

Research Article

Show me the product, show me the model: Effect of picture type on attitudes toward advertising ☆

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Abstract

We suggest that a consideration of consumer self-evaluations is fundamental to understanding the conditions under which it is more advantageous to present person or product pictures in print advertisements. We build on the basic human motives of self-enhancement and self-verification to propose that the specific self-esteem level of consumers, in the domain relevant for the category, differentially affects their responses to picture type. Specifically, for consumers with low (high) domain-specific self-esteem, depicting a product (person) in the advertisement enhances attitudes toward the advertisement more than depicting a person (product). In two studies, we demonstrate the proposed matching relationships using two different domains of consumer self-evaluation: appearance self-esteem and academic self-esteem. We also show that increased and more fluent generation of self-related mental imagery drives the observed improvement in attitudes toward the advertisement. Our findings suggest direct implications for advertising design.

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Introduction

Contemporary print advertising is distinctive in its reliance on the persuasiveness of pictures (McQuarrie, 2007). Pictures have come to occupy an increasingly large portion of the typical magazine or newspaper advertisement (ad), and almost every print ad contains a picture (van Gisbergen, Ketelaar, & Beentjes, 2004). This reliance is justified given the variety of ways in which pictorial stimuli have been shown to facilitate

persuasion and improve related consumer responses (Edell & Staelin, 1983).

Although attention, learning, memory, and attitude enhancing abilities of pictures are well documented, researchers criticize them as being visuals “imposed” by advertisers (Lutz & Lutz, 1978). The choice of a specific picture for an ad may limit its potential relevance for some viewers. For instance, an ad for a holiday resort depicting a poolside full of people may conjure a vivid representation of the advertised experience. However, it may seem less personally relevant to some of the viewers who cannot relate to the people depicted in the ad or who may find some aspect of the pool unsuitable for themselves. Such a potentially incongruent representation is especially problematic because a key aspect of advertising effectiveness is the ability to encourage viewers to relate to some aspect of the product and/or the ad (Debevec & Romeo, 1992). Self-referencing, this process of relating external stimuli to oneself, introduces additional memory and persuasion advantages in an advertising context

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(Meyers-Levy & Peracchio, 1996). Therefore, factors that encourage self-referencing when processing pictorial stimuli are crucial to study because they may ameliorate the imposed nature of pictures in ads.

In this paper, we consider consumer self-perception as a factor that may affect self-referencing when processing pictures in advertising. We focus on the type of picture used in an ad, and we explore the conditions under which presenting a *person* versus a *product* picture is more advantageous. We suggest that the specific consumer self-esteem elicited by the product category (e.g., appearance self-esteem for cosmetic products) affects consumer reaction toward the use of person or product pictures in advertising.

As Yang, Zhang, and Peracchio (2010) note, only a few researchers have examined consumer self-perception as a determining factor in the effectiveness of pictorial stimuli within advertising. An important stream of research on pictures with such a focus has been the study of idealized advertising images in relation to physical self-esteem. Multiple papers have consistently shown the significant role of women's appearance self-esteem in affecting their responses to ads that use pictures of attractive models (e.g., Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Martin & Gentry, 1997). Specifically, women with low appearance self-esteem experienced greater negative affect than women with high appearance self-esteem when exposed to ads containing pictures of beautiful women (e.g., Bower, 2001). This negative affect, in turn, lowered their evaluations of product argumentation and resulted in less favorable attitudes toward the ad (e.g., Martin, Veer, & Pervan, 2007). This stream of work focuses on the effectiveness of *person* pictures in advertising, as affected by consumer self-perceptions in the domain of appearance self-esteem.

We aim to take a more basic perspective in this paper. We study *product* pictures in addition to *person* pictures. Moreover, we explore their relation to consumer self-perceptions in multiple domains of specific self-esteem: appearance and academic. In both of these domains, the choice of a product picture (i.e., cosmetic products or educational services) versus a person picture (i.e., attractive models or successful models) differentially affects attitudes toward the ad, depending on consumers' specific self-esteem level in the given domain (i.e., domain-specific self-esteem). We posit that the interplay between the types of picture used in an ad and consumers' domain-specific self-esteem triggers greater self-referencing, ultimately affecting attitudes toward the communication.

We add to the existing research on advertising effectiveness in various ways. First, multiple scholars have noted the lack of a conceptual toolkit for differentiating pictures and “breaking up” their elements to understand them better (e.g., McQuarrie, 2007). We identify *person* versus *product* pictures as an important conceptual (and strategic) differentiation, which has not been the focus of previous systematic empirical work. This focus also allows us to extend the work on idealized advertising images by incorporating the study of product pictures together with person pictures, using multiple specific self-esteem domains for both male and female consumers. We also demonstrate a process explanation through increased and

easier generation of self-related mental imagery, building on self-referencing. Because pictures have been noted previously as having limited capacity to be self-relevant with their advertiser-imposed imagery (Lutz & Lutz, 1978), our work also adds to research on imagery processing.

We begin by discussing the literature relevant to our research. We present insights from previous work on the imagery value of pictures and consumer self-esteem while building the conceptual framework for our hypothesized effects. We then describe in detail two studies that use appearance and academic self-esteem domains. We conclude by discussing the specific contributions of the research and presenting future directions in this area.

Imagery value of pictures as affected by self-referencing

Previous research has established the perceptual and persuasive advantages of using pictures in advertising, either in comparison to or through their interaction with textual systems (e.g., Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 2005; Scott, 1994; Sojka & Giese, 2006). Pictures have high attention-grabbing and -keeping qualities (McQuarrie, 2007). They are remembered better (Childers & Houston, 1984), and they influence attitudes more than words alone (Kisielius & Sternthal, 1984).

Pictures, due to their vivid nature, are also influential through their imagery value (MacInnis & Price, 1987). Imagery processing is “a mental event involving visualization of a concept or relationship” (Lutz & Lutz, 1978), and increased imagery has been consistently shown to improve consumer attitudes toward advertising (e.g., Bolls & Muehling, 2007; Bone & Ellen, 1992; Rossiter & Percy, 1980). Accordingly, researchers have suggested the use of concrete pictures (visuals easily identifiable as a person, place, or object) as an important means of stimulating imagery processing and improving attitudes toward the ad (Babin & Burns, 1997).

A potential limitation of concrete pictures is that the imagery generation can be restricted to the advertiser-imposed content of the visual (Lutz & Lutz, 1978). McQuarrie (2007) suggests that the imagery value of a picture should not only be limited to its representational ability of an existing content, but should also incorporate its capacity to stimulate further imagery generation. Accordingly, we posit that to move beyond the imposed or suggested imagery content of concrete pictures, viewers need to be able to relate to some aspect of this content. The imagery value of pictures, and the corresponding positive influence on consumer responses, should improve when greater self-referencing occurs. Knowledge structures about oneself contain rich and plentiful associations, which are also, by definition, more pertinent for the individual (Burns, Biswas, & Babin, 1993). The effectiveness of a marketing communication improves when viewers are able to tap into these associations about themselves while processing the stimuli (Burnkrant & Unnava, 1995; MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989).

Building on this significance of self-referencing, we focus on the activation of self-related imagery through the correct use of pictures in advertising, while considering consumer self-perceptions. Similar to Aydinoglu and Krishna (2012), we define self-related mental imagery as “consumers' visualization of the

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