

Provocation in Advertising: The Attitude of Lebanese Consumers

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Shocking messages are used in a bid to draw attention to an advertisement with the expectation that further processing will take place if the advertisement is noticed. The purpose of this article is to investigate the effectiveness of shocking advertisement content in the Lebanese context. Results from a survey of 300 interviewees conducted between September and November 2014, indicated a negative effect of provocation in advertising on the Lebanese consumers' emotions. We noticed that the Lebanese consumers are not tolerant of offensive advertising which can affect their buying behavior.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of cable channels has multiplied the viewer's choices, and the development of remote control devices have dramatically altered the relationship between television viewing and advertising exposure or attention (Olney, et al., 1990). Consumers have more power than ever to avoid advertising (Romaniuk, 2013). Advertisers have become increasingly concerned about capturing the TV viewer's attention and interest (Hazlett and Hazlett, 1999). Creators of television commercials today are using innumerable strategies to increase the probability of attracting attention, in the hopes of influencing consumers' brand-related attitudes, purchase intentions, and, ultimately, their behaviour. Several strategies are increasingly employed to stir emotions or rouse particular feelings (Berthon, et al., 2013) such as fear, humor, warmth, irritation and sexual arousal. All designed to elicit an emotional response in the viewer that both grabs their attention and helps communicate the advertising message (Bruzzone and Tallyn, 1997; Peterson and Malhorta, 1998). Another execution strategy that has been gaining popularity in recent years is the recourse to provocation with the intention to shock particular segments of the population (Vézina and Paul, 1997).

The most widely publicized cases include the advertising campaigns produced by clothing makers Benetton and Calvin Klein (Dahl, et al., 2003). The images used by Benetton became increasingly provocative, referring for instance, to racial issues (a black woman breast feeding a white baby), religion (a priest in black kissing a nun in white), death and disease (a young man dying of aids), war (the clothes

of a soldier killed in Bosnia, and recently the un-hate campaign (Vatican's Pope kissing Islam's leading figures Ahmed Mohamed el-Tayeb, current Imam of al-Azhar Mosque in Egypt). Calvin Klein's advertisements are typically of a sexual nature were targeted for their use of "pornographic" images (Sloan and Decoursey, 1995).

The majority of research about offensive advertising has been conducted in Western countries. However little is known about consumer's perception of offensive advertising in a middle-eastern context, especially Lebanese context. The main contribution of this research is to enable marketer and advertising professional to communicate well in the Lebanese population. A deep understanding of cultural differences is needed otherwise; a marketing myopia is bound to happen.

Thus, this paper is organized as follows. The first section, presenting the literature review, provides a definition of provocative appeals in advertising, identifies the impacts of this strategy on the consumers. The second section exposes the research methodology as well as an empirical assessment of Lebanese consumers' reaction to provocative advertising. Finally, in the conclusion, limitations and directions for future research are highlighted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on previous studies examining offensive advertising, the following review highlights some of the most important definitions of the shock advertising and its impact on the consumers.

Shock Advertising: Toward A Definition

Gustafson and Yessel (1994) define a shock advertising appeal as one deliberately, rather than inadvertently, startles and offends its audience. Vézina and Paul (1997) define the provocation in advertising as "a deliberate appeal, within the content of an advertisement, to stimuli that are expected to shock at least a portion of the audience, both because they are associated with values, norms or taboos that are habitually not challenged or transgressed in advertising, and because of their distinctiveness and ambiguity"(p.179). This definition reveals three main components of provocation, namely; distinctiveness, ambiguity and transgression of norms and taboos.

- The provocative power is maintained by the innovative character of an advertisement. The distinctiveness has often been utilized with the tangible aspects such size, color, position or movement, position or movement. Childers and Houston (1984), Beattie and Mitchell (1985) supported the hypothesis that distinctive stimuli have a positive effect on the degree to which attention is attracted by the advertisement (ad.) and on the evaluation of the brand.
- Distinctiveness in itself is not sufficient to trigger provocation. Vézina and Paul (1997) suggest that a provocative message which contains no ambiguity is more likely to be dismissed immediately by those receivers that are shocked. Howard and Sheth (1969) defined the stimulus ambiguity as the lack of clarity of the stimulus display in communicating the aspects of a brand or a product.
- Advertisement which is only distinctive and ambiguous would hardly shock by itself. For Dahl, et al. (2003), shocking advertising attempts to surprise an audience by deliberately violating norms for societal values and personal ideals. Provocation is more likely to take place when the content of an advertisement refers to something that is generally considered by viewers as taboo.

Barnes and Dotson (1990) and Christy (2006) proposed a definition of the construct "offensive advertising" which consists of two separate but related dimensions:

- The ads may be perceived as offensive due to the nature of the product (condoms, sanitary napkins, etc.) or the service (abortion, funeral direction) they depict. However, according to Prendergast, et al. (2008), what constitutes offensive matter evolves with time. Contraceptives, for instance, have since 1960 a regular uncontroversial presence in mainstream media (Wilson and West 1981).
- There are ads which may be perceived as offensive due to their creative execution. It does not just depend on the product and the service, but also on the type of appeal and the manner of

presentation (Prendergast and Hwa 2003). Offense is elicited through disgusting images (blood, body parts or secretions), sexual references (implied sexual acts, sexual suggestive nudity), profanity/obscenity (swear words, obscene gestures), vulgarity (crude or distasteful acts by human or animals), impropriety (violations of social conventions), moral offensiveness and religious taboos (harming innocent people, putting children in provocative situations, inappropriate use of spiritual or religious symbols) (Dahl, et al., 2003), and silliness of presentation (Greyser, 1972). The use of strong humour (satire, sexual humour) is also considered as a message tactic frequently cited for its significant potential for causing offense (Beard, 2008; Flaherty, et al., 2004)

Impacts of Shock Advertising

Advertisers have long been interested in measuring consumers' evaluations of advertisements (Barnes and Dotson, 1990). Numerous models that explain consumers' cognitive, affective, and conative reactions have been advanced and tested (Buchholz and Smith, 1991).

The general conclusion of the most studies conducted in advertising is that positive affective responses do have a positive influence on attitude toward ad, as well as attitude toward the brand (Holbrook and Batra, 1987; Moore and Hoenig, 1989). There is a simple positive association between (Aad) and the reaction to the brand (Ab) (Shimp, 1981). KlerkWarmerdam (1996) found that unpleasant feelings and low-intensity pleasant feelings affected attitude toward the ad, while high-intensity pleasant feelings affected ad re-call. The core idea is that the more they like the ad, the more they like the brand. It has also been argued that (Aad) can affect perception by affecting audience mood (Bower, 1981, Srull, 1987), attention, and the amount of information processed (Ray and Batra, 1983).

However, it will be interesting to know about the mediating role of negative emotion (such as anger, fear, distress, pity, etc.) on attitude toward the ad and behavioural intentions. Aaker and Bruzzone (1985) stated that irritating advertisements can be more effective than neutral one, although less so than well-liked advertisements. According to Dahl, et al. (2003), shocking stimuli should facilitate message comprehension and elaboration, enhance message retention and influence behaviour. In some contexts, attention and processing could be stimulated without the negative reaction being transferred directly to the brand (Aaker and Bruzzone 1985). Stiensmeier-Pelster, et al. (1995) claimed that any advertisement that contradicts an established expectation causes surprise. Significant part of the process, the surprise attracts attention to the novel stimulus or event. By focusing attention on the stimulus, surprise encourages additional processing of advertising content. In some contexts, attention and processing could be stimulated without the negative reaction being transferred directly to the brand (Aaker and Bruzzone 1985). Dahl, et al. (2003) concluded that shocking advertising content might elicit appropriate behavior, because it attracts attention and elicits cognitive processing. For instance, the sexual content of advertisements increases the amount of attention and interest toward the ads (Bello, et al., 1983) as well as the level of purchase intention (Severn, et al., 1990), despite the controversy surrounding these appeals.

Although the use of shocking advertisements is a growing phenomenon, the findings regarding the effectiveness of such advertisements remain mixed (Parry et al. 2013). Attempting to shock consumers may generate a high level of awareness, but may also result in a low level of acceptance or even a high level of disapproval (Vézina and Paul, 1997). Berthon, et al. (2013) argued that, faced with disingenuous, crass, and hyper-sexualized images and messages, people may respond with irritation, resentment, anger, and disgust.

RESEARCH METHODS

The primary objective of the empirical research is to assess the effect of provocative advertisements on Lebanese consumers, and to evaluate the effectiveness of provocation as an execution strategy.

The Lebanese Context

Since large portions of human behavior are culturally influenced, most of our consumptions behavior is also culturally influenced (Cundiff and Hilger, 1988). Marketing and specially advertising is influenced

by cultural differences. Cross cultural differences mean that geographic location also strongly affect perceptions of offensiveness (Prendergast, et al., 2008). Mostly of the research related to the offensive advertising are conducted in the Western culture. It will be interested to assess the effect of such a strategy on Lebanese consumers.

Lebanon is a mosaic of culture and sub-cultural nuances. Lebanese culture is the cross culture of various civilizations over thousands of years. Originally home to the Phoenicians, and then subsequently conquered and occupied by the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Crusaders, the Ottoman Turks and most recently the French. The culture in Lebanon, as in the most countries in the Arab World, is characterized by close family relationship, emotionally involvement, and the pursuit to self actualization. Emotional based decisions are at the center of Middle Eastern's decision making process (Darouni, 2006). Because Lebanon is a place where there is a close interaction between Eastern and Western values, and because it is basically an international society, it is an interesting location to explore consumer perceptions of offensive advertisement.

Research Problem and Hypotheses

According to Vezina and Paul (1997), attempting to shock consumers may generate a high level of awareness, but may also result in a low level of acceptance or even a high level of disapproval. According to Dahl, et al. (2003), shocking stimuli should facilitate message comprehension and elaboration. In some contexts, attention and processing could be stimulated without the negative reaction being transferred directly to the brand (Aaker and Bruzzone 1985). Thus, do negative emotions induced by an advertising message necessarily enhance comprehension? Is it possible for consumers to have a negative attitude towards an ad and still retain a positive attitude towards the brand advertised?

This line of reasoning leads to the following hypotheses:

H1: The exposure to provocative advertising generates negative emotions.

H2: The exposure to provocative advertising reduces comprehension.

H3: The provocative ads have an effect on consumer purchase intentions.

H4: The Lebanese consumers will have a negative attitude towards an ad and still retain a positive attitude towards the brand advertised.

H5: The attitude toward an offensive ad is influenced by the specific of the Lebanese culture.

Stimuli

To prepare stimulus materials, we first examined a convenience sample of advertisements that did not run in the geographical region in which the study was conducted. Three print advertisements were selected from the sample to serve frames for stimulus development:

- A controversial photo frame for a campaign against anorexia sponsored by an Italian clothing brand No-lita. The advertising shows an anorexic woman completely naked (see Figure 1)
- The Unhate campaign promoted by Benetton showed images of controversial kissing couples (mainly world leaders in conflict, like Barack Obama and Hu Jintao) (see Figure 2)
- The “newborn” photo, promoted by Benetton, showed the birth of a child still attached to his mother by the umbilical cord (see Figure3)

Pretesting was conducted to ensure that the advertisements were perceived as shocking. A sample of persons (n=300) viewed the three test advertisements. Subjects rated the advertisement on 5-point scales (Disagree/Agree) indicating the extent to which advertisements were considered shocking. We suggested several reasons for an advertisement to be considered offensive. The interviewees were asked to indicate the reason of their personal offense.

- 92% were shocked by the no-lita advertisements. Among them, 69% felt that nudity is the reason of their reaction toward this image.
- 58% of the respondents find the “Unhate” campaign very shocking and 28.3% find it shocking. Firstly, the fact that two men were kissing was cited as being shocking, given that the

homosexuality is considered as a taboo in the Lebanese society. Secondly, the kiss between a pope and the imam was quoted as shocking.

- 77% were shocked by the “new born” advertisement. Among them 43% found the image disgusting and 31.7% are against the use of a newborn baby image for a commercial finality.

“Images are inappropriate for children” would be cited more frequently as a reason for the perceived offense of the three advertisements.

Questionnaire Design

A questionnaire was conducted among a sample of 300 respondents between September and November 2014. The sample was chosen randomly. 66% of those surveyed are women, averaging 25 years of age. 44.3% are students and 29.3% are employees living in Tripoli, north of Lebanon. The data-collection procedure involved a questionnaire organized around the following themes:

- The affective responses
- The comprehension of the message
- The intention of purchase
- Individual differences

FINDINGS

Hypothesis H1 predicts that the offensive advertisements will generate negative emotions. The most frequently selected adjectives for the three print advertisements were negative. The first advertisement (Nolita) provoked disgust (52%), sadness (31%) and offense (6%). The “unhate” campaign generated offense (52%), anger (19.7%). 45% of the respondents claimed that they were disgusted by the newborn advertisement, while 15% claimed feeling shocked.

With the respect to the second hypothesis H2, for the three selected advertisements, we noticed that the respondents did not understand the overall message intended by the advertiser. For instance, 80.1% of the respondents stated they did not comprehend the message behind the newborn baby advertisement. For the no-lita advertisement, 62% of the sample did not get the message. 71.3% found that the “unhate” campaign did not succeed to deliver the message to the consumers.

The hypothesis H3 is concerned with determining the behavioral consequences of provocative appeals in advertising. 34.3% of the respondents considered themselves as consumers of Benetton items. Among them, only 18.6% of the respondents claimed that they will not hesitate to purchase Benetton’s products even though they considered the “Unhate” and the “newborn” campaigns as an offensive advertisement. For the nolita advertisements, only 14.7% of our sample pretend to know this brand. Among them 16% will continue to purchase the No-Lita products. It should be also noted that there is 51% among the respondents who persist purchasing from No-Lita and Benetton products, are more concerned with the quality than the use of the chock advertising.

The fourth hypothesis was concerned with determining if there is any transfer from the attitude toward an advertisement to the brand. We found that only 24% of the respondents claimed that they will not change their attitude toward the brand even though they have a negative attitude toward the advertisement.

Finally, the interviewees were asked about their tolerance of offensive advertisements. 74 % of the respondents agree with the prohibition of offensive advertisements in Lebanon, pretending that this kind of executive strategy is not appropriate. 75% find that the Lebanese culture is not ready to accept such advertisements. Furthermore, 61.3% of the respondents state that the negative attitude toward the chock advertisements is due to their local culture.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In summary, these preliminary results suggest that Lebanese consumers were offended by the offensive manner of advertising. Many negative emotions were generated while the respondents were

exposed to the three advertisements, such as disgust, sadness, offense and anger. Consistent to the literature, this study supports that the use of sex or fear can lead to general consumer irritation. The negative aspects of provocation seem to transfer and affect consumer attitudes towards brands provocative execution strategies.

The comprehension of the message delivered by the advertiser is not facilitated by using the offensive strategy. This finding provides additional support that an offense is more likely to occur when a provocative message contains ambiguity and a lack of clarity (Vézina and Paul 1997). However, this result is different from the findings of Dahl, et al. (2003). According to the authors, shocking stimuli should facilitate message comprehension and elaboration.

Furthermore, only few interviewees claimed to continue to purchase the brand products. This finding contributes to the literature in its support for the prediction that offensive advertisements damaged company image and are proportional to the purchase intention of the consumer. Once the customer feels uneasy or has a negative impression of the advertisement, he or she might not buy the products of the companies that are perceived to use offensive advertisements (Ford, et al., 1990).

Finally, it seems that the Lebanese culture and the religious values are considered as main factors leading to the negative attitude toward the shock advertising. Hence, it is important for advertisers to understand and incorporate culture into communication efforts. The Lebanese consumers seem to be attached to their individual values and religion believes. Thus, ambitious marketers who would like to utilize offensive advertisement in Lebanon should use a less offensive appeal such as sexual or religious connotations.

CONCLUSIONS

Conventional wisdom in the advertising industry holds that a certain amount of irritation enhances the effectiveness of advertising. However, this study has shown that for certain demographic groups offensive advertising may be negatively perceived, to the extent that it affects their purchase behavior.

The above conclusions should be tempered by the recognition of two limitations to this in this research. First, it should be noted that these results are based on short-term reactions registered immediately following exposure to the ads. Second, our sample might not be representative of all the Lebanese population, especially that the region covered is limited to the north. For this reason, future studies of shock advertising and audience offense should replicate these finding.

Limitations aside, this study suggests several pieces of advice to advertising stakeholders. It is often difficult for advertisers to create messages that do not offend at least a few individuals, especially Lebanese consumers. This research offers the practitioners as well as the academics in advertising research an opportunity to clarify the impact of provocative messages on the Lebanese consumer. The designers of shock advertising or advertisement in general need to be very careful when creating and advertising campaign.

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