Effects of Metaphor on Goal-Oriented Appeals in Advertising

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We examine the effect of using metaphor on two distinct goal-oriented appeals (prevention and promotion) in advertising. The results of our preliminary study suggest that when consumers are presented with an indirect metaphorical claim, they prefer promotion- (vs. prevention) framed messages. When consumers are exposed to a direct literal claim, however, prevention – (vs. promotion) framed messages are more persuasive.

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Advertising messages influence one’s motivations, views, and perceptions in achieving goals. One of the key techniques to encourage consumers to reinforce or alter their goals is the use of rhetorical figures, such as metaphorical expression (McQuarrie and Mick 1996). While metaphorical claim is the most widely used rhetoric in current advertising practice, little is known about the circumstances under which metaphorical claims are most persuasive. Previous studies tend to focus on the advantages of metaphoric claims as compared with literal claims (e.g., McQuarrie and Phillips 2005), and the persuasive nature of metaphorical claims themselves is not fully investigated. In this article, we adopt regulatory focus theory to investigate the effectiveness of metaphor on enhancing one’s goal achievement.

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1997) suggests two basic motivational orientations that individuals adopt to achieve their goals: prevention-focus and promotion-focus. Prevention-focus oriented individuals seek to avoid negative outcomes; thus, their concerns are about safety, responsibilities, and obligations (Higgins 1997, 2000). Conversely, promotion-focus oriented individuals, seek to achieve positive goals and are concerned with growth, accomplishment, and aspirations. When people adopt the goal pursuit strategies and engage in activities that are consistent with their regulatory orientation, they experience “feels-it-right” sensation and their motivations become heightened (Aaker and Lee 2006).

Researchers of regulatory orientation have also suggested that not only a match between a manner in which a person pursue a goal and his or her goal orientation, but also the types of message framing (i.e., promotion vs. prevention) in a given context determine the persuasiveness of information. That is, prevention-focused messages are most persuasive at a concrete, detail-oriented level because they allow consumers to maximize the accuracy of their decision outcomes (Mogilner, Aaker, and Pennington 2008). Promotion-focused messages, however, are most persuasive when framed at an abstract level because people who are presented with promotion-focused messages would focus more on the ultimate meaning of an event, as opposed to its concrete details. Mogilner et al. (2008) empirically tested this notion by suggesting that prevention-framed products were more favorable when consumers’ purchase decisions are imminent while promotion-framed products were preferred when the purchases did not need to be made immediately.

Given the different characteristics of prevention/promotion goal orientations, it is expected that prevention-focused messages would be more effective when the ad employs literal rhetorical techniques to persuade consumers because these messages provide explicit, concrete means to avoid the negative outcomes. On the other hand, it is expected that promotion-focused messages will be more persuasive when the ad uses metaphorical rhetorical technique because promotion-oriented individuals will focus more on the ultimate meaning of an event. The promotion-focused messages should motivate people to achieve positive outcomes rather than emphasizing a concrete focus (Mogilner et al. 2008). Furthermore, metaphorical claims have been shown to be more advantageous in providing positive outcomes as compared to literal claims because they render consumers more receptive to diverse and positive influences about advertised brands while still conveying the main message of the ad (McQuarrie and Phillips 2005). We conducted an experiment to test these expectations.

Method
Stimulus Development. To develop a set of rigorous metaphorical advertising stimuli, stimulus development procedure followed a multiple-step process. First, professional advertising artists initially created 10 sets of ads carrying various themes of metaphorical verbal expressions that emphasize the benefits of eating cereals. The prevention-focused ads conveyed messages such as, “This cereal helps prevent heart disease” whereas the promotion-focused ads had messages such as, “This cereal helps enhance your heart health.” Since the quality of metaphorical expression critically influences participants’ evaluations of ads, we conducted several pre-tests to screen out dead or inapt metaphors among these ads. Undergraduate students at a large southern American university evaluated whether ads were creative/imaginative or plain/matter-of-fact (McQuarrie and Mick 1996). Participants also rated the levels of implications of these ads on a seven-point scale anchored by “Almost everyone/no reasonable person would draw this conclusion from the ad.” (McQuarrie and Phillips 2005). Through these procedures, we selected a final set of metaphorical ads for the preliminary study.

Preliminary Analysis. In order to investigate these hypotheses, we used a 2 (rhetorical styles: metaphorical vs. literal) × 2 (goal orientation: prevention vs. promotion) between-subjects factorial design. The dependent variable was attitude toward the advertised brand (a cereal brand). The results of ANOVA indicated that there was a marginally significant interaction effect of rhetorical styles and
goal orientations ($F = 3.78, p = .058$). Direction of the effect was consistent with our expectations. That is, the prevention-focused ad was more favorable ($M = 4.92$) than the promotion focused ad ($M = 4.05$) when participants were shown a set of ads containing literal claims. The promotion-focused ads, however, became more appealing ($M = 4.60$) than prevention-focused ads ($M = 4.25$) when participants were shown a set of ads containing metaphorical claims.

Implications and Limitations

McQuarrie and Phillips (2005) argued that, in general, the use of metaphorical claims (vs. literal claims) in ads is more effective to evoke positive attitudes among consumers given its ability to provide diverse references about advertised brands. Our initial phase of the study, however, shows that the goal orientation of the message-framing influences the persuasiveness of metaphors in ads, thus demonstrating a potential limitation on the suitability of metaphorical claims. The results provide useful guidelines for advertising practitioners in effectively utilizing metaphorical techniques in ads. At this stage, we only tested the effectiveness of metaphor in terms of verbal expression (i.e., ad copies) for a routinely purchased commodity. To a better understanding of the nature of persuasiveness in metaphor, future study should incorporate visual metaphors. It may also be worthwhile to investigate if this interaction occurs in other types of purchases.

Selected References


Do I Really Have to Prove Who I Am? The Impact of Identity Denial and Targeted Ads
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Extended Abstract

American citizens of foreign origins, who might be born and raised in the United States, frequently have to answer questions such as “do you speak English” or “where are you really from?” (Cheryan and Monin 2005). Since they do not match the prototype of the in-group, their belonging to that group is questioned. This phenomenon has been labeled as “identity denial” (Cheryan and Monin 2005). The purpose of this research is to assess consumers’ reaction to such an acceptance threat (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje 1999).

Past consumer research has assessed the impact of in-groups, out-groups and dissociative groups from different perspectives (e.g. Bearden and Etzel 1982; White and Dahl 2007). Consumption (or abandonment) of brands/products was advocated to help individuals build their self-concept (e.g. Escalas and Bettman 2005) or to differentiate them from out-group members adopting these tastes (Berger and Heath 2007, 2008).

However, to the best of our knowledge, no research has assessed the impact of identity denial on consumers’ attitudes. Cheryan and Monin (2005) demonstrate that identity denial leads to an increase in respondents’ effort to show cultural knowledge and claims to participate in in-group practices. Nevertheless, we currently do not know to which extent this phenomenon affects consumers’ consumption decisions, brand/product attitudes and perception of advertisement executions.

Theoretical Background

Ethnic identities. Advertisers frequently use ethnic cues in order to target members of ethnic groups. Past research has shown that, in general, consumers targeted by this tactic respond in a positive manner (Whittler 1989, 1991). According to Deshpandé and Stayman (1994), ethnic minorities (vs. ethnic majorities) evaluate spokespersons from the same ethnic background as more trustworthy. Subsequently, this increased trustworthiness leads to higher brand attitudes. Most of past research has assessed ethnic cues from an in-group versus out-group perspective. Respondents were primed by (or exposed to) ads containing (vs. not containing) a cue specific to their ethnicity. As Deshpandé and Stayman (1994), we are interested in trustworthiness or honesty of advertisers. However, the present study takes a different look at the implementation of ethnic primes. More precisely, we are interested by the impact of a prime which denies membership to a group, even though the person objectively belongs to that group. In other words, the purpose is to assess how consumers react to ethnically targeted ads when they are denied one of their identities and, concomitantly remembered of another one.

Identity denial. As stated by Cheryan and Monin (2005, p. 718) “whereas stereotypes threat (Steele 1997) is the fear of being seen in a negative light because of one’s group membership, identity denial is the fear of not being seen as part of the in-group at all”. Rejection from an important group may frustrate the basic need of belonging (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Eisenberger, Liberman and Williams 2003). As demonstrated by Schmitt and Branscombe (2001), when people are targeted by a social identity threat, they alter their subsequent behavior. The reaction to an identity denial is to assert one’s identity in order to prove to others than one really belongs to that in-group (Cheryan and Monin 2005).