Too Much to Take In?: the Role of Advertising Variables, Emotions and Visual Attention in Consumer Learning For Really New Products

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Really New Products (RNPs) create new product categories or at least significantly expand existing ones. The difficulty for consumers to learn about RNPs is a significant barrier to the success of these products, yet marketing communications can contribute to the enhancement of individual-level cognition for RNPs. This study is an investigation of a) advertising variables that may be manipulated to enhance comprehension of RNPs (learning strategy and presentation format), b) the extent to which an emotional response (discouragement) acts as a mediator between the advertising variables and comprehension and c) the explanatory role of visual attention in learning for RNPs.

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Too Much to Take In? The Role of Advertising Variables, Emotions and Visual Attention in Consumer Learning for Really New Products

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“Learning is not attained by chance; it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence” (Eugene S. Wilson)

RNPs create new product categories or at least significantly expand existing ones, and can lead to major shifts in market shares (Lehmann, 1994). For instance, Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) qualified as RNPs at the time of launch. RNPs are a priority for most companies as, without the success of such novel products, market shares ultimately drop off (Hoeffler, 2003). The difficulty for consumers to comprehend the nature of a RNP using their existing cognitive knowledge structures can be a significant barrier to the success of the product, due to their highly innovative nature. Past research has shown that two learning processes may help consumers understand RNPs: analogical learning (Roehm and Sternthal, 2001) and mental simulation (Dahl and Hoeffler, 2004). However, existing studies have typically examined responses to advertising for RNPs conveyed using words. As decision-making research has shown that visualization tools can make concepts more accessible (Lurie and Mason, 2007), we seek to add to the extant literature by determining whether advertising strategies rendered accessible (Lurie and Mason, 2007), we seek to add to the extant literature on consumer responses to RNPs by exploring a) advertising variables that can be manipulated to enhance consumer comprehension of the product (learning strategy and presentation format), b) the extent to which an emotion (i.e. discouragement) acts as a mediator between the advertising variables and product comprehension and c) the explanatory role of visual attention in learning processes for RNPs.

The present research extends the literature on consumer responses to RNPs by exploring a) advertising variables that can be manipulated to enhance consumer comprehension of the product (learning strategy and presentation format), b) the extent to which an emotion (i.e. discouragement) acts as a mediator between the advertising variables and product comprehension and c) the explanatory role of visual attention in learning processes for RNPs.

The knowledge transfer paradigm identifies an analogy as the comparison between a “base” and a “target” which share relations but lack common attributes (Gentner, 1989). Mental simulation is defined as the nonverbal representation of perceptual information and sensory experiences in memory (Baddeley, 1986). Analogies and mental simulation have been proved useful to deal with uncertain environments (Hoeffler, 2003) and therefore should help consumers learn about RNPs. However, the academic interest for analogies and mental simulations has largely been confined to the use of words. Research in visual syntax indicates that one of the main properties of visual communication is its lack of explicit means to identify how images relate to each other (Messaris, 1997). Two types of inferences may be drawn from a claim: strong and weak implicatures (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). Strong implicatures call for one interpretation which varies little across individuals whereas weak implicatures yield a wider range of inferences. Using analogies or mental simulations conveyed by images should trigger weak implicatures (Messaris, 1997), hence a risk that consumers lack guidance to merge the RNP with their existing usage patterns. Contrarily, the explicitness of verbal syntax may help respondents to vicariously experience the consequences of product use (Walker and Olson, 1997). Thus, we posit that both mental simulation and analogical learning strategies are more likely to increase product comprehension when conveyed by words rather than by pictures.

Moreover, drawing on the E3 model of emotional influence (Wood and Moreau, 2006), we argue that the difficulties involved in learning about complex new products will trigger strong emotional responses such as discouragement, which in turn will affect product comprehension. We hypothesize that an increase in discouragement will mediate the effects of presentation format and learning strategy on product comprehension.

We also intend to demonstrate how visual attention can contribute to our understanding of the links between conceptual and perceptual analyses when learning for a RNP. We use the physiology of reading literature (Rayner, 1998), and the inverse inference model (Feng, 2003) with the aim to discriminate the state of higher-order cognitive processing from observed patterns of eye movements. We hypothesize that when the message is conveyed with words attention increments to the advertising message will reflect an increase in product comprehension, whereas when the message is conveyed with pictures an increase in attention will indicate confusion.

A total of eight hundred fifty three respondents participated in Study 1. The design was a 3 within-subjects (learning strategy: mental simulation vs. analogy vs. no analogy/ no mental simulation) x 2 between-subjects (presentation format: words vs. pictures) X 3 between-subjects (product: Digipen vs. Video glasses vs. Intelligent Oven). Each participant was thus exposed to three adverts. Study 1 provides us with two important results. First, as expected, both analogies and mental simulations enhance product comprehension to a greater extent when conveyed using words than using pictures. An analysis per product reveals that the video glasses are a notable exception, which suggests that the combination of mental simulation and pictures may actually facilitate comprehension for RNPs of a more hedonic nature. Second, discouragement partially mediates the effects of presentation format and learning strategy on product comprehension.

Study 2 measures individuals’ visual attention to adverts for RNPs using an eye-tracking technique. The results suggest that when the message is conveyed using words, an increase in attention to the message reflects enhanced comprehension for the RNP. However, when the message is conveyed using pictures, an increase in attention reflects confusion towards the nature of the product. This study adds evidence to a growing body of literature which shows that eye movements reflect higher order cognitive processes (Pieters, Wedel and Zhang, 2007). Our research also demonstrates that the link between attention and comprehension is not always straightforward as an increase in attention may actually reflect confusion as opposed to comprehension.

REFERENCES


