



Do sensory ad appeals influence brand attitude?

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ABSTRACT

This article presents two studies that investigate whether or not sensory appeal preferences in advertisements affect brand attitude. Study 1 seeks to discover empirically whether self-referencing and positive affect mediate sensory appeals to influence consumers' attitudes toward a brand, and whether such mediation effects differ across various ad formats. Study 2, a case approach, attempts to derive core sensory concepts through qualitative techniques as applied to an established specialty coffee brand. The results indicate that self-referencing and positive affect both have significant mediating effects between sensory appeal preferences and attitudes toward a coffee brand. Moreover, the finding that sensory preferences enhance ad effectiveness using particular delivery platforms sheds important insights on creative strategies for sensory ads. As a result of qualitative techniques that elicited metaphoric images regarding the specialty coffee brand, this research found that sight was the most influential sense. In the end, this paper discusses the implications concerning synaesthetic assumptions made and tested in this research as well as the broader applicability of the sensory approach to advertising effectiveness.

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1. Introduction

Human senses are an incredible information collection system. Through them, we create and recreate images of ambient situations and, based on that information, intuitively and instantaneously process sensory information to make imminent decisions. Recently emerging behavioral economists have begun addressing this need for “sensory marketing,” which emphasizes the sensory impressions that usually accompany optimal emotional responses to cause changes in purchasing behavior.

Traditional information processing in consumer behavior theories encompasses a broad range of stages. Consumers review and evaluate each piece of information (i.e. company, product, store, ads, etc.) through the stages of exposure, attention, and comprehension, arriving at a final judgment: purchase intention. A stimulus is detected in sensory registers and transmitted to short-term memory, where it is attended to and comprehended through the process of encoding, storage, and retrieval from long-term memory. In this perspective, it is important not only to understand the role of senses in information processing but also to develop new consumer decision-making models based on the senses by critically reexamining the cognition- or emotion-based models.

In traditional consumer decision-making processes, reasonable decisions and inferences are made based on the process of learn-feel-act. However, a new sensory branding model based on intuitive and unconscious information processing proposes that consumers sense first, then feel or think, and act last. The understanding of how our senses work is especially important in branding. Making a sensory, emotional, and rational connection with consumers can stimulate their senses and appeal to them, thereby rendering marketing plans far more effective (Hill, 2003).

The link between sensory appeals and brand effectiveness has been demonstrated by the studies of Lindstrom (2005), who argued that each brand must incorporate sensory appeals specific to its product features. Lindstrom's pioneering research proposes a multisensory branding strategy that encompasses a consumer sensory experience. According to the results of focus group studies in thirteen countries and research on brand sense in global markets, each brand has a sensory profile related to at least one distinct and positive sensory characteristic. Some brands have several sensory characteristics simultaneously. For instance, Coca-Cola appeals to various senses through sight (its curvy bottle), touch (the feel of its cool package), hearing (the sound created when pouring), and taste (its invigorating flavor). Lindstrom (2005) also suggests that consumer brand loyalty results from sensory perceptions of superior brand experience, leadership, and clarity. In a study of nine different brands, sight had a significant relationship with brand leadership and clarity and played a supplementary role in the other functions. Taste, touch, and smell all enhanced brand loyalty through superior brand experience. In addition, all five senses have different levels of impact on loyalty, with taste exerting the greatest influence, followed by smell,

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sound, touch, and sight. The more sensory stimuli provided by a product, the greater the product's perceived value. Therefore, developing a branding strategy based on sensory experience has important implications in a consumer market characterized by individuals' emotions and experiences.

In light of these findings, the research presented here explores the mechanism in which sensory appeal affects brand attitude by employing both qualitative and quantitative methods to develop a sensory branding model. To date, research suggests that self-referencing influences positive affect, which improves ad attitude (Chang, 2005), or affects mental simulation, which eventually enhances brand attitude (Escalas, 2004). Comparatively little research, however, explores the mediating effects of self-referencing on sensory preferences, viewing self-reference as a collateral construct to positive affect with consequent influences on evaluative judgments and attitudes toward brands. Rather, researchers have investigated positive affect as merely an antecedent or emotional linking pin to brand equity without concomitant consideration of the role of self-referencing (Gurhan-Canlılil and Ahluwalia, 1999; Kamp and Macinnis, 1995). Thus, our understanding of the roles of self-referencing and positive affect as dually conjoint mediators between sensory preference and brand attitude remains somewhat limited.

Another relatively poorly researched area of sensory effects in branding is that concerning the role of multisensory appeals of an ad's creative elements and the impact they may have on attitudes toward the brand. The literature discusses *synaesthetics* as a term to explain the synthetic mechanism of multi-senses (Cooper and Braithwaite, 2002; Lindstrom, 2005), but empirical applications of the concept in advertising studies are difficult to find. Yet another potentially important area warranting further investigation in connection with the sensory effects of ads is "creativity in advertising," which would strengthen both methodological and theoretical aspects of introducing creative approaches to ad effectiveness (O'Quin and Besemer, 1989; Heiser et al., 2008).

The research here consists of two parts. Study 1 proposes that consumers have a predisposed preference toward sensory clues featured in coffee ads that creates self-referencing when the sensory appeals are perceived as congruent with one's image. A consumer emotionally identifying with sensory stimuli elicits a positive affective response. The self-referencing and positive affect boost brand attitude. The study investigates whether self-referencing and positive affect in ads play a role in mediating between sensory preference and brand attitude. Further, it empirically tests for any difference in mediating effects depending on type of ad (copy or visual). Added to this objective is an exploration of the effects of multisensory appeals on brand attitude, with special attention to the presence of *synaesthetic* functionality among those appeals.

Study 2 presents a case approach to sensory perceptions of an established specialty coffee brand (The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf) by qualitatively eliciting the core sensory concepts through image-based techniques such as ZMET (Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique, developed by Zaltman and Coulter, 1995). Specifically, the research aims to elicit metaphysical thoughts and concepts by translating sensory appeals into images and metaphors. Translating sensory images into mental concepts has been attempted in previous studies as an auxiliary means of confirming concepts susceptible to imagery (Creswell, 1998; Weiss, 1992). However, the application of such imagery-based techniques has confined itself mostly to deriving consumers' mental concepts of certain objects or events (Creswell, 1998; Zaltman and Coulter, 1995), with very few studies attempting to derive marketing implications. Study 2 strives to bridge this gap by attempting to extract core sensory concepts associated with a specific coffee brand to find strategic or practical implications for sensory branding. Methodologically, this research examines how coffee-related sensory preferences influence brand attitude through the use of pictures or images associated with the specific brand.

In sum, the results of these two studies may contribute to deepening our understanding of how sensory stimuli bring up resident memory, either experiential or imaginary, through self-referencing and positive affect. Moreover, based on a case approach, it may extract core sensory concepts by means of metaphoric images represented in semantic schema, which has rich implications for a creative strategy applicable to product-specific or brand-specific communications.

2. Study 1: Theoretical background and development of hypotheses

Five senses help us understand the world through recall of the resident information stored in our memories. Therefore, sensory systems play an important role in encoding, retrieving, and reconstructing information. Senses interact with memories differently, depending on individuals' social backgrounds and cultural differences. For example, researchers have investigated the role of scent as an external clue. Pleasant ambient *scent* improves both recall and recognition of unfamiliar brands rather than familiar brands (Morris and Ratneswar, 2000). It carries out the function of memory marker by strengthening the clarity of the recollection. Some scents, such as lemon, make people nervous and improve their information processing capability. Such information is useful for firms to develop marketing plans germane to sensory appeals in brand communications. The past literature on brand effectiveness has investigated, in addition to sensory appeals, national culture (Kim et al., 2008), ad model (Chung and Lee, 2008), in-store music (Ki and Lee, 2006), luxury products (Kim et al., 2010), and product type (Moon et al., 2010) as potential factors affecting brand equity and purchasing behavior.

This research proposes that response to sensory appeals invokes self-referencing and affective reaction, which in turn influence brand attitude. In other words, Study 1 examines the mediating effects of self-referencing and positive affect between sensory preference and brand attitude, while also exploring how multisensory appeals based on *synaesthetic* assumptions influence brand attitude using the five senses.

2.1. The mediating effects of self-referencing

In traditional consumer behavior and psychology research, self-referencing increases elaboration, influences persuasion, and improves recall of words and sentences (Belleza, 1984; Klein and Loftus, 1988; Rogers et al., 1977). Self-referencing is "a process inducing relative significance where a consumer relates message information to his or her self experience or expectation" (Burnkrant and Unnava, 1989, p.632). The desirability of self-improvement motivates consumers to associate themselves with advertising situations in which the ad message evokes an ideal consumer self. Such an association connects consumers to a cognitive activity they can associate with themselves, thereby affecting their ad and brand attitudes. For example, Escalas (2004) reports that a mental simulation of wearing running shoes leads to a favorable attitude that, in turn, increases the likelihood to try and purchase that product. Self-referencing caused by mental simulation typically generates a positive emotion, while non-self-referencing generates skepticism or ignorance (Escalas, 2004). Chang (2005) claims that self-referencing and positive affect act as mediators between self-congruency and ad attitude. In other words, self-congruent ads generate positive affective reaction through self-referencing when consumers imagine that the ad image is congruent with their ideal self schemata.

How, then, does a consumer's preference toward sensory clues influence brand attitude formation through self-referencing? In general, when consumers see ad messages with sensory appeals, they first retrieve information registered in the schema which is built by past sensory experience (e.g., product color or background music). This retrieval helps them evaluate whether or not it is a favorable sense.

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