

The influence of perceived authenticity on attitudes towards the ad

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Abstract

Current research has demonstrated that advertising audiences are becoming more astute when evaluating, constructing, and deciphering advertising messages. This study examines authenticity and the influence that this may have on attitudes toward the advertisement. 300 subjects participated in a 2 (authentic/inauthentic) x 2 (male/female source) experimental design. Findings from this study suggest that perceptions of authenticity can enhance cognitive message thoughts, affective message thoughts, source oriented thoughts and overall attitudes towards the ad. The study also revealed that males may form less favourable attitudes towards a male source compared with a female source if a male source is portrayed in an unfavourable social situation and/or makes an unfavourable claim in a testimonial advertisement.

Key words: advertising, attitudes, authenticity

Introduction

On average consumers are exposed to over 2000 advertisements each day by the multi-billion dollar advertising industry (Kilbourne 1989). Since the market is saturated with multiple advertising communications, each message has to be sharper and more effective in order to achieve its objectives. Consequently, it is important to understand what variables mediate attitudes toward the advertisement, and subsequently advertising effectiveness (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989; Muehling, 1987). Furthermore, due to the continual advancement of technology and education, consumers are better able to distinguish between what is real and truthful when evaluating, constructing, and deciphering advertising messages (Blackshaw, 2008). Hence, this suggests that advertising cues such as authenticity are being scrutinised more closely, which may influence how a brand or message is perceived. This research endeavours to establish whether there is a significant relationship between perceived authenticity and attitudes toward the advertisement.

Background

Authenticity can be described as a multidimensional construct (Arthur, 2006; Beverland et al., 2006), which is often associated with perceptions of genuineness, truth, and legitimacy (Blackshaw, 2008), e.g., something or someone is perceived to be ‘the real thing’ (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Likewise, objects, people, and places that are not associated with commercialisation, imitation and artificiality may also be perceived to be authentic (Arthur, 2006). However, Grayson and Martinec (2004, p.8) suggest that, “most scholars who study authenticity agree that authenticity is not an attribute inherent in an object; it is better understood as an assessment made by a particular evaluator in a particular context”. In other words, one must acknowledge that authenticity is “a contrivance rather than a reality” because authenticity is something that is constructed by the individual (Brown et al., 2003, p.553).

As the literature suggests, there are three forms of authenticity: indexical, iconic and existential (Alexander, 2009; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Ozsomer and Altaras 2008; Wang 1999). Firstly, indexical is what separates the real thing "from its copies" (Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p.298). For example, authenticity within this context is when a person's actions are reflective of that person's true self, not simulated to achieve a particular effect, or to meet social conventions, or to make money (Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p.297). Iconic authenticity, on the other hand, is used to describe an authentic reproduction of an object or person "who's physical manifestation resembles something that is indexically authentic" (Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p.298). For example, as Ozsomer and Altaras (2008) illustrate, a painting that accurately imitates the original can be viewed as having iconic authenticity. The third form of authenticity is existential, originally proposed by Wang (1999), which refers to a consumer's desire to find his or her authentic self (Ozsomer and Altaras, 2008). This explores the idea that people consume products and experiences in order to experience existential authenticity (Ozsomer and Altaras, 2008). These elements also reinforce the idea that authenticity is a social construction that may change due to different evaluators' perceptions and interpretations of the place, situation, person, or object (Grayson and Martinec, 2004).

Within the context of this study, Blackshaw (2008) identifies authenticity as one of the key drivers of credibility, a concept that is closely interrelated with trust. Yet, authenticity is not the *same* thing as credibility. An advertisement, for example, can be viewed as being 'the real thing' without being deemed credible, whilst other advertisements can be deemed credible without being 'the real thing' (Beverland, 2006). The credibility of a message is primarily defined by 'believability, fairness and completeness' (Gordon, 1982), and is usually measured in four forms: source credibility, advertising credibility, content credibility, and media credibility (Soh, Reid and Whitehill King 2007). Authenticity, on the other hand, delves much deeper than simply interpreting whether something can be trusted or not (Blackshaw, 2008). It is a multidimensional construct that can make a person, situation, brand or object seem original, real and contextualised (Arthur, 2006; Beverland, 2006).

Research problem

As noted by Muehling (1987, p.32), due to the "practical importance of the attitude toward the ad construct it is imperative to examine closely the antecedent factors that may influence/shape these ad-specific attitudes". Therefore this research endeavours to establish whether there is a significant relationship between perceived authenticity and attitudes toward the advertisement within a social marketing context. Authenticity has been explored within the context of product brand advertising (e.g. Alexander, 2009; Beverland et al., 2008), culture (e.g. Arthur, 2006), and tourism marketing (e.g. Kolar and Zabkar, 2007) but there has been limited research in the area of advertising. More specifically, the influence that perceived authenticity might have on attitudes toward the ad. In addition, research to date has also suggested that thoughts toward the *source* can significantly influence individuals' attitudes towards an advertisement (Lafferty, Goldsmith & Newell, 2002). A *source* can be defined as the person, endorser or spokesperson in the advertisement (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Lafferty *et al.*, 2002). Within the context of the message endorser, four key dimensions have been operationalised. They are expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness and likeability (Lafferty *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, a source's fit, belongingness and relatedness to a cause are also considered to be important drivers of advertising effectiveness (Wheeler, 2009). As research in this area has demonstrated, the more credible the source is perceived, the more

likely the message will be accepted (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In addition to this, research has demonstrated that credibility also correlates with positive attitude formulation (Lafferty *et al.*, 2002). Likewise, we propose that an authentically perceived advertisement (and *source*) will generate more favourable attitudes.

Research has indicated that attitude change is significantly influenced by the strength of the claims made within an argument and the cognitive thoughts that are formed (Andrews and Shimp, 1990). Likewise, a higher level of cognitive processing will increase the likelihood that the perception of authenticity will be thoroughly processed (Olsen *et al.*, 1982). Research has also indicated that cognitive processes mediate the acceptance of the advertisement's message (Megehee, 2008). Therefore, a realistic and genuine representation of the issue is likely to influence cognitive message thoughts and message acceptance. If the individual believes that what is being said is relevant, and believes it could occur, the message claims are more likely to be accepted by the individual (Eppright *et al.*, 2002). Likewise, if the advertisement is perceived to be authentic it will generate more supportive arguments and generate more favourable attitudes. Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H1. Subjects exposed to the authentic advertisement as opposed to the inauthentic advertisement will generate a greater number of favourable cognitive message thoughts.

Literature demonstrates that feelings towards the advertisement can have a direct influence on attitudes toward the advertisement (Homer and Yoon, 1992). Feelings toward an advertisement are formed holistically from a range of variables such as pictures and colour quality, visual effects, and general feelings toward the advertisement (Belch and Belch, 2007). The literature also suggests that images that are seen as an imitation or viewed as being too commercialised might be viewed as inauthentic, yet brands that successfully represent 'who we are' can generate more favourable feelings (Arthur, 2006). Likewise, studies undertaken within health marketing have also indicated that advertisements are more influential if they are congruent with the audience (La Tour and Pitts, 1989). This suggests that an individual will have more favourable attitudes towards an advertisement if it perceived to be a realistic and authentic depiction of society and the issue at hand. Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H2. Subjects exposed to the authentic advertisement as opposed to the inauthentic advertisement will generate a greater number of favourable advertisement execution thoughts towards the advertisement.

Testimonials are popular within certain advertising contexts because the source is often perceived as being more credible, trustworthy, and expert (Wheeler, 2009; Zhang and Buda, 1999). What is more, studies have found that credible sources may have a positive relationship with attitude change (Lafferty, *et al.*, 2002). Positive source thoughts have also been shown to lower counter arguments and make the audience more open to the message (Zhang and Buda, 1999). Such conclusions indicate that people are swayed by honest and genuine messages (Gordon, 1982). Research has also demonstrated that sources that are congruent and consistent with the product or cause that they are being matched with, are more influential (Wheeler, 2009). We propose that a source that is perceived to be authentic within the context of the cause will generate attitudes that are more favourable. Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H3. Subjects exposed to the authentic advertisement as opposed to the inauthentic advertisement will generate a greater number of favourable source-oriented thoughts.

Attitude towards the advertisement measures the subject's overall evaluation of the advertisement; this can be either positive or negative (Hassan et al., 2000). Consequently the affect of perceived authenticity on the three mediating factors should logically lead to positive attitudes towards the advertisement overall. At the same time, overall attitudes toward an advertisement can also be attributed to one's attitude towards advertising as a whole (Tan and Chia, 2007). As Tan and Chia (2007) maintain, attitudes towards advertising is still relatively low (Tan and Chia, 2007) due to people's institutionalised beliefs that advertising is a highly commercial, persuasive, and manipulative vehicle for communication. Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H4. Subjects exposed to the authentic advertisement as opposed to the inauthentic advertisement will generate a greater number of favourable overall attitudes towards the advertisement.

Lastly, literature has demonstrated that a source that is perceived to be congruent with the audience is more likely to have a positive influence on attitudes towards the ad (Brumbaugh, 2002; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Research has also illustrated that the stronger the connection between the source and the audience, the more effective the advertising message will be (Wheeler, 2009). As a result, it is assumed that male and female subjects will have more favourable attitudes toward the authentic same sex source. Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H5. Female participants will have more favourable attitudes than male participants will toward the female source.

H6. Male participants will have more favourable attitudes than female participants will toward the male source.

Method

300 undergraduate students (55% female) participated in a 2 (authentic/inauthentic) x 2 (male/female source) experimental design. In order to test the influence of authenticity on attitudes, four surveys were created, and subjects were randomly assigned to one of four treatments. For the purpose of this study, a social marketing context was used to explore authenticity, although future studies could incorporate other types of products. In this study, excessive drinking was used because it is an issue that is relevant to the subjects, and they are continually being exposed to a large number of social marketing campaigns, in particular anti-drinking campaigns (ALAC, 2009; Vicary and Karshin, 2002). Almost 94 percent of the sample group were aged between 18 and 24.

Findings

Hypothesis one proposed that subjects would have more favourable cognitive thoughts toward the authentic treatment rather than the inauthentic treatment. A one-way ANOVA analysis supported this hypothesis demonstrating a significant difference at a 95 percent confidence

level ($p < 0.05$). Cognitive attitudes toward the inauthentic treatment ($m = 3.5587$) were significantly lower than the authentic treatment ($m = 3.2160$) at a 95 percent confidence level ($p < 0.003$). As the level of significance was well within $p < 0.05$ the hypothesis could not be rejected and was therefore accepted. Hypothesis two proposed that subjects would have more favourable affective thoughts toward the authentic treatment in contrast to the inauthentic treatment. A one-way ANOVA analysis supported this theory. Affective attitudes toward the inauthentic treatment ($m = 4.4944$) were significantly lower than the authentic treatment ($m = 4.2244$) at a 95 percent confidence level ($p < 0.024$). Hypothesis three proposed that subjects would have more favourable thoughts toward the source for the authentic treatment rather than the inauthentic treatment. A one-way ANOVA analysis also supported this hypothesis. Source oriented thoughts toward the inauthentic treatment ($m = 4.3267$) were significantly lower than the authentic treatment ($m = 3.6756$) at a 95 percent confidence level ($p < 0.000$). Hypothesis four proposed that overall attitudes would be more favourable toward the authentic treatment rather than the inauthentic treatment. A one-way ANOVA analysis also supported this hypothesis. Overall attitudes toward the inauthentic treatment ($m = 4.1173$) were significantly lower than the authentic treatment ($m = 3.5893$) at a 95 percent confidence level ($p < 0.000$). Hypothesis five proposed that female subjects would have more favourable thoughts toward the authentic female source compared with the male subjects. The independent sample t-test results showed that there was a significant difference ($p < 0.039$) between the females ($m = 3.5238$) and male subjects' means ($m = 3.6176$). Therefore, as the hypothesis cannot be rejected it must be accepted. Hypothesis six proposed that male subjects would have more favourable thoughts toward the authentic male source than the female subjects. The independent sample t-test result showed that there was no significant difference ($p < 0.842$) between the means. The male subjects' source thoughts ($m = 4.2533$) were not significantly more favourable toward the male source than the female subjects' source thoughts ($m = 3.5619$). Therefore since this hypothesis cannot be accepted it must be rejected.

Discussion

Findings from this study suggest that perceptions of authenticity can enhance cognitive message thoughts, affective message thoughts, source oriented thoughts and overall attitudes towards the ad. The study also demonstrated that male and female attitudes towards a source might vary. As the findings revealed, using the same sex source can lead to more favourable attitudes towards the advertisement for female subjects, which indicates that in some contexts females may formulate more positive attitudes toward the same sex source. On the other hand, the study revealed that males might have less favourable attitudes toward male sources when they are portrayed in unfavourable social situations and/or make unfavourable claims within a testimonial advertisement. Hence, this indicates that male and female social roles must be constructed carefully when designing advertising campaigns. For example, male perceptions of masculinity and independence may need to be reflected within the advertisement in order to generate favourable attitudes toward the advertisement. Such implications also demonstrate a potential area for future research. In conclusion, the findings suggest that consumers' perceptions of authenticity can be positively related to favourable attitudes toward an advertisement. Hence, authenticity may have the ability to manipulate the believability, strength, and meaning of an advertisement (Beverland et al., 2008; Lafferty et al., 2002). However, it would also be useful to look at authenticity within the context of advertising deception. In other words, what happens if one discovers at a later date that an advertisement is not authentic, even though the message itself may be credible? In other words, how might this affect the strength of the message claim, and/or the brand's identity?

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