



Emotional advertising: Revisiting the role of product category

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to the Affect Infusion Model, popular advertising planning grids suggest that emotional advertising is effective for low involvement and hedonic products, but not for high involvement or utilitarian products. In two experiments, 400 and 392 consumers respectively evaluate a non-emotional and a product-congruent or product-incongruent emotional appeal promoting four different product types. In a third study, 909 respondents evaluate 323 existing TV commercials. The findings confirm expectations based on the Affect Infusion Model and indicate that for none of the product types negative effects of emotional advertisements appear. However, emotional ads do work better for some than other product types. In addition to clearing out the moderating role of product type, this paper contributes to the literature by showing that previous poorer results of emotional ads for some products may be partly due to less positive attitudes towards the products themselves instead of to the inappropriateness of the appeal.

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1. Introduction

Since the eighties, the use of emotional advertising has substantially increased, accompanied by an increased research interest in the role emotions play in attitude formation (e.g., Allen et al., 2005; Grimm, 2005; Laros and Steenkamp, 2005; Malhotra, 2005; Poncin et al., 2006; Yoo and MacInnis, 2005). In contrast to current theories on ad processing, academics and advertising practitioners often assume that the effectiveness of emotional advertising appeals depends on the product category they promote. Several researchers believe, for example, that emotional ads evoke more positive responses for hedonic versus utilitarian products and for low versus high involvement products (e.g., Adaval, 2001; Batra and Stephens, 1994; Johar and Sirgy, 1991; Rossiter et al., 1991).

Despite the fact that both academics and advertising professionals acknowledge that product category is an important variable for the choice of advertising strategy, most prior research largely ignores the moderating influence of product type or takes this influence into account only partially. The objective of this study is to contribute to the literature by examining (1) whether and (2) how product category moderates the processing of emotional and non-emotional advertising. To this end, three studies investigate the moderating effect of high and low involvement products on the one hand, and

utilitarian and hedonic products on the other, on the responses to emotional and non-emotional advertising appeals.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The role of emotions in ad processing

In contrast with traditional cognitive theories which consider affect as either irrelevant or as a source of disruption of normal thinking, current models increasingly recognize that cold thinking is the exception rather than the rule and, consequently, devote an important role to the interplay between affect and cognition (Forgas, 2008). An important integrative model in this respect is the Affect Infusion Model (Forgas, 1995). The Affect Infusion Model distinguishes two judgmental strategies in which affect can play an important role: (1) heuristic processing, and (2) substantive processing. Heuristic processing is most likely to occur when consumers are low involved and when little time or information is available. During heuristic processing affect can directly influence judgments as consumers use their feelings as information and as a shortcut to infer their evaluations to the target. Substantive processing in general takes place when consumers are highly involved and exert high effort to process the message. Also during substantive processing affect can exert an important influence, but here affect influences judgment indirectly by means of affect priming. The affect priming principle predicts that affect will influence judgments in an indirect way by selectively influencing attention, encoding, retrieval and interpretation processes (Forgas, 1995). By now, many researchers have

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found support for the assumption that emotions can play different roles (for a review, see [Forgas, 2008](#)).

2.2. Product type: moderator of emotional ad effectiveness?

Academics and advertising professionals can classify products on the basis of many characteristics. Several researchers distinguish between utilitarian and hedonic products/motivations (e.g., [Bridges and Florsheim, 2008](#); [Hirshman and Holbrook, 1982](#); [Jones et al., 2006](#); [Overby and Lee, 2006](#)). In combination with this dimension, also an involvement dimension is often used (cfr. the Rossiter–Percy Grid ([Rossiter et al., 1991](#)), the FCB-grid ([Vaughn, 1986](#)), and the Affect–Reason–Involvement model ([Buck et al., 2005](#))). In view of the popularity of the latter grids, the discussion and studies in this paper focus on low versus high involvement products, and hedonic versus utilitarian products.

In contrast to the Affect Infusion Model, several academics and practitioners assume a moderating impact of product type on the responses to emotional and informational advertising appeals. [Malhotra \(2005\)](#), for example, believes that the relative effect of cognition versus affect varies across objects (e.g., perfumes versus mutual funds). [Rossiter et al. \(1991\)](#) suggest that emotional advertising is important only for low involvement and/or transformational (hedonic) products. Regarding the utilitarian–hedonic product dimension, several researchers tend to agree. [Johar and Sirgy \(1991\)](#), for example, find that value-expressive appeals are most effective for value-expressive products and vice versa for utilitarian appeals. [Spotts et al. \(1997\)](#) show that advertisers use a humorous appeal least frequently for functional products and most often for low risk, expressive products. [Youn \(1998\)](#) observes that advertisers usually promote approach products in an emotional, image-oriented way, whereas for utilitarian products they more often use a rational, message-oriented appeal. [Youn et al. \(2001\)](#) find a positive and significant relationship between ad liking and ad recall for approach products only, and not for avoidance or utilitarian products. Also regarding the impact of involvement on the role of feelings in attitude formation some authors agree ([Lautman and Percy, 1984](#); [Batra and Stephens, 1994](#); [Shiv and Fedorikhin, 1999](#)), or partially agree ([Miniard et al., 1990](#)) with [Rossiter et al. \(1991\)](#).

3. Hypotheses

On the basis of the Affect Infusion Model, the results and claims concerning involvement as a moderator of the effectiveness of emotional ads are hard to explain. Indeed, under low involvement (heuristic processing), the Affect Infusion Model expects that emotional advertising can exert a positive impact on the basis of the mood-as-information principle, whereas under high involvement (substantive processing) the positive feelings evoked by the ad can influence ad processing positively by means of priming.

The Affect Infusion Model does not account for differences in emotional ad effectiveness for hedonic versus utilitarian products either. However, the findings of [Pham \(1998\)](#) can explain the belief that emotional ads work better for hedonic products. [Pham \(1998\)](#) states that feelings in ad appeals are effective only if these feelings are representative and relevant for the evaluation of the product. Assuming that consumers are more likely to perceive their feelings as relevant when they have hedonic versus utilitarian motives to buy the product, one can expect that emotional appeals are more effective to promote hedonic than utilitarian products. However, both hedonic and utilitarian products may possess benefits that are hedonic/emotional or utilitarian in nature ([Lim and Ang, 2008](#)). Even more, [Lim and Ang \(2008\)](#) find that consumers like utilitarian products more when the ad features hedonic rather than utilitarian benefit claims. Therefore, on the condition that a product-congruent emotion is used (i.e., an emotion that is both representative and relevant for

the product), emotional advertising may be effective irrespective of the product. The foregoing leads to the following hypothesis:

H1. Emotional ads using product-congruent emotions lead to more positive ad and brand attitudes than non-emotional ads, irrespective of whether the product is utilitarian or hedonic, or a low or a high involvement product.

The story may be different for product-incongruent emotions though. Consumers are not likely to perceive feelings that are incongruent with a product as representative for this product. According to [Meyers-Levy and Tybout \(1997\)](#) and [Meyers-Levy and Malaviya \(1999\)](#), inappropriate contextual information only leads to a negative effect when the individual is sufficiently motivated to thoroughly process the message. Only in this case, consumers may realize that the information has influenced their views about the persuasive message inappropriately, and only then they partial out or overcorrect for the inappropriate information. The foregoing reasoning leads to the following hypotheses:

H2a. Emotional ads using incongruent emotions for low involvement products lead to more positive ad and brand attitudes than non-emotional ads, irrespective of whether the product is utilitarian or hedonic.

H2b. Emotional ads using incongruent emotions for high involvement products lead to less positive ad and brand attitudes than non-emotional ads, irrespective of whether the product is utilitarian or hedonic.

3.1. The importance of product associations

Notwithstanding the foregoing hypotheses, the literature on product category effects shows that product category may indeed matter. The high correlation between ad likeability and brand attitude in case of low involvement and hedonic products suggests the usefulness of emotional approaches for those products. For high involvement and utilitarian products, on the other hand, researchers typically discourage the use of emotional appeals ([Brown and Stayman, 1992](#); [Rossiter et al., 1991](#); [Shiv and Fedorikhin, 1999](#); [Youn et al., 2001](#)). An explanation for these controversial results may reside in the fact that none of the previous studies compares an emotional and a non-emotional ad promoting the same brand, but instead only compares emotional appeals promoting different products. Therefore, the question is: do certain ads for certain products have less impact, not because of the advertising appeal, but because of the product itself? Several research results point in this direction. [Biel and Bridgwater \(1990\)](#), for example, report that consumers like food and beverage commercials more than ads for other products. [Aaker and Bruzzone \(1985\)](#) and [De Pelsmacker and Van den Bergh \(1998\)](#) find that consumers perceive some product categories as much more irritating than others, and [Raghunathan and Irwin \(2001\)](#) report that the pleasantness of the product category significantly influences consumers' evaluations. Also, [Lim and Ang \(2008\)](#) show that (Singaporean) consumers prefer hedonic to utilitarian products. These findings are in line with [Keller \(2008\)](#) who argues that consumers automatically transfer their product category associations to a new brand in this category. Therefore, the previously reported higher impact of emotional appeals for low involvement, hedonic products than for high involvement, utilitarian products can perhaps be explained by existing product category associations. Also, if product associations cause the differences in ad impact, the same differences should emerge for both emotional and non-emotional appeals. The foregoing findings lead to the following hypothesis:

H3. Irrespective of the advertising appeal (emotional versus non-emotional), ads for hedonic as compared to utilitarian products, and for low as compared to high involvement products lead to more positive attitudes.

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