

Religious Symbols as Peripheral Cues in Advertising: A Replication of the Elaboration Likelihood Model

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This study is a replication of the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion, and differs from prior examinations of the ELM in that the peripheral cue has deep meaning. The Christian cross, a powerful sacred symbol in our culture, is used as a peripheral cue, rather than a more mundane peripheral cue (such as source attractiveness) that typically has been used by consumer researchers in the past. This represents a conceptual (Type III) replication. Respondents' levels of religious dogmatism and product category involvement were measured and used as blocking factors. Argument strength and presence or absence of the Christian cross were manipulated to form four experimental cells. Hypotheses follow traditional ELM predictions regarding attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the product, and purchase intention. Results suggest that the nature of the peripheral cue used in an advertisement does make a difference in how the cue operates. Contrary to expectations, low-involvement subjects who were high in religious dogmatism were found to have a less favorable attitude toward the brand and a lower purchase intention when exposed to ads containing the cross ($F = 2.81, p < 0.05$; $F = 6.18, p < 0.001$). Highly dogmatic subjects who manifest interest in the product, however, have their positive feelings toward the product marginally enhanced by the presence of the cross ($F = 3.52, p = 0.065$). Specifically, there seems to be a boundary condition existing for the ELM with regard to the type of peripheral cue used. J BUSN RES 2000. 48.63–68. © 2000 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Petty and Cacioppo (1979, 1981) developed the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) to organize social psychological research on persuasion. The ELM framework posits both central and peripheral routes to attitude formation. A number of studies have been conducted investigating the effects of level of involvement and strength of message argument on attitude formation. Many of these studies represent replications that are deliberate modifications of previous stud-

ies, with an attempt to generalize the ELM to a broader set of cues and/or to clarify relationships among variables within the framework (e.g., Droge, 1989; MacKenzie and Spreng, 1992; Miniard, Sirdeshmukh, and Innis, 1992; Swasy and Munch, 1985). These studies have all used similar peripheral cues, such as background music (Park and Young, 1986), source factors (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981, 1984a, 1984b; Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann, 1983; Andrews and Shimp, 1990), or humor (Duncan and Nelson, 1985), all of a profane nature. It is possible that the nature of the peripheral cue might have an effect on the target audience, depending upon the level of meaning of such a cue to different audiences. If more profound cues with demonstrated deeper effects on target audiences could be used, then the use of peripheral cues in low-involvement persuasive situations might become more effective. That is, the use of more potent peripheral cues should lead to more powerful advertising effects if the relationships posited by the ELM hold across this boundary.

The present research represents a conceptual replication of the ELM; that is, it uses a similar conceptual structure but incorporates a change in the independent variable (Monroe, 1992a). This is called a Type III replication, because it is a deliberate modification of a prior study, rather than a faithful reproduction of previous research efforts (Easley, Madden, and Dunn, 1994). To test the generalizability of the ELM, the effects of embedding a core religious symbol; namely, a cross, (as an example of a peripheral cue with more profound meaning) in a target advertisement are tested here. The influences of involvement with the product category and level of religious dogmatism on this process are examined as well.

Background Literature

Attitude Formation and the Elaboration Likelihood Model

When people are motivated and able to engage in issue-relevant thinking regarding a message, elaboration likelihood is

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high. Specifically, people will likely: (1) attend to the central arguments present in the appeal; (2) attempt to access relevant associations, images, and experiences from memory; (3) scrutinize and elaborate upon the externally provided message arguments in light of associations available from memory; (4) draw inferences about the merits of the arguments based on their analysis of the data extracted from memory and from the appeal; and (5) derive an over-all evaluation of, or attitude toward, the issue or object recommended in the appeal (Petty and Cacioppo, 1984a). Thus, when people are motivated to consider carefully the merits of a buying decision, as in a high-involvement situation, the ELM suggests that they will follow this central route to persuasion in which attitude change results from a conscientious effort to evaluate the merits of the advocated position (Petty and Cacioppo, 1984b; Andrews and Shimp, 1990).

When people are not motivated to consider issue-relevant information, as in a low-involvement situation, acceptance or rejection of the promotional appeal is not based upon conscientious consideration of the message arguments. Instead, attitude formation is based upon the issue or object being associated with positive or negative cues that have no intrinsic link to the product, such as source attractiveness. Message recipients then draw simple inferences based upon these various peripheral cues in the persuasion context, which, in turn, affects their judgments of the merits of the promotional message (Petty and Cacioppo, 1984b; Andrews and Shimp, 1990). The central and peripheral routes represent points on a continuum ranging from high- to low-elaboration likelihood, and not two mutually exclusive and exhaustive types of persuasion. For example, when the message relevance is neither high nor low, the attractiveness and expertise of the source enhance persuasion only when compelling arguments are presented (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann, 1983).

Attitude Toward the Advertisement

The concept of attitude toward the advertisement (Aad) can be defined as "a predisposition to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner to a particular advertising stimulus during a particular exposure occasion" (Solomon, 1992, p. 139). Emphasis is, of course, focused on the creation of a positive feeling on the part of the consumer after she or he has processed the ad. Aad is a common dependent variable in copy tests.

Research suggests that Aad has two distinct dimensions (Shimp, 1981; Burton and Lichtenstein, 1989). First, there is a cognitive dimension wherein a consumer may form an attitude toward the ad by consciously processing executional elements of the ad, such as copy and layout. There is also an emotional dimension wherein a consumer may form an attitude toward the ad because of an affective response evoked by the ad without conscious processing of the executional elements. This is the dimension wherein a sacred cue would most likely operate to affect over-all Aad. A consumer's Aad may impact her or his brand choice, because it allows her or him to retrieve

an over-all evaluation of or affect for each purchase alternative without having to examine beliefs about specific product attributes, allowing the consumer to engage in minimal processing. It has also been suggested that a consumer's pleasant feelings regarding ads for a new product may provide a key input into her or his over-all global attitude toward the product, and, therefore, the probability of choosing the new brand (Shimp, 1981).

Religious Symbolism

The role of religion in a culture is to transform magic from a direct manipulation of natural and unnatural (or at least misunderstood or mystical) forces into a symbolic activity. The realm of the supernatural becomes accessible only through the mediation of symbols. In an effort to influence the spiritual powers, actions are addressed to spirits, souls, and/or gods/goddesses using concrete instrumentalities that mean something above and beyond their real-world potencies (Weber, 1922). Such symbols become entrenched and unalterable within a religious tradition and fall under the protection of supernatural forces. Therefore, as a peripheral cue, a religious symbol should be more powerful than a secular cue, and is worth testing in the ELM framework because of its special nature.

Religious symbols differ in their importance to people of a particular religious affiliation, depending upon members' degree of identification with the faith. Strength of belief in the tenets proclaimed by the religious order in question, known as religious dogmatism, is an indication of immersion in a religious system (Di Giuseppe, 1981). That is, religious dogmatism is positively correlated with the degree to which religion is meaningful and important to people's lives. Therefore, concrete religious symbols should take on more significance to those with higher levels of religious dogmatism. For example, the cross should play a central role in the lives of highly dogmatic Christians, and its presence should elicit favorable associations in their minds.

Symbolism in Consumer Research

The consumer world is a web of meanings among consumers and marketers woven from signs and symbols ensconced in their cultural space and time. (Mick, 1986, p. 196)

A considerable body of consumer research has focused on cultural symbolism. The idea that products represent many things to consumers above and beyond their functional uses is well established (c.f., Levy, 1959, 1989). Such associations can be created by the advertisements and contexts in which the product appears in the marketplace as well as through the social settings and situations in which the product is consumed. Any material commodity can assume many meanings through the use of that object in social interaction (Gottdiener, 1985). A person's relation to objective reality (i.e., consumption objects that he or she encounters) then, is mediated by the symbolic environment surrounding such objects

(Solomon, 1992). There is a three-way relationship between the consumption objects, the set of marketers who produce, promote, and distribute such objects, and the social groups who use such objects. These connections serve to infuse the commodity with symbolic meaning within a particular cultural context (Gottdiener, 1985). Consumers form particular attitudes regarding products and their advertisements based upon these cultural connections. Differing perceptions of symbolic associations with products and the symbols themselves may have considerable influence on purchase decisions, as well. Therefore, associating a product with a core cultural symbol, such as the Christian cross, is likely to affect consumer attitudes and behaviors toward the product.

Hypotheses

Given that the cross is considered sacred (not worldly) by dogmatic Christians, it follows that they exhibit a certain commitment to it and what it stands for, characterized as a “focused emotion or emotional attachment.” This commitment functions psychologically to direct the Christian’s attention to the cross (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, 1989, p. 7).

H1: Low-involvement subjects who are high in religious dogmatism should pay greater attention to the ad in which the cross has been embedded than subjects low in religious dogmatism.

Furthermore, because the cross crystallizes a whole belief system for believers and produces a positive emotional reaction in them, the affective component of attitude toward the ad should be triggered by the presence of the cross.

H2: Low-involvement subjects who are high in religious dogmatism should have a more favorable attitude toward the ad containing the cross than subjects low in religious dogmatism.

The product selected for this study is pet insurance (as described in the methods section below). Pets are also seen as a type of sacred entity in our society, especially by pet owners (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, 1989). This same type of positive emotional reaction, then, should be triggered in people who have a pet in the home. Pet owners are the target audience for pet insurance.

H3: Subjects who are highly involved with pet insurance should have a more favorable attitude toward the ad.

From the earlier discussion of the ELM regarding central and peripheral cues, several predictions regarding message argument strength can be made. Strong arguments should act as central cues to those highly involved with the product, but should have little effect on those with low involvement. The cross should act as a peripheral cue to those with low involvement with the product, but should arouse pleasant associations particularly in highly dogmatic Christians. Therefore,

the cross should be an effective peripheral cue for those high in religious dogmatism and not for those with low levels of religious dogmatism.

H4a: Subjects highly involved with the product category (pet insurance) should have more favorable attitudes toward the brand when exposed to strong arguments.

H4b: Subjects with low involvement in the product category and who are high in religious dogmatism should have more favorable attitudes toward the brand when exposed to the ad containing the cross.

Similar effects are predicted for purchase intentions.

H5a: Subjects highly involved with the product category should exhibit higher purchase intentions when exposed to strong arguments.

H5b: Subjects with low involvement in the product category and who are high in religious dogmatism should exhibit higher purchase intentions when exposed to the ad containing the cross.

These hypotheses are consistent with the predictions of the ELM. The change in the nature of the peripheral cue is a test of the robustness of the model.

Method

Pretests

Using Zaichkowsky’s (1985) 20-item seven-point bipolar adjective scale to measure involvement, several product categories (wireless bicycle computer, mountain bike, dome tent, pet insurance, portable CD player, lap-top computer, professional running shoes, and roller blades) were tested, looking specifically for a well-defined bimodal distribution of high and low involvement. Pet insurance displayed the most pronounced levels of high and low involvement, with respondents seeing the product as either highly relevant to them or not very relevant to them at all, probably indicative of pet ownership status. An ad for pet insurance was developed with a dog in front of the hearth, and a cross was embedded over the fireplace mantle in one version of the ad. Both versions of the ad with copy were pretested within a portfolio of real ads to see if the target ad was readable and realistic enough to seem to be a real-life ad. Twelve different message arguments (six developed to be weak and six developed to be strong) were tested on a seven-point weak-to-strong scale, and the three weakest and three strongest were selected for the final versions of the ad.

Sample and Design

A convenience sample of 368 undergraduate students (47% female, 53% male) in classroom groups of 25 to 60 students were shown one of four different ad versions (2 × 2 between-subjects factorial design): weak arguments with (II) or without

Table 1. Descriptions and Measures of Variables

| Variable | Measures | Description |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Attention to the ad | “The Vetcare advertisement caught my interest.” “The Vetcare advertisement was boring.” | 2 five-point items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Coefficient alpha = 0.76 |
| Attitude toward the ad | “I liked the Vetcare ad.” “I disliked the pet health insurance ad.” “The Vetcare ad itself was enjoyable.” | 3 five-point items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Coefficient alpha = 0.84 |
| Attitude toward the brand | “Good-bad” “Harmful-beneficial” “Foolish-wise” “Rewarding-punishing” | 4-item seven-point bipolar adjective scale. Coefficient alpha = 0.84 |
| Behavioral intention | “There is no way that I would try Vetcare Pet Health Insurance.” “How likely would you be to purchase Vetcare Pet Health Insurance if it were available in your area?” | 1 five-point item ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) and 1 five-point purchase intention measure ranging from 1 (definitely unlikely) to 5 (definitely likely). Coefficient alpha = 0.82 |
| Product involvement | Zaichkowsky's (1985) scale | 20-item seven-point bipolar adjective scale. Coefficient alpha = 0.98 |
| Dogmatism | Fagan and Breed's (1970) scale | 21-item five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Coefficient alpha = 0.88 |

(I) the cross or strong arguments with (IV) or without (III) the cross. The target ad was embedded in a slide portfolio of 10 ads. All subjects saw all 10 ads for 15 seconds each two times through, and then filled out a questionnaire. Contained in the questionnaire were a previously validated 21-item five-point Likert scale measuring level of religious dogmatism (Fagan and Breed, 1970) and the Zaichkowsky involvement scale for three selected product categories.

Dependent Measures

First, subjects' recall and recognition of product categories and brands were measured, along with recall of product features mentioned in three selected ads, one of which was the target ad. Then, for the same three ads, subjects' attitude toward the ad (four-item, five-point Likert scale), attention to the ad, attitude toward the brand (three-item, five-point Likert scale, four-item semantic differential scale, and ratio measure), and purchase intention (two-item, five-point Likert scale) were measured. A more detailed description of the variables and scale reliabilities appear in Table 1. Gender and religious affiliation were measured, as well as demand awareness and manipulation checks.

Results

The 27 subjects who identified themselves as non-Christian were eliminated before analyzing the data, leaving a final

sample size of 341 (47% female, 53% male). The eighteen subjects who were aware of the experimenters' interest in the effects of religious symbols in the advertisements were not eliminated to avoid biasing the results. By automatically eliminating demand-aware subjects, researchers risk adding systematic bias to experimental results, rather than simple random error resulting from leaving such subjects in the analysis (Shimp, Hyatt, and Snyder, 1991). The manipulation of argument strength in the ads was successful ($\chi^2 = 99.0, p = 0.000$). All (100%) subjects who were exposed to ads containing the cross noticed its presence in an open-ended unaided recall measure.

No support was found for the first two hypotheses regarding attention to and attitude toward the advertisement. (A summary of multivariate analysis of variance [MANOVA] results appears in Table 2). Thus, it seems that the presence of the cross in the ad had no impact on low-involvement subjects who are high in religious dogmatism regarding their reaction to the actual ad. Perhaps highly dogmatic subjects did pay greater attention to the cross itself, as predicted, without paying greater attention to the rest of the ad or without developing more favorable over-all attitudes toward the ad. This is counter to the prediction made by the ELM that low-involvement subjects' level of attention to the ad and attitude toward the ad should be favorably affected by a peripheral cue with positive associations.

As predicted, subjects highly involved with pet insurance

Table 2. Results for Hypothesized Effects

| Hypothesis | F-Value | Results |
|---|--------------------|---|
| H1: High-dogma subjects should pay greater attention to the ad with the cross. | 0.59 | Not supported |
| H2: High-dogma subjects should have more favorable attitude toward the ad with cross. | 0.61 | Not supported |
| H3: High-involvement subjects should have a more favorable attitude toward the ad than low-involvement subjects. | 89.22 ^a | Supported |
| H4a: High-involvement subjects should have a more favorable attitude toward the brand when exposed to the ad with strong arguments. | 54.15 ^a | Supported |
| H4b: Low-involvement, high dogma subjects should have a more favorable attitude toward the brand when exposed to the ad with the cross. | 2.81 ^b | Not supported (means in wrong direction) |
| H5a: High-involvement subjects should have greater purchase intentions when exposed to the ad with strong arguments. | 95.27 ^a | Supported |
| H5b: Low-involvement, high dogma subjects should have greater purchase intentions when exposed to the ad with the cross. | 6.18 ^a | Not supported (means in wrong direction) |

^a $p \leq 0.000$.^b $p \leq 0.05$.

had a significantly more favorable attitude toward the ad than did low-involvement subjects ($F = 89.22$, $p < 0.0001$). This supports the predictions made by the ELM (Petty and Cacioppo, 1984b). These findings suggest that subjects' attitude toward the ad is a function of cognitive processing and not an affective response to the cross.

Support was also found for the hypotheses predicting that attitude toward the brand ($H4a$: $F = 54.15$, $p < 0.001$) and purchase intentions ($H5a$: $F = 95.27$, $p < 0.001$) would be greater for high-involvement subjects exposed to strong arguments. Again, these are standard effects predicted by the ELM.

Hypotheses 4b and *5b*, which predict that low-involvement subjects high in religious dogmatism would have more favorable attitudes toward the brand and higher purchase intentions when exposed to the ad containing the cross, were not supported. Instead, these subjects have less favorable reactions to the product ($H4b$: $F = 2.81$, $p < 0.05$; $H5b$: $F = 6.18$, $p < 0.001$). These findings are contradictory to what the ELM would predict, and suggest that when subjects are not interested in a particular product, the use of a sacred symbol to promote such a product might be perceived as offensive to them. In other words, they may feel that what is sacred to them is being co-opted by marketers to sell an unimportant product.

However, there is evidence to suggest that the cross operates to enhance the central cue effect for highly involved subjects who are also dogmatic Christians. A marginally significant interaction was discovered between argument strength and presence of the cross ($F = 3.52$, $p = 0.065$). That is, subjects who are interested in the product do not seem to mind when marketers use a sacred symbol to promote such a product. Rather, the presence of the cross improves their already positive feelings toward the product. The ELM, however, would predict that a favorable peripheral cue would not significantly enhance the attitudes or purchase intentions of highly involved subjects.

Discussion

This research indicates that it is not possible to view peripheral cues in a deterministic way. Rather, these results suggest that the perception of a peripheral cue is a function of the specific nature of that cue. That is, the symbolic associations that a particular cue has with different audiences will affect the way that that cue operates. The nature of the peripheral cue, then, seems to represent a boundary condition for the ELM.

The use of a sacred object as a peripheral cue requires careful consideration. First, how the sacred object is presented and/or what it is associated with can affect consumer reactions to it. For example, several years ago Nike used the Beatles' song "Revolution" as a peripheral cue (background music) in an advertisement for athletic shoes. The ad was subject to intense criticism by consumers because of the perceived sacred nature of the song and its alleged co-optation by marketers to sell shoes (Scott, 1993). More recently, Nike again raised consumer ire by having basketball star Dennis Rodman threaten Santa Claus, a perceived sacred figure. Here, the peripheral cue is humor, with the joke centering around asking Santa for athletic shoes. In each case, it seems that the use of sacred symbols stimulates counterarguments by and negative associations for many consumers. In this particular study, the association of the cross with a pet-related product (and an actual dog in the ad) might have offended some consumers. If a peripheral cue has sacred meaning to members of the target audience, then, marketers need to be careful addressing such issues as: Who is the target audience? What associations do they have with the intended peripheral cue(s)? What will the cue be associated with (i.e., what associations do members of the target audience have with the product being advertised)? and How will the cue be presented?

Because this study represents a partial replication and does not confirm original results regarding peripheral cues, there

is some uncertainty as to what exact characteristics of and relationships between the variables constitute a boundary condition (Monroe, 1992b). To date, there has been little variety in the nature of peripheral cues used in research to test the robustness of the ELM. Future research efforts must be directed at gaining an understanding of the exact nature of peripheral cues and their effects. This will serve to define further the boundaries of this important theoretical model.

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