Is a Diamond Really Forever? Effects of Lay Theories of Love on Responses to Romance Appeals in Advertising

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This research explores consumers’ lay theories of love (lasting versus fleeting), and how they may influence responses to romance appeals in advertising. Two completed experiments support the propositions that lasting-theorists have more favorable attitudes towards romance appeals than fleeting-theorists, and this effect is moderated by the presence of relationship threat.

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Results showed a statistically significant difference across all thematic recall measures for those subjects exposed to the trailers featuring similar executions. Those in the interference-ad-absent and control conditions were not significantly different. In addition, those in the interference-ad-present condition were much more likely to interpret the Flightplan trailer in a way that did not match its execution or its actual theme. For example, many subjects thought the film included a plane crash when, in fact, it did not (nor did either of the two trailers they saw). Thus consumers were creating alternative interpretations that matched neither the target advertisement nor the test advertisement. Other results include lower unaided recall (of the trailers viewed) and decreased intention to purchase (to see the film advertised).

Selected References

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Extended Abstract
The theme of romantic love is commonly used in advertising as marketing practitioners strive to generate favorable attitudes towards advertised products (Galician and Merskin 2007; Huang 2004). It is therefore interesting to observe that consumer researchers have paid scarce attention to this theme (choosing instead to focus their efforts on the study of a possibly related area, namely, sex in advertising, cf. Dahl, Sengupta, and Vohs 2009). The aim of this research is to address this gap in the literature, by exploring consumers’ responses to romance appeals in advertising and how these may depend on their lay theories.

Lay theories, the basic and often naive assumptions that people hold about their world, guide many aspects of social behavior (Dweck 1999; Wyer 2004). Consumer researchers have recently begun to uncover some of these diverse effects of lay theories on various aspects of consumer judgment and decision making (e.g., Mukhopadhyay and Yeung 2010; Mukhopadhyay and Johar 2005; Raghunathan, Naylor, and Hoyer 2006; Wang, Keh, and Bolton 2010). Particularly relevant to this research, Hung and Wyer (2008) demonstrated that consumer’s responses to advertising may be influenced by their lay theories. Along similar lines, we seek to understand how lay theories that are specific to love might influence consumers’ responses to romantic appeals in advertising.

Various literatures have proposed different beliefs regarding love (Lindholm 1998). Some ideally believe that love is forever and eternal; in contrast, some strongly believe that love is transitory and destined to change (Peck 1978). This distinction corresponds to Labroo and Mukhopadhyay’s (2009) study of lay theories of emotions, according to which people’s beliefs about the transience of emotions range along a continuum from “lasting” to “fleeting”. Correspondingly, we too suggest that lay theories of love may vary—from lasting to fleeting.

What effect might these lay theories have on the appraisals of romantic messages in advertising? Wheeler, Petty and Bizer (2005) demonstrate that self-schema matching, or presenting individuals with a message that appeals or conforms to some aspect of their self-conception, enhances favorable reactions to that message. Romantic love often entails feelings of attachment and wishes of long-lasting relationships (Hazan and Shaver 1987), which is more consistent with the belief of lasting-theorists. Therefore, our first prediction is that lasting-theorists will have more favorable attitudes towards romance appeals than will fleeting-theorists.

What if the relationship is threatened? Optimism may lead to a false sense of security (Weinstein 1980), and hence lasting-theorists who optimistically believe love is eternal may perceive their relationships to be more secure than they really are. This would make them less inclined to take actions to maintain their relationships. Kne (1998) found that people who held a “destiny” theory of relationship (potential partners are meant for each other) were more likely to engage in avoidance coping in response to a stressful relationship event as compared to “growth” theorists (relationship is cultivated and developed over time). In our context, this would imply that lasting-theorists would have an avoidant reaction to relationship threats, and therefore the presence of a relationship threat would make them less likely to buy products advertised using romantic appeals. In contrast, since fleeting-theorists do not hold such over-optimistic beliefs about perennial love, the presence of threat should not affect their responses to romantic appeals.

Till date, we have tested our hypotheses in two completed experiments. In Study 1a (N=144), participants viewed a target ad for chocolates, featuring a romantic appeal, and a filler ad for mobile phones, and reported their attitudes towards both ads (α=.95). They then responded to some demographic measures, following which we assessed lay theories of love based on six items including statements such as “Love is forever” and “love is transitory”(α=.87). Lower (higher) scores on this scale represent a greater fleeting (lasting) orientation. Regression analyses showed that lay theories of love significantly predicted attitudes towards the romance appeal ad, such that lasting-theorists had more positive attitudes than fleeting-theorists (β=.40, t(143)=5.18, p<.001). An analysis using median splits
for ease of explication indicates the difference between the two groups ($M_{\text{lasting}}=5.84, M_{\text{fleeting}}=4.94$, $t(143)=4.84, p<.001$). There were no significant differences in attitudes for the filler ad. Study 1b ($N=65$) replicated these results on a different sample, with the stimuli consisting only of the target ad and no filler ($\beta=.47, M_{\text{lasting}}=6.24, M_{\text{fleeting}}=5.04, t(64)=4.29, p<.001$).

Study 2 assessed whether threat moderates the effect of lay theories of love on the purchase intention for the advertised product. Participants ($N=48$) in a 2 (threat vs. no threat) $\times$ 2 (lasting vs. fleeting) between-subjects design read a scenario in which their romantic relationship was in conflict vs. not. They then saw an ad featuring a romantic appeal for chocolates, and indicated their intention of buying the advertised product as a gift to resolve the conflict ($r=.88$). Participants in the no-threat condition merely indicated how likely they were to buy the chocolates as gifts for their lovers. The analysis reveals a significant interaction between threat and lay theories of love ($F(1, 44)=55.16, p<.01$). In the absence of threat, the previous results obtain, such that lasting-theorists had higher purchase intentions than fleeting-theorists ($M_{\text{lasting}}=4.58, M_{\text{fleeting}}=3.98$, $F(1, 44)=5.25, p<.01$). In contrast, under threat, there was no difference in purchase intentions ($M_{\text{lasting}}=3.94, M_{\text{fleeting}}=3.79$, $F(1, 48)=1.78, n.s.$). As expected, relationship threat does not affect fleeting-theorists' responses to romance appeals, but strongly affect lasting-theorists' behavior.

To summarize, this research investigates romantic appeals in advertising, and our results till date demonstrate that responses to such appeals vary based on consumers’ lay theories of love as well as the presence of relationship threat. These results are among the first in consumer research to investigate the effects of romantic appeals, a perennial theme in advertising. Subsequent studies will explore the mechanisms underlying the observed effects.

References
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The Effect of Cultural Orientation on Responses to Comparative Advertising
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Nowadays, brands often try to differentiate themselves from competitors, and comparative advertisements are used as traditional tactics to persuade consumers of their superiority over other brands. To that effect, advertisers state that their product is better than the competitor’s product or even better than any other product. Many of us are familiar with Subway’s advertisement targeting McDonald’s and these practices are increasingly used by industry giants such as Pizza Hut, Diet Pepsi and Apple (McArthur and Cuneo, 2007). Extant research has examined the effects of comparative message claims. For example, Grewal et al (1997) found that comparative ads