Measurement of Emotions Elicited By Advertising

Andrea Groeppel-Klein, Saarland University, Germany
Oliver Hupp, GfK, Germany
Philipp Broeckelmann, Saarland University, Germany
Anja Dieckmann, GfK, Germany

Emotions elicited by advertising affect the advertising’s success (Keller, 2008a; Bagozzi et al. 1999). Thus, it is highly important to gain insights into consumers’ emotional reactions to advertising and to measure them in a valid way. However, defining and measuring emotions cause “notorious problems” (Scherer, 2005). This article summarizes the perspective of different emotional theories and the development of a picture-based scale that is tested in different formats and against a simple verbal scale with respect to scale validity, scale handling, ease of use, enjoyment of the survey and expert judgments. It concludes by presenting initial applications in advertising effectiveness research.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Emotional experiences shape people’s attitudes towards brands and products (Bagozzi et al., 1999) and also emotions elicited by advertising affect the advertising’s success (Keller, 2008a, 2008b; McEwen, 2004; Percy & Rossiter, 2001). Thus, it is highly important to gain insights into consumers’ emotional reactions to advertising and to measure them in a valid way. Until now, there has been no uniform, broadly accepted definition of emotions. Rather, most current definitions are confined to a list of characteristics (Scherer, 2005; Plutchik, 1991), according to which emotions are complex reactions to events that are relevant to a person’s subjective well-being. They involve changes in physiology, behaviour (including facial expressions), and subjective experience. Emotions depend on the conscious or unconscious appraisal of the triggering event and are associated with certain behavioural responses, which are partly formed by evolution. They can be distinguished from other affective phenomena by their relatively fast onset, short duration and high intensity.

Basically, one can distinguish two different traditions in emotion theories: Appraisal theorists propose that emotions result from the comparison between a desirable or undesirable goal and the degree of goal attainment. Lazarus (e.g., 1982) considers cognitive activity a necessary precondition for emotions. According to his theory, emotional experience requires the understanding that an event can have positive or negative consequences for subjective well-being (Bagozzi, Baumgartner & Pieters, 1998). Also, people can anticipate and revive emotions by purely mental activity, which in turn can lead to physical reactions (Pham, 1998). According to biologically oriented emotion theorists, emotions are genetically programmed (e.g., Zajonc, 1980). They can be triggered automatically and without higher cognitive processing by innate or learned stimuli, even before one becomes conscious of these stimuli (e.g., LeDoux, 1996). With the help of modern brain-imaging technologies, neuroscientists have in recent years done impressive work in shedding light upon such automatic emotional processes. A series of studies now demonstrates that emotions can bias decisions in a certain direction before any conscious thought process occurs (Bechara et al., 2005; Damasio, 1996). Today, most current emotion researchers regard both theoretical accounts as legitimate. Emotions can occur automatically and unconsciously, facilitating fast reactions (e.g., “freezing”, LeDoux, 1996). But they can also result from conscious assessments in cortical areas.

If emotions can be both, biologically pre-wired and arising from higher cognitive activity, their measurement in marketing and advertising effectiveness research becomes even more challenging (Scherer, 2005). Can emotions simply be captured by self-report or standardized verbal scales? Biologically oriented emotion researchers often apply neuroscientific methods to measure physiological indicators of emotions such as heart rate, electrodendal reaction, or regional brain responses. Observational methods for capturing emotional facial expressions are also popular, such as the Facial Action Coding System (FACS; Ekman & Friesen, 1975). These approaches have obvious advantages. They are highly objective and can capture emotions while they are occurring. But there are also disadvantages, especially when it comes to their application in marketing. For instance, not all emotions have a unique physiological or mimic pattern. Especially secondary emotions can hardly be deduced in an unambiguous way. Additionally, application of these methods requires much time, effort and high levels of expertise, making them almost impracticable for large sample research.

Appraisal theorists mainly concentrate on capturing the conscious emotional experience by verbal methods, such as thinking-aloud techniques or questionnaires. Indeed, self-reports provide the only access to the subjective experience level of emotions, despite all the progress in the neurosciences. The variety of more complex secondary emotions cannot be revealed in any other way. Additionally, questionnaires are easy to apply and cost-effective, both in data-collection and in analysis (e.g., Pleasure/Arousal/Dominance-Scale (PAD) by Russell and Mehrabian (1977), Differential Emotional Scale (DES) by Izard (1977), Emotions Profile Index (EPI) by Plutchik (2003), Consumption Emotion Set (CES) by Richins (1997) or Watson and Tellegen’s (1985) Two-Factor Structure of Affect). But they can lead to problems as well. Verbal methods are often criticised for inducing rationalizations in respondents and preventing intuitive responses. This raises serious concerns: Do respondents have sufficient insight into their emotions to be able to answer questions truthfully? Does the interview situation induce cognitive filtering of emotional experiences, thereby increasing the tendency to give socially desirable answers? Which unconscious or automatic components of the emotional reactions are missed by verbal measurement approaches?

Picture-based approaches (e.g., Desmet’s (2003) PrEmo-Scale), unlike purely verbal questionnaires, are expected to facilitate intuitive access to emotions that are difficult to verbalize or which respondents are reluctant to talk about. At the same time, picture-based scales can give a fresh impetus to the interview and increase interest, motivation, and, ultimately, response rates. However, selection and validation of the pictures for such scales requires special care. It is very difficult to find truly unambiguous pictures that represent the same emotion for most people, especially if the scale is to be extended beyond the basic emotions. For instance, misinterpretations can result when the depicted emotional scene is not taken as metaphor for an emotion.

The number of emotions whose marketing relevance has been demonstrated in numerous studies extends far beyond the basic emotions (Bagozzi, Gopinath & Nyer, 1999). As mentioned above, both verbal and picture-based methodologies have pros and cons. The final decision for one approach—verbal or pictorial or a combination of both formats—will thus be based on an empirical comparison. To allow for a fair comparison, special attention needs to be paid to the selection of appropriate, unambiguous pictures. The development of the scale for capturing emotions can therefore be divided into different steps (identification of emotions, search for pictures and validation of pictures). This article summarizes the development of a picture-based scale and its validation in different steps. Finally, different scale variants (verbal, pictorial, and combinations of them) are used to capture emotional responses to TV ads and then evaluated on different performance criteria (scale validity, scale handling, ease of use, enjoyment of the survey and expert judgments). To sum up, the scale formats with “pictures/collages + labels” outperform the purely pictorial formats (pictures, collages) and “word only” on almost all comparison criteria. Assignments
that are solely due to similar motifs of pictures and TV-ads can thus be avoided. The comparison between the two labeled pictorial formats and the purely verbal format reveals several advantages of presenting a picture in addition to a verbal label. Labeled pictures lead to more pronounced differentiation across both emotions and TV spots. Socially desirable answers can be reduced, as indicated by higher selection rates for the negative emotions that a spot is expected to elicit in terms of the expert judgments. In general, labeled pictures produce higher levels of agreement with expert judgments and the scale handling gets better ratings compared to the other formats. Regarding the comparison between labeled single pictures and labeled collages no conclusive recommendation can be derived. In conclusion, we recommend using our labeled picture-scale for testing TV-ads for their emotional content.

REFERENCES