

The effectiveness of openness in advertising for familiar and unfamiliar brands across different nationalities

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Abstract

This generalization study determines if open advertisements for brands differing in familiarity can be successfully used as a cross cultural advertising tool. Open ads do not guide consumers towards a ready-made interpretation and require more effort to decipher than closed ads. The study was performed in five European nationalities and the United States. A randomized 4-group design was used with ten advertisements, each in four different versions, with attitude towards the ad as the dependent variable. The results, which are robust across different nationalities, show that the attitude towards closed ads with familiar brands is more positive than towards open advertisements with unfamiliar brands. However, the negative effect of openness and the positive effect of brand familiarity can be explained by ease of comprehension. Controlled for ease of comprehension the open ads outperform the closed ads. When advertisers aim their campaigns at different nationalities, they might consider using open advertisements in combination with unfamiliar brands, but only if these ads are easy to understand.

Key words

Global advertising

Openness

Brand familiarity

Attitude towards the ad

Introduction

The increasing globalization incites international firms to approach their communication from a global perspective. Since global advertising can offer enterprises substantial financial benefits, advertisers are eager to adapt standardized global communication techniques. In this context, we determine in our study if openness in advertising messages is an eligible means to deliver a standardized advertising message. We will use the term ad openness to refer to the amount of guidance towards a certain interpretation; a high level of openness means there is little guidance towards an intended interpretation. Consumers experience ads with little guidance as more open than ads in which guidance toward a certain interpretation is high (Ketelaar, Van Gisbergen, Bosman, & Beentjes, 2008). Openness might be an advantageous strategy for global advertising because open ads are often highly visual and visuals are easier to standardize than text. A standardized advertising campaign is cost effective and enables brands to spread a consistent image throughout nationalities. Besides, an open ad without text may overcome the linguistic barrier in global advertising (Okazaki, Taylor & Zou, 2006; Sirisagul, 2000; Theodosiou & Leonidou, 2003; Hornikx, de Groot, Timmermans, Mariëns & Verckens, 2009, p. 2).

Some researchers believe open advertisements to be a successful global marketing tool (e.g. Chebat, Charlebois & Gélinas-Chebat, 2001; McQuarrie & Mick, 1999), because of the tendency towards globalization in marketing communication. Multinationals are making increasingly more use of visuals for standardized print ads when advertising cross culturally (Bu, Kim, & Lee, 2009). Other researchers, however, do not believe in the effectiveness of open advertisements (e.g. Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2006; Philips, 1997), mainly because cultural differences will stimulate different interpretations. Despite the fact that there is disagreement about its effectiveness, there has been an increase in the use of open

advertisements (Berger 2001, Pollay, 1985; Scott, 1994; Leiss, Kline and Jhally, 1990; Van Gisbergen, Ketelaar & Beentjes, 2004; Callow & Schiffman, 2002; Warlaumont, 1995).

Contemporary research into the effectiveness of ad-openness seems to have neglected the importance of the advertised brand. The familiarity of the brand might influence the attitude towards advertisements (Dahlén & Lange, 2005). Ketelaar, van Gisbergen, Bosman and Beentjes (2008) have argued that the brand may anchor the intended message in an open ad, which makes open ads easier to interpret and therefore more liked. In their opinion brand familiarity should be an important part of research into the effectiveness of ad-openness. For this reason we incorporated familiar as well as unfamiliar brands in our study.

Although advertising with openness may offer global brands substantial advantages, the question remains to what extent these advertisements are effective across different nationalities. In order to determine the effectiveness of advertisements that focus on the visual aspect of their ads to deliver the message, this study explores the effects of openness in advertising for familiar and unfamiliar brands.

This study can offer valuable insights in the role of the brand on the effectiveness of open advertisements. It investigates how openness and brand familiarity affect consumers attitudes towards advertisements and how both variables interact. This is done in a cross cultural setting. A more detailed understanding of the effectiveness of open advertisements can contribute to global marketing business practice, and may increase their global effectiveness while reducing costs at the same time.

To be able to generalize the results, we performed the research in five European nationalities and in the United States, using ten different products, and established the effects on the attitude towards the ad (A_{ad}).

Theory

Several terms in advertising relate to openness. Therefore, the effects of openness have been studied under various names. Some researchers have used the label open-ended (e.g., Boutlis, 2000; Sawyer, 1988; Sawyer & Howard, 1991) while others have used the term open-conclusion ads (e.g., Chebat, Charlebois & G elinas-Chebat, 2001). Other terms relate to openness but do not include the word ‘open’: indirect advertising (e.g., Dingena, 1994; Kardes, 1988; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005), implicit advertising (e.g., Dingena, 1994; Messaris, 1997), figurative advertising (e.g., Dingena, 1994; Martin, Lang & Wong, 2003; McGuire, 2000), ambiguous advertising (e.g., Perrachio & Meyers-Levy, 1994; Warlaumont, 1995; Young-Won Ha & Hoch, 1989), polysemic advertising (e.g., Warlaumont, 1995), unframed advertising (e.g., Edell & Staelin, 1983), abstract advertising (e.g., Babin & Burns, 1997; Morgan & Reichert, 1999), and undercoded advertising (e.g., McQuarrie & Mick, 1996).

These terms are not always synonymous for openness, but they all refer to ads that provide less guidance towards a certain interpretation. The term openness represents a common dimension of the terms mentioned above. We regard the term openness as especially suited for advertising research because of its definition in terms of guidance towards an intended interpretation. There is less guidance in a more open ad, compared to a more closed ad.

Several factors influence the openness of an advertisement. The first factor is the absence or presence of the product in the advertisement. When the product is mentioned or depicted, it is likely to reduce the amount of possible interpretations. Reversely, the absence of the product increases the amount of possible interpretations. The second factor that influences openness is the presence of rhetorical figures. Readers need to ‘solve’ the meaning of these figures in order to figure out why they are depicted in the advertisement. The third factor is the absence of verbal anchoring. This means that no meaning of a rhetorical figure is stated in

the headline or picture. The last factor is the level of brand familiarity. Although logo and brand name are displayed, open ads do not contain many references to the brand (Ketelaar, Van Gisbergen, Bosman & Beentjes, 2010).

Although some researchers believe consumers might experience pleasure in searching for and finding a plausible interpretation in an open advertisement (e.g. Eco, 1979; Phillips, 2000; McQuarrie & Mick, 2003; Perracchio & Meyers-Levy, 1994; Van Mulken, van Enschoot & Hoeken, 2005; Sawyer & Howard, 1991; Tanaka, 1992; & Toncar & Munch, 2001), there is reason to cast doubt about the effectiveness of open advertisements as a global marketing tool. One of the reasons why openness might negatively affect A_{ad} is the fact that images are not universal and that people from different nationalities might interpret an advertisement differently (Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2006, p. 66; Phillips, 1997, p. 78). When visual metaphors do not have the same meaning in different nationalities, this might lead to different levels of ease of comprehension and a lower A_{ad} .

A second reason pertains to the effects of guidance. If the amount of guidance towards an interpretation is low, consumers may find it difficult to interpret an ad. Some scholars argue that consumers do not want, or like, to spend much time and effort in trying to understand what an advertiser wants to communicate (Franzen, 1997; Phillips, 2003; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004; Toncar & Munch, 2001; Warlaumont, 1995). As a consequence, processing open ads might not cause the feelings of pleasure and excitement that are associated with activities people voluntarily engage in for pleasure, like chess games, cross-word puzzles and the interpretation of art works. Furthermore, consumers may not regard creating an interpretation as a reward if the text is an ad, because they are not really interested in the persuasive messages of ads and because they know that the ad's message, whether in open or in closed form, will always be the same ('buy this product, because...') (Phillips, 1997; Warlaumont, 1995). If consumers are confronted with an ad that is difficult to understand,

they might become irritated because they do not want to spend time or energy in creating an interpretation (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005; Perrachio & Meyers-Levy, 1994). Some researchers (e.g. Warlaumont, 1995); Phillips, 2000, and Ketelaar van Gisbergen, Bosman & Beentjes, 2010) found a negative effect of openness on A_{ad} . Incongruent ads due to nonsense humor (in which guidance is low because the slogan has no obvious relation to the visual part of the ad) strengthen A_{ad} and A_b across cultures (Muller, Hoffmann, Schwartz & Gelbrich, 2011). However, the effect of type of humor on A_{ad} and A_{br} was almost fully mediated by perceived level of humor. Other researchers have shown that the effect of openness on A_{ad} (operationalized as absurdity in ads) depends on culture. When masculinity is high in cultures, absurd ads lead to more positive attitudes, whereas more feminine cultures prefer more closed ads that are less incongruent allowing less comprehensive cognitive effort to decipher them (Gelbrich, Gätke & Westjohn (2012). In all, we expect that openness in advertising has a negative effect on A_{ad} and A_b .

H1: The attitude of consumers will be more negative towards open advertisements than towards closed advertisements.

In addition to the distinction of ads being more open or more closed, this study makes a distinction between familiar and unfamiliar brands. Consumers distinguish familiar brands relatively easy from unfamiliar brands because the former are dominant in their product category and because of the strong brand associations they evoke. Coca-Cola and Nike are typical examples of familiar brands (Keller, 2001). We expect a main effect of brand familiarity. Consumers have more and stronger developed brand schemes of familiar than of unfamiliar brands, as for low equity brands (Bu et al., 2009). This makes information for familiar brands both easier and more pleasant to process (Dahlén & Rosengren, 2005;

Mikhailitchenko et al., 2009). In other words, the information that we already have about the brand influences the interpretation of the new information which is encoded, in for instance the ad's visual, a process that Ketelaar and Van Gisbergen (2006) refer to as brand anchoring. Information and advertising related to familiar brands are automatically better liked (Dahlén & Rosengren, 2005, p. 153). When consumers have a positive attitude towards the brand, they enjoy advertising more (Machleit & Wilson, 1988) and seek it out to reinforce their brand attitude (Dahlén & Bergendahl, 2001). In other words, consumers will find it easier to interpret ads for familiar brands than for unfamiliar brands which will result in a more positive A_{ad} .

H2: The attitude of consumers will be more positive towards ads for familiar brands than towards ads for unfamiliar brands.

A potential interaction effect between openness and brand familiarity is relevant for our study because openness might be a better strategy in combination with familiar instead of unfamiliar brands. In other words, the positive effects of openness might only materialize in combination with familiar brands. This may be explained by the concept of brand anchoring. Because there is a lack of references towards the brand in open ads which helps consumers to interpret them, open ads are characterized by a low level of brand anchoring. Consumers have to devote more cognitive energy to interpret open ads than closed ads. Therefore, the presence of a familiar brand might help consumers to interpret the hidden messages in open ads. The brand offers

consumers a context which helps them to plausibly interpret the open ads' message. The more stronger the associations consumers have of a brand, the more these associations will guide consumers towards a plausible interpretation (Bu et al., 2009). The brand functions as a strong anchor for the open ad as it strongly suggests how the open ad should be interpreted. The idea of consumers that they have solved the puzzle by themselves might positively affect the attitude towards the open ad, but only if the rendered associations are meaningful in solving the puzzle (Ketelaar, et al, 2010; Ketelaar, Van Gisbergen, & Beentjes, 2012). Therefore the expected negative effects of open ads might be compensated for by using familiar instead of unfamiliar brands. We expect that the moderating effect of brand-familiarity on ad-openness will be more dominant for familiar than for unfamiliar brands. The interaction effect between openness and brand familiarity is hypothesized as follows:

H3. The negative attitude towards open advertisements will be stronger in ads for unfamiliar brands than for familiar brands.

Several studies have shown that ease of comprehension mediates the effect of openness on A_{ad} (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992; Phillips, 2000; Van Mulken, van Enschoot and Hoeken, 2005; Phillips, 2000, p. 22; Ketelaar, van Gisbergen, Bosman & Beentjes, 2010). These studies have determined that the attitude towards open ads is less favorable than the attitude towards closed ads, because closed ads are easier to interpret. However, these studies have not incorporated brand familiarity in their design. As familiar brands appeal to better developed brand schemes and are therefore easier to process than unfamiliar brands (Dahlen & Rosengren, 2005), we also expect that ease of comprehension mediates the effect of brand familiarity on A_{ad} .

H4. Ease of comprehension mediates the effect of ad openness on the attitude towards

the ad.

H5. Ease of comprehension mediates the effect of brand familiarity on the attitude towards the ad.

According to practitioners as well as scholars, consumers are becoming more similar in attitudes and behaviors due to globalization. This also contains increasingly shared sets of consumption-related symbols as product categories, brand preferences and consumption activities (Archpu & Alden, 2010).

Using this globally standardized approach to advertising however requires a similar effectiveness of advertisements between nationalities. The use and need for visualization also differs culturally which might limit the cross-cultural use of image (Mikhailitchenko, Javalgi, Mikhailitchenko, & Laroche, 2009). Recent studies continue to indicate that global advertising campaigns might fail if they are not congruent with local values (Torelle, Ozsomer, Carvalho, Tat Keh, & Maehle, 2012) or be less effective compared with (sub)culturally targeted advertising appeals (Torres & Luna-Nevarez, 2012). We formulated the following research question:

RQ1: Are there any differences in the effects of openness and brand familiarity on attitude towards the ad between people of different nationalities.

Method

In order to determine the effectiveness of open advertisements in combination with brand familiarity in a cross-Atlantic setting, we performed our research in five European nationalities and the USA. These nationalities entertain strong economic ties. The consumers

in these nationalities have great purchasing power which makes it interesting to know for companies what the possibilities are for global advertising campaigns. Besides, the chosen European countries are highly relevant markets for business practice, not only because of the purchasing power of their consumers, but also in terms of their geographical proximity. An effective standardized advertising strategy in this region would entail substantial cost cuts and would open the door for more research of the surrounding countries. The global products selected for the researched advertisements are present in these markets which is important with regard to the role of brand familiarity in this research. The chosen European nationalities are also known as investors in US economy (www.bea.gov), and this tie clearly showed when the economic crisis hit the United States: the European nationalities were dragged into the crisis as well. To test our hypotheses we used a randomized 4-group design in which we used ten advertisements, each having four different versions. The questions in the questionnaire were presented in a fixed order in the mother tongue of the participant.

Material

The advertisements were created by master students of the University of Leuven. This rules out the possibility of previous exposure, as the ads have never been used in real campaigns. In creating these advertisements, the students took several criteria into account: the advertisements should contain a plausible interpretation; they had to be applicable to different nationalities; they had to be of a good quality; the visuals should be prominent; the ads should contain an undercoded visual rhetorical figure and little or no verbal copy and the product should be absent. Based on these criteria and the presence of the product in our selected nationalities, ten advertisements were chosen.

To be able to generalize results, we selected ads for different products (Table 1). Furthermore, the selected advertisements complied with the requirements of Perceived Brand

Globalness (PGB) emphasizing the international character of the products. Being positively associated with brand quality and prestige, PGB influences the likelihood that consumers will purchase the product (Steenkamp, Batra, & Alden, 2003, p. 61).

Table 1 about here

Each ad was created in four versions. For each of the ads, we created an open (without slogan) version and a closed (with slogan) version, both in an unfamiliar and a familiar brand version. The familiar brands are strong global brands. In line with several researchers (e.g. Martin, Lang, & Wong 2003; McQuarrie & Mick 1999; McQuarrie & Phillips 2005; Peracchio & Meyers-Levy 1994; Phillips 1997, 2000; Toncar & Munch 2001), the unfamiliar brands are fictitious (Figure 1). The invented names mostly contain a reference to the product and the logos are similar in size and position within the ad.

Figure 1 about here

We assumed that respondents are less certain of their interpretation of ads for open than for closed advertisements. Therefore, we performed a manipulation check on openness and brand familiarity among a group of 20 people from different nationalities (Belgium, Australia, Germany, France, Indonesia, and Turkey). The results of the manipulation check confirmed our assumption. For open ads in combination with a familiar brand, 44% of the respondents were “certain” of their interpretation. For open advertisements in combination with an unfamiliar brand, 35% were certain. For closed ads however, respondents are more certain of their interpretation, both for familiar (46%) as for unfamiliar (41%) brands. For all ten

advertisements they were able to formulate a plausible interpretation and judged that the message fitted the brand (Figure 2).

Figure 2 about here

We also incorporated questions in our main research, which showed that the open versions were, as expected, more difficult to understand than the closed versions ('not obvious / obvious'; 'confusing / clear'; 'hard to understand / easy to understand'; 'complicated / simple') and that brands, as intended, differed in familiarity ('high knowledge about the brand / low knowledge about the brand', 'high interest in the brand / 'low interest in the brand', high knowledge about the brand compared to others' / 'low knowledge about the brand compared to others').

Table 2 about here

Table 3 about here

Participants

An online questionnaire was distributed among respondents (N= 2329) from the United States (N=177), the United Kingdom (N= 740), Germany (N=589), the Netherlands (N=412), Belgium (N=176) and Poland (N=235). An international market research agency contacted the participants from the UK and Germany by email. The participants from the Netherlands are contacted by a Dutch research agency in the same way. The other respondents (Americans, Belgians and Poles) are collected with a snowball sample by email. Unfortunately there was no check for sample bias. The respondents within each group are

between 18 and 39 years old ($M=28$, $SD=5.7$), both males (39,6%) and females (60,4%). This age group has a great purchasing power. This makes them most likely to use and purchase the products which are shown in the advertisements. It is also likely that they are ‘in the market’ for the advertised products in our study. To prevent fatigue, each respondent randomly saw five different ads. Within each nationality all conditions were equally divided among participants.

Measures

Attitude towards the ad (A_{ad}). We measured A_{ad} by using five 5-point semantic differential scale with five items: ‘not nice / nice’; ‘not good / good’, ‘not appealing / appealing’; ‘ugly / pretty’; and ‘irritating / not irritating’ ($\alpha = .894$, $M=3.24$, $SD=1.01$). The first and second items were used in previous experiments measuring A_{ad} with ads that can be considered as open (e.g. McQuarrie & Mick, 1992, 1999; Warlaumont, 1995; Phillips, 2000). Item three was taken from the study of Mitchell and Olson (1981). In addition we asked the participants to express their appreciation of the advertisements on a 10-point scale (1=*low appreciation*, 10=*high appreciation*). This scale validates the A_{ad} scale (pearson r-square=0,76).

Attitude towards the brand (A_b). We measured A_b by asking ‘What is your attitude towards the advertised brand?’. The item was followed by a 5-point scale ($M=3.28$, $SD=0.80$, 1=*very negative*, 5=*very positive*) (Ketelaar, van Gisbergen, Bosman & Beentjes, 2010).

Ease of comprehension. To determine the ease of comprehension of the ad, we used a 5-point semantic differential scale. Participants indicated the appropriate response for four items: ‘not obvious / obvious’; ‘confusing / clear’; ‘hard to understand / easy to understand’; ‘complicated / simple’ ($\alpha = .959$, $M=3.40$, $SD=1.31$). Two items (‘confusing / clear’, and ‘hard to understand / easy to understand’) were adopted from a scale used by McQuarrie and Mick (1992, 1999) and Phillips (2000).

Attitude towards advertising. Participants' attitude towards advertising in general has been hypothesized to affect the attitude towards specific ads (Mehta, 2000; Smit & Neijens, 2000). We assessed the attitude towards advertising by means of a 5-point semantic scale-item "what is your opinion about advertising in general?" (M=3.39, SD=.85, 1=very negative, 5=very positive).

Procedure

The forty ads in the survey, i.e. four versions of each ad for ten products, were assigned to the respondents at random. First, the participants answered questions about their background (nationality, age and gender). In the second part, participants were exposed to 5 ads whereafter their attitude towards the ads was measured. Third, each advertisement was shown again and questions were answered about the attitude towards the brand, ease of comprehension and their attitude towards advertising in general. All the advertisements could be watched as long as preferred. Not all respondents completed the whole questionnaire. Therefore, as much as 9791 ads could be used for all analyses.

Results

In order to test H1, H2 and H3 an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) is performed on A_{ad} . The results as presented in Table 4 and 5 show that open ads and ads for unfamiliar brands are significantly less appreciated. Furthermore, there turns out to be no significant interaction between openness and brand familiarity. Thus, H1 and H2 are confirmed and H3 is rejected. The analysis also shows that the way in which openness and brand familiarity influenced A_{ad} cannot be generalized for all ten products: there is a significant interaction between product and openness and between product and brand familiarity. In fact, in contrast to the average, both familiar versions of the Anti Wrinkle Cream do not outperform the unfamiliar versions

and both closed versions of the offroad Car advertisements do not outperform their open counterparts.

Testing for interactions of nationality with openness and brand familiarity revealed no significant first or second order interactions (RQ 1). Thus, the way in which openness and brand familiarity influences the attitude towards the ad, given the product, is roughly the same across the six nationalities. The results also show that there is no significant effect of sex and age.

Table 4 about here

Table 5 about here

In order to test H4 and H5 a second analysis of covariance is conducted on A_{ad} , now with ease of comprehension added to the model as independent variable. The results are shown in Table 6 and 7.

Table 6 about here

Table 7 about here

Ease of comprehension has a significant, positive effect on A_{ad} ($b=0,278$, $p=0,000$). Furthermore, if controlled for ease of comprehension, there is no significant direct effect for brand familiarity on A_{ad} , whereas the direct effect of openness turns out to be positive. Only the ads for the mobile phone (BlackBerry and Phonos) and offroad car (Jeep and Geop) do not show higher appreciation for the open versions, if controlled for by ease of comprehension.

An analysis of covariance on ease of comprehension is performed to further investigate its mediating role in the effect of openness and brand familiarity on A_{ad} . The results as presented in Table 8 and 9 show that open ads and ads for unfamiliar brands are indeed significantly less easily interpreted.

Table 8 about here

Table 9 about here

The mediating role of ease of comprehension as hypothesized in H4 can therefore be described as follow: there is a negative effect of openness on ease of comprehension, which in turn affects A_{ad} in a negative way: open ads are less easily understood which in turn makes them less appreciated. Moreover, in contrast to what one might expect from H1, there even turns out to be a positive direct effect of openness on A_{ad} .

Also, there is a positive effect of brand familiarity on ease of comprehension (H5) which in turn affects A_{ad} in a positive way: ads for familiar brands are more easily understood which in turn makes them more appreciated. The mediating role of ease of comprehension is visualized in Figure 3.

Figure 3 about here

In addition to the hypotheses we analyzed the bivariate relations between the variables involved in the model (Table 10).

Table 10 about here

Between the six nationalities there is a difference in A_{ad} ($F(5,9785)=6.21, p=0.000$), in perceived ease of comprehension of the ads ($F(5,9785)=12.84, p=0.000$) and in attitude towards advertisements in general ($F(5,9785)=71.28, p=0.000$). Table 11 shows that the Dutch are in general the least positive in their attitude towards the ads, shown in our study ($M=3.19, SD=1.04$) and the Poles the most positive ($M=3.37, SD=0.84$). The ease of comprehension of the ads shown is the lowest in Germany ($M=3.32, SD=1.33$) and the highest in the USA ($M=3.62, SD=1.31$) The attitude towards advertisements in general turns out to be the lowest in Poland ($M=3.08, SD=.88$) and the highest in the United Kingdom ($M=3.59, SD=.87$).

Table 11 about here

As shown in Table 12, there is a significant difference in attitude towards the ads ($F(9,9781)=145.99, p=0.000$) and in perceived ease of interpretation of the ads ($F(9,9781)=156.58, p=0.000$) between the ten products. The ads concerning the detergent are the least appreciated ($M=2.70, SD=.98$) and those concerning the Cat Food the most ($M=3.87, SD=.88$). Whereas the advertisements of the Battery are the least understood ($M=2.61, SD=1.22$) and those of the Toothpaste the best ($M=3.96, SD=1.11$).

Table 12 about here

Discussion

The aim of this generalization study was to determine the effectiveness of open versus closed advertisements for familiar and unfamiliar brands and to establish if these differences are generalizable to different nationalities. More precise, we established whether differences exist in consumers' attitude towards ads that differ in openness as well as in the familiarity of the advertised brands. In addition, we explored if ease of comprehension mediates the effect of openness and brand familiarity on A_{ad} . All results are controlled for the effect of age, sex, nationality, attitude towards advertisements in general and product.

Consistent with past research of Phillips (2000) and Warlaumont (1995) we found that the attitude of consumers is more negative towards open advertisements than towards closed advertisements (**H1**). We also found a negative effect of open ads on A_b , which should not come as a surprise, as it is consistent with the strong correlation between A_{ad} and A_b shown in several studies (e.g., Heath & Gaeth, 1994). Confirming the findings of Dahlén & Rosengren (2005) and Phillips (2000) the attitude of consumers towards ads for familiar brands is more positive than towards ads for unfamiliar brands (**H2**). Not confirming our notions, we did not find an interaction effect between openness and brand familiarity. More precise, we did not find that the negative effect of openness is smaller in familiar brands than in unfamiliar brands (**H3**). This might be due to the fact that although familiar brands make an ad more easy to comprehend (see H5) it does not reduce the amount of openness. A familiar brand might even enhance openness due to the fact that consumers have more associations with the brand which opens up the possibilities for interpretation (of the visual in the ad). We investigated if ease of comprehension mediates the effect of openness on A_{ad} and brand familiarity. First, confirming the notions of several researchers (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992; Phillips, 2000; Van Mulken, van Enschoot and Hoeken, 2005; Phillips, 2000; Ketelaar, van Gisbergen, Bosman & Beentjes, 2010), ease of comprehension mediates the effects of ad openness on A_{ad} (**H4**) There is a negative effect of openness on ease of comprehension and a positive effect of ease of

comprehension on A_{ad} . The negative effect of openness on A_{ad} as described in H1 can be explained by the ease of comprehension: open ads are less easy understood which in turn makes them less appreciated. Moreover, the direct effect of openness on A_{ad} when controlled for ease of comprehension even turns out to be positive. An explanation for this finding might be that the reward, the pleasure in solving the riddle, compensates for the cognitive effort to decipher the ad. This finding contradicts the argument of several authors that consumers do not want, or like, to spend much time and effort in trying to understand what an advertiser wants to communicate (Franzen, 1997; Phillips, 2003; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004; Toncar & Munch, 2001; Warlaumont, 1995). Second, confirming our notions, ease of comprehension mediates the effects of brand familiarity on A_{ad} . **(H5)**. There is a positive effect of brand familiarity on ease of comprehension and a positive effect of ease of comprehension on A_{ad} . The positive effect of brand familiarity on A_{ad} as described in H2 can be completely explained by the easiness of interpretation of familiar brands: ads for familiar brands are more easily understood which in turn makes them more appreciated.

An interesting finding is that differences do exist between nationalities in the attitude towards advertising in general. Some nationalities are more positive in a general sense about advertising than other nationalities. More specific, they have a more positive attitude towards the ads shown in this study. On average open ads are less liked than closed ones and the magnitude of this difference in A_{ad} depends on the advertised product (= interaction openness x product, if not controlled for ease of comprehension). The same holds for ads for familiar brands. The attitude towards these ads is more positive than for ads advertising unfamiliar brands and the difference in A_{ad} also depends on the advertised product (= interaction brand familiarity x product). Therefore, advertisers should realize that before they device campaigns which they want to disseminate globally, the attitude towards advertising in general differs substantially between nationalities.

Limitations

Our experiment has three limitations that warrant attention. First, the predispositions towards the product could have influenced A_{ad} , a possible effect which has not been taken into account in this research. This makes that the outcome of this research, the fact that open advertisements can be used as a global marketing tool just as well as closed conclusion advertisements, is only applicable to certain products, and not to open advertisements in general.

Second, the high degree of task involvement might have influenced the results of our experiment. Although participants filled in the questionnaire at home at their own pace, at a moment that suited them best, the ads were processed with a high degree of task involvement due to the forced-exposure of respondents to ads. This approach is typical for experiments in the field of advertising (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992), and it leads to a high degree of internal validity. However, in normal viewing conditions consumers might not devote any attention at all to advertising messages, because they might not bother to interpret open ads thus rendering no effect of openness on A_{ad} .

Third, the single-exposure design might have influenced the results of our experiment. In real life consumers are exposed to ads more than once in different editions of the same magazine or in different magazines within a certain time period. Repetition of open ads might facilitate processing and subsequently ad-liking, because it provides more opportunities to learn the ad's intended messages (Anand & Sternthal, 1990; Cox & Cox, 1988; MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989). Multiple exposures might lead to more positive effects of openness than found in the single exposure setting of our study.

Theoretical and practical implications

This study is important for theoretical and practical reasons. Confirming the results found by Phillips (2000) our experiment showed that subtle alterations in openness do have a measurable impact on A_{ad} . The headlines explaining the ad's message increased A_{ad} for the majority of the ads. On average we may conclude that open ads are likely to benefit from verbal anchoring, because verbal anchoring renders ads less difficult to interpret. This finding confirms the argument of Messaris (1997) who argues that whereas verbal language contains words that can be used to make explicit connections or causalities (e.g., 'because of' or 'due to'), visual images lack such an explicit syntax, rendering the task of processing them more difficult. On the other hand, when open ads are just as easy to understand in comparison with the closed counterparts, they even outperform closed ads.

For the first time, an important structural element of an ad is studied that may contribute to the outcome of openness: brand familiarity. Consumers with well developed schemata for brands evaluate open ads higher than average consumers. We also found that ease of comprehension mediates the effects of brand familiarity on A_{ad} .

An important practical implication of this study is that ad-makers should not rely exclusively on (open) pictures to convey commercial messages. In order to diminish the possible negative effects of open advertisements, researchers should select test ads that should not be too hard to decipher. Perhaps they can increase the amount of guidance by repeating open ads, and by embedding open ads in ad campaigns and sometimes replace them by closed ads. Different ads within the same campaign often aim to communicate the same message by using different executional elements. The use of open ads in the context of an advertising campaign might increase the level of guidance, even without adding verbal information. Just as with an increase in the number of ad exposures, confronting consumers with ads that belong to the same campaign increases repetition of the ad's intended message, which consequently may increase the amount of guidance.

When open advertisements are used, especially for unfamiliar brands, they should be easy to understand to benefit from them. If not so, advertisers are better off using closed ones. Lastly, to guaranty that open ads will be easy to understand will be more difficult to accomplish for unfamiliar brands than for familiar brands.

Future research

This exploratory study has shown that nationality and product both have moderating effects on openness and brand familiarity. However, we did not formulate an expectation about the direction of these effects. Future research should hypothesize about how cultural differences and the product relate to differences in attitude towards open ads. It should also take other nationalities into account in order to conform whether our findings stand in a non European context and hold for more distinctive cultures and as well.

On the positive side, we may cautiously conclude that open advertisements are suitable for communicating with consumers from different nationalities, but only if they are easy to understand. The lack of text and the use of images is an effective way to advertise across borders as it gets around language barriers. The standardisation of the advertisement lowers costs because only one, textless advertisement is needed for different nationalities. By using the same advertisement everywhere, there is a chance of achieving a uniform market image. However, on the negative side, openness is not such an effective strategy as ad-makers might think because images always seem more difficult to interpret than text. Considering its potential negative effects and the large amounts of money involved in the advertising business, we may conclude that the open ad-strategy seems a risky venture.

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Table 1
Overview of the advertisements

Nr.	Familiar brand	Unfamiliar brand	Product
1	Blackberry	Phonos	Mobile phone
2	Durex	Pleazure	Condom
3	Panasonic	Megapower	Battery
4	Tom Tom	A+ Ride	GPS
5	Volkswagen	Elgey	Car
6	Lancôme	Deraviza	Anti wrinkle cream
7	Dash	Wash It	Detergent
8	Whiskas	Lucky Cat	Cat food
9	Colgate	Shine	Toothpaste
10	Jeep	Geop	Offroad Car

Table 2**Manipulation check for openness by country**

Openness	Closed		Open		t (df)	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Country						
Belgium	2,08	1,06	2,76	1,30	-7,35 (633,230)	<.001
The Netherlands	2,37	1,13	2,87	1,30	-8,92 (1855,253)	<.001
United Kingdom	2,35	1,24	2,99	1,39	-13,94 (3238,489)	<.001
Germany	2,45	1,27	2,90	1,34	-8,78 (2603,758)	<.001
Poland	2,17	1,14	2,66	1,32	-5,28 (686,046)	<.001
United States	2,03	1,13	2,73	1,38	-6,60 (545,179)	<.001

Table 3**Manipulation check for brand familiarity by country**

Brand	Unfamiliar		Familiar			
Country	M	SD	M	SD	t (df)	p
Belgium	2,20	0,67	3,04	0,78	-14,80 (666)	<.001
The Netherlands	2,16	0,69	2,85	0,75	-20,85 (1893)	<.001
United Kingdom	2,25	0,90	3,09	0,91	-26,49 (3306)	<.001
Germany	2,12	0,82	3,06	0,81	-29,39 (2610,840)	<.001
Poland	2,18	0,75	3,11	0,84	-15,91 (731)	<.001
United States	1,96	0,66	3,03	0,80	-17,24 (547,171)	<.001

	df	F	p
intercept	1	2012,60	,000
country	5	10,75	,000
gender	1	,01	,926
open	1	27,78	,000
familiarity	1	57,92	,000
product	9	95,86	,000
age	1	1,11	,292
general attitude	1	278,91	,000
open* familiarity	1	,35	,553
open*product	9	5,01	,000
familiarity*product	9	4,55	,000
country * product	45	3,42	,000
error	9707		

R²=.174

Table 5
Predicted means of attitude towards the ad.

openness	familiarity	mobile phone	condom	battery	GPS	car	cream	detergent	cat food	toothpaste	offroad car
Open	Unfamiliar	3.43	3,13	2,75	3,41	3,13	3,56	2,39	3,84	2,82	3,23
	Familiar	3.48	3,30	2,91	3,67	3,17	3,50	2,63	3,90	3,14	3,52
Closed	Unfamiliar	3.59	3,17	2,90	3,56	3,34	3,63	2,76	3,90	2,83	3,12
	Familiar	3.62	3,31	3,04	3,80	3,36	3,55	2,98	3,93	3,13	3,38

Evaluated at the mean values of covariates

Table 6
Analysis of variance of attitude towards the ad, controlling for
ease of comprehension

	df	F	p
intercept	1	925,45	,000
Nationality	5	5,00	,000
Gender	1	,00	,961
Open	1	8,70	,003
Familiarity	1	1,02	,314
Product	9	114,36	,000
Age	1	,28	,598
general attitude	1	170,08	,000
ease of comprehension	1	1219,68	,000
open*familiarity	1	1,83	,177
open*product	9	1,73	,076
familiarity*product	9	6,62	,000
nationality*product	45	3,84	,000
error	9706		

R²=.266

Table 7											
Predicted means of attitude towards the ad, controlling for ease of comprehension											
Openness	Familiarity	mobile phone	condom	battery	GPS	car	cream	detergent	cat food	toothpaste	offroad car
Open	unfamiliar	3.61	3.02	3.08	3.73	3.31	3.57	2.63	3.93	2.72	3.59
	familiar	3.33	3.01	3.20	3.65	3.18	3.45	2.75	3.73	2.87	3.62
Closed	unfamiliar	3.66	2.95	3.00	3.63	3.29	3.46	2.57	3.85	2.65	3.34
	familiar	3.42	2.99	3.17	3.59	3.21	3.39	2.73	3.71	2.84	3.42

Evaluated at the mean values of covariates

Table 8
Analysis of variance of ease of comprehension.

	df	F	p
intercept	1	1700,36	,000
country	5	18,84	,000
gender	1	,17	,679
open	1	592,74	,000
familiarity	1	661,27	,000
product	9	137,70	,000
age	1	2,77	,096
general attitude	1	165,89	,000
open*familiarity	1	31,28	,000
open * product	9	27,97	,000
familiarity * product	9	25,90	,000
country * product	45	3,69	,000
error	9707		

R²=.288

Table 9											
Predicted means of ease of comprehension											
Openness	Familiarity	mobile phone	condom	battery	GPS	car	cream	detergent	cat food	toothpaste	offroad car
Open	Unfamiliar	2.73	3.80	2.19	2.22	2.75	3.36	2.51	3.09	3.75	2.13
	Familiar	3.95	4.44	2.37	3.47	3.39	3.59	2.96	3.99	4.39	3.04
Closed	Unfamiliar	3.16	4.17	3.03	3.12	3.55	3.99	4.08	3.55	4.05	2.59
	Familiar	4.12	4.56	2.96	4.12	3.94	3.97	4.28	4.19	4.43	3.25

Evaluated at the mean values of covariates

Table 10
Correlation matrix of all the variables involved in the model.
N =9791.

	country	product	age	gender	open	familiarity	attitude towards brand	attitude towards ads in general	ease of comprehension
product	,019 ^a ,999								
age	,408 ^b ,000	,019 ^b ,948							
gender	,115 ^a ,000	,021 ^a ,874	-,045 ,000						
open	,012 ^a ,929	,020 ^a ,909	-,002 ,829	,003 ,774					
familiarity	,009 ^a ,972	,029 ^a ,536	,004 ,710	,013 ,189	,002 ,881				
attitude towards brand	,076 ^b ,000	,166 ^b ,000	-,009 ,376	,005 ,588	-,044 ,000	,323 ,000			
attitude towards ads in general	,187 ^b ,000	,015 ^b ,987	,090 ,000	,001 ,926	-,004 ,704	,011 ,272	,210 ,000		
ease of comprehension	,081 ^b ,000	,355 ^b ,000	-,033 ,001	,006 ,582	-,213 ,000	,220 ,000	,409 ,000	,103 ,000	
attitude towards ad	,056 ^b ,000	,344 ^b ,000	-,022 ,027	,007 ,513	-,050 ,000	,073 ,000	,420 ,000	,148 ,000	,327 ,000

^a Cramer's V, ^b eta, pearson correlation otherwise.

	Belgium	Netherlands	UK	Germany	Poland	US
Attitude towards ad	3.33	3.19	3.21	3.24	3.37	3.34
Ease of comprehension	3.58	3.38	3.34	3.32	3.61	3.62
Attitude toward ads in general	3.38	3.30	3.59	3.33	3.08	3.20

	mobile							cat		offroad
	phone	condom	battery	GPS	car	cream	detergent	food	toothpaste	car
Attitude towards ad	3,49	3,16	2,88	3,54	3,22	3,52	2,70	3,87	2,82	3,27
Ease of comprehension	3,39	4,11	2,61	3,22	3,33	3,75	3,28	3,57	3,96	2,71

Figure 1
Examples of fake brands and logo's: Lucky Cat, Shine, Elgey, Deraviza



Figure 2
Ten advertisements in four versions

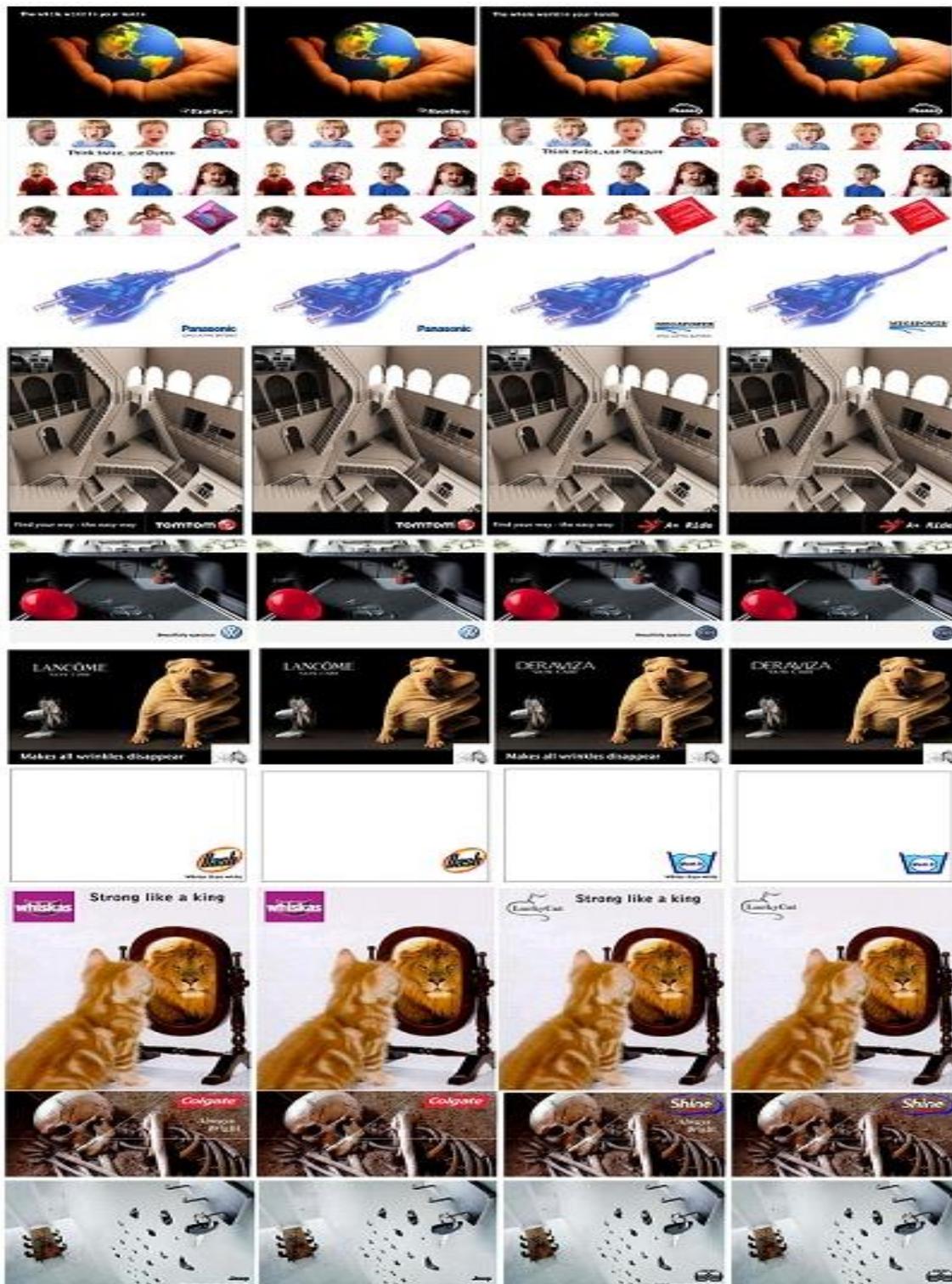


Figure 3:
The mediating role of ease of comprehension in the effects of openness and brand familiarity on attitude towards the ad

