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The Use of Ambiguous Messages as a Strategy to Appeal to Multiple Decision Makers

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Abstract: Messages that are tailored to specific audiences (matched messages) are typically more persuasive compared to messages that are crafted for a general audience (Hirsh, Kang, & Bodenhauser, 2012). However, tailoring messages can have the effect that messages are less persuasive for audiences for which they were not tailored (mismatched messages; Sillince, Jarzabkowski, & Shaw, 2012). Eisenberg (1984) introduced the concept of strategic ambiguity to appeal to multiple audiences simultaneously. We systematically compared effects of matched/mismatched tailored messages with the effects of ambiguous messages on multiple-criteria choice behavior. We found evidence that ambiguous messages can be used under certain conditions to simultaneously appeal to multiple audiences within the context of credit card choices. Using the financial control typology developed by Shefrin and Nicols (2014) to define different audiences, the study (154 participants) provided some support for the use of ambiguity as a tool for tailoring messages to diverse credit-card holders.