

Research Article

Just do it! Why committed consumers react negatively to assertive ads

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Abstract

Research shows that assertive ads, which direct consumers to take specific actions (e.g., Visit us; Just do it!), are ineffective due to reactance. However, such ads remain prevalent. We reexamine assertive ads, showing that their effectiveness depends on consumers' relationship with the advertising brand. Across studies, we compare committed and uncommitted consumers' reactions to assertive ads. We find that because committed (vs. uncommitted) brand relationships involve stronger compliance norms, assertive ads create greater pressure to comply for committed consumers. Specifically, we propose and show that committed consumers anticipate feeling guilty if they ignore an assertive message, creating pressure to comply. Pressure to comply increases reactance, which paradoxically reduces compliance, ultimately leading to decreased ad and brand liking as well as decreased monetary allocations to the brand. Our results show the perils that assertive ads pose for marketers and their most valuable customers.

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Assertive ad language directs consumers to enact specific behaviors (e.g., “Buy now!” “Like us on Facebook!”), creating the impression that refusal is not an option (Dillard, Kinney, & Cruz, 1996; Dillard & Shen, 2005; Grandpre, Alvaro, Burgoon, Miller, & Hall, 2003; Kronrod, Grinstein, & Wathieu, 2012a, 2012b). As a result, assertive ads create pressure for consumers to comply. Intuitively, such pressure should increase compliance. However, prior work shows that pressure to comply can activate reactance (Clee & Wicklund, 1980; Wicklund, Slattum, & Solomon, 1970), a strong motivation to protect one's freedom (Brehm, 1966). Due to reactance motivation, consumers often disregard assertive ads, backlash against them,

and evaluate the communication and communicator negatively (Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004; Grandpre et al., 2003; Kronrod et al., 2012a; Miller, Lane, Deatrick, Young, & Potts, 2007). Despite these negative effects, assertive ads remain prevalent. A content analysis of America's top ten print magazines revealed that 72% of ads contained assertive language (e.g., “Visit us”, “Call now”, “Shop now”). On average, each ad contained two assertive statements (see Table 1). Given their prevalence, the present work examines when and why assertive ads elicit reactance.

We identify a new moderator of reactance to assertive ads: consumer–brand relationships. We predict and show that compared to consumers in uncommitted brand relationships, consumers in committed brand relationships exhibit greater reactance and increased negative responses to assertive ads. We hypothesize that this occurs because committed brand relationships have stronger compliance norms than uncommitted brand relationships (Aggarwal, 2004; Fournier, 1998). While it may

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¹ The first two authors contributed equally to this research.

Table 1
Coding of print ads from America’s top ten magazines by circulation.

Circulation (millions)	Magazine title	Total ads	Assertive ads		Average # of assertive expressions	Examples
			#	%		
8.30	Reader’s Digest	62	44	71%	1.63	Send for it. You must own! Use every day. Register now. Visit...
7.70	Better Homes & Gardens	105	69	66%	1.58	Buy one. Now get... Visit us. Switch today. Use it regularly.
5.00	National Geographic	21	19	90%	2.62	Mail us...Order today! Call now. Visit...
4.70	Good Housekeeping	100	78	78%	2.21	Try it on. Us it. Visit... Switch. Call... Download... Get active... Look... Drive one. Go to Facebook.
3.90	Family Circle	132	105	80%	2.20	Go To Facebook. Visit [website]. Visit store. Switch to. Schedule today. Talk about it. Choose... Get...
3.90	Woman’s Day	122	87	71%	2.25	Become a Fan. Visit... Get it now! Recycle. Hurry!
3.80	Ladies’ Home Journal	59	47	80%	2.29	Try it. Visit... Email us. Buy at... Shop... Make an appointment today. Get started. Get up. Share it.
3.70	People	87	43	49%	1.25	Shop now! Step away. Get dressed. Pick one.
3.50	Game Informer	13	9	69%	1.85	Pre-order now! Prepare for... Sign up... Remember... Visit...
3.40	Time	17	14	82%	2.00	Stop in today. Smile. Go to... Visit... Tune in. Stand up. Donate...
	<i>Total</i>	<i>718</i>	<i>515</i>	<i>72%</i>	<i>1.99</i>	

Note: Circulation based on 2008 Audit Bureau of Circulations, Magazine Publishers of America. Content analysis was done using September 2010 issues for all magazines. All language in the ad, excluding the fine print, was analyzed.

seem that stronger compliance norms should increase compliance, we suggest that because compliance norms increase pressure to comply, they will instead increase reactance (Brehm, 1966; Wicklund et al., 1970). Paradoxically, increased reactance will reduce compliance (Brehm, 1966; Dillard & Shen, 2005; Pavey & Sparks, 2009), leading to an increase in committed consumers’ negative reactions to assertive ads.

We propose that this effect is driven by a previously unidentified antecedent of pressure to comply: non-compliance guilt. Specifically, we posit that because committed relationships have strong compliance norms, non-compliance with an assertive ad’s directive violates those norms, and can elicit guilt (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1995; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Tangney & Fischer, 1995). While guilt can increase compliance in human relationships (Freedman, Wallington, & Bless, 1967; Overall, Girme, Lemay, & Hammond, 2014), we predict that it will *reduce* compliance in brand relationships. Specifically, we argue that brands’ use of guilt appeals can be perceived as an overt persuasion attempt, raising consumers’ suspicion (Hibbert, Smith, Davies, & Ireland, 2007), activating their persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994), and making the brand’s manipulative intent salient (Cotte, Coulter, & Moore, 2005). When manipulative intent is salient, reactance increases (Clee &

Wicklund, 1980; Reinhart, Marshall, Feeley, & Tutzauer, 2007). Accordingly, we predict that in response to assertive ads, committed consumers will experience guilt, referred to here as “non-compliance guilt”. Non-compliance guilt will increase pressure to comply, which will increase reactance, leading committed consumers to have more negative reactions to assertive ads than uncommitted consumers (see Fig. 1).

This research provides several contributions. Foremost, we bring reactance and consumer–brand relationship theories together via the shared construct of compliance. This contributes to reactance theory by introducing a new moderator of reactance: consumer–brand relationships. Moreover, we identify a new antecedent of pressure to comply: non-compliance guilt. Whereas prior work has focused on tangible, practical consequences of non-compliance as antecedents of pressure to comply (e.g., missing out on a deal; Lessne & Notarantonio, 1988; Kronrod et al., 2012a), we show that reactance can occur even without such tangible consequences. In addition, we extend consumer–brand relationship theory by identifying reactance as a novel outcome of relationship type. Finally, we draw out differences between human and brand relationships.

We begin with a brief review of relevant prior work, focusing on the nature of reactance and the role of pressure to comply across committed and uncommitted brand

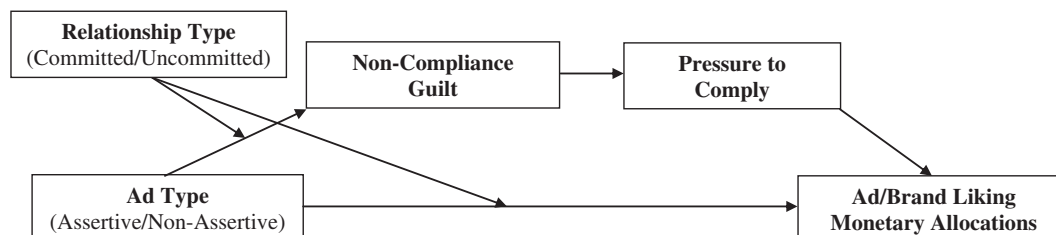


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

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