Original Article

How consumer expertise moderates the relationship between materialism and attitude toward advertising

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ABSTRACT Using a sample of 1854 consumers from the United States, China and Japan, this article investigates the relationship between materialism and attitudes toward advertising in general. The results suggest the materialism-attitudes toward advertising relationships is moderated by consumer expertise. The relationship is stronger when consumer expertise is high as opposed to low. Strategic implications of this research for practicing managers are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the main challenges of marketing practitioners is to select the right consumer segment at which to target advertising messages. The difficulty arises not just from time and

effort that is usually required when performing segmentation, targeting and positioning activities, but also in getting consumers' attention, interest, desire and action. Marketing strategists face many barriers to achieving such communications objectives (for example advertising clutter, tuning out and so on). One of the main barriers is the overall negative attitude toward advertising in general among many consumers. Consumers have a slightly negative attitude toward advertising in general¹ and it affects all businesses and industries as the distrust of advertising limits advertising effectiveness.²

Previous research in marketing examined and measured various dimensions of attitude toward advertising in general,^{3,1} and suggested that negative feelings about advertising are caused by consumer perceptions about covert manipulation and subliminal persuasion by advertisers.⁴ However, extant research does not address the issue of overcoming the negative attitudes toward advertising from a practical view of an individual company.

This study attempts to fill the gap in existing research by suggesting ways for targeting particular consumers in order to overcome the barrier of negative attitudes toward advertising in general. Our general thesis is that marketing strategists need to be more creative in their audience targeting, they need to identify consumer groups that would have less negative attitude toward advertising by using personal values, such as materialism, and level of expertise as segmentation variables. This study attempts to contribute to our existing understanding of antecedents of the attitude toward advertising in general, by suggesting a relationship between materialism and attitude toward advertising. Additionally, we posit that consumer expertise will moderate this relationship (see Figure 1). In the following sections we discuss relevant marketing literature to build our theoretical model, then we describe our data collection and analysis procedures, and we conclude with a discussion of the findings and implications for managers and future research.

Figure 1: Theoretical model of the impact of materialism on attitude toward advertising.

THEORETICAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Consumer materialism

Consumer materialism is 'a set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life'.⁵ Materialism has been conceptualized as a personal value that is fairly durable.⁶ Moschis and Churchill⁷ attempted to determine the origins of consumer materialism. Their main objectives were to determine the influence of the mass media, school, parents and a consumer's peers on the development of consumer-related motives and values. Their two main hypotheses were that the more television a consumer watches, the greater the degree of social motivations behind consumption; and that the more frequently a consumer communicates with their peers about consumption matters, the more positive the individual's social motivations for consumption and materialistic attitudes.

In their study of 806 adolescents, Moschis and Churchill⁷ found that only the mass media and a consumer's peers have a statistically significant relationship with a consumer's values, specifically materialism. The study found that the more television a person watches, the more likely they are to have materialistic attitudes about consumption. The research came to the conclusion that while exposure to advertising creates materialistic attitudes toward consumption, the underlying factor causing materialism is the

interpersonal social processes in which an individual participates.⁷

Consumption symbolism is the tendency to attach meaning to the type of products that a consumer purchases.⁸ Excessive consumption has been encouraged in the United States since the early 1900s primarily owing to the social and economic environment that has prevailed in the United States during the last century.⁹ Consumers attempt to use the products that they purchase as a way of communicating their personal image to their peers.⁸ Consumption symbolism is not defined in the same way as materialism, but it can be inferred through past research that symbolism leads to consumers being materialistic because of how they relate purchases to social status.

Attitude toward advertising

Attitude toward advertising is defined as 'a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner toward advertising in general'.³ Many studies have been done to determine consumer's attitudes toward marketing. One study that was done in 1986, and has been done every year since, is John Gaski and Michael Etzel's index of consumer sentiment toward marketing. The study asks respondents a series of questions from five categories: product quality, price of products, advertising for products, retailing or selling, and marketing in general in order to determine their overall feelings toward advertising. The survey included items such as 'advertising results in better products for the public', 'advertising raises our standard of living', 'I am satisfied with the prices I pay', and 'the prices I pay are reasonable given the high cost of doing business'. The survey resulted in advertising effects being placed into two separate categories: social and economic effects on consumers. Overall the survey found that consumers have a slightly negative outlook on advertising.

Distrust of advertising is important because it can limit the effectiveness of advertising, and lower the level of competition in the marketplace.² Consumers are often left with negative feelings about advertising owing to

covert manipulation and subliminal techniques that are included in advertising messages.⁴ If advertising fails to work for a firm they will have to invest substantial time, effort and money into developing new methods that will stimulate a consumer's desire to consume their products.

Previous studies have linked consumer's behavioral outcomes and individual values.^{6,7,10} For instance, Wang and Wallendorf⁶ found that the personal value of materialism is related to product satisfaction across different products and consumers. Additionally, Yoon¹¹ found a positive relationship between materialism and general attitude toward advertising, suggesting the somewhat controversial idea that advertising may cause more materialistic beliefs. Most mainstream consumer behavior research^{5,6} suggests that values such as materialism are enduring individual characteristics that are likely to be resilient to the influences of advertising. Therefore, we accept Yoon's¹¹ positive association between attitude toward advertising and materialism, but adopt Richins and Dawson's⁵ as well as Wang and Wallendorf's⁶ premise that materialism is a durable personal value that is likely to influence attitudes such as attitude toward advertising in general. Our explanation for the positive relationship between materialism and attitude toward advertising is that materialistic beliefs cause consumers to pay more attention to advertisements, process them and evaluate them because they are interested in possessing the objects portrayed in advertising. So, more materialistic consumers will be positively predisposed to advertising as it allows them to learn about different products they could own and use to impress others. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Consumer materialism is positively related to attitude toward advertising.

While the direct relationship between materialism and attitude toward advertising is well supported theoretically and tested in this study empirically, additional investigation is warranted to explore potential boundary conditions of this relationship. The following section examines

consumer expertise as one possible variable that may impact the strength of the relationship between materialism and attitude toward advertising.

Consumer expertise

A review of past consumer expertise research shows that there are two primary components of consumer knowledge: familiarity and expertise. Alba and Hutchinson¹² used the number of product-related experiences that have been accumulated by the consumer as their definition of familiarity, and the ability to perform product-related tasks successfully as their definition of consumer expertise. Product familiarity would include exposure to advertising, discussions with product sales personnel, choice and decision making, and purchasing and product usage. Expertise would include cognitive structures (beliefs about product attributes) and cognitive processes (decision rules for acting on held beliefs) that allow consumers to perform product-related tasks successfully.¹²

The impact of consumer expertise has been widely studied in the context of marketing and consumer persuasion.^{13–15} Previous research suggests that the differences in knowledge that consumers possess affect how they process information that is presented to them. Alba and Hutchinson¹² found that expert consumers were able to link different messages in advertisements no matter how it was presented, while novice consumers were affected by how the organization of the advertisement was presented. Consumers were also affected by the information presented in an advertisement. If the message only included the benefits of a product, expert consumers reacted negatively to the advertisement. If the advertisement provided information on the attributes of the product, experts reacted positively.¹⁶

Maheswaran *et al*¹⁶ found that novices and experts interpret the messages in advertising differently. Novices were affected by both the repetition and organization of the message while experts were only affected by the attributes presented for the product. The more times a

novice was exposed to the supposed benefits of a product, the more likely they were to rate the advertisement favorably. Therefore, prior knowledge of a product allowed expert consumers to think more critically when presented with advertising than consumers without that prior knowledge. The results of this study are consistent with previous research that showed that novices do not interpret attributes presented in advertisements in a way that allows them to elaborate or expand on the ideas presented.¹⁴ The way experts processed the repetition of benefits in advertising is also reaffirmed by the findings in the work of Alba and Hutchinson.¹² The effects of consumer expertise on consumer attitudes can be seen in the studies that link expertise to product choice and product satisfaction.^{12,16,17} There is a positive correlation between the level of expertise a consumer has and the level of critical thought that is evident when consumers are exposed to advertising.

As evidenced by the previous discussion, consumer expertise is a central construct in consumer behavior literature and it intervenes in many relationships. The difference in how expert and novice consumers process and interpret information in advertisements provides for differential outcomes between these groups. In our case, more materialistic consumers that are also experts will tend to view advertising, in general, more positively than materialistic novices, by using their superior information processing skills in identifying product attributes that are appealing to their materialistic nature. On the other hand, less materialistic experts will tend to view advertising, in general, more negatively than less-materialistic novices, by using their superior information processing skills to identify misleading or inconsistent advertising claims. This explanation argues for an interactive effect between consumer materialism and consumer expertise, and we advance the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Consumer expertise moderates the relationship between consumer materialism and attitude toward advertising.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

Data collection was a part of a cross-country consortium initiated by one of the largest advertising agencies in Japan, and three waves of surveys were conducted between 2006 and 2008 in the United States, China and Japan. In Japan and China, random samples consisted of household respondents from Tokyo and Beijing, and in the United States, a consumer panel selected by University of Texas in Austin was used. A total of 1854 respondents participated in the study: 824 from the United States, 308 from China and 720 from Japan. The survey questionnaire was constructed in English, and then translated into Chinese and Japanese by experts in the field, using translation-back-translation to double check for accuracy.

Measures

The measures used in this study were all developed and used in previous research. A brief description of each measure can be found below, and the complete scales can be found in Appendix.

Consumer expertise

Consumer expertise was measured with a four-item scale developed by Kleiser and Mantel.¹⁸ A sample item is 'I am good at collecting information and recommending things to people'. The scale's Cronbach's α was 0.87.

Attitude toward advertising

The attitude toward advertising scale was a compilation of items from Pollay and Mittal's⁴ scale and Gaski and Etzel's¹ scale. A sample item is 'Advertising helps raise our standard of living'. The scale's Cronbach's α was 0.77.

Materialism

The materialism scale was developed by Moschis and Churchill⁷ and includes items such as, 'It is really true that money can buy happiness'. The scale's Cronbach's α was 0.55.

Table 1: Results of multiple regression results of study variables on attitude toward advertising^a ($n=1854$)

Predictors	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Materialism	0.298***	0.303***	0.286***
Consumer expertise	—	−0.075***	−0.079***
Materialism X consumer expertise	—	—	0.066***
ΔR^2	0.080	0.007	0.006
Total R^2	0.282	0.295	0.305

^aMain effect variables are centered, before inclusion. Values shown are unstandardized coefficients.

*** $P \leq 0.001$.

Analyses

Both hypotheses were tested using a three-step hierarchical regression. Hypothesis 1 was tested in the first step of the regression, in which materialism was the independent variable and attitude toward advertising was the dependent variable. The second step of the regression added consumer expertise as an additional independent variable, and was not directly used for hypothesis testing. In the third step of the regression, a cross-product term was used to capture the moderating effect of consumer expertise on the materialism-attitude toward advertising relationship. The cross-product term was calculated by multiplying materialism and consumer expertise. Before analysis, all variables were centered to minimize potential for multicollinearity influencing the results.

Results

Hypothesis testing results can be found in Table 1. Results support Hypothesis 1, whereby it was predicted that materialism would have a positive relationship with attitude toward advertising ($B=0.298$, $P<0.001$). The effect is strong and provides support for our notion that materialism has a positive effect on attitude toward advertising in general. Additionally, results also suggest that consumer expertise moderates the relationship between materialism and attitude toward advertising, as the cross-product term was significant in the third step of the hierarchical regression ($B=0.066$, $P=0.001$). This provides support for our Hypothesis 2. Although the effect is small it is significant and suggests that

Figure 2: Slopes of attitude toward advertising regressed on materialism at high and low levels of consumer expertise.

theoretically, consumer expertise may provide for certain boundaries for the main effect. The direction of the interaction is depicted in Figure 2. As could be seen in Figure 2, the main effect is higher in high consumer expertise condition than low expertise condition, as predicted in our hypothesis.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our findings provide support for our theoretical model and general thesis that materialism strongly influences consumers' attitude toward advertising and consumer expertise plays a moderating role. The results of the empirical analysis suggest that materialistic consumers have more positive attitudes toward advertising than less materialistic consumers. Additionally, materialistic consumers with higher levels of expertise have the most positive attitudes toward advertising, followed by materialistic consumers with low expertise, then come less materialistic consumers with low expertise, followed by less materialistic consumers with high expertise. From a targeting standpoint, the implications for marketing strategists are straightforward. In order to overcome the barrier of the overall negative attitude toward advertising, the managers should prioritize their segments in this order: (1) materialistic experts, (2) materialistic novices, (3) less materialistic novices and (4) less materialistic experts. Our findings suggest that this prioritization of

segments may provide a route in dealing with varying degrees of negative attitudes toward advertising.

It could be argued that managers could simply use attitude toward advertising scores to prioritize segment targeting. However, the managers would face the cost-benefit issue of performing marketing research to obtain these scores. Expertise levels and materialism data could be more easily obtained through secondary sources. For instance, for international marketing decisions the lack of pertinent marketing information and providers of marketing research is well known. So, managers could use their judgment on consumer expertise level about the product in different countries, or use proxies (for example first-time buyer versus repeat buyer; competitive advertising intensity). For materialism scores, managers could turn to many secondary sources online (for example www.worldvaluessurvey.org/). In summary, our proposed segmentation scheme could potentially lower information-gathering requirements for managers, or at least provide additional options for practicing managers domestically and internationally.

Theoretically, our results suggest that personal values, such as materialism, have a major impact on attitude toward advertising in general. This relationship's boundaries are defined by the level of consumer expertise. Previous research have not examined these linkages, which we find very interesting and worth investigating further. For instance, future research could replicate the study by using experimental design in which the levels of expertise and materialism would be manipulated through scenarios and group assignments and other relevant variables (for example attitude-institution, attitude-instrument) controlled. Such experimental design study would provide stronger support for our findings.

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APPENDIX

Measurement items

Consumer expertise (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$)

1. I can immediately identify my preferred brand even if it is located with other brands.¹⁸
2. I am good at collecting information and recommending things to others.
3. I am good at delivering messages and information properly to other people.
4. I am good at coordinating a variety of opinions.

Attitude toward advertising (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$)

1. Advertising helps raise our standard of living.⁴
2. Advertising results in better products for the public.⁴
3. I enjoy most ads (the index of consumer sentiment toward marketing¹).

Materialism (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.55$)⁷

1. It is really true that money can buy happiness.
2. People judge others by the things they own.
3. I buy some things that I secretly hope will impress other people.