



Consumers' emotional responses to the Christmas TV advertising of four retail brands



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyse consumer perceptions of Christmas advertising and its impact on brand perception for four UK fashion retail brands. The research develops the [Holbrook and Batra \(1987\)](#) advertising communications model by taking into account the portrayal of advert content arising from the retailer's positioning and self-perception, and pre-existing brand attitudes, and how these shape consumer response to the brand. Findings include that prior brand attitudes do not necessarily affect consumers' attitude towards the advert; they are able, for example, to enjoy the advert but still dislike the brand. Practical and managerial implications are included.

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1. Introduction

Consumers' emotional response to TV advertising is an established literature theme, with a corpus of research suggesting affect is critical in the way that consumers understand brand messages (e.g. [Aaker et al., 1986](#); [Batra and Ray, 1985](#); [Biel and Bridgwater, 1990](#); [Holbrook and Batra, 1987](#); [Stout and Leckenby, 1986](#)). [Mehta and Purvis \(2006\)](#) state that effective advertising should create appropriate affective responses critical in developing brand-consumer relationships. Research suggests that advertising constructed around emotional appeals is liked more ([Stout and Leckenby, 1986](#)), and is influential upon consumer decision-making processes ([Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1984](#)), ultimately creating a more positive attitude towards advert and brand ([Shimp, 1981](#)). Well-liked advertising arguably increases memorability, and persuades consumers to use the product/brand ([Keller et al., 2008](#)). In particular, advertising using sentimental, feel-good, family situations can evoke 'warm' feelings of love, belonging, family or friendship ([Aaker and Bruzzone, 1981](#)).

Such positive emotions arguably have greater resonance at Christmas, which is a symbolic time of love, friendship and reconciliation ([Clarke, 2007](#); [Gurău and Tinson, 2003](#)), and importantly, closely associated with gift giving ([Fischer and Arnold, 1990](#); [Otnes et al., 1993](#); [Pandya and Venkatesh, 1992](#)). Consequently for retailers, Christmas is characterised by high sales volumes ([Gurău and Tinson,](#)

[2003](#)), and is, therefore, 'a central component of the retail calendar' ([McKechnie and Tynan, 2006](#), p.131), and discussion of the seasonal retail 'winners and losers' is a feature of media comment in the commercial post mortem occurring each New Year, with implications for wider perceptions of the brands concerned.

Notwithstanding this, consumers' emotional responses to Christmas advertising and implications for retailer brand perception has been neglected in academic research. Related literature addresses the effects of Christmas advertising on children's gift requests ([Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2000](#); [Pine et al., 2007](#); [Otnes et al., 1994](#) and [Oprea et al., 2014](#)), but there appears to be no research relating specifically to perceptions of the products/brands in question, which in any case, are not retail-related. This paper analyses consumer perception of Christmas advertising and its impact on brand perception for four contrasting retail brands in the UK; [Marks and Spencer \(M&S\)](#), the [John Lewis Partnership \(JLP\)](#), [TK Maxx](#) and [Matalan](#). The paper begins by reviewing literature on consumer response to advertising messages and retail brand advertising, and introduces the conceptual framework for the study. The qualitative research design is outlined, before analysing consumers' perceptions of the adverts themselves and their impact on brand perceptions of the four retailers. The paper concludes by discussing implications, and advances an agenda for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Consumer emotional responses to advertisements

Audience response to advertising has been extensively researched (see [Batra and Stephens, 1994](#); [Percy and Rossiter, 1992](#); [Stout and](#)

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Leckenby, 1986). Specific responses will depend on the nature of the advertising appeal, and emotional appeals are one of a range of different types (see Allan, 2008; Klein, 2013). Well-made and original emotionally appealing adverts are more likely to produce higher brand and message recall (Friestad and Thorson, 1986), and cut through media clutter (Mai and Schoeller, 2009). Hazlett and Hazlett (1999) demonstrate that a well-crafted emotional advert can change brand attitudes (see also Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1984).

Arguably, the primary aim of emotional advertising is to create connections between product/brand and customer (Biel and Bridgwater, 1990; Schmitt, 1999). Television remains the strongest medium for emotional appeals (Clow, 2007; Heath, 2009). One particular emotional expression frequently used to engage TV viewers is nostalgia, relating to an individual's warm feelings about past experience, and reminiscence (Holak and Havlena, 1998). Stern outlines a broad approach to creating adverts that stimulate nostalgic response, noting that 'idealised memories' (Stern, 1992, p.13) play a critical role in eliciting the positive responses that are important in attitude formation towards advert and brand (Burnkrant and Unnava, 1995). According to Muehling and Pascal (2011), the ability to portray situations that create nostalgia is an important success factor. Christmas is a time renowned for nostalgia (Hall, 2014; Holak and Havlena, 1992) and is therefore an appropriate occasion to use this approach, particularly with regard to retail brands.

2.2. Retail brand advertising

A retail brand identifies a retailer's goods and services and differentiates them from competitors, (Keller, 2003), and brand equity is created when marketing/promotional activity attracts a more favourable response from consumers than for other retail brands (McGoldrick, 2002). Retail brand image is also affected by offering manufacturer brands in stores, as this can encourage 'consumer interest, patronage, and loyalty' (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004, p.4), in that these brands can enhance retailer image and build credibility, further contributing to brand positioning. This relates directly to the retailers in this study, as they sell either manufacturer brands and/or own-brand goods (and in the case of M&S and JLP, very strong own-brands). McGoldrick (2002) states that, for retailers, marketing communications objectives should be: to increase expenditure from existing customers; increase store traffic; increase product sales; and develop store image. Additionally, Keller suggests these objectives also incorporate, 'building brand equity, creating favourable attitudes towards the brand and maintaining the strength of unique brand association' (Keller, 2008, p.53).

Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) state that advertising seeks to gain an affective or emotional consumer reaction, and uses imagery/appeals that deliver the desired self-image and attractiveness (with ensuing emotional gratification), and that this can be displayed through clothing, which is the main product category sold by the retailers studied here. Clothing is a high-involvement product (Solomon and Rabolt, 2006), that can reflect social status, personality and aspirations. Thus, fashion advertising uses visual imagery to present products in idealistic settings (Solomon et al., 2010) and implying that buying/wearing these garments achieves desirable outcomes. However, Kim (2000) notes that little is known about consumers' reactions to *fashion-related* advertisements. Such research has tended to focus on press advertising (see Kim, 2000; Oh, 2005), and has not focused on retailers' brands specifically. This study aims to address these lacunae by analysing emotional responses to TV advertising by fashion-oriented retail brands at a crucial period of the year.

2.3. Conceptual framework

Given the aim of analysing consumer emotional responses to particular adverts, this study draws on theory relating to 'attitude towards the ad'¹ (A_{AD}), whose importance to formation of brand attitude has been attested by Mehta, (1994) and Gresham and Shimp, (1985). Heath, (2009) suggests that A_{AD} is vital for the emotionally biased appeals prevalent in TV advertising. Moreover, consumers' 'liking' of an advert is a key element in determining how well it increases sales (Biel and Bridgwater, 1990). Holbrook and Batra (1987) utilised an aggregated communications model to demonstrate the role that emotional response plays as the key intermediary between advertising content and attitude towards advert and brand. Thus, advert content affects the consumer's emotional response to the advert (P1), which affects attitude towards the advert (P2), and in turn, affects attitude towards the brand (P3), as shown in Fig. 1.

Studies of A_{AD} and emotional response were developed in the 1980's in an attempt to assess attitude to the advert and resulting brand attitude, in a period when quantitative studies dominated research in this area (Höjjer, 2008). The communication model was used to summarise this work and assumes a sequential track from advert content to brand attitude, and included the intervening factor of emotional response to the advert as a new area of study.

Research of this nature has been criticised (see Kim-Shyan Fam, 2008): studies were often conducted with students who are deemed to have a more emotional response; and adverts were purposively selected for the research, leading to potential bias. The research focused on the adverts themselves, and not peoples' response to them. Furthermore, using predetermined emotional adjectives to describe feelings towards the adverts in question restricted respondents in their answers.

Since this time, notwithstanding a greater emphasis on emotional advertising (Bold, 2014), focus on such research appears to have declined. But, given the fact that TV advertising is still important in the UK media landscape, and that for retailers, 'The battle to "own" Christmas is the toughest fought and most mission-critical one of the year' (Collins, 2014), a deeper understanding of consumer's emotional response to advertising at a critical time in the retail calendar is valuable, as it is often when brand building can be reinforced in the minds of consumers (Chala, 2015).

3. Research design

This study uses a two stage qualitative approach to examine emotional responses to the adverts shown, why they arise, and how they impact on respondents' feelings, attitude towards the advert and attitude towards the brand. The selection of retail brands whose Christmas adverts were the subject of analysis (see Appendix 1 for background information on retailers) was informed by:

- (1) Position in the *Retail Week* top 500 retailers (i.e. established brands, and therefore recognisable to respondents);
- (2) Targeting of women aged 18–45 (i.e. a broad shopper profile, selling general merchandise for the family).
- (3) Use of mass media to reach their target audience, with TV advertising featuring media activities to some degree. Retailers featured spent between 13–43% of their marketing communications spend on TV advertising.

¹ In the original Holbrook and Batra (1987) paper Attitude towards the Advert was expressed as an equation, A_{AD} .

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