

Individually Driven Narratives Facilitate Emotion and Consumer Demand

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The European Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2018
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

While emotion is recognized to play a large role in consumer decision making, little work has systematically explored the factors which give advertisements their emotional quality. We set out to explore this by isolating a single factor: the number of individuals featured in the advertisement. We hypothesized that, in line with previous observations from the moral judgement literature (e.g. Slovic 2007), depictions of a single individual would inspire more emotional connection than depictions of groups. To evaluate this, we created 10 original paragraph-long vignettes which promoted specific products. For example, one depicted a someone running through an airport and barely making their flight, as an advertisement for running shoes. In one condition, the vignettes involved a group of people, while in the other, it featured only a single individual. The vignettes were identical in all other respects, instantiating “group size” as the sole independent variable. After reading each vignette, participants judged how emotional these advertisements were, and how much they wanted the featured product. The results confirmed our hypothesis: individually-based vignettes were consistently reported as more emotional, and furthermore, were also associated with a higher demand for the featured product. Overall, these findings elucidate an important factor which make advertisements both more emotional, and more compelling. Future work addressing how this general effect interacts with a wide range of factors will be needed in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how advertisements derive emotions in their viewers, and how this in turn, translates to consumer demand.

Keywords: Empathy, Storytelling, Marketing

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The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Commercial advertisements can create strong, reliable emotional responses, which is understood to play a crucial role in consumer decision making (e.g. Liu et al. 2018; Achar et al. 2016). At the same time, little empirical work has looked at why certain advertisements produce reliable emotional responses, and the specific factors which mediate this. Investigations into this domain have largely been limited to self-reports on the types of emotion (e.g. humor) consumers find emotionally appealing (Nielson Report, 2015). Understanding the rudiments of emotions in advertisements is therefore of significant practical importance, but is poorly understood.

Body

For any given advertising material (e.g. video commercial), a broad range of factors (e.g. music, actors, product) are no doubt important in generating emotion. We decided to focus our exploration on a single, isolatable factor: the number of individuals featured in the advertisement. We hypothesized that advertisements with storylines revolving around a single individual would lead to a heightened emotional response compared to those which revolved around small groups. This prediction stems from observations in moral psychology and the phenomenon of ‘psychic numbing’ (Slovic 2007), which appears to show that emotional responses to human loss scales inversely with the number of individuals affected. This phenomena was derived from a series of behavioral experiments in which participants are shown either one impoverished child in need, or several, and asked how much they would be willing to donate in order to help. The experiments reveal that as group size increases, our emotional resonance decreases. That is, we care maximally about a single child, and this drops substantially as the group becomes larger (Susskind et al. 1999; Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic 2007).

We hypothesized therefore that a similar effect may be operative in commercial advertisements, leading individual based advertisements to be perceived as more emotional than those based on groups.

To evaluate this, we created ten original paragraph-long vignettes which promoted specific products. Each vignettes described a story-line which either revolved around a single main character, or a small group of people. For example, one vignette describes the situation of running through an airport and barely catching a flight, as an advertisement for running shoes. In one condition, the vignettes depict a group of people running through the airport, while in the other, it features only a single individual. The products and services differed widely - from yoga classes, to car insurance, to mobile applications, as did the range of story-lines which promoted them. After reading each vignette, participants were asked to rate, on a scale 1-7, their responses to two questions: “How much did the scenario change your emotional state?” and “How likely would you be to purchase this product/service?”. The survey closed with a short series of demographic questions (e.g. age, gender).

The study utilized a within-subjects design, with all participants being exposed to both conditions: half of the scenarios were viewed as ‘individual’, with the other half viewed as ‘group’. Importantly, the vignettes were identical in all other respects, instantiating ‘Individual vs Group’ as the lone independent variable.

100 adult subjects (54 males, 46 females; average age: 44) were enlisted through the online survey tool Qualtrics, and were paid \$5 for their participation in the study. We first explored whether individual-based or group-based advertisements lead to differential responses. An overall two-way ANOVA comparing advertisements across both ratings revealed a statistically significant difference, $F(1,998) = 11.892$, $p < .001$, with individual-based advertisements rated higher than group-based advertisements. An analysis by question revealed statistically significant advantages for individual over group based advertisements: We found here that individual-based advertisements were rated as more emotional ($F = (1,499) = 5.05$, $p = .025$); in addition, were also associated with a higher demand for the featured product or service ($F(1,499) = 4.19$, $p < .041$) than their group-based counterparts (see Figure 1).

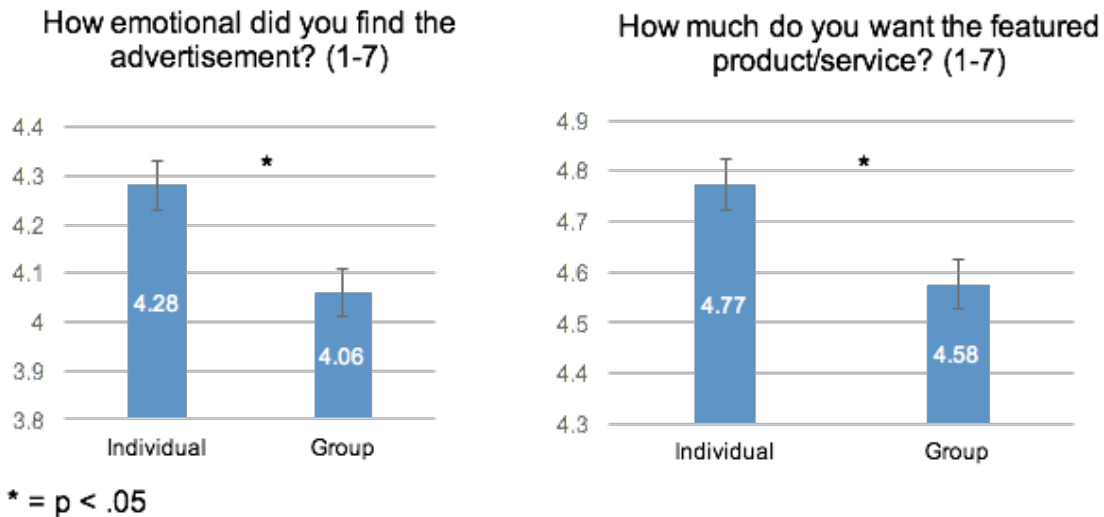


Figure 1: Mean comparison (individual vs. group) for emotional rating and product demand

Overall, these findings provide empirical support for the potency of advertisements which focus on a single individual: not only were these advertisements considered more emotional, but they also lead to an increased demand for the products and services they depicted. These findings help elucidate our understanding of how story-driven advertisements generate emotion in their viewers. Consistent with previous research on psychic numbing discussed above, these findings help elucidate our understanding of how story-driven advertisements generate emotion in their viewers, suggest our emotional empathy does not scale easily, and indicates that we connect maximally with a single individual. When applied to the consumer world, these results then may also help explain new trends in modern marketing, such as the rise of ‘influencer’ marketing, and the power of celebrity endorsements.

All things being equal, individual-based advertisements lead to greater emotional resonance and higher demand. However, In real world settings all things are seldom equal, and our chosen variable of group size no doubt interacts with a wide range of other factors. Our current work explores how this general effect interacts with the intrinsic emotionality connected with the product or service category. For example, we might expect that baby products to be more closely tied to an emotional response than automobiles. And while an individually oriented advertisement may lead to heightened emotional responses in both, this may only translate to higher demand in product categories where emotion is important to the consumer decision making process. Preliminary work suggests exactly this kind of interaction, but further data will need to be collected in order to ensure such a finding is statistically reliable.

Conclusion

Overall, this research provides an important contribution to our understanding of the factors giving rise to emotional resonance in advertisements. Future work addressing how this general effect interacts with a wide range of factors will be needed in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how advertisements derive emotions in their viewers, and how this in turn, translates to consumer demand.

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