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IDIOCENTRISM, INVOLVEMENT, AND HEALTH APPEALS: A Social Psychological Framework

Mohan J. Dutta-Bergman

Recent years in health communication have witnessed a surge in personality-based campaigns. These campaigns have focused on targeting individuals with messages based on personality profiles. This study extends this line of work by investigating the role of idiocentrism-allocentrism in audience response to message appeals. In addition, the project introduces a situational framework, examining the effect of involvement on the relationship between audience personality and audience response to appeal types. Study results support the need for a personality-based segmented approach.

Based on the fundamental notion that audience orientation is the key to effective communication, a strong health communication program begins with the development of an adequate understanding of the message recipient (Andreasen, 1997; Dutta-Bergman, 2003). This argument has been noted by health communication scholars, who have pointed out that the most important problem facing the field is one of identifying well-defined adopter groups and designing messages specifically for these groups (Dutta-Bergman, 2003; Frankenberger & Sukhdial, 1994; Stephenson, 2002).

Matching messages to individual recipients based on their needs has been made possible by tailored communication (Rimer & Glassman, 1998; Skinner, Campbell, Rimer, Curry, & Prochaska, 1999). Not limited by traditional audience identifiers such as demographics and geographics (Dutta-Bergman, 2003), today's communicators have the ability to fit the message to the disposition (also referred to as personality or trait) and situation of the individual audience member (Dutta-Bergman, 2003; Palmgreen, Donohue, Lorch, Hoyle, & Stephenson, 2001). This ability to tailor the message to dispositional and situational characteristics is important because the person's internal disposition interacts with his/her situation in the production of attitudinal, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes. Almost everything a communicator needs to know about his/her audience can be categorized under one of the two broad categories of disposition and situation. This research explores the interplay between idiocentrism/allocentrism, a personality trait, and involvement, a situational factor, in the context of audience response to different health message appeals.

IDIOCENTRISM/ALLOCENTRISM

Idiocentrism/allocentrism is a trait-level construct that has been systematically used to describe variances within a population (Dutta-Bergman, 2003; Dutta-Bergman &
Wells, 2002; Triandis, 1995; Yamaguchi, Kuhlman, & Sugimori, 1995). The differentiation of individuals into idiocentrics and allocentrics is based on the extent to which individuals are driven by individualistic values such as independence, achievement, and freedom or collectivistic values such as relational harmony, commitment to family, and mutual interdependence. Extant research on idiocentrism/allocentrism demonstrates that idiocentrics and allocentrics differ from each other in the way they live their lives; in other words, the lifestyle narratives of idiocentrics and allocentrics demonstrate systematic variance.

The conceptualization of idiocentrism/allocentrism originates from the impressive body of work on individualism-collectivism at the cultural level (Triandis, 1995). Originally introduced by Hofstede (1984), cross-cultural research on the persuasive impact of individualism-collectivism has received much attention in the past two decades (Hofstede, 1984; Triandis, 1989, 1995), demonstrating that individualism/collectivism strongly predicts audience response to message appeals (Han & Shavitt, 1994). The distinction between individualism and collectivism is based on people's tendency to value personal and individual time, freedom, and experience (Hofstede, 1984; Roth, 1995; Triandis, 1989, 1995). The individualist values independence, focusing on his or her private qualities (Triandis, 1989, 1995). Collectivists, on the other hand, are more likely to have interdependent relationships with their in-groups (Triandis, 1989, 1995). A collectivist favors attitudes that reflect sociability, interdependence, and family integrity (Han & Shavitt, 1994; Triandis, 1989, 1995).

Individualism-collectivism can be differentiated at four different levels (Triandis, 1995): (a) an interdependent versus independent self-concept (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995); (b) a close alignment of personal and communal goals (Triandis, 1989, 1995); (c) focus on norms, obligations, and duties versus focus on attitudes, personal needs, rights, and contracts (Miller, 1984); and (d) emphasis on relationships versus emphasis on rational advantages (Triandis, 1995).

Not only do cultures differ from one another in their levels of individualism-collectivism, they also demonstrate a great degree of variance within themselves (Yamaguchi et al., 1995). Individualism/collectivism then becomes a trait-level phenomenon with systematic difference being observed among a culture's people; person-level individualism is referred to as idiocentrism and person-level collectivism is referred to as allocentrism (Dutta-Bergman & Wells, 2002; Triandis, 1995; Yamaguchi et al., 1995). Idiocentrics emphasize self-reliance, competition, and detachment whereas allocentrics emphasize social and familial interaction and cooperation (Dutta-Bergman & Wells, 2002; Yamaguchi et al., 1995). One purpose of this research is to investigate whether the strong findings on the cross-cultural persuasive effects of individualism/collectivism clearly translate to within culture differences between idiocentrism and allocentrism.

**ISSUE INVOLVEMENT**

Involvement reflects the extent to which a particular product, issue, or idea is relevant to an individual. The level of involvement of the audience member affects the way he/she processes a communication (Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Rodriguez, 1986; Dutta, 2000; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). High involvement produces more elaboration and rehearsal on a topic or issue than low involvement. Therefore, highly involved audiences primarily process information central to the message, focusing on the relevant arguments (Andrews & Shimp, 1990; Petty et al., 1983) whereas audience members who are in a low involvement state process information peripheral to the message (Andrews & Shimp, 1990; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty et al., 1983). Past research has established that issue involvement affects the message appeal preference of audience members (Flora & Maibach, 1990; Kirby, Ureda, Rose, & Hussey, 1998).
Although involvement typically has been used in the context of product categories, this article conceptualizes involvement in terms of the issue (Flora & Maibach, 1990; Kirby et al., 1998; Salmon, 1986). Issue involvement becomes significant when an issue has personal or intrinsic meaning (Salmon, 1986) or when the viewer attributes great significance to the consequence of the issue (Flora & Maibach, 1990). Depending upon the level of issue involvement, it may be argued that audience members will process information through either the central route or the peripheral route, paying attention to either the functional elements of information or to the nonfunctional peripheral elements. This project explores the interaction between involvement and idiocentrism/allocentrism in the production of audience response to message appeal types.

MESSAGE APPEALS

Selecting and managing an appropriate and consistent image of a health campaign is pivotal to its success (Dutta-Bergman, 2003). After reviewing the consumer behavior and advertising literature, Park, Jaworski and MacInnis (1986) proposed a comprehensive model of appeal classification that has since been used in both commercial and social marketing (Dutta-Bergman, 2003; Park et al., 1986; Roth, 1995). According to Park et al.’s (1986) model, appeal types may be classified as functional, social, and sensory based on which of the three fundamental categories of human needs they satisfy.

Functional needs motivate the search for products and/or services that solve consumption-related problems (Shavitt, Lowrey, & Han, 1992). Therefore, a functional appeal type focuses on problem solving and problem prevention. This type of approach is similar to the utilitarian approach discussed by Shavitt et al. (1992). Utilitarian attitudes, focusing on the inherent qualities and benefits of the product, maximize the rewards and minimize the punishments obtained from objects in one’s environment. Therefore, behavior is guided in a direction that obtains the benefits associated with the objects (Katz, 1960; Shavitt et al., 1992).

Social appeals, on the other hand, focus on fulfilling internally generated needs for self-enhancement, role position, group membership and affiliation, or ego-identification (Park et al., 1986; Roth, 1995), clustered together as the social identity function (Shavitt, 1989). Sensory images build around the novelty, variety seeking, and sensory gratification needs of audiences (Dutta-Bergman, 2003; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Roth, 1995; Palmgreen et al., 2001; Stephenson, 2002). The importance of experiential needs in consumption has been illustrated by work on variety seeking, consumer aesthetics, and experiential consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

In cross-cultural research, high individualism has been shown to have a positive impact on the persuasive effect of functional and sensory appeals (Han & Shavitt, 1994; Roth, 1995; Zhang & Gelb, 1996). Extrapolating the findings to the individual level, idiocentrists may be expected to be persuaded by functional and sensory message executions (Han & Shavitt, 1994). Similar to their culture-level equivalent of collectivism, allocentrics stress social norms, roles, and values, and, therefore, are expected to find social brand images that reinforce group membership and affiliation more attractive (Roth, 1995; Zhang & Gelb, 1996). Hence, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Allocentrists will demonstrate a stronger positive attitude toward social appeals than idiocentrists.

H2: Idiocentrists will demonstrate a stronger positive attitude toward functional appeals than allocentrists.

H3: Idiocentrists will demonstrate a stronger positive attitude toward sensory appeals than allocentrists.
As argued earlier, issue involvement is a moderating factor that affects appeal preference (Han & Shavitt, 1994; Petty et al., 1983). A high involvement situation leads to evaluation of an issue/product in terms of criteria that are considered highly important by the audience member whereas a low involvement situation leads to attentiveness to peripheral cues (Han & Shavitt, 1994). Although the moderating role of involvement is widely accepted, the extant literature evidences conflicting results in the domain of audience response to appeal types under high and low involvement situations based on the debate over the central and peripheral nature of appeals.

Han and Shavitt (1994) argued that under low levels of involvement, a person is responsive to a wider variety of appeals, not being concerned about the specific needs satisfied by an appeal. On the other hand, under high involvement conditions, the individual responds positively to appeal types that are congruent with his/her self-image. In other words, according to the model proposed by Han and Shavitt (1994), personality-based communication would be more effective under high levels of involvement when the individual’s self-concept becomes salient. Therefore, when involvement is high, relationship-oriented allocentrics may be expected to respond strongly to social appeals and self-oriented idiocentrics may be expected to respond to functional appeals over other appeal types.

However, in contradiction to the model suggested by Han and Shavitt (1994), another body of research demonstrates that individuals process issue-related functional messages when they are highly involved with the issue (Cacioppo et al., 1986; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty et al., 1983). Therefore, according to this alternative perspective, functional appeals that highlight the costs and benefits related to the issue would be most effective under high involvement conditions, irrespective of the personality of the receiver. Given the contradictory nature of the findings regarding the roles of involvement and personality, the following questions were proposed. It is important to emphasize here the nature of the comparison focusing on appeal types within each idiocentrism/allocentrism-involvement combination, not among the different combinations.

RQ1: What is the relationship between involvement and idiocentrism/allocentrism in the context of the attitude toward social appeals?

RQ2: What is the relationship between involvement and idiocentrism/allocentrism in the context of the attitude toward functional appeals?

RQ3: What is the relationship between involvement and idiocentrism/allocentrism in the context of the attitude toward sensory appeals?

METHOD

The study used a mixed 3 x 2 x 2 within-subjects design, with three categories of appeals (functional, social, and sensory) and two levels of involvement (high versus low) and idiocentrism/allocentrism. The message appeal was treated as a within-subject factor and idiocentrism/allocentrism and involvement were treated as between subject factors.

Participants

The 73 respondents were undergraduate students enrolled in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at a large mid-western university. The participants received extra credit in their course in exchange for participation. Fifty-five women and 21 men participated in the project. The ages ($M = 24; SD = 3.12$) of the respondents ranged from 18-28.
AIDS was selected as the target issue based on the significance of AIDS communication for the target population (Brinson & Brown, 1997). Message appeals were manipulated by manipulating the slogans used in the advertisements. Slogans often serve as the best means to test an execution based on their simplicity, comprehensiveness, and stability over the period of the campaign (Dutta-Bergman, 2003). Because slogans provide the cue to the image of a product/concept, the theme of a campaign is summarized in its slogan (Dutta-Bergman, 2003).

The author (a former copywriter) created the slogans instead of picking them from those available in order to avoid recognition bias and any other effects of prior attitudes. Also, it was important to create mutually exclusive slogans that appropriately represented each of the categories. Advertisements contained the three slogans, numbered A, B, and C, each representing a particular appeal type, and a simple body copy to eliminate any bias created by more elaborate executions. Initially, nine slogans were designed by the author, each appeal type being represented by three slogans. Six judges viewed all nine slogans and independently classified them as functional, social, or sensory. Based on the scores assigned by the coders and the agreement among these scores, three slogans were picked, each slogan representing a particular appeal category. The slogans were validated in earlier studies (see Dutta-Bergman, 2003; Dutta & Vanacker, 2000) and the six judges agreed on 100% of their classifications for the three selected slogans.

Furthermore, a pre-test was conducted to check the manipulations of the appeal types. Thirty respondents recruited from an undergraduate journalism course were exposed to the appeal types, randomly assigned to each group (10 assigned to each appeal category). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that the functional appeal (M = 4.97, SD = 1.41) was categorized as more functional than the social (M = 2.43, SD = 1.04) and sensory appeals (M = 2.20, SD = 1.08), F(2, 27) = 16.66, p < .001, η² = .55. Post-hoc Bonferroni tests revealed significant differences between the functional and social appeals (mean difference = 2.53, p < .001) and functional and sensory appeals (mean difference = 2.77, p < .001). The social appeal (M = 5.40, SD = 1.74) was rated as significantly more social than the functional (M = 2.47, SD = 1.62) and sensory appeals (M = 2.40, SD = 1.30), F(2, 27) = 1.97, p < .001, η² = .47. Significant differences were detected between social and functional (mean difference = 2.93, p < .001) and social and sensory (mean difference = 3.00, p < .001) appeals. Supporting the appeal design, it was observed that the sensory appeal was rated as more sensory than the functional and social appeals, F(2, 27) = 9.86, p < .001, η² = .42. The post-hoc tests demonstrated that the sensory appeal differed from the functional (mean difference = 2.20, p < .01) and social (mean difference = 2.87, p < .001) appeals on the sensory scale.

Presentation of Slogans

Each participant read and responded to all three slogans. The three slogans were arranged beside a simple and general body copy that matched all three appeal types. In other words, the message content of the body copy was such that it made sense when read in the context of any of the three slogans. The order of appeals was counterbalanced so that a functional slogan was read first for one set of questionnaires, a social appeal was read first for another set, and a sensory appeal was read first for the rest. Respondents participated in groups of 4 to 12. After providing their responses to the message appeals, the respondents completed the idiocentrism-allocentrism and involvement measures.

Independent Measures

The participants’ degree of idiocentrism was measured using a scale created by Triandis (1995). When the items were subjected to a principal components factor analysis
with Varimax rotation, they generated one factor. A reliability test yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of .78. Based on the median score, respondents were classified as high or low idiocentrics. Dichotomizing on the basis of a median score allows us to draw comparison between the two categories—idiocentrism and allocentrism. The same argument has been used in other studies of personality-based message appeals that have applied the median split approach (see for example, Dutta-Bergman, 2003). Involvement was measured using Flora and Maibach’s (1990) AIDS involvement scale. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .81. On the basis of a median split, half of the respondents were classified as high involvement and half as low involvement ($M = 11.33, SD = 5.65$). The mean involvement score of the low involvement group was 7(2.59) whereas the mean involvement score of the high involvement group was 16.29(3.80).

**Dependent Measures**

Participants rated each of the advertisement slogans on a 7-point Likert scale. The items that measured attitude toward the slogans were pleasantness, appeal, attractiveness, excitement, interesting, fascinating, and meaningfulness and were borrowed from past research on attitude measurement (Dutta & Vanacker, 2000; Dutta-Bergman, 2003). Cronbach’s alpha for the aggregated scale was .78.

**RESULTS**

Given the study design, a within-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was first conducted to examine the relationship among idiocentrism/allocentrism, involvement, and appeal type. The analysis revealed that message appeal type interacted with idiocentrism/allocentrism in influencing the attitude toward the appeal, Wilk’s $\lambda = .09, F(2, 68) = 3.17, p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .09$.

The $\eta^2$ for the interaction effect of appeal type and idiocentrism/allocentrism was .09, suggesting a moderate effect size ($f$) of .32 (Cohen, 1977). Involvement had no main or interaction effect on attitude and hence was removed from subsequent analyses. The means and the standard deviations for the ANOVA are presented in Table 1. Separate analyses of variance were conducted for each appeal type in order to decipher the effects of idiocentrism/allocentrism on attitude toward individual appeals and test the appeal-based hypotheses.

H1 stated that allocentrics will demonstrate stronger attitudinal response to social appeals than idiocentrics. Supporting H1, allocentrics ($M = 11.86, SD = 4.58$) were more
likely than idiocentrics ($M = 9.67, SD = 3.67$) to prefer the social appeal, $F(1, 71) = 4.89$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .06$. According to H2, idiocentrics will demonstrate a stronger positive attitude toward functional appeals than allocentrics. The ANOVA with the functional appeal demonstrated a main effect of idiocentrism/allocentrism on attitude toward the appeal that approached significance, $F(1, 71) = 2.83$, $p < .10$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Idiocentrics ($M = 13.18, SD = 3.47$) were more likely than allocentrics ($M = 11.74, SD = 3.47$) to report a positive attitude toward the functional appeal. Finally, H3 posited that idiocentrics will be more likely to hold a positive attitude toward sensory appeals than allocentrics. H3 was not supported with no significant differences between idiocentrics and allocentrics with respect to attitude toward sensory appeals, $F(1, 71) = .74, p = .39$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

To further understand the interaction effect, two separate within-subjects ANOVAs were conducted for idiocentrics and allocentrics respectively. Idiocentrics demonstrated significant main effect of appeal type, Wilk's $\lambda = .60, F(2, 32) = 10.72, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Paired-sample t-tests comparing the attitudes of idiocentrics toward the different appeals revealed significant differences between the functional ($M = 13.18, SD = 3.47$) and social appeals ($M = 9.67, SD = 3.67$), $t(33) = 3.65, p < .001$ and functional and sensory appeals ($M = 9.32, SD = 3.51$), $t(33) = 4.32, p < .001$. Idiocentrics revealed no significant difference in their attitudes toward the social and sensory appeals. The within-subject ANOVA conducted for allocentrics did not show an effect of appeal type, Wilk's $\lambda = .10, F(2, 37) = 2.14, p = .13$, $\eta^2 = .10$.

**DISCUSSION**

The study results demonstrate that idiocentrism-allocentrism interacts with appeal types in predicting audience attitude toward the message. Figure 1 shows that the attitudinal preference of the idiocentric for the functional appeal is the strongest among the different idiocentrism-involvement combinations. Idiocentrics demonstrate weak attitudes for both social and sensory appeals. Allocentrics, however, do not meaningfully
differentiate among any of the appeal types. These results suggest that in the realm of communication about an issue such as HIV/AIDS with high perceived severity and susceptibility for the college population, functional appeals are most likely to generate positive audience attitude. Perhaps, the very nature of HIV/AIDS triggers audience orientation toward rational cost-benefit oriented responses.

The use of sensory appeals focusing on hedonistic pleasures associated with the issue, on the other hand, is likely to be ineffective in the persuasion process. The low effect of sensory appeals might also be a product of optimistic biases in participant evaluation of the message (Weinstein & Klein, 1995). Sensory messages are perhaps more likely to trigger such a heuristic and, therefore, reduce message effectiveness (Weinstein & Klein, 1995). Other systematic and heuristic processing cues might also have impacted the audience response to sensory appeals. For instance, it may be argued that the contextual cognitive and affective frameworks (such as the severity of the disease) triggered by the nature of the issue (HIV/AIDS) impact how audience members respond to the message. Future research needs to examine the interaction between idiocentrism/allocentrism and appeal type in the realm of other issues (such as healthy eating, exercising, and seat belt use) that provide a greater degree of contextual variance. Also, future research needs to test audience response to sensory appeals in the context of sensory-oriented issues such as alcohol consumption and drug use. Along these lines, it is important to point out that a significant body of work points to the effectiveness of sensory messages in anti-drug interventions (Palmgreen et al., 2001; Stephenson, 2002).

The personality-based framework of the study was supported by the data. Idiocentrism-allocentrism emerges as a trait-level predictor of attitude toward social appeals. Supporting the findings from previous research (Dutta & Vanacker, 1999; Dutta-Bergman, 2003), it was observed that allocentrics are more likely than idiocentrics to prefer social appeals. Also, the different preference patterns of idiocentrics and allocentrics approach significance in the domain of functional appeals. However, no differences were observed between idiocentrics and allocentrics in their attitudes toward sensory appeals.

Involvement did not have a significant main effect or an interaction effect on attitudinal responses of the participants. This outcome can perhaps be explained by a plethora of factors. First, because HIV/AIDS is a well publicized issue, it is associated with high severity (death), triggering a functional orientation and limiting the variance in involvement. It might be argued that effects of the differences in the level of involvement may be more visible when the issue itself is a weaker issue that is not linked with high levels of susceptibility and severity. When the top 25% of the sample was compared with the bottom 25% in the realm of involvement, no significant differences were detected in attitude toward the different appeals. Second, the emphasis of this study was on tapping the preexisting population variance in involvement. To remedy this problem, future research on the role of involvement in appeal choice might manipulate involvement along the lines of the work done by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). Third, involvement was perhaps not given an opportunity to demonstrate its effect by limiting the stimulus materials to slogans. It may be argued that slogans do not give the audience member an opportunity to cognitively process a message and instead generate affective responses. Therefore, the participants in the high involvement situation were perhaps simply demonstrating their affective response. Future research with more complex messages that provide the high involvement participants with opportunities to elaborate might demonstrate different results.

**Limitations**

The study has several limitations. Idiocentrism-allocentrism was measured as a dichotomous construct with idiocentrism and allocentrism being two ends of a spec-
trum. Whereas some scholars suggest the existence of research that suggests that idiocentrism and allocentrism are distinct constructs and not the two ends of a continuum (Triandis, 1995), others continue to measure it as a dichotomous construct (Dutta-Bergman, 2003; Triandis, 1995). Internal and external validity are necessarily in tension in such experiments. This study focused on internal validity that required some decisions involving trade-offs regarding external validity. The quality of the production material did not match up with the quality of print advertisements used in campaigns. Although the slogans were accompanied by a body copy, the message did not look like real-life advertisements. The use of real-life messages would increase the external validity of the results although internal validity may be sacrificed. In this project, single executions of the appeal types were used. Jackson, O'Keefe, Jacobs, and Brashers (1989) call for randomization of message manipulations through multiple message executions for each message category. However, as pointed out by Hunter, Hamilton, and Allen (1989) such multiple message executions threaten the power of the study; furthermore, these authors argue that nested designs and multiple messages should be used only when absolutely necessary. Given the exploratory nature of the study, single message executions were used to detect the effects of appeal types. Future research needs to build upon this study, perhaps using multiple messages and following-up with meta-analyses once a significant body of work has been built.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

This project makes several important contributions. Message appeals, according to the data, are an important element in communication campaign development and warrant further attention. By demonstrating the differential impact of appeal types on audience attitudes, the study supports the importance of strategic planning in campaign design (Dutta-Bergman, 2003). The classification of appeals into the functional, social, and sensory categories emerges as a meaningful scheme and may be used in future research and application development (Park et al., 1986). The strategic use of personality adds to the growing body of health communication research on personality-based message strategies and suggests that systematic differences in personality in the population explain a significant level of variance in audience response to persuasive appeals (Dutta & Vanacker, 1999; Dutta-Bergman, 2003; Palmgreen et al., 2001; Stephenson, 2002). The personality-based framework is particularly conducive to message tailoring applications. Future scholarship ought to interrogate these and other personality variables in the role they play in strategic communication campaigns.

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