Do Opposites Attract? Understanding How Oppositional Advertisements Work

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We define opposition in advertising as the practice of pitting two seemingly opposing views in one advertisement. In this paper, we extend extant research to identify when and why oppositional ads are effective. We propose that opposition is a visual tool that simplifies decision-making and perceptual cognition. In a series of two experiments, we demonstrate that the underlying mechanism for opposition is reduction of visual complexity. Thus, we show that oppositional ads not only allow individuals to make easier decisions, but that they also enable more simplistic perception.

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Therefore, this study investigated the effects of two variables on CRM effectiveness: a company’s commitment to CSR, and the level of commercialization of the cause. As drawn from attribution theory, it was predicted that when a company demonstrates strong commitment to CSR in general by having engaged in various CSR activities over the long term, consumers will infer more altruistic and less self-serving motives from the company’s CRM and hold more credible perceptions of and favorable attitudes toward the company than is the case when the company shows little commitment or has no history of CSR activities. Similarly, when the company is aligned with a less commercialized cause that receives little corporate support, consumers will perceive more altruistic and less profit-oriented motives from engaging in CRM and show greater corporate credibility and attitude than would be the case when associated with a more commercialized cause that enjoys a larger roster of corporate sponsors.

To examine how CRM programs with different degrees of corporate commitment to CSR and cause commercialization influence consumers’ attribution of corporate motives, credibility, and attitude, this experimental study employed a 2 (CSR commitment: strong vs. weak) X 2 (commercialization of the cause: high vs. low) between-subjects, factorial design. A fictitious beauty care company was used in this study; the subjects were instructed to read the description of the company and its recent activity in supporting a social cause. Specifically, stronger corporate CSR commitment was manipulated by focusing on a long history of corporate involvement in CSR activities and support of various socially worthy causes while weaker corporate commitment was manipulated by stating that the company had no record of CSR engagement until recently. For the commercialization level of the cause, the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation (Komen) was chosen as the more commercialized cause based on its popularity and sufficient number of corporate sponsors, while Breast Cancer Action (BCA) was selected for the less commercialized cause that has low visibility and little corporate support. Congruence between cause, company, and cause importance were pretested—no significant differences were found across the four conditions.

As predicted, the results suggest that stronger corporate CSR commitment leads consumers to ascribe more altruistic and less self-serving motives to a company’s CRM, and to hold more credible perceptions of and favorable attitudes toward it than does weaker corporate CSR commitment. On the other hand, the level of cause commercialization produced no significant effects on the dependent measures. Study findings expand our theoretical knowledge of the effects of corporate CSR commitment and cause commercialization on consumer attributions of corporate motives in the CRM context that subsequently influence corporate credibility and attitude. This study also has useful implications for managers who seek to optimize the effectiveness of CRM campaigns by indicating the benefits of establishing long-lasting CRM programs and points to the importance of carefully selecting a socially worthy cause.

References

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Introduction
In their discussion of advertising language, McQuarrie and Mick (1996) identify schemes and tropes as two key forms of figurative rhetoric. Tropes are theorized to increase destabilization in several forms, one of which is opposition. Recently, scholars distinguish Janusian thinking, a process which involves bringing opposites to mind and creating meaning out of them (Rothenberg 1971; Blasko and Mokwa 1986), as an important form of advertising creativity (Sasser and Koslow 2008; Goldenberg and Mazursky 2008). We hence define opposition in advertising as the practice of pitting two seemingly opposing views in one ad. Oppositional ads can feature either literal or metaphorical opposition, often originating from consumer mythology (Levy 1981). An example of literal binary opposition is one such as inside/outside or weak/strong. On the other hand, a metaphorical opposition may be one such as heart/mind or beauty/power. In this paper, we extend extant research to explore when and why oppositional ads are effective/persuasive. We propose that opposition is a visual tool that simplifies decision-making and perceptual cognition. In a series of two experiments, we demonstrate that the underlying mechanism for opposition is reduction of visual complexity. In our first study that utilizes actual print advertisements, we show that perceived complexity is consistently lower for those ads defined as oppositional. The second experiment connects the lower perceived complexity in an oppositional advertisement to higher ad meaning and ad creativity.

Study I: Opposition and Perceived Complexity
Due to the sparse academic research on consumer’s perceptions of oppositional advertisements, an initial understanding of the role of visual complexity is warranted. The aim of Study 1 (S1) is to determine consumers’ perceptions of the complexity level of an
oppositional versus a non-oppositional ad across two different product categories (i.e., undergarments and candy). Thus, a 2 (product category: undergarments versus candy) x 2 (ad type: oppositional versus non-oppositional) mixed-design is used to test the guiding hypotheses: opposition format (ad type) serves as the within-subjects factor and product category serves as the between-subjects factor (N=60). Perceived complexity, the primary dependent variable, is measured with a seven-item (7-point) semantic differential scale (Geisssler, Zinkhan, and Watson 2001). Items range as follows: not complex/complex, not dense/dense, not crowded/crowded, no variety/variety, inefficient/effective, not overwhelming/overwhelming, and simple/complicated.

Results

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) identifies a main effect for ad type (F(1, 60)=56.93, p<.01, M=2.84 versus M=4.49) and an ad type x product category interaction (F(1, 60)=12.85, p<.01) for perceived complexity. Planned comparisons reveal that perceived complexity remains relatively constant across the two product categories for oppositional type ads (M=3.03 for the undergarment ads and M=2.54 for the candy ads; t(60)=1.27, ns). However, for the non-oppositional advertisements, perceived complexity is greater for the candy ads (M=5.09) compared to the undergarment ads (M=3.89; t(60)=3.0, p<.01).

Discussion

S1 data show that individuals perceive that ads that are oppositional in nature are less complex, and this finding is robust across two different product categories. Next, a second study (S2) connects lower perceived ad complexity, shown in S1, to mechanistic explanations for opposition itself.

Study 2: Oppositional Versus Its Half

To better understand how opposition in advertising works, S2 uses one particular advertisement. The idea is to have one set of respondents view the oppositional advertisement while the others view only the half of the ad that “sells” the product. The complexity level for these two ads is hypothesized to be significantly different, with the oppositional format being perceived as less complex (though it has more physical information). Thus, this experiment (N=54) is a single factor between-subjects design (ad type: oppositional versus non-oppositional). Perceived complexity, ad meaning, and ad creativity are the dependent measures of interest. The ad meaning construct is the average of three (9-point) scales: meaningless/meaningful, not believable/very believable, and not credible/very credible (α=.62). Similarly, ad creativity averages three 9-point items: not creative/creative, not eye-catching/eye-catching, and not clear/clear (α=.70).

Results

The print advertisement features a popular children’s drink and thus, familiarity is treated as a covariate (in all hypothesis tests) to account for prior knowledge and experience with the brand. The two ads are rated as being similar in terms of uniqueness, which serves to refute a “novelty” explanation (F(1,53)=2.02, ns). For perceived complexity, analyses reveal an ad type main effect, supporting that the oppositional ad is perceived to be less complex than the non-oppositional ad (F(1,52)=8.84, p<.01, M=3.03 versus M=4.11). In addition, the oppositional advertisement displays higher ad meaning than the non-oppositional ad (F(1,51)=4.73, p<.05, M=6.23 versus M=5.52), and is perceived to be more creative than the non-oppositional version (F(1,52)=3.86, p=.05, M=6.69 versus M=5.98).

Discussion

S2 extends the previous study by showing that not only is there lower perceived complexity in the oppositional advertisement (which has physically more information than its non-oppositional counterpart), there are also significant differences in terms of ad meaning and ad creativity. The oppositional ad is perceived to have higher ad meaning and creativity, thus providing an explanation for why individuals prefer opposition.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, these studies extend the concept of opposition in choice sets (Krishen, Nakamoto, and Herr 2008) to advertisements, showing that it is a visual perception phenomenon that cuts across multiple human tasks. As such, we show that opposition not only allows individuals to make easier decisions, but it can also enable more simplistic perceptual processes. Thus, even though opposition does not appear to reduce information load, it is a creative technique that can reduce visual complexity. We plan to share more data at the ACR conference: e.g., a third study is currently underway.

References