A Reexamination of Post-Experience Advertising Effects: the Moderating Role of Accuracy Motivation

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Braun (1999) demonstrated that advertising can influence consumers’ recollection of a firsthand experience with a product even when exposure to advertising information follows rather than precedes direct product experience. This post-experience effect was attributed to the overshadowing of experiential information by favorable advertising. We extend this cognitive perspective and show that motivational factors moderate the post-experience advertising effect. In two studies we demonstrate that accuracy motivation eliminates the distorting influence of post-experience advertising. More specifically, we show that even if accuracy motivation is increased right before the judgment (retrieval stage), i.e. after the exposure to advertising, it can still lead to more accurate judgments.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Many studies have shown that advertising messages preced-ing product experiences can affect product evaluations by creating expectations that are subsequently confirmed in a direct experience with the product (Hoch and Deighton 1989; Hoch and Ha 1986; Olson and Dover 1979). In an interesting extension of this research, Braun (1999) demonstrated that even when the advertising follows a direct product experience, it can still transform consumers’ memory of the original experience and result in more favorable product evaluations. Participants were asked to taste a bad mixture of orange juice, described as a new brand. Those exposed to positive advertising messages after the taste experience provided more favorable evaluations and, when asked to identify the orange juice from a range of options varying in taste, systematically picked better juices than the one they had originally tasted. This impact of advertising after actual experiences (i.e. after-the-fact) was referred to as the post-experience advertising effect. It is a novel phenomenon that has important implications for both consumers and marketers. While demonstrating the critical role of advertising for marketers, it also draws attention to the vulnerability of consumers to exaggerated advertising claims.

The effects of post-experience advertising were conceptualized based on cognitive theories suggesting that information acquired after an experience can transform people’s memory of that experience (e.g., Garry et al. 1996). Braun (1999) argued that since memory is malleable, information from the advertising may be used to reconstruct the original experience, leading to an overshadowing of experiential information by suggestive advertising claims. Braun emphasized that the post-experience advertising phenomenon was not simply a matter of advertising affecting consumer judgments of a product in addition to or apart from the product information stored in memory, but that the advertising actually altered consumers’ memory of the original experience. Although subsequent consumer research has uncovered some boundary conditions of the effect by showing that factors increasing the cognitive ability of the respondent (e.g. product knowledge and familiarity) tend to reduce the misleading effects of advertising (Chang 2004; Cowley and Janus 2004), the basic post-experience advertising effect appears to be a robust phenomenon.

All of the explanations offered for the influence of post-experience advertising have implicated cognitive factors, such as consumers’ knowledge and ability, as the culprit of memory distortions caused by marketing communications. Our contention in this paper is that motivational factors have to be considered as well. McDonald and Hirt (1997) demonstrated that motivation not only biases what a person recalls from memory (biased memory search), but also how the contents of memory are interpreted (biased memory reconstruction). Since consumers have different types and levels of motivation when they experience products, process ad messages, or make purchase decisions, motivational factors may be expected to play a crucial role in how susceptible consumers are to the post-experience advertising effect. In a recent review article, Johar, Maheswaran and Peracchio (2006) make a similar point by stating that “Braun (1999) argued for a cognitive source memory explanation for [the post-experience advertising] phenomenon, but it is likely that motivation also plays a role” (p. 139).

The goal of our research is, therefore, to investigate the role of different types of motivation in post-experience advertising effects. In two studies, we replicate past findings on memory distortion due to post-experience advertising. However, we extend this result by introducing manipulations of accuracy during memory retrieval using diverse methods. We show that increasing accuracy motivation during memory reconstruction and product evaluation eliminates the effects of post-experience advertising. We also control for respondents’ impression motivation and demonstrate that participants high in social desirability are more susceptible to the effects of post-experience advertising claims.

References