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Affective Responses to Images in Print Advertising: Affect Integration in a Simultaneous Presentation Context

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Print advertising frequently employs multiple images within a single advertisement, each of which is capable of generating an affective response. Little is known, however, about how these multiple ad components combine to impact overall emotional response to advertising. Evidence from three experiments suggests that when advertisement images are all positive or all negative, the most extreme image determines overall response. When an advertisement contains both positive and negative images, a compensatory mechanism seems to drive overall response. This implies that there may be little advantage to using multiple images of similar valence and intensity, but that a greater number of positive pictures will lead to a more positive response in mixed-valence advertisements.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Print advertisements routinely employ more than one image. Often the multiple images in an advertisement are of the same valence, either all positive (an ad for a vacation destination where multiple positive images of the place are shown) or all negative (a social marketing ad for wearing seatbelts where multiple negative images associated with not wearing one are shown). Many other advertisements, however, employ both positive and negative visuals in the same ad.

Previous research has explored sequentially presented affective stimuli, usually of the same valence (e.g. negative events of varying intensity). For example, Fredrickson and Kahneman (1993), indicate that the global affective response to a particular event is a joint combination of the peak level of affect experienced, as well as the affect encountered during the last portion of the event (i.e., the "peak-end rule"). Work on how people integrate multiple affect inducing images in a single exposure setting (as in an ad) has not been done previously. Therefore, we build on the extant literature and develop hypotheses about the integration of simultaneously presented affective images within an advertisement. Specifically:

H1a: In a simultaneous presentation context, the overall positive affect generated when combining affective images of positive valence in the same advertisement is a function of the peak positive image.

H1b: In a simultaneous presentation context, the overall negative affect generated when combining affective images of negative valence in the same advertisement is a function of the peak negative image.

H2: In a simultaneous presentation context, when oppositely valenced images are combined in the same advertisement, a compensatory mechanism will be used to arrive at the overall negative and overall positive affect experienced.

These hypotheses are tested in a series of three experiments involving advertising. Participants in each experiment view an ad for a camera, which purports to show several images taken by the camera. After viewing the ad for 30 seconds, participants fill out a 10 item affect scale

Experiment 1

The first experiment investigates whether a "peak" mechanism is operating when affective images of the same valence are simultaneously presented. Results of this study support H1a and H1b, indicating that when valence is held constant, the peak determines the overall affective reaction

Experiment 2

The second experiment investigates whether a compensatory mechanism operates when images of opposite valence but similar magnitude are presented together. Results of this experiment support Hypothesis 2. This was true for both the positive affect scale and the negative affect scale.

Experiment 3

The third experiment investigates whether the compensatory mechanism observed in experiment 2 would hold when both the valence and magnitude were altered. Further support is found for Hypothesis 2. As predicted, a compensatory mechanism was still observed.

Previous affect integration research suggests that non-compensatory mechanisms best describe the way in which we form overall affective impressions of an event, with disproportionate weight being given to the peak and end points. This prior research, however, has almost exclusively focused on the integration of stimuli of a common valence, within a sequential presentation context. Results from the present research indicate that, in a print advertising context, while a peak mechanism might best describe the integration of simultaneously presented affective images of common valence, a compensatory mechanism best describes the integration of simultaneously presented affective images of different valence (i.e. one positive and one negative). This is true both in the case of oppositely valenced images of the same intensity and oppositely valenced images of differing intensity.

The compensatory mechanism witnessed here is interesting on two fronts. First, purely compensatory findings in affect integration research, to this point, have not been observed. Second, whereas information integration literature suggests that simultaneous presentation leads to more non-compensatory the opposite is observed with respect to affect integration. This further underscores the need to consider research regarding affect integration and cognitive information integration as distinct

There are some caveats to the findings in this study. This study investigated affect integration in a simultaneous presentation context, however the exact sequence of the processing of the images by individuals was not examined. Across the three experiments, the order of affective stimuli (position of the images on the page) was counterbalanced, and there were no order (position) effects in any of the experiments. Nonetheless, eye-tracking evidence would provide useful insights into the exact sequence of the processing and indicate whether there is systematic processing of the stimuli in terms of order (e.g., processing the images left to right similar to text).

This research presents the first work to examine visual affect integration under simultaneous presentation of affective stimuli. An interesting picture of the process is emerging, which is consistent with, but different from the sequential presentation literature. We hope that these intriguing findings will spur greater interest in understanding how people respond to simultaneously presented affective stimuli, particularly in a print advertising context.

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