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# Advertising Effectiveness of Different Social Appeals through Microblog

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**Abstract:** In today's interactive marketplace, microblog has become a powerful social marketing and advertising platform. An important type of information in microblog is consumer generated and forwarded advertising. In our study, we explore advertising effects of different social appeals through microblog. We find that oriented appeals (i.e., other-oriented and self-oriented appeals) are more effective than non-oriented appeals. But the difference between other-oriented appeal and self-oriented appeal is insignificant. The relationship between sender and receiver moderate the result. Other-oriented appeal is more effective than self-oriented appeal for dyads with offline relationship, while self-oriented appeal is more effective for dyads of online-only relationship.

Keywords: advertising effectiveness, social appeal, other-oriented, self-oriented, relationship type

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's interactive marketplace, social media is considered a powerful tool for marketing communication <sup>[1]</sup> (Bulearca, M. and Bulearca, S, 2010). Among social media in China, microblog has been taking an important role as a tool for interpersonal relationship management and information sharing. An important type of information is consumer generated advocacy of products. Over the past few years, microblog has emerged as a powerful social marketing and advertising platform.

Advertising is to make consumers establish a good attitude towards a product or company, and to produce a purchase intention. Advertising appeals are used to attract the consumers' attention and to influence their attitude and evaluation of goods. By advertising appeal, we refer to values conveyed in the advertising message to its receiver. One advertising appeal in social marketing is to leverage the social relationships among consumers. Consumers' psychological mechanisms vary towards different social appeals, leading to different influence on consumers' product evaluation and purchase intention.

Since the amount of information in microblog is overwhelming, users usually scan it quickly and ignore ads spontaneously. However, successful ads are still able to gain viewers' attention, gain mindshare, and even convert them into buyers. What kind of appeals can work well in social media, especially in the context of microblog? Researchers have divided ad appeals into rational appeal and emotional appeal.

This study focuses on consumer generated ads and forwarded ads via micro-bloggers to their fans in microblog. We classify social appeals into non-oriented (i.e., a message that does not imply any dyadic relationship), other-oriented (i.e., a message that suggest a value particular to a receiver) and self-oriented appeals (i.e., a message that suggests a value to the sender). A non-oriented appeal ad presents only the information of a product or a brand without any call for action based on social relationship between the sender and the receiver. Although a company can mobilize some consumers to spread such ads to their fans, these ads are no longer "organic" consumer generated advertising <sup>[2]</sup> (Trusov et al, 2009). An oriented appeal ad calls for action based on social relationship. Other-oriented appeal ads tell receivers that the product is especially recommended for them. It can contain words like "I recommend this book to you". Receivers who read the ads get benefit since they can obtain useful information from a trusted friend. Self-oriented appeal ads ask receiver to help the sender with regard to the product in the message, such as giving an advice. It can contain words like

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“I want to buy this book. What do you think of it?” The purpose of social oriented appeal in an ad is to gain receiver’s attention and to convert them ultimately.

Receivers’ attitudinal and behavioral response to social appeals are influenced by the relationship with the sender. Relationship type moderates the effectiveness of different social appeals. Two types of relationship between a microblog sender and his or her fans (i.e., receivers) are defined: those with offline relationship in which they know each other offline and Internet is not the main way to maintain relationship, and online-only relationship in which they do not know each other offline and microblog is the main way or the only way to maintain relationship.

Do non-oriented and oriented appeal have different impacts on message effectiveness? What is the different impact of the two oriented appeals when the relationship between the sender and the receiver varies? There is a paucity on research on this issue. This study proposes a novel classification of social appeals, extending prior classification of rational and emotional appeal. We also propose a very important moderator: relationship type. Our findings provide practical guidance for companies to use consumer generated media (CGM) to attract consumers’ attention in a microblog setting.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Advertising effectiveness**

Advertising effectiveness can be classified into arrival effect, cognitive effect, and psychological change effect. Arrival effect refers to whether consumers have noticed the ad. Arrival effect is the foundation of other effects. Cognitive effect refers to the effect on the attention and memory of consumers on the basis of noticing the ad. Cognitive effect is usually measured by consumers’ impression and memory. Psychological change effect refers to consumers’ change of their favor, their attitude, and purchase intention. We measure psychological change effect by the subjects’ favorability for the good, desire to buy the good, and feelings of disturbance. <sup>[3]</sup><sup>[4]</sup><sup>[5]</sup> (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961; MacKenzie et al, 1986; Vaughn, 1980 and so on)

### **2.2 Self-benefiting versus other-benefiting marketing appeals**

Although the research on social appeals in marketing is few, self-serving benefits of helping others have long been recognized in prosocial behavior research. of the literature on self-benefiting and other-benefiting marketing appeals for charitable support provides a theoretical lens for the study of social appeals.

Research found that self-benefiting appeals are particularly successful in encouraging positive donor support. Social exchange theory, which is commonly used to explain the efficacy of self-benefiting appeals, suggests that people invest in relationships on the basis of comparative levels of costs and rewards <sup>[6]</sup> (Blau 1964). Consistent with the notion that self-benefiting appeals are more effective than other-benefiting appeals in getting donor support, Holmes et al, (2002) demonstrated that though people want to help others, they often hesitate to do so unless they can justify that their behaviors serve their own self-interest <sup>[7]</sup>. This framework predicts that people react more positively to self-benefit than to other-benefiting appeals.

In contrast, Rothschild (1979) argued that the traditional marketing model of exchange is less relevant for noncommercial exchanges on social marketing. Impression management theory posits that <sup>[8]</sup>, in general, people are motivated to make a favorable impression on others and to present themselves in a positive light <sup>[9]</sup> <sup>[10]</sup> (Leary and Kowalski 1990; Schlenker 1980). Prior research has suggested that people consensually share the normative expectation that they should help for altruistic rather than for egoistic reasons <sup>[11]</sup> (Berkowitz and Daniels, 1964). The norm to help others for other-serving rather than self-serving reasons may have developed because there is a shortage of such behavior <sup>[12]</sup> (White 1984).

In this study, other-oriented appeal highlights the benefit for the information receiver, while self-oriented

appeal highlights the benefit to the information sender. We can use social exchange theory and normative expectation theory to analyze the social appeals from the viewpoint of the receiver.

### 3. RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

#### 3.1 Research model

Integrating theories from social appeals and advertising effectiveness, our research model is presented in Figure 1. The independent variable is social appeal which can be classified into three kinds: non-oriented appeal, other-oriented appeal, and self-oriented appeal. The dependent variables are measures of ad effectiveness. The relationship type between a sender and a receiver is the moderator.

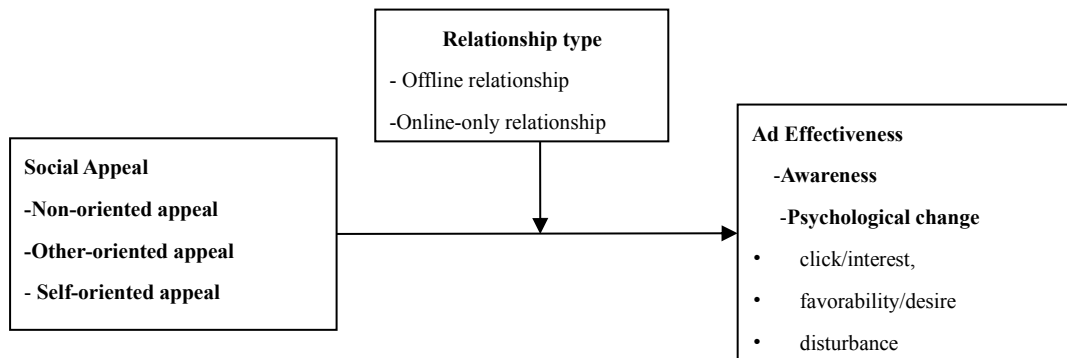


Figure 1. Research model

#### 3.2 Non-oriented appeal versus oriented appeal in awareness

Psychological research suggested that the oriented information can attract more attention than non-oriented one. In the context of microblog, because users scan their messages very quickly, non-oriented messages are likely to be ignored. However, if the information is oriented and contains social communication, receivers would read it more carefully. Therefore, oriented appeal can catch more attention and reading. In the end, the receiver is more likely to remember what he has read. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1: Oriented appeal is more effective than non-oriented appeal in having receiver's awareness, that is, both (a) other-oriented appeal and (b) self-oriented appeal is more effective than non-oriented appeal in having receivers' awareness.

#### 3.3 Other-oriented appeal versus self-oriented appeal in awareness

Social exchange theory suggests that people invest in relationships on the basis of comparative levels of costs and rewards <sup>[6]</sup> (Blau 1964). Receivers might want to help the sender, but they may hesitate to do so unless they believe that serves their self-interest <sup>[7]</sup> (Holmes et al, 2002). Therefore, in general, other-oriented appeals attract more of receivers' attention than self-oriented appeals. We hypothesize:

H2: Other-oriented appeal is more effective in having receiver's awareness than self-oriented appeal.

#### 3.4 Psychological Reactance and the moderating role of relationship type

Although social exchange theory suggests that people prefer other-oriented ads, impression management and normative expectation theories suggest the possibility for otherwise. People can be motivated to help others for other-benefiting rather than self-benefiting reasons <sup>[9]</sup> <sup>[12]</sup> (Leary and Kowalski 1990, White 1984). In this light, self-oriented appeals might attract receivers' attention. The competing theories suggest there is a moderator for different motivations to be activated. We examine the moderating role of relationship type between the information sender and receiver in the light of psychological reactance.

According to the theory of psychological reactance, a demand, explicit or implicit, to help someone, and even a felt obligation to do this, is often resented because the demand or obligation is a bothersome threat to the

individual's freedom of action <sup>[13]</sup> (Berkowitz, 1973). Between a partner who makes a request for help and a subject who is supposed to offer help, Berkowitz (1969) demonstrated that the different relationships between them affect how much work the subject would do for the partner <sup>[14]</sup>. When the partner needs help because of circumstances beyond his control, his level of dependency on the subject makes the subject to do more on the partner's behalf. When the partner needs help because of his own deficiency, his level of dependency on the subject makes the subject to do less work for the partner.

In the context of self-oriented appeal and offline relationship, psychological reactance is likely to be activated in the receiver. First, due to the established social relationship, the receiver will feel an obligation to help the sender. Second, a request for product judgment is not an externally caused need, but rather due to the sender's own deficiency. Third, given that microblog is a lean medium to convey information of the product, it is not an easy task for the receiver to make a decision for the sender. Finally, there is an alternative and effective channel (i.e., offline interaction) for the receiver to help the sender. Given that the receiver is overwhelmed by the amount of messages and demands attention, the sender is likely to regard such message as a burden and decide not to offer an help, at least in this channel.

In contrast, in the context of self-oriented appeal and online-only relationship, psychological reactance might not be activated in the receiver. Helping others can increase self-esteem, personal identification with the organization, self-respect, respect from others, and feelings of commitment <sup>[15]</sup> (e.g., Orr 1989). This is especially true when one helps without a self-benefiting motivation. Help on a computer network is founded on organizational citizenship and norms of generalized reciprocity <sup>[16]</sup> <sup>[17]</sup> (Bateman and Organ 1983, Brief and Motowidlo 1986). In the context of general reciprocity, help is unrelated to direct reciprocity but to maintaining the friendly social environment <sup>[18]</sup>. (Constant et al, 1996). Moreover, with online-only relationship, when receivers are asked for help, they would not view it as an obligation, because they have the freedom not to offer a help. The sender who asks for help is not regarded as dependent on the receiver. Rather, receivers offer help out of freedom and out of prosocial motivations to show their kindness to the "strangers". In this light, they would pay more attention to the self-oriented appeal information a sender and feel less bothersome.

In contrast, in the context of other-oriented appeal and offline relationship, a sender and a receiver know each other in person. The receiver is likely to trust the message from the sender and will not view it as an ad. In this situation, the receiver is expected to respond more positively to an other-oriented appeal than to a self-oriented appeal since this is self-benefiting.

In the context of other-oriented appeal and online-only relationship, the relationship is likely shallow. Peers do not know each other well and cannot trust each other fully. An other-oriented appeal with words such as "I recommend this book to you" is more like a disguised ad, which will annoy the information receivers. In this situation, information receivers are likely to disregard the other-oriented appeal. They do not it as a real request for help. In summary, we hypothesize:

H3: Comparing to self-oriented appeal, other-oriented appeal has a stronger effective on awareness when a sender and a receiver have an offline relationship. In contrast, the effect is weaker when the sender and the receiver have an online-only relationship

H4: Comparing to self-oriented appeal, other-oriented appeal has a stronger positive effective on click to get more information when a sender and a receiver have an offline relationship. In contrast, the effect is weaker when the sender and the receiver have an online-only relationship.

H5: Comparing to self-oriented appeal, other-oriented appeal has a stronger positive effective on attitude when a sender and a receiver have an offline relationship. In contrast, the effect is weaker when the sender and the receiver have an online-only relationship.

H6: Comparing to self-oriented appeal, other-oriented appeal has a stronger negative effective on irritation

/ disturbance when a sender and a receiver have an offline relationship. In contrast, the effect is weaker when the sender and the receiver have an online-only relationship.

#### 4. Method

We use a field experiment to collect data. In this experiment, we used a 3 (social appeal: non-oriented vs. other-oriented vs. self-oriented)  $\times$  2 (relationship type: offline vs. online-only) between-subjects design. We designed 3 messages, each represented a different social appeal. All messages contained the same information including book name, author, description, picture, and the website link for more information. The only difference was the social appeal. Non-oriented appeal didn't contain social appeal words. Other-oriented version contained the words "I recommend this book to you." Self-oriented version contained words "I want to buy this book. How do you think of it?"

The experiment procedure was as follows. At first, we recruited 5 confederates as microblog senders; each picked 45 fans who were active users. Overlapping contacts were removed. Then each sender randomly divided his/her 45 fans into 3 groups, with 15 subjects in one group. Having done that, the sender sent the 3 versions of ads to the 3 groups, respectively. Each receiver received only one message. We had 225 (45 $\times$ 5) subjects in total.

Two days later after sending the message, we sent the questionnaire through "private" messages to the subjects. In this way, we ensured that subjects who completed the questionnaire must have logged on his microblog. In general, the subjects should have glanced over the message, no matter whether they still remembered it or not when they filled the questionnaires. The questionnaires included questions such as: whether they remembered seeing the microblog (for awareness), whether they had clicked the picture for more information about the book, their favorability about the book and the seller, their desire to buy it and their feelings of disturbance. We also asked about the subjects' basic information (gender, time of microblogging daily, fans, fans\_to) and the relationship between the subject and the microblogger (communication frequency and degree of concern). The senders also reported their communication frequency with the receiver and relationship type.

Excluding invalid questionnaires with missing data, 218 effective questionnaires were returned. Among the 218 effective questionnaires, there were 114 females and 104 males; the average blogging time was about 1 hour every day. There were 118 dyads who had an offline relationship and 100 dyads who had an online-only relationship.

#### 5. Results and Discussion

##### 5.1 Main effect of social appeal

We use logistic regression and likelihood ratio (LR) test to analysis the main effect of social appeal taking Gender, BloggingTime, Fans, and FansTo as control variables.

We used non-oriented appeal as the benchmark, tested a complete model with other-oriented and self-oriented appeals, and then tested a reduced model excluding other-oriented and self-oriented appeals. After that we conduct LR test to conclude if there is an "overall main effect" for oriented appeals. We find the test statistic is 16.36 ( $p=0.0003$ ). The result showed that adding other-oriented appeal and self-oriented appeal as predictors together resulted in a statistically significant improvement in model fit, which supports H1. When checking the significance of other-oriented appeal and self-oriented appeal individually, the  $p$ -values were 0.000 and 0.033, and the coefficients were both positive. Therefore, H1a and H1b are supported.

Then we use logistic regression to test H2. We now excluded non-oriented group in data analysis to compare other-oriented and self-oriented appeals. We took self-oriented appeal as benchmark, we find that the coefficient is 0.73 ( $p=0.05$ ), which supports H2.

## 5.2 Moderating effect of relationship type

### 5.2.1 Awareness

Then we use logistic regression to test H3. We used self-orientation appeal as benchmark and set Offline Relationship = 1, Online only relationship = 0. The result is shown in Table 1

**Table 1. Logistic regression of social appeal × relation type on awareness**

	DV: Awareness		
	b	Z	p
Other-oriented	-0.74	-1.25	0.212
Relation type	-0.83	-1.49	0.135
Other-oriented x Relation type	2.68	3.37	0.001
Gender	0.65	3.42	0.001
Blogging time	-0.11	-0.27	0.788
Fans	-0.35	-1.08	0.278
Fans to	0.19	0.48	0.631

The coefficient of other-oriented x relation type is 2.68 ( $p=0.001$ ), which means that comparing to self-oriented appeal, other-oriented appeal has a stronger effective on awareness when a sender and a receiver have an offline relationship. We can also use other-orientation appeal as benchmark and find the result showing that self-oriented appeal has a stronger effective on awareness when a sender and a receiver have an online relationship, which support H3.

### 5.2.2 Psychological change (click/interest, favorability/desire, disturbance)

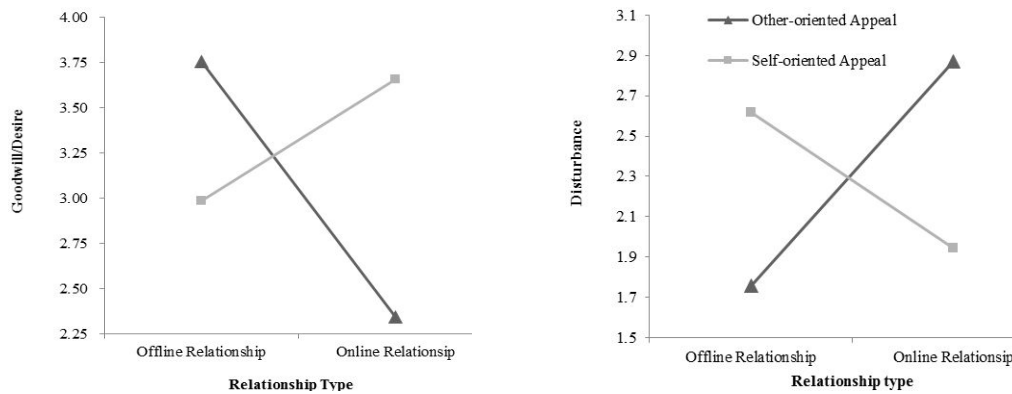
For the binary dependent variable “click”, the test of H4 was similar to that of awareness. The coefficient of other-oriented x relation type was 0.21 ( $p=0.832$ ), which is not significant and did not support H4. However, the main effect of relationship type was significant ( $p=0.019$ ) which means receivers with online relationship had more interest in the good and were more likely to click the product link.

Favorability and feeling of disturbance are continuous variables. We conducted a 2 (social appeal: other-oriented vs. self-oriented) × 2 (relationship type: offline vs. online-only) analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) on receivers' favorability/desire and feeling of disturbance as shown in Table 2. We still used gender, blogging time, fans, and fans\_to as control variables.

**Table 2. ANCOVA analyses of social appeal × relation type on goodwill/desire and disturbance**

	DV: Favorability	DV: Disturbance
Social appeal	F=1.677, p=0.199	F=0.011, p=0.916
Relation type	F=2.925, p=0.091	F=0.455, p=0.502
Social appeal*Relation type	F=26.136, p=0.000	F=8.463, p=0.005
R <sup>2</sup>	0.226	0.156

The ANCOVA analysis on receivers' favorability and desire to buy it revealed a significant moderating effect ( $F=26.136$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). As we predicted, other-oriented appeal was more effective than self-oriented appeal in favorability/desire in the situation of offline relationship, and self-oriented appeal was more effective than other-oriented appeals in the situation of online-only relationship. H5 was supported. These results are shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** ANCOVA analyses of social appeal × relationship type on favorability/desire and disturbance

As for receiver's feeling of disturbance, the interaction effect was significant ( $F=8.463$ ,  $p=0.005$ ), which supported H6. As we predicted, self-oriented appeal brings a stronger feeling of disturbance than other-oriented appeal in the situation of offline relationship, and other-oriented appeal brings a stronger feeling of disturbance than self-oriented appeal in the situation of Online-only relationship (Figure 2).

## 6. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this research, we classify social appeal of ads into non-oriented appeal, other-oriented appeal and self-oriented appeal. Oriented appeals are more effective than non-oriented appeals. But other-oriented appeal and self-oriented appeal do not have a significant different in their overall effect. When we use the relationship between a micro-blogger and fans as a moderating variable, the difference is significant in different conditions. Other-oriented appeal is more effective than self-oriented appeal in the situation of offline relationship, while self-oriented appeal is more effective in the situation of online-only relationship.

This research makes two important contributions to the field. First, our definition of different kinds of social appeals is novel. It is based theories from marketing, sociology and psychology. This study uses relationship type as a key moderator based on psychological reactance theory. By highlighting the key moderator, we get a better understanding of under which conditions these two social appeals will have a significant advertising effect.

Our findings are practically interesting to practitioners. Since social media and microblog has emerged as a powerful social marketing and advertising platform, it is important for organization to know how to conduct marketing activities on these platforms. They know that interpersonal interactions among users are important means to for word-of-mouth and advertising, but they may not know how to effectively design the message and spread the message based on the relationship among users. Our findings provide an actionable guidance for them to design message and to spread them to the appropriate audience.

The current work highlights the conditions under which using other-oriented appeal and self-oriented appeal might be more (or less) effective. Marketers should ensure a match between the social appeal type and the relationship type in the context of microblog. More specifically, in the situation of offline relationship, the use of other-oriented appeal ads is more effective in advertising effectiveness. While in the situation of online-only relationship, using self-oriented appeal is better. For the companies which hire or stimulate customers to send microblogs to advertise their goods, they should suggest the customers to use the oriented appeals and use the words such as "I recommend XX to you" for their offline friends or peers, while use "I find XX, how do you think of it?" for their online-only friends.

### Future research

Our study offer interesting avenues for future research and there are many aspects of social appeals can be



further studied. For example, future research can use several kinds of goods to study the different ad effectiveness of social appeal ads. Besides, the research model could be enhanced. More characteristics of the micro-blogger and the communication in normal times between micro-blogger and fans could be incorporated into the model. Future research can also study the ad effectiveness of different social appeals through other social media, such as Wechat or forums.

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