The Impact of Nfc and Knowledge on Consumer Response Toward Complex Print Advertisements

Sanjay Putrevu, Byrant College
Joni Tan, University of Western Australia
Kenneth R. Lord, Mercer University

EXTENDED ABSTRACT - In this era of high media clutter, advertisers frequently use a variety of ad-execution strategies to gain the attention of an increasingly fickle audience. One such strategy is to vary the level of complexity inherent in the message. To assess the efficacy of such a strategy, one needs to understand the impact of ad complexity on consumers. Research addressing this issue has generated mixed results; some find that simple ads are superior (Anderson and Jolson 1980; Paivio 1986; Rossiter and Percy 1983) while others find that complex messages are more effective (Chamblee et al. 1993; Lowrey 1998; Morrison and Dainoff 1972; Phillips 1997). This research attempts to reconcile such mixed findings by (a) isolating the various dimensions of message complexity and (b) studying the impact of two potential moderating variables, need for cognition (NFC) and knowledge, on consumer response toward complex messages.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/8836/volumes/v31/NA-31

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
The Impact of NFC and Knowledge on Consumer Response Toward Complex Print Advertisements
Sanjay Putrevu, Bryant College
Joni Tan, University of Western Australia
Kenneth R. Lord, Mercer University

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this era of high media clutter, advertisers frequently use a variety of ad-execution strategies to gain the attention of an increasingly fickle audience. One such strategy is to vary the level of complexity inherent in the message. To assess the efficacy of such a strategy, one needs to understand the impact of ad complexity on consumers. Research addressing this issue has generated mixed results; some find that simple ads are superior (Anderson and Jolson 1980; Paivio 1986; Rossiter and Percy 1983) while others find that complex messages are more effective (Chamblee et al. 1993; Lowrey 1998; Morrison and Dainoff 1972; Phillips 1997). This research attempts to reconcile such mixed findings by (a) isolating the various dimensions of message complexity and (b) studying the impact of two potential moderating variables, need for cognition (NFC) and knowledge, on consumer response toward complex messages.

The literature defines message complexity along four dimensions: visual complexity which refers to the number of distinct visual elements in the stimuli; technical complexity which refers to the amount of technical content and jargon used in the advertisement; lexical complexity which refers to the linguistic structure and semantic content of communications; and informational complexity which refers to the amount of product and/or usage information contained in the message.

Cacioppo and Petty (1982) define NFC as “the tendency for an individual to engage in and enjoy thinking.” NFC could moderate the effectiveness of an advertisement through its influence on the preferred style and amount of processing. Consumers with high NFC derive intrinsic value from collecting information and obtain enjoyment from ads that are mentally stimulating. NFC may also be viewed as one determinant of a consumer’s motivation to process information. i.e., high-NFC consumers are more likely to follow the ELM’s central route to persuasion, forming attitudes on the basis of rational evaluation of message claims. Hence, such high-NFC consumers are likely to respond more favorably to messages that are complex along the dimensions noted above.

A knowledgeable consumer is one who has experience in a given context, possesses the ability to judge and evaluate product information and is more efficient in obtaining a given amount of information with less effort (Putrevu and Ratchford 1997). Research has found that knowledgeable consumers are equipped with the necessary skills or proficiencies to conduct in-depth processing of information (MacInnis et al. 1991). This superior ability might enable and motivate knowledgeable consumers to encode the rich cues embedded in complex messages. On the other hand, novice consumers might find the rich multitude of cues contained in complex messages to be confusing and overwhelming. Hence, knowledgeable consumers are likely to respond more favorably to complex ads containing a multitude of visual, technical, lexical, and informational cues.

The above predictions were tested on data obtained from a sample of 244 undergraduate students (53.7 percent male, 46.3 percent female) from a major Australian university. Subjects responded to fictitious ads for cars that varied along each of the four dimensions of ad complexity. Small (economy) cars were selected as the target product because they were of relevance to the student population and also because of the product category’s potential for variable positioning across the four types of complexity. Test ads were created for fictitious automobile brands to avoid potential confounds with prior preferences. Subjects were randomly assigned to treatment conditions. Each subject was exposed to a ten-page booklet containing a cover page, instruction page, four ads (two target and two filler ads) and four filler editorials. The target messages appeared third and sixth in each of the booklets; the order of the test ads (simple and complex versions of each dimension of ad complexity) and that of the six filler items was rotated to guard against systematic order or context effects.

The results are largely supportive of the hypotheses. High-NFC subjects exhibited higher affect and purchase intent toward visually, lexically, and informationally complex ads. However, there was no difference between high- and low-NFC subjects for technically complex ads. High-knowledge consumers showed a preference for complex messages along the dimensions of visual, technical, and lexical complexity. However, there was no difference between experts and novices for the informationally complex message.

These results suggest that NFC and knowledge (at least partially) moderate the impact of message complexity. However, the results are not consistent across all four dimensions of ad complexity, suggesting that these individual-difference variables have varying levels and directions of influence on each of the dimensions of ad complexity. The effects are strongest and most consistent for the visual and lexical dimensions with high-NFC and high-knowledge consumers responding more favorably to messages that are visually and lexically complex.

From a strategic perspective, these results suggest that consumers who are high in NFC and knowledge can be effectively targeted, and have their attitudes and purchase intentions enhanced, by the use of appropriate forms of message complexity. The study suffers from two limitations: the use of a student sample and a single product category. Future research should remedy these shortcomings by using more representative samples, studying other product categories, testing for the effects of earlier and later stages of the response hierarchy, and exploring whether the results would hold for other media types.

REFERENCES


