

Effects of Commercial Breaks Placement on Television Advertisement Effectiveness

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Abstract

A number of researchers have studied the effects of program environment on felt mood and, subsequently, on television advertisement effectiveness. This study focusses on commercial breaks placement, showing that it can influence a viewer's felt mood that will, in turn, affect his reactions to an advertisement.

Keywords: Program environment; felt mood; advertising effectiveness; commercial break

1. Introduction

Several studies showed that the effectiveness of a television commercial is influenced by the program it is inserted in. Mainly three factors seem to interact with the performance of an ad: the level of viewer involvement with the program (Soldow & Principe, 1981; Krugman, 1983; Moorman, Neijens & Smit, 2007), the commercial's method of presentation (Rich, Owens and Ellenbogen, 1978; Moorman, Neijens and Smit, 2005) and the mood states induced by the program or its environment (Murphy, Cunningham and Wilcox, 1979; Goldberg and Gorn, 1987; Coulter, 1998; Aylesworth and MacKenzie, 1998; Owolabi, 2009). Putting it simply, these authors suggest that the viewing context of a TV program will influence an individual's felt mood that will then have a significant impact on a commercial's performance. The questions asked in this study are as follows: (1) Will an abruptly placed commercial break (a commercial that suddenly interrupts a television program) arouse a stronger negative felt mood in viewers than one inserted more smoothly? (2) Will this increased negative mood felt during the viewing of a TV ad have repercussions on the ad's effectiveness?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The effect of mood on gathering, treatment, evaluation and judgement of information

Bower's (1981) experiments on mood and memory allow one to make the assumption that a person's attention, when feeling a particular mood, should be selective. He suggests that individuals will actively attend to material consistent with their feelings.

Hence, an individual experiencing a negative mood should then pay more attention to the negative elements presented to him. Eysenk (1984) also claims that people choose to pay attention to sources of information that are consistent with their current activities and intentions. On the other hand, Medianu (2007) asserts that Bower's theory has an important weakness. In his study he assumes that mood and memory share a "one to one" relationship, that is, an unmediated relationship. Also, Bower's theory fails to account for the finding that, sometimes, people in sad moods actually recall more positive events than people in happy moods (e.g. Parrott and Sabini, 1990). Therefore, people in sad moods, instead of recalling mood congruent material, like Bower's theory would predict, tend to recall mood incongruent material. Disagreeing with all these views, Silk and Vavra (1974) posit that the direction of the mood won't affect memory, but its intensity will.

Srull (1983) showed that evaluations are strongly influenced by a person's mood at the time he gathers information. Whereas a positive mood will lead to more positive evaluations, a negative mood will render them less favourable. Gardner (1985) adds that mood can bias many types of judgements in a direction that will be congruent to it. He also states that the link between mood affective responses and judgement may be considered as being both direct and indirect.

Firstly, an affective reaction is viewed as a conditioned response to a certain mood, and will act as an intermediary between that mood and an evaluative response. A given mood will also make mood congruent items more easily accessible, which will then make them more likely to affect evaluations. Ciarrochi and Forgas (2000) also found significant effects of mood on subjective evaluations. Participants in their study made more positive evaluations of consumer items when in a positive rather than negative mood.

Handley and Lassiter (2002) conducted two studies to demonstrate that sad and happy moods can cause individuals to be similarly sensitive to the valence of observed stimuli with regard to how effortfully such stimuli are processed. Their results seem to establish that under certain conditions, sad and happy individuals similarly decrease the amount of information processed from a neutral or depressing, relative to a positive, stimulus.

2.2 The effect of program environment on mood and on advertising effectiveness

Comparing two types of television programs, one happy and one sad, Goldberg and Gorn (1987) claim that the mood yielded by a program will be transferred by the viewer to a commercial inserted in it and affect advertising effectiveness. Results from their study show that: (1) individuals viewing happy programs evaluated commercials as being more effective than those viewing sad programs; (2) recall is better when viewing a happy program compared to a sad. Using standardized 10 minute film clips to induce a negative or positive mood, Owolabi (2009) observed that subjects in the induced positive mood group have a more positive attitude and greater intention to try advertised products when compared with subjects in the induced negative mood group. Other studies (e.g. de Pelsmacker, Geuens & Ankaert, 2002; Cauberghe, Geuens and De Pelsmacker, 2010) also show that responses to a program carry over to embedded ads. Using excerpts from movies as an induction mechanism for different arousal and valence dimensions of mood, Shapiro, MacInnis and Park (2001) assert that arousal and valence differentially affect ad processing, with arousal affecting the level of processing, and valence influencing the nature of processing. They assert that processing level is shallower when arousal level is high (vs. moderate). They also observed that positive valence is associated with greater use of schematic processing, whereas negative valence is associated with greater use of data driven processing.

Batra and Ray (1986) have found that a mood evoked by a television ad will influence the attitude towards that ad and will also have a weak but significant impact on brand attitudes. It should be noted that they only studied the possible existence of a link between mood and attitudes, but not the direction of that relationship. Axelrod (1963) showed that viewing a TV show can induce a given mood that will in turn affect the beliefs the viewer has about an advertised product. He claims that the mood provoked by watching a movie seems to increase the feeling that buying the advertised product will bring about that same mood.

Another variable having an effect on a commercial's performance is TV program involvement. Many researches (e.g. Soldow and Principe, 1981; Krugman, 1983; Norris and Colman, 1993; Tavassoli, Shultz and Fitzsimons, 1995; Owolabi, 2009; Moorman, Willemsen, Neijens and Smit, 2012) have found that the level of viewer involvement with a television show will influence the effectiveness of a commercial inserted in it. Soldow and Principe (1981) assert that when the level of involvement is high, the interruption of a program for a commercial break will be more unacceptable to the viewer, and hence the effectiveness of these ads will be diminished. On the other hand, when viewer involvement is low, the commercial break will almost be unnoticed. In a similar experiment, Krugman (1983) has reported conflicting results. He found that when an interesting program is interrupted by an equally interesting commercial, the interest stirred up by the program will induce the viewer to be more receptive to the ad.

3. Research Hypotheses

The focus of this study is not on program content, but on the effect of one aspect of program environment (i.e. Commercial Break Placement) on an individual's felt mood, and subsequently on his reaction to the information given in an advertisement. The remainder of this paper reports on the laboratory study conducted to verify the existence of these relationships.

H1: Felt mood and affective tone of cognitive responses

An abruptly placed commercial break will cause a stronger negative mood to be felt by the viewer than a smoothly placed one. This negative mood will generate negative thoughts towards the advertisement.

H2: Recall of mood congruent items

The negative mood felt while viewing a commercial included in an abruptly placed commercial break will facilitate the unassisted recall of mood congruent items. Hence, viewers submitted to an abruptly placed commercial break will recall a larger number of an ad's negative elements than those presented a smoothly placed commercial break.

H3: Commercial evaluation

The negative mood induced by an abruptly placed commercial break will drive individuals to evaluate an ad more negatively than the same ad included in a smoothly placed commercial break.

H4: Product judgement

The negative mood induced by an abruptly placed commercial break will drive individuals to judge more negatively an advertised product, compared to the same advertised product included in a smoothly placed commercial break.

H5: Intention to purchase

The negative mood induced by an abruptly placed commercial break will influence more negatively the viewer's intention to purchase an advertised product, compared to the same advertised product included in a smoothly placed commercial break.

4. Methodology

The goal of this study was to measure the relationship between a number of dependant variables (cognitive responses, recall of mood congruent items, commercial evaluation, product judgement and intention to purchase) and one independent variable (commercial break placement). Control of the "cause to effect" relationship has been ensured by a making a thorough analysis of potentially important external factors. One of these factors was the viewer's involvement with the TV program. Other factors (e.g. Aaker, Stayman and Hagerty, 1986) are the length of the commercial break, pod position of the commercial, position of the break within the program and interference effects. Consequently, the methodological aspects of the experiment had to take these factors in account.

In this study a single variable was manipulated; the position of the break within the television program. All other variables were fixed. This resulted in a simple experimental design that consisted of two groups of participants being submitted to a different treatment. The goal was that slightly changing the positioning of the commercial break, resulting in an abrupt break for the experimental group and a smooth one for the control group, would affect more negatively the mood of the viewers in the experimental group and provoke a strong negative reaction towards the commercial pauses, while the control group sustained no voluntary attack. Indeed, this simple experimental design limited the number of data analysis that could be done, but was very well suited to the objectives of this study.

Obviously, since it has clearly been established in the literature that the level of viewer involvement with a television program has an impact on advertising effectiveness, it was decided to present the same movie to both groups of participants, this to eliminate any bias that could be caused by differing degrees of interest. Also, the levels of viewer involvement with the film had to be taken into account. Choosing a movie sustaining a regular level of interest would have a more stable effect on the commercials inserted in it. A comedy was better suited to this, since it allowed for a steadier level of viewer involvement than a thriller, which tends to promote emotional fluctuations.

Two copies of the movie were made, but interrupted differently by the commercial breaks. For the control group, the commercials were inserted so they would not interrupt the course of the story. This task was simple since the film consisted of a sequence of short independent segments. For the experimental group, the breaks were moved backward by about ten seconds so they would appear just before the end of a given story. This manipulation was aimed at maximising the negative felt mood of the participants from the experimental group towards the commercial pauses. The commercials used for the experiment were also scrutinised. To avoid the risk that participants had differing recall levels of them, only advertisements that had never been shown were used for the experiment.

The ads also had to include an adequate number of information elements, this to allow for a sufficient degree of variation in the answers given by the participants. In addition, measuring the recall of mood congruent elements required that the commercial featured a good number of negative facts.

After a panel of judges sampled a considerable number of ads, a laundry detergent commercial was chosen, since an analysis of its content showed that it contained elements congruent with a negative mood, and that commercials featuring this class of products are recommended for this type of study (e.g. Soldow and Principe, 1981).

Only one message at a time interrupted the film. This decision was made to eliminate any bias caused by interference effects from other messages in the pod (e.g. Swaminathan and Kent, 2013). A few years ago viewers being shown only one commercial in a break would have probably considered it inhabitual, but this has now become a common practice on French Canadian television. Six different commercials were inserted in the film, even though only the reactions to the last one were measured. The rationale was that the viewers' negative felt mood would probably be accumulated from interruption to interruption, and hence it would be better to expose them to a number of commercial breaks before taking any measurements.

The experiment took place at l'Université du Québec à Rimouski, using 72 night time adult undergraduate students in business administration. Consequently, the interpretation of the results originated from two groups of 36 students. Data from descriptive variables of the respondents are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of Respondents (N = 72).

	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	28	38.9
Female	44	61.1
	Average	SD
Age	23.3	2.6

The subjects' age varies from 19 to 31 (A = 23.30; SD = 2.60). The sample consisted mainly of women (44; 61.1 %). No significant statistical differences between data coming from the experimental and control groups were found, leading us to conclude that the samples used for the purposes of this study were similar regarding to the age and sex of the participants

5. Findings

Results for the experiment's main variables are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables

Variables	Exp. Group	Control Group	Z Statistic	Sig.
Felt mood and affective tone of cognitive responses ⁽¹⁾	0.0733	0.5491	4.72	0.00
Recall of mood congruent elements ⁽²⁾	0.1020	0.1200	0.23	n.s.
Commercial evaluation	3.6759	4.4846	4.83	0.00
Product judgement	4.8047	5.4431	2.15	0.03
Intention to purchase	3.9974	4.3940	1.65	0.10

- (1) For each participant, proportions were calculated by considering the number of negative thoughts compared to the total number of thoughts. An average of these proportions was then calculated for both groups.
- (2) Only negative elements were considered, since the provoked felt mood in this experiment is expected to be negative.

a. Felt mood and affective tone of cognitive responses

Participants were asked to write down all thoughts and sentiments that came to them while viewing the last commercial that was presented to them. Two judges independently evaluated the affective tone of all thoughts written down and classified them as being negative, neutral or positive. The judges were in agreement for 96% of the statements. The remaining cases were classified by a third judge, a small number of them being discarded because of a lack of clarity. The results for the cognitive responses are shown in Table 2.

The Z statistic supports the existence of a significant difference between the two groups of subjects, and the difference is in the expected direction. It can be deduced from this outcome that viewers submitted to abrupt commercial breaks expressed a greater proportion of negative thoughts than those who were not.

b. Recall of mood congruent elements

It is shown in Table 2 that the recall of negative elements went in the desired direction, but there was no significant difference between the results obtained from the two groups. Therefore, the experiment did not allow verifying that a negative mood increased the recall of negative elements. This result is disappointing, but an explanation can be put forward. It may be that the nature of the commercial used gave rise to the inability of verifying H2. The ad almost exclusively included information elements that were easily identifiable by the viewers. What was originally thought to be a desirable characteristic for the commercial probably had an equalizing effect and hence, considerably reduced the possibilities of getting significantly different results from the two groups. Accordingly, a survey of all the answers given by the participants was made, and it was clearly established that just about everyone (whatever the group they were in) had mainly recalled the same elements.

c. Commercial evaluation

The third hypothesis was verified by asking the respondents to evaluate five statements using seven-point bipolar scales. Reliability of the measure was checked and judged satisfactory (Cronbach alpha: 0.93). The Z statistic shows a statistically significant difference between the two groups and it is in the expected direction. It can then be asserted that viewers being exposed to abrupt commercial breaks had a tendency to evaluate the commercial more negatively than those who were not.

d. Product judgement

Participants were asked to evaluate two statements using seven-point bipolar scales (Cronbach Alpha: 0.95). Again it is clearly shown in Table 2 that the two groups behaved differently in a significant way, the abruptly positioned commercial causing viewers to judge a product less favorably. It must however be underlined that the participants had to evaluate the performance of a product from a brand that was unknown to them, so it would certainly be hazardous to generalise this result to well-known brands.

e. Purchase intention

Participants again used seven-point bipolar scales (Cronbach Alpha: 0.93) to indicate their "degree of likeliness" of buying the advertised product (e.g. Hosein, 2012). Even though the observed difference between the two groups is fairly important and in the expected direction, it isn't strong enough to conclude that H5 has been verified. This possibility had been anticipated, because of the number of stages separating felt mood and purchase intention. Also, the participants were shown the commercial only once and the product was of a brand unknown to them. Perhaps that under more suitable conditions different results would be obtained.

f. Manipulation check

The participants were asked if they thought the commercial breaks interrupted too abruptly the film they just watched. A chi-square test ($p = .04$) clearly shows that the subjects from the experimental group thought that the breaks were too abrupt, this not being the case for those in the control group. This is reassuring because it supports the assumption that the experiment's observations resulted from the manipulation check, and not because of external factors.

g. Research objectives awareness

Before the participants were finally informed of the hypotheses put forward in this study, they were asked to write down their beliefs regarding the experiment's goal. Not one of them (even imprecisely) identified commercial breaks as the topic for this research.

Conclusion

The results of this study support hypotheses asserting the existence of a relationship between the methods used for positioning commercial breaks in television programs and felt mood. They also show that this relationship will have an impact on advertising effectiveness. It remains to be seen if these results will hold for other products and brands than those used for this study. Also, further research should be done to verify under which conditions, and to what extent, these findings can be applied to actual television advertising situations.

It is common knowledge that advertisers can choose, to the extent of their available financial resources, the television program that will carry their advertisements. The results from this study suggest that they should be very cautious when picking these shows. Programs not well suited for commercial breaks (e.g. soccer match or Formula One race) should perhaps be avoided to some extent.

Although considerable work remains to be done on the circumstances or conditions under which the observations made in this research can be put to practical use, this paper has shown the likely practical significance of a thorough analysis in ad programming that should take in account the positioning of commercial pauses.

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