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Role of Incongruity and ‘Aha’ Effect in Positive Affect Experienced From Visual Metaphors

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Visual metaphors used extensively in advertising make an analogical comparison between two terms. The homospatial existence of two distinct terms makes the visual metaphor incongruous. This incongruity in visual metaphors renders the message of the ad incomprehensible at first glance. This in turn provokes the viewer to resolve the conflict via metaphorical comprehension. The initial incomprehension followed by comprehension of the message is called the ‘aha experience’ that yields positive affect. Our study attempts to throw light on (a) the nature of relationship between incongruity of visual metaphors and affect (b) the mechanism by which incongruity in visual metaphors leads to positive affect.

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Role of Incongruity and 'Aha' Effect in Positive Affect Experienced from Visual Metaphors

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A recent ad for Microsoft Office showed a female standing in an office setting with the head of a dinosaur. The ad copy read as "Microsoft Office has evolved have you?" This is an example of a visual metaphor, a type of rhetorical figure that is used extensively in advertising and communication (Phillips 2003). A *visual metaphor* makes an analogical comparison between two terms, by stating that one term is figuratively like the other term, even though the two are literally different (Stern 1990). The visual of a dinosaur's head on a female's body is incongruous, it does not make sense at a literal level. This incongruity in the visual attracts attention and one is drawn towards reconciling the incongruity. Only at a figurative level, can one interpret that the ad is suggesting that the female is "outdated, anachronous" and needs to upgrade to newer versions of Microsoft Office. The incongruity in the visual makes the ad stimulating (McQuarrie and Mick 1996; McQuarrie and Mick 1999; Peracchio and Meyers-Levy 1994), elicits some level of exploratory behavior (Berlyne 1960) and subsequent resolution of incongruity with meaningful perceived comprehension yields what is termed in semiotics literature as 'pleasure of the text' (Barthes 1986). 'Pleasure of the text' is conceptualized as the positive affect that the viewer experiences due to the viewer's subsequent perceived comprehension of an initially incomprehensible text.

We embark on a journey to address two unanswered questions in advertising and marketing literature: (i) What is the nature of relationship between incongruity in visual metaphors and affect? (ii) What is the mechanism by which incongruity in visual metaphors leads to positive affect? First, the relationship between incongruity in visual metaphors and positive affect has not been examined empirically in the marketing literature. Research has demonstrated the "figures effect" i.e. rhetorical figures versus literal expressions have a significant positive effect on attitude-toward-the-ad (McQuarrie and Mick 1999; Mothersbaugh et al. 2002). But we are still uninformed about the effect of different levels of incongruity in rhetorical figures (visual metaphors in our study) on ad evaluations. Second, the process by which incongruity in visual metaphors leads to positive affect though has attracted theoretical discussions; it still has not been empirically examined.

We propose a *process model* to empirically examine the effect of different levels of incongruity of visual metaphors on affect. We define, *incongruity in a visual metaphor* as the degree to which there is the lack of structural and semantic correspondence between the source and target elements in the visual metaphor in the presented context and the pre-existing knowledge structures associated with source and target elements in the given context. There are two routes that account for the effect of incongruity of visual metaphors on affective evaluations. One is the *perceptual route* and other is the *comprehension route*. *Perceptual route* is the direct effect of the incongruous stimuli on affect. On the other hand, *comprehension route* is the effect of incongruity of visual metaphor on affect mediated by comprehension. The *perceptual route* can be understood in terms of *arousal boost* concept and *comprehension route* can be understood in terms of *arousal jag* concept introduced by Berlyn (1971; 1960) in context of collative variables. The two routes can be reconciled to understand the overall effect of incongruity in an ad on advertising evaluations. We propose a non-linear relationship between incongruity in a visual metaphor and affect. This argument is informed by theoretical paradigms proposed by Berlyn (1971; 1960) and the schema incongruity theory (Fiske and Taylor 1991; Mandler 1982). The perceived comprehension and perceived certainty of comprehension play a crucial role in the intensity of affect experienced from the metaphor.

H1: Incongruity in visual metaphors will have a non-linear relationship with affect. Moderate level of incongruity versus low level of incongruity in a visual metaphor should lead to a greater level of positive affect. Also, moderate level of incongruity versus high level of incongruity in a visual metaphor should lead to a greater level of positive affect

A mediatory process of interest in this process model is the 'aha experience'. The 'aha experience' is a transition from a state of incomprehension to that of comprehension of the stimulus. The 'aha experience' therefore is an outcome of the combination of *arousal boost* caused by perceptual route and *arousal jag* caused by the comprehension route. 'Aha' is experienced in case of visual metaphors because the incongruity is meaningful or metaphorical comprehension resolves the incongruity. We propose that incongruity in a visual metaphor will have a non-monotonic relationship with the 'aha experience'. That is moderate level of incongruity should lead to maximum intensity of 'aha'. It is the 'aha experience' that leads to the 'pleasure of the text'. *Pleasure of the text* is the positive affect that a viewer experiences due to the viewer's perceived successful comprehension of an initially incomprehensible text. 'Pleasure of the text' is like the thrill one experiences from cracking a puzzle (Peracchio and Meyers-Levy 1994). The stronger the 'aha experience', the greater should be the 'pleasure of the text'.

H2: Incongruity in a visual metaphor will have a non-linear relationship with the 'aha experience'

H3: The 'aha experience' will mediate the relationship between incongruity of visual metaphor and pleasure experienced from a visual metaphor

H4: The 'aha experience' will have a linear relationship with pleasure experienced from a visual metaphor