The Tri-Mediation Model of Persuasion: Incorporating Negative Advertising Appeals

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We utilize a political advertising setting to re-define the traditional Dual Mediation Model of persuasion to include the effects of negative appeals. We demonstrate that a peripheral cue can have an impact on the central route to persuasion by fostering message acceptance, not only in regard to the sponsor of the ad, but also in regard to a competing brand (or opponent). We utilize multi-group structural equation modeling to analyze our data.

[to cite]:

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

An on-going concern of advertising practitioners is the persuasive impact of their marketing communications. One of the most widely employed measures of persuasive impact is change in brand attitude (Ab). Consequently research attention continues to focus on describing the specific types of cognitive and affective responses to advertising that lead to brand attitude formation. The traditional “Dual Mediation” model (DMM), which has been well supported within the ad effects literature (e.g., Brown and Stayman 1992), models the effects of various constructs (i.e., ad cognitions, brand cognitions, and attitude toward the ad) on brand evaluations. However a weakness of the DMM is that it appears unable to model the effects of negative comparative advertising.

In this paper, we utilize a political advertising setting to redefine the traditional Dual Mediation Specification in order to model the effects of negative appeals. Because cognitive responses to a political advertisement can be directed toward either the sponsor or the opponent, and because these cognitions may act independently in terms of their influence on brand (sponsor) attitudes, we refine the brand cognitions construct to include both sponsor (i.e., CbSpon) and competitor or opponent (i.e., CbOp) components. Our modified version of the DMM results in three levels of mediation, and hence is referred to as the Tri-Mediation Model of persuasion, or “TMM.”

We utilize an experimental setting to examine the impact of political ad type (positive, negative comparison, and negative attack) and argument strength (strong, weak) on the various paths and constructs in the TMM. Student subjects (n=359) were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions, viewed a target ad, and then filled out a written questionnaire.

We utilized structural equation modeling to analyze data. We find that negative thoughts about the ad sponsor’s opponent or competitor can indeed have a positive effect upon attitude toward the sponsor. Our multiple-group analysis results indicate that if the message is strong, direct attack ads may be superior to either direct comparison ads or positive ads in generating favorable attitudes toward the sponsor. The reason for their effectiveness appears to lie in their ability to trigger the generation of a proportionately larger number of (negative) cognitions regarding the sponsor’s opponent. These outweigh the relatively greater number of positive thoughts generated in regard to the sponsor, and the relatively greater salience of those thoughts in forming a sponsor evaluation in the case of positive or negative comparison ads.

Multiple group analyses further reveal that if the advertising message is weak, then direct comparison ads appear to be superior to either positive ads or direct attack ads in generating positive attitudes toward the sponsor.

Because our Tri-Mediation Model of Persuasion effectively incorporates thoughts about the advertising sponsor’s competitor into overall sponsor evaluations, we are able, in effect, to utilize a non-relative measure of advertising effectiveness to assess the relative nature of a negative political ad. We demonstrate that a peripheral cue (attitude toward the ad) can have an impact on the central route to persuasion by fostering message acceptance not only in regard to the sponsor, but also in regard to the competitor (opponent).

Contact the author for a complete list of references.