The Role of Product Category Familiarity and Temporal Construal in Consumer Self-Referent Advertising

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Previous research conceptualizes consumers’ evaluations of self-referent advertisements as discrete episodic processing instances involving the ad-hoc matching of ad and personal memory detail. Effects vary depending on whether individuals are reliving their past or imaging their future. The present article qualifies this finding by proposing that consumers familiar with a product are primarily semantic processors and largely unaffected by advertising detail. Instead, self-referent ads prompt their personal knowledge causing source monitoring errors and memory intrusions. This leads to self-related biases in ad evaluation, depending on the temporal orientation of the ad.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13564/volumes/v35/NA-35

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Advertisers frequently encourage consumers to process ad information in relationship to specific aspects of their selves, such as traits and experiences (Burnkrant and Upprana 1995). The self-related elaboration of incoming stimulus information is presumed to result in more positive evaluations and superior message recall (Debevec and Romeo 1992). The present research proposes that consumer familiarity with a category is a limiting condition for self-referencing effects and suggests that memory intrusions is the mechanism by which this limit occurs. We attempt to explain how consumer knowledge and the temporal perspective of the self-referencing process (operationalized as the episodic and temporal dimensions of the self, respectively) jointly contribute to consumers’ response to self-referent messages.

Retrospective self-referencing invites consumers to reminisce about past personal brand experiences, whereas anticipatory self-referencing encourages consumer-originated imagination exercises that promote favorable self-brand associations. Krishnamurthy and Sujan (1999) contend that both retrospective and anticipatory cases involve a self-referencing mechanism that is indissolubly linked to a memory matching effort on the consumers’ part, particularly of the episodic memory variety.

A simple way of contrasting episodic and semantic memory is in terms of their elementary functions: episodic memory is concerned with remembering, whereas semantic memory is concerned with knowing (Tulving 1993). Similarly, consumers familiar with a product category are thought to have systematically acquired significant amounts of related knowledge that directly impacts their information processing patterns (Mitchell and Dacin 1996). Conversely, individuals less familiar with the product category have yet to develop this domain knowledge and are significantly impaired in terms of their depth of information processing (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). We therefore propose that:

H1: In self-referent advertising, consumers of low familiarity with the product category will predominantly exhibit episodic processing and consumers of high familiarity with the product category will mainly exhibit semantic processing.

H2: In self-referent advertising, amount of ad detail, consumer familiarity with the product category, and the temporal orientation of the ad will interact, such that: for consumers of low familiarity with the product category, attitudes toward ad and brand will be more (less) favorable under anticipatory self-referencing than under retrospective self-referencing in the high-detail (low-detail) ad; no difference is expected for consumers of high familiarity with product category.

Study 1. A first experiment employed a 2 (temporal orientation: retrospective and anticipatory self-referencing advertisement) X 2 (amount of ad detail: low and high) X 2 (familiarity: low and high, measured) random assignment design. Participants attended to a print ad that encouraged them to remember/imagine details of their own Florida vacation. Data provided substantial evidence toward the conceptually proposed role of consumer familiarity with the product category in self-referent advertising. First, it was shown that individuals more familiar with the product category tend to have a detailed schema of their self-product interactions, leading to semantic processing of ad stimuli. Conversely, people less familiar with the category only rely on their occasional, specific instances of self-product interactions and therefore resort to episodic matching when processing. Overall, little support was found for hypothesis 2’s prediction of a three-way interaction involving ad detail. Once the moderating role of consumer familiarity is accounted for, the effects of Krishnamurthy and Sujan (1999) are not evident.

The Memory Intrusions Account. Cognitive psychologists accept that both accurate and inaccurate source attributions can occur from heuristic processes that evaluate a mental experience. Pezdek et al. (1997) proposed that the success of planting false childhood memories will vary along the event plausibility dimension. This schema-based account argues that the likelihood of individuals’ taking ownership of a suggested false childhood event increases whenever subjects possess relevant mental schemata for such events. Garry et al. (1996) showed that when adults imagined childhood events, these events were later judged as more likely to have occurred than events that were not imagined. The authors termed this effect “imagination inflation” and discovered that most people (in particular children) exhibit it. Imagination inflation after exposure to self-referent imagery would therefore be expected to occur more for individuals lacking the schema relevant to the imagined activity (low-familiarity processors) than for people who possess such generic knowledge.

H3: In response to self-referent advertising, consumer familiarity with the product category and the temporal orientation of the ad will interact such that under retrospective self-referencing more memory intrusions will occur for consumers familiar with the product category than for those unfamiliar with it, while under anticipatory self-referencing the intrusions pattern will reverse.

H4: In response to self-referent advertising, consumers’ attitudes will follow the pattern described by the memory intrusions, such that under retrospective self-referencing, attitudes toward the ad and brand will be more favorable for consumers familiar with the product category than for those unfamiliar with it, whereas under anticipatory self-referencing the attitudes pattern will reverse.

Study 2. A second experiment employed a 2 (temporal orientation: retrospective and anticipatory self-referencing advertisement) X 2 (familiarity: low and high, measured) random assignment design. Participants were instructed to express their certainty that specific events had happened to them during the previous 15 years (Life Events Inventory 1), including taking a Delta Airlines commercial flight. Subsequently, they attended to a print ad that encouraged them to either remember or imagine details of their own Delta flight. Dependent measures were collected at the end. Three weeks later, an identical LEI was collected. Intrusions were counted as LEI2-LEI1. A two-way ANOVA found the significant interaction proposed in H3 on the number of memory intrusions. ANOVAs also found the significant interactions proposed in H4 on the attitude toward the ad and brand measures. Finally, mediation analyses showed that the effect of familiarity on self-referent attitudinal response was mediated by memory intrusions.
Discussion. A general practical implication for marketers addresses the need to match consumer product category familiarity with the specific type of self-referencing employed. This research also predicts that retrospective stimuli such as the “Remember the Magic” series of Disney ads are likely to be effective for consumers with frequent past visits to theme parks (not necessarily Disney-owned), while less so for occasional visitors. Conversely, Ford’s “Imagine Yourself in a Mercury” promotional campaign will likely work better for first-time buyers, while less so for more seasoned consumers.

References