AFFECTIVE INVOLVEMENT IN ADVERTISING EFFECTIVENESS: IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERPRETATION OF PRINT ADVERTISEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact that affective dimensions of involvement have on the decoding process of print advertisements. The results from a factorial experiment using advertisements for two types of product, credit cards and chocolate bars, indicate that outcomes of the decoding process are predominantly influenced by affective dimensions of involvement, such as interest and pleasure, in a low involvement situation. This affective involvement has a strong relationship with likeability of the advertisement. However the relationship between comprehension and likeability is less straightforward and seems to be linked to beliefs about the advertisement.

INTRODUCTION

Involvement plays a key part in the decoding process by directing attention and effort to evaluating advertisements that are interesting and relevant and to filter out those that are not. Increasingly advertising messages are fighting for attention in an age of marketing communication overload. There is a trend towards more implicit and visual advertising executions for print advertisements (Phillips and McQuarrie 2002) consistent with increased "peripheral" or low involvement processing (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981) which is now often a primary route of cognitive processing (Kerr et al., 2010).

Information processing models such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) suggest that involvement is an important mediator of information processing, as high and low levels of involvement exhibit different impacts on the intensity and nature of decoding and consequently persuasion of a message. High involvement generally leads to careful consideration, thinking and evaluation of arguments contained in an advertising message. By contrast, in a low involvement situation, the peripheral route of the ELM (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) uses simple associations, inferences, and heuristics to activate attitude change.

INVOLVEMENT, COMPREHENSION AND LIKEABILITY

Most studies in this area focus on a small set of variables in order to measure key relationships e.g. between involvement and processing outcomes such as attitude to the advertisement (liking), which has been considered an important measure of advertising effectiveness for some time (Biel, 1990; du Plessis, 1998; Hollis, 1995). Liking is hypothesised to act as a processing filter, produce fewer counter-arguments, increase trust and source credibility, and it has also been suggested to directly increase liking of the brand (Haley and Baldinger, 1991; Laczniak and Grossbart, 1990).

Advertising effectiveness can also be influenced by how easy or difficult it is to comprehend the advertisement. There is evidence to suggest that if advertisements are understood they are also liked (McQuarrie and Mick, 1999). However, the relationship between comprehension and likeability may not be straightforward. A non-linear (or quadratic) relationship may explain cognitive processing outcomes as argued by Mortimer and Lloyd (2010).

Similarly, an experiment by Huhnmann and Mott-Stenerson (2008) found that comprehension results were consistent with a resource-matching perspective. Information processing is optimised when the resources made available by consumers match those required to interpret an advertisement. The implication of such U-shaped relationship between involvement (motivation to process information) and comprehension is that, in a low involvement situation, advertisements should be easy to understand otherwise negative attitudes are likely to occur. On the other hand, in a high involvement situation, there are more processing resources made available and therefore it is less likely that negative attitudes will result. It is generally understood that high involvement consumers execute a brand processing strategy, directing attention to brand relevant information and processing this deeply (Celci and Olson 1988; Mitchell 1981) and attitudes are generated on the basis of thoughts about the persuasiveness of the information. By contrast, low involvement consumers do not allocate sufficient attention for critical analysis, but rely on active schema relevant knowledge to comprehend a message. Attitudes are thus formed by an evaluation of learned information rather than the persuasiveness of the message. The meaningfulness of message content is also suggested to be a major determinant of the amount learnt when exposed to a communication (Burnkrant and Sawyer 1983). Increased learning then has a positive influence on recall, recognition, and thoughts generated by consumers thus increasing the likelihood of advertising effectiveness.

Brain orientation has long been suggested to influence processing of advertising information differently. Left brain activity, being more analytical and cognitive, involves linguistic information processing whereas the creative and emotional right brain processes holistic and novel stimuli (Anand and Sternthal, 1989). The resources available in each brain hemisphere were thought to be independent (Anand and Sternthal, 1989), but more recent neurological models suggest that each advertisement perception or interpretation has both emotional and rational content (Chaudhuri and Buck, 1997; du Plessis, 1998). So it is important to measure both what individuals think and feel about an advertisement in order to provide greater explanatory power of the attitude construct (Greenwald, 1968). Edell and Burke (1987) compared transformational and informational advertisements and showed that affect (i.e. feelings) were more important than judgements in explaining attitude to the advertisement when the advertisement was high in transformation (i.e. affect) and low in information. Increasingly, it is believed that the brain's neural networks automatically stimulate memory either via attention or interpretation, without conscious cognition suggesting that attention and decision-making may in some cases be driven by affect alone with little rational involvement except for post-rationalisation (du Plessis, 1998; Plassmann et al., 2007).

This study aims to utilise accepted involvement scales and advertising models that include both cognitive and affective dimensions to examine their impact on the decoding of advertising messages. More specifically, it is expected that affective dimensions of involvement will be prominent at the time of advertising exposure and the purpose is to establish how this will influence outcomes of the decoding process in terms of comprehension, beliefs about the advertisement (cognitive attitude) and likeability (affective attitude to the advertisement).

H1:   There is a positive relationship between affective involvement and likeability.

H2:   There is a positive relationship between comprehension and likeability.

H3:   There is a positive relationship between beliefs about an advertisement and likeability.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study represents an extract from a much larger research project and concentrates on examining the effects of advertising exposure on the decoding process for two product categories. Chocolate bars and credit cards were found to be representative of low product involvement and were chosen to represent a "transformational" and "informational" product category respectively (Rossiter and Percy 1987). A factorial experiment with control was used to examine the effects of advertising exposure on the decoding process. The original experiment manipulated different types of product with a risk and pleasure advertising appeal, but for the purpose of this study, the findings and discussion will focus specifically on category differences in a low involvement situation.

It was necessary to create the treatment advertisements to increase internal validity of the experiment and to avoid the confounding effects of prior brand attitude as recommended by Babin and Burns (1997); Stafford and Day (1995), and Toncar and Munch (2001). The advertisements for each product category were created using a similar format and included a headline, visual, and four product claims as constant factors to increase control of the experimental treatments as recommended by Toncar and Munch (2001). The participants were business and marketing students (n=272) from two universities in the UK. Participants were randomly allocated to treatment and control groups consisting of 68 – 70 people. This is in excess of most empirical studies of this nature thus providing a sufficiently reliable basis for analysis (Kline, 1994). The students were requested to participate during class time and asked for their consent to take part in the study to minimise effects of involuntary participation. The participants were presented with an advertising portfolio featuring four advertisements with the target advertisement always placed in the third position in accordance with procedures recommended by Ariaz-Bolzmann et al. (2000) limiting recency and positioning effects of either being first, middle, or last.

An answer booklet was used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. Involvement was measured using a 7-point differential scale adapted from McQuarrie and Munson's (1992) RRPII scale measuring "importance" and "interest" ($\alpha \geq .90$) and a 7-point Likert scale based on Jain and Srinivasan (1990) measuring "purchase risk" "($\alpha \geq .76$), "sign" ($\alpha \geq .72$) and "pleasure" ($\alpha \geq .89$). Cognitive attitude to the advertisement (beliefs) was measured by the sum of a 7-point semantic differential scale anchored by "uninformative/informative, believable/unbelievable, convincing/unconvincing, ineffective/effective, persuasive/non-persuasive" ($\alpha \geq .75$) utilised previously by Burton and Lichtenstein (1988). Similarly, affective attitudes to the advertisement used a standard measure of likeability (Babin and Burns, 1997; Stafford and Day, 1995) anchored by "good/bad, unpleasant/pleasant, nice/awful, favourable/unfavourable, irritating/not irritating" ($\alpha \geq .83$). All the results were above the acceptable level proposed by Nunnally (1978) for computing the means for analysis.

Both objective and subjective comprehension measures (Mick, 1992) were utilised to overcome limitations with either method. The number of thoughts (Celsi and Olson, 1988) were recorded for each participant to measure depth of processing, but still this does not fully determine whether the message has been understood and thus procedures utilised by Morgan and Reichert (1999) and Philips (1997) were followed for obtaining open-ended answers to the question of "what the advertising is trying to communicate" which were then coded into three categories "complete," "partial", or "not understood" as recommended by Toncar and Munch (2001).

Recall measures an advertisement's impact on memory and reflects the attention paid to the target advertisement and engagement with the message. The present recall task used unaided recall asking respondents to recall any of the product claims mentioned in the target advertisement. Complete, partial or paraphrased recollections of product claims are accepted as a recalled item in accordance with procedures used by Toncar and Munch (2001).

RESULTS

The proposed relationships were then examined by undertaking statistical analysis of the quantitative data. The ANOVA results provided in Table 1 indicate that affective involvement, measured by "interest" (McQuarrie and Munson, 1992) and "pleasure" (Jain and Srinivasan, 1990) is significantly higher for chocolate bars than credit cards as expected. It can also be seen that "purchase risk" is significantly higher for the credit card than the chocolate bar. To establish the relationship between these constructs a series of correlation tests were undertaken and these results are presented in Table 2. Pearson's correlations for both product categories confirm that as the level of affective involvement increases so does likeability in support of **H1**. This relationship is stronger for the "pleasure" dimension (Pearson's correlation =.266, p=.000) than "interest" (Pearson's correlation =.219, p=.001) but both obviously significant. "Purchase risk", one of the cognitive measures of involvement was also correlated to likeability, but negatively (Pearson's correlation = -.229, p=.001), which would suggest that if the consumer perceives a purchase to be of high risk they like the advertisement less ,which is an interesting finding that will be discussed later .

The ANOVA results also reveal that there are differences between the advertisements for both product categories in terms of two of the comprehension measures and likeability. While there are no differences in the number of thoughts, the participants did recall more thoughts about the chocolate bar and felt that they understood the message better. They also liked the chocolate bar advertisements more than the credit card advertisements. However, the Pearson's correlation (Table 2) indicates that there is only a direct relationship between the number of claims recalled and likeability (Pearson's correlation = .128, p=.046), thus only partial support for **H2** is found.

Finally, the relationship between cognitive and affective attitudes to the advertisements indicated that the more believable or informative an advertisement is perceived to be the more liked it will be (Pearson's correlation =.664, p=.000). A regression analysis was undertaken for both product categories to examine the strengths of these relationships and beliefs about the advertisement explain a high level of likeability in a linear relationship, 47% ($R2$=.470) for chocolate bars and 44% ($R2$=.442) for credit cards finding support for **H3**.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study presents support for the hypothesis that affective involvement has a strong influence on information processing in a low involvement situation. The data also suggest that a higher level of affect in terms of "pleasure" influences more positive outcomes of the decoding process even at low levels of information processing as the chocolate bar advertisements were found to be liked more and although the number of thoughts was similar for both advertisements, the chocolate bar advertisements were better understood with higher recall of the product claims. Further, these findings emphasise that advertising interpretations contain both judgements (beliefs) and feelings (liking) and that the relationship between these attitude constructs is particularly strong.

The results from this study provide some assistance in understanding the relationships between key variables in the advertising decoding process for low involvement products suggesting that affective involvement as measured by "pleasure" is a key antecedent factor in the decoding process for both informational and transformational products. The importance of beliefs is congruent with the negative influence of perceived risk on likeability. If consumers see a purchase as risky, even in a low involvement situation, this results in them liking the advertisement less. It has been recognised that individuals respond with different emotions to the same advertisements suggesting that feelings are properties of the individual while judgements of the advertisement's characteristics are properties of the advertisement (Edell and Burke, 1987). Thus, our data indicate that it is important that advertisements appeal to consumers in a number of ways by being pleasurable as well as informative and believable. Indeed, this may be the expectation by consumers for positive outcomes of the decoding process to occur as evidenced by better understanding of the message and recall of the product claims for the chocolate bar advertisements. Researching the advertising decoding process and its antecedents and consequences is arguably complex as many situational factors can affect the attention and processing efforts of consumers. Whilst our data indicate that beliefs about the advertisement have a strong influence on likeability, other factors in the advertising execution, e.g. creativity, may also have to be considered as possible explanations for the difference in liking of the advertisements. It is conceivable that an advertisement can be perceived to be informative, believable and providing assurance by virtue of the copy contained in the advertisement by simply registering that it is there, but at the same time the advertising execution may not be sufficiently interesting to warrant conscious processing of the information.

The resource matching perspective (Huhnmann and Mott-Stenerson, 2008) may also provide some explanation for the differences in likeability and comprehension found in this study. If advertisements are not found to be sufficiently pleasurable (or easy to understand) given the limited cognitive resources made available for processing in a low involvement situation, then the additional elaboration required may have a negative effect on likeability. The implication is that there is more probability of this happening in a low involvement situation if consumers cannot immediately make the connection between the advertising execution and the brand message. Findings from a study by Mortimer and Lloyd (2010) indicated a threshold at either end of the spectrum where advertisements must not be too easy or too difficult as this will negatively affect likeability. For advertising practitioners this means that particular attention should be paid to creating advertisements that match closely the decoding strategies and expectations of their target consumers particularly in a low involvement situation where affective involvement is a driving factor.

The study has included both subjective and objective measures of comprehension and although the three measures of comprehension are correlated with each other, only the measurement of the number of claims recalled relates to likeability. This finding adds to the discussion on the best way of measuring this construct. The number of thoughts may not necessarily indicate quality of information processing leading to better understanding of the intended message. It has been suggested that unconscious processing (mere exposure) may be responsible for a significant part of advertising effect in low involvement situations (du Plessis, 1998; Janiszewski, 1988), e.g. brand recognition in retail stores. Equally, it can be argued that likeability is suggestive of no perceived difficulties in comprehending the message and it would seem to be important that a lack of comprehension overall did not have an adverse effect on likeability.

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Table 1: ANOVA results for credit cards and chocolate bars

Outcomes of the decoding process:

Advertisement	Comprehension			Beliefs	Likeability
	Subjective: Understanding the message	Objective: Number of thoughts	Number of claims recalled	Cognitive Attitude to the advertisement	Affective Attitude to the Advertisement
Credit card	2.08	2.15	.68	3.40	2.93
Chocolate bar	2.43	2.31	1.09	3.65	3.72
F Value	7.34	21.06	16.05	9.95	44.98
P	.001	.510	.000	.166	.000

Involvement dimensions:

Advertisements	Involvement scale dimensions adapted from McQuarrie and Munson's (1992) RRPII		Involvement antecedent scale dimensions adapted from Jain and Srinivasan (1990) NIP		
	Interest	Importance	Purchase Risk	Social Risk/Sign	Pleasure
Credit card	3.55	3.58	3.41	2.32	3.71
Chocolate bar	4.13	3.87	2.42	2.55	4.92
F Value	71.40	133.19	110.16	72.74	56.37
P	.000	.129	.000	.161	.000
	Affective	Cognitive	Cognitive	Cognitive/Affective	Affective

Table 2: Pearson Correlation for credit cards and chocolate bars

Involvement

	Interest	Importance	Purchase Risk	Social Risk	Pleasure
Likeability	.210**	.011	-.229**	.049	.266**
P	.001	.856	.001	.433	.000

** = p less than 0.01

Comprehension

	Subjective comprehension	Number of claims recalled	Number of thoughts
Likeability	.066	.128*	-.013
P	.286	.046	.828
Number of thoughts	.212**	.239**	
P	.000	.000	

* = p less than 0.05

** = p less than 0.01

Beliefs

	Beliefs
Likeability	.664**
P	.000

** = p less than 0.01