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“White space” conveys meanings to consumers via social history. It might also be a burning money signal. Two studies show that white space is different from other ways of burning money, and its meanings are sufficiently different across cultures to give strong support to the socio-historical explanation.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT:

The pioneering work of Nelson (1970, 1974, & 1978) brought forth the idea that under certain conditions high advertising expenditures can inform consumers about particularly high product quality, even if consumers never actually see any of the advertising. While this mechanism of action for the economic analysis of advertising is widely accepted, there are few demonstrations of consumers inferring quality from advertising elements which suggest “burning money”. One set of studies show that ad repetition can lead to inferences of quality (Kirmani, 1997; Moorthy & Hawkins, 2005) or ad size (Kirmani, 1990; Homer 1995). As Moorthy and Hawkins (2005) pointed out, ad frequency effects are thoroughly confounded with mere exposure effects leaving the role of signaling in doubt for those studies that manipulated frequency. This limitation effectively leaves ad size as the only advertising variable purported to indicate product quality to consumers through a burning money signal.

Both Kirmani (1990) and Homer (1995) manipulated ad size in their studies. Surprisingly, however, both studies also manipulated the amount of white space in the ads. Given this, it is possible that large ads did not signal quality to consumers via inferences about market power. An alternative explanation for the behavioral effects of white space proposed by Pracejus, et al. (2006) holds that in North America, white space is a well-known and widely understood trope in the lexicon of modern visual commercial rhetoric, which developed from specific historical moments during the late 1950’s and Early 1960’s when advertising and commercial design were strongly influenced by the minimalist movements taking place in art.

Given these two potential ways white space can influence consumers, two studies were conducted. Study one contrasts white space against ad size. If the economic signaling explanation is correct, there should be little difference between these two expensive and extravagant advertising techniques. Study two compares the effect of white space across cultures. If the economic signaling explanation is correct, there should be little difference in the impact of white space across cultures.

Study 1

Participants. One hundred and eighty-four undergraduate students at a North American university.

Design and Stimuli. Three ad conditions (full-page, low white space; full-page, high white space; and, 1/5th page low white space) were used, with 2 product category replicates for each ad (furniture and mutual funds). Participants were told they would view an ad for Hastings (furniture/clothing) that would run in a British newspaper.

Dependent Variables. After viewing the ad for 30 seconds, participants responded to 10 statements about Hastings along a seven-point, 1=“Strongly Disagree” and 7=“Strongly Agree” scale. Eight of these statements were from Pracejus, et al. (2006). Attitudes and purchase intentions were also taken.

Results

For cases where the type of the advertisement differed, contrasts were conducted to examine the source of the difference. The impact of ad size alone can be assessed through contrasting the 1/5th page ad with the full page, low white space ad. Here, the only significant impact of ad size is on the item Hastings has considerable market share (F=14.71, p<.001). This is in keeping with the expectations of the burning money signaling theory.

When the 1/5th page ad was compared with the full page, high white space ad, however, we observed significant increases in beliefs about Hastings in 6 out of 8 of the specific meanings expected to be conveyed by white space, as well as significant increases in attitudes and purchase intentions.

Study 2

The second way the rhetorical account can be distinguished from the burning money account is cross culturally. If the socio-historical account is accurate, we should expect a different— weaker, narrower—impact of white space on consumers outside of the North American context. To explore the role of culture and social history on the meanings conveyed to consumers through the use of white space in advertising we compared responses to white space across groups with different social histories.

Participants. 260 undergraduate students 130, at a university in North America, and 130 at a university in Hong Kong.

Design and Stimuli. A 2 (product category) x 2 (high/low white space) x 2 (country of residence) between-subjects design. All advertisements contained a picture of a clock, accompanied by a logo for a fictitious brand (Hastings), along with ambiguous copy like that used in Study 1. Exposure and cover story and dependent variables were similar to study 1.

Results

The impact of white space on brand perceptions varied significantly by country. After mean centering by country and product class, an ANOVA revealed a significant interaction of white space and country of residence on quality, risk, prestige, trust, and overall brand attitude. The interaction was also marginally significant on expensive (F=3.7, p>.055) and leadership (F=3.4, p>.06). So, for nearly every meaning associated with the social history of white space, its impact was principally dependent on culture.

For North American participants, white space significantly increased perceptions of quality, low risk, prestige, trust, and leadership. It also significantly increased overall brand attitude and purchase intention. For the Hong Kong participants, however, white space only significantly influenced perceived market share (F=5.29, p<.023). It also marginally impacted expense (F=3.57, p<.061) and trust (F=3.25, p=.074). However, for both of these measures, the impact of white space was in the opposite direction to the North American participants. That is, low white space was marginally predictive of the brand being expensive and trustworthy.

General Discussion

Whereas white space in an ad can imply that the advertiser is a large company much like a large ad does, it does not only mean the company has money to burn. In North America, it turns out that white space in ads implies much more about the brand: quality, prestige, trust, etc. In Hong Kong, white space only implied a large market share. This is convincing evidence that the rhetorical account...
adds substantially to our understanding compared to economic signaling alone.

REFERENCES


