Impact of Mortality Salience on Advertising Effectiveness in a Commercial Pod

Priyamvadha Rangan, University of Kansas, USA
Surendra N. Singh, University of Kansas, USA
Mark J. Landau, University of Kansas, USA
Jungsil Choi, University of Kansas, USA

Death-related information is prevalent across various television genre (movies, documentaries, dramas, soap operas etc.). But research on the ramification of such information, that one is exposed to on a daily basis, on advertising effectiveness is profoundly lacking. This research examines the impact of archetypal television programming that contains death-related information on the ensuing commercial pod. We find that death-related thoughts vary across the duration of the commercial pod and death-related program context effects on advertising evaluation are evinced only at the end of the commercial pod, with death thought accessibility mediating the relationship between program context and attitude toward ad.

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way consumers perceive, categorize, and use their relationships for consumption purposes, even as the relationships fluctuate and operate at different points along the relationship continuum over time.

CONCLUSION

The identification and examination of a new class of commercial friendships illuminates important theoretical differences underlying the various types of relationships between consumers and firm representatives. This study demonstrates the importance of conceptualizing commercial friendships as multi-dimensional phenomena that are both determined and constrained by instrumental and expressive components. Interestingly, we find that the nature of the relationships, at the time they are established, has a lasting and powerful impact. Ultimately, identifying the underlying features of these friendships has important implications regarding how consumers perceive their relationships with firms and how they use them for consumption purposes. Additionally, explicating these relationships also reveals important ways firms might manage customers engaged in instrumental oriented and expressive oriented marketing relationships.

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A crucial media planning consideration is the nature of the program itself, as the program context influences the effectiveness of embedded advertising, with the context effect being maximal for the first ad in the ensuing commercial pod and minimal for the last ad in the pod (Murry, Lastovicka and Singh 1992). Terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon 1986) posits that humans’ innate desire for perpetual life, coupled with awareness of their mortality, creates the potential for existential anxiety. Conscious death-related thoughts instigate proximal defenses (e.g., thought suppression/denial of one’s vulnerability to death; Arndt, Allen and Greenberg 2001), whereas unconscious but accessible death-related thoughts activate distal defenses (e.g., cultural worldview bolstering; Pyszczynski, Greenberg and Solomon 1999).

Recent research in marketing (Liu and Smeesters 2010) induced mortality salience (hereafter, MS) by exposing participants to epochal news coverage (9/11 terror attacks). MS-inducing programs caused participants to prefer domestic brands over foreign brands; due to enhanced patriotism. However, the authors do not find MS effects on ad evaluation. They suggest that ad evaluations are affected by program-induced mood, and since MS does not affect mood, MS will not influence ads. Based on extant literature, we expect program-induced mood effects to be independent of program-induced MS effects, in that moods influence the first few commercials in the pod, while program-induced distal MS effects manifest themselves on the later commercials.

We investigate whether (a) archetypal death-depicting television programs trigger death-related thoughts and whether these vary over an ensuing commercial pod, (b) if and when death-related thoughts turn from being conscious to unconscious in the pod, and (c) do distal defenses impact advertising effectiveness in the pod, and if so, what is the process mechanism? We conducted three studies. Local news from an affiliate was recorded and edited before each study. The first three-and-a-half minutes of the MS and control videos contained information on local governance etc. The last one-and-a-half minutes of the MS video contained death-related information while the control video contained sports information. Pre-tests were done to select filler ads for all studies and the target ad for the third study.

Study 1: One factor, four-level between-subjects design was used with MS-content and ads at three pod positions: beginning (MS<sub>beg</sub>), middle (MS<sub>mid</sub>) and end (MS<sub>end</sub>) and a control condition. Death thought accessibility (DTA; Greenberg et al. 1994) was measured after
stimulus exposure. Results showed that DTA in control condition (M_{CON} = 1.55) was similar to MS_{MED} (M_{MED} = 1.52, p = 1) but lower than at MS_{BEG} (M_{BEG} = 2.2, p = .026) and MS_{END} (M_{END} = 2.15, p = .044).

Study 2: Six-level between-subjects design was used with MS-content and ads at five pod positions: MS_{BEG} after one ad (MS), after two ads (MS), MS_{MED} and MS_{END} and a control condition. Participants completed a thought-listing exercise (Greenberg et al. 1994), the Emotional Lability Inventory (ELI; Greenberg et al. 2000), and PANAS after stimulus exposure. Results showed that number of death-related thoughts in the control condition (M_{CON} = .07) was comparable to MS_{MED} (M_{MED} = .52, p = .095) and MS_{END} (M_{END} = .47, p = .161) but lower than other pod positions (ps < .001). ELI scores at MS_{END} (M_{END} = 5.83) were similar to control condition (M_{CON} = 6.01, p = .941), but lower than other pod positions (ps < .05). Positive and negative affect did not vary across conditions.

Study 3: 5 (MS: MS_{BEG}, MS, MS_{MED}, MS_{END}) x 2 (AdType: Foreign vs. Domestic) + 2 (Control: Foreign vs. Domestic) between-subjects design was used. Participants viewed the video and then saw one of two ads varying only in the country-of-origin information in the headline, and completed DTA, attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand measures. There was only a treatment main effect for DTA (F(5,288) = 4.61, p < .001). Contrasts showed that DTA followed the first study’s pattern. There was only an interaction effect for attitude toward the ad (F(5,288) = 2.86, p = .015). The foreign ad was rated lower than domestic ad only at end of pod (F(1,288) = 7.5, p = .007); ps > .14 in other positions. Moderated mediation (Preacher, Rucker and Hayes 2007) showed that DTA mediated relationship between program context and attitude toward the ad for foreign ad, but not domestic ad. ANOVA results for attitude toward the brand were similar to attitude toward the ad. A multiple step, multiple mediator model (Hayes, Preacher and Myers 2010) showed that the relationship between program context and attitude toward the brand was mediated by attitude toward the ad via DTA. To summarize, we demonstrate that quotidian violent television programming makes mortality salient, triggering death-related thoughts over the ensuing pod. We find that death-related thoughts are of a conscious nature at the front of the pod and become nonconscious but accessible at the end of the pod. Further, distal defenses against death-related thoughts are activated only at the end of the pod—advertisements for foreign brands are negatively evaluated over advertisements for domestic brands—driven by nonconscious but accessible death-related thoughts.

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Fourteen Research Ideas in Behavioral Pricing
Robert Schindler, Rutgers University - Camden, USA

Price is unique among marketing variables in at least two ways. First, it is the marketing variable that “harvests” the benefits created by all the others (Nagle and Holden 1995). This gives price a crucial managerial relevance that makes one wonder why courses in pricing are not more prominent in the business school curriculum. Second, its numerical nature makes price explicit and specific to a degree unmatched by any of the other marketing-mix variables (Schindler 2007). This gives the study of how consumers deal with price an extraordinary theoretical potential – the price side of things being so clear and concrete, the habits and limitations of the consumer can emerge in bold relief.

As I have been reviewing behavioral pricing research during my writing of a new pricing textbook, some particular examples of needed work in pricing-related consumer behavior have become apparent. Thinking of the many young researchers at the ACR conference, I feel it is an appropriate setting for encouraging needed research. Below are fourteen ideas that I have selected as promising opportunities for making a difference in the practice of pricing as well as in approaching more fundamental behavioral questions. It is my hope that these ideas will at least stimulate thinking in these important research areas.

1. Prospect theory suggests that framing a loss as a gain foregone reduces its negative impact. Nagle and Holden (1995) have suggested that this is illustrated by retail advertisements, often seen around April, that suggest consumers use their income tax refund to purchase a product. Is this type of advertising appeal effective?