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Benefit salience and consumers' selective attention to product features

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Abstract

Although attention is a key construct in models of marketing communication and consumer choice, its selective nature has rarely been examined in common time-pressured conditions. We focus on the role of benefit salience, that is, the readiness with which particular benefits are brought to mind by consumers in relation to a given product category. Study 1 demonstrated that when product feature information was presented rapidly, individuals for whom the benefit of personalised customer service had high habitual salience displayed selective attention as evidenced by elevated recall and recognition of a target feature (a bank's "friendly employees"). Also, as expected, individual differences in habitual benefit salience affected judgements of the target product. Study 2 showed that when subjects were additionally informed about a specific product usage situation, selective attention was primarily influenced by the relevance of the target feature to benefits made salient by the usage situation; individual differences played a less important role. Discussion emphasises theoretical aspects of the findings as well as managerial implications with respect to person-situation approaches to benefit segmentation. © 1997 Elsevier Science B.V.

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1. Introduction

Each day in their harried lives consumers are bombarded by product information, from advertising to packaging to sales pitches. Some they tune in, much they tune out. While marketing stimuli (e.g., print ads or packaging) often furnish information about multiple product features, time pressures of the kind consumers face everyday (e.g., while flipping through a magazine or hurrying down a supermarket aisle) are likely to compel selective attention only to a small subset of those features. The resulting product evaluations and choices are often based on the few features that receive attention (Wright, 1974). In order to design effective marketing communication strategies, it is, therefore, critical for marketers to understand why and how consumers selectively attend to information about particular product features but not others. More than twenty-five years ago

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Haley (1971, p. 8) stated that "people are apt to look at and remember things in which they are interested rather than things in which they are not" and that "the way people screen product information is related to the benefits they are seeking." In his classic example of benefit segmentation, Haley (1968) suggested that consumers desiring the benefit of decay prevention in a toothpaste might especially attend to information about the product feature fluoride, while those seeking flavour might be more attentive to features such as a minty taste. Although the benefit segmentation approach quickly developed into standard textbook material, most of the emphasis has been on the influence of benefits sought on product evaluations and corresponding marketing strategies (Dickson and Ginter, 1987; Wedel and Steenkamp, 1989; Wind, 1978). Despite Haley's simple and compelling insight, theory and empirical research on selective attention has been scarce in the domain of marketing. Practically no studies have been done to investigate the determinants of selective attention to product features in conditions where the consumer's opportunity to process information is severely limited. This research gap is unfortunate. More insight into the determinants of selective attention is critical for marketers who are confronted with the task of breaking through heavy advertising clutter. A thorough understanding of consumers' selective attention would help managers develop communication strategies that effectively penetrate the perceptual filters of their targeted markets. Specifically, it will help them decide whether in a particular situation to apply segmentation strategies based on individual differences or on differences in usage situations.

Although a complete review of past attention-related marketing research is beyond our scope here (see, e.g., Bettman, 1979; Greenwald and Leavitt, 1984), it is worth noting that prior research on the causal determinants of attention can be classified in terms of stimulus, situational, or individual factors. Research on stimulus factors has been predominant, focusing on such tactics as naming a competitor (e.g., Pechmann and Stewart, 1990), or incorporating arousal-producing elements such as sexuality or humour (e.g., Alexander and Judd, 1978; Duncan and Nelson, 1985). Research on situational factors that impact attention has mostly emphasised two different issues. First, it has examined contextual influences such as the distraction produced by the program in which an ad is embedded (e.g., Anand and Sternthal, 1992). Second, it has investigated the role of situational factors that affect short-term motivation for processing an ad (e.g., whether a brand is being introduced or not being introduced in the local market (Petty et al., 1983). Finally, research on individual factors that influence attention has been least frequent, typically focusing on long-term motivational tendencies (e.g., Celsi and Olson, 1988). Also, some people by nature are simply more effortful and analytical, i.e., they have a comparatively high "need for cognition." Such individuals are more likely to attend to central product features as opposed to peripheral cues (e.g., Haugtvedt et al., 1992).

These cited studies are highly representative of previous marketing research in that they all pertain to the issue of attention at an *overall* level. To reiterate our earlier point, empirical research in marketing has seldom dealt with the phenomena of *selectivity* of attention with respect to specific product features or its underlying theoretical explanation. To our knowledge hardly any systematic research has been conducted to test Haley's (1971) proposition that consumers attend to product features purposefully on the basis of specific benefits they seek from the product. In the remainder of this paper, we first conceptualise the individual and situational factors that affect benefit salience, and the likely consequences for selective attention. We then report two studies which required participants to make snap judgements of products when presented with product information at a rapid rate. Selective attention was measured via a surprise recall test of product features [1]. Effects on product evaluative judgements are also examined. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of our findings.

[1] Researchers tend to approach attention as either an independent or dependent (outcome) variable; we take the latter approach here (see also Johnston and Dark, 1986). Attention may be assessed in a variety of ways; physiological assessments (e.g., brain activity or eye-tracking measures), "looking" time, and measures of stimulus memory (e.g., recall) are commonly used.

2. Benefit salience and selective attention to product features

A considerable number of studies have demonstrated that the salience of specific product benefits or decision criteria play an important role in consumer information acquisition, judgements, and choices (e.g., Bettman and Sujan, 1987; Haley, 1968; Huffman and Houston, 1993; Park and Smith, 1989; Wright and Rip, 1980). In the present research, we assume that both individual and situational factors can influence benefit salience (Dickson, 1982), and we label them as habitual and situational benefit salience, respectively. *Habitual benefit salience* is an individual difference variable, defined as the enduring readiness with which specific benefits are brought to mind in relation to a given product category. Consider a benefit such as "favourable health consequences" in reference to a consumer who is evaluating snack foods on a given purchase occasion. This benefit may be highly salient to individual X because she/he has habitually (frequently) brought to mind and sought the same benefit on past purchase occasions, possibly because it derives from higher-order goals and values that are central to the individual (Mick and Buhl, 1992; Reynolds and Gutman, 1988). For individual Y, on the other hand, this benefit simply might not be salient because this person has not habitually brought it to mind on similar occasions in the past.

In addition to individual sources of variability in benefit salience, situational influences need to be considered. Several consumer research studies have documented that product usage situations play a major explanatory role in consumer preferences and choices (see, e.g., Belk, 1975; Dickson, 1982; Srivastava et al., 1984). Knowledge of the anticipated usage context helps the consumer define specific benefits that are relevant to the intended product usage (Miller and Ginter, 1979; Ratneshwar and Shocker, 1991; Warlop and Ratneshwar, 1993; Wansink, 1994). Thus, while favourable health consequences may not have been a salient benefit to individual Y in the past, the situational context of being on a diet might temporarily activate the benefit in the consumer's mind in relation to snack foods. Therefore, *situational benefit salience* can be defined as a temporary increase in the mental salience of a particular product benefit, originating in the anticipation and consideration of a product in the context of a specific usage situation.

As discussed above, past research has focused on the effects of benefit salience on product evaluations. In contrast, our primary goal was to investigate whether a highly salient benefit might serve as a perceptual filter for the consumer when selective attention is necessitated in information processing (cf. Haley, 1971; Ratneshwar et al., 1990). The selective nature of attention is well documented, especially in psychology (Johnston and Dark, 1986; Kahneman, 1973). A key aspect of selective attention is that the same objective information can be processed differently depending on the particular concepts that are mentally salient or "accessible" for the individual in a given situation (Bruner, 1957; Kelly, 1955). Contemporary social psychologists stress the interaction between stimuli that are present in the environment and the individual's cognitive readiness to perceive some aspects of the stimuli and not others. Further, it has been posited that habitual (i.e., individual-specific) and temporary (situation-specific) mental concepts have similar consequences for perception (see Bargh et al., 1986; Higgins, 1990). Ceteris paribus, the more accessible or salient a concept, the more likely it will be used in the perception of new information.

Hence, we posit that whenever there is a potential for information overload, consumers will selectively attend to those product features (e.g., "low fat ") that map on to habitual and/or situational benefits that are currently salient (e.g., favourable health consequences of consuming a snack food). Features that map on salient benefits should pass through the attentional filter of the consumer, while features that do not map on these benefits will be "filtered out". Further, if a feature is positively valenced as in the above example, it should have a more favourable effect on judgements of a product when that feature is related to a highly salient benefit. We predict that when coping with product information in the harried manner that is characteristic of many consumer behaviour environments, benefit salience should affect subsequent recall of benefit-relevant product features (our primary prediction) as well as evaluative judgements of the product (our secondary prediction). Study 1 investigates the impact of habitual benefit

salience on attention to product features. In study 2 habitual benefit salience is combined with situational benefit salience.

3. Study 1

The first study constituted a direct test of Haley's key assertion that consumers selectively attend to features that are relevant to a salient benefit [2]. We focused on individual differences among consumers in the key variable, habitual benefit salience. We predicted that when individuals are rapidly presented with product feature information, differences in habitual benefit salience should impact on the attention paid to a relevant target feature that pertains to the target benefit. Consequently, individuals with high (versus low) habitual benefit salience should evidence better recall of the target feature and rate the target product more favourably, given that the feature is positively valenced.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Subjects and design

Subjects were 117 undergraduate marketing students who participated in small groups for extra course credit. The target product selected for the study was *a bank*, a category familiar to our student subjects since all had at least one local bank account. The target benefit was *personalised customer service*, based on pilot surveys showing considerable inter-individual differences in the salience of this benefit among our subject population. The study was conducted in two ostensibly unrelated sessions. In the first session a top-of-the-mind elicitation task was used to measure habitual salience of the target benefit. The second session, conducted two weeks later, was devoted to the time-pressured information-processing task. In this second session, subjects were exposed to the target feature, "friendly employees", in the manner described in detail below.

3.1.2. First session procedure

We measured the habitual salience of the target benefit to individuals with an elicitation method developed and extensively validated in social cognition research (Bargh and Thein, 1985; Bargh et al., 1986; Higgins et al., 1982). Operationally, the measure assesses which product characteristics come most readily to mind when somebody is thinking about a particular product category. Three different product categories were used. For each category, subjects were given four separate tasks, namely, they were asked to list product characteristics that came to mind when they thought about the type of product in a given category (e.g., banks) that they *liked, disliked, sought*, and *avoided*. The order of presentation of the three product categories was rotated systematically so that subjects had to elicit characteristics for two filler categories (apartments and stereo systems) in between tasks related to banks (the target category). The filler categories helped to clear previously-listed product characteristics from memory and to disguise the actual target product.

Subjects were informed that there were no right or wrong answers and that they had to simply record the characteristics in the order in which these occurred to them. They were provided with a stack of blank index cards to record their responses. Each product characteristic was written on a fresh card which was then turned over and kept face down. Subjects were told to number the cards to facilitate coding of the order in which characteristics had been listed for each task. They were also instructed not to look back at the cards on which they had already written. Upon completion, subjects filled out the 18-item "need for cognition" scale developed by Cacioppo et al. (1984) and were then dismissed. We measured need for cognition in order to include it as a covariate in the analyses to control for individual differences in task motivation (see previous discussion).

A judge coded subjects' response cards for the four tasks related to *banks* in terms of whether or not the listed product characteristics were related to

[2] The experiment procedures for Study 1 also included an unobtrusive priming manipulation of the target benefit; we had originally intended to study the effects of habitual benefit salience in combination with priming. However, the data showed no effects at all for the priming variable on any of the dependent variables. Hence, our report on this experiment refers only to the effects of habitual benefit salience.

the target benefit, namely, personalised customer service. We computed a habitual benefit salience score for each subject by taking into account the frequency as well as the primacy with which relevant product characteristics were listed, since both are potential indicators of top-of-the-mind salience. For each task, only the first five cards were counted. When a related characteristic (e.g., "they treat you nicely" or "rude tellers") was mentioned on the first card, the subjects' response was given a score of 5. If a related characteristic did not appear on any of the first four cards but appeared on the fifth card, the response was scored as 1. Related characteristics listed on the cards in between were scored proportionately. There was no double-counting if several related characteristics were mentioned within the same orienting task. If no related characteristics were produced on any of the first five cards for the task, the response on that task was scored as 0. Finally, each subject's scores were summed across the four tasks to create the individual-level measure of habitual benefit salience (range: 0 to 20). A second judge independently coded a randomly selected one third of subjects' cards. Inter-judge reliability with regard to subjects' habitual benefit salience scores was very high ($r = 0.93$).

3.1.3. Second session procedure

Subjects were informed in a cover story that they would be asked for their impressions of products on the basis of product features that would be presented to them rapidly on a screen by an overhead projector connected to a personal computer. On eight successive trials, features of eight products were presented on the screen. Each time the experimenter ensured that all subjects were gazing at the screen by alerting them with the word "Ready?" She then initiated the program on a computer-controlled overhead projector. On each trial the name of a target product (e.g., *a calculator, a bank*) first appeared at the top of the screen for five seconds. Next, a list of six features was displayed below the product name for five seconds, after which the screen went blank. We opted to use a feature display-time of five seconds based on pretesting which established that this allowed one rapid reading of the feature list for virtually all subjects. As soon as the list of features disappeared from the screen, subjects recorded their evaluative judgements ("impressions") of the particular product. After all eight trials were over, subjects completed the other measures in the questionnaire and were debriefed.

For every product, six product features were presented simultaneously one below another and in clearly visible block letters. In the case of the target product, *a bank*, these features were described as *ample parking*, *founded 40 years ago*, *attractive landscaping*, *friendly employees*, *safety lockboxes available*, and *modern building*. The positively-valenced feature pertaining to the target benefit was *friendly employees*. The other five features were deliberately chosen based on pilot testing to be relatively nondiagnostic in their evaluative implications for our subjects.

The first trial simply served to familiarise subjects with the task; the target product (bank) was presented in the second position in the block of eight trials. The succeeding six trials were fillers: they ensured that if the target feature did not receive much attention, it would likely be erased from memory through retroactive interference before subjects were administered the recall task. Care was taken to ensure that there were no overlaps between the target feature ("friendly employees") and the features of these filler products.

3.1.4. Dependent measures

Subjects judged the target product by rating it on three commonly-used bipolar 9-point scales (positive poles: very favourable, very positive, very likeable). These items (*Cronbach alpha* = 0.94) were summed to form a composite judgement index (range: 0 to 24). After completing the judgement task, subjects rated the extent to which the task had been a pleasant experience (scale: 1 to 9). We obtained task pleasantness ratings in order to use this variable as a covariate in the analyses; we wished to control for information-processing differences caused by the negative affect possibly engendered by time-pressured tasks. Subjects then answered two questions designed to check whether they had adequate English fluency. Next, subjects were given one minute in which to recall as many product features as possible out of those they had seen for *a bank*. (Importantly, subjects had not anticipated that their memory would be tested.) Two judges (blind to condition) scored all

the recall records for accuracy of recall; inter-judge agreement was 100%. Subjects then responded to a recognition task. They were presented a list of ten potential features for the target product: four old features that included the target ("friendly employees") and six new ones (e.g., "quick service"). Subjects were asked to check all the features they recognised as having seen earlier.

3.2. Results

Subjects were divided into three groups of approximately equal size based on their habitual benefit salience scores (low ≤ 5, medium > 5 but < 13, high ≥ 13). The main dependent variables are presented as a function of habitual benefit salience in Table 1.

Table 1
Study 1: Attention and judgement as a function of habitual benefit salience

	Habitual benefit salience		
	low ($n = 41$)	medium ($n = 42$)	high ($n = 34$)
Recall of target product feature	57%	61%	93%
Recall of nontarget product features (average)	44%	44%	38%
Recognition of target product feature	78%	71%	97%
Product judgement	15.9	18.0	19.8

Note: Higher numbers indicate higher proportions of subjects correctly recalling or recognising the particular product features and more favourable product judgements (possible range: 0 to 24). Habitual benefit salience groups were created on the basis of individual's first-session scores: low ≤ 5, medium > 5 and < 13 and high ≥ 13. Cell proportions and means are adjusted for covariates (see text for details).

3.2.1. Recall of target product feature

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the recall of the target product feature (coded 0 or 1) [3]. In addition to the primary independent variables, subjects' need for cognition scores and task pleasantness ratings were included as covariates in the analysis. The ANOVA yielded a significant main effect for habitual benefit salience, $F(2, 111) = 7.42$ ($p < 0.001$; see Table 1, row 1 for covariate-adjusted proportions for each condition). As predicted, subjects with high (versus low) habitual benefit salience performed significantly better in correctly recalling the target feature (93% versus 57%, $p < 0.001$). Need for cognition proved to be marginally significant ($p < 0.06$), while task pleasantness did not have a statistically significant effect.

3.2.2. Recall of nontarget product features

An ANOVA was conducted on the number of nontarget product features correctly recalled by subjects. The analysis did not yield any significant effects (all Fs < 1; see Table 1, row 2). Thus, when considered together, the results for the recall of target and nontarget features are consistent with our selective attention hypothesis for habitual benefit salience. Individuals with high (versus low) habitual benefit salience displayed better recall of only the target and not the nontarget features, given that only the target feature pertains to the benefit. We sought more direct evidence for this hypothesised interaction by conducting a MANOVA in which we included both target and nontarget recall as within-subject dependent variables. This analysis confirmed a significant interaction between habitual benefit salience and target/nontarget recall, $F(2, 111) = 8.80$ ($p < 0.001$).

3.2.3. Recognition of target product feature

An ANOVA identical to that on recall was conducted on recognition of the target product feature (coded 0 or 1). It revealed a significant main effect for habitual benefit salience, $F(2, 111) = 4.60$ ($p < 0.05$; see Table 1, row 3). Subjects with high (versus low) habitual benefit salience were more likely to correctly recognise the target product feature (97% versus 78%, $p < 0.05$). In this analysis, the need for cognition covariate was marginally significant ($p < 0.08$).

3.2.4. Judgements of target product

An ANOVA was also conducted on subjects' judgements of the target product. Here, in addition to

[3] Since recall and recognition of the target feature are binary variables, we checked on the reliability of the ANOVAs in both studies by conducting logistic regressions using maximum-likelihood estimation. In all cases, the ANOVA results were fully corroborated by the logistic regressions.

need for cognition and task pleasantness, we included judgement scale tendency as an additional covariate. This last covariate was simply the subject's mean judgement of the seven non-target (filler) products, and we included it to control for individual differences in the use of the judgement scales. In accordance with our expectations, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for habitual benefit salience, $F(2, 110) = 7.52$ ($p < 0.001$; see Table 1, row 4). High (versus low) habitual benefit salience subjects judged the target product significantly more favourably (means 19.8 versus 15.9, $p < 0.001$). Judgement scale tendency was the only significant covariate ($p < 0.05$).

3.3. Discussion

Study 1 results supported our predictions with regard to the effects of habitual benefit salience on selective attention. When presented with product feature information at a very rapid rate, individuals for whom the benefit of personalised customer service had high (versus low) habitual salience displayed considerably higher levels of recall and recognition of the target feature (''friendly employees''). Importantly, this result was obtained in the context of a product judgement task in which subjects were not forewarned that they would be tested on their memory for the product features. Further, supporting a selective attention explanation, habitual benefit salience did not enhance recall of *nontarget* product features. Also, as expected, subjects with higher levels of habitual benefit salience made more favourable judgements of the target product, a bank, thus reflecting their pick up of information about its ''friendly employees''. These results were obtained after controlling for individual differences in (1) motivation for processing (as measured by the need for cognition scale) and (2) affect generated by the time-pressured task (as measured by subjects' task pleasantness ratings). Thus, it appears quite unlikely that the effects of habitual benefit salience were confounded by individual differences in task motivation or affect.

One other possible alternative explanation needs to be ruled out, however, with regard to the recall results. It is conceivable that individuals with high habitual benefit salience, instead of paying more attention to the target feature at the point of presentation, were simply more adept at *constructing* this feature at the point of memory test because it was related to a benefit that was ''on top of their mind.'' Note that such a constructive explanation implies that we should have observed the effect of habitual benefit salience on recall of ''friendly employees'' even if the target feature had *not* been part of the stimulus information. Thus, in order to rule out this alternative explanation, we replicated the complete second-session experiment procedures with another group of subjects ($n = 36$) from the same subject pool, but with one critical change in the procedure: The target feature *friendly employees* was replaced by the feature *ATM facility*. Analyses of the recall records of these latter subjects did not yield even a single instance of an item related to *friendly employees*. Thus, a constructive rather than attentional explanation for the recall results does not seem plausible.

4. Study 2

Study 1 provided clear evidence that inter-individual differences in habitual benefit salience can impact on selective attention to product features. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the aforementioned effect was observed in an experimental setting where subjects were not provided with any situational information at all prior to their exposure to product features; instead, only the product names were provided. Therefore, in study 2 we examined how individual variability in benefit salience might combine with situational influences in affecting selective attention.

Prior research on consumers' judgements of products has established that the most important aspect of situational influence is the ''task definition'' furnished by the product usage context (Belk, 1975); information about the anticipated product usage helps the consumer to define the benefits to be sought from the product (Dickson, 1982; Ratneshwar and Shocker, 1991). Consequently, we propose that when the usage situation makes certain benefits unambiguously salient, the individual will focus attention on product features that can be instrumental to those context-specific benefits. For example, the product usage situation ''A beverage to drink upon returning home from a workout on a hot summer day'' might

make very salient in the consumer's mind the associated benefit "refreshing" (as opposed to, say, "stimulating"). In turn, this should attune the consumer to product features (e.g., the temperature of a beverage) that are relevant to the benefit made salient by the usage context.

But what should be the joint effects of habitual and situational benefit salience? One possibility is that these two factors should produce additive effects with regard to attention to product features. Indeed, contemporary models of person perception in the field of social cognition suggest that salience is a simple, additive outcome of individual and situational factors (Bargh et al., 1986; Higgins, 1990). Nonetheless, at least with regard to product perceptions, a second possibility is that situational benefit salience might dominate. Past research has demonstrated that product usage context can overshadow individual differences in terms of variance explained in consumers' preferences (see Belk, 1975; Srivastava et al., 1984). To the extent that consumers adapt the benefits they seek in a flexible manner to the constraints imposed by the usage context, situational influences might rule over habitual tendencies. If so, situational benefit salience rather than habitual benefit salience should play the major role in guiding attention to product features. Study 2 examined these alternative possibilities in an experimental setting where subjects were provided with descriptions of the product usage situation prior to exposure to product feature information.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Subjects and design

Subjects were 100 undergraduate marketing students. We used the same target product (a bank) and target benefit ("personalised customer service") as in study 1 in order to maximise the comparability of results across the two studies. Again, to keep the results comparable, the participants in study 2 were also drawn from the same subject pool as in study 1. In the first of two ostensibly unrelated sessions, an elicitation task identical to the one in study 1 was used to measure habitual benefit salience. The second session, held two weeks later, involved the product judgement and feature recall and recognition tasks; in this session, subjects were assigned randomly to one of three situational benefit salience conditions.

Situational benefit salience was manipulated through product usage situation scenarios that we provided to the subjects (see below for details). Product usage situation scenarios have been successfully employed in the past by several leading researchers in both marketing and consumer research and it has been ascertained that such scenarios do produce valid responses from consumers (see, e.g., Belk, 1975; Miller and Ginter, 1979; Ratneshwar and Shocker, 1991; Srivastava et al., 1984). In the high situational benefit salience condition, the description of the product usage situation was designed to make the target benefit very salient; in the low situational benefit salience condition, we manipulated the usage situation so as to minimise the salience of personalised customer service. In a third (control) condition, the usage situation was neutral and quite nondescript in its benefit implications.

4.1.2. Second session procedure

Subjects were informed that we were interested in their impressions of particular products (e.g., "a tennis racket") in the context of certain situations (e.g., "buying a birthday present for a 12-year old boy"). They were told that it was very important for them to imagine themselves in those situations. The rest of the cover story was virtually identical to that of study 1 and it included an advance intimation to subjects that they would be given only a limited amount of time for reading the product features on the screen, following which they would be recording their impressions in the questionnaire.

On each of the eight trials subjects first read a description of a product usage situation that was given at the top of the page in the questionnaire. They did this twice, since we wished to ensure that they grasped the product usage context conveyed by the situational information. Each situation description first identified the product and then presented a scenario (i.e., vignette) of approximately 70 words. Once the subjects had finished reading a situation description, the experimenter directed their attention to the screen and initiated the presentation of product feature information. The format, content, and timing of the feature information display on each trial was identical to that of study 1. As in study 1, the target

product was second in the series of eight. Subjects recorded their judgements of the products after each 5-second feature information display. At the end of the eight trials, they responded to the other dependent measures just as in study 1.

4.1.3. Manipulation of situational benefit salience

Subjects in the high situational benefit salience condition were provided a product usage situation that was designed to make very salient the benefit of personalised customer service:

You have a new job in a town where you do not know anyone yet. You need to open an account in a bank where you can regularly go to deposit your salary checks. You also need to pick up rolls of quarters regularly. In the past you have needed help in balancing your check book, and you do not consider yourself an expert in financial matters. You are thinking about buying a house in the near future, and you need assistance in considering the various financing options that are available.

Subjects in the low situational benefit salience condition were provided a usage situation that minimised the salience of personalised customer service and accentuated instead alternative benefits such as remote (electronic) access to bank accounts and convenience in withdrawing cash:

You have a new job in a big city where you have been living in recent years. You need to open an account in a bank where your employer can directly deposit your salary through computer transfer funds. You also need to move money regularly between your checking and saving accounts. In the past, you have kept very good records of your bank transactions, and you are fairly confident in your understanding of financial matters. Your job requires considerable overnight travel, so you will frequently need cash from your account to pay for travel expenses.

Subjects in the neutral situational benefit salience condition were provided a nondescript usage situation that did not make any particular benefit salient. Given the absence of any strong situational constraints, we expected that in this condition, at least, habitual benefit salience would still influence selective attention:

You have a new job in a town where you have been living in recent years. You need to open an account in a bank where your salary can be deposited. You wish to open both a checking and a savings account. In the past, the monthly balance statements have usually enabled you to keep track of your bank transactions, and you have a reasonable understanding of financial matters. You will need to go into the bank about once a month.

A separate pilot study was conducted to validate our manipulations of situational benefit salience. In this pilot study we ascertained that (1) the three usage situation conditions produced differential salience of the target benefit, and that (2) the neutral condition was one that did not impose any particular usage benefit, thus ensuring that the salience of the target benefit would be driven primarily by habitual benefit salience. Habitual salience of the benefit "personalised customer service" was first assessed in a group of 90 subjects. They returned two weeks later for an ostensibly unrelated study and were randomly assigned to one of the three situational benefit salience conditions. They were instructed to read the corresponding usage situation description. They were asked to think of the type of bank they would seek out in the particular situation and to list the bank's characteristics in the order in which these characteristics came to mind. Confirming our expectations, a significantly higher proportion of the high (versus low) situational benefit salience subjects listed one or more characteristics that related to personalised customer service (79% versus 25%, $p < 0.001$); in the neutral condition, 42% of the subjects did so. In addition, the data in the high situational benefit salience condition showed very little correlation between subjects' normalised habitual benefit salience scores (based on the data from the first session) and whether or not they listed product characteristics pertinent to the target benefit when provided with usage situation scenarios in the second session ($r = -0.09$, $p > 0.89$). In the low situational benefit salience condition, this correlation was slightly higher, but again not statistically significant ($r = 0.27$, $p > 0.22$). In contrast, as we had anticipated, the correlation between habitual benefit salience and accessibility of the target benefit was quite strong in the neutral situational benefit salience condition ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$). These data validated our expectation that the usage situation scenarios produced differential salience of the target bene-

fit, and that the neutral condition was indeed one that did not impose strong situational constraints on the cognitive accessibility of the target benefit.

4.2. Results

Subjects were divided into three groups of approximately equal size based on their habitual benefit salience scores, as in study 1. The major dependent variables are presented as a function of both habitual and situational benefit salience in Table 2.

4.2.1. Recall of target product feature

A 3 (habitual benefit salience) X 3 (situational benefit salience) ANOVA was conducted along with follow-up contrasts of means where appropriate. Need for cognition and task pleasantness ratings were introduced as covariates. The overall main effect of situational benefit salience was marginally significant ($F(2, 89) = 2.08$, $p < 0.12$). More importantly, however, subjects in the high situational benefit salience condition displayed significantly higher levels of correct recall of the target feature, *friendly employees*, than did subjects in the low situational benefit salience condition, $F(1, 89) = 4.15$ (93% versus 60%, $p < 0.05$). Recall of the target feature in the neutral situational benefit salience condition, not surprisingly, was found to be about midway between the high and the low conditions (see Table 2, row 1). Habitual benefit salience, in contrast, had no significant effects on recall and the interaction between situational and habitual benefit salience was also not significant (p's > 0.5). As for the covariates, need for cognition was marginally significant ($p = 0.07$) but task pleasantness was not ($p > 0.8$).

4.2.2. Recall of nontarget product features

A 3 (habitual benefit salience) X 3 (situational benefit salience) ANOVA with need for cognition and task pleasantness as covariates revealed a significant main effect for situational benefit salience, $F(2, 89) = 3.34$ ($p < 0.05$). Follow-up comparisons showed that both the high and low situational benefit salience conditions evidenced lower levels of correct recall of nontarget product features than in the neutral condition (p's < 0.05; see Table 2, row 2). Habitual benefit salience did not have a significant impact on recall of nontarget features ($p > 0.80$).

As in study 1, we conducted a MANOVA in which we included both target and nontarget recall as within-subject dependent variables. The MANOVA revealed a weak interaction between situational benefit salience and target/nontarget feature recall ($F(2, 89) = 2.17$, $p < 0.13$). Consistent with the idea of selective attention, relative to the neutral condition, high situational benefit salience increased recall of the target feature but decreased recall of nontarget features $F(1, 89) = 3.15$, $p < 0.08$).

4.2.3. Recognition of target product feature

An ANOVA identical to those on the recall measures was conducted on recognition of the target feature. Somewhat surprisingly, situational benefit salience did not affect recognition ($p > 0.7$), but habitual benefit salience did ($F(2, 89) = 3.74$, $p < 0.03$). Individuals with high (versus low) habitual

Table 2
Study 2: Attention and judgement as a function of habitual and situational benefit salience

	Habitual benefit salience			Situational benefit salience		
	low ($n = 37$)	neutral ($n = 33$)	high ($n = 30$)	low ($n = 34$)	neutral ($n = 34$)	high ($n = 32$)
Recall of target product feature	67%	69%	79%	60%	71%	83%
Recall of nontarget product features (average)	31%	31%	32%	28%	38%	28%
Recognition of target product feature	76%	77%	98%	81%	86%	84%
Product judgement	11.9	12.2	12.9	7.8	14.3	15.0

Note: Higher numbers indicate higher proportions of subjects correctly recalling or recognising the particular product features and more favourable product judgements (possible range: 0 to 24). Habitual benefit salience groups were created on the basis of individual's first-session scores: low ≤ 5, medium > 5 and < 13, and high ≥ 13. Cell proportions and means are adjusted for covariates (see text for details).

benefit salience recognised the target feature significantly better (98% versus 76%, $p < 0.05$; see Table 2, row 3). The interaction between the two types of benefit salience, again, was not significant ($p > 0.8$).

4.2.4. Judgements of target product

Product judgements were subjected to a 3 (habitual benefit salience) X 3 (situational benefit salience) ANOVA with need for cognition, task pleasantness, and judgement scale tendency as covariates. The overall main effect of situational benefit salience was significant ($F(2, 89) = 17.25$, $p < 0.001$). Confirming our expectations, high situational benefit salience resulted in more favourable product judgements than low situational benefit salience, $F(1, 89) = 27.66$ (means 14.9 versus 7.8, $p < 0.001$; see Table 2, row 4). Judgements were not significantly affected by habitual benefit salience ($p > 0.7$), nor by the interaction between both types of salience ($p > 0.5$). The only significant covariate was judgement scale tendency ($p < 0.01$).

4.3. Discussion

In study 2, unlike study 1, we provided descriptions of product usage situations prior to subjects' exposure to product feature information. Further, we manipulated situational benefit salience via these usage contexts. We found that recall of the target feature *friendly employees* was significantly higher and judgements were more favourable when, prior to being exposed to the feature information, subjects were provided with a usage context for *a bank* that implicitly made salient the benefit of personalised customer service. These results confirm the hypothesis that selective attention to product features is sensitive to benefits engendered by situational factors.

The results also attested to the capacity-limited nature of attentional processes: Subjects in *both* the high and the low situational benefit salience conditions paid less attention than those in the neutral condition to nontarget features. Subjects in the low situational benefit salience condition, just like those in the high salience condition, probably focused their attention on feature information that could be relevant to their situation-specific benefits (e.g., convenient cash withdrawals). Given that the target product did not have such features, low situational benefit salience subjects produced less favourable product judgements. However, like the high situational benefit salience subjects, these subjects also lacked the attentional resources to process much other information about the target product.

In contrast to the results obtained in study 1, habitual benefit salience did not significantly affect recall of the target feature. The constraints imposed by the usage context presumably dominated subjects' thoughts. Consequently, when the situational salience of personalised customer service was low, even individuals for whom this benefit otherwise had high habitual salience probably did not bring it to mind. But, rather surprisingly, even in the neutral situational benefit salience condition we did not find any effects for habitual benefit salience on recall; we comment on this later in the general discussion. Nevertheless, the data do suggest that habitual benefit salience is not inconsequential when strong situational constraints are present. Note that high habitual benefit salience subjects were more likely to recognise the critical feature *friendly employees* in a later recognition test than their medium- and low-habitual benefit salience counterparts.

5. Summary and general discussion

How do consumers deal with the barrage of complex product information directed at them everyday? Several authors have suggested that consumers are not passive targets of marketing stimuli (e.g., Bauer and Greyser, 1969), and that they selectively attend to product features based on the benefits they seek (Haley, 1968, 1971), although empirical evidence for these statements has been lacking. Similarly, today's consumer researchers also postulate that attention to product information is influenced by purposeful factors related to the individual or the situation at hand (Dickson, 1982). These propositions regarding selective attention appear to have considerable significance for marketers, particularly in relation to the information overload conditions that consumers face much of the time. Yet, there have been very few efforts in the past to conduct controlled studies that empirically test the individual and situational factors that govern selective attention.

The main purpose of our research was to contribute to a theoretically sound and managerially

useful understanding of selective attention to product feature information. We argued that when the opportunity to process information is limited, the product features receiving selective attention are determined (at least in part) by the benefits that are currently salient in an individual's mind. We operationalised benefit salience on the basis of the readiness with which subjects brought to mind a target benefit (personalised customer service at a bank). We examined in two studies both habitual and situational sources of benefit salience and their relative effects on selective attention when product feature information is presented very rapidly.

Study 1 showed that individuals with high (versus low) habitual benefit salience displayed considerably higher recall and recognition of a relevant product feature (a bank's "friendly employees"). The same relationship was also observed between habitual benefit salience and evaluative judgements of the product (bank). Notably, these results were obtained in a task wherein subjects were merely oriented to make snap judgements of products; they were *not* forewarned that their memory would be tested and their recall of feature information was not based on intentional learning. Further, with the help of a follow-up study, we were able to rule out the alternative explanation that the recall results were due to construction rather than selective attention.

Study 2 on the other hand showed that habitual benefit salience is not always a significant factor in guiding the selective filtering of product information. When subjects read descriptions of product usage situations just prior to their exposure to product feature information, habitual benefit salience had only weak effects on selective attention. Instead, recall of the feature *friendly employees* was significantly higher and evaluations of the bank were more positive when subjects faced the evaluation task given a usage context with elements (e.g., difficulty in balancing a check book, the purchase of a new home) that made salient the benefit of personalised customer service. Correspondingly, recall of the target feature was lower and judgements were relatively unfavourable when the usage situation focused attention toward alternative benefits such as convenient cash withdrawals.

Apparently, our study 2 subjects readily adapted the benefits they sought to fit product usage constraints and consequently their attention was no longer governed by factors at the individual level. Habitual benefit salience failed to have an impact even in the nondescript, neutral situation condition. This suggests that even the mere presence of salient extrinsic information might cause consumers to adopt a mind-set that limits access to internal benefits, including those presumed to be habitually salient. The current findings, therefore, do not support the conceptualisation of individual and situational sources of benefit salience as additive influences on selective attention (cf. Bargh et al., 1986; Higgins, 1990). Future research might fruitfully examine the value of an alternative model where personal and situational factors in fact compete against each other for benefit salience in the context of product perception.

We did not anticipate the seeming dissociation between the recall and recognition measures in Study 2. Apparently, habitual benefit salience did influence attention and encoding of the target feature, but only to the extent that it would show in the more sensitive of our two dependent measures (i.e., subjects' recognition rather than recall). It is, however, important to note that in both studies product judgements were driven by what could be recalled rather than by what could be recognised. This finding is consistent with the general idea that product judgement is driven by the subset of total information that is currently most salient (or accessible) rather than by the totality of the information that is potentially available in memory (see Alba et al., 1991).

To summarise, our studies showed that (1) benefit salience significantly influences selective attention to product features, and (2) benefit salience itself is a function of habitual individual differences as well as situational factors such as the benefits defined by product usage context. Taken together, our studies suggest that, during rapid information processing, if situational factors do not strongly constrain a person's attention, the pre-existing benefits that the individual is apt to access on a habitual (and possibly frequent) basis will guide selective attention to product features (study 1). However, if situational factors orient attention toward product features relevant for achieving contextual benefits, then the impact of habitual individual differences in benefit salience will be considerably diminished (study 2).

In a prior investigation, Huffman and Houston (1993) demonstrated that subjects prefer to obtain and learn benefit-relevant information when they are explicitly asked to choose the specific features on which they would like more information about a product and they are given substantial time to make such choices. In conceptual terms, their research examined the effects of consumer benefits on the more deliberate and premeditated processes involved in information acquisition. In contrast, the present results were obtained in a task wherein subjects were asked to form snap judgements of products in a highly time-constrained manner, one that necessitated spontaneous filtering of the available feature information (cf. Wright, 1974). Thus, a distinctive contribution of our research is that it addresses the influence of salient benefits on the *reflexive* aspects of selective attention, a process that is necessitated whenever consumers face potential information overload.

Several limitations of our research require acknowledgement. Only one product class and a single benefit were examined. For the sake of generalisation, other product classes and benefits need to be investigated. Further, our results should not be interpreted to indicate that habitual individual sources of benefit salience are almost always overridden by situational sources whenever product usage benefits are salient. The product category we used, bank services, was relatively mundane and not very involving in terms of salient personal concerns. Future research could test whether the balance of individual and situational influence is moderated by degree of involvement in the product category. Another factor worth noting is that we experimentally manipulated product usage situations; thus, the usage situation for a particular product was a "given" as far as subjects were concerned. Outside of laboratory contexts, however, consumers likely engage in life situations that are consistent with their values and salient concerns. While it may be a general rule that consumer information processing that is situated in place and time may be primarily driven by the immediate context, the dominant role of individual differences among consumers may well be in self-selection of the contexts themselves. Again, more research on this supposition would be quite valuable.

The present research concentrated on theory-testing aspects and we did not use actual marketing stimuli such as advertising. Still, the results suggest very interesting implications for advertising and marketing. Haley (1971), in connection with his advocacy of benefit segmentation, opined that consumers use perceptual screens to effectively block out vast amounts of advertising. Haley argued that to penetrate this attentional barrier, advertisers should rely less on devices such as exotic locales and humour and instead concentrate their creative efforts on product benefit information relevant to the targeted segment. Haley (1971) implied that consumers in the segment of interest (but not necessarily other segments or the aggregate market) might selectively attend to the product information in such advertising. He relied on case studies to indirectly substantiate his arguments and did not report any direct tests of his hypothesis. Nevertheless, the systematic individual differences in recall and recognition in study 1 provide solid empirical support to his suggestions. We were able to demonstrate in carefully controlled conditions that certain consumers (those habitually predisposed to a particular product benefit) can be reached in a small amount of time, even just a few seconds. Future research may be able to further validate our findings for marketers by using real ads or commercials as stimuli.

It should be noted that previous work only demonstrated benefit salience effects on product evaluations, cued by questions asked by the researchers (Dickson, 1982; Ratneshwar and Shocker, 1991; Srivastava et al., 1984). We are the first to show that both personal and situational determinants of benefit salience influence attention to product features, and do so spontaneously even when the information is presented such that only limited processing is possible. The results of study 2 also speak to the value of marketing communications that position a product for a particular usage situation (Wansink, 1994). For example, marketers of niche brands (e.g., a gourmet dessert) might embed their ads in "slice of life" situations (e.g., one where important guests are expected for dinner) that direct the consumer's attention toward relevant features (e.g., the dessert's appearance and rich taste) and away from other features (e.g., price and fat content) that might be normally salient to the health-conscious consumer (also see Wright and Rip, 1980). More

generally, our results suggest that at times when such situational concerns are salient, marketers will be more likely to break through the consumers' attentional filters by capitalising on the usage situation rather than on pre-existing individual differences.

In conclusion, the concept of attention has played a ubiquitous explanatory role in models of marketing communications and consumer choice. But when it has been investigated empirically, past emphasis has tended to be on stimulus and task-related factors that impact overall attention. In contrast, our focus on the readiness and benefit-motivated aspects of selective attention coheres not only with the classic work of Haley (1968, 1971) but also with recent consumer research that examines the meaning of product information in terms of how the individual consumer and/or the ongoing context determine it (e.g., Dickson, 1982; Mick and Buhl, 1992; Ratneshwar and Shocker, 1991). The significance of marketing stimuli to the consumer is a function of both the person and the situation. As Higgins (1990) points out, interactionism is not a new idea, but it is an idea whose time has come. We believe that the why and how of selective attention will be most fruitfully addressed by focusing more closely on who, where, and when.

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