THE EFFECT OF THE HYPNOTIC-SUGGESTIVE COMMUNICATION LEVEL OF ADVERTISEMENTS ON THEIR EFFECTIVENESS

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Abstract

Advertising is mentioned sometimes as a hypnotizing experience. The present study investigated this claim by developing and implementing a questionnaire for measuring the level of hypnotic-suggestive communication in advertisements. The results demonstrated that this level is a crucial variable for advertising effectiveness and for the evaluations of the advertised brand. Copyright © 2007 British Society of Experimental & Clinical Hypnosis. Published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: hypnosis, suggestion, advertising, effectiveness, questionnaires, persuasion

Introduction

The main tool used by hypnotherapists is suggestion. Hammond (1990) reviews the principles for formulating hypnotic suggestions. Yapko (1995) also proposes a list of principles for constructing suggestions and establishing hypnotic communication. Certain components of both lists overlap, while others complement each other. However, the combined list represents the main principles of suggestion accepted in the field of hypnosis.

The main goal of the present study was to examine the convergent validity of these suggestions by using them in an area other than hypnotherapy, but one similar enough in the context of persuasion, that is, in advertising.

The main goal of advertising is to persuade target audiences in favour of the ideas, commodities or services featuring in the advertisement. The quality of the advertising message is assessed mainly by the level of persuasion it creates in the consumer, very much as the quality of the hypnotic suggestion is measured by the level of acceptance by the patient. In the two cases, we investigate the question of whether the suggestion was accepted.

This study is therefore aimed at exploring whether the rules for phrasing effective hypnotic suggestions in psychotherapy might also be used as a guideline to examine such suggestions in advertising. In the first stage a questionnaire based on the aforementioned rules by Hammond (1990) and Yapko (1995) will be presented, assessing the level of hypnotic-suggestive communication in an advertisement. This questionnaire has been constructed by experts in hypnosis, and was later used to evaluate the level of hypnotic-suggestive communication in a series of 12 commercials. This evaluation, too, was conducted by experts in the field. Using the experts’ evaluation, the advertisements were classified into two levels of hypnotic-suggestive communications: low and high. In the
last stage of this study, the abovementioned commercials were played to a sample of students, who then evaluated them by means of a questionnaire in order to gauge the advertisements’ effectiveness.

The main hypothesis is that the level of the hypnotic-suggestive communication of an advertisement, as defined by hypnosis experts, will predict its effectiveness as assessed by the student sample group, and thus will provide convergent validity for the hypnotic suggestion.

**Method: Section A, constructing a questionnaire to gauge the level of hypnotic-suggestive communication in advertisements**

The aforementioned lists devised by Hammond (1990) and Yapko (1995) were used as a basis for phrasing a first draft of the questionnaire. An adaptation of the phrasing of details was carried out to make them relevant for advertisement evaluation. The questionnaire was later passed on to be evaluated by two top experts in hypnosis, one psychiatrist and one clinical psychologist, licensed by Israel’s Ministry of Health to offer treatment by hypnosis and undertake scientific research in this field. Additionally, these experts are licensed to teach and coach hypnotists. Each of these judges independently expressed an opinion on the questionnaire and the changes required to it, in the course of six rounds of amendments and adjustments. The final questionnaire, including its various details, was agreed upon in full consensus between these two judges, as well as the author of this article, also licensed for treatment and scientific research in hypnosis. Following are the details of the final version of the questionnaire. The scale designed for this questionnaire is a 7-point semantic differential scale, ranging between ‘absolutely not’ (1) and ‘positively yes’ (7), while the respondents were requested to evaluate to what extent an advertisement which they saw observed each of these items. The questionnaire can be seen in Appendix A.

**Method: Section B, determining the level of hypnotic-suggestive communication in advertisements**

**Participants**

Eight hypnotherapy experts, who were either clinical psychologists or physicians, participated as assessors to evaluate hypnotic-suggestive communication in advertising. The experts volunteering to serve as assessors were recruited for the task at a convention of the Israeli Society of Hypnosis. All of them were licensed to hypnotize by the Israeli Ministry of Health and were members of the Israeli Society of Hypnosis. Each expert received vouchers to purchase books as compensation for their participation in the research.

**Tools**

A number of videotapes were borrowed from the campus library, containing commercials that had been broadcast on Israeli television in the previous year. The tapes were purchased from a databank providing such services to the college for academic requirements. In total there were some 100 advertising spots in different categories. With the assistance of a class of MBA students who served as adjudicators, the advertisements were classified into six content categories according to the themes of the brands and companies featuring in each advertisement: foodstuff, beverages, clothing, communication, finances and toiletries. Single advertisements which did not fit these categories were
dropped from the research. In order to create a balanced advertisement list, two commercials were selected randomly from each of the main categories, so that eventually there were 12 spots to be projected as part of the research. Additionally, two more commercials were randomly selected from any field category; not to be broadcast, but for the researcher to use their brand title in a brand questionnaire, to be explained further in Section C of the Method below.

Procedure
A research assistant visited each of the experts' clinics separately and showed them the 12 advertisements one after another on a laptop. The order of the advertisements was random and each of the experts viewed them in a different order for counterbalance. After each advertisement was played, the expert filled out the questionnaire to evaluate hypnotic-suggestive communication in the advertisement. Subsequently the following advertisement was screened. The findings were statistically processed and using them the advertisements were divided into two equal-numbered groups of 6 advertisements each, which were defined as advertisements of a low and high hypnotic-suggestive communication level, respectively.

Method: Section C, evaluating advertising effectiveness

Participants
One hundred and eighty-one (181) students at the School of Business in The College of Management in Rishon LeZion, Israel, partook voluntarily as participants in the experiment, as part of their studies in the course ‘Introduction to marketing’, in groups of 10 to 30 students per class. Eight questionnaires were found to be blank or partially blank and were excluded from the database. There were 173 valid records remaining, on the basis of which the results of this study will be reported. The average age was 27.38 with standard deviation 5.43, of which 97 participants were men and 76 women.

Tools
The advertisements
The abovementioned 12 commercials that were evaluated by experts in stage B were used.

Participant questionnaire to evaluate advertising effectiveness
The questionnaire comprised four parts. The first part included a questionnaire examining what the participant felt about the brand that was about to appear in the commercial spots, which was also used for the purpose of re-evaluation at the end of the process. In addition to the list of 12 brands featured in the advertisements, a list was provided of the 12 additional brands chosen (two from each content category) not featuring in the advertisements and matching in character those that did (for example, a spot for food product A was accompanied in the brand questionnaire by an item asking about food product B). The order of presentation of the brands was random, with products used in the research and those not used appearing alternately in the questionnaire. The questionnaire included the list of 24 brands, with next to each of them a 7-point semantic differential scale ranging between ‘hate’ (1) and ‘love’ (7), describing the participant’s feeling toward the brand.

The second part comprised a questionnaire to appraise the effectiveness of the advertisement. It consisted of 12 pages, one page per advertisement. Each page asked four
questions concerning the commercial in terms of four aspects customary in the literature (e.g. Batra and Ray, 1986; Edell and Burke, 1987). Attitudes were measured by four affectivity aspects on a 7-point semantic differential scale: good/bad; like/dislike; convincing/unconvincing; favourable/unfavourable. In addition, participants were asked to indicate with regard to each commercial whether they had seen it before: yes, maybe or not.

The third part included a demographic and lifestyle questionnaire. It posed questions concerning gender; age; television viewing frequency; stance regarding television commercials; preference regarding television programme genre (talk shows, feature films, documentaries, news, entertainment, art and so on). Participants were also asked which television and cable channels they habitually watched.

The fourth and final part again comprised the preliminary questionnaire evaluating how the participant felt about the brand.

Procedure
A research assistant arrived at the students’ classroom. The explanation was given that they would be asked to participate in research which was studying advertising effectiveness, and that no further information would be given at that time to prevent distortion of the results. Nonetheless, a more comprehensive explanation was promised at the end of the experiment. It was also clarified that participation was voluntary, and that any student reluctant to participate could refuse to do so or simply not complete the questionnaire. At this time the questionnaires were handed out to the students, and they were requested to fill out the first part concerning the brands. Once these pages were completed, the screening of the advertisements began, using a computer and digital projector present in the classrooms. Following the projection of each advertisement the students were asked to complete the question page for that advertisement, and so on until the last commercial. The order of screening of the 12 advertisements was random and varied between one group and another for counterbalance. At the end of the advertising screening students were asked to fill in the third, demographic part as well as the fourth part that repeated the evaluation of the brand. Finally the questionnaires were collected. The research assistant thanked the class and handed out a pamphlet explaining the purpose of the research and its theoretical background. In addition, the experiment was later discussed with the students in order to clarify issues in research methods constituting part of the course syllabus.

Results
For each of the 12 advertisements, Cronbach’s alpha was calculated for measuring the internal reliability of the four semantic differential scale statements (like/dislike, good/bad, convincing/not convincing, favourable/unfavourable). The Cronbach’s alpha measures for all advertisements were high, ranging from 0.91 to 0.97. Therefore, a new variable was calculated for each advertisement, ‘a general effectiveness scale’, which was the average of the four statements for each of the 12 advertisements, respectively.

In order to check whether there was any influence of previous familiarity with the advertisement on the participant’s evaluation of its effectiveness, 12 ANOVAs were conducted, one for each advertisement, that examined the differences between means of the general effectiveness scale in each of the 3 familiarity categories for each advertisement: those who had seen the advertisement in the past, those who might have seen it and those who reported not having seen it. Out of the 12 ANOVAs only two were found to be sig-

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Published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd

DOI: 10.1002/ch
significant, \( p < 0.05 \), each with a different trend. For one of the significant advertisements those who ‘might have seen’ it reported the advertisement as less effective than those who had seen it, as well as those who had not seen it. In the other case those who had seen it reported the advertisement as more effective. In addition, for the other 10 advertisements (whose ANOVAs were not significant) the trends of the means were not consistent either with a familiarity-positive or with a familiarity-negative effect. As the general trend did not show consistent bias regarding any familiarity effect, and as in a ‘real life’ situation consumers are at different familiarity levels regarding the advertisements they watch, it was decided to use the whole sample and not to omit participants from the sample on the basis of previous familiarity/lack of familiarity with the advertisements.

The effect of an advertisement’s hypnotic-suggestive level on advertisement effectiveness

The 12 advertisements were divided into two equal subgroups according to the median score deriving from the experts’ evaluation of each advertisement. Two new variables were then calculated: the first was the mean of the low six hypnotic-suggestive advertisements and the second was the mean of the high six hypnotic-suggestive advertisements.

In order to evaluate the effect of the hypnotic-suggestive level on advertisement effectiveness a paired t-test was conducted, \( t(172) = 12.02, \ p < 0.001 \). The results are demonstrated in Figure 1. As can be seen, the high hypnotic-suggestive level advertisements were perceived as more effective than the low ones.

The effect of an advertisement’s hypnotic-suggestive level on brand evaluation

For this analysis parts 1 and 4 of the questionnaire were used: the former represents a naïve evaluation of brands whose advertisements had not been screened yet; the latter represents an evaluation of brands after exposure to 12 advertisements. Naturally this design results in two subgroups of brands: 12 brands that were promoted by advertisements during the procedure and 12 brands that were just re-measured but were not promoted. The first group can be further subdivided into another two subgroups: those brands whose advertisement was evaluated as ‘low hypnotic-suggestive level’ and those for which the advertisement was evaluated as ‘high hypnotic-suggestive level. Figure 2 illustrates the results.

In order to explore the trends seen in Figure 2, a 3 X 2 ANOVA with repeated measures was conducted. The dependent variable was the brand evaluation grade. The first
factor was the hypnotic-suggestive level (high, low, or no-exposure). The second factor was the timing of the measure (before or after the advertisement presentation). The main effects of Level and Timing were not significant, \( p > 0.10 \), respectively. The Level X Timing interaction was significant, \( F(2,342) = 13.21, p < 0.001 \).

In order to explore the meaning of the interaction a series of contrasts was generated, all with Bonferroni correction.

The first series of contrasts was generated in order to explore the differences between the levels before the advertisement presentation. As was expected and as can be seen in Figure 2, all of the contrasts between the levels, before the advertisement presentation, were not significant, \( p > 0.05 \).

Another set of three contrasts was generated for the conditions after the advertisement presentation. The contrasts between high and low levels and between high and no-exposure levels were significant, \( t(171) = 3.94, t(171) = 3.12, \) \( ps < 0.05 \) respectively. The contrast between low and no-exposure levels was not significant, \( p > 0.10 \). The interpretation of the results could imply that high hypnotic-suggestive advertisements generate a higher brand preference score than low hypnotic-suggestive advertisements or a no-exposure-at-all condition.

The third series of contrasts was generated for the ‘After’ versus ‘Before’ conditions for each level separately. The contrasts for the high and for the low levels were significant, \( t(171) = 4.23, t(171) = -4.59, \) \( ps < 0.05 \) respectively. The contrast for the no-exposure level was not significant, \( p > 0.10 \). The interpretation of the results could imply that high hypnotic-suggestive advertisements are positively effective and therefore generate higher brand preference scores than seen in the condition before advertisement exposure; and on the contrary that low hypnotic-suggestive advertisements not only do not support the brand, but also decrease the brand preference score towards it. Naturally, no exposure does not change brand preference at all.

**Discussion**

The current research intended to examine the impact of the extent of hypnotic suggestion in advertisements on their effectiveness. Despite the existing discussion in the literature...
regarding the link between hypnosis and advertising, thus far no research has been published which examines this issue empirically. For the purpose of this study, a dedicated questionnaire was developed for experts in hypnotherapy, evaluating the level of hypnotic communication in advertising messages. This questionnaire is itself a novel component, and could probably be used further for future research on hypnosis.

The results demonstrated clearly that advertisements at a high hypnotic-suggestive communication level are more effective than low level ones. However, surrounding this phenomenon additional complex and important patterns were established.

Advertising effectiveness by direct evaluation
It was found that advertisements of high suggestive communication predict higher advertising effectiveness than advertisements of low suggestive communication. The effectiveness was measured by means of direct reference by the participants to the advertisement according to a number of aspects, including: to what extent the advertisement was liked/disliked; found to be good/bad; evaluated as convincing/unconvincing; and a general stance (whether the participant found it favourable/unfavourable).

Advertising effectiveness by indirect evaluation
The central independent variable in the study was the degree of hypnotic suggestiveness of the advertisement, which included three possible values: low, high or unexposed. It might have been expected that brands entirely unadvertised would not be affected, and indeed that has happened. Regarding brands advertised, it might have been expected that a high hypnotic-suggestive level would improve consumer attitudes toward the brand, whereas a lower level would influence these less or not at all. The result was indeed that a high level of hypnotic-suggestive communication improves the attitudes of the consumer toward the product, as expected. However, an unexpected outcome was also noticed, which is that an advertisement with a low level of hypnotic-suggestive communication evidently worsened the consumer’s attitudes. The disparity in attitudes toward brands, then, is created by a twofold effect, improving attitudes toward brands receiving a high level of exposure, but worsening attitudes toward brands being given low-level exposure. The surprising part is, of course, the fact that inferior advertising (utilizing a low level message) is liable to harm the brand more than absolute lack of advertising. This finding contradicts those of other studies, which determine that even a not particularly convincing message might improve, or at least not damage, attitudes (e.g. Petty and Cacioppo, 1981; Zajonc, 1968; 2001).

How might the outcomes of this research be explained in view of the findings of many studies previously, showing that peripheral and unconvincing messages could contribute to a brand (or at least not be detrimental to it)? It could be that the main variable relevant to the purpose of this discussion is the fact that the unpersuasive advertisement was not shown on its own (between-subject design), but rather appeared in a manner enabling one to compare it to other, more effective messages (within-subject design). Most studies that have demonstrated that a peripheral message could be convincing have done so by exposing the participants to this message in a between-subject design. In the first situation, the participant allots attention only to this one stimulation and indeed relates to it in one way or another, in the sense of ‘better than nothing’. However, in the present study, when participants receive a sequence of messages of different persuasion levels, they are affected by the general heterogeneous context of the various advertisements. In fact, this is also the realistic situation in both the world of marketing and psychotherapy, since people are commonly exposed to a series of
messages rather than a single spot. Mutual influences of advertisements in a block of commercials have been found in the past as well. One example of such influence is the primacy and recency effect (e.g. Terry, 2005; Burke and Srull, 1988; Stewart, Pechmann, Ratneshwar, Stroud and Bryant, 1985). Understandably, the message is granted prominence not merely for being first, but also due to the others being placed elsewhere. Here too, the negative impact of the lower level advertisement stems from its presence in a block in which there are better advertisements.

Conclusions

The main conclusion arising from the findings of this study is that the myth concerning advertisements being ‘hypnotic’ is valid, at least partially.

It appears that advertisements that succeed in creating a message adhering to the criteria of hypnotic-suggestive communication benefit from higher effectiveness and generate an attitude change toward the brands they advertise. However, advertisements acting inversely, and which are not consistent in qualitative hypnotic-suggestive communication, might be perceived as less effective but, even more seriously, cause a decline in the perception of the brand they advertise, at least in the immediate term which is examined by this paper.

The findings raise important questions regarding the use of suggestions and their influence also in the therapeutic environment, that should be explored in future research.

Note

1 Oren Kaplan (PhD psychology, MBA marketing, MA clinical psychology) is the head of both the Department of Marketing and the MBA Management and Business Psychology Program at the College of Management, Rishon LeZion, Israel. He is a licensed clinical psychologist and licensed in therapy and in research in hypnosis.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Joseph Meyerson and Dr Eitan Abramowitz for their help in developing the research tools of the present study, and to the other members of the Israeli Society of Hypnosis that agreed to participate in the study.

This research was executed with the support of the research unit of the School of Business, The College of Management, Rishon LeZion, Israel.

References


Appendix A

Items in the questionnaire to evaluate hypnotic-suggestive communication in advertisements

1. The advertisement creates rapport with the viewer (an ambiance of warmth, caring, respect and trust).

2. The characters, the narrator and/or the message in the advertisement use a suggestive speaking manner – clear and confident speech.

3. ‘The Carrot Principle’: the advertisement generates positive expectancy in the viewer regarding the benefits that will accrue to him/her following the use and purchase of the advertised product, by promising reward and using reinforcements (‘you should do so because . . .’).

4. ‘The Law of Reversed Effect’: the commercial avoids making impossible and direct demands of the viewer (for instance, a saying such as ‘don’t have traffic accidents’ is not effective but rather increases stress, as opposed to a saying such as ‘put on a safety belt’, which is a simple and practical instruction).

5. ‘The Law of Repetition’: the advertisement features repetition of the main message several times. (The repetition might be simple or use different words or different nonverbal tactics.)

6. ‘The Law of Concentrated Attention’: the advertisement conveys messages in diverse methods using various sensory modalities, so that different dimensions are created through which the spectator’s attentiveness is directed toward the main message (for example, the announcer says ‘look at product X’ while the camera visually focuses on the product).

7. ‘The Principle of Successive Approximations’: gradual escalation of suggestions in the advertisement. (For instance, progressing from what is easy to understand and perform to the more difficult and complex, more powerful suggestions at the end of the advertisement, etc.)

8. ‘The Law of Dominant Effect’: the advertisement uses a prominent emotion of the viewer in order to convey a message. (For example: ‘are you feeling sad? Bored? Then get started . . .’)

9. ‘The Principle of Positive Suggestion’: the advertisement does not use words evoking negative associations (for example, rather than ‘don’t gain weight’, there is the use of the phrase ‘from now on you will be thinner’).

10. ‘The Principle of Positive Reinforcement’: complimenting and encouraging the spectator for performing actions based on previously given suggestions (such as, ‘look at the blue circle on the screen . . . great, and now see what the guy is doing . . . very good’, etc.).
11. The commercial ‘Creates an Acceptance or Yes-Set’: (for instance, ‘it is true you have A . . . and it is a fact you also have B . . . obviously it is true you should also have C’).
12. ‘The Principle of Interspersing and Embedding Suggestions’: in the course of the advertisement you find yourself immersed and interested in the storyline of the spot.
13. ‘The Principle of Using the Customer’s Own Language’: to what extent does the advertisement differentiate a designated sector of the population and address it specifically in its own language using distinctive expressions and/or slang?
14. The advertisement uses directive suggestions that present solutions together with detailed instructions on how to behave. (For example, ‘now go to the grocery store and buy the product’)
15. Indirect suggestions are used in the advertisement – use of stories, analogies, jokes, puns and suchlike techniques to convey the message indirectly but convincingly.
16. The advertisement uses supportive and action-encouraging suggestions, aiming to increase the viewer’s sense of self-efficacy by his using the product. (For instance, ‘you can, you are able, a person like you will do it’, etc.)
17. The commercial uses negative suggestion as a paradoxical and manipulative way to motivate and activate resistance (e.g.: ‘cancer cures smoking’, ‘don’t buy a lottery ticket because you might win millions’, or presenting preposterous people as an example of the kind of person you would not want to be).
18. The advertisement uses content suggestions: there are specific details describing the product/service in a clear and explicit manner, illustrating to the viewer what it is about.
19. The advertisement uses process suggestions: conveying open messages enabling the viewer to take things associatively to wherever it might suit her. (For instance, ‘and now when you go shopping, I wonder which shop you will enter and what you are going to buy there?)
20. The advertisement uses post-hypnotic suggestions that are supposed to activate the viewer subsequently to his watching the spot (for instance, ‘when you get into the car you will remember us and drive differently’, or ‘when you pass the supermarket corridors and see the tea packs, you will remember our product’).
21. The advertisement makes use of simple and easy to follow language and suggestions.
22. ‘The Principle of Continuity’: the advertisement uses the present tense or alternatively begins in the past or future tenses, ending at the present tense (for example: ‘you need it now’).
23. ‘The Principle of Activating Modalities’: the advertisement appeals to different senses with a particular emphasis on the sense most suitable to the central theme of the commercial (hearing, sight, touch, etc.).
24. The commercial makes use of sound and demeanor befitting its purpose (for example: romantic and moving music if it aims to create the atmosphere and associations of family and relationships; intimidating music if it is a threat).
25. The advertisement includes chaining suggestions creating Trance-Logic and a seemingly logical sequence between things and behaviours that have no natural connection between them, without activating the control of logic (for instance, the more you eat of this delicacy the more you enjoy it, and the more you enjoy it the more you want of it).
26. The advertisement uses a suggestion covering all the possibilities that the consumer might encounter, in which the solution to all of them is through acquisition of the product/service advertised (to prevent failure in case of incompatibility with a particular client in a specific situation).

27. The advertisement asks questions evoking an active search by the viewer for answers.

28. Using confusion as a technique: the viewer does not understand what is happening on-screen hence tension rises, making it easier later on to send a clear message reducing the stress. As her defences are lowered she takes in the message as a way of solving the confusion and tension.

29. The commercial creates a balance between opposite experiences: Apposition of Opposites (for example, ‘the more chilled the wine is, the warmer your heart; the heavier the furniture is the lighter your house seems; you can take all the time in the world in the next few minutes’).

30. Principle of Permissive Involuntarism: the advertisement uses a forced choice, which is a seeming choice of a marginal component, while the customer must choose the product itself (‘will you buy the product in the grocery store or the supermarket?’).

31. Principle of Presupposition: the advertisement uses presupposition as a supposedly evident fact (for instance, ‘the main question is of course when you are going to buy it, not whether you are going to buy it’).

32. Principle of Truism: the advertisement uses correct, well-known truths and continues with a marketing message (for example, ‘it is known that quality products are the best choice. That is why our product is the best’).

33. The advertisement uses concealed commands (for example, ‘and you are considering whether to Buy! This product’).

34. The advertisement uses nonverbal suggestions (tone of voice, body gestures, etc.).

35. The commercial uses ideo-dynamic responses, for example: ‘see the pie – feel the saliva in your mouth . . .’.

36. In summation, in the light of all of the above and your professional evaluation, how ‘hypnotic’ is the advertisement?

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