Effects of Storytelling in Advertising on Consumers’ Empathy

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Differentiated positioning becomes increasingly difficult when brand salience weakens. Also, the daily increase in new media use and information load has led to a social climate that regards advertising stimuli as spamming. For these reasons, the focus of advertisement-related communication is shifting from persuading consumers through the direct delivery of information to an emphasis on appealing to their emotions using matching stimuli to enhance persuasion effects. Recently, both academia and industry have increasingly shown an interest in storytelling methods that can generate positive emotional responses and attitude changes by arousing consumers’ narrative processing. The purpose of storytelling is to elicit consumers’ emotional experience to meet the objectives of advertisement producers. Therefore, the most important requirement for storytelling in advertising is that it evokes consumers’ sympathy for the main character in the advertisement. This does not involve advertisements directly persuading consumers, but rather, consumers themselves finding an answer through the advertisement’s story. Thus, consumers have an indirect experience regarding the product features and usage through empathy with the advertisement’s main character.

In this study, we took the results of a precedent study as the starting point, according to which consumers’ emotional response can be altered depending on the storytelling methods adopted for storytelling ads. Previous studies have reported that drama-type and vignette-type storytelling methods have a considerably different impact on the emotional responses of advertising audiences, due to their different structural characteristics. Thus, this study aims to verify that emotional response aroused by different types of advertisement storytelling (drama ads vs. vignette ads) can be controlled by the socio-psychological gender difference of advertising audiences and that the interaction effects between the socio-psychological gender differences of the audience and the gender stereotype of emotions to which advertisements appeal can exert an influence on emotional responses to types of storytelling in advertising. To achieve this, an experiment was conducted employing a between-group design consisting of 2 (storytelling type: drama ads vs. vignette ads) x 2 (socio-psychological gender of the audience: masculinity vs. femininity) x 2 (advertising appeal emotion type: male stereotype emotion)
emotion vs. female stereotype emotion). The experiment revealed that the femininity group displayed a strong and consistent empathy for drama ads regardless of whether the ads appealed to masculine or feminine emotions, whereas the masculinity group displayed a stronger empathy for drama ads appealing to the emotional types matching its own gender as well as for vignette ads.

The theoretical contribution of this study is significant in that it sheds light on the controllability of the audiences’ emotional responses to advertisement storytelling depending on their socio-psychological gender and gender stereotype of emotions appealed to through advertising. Specifically, its considerable practical contribution consists in easing unnecessary creative constraints by comprehensively analyzing essential advertising strategic factors such as the target consumers’ gender and the objective of the advertisement, in contrast to the oversimplified view of previous studies that considered emotional responses to storytelling ads were determined by the different types of production techniques used. This study revealed that emotional response to advertisement storytelling varies depending on the target gender of and emotion type appealed to by the advertisement. This suggests that an understanding of the targeted gender is necessary prior to producing an advertisement and that in deciding on an advertisement storytelling type, strategic attention should be directed to the advertisement’s appeal concept or emotion type. Thus, it is safe to use drama-type storytelling that expresses masculine emotions (ex. fun, happy, encouraged) when the advertisement target, like Bacchus, includes both men and women. For brands and advertisements targeting only women (ex. female clothes), it is more effective to use a drama-type storytelling method that expresses feminine emotions (lovely, romantic, sad). The drama method can be still more effective than the vignette when women are the main target and a masculine concept-based creative is to be produced. However, when male consumers are targeted and the brand concept or advertisement concept is focused on feminine emotions (ex. romantic), vignette ads can more effectively induce empathy than drama ads.

Key words: Storytelling, Drama ads, Vignette ads, Empathy, Gender

I. Introduction

According to previous studies on emotional responses to advertising (Deighton and Hoch 1993; Escalas and Stern 2003; Bok and Min 2013), the storytelling characteristics of an advertisement are an effective persuasive element capable of influencing consumer attitude and behavior by arousing sympathy in consumers. Consumers purchase products when they feel sympathy and immerse themselves in the story a brand conveys. According to Escalas’s study (2004), consumers tend toward narrative processing through which they interpret the meanings of what they experienced themselves by