The impact of emotions in advertising is generally examined by manipulating message content (e.g. fear appeal, humor) or imposed through context (neutral ad appearing in an uplifting program). Less common, but perhaps equally important, is the creation of emotion through the use of medium features of ads such as zooms, edits and cuts (Lang 1990). Recently, Pronin and Wegner (2006) found that simply speeding up the time in which people were given to read a series of statements aloud induced positive mood. In addition to increasing positive mood, this effect of fast thinking was found to also increase feelings of energy. This work suggests that speed of presentation can affect both arousal and valence.

Prior research with media messages has tended to focus just on the impact of these features on the arousal dimension of emotion and its impact on attention and information processing. Features, such as number of cuts in a commercial have been found to elicit orienting responses and increased arousal (Lang 1990). Moving images have been found to increase arousal over still images (Lang, Dhillon and Dong 1995). Research on the speed of animated banner ads has found that fast animation increases attention and elicits increased physiological arousal. In turn, this may increase resources for information processing (Fox et al 2004, Sundar and Kalyanaram 2004).

Pronin and Wegner’s work, however, suggests that animation speed might not only influence arousal and recall, but also alters the valence of feelings. This is similar to theories such as perceptual fluency, where faster processing elicits more positive mood (Winkielman et al 2003), or clinical cases such as manic episodes which are characterized by ‘racing thoughts’ along with elated mood. If faster speeds in banner animation do indeed create more positive feelings, this positive mood may influence brand evaluations.

However, some research shows that arousal may not always cause positive emotions. For example, arousal can serve to enhance judgments of an ambiguous ad in the direction of one’s prior (positive/negative) mood (Gorn, Pham and Sin 2001). If this is the case, animation speed may not influence brand attitudes. However, it may still influence brand trial through the effect of arousal alone. Here, arousal may serve to tax self-regulatory resources and provide fewer resources to control subsequent desire (e.g. Vohs and Faber 2007).

To better understand the role of animation speed in banner ads can play, an experiment was conducted using a method similar to that employed by Pronin and Wegner. Because their message statements were highly valenced (positive or negative) it is difficult to dissociate induced mood from speed of thought. In order to overcome this problem, and to make the task more applicable to advertising, informational banner ads were used.

Eight banner ads, each with approximately 40 words and a visual brand logo, were put into a PowerPoint slideshow format. The ads were adapted from existing ads, with brands that were largely unfamiliar to the participants. The PowerPoint was programmed to progress at a speed of 40ms per letter in the fast condition (with an additional 400ms between slides) and at 160 ms per letter in the slow condition (with an additional 1,600ms between slides). These speeds match those used by Pronin and Wegner and pretesting showed people correctly perceived the pace as fast or slow.

Participants filled out a pretest which included a baseline mood scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988) as well as some filler tasks. They were then shown to a room and told that they would be participating in an advertising study. Participants were instructed view and read out loud the content of the banner ads. They were told that this would be recorded to ensure that they had actually read all the information. Though this decreases external validity, this was necessary in order to ensure that the banners were being completely read at the speed shown. After going through a practice ad, they viewed the 8 ads in succession and then filled out a questionnaire which assessed their perceived speed of thoughts, feelings of energy and mood state. When that packet was completed, they were given a second packet with a previously unseen print ad and asked to complete additional questions related to this ad. This was done because work in arousal (e.g. excitation transfer) and mood has shown that it is transient and more likely to attach itself to objects and judgments apart from the cause. Thus it was believed possible that arousal from the fast animation would not influence the banner ads themselves, but would instead affect a subsequent message.

Participants in the fast condition rated their subjective feeling of thought speed significantly higher than those in the slow condition (t(54)=-5.02, p<.001). A significantly heightened sense of energy was also found in the fast group (t(53)=-2.21, p<.05). Interestingly, mood was significantly higher in the fast group for both positive mood (t(53)=1.81, p<.05) and negative mood (t(53)=3.27, p<.005). For ad evaluation there was no effect of speed of banners on attitude toward the subsequent ad (t(51)=1.35, p>1), however those in the fast condition were significantly more likely to indicate that they would try the product (t(51)=1.91, p<.05).

As would be expected from a generalized arousal effect, those in the fast banner group reported a significantly higher sense of energy. Additionally, positive mood states showed an increase after viewing the fast banner ads relative to the slow condition. Interestingly, negative moods also increased more after viewing the fast banner ads. This contradicts the findings of Pronin and Wegner who only found an increased positive mood for their fast condition. Speed of presentation did not impact attitude toward the subsequent ad. In spite of a lack of difference between the groups in ad attitude, those in the fast group were more likely to say they would try the product. This finding is in line with work on self-regulation and impulsivity showing that cognitive, behavioral and attentional tasks that reduce self-regulatory resources all lead to an increase in impulse buying (Vohs and Faber 2007). The impact of arousal from fast banner ads may have similarly increased the likelihood of trial in response to a subsequent ad.