Effects of Brand Incongruent Advertising in Competitive Settings

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ABSTRACT
This study examines if brand-incongruent advertising (ads which are incongruent with established brand associations) can break through the competitive advertising clutter. Challenging the popular belief in maintaining consistency in brand communications, we show that brand-incongruent ads can lead to an increase in attention, more sophisticated processing of brand associations, better ad and brand recall, as well as improved ad attitudes. Due to the competitive context, however, brand attitudes and purchase intentions remained unchanged. The study contributes to research on competitive advertising and information incongruity, in addition to having practical implications for advertising well-established brands.

INTRODUCTION
This study examines if incongruent advertising has the potential of breaking through the competitive advertising clutter, and how consumers respond to it. We examine a specific type of information incongruity, namely that between an advertisement and established associations for the advertised brand, referred to as ad-brand incongruity. Drawing on schema congruity theory, we examine the potential for this somewhat unconventional way of communicating, deviant from advice from brand management practice and textbooks embracing the importance of consistency in brand communications (e.g. Keller 2003). On the other hand, some research caution against exaggerating advertising consistency for well established brands (Alwitt, 2000; Dahlén et al. 2005; Machleit 1993; Sjödin and Törn 2006). Addressing this issue of balancing consistency and change in brand communications is important since the use of brand incongruent advertising should have the potential to combat two increasingly growing problems to established brands.

The first problem is that established brands need to be constantly rejuvenated and spark consumer interest; Research demonstrates that established brands increasingly need to be interesting if they are to be successful (Alwitt 2000; Machleit 1993) also in the future. The second problem is that established brands are located in mature markets and highly mature media. This makes it hard for established brands to break through the advertising clutter (Jewell and Unnava 2003; Pieters, Warlop, and Wedel 2000). Interestingly, these two problems are interlinked: The vast amount of marketing communications puts demands on advertising to be interesting to consumers (Alwitt 2000), and one way to reach through the advertising clutter is to make distinctive, creative, and interesting ad executions (e.g. Till and Baack 2005). Incongruent advertising should be such a way, but it is a more precise tool than the somewhat vaguely defined concepts of originality as proposed by Pieters et al (2002) or creativity as proposed by Till and Baack (2005). Examining the more specific concept of brand-incongruent communications also provides an advantage over “originality” in that we can provide a theoretical background to explain the effects of incongruity based on a solid foundation in cognition literature.

Research has examined opportunities for employing information incongruity in ads (e.g., Houston, Heckler, and Childers 1987; Lee 2000; Lee and Mason 1999) and specifically the employment of advertising which is incongruent with established brand associations (Dahlén and Lange 2004; Dahlén et al. 2005; Lange and Dahlén 2003; Sjödin and Törn 2006). However, previous studies on effects of incongruent advertising (e.g., Dahlén and Lange 2004; Dahlén et al. 2005; Goodstein 1993; Lange and Dahlén 2003) have not discussed opportunities with incongruent communications from a competitive perspective. On the contrary, studies on incongruity have typically examined only one brand, or if there have been more brands, they have not been competing brands (e.g., Goodstein 1993).

This is highly problematic since advertisers typically select thematically congruent media for their advertising (Kent 2002), making competition from other brands difficult to avoid. In the presence of such competitive ads, brand advertising is less effective, one reason being that consumers have difficulties in retrieving brand-related information, a phenomenon known as competitive interference (Burke and Srull 1988; Jewell and Unnava 2003). Examining effects of incongruent advertising in a more realistic, competitive setting should therefore be of theoretical interest as well as practical relevance since the competitive context may hamper the positive effects of incongruity reported in previous studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
There are numerous studies on effects of the use of information incongruity in the marketing literature. Studies have been conducted on incongruities between pictures and words in ads between an ad and a general viewer expectations, between features of a product and product category schemas, between brands and brand extensions as well as in sales-people schemas (for a review see Lee and Schumann 2004). Drawing on this literature and specifically a few studies on the employment of brand-incongruent information in advertising (Dahlén and Lange 2004; Dahlén et al. 2005; Lange and Dahlén 2003; Sjödin and Törn 2006), we examine the potential for brand incongruent advertising to combat effects of the competitive context.

The need for devising interesting communications campaigns becomes especially relevant in a cluttered advertising milieu, which is the case for most well established brands: In terms of media selection, marketers typically select media which are thematically congruent with the brand (Moorman et al. 2002). This makes competition fierce as similar brands select the same media (Kent 2002). Malaviya et al. (1999) found that a typical magazine may comprise close to 70 ads, divided into categories with up to five directly competing brands. Likewise, Law (2002) reported that 41 percent of TV ads in a prime-time hour has at least one direct competitor also advertising. Moreover, advertisers in a thematically congruent medium face competition also from the editorial material, directing consumers’ attention away from the ads, as they are more likely to focus on the editorial material than on ads (Jun et al. 2003).

The effects on attention of brand-incongruent advertising have not been examined previously, but schema theory postulates that information which fits an existing schema—that is, confirms to expectations—will be encoded effortlessly into that schema structure. When information does not fit the schema, however, people will engage in more extensive processing to resolve the incongruity (e.g., Mandler 1982; Srull 1981). Incongruent information will cause people to pay more attention to it, and make them more motivated to think about it, resulting in deeper cognition (Fiske, Kinder, and Larwer 1983). For example, ads are viewed longer if
they are incongruent compared to when they are consistent with previous knowledge (Goodstein 1993) and original ads induce more frequent eye fixations than traditional ads (Pieters et al. 2002). Recent research also suggests that processing ads in a cluttered ad context is a capacity-demanding job which will encourage ad perceivers to rely on salient heuristic cues to formulate judgments (Chang 2005). One such salient cue should be brand associations stored in long-term memory. If an ad execution does not conform to these brand associations, the heuristic cannot be utilized. This should force consumers to study the ad longer to make sense out of it. Consequently, we expect that consumers will pay more attention to brand-incongruent ads than brand-congruent ads (H1).

Previous research has documented that in the presence of competitive advertising, there is a lower recall of target brand information (e.g., Jewell and Unnava 2003). Commonly investigated from the perspective of associative network memory, interference refers to the impaired ability to remember information about a stimulus from long-term memory since other information interferes with the retrieval of the target information. This seems to take place independent of whether competing ads feature brands in the same product category (Burke and Srull 1988) or in different product categories (Kumar 2000).

However, incongruent advertising should be able to combat interference effects: Not only does incongruent information in general have a tendency to attract attention, the mental activity is also likely to be higher and more sustained. Information is held in working memory for a longer time, as people stay “online” rather than direct their attention to other things. Previous research has provided ample evidence that discrepancies increase elaboration (e.g., McQuarrie and Mick 1999). This extensive processing and deeper encoding should affect consumers’ memory: When people try to resolve incongruity, they develop a greater number of associative pathways in memory relative to when processing congruent information (e.g., Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989). Although this may not dramatically alter the foundations of existing knowledge, it should have the opportunity to influence finer elements of brand-related knowledge (cf. Braun 1999). Brand-incongruent ads could slightly reform the brand schema and allow more sophisticated representations as more facets of the brand are considered in the sensemaking efforts. Although effects on memory of brand-incongruent advertising have not been tested before, we believe that since the number of associative pathways increases chances of retrieving a particular item in memory, this will result in improved memory of the incongruent information and related parts of the communication (cf. Lee and Schumann 2004).

Therefore, we expect that brand-incongruent ads lead to a more sophisticated processing of brand associations than do brand-congruent ads (H2), and that consumers will have relatively better memory of the ad and brand from brand-incongruent ads than brand-congruent ads (H3).

Many times, advertising is painfully predictable (cf. Ritzer 1993). For a considerable number of multinational brands, advertising is quite similar to what it looked like even ten or twenty years ago and often very similar to other competing brands in the same product category (for example, motor, perfume, or alcohol ads). Although brand management literature (e.g. Keller 2003) stresses the importance of consistency in effectively building a successful brand, some research points to hazards of embracing consistency too much for an already well established, familiar brand. For instance, Alden et al. (2000) suggest that consumers could come to anticipate what the advertising will entail for a familiar brand, which reduces the curiosity and interest in the brand and its communication. Machleit et al. (1993) argue that the most important goal for advertising of established and familiar brands should be to reduce the boredom consumers experience with a heavily advertised, well-known brand and increase brand interest. For low-risk frequently purchased goods, an enhanced degree of brand interest among consumers should reduce variety-seeking tendencies and for high-risk categories, it should serve as a determinant of which brands are selected in a search process. In addition, Alwitt (2000) argues that advertisers must concentrate on the interestingness of advertising if they want viewers to attend to their messages throughout the course of a commercial. A too narrow focus on consistency may limit opportunities for curiosity and interest in the brand.

Therefore, we believe that incongruent advertising also has the potential to affect evaluations.

An effect on evaluations could also be inferred from schema congruity theory: We can expect that for congruent ads, which are unlikely to lead to cognitive elaboration or arousal, the evaluation of the ad and brand is typically mild (cf. Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989). The incongruent ad on the other hand is likely to be perceived as challenging and interesting (Alwitt 2000). Furthermore, the challenging ad will cause cognitive elaboration, as pointed out previously, and a questioning of how the ad fits with the established brand schema. Mandler (1982) argued that incongruity could be resolved rather easily through assimilation or the use of alternative schemas. When this is the case, positive affect will follow from the success of the resolution (cf. Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989). This should color evaluations (e.g., Lee and Mason 1999) and enhance purchase intentions of the advertised brand. Furthermore, the elaboration of the brand schema increases the salience of the brand in memory (Alba and Chattopadhyay 1986), which in turn leads to enhanced brand attitude (Holden and Vanhuele 1999). We therefore expect that brand-incongruent ads generate higher (H4a) ad attitudes, (H5a) brand attitudes, and (H6a) purchase intentions than brand-congruent ads.

However, processing ads in a competitive, cluttered setting is more demanding of consumers than processing ads in isolation (Burke and Srull 1988; Chang 2005). Furthermore, when several brands advertise in the same medium, consumers tend to engage more in relational, or between-brand, processing rather than individual, within-brand processing, meaning that they focus more on common traits between brands than unique brand features (Malaviya et al. 1996, 1999). This should have consequences for the resolution of the incongruity as consumers may not have the capacity to resolve it. Analogous to findings that external conditions such as limited time may hamper resolution of incongruity (Srull 1981), we believe that the competitive setting may limit resolution ability. If resolution cannot be resolved, negative affect will typically follow which would harm evaluations of the incongruent ad and brand (Mandler 1982; Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989). So although incongruity in advertising offers the potential for cutting through the clutter by raising attention and enhancing brand memory, resolution of incongruity in a competitive setting (i.e. ads in the presence of ads for competing brands) may simply demand too much effort to become successful. Consequently we propose an alternative to hypotheses 4–6 for competitive settings, such that brand-incongruent ads generate lower (H4b) ad attitudes, (H5b) brand attitudes, and (H6b) purchase intentions than brand-congruent ads.

**METHOD**

Ad-brand incongruity (2 levels—brand congruent and brand incongruent ad) was operationalized as a between-subjects variable. Using print advertisements inserted into real magazines, the hypotheses were tested in an experiment in which participants were exposed to advertising for familiar brands and asked to indicate
their reactions to the advertisement and the brand. Participants were thus exposed to one target ad and several competitive filler ads.

A sample of 38 college students (from the same population as in the experiment) were asked to rate a number of brands on familiarity (scale 1-7, ranging from “not at all familiar with” to “very familiar with”) and associations along 14 dimensions of brand personality. The scale for brand personality was adapted from a subset of dimensions presented by Aaker (1997).

Based on the results of the pre-test, we selected two familiar brands that differed significantly from each other in terms of brand associations. The first brand was L’Oréal, which was rated as highly familiar (M=5.87), and whose four most strongly held associations were: successful, charming, cheerful and imaginative (all M>5). The second brand was Gore-Tex, which was also rated as highly familiar (M=5.51), and whose four most strongly held associations were: reliable, down-to-earth, honest and intelligent (all M>5). The associations differed significantly (p<.01) between the brands, so that the four most strongly held associations for each brand rated below 4 (midpoint of the scale) for the other brand.

Magazines were chosen as a medium for two reasons. Print media are reader-paced and are therefore well-suited for research concerning information incongruity (cf. Lee 2000). This is because subjects can process the ads for as long as they want, allowing for differences in attention and elaboration induced by the ad placements. Secondly, they are typically thematic and comprise ads for competing brands (Malaviya et al. 1999), thus creating a possibility for competitive interference effects.

To control for prior exposure to ads, a professional advertising agency developed new ads for each brand employing the associations elicited in the first pretest. For each brand, one brand-congruent ad and one brand-incongruent ad were developed. The congruent ad for L’Oréal featured the face of a model-like young woman while the incongruent ad featured the face of rock artist Iggy Pop. The congruent ad for Gore-Tex portrayed a person alpine skiing while the incongruent ad portrayed a person indoor playing the guitar. In a second pretest 30 participants judged how well the ad fit the advertised brand (1=low perceived fit, 7=high perceived fit). The results showed that the congruent ads fit the brand well – M(L’oréal) = 6.12, M(Gore-Tex) = 5.95 – and that the incongruent ads had low fit with the brand – M(L’oréal) = 1.89, M(Gore-Tex) = 2.33.

To select appropriate magazines in which to place the ads, 30 participants were presented with a list of magazines and asked to indicate how well each magazine fit the two brands (1= low perceived fit to 7= high perceived fit). Two magazines were selected on the basis of the results of the pretest: “Cosmopolitan” for L’Oréal and “Outdoor Sports Magazine” for Gore-Tex. L’Oréal had a high fit (M=6.16) with Cosmopolitan and Gore-Tex had a high fit with Outdoor Sports magazine (M=6.11). Both brands had also been advertising repeatedly in the selected magazines.

A sample of 169 college students participated in the study. Students were randomly assigned to one of four groups (L’Oréal congruent ad/L’oréal incongruent ad/Gore-Tex congruent ad/Gore-Tex incongruent ad). Copies of the magazines were distributed together with a questionnaire. Participants were instructed to look through the magazine in the “same fashion that you normally do for this type of magazine”, thus being exposed to the target ad as well as several filler ads. When participants finished reading, they closed the magazines and answered the questions in the booklet. To clear short time memory, the first part of the questionnaire consisted of filler items (demographics and magazine-related questions). The second part consisted of measures of memory, attention, processing, and evaluations.

Attention (H1) was measured by self-reported study time: “Approximately how long time did you study the ad when you looked through the magazine the first time? About __ seconds”.

Brand associations (H2) were measured with the question “How well do you think the following adjectives describe the brand?” Respondents rated each adjective on a seven-point Likert type scale. The measures of brand associations were adopted from a subset of a scale of brand personality developed by Aaker (1997).

The four brand associations found to be associated most strongly (all M>5) with each brand, respectively, in the pre-tests, were successful, charming, cheerful and imaginative for L’Oréal, and reliable, down-to-earth, honest and intelligent for Gore-Tex. These associations were selected for the testing of H2.

Three different aspects of memory (H3) were examined: ad related brand recall, ad related brand recognition, and ad message memorability. Ad related brand recall was examined by asking participants to “name all brands, for which you have just seen ads”. Answers were coded as 1 (focal brand recalled), or 0 (focal brand not recalled). Ad related brand recognition was examined by asking participants to “Please tick the names for the brands, for which you have just seen ads”. A list with all brands that were advertised in the magazine was presented. To control for false recognition several brands not advertised in the magazine were also included in the list. However, no participant falsely marked an additional brand. Answers were coded as 1 (focal brand recognized), or 0 (focal brand not recognized). Ad message memorability was measured using the questions: “How difficult was it to remember the message of the ad?” The answer was given on a 7-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (very easy) to 7 (very difficult). The measure has been found to be a valid proxy of competitive interference (Dahlén and Nordfält 2004).

Ad attitude was measured on a seven-point semantic differential scale consisting of three items: good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant, favorable/unfavorable. An index was produced by averaging the responses to the items (Cronbach’s α=.89). Brand attitude was measured with the following three items: good/bad, negative/positive, and satisfactory/unsatisfactory. The averaged index had a Cronbach’s α=.93. Purchase intentions were measured with “Imagine you were to buy a winter jacket (beauty product), how likely is it that you would buy one with Gore-Tex (buy L’Oréal)?” on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all likely) to 7 (very likely).

RESULTS

As a manipulation check, ad-brand incongruity was assessed by indexing two measures: “How well does the ad fit/match the brand?” (r=.94). The congruent ad had a significantly, t(167)=9.6, p<.01, higher fit (M=4.50) with the brand than did the incongruent ad (M=2.19).

A MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance) was run on all dependent variables (excluding brand associations, which were tested separately for each brand). Level of congruity had a significant main effect on dependent variables, F(7,159)=11.25, p<.01, Wilks’ λ=.67). Whereas brand had a significant main effect (F(7,159)=4.79, p<.01, Wilks’ λ=.83) on dependent variables (e.g., brand attitude was higher for Gore-Tex than for L’Oréal), there was no significant interaction effect with level of incongruity (F<2).

Thus, for purposes of testing H1 and H3-H4, the two congruent conditions were collapsed, as were the two brand-incongruent conditions. H2 had to be tested separately since the set of brand associations were unique to each brand. Planned comparisons (with significance levels Bonferroni adjusted) were used to test each hypothesis individually.
H1 stated that consumers will pay relatively more attention to brand-incongruent ads than brand-congruent ads. As shown in Table 1, analysis of the self-reported study time of the ad showed a significant difference ($p<.01$) between the congruent and incongruent conditions, such that study time was longer for incongruent ads ($M=6.24$ seconds, $SD=4.69$) than for congruent ads ($M=2.35$ seconds, $SD=1.39$). Therefore, H1 is supported.

In order to investigate H2, we conducted exploratory factor analyses (PCA with Varimax rotation) of brand associations, separately for each brand. Results are shown in Table 2. The procedure was based on Low and Lamb (2000) and Dahlén et al (2005), who used PCA of a fixed number of associations to test differences in sophistication of brand schemata. By examining how, and into how many, components associations fall into, we get an indication of how well consumers can discriminate between items of brand-related information. The more components, the more sophisticated is the representation of brand-related knowledge: In the congruent conditions, the PCAs produced two components, one component for target brand associations and one for non-target brand associations, whereas in the incongruent conditions, the PCAs produced three components with brand associations no longer loading on the same component. This gives support to H2: Brand-incongruent ads seem to lead to a more sophisticated processing of brand associations than brand-congruent ads.

H3 suggested that memory of the ad and brand should be better for brand-incongruent ads than brand-congruent ads. Planned comparisons for ad-related brand recall, ad-related brand recognition, and ad message memorability all showed significant ($all p<.01$) results in accordance with the hypotheses (Table 1). Hence, H3 is supported.
As for H4-H6, we hypothesized that ad-brand incongruity would affect ad attitudes, brand attitudes and purchase intentions. However, analysis of results showed no significant difference in either direction on ad attitude, brand attitude, or purchase intentions between the two conditions ($p > .2$). However, since the effects of incongruity on evaluation may be contingent on resolution of incongruity (Mandler 1982), for exploratory purposes we re-ran the MANOVA using the index for perceived fit between the ad and brand as a covariate. Level of congruity again had a significant main effect on dependent variables, but this time the effect of incongruency was significant also on ad attitude (see Table 1). This suggests that the effect on ad attitude is contingent on consumers‘ ability to resolve the incongruency.

**DISCUSSION**

This study examined effects of brand-incongruent advertising in competitive settings. The results showed that ads, which are incongruent with established brand associations, can lead to an increase in attention, more sophisticated processing of brand associations, better ad and brand recall as well as enhanced ad attitudes. However, brand attitudes and purchase intentions remained unchanged. The results of this study contribute to research on competitive advertising and information incongruity, in addition to having practical implications for advertising of well established brands.

This study contributed to competitive interference literature by providing support for the idea that information which is incongruent with established brand associations may be an effective means of reaching through the advertising clutter: We noticed that the incongruent ad was more attended to and better remembered than the congruent ad. In addition, consumers more strongly elaborated on, and more finely processed, brand associations after having been exposed to an incongruent ad. Such an effect should be desirable for mature brands since advertising for mature brands are seldom thoroughly processed (cf. Alden et al 2000). Also, it could provide opportunities for brand schema change if the advertiser is interested in rearranging brand associations, for instance before launching new, less related products under the same brand (cf. Jewell and Uman 2003).

Contributing to the information incongruity literature, we demonstrated previously untested effects of brand incongruent advertising enhancing ad and brand recall. Our research also showed that there may be boundary conditions to the positive effects of incongruity observed in previous studies. It seems as if the competitive context is such a boundary condition, hampering the ability to resolve incongruent ads. Since advertising for established brands typically is located in a competitive setting, we should not anticipate brand-incongruent ads to indisputably improve brand evaluations: This study shows that employing incongruity may not be the guaranteed success one might interpret the conclusions by Dahlén et al (2005). In a more realistic setting than their study, we did find expected effects of ad-brand incongruity on attention, processing and memory, but these effects did not suffice to improve brand evaluations in the competitive setting. This study also showed that brand-incongruent ads improves ad attitudes, but only if consumers are able to resolve the incongruity inherent in the ads. This calls for close observation of the level of incongruity and the opportunity and ability to resolve the incongruity in the employment of incongruent advertising. As the positive evaluative effects of incongruity only follow if the incongruity is resolvable (Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989), in competitive settings advertisers may need to reduce the level of incongruity even more to make it moderately incongruent and/or enhance resolution opportunities.

One way to do this might be to use informative copy texts that help the viewer resolve the incongruity (cf. Bridges et al. 2000).

From a managerial perspective, the results of this study indicate that the popular tendency of embracing consistency in brand advertising may have to be revisited, at least for well-established brands. Although incongruity did not improve brand evaluations in this study, three other desired advertising effects were observed showing that incongruity can reach through the advertising clutter: It causes consumers to better pay attention, to better remember the ad message and focal brand and improves ad evaluations (when incongruity is resolved). For established brands, the advertising campaign objective must not always necessarily be the improvement of brand attitudes (as long as brand attitudes are not hurt). Instead it could be to enhance brand salience in consumer memory to keep the brand “top-of-mind” (Ehrenberg et al. 2002; Machleit et al. 1993). Consequently, for established brands in a cluttered advertising milieu, the positive effects on attention, memory, and ad attitudes may be enough reason to employ brand-incongruent advertising. Indeed, these objectives could be obtained without risks of jeopardizing brand attitudes or purchase intentions.

Practitioners and academics alike would benefit from future research examining the role of involvement on the effects of brand-incongruent communications as the present study did not consider this important factor. Drawing on previous research, we may expect incongruent communication in high involvement situations to stand a better chance of being resolved than in low-involvement situations, as consumers with high involvement will devote more cognitive effort to a stimulus, facilitating information processing (cf. Mao and Tybout 2002; Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann 1983).

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