

# The Directional Influence of Music Backgrounds in Television Advertising

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## Abstract

*Advertisers frequently incorporate music backgrounds in television commercials as a means of improving ad effectiveness. This paper examines the relationship of alternative music backgrounds on brand attitude formation. Brand attitudes were more favorable when emotive cues deviated from neutral presentations in circumstances of high involvement and when emotive cues were positive in situations of low involvement. Implications for advertising practice as well as suggestions for future research are discussed.*

## Introduction

### Background

Television advertising often uses contextual features such as music in an effort to influence consumer preference. Aaker and Norris (1982) conducted a survey of over five hundred commercials and classified television advertising into two broad categories. The study documented an emotive group which uses background cues to elicit an emotional reaction. A cognitive group, stressing the informative aspects of a persuasive message, was also identified. More than half of the sampled commercials had characteristics consistent with the emotive category.

The effect that emotional presentations may have on consumer behavior is not clear, however. Two contradictory views concerning the role of emotive cues are found in the marketing literature (Silk and Vavra 1974). The traditional perspective is commonly referred to as the Law of Extremes Hypothesis. This proposition suggests that an emotional presentation has an indirect influence on consumer behavior, through the amount of attention paid to an ad. A concave relationship (J-curve) is hypothesized where affectively neutral ads have significantly less influence on consumer reactions than negative or positive presentations. High levels of attention are thought to inhibit the association of emotional appeals with advertised brands. Extreme emotional cues simply focus the awareness of potential customers on the informative aspects of a persuasive communication. The elicited affect (negative or positive) does not directly alter brand attitudes. Rather, greater persuasion may occur with either negative or

positive presentations due to the heightening of attention.

The alternative explanation for the effects of emotive appeals is referred to as the Superiority of the Pleasant Hypothesis. Affective cues paired with an advertisement's claims are thought to transfer emotional responses directly to the brand. Emotions become an integral part of the persuasive communication and directly influence the overall evaluation of an advertised brand. This approach indicates that a negative as well as a positive effect may be associated with an emotional advertisement. A direct relationship is expected between emotive favorability and subsequent brand attitudes. The direct transference of either an unfavorable or favorable feeling to an advertised brand conflicts with the traditional theoretical approach in both process and potential outcomes.

Positively and negatively valenced ads still deviate significantly from neutral presentations; however, the direction of effects are quite different. A negative emotive appeal would transfer directly to the object of an ad while a positive appeal would tend to enhance consumer preference for the advertised brand according to the Superiority of the Pleasant Hypothesis. Unrelated research efforts have produced conflicting and inconclusive results concerning the directional influence of emotive cues. A concave response function was obtained in one experiment (Gresham and Shimp 1985) while a linear response function was obtained in another

study (Mitchell 1986).

### *Applicability to Television Advertising*

The thoughtful consideration of advertising messages does not often occur with the frequency desired by advertisers (Krugman 1965; Petty and Cacioppo 1981). The television medium, in particular, exacerbates this problem. Consumers are constantly bombarded with numerous appeals, only a few of which may attract their individual attention (Ray and Webb 1986). In addition, the television medium only allows a brief exposure period. This tends to prohibit any in-depth analysis of a persuasive communication. As a consequence, an individual's motivation and ability to process advertising claims pose interesting dilemmas for advertisers attempting to develop effective television commercials.

While a variety of advertising effectiveness measures exist, this study examines brand attitudes. This measure was selected because it is consistent with much of the literature regarding advertising effects (e.g., Gardner 1985; Park and Young 1986). The purpose of this paper is to explore how alternative music backgrounds exert a differential impact on the effectiveness of television advertising. To the extent that they can be shown to do so, a valuable tool will have been identified for producers of advertising. A construct is proposed which integrates the previous explanations of emotional appeals and is used to develop two corresponding hypotheses. A series of television advertisements for a fictitious product are then utilized to test the hypotheses. Practical implications for advertising practice, as well as suggestions for future research, are discussed.

### **Hypotheses**

This paper relies on a model of persuasion that incorporates an involvement concept to explain consumer behavior (Petty and Cacioppo 1981; Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983). The Elaboration Likelihood model proposes two alternative methods through which advertisements may influence consumer behavior. The central route presumes a high level of consumer involvement where an advertisement's information quality is of primary importance. A peripheral route is indicated in circumstances of low involvement. Emotive presentations are more appropriate in this circumstance.

The level of consumer involvement is defined here as the amount of attention an individual pays to a television commercial, rather than the personal relevance of the message. This view of involvement captures the ability antecedent inherent to the concept (Houston and Rothschild 1978). Incorporating the involvement concept proves particularly useful in examining the role affective cues exert in television advertising. Both cognitive and emotive responses to alternative advertis-

ing presentations affect the development of consumer preferences within this conceptual framework.

One specification of the model posits a direct causal relationship from an advertisement to brand attitudes via classical conditioning. Under this specification, an individual could develop brand preferences based on emotive responses to an ad without any conscious evaluation of the persuasive message. Several studies which incorporate music backgrounds have been successful in demonstrating the direct influence of this contextual feature on brand attitudes (Gorn 1982; McInnis and Park 1991; Stuart, Shimp, and Engle 1987; Shimp, Stuart, and Engle 1991).

Another model specification postulates an indirect route to persuasion where brand cognitions lead to brand attitude formation. In this circumstance, emotional responses to background cues mediate the acceptance or rejection of media claims. Specifically, variations in cognitive response are expected due to the moderating role of the feelings elicited by the emotional features in an ad. Support for this specification of the Elaboration Likelihood Model is somewhat mixed (Droge 1989; MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch 1986; MacKenzie and Lutz 1989; Stayman and Aaker 1988).

### *Hypothesis 1*

In high involvement situations, an emotional appeal is hypothesized to have an indirect influence on brand attitude formation. This proposition suggests a linkage mechanism wherein an affect-laden message simply enhances the memorability of an advertisement's claims. Individuals utilize the information remembered from the commercial at a later time for cognitive appraisal. This theoretical perspective indicates that either a positive or a negative valenced message could be equally effective within an advertising context. The only purpose served by an affective presentation would be to increase the memory interconnections used in information storage and retrieval. Cognitive responses concerning message content are expected to predominate and take precedence over any evaluation of the executional aspects of an ad. As a result, a concave relationship is hypothesized in high involvement circumstances, where affectively neutral ads have significantly less effect on consumer brand attitudes than either negative or positive presentations. As a consequence, the dictates of the Law of Extremes Hypothesis are expected to be more appropriate in high involvement situations.

**H1:** A neutral emotive cue will exert an influence on brand attitudes which is less favorable than either negative or positive emotive cues in high involvement situations.

## *Hypothesis 2*

Affective cues paired with an advertisement's claims are thought to transfer emotional responses directly to the brand in low involvement circumstances. Emotions become an integral part of the situation and influence the overall product evaluation. A negative feeling, as well as a positive feeling, could transfer directly to the promoted brand when emotive ads are employed. Cognitions also reflect a different pattern under this view of an emotive cue's role in advertising. A significantly fewer number of message or product specific thoughts should occur during affective presentations under low involvement circumstances. Little, if any, cognitive appraisal is expected under conditions of low involvement. The second hypothesis specifies that emotionally valenced cues will result in a linear relationship between emotive cues and brand attitudes in low involvement circumstances, a prediction consistent with the Superiority of the Pleasant Hypothesis.

**H2:** Negative, neutral, and positive emotive cues will exert a progressively enhancing influence on brand attitudes in low involvement circumstances.

## **Method**

### *Subjects and Design*

A convenience sample of two hundred ten undergraduate students participated in the study. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of six treatment conditions. The study was designed as a 2 (high and low involvement) by 3 (negative, neutral, and positive music) between-subjects factorial design.

Three variations of a single commercial were developed by a local television station in order to investigate the impact of emotive presentations on brand attitudes. The test advertisements featured the same fictitious brand of soap, as well as a narrative which was evaluative in nature. This basic commercial was coupled with three sound overlays to create distinct commercials which differed only in their music backgrounds.

Prior to constructing the test ads, sixteen melodies had been pretested on fifty one students to obtain music which would elicit negative, neutral and positive emotions. While listening to music selections obtained from the production studio's library, subjects were asked to respond to a nine-point scale with the anchors: Dislike Very Much(1) and Like Very Much(9). The three melodies utilized in the ads had means significantly different from one another at the .05 level or better. The negative music selection had a mean rating of 2.04, the neutral music selection a mean rating of 4.35, and the positive music rating was 6.31.

## *Procedure and Measures*

Each ad featured a fictitious brand of soap to eliminate the potentially confounding influence of a respondent's prior familiarity with the advertised brand. In addition, the experimental ad was placed second in a pod of three commercials. Two unfamiliar filler ads were used to reduce the likelihood that subjects might pay undue attention to the test ad. That is, regional ads that would be unfamiliar to respondents were incorporated in order to ensure that the test ad would not stand out from the other advertisements.

The three commercials were coupled with an involvement manipulation in order to obtain the six experimental treatments. Respondents' attention was either directed toward the test ad or diverted to a competing ad to manipulate involvement states (Petty, Wells, and Brock 1976; Park and Young 1986).

A deceptive cover story was provided to minimize the possibility of demand artifacts. Subjects were informed that the study was concerned with determining the order effects that might occur under alternative groupings of television commercials. The high involvement subjects were told to pay particular attention to the second (test) ad. The low involvement subjects were told to pay particular attention to the first (filler) ad. We anticipated that a subjects' involvement with the test advertisement would be increased or decreased by the use of this manipulation (cf., Celsi and Olson 1988).

Immediately after exposure to an experimental treatment, subjects were asked to list all the thoughts that came to mind during the time they were exposed to an ad. Respondents were instructed to write down each thought or idea in a box provided for that purpose. The total number of cognitive responses per respondent on the test ad were obtained by simply adding the number of boxes containing responses.

The dependent variable in this study, attitude toward the advertised brand, was measured via three seven-point bipolar adjective scales (bad-good, unfavorable-favorable, negative-positive). Cronbach's alpha indicated that the items were internally consistent (0.94) and justified constructing a summated index of attitude toward the brand. Items similar to this have been previously reported in the marketing literature (Gardner 1985; Park and Young 1986).

## **Results**

### *Manipulation Check*

An analysis of variance indicated that the involvement manipulation was successful. The total number of cognitive responses was greater across all music treat-

ments under the high involvement condition ( $F(1,204) = 10.37, p < .01$ ). Recall that the total number of cognitive responses were expected to be higher when a subject's attention has been focused on a persuasive message. The mean number of cognitive responses in the high involvement condition was 5.83 versus 4.90 in the low involvement treatment.

### Hypotheses Tests

Hypotheses tests were accomplished via trend analysis. Figure 1 suggests that, under conditions of high involvement, brand attitudes display a concave relationship relative to emotive appeals. Consistent with theoretical expectations, negative and positive affective presentations appear to have a more favorable impact on brand attitudes than neutral appeals. Trend analysis confirms the first hypothesis. Brand attitudes exhibited a significant concave trend in the high involvement condition ( $F(2,102) = 3.89, p < .05$ ).

Examination of Figure 1 also indicates that a linear relationship between variations in emotive appeals and brand attitudes may exist in low involvement situations. Trend analysis confirmed the second hypothesis as well as the first. Negative music had a less favorable influence on brand attitudes than neutral music, and neutral music had a less favorable influence on brand attitudes than positively valenced music ( $F(2,101) = 4.74, p < .05$ ).

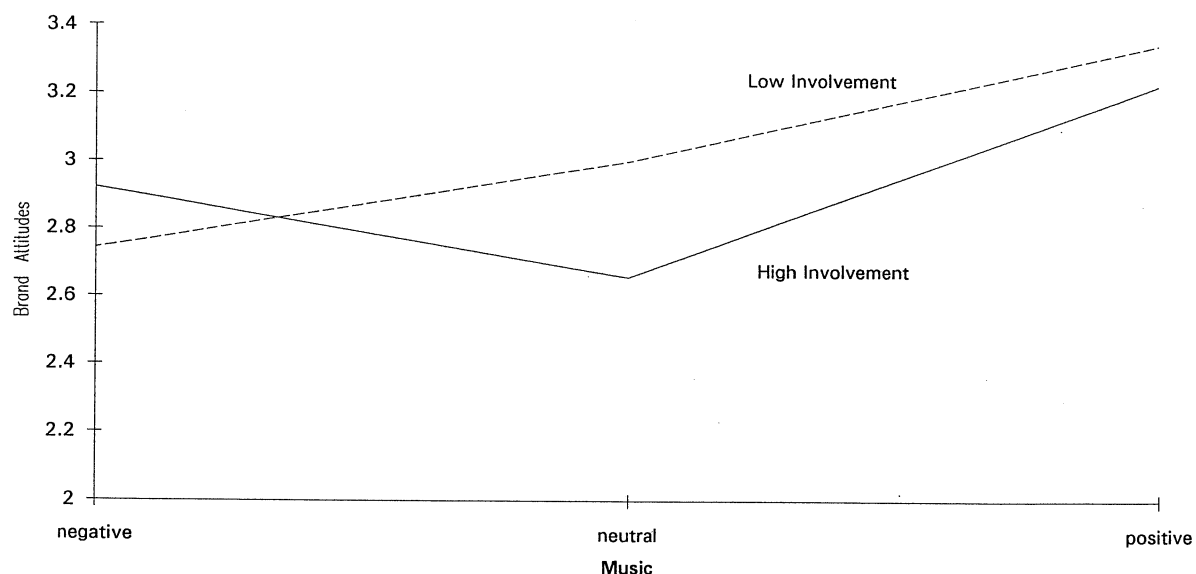
Although these results do not provide unequivocal support for the Law of Extremes Hypothesis in high involvement circumstances or the Superiority of the Pleasant Hypothesis in low involvement circumstances, they do suggest the basic premise underlying the hypotheses may be correct. The involvement construct appears to mediate the persuasive influence of peripheral cues such as music.

### Discussion

This study contributes to the advertising literature by integrating two previously discrepant viewpoints. Both the Law of Extremes Hypothesis and the Superiority of the Pleasant Hypothesis were found to be applicable under specific conditions. The J-curve observed in the high involvement condition is consistent with the Law of Extremes Hypothesis. The linear relationship between emotive cues and brand attitudes in low involvement situations is consistent with the Superiority of the Pleasant Hypothesis. These findings are congruent with the predictions of the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which proposes that an involvement construct mediates the influence of persuasive communications.

A limitation associated with this research inquiry should be noted. The use of a student sample was convenient, but reduced the external validity of the study. Until other studies with heterogeneous samples corroborate our findings, little in the way of broad

FIGURE 1  
The Directional Influence of Music Backgrounds



generalizations can or should be made. However, the findings do suggest one aspect of commercial television production should take on a more significant role. Pretesting music backgrounds on a sample of target prospects could potentially improve the effectiveness of television advertising. Perhaps more importantly, pretesting should prevent the airing of a television commercial which would negatively affect brand attitudes already held by consumers. Television broadcasting is an inherently low involvement medium and a disliked emotive cue could cause sponsors more harm than benefit.

The effects of repetition of emotional advertising appeals has received very little attention in the literature. In both high and low involvement situations, the number of times affective cues are repeated could influence an ad's persuasive ability. Of course, we might also expect the effects of alternative background cues to be moderated by the type of message appeal. As such, further research regarding interactions of repetition with contextual features as well as varying message formats should have important implications for advertisers. ■

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