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Neural responses to functional and experiential ad appeals: Explaining ad effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

Despite the large body of research that has investigated the effect of ad appeals of television advertisements on consumers' internal responses and behavior, our understanding of how different ad appeals are processed remains limited. Complementing existing literature with novel insights from neuroimaging techniques can be valuable, providing more immediate insights into implicit mental processes. The present study explores the neural responses to functional and experiential executional elements in television advertisements by using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). Comparing a unique set of different commercials for the same brand enabled examination of the influence of differences in ad appeal on brain responses and subsequent advertisement effectiveness. Findings show that functional and experiential executional elements engage different brain areas, associated with lower- and higher-level cognitive processes, and that the extent to which these particular brain areas are activated is associated with higher ad effectiveness.

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1. Introduction

More than sixty years after the emergence of television advertising, the debate of what constitutes a successful commercial is still ongoing (Heath & Stipp, 2011). A large body of prior research has enriched our understanding of the effect of different ad appeals in television advertisements on cognitions, emotions, and behavior. The literature indicates that internal processes in response to ad appeals are important indicators of ad effectiveness. For instance, consumers' feelings in response to ads have been shown to have a positive influence on brand attitudes (e.g., Edell & Burke, 1987). Research on internal responses to ads has been conducted primarily using self-report metrics, which have provided useful insights, but do have several limitations. For instance, research has shown that people are limited in reflecting on their internal states (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Hence, the more complex cognitive or emotional responses to dynamic marketing stimuli might be difficult to capture with self-report alone, and could thus have been overlooked. Given the significant role of internal processes in driving ad efficacy (e.g., Pham, Geuens, & De Pelsmacker, 2013) a more accurate measurement of these processes is imperative, providing a richer

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understanding of consumers' responses to different advertisement executions. Through this increased understanding, the creative development of ads can be further optimized.

More implicit and innovative methods to measure internal responses, such as neuroimaging (i.e., functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI)), can be of value here, providing online insight into ongoing mental processes unbiased by self-report (Yoon et al., 2012). In the current study, we explore how novel insights from neuroimaging techniques can advance our understanding of how different ad appeals of a set of television commercials for the same brand are processed by consumers and how these processes are, in turn, related to advertisement effectiveness in an independent sample of consumers.

2. Conceptual framework and study rationale

2.1. Functional and experiential approaches in advertising

Broadly speaking, an advertising appeal—the central idea of a message that highlights specific attributes of the product—can be described in terms of its functional and experiential elements (e.g., Zarantonello, Jedidi, & Schmitt, 2013). In the literature, related distinctions have been defined and referred to using varying terminology, such as informational and transformational (Rossiter & Percy, 1987), utilitarian and value-expressive (Johar & Sirgy, 1991) and somewhat broader concepts as hard-sell and soft-sell (Okazaki, Mueller, & Taylor, 2010). Although many of these distinctions relate to a more general rational/emotional framework of advertising message strategy (Albers-Miller & Stafford, 1999), in the current study we will specifically focus on the distinction between functional and experiential ad appeals. Ads with a predominant functional appeal typically convey a message that focuses on factual information to explain why the consumer should like and buy a product. That is, the functional elements of an advertising message relate to a rational or utilitarian focus on product features, by including references to the product attributes, its use and performance, as well as the benefits and value that come with these features (Abernethy & Franke, 1996). In contrast, one of the key ideas of an experiential advertising appeal is that value does not only reside in the advertised good and its utilitarian and functional benefits, but that value also lies in the emotional and experiential elements associated with the good, and in the (indirect) experience of it (e.g., through advertisements; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013). Accordingly, a typical experiential appeal associates the product with desirable images or symbols and depicts what kind of experience results from using the brand. The experiential elements of an ad particularly evoke sensations, feelings, emotions, imaginations and behavioral responses (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009).

The issue of when a particular type of appeal should be employed has been extensively studied in the marketing and advertising literature. Researchers have posited that the effectiveness of the appeal largely depends on the advertised good itself. That is, several studies suggest that the appeal should match the product type, as, for instance, ads with a utilitarian focus are found to be more effective for utilitarian products (e.g., Johar & Sirgy, 1991). In some cases, however, advertisers may adopt an appeal that is rather incongruent with the product type. It has been shown that employing a more creative appeal with metaphorical instead of literal information for utilitarian products enhanced perceptions of sophistication and excitement, although at the cost of reduced perceptions of sincerity (Ang & Lim, 2006). Furthermore, advertisers may use incongruent (e.g., irrelevant or unexpected) messages to grab consumers' attention. Research on print ads shows that consumers' memory for information in the ad appeared to benefit most from incongruence created with unexpected but relevant information (Heckler & Childers, 1992).

Many ad appeals—also the ones of interest in the current study—contain, to some extent, both functional and experiential elements. Some research suggests that mixing emotional elements with rational information is rather ineffective. For instance, research on donation behavior shows that a narrative description of an identifiable victim led to higher donations than when the description was combined with statistical information about the cause (Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007). Moreover, eye-tracking studies of individuals viewing television commercials found that people were more likely to discontinue viewing when ads were both entertaining (i.e., warm, amusing, and playful) and informative (Woltman Elpers, Wedel, & Pieters, 2003). However, other studies have suggested that emotional content would be beneficial to any ad, independent of product category or level of involvement (e.g., Pham et al., 2013).

2.2. Processing functional and experiential ad appeals

As research on the persuasiveness of ad appeals has yielded inconclusive insights, it is crucial to understand how functional and experiential ad appeals are processed by consumers. Traditionally, the two approaches are believed to be effective through different routes to persuasion: targeting affect with experiential executional elements, and targeting cognitions with functional executional elements. Research suggests that positive brand attitude formation for information-based ads is predominantly driven by deliberate evaluations and beliefs (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). Functional information may reduce uncertainty about the advertised product or brand (Abernethy & Franke, 1996). In contrast, positive brand attitudes for emotion-evoking ads may be predominantly driven by feelings (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). Research has revealed that ad-evoked feelings of warmth exert a positive influence on ad liking and purchase intent (Aaker, Stayman, & Hagerty, 1986). How ad-evoked feelings affect positive brand attitudes has been widely studied in the literature, resulting in a range of different possible explanations. For instance, ad-evoked feelings may be associatively incorporated in brand evaluations through evaluative conditioning (e.g., De Houwer, Thomas, & Baeyens, 2001; Jones, Olson, & Fazio, 2010), or may affect brand evaluations indirectly through a more inferential process of affect-as-information (e.g., Schwarz & Clore, 1983).

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