When Less Is More: Not Showing the Product’s Picture in an Advertisement Can Increase Product Evaluations

Tao Tao, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, China
Leilei Gao, Chinese University of Hong Kong, China

Four experiments showed that leaving out (vs. presenting) the product’s picture in an advertisement can lead to more favorable ad and brand evaluations. This effect only occurs when the content of the ad is less relevant to the viewers’ current life experiences.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Advertisers often include both the focal product’s picture and a context picture that illustrates the brand’s benefits in a print advertisement. In some cases, a product’s visual appearance is an important information to the viewers (Lazarus 1982, 1991; Yeung and Wyer 2004). In other cases, however, presenting the focal product’s picture does not provide much additional information, especially when the product mainly provides non-visual benefits (e.g., service), or when consumers are already familiar with the product’s appearance (e.g., coffee, tea). Then, when presenting the product’s picture does not provide additional value to the ad viewers, how will the absence (vs. presence) of a product’s picture affect consumers’ evaluations of the ad and the brand being advertised? The present research bears on this question.

Previous literature has suggested that people respond to pictures in a holistic manner (Spoehr and Lehmkuleh 1982), which facilitates the appreciation of the picture’s aesthetics and feelings (Holbrook and Moore 1981). Although responses to pictures are typically holistic, a visually prominent feature or an a priori motive to inspect a specific element can induce a shift from a generalized to a localized processing manner (Spoehr and Lehmkuleh 1982; Hochstein and Ahissar 2002). Based on this logic, consumers are assumed to approach an ad in a global manner. However, since consumers are normally aware of the promotional intent of an advertisement, their subsequent attention is likely to be quickly directed to the focal product’s picture (if any). As a result, consumers are likely to quickly shift from processing the holistic features of the ad to attending to the product’s picture, facilitating a local processing manner. Furthermore, since the appreciation of the context picture that conveys feelings often requires holistic processing (Escalas 2014; Green and Brock 2000), a local processing manner will reduce consumers’ appreciation of the affect-laden benefits. Thus, we propose that when the product’s appearance cannot contribute much to an appraisal of its quality, the omission of a picture of the product in an advertisement can increase consumers’ affective responses to the ad, and in turn can increase ad and brand evaluations as well as purchase intentions.

Using four different sets of stimuli, the first set of experiments examined the positive effect of the omission of a product’s picture. Experiment 1a employed a 2 (product presence: absent vs. present) x 2 (ad stimulus: Lay’s potato chips vs. Turkish Airlines) between-subjects design. The Lay’s chips ad depicted a scene of a girl enjoying eating. The product’s picture, a bag of potato chips was either printed on the lower left-hand side of the ad or not. The Turkish Airlines ad showed the silhouette of a girl standing on the beach, looking up into the sky. The product’s picture, an airplane, was either presented in the sky or absent from the ad. As expected, regardless of the ad stimulus, compared to the presence of a product’s picture, the absence of the picture increased brand evaluation (6.35 vs. 7.02; F(1, 114) = 4.76, p < .05), ad evaluation (5.02 vs. 5.51; F(1, 114) = 4.42, p < .05), and affective reaction (4.46 vs. 5.09; F(1, 114) = 6.64, p < .05). Besides, bootstrapping analyses showed that affective reaction mediates the effects of product presence on brand and ad evaluations. Experiment 1b and 1c replicated these findings using an ad of foot massage and an ad of tea ware, respectively.

Experiment 2 tested three alternative explanations. First, consumers might perceive the absence of the product’s picture as a mystery, enhancing favourableness. Second, consumers might try to imagine the appearance of the product when it is absent (Sengupta and Gorn 2002), and the self-generated product’s image might be more attractive. Third, the product’s picture might be unattractive and thus lead to negative impressions. To rule out these explanations, Experiment 2 manipulated whether the product’s picture was revealed after participants had browsed an ad for tea but before they made evaluations. If the positive product omission effect was driven by any of the above explanations, this effect should be eliminated after the product revelation. Results showed that ad evaluation was higher when product’s picture was not shown than when it was (4.64 vs. 3.82; F(1, 115) = 9.37, p < .01), independent of product revelation (Fs < 1).

Experiment 3 and 4 tested an important moderator. We assume that appreciation of the context picture requires holistic processing. However, if the context picture is highly relevant to the viewers’ current life experiences, they are likely to integrate his or her relevant personal experiences into the simulation of the content, which involves a detailed and concrete processing strategy (Zhao, Dahl and Hoeflerr 2014). As a result, the global processing manner triggered by the absence of a product’s picture will impair this self-relevant imagery and decrease the affective reactions evoked by the simulated experience. Consequently, omitting the product’s picture will have negative effects.

To test this proposition, participants in Experiment 3 browsed an ad for a bridal cake. The context picture depicted a hugging couple. Participants indicated their current romantic relationship status. If they were in a relationship, their simulation was likely to involve their personal experiences, resulting in a negative product omission effect. If participants were not, however, a positive product omission effect should occur. A significant interaction of product’s picture and relationship status (F(1, 117) = 6.47, p < .05) confirmed this prediction. Participants who were not in relationship evaluated the brand more favorably when the product’s picture was absent than when it was present (6.76 vs. 6.22; F(1, 117) = 3.71, p = .06). In contrast, participants who were in a relationship rated the brand less favorably in the former condition than in the latter condition (6.29 vs. 5.74; F(1, 117) = 2.88, p = .09). Experiment 4 replicated these findings using an ad of coffee and manipulating the content of the ad as either a study or a business scenario, which was either relevant to the student participants or not.

In summary, four experiments demonstrated that leaving out (vs. presenting) the product’s picture in an ad can lead to a positive effect on evaluations of the ad and the brand. These findings provide practical implications to advertisement design.

REFERENCE

