THE POWER OF ABSTRACT IMAGES IN ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT

Marketers have discovered the power of utilizing images in advertisements as a means to convey the experience of their product offerings. Advertising images of human models engaging in the product experience have the power to create self-referent schema storylines, emit emotions, and effect attitudes and behavior intentions toward that of the product. However, little research has been done to investigate the effect of a model’s image on the ability to fully engage the participant in self-referent processing. Does an abstract image of the model allow for the participant to transport themselves into the role of the model more easily than that of an image which clearly shows the distinguishing features of the model?

INTRODUCTION

Reaching the consumer is often a difficult task. Whether the goal is that of getting the attention of the consumer in a magazine, television commercial, or some other medium, competition can be fierce. How is the marketing manager supposed to not only gain the attention of the consumer but also ensure that the consumer receives the experiential message as intended? The product itself may be full of experience and emotion (i.e. tourist destination), but these messages are often hard to get across in today’s competitive and cluttered marketing environment.

So how should the marketing manager target the consumer using these mediums? Often times, clear images of model consumers enjoying the experience are used to gain the attention of the target consumer along with a listing of the product details. I purport that the use of images with model consumers clearly showing facial features can also restrict the consumer from engaging with the image to its full extent. I also purport that the use of textual listings such as the listing of amenities, pricing and other product particulars will restrict the consumer from engaging in the experiential image. One can truly immerse themselves into an advertising image similar in the way that we immerse ourselves into a novel. This narrative transportation (Gerrig; 1993) allows us to transport ourselves into the setting, imagining ourselves as a side participant. To make this transportation, we process things differently than when we are cognitively using our minds to process listing information (Green & Brock; 2000).

In this study, I will demonstrate how abstract images allow the individual to interpret the image using a desired schema already created by the individual. As in reading a novel, an individual can choose how to visualize the character in the marketing medium. If the image displayed in the advertisement shows clear facial features of the model consumer, there will be no leeway for the participant to interpret that model consumer as themselves or some other desired figure. However, if the image of the model consumer lacks clear facial features such as a picture taken from behind, the participant now has the freedom to picture themselves as that model on that secluded beach.

I will also demonstrate that the individual can not be transported when distracted with the task of cognitively listing as one does when reading about the product offering (amenities, pricing, etc.). Dual-processing models (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981) have been used to explain the cognitive elaboration used when processing listing tasks. However, transportation processing (Green & Brock, 2000) is used to explain the immersion of oneself into text and when this is interrupted by cognitive elaboration, all immersion is retracted, similar to the way one can be disrupted while engaged in a novel.

LITERATURE

Communication-Evoked Imagery

In a situation in which the product is an intangible service, the industries, such as tourism, often use images in their promotional work in order to help capture the experience offered by their product. A tourist destination may utilize an image of a happy couple on a secluded beach while a hotel may utilize an image of a relaxed woman utilizing the spa amenities at the resort. These images hope to convey the product experience offered as well as to elicit emotions that may be gained from the experience. Researchers have found two similar theories that demonstrate the effects of imagery on attitudes and intentions by the most readily available information that comes to mind when they see an image. These theories (dual-coding hypothesis and availability-valence hypothesis) are based on how the individual retrieves information after it is stored in a manner related to an image itself (Unnava and Burnkrant 1991; Kisielius and Sternthan 1984, 1986). To further the strength
of the image, Sheikh and Jordan (1983) state that the processing of images is more likely to retain the emotional nature of the stimulus that creates it affect.

Cognitive Pleasure

Research purports that the creation of fantasies daydreams and fantasies that a symbolic image can inspire, can encourage cognitive pleasure in addition to the sensory and emotional pleasures (MacInnis and Price 1987). The messages that images convey in various advertising media (Television, Solomon and Greenberg 1993; Print, Scott 1991; Radio, Bone and Ellen 1992) can require cognitive activity to both comprehend the material as well as to create further imagery. This pleasurable cognitive activity has been found to transfer towards the attitude of the product.

Self-Referent Processing

The characters portrayed in an image also influence the processing of the image. For example, advertisements often portray a happy couple enjoying the experience of the product. The two models in this image are clearly the focal point of the image. However, what has not been made clear in this example is whether the participant identifies with the models and why or why not? Do the models look like themselves and their significant other? It is clearly the intent of the advertiser to encourage the participant to imagine themselves in the image, but how is this done? Does he or she see themselves in this image? Research on self-related imagery demonstrates that the participant makes all efforts to picture oneself in the image prior to relating others within the image (Brown, Keenan, and Potts 1986; Kuiper and Rogers 1979). The participant first activates the schema references from their own experience before applying those of other-related schemas (MacInnis and Price 1987; Smith et al. 1984). Also, images that are self-referent will be more vivid in that it creates images from the self-schema over that of other-related schema.

Narrative Transportation

Gerrig (1993) has purported that participants often try to create a story with a beginning, middle and an ending when encountered with either text and/or image. The term Narrative Transportation was created to capture the mental process that melds attention, imagery, and feelings by the feeling of being lost in this story (Green and Brock 1993).

Someone (“the traveler”) is transported, by some means of transportation, as a result of performing certain actions. The traveler goes some distance form his or her world of origin, which makes some aspects of the world of origin inaccessible. The traveler returns to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey. (Gerrig 1993, pp. 10-11)

Many of us are experienced in being “lost” in a story (Nell, 1988, 2002) such as reading a novel or viewing a movie. However, this transportation can be inspired by any media that allows us to create our own storyline. The image of driving down a challenging and windy mountain highway in our new red sports car or relaxing in a hammock on a secluded beach, listening to the birds and the waves are two examples of being transported by simple television advertisements. These are triggered by plausible (Smith et al. 1984) self-referent mental schemas that we may already hold.

When a participant is transported, researchers have found that the participants do not see themselves as if they were viewing from afar but that they see the stories through their own eyes (Lord 1980). Gerrig (1993) describes this as a side-participant in the story with the participant viewing the story about them but not actually seeing themselves in the imagery created. Thus similar to Lord’s (1980) research, the participant sees themselves through their own eyes, projected in the story but does not literally see themselves as the model.

PROPOSITIONS

So a question remains that when a participant views an advertisement, how do they process an image that clearly is not of themselves on the secluded beach? Can the participant be as easily transported by the image of models who are concretely not themselves or another related individual? Is there a significant difference in the level of transportation between that of an image that displays models that are clearly not self-referent to that of images in which the participant has leeway to make the model self-referent? For example, can an image with two models found on a secluded beach encourage more transportation if the image only shows the backs of the model’s heads without displaying any discerning facial features?