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The effect of perceived message choice on persuasion

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Abstract

We argue that giving individuals a sense of choice over the product information they receive (i.e., message choice) can have important subsequent effects when individuals are prompted to make inferences about the company. Even when the product information that is received is exactly the same, being given a sense of choice can produce more favorable company evaluations and in turn, more favorable product judgments. The first two experiments support these hypotheses using different means of prompting company inferences: when prompted, those who had been given message choice judged the company more favorably and were more willing to purchase from that company. The third experiment illustrates when message choice effects can backfire. Specifically, when the company itself highlights the provision of message choice in the ad, and consumers are prompted to make inferences about the company, message choice can backfire because it may be perceived as a persuasion tactic rather than a sincere attempt to inform. The results support company evaluations as the mediator of message choice effects and rule out alternate accounts based on dissonance, elaboration, reactance and self-labeling explanations. These findings are important in interactive media environments where marketers have opportunities and imperatives to give consumers a sense of choice in message selection.

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Imagine that you are reading an advertisement for a stylish pen, such as a Mont Blanc. With print ads, your only role in terms of message delivery might be to turn the page to read more. But in interactive media environments such as the Internet, you may be given a link to click to read more about the pen or you may be given a choice between several pen attributes to delve into further. How might this opportunity to exercise choice affect your subsequent responses to information you encounter about the pen? How might it affect your feelings about the company and, thus, your willingness to purchase from this company?

Marketing communication has traditionally involved one-way communication, with the consumer being a relatively passive recipient of the message. Although advances in technology have allowed marketers to deliver mass communications with a more personalized touch, the Internet is unique in allowing the message recipient to work with the source to choose the product information they wish to receive (Hoffman

& Novak, 1996). This article examines the impact of this felt autonomy on persuasion processes. For instance, although general product information may be featured on a homepage or product landing page, the consumer may also be provided with a hyperlink to “click here to learn more” or may be given a choice among product attributes to read about (i.e., a choice between different messages). For instance, for each model of sunglasses at Oakely.com, visitors are given a general description of the sunglasses as well as links to access more information about the colors, lens tints and accessories for that model. Whether to provide product information via a single link or a choice of hyperlinks may seem to be an inconsequential website design decision. However, we propose that the mere act of choosing among messages may have important implications for one’s subsequent willingness to do business with a company.

The impact of making choices—including illusory choices—has been a topic of recent debate (e.g., Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, & Vohs, 2008; Mick, 2008; Wertebroch, Vosgerau, & Bruyneel, 2008). The focus here is on the implications of believing that one has exercised message choice provided by a company, not on actual exposure to different messages. When a

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situation subsequently prompts people to make inferences about the company, we propose that people will consider the provision of message choice in evaluating whether the company has treated them well (e.g., respectfully and sincerely). Those provided with a message choice should judge the company more favorably and should be more inclined to purchase from it than those not given a choice. Furthermore, we argue that such message choice effects can occur whenever the situation calls attention to the provision of choice. However, providing message choice may backfire when the company itself draws attention to its provision of choice in its ad. In such a case, consumers who are prompted to make inferences about the company may view message choice as a persuasion tactic rather than a sincere attempt to inform, thereby leading to less favorable inferences about the company and its product. Overall, then, we argue that consumers make inferences about a company based on its marketing messages, in line with previous research (e.g., Campbell, 1999; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Kirmani & Rao, 2000). In turn, this has implications—both good and bad—for consumers' willingness to buy from a company that gave them a choice of messages.

Across our studies, we contrast this account against other potential processes that may be expected to yield message choice effects, such as cognitive dissonance. Research on cognitive dissonance has suggested that choosing among equally attractive alternatives leads to more favorable attitudes toward the chosen (vs. forgone) alternative (Brehm, 1956; but see Chen, 2008). However, we propose that choosing among messages can affect individuals' product judgments by predisposing positive evaluations toward the company, rather than the message chosen. Consequently, regardless of the message chosen, when prompted to make company inferences, those who were given message choice should evaluate the company more favorably and thus be more willing to buy the advertised product than those who did not have a choice. Unlike our account, dissonance theory would suggest a direct effect: Choice should affect product attitudes independent of prompts to make company inferences and independent of individuals' feelings about the company.

Three experiments demonstrate that even though message content is held constant and hence the sense of message choice is illusory, it nevertheless affects judgments of the advertised product. The first experiment shows that perceived message choice buffers the impact of subsequent negative product information compared to those not given a sense of message choice. These message choice effects emerge because subsequently encountering negative information about a product that consumers previously judged favorably is likely unexpected, thereby prompting them to make inferences about the company that advertised the product. When making such inferences, consumers likely think about the company's message—and the provision of choice—as an indicator of how the company has treated them, and this will favor companies that provide message choice. In the second experiment, we support this account by demonstrating that directly prompting individuals to make inferences about the company that gave them message choice leads to similar effects. In experiment 3, we demonstrate

that message choice effects can backfire when a company calls attention to its provision of message choice in the ad. In this case, when prompted to make inferences about the company, the provision of choice may be seen as a persuasive tactic rather than a sincere attempt to inform. Across studies, through a variety of measures, we further show that the effects of message choice are mediated by favorable evaluations of the company that consumers form when drawing inferences about the company. Thus, our contributions are several. Specifically, we demonstrate that merely perceiving that one has made a choice among product messages can affect product judgments under certain conditions. Moreover, we demonstrate that company inferences explain such choice effects. Consequently, depending on how favorable these inferences are, choice effects can have positive or negative consequences for product judgments.

The effect of message choice

Although a great deal of research has examined the effect of message content on individuals' product judgments, very little work has examined the effect of selecting message content (for an exception, see Ariely 2000), much less how this might influence individuals' inferences about the company behind the message and thus consumers' purchase intentions. However, studies have demonstrated the importance of considering the effect of message factors on consumers' evaluations and inferences about a company (Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994; Campbell, 1999; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Folkes, 1988; Kirmani, 1990; Kirmani & Wright, 1989; Trifts & Häubl, 2003). For instance, providing access to competitor price information online appears to increase a company's perceived trustworthiness, which in turn enhances long-term preferences for that company (Trifts & Häubl, 2003).

We propose that perceived message choice predisposes positive feelings toward the company behind the advertised product. As a result, when prompted to make inferences about the company, those provided with message choice should evaluate the company more favorably. For instance, they may perceive that their interests and those of the company are more aligned, perceive the company to be more sincere, and trust the company more. We refer to this sense of alignment as *connectedness*, though it has been variously labeled as organizational/relational identification (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), interpersonal/psychological closeness (Aron, Aron & Smollan, 1992; Fitzsimons & Kay, 2004; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007; McCullough et al. 1998), and interconnectedness (Aron et al., 1992; Mandel, Petrova & Cialdini, 2006). Connectedness could be described as a feeling of closeness to another (Aron et al. 1992) and a sense of trust in another. We argue that perceived message choice—or working with the marketer during the persuasion process by choosing which product information to receive—can lead to such feelings toward a company when individuals are prompted to make inferences about the company. When prompted, individuals may reflect on the message, and hence their attention is likely drawn to the provision of choice. Because consumers generally prefer the freedom to

choose, and perceived choice can confer positive outcomes even when such choices are illusory (for reviews, see [Iyengar & Lepper, 2000](#); [Werthenbroch et al., 2008](#)), a company that gave vs. did not give message choice is likely to be evaluated more favorably (e.g., “if they cared enough to let me choose the content I’m interested in, then they must be a good company”).

Feelings of connectedness to a firm can emerge between consumers and organizations even in the absence of formal memberships such as being an employee of the organization, and they can produce positive company evaluations and purchase intentions ([Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001](#)). Of course, simply choosing among messages is unlikely to produce strong feelings of connectedness and liking for a company. However, in situations that prompt consumers to make inferences about the company, those who were originally given a choice among messages should evaluate it more favorably than those who were not given a choice.

H1. When prompted to make inferences about a company, those who were given a choice of messages will judge the advertised product more favorably than will those who were not given message choice.

H2. The effect of message choice on the favorability of consumers’ product judgments will be mediated by evaluations of the company.

One situation in which message choice (vs. no-choice) should produce more positive evaluations of a company, and thus more favorable product judgments, is when negative information is subsequently encountered. Research shows that unexpected or negative information causes consumers to think about the company behind a message ([Campbell & Kirmani, 2000](#); [Folkes, 1984, 1988](#); [Friestad & Wright, 1994](#); [Raghubir & Corfman, 1999](#)). Such situations prompt people to seek an attribution for that unexpected information ([Clary & Tesser, 1983](#); [Folkes, 1984, 1988](#); [Hastie, 1984](#); [Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1981](#); [Weiner, 1985](#)). If an ad persuades consumers to hold favorable product attitudes, then encountering subsequent negative product information is likely to be unexpected. Accordingly, we anticipate that when a negative product review is encountered, consumers will make inferences about the company that advertised the product. A company that provided message choice will be viewed more favorably than one that did not, resulting in more favorable product judgments. Thus, we test hypotheses 1 and 2 by giving participants a negative review of the advertised product (experiments 1 and 2), as well as directly prompting participants to make inferences about the company through survey questions regarding the company (experiments 2 and 3).

Overview of experiments

Across all experiments, participants visited fictitious websites and were randomly assigned to either a choice or no-choice condition. Those in the choice condition were asked to select an additional message that they would like to read regarding the product’s quality, style or value. Those in the no-choice

condition were given an additional message purportedly about the product’s quality, style or (in experiment 3) value. The actual message participants received across all of these conditions was identical. In the first two experiments, participants subsequently received negative information in the form of a “product review” describing unfavorable attributes of the product. We expected that the negative review would prompt participants to make inferences about the company that advertised the product and that this would result in more favorable company and product judgments among those in the choice than no-choice condition.

Experiment 1 examined whether being given a choice among messages would reduce the influence of the subsequent negative review on product judgments. We also examined the underlying process for this anticipated effect by measuring evaluations of the company and their role in mediating message choice effects. Experiment 2 is a theory test that follows programmatically from our account and from the results of experiment 1 by examining whether directly prompting individuals to make company inferences produces similar message choice effects. In experiment 3, we extend the findings from the first two experiments by examining a condition under which providing message choice might backfire.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants

A sample of 168 undergraduates participated to fulfill an introductory course requirement. They were randomly assigned to either the choice or no-choice condition and to a subsequent product review that criticized either the quality or style of the product.

Materials and procedure

All participants began by viewing the purported homepage for Omega 3000 eyewear. The homepage was identical for everyone with one exception. At the bottom of the page was the choice manipulation (see Appendix A). Specifically, at the bottom of the homepage, those in the choice condition read: “In the interest of time, please choose only one of the three links provided that you are most interested in knowing at this time.” Below this were hyperlinks labeled, “quality,” “style” and “value.” In contrast, the no-choice condition had a single link that read: “Click here for the next page.” The hyperlinked page with the chosen/given message contained the same information for everyone with the exception that the attributes were introduced as being about the product’s quality, style or value. Specifically, the introduction read, “As a [quality-, style- or value-] oriented consumer, you’ll be interested in knowing that the Omega 3000 eyewear has these additional features.” Whether the introduction mentioned quality, style or value corresponded to participants’ chosen message in the choice condition. In contrast, those in the no-choice condition were randomly assigned to a message with the quality or style

introduction. Across conditions, the same eight bulleted points followed this introduction.

After reading this message, all participants clicked on a hyperlink to continue. On the following web page, participants reported their attitudes toward the product on three 9-point semantic differential scales ranging from -4 to $+4$ and anchored with negative/positive, unfavorable/favorable, dislike/like ($\alpha = .94$). Upon completion of this pre-review measure, participants received a paper-and-pencil booklet beginning with the product review. The review contained company history and results of product tests. Participants received a review mildly criticizing either the product's style (i.e., the look of the frames and color selection) or the product's quality (i.e., the sunglasses did not retain their fit under rigorous sporting activities). Because the review may have critiqued the dimension described in the prior message that was either chosen/given (a direct criticism) or a different dimension (an indirect criticism), this direct/indirect *criticism* factor was treated as a blocking variable to control for what would otherwise be error variance.¹

Next, participants indicated the extent to which they agreed that "Omega 3000 eyewear is very good" on a scale from -4 (strongly disagree) to $+4$ (strongly agree; the post-review attitude measure). Then they rated the likelihood that they would look for Omega 3000 eyewear to purchase the next time they were in the market for eyewear on a scale ranging from -4 (very unlikely) to $+4$ (very likely; the purchase intention measure). Participants were then asked to list their thoughts about Omega 3000 eyewear using a standard cognitive response measure (Cacioppo & Petty, 1981). Specifically, they were given seven boxes and instructed to write only one feeling or thought in a box. They were also informed that they did not need to fill every box but rather to list the thoughts that occurred to them at that time. This measure was included to test an alternate (elaboration) account for our data. That is, instead of favorable evaluations of the company mediating the choice effects on product evaluations, it is possible that the perception that one has selected a message increases involvement and elaborated processing of product information, much like receiving actual self-relevant message arguments has been shown to do (Greenwald, 1968; Petty & Cacioppo, 1990; Petty, Ostrom & Brock, 1981). We address this by examining whether those in the choice condition list more thoughts in response to product information than do those in the no-choice condition, because elaborated processing should be reflected in the amount of cognitive responses generated (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

To test our hypothesized process mechanism (H2), company evaluations were assessed using the inclusion of other in the self (IOS) scale—a measure of subjective feelings of connectedness (Aron et al., 1992). The scale is a single-item pictorial scale consisting of two circles, one representing participants' own

Table 1

Experiments 1–2: the effect of message choice on product judgments.

Experiment and choice condition	Initial (pre-review) attitudes	Post-review attitudes	Post-review purchase intentions
Experiment 1			
Choice	1.73 _a	.52 _a	-.37 _a
No-choice	1.46 _a	.29 _a	-1.02 _b
Experiment 2			
Choice	1.69 _a	.48 _a	-.18 _a
No-choice	.92 _b	-.85 _b	-1.44 _b

Note—Different subscripts indicate the predicted differences between choice conditions within an experiment are significant at $p < .05$, one-tailed. The means for post-review attitudes and purchase intentions are adjusted for initial attitudes in experiment 1. In experiment 1, participants were prompted to make inferences about the company after reporting their initial attitudes, whereas in experiment 2, they were prompted to make inferences about the company initially, prior to the review, and thus those initial attitudes were also affected by the choice condition.

self-definition or identity and the other representing the company's identity. The circles range from being far apart (score = 1) through varying degrees of overlap between the circles up to complete overlap (score = 8). Participants indicated which pair best represented the degree of overlap between their own and the company's identity. This measure has been used successfully in numerous studies to assess feelings of connectedness with various entities (Aron et al., 1992; Fitzsimons & Kay, 2004; Mandel et al., 2006; McCullough et al. 1998). To examine whether those who chose vs. were given a message (e.g., about quality) came to view that message content as more interesting or valuable (as predicted by an account of post-choice dissonance reduction; Brehm 1956), we assessed their interest in the dimensions of quality and style when evaluating eyewear in general.² This was measured as participants' degree of interest in gathering quality and style information about eyewear on -4 (not at all) to $+4$ (extremely) scales.

Results

Initial product judgments

Product attitudes were first measured directly after the message choice manipulation, before seeing the negative review. Recall that message choice effects are expected to occur in situations that prompt people to make inferences about the company (e.g., when negative information is encountered). Prior to seeing the negative information in the review, therefore, no message choice effect was expected: Everyone should hold relatively favorable attitudes. Consistent with this, a 2 (choice) \times 2 (criticism) ANOVA yielded no significant differences across conditions in initial attitudes ($F_s(1, 164) < 1.76$, *ns*, see Table 1 for cell means).

² Participants did not evaluate the importance of the value dimension because none of the participants in the no-choice condition received a message purportedly about value. Instead those in the no-choice condition were randomly assigned to one of the two dimensions that were subsequently attacked in the review (i.e., quality or style).

¹ The dimension criticized in the review was varied to ensure that the effect of message choice was unaffected by whether the review criticized the quality vs. style dimension. A 2(choice) \times 2(review: quality vs. style criticized) ANCOVA on purchase intentions yielded a nonsignificant choice \times review interaction ($F(1, 163) = 2.25$, *ns*). Thus, we collapse across dimension criticized in the review and instead control for whether the review directly criticized the dimension chosen/given to them.

Product judgments after exposure to negative review

After exposure to the negative review, a situation that should prompt company inferences, product attitudes and purchase intentions were measured and were analyzed with a 2×2 ANCOVA that controlled for variation in the initial product attitudes. Here and elsewhere, all planned pairwise comparisons are directional tests. Not surprisingly, as shown in Table 1, the negative review led participants' judgments overall to become substantially less favorable. However, those who had initially been given message choice were less affected by that negative review. They held somewhat higher product attitudes after reading the review than those in the no-choice condition did, although this effect was not statistically significant ($M_s = .52$ and $.29$, $F(1, 163) < 1$). For purchase intentions, consistent with hypothesis 1, the key effect emerged as expected: Those in the choice condition held significantly higher purchase intentions than did those in the no-choice condition ($M_s = -.37$ vs. -1.02 , $F(1, 162) = 3.58$, $p < .05$). Thus, when people had been given a choice of which message to view (vs. no-choice), their purchase intentions were less affected by the negative review they subsequently encountered. No other effects were significant ($F_s(1, 162) < 1$).

Although we expected the choice effect to be significant for both attitudes and purchase intentions, it may be that feelings of connectedness toward a company have a stronger influence on purchase intentions than product attitudes. Indeed, purchase behavior has been used as a measure of the relationship between a customer and a company (for reviews, see Dholakia & Morwitz, 2002; Reinartz & Kumar, 2000). Because purchase intentions imply an exchange between the company and the consumer, they may be particularly affected by factors that increase one's sense of connectedness with a company. Consequently, a stronger prompt to draw (and use) company inferences may be needed for the effects to be significant for product attitudes. This was explored in our subsequent studies.

Consistent with hypothesis 2, those in the choice condition evaluated the company more favorably: They felt more connected with the company than those in the no-choice condition did ($M_s = 3.71$ vs. 2.94 , $F(1, 162) = 12.74$, $p < .01$), and this sense of connectedness was significantly related to purchase intentions ($r = .55$, $p < .01$). Finally, completing the requirements for mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986), and thus supporting hypothesis 2, including connectedness as a covariate in the analysis on purchase intentions yielded a significant connectedness covariate ($F(1, 161) = 34.21$, $p < .01$) and a nonsignificant choice main effect ($F(1, 161) < 1$). Thus, a sense of connectedness with the company mediated the effect of message choice on purchase intentions.

We also evaluated an alternative explanation based on elaborative processing. According to this account, message choice may enhance self-relevance and involvement and thus prompt more elaborative processing of product information, leading to greater resistance to the negative review. In this study, we collected listed thoughts only after the product review, assessing whether message choice affected the degree of processing of the review. No effects involving choice were significant for the number of thoughts listed after reading the

review (all $F_s(1, 161) < 2.38$, *ns*). The only significant effect that emerged was a dimension main effect: Those who read the review that attacked the information promoted in the message listed more thoughts than those who read the review that attacked a different dimension ($M_s = 4.39$ vs. 3.74 , $F(1, 161) = 6.81$, $p = .01$). In sum, message choice did not appear to trigger more elaborative processing of product information.

Our findings were also not consistent with a cognitive dissonance reduction account, which would predict an immediate effect of message choice on initial product judgments. Moreover, this account would predict that message choice would yield more favorable intentions because people came to view their chosen message (vs. the given message) about quality or style as being more interesting or valuable to them. To examine this alternative account, we examined whether message choice influenced how interested people said they were in the dimension they chose or were given in the message. A 2 (choice) $\times 2$ (message chosen/given: quality vs. style) $\times 2$ (dimension rated, a within-subject variable: quality vs. style) ANOVA yielded a nonsignificant choice \times message \times dimension rated interaction ($F(1, 133) = 2.34$, *ns*). Hence, choosing a message did not appear to enhance participants' perceptions of the value of their chosen message content. Instead, the data suggest that it affected their sense of connectedness with the company which, in turn, fostered more favorable purchase intentions.

Conclusions

The results of experiment 1 generally support the hypotheses. Having a choice of messages predisposed consumers to feel more connected to the company. In turn, when negative information prompted them to make inferences about the company, they reported more favorable purchase intentions toward the company's product. This was true even though the advertising messages that participants had chosen/received were exactly the same. All that differed was their sense of having chosen (vs. having been given) the message content.

Specifically, in this experiment, being given message choice reduced the impact of a subsequent negative review of the company's product. That is, when consumers encountered a negative review of the advertised product, which presumably prompted them to form inferences about the company, those who had been given a choice of messages (vs. no-choice) reported a greater sense of connectedness with the company that advertised the product. As a result, their purchase intentions were less affected by the negative review compared to those who had not received message choice. Moreover, the results support that company evaluations (i.e., feeling connected to the company) mediated the effect of message choice on purchase intentions.

Two alternate processes—elaborative processing triggered by message choice and dissonance-reduction increasing the perceived value of chosen message content—did not appear to explain the influence of message choice. Moreover, we conducted another study similar to that of experiment 1, the results of which replicated those in experiment 1 and further

suggested that elaborative processes were not responsible for the choice effects. Specifically, in that study, message choice did not increase the number of thoughts listed in response to the Omega ad itself, nor did it improve recall of the subsequent product review, both of which suggest that choice did not trigger increased scrutiny of the information about Omega.

Although perceived choice affected product attitudes in the predicted direction, the choice effect was only significant for purchase intentions. As mentioned earlier, this may be because purchase intentions are more strongly related to and thus more sensitive to company–customer relationships than are product attitudes. Thus, a less subtle prompt to make company inferences may be needed for consumers' company evaluations to significantly influence their product attitudes.

We proposed that perceived message choice predisposes a sense of connectedness with and positive evaluations of the company that provides choice. These company evaluations emerge when inferences about the company are triggered, such as when encountering a negative review of the advertised product. Thus, one should also observe message choice effects when consumers are directly prompted to make inferences about the company. In these situations, people who had message choice should form a stronger sense of connection with and more positive evaluations of the company and, therefore, more favorable product judgments than those not given message choice. The second experiment tests this logic underlying our account, replicating and extending the findings of experiment 1.

Experiment 2

Method

Participants

A sample of 51 undergraduates participated to fulfill an introductory course requirement. Participants were randomly assigned to either the choice or no-choice condition.

Materials and procedure

The stimuli and procedure were the same as those in the preceding experiment with the following exceptions. After the message choice manipulation, participants were prompted to form inferences about the company. This was done by asking participants whether the company provided them with an opportunity to choose between messages (yes or no). Next, respondents were asked to make inferences about the company's approach to them on three semantic differential scales anchored with disrespectful/respectful, indifferent/caring and insincere/sincere and ranging from -4 to $+4$ (the inference variable; $\alpha = .89$). Then, after reporting their product attitudes, participants read the negative product review (the version that criticized the style of the product), and finally reported their post-review attitudes and purchase intentions. Both sets of attitude measures were multiple items with three semantic differential scales ranging from -4 to $+4$. The anchors for these measures were the same as those used in experiment 1. For intentions, the anchors were very unlikely/very likely, improbable/probable, definitely no/definitely yes. The average responses to these items formed

the measures of post-review product attitudes ($\alpha = .97$) and purchase intentions ($\alpha = .97$).

To further test whether message choice leads to more connectedness and related company evaluations, we included additional relevant measures. Because connectedness is related in part to feelings of trust (Aron et al. 1992), participants completed Mayer and Davis's, (1999) scale of trustworthiness, which measures three components of trustworthiness (ability, benevolence and integrity) as well as global feelings of trust. Participants reported their beliefs about the company's trustworthiness on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Then, they completed the IOS scale.

Results

Initial product judgments

Product attitudes were first measured directly after the message choice manipulation and the prompt to make inferences about the company. As predicted, these attitude ratings were significantly higher for those in the message choice condition than for those in the no-choice condition ($M_s = 1.69$ vs. $.92$, $F(1, 49) = 3.84$, $p < .05$, see Table 1). Furthermore, participants' inferences about the company's approach to them (respectful, caring, sincere) were more favorable when they had been given message choice vs. no-choice ($M_s = 1.30$ vs. $.18$, $F(1, 49) = 7.16$, $p = .01$). Consistent with the requirements for mediation, participants' inferences about the company's approach to them were strongly and significantly related to their product attitudes ($r = .83$). Moreover, completing the requirements for mediation, company inferences were a significant covariate when added to the model assessing the effect of choice on product attitudes ($F(1, 48) = 93.99$, $p < .01$), whereas the previously significant effect of message choice on product attitudes was reduced to nonsignificance ($F(1, 48) < 1$). Thus, when directly prompted to make inferences about the company, those given a choice of messages viewed more favorably the company's approach to them and thus reported more favorable product attitudes than did those not given a choice.

Product judgments after exposure to negative review

Product judgments were significantly more favorable in the message choice compared to the no-choice condition, both in terms of attitudes ($M_s = .48$ vs. $-.85$, $F(1, 49) = 8.91$, $p < .01$) and purchase intentions ($M_s = -.18$ vs. -1.44 , $F(1, 49) = 5.00$, $p < .05$). Thus, replicating experiment 1, being given a sense of message choice (vs. no-choice) buffered the effects of a negative product review, leading to more favorable attitudes and intentions. Both effects were largely mediated by inferences about the company's approach to them (respectful, caring, sincere), which were significantly correlated with post-review attitudes ($r = .49$) and purchase intentions ($r = .39$). Furthermore, completing the requirements of mediation, company inferences were a significant covariate when added to the model assessing the effect of choice on product attitudes and intentions ($F(1, 48) = 9.74$, $p < .01$ and $F(1, 48) = 5.44$, $p < .05$, respectively), whereas the previously significant message choice effects were

reduced (from $F(1, 49)=8.91, p<.01$ to $F(1, 48)=3.65, p=.06$ for attitudes, and from $F(1, 49)=5.00, p<.05$ to $F(1, 48)=1.82, p=.18$, for intentions). It appears, then, that participants' inferences about the company's approach to them largely explained the effect of message choice on their product judgments.

Feelings of connectedness with the company were examined using the trust and IOS measures. The three components of trust, the global measure of trust, and IOS ratings were interrelated (all $r_s>.23$), and thus were analyzed with a MANOVA. A significant choice effect emerged ($F(5, 45)=2.40, p=.05$), indicating as predicted that being given message choice enhanced consumers' overall feelings of connectedness to the company. Compared to those in the no-choice condition, those given message choice had greater trust in the company's benevolence ($M_s=3.10$ vs. $2.61, F(1, 49)=7.77, p<.01$), and had greater global feelings of trust ($M_s=2.72$ vs. $2.42, F(1, 49)=5.11, p<.05$). Finally, although nonsignificant, there were directional effects consistent with our predictions for trust in the company's integrity ($M_s=3.00$ vs. $2.87, F(1, 49)=1.69, p<.10$) and ability ($M_s=3.05$ vs. $2.83, F(1, 49)=2.01, p<.10$), and for overlap between their own and the company's identity (IOS scale; $M_s=2.22$ vs. $1.96, F(1, 49)<1$). The nonsignificant effect of choice on the IOS scale responses may be due to participants completing the trust measure immediately prior to the IOS scale. Having answered similar questions just prior to it may have led participants to infer that the IOS requested distinct, nonredundant information (Schwarz, Strack, & Mai, 1991). From the mediation analyses reported earlier, it appears that message choice improved consumers' inferences about the company's approach to them, and that these inferences drove product judgments. Thus, the effect of message choice on product judgments appears to be driven by more favorable evaluative judgments relating to the company that provided choice.

Conclusions

The results of experiment 2 provide general support for the hypotheses. Perceived message choice predisposes positive views of a company that provides choice. In this study, to test directly our account regarding the role of company inferences, consumers were prompted through survey questions to make inferences about the company's approach to them. Those who had been given message choice viewed the company's approach to them as more caring, sincere and respectful, which in turn caused them to judge the product more favorably than did those who were not given a choice. Furthermore, consistent with the results of experiment 1, the provision of message choice buffered the impact of a subsequent negative product review. Indeed, after reading the negative review, those who had originally been given a choice of messages reported more favorable company evaluations, and more favorable product attitudes and purchase intentions, than those in the no-choice condition did. Thus, the results of experiments 1 and 2 generally support our predictions: when conditions subtly encourage company evaluations (experiment 1) or when people are

directly asked for them (experiment 2), message choice effects emerge.

One might argue that message choice effects emerged in experiment 2 because participants' attention was drawn to the provision of choice as a messaging approach. Indeed, drawing attention to message choice should cause consumers to hold more favorable product judgments. However, our view is that it is not the salience of message choice that matters, but its impact on inferences about the company. If those inferences are favorable, then message choice should enhance persuasion. If, however, one makes unfavorable inferences about the company that provides message choice—for instance, if one comes to view the provision of choice as a persuasion tactic—message choice may instead result in less favorable evaluations of the company and, accordingly, less favorable product judgments (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Morales, 2005; Tuk et al., 2009). This suggests that reflecting too much on the provision of choice may backfire, as it increases the opportunity to consider the company's motives and tactics (Kirmani & Campbell, 2009).

We examined this possibility in the next study. In the message choice condition, the ad itself highlighted the provision of message choice. We expected that in the absence of prompts to make company inferences, noting the provision of choice in the ad should have a favorable effect on product evaluations. If, however, consumers are led to make inferences about the company's approach to them, the effect may reverse. That is, upon further reflection, the company's touting its provision of choice may appear to be more of a marketing tactic than a sincere effort to inform. Thus, consumers may judge the company and its products less favorably.

H3. When prompted to make inferences about a company that calls attention to its provision of message choice, consumers will judge a product less favorably than if they were not given message choice.

Experiment 3

Method

Participants

A sample of 169 undergraduates participated to fulfill an introductory course requirement. Participants were randomly

Table 2
Experiment 3: the effect of message choice and company inference prompt on attitudes and purchase intentions.

Company inferences	Choice condition	Attitudes	Purchase intentions
Not prompted	Choice	2.82 _a	1.11 _a
	No-choice	1.99 _b	-.26 _b
Prompted	Choice	1.97 _b	.32 _b
	No-choice	2.68 _a	.58 _b

Note—Different subscripts indicate the predicted differences between choice conditions within company inference condition were significant at $p<.05$, one-tailed. Unlike experiments 1–2, in experiment 3, the company called attention to the provision of choice in the message.

assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (choice: choice vs. no-choice) \times 2 (inference prompt: company inferences prompted vs. not prompted) factorial design.

Materials and procedure

The procedure was the same as in the preceding experiment with the following exceptions. To test the generalizability of the findings to a different product category, pens rather than sunglasses were used as the stimuli. Importantly, in the choice condition, the company itself touted the presence of message choice. Specifically, above the three message choices on the website, those in the choice condition read, "Rather than deciding for you which product information to read, we want you to have a choice." In contrast, those in the no-choice condition were simply given a link that read "Click here to continue." They were then randomly assigned to receive information about the product's quality, style or value.

After reading the second web page about quality, style or value, participants completed the survey, which contained the inference prompt manipulation. For those in the prompt condition, participants made inferences about the company before rating the product, whereas those in the no prompt condition made inferences about the company at the end of the survey. Specifically, those in the prompt condition first rated how respectful, caring and sincere they found the company's approach to them to be ($\alpha=.79$; combined to reflect the approach dependent variable). Afterwards, they evaluated Omega 3000 as a company by reporting their company attitudes using the three semantic differential scales used to measure product attitudes in experiments 1 and 2 ($\alpha=.95$). We added this measure because feelings of connectedness are related to positive company evaluations (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Next, those in the prompt condition reported their product attitudes ($\alpha=.94$) and purchase intentions ($\alpha=.96$). In contrast, those in the no prompt condition began by reporting their product attitudes and their purchase intentions, followed by their company attitudes and how respectful, caring and sincere they found Omega's approach to them to be. All participants then completed the IOS scale. After some other measures, they were debriefed and dismissed.

Results

Product judgments

Product attitudes and purchase intentions were analyzed with a 2 (choice) \times 2 (inference prompt) \times 3 (dimension read: quality, style vs. value) ANOVA. As predicted, a significant choice \times inference prompt interaction emerged for both attitudes ($F(1, 165)=12.96, p<.001$) and intentions ($F(1, 165)=5.67, p<.05$). Specifically, in the no prompt condition, participants were persuaded by the company's conferral of message choice (Table 2): Those in the choice condition held more favorable attitudes and higher purchase intentions than did those in the no-choice condition ($M_s=2.82$ vs. 1.99, $F(1, 58)=4.91, p<.05$ for attitudes; $M_s=1.11$ vs. $-.26, F(1, 58)=5.50, p<.05$ for purchase intentions). However, when prompted to make inferences about the company's approach to them, the

company's conferral of message choice backfired. Those in the choice condition held significantly less favorable attitudes and slightly lower purchase intentions than those in the no-choice condition did ($M_s=1.97$ vs. 2.68, $F(1, 109)=8.60, p<.005$ for attitudes; $M_s=.32$ vs. $.58, F(1, 109)<1$ for intentions). Although prompting company inferences did not significantly reverse the effect of message choice on purchase intentions, it did cause the positive effects of highlighting message choice to disappear. No other effects from the 2 \times 2 \times 2 ANOVA were significant (all $F_s<2.92, p_s>.05$).³

Company inferences and their role in product judgments

A significant choice \times inference prompt interaction also emerged for participants' attitudes toward the company, inferences about the company's approach to them (respectful, caring, sincere), and feelings of connectedness (IOS scale) ($F_s(1, 165)>3.79, p_s<.05$). For those in the no prompt condition, message choice resulted in more favorable company attitudes than in the no-choice condition ($M_s=2.31$ vs. 1.53, $F(1, 58)=3.90, p=.05$). Furthermore, although nonsignificant, the company's approach was perceived slightly more favorably by those in the choice vs. the no-choice condition ($M_s=1.98$ vs. 1.51, $F(1, 58)=1.89, ns$) and elicited slightly higher IOS scores in the choice than the no-choice condition ($M_s=4.28$ vs. 3.68, $F(1, 58)=1.63, ns$). As in experiment 2, the nonsignificant simple main effect of choice on the approach and IOS scale may be due to completing the company evaluation scale beforehand, thereby causing participants to infer that these scales required distinct, nonredundant information (Schwarz et al, 1991).

Yet, for those who were asked to make inferences about the company's approach to them (the prompt condition), message choice backfired: Those in the choice condition held less favorable company attitudes than did those in the no-choice condition ($M_s=1.88$ vs. 2.39, $F(1, 104)=4.32, p<.05$). In addition, they evaluated the company's approach to them less favorably ($M_s=1.50$ vs. 2.07, $F(1, 109)=6.14, p<.05$), and had slightly (though not significantly) lower IOS scores than did those in the no-choice condition ($M_s=3.39$ vs. 3.84, $F(1, 109)=2.18, ns$).

To test whether company evaluations mediated the choice \times inference prompt effect on product judgments, participants' company attitudes, their inferences about the company's approach, and their IOS score were correlated with their product attitudes and purchase intentions. All three variables were significantly correlated with product attitudes ($r_s>.42$,

³ Whereas prompting company inferences produced lower product attitudes and purchase intentions among those in the choice condition ($M_s=1.97$ vs. 2.82, $F(1, 79)=10.14, p<.005$ and $M_s=.32$ vs. 1.11, $F(1, 79)=2.70, p=.05$ respectively), it also produced higher product attitudes and purchase intentions among those in the no choice condition ($M_s=2.68$ vs. 1.99, $F(1, 90)=4.58, p<.05$ and $M_s=.58$ vs. $-.26, F(1, 90)=3.05, p<.05$ respectively). In other words, participants visiting a standard website with no choice incorporated or mentioned judged the product more favorably when prompted (vs. not prompted) to evaluate the company. Because this outcome in the no-choice condition is not relevant to our message choice account, we do not interpret it further.

$ps < .001$) and purchase intentions ($rs > .32$, $ps < .05$). To complete the requirements for mediation (Baron & Kenney, 1986), participants' inferences about the company's approach, their IOS score, and their company attitudes were entered as covariates into the $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANCOVA for product attitudes and purchase intentions. For product attitudes, both company attitudes and approach inferences were significant covariates ($F_s(1, 168) > 4.66$, $p < .05$), whereas the choice \times inference prompt effect was reduced to nonsignificance ($F(1, 168) = 3.34$, *ns*). For purchase intentions, both company attitudes and the IOS score were significant covariates ($F_s(1, 168) > 12.17$, $p < .001$), whereas the choice \times inference prompt effect was reduced to nonsignificance ($F(1, 168) < 1$). The results of these mediation analyses suggest that, as expected, the effects of message choice on product judgments depended on individuals' evaluations of the company.

Discussion

The results of three experiments suggest that the way in which individuals encounter product information—specifically, whether they are given a chance to choose the message that they receive—affects how they subsequently evaluate the company and the advertised product when prompted to make company inferences. Even though the perception of choice was in this case illusory because the actual message received was the same for everyone, the perception of having made a choice predisposed a different evaluation of the company and the product.

Across experiments, we found that calling attention to the provision of message choice—through a negative review (experiment 1), direct survey questions (experiment 2) or the company promoting its provision of choice in its message (experiment 3)—led to more favorable product judgments. Furthermore, although the specific dependent measures that mediated the choice effect sometimes differed across experiments, these measures all assessed participants' evaluations of the company. Thus, consumers' evaluations of the company consistently mediated the message choice effects. Moreover, we found that message choice effects can backfire when the provision of choice appears to be a persuasive tactic rather than a sincere and caring effort to inform (experiment 3). This is consistent with our contention that the provision of message choice does not have a direct effect on product judgments. Instead, message choice influences product judgments via consumers' evaluations of the company.

Experiments 1 and 2 suggested that being given a choice among messages can buffer against the effects of subsequent negative product information. This is important in a communications environment where negative product information in the form of product reviews and user ratings is readily available and often encountered. Furthermore, experiment 3 suggests that touting the provision of message choice can produce more favorable product judgments. Such a strategy is not new: Other companies call attention to their provision of choice, such as Burger King with its famous slogan "Have it

Your Way." Likewise, companies such as Subway, Nike (for NIKEiD) and Progressive Insurance promote their provision of choice in their advertisements and on their websites. Although these choices allow for product customization rather than message customization, the results of experiment 3 suggest that calling attention to something as simple as choosing which message to receive can have positive effects on company and product judgments. However, the results of this experiment also suggest that such a tactic can be risky if consumers encounter situations that prompt them to make inferences about the company behind the ad. If instead of appearing sincere, caring and respectful, the company appears to be strategic and self-serving, this can lead to less favorable product judgments. These findings are in line with other studies that have shown that consumers reward firms that are seen as exerting extra effort, but only when that effort is not interpreted as a persuasion tactic (Morales, 2005).

Taken together, the results of these experiments contribute to the understanding of choice, advertising and persuasion in several ways. Specifically, to our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the persuasive implications of providing consumers with a choice among different messages in an ad, such as provided on a product landing page of a website. Across the studies, we find that merely perceiving that one has made a choice among product messages can affect product judgments. Moreover, we demonstrate that company inferences play an important role in whether message choice has a positive or negative effect on product judgments: It depends on the favorability of inferences likely to be drawn.

The external validity of the stimuli represents a strength of our studies: Participants visited and interacted with an actual web site. It is not uncommon to view websites that are analogous to the conditions in this study. For instance, at the landing page for each clothing item at both EddieBauer.com and Lucy.com, there is a general description of the product as well as a choice among links to access the product's "details," "fit," and "fabric and care." The results of our studies suggest that websites that do not offer a choice of hyperlinks may not be designing their websites optimally. Instead of giving visitors all product information at once, it may be advisable to offer a choice in order to build customer rapport and predispose higher purchase intentions.

Alternate accounts

In addition to the role of company evaluations, the results of the experiments allowed us to examine alternate accounts for the message choice effects based on cognitive dissonance, self-labeling, elaboration, or reactance processes. According to dissonance theory, individuals who believe that they voluntarily chose a behavior should report attitudes consistent with that behavior (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). Consequently, when choosing between alternatives, their liking for their chosen (vs. forgone) alternative should increase (Brehm 1956). Thus, if dissonance processes can account for message choice effects, then those provided with message choice (vs. no-choice) should (1) report more favorable evaluations of the chosen (vs.

forgone) message as well as the product promoted in the message, and (2) be more resistant (i.e., hold more favorable product evaluations) when the content of their chosen message is criticized in a negative review. A self-labeling account makes similar predictions. Specifically, people may identify with the message they chose and perceive that this message is particularly self-descriptive (Greenwald, 1968; Perloff & Brock, 1980), thereby leading to more favorable product judgments. Yet, message choice only produced more favorable product judgments after prompting company inferences (experiments 1–2) or when the company called attention to the provision of choice in the ad itself (experiment 3). Moreover, the message choice effect backfired when participants were prompted to make inferences about a company that touted its provision of message choice (experiment 3)—a finding that cannot be explained by a dissonance or self-labeling account. Furthermore, if message choice leads individuals to evaluate their choice more favorably due to dissonance or because they identify with their choice, then they should evaluate their chosen message more favorably than the forgone messages, especially when compared to no-choice participants. However, as described in experiment 1, choosing a message about quality or style did not affect how interesting or valuable participants felt quality vs. style information to be. Instead, the data suggest that message choice changed participants' evaluations of the company which, in turn, affected their purchase intentions.

According to an elaboration account, individuals who are given message choice may perceive these messages to be more self-relevant and thus may cognitively elaborate more on the product information. This in turn causes product judgments to be stronger and more resistant to the negative review. Yet, in experiment 1, message choice had no significant effect on the number of post-review thoughts that the participants listed. Moreover, in a supplemental study measuring pre-review thoughts and recollections of the message, message choice again did not appear to elicit more detailed processing of the product information.

An additional alternative explanation for message choice effects is that those who were assigned a message may have experienced greater feelings of reactance (Brehm 1956) than those who had a choice among messages. This would in turn cause the assigned message to be less attractive (Robertson & Rossiter, 1974; Wicklund, Slattum & Solomon, 1970; see Clew & Wicklund, 1980 for a review). For instance, forced exposure to persuasive attempts such as mass media messages can elicit reactance, which can reduce the attractiveness of the promoted product (Robertson & Rossiter, 1974). Indeed, forced exposure to Internet ads also generates reactance as well as negative affect toward the ad (Edwards, Li & Lee, 2002).

According to this reactance account, therefore, those who were assigned a message should experience more reactance than those who had a choice among messages. Consequently, their product judgments should be less favorable. However, we found no immediate effects of message choice on product attitudes in experiment 1. Instead, the effect of message choice on product attitudes emerged only when company inferences were

prompted (experiments 1–2). Furthermore, making inferences about a company that touted its provision of message choice in the ad led to less favorable product judgments than the no-choice condition (experiment 3). These are contingencies that the reactance account would not anticipate.

Limitations and future directions

It should be emphasized that message choice can come into play in different ways and at different message-exposure points in the persuasion process besides what was investigated here. Indeed, choice is an important aspect of website experiences. Individuals generally have the option to choose (a) whether to be exposed to the web, (b) whether to read any ads for a given product category, (c) which brands in the category to read about, and finally, (d) which dimensions or aspects to read about regarding a specific brand. The last of these choice elements is investigated here. There is also generally choice surrounding exposure to the amount and type of potentially negative information (e.g., online technical reviews, customer ratings at e-tailer sites, etc.). In fact, the presence of choice at so many levels in online marketing communications underscores the importance of understanding the impact of felt autonomy in persuasion contexts.

In the present research, the choice condition offered only three alternative messages from which to choose. It is possible that having more choice alternatives may increase consumers' feelings of connection to the company. For instance, consumers might infer that the company really wants them to find the information that is right for them. However, increasing the number of alternatives may only be beneficial up to a point. Having too many alternatives to choose from may be depleting (for a review, see Baumeister et al. 2008) and demotivating, resulting in lower purchase intentions and less choice satisfaction (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Furthermore, exercising choice does not have universal appeal: Those in individualistic cultures appear to be more motivated by choice opportunities than are those in collectivist cultures (see Savani, Markus & Conner, 2008). Thus, in collectivist cultures, message choice may not produce more positive company evaluations and higher product judgments.

Moreover, although we focused upon websites in these studies, the results would likely extend to other interactive marketing contexts such as electronic mail and digital video recorders (e.g., TiVo). For instance, permission-based marketing typically involves a simple choice—to receive future emails from a company or not. Likewise, TiVo has offered telescoping ads, in which consumers can press a button to learn more about the advertised product. However, in both cases, being able to choose the type of messages one wishes to receive would likely confer more favorable choice effects. Although the effect of personal choice has been investigated in other domains (see Iyengar & Lepper, 2002 for a review), this topic is virtually ignored in research on persuasive appeals. The current studies suggest that such effects are worthy of further investigation.

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Appendix A

First web page for choice and no-choice conditions of experiments 1–2.

OMEGA 3000 EYEWEAR	
FOR HIM OR HER	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > The G-15 polarized sun lenses means 100% UV protection while maintaining color clarity. > Sleek, ergonomic design. > Durable lightweight frames, minimizing breakage. > Available in an assortment of trendsetting styles and colors. <p>The unique combination of form and fashion at an affordable price, just right for the student or professional.</p> <p>In the interest of time, please choose only <u>one</u> of the three links provided that you are most interested in knowing at this time.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The quality of Omega 3000 eyewear • The style of Omega 3000 eyewear • The value of Omega 3000 eyewear

Screen capture for choice condition.

OMEGA 3000 EYEWEAR	
FOR HIM OR HER	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > The G-15 polarized sun lenses means 100% UV protection while maintaining color clarity. > Adjustable, form-fitting nose pads. > Durable lightweight frames, minimizing breakage. > Available in an assortment of trendsetting styles and colors. <p>The unique combination of form and fashion at an affordable price, just right for the student or professional.</p> <p>CLICK HERE FOR NEXT PAGE</p>

Screen capture for no-choice condition.

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