

## **Facts versus Feelings?**

### **The effectiveness of Hard versus Soft Sell Appeals in Online Advertising**

**In two experimental studies, the advertising effects of hard versus soft sell appeals are investigated. Both studies show that in online advertising (banner ads and viral video ads), soft sell appeals in advertisements on high involvement products generate a more positive attitude towards the ad than hard sell appeals. In print advertising however, hard sell appeals lead to a more positive Aad, due to the fact that the advertisement is perceived as less irritating and more credible. Additionally, study II revealed that using soft sell appeals in viral video ads leads to a higher intention to share, due to the generation of a positive attitude towards the ad.**

**Key Words:** *appeals, medium, advertising effectiveness, viral video ads*

**Track:** *Advertising, Promotion, Marketing Communications*

## 1. Introduction

In the development of an effective advertisement, advertising professionals can, amongst other strategies, use hard sell or soft sell appeals. Ads using hard sell appeals focus on sales. They display actual and tangible characters in an explicit way emphasizing brand and product recommendations, whereas in a soft sell appeal, emotions and sentiments are emphasized over clear-cut product related attributes (Okazaki, Mueller and Taylor, 2010). Previous research has demonstrated that hard sell appeals generate a positive attitude towards the ad (Aad) and a higher brand recall due to the fact that consumers need to think more and obtain more information about the product (Golden & Johnson, 1983). However, Okazaki et al. (2010) found that this evoked positive attitude is significantly less positive than the positive attitude evoked by soft sell appeals. Till now very little research has been done on the use of hard sell and soft sell appeals in advertising (Okazaki et al., 2010). Moreover, until today most of the research concerning hard sell and soft sell appeals, was conducted in a traditional, passive media environment. The current study will therefore investigate the effectiveness of hard vs. soft sell appeals in an online advertising environment.

With the technological advancement and democratization of the Internet, the marketing landscape has evolved considerably. There is an exponential increase in online advertising, like banner ads, advergames and viral video ads. The Internet is an interactive medium, facilitating direct two-way communication, regardless of distance and time (Rodgers & Thorson, 2000) and offering a lot of opportunities for advertisers. In the current paper, we focus on two specific online advertising formats, these are online banner ads and viral videos. Furthermore, as viral advertisements hold the possibility to share them with one's social network, consumers can become active communicators of brand messages creating the potential for advertisers to reach a large group of consumers through the Internet at an exponential rate (Watts & Peretti, 2007). Therefore, in the second study, we will examine which type of appeal will generate a higher likelihood to share advertisements.

Study 1 extends knowledge by exploring the impact of hard and soft sell appeals in both traditional print and online banner ads, on attitude towards the ad (Aad), for high involvement products. In addition, the mediating role of ad credibility and irritation are examined. Study 2 further examines the moderating role of product involvement on the effectiveness of hard versus soft sell appeals in viral video ads (social media). Moreover, the mediating role of Aad on the intention to share the viral ad with one's social network is investigated.

## 2. Study I: hard sell versus soft sell appeals in traditional and online media

### *2.1 Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development*

Product involvement influences the way information is processed by consumers. In particular, dual-processing models suggest that advertisements for high involvement products are processed in a more central way compared to advertisements for low involvement products. This implies a more elaborate processing and a higher emphasis on central and factual claims (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 1998; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Therefore, we expect that hard sell appeals in print advertisements for high involvement products will generate more positive attitudes toward the ad compared to soft sell appeals. However, this effect may be different for online advertisements. This is because, unlike print media which generate rather analytical and cognitive reactions to advertisements (Sundar, Narayan, Obregon, & Uppal, 1994), most online media are transformational. For such media the use of emotional, soft sell appeals can more positively affect attitudes towards the ad than hard sell appeals. Lee & Thorson (2009) for example found that if people are browsing on a commercial website that emphasizes emotion rather than thinking or cognition, the attitude towards the website is higher, because

less efforts have to be made to process the content. Therefore, in online advertising, we expect soft sell appeals to elicit more favorable reactions from consumers than hard sell appeals.

*H1: For print advertisements (for high involvement products), hard sell appeals will generate a more positive attitude towards the ad than soft sell appeals. For online advertisements (banner ads), soft sell appeals will generate a more positive Aad than hard sell appeals*

Message credibility and irritation evoked by the ad have an important impact on advertising effectiveness. Already in 1963, Maloney argued that advertising needed to be credible in order to be effective. In an online environment, credibility is believed to have an important impact on advertising effectiveness as well. Lan, Prayogoyusmanto and Lau (2011) for example found that credibility is positively related to consumer's attitude towards banner ads. Hard sell appeals are said to be perceived as more credible than soft sell appeals (Okazaki et al., 2010), which can be mainly attributed to clear product and brand claims in hard sell appeals (Albers-Miller & Stanford, 1999). In our study, we want to investigate whether credibility also has an impact on the expected positive effect of soft sell appeals on online Aad. Several studies have indicated that increased irritation evoked by the ad can lead to a reduction of advertising effectiveness. Ozakaki et al. (2010) found that in general, hard sell appeals evoke more irritation compared to soft sell appeals. In an online environment, we expect a similar effect:

*H2a: Hard sell appeals in print ads will lead to a more positive Aad, through a higher perceived credibility (a) and a lower evoked irritation (b) than soft sell appeals*

*H2b: Soft sell appeals in online ads will lead to a more positive Aad, through a higher perceived credibility (a) and a lower evoked irritation (b) than hard sell appeals*

## 2.2 Design and Method

The experiment used a 2 (appeal: hard vs. soft sell) by 2 (medium: print vs. online) between-subjects experimental design to test the hypotheses. First, two high involvement products, an MP3 player and a tablet were selected. To manipulate the advertising appeal (hard vs. soft sell), six ads were evaluated on hard sell versus soft sell, using Okazaki et al.'s scale (2010,  $\alpha = .80$ ) by a group of twenty participants. Two ads that are perceived as hard sell, of which one on an MP3 player and one on a tablet, and two ads that are perceived as soft sell, of which one on an MP3 player and one on a tablet, were selected.

These four advertisements were integrated into an existing European magazine and into the magazine's website. In the print medium condition, participants were asked to browse through the magazine. In the online medium condition, participants were asked to click a link and which directed them to the site of the magazine on which the ad was displayed as a banner ad. In both conditions the media content was kept constant. After the media session, participants filled in a short survey consisting of demographic, and ad effectiveness measures. Aad was measured by four, five-point Likert-scale items adopted from Mitchell and Olson (1981) ( $\alpha = .82$ ). Irritation was measured by three, five-point Likert-scale items (Bhat, Leigh and Warlow, 1998) ( $\alpha = .96$ ). Credibility was measured by a five item, five-point semantic differential (Bhat et al. (1998) ( $\alpha = .85$ ). The perception of hard sell versus soft sell was measured by a six item, five-point semantic differential based on Ozaki et al.'s scale (2010).

One hundred twenty-four people (63 female, M age = 28.10 years, SD=12.02) took part in the study. We used a snowball sampling method, recruiting participants via social media and personal invitations.

## 2.3 Results

First, a manipulation check revealed a significant difference between the hard sell (M = 2.10, SD = 0.57) and the soft sell advertisements in how they were perceived (hard sell vs. soft sell) (M = 3.33, SD = .69,  $t(122)=-10.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Next, the results of a two-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) with ad appeal and medium as independent variables revealed no main effects of medium ( $F(1, 120) = .18, p = .67$ ) and appeal ( $F(1, 120) = .58, p = .45$ ) on Aad. The results did indicate a significant interaction effect between ad appeal and medium type on Aad ( $F(1, 120) = 15.44, p < .001$ ). As predicted, in an online medium, a soft sell appeal ( $M = 3.41, SD = .52$ ) leads to a more positive Aad than a hard sell appeal ( $M = 2.89, SD = .85, t(47) = -2.63, p = .01$ ), whereas in a print medium, a hard sell appeal ( $M = 3.60, SD = .91$ ) generates a more positive Aad than a soft-sell appeal ( $M = 2.84, SD = 1.09, t(61) = 2.97, p < .001$ ).

Further, a moderated mediation analysis (process macro of Hayes, 2012, model 8, 5000 bootstrap resamples) with appeal as independent variable, medium as moderator, irritation and credibility as mediators and Aad as dependent variable was conducted to test hypotheses 2 and 3. The results revealed a significant moderation by the medium of the mediating effect of irritation ( $\beta = .32, SE = .12, 95\%-CI = [.133 \text{ to } .636]$ ) and credibility ( $\beta = .64, SE = .22, 95\%-CI = [.221 \text{ to } 1.108]$ ) on the relationship between appeal and Aad. In particular, the results showed that in the print medium condition, the effect of the appeal on Aad was mediated by irritation ( $\beta = -.157, SE = .08, 95\% CI = [-.368 \text{ to } -.040]$ ) and credibility ( $\beta = -.607, SE = .17, 95\% CI = [-.969 \text{ to } -.284]$ ). In the online medium condition, however, the effect of appeal on Aad was only partly mediated by irritation ( $\beta = .16, SE = .07, 95\% CI = [.053 \text{ to } .348]$ ) and not by credibility ( $\beta = .03, SE = .13, 95\% CI = [-.232 \text{ to } .286]$ ). Further, the analysis revealed a direct effect of appeal on Aad in the online medium condition ( $\beta = .32, SE = .15, t = 2.12, p = .04, 95\% CI = .021 \text{ to } .616$ ). No significant direct effect of appeal on Aad in the print medium condition was found ( $\beta = .004, SE = .15, t = .03, p = .98, 95\% CI = -.301 \text{ to } .310$ ).

### **3. Study II: hard sell versus soft sell appeals in online viral ads**

#### *3.1 Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development*

Study I showed that online banner ads for high involvement products that use soft sell appeals generate a more positive Aad. Study II wants to investigate whether this is also the case for high involvement products advertised through viral video ads. With the explosive growth of social media (e.g. YouTube and Facebook), viral advertising is rapidly adopted by marketing professionals. These advertisements hold the possibility for consumers to share it with one's social network, turning them into active communicators of brand messages. In this way, electronic content has the potential to reach a large group of consumers through the Internet at an exponential rate (Watts & Peretti, 2007). Therefore, for viral marketing to work, viewers must be encouraged by the message to pass it on to their social network. Previous studies have pointed out the importance of emotional tone in viral video ads (e.g. Witthaus, 2002).

According to Dobeles, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme and van Wijk, 2007, viral marketing messages must build an emotional connection between the campaign and the recipient in order to ensure spreading of the message. To our knowledge, the impact of hard versus soft sell appeals in a viral marketing context hasn't been examined yet. However, already in 1966, Dichter stated that an advertisement should be naturally, non-commercially in order to evoke word-of-mouth, in other words the advertisement should use a soft sell technique. Broadening these findings, Cruz and Fill (2008) stated that viral ads should be commercial-free (soft sell), and not include a call-to-action (hard sell). Therefore, we expect viral (video) ads that use soft sell appeals will generate a more positive Aad than viral video ads using hard sell appeals.

*H4: Viral video ads for high involvement products using soft sell appeals will generate a more positive Aad than viral video ads using hard sell appeals.*

The success of viral video ads depends on consumers' intention to share. Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry and Raman (2004) found that there is a correlation between attitude towards a viral message and the spreading of it. Moreover, Camarero and San Jose (2010) demonstrated that a positive attitude towards a viral message is the most important motivation for whether

or not forwarding these messages. Hence, we expect the effect of soft sell appeals in high involvement viral video ads on intention to share to be positively mediated by Aad.

*H5: The effect of a soft sell appeal in high involvement viral video ads on intention to share will positively be mediated by Aad.*

### 3.2 Design and Method

The study employed a 2 (appeal: hard sell vs. soft sell appeal) by 2 (product involvement: high versus low) between-subjects experimental design. An additional low involvement condition was selected to check whether the expected effects for high involvement products also apply to low involvement products.

First, to manipulate product involvement, twenty-six different products were pretested on involvement (Zaichowsky, 1994) ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Five high and five low involvement products were selected. For these products, twenty viral video ads selected on existing Facebook and YouTube brand pages were pretested on hard sell versus soft sell (Okazaki et al., 2010) ( $\alpha = .68$ ). Four hard sell and four soft sell commercials for the low involvement condition and four hard sell and four soft sell commercials for the high involvement condition were selected.

Results were aggregated over the four advertisements.

Participants were first asked to watch a 30-second viral commercial. Further, their attitude towards this commercial (Aad) was measured by a four-item, seven-point semantic differential adopted from Holbrook & Batra, 1987 ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Next, the participants' intention to share was measured by three, five-point Likert-scale items adopted from Hsieh, Hsieh & Tang (2012) ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

A total of 189 participants (119 female, M age = 27.06 years,  $SD=12.67$ ) participated in this study. Similar to study 1, a snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants via social media.

### 3.3 Results

First, a manipulation check revealed a significant difference in perceived involvement between viral video ads for a high ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) versus a low involvement product ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ,  $t(187) = 2.10$ ,  $p = .037$ ). The second manipulation check was also successful and revealed a significant difference between the hard sell and the soft sell advertisements in how they were perceived (hard sell vs. soft sell) ( $M_{\text{soft sell}} = 4.64$ ,  $SD = .85$  vs.  $M_{\text{hard sell}} = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ,  $t(187) = -9.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Further, the results of a two-factor ANOVA with ad appeal and product involvement as independent variables revealed a main effect of appeal ( $F(1, 185) = 3.19$ ,  $p = .05$ ) on Aad. No main effect of product involvement ( $F(1, 185) = 1.43$ ,  $p = .23$ ) on Aad was found. The results indicated a significant interaction effect on Aad ( $F(1, 185) = 3.89$ ,  $p = .05$ ). Confirming the fourth hypothesis, for high involvement products, a soft sell viral commercial ( $M = 4.91$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) generates a more positive Aad than a hard sell viral commercial ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ,  $t(99) = -2.85$ ,  $p = .005$ ). For low involvement products, however, no significant differences between soft sell ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) and hard sell ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) viral video ads on Aad were found ( $t(86) = -.00$ ,  $p = .99$ ).

A moderated mediation analysis using the process macro of Hayes (2012, model 8, 5000 bootstrap resamples) with appeal as independent variable, product involvement as moderator, Aad as mediator and intention to share as dependent variable was conducted to test hypothesis 5. The analysis revealed a significant moderation by product involvement of the mediating effect of Aad ( $\beta = -.52$ ,  $SE = .27$ ,  $95\%CI = [-1.085 \text{ to } -.018]$ ) on the relationship between appeal and intention to share. In particular, the results showed that in the high involvement condition, the effect of ad appeal on intention to share was fully mediated by Aad ( $\beta = .521$ ,  $SE = .19$ ,  $95\% CI = [.176 \text{ to } .898]$ ), which confirms the fifth hypothesis. In the low

involvement condition, no significant indirect effect of appeal on intention to share through Aad ( $\beta = .00$ ,  $SE = .19$ , 95%  $CI = [-.379 \text{ to } .360]$ ) was found. Further, the analysis revealed no direct effects of appeal on intention to share in the high involvement condition ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $SE = .23$ ,  $t = 1.06$ ,  $p = .29$ ), nor in the low involvement condition ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $SE = .24$ ,  $t = 1.09$ ,  $p = .28$ ).

## 5. General Discussion

Comparing different advertising strategies for high involvement products, we found that in print ads, hard sell appeals generate a more positive Aad than soft sell appeals, whereas in banner ads, soft sell appeals generate a more positive Aad than hard sell appeals. In the print medium condition, a more positive Aad is triggered by hard sell appeals, because the ad is perceived as less irritating and more credible, as Holbrook (1978) and Ozaki et al. (2010) had already pointed out. In the online medium condition, the positive effects of soft sell appeals on Aad can partly be attributed to less irritation evoked by the ad. No mediating role of credibility of the banner ad was found.

Exploring viral advertising possibilities, study II focused on viral video ads. Similar to banner ads, we found soft sell appeals in ads on high involvement products to generate a more positive Aad than hard sell appeals. Moreover, in a high involvement condition, viral video ads using soft sell appeals generate a higher intention to share, because a more positive Aad is evoked. These results are in line with the findings of Phelps et al. (2004) and Camarero et al. (2010).

In summary, we can conclude that in online advertising (banner ads and viral video ads) soft sell appeals are preferred over hard sell appeals, because they generate a more positive attitude towards the ad and a higher intention to share. Future research could examine whether this is also the case for other types of online ads. Further, future research could look for different moderators (e.g. product type: functional vs. hedonic) and additional mediators of the observed effects. Furthermore, future studies could focus on the specific characteristics of online ads and how they influence the preference for hard vs. soft sell appeals. Also the reason why there are no differences between hard vs. soft sell appeals on Aad in viral ads could be further investigated. Another promising research direction is to explore the effect of different content on the intention to share a viral commercial. Furthermore, deepening our understanding of motivations to share a viral commercial could help craft efficient strategies for advertisers as they attempt to reach consumers in a cluttered media landscape.

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