CONCLUSION EXPLICITNESS IN ADVERTISING

The Moderating Role of Need for Cognition (NFC) and Argument Quality (AQ) on Persuasion

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ABSTRACT: Previous research into the use of explicit and implicit conclusions in advertising has yet to demonstrate consistent effects for both brand attitudes and purchase intentions. While research has examined the role of involvement, this study contributes by examining the trait called need for cognition (NFC), which addresses a person's propensity to engage in effortful thinking. In addition, this study introduces argument quality (AQ) as another potential moderator of conclusion explicitness effects. In a 2 × 2 experiment of 261 subjects, conclusion explicitness (explicit conclusion, implicit conclusion) and AQ (strong, weak) are manipulated, with NFC (high NFC, low NFC) as a third measured variable. Results indicate more favorable evaluations for implicit conclusions over explicit conclusions for high-NFC individuals. Further, implicit conclusions result in more favorable brand attitudes and purchase intentions when linked with strong AQ for high-NFC individuals. The findings confirm that conclusion explicitness does not differentially affect the evaluations of low-NFC subjects. Results suggest that NFC may represent an important moderating variable for future conclusion explicitness research.

One of the ultimate aims of advertising is to persuade consumers to buy certain brands over others. To achieve this goal, many advertisers utilize advertisements with a clear conclusion (e.g., Beardi 2001; Halliday 2001). For obvious conclusions, however, it may be more effective to imply rather than state the intended conclusion, as this may be viewed as less of a "hard sell." Indeed, in the field of comparative advertising, the use of explicit and implicit conclusions is becoming increasingly common (Barone et al. 1999). For example, a recent print advertisement by Saab presents the performance of a Saab and a BMW on a number of attributes. The ad invites consumers to "compare the value you will get," before stating, "and then you make the decision." Although early conclusion explicitness research found explicit conclusions to be more effective (e.g., Fine 1957; Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953), recent research has shown the benefits of implicit conclusions in advertising (e.g., Ahearne, Gruen, and Saxton 2000; Sawyer and Howard 1991). Thus, conclusion explicitness offers practitioners a way of formulating ad copy to enhance advertising effectiveness.

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For academic researchers, theoretical understanding of conclusion explicitness effects is promising but underdeveloped. For instance, research indicates that a consumer's motivation to process ad information has a key impact on whether implicit conclusions are effective. Motivated consumers tend to be more likely to be persuaded by implicit conclusions. This research has studied the impact of situational states, such as involvement (e.g., Chebat, Charlebois, and Gélinas-Chebat 2001; Sawyer and Howard 1991). However, little research has examined the effects of personality traits on conclusion explicitness effects. This gap in the literature is important given that the trait called need for cognition (NFC) (Cacioppo and Petty 1982) relates to a person's motivation to process information. Further, researchers have identified NFC as a potentially important moderator of conclusion explicitness effects, and have called for research on this topic (e.g., Ahearne, Gruen, and Saxton 2000; Kardes, Kim, and Lim 1994). Thus, the present research offers three contributions, which are outlined in the paragraphs that follow.

First, the role of NFC is studied, thereby extending the literature from situational states (e.g., involvement) to predispositional traits (e.g., NFC). This contributes by exploring the cognitive processes involved in conclusion explicitness effects, specifically the impact of individual differences on a person's motivation to think about an ad. This tests a boundary condition of conclusion explicitness research, and explores the role of individual differences in advertising. Individual differences are currently being highlighted as offering useful perspectives for marketers (e.g., Baumgartner 2002; Luna and Peracchio 2002), and research into traits has offered useful insights for advertising research (e.g., Moore and Har-

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ris 1996; Zhang and Buda 1999). Research into ad avoidance also reveals individuals' differences in motivation to process ads, with motivated people less likely to avoid print ads (e.g., Speck and Elliott 1997). Consequently, NFC appears to be a useful construct to consider.

Second, we explore the moderating role of argument quality (AQ) on conclusion explicitness effects. Previous research suggests that the effect of AQ is influenced by the amount of elaboration engaged in by a consumer (Batra and Stayman 1990). Since NFC relates to a person's inherent tendency to engage in elaboration, researchers have suggested that AQ is an important factor to consider in conjunction with NFC (Batra and Stayman 1990; Cacioppo et al. 1986). As stated by Petty, Unnava, and Strathman (1991, p. 246), "People who enjoy thinking (high in 'need for cognition') tend to form attitudes on the basis of the quality of the arguments in a message." Consequently, studying AQ contributes to our theoretical understanding of the role of NFC in conclusion explicitness effects.

Third, as the majority of studies in conclusion explicitness have examined simple product categories, such as toothbrushes (Sawyer 1988; Sawyer and Howard 1991), this study contributes by examining conclusion explicitness effects for a complex product category. A complex product is defined as a product possessing several functions or features (Griffin 1997). Studying complex products allows us to examine the generalizability of conclusion explicitness effects. From a managerial perspective, insights gained from a complex product context is highly relevant, since many comparative ads compare brands on a variety of attributes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Explicit and Implicit Conclusions

Within the conclusion explicitness literature, there is variation in the terminology used to describe an ad format that provides a conclusion or no conclusion. Researchers have referred to closed-ended and open-ended messages (e.g., Ahearne, Gruen, and Saxton 2000; Sawyer and Howard 1991) or explicit and implicit conclusions (e.g., Kardes 1988; Kardes, Kim, and Lim 1994). As this study addresses message conclusion explicitness, the latter terms are used.

Explicit conclusions involve the direct statement of a conclusion within an ad (Sawyer and Howard 1991), such as "Brand *X* is better than the rest." An advantage of this type of message is that the chances of a consumer misinterpreting the ad are minimized (Ahearne, Gruen, and Saxton 2000). However, Kardes, Kim, and Lim (1994) suggest that explicit conclusions are a form of "hard sell" that allow little scope for individual interpretation, which can result in distrust and less favorable evaluations. By contrast, implicit conclusions do not directly state a conclusion. This format relies on an implied set of arguments that are designed to lead an audience toward the intended conclusion. Phrases commonly seen in such ads ask the consumer to "compare for yourself" and suggest that "you make the decision." Such messages allow consumers to form their own conclusion based on the information provided (Kardes, Kim, and Lim 1994; Sawyer and Howard 1991). They also encourage consumers to read the ad prior to making their own decision, thus prompting higher levels of message processing. Advantages of implicit conclusions include enhanced advertiser credibility owing to being perceived as less coercive. Yet the risks of using implicit conclusions include consumers failing to form a conclusion (see Sawyer and Howard 1991), or reaching the wrong conclusion (Ahearne, Gruen, and Saxton 2000; Kardes, Kim, and Lim 1994).

Previous Research on Conclusion Explicitness

Early research indicated that explicit conclusions resulted in greater opinion change (for reviews, see Sawyer 1988; Sawyer and Howard 1991). More recently, scholars have begun to address how conclusion explicitness relates to a consumer's motivation to process the message. Kardes (1988) was the first study to consider the role of involvement and conclusion explicitness. Involvement is defined as the level of personal relevance that motivates individuals to engage in effortful processing (Batra and Stayman 1990). Kardes's (1988) findings suggest that when an audience is confronted with an implicit conclusion ad, high-involvement subjects are likely to spontaneously generate inferences about the missing conclusion. This facilitates highly accessible brand attitudes, whereas brand attitudes for low-involvement subjects are relatively inaccessible due to an insufficient motivation to infer missing conclusions. However, Kardes (1988) did not find a differential effect for involvement on brand attitudes for implicit messages.

This lack of a persuasive advantage for implicit conclusions prompted further exploration by Sawyer and Howard (1991). Rather than processes, their main focus was on the relative persuasive impact of implicit and explicit messages, and the moderating role of involvement. They presented subjects with information on the relative performance of four brands across a set of attributes. Such a design made a conclusion about each attribute, and a global conclusion, clearer. They found a persuasive advantage for implicit conclusions over explicit conclusions for brand attitudes, purchase intentions, and choice behavior under high involvement. Recently, Ahearne, Gruen, and Saxton (2000) replicated Sawyer and Howard (1991) in two experiments—one with low product complexity and one with high product complexity. They found similar results to Sawyer and Howard (1991) for the simple product category, but nonsignificant results for the complex

product (a compact disc player). However, their use of real brand names and attributes with complex terminology (e.g., bump immunity, programmability) may have affected subjects' ability to process the message, and consequently, the results. Due to such methodological issues in previous studies, a complex product is used as the basis for this study. Overall, the research on conclusion explicitness and involvement highlights involvement as a moderator, and suggests that the advantage of implicit conclusions may be conditional upon individual traits or message-specific factors.

NFC, AQ, and Conclusion Explicitness

Many studies have suggested that need for cognition (NFC) is an important variable to consider for conclusion explicitness (e.g., Ahearne, Gruen, and Saxton 2000; Sawyer 1988). NFC refers to an individual's propensity to engage in and enjoy cognitively demanding tasks (Cacioppo, Petty, and Kao 1984). High-NFC individuals enjoy solving complex problems and report greater cognitive effort relative to low-NFC individuals (Batra and Stayman 1990).

Previous research suggests that high-NFC individuals are more influenced by argument quality (AQ) (e.g., Inman, McAlister, and Hoyer 1990; Zhang 1996). Indeed, strong arguments tend to be more persuasive for high-NFC individuals. Further, they are more likely to seek out and elaborate on information, since they enjoy doing so (Luna and Peracchio 2002). Conversely, low-NFC individuals are less motivated to study a message in depth. As a result, they are more influenced by humor (Zhang 1996), promotion signals (Inman, McAlister, and Hoyer 1990), and positive mood (Batra and Stayman 1990), which suggests that attitude change relates to simple cues in the advertising message. In much of this research (e.g., Cacioppo et al. 1986; Inman, McAlister, and Hoyer 1990; Zhang 1996), the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty and Cacioppo 1981) has been used to interpret the findings, with high-NFC individuals following a central, cognitively effortful route to persuasion, and low-NFC individuals following a simpler peripheral, cue processing route.

Stayman and Kardes (1992) were the first to consider NFC in a conclusion explicitness context. Although the focus of their study was spontaneous inference generation rather than persuasion, they found that inferences about implicit conclusions were more likely to be spontaneous for high-NFC individuals, owing to a greater processing motivation. This is consistent with previous research where highly involved audiences generated inferences about implicit conclusions (Kardes 1988). However, it is unclear whether high-NFC individuals respond differently implicit conclusions in terms of persuasion. This study seeks to explore this important issue.

HYPOTHESES

Effects for NFC and Conclusion Explicitness

Hypothesis 1 predicts that the NFC levels of consumers (high, low) and the conclusion explicitness of the ad (implicit, explicit) will interact, resulting in differences in persuasion. Specifically, given that previous research has found involvement to be a moderator of conclusion explicitness (e.g., Kardes 1988; Sawyer and Howard 1991), we might expect NFC to be a moderator of conclusion explicitness effects. From an ELM perspective, Petty, Unnava, and Strathman (1991) classify involvement as a situational factor, and NFC as an individual factor, with both influencing an individual's motivation to process a message. Thus, since high-NFC individuals enjoy elaborating upon a message, they are more likely to evaluate implicit messages more favorably than explicit conclusions. By contrast, conclusion explicitness effects are not expected for low-NFC consumers, as these effects require the effortful processing of arguments presented in an ad. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> *H1: There will be a significant interaction between NFC and conclusion explicitness across dependent measures. Specifically, for high-NFC individuals, implicit conclusion ads will lead to more favorable attitudes toward the ad (A_{ad}), attitudes toward the brand (A_b), brand beliefs, and purchase intentions, when compared with an ad with an explicit conclusion. For low-NFC individuals, there will be no difference between implicit conclusion ads and explicit conclusion ads for A_{ad}, A_b, brand beliefs, or purchase intentions.*

Effects for NFC and AQ

Argument quality (AQ) is defined as the valence of thoughts evoked by an argument (Batra and Stayman 1990). Strong arguments elicit more favorable thoughts about an advocated position; weak arguments elicit more unfavorable thoughts. Despite its potential importance to persuasion, the application of AQ to conclusion explicitness has not been examined. Indeed, much of the previous research has focused on the most important product attributes for comparison between brands, constituting a relatively strong AQ. In this study, we examine the role of AQ for strong and weak arguments. Previous research suggests that AQ has a greater impact on persuasion under high involvement (Petty and Cacioppo 1981) and for high-NFC individuals (Batra and Stayman 1990; Cacioppo et al. 1986). Thus, AQ is expected to be an important persuasion variable for high-NFC individuals. Since high-NFC consumers are more likely to scrutinize the arguments in a message (Cacioppo et al. 1986), it is expected that a strong AQ will be more persuasive than a weaker argument. By contrast, low-NFC individuals are expected to be unaffected by AQ, owing

to a lack of motivation to process the information. Thus, the second hypothesis is posited:

H2: There will be a significant interaction between NFC and AQ across dependent measures. Specifically, for high-NFC individuals, a strong AQ ad will lead to more favorable A_{ad}, A_b, *brand beliefs, and purchase intentions when compared with a weak AQ ad. For low-NFC individuals, there will be no difference between a strong AQ ad and a weak AQ ad for* A_{ad}, A_b, *brand beliefs, or purchase intentions.*

Effects for NFC, Conclusion Explicitness, and AQ

Drawing upon H1 and H2, we expect that high-NFC individuals will be persuaded by ads with implicit conclusions over explicit conclusions, and that this effect will be stronger for ads with a strong AQ. Sawyer (1988) suggests that an implicit conclusion with weak arguments may result in the wrong conclusion being reached. Hence, we expect that conclusions drawn from strong arguments will be perceived as more valid than conclusions based on weak arguments. For low-NFC individuals, no preference should be evident. Specifically, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H3: There will be a significant interaction between NFC, conclusion explicitness, and AQ across dependent measures. Specifically, high-NFC individuals will exhibit more favorable A_{ad}, A_b, *brand beliefs, and purchase intentions toward implicit conclusion ads with strong AQ. For low-NFC individuals, no preference in ad type will be exhibited.*

METHOD

Subjects, Design, and Procedure

A total of 275 students recruited from an undergraduate marketing class were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions. Of these, 14 students were excluded owing to incomplete responses, resulting in a final sample of 261 students. Subjects participated in groups of 85 to 100 and received the chance to win free movie passes.

The design of the experiment was a 2 (conclusion explicitness: explicit, implicit) × 2 (AQ: strong, weak) between-subjects factorial design, with NFC (high, low) used as a measured independent variable, following a median split procedure as in previous research (e.g., Batra and Stayman 1990; Luna and Peracchio 2002). Subjects were informed that a study was being conducted on cellular phone advertisements. They then read a booklet containing an ad and the questionnaire. Subjects were asked to read the ad as they would normally do if they were reading it in a magazine. The entire procedure took 20 minutes to complete. Subjects were later debriefed in a follow-up session.

Experimental Stimulus Development

Pretest 1

This pretest identified an appropriate product based on two criteria: (1) the product offered a range of attributes for the AQ manipulation, and (2) the product was relevant to a student sample. First, 20 undergraduates were asked to create a list of complex products. Next, 32 subjects rated the four most frequently mentioned products from stage one on five, seven-point scales (e.g., unimportant/important) for involvement (a list of past research from which the measures used in this study were sourced is available from the first author upon request), from which an average score was derived. Prior knowledge, ownership, and frequency of use measures were also administered. It was found that cell phones had the highest involvement score (M = 5.04), most subjects had previously or currently owned a cell phone (93.8%), and a large number use a cell phone more than four times a week (87.6%), suggesting a moderate to high frequency of use. Thus, cell phones were selected.

Pretest 2

This pretest sought to determine product attributes for the AQ manipulation. Twenty-two subjects rated a list of 15 attributes derived from a content analysis on six, seven-point scales for AQ (e.g., not compelling/compelling). These scores were summed to form an index. The five attributes with the highest means (talk time, standby time, vibrating alert, weight, and security features) and the five lowest means (ringing alert options, internal antennae, range of colors, Personal Information Manager, and interchangeable face plates) were chosen for the strong and weak AQ manipulations, respectively.

Pretest 3

This pretest identified fictitious brand names. Eight brand names were created that (1) did not sound phonetically similar to existing brands, and (2) did not include a relevant attribute or benefit (e.g., PicturePerfect) that can lead to higher recall (Keller, Heckler, and Houston 1998). Thirty-one undergraduates rated these names on five, seven-point items (e.g., bad/good). The three brands rated as most similar were Tectron TZ (M = 4.10), Samsonic SX (M = 4.19), and Norden NT (M = 4.16). A paired-samples t test confirmed that there were no significant differences between these evaluations ($p > .10$). Hence, Samsonic was chosen as the target brand, with Tectron and Norden as the two competitors. Furthermore, the comparative advertising format adopted reflects the format of recent advertising by well-known brands (e.g., Toyota, Saab),

but not of any cellular phone brands that may prime, and thus bias, responses.

Independent Variables

For conclusion explicitness, the conclusion was clearly stated (explicit) or implied (implicit). Explicit conclusion conditions contained a statement that the target brand (Samsonic) was superior: "Now that you've seen the facts, choose Samsonic—the cellular phone which is best for you." For the implicit conclusion, the following statement invited subjects to infer their own conclusion about which brand was superior: "Now that you've seen the facts, decide for yourself which cellular phone is best for you." This approach was adapted from Sawyer and Howard (1991). An example of the ad stimuli is provided in the Appendix.

NFC was measured using the 18-item scale devised by Cacioppo, Petty, and Kao (1984). For AQ, strong AQ ads contained the five most important attributes (pretest 2), with the target brand outperforming competitors on four of the five attributes. By contrast, weak AQ ads contained the five least important attributes, with the target brand outperforming competitors on three of the five attributes. The performance of the target brand relative to competitors was varied to provide for a more comprehensive AQ manipulation than simply changing the nature of attributes promoted in the ad copy. AQ manipulations emphasized attributes, which follows recommendations for long advertising copy (e.g., Westphal 2001).

Dependent Variables

Brand attitudes were measured on four, seven-point scales (bad/good, dislike quite a lot/like quite a lot, unpleasant/pleasant, poor quality/good quality; α = .90). A_{ad} was measured on four, seven-point scales (bad/good, dislike/like, not irritating/irritating, not interesting/interesting; α = .78). Brand attribute beliefs assessed how realistic subjects felt about the performance of the three brands on each attribute. Subjects rated the likelihood (very unlikely/very likely) that each of the brands had the attribute in question on a five-point scale. An overall belief rating was summed and averaged for each brand. Two measures of purchase intentions were used: a four-point scale (definitely would not buy/definitely would buy) and a constant-sum scale where subjects allocated 100 points indicating the likelihood they would buy each of the brands. These intention measures were identical to those of Sawyer and Howard (1991), and were combined to form an overall intention score by calculating a standardized score for the target brand on each of the items and analyzing the mean of the two standardized scores (α = .88).

Covariates

Potential covariates—involvement and product knowledge—were measured to control for the influence of extraneous variables (Hair et al. 1998). Involvement and product knowledge were chosen because previous conclusion explicitness research suggests that these factors may have an effect (Chebat, Charlebois, and Gélinas-Chebat 2001; Kardes 1988; Sawyer and Howard 1991). Involvement was measured on four, seven-point scales (unimportant/important, irrelevant to me/relevant to me, means nothing to me/means a lot to me, not needed/needed). Product knowledge was measured on four, seven-point scales (know very little/know very much, inexperienced/experienced, uninformed/informed, novice buyer/expert buyer).

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

A conclusion explicitness manipulation check was conducted using two, seven-point scales rating subjects' level of agreement with the following statements: (1) I think that the advertisement for Samsonic SX ends with an explicit conclusion about which brand is superior, and (2) I think that the advertisement for Samsonic SX ends with an obvious conclusion about which brand is superior (r = .65). It was found that explicit conclusions ($M_{explicit}$ = 4.48) were regarded as being more explicit and obvious than implicit conclusions ($M_{implicit}$ = 3.89, p < .05). An AQ manipulation check was performed using four, seven-point items (weak/strong, unpersuasive/persuasive, not convincing/convincing, bad/good; α = .93). These results indicate that the AQ manipulation was effective ($M_{strongAQ}$ = 4.16, M_{weakAQ} = 3.76, p < .05).

Assumption Testing

Prior to examining treatment effects with multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), a variety of assumptions were tested. First, skewness and kurtosis statistics verified that the assumption of normality was satisfied for the dependent variables and covariates. Second, a nonsignificant Box's M test confirmed that homogeneity of variance existed among the covariance matrices (Box's M = 38.50, p > .16). Third, a requirement of covariance analysis is that covariates must be correlated with the dependent variables (Hair et al. 1998). A correlation matrix suggested that involvement was a significant covariate (r > .33, p < .01). However, product knowledge was uncorrelated with any dependent variable (r < .10, p > .13), and was hence excluded from the analysis. Fourth, prior to using MANCOVA it is important to identify any outliers that impact the level of type I error and

distort the results (Hair et al. 1998). An examination of studentized residuals across the dependent variables revealed 13 cases as outliers. Hence, the sample size was reduced to 248 observations.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1: Effects for NFC and Conclusion Explicitness

Hypothesis 1 predicts that for high-NFC individuals, implicit conclusions will be more effective than explicit conclusions. For low-NFC individuals, no such differences will be evident. A two-way MANCOVA did not produce a significant NFC × conclusion explicitness interaction across any of the dependent measures (Fs < 2.30, ps > .13).

To further investigate this result, a planned comparison MANCOVA was run across dependent measures for high-NFC individuals only. This yielded a significant main effect for conclusion explicitness for brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Specifically, for high-NFC individuals, implicit conclusions ($M_{implicit}$ = 4.66) result in more favorable brand attitudes than explicit conclusions, $M_{explicit}$ = 4.08, $F(1, 118) = 7.06$, $p < .01$. A similar pattern is evident for purchase intentions, $M_{implicit}$ = .33, $M_{explicit}$ = –.11, respectively; $F(1, 118) = 5.58$, $p < .05$. Although the means for A_{ad} and brand beliefs were in the predicted direction, they approached but did not reach significance (ps > .07). Furthermore, as expected, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) performed for low-NFC individuals yielded no preference for different types of conclusion explicitness in ads (F < 1.02). Thus, these results generally support the hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: Effects for NFC and AQ

Hypothesis 2 posits that for high-NFC individuals, ads with strong arguments will be more effective than ads with weak arguments. Low-NFC individuals, on the other hand, should not be affected by AQ. Consistent with the hypothesis, for high-NFC individuals, a significant positive main effect for AQ was revealed for brand beliefs, $F(1, 118) = 8.68$, $p < .01$, and purchase intentions, $F(1, 118) = 10.96$, $p < .01$. It is important to note that the means were in the expected direction, supporting the hypothesis. For example, high-NFC individuals showed more favorable brand beliefs for strong ad arguments ($M_{strongAQ}$ = 3.92) than for weak arguments (M_{weakAQ} = 3.68). Likewise, for purchase intentions, high-NFC individuals rated more favorable purchase intentions for strong ad arguments ($M_{strongAQ}$ = .34) than for ads containing weak arguments (M_{weakAQ} = –.08). Yet while significant positive effects were evident for brand beliefs and purchase intentions, the differences for A_{ad} and brand attitudes did not reach significance (Fs < .80, ps > .37). As expected, however, low-NFC individuals showed no preferences for AQ, as a MANCOVA for the low-NFC group revealed no significant main effects or interactions (F < 1.61). Thus, overall there is partial support for this hypothesis.

Hypotheses 3: Effects for NFC, Conclusion Explicitness, and AQ

Hypothesis 3 proposes that high-NFC individuals will prefer ads with implicit conclusions and strong AQ, whereas there will be no effect for low-NFC individuals. A conclusion explicitness × AQ × NFC MANCOVA with involvement as a covariate on all dependent variables revealed significant main effects for NFC, Wilks's λ = .96, $F(4, 236) = 2.76$, $p <$ .05; conclusion explicitness, Wilks's λ = .95, $F(4, 236) = 3.00$, $p < .05$; and AQ, Wilks's λ = .91, $F(4, 236) = 5.97$, $p < .01$. No significant three-way interactions were evident, however. Yet further analysis of high-NFC data revealed a significant positive conclusion explicitness × AQ interaction for brand attitudes, $F(1, 118) = 4.30$, $p < .05$, and the result for purchase intentions approached, but did not reach, significance (p = .06).

As can be seen in Table 1, planned contrasts revealed that implicit conclusions ($M_{implicit}$ = 4.82) generated more favorable brand attitudes than explicit conclusions ($M_{explicit}$ = 3.91, p = .01) for ads with strong arguments, but not for ads with weak arguments. Similarly, for purchase intentions, implicit conclusions ($M_{implicit}$ = .77) were more effective than explicit conclusions ($M_{explicit}$ = –.01, $p < .01$) for strong argument ads, but not for weak argument ads. Nevertheless, although the means for A_{ad} and brand beliefs were in the predicted direction, the differences were not statistically significant, and thus can not be considered supportive of the hypotheses. Overall, implicit conclusions used with strong AQ were the most persuasive ads for high-NFC individuals. As expected, no such result was evident for low-NFC individuals (p > .14). Hence, H3 is partially supported.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study offer several contributions to the issue of conclusion explicitness. First, this study is the first to provide empirical evidence that NFC moderates the persuasive impact of conclusion explicitness. Although NFC has been identified as a potential moderating factor in previous research (e.g., Kardes, Kim, and Lim 1994; Sawyer and Howard 1991), its influence on the persuasive impact of conclusion explicitness has not been examined. Although most of our hypotheses received only partial support, our results suggest that implicit conclusions are more effective for high-NFC individuals for brand attitudes and purchase intentions. This suggests that personality trait antecedents can have an influence on conclusion explicitness effects.

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations for the Effects of Conclusion Explicitness by AQ for High-NFC and Low-NFC Groups

Source of variation	Attitude toward the ad	Brand attitudes	Brand beliefs	Purchase intentions
High NFC				
Strong AQ				
Implicit conclusion	4.35	4.82*[a]	4.05	.77**
	(1.01)	(.86)	(.42)	(.64)
Explicit conclusion	3.74	3.91*	3.82	–.01**
	(.82)	(.58)	(.46)	(.85)
Weak AQ				
Implicit conclusion	4.02	4.55	3.75	.02
	(.87)	(1.01)	(.50)	(.86)
Explicit conclusion	3.67	4.27	3.59	–.21
	(1.03)	(.89)	(.52)	(.76)
Low NFC				
Strong AQ				
Implicit conclusion	3.85	4.08	3.98	.15
	(1.13)	(.75)	(.43)	(.81)
Explicit conclusion	3.57	3.94	3.77	.03
	(.92)	(1.02)	(.42)	(.80)
Weak AQ				
Implicit conclusion	3.64	4.03	3.89	–.35
	(1.26)	(.95)	(.42)	(.85)
Explicit conclusion	3.61	3.90	3.78	–.23
	(1.09)	(1.11)	(.49)	(.80)

Note: AQ = argument quality; NFC = need for cognition. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

[a] Significant effects represent a statistically significant difference for conclusion explicitness for high-NFC/ strong AQ data, for that dependent variable.

* $p = .01$.

** $p < .01$.

Second, this study examined the effect of AQ. Previous conclusion explicitness research has examined only strong arguments. Hence, it is unknown whether the persuasion advantages of implicit conclusions can be extended to ads containing weaker arguments, such as when a brand advertises outperforming competitors on attributes that consumers deem to be relatively unimportant. The present study hypothesized that implicit conclusions and strong arguments would be more persuasive for high-NFC individuals, owing to the greater perceived validity of a conclusion drawn from a strong argument as opposed to a weak argument. Overall, the findings partially supported this hypothesis for brand beliefs and purchase intentions. Furthermore, the lack of interaction between conclusion explicitness and AQ for A_{ad} suggests that high-NFC individuals evaluate these two factors independently of each other. Indeed, conclusion explicitness does not appear to affect A_{ad}. In a metanalysis of comparative advertising research, however, Grewal and colleagues (1997) found that comparative ads created more negative A_{ad} than noncomparative ads, as they can be viewed as more impersonal and unfriendly. Hence, future research could consider conclusion explicitness and A_{ad} in a noncomparative format.

Third, this study used a complex product category. With the exception of Ahearne, Gruen, and Saxton (2000), the majority of conclusion explicitness studies have focused on simple products. Ahearne, Gruen, and Saxton (2000) suggested that conclusion explicitness effects in advertising do not apply to complex product categories, but methodological factors may have influenced their findings. In contrast, this study found significant conclusion explicitness effects for a complex product. Finally, this study confirms that the persuasion of low-NFC individuals is unaffected by conclusion explicitness or AQ. Although not tested in this research, it could be that low-NFC consumers avoid effortful cognitive tasks and are relatively unmotivated to process arguments. Hence, low-NFC consumers did not respond differently when presented with an implicit conclusion versus an explicit conclusion. These results concur with Sawyer and Howard (1991), who found that an uninvolved audience tended not to draw a conclusion, especially when an explicit conclusion is not provided in the message. Similarly, consistent with pre-

vious research (Cacioppo et al. 1986), AQ did not have an effect on low-NFC persuasion.

This study offers several implications that may be of interest to advertisers. First, in designing ads, it may not always be effective to explicitly state the conclusion of the message. An implicit conclusion with strong arguments may cause high-NFC consumers to evaluate the advertiser's brand more favorably and have higher purchase intentions than if an explicit conclusion is used. In other words, if the target market is comprised of high-NFC individuals and the advertising brand has a competitive advantage on the most important attributes (i.e., has strong AQ), then implicit conclusions offer a useful alternative for promotion.

Furthermore, implicit conclusions may prove useful when comparing several competing brands. As comparative advertising can be regarded as an aggressive attack on competitors, using an implicit conclusion may be perceived as less of a hard sell. Practitioners should be aware of the risks with implicit conclusions, however. First, there is the risk that consumers may fail to draw a conclusion. Hence, the ad should be designed to encourage consumers to draw a conclusion. For example, asking consumers to "decide for yourself" or "compare for yourself" should complement an implicit conclusion strategy. Second, consumers may draw the incorrect conclusion. Thus, ad information must be presented in an obvious way to enable consumers to draw the correct conclusion. As such, implicit conclusions are likely to work best in print as opposed to television or radio, since print ads allow consumers sufficient time to process the information and reach a conclusion.

Yet while conclusion explicitness lies well within the control of advertisers as an ad design factor, how can advertisers make use of findings relating to NFC? In answer to this question, NFC offers additional information for market segmentation (Luna and Peracchio 2002), where segments can be classified as high-NFC or low-NFC. How can this be done? One approach is to study the nature of the media vehicle in which the ad is to be placed. A judgment can be made regarding the NFC level of the target market reader, based on preferred content and featured articles. For instance, readers of investment magazines that offer company case studies (e.g., *Forbes*), should enjoy—or at least process—in-depth information. Such formats tend to be more demanding of cognitive resources (Meyers-Levy and Peracchio 1995). Thus, the readership profile for these magazines may be closer to high-NFC than the readership for less text-based magazines, which focus on, for example, photos of movie celebrities. In the latter case, we could assume a low-NFC readership profile and, thus, use conclusion explicitness accordingly.

This study does have a variety of limitations. First, in addition to the usual limitations associated with student subjects, the study was conducted in an artificial setting, which may have raised subjects' involvement levels. Second, although cellular phones represent a complex product, future research might examine other complex products that contain a higher level of risk and complexity (see Darley and Smith 1995 for an application of risk types).

Future research should also study the effects of repetition. Research by Ray and Sawyer (1971) suggests that hard-sell ads perform poorly over repetition relative to soft-sell ads. Thus, research could examine whether the advantage of an implicit conclusion over an explicit conclusion holds over repeated exposures. Furthermore, while this study used a comparative advertising format with the ad conclusion related to a target brand's superiority, noncomparative formats could be studied, if the ad conclusion is not contingent upon such information (e.g., presenting research on product performance). In addition, this study focused on a verbal manipulation of ambiguity by varying whether or not an explicit conclusion was stated. It would be useful, however, to study visual and audio formats to examine whether similar effects can be found for the effectiveness of implicit over explicit conclusions.

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Appendix

Stimulus Example: Implicit Conclusion and Strong Argument Quality

If you want the best from a cellular phone, you need the facts.

The following results from an independent consumer testing organization show that one cellular phone is clearly superior.

Features	Samsonic SX	Norden NT	Tectron TZ
Talk time	210 mins	160 mins	175 mins
Standby time	200 hrs	150 hrs	110 hrs
Vibrating alert	Included	Not included	Not included
Weight	4.6 oz	4.2 oz	4.4 oz
Security features	Four	One	Two

Now that you've seen the facts,
decide for yourself
which cellular phone is best for you.