

An exploration into the elements of consumer processing of sport-related advertising imagery

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The use of sport-related imagery in marketing communications, such as advertisements, is a common tactic in sport marketing (Meenaghan & O'Sullivan, 1999). It is theorized that when these elements (i.e., pictures or text) are linked to sport, consumers 'transfer' positive feelings from the sport image to the brand depicted (e.g., Belch & Belch, 1998), which, in turn, results in more ad favorable response (Bennett, 1999; Ferrand & Pages, 1996; Meenaghan & Shipley, 1999). This type of pair association is utilized not only for advertising sport products (e.g., sporting goods) but non-sport products as well (Van Hoescke, Van Hoescke, De Knop & Taks, 2002). While there is a growing body of scholarly work on the use of sport to promote non-sport products, there is a need for additional investigation into the underlying framework of consumer processing of sport marketing-related phenomena (Cornwell, Weeks & Roy, 2005). Promotional games are a form of sales promotion that includes contests or sweepstakes which feature a chance for consumers to win a prize (Ward & Hill, 1991). Ward and Hill (1991) posit that these games present an opportunity for individuals to fantasize about winning. These promotions are widely applied in a sport marketing context, such as in the leveraging of sponsorship commitments (Cornwell, Weeks & Roy, 2005). Despite their popularity in practice, however, there is a need for additional research on the processing related to elements of sponsorship advertising (Pham & Vanhuele, 1997).

A significant body of consumer literature focuses on the influence of imagery on response to advertisements (Babin & Burns, 1997). Much of this research treats processing style as an indicator of differences in consumer processing (e.g., Babin & Burns, 1997). Further, some show that one's ability to process information using imagery can explain effects of ad execution on response (Petrova & Cialdini, 2005; Thompson & Hamilton, 2006). However, while many of these studies purport to measure 'individual differences' in processing, there is an overall lack of consistency as to the conceptualization of imagery (Miller et al., 2000). One method to examining such differences in an advertising context is the use of personality theory (Haugtvedt, Petty & Cacioppo, 1992). There are some studies demonstrating the utility of personality in explaining variance in ad response (Brennan & Bahn, 2006; DeRosia, 2008; McDaniel, Lim & Mahan, 2007; Mowen, Harris & Bone, 2004).

However, additional investigation using theoretically-grounded personality constructs could add to this growing body of literature (Haugtvedt et al., 1992). Hirschman (1983) and others (d'Astous & Deshenes 2005) posit that certain traits can influence participation in fantasy-related consumption behaviors, including role-projection and escapism (i.e., to get away from one's everyday life) or other activities involving visualization. Specifically, an individual's preference for using imagination can predict a tendency to engage in certain types of fantasy, including both role-projection and escapism.

The current study adopts a similar approach in employing a personality trait, fantasy-proneness, which appears conceptually similar to Hirschman's (1983) operationalization of imagery. Further, existing research suggests that certain measures of the fantasy-proneness trait can gauge tendencies to engage in projective fantasy (McDaniel, Lee & Lim, 2001) In order to facilitate the design of ecologically valid advertisements that provide an opportunity to attribute variance in response to the chosen manipulations, pre-tests were conducted prior to constructing ad stimuli. Prior research offers that both product category involvement and hedonic/utilitarian attitudes toward product category are important to understanding consumer response to marketing stimuli, such as advertising (e.g., Voss, Spangenberg & Grohmann, 2003). Further, scholars suggest the involvement construct can be related to the processing of sponsorship stimuli (cf. Cornwell, et al, 2005). Likewise, some marketing studies indicate that consumers tend to process certain categories of products (e.g., utilitarian) differently (Voss et al., 2003). In the present study, a pre-test was used to select a low-involvement utilitarian product category as well as a low-involvement sport event. Since the imagery-evoking potential of the ad containing the promotional game was of interest here, it was important to avoid potential confounds to processing such as products or game prizes that are likely to be of high personal relevance.

Pre-test results pointed to ballpoint pens as a low-involvement, utilitarian product category and the professional tennis tournament Wimbledon as a low-involvement sport event in a sample of Undergraduate college students. The main study was conducted using a convenience sample of Undergraduate college students stratified by gender (N=191; 50.1% female) and consisted of two parts: an on-line survey and a classroom session.

The on-line survey included the 25-item Creative Experiences Questionnaire (CEQ; Merckelbach et al., 2001), a measure of fantasy-proneness, the six-item promotion-proneness scale (Wakefield & Barnes, 1996), items relating to predictive validity of these scales as well as demographic items. In the classroom session, each individual saw three black-and-white print ads in a booklet, one of which was the treatment ad; ads were rotated across booklets to control for order effects. Following each ad,

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participants responded to items from the three dimensions of the Imagery scale (Miller et al., 2000), Quantity (three items), Vividness (five items) and Valence (five items). Scores on all three outcome measures were summed and averaged, resulting in an index for each facet of imagery processing. Results of hierarchical regression analyses pointed to support for some of the hypotheses. Models including gender and promotion proneness were not significant. On the contrary, models including fantasy-proneness while controlling for gender and promotion proneness were significant on Quantity ($B=.21, p<.01$) and Vividness ($B=.16, p<.05$) but not Valence ($B=.10, ns$). In addition, the model including ad execution type was significant for Quantity ($B=.20, p<.01$), Vividness ($B=.26, p<.001$), and Valence ($B=.21, p<.01$). The findings of this study show that fantasy-proneness and imagery-eliciting ad executions can play a role in consumer processing of print ads in a sport marketing context. The implications of the findings for sport marketers as well as suggestions for future research are discussed.