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Congruence and Incongruence in Advertising-Medium Combinations: More Than Just Two Sides of the Same Coin

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We suggest that ad-medium incongruence can evoke a negative process, involving persuasion knowledge, which is different from the standard fluency explanation. Experiment 1 shows that under incidental exposure, consumers focus their attention on incongruence, but not congruence. Experiment 2 confirms that incongruence leads to suspicion about manipulative intent.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Congruence/incongruence has been a key influencing factor in the marketing and advertising literature. We focus on perceived congruence/incongruence between an advertised product category and thematic media content of the vehicle in which it appears (e.g., type of magazine). Existing advertising research suggests that increased congruence generally has positive effects on consumer evaluations, although incongruence can also lead to positive evaluations under specific circumstances. Congruent (as opposed to incongruent) combinations have been described as easier to understand and to memorize (Dahlén 2005, 90; Maille and Fleck 2011, 71). Positive effects of incongruence are often explained by more extensive processing by consumers when they face moderately schema-incongruent information (Mandler 1982) because they want to resolve the incongruence (Dahlén et al. 2008).

The majority of existing studies rely on forced exposure and on explicit ratings of ad-media congruence. Conscious attention to congruence may be less evident when consumers are incidentally exposed to advertised products (e.g., while flipping through a magazine), or when congruence is assessed via less obvious open-ended measures. Under such circumstance, any evaluative effects of congruence are more likely to operate on evaluations through automatic processing.

Conversely, we expected incongruent combinations to garner more attention than congruent combinations under incidental exposure. We base this prediction on Maheswaran and Chaiken (1991) who found that incongruent elements of an advertisement increased the level of elaboration applied to the ad. Study 1 experimentally examines the degree to which consumers consciously focus on congruence or incongruence between an ad and the thematic media content under conditions of forced versus incidental exposure. Our predictions were that consumers would be aware of the congruence between advertising and media primarily under forced exposure conditions, while they would be more aware of incongruence between the ad and medium under the more naturalistic conditions of incidental exposure.

Our theorizing further suggests that congruence and incongruence may evoke different forms of information processing that respectively have positive and negative effects on consumer evaluations, albeit by very different means. This possibility is addressed in Study 2, where we include a control condition in order to split the effects of congruence and incongruence, and isolate the effects of each on consumer evaluations and the underlying information processing involved.

EXPERIMENTAL STUDY 1

We manipulated congruence versus incongruence of the ad/medium combination, as well as the method of exposure (incidental vs. forced). Sixty non-marketing male students were exposed to an ad (EPSON ad, Printer) that was either congruent (COMPUTER BILD) or incongruent (AUTO BILD) with the magazine in which the ad appeared. Participants were exposed to the ad either in a forced exposure condition (magazine cover and target ad visible together), or in an incidental exposure condition (magazine cover, followed by a

series of individual ads including the target and filler ads displayed for 3 sec/page).

A logistic regression showed a significant congruence/incongruence X incidental/forced exposure interaction on spontaneous mentions of congruence/incongruence ($p=.003$). Consumers rarely mentioned thematic congruence spontaneously under incidental exposure (6.67%), but were significantly more likely to mention congruence when exposure was forced (73.33%, $p<.001$). The interaction between exposure and incongruence further implied that when consumers were incidentally exposed to the ad they were more likely to spontaneously focus on thematic incongruence than congruence (46.67% vs. 6.67%, $p=.01$), whereas this difference was not significant under forced exposure (46.67 vs. 73.33%, $p=.13$).

Thus, positive effects of congruence observed under incidental naturalistic exposure conditions are likely to be the result of a relatively automatic process, whereas any negative evaluations of ad-magazine incongruence seemed more likely to involve conscious, deliberative information processing, possibly focused on the intended purpose or meaning of the incongruity. These predictions are examined in Study 2 by including an additional control condition that allowed us to tease apart the different forms of information processing that were likely to apply to the effects of congruence and incongruence.

EXPERIMENTAL STUDY 2

107 non-marketing students were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental groups (congruent, incongruent, or control). We used the same magazines as in study 1, but now combined with the fictitious brand name NANOX in order to avoid biases caused by preexisting brand attitudes. In the new control condition, participants only saw the NANOX ad. The incidental exposure procedure from study 1 was used, as this was the more realistic condition.

Since both the traditional fluency and persuasion knowledge explanations for the effect of ad-medium (in)congruence could work at the same time, both paths were first modeled and tested simultaneously using SEM (congruent=1, control=0, incongruent=-1; GFI .903; RMSEA .061). Supporting the fluency explanation, congruence had positive effects via the consistency—fluency—Aad—Aproduct—PI path. In addition, the novel pk predictions for incongruent ad-medium combinations were also supported. In this case, incongruence led to negative effects via the consistency—pk—Aproduct—PI path. When isolated in separate models that compared either ad-medium congruence or incongruence to controls, only the negative incongruence effects via perceived manipulative intent (pk) remained significant. Thus, results from the second study were consistent with the traditional view that increased congruence generally has positive effects on consumer evaluations, but importantly this was due to a combination of positive fluency effects associated with congruence, and negative pk effects associated with incongruence. Furthermore, when the effects of congruence and incongruence were better isolated, the negative effects of incongruence on consumers' evaluations via the pk mechanism proved to be more robust than the traditional congruence—fluency model.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We find that consumers seem to focus on congruence only when forced exposure is applied. Under incidental exposure, we find almost no attention on congruence. However, consumers are relatively aware of incongruence even under incidental exposure. Study 2 suggests that incongruence can evoke a negative process of its own, which operates through persuasion knowledge. It can be argued that past results that show positive congruence effects involving fluency by comparing congruent vs. incongruent conditions under forced exposure may have: 1) inflated attention to congruence per se, and 2) inadvertently confounded two very different congruence and incongruence processes.

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