When Ads Make Drama Seem Silly and Comedy Seem Dull: Role-Fulfillment Effects of Mood on Evaluations of Emotional Television Commercials

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Previous consumer research has examined how moods induced by television programs influence viewers’ evaluations of commercials. We extend this research by drawing on psychological research on role-fulfillment evaluation processes to hypothesize that viewers like commercials more when they support, rather than break, the moods established by programs. We predict that viewers evaluate happy commercials more favorably than sad commercials following happy programs, and that they evaluate sad commercials more favorably than happy commercials following sad programs. We report the results of two studies that support our hypothesis and provide evidence in favor of the theorized role-fulfillment process.

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Previous consumer research has examined how moods induced by emotional television programs influence viewers’ evaluations of commercials. For example, Goldberg and Gorn (1987) showed that happy and sad television programs induce parallel moods among viewers, that viewers continue experiencing these happy and sad moods during commercial breaks, and that these moods influence their reactions to individual commercials. Drawing on research on mood congruency and accessibility (e.g., Bower 1981; Isen et al. 1978), Goldberg and Gorn hypothesized that viewers evaluate commercials more favorably when they appear during happy (vs. sad) programs, and provided experimental support for this hypothesis.

We believe that previous consumer research only captures part of a more complex relationship between the emotional valence of television programs and viewers’ evaluations of commercials.

Role-Fulfillment Evaluation Processes

In this paper, we draw on psychological research on mood as an input to role-fulfillment evaluation processes. Whereas most theoretical models of the relation between mood and evaluations suggest that people in positive moods provide more favorable evaluations than do people in negative moods (e.g., Bower 1981; Isen et al. 1978; Schwarz and Clore 1988), role-fulfillment research suggests that the more people experience the feelings (positive or negative) that they would expect to feel if some mood-inducing object or event had fulfilled its role, the more favorably they evaluate that object or event.

For example, Martin et al. (1997) showed that participants in an experiment evaluated a comedic television program more favorably after being incidentally placed in a happy (vs. sad) mood, whereas they evaluated a dramatic television program more favorably after being incidentally placed in a sad (vs. happy) mood. Martin et al. argue that happy participants evaluated the comedy more favorably than did sad participants, because, for them, the comedy seemed to have fulfilled its role: they expected it to make them feel happy, and (due to the positive incidental mood induction) they indeed felt happy. Similarly, Martin et al. argue that sad participants evaluated the drama more favorably than did happy participants, because, for them, the drama seemed to have fulfilled its role: they expected it to make them feel sad, and (due to the negative incidental mood induction) they indeed felt sad.

Hypothesis

In this paper, we propose that when a television program establishes a mood, viewers expect to continue experiencing that mood throughout the duration of the program, including commercial breaks. Then, based on research on role-fulfillment processes, we hypothesize that viewers evaluate commercials more favorably when they support, rather than break, the moods established by programs. Based on this hypothesis, we predict that viewers like happy commercials more than sad commercials during happy programs, and that they like sad commercials more than happy commercials during sad programs. The notion that, under some circumstances, viewers may prefer sad (vs. happy) commercials is counterintuitive and a key contribution of this paper.

Experiment 1

The goal of Experiment 1 was to test our hypothesis that viewers evaluate commercials more favorably when they support, rather than break, the moods established by programs.

**Design:** The experiment had a 2 (program mood: happy vs. sad) X 2 (chronological positioning of commercial in program: middle vs. end) X 2 (commercial mood: happy vs. sad) between-subjects design.

**Procedure:** Participants watched a 15 minute clip from a happy vs. sad television program, followed by one of two happy vs. sad
commercials which were chronologically positioned such that they either interrupted the program or followed its conclusion. Then they evaluated the commercial.

**Results:** Consistent with our hypothesis, the results showed that following happy program clips, participants evaluated happy commercials significantly more favorably than sad commercials, and that following sad program clips, they evaluated sad commercials significantly more favorably than happy commercials. This interaction effect was significant both when the commercials interrupted the program and when they followed its conclusion, providing evidence that the effect is robust.

**Experiment 2**

The goal of Experiment 2 was to test whether the theorized role-fulfillment process underlies the interaction effect observed in Experiment 1.

**Design:** The experiment had a 3 (focus: cognitive vs. affective vs. none) X 2 (commercial mood: happy vs. sad) X 2 (commercial replicates) X 2 (awareness of potential biasing effects of mood on evaluations: aware vs. unaware) between-subjects design.

**Procedure:** Participants utilized a computer program which displayed instructions that implemented the focus manipulation (for a discussion of cognitive vs. affective focus see Millar and Tesser 1986). In the cognitive focus condition, the instructions stated that participants should carefully attend to the details of the ensuing program clip’s plot, characters, and scenes in preparation for a memory test. In the affective focus condition, the instructions stated that participants should carefully attend to their emotional responses to the ensuing program clip in preparation for an empathy survey. In the no focus condition, the instructions did not indicate what participants should focus on during the ensuing program clip.

Participants then watched a 15 minute clip from a sad television program, followed by a happy vs. sad commercial. Following the video, the computer displayed instructions that implemented the awareness manipulation. In the aware condition, the instructions described psychological research which has shown that people’s incidental moods may sometimes bias their evaluations of stimuli. In the unaware condition, the instructions did not mention this research. Finally, participants evaluated the commercial.

**Results:** There were four interesting results. First, among participants in the affective focus and no focus conditions, evaluations of the sad commercials were significantly more favorable than those of the happy commercials. Since these commercials followed a sad program clip, this result is consistent with our hypothesis that television viewers evaluate commercials more favorably when they support, rather than break, the moods established by programs.

Second, among participants in the cognitive focus condition, evaluations of the sad commercials and the happy commercials were statistically equal. By demonstrating that when viewers ignore their moods the difference in evaluations between mood-matching vs. mood-mismatching commercials disappears, this result provides support for the theorized role-fulfillment process.

Third, among participants in all three focus conditions, evaluations of the sad commercials in the aware condition were either significantly lower than or statistically equal to evaluations of the sad commercials in the unaware condition, in support of the theorized role-fulfillment hypothesis and contrary to the predictions of the competing HDIF heuristic (see Schwarz and Clore 1988).

Fourth, among participants in all three focus conditions, evaluations of the happy commercials in the aware condition were either significantly higher than or statistically equal to evaluations of the happy commercials in the unaware condition, in support of the hypothesized role-fulfillment hypothesis and contrary to the predictions of the HDIF heuristic.

**Conclusion**

Our results have implications for consumer research on the effects of mood in advertising, for psychological research on role-fulfillment and the interplay between competing mood models, and for important aspects of marketing practice such as commercial design and scheduling and the pricing of television airtime.

**References**


