

## **The Curious Case of Curiosity : Unpleasant Advertising and Curiosity**

### **Abstract**

**Previous research demonstrated that advertisements that induce positive feelings are effective. However, unpleasant advertising are frequently used and can be effective as well. This research examines whether evoked curiosity can explain the effectiveness of unpleasant advertising. Our results indicate that although unpleasant advertising did not lead to behavioral intention with regard to the advertised product, unpleasant advertising did evoke curiosity. Curiosity itself proves to be a strong predictor of behavioral intention.**

**Keywords:** *curiosity, marketing, pleasure, advertising, negative appeals*

**Track:** *Consumer Behavior*

## 1. Introduction

Previous research demonstrated that positive feelings towards advertisements can induce positive brand attitudes and behaviors (Olsen & Pracejus, 2004; Geuens & Fasseur 2006). However, unpleasant advertising is also used by marketers, especially in social marketing. Cotte and Ritchie (2005) performed a qualitative research among advertising creative personnel and found that marketers use unpleasant advertisements as a device to capture people's attention. Academic research, however, is inconsistent about the effectiveness of unpleasant advertising. While some research shows that unpleasant advertising can be effective, other literature shows the opposite (Cotte & Ritchie, 2005).

The goal of this current research is to investigate the effectiveness of unpleasant advertising. This current research argues that unpleasant advertising can indeed be effective because of the curiosity it may provoke. Unpleasant feelings may evoke the consumer's curiosity and make the consumer wonder if there is more to this advertisement than meets the eye. Consumers do not expect unpleasant advertising and tend to be curious about events that are unexpected or that they cannot explain (Arnone & Small, 1995; Loewenstein, 1994). Once someone is made curious, it may lead to approach behavior with regard to the advertised product (Van Dijck & Zeelenberg, 2007). In a similar vein, previous research has shown that disbelief can evoke curiosity towards the advertisement and in turn increase purchase intention (Maloney, 2000). The goal of this paper is to examine if unpleasant advertising can lead to curiosity which in turn leads to approach behavior.

First, we sum up research about curiosity and unpleasant advertising and propose some hypotheses. Next, our methodology and results are presented. Finally, we discuss our research and put forward limitations and suggestions for further research.

Pleasure refers to a positive affective state that is distinguishable from preference, liking, positive reinforcement and approach avoidance (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Positive feelings such as pleasure have proven to be effective in winning over a consumer's heart (Hirschman & Stern, 1999; Geuens & Fasseur, 2006). Nevertheless, other research suggests unpleasant advertising can be effective as well. Aaker & Bruzzone (1985) found that irritating commercials, causing displeasure, were better remembered. An example is found in an advertisement of Commonwealth which one out of three people found unpleasant, yet the brand awareness grew from 70% to 95% (the financial brand, 2008). Creative personnel indicate that they use appeals that trigger unpleasant feelings to overcome a consumer's indifference (Cotte & Ritchie, 2005). The advertising research center discovered that negative emotions result in more acute processing and higher engagement (Young, 2006).

Advertisements that evoked negative emotions were perceived as more interesting, involving and unique (Young, 2006). For example, IBM created an ad about hackers breaking into a company's accounting system. Although this ad evoked negative emotions, it proved to be very effective (Young, 2006). Moreover, Litt, Kahn and Shiv (2009) found that sometimes, wanting and liking can be driven in opposite directions. This indicates that the elements that made an advertisement unpleasant, could also increase its effectiveness.

Much is written about curiosity and several different theories have been put forward to explain the concept of curiosity (for a review: see Kashdan & Silvia, 2008). The major consensus between these theories is that curiosity is an approach-oriented motivational state associated with exploration. It is seen as a function to learn and explore. In literature, curiosity is mostly defined as “*the desire to seek out and acquire new information*” (Berlyne, 1954). Curiosity can thus be an effective tool because it leads to interest (Litman & Silva, 2006) which triggers behavioral intention. Marketers often spark consumers’ curiosity over a product to capture and hold consumers’ attention and to evoke consumers’ interest in a product. Curiosity is a powerful driver for behavior that when curiosity is triggered, consumers are even willing to buy packages without knowing the content (Van Dijck & Zeelenberg, 2007). Academic research on the effectiveness of curiosity evoking ads demonstrates their effectiveness. About four decades ago, Hewett (1975) showed that evoking curiosity through a billboard ad encourages people to search for information. Smith and Swinyard (1988) showed that evoking curiosity can change the consumer from a passive information processor to an active seeker of brand information and that evoking curiosity is effective for low-cost/risk products. Gibson and Zillmann (1993) demonstrated that curiosity-evoking radio ads capture attention and improve information acquisition. Menon and Soman (2002) connected curiosity to the development of advertising strategy and showed that curiosity evoking internet advertising enhances time spent and attention devoted to specific information.

Curiosity can have negative as well as positive consequences. In addition to enhancing academic performance, economic growth and scientific progress (Sweeney, 2010), curiosity can lead to impulsive behavior, a loss of self-control or engagement in unhealthy behavior (smoking, consuming unhealthy food etc.) (Sweeney et al., 2010). Moreover, curiosity is a clear deviation from the rational choice theory. People can sometimes be curious over information that does not give them a direct advantage or gives them more information than needed to make decisions. Curiosity might tempt people to opt for uncertain options that they might regret later (Van Dijck & Zeelenberg, 2007; Loewenstein, 1994). This suggests that people can be curious about negative things. Previous research has shown that people are often tempted by the “forbidden fruit”. For example, in younger people, restrictive age labels and violent-content labels increases the attractiveness of video games (Bijvank, Konijn & Bushman, 2008). Other research showed that people who were told to avoid a certain type of food experienced increased desire for the food (Mann & Ward, 2001).

As mentioned before, unpleasant advertising is used to attract attention; negative appeals blend out in the multitude of positive advertising that consumers see every day. The current paper suggests that appeals that trigger unpleasant feelings can evoke curiosity because they are unexpected and tempt people to explore a possible negative path.

Therefore, we hypothesize that:

- H1:** Unpleasant advertising generates more curiosity than pleasant advertising.
- H2:** Advertising that generates curiosity leads to higher behavioral intention compared to advertising that generates less curiosity.

## 2. Methodology

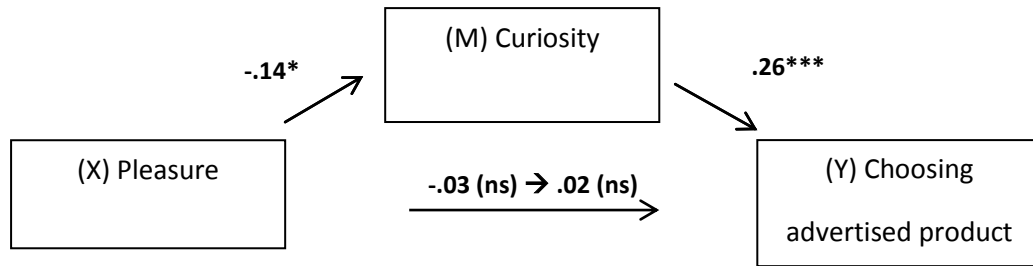
Two hundred and twenty nine respondents (135 women,  $M=27$  years, range 18-65), filled in an online survey in exchange for a chance to win a cinema-ticket. Respondents were randomly exposed to different advertisements that we created for an alcoholic beverage of an inexistent brand (MAVI). The ads were created to evoke different levels of curiosity by using specific slogans (i.e. Do you dare to try?"; "Do you dare to try this new drink?"; "Try MAVI. A new Fruity Cocktail"; no slogan) and were either pleasant (beautiful beach with a sunset) or unpleasant (a dark background with an obscure drawing of a face of a woman). Pretests were performed to make sure that the ads were rated as either low or high in curiosity and low or high in pleasure. All the ads included a website ([www.mavibelgium.com](http://www.mavibelgium.com)) and a little note that the ad was for an alcoholic beverage. ("Drink responsible").

After ad exposure, respondents received some questions about the ad. Curiosity was measured by the "curiosity about the product scale" (Menon & Soman, 2002), a four item, five point scale which measures the consumer's motivation to seek out more information regarding a certain product ( $\alpha=.92$ ). Further, the human emotion pleasure was assessed by a six item, five point scale using the pleasure dimension of PAD (Mehrabian & Russell 1974). It captures pleasure and is specified by feelings such as happiness and joy on the one hand and sadness or despair on the other hand as ( $\alpha=.81$ )

Respondent's intention to attain the products was measured through a single-item variable, "after filling in in this survey, if you had to choose between the advertised product and two similar products, would you choose the product in the ad?". We included additional behavioral intention-measures as a robustness check ("Would you surf to the website mentioned in the advertisement?", "How important is it for you to try out the advertised product?", "After seeing the advertisement, would you recommend this product to your friends?", "If you had the possibility to pick up the product after school or work, but you had to wait a bit, how long would you be willing to wait?", "If you had the possibility to obtain the advertised product in a store, how far can the store be located in order that you would go and get it?", "How many floors would you go up the stairs to taste this product?", "If we would ask you to circle the letter 'e' in a text to obtain the advertised product for free, how much time would you spend on doing that?" and "How long would you wait until a website is uploaded if you, after registering to this website, could obtain the advertised product for free?").

### 3. Analyses and results

Figure 1: Regression analysis and mediation analysis



Note: \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ , ns = not significant

Our results (see figure 1) show a negative relation between pleasure and curiosity ( $t(226) = -2.2$ ,  $\beta = -0.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Respondents who found their advertisement more unpleasant, were more curious about the product offered in the advertisement. This confirms our first hypothesis.

Furthermore, analysis shows a strong positive effect of curiosity on behavioral intention, ( $t(226) = 5.16$ ,  $\beta = 0.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Respondents who were curious about the product would rather choose the advertised product over two similar products. In addition to the purchase intention measure, we tested the effect of curiosity on other behavioral measures as a robustness check. These analyses confirmed the strong effect of curiosity. Respondents would surf more to the website mentioned on the advertisement if they scored high on curiosity ( $t(226) = 8.5$ ,  $\beta = 0.5$ ,  $p < .001$ ), they found it more important to try out the product ( $t(226) = 3.61$ ,  $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and they would rather recommend the advertised product to their friends ( $t(226) = 3.61$ ,  $\beta = 0.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, respondents would make a greater effort to receive the advertised product if they were curious about the product. Respondents would wait longer to receive the advertised product after work or school ( $t(226) = 6.6$ ,  $\beta = 0.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ), they would cover a greater distance to get the advertised product in a store ( $t(226) = 8.1$ ,  $\beta = 0.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and they would go up more stairs to taste the advertised product ( $t(226) = 5.9$ ,  $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, they would spend more time on encircling the letter 'e' in a text in exchange for the advertised product ( $t(226) = 6.6$ ,  $\beta = 0.4$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and they would wait longer until a website was upload ( $t(226) = 6.17$ ,  $\beta = 0.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This confirms our second hypothesis.

A third regression fails to show a relation between unpleasant feelings and choosing the advertised product over two other similar products ( $t(226) = -0.42$ ,  $\beta = -0.029$ , ns).

Moreover, a mediation analyses did not find an indirect effect of pleasure on behavioral intention through curiosity towards the advertised products ( $t(226) = 0.31$ ,  $\beta = 0.024$ , ns).

### 4. Discussion

This paper builds on previous research of curiosity which shows curiosity can be an effective tool in advertising because it leads to interest and behavior (Hewett, 1975; Gibson and Zillman, 1993; Menon & Soman, 2002).

Our research reported in this paper studies the effect of unpleasant advertising on curiosity and the effect of curiosity on behavioral intention. While unpleasant advertising has no effect on behavioral intention with regard to the advertised product, we did find that respondents experienced curiosity after seeing an unpleasant advertisement. Further, a separate regression analysis showed that curiosity has an effect on behavior. Curiosity has a strong positive effect on several measures of behavioral intention with regard to the advertised product. People were more willing to choose for the advertised product if they were curious, they would rather surf to the website mentioned on the advertisement if they scored high on curiosity, they found it more important to try out the product and they would rather recommend it to their friends. Moreover, respondents would make a greater effort to receive the advertised product if they were curious about it. They would cover a greater distance to get the advertised product in a store, wait longer to receive the advertised product, go up more stairs to taste the advertised product and spend more time on cognitive tasks in exchange for the advertised product.

In sum, our results indicate that people get curious when they see an unpleasant advertisement. This may explain why unpleasant advertising can capture people's attention among the overload of advertising they see, hear and consume every day. This curiosity can then evoke interest in the advertised product.

In our study, there is no (in)direct effect between unpleasant advertising and behavioral intention. It is possible that the advertisement may be perceived as novel and surprising, but not very comprehensible. In this way, consumers could not develop enough expectations about the product. This can be a reason why in this research, the unpleasant advertisement did not lead to behavioral intention with regard to the advertised product. Probably, more is needed to convince people to really choose for the product and spend their resources on it. It can be presumed that once people get more and stable information about the product, this could lead to behavior. In that sense, unpleasant advertising could be a first step to make people curious. It can result in the consumer watching for further ads which eventually can persuade him to choose for the product.

There are some limitations with our study that offer interesting possibilities for further research.

First and foremost there is a possibility that curiosity can go together with an intense feeling of "wanting to reduce uncertainty" which can be unpleasant. The relationship between uncertainty and curiosity however remains unclear. Uncertainty can be seen as unpleasant by people in which case they might want to reduce it by buying the product. On the other hand, some people might perceive this same uncertainty as pleasant which can result in inaction, i.e., not buying the product. Secondly, the scale we used to measure unpleasant emotions is a generic scale which didn't enable us to know exactly what it was that the respondent found unpleasant.

Future research can address these limitations and clear out the relation between curiosity, uncertainty feelings and specific emotions.

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