Attracting Attention through Absurd Advertisements: An Eye Tracker Study

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Abstract

Advertisers nowadays are challenged to invent ways to break through the advertisements clutter. One potential technique is the use of absurdity in advertisements. In the present study, eye-tracking technology was used to examine the effect of absurdity on attention. More time was spent looking at absurd advertisements and absurd advertisements received significantly more fixations than normal advertisements. Absurd advertisements were however not better in drawing initial attention than normal advertisements. Absurd advertisements did draw more attention than normal advertisements overall.

Keywords: advertisements, absurdity, eye-tracking, attention

Attracting Attention Through Absurd Advertisements: An Eye Tracker Study

Advertisements are everywhere. People are exposed to more than 1000 advertisements each day (Fennis & Stroebe, 2015). Due to this overload, it has become increasingly difficult to gain consumer's attention and get an advertisement noticed (Dahl, Frankenberger, & Manchandra, 2003; Pieters, Warlop, & Wedel, 2002). Advertisers are hence challenged to invent ways to break through this advertisement clutter and to develop advertisements that draw attention. One potential technique is the use of absurdity in advertisements.

Absurd advertisements are those with "incongruously juxtaposing pictorial images, words and/or sounds that viewers perceive as bizarre, irrational, illogical, and disordered" (Arias-Bolzmann, Chakraborty, & Mowen, 2000, p. 35). Examples of absurdity in advertisements are surrealism, anthropomorphism, allegory, humor, and hyperbole. Absurdity appears to stem from a deviation from or violation of people's expectations of a coherent world. Kahneman (1973) described these illogical relationships, or incongruities, as a mismatch between stimulus and expectations and Loizou (2005) refers to incongruity as a violation of an existing schema, which are knowledge structures that guide a person's interpretation, expectation, and attention. In other words, incongruity is experienced when something is seen as unusual and when it violates expectations and existing schemas. Hence, incongruity is the basis for absurdity.

Absurdity draws attention (Lee & Schumann, 2004). Accordingly, absurd advertisements have the potential to break through the advertisement clutter and attract a consumer's attention. As opposed to other advertising techniques, absurdity may have the greatest ability to do this. Advertisements frequently contain absurd elements (Arias-Bolzmann et al., 2000; Gelbrich, Gäthke, & Westjohn, 2012; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002). Based on this popularity, it seems that people think absurdity in advertising works. However, little research has been done on absurdity

in advertisements and the effectiveness of using it to attract the attention of viewers. Therefore, in this paper we investigate the relationship between absurdity and attention.

Absurd advertisements and attention

Attention has a strong contribution to advertising effectiveness (Wedels & Pieters, 2008; Lee & Ahn, 2012). In fact, attention is a necessary component for advertising success, as an advertisement first has to be seen in order to be effective at all. Furthermore, most hierarchy-of-effects models of advertising effectiveness emphasize that attention is essential to attain higher-level processes (Milosavljevic & Cerf, 2008). Pieters et al. (2002), for instance, proposed that increased attention to an advertisement allows for deeper processing, which is likely to result in a stronger brand memory.

Considering the importance but limited capacity of attention, it is imperative to explore the factors that make absurd advertisements attract attention. One of the most important reasons is that absurd advertisements are original; they are different than regular ads that solely focus on product or brand features (Gelbrich et al., 2012). It has been shown that original advertisements attract more attention than regular advertisements (Pieters et al., 2002). Originality is closely related to stimulus salience, which refers to features that are most noticeable or eye-catching. The attention-grabbing effects of visual salience are likely to result from factors such as novelty (Homer & Kahle, 1986; MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989). An advertisement is perceived as new when it is unexpectedly different from advertisements that promote the same product category (Milsosavljevic & Cerf, 2008). Thus, original and novel advertisements—such as absurd advertisements—expose viewers to expectancy violations that trigger surprise (Alden, Mukherjee, & Hoyer, 2000; Meyer et al., 1991). The experience of surprise interrupts other ongoing processes in order for attention to be focused on the surprising source (Meyer et al.,

1991). Using an absurd image that evokes surprise is therefore likely to increase the distinctiveness of an advertisement, which makes it more likely to break through the advertisement clutter (O'Brien & Wolford, 1982).

Another reason why absurd advertisements may attract attention is because of the incongruity that is present in the absurd advertisements themselves. Similar to the surprise related to the originality and novelty of absurd advertisements, which has been described earlier, the absurd images themselves may also evoke surprise. This surprise that is induced by expectancy violations may also draw attention towards an absurd advertisement.

The attention-grabbing effects of absurdity can also be explained by processes similar to the Disrupt Then Reframe (DTR) technique of persuasion. This technique implies that people are more likely to be persuaded when they experience a disruption followed by a direct reframe (Davis & Knowles, 1999). The usual example describes a salesperson that sells candy, who disrupts participants by telling them the price is hundred Eurocents. This disruption is then followed by a reframe: "That's one Euro. It is a bargain!". Participants in this disruption condition were more likely to buy the candy than participants in conditions without a disruption. Davis and Knowles (1999) stated that messages that confuse people followed by messages that reduce ambiguity can result in an increased compliance. Like absurd advertisements, the disruption in the DTR technique relies on the violation of expectancies. A disruption may occur when viewers see an absurd, incongruent, or unexpected image in an advertisement. However, people are naturally motivated to seek out consistent information and reduce uncertainty (Hirsh, Mar, & Peterson, 2012). Hence, the tension related to the experience of incongruity in an absurd advertisement may motivate consumers to search for any reframe that can restore their

expectations of a coherent world (Festinger, 1962; Lee & Schumann, 2004). This enhanced

motivation may increase a viewer's attention towards an absurd advertisement.

Absurdity and Humor

A related area of research in advertising is the research on humor. Absurd advertisements

share many similarities with humorous advertisements. Overall, incongruity plays an important

role in humor too (Alden, Hoyer & Lee, 1993). Humorous and absurd advertisements thus may

draw attention in a similar way. As mentioned earlier, expectancy violations—present in both

absurd and humorous advertisements—cause surprise, which in turn draws attention (Alden et

al., 2000; Meyer et al., 1991). Humorous advertisements have also been shown to improve

factors such as message comprehension and persuasion (Kelly & Solomon, 1975). Importantly, it

has been shown that humorous messages attract attention (Sternthal & Craig, 1973).

However, there seems to be a difference in advertisements that mainly focus on absurdity

rather than humor. Some theorists argue that incongruity is necessary and sufficient to produce

humorous responses, while others state that humorous responses cannot be obtained without a

resolution for the incongruity (Ritchie, 1999; Suls, 1983). This difference can be illustrated by

Raskin (1979). He stated that a message or image would not be perceived as funny, and not even

comprehended, when the 'speaker' and the 'audience' do not have the same schemas. Having a

particular knowledge structure may provide the resolution of a joke, and when the knowledge

structure is not shared, the humorous message will not be understood. This relates to absurd

advertisements, because a shared knowledge structure may act as a resolution of an absurd

image, resulting in a humorous response that is present in absurd humor. When the required

knowledge is absent and the absurd image thus cannot be reframed, the absurd image stays

absurd for the perceiver (Veatch, 1998). Relating this to the DTR technique, consumers may be less persuaded by an absurd image because of the lack of an appropriate reframe.

It is important to examine the role of humor in advertisements that use absurdity, because it can provide insights into what advertisement types will be most effective. Although absurdity and humor both rely on expectancy violations, the differences may have different impacts on advertisement effectiveness. Absurd advertisements either can draw attention because of absurdity itself, or because the absurdity evokes humorous responses. If absurdity still draws attention, even if it is not perceived as funny, then this would imply that absurdity and humor are distinct techniques of attracting attention. These may have different consequences for advertisement success that should be studied in future research.

Eye tracking

Eye tracking provides a direct measure of attention and can be used in advertising research (Venkatraman et al., 2015). For example, several studies have been performed on the visual processing of different types of advertisements (Wedel & Pieters, 2008). Researchers showed that more time was spent on advertisements that included pictures and texts that were not related to the product, in contrast to advertisements that depicted the product (Hyona, Radach, & Deubel, 2003). Also, Wedel and Pieters (2008) recorded the number of eye fixations on brand, pictorial, and text objects in print advertisements in magazines to assess a proposed attention-to-memory link. They found that an increased number of fixations for brand and pictorial objects enhanced brand memory, while fixations to text objects did not (Wedel & Pieters, 2008). A similar study was done by Pieters et al. (2002) to examine the effects of ad originality on brand memory. Although original advertisements were expected to draw more attention to the ad, the researchers mentioned the possibility that memory for the brand itself could be impaired because

of this increased attention to the advertisement in general. Nevertheless, their results showed that original advertisements gained more attention and even improved brand memory (Pieters et al., 2002).

Absurd advertisements have not been studied with an eye-tracker yet. There has been some eye-tracking research on advertisements that contain humor. Strick et al. (2009) studied the effects of humor in advertisements on attention and showed that advertisements paired with humorous texts drew more attention than those paired with non-humorous texts (Strick et al., 2009). However, the humorous messages that Strick et al. (2009) presented were positioned next to the advertisement and these messages were unrelated to the advertised product. This means that the humorous element was not really present in the advertisement itself, while this would be the case in real life advertising. Therefore, the attention-grabbing results of the eye-tracking study may not be generalizable to real advertisements that use humor to promote their products. In the present study we will use real advertisements, where the absurd element will relate to the advertised product and will be present in the advertisement itself.

Hypotheses

Taking in consideration the similarities of absurd and humorous advertisements, we examined whether absurd advertisements produce the same results as humorous advertisements. As mentioned earlier, it is expected that gaining attention is the greatest potential of absurd advertisements. Hence, eye-tracking technology was used to examine the effect of absurdity on attention. Based on previous studies, it is expected that absurd advertisements will receive more fixations than normal advertisements and that more time will be spent on absurd advertisements, when comparing them to normal advertisements. Moreover, it is expected that participants are more likely to first fixate on absurd advertisements compared to normal advertisements.

Method

Participants and design

Thirty-eight students (4 males, 34 females) from Tilburg University participated, receiving 0.5 course credit in return. The study was divided into two parts. The first part consisted of an eye tracker task in which participants were repeatedly presented with pairs of normal and absurd advertisements. In the second part, participants answered questions regarding the advertisements.

Procedure

The study was conducted in a lab setting. Each participant signed an informed consent before taking part in the experiment. Following consent, participants began with the eye tracker task. The eye tracker was calibrated to the participant and following two practice rounds, the advertisement task commenced. Subsequently, the participants had to answer questions about the advertisements that were presented during the eye tracker task. At the end, participants answered several demographics questions.

Materials

Eye tracker task. A Tobii T60 eye tracker (Tobii, Stockholm, Sweden) was used to record eye movement data. The Tobii T60 is a noninvasive eye tracker that is integrated in a 17" TFT monitor, resembling a standard PC monitor. It records at a rate of 60Hz. The computer screen had a screen resolution of 1280 x 1024 pixels.

The eye tracker task consisted of 26 trials. Each trial began with a central fixation cross (1000 ms), followed by the presentation of one absurd and one normal advertisement (20000 ms). The eye-tracker registered participants' eye-movements during these 20000 ms. Trials automatically switched to the next trial, with a 3000 ms inter-trial white screen.

In total, 52 existing advertisements were used for the eye tracker task, of which 26 were absurd and 26 were normal. The advertisements were collected via online search engines, using relevant terms such as absurd, irrational, and bizarre advertisements. The advertisement frames were 576 x 432 pixels (landscape) or 432 x 576 pixels (portrait).

The dependent variables measured in the eye tracking task were fixation duration and fixation frequency. Eyes make two distinct movements: fixations and saccades. Saccades are rapid eye movements between fixation points. On these fixation points, the eye is stationary, which is called a fixation. Fixations allow detailed visual processing and indicate visual attention processes (Wedel & Pieters, 2008). In the present study, data analyses determined whether the eye fixations fell within the advertisement frames, how many times the eyes fixated within a frame (fixation frequency), and how much time was spent in total in each frame (fixation duration). These measures were used to determine whether participants paid most attention to either absurd or normal advertisements.

Advertisement questions. Five questions had to be answered per ad. Participants had to indicate the extent to which they perceived the advertisements as good, understandable, absurd, positive, and funny. The questions regarding absurdity, good, humor and valence were scaled on a 7-point Likert scale. The question that measured whether participants understood the advertisement included two answer options: yes or no. The scores on the question whether an advertisement was perceived as absurd served as a manipulation check for the advertisements used in part one.

<div align="center">

Results

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Manipulation check

Paired sample *t*-tests were conducted in SPSS to examine the effect of advertisement type on the manipulation check item. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests. Participants perceived absurd advertisements (M = 4.36, SD = 1.21) significantly more absurd than normal advertisements (M = 1.90, SD =.77), $t(36)$ = 12.217, $p < .001$.

Eye-tracking

Paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine the effect of advertisement type (absurd or normal) on fixation duration and fixation frequency. These results can be found in Table 1. A significant difference was found for fixations duration between absurd advertisements and normal advertisements, $t(36)$ = 8.610, $p < .001$. Participants fixated for a longer duration on absurd advertisements (M = 600.68, SD = 162.77) compared to normal advertisements (M = 514.85, SD = 145.72. A significant difference was also found for fixation frequency, $t(36)$ = 3.787, $p = .001$. Participants fixated significantly more frequent to absurd advertisements (M = 15.86, SD = 3.88) compared to normal advertisements (M = 14.23, SD = 2.85). Finally, a percentage was determined for the average first fixation to test whether participants were more likely to first fixate on absurd advertisements compared to normal advertisements. The mean first fixation to an absurd advertisement was 48.31% (SD = .09). This percentage was not significantly lower than the mean first fixation to an normal advertisement, $t(36)$ = -1.152, $p = .257$. We also tested whether participants preferred to first fixate on advertisements appearing on the left or right, regardless of advertisement type. In 80.34% of the trials, participants first paid attention to the advertisement appearing on the left side of the fixation cross (SD = .19).

Advertisement rating

Paired sample *t*-tests were conducted to analyze the advertisement rating data. These results can also be found in Table 1. Perceptions of whether an advertisement was perceived as

good did not significantly differ between absurd (M = 4.36, SD = 0.89) and normal advertisements (M = 4.29, SD =.83), t(36) = -0.067, p = .947. Absurd advertisements (M = 3.84, SD = 1.22) were perceived as more humorous than normal advertisements (M = 1.70, SD = .67), t(36) = 11.106, p < .001. Also, a significant difference was found for the scores of the question regarding understanding the advertisement. Absurd advertisements (M = .80, SD = .15) were understood significantly less than normal advertisements (M = .96, SD = .05), t(36) = -7.436, p < .001. Finally, absurd advertisements (M = 3.61, SD = .74) were perceived less positive than normal advertisements (M = 3.99, SD = .80), t(36) = -2.971, p = .005.

Linear mixed model analysis

To determine whether the effect of absurdity on our dependent variables would hold when controlling for humor, a linear mixed effects analysis was used in R (R Core Team, 2017), using the 'lme4' package (Bates, et al., 2015). The p-values were obtained with the 'lmerTest' package (Kuznetsova, Brockhoff, & Christensen, 2016). Linear mixed effects analyses were done to analyze the effect of absurdity on two of our dependent variables: fixation duration and number of fixations. A linear mixed model of average fixation duration as a function of advertisement type was constructed, with random intercepts per participant. This effect of advertisement type was significant, t(39.3) = 21.343, p < .001. When controlling for the humor rating of the advertisement, the effect of advetisement type on average fixation duration was still significant, t(62.2) = 17.945, p < .001. Another linear model was constructed to determine the effect of absurdity on number of fixations. This effect was significant, t(40.3) = 29.865, p < .001. When controlling for the effect of humor rating, the effect of advertisement type on number of fixations was also significant, t(75.5) = 25.633, p < .001.

Correlations

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient were determined to analyze the correlations between the advertisement ratings to gain insights into our participant's meta-cognitions. These correlations can be found in Table 2. Whether participants rated advertisements as good significantly correlated with valence, $r = .64, p < .001$. Ratings of humor and valence of advertisements were significantly correlated, $r = .61, p < .001$. Moreover, ratings of humor and whether participants rated the advertisements as good also correlated significantly, $r = .55, p < .001$.

Discussion

In this study we examined whether absurd advertisements draw more attention than normal advertisements. We found support for our hypothesis that more time will be spent looking at absurd advertisements. We also found support for our hypothesis that absurd advertisements would receive significantly more fixations than normal advertisements. Our final hypothesis was not supported. There was no significant difference between absurd and normal advertisements regarding the initial fixation. Hence, absurd advertisements were not better in drawing initial attention than normal advertisements.

The lack of difference between the initial fixation to an absurd and normal advertisement could be due to a so-called left-to-right bias (Spalek & Hammad, 2005). By randomization, absurd and normal advertisements were equally likely to appear on either the left or right side of the fixation cross. However, participants paid their initial attention to the left advertisements in 80.34% of the trials. Participants in the present study were all Dutch natives and were used to read text from left to right. Hence, the participants are used to shift their attention to stimuli that show up on the left side of the visual field. Although it is possible absurd advertisements might

nevertheless draw more initial attention than normal advertisements, when advertisements are presented side by side this effect is likely to be small, if present at all.

The manipulation of advertisement type was successful. Absurd advertisements were perceived as more absurd than normal advertisements. Absurd advertisements were, however, less understood than normal advertisements and were perceived as less positive than normal advertisements. Both advertisement types were perceived equally as good. Moreover, absurd advertisements were sometimes perceived as more humorous than normal advertisements. Arias-Bolzmann et al. (2000) stated that absurdity can be reached using surrealism, anthropomorphism, allegory, hyperbole and humor. Thus, some absurd advertisements might have drawn attention because they contained humor and participants perceived them as funny. However, even when controlling for humor, absurd advertisements still drew significantly more attention than normal advertisements. This means that absurdity still draws attention, even when participants do not perceive an advertisement to be humorous. Although absurdity and humor both rely on expectancy violations by using incongruity, these results imply that these are distinct techniques of attracting attention. Absurdity and humor may have different consequences on other advertisement success criteria such as attitude and memory as well. Thus, these techniques now can be chosen carefully depending on the desired advertisement goals.

Implications

Strick et al. (2009) revealed that humorous advertisements drew more attention than normal advertisements, but also showed that the brand of the advertisements with humorous texts became less recognized. They concluded that increased viewing time was negatively correlated with brand recognition (Strick et al., 2009). Viewers may have paid attention to the humorous part only. This may have some implications for absurd advertisements too. When someone is

presented with an absurd advertisement, this viewer may only pay attention to the absurd image, while the brand may remain ignored. Just drawing attention to an advertisement by using an absurd or humorous image therefore may not be sufficient. Thus, the present study only focused on attention, while there are many other important means to measure advertisement effectiveness. Gelbrich et al. (2012) described three categories of advertising success: memory, persuasion, and behavior. Attention is important in the first category of memory, together with recall and recognition. However, also cognitive responses and attitudes are important for the category of persuasion, and purchase intent and actual purchase for the behavioral category of advertising success (Gelbrich et al., 2012).

Evaluations of the advertisements could provide insights into the meta-cognitions of consumers. By the conducted correlations, we can state that absurd advertisements were not perceived as good advertisements, while humorous were. Also, humorous advertisements were perceived as positive. Valence perception or perceptions of how good an advertisement could be important for consumer's brand perceptions and attitudes towards the brand. It is stated that the attitude towards an advertisement is greatly influencing a brand attitude (MacKenzie, Lutz & Belch, 1986). As mentioned earlier, brand attitudes may be as important for advertisement effectiveness as drawing attention. For instance, a negatively perceived brand may use advertisements that draw attention. However, negative brand attitudes may motivate consumers to not buy anything from the brand, avoid the brand, or talk negatively about the brand. Negative attitudes towards an advertisement can thus pollute a brand name in the long term. This is concerning for the use of absurdity in advertisements, as our results showed that these were not perceived as good advertisements.

Future research

As has been shown in the advertisement literature, both absurd advertisements and humorous advertisements draw more attention than normal advertisements (Strick et al., 2009). However, in the present study we showed that there is an effect of absurdity above and beyond the effect of humor. However, it remains unclear what the exact differences are between these two techniques. As mentioned earlier, a difference may be that humor requires a resolution of incongruities, while this may not be the case for absurdity (Ritchie, 1999). Future research is necessary to determine the differences of the underlying processes, rather than just knowing that humor and absurdity have separate effects. This can be done by manipulating the resolution or reframe of an absurd advertisement.

Also, real advertisements were used in the present study and a variety of product categories were represented. It can be argued that it is good to use real advertisements, because results can be generalized to the real world. However, the use of existing, real advertisements may also be a limitation. Using existing advertisements means that we could not control for irrelevant information that some advertisements contained, which could have had an influence on our dependent variables rather than absurdity. One example is the amount of text in each advertisement. Advertisements that contained a lot of text could have received more fixations and more time could have been spent while viewers read these texts. It may be better to do a manipulation of advertisement type by photo-shopping a normal advertisement into an absurd advertisement. By doing this, there will be no influence of advertisement category nor advertisement text on the dependent variables.

Conclusion

In order break to through advertising clutter, marketers often use absurd advertisements. It has been argued that absurd advertisements draw more attention than normal advertisements.

In the present study, we confirmed the idea that absurd advertisements draw more attention than normal advertisements by conducting an eye-tracker study. Absurd advertisements indeed received more fixations and more time was spent on absurd advertisements than on normal advertisements. There was, however, no difference between absurd and normal advertisements in receiving initial attention. We also discussed the similarities and differences with advertisements that contain humor and concluded that both draw attention in their own way.

Further research is needed to determine the exact difference between absurd and humorous advertisements. Also, it is important to take other success criteria such as persuasion and behavior into consideration to determine advertisement effectiveness.

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Appendix

Table 1

Paired Sample t-tests of Dependent Variables and Advertisement Ratings

| | Advertisement type | | | | |
| | Absurd | | Normal | | |
	M	SD	M	SD	*t*-test
1. Fixation duration	600.68	162.77	514.85	145.72	8.610**
2. Fixation frequency	15.86	3.88	14.23	2.85	3.787**
3. Absurd	4.36	1.21	1.90	.77	12.217**
4. Good	4.28	.89	4.29	.83	-.067
5. Humor	.84	1.22	1.70	.67	11.106**
6. Understanding	.80	.15	.96	.05	-7.436**
7. Valence	3.61	.74	3.99	.80	-2.971**

** $p < .01$.

Note. M = Mean. SD = Standard Deviation. Fixation duration is in ms. Absurd, Good, Humor,

and Valence range from 1 (not absurd/good/humorous/positive) to 7

(absurd/good/humorous/positive). Understanding ranges from 0 (do not understand) to 1 (do understand).

Table 2

Pearson Product-Moment Correlations of Advertisement Ratings

Rating variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Absurd	–				
2. Good	.062	–			
3. Humor	.310	.550**	–		
4. Understanding	.168	-.163	-.125	–	
5. Valence	.006	.640**	.605**	-.002	–

** *p* < .01.