



Print advertising: Type size effects

Kishore Gopalakrishna Pillai^{b,*}, Constantine S. Katsikeas^a, Caterina Presi^b

^a Arnold Ziff Research Chair, Leeds University Business School, University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom, LS2 9JT

^b Marketing, Leeds University Business School, University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom, LS2 9JT

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ABSTRACT

Previous research identifies two types of advertising comprehension—objective comprehension and subjective comprehension—with the former message-based and the latter receiver-based. This study examines the effects of body-copy type size on readers' subjective and objective comprehension of the message in a typical print ad. The study finds that type size has a significant positive effect on subjective comprehension of the ad, but not on objective comprehension. Subjective comprehension mediates the positive effect of type size on attitude toward the advertised product. The main implication of the study is that advertisers should use as large a type size as possible for the copy in all ads that contain text.

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1. Introduction

Message comprehension is an antecedent of persuasion (Mick, 1992; Ratneshwar and Chaiken, 1991; Stewart, 1986). Greenwald and Leavitt (1984) identify comprehension as the third of four stages of message processing, which they called preattention, focal attention, comprehension, and elaboration. The stages through to comprehension are probably sufficient for low-risk or low involvement persuasion (Rossiter and Percy, 1997) but elaboration, in the form of cognitive responses, may be necessary for high-risk or high involvement persuasion (Greenwald and Leavitt, 1984; Rossiter and Percy, 1997). The present study concerns high-involvement persuasion.

1.1. Objective and subjective comprehension

Mick (1992) identifies two types of message comprehension – objective and subjective. Objective comprehension refers to the “grasping or extracting of prespecifiable meanings from the message” (Mick, 1992, p. 411) and is therefore message-based. Most advertising studies use recognition of “facts” from the message to measure objective comprehension (Leigh et al., 2006).

Subjective comprehension, on the other hand, is receiver-based. Subjective comprehension is most often measured by a global self-report rating of how well the recipient *claims* to have understood the message. Both types of comprehension should increase persuasion. Objective comprehension should increase persuasion for low-risk

products, at least, because it signifies successful low-involvement message processing (Rossiter and Percy, 1997) but, without favorable elaboration, objective comprehension should not be sufficient for high-involvement persuasion. Subjective comprehension, on the other hand, may increase high-involvement persuasion but *not* low-involvement persuasion. Subjective comprehension may not increase low-involvement persuasion because it doesn't guarantee objective comprehension. However, self-reported subjective comprehension can signify favorable elaboration and therefore increase persuasion for high-risk product choices.

1.2. Type size

The type size of text affects legibility (Poulton, 1967), with legibility measured as the rate of reading of text of a given length. Whereas one researcher argues the case for an inverted U-shaped relationship between type size and legibility (Wheildon, 1995) such that 10, 11, and 12 point types should be easier to read than smaller or larger sizes, the empirical results suggest a monotonic positive relationship (Poulton, 1967). For magazine advertisements specifically, larger type size also correlates with increased readership of the copy (Holbrook and Lehmann, 1980), although this might be due to the likelihood that larger font tends to be used in shorter ads.

Although Chebat et al. (2003) hypothesize that rate and amount of reading should result in greater objective and subjective comprehension, it seems unlikely that objective comprehension would be affected within a normal range of type size. Subjective comprehension of the ad, on the other hand, may increase with type size because larger type size may give the impression of easier text, as in children's books, for instance. A positive linear relationship may therefore be hypothesized between type size and subjective comprehension.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: kgp@lubs.leeds.ac.uk (K.G. Pillai).

1.3. Gender

Men and women process advertisements differently (Putrevu, 2001; Wolin, 2003). Females are thought to be “comprehensive” information processors who assimilate all available cues while males are thought to be “selective” information processors who assimilate only salient cues (Wolin, 2003), tendencies supported by a number of studies (Meyers-Levy, 1988; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1991). Accordingly, female readers may show greater objective comprehension of the message in an ad than male readers.

Subjective, self-reported comprehension, on the other hand, may reveal an opposite gender difference. This is because males tend to be more confident in their judgments about their knowledge. Higher confidence among men has been found for reported knowledge of the Worldwide Web (Pillai and Hofacker, 2007), for knowledge of science (Fox and Firebaugh, 1992), and for investment decisions in the stock market (Estes and Hosseini, 1988). Generalizing from this finding to print advertising, men may report greater subjective comprehension of the ad than women report.

1.4. Hypotheses

H_{1a}: Type size has no effect on objective comprehension of the ad. H_{1b}: Type size has a positive linear effect on subjective comprehension of the ad. H_{2a}: Women have greater objective comprehension of the ad than men. H_{2b}: Men report greater subjective comprehension of the ad than women. H_{3a}: Objective comprehension has no effect on attitude toward the advertised product. H_{3b}: Subjective comprehension has a positive effect on attitude toward the advertised product. H_{4a}: Objective comprehension does not mediate the positive effect of type size on attitude toward the advertised product. H_{4b}: Subjective comprehension mediates the positive effect of type size on attitude toward the advertised product.

2. Method

2.1. Experimental design

The design was a post-only, quasi-experiment in which participants were randomly assigned to receive one of three versions of the test ad that differed only in the type size of the copy (see 2.2). The experimental groups consisted of men and women in approximately equal numbers. The measures were taken following a single exposure to the test ad.

2.2. Test ads

A rough ad was designed for the purpose of this experiment. The product category in the ad was carbon (CO₂) labeling for companies involved in the energy industry and the labeling brand was Carbon Trust (a fictitious brand). According to Rossiter and Percy (1997), support for or opposition to carbon labeling would be a high-involvement (high purchase risk) decision. The content of the ad incorporated the usual structural factors of a print advertisement:

picture, headline, body copy, and the brand name and logo (Rossiter and Percy, 1997). Pretests were conducted with four faculty members and doctoral students to assess whether the ad conforms to the format of similar ads found in newspapers and magazines and appropriate modifications were made based on feedback. Three versions of the ad were prepared, each in Arial font, one with type size 9 for the body-copy text, the second with type size 12, and the third with type size 15. The type size of the headline in each ad was 2 points above that of the text. The type size 12 ad is shown in the Appendix.

2.3. Participants

The sample comprised 195 students attending a British university: 104 females and 91 males. Randomly, 66 subjects were assigned to version 1 (type size 9), 67 to version 2 (type size 12) and 62 to version 3 (type size 15).

2.4. Procedure

The participants were asked to read the ad as they would in the case of a magazine ad that catches their attention. The test ad was presented on the second page of the questionnaire. The questions on objective comprehension, subjective comprehension, and attitude toward the advertised product followed. The participants were instructed not to turn back to the ad.

2.5. Measures

Objective comprehension was measured by (initially) 10 true/false questions. The questions were pretested among five participants, who did not participate in the experiment, for relevance and ambiguity and one question found to be ambiguous was omitted. Objective comprehension was scored as the individual's percentage of correct answers from the remaining nine true/false questions and thus possible scores ranged from 0 to 9.

Subjective comprehension was measured after objective comprehension. The participants were asked to rate how much they *believed they understood* the ad, where 0% was “I did not understand the ad at all” and 100% was “I fully understood the ad.”

Attitude toward the advertised product, Carbon Trust labeling, was measured using a 4-point scale of perceived effectiveness of the product (1 = not at all effective, 2 = somewhat effective, 3 = very effective, and 4 = outstandingly effective), which served as an appropriate measure of high-involvement persuasion for this type of product.

3. Results

Objective comprehension of the ad across all participants ranges between 11% and 100% with a mean of 68.2% and standard deviation of 16.7%. Subjective comprehension ranges between 10% and 100% with a mean of 65.4% and standard deviation of 21.1%. Attitude toward the advertised product ranges from 1 to 4 with a mean of 2.12,

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for the experimental groups and overall.

Type size group	Objective comprehension		Subjective comprehension		Attitude toward the advertised product (1–4)	
	Mean (%)	SD (%)	Mean (%)	SD (%)	Mean	SD
Type size 15 (n = 62)	69.6	.15	69.2	.17	2.21	.55
Type size 12 (n = 67)	67.7	.15	65.8	.19	2.13	.52
Type size 9 (n = 66)	67.4	.17	61.4	.22	2.03	.53
Overall (n = 195)	68.2	.15	65.4	.19	2.12	.53

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