the first ads. Results of the analyses are available from the authors on request.

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Appendix

APPENDIX

Questionnaire Items Used in the Nomological Validity Test

1. Attitude toward the ad (Mitchell and Olson 1981; seven-point semantic differential scales):

Bad-Good

Unpleasant-Pleasant

Unfavorable-Favorable

Negative-Positive

2. Ad believability (Bhat, Leigh, and Wardlow 1998; seven-point semantic differential scales):

Convincing-Unconvincing (reverse)

Not credible-Credible

Unacceptable-Acceptable

Untruthful-Truthful

Believable-Unbelievable (reverse)

3. Ad irritation (Bhat, Leigh, and Wardlow 1998; seven-point semantic differential scales):

Unannoying-Annoying

Unirritating-Irritating

Undisturbing-Disturbing

4. Intention to purchase the advertised brand XX (seven-point Likert scales):

Would you like to try the product?

Could you imagine yourself buying this product?

Could you imagine this product being one of your most likely choices when you next make a purchase?