THE MEDIUM IS NOT THE MESSAGE FOR ALL CONSUMERS

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ABSTRACT

Whereas managerial common sense proposes that there is an obvious relationship between perception of the media and perception of the advertisement, the present research proves this to be partially wrong. An empirical study on three professional magazines for farmers (N=337) shows that the relationship is not significant. However there is an important element of segmentation when the receivers' Locus of Control is used as a mediator variable: there is a positive relationship for the group of internally-controlled receivers and a negative relationship for the group of externally-controlled receivers. Advertisers are thus advised to differentiate their media strategy for these two publics. More studies are needed to probe this "obvious" relationship.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally considered by both academic and commercial researchers that there is a strong and almost obvious relationship between the medium and the message. Commercial researchers are tackling the problem of the contextual influence exercised by the medium on the perception of the advertisements.

It is generally admitted as a trivial evidence that the perception of the medium strongly influences the perception of the message. However, this evidence is not empirically based when we consider the particular relationship between credibility of the medium and perception of the advertisement.

This paper focuses on this question of particular importance for advertisers. In fact, advertisers choose media according to a number of quantifiable variables but also according to less easily quantifiable and almost qualitative variables such as the "image" of the medium. In other words, some media are more reputed, more prestigious than others and it is assumed that the "image" of the medium will enhance the acceptance of the advertisement. More clearly, it is assumed that the credibility of the message will induce the reader to accept more easily the content of the message. However this relationship does not seem to have been tested, but taken for granted.

This paper presents the results of an empirical study on readers of three competitive professional magazines. This experiment shows that the relationship holds only for a restricted segment of readers those who are characterized by a specific psychological trait, i.e. an internal Locus of Control.

We used this psychological trait because previous researches showed that this variable significantly intervenes in similar processes, which are exposed in the literature review section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Effects of credibility

As already stated, there does not seem to be any study relating the medium's image with the acceptance of the message. However, there is a number of non empirically-based statements on this relation, among which we have selected the following.

"The reputation of the medium in terms of honesty or objectivity (also) affects the credibility of the advertising. Consumers often think that a medium they respect should not do advertising for products it did not "know" were good" (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1983:264).

"Magazines such Life, Reader's Digest, Good Housekeeping and Parents' Magazine, which claim to exercise discretion as to what advertising is accepted, ..., are in effect, standing behind these products and recommending them in the capacity of a source" (Robertson, 1971:137).

"If creative strategy seeks to inspire confidence or dispel doubt, a medium such as Good Housekeeping magazine with its highly respected editorial and Seal of Appraisal would be appropriate" (Sandage and Fryburger, 1971:429).

"If people do not trust their media, they are likely to have less confidence in (your) advertisements as well" (Mc Grath, 1986:58; our emphasis).

One of the very few empirical researches show that magazines' credibility strongly and significantly affect attitudes toward advertisements (Fuchs 1964).

There is a very abundant literature on the relation between source credibility and message
acceptance. This literature is somewhat straightforward and is briefly reported here although it is relatively hazardous to transfer results on the source onto results on the medium.

However, it should be stressed that the distinction between source and media credibility is not even made at least in one major article of this literature: in their famous study on the effects of credibility upon immediate-versus-postponed changes of opinion, Hovland and Weiss (1951-52) consider the magazines studied as the source.

Previous research has consistently shown that credibility does enhance message acceptance. Trustworthiness and expertise, which, according to Kelman (1961) represent the cognitive component of source credibility, bring about more immediate attitude changes (Miller and Balsecheurt, 1969, Shulman and Worrall, 1970). Affective characteristics of the source, in particular attractiveness, have also been found to have positive effects on attitude change when there is a similarity between source and receiver (Simons et al., 1970).

Effects of Locus of Control

Locus of Control (or LOC) is a psychological concept that refers to attribution of success and failure, rewards and punishments to internal (i.e., individual's volitional behavior) versus external causes (i.e., environment):

"... an event regarded by some persons as a reward or a reinforcement may be differently perceived and reacted to by others. One of the determinants of this reaction is the degree to which the individual perceives that the reward follows or is contingent upon his own behavior or attributes versus the degree to which he feels the reward is controlled by forces outside of himself and may occur independently of his reactions (...) when the event is interpreted in this way (i.e., as a result of luck, chance, fate, as under the control of powerful others or as unpredictable because of the great complexity of the forces surrounding him) we have labeled this a belief in external control. If the person perceives that the event is contingent upon his own behavior or his own relatively permanent characteristics, we have termed this a belief in internal control" (Rotter, 1966).

Internally controlled individuals feel that they are in charge of their destinies whereas those who are externally controlled feel that they are at the whim of outside forces.

Several studies have established the relationship between LOC and persuasion: Chebat and Picard (1984), McGinnies and Ward (1974), Perreira and Austin (1980), and Weigly (1977) have shown that externals are more persuasive than internals.

INTERACTIVE EFFECTS OF CREDIBILITY AND LOCUS OF CONTROL

Very few studies have focused on the interactive effects of LOC and credibility upon message acceptance. Hester (1977) found that internally controlled individuals attribute significantly more credibility than externally controlled individuals to the source (r=.84; df=178; p<.001).

McGinnies and Ward (1974) showed contradictory results: whereas U.S. and Japanese externally controlled subjects are more influenced by highly credible source than internally controlled subjects, the reverse was true for Australian subjects.

It is reasoned that internals construct an integrated perception of the source and the message. Internals are assumed to be less sensitive to external pressure (such as the source's prestige, expertise, trustworthiness) than externals: consequently highly credible source would enhance less defensive reactions form internals than from externals.

Taking into account this "de facto" vacuum on this relationship we shall test the "obvious" hypothesis that the credibility of the medium strongly affects the acceptance of the message. The rationale for this hypothesis is basically the general theory of dissonance: the more respected media are vehicles of messages which cannot be rejected without a deeper reflection on the part of the reader if they were published by lesser respected media; consequently, respected media cannot accept advertisements which would harm their images. This is about the same kind of reasoning which justifies the simplest results on the source's credibility-message acceptance relationship.

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaire

A three-section questionnaire was administered to respondents whose composition is analyzed in the "sample" section. The first part focuses on attitudes toward three agricultural magazines. Following Kelman (1961) in particular, respondents were asked to evaluate the magazines on two cognitive dimensions (competence and confidence) and two affective dimensions (prestige and identification). An average score was performed as a measure of media credibility. The second part is a set of measures of exposure attention information and retention of randomly selected advertisements published in these three magazines. The third part contains various psychological tests, among which these is the Locus of Control scale (Rotter, 1966).