Does Bigger Equal Better? How Product-Model Size Ratio and Brand’s Social Role Impact Ad Effectiveness

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In this research, we adopt the “size embodies power” metaphor and suggest that this metaphorical link may influence ad effectiveness: a larger size contrast between product and model images in an ad will make it easy for consumers to associate the advertised product with a greater social power.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research examines how advertisers can use the size contrast between product and model images (SCPM) to maximize ad effectiveness. Size (big or small) can be an important metaphor and it shapes perceptions of the significance of social stimuli (Landau et al. 2010). Early studies showed that both children (Bruner and Goodman 1947) and adults (Bruner and Postman 1948) perceive socially significant symbols as physically larger than neutral symbols. People commonly talk about an increase in significance of importance as physical largeness or expansion (“This is a big problem, and it is only going to grow,” Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Despite its prevalence in our daily life, such the metaphor in advertising remains unexplored.

Before this project, we conducted a content analysis with 1325 ads from popular magazines with various product categories. The results indicated a positive correlation between SCPM ratio and product price ($r=.12, p<.01$): advertisers tended to exaggerate their product images (bigger than the model image) among high-priced products. The observations lead us to propose that SCPM may increase perceptions of power and bring about a sense of the product’s worth.

Furthermore, we are interested in the boundary conditions of using SCPM. Brand’s social role (BSR) is proposed as a moderator. Consumers tend to treat a brand as a human being (Aaker 1997; Aggarwal and McGill 2012), and interact with the brands in ways similar to interpersonal relationship partners (Aggarwal 2004; Fournier 1998; Swaminathan, Page, and Gurhan-Canli 2007). Two BSRs are distinguished based on brand’s social role: leader-like vs. friend-like brand. When a brand positions itself as a leader to its customers, consumers consider it superior to other brands in the same product category. Slogans such as “there is no substitute” (Porsche) and “the king of beers” (Budweiser) are two examples. On the other hand, when consumers perceive the brand as a friend, they feel sincere and trustworthy (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). Mutually shared concerns exist between the friend-like brand and its customers (Aggarwal 2004). For instance, Coca-Cola’s slogan “the best friend thirst ever had” describes the friend-like relationship between the brand and its consumers.

We propose that processing fluency as the underlying mechanism behind the phenomena above. Fluency is defined as the ease with which new information can be processed (Alter and Oppenheimer 2009; Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman 2004). The right match between SCPM and BSR is expected to improve processing fluency, which enhances ad effectiveness.

In Study 1, we tested the interaction effect between SCPM and BSR. A 2 (SCPM: large vs. small) x 2 (BSR: leader-like vs. friend-like) between-subjects design was conducted. Chocolates were chosen as the test product category. Godiva and Kinder Bueno were chosen to represent for leader- and friend-like brands. Each participant was presented with one ad selected from the pool of four (i.e., two SCPM for each of the two BSRs). The different SCPM were created. In the large (small) SCPM condition, the size of chocolate (model) image is twice bigger than that of the model (chocolate). In the leader-like (friend-like) brand condition, a capital letter G (K) was placed on the chocolate image with the logo of Godiva (Kinder Bueno) shown in the ad. Each ad was A5 size. After ad viewing, two dependent variables were assessed: attitudes toward the brand and purchase intentions. The results showed that when facing the leader-like brand, participants in the large SCPM condition showed more favorable attitudes toward the brand and stronger purchase intention than the counterparts in the small SCPM condition. Opposite results were found with participants facing the friend-like brand, participants in the small SCPM condition showed more favorable attitudes toward the brand and stronger purchase intention than those in the large SCPM condition.

In Study 2, we had three objectives: to replicate the results of Study 1 with a different manipulation for BSR, to rule out the effects of product type, and to explore the possible mechanism underlying the predicted effect: processing fluency. A 2 (SCPM: large vs. small) x 2 (BSR: leader-like vs. friend-like) x 2 (product type: hedonic vs. utilitarian) between-subjects design was conducted. Since gender differences play an important role in product perceptions, only female participants were recruited. They were first asked to read a magazine article regarding a brand and then asked to view a forthcoming ad. Participants were presented with a brief description of a leader-like (friend-like) brand with a fictitious brand “Mirabelle” designed to prime the brand’s social role. The second section was the ads differing on SCPM and product type. The ad materials were identical as those used in Study 1. Perfume and cleanser were chosen to represent as hedonic and utilitarian products. The different ratios between product and model image sizes were created. After the ad was read, purchase intention was assessed. The results was consistent with those in Study 1. We then conducted mediated moderation analysis (Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010) and confirmed that the processing fluency mediated the effects of SCPM and BSR on purchase intention.

This research contributes to the literature on power in consumer behavior. Previous research has shown that power can be manipulated by the copy embedded in an ad (Rucker, Dubois, and Galinsky 2011). The current research is the first to illustrate that power can be primed through a larger product image (compared with a model image) in an ad. The current work offers rich managerial implications. Advertisers may benefit from taking power difference into consideration and arranging a larger size of the product image (compared with the model image) when promoting a leader-like brand. However, the findings from this work also lend a cautionary note: the strategy of a larger size of product image may not work when the brand is perceived as a friend to consumers. The current investigation provides guidance for brand managers in how to frame the brand’s social role in their brand positioning strategies. Brand managers should work closely with ad designers and be judicious in image placement in advertising strategy.

REFERENCES


