When Creativity Meets Repetition: Frequency Effects Depend on Exposure Duration

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Repetition effects are crucially dependent on exposure duration. Counter to two-factor theory, our results reveal that atypical ads do not wear-in under brief exposures, and wear-out rapidly when duration is long or self-paced. Moreover, they show the surprising ability of typical ads to retain high levels of liking across repetitions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In an increasingly cluttered environment, competition for consumers’ limited attention is a key issue. Two strategies that are commonly used by advertisers to maximize attention to their ads are creativity and repetition. Whereas previous research suggests that creative advertising can postpone attention wear-out due to repetition (Pieters, Warlop, and Wedel 2002), it is less clear how combinations of creativity and repetition affect more downstream effects, such as ad and brand evaluation. This research tests the hypothesis that the influence of repetition on evaluations of standard (typical) and creative (atypical) ads critically depends on exposure duration. We compare brief and fixed (as when passing billboards by car), long and fixed (as in the case of cinema advertising), and self-paced exposures (as when paging through a magazine). Specifically, we predict that atypical ads do not wear-in at all when exposures are brief and fixed (hypothesis 1), and wear-out faster than typical ads when exposure duration is long and fixed (hypothesis 2), or self-paced (hypothesis 3).

The idea is that comprehension of atypical ads is characterized by a delayed-but-sudden “aha” experience (Topolinski and Reber 2010). For atypical ads to wear-in, these ads require at least one exposure that is long enough for this “aha” experience to occur. At such longer exposures, however, processing of atypical ads will lead to more distinctive memory traces and active recognition, and exactly this may accelerate their attitude wear-out. We predict the effect of repetition to be critically dependent on the exposure duration, as follows.

When exposures are brief and fixed, atypical ads are liked less than typical ads, because a single glance is insufficient to comprehend them, and this uncertainty is disliked. Subsequent brief exposures do not “add up” to comprehension, hence the negative ad evaluation will not be positively updated. Typical ads, in contrast, which are almost instantly understood (“Ha, it is a car ad”), are immediately evaluated positively. This identification certainty is re-experienced during subsequent brief exposures, which delays wear-out.

When exposures are long and fixed, atypical ads will wear-out faster than typical ads. Because they are unique, atypical ads will leave stronger and more distinctive memory traces, and exactly this may accelerate evaluation wear-out. Upon repeated exposure, atypical ads are more actively recognized as being seen before. This improved memory of atypical ads depresses attitudes, once the novelty of their initial exposure wanes (“Oh, it is that ad again”). In contrast, due to their similarity to other ads in the category, typical ads leave less distinctive memory traces, and generate feelings of familiarity even if they are new. Repeated exposure to typical ads further raises familiarity, and attitudes wear-out less quickly as a result.

When exposure is self-paced, atypical ads should wear-out even more rapidly. Precisely because atypical ads continue to draw attention where other ads wear out, they may be even more readily recognized upon repeated exposure, and evaluations drop even faster. Thus, ironically, the attention-getting qualities of atypical ads may accelerate evaluation wear-out even more.

Three experiments tested these predictions. Experiment 1 tested the idea that many brief exposures to atypical ads are not equivalent to one long exposure. Typical and atypical ads were shown at various exposure durations (from 100 msec to 8 sec) and frequencies (from 1 to 10). As predicted, for atypical ads, comprehension ratings and ad evaluations were very different after many brief exposures as compared to one long exposure, while the differences were much smaller for typical ads. Indeed, many brief exposures to atypical ads did not “add up” to comprehension.

Experiment 2 tested hypothesis 1 and 2. In this experiment, participants evaluated typical and atypical ads that they had seen either zero, one, three or six times in a previous part of the experiment, as well as distracters (which were slightly changed versions of the target ads). Ads were exposed for either 100 msec (brief and fixed) or 10 seconds (long and fixed). As predicted, when exposure duration was brief and fixed, typical ads were immediately evaluated more positively than atypical ads, and additional glances did not improve evaluations of atypical ads, nor deteriorate evaluations of typical ads. Evaluations were driven by differences in comprehension levels between typical and atypical ads, that sustained across the repeated brief exposures. When exposures were long and fixed, atypical ads wore-out faster than typical ads, which was predicted to be the result of different bases for recognition (i.e., recollection vs. familiarity; Yonelinas 2002). As predicted, participants were well able to discriminate atypical ads from other ads, suggesting that processing of these ads led to distinctive memory traces and active recognition upon repeated exposure. In contrast, false recognition was higher at all frequency levels for typical ads, and this low ability to discriminate suggests that recognition was based on feelings of familiarity, as predicted.

Finally, experiment 3 tested and supported hypothesis 3, that atypical ads also rapidly wear-out under self-paced exposure conditions. However, the accelerated evaluation wear-out of atypical ads was not due to increased attention. Although atypical ads retained attention longer than typical ads at first exposure, subsequently attention quickly dropped, to equal attention levels of typical ads. Rather, atypical ads were more actively recognized than typical ads, as reflected in lower false recognition for these ads at all frequency levels.

Together, the results show that repetition effects crucially depend on the exposure duration. Our predictions and findings are different from two-factor (Berlyne 1970) and related theories, which would predict the opposite, namely that atypical (complex) ads wear-out more slowly than typical (simple) ads, due to positive habituation and later set-in of tedium. Although either one may have positive effects, our results show that combining high creativity and high repetition is less effective. They show that, ironically, exactly because atypical ads attain better memory, the attitudes towards them and their brands wear-out more quickly. On the other hand, typical ads fly under the radar of active recognition, and retain their positive attitudes under repeated exposures as a result. Thus, the “boring” ads appear not so boring after all.

REFERENCES


