

Advertising Assertiveness and Effectiveness: The Role of Product Involvement

This paper examined the influence of assertive and non-assertive claims on advertising effectiveness, moderated by product involvement within an environmental context.

Assertiveness in Advertising

Assertiveness is when “bold or confident statements” are used (Merriam Webster, 2003) or when statements have appeared “confident and forceful” (Oxford Dictionary, 2012), for example the NSPCC (the UK charity campaigning to stop cruelty to children) has used “don't lose control!”, which intentionally uses grammatical and spelling errors so it is perceived to be written by children. Research into how assertive language is used in advertising has conflicting results depending on whether it is in a commercial or environmental context. Kronrod et al. (2012) found that the negative effect of message assertiveness on consumer compliance (e.g. Lord 1994; Shrum, Lowrey, and McCarty 1994) is reversed when the issue is perceived as being important. Therefore within green advertising, assertive language typically increases compliance when the recipients perceive the issue as important. This is because the recipients have already been persuaded by the cause, so they perceive assertive messages as encouragement (Kronrod et al., 2012). However non-assertive messages are not consistent with the recipient's level of importance, so they would lower compliance (Kronrod et al., 2012) due to being perceived as irritating or “too polite” (Lakoff and Sachiko 2005; Tsuzuki, Miamoto, and Zhang 1999).

The reverse is true for recipients perceiving environmental issues as less important, as they are more affected by less assertive messages. As these messages are more polite, they may be more persuasive by representing the recipient's attitudinal resistance. Compliance tends to be higher here, in comparison to assertive messages which are perceived as being forceful and therefore off-putting (Kronrod et al., 2012). Consequently, Kronrod, Grinstein & Wathieu (2012) advise environmental messages in the media to use less assertive language so to target general audiences of possibly less concerned consumers. Within a commercial advertising context, some brands have also started to use less assertive language to communicate their environmental credentials (Baker, 2012).

Product Involvement

Zaichkowsky's research (1985) on Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) shows that products such as instant coffee, bubble bath and breakfast cereals are perceived as low involvement products by most individuals. Other products such as wine, tissues and pain relief are perceived as average involvement products whilst products such as cars are perceived as high involvement products by most individuals. In addition to using this tool to measure and compare involvement levels for different classes of products, our study differentiated the products based on their different amount of processing and decision making involved (Rothschild, 1984). Therefore a high involvement product was understood to use more extensive processing and consist of a lengthier and more comprehensive decision making process versus a low involvement product using less extensive processing and consisting of a shorter and less comprehensive decision making process.

In the context of advertising, the works of Rothschild (1979), Vaughn (1980), and Richins and Bloch (1986) have shown that consumers respond differently to advertising messages depending upon their level of involvement with the type of product. High involvement

products tend to score higher than low involvement products in terms of advertising effectiveness such as attitudes, recall, attitude towards purchasing and purchase intention etc (Gardner et al.1985; Thorson and Page 1988; Hitchon and Thorson 1995). This is because when individuals are more highly involved with a product, they are more likely to pay attention to the stimulus (Celsi & Olsen, 1988) so they tend to have a higher ability to cognitively differentiate between the product's features, which results in a better recall of the contents and messages of the product's ad (Zinkhan & Muderrisoglu, 1985).

According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) there are two routes to persuasion: the central route and the peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a). Persuasion will occur via the central route when a person is motivated, able and has the opportunity to process a communication (high elaboration likelihood) due to all of the cognitive processing that is involved. On the contrary, persuasion will occur via the peripheral route when a person has less motivation, ability and/ opportunity to process a communication (low elaboration likelihood) (Torres & Briggs, 2007). The type of product also influences a person's elaboration likelihood. A high involved product would increase a person's motivation for issue-relevant thinking, thereby increasing their "elaboration likelihood," so the central route to persuasion would probably be induced. Conversely, low involved products would probably reduce a person's motivation to process information, therefore being more likely to lead to the peripheral route to persuasion (Torres & Briggs, 2007).

When applying the ELM to assertive messages in green advertising, we expect that assertive messages will induce recipient's central route to persuasion for high involvement products when the recipients perceive the environmental issue as important. That is the high involvement product and the strength of the environmental message would act as central cues with consumers being more motivated to process information. On the contrary, when non-assertive messages are used, this would induce recipients' peripheral route for low involvement products when the environmental issue is not considered important. That is consumers are less motivated to process information because the product has low involvement and because they do not consider the environmental message as important.

Thus:

H1: Levels of product involvement will moderate the effects of assertive/non assertive messages within environmental advertising

PRE-TEST

In order to select a suitable low involvement and high involvement product, we asked 27 students to evaluate biscuits, cereal, jeans and mobile phones using the PII instrument (Zaichkowsky, 1985). We then chose the product with the lowest and the product with the highest mean score for further analysis. This resulted in breakfast cereal (M: 74.56 SD=19.98) and jeans (M: 101.63 SD=17.25) being eliminated. Biscuits (M: 72.4 SD=18.18) and mobiles (M: 117.1 SD=13.39) were used as products for the main study. One-sample t-test indicated that product involvement for mobiles was significantly higher $t(26)=10.52$, $p < .005$, $d=3.98$, than for biscuits $t(26)=-5.03$, $p < .005$, $d=1.9$.

There are no universally acknowledged tools available for testing assertiveness of language. Therefore we asked the same students to rank four slogans (with no relation to any product) on their perceived assertiveness. The slogans we used were “The product reduces environmental damage” “The product may reduce environmental damage” “The product will help to save the environment” and “The product helps to save the environment”. The results of the Friedman Test indicated that there was a statistical significance between the four ranked items ($\chi^2(3, N=27) = 57.513, p < 0.005$). The mean showed that perceived assertiveness was highest for “reduces environmental damage” ($M=1.06$) and lowest for “helps to save the environment” ($M=3.56$), with “may reduce environmental damage” ($M=2.33$) “will help to save the environment” ($M=3.06$) scoring in the middle.

METHODOLOGY

We then designed a 2 (high/low involvement) x 2 (assertive/non-assertive message) between subjects experiment. Each participant was randomly assigned to be shown both an assertive or non-assertive framed biscuit advertisement and an assertive or non-assertive mobile phone advertisement. The first product shown was randomised to control for wear-out effect. Following each advertisement participants completed a one-item measure for ad liking (A_{Like}) (Haley and Baldinger 1991; Walker and Dubitsky 1994), a three item measure for Attitude towards the Ad (A_{AD}) (MacKenzie and Lutz 1989) and a one-item measure for purchase intention (PI) (Mohr et al. 2005). We did not include a measure for Attitude towards the Brand because we used fictional brands for the study in order to avoid respondents being influenced by prior brand perceptions.

Sample

The participants completed on-line surveys from various social networking sites in the UK. This type of snowball sampling was used to create an increasing chain of referrals (Browne 2005; Heckathorn 2002). Although snowball sampling has commonly accepted limitations, as selection of individuals was on the basis of social networks, we compensated for this to some extent by including advertising measures in the survey.

We collected 112 completed responses in total. In total, 71% were female ($n=76$) and 29% male ($n=36$) respondents. The age range ranged from 22 to 67, with a mean age of 34.15 years.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the mean scores for the assertive or non-assertive A_{Like} , A_{AD} or PI for both adverts and both assertive and non-assertive framing. As can be seen from the table, the difference in mean scores reached significance for A_{Like} and PI for the low involvement advert (biscuit) only. No measure reached significance for the high involvement item.

**TABLE 1:
MEAN SCORES**

Var	Biscuit Advertisement						Mobile Phone Advertisement					
	Non-Assert.		Assertive		Sig		Non-Assert.		Assertive		Sig	
	M	SD	M	SD	T	P	M	SD	M	SD	T	P
A _{Like}	2.67	.89	3.13	.92	-2.26	.028	2.71	.68	2.69	.79	.08	.94
A _{AD}	4.77	1.27	4.86	1.07	-.31	.76	4.85	1.35	4.49	1.28	1.19	.24
PI	4.15	1.58	4.91	1.44	-2.18	.03	3.34	2.32	3.25	1.57	.20	.84

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As we have set out in the conceptual model of this paper, we tested the assumption that levels of product involvement moderates the effects of assertive/non assertive messages in the context of environmental advertising.

The results indicate that for a low involvement product (biscuits), message assertiveness influenced advertising effectiveness measures, which confirms H1 for a low-involvement context. Conversely, for a high involvement context (mobile phone), no advertising effectiveness measures reached significance, which indicates that message framing may be less important here. This suggests that purchases of high involvement products are using a more complex decision making set, moderating the tone of communication received.

This finding has several implications. From a practical perspective, manufacturers advertising environmentally friendly low-involvement goods should be more assertive in their claims, as more assertive claims lead to higher effectiveness measures and potentially a increase in sales. Our research shows that for high involvement products, both assertive or non-assertive pro-environmental claims are likely to be equally effective, therefore marketers can use either.

The research raises the question about why a framing affect was found for only a low involvement product and not for a high involvement product. Barriers to purchasing environmentally friendly products include a lack of consumer awareness of the products, negative perceptions of the products, distrust of company claims about how green a product is, higher prices, and lower product availability (Young et al. 2010). In terms of the mobile phone ad, the only applicable barrier was a lack of consumer awareness of the product as there was no information about the brand, price or availability. A way to overcome this barrier would have been to provide more information so to raise consumer awareness, understanding and access to the product (Bonini and Oppenheim 2008). Products should be advertised in a way that focuses on all the attributes of the product, not just its green attributes (Rex and Baumann 2007), at least for the mobile phone category. So if the ad contained other information such as features, battery life, network etc, a framing affect may have been found if the environmental credentials of the product was the main distinguishing factor.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this paper should be interpreted with certain limitations in mind, some of which open up avenues for future research. Firstly, we drew a sample from various social network sites in the UK, which was necessarily self-selective and unlikely to be fully representative of a society as a whole. Future research could broaden the sample to be more representative or focus on specific groups within society such as different age groups. Additionally it could compare different cultural backgrounds.

Secondly, the study examined one low involvement and one high involvement product, so further research could introduce an additional product with a medium level of involvement as a control.

Thirdly, the study examined products in two different categories. Further research could see if product type confounded the effects by testing two products from the same category, for example, food or even consumer electronics.

Finally, we did not test the participants' environmental concerns, values and attitudes, which could have affected the results. This could have been achieved by basing some questions on the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) scale for example (Hawcroft & Milfont, 2010).

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