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Advertising theory: Reconceptualizing the building blocks

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Abstract. A large amount of research in advertising utilizes theories from other disciplines and simply uses an advertising message as a stimulus or focal content topic. The actual elements that make advertising unique are often ignored in this work. It is proposed here that advertising theory and research needs to become more focused on what makes advertising a distinct phenomenon and these elements need to be incorporated in our thoughts and research. Four examples of possible elements are suggested here. These are skepticism, repetition, message coordination and clutter. Research in each of these areas is reviewed and illustrations of how they may impact theory development and theory testing in advertising are presented. Key Words • advertising • clutter • integrated marketing communication • message coordination • repetition • skepticism

Introduction

The history of science shows that the development and growth of disciplines is often a matter of historical accident reflecting the changing interests or concerns of a given time. For example, the development of mass communication as an academic field occurred in large part as an aftermath of the use of propaganda in World War I and II (O’Guinn and Faber, 1991; Tan, 1981). Concerns about violence on television in the 1960s and the Watergate scandal of the 1970s did much to shape the growth of this field (Pearl et al., 1982). The need for training in a new area or the sudden existence of large-scale funding opportunities has been among the chief reasons for the emergence of
new disciplinary areas. Typically, a young field gets its start within older, more established fields. Thus, the initial researchers in an emerging area were trained in some previously established discipline and bring with them the practices and perspectives of this prior field (Paisley, 1972). This often limits the perspectives brought to bear on a new field and suggests the importance of occasionally stepping back and determining if the theoretical perspectives being applied to a discipline are indeed the most appropriate ones that best represent the elements that define the field and make it unique.

Compared to other more established fields such as psychology and economics, advertising represents a relatively new research area. It is not uncommon for advertising researchers to borrow theories from other more established fields and apply them in advertising settings. Utilizing relevant theories from other fields to examine advertising has certainly deepened our understanding of the phenomena under investigation over the years. However, what is often ignored in the theory borrowing/application process is that advertising is a unique phenomenon and the field of advertising is defined by a set of important characteristics. Advertising researchers have rarely taken a step back and made an attempt to determine if the theoretical perspectives borrowed from other fields are the most appropriate ones and if they adequately incorporate the elements that define the nature of advertising. An advertising theory will not be particularly enlightening if it does not account for the features that make advertising distinct from other fields.

The purpose of this article is to identify some of the key elements associated with advertising and examine the possible impact they may have on advertising theory development and testing. Although it is not our goal to develop an exhaustive set of unique elements of advertising, we do aim to highlight features that are particularly characteristic of advertising and help to make it unique. We hope that by doing so, advertising researchers will become more sensitive to these elements and consider their impact on research and theories that address advertising. To demonstrate the potential importance of these key characteristics on advertising effects, a review of prior research on each is provided. We then present the results of a content analysis of empirical advertising studies appearing in six leading journals to illustrate the lack of sufficient attention to these variables. We conclude with a discussion of the important implications of our contentions for the enhancement and development of advertising theory in the future.

The unique elements of advertising

Level and variable fields

Disciplinary fields have tended to coalesce around one of two key attributes. Either they have a shared interest in the unit of analysis they examine, or they are united in their topical interest. Paisley (1972) has referred to these as level fields and variable fields respectively, and has elaborated on the importance of this distinction for the development of academic disciplines. Although exceptions exist,
the earliest divisions in the social sciences tended to be around level fields (Berelson, 1963). The primary level fields in behavioral sciences (Campbell, 1969) are generally said to be anthropology (with a focus on intact societies or cultures), sociology (examining groups within a single society), and psychology (focusing on individuals). Each represents a progressively more micro unit for study. Continuing down, the level of analysis moves into the realm of the physical sciences, first examining human behavior from a biological perspective and then on the basis of chemical processes and physics. The commonality that binds level fields is their interest in examining behavior at a specific level of analysis and the use of particular types of methodologies. However, over time, the distinctions between level fields begin to blur with the emergence of overlapping sub-disciplines such as social anthropology, social psychology, physiological psychology and neurochemistry.

On the other hand, variable fields bring together researchers interested in a common focal topic or variable. Examples here include political science, communications, economics, business, and education. The unique domains of each of these fields are at least as arbitrary as those of the level fields and in time, some divide into smaller variable fields and others may merge to form a new area. The value of a variable field comes from its ability to unite scholars around an area of common interest and its ability to provide unique insights to help the development of broader theories.

In general, theories develop within a single field and the most useful ones then travel across fields. Most of the broadest and most basic theories in science have originated in a level field and then moved across variable fields rather quickly. As theories move across different variable fields, each may suggest new situations or variables to consider in testing the theory. These new situations or variables may become mediating or moderating conditions for the theory, or in some cases, actually serve to alter the theory. To make such a contribution, researchers in each variable field need to be aware of what makes it a unique field and what forms its key commonalities.

On rare occasions, theories can also move across level fields. When a theory moves across level fields, the contribution is often seen as a very important one. Such modifications of theories are generally referred to as reduction, although the direction can be either up or down levels of analysis (Paisley, 1972). One famous example is the applications of Dollard et al.’s (1939) work on frustration and aggression (initially done at the individual level) to explain inter-group aggression (Hovland and Sears, 1940) and even wars between nations (Tolman, 1942). Similarly, social behaviors such as interaction and affiliation have been shown to reduce down to operant conditioning (Homans, 1961), and learning can be explained at a biochemical level (Schmidt, 1999).

Far more frequently, however, theoretical models spread across variable fields and in so doing produce smaller increments in understanding and knowledge. Showing that a theory applies across different variable fields increases the theory’s generalizability or abstractness and suggests it is a ‘better’ or more useful theory (Reynolds, 1971). Such increases in generalizability do serve a valuable purpose.
Ideally, in applying a theory in a new variable field, this field should also suggest some important variables or situations that may moderate or influence the broader theory. Thus, an important contribution of advertising as a variable field would be to suggest specific variables or situations that may be important in mediating, moderating or testing broader theories. To maximize its value as a variable field, advertising must determine what unique elements make it a distinct field of study.

Advertising as a distinct variable field

Advertising can be viewed as a variable field created by the merged interests of communication and marketing. Variable fields grow or fade based on changing interests and concerns in society. A variable field begins when a group of scholars develop a common interest in a phenomenon and begin to systematically investigate it (Paisley, 1972). To be successful, there must be common agreement on what constitutes the phenomenon. The development of advertising as an academic discipline emerged in large part from the need to train a body of students to have the skills necessary to engage in this profession. For business schools, there was a need for training students to produce or procure advertising services. In mass communications, advertising emerged from journalism programs where selling (newspaper) advertising space was the primary concern.

As a result of the way it developed, definitions of what constitutes advertising were seen from the perspective of the advertiser rather than that of the consumer of the message. One of the earliest and simplest definitions was 'selling in print' (Starch, 1923: 5). Obviously, the focus on print was a reflection of the media available at the time. More recent definitions have updated this by referring to media, mass communication or some similar terms (Lamb et al., 2000; O’Guinn et al., 2000; Wells et al., 1998). By the 1960s and 1970s definitions began to include a number of common elements such as:

• advertising was paid for;
• the sponsor was identifiable; and
• the message was non-personal. (American Marketing Association, 1960; Cohen, 1972; Dunn, 1969)

Current textbooks offer virtually unchanged definitions of advertising, except for the fact that some now add the goal of advertising, which is to persuade or influence (O’Guinn et al., 2000; Wells et al., 1998). A recent attempt to get academic and professional experts in the field of advertising to examine and reconsider the definition of advertising resulted in an almost unchanged definition, ‘Advertising is a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action now or in the future’ (Richards and Curran, 2002: 74).

While some scholars have forcefully argued that persuasion alone may be too limiting a view of advertising (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998), it is difficult to deny that a good deal of the focus in advertising is to persuade (or reinforce attitudes).
Schramm (1973) claimed that persuasion is primarily a communication process, and most definitions of advertising classify it as a form of communication (Richards and Curran, 2002). Therefore, it should not be surprising that a large body of research in the field of advertising has utilized attitude change theories.

Attitude change theories have generally emerged from psychology and have been utilized by a number of variable fields. Key variables from these variable fields have often been shown to impact these theories. For example, in political science, attitude change theories are used to explain voting preference and behavior. Work here has shown that important political science variables such as group identification, in the form of party affiliation, and reference groups can significantly mediate attitude change (Berelson et al., 1954; Weaver, 1996). Once identified, these variables were shown to also apply to other viable fields (Klapper, 1960). Ideally, advertising as a field should be able to contribute variables that similarly help to test and expand theory.

Duncan and Moriarty (1998) have shown how at a macro level communication can be used to help form a model for understanding how to manage marketing relationships. It is proposed here that communication at a more micro level can be used to help identify some of the potential variables that make advertising distinctive, and that the discipline of advertising can contribute to testing and understanding broader theories.

Communication content can be categorized in numerous ways (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). One of the early seminal works in communication suggested that communication could best be determined by its structure and function (Lasswell, 1948). It is argued in this article that by crossing the structure of communication with its functions, we can get a better idea of some of the elements that make advertising as a discipline distinct from other areas of communication.

Lasswell (1948) suggested that communication could be described as the study of Who, Says What, In Which Channel, To Whom and With What Effect. We can view this as representing the structure of the communications act. Other authors have added noise and feedback as possible additional elements of the structure of communication. All communication research can be seen as the combination of two or more of these elements. These structural elements have led to the key communication components of source (who), message (says what), media (channel), receiver (to whom) as well as noise and feedback that are frequently used to study attitude change (McGuire, 1969; O’Keefe, 2002; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981).

In the same work where he laid out the structural elements of communication, Lasswell (1948) also identified three functions of communication. These were:

- surveillance of the environment;
- correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment; and
- the transmission of social heritage.

Surveillance is concerned with using media to know what is going on and is of particular importance in staying alert to potential threats and dangers. News is seen as the type of content that best exemplifies surveillance (Dominick, 1983; Wright, 1986). Correlation refers to using the media to find the appropriate
responses to the needs one has. Advertising has been identified as a prototypical example of the type of content that fits the correlation function since it helps audience members find the brand that best meets their needs (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Transmission of social heritage refers to the socialization function of communication (Dominick, 1983). It can be argued that all forms of communication serve this function (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Wright (1986) added entertainment as another important function of communication. Broadcast media such as TV and films best reflect this function.

Many later authors have empirically examined various motives and functions of media use, especially as part of the uses and gratifications approach to studying communication. In a review of these studies, McQuail et al. (1972) argued that motivations or functions of media use could be reduced down to four basic categories. They referred to these as surveillance, diversion, personal relationships and personal identity. These are very similar to the theoretical motivations proposed by Lasswell and later by Wright. Surveillance is included in both the theoretical and empirical derivations of communication functions. Diversion and personal identity match the entertainment and correlation functions respectively. Personal relationships refer to use of the media to maintain a sense of connectedness to others either directly (by gathering content to use in interpersonal discussions) or psychologically (via parasocial interaction). This connectedness to society may be seen as related to the social transmission function.

It is interesting to note that the division of academic departments in communications provides a good representation of each of these functional differences. In Colleges of Communication, where departmental divisions exist, the most common configuration is to have separate departments for journalism, broadcasting (or radio, television, film), advertising, and speech communication. Journalism is concerned with news and can be seen as best representing the surveillance function. Broadcasting tends to be more concerned with entertainment media and thus represents diversion. Advertising can be seen as an example of matching products with the individual and as such is an example of the personal identity (or correlation) function (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Finally, speech communication focuses on interpersonal communication and personal relationships. While each academic discipline is likely to include multiple functions, it is interesting to see how communication divisions can be seen to predominantly embody specific functions.

The unique elements of advertising

By crossing the areas that represent the different functions of communication with its structural elements we can get a better idea of how the functional areas of communication differ and what may make advertising different from these other disciplines (see Table 1). One can argue that advertising differs from other forms of communication in numerous ways. Although we tried to identify as many distinctive features of advertising as possible, the goal of this analysis is not to develop the definitive list of attributes that make advertising unique, but rather
to serve as a springboard for the development of the unique contributions advertising can make as a variable field. The variables identified here are ones that serve to distinguish advertising from other communication functions. In most cases the differences are more a matter of degree or emphasis rather than being absolute, but they are sufficiently great as to distinguish advertising from other forms of communication. As such, they represent variables that should be utilized in advertising theory and research and that may act as potential moderating or mediating conditions for broader theories.

**Source variable**  Source variables refer to the attributes of the source of a message that can impact attitude change. Typically research on source variables has examined the characteristics of the spokesperson rather than the actual producer of the message (McGuire, 1969). The two most common types of source variables examined are source credibility and attractiveness. Credibility can be further broken down into two components: expertise and trustworthiness (McGuire, 1969; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981). Expertise refers to the degree of experience and knowledge the source has for the specific topic, while trustworthiness reflects the likelihood that the source is providing a non-biased message. Attractiveness can be broken down into liking, similarity and physical attractiveness. Each of these factors has been shown to influence attitude change in various situations (McGuire, 1969).

When dealing with news, the most important element is the source’s knowledge or expertise. To be influential, the source must be seen as knowing what he/she is talking about. For example, our view of world affairs or the economy would

### Table 1

**Comparisons of advertising and other forms of communication on the structural elements of communication**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Advertising</th>
<th>Broadcasting</th>
<th>Interpersonal communication</th>
<th>Journalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Source</strong></td>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Physical attractiveness/liking</td>
<td>Similarity</td>
<td>Expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pathos</td>
<td>Ethos</td>
<td>Logos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Message</strong></td>
<td>Pathos and logos</td>
<td>Pathos</td>
<td>Pathos</td>
<td>Pathos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>appeals</strong></td>
<td>Repetition and explicit conclusion</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Message</strong></td>
<td>Coordinated</td>
<td>Not coordinated</td>
<td>Not coordinated</td>
<td>Not coordinated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>forms/styles</strong></td>
<td>Influenced by individual characteristics</td>
<td>Influenced by individual characteristics</td>
<td>Influenced by individual characteristics</td>
<td>Influenced by individual characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Media</strong></td>
<td>Coordinated</td>
<td>Not coordinated</td>
<td>Not coordinated</td>
<td>Not coordinated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Receiver</strong></td>
<td>Influenced by individual characteristics</td>
<td>Influenced by individual characteristics</td>
<td>Influenced by individual characteristics</td>
<td>Influenced by individual characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feedback</strong></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Noise</strong></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
certainty exert less influence on a mass audience than that of the President of the US or Alan Greenspan. In regard to source variables, entertainment media are much more concerned with likeability and physical attractiveness. These are the characteristics that attract people to entertainment shows and are the characteristics that can create attitude change via a peripheral route in entertainment settings (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981). In interpersonal communication, similarity may be particularly important in attitude change. We are more persuaded by others like ourselves and tend to communicate more with similar people.

Finally, for advertising, trustworthiness is likely to be particularly important as a source variable. Advertising and interpersonal communication are the two forms of communication where the source may be attempting to directly influence the receiver and both parties are aware of this effort. However, in interpersonal communication the influence attempt is generally seen as emanating from power (the source has power over the receiver, such as a parent communicating to a child or a boss to a worker) or concern for the receiver’s own good. On the other hand, advertising is almost always an attempt to get the receiver to do something that will benefit the source. Thus, the advertisers’ objectivity is always in question. As a result, consumers tend to be highly skeptical of the source of advertising messages (Calfee, 1997; Calfee and Ringold, 1994). This suggests that one unique element that distinguishes advertising from other forms of communication is the particular importance of perceived trustworthiness and consumer skepticism in the formation or change of attitudes or behaviors.

Message variables A countless number of message variables can be considered in comparing communication forms. These can include the types of persuasive appeals, and the form or style of the appeal. The categorization of types of appeals tends to emanate from Aristotle’s discussion of ethos, pathos and logos in the Rhetoric. The use of ethos, which focuses the receiver on the source of the message, is most closely linked with interpersonal communication and helps to distinguish it from other forms of communication (McGuire, 1969). Pathos involves arguments that are based on appealing to feelings or emotions. This can certainly be important in advertising and an important area of advertising research addresses the use of emotional appeals. However, similar appeals are equally important in other forms of communication such as entertainment and thus do not represent a unique contribution of advertising. Logos involves appeals deduced from broader principles and may best apply to news or political content. Overall, advertising seems to offer no truly unique elements in regard to types of appeals. Instead, we turn our attention to message forms or styles.

A large number of different formats or styles exist. Some common variables discussed here include order of presentation, repetition and implicit versus explicit conclusions (McGuire, 1969; O’Keefe, 2002). Order of presentation is perhaps most important for news. Placement within a newspaper or broadcast signals the relative importance of the story. However, this is more important for influencing perceived salience of an issue than it is for determining attitude preferences.

Agenda setting research has also shown that repetition is important in deter-
mining the issue salience of news, but not necessarily for altering attitudes (McCombs, 1994). In regard to attitude change, repetition is most important in explaining the impact of advertising (Runyon, 1979). Ads are seen as requiring multiple exposures to influence the audience. Advertising is also the primary form of communication where one will be repeatedly exposed to exactly the same message. Therefore, repeated exposure is an important, and somewhat exceptional, characteristic of the way advertising influences attitude change.

Advertising also differs from news and entertainment in regard to the use of explicit conclusions. Ads generally make their recommendations very apparent to audience members rather than leaving it to people to draw their own conclusions. News and entertainment programming typically require people to infer issue salience and preferences. Like advertising, however, interpersonal communication tends to utilize more explicit recommendations when attempting to change attitudes. Since advertising and interpersonal communication are similar in this regard, explicit conclusions were not considered to be a unique characteristic of advertising.

**Media variables** Research on media factors has tended to focus on comparisons of different media forms. In general, messages that are heard (or viewed) tend to be more persuasive than the same message that is read in print (McGuire, 1969). Part of this may be due to differences in perceived credibility since Roper polls have consistently found that more people say they would believe a broadcast news story over news in print. However, since advertising appears in different media this is not a unique feature of advertising.

News, advertising and entertainment can all come from different channels, but the content may be rather similar across these channels. News stories, regardless of channel, have similar content due to a number of factors including organizational characteristics, reliance on wire services and beat reporters, professionalism and the use of similar sources (Graber, 1997). While the content of entertainment programming may vary greatly, cultivation theory states that the underlying values expressed in these programs are highly consistent (Gerbner et al., 2002). For this reason, entertainment programming is seen as predominantly having a mainstreaming or homogenizing effect on the audience. Since we generally communicate interpersonally with others like ourselves, even messages here may be rather similar in nature.

Advertisers also want consumers to get similar messages about a brand regardless of the promotional strategy being used. What makes advertising different from these other communication functions is the degree to which advertisers can intentionally coordinate and control the content of their messages across channels. This effort can be seen in the development and growth of integrated Marketing Communications. Thus, what distinguishes advertising from other forms of communication is this element of control and coordination of the message across media.

**Receiver variables and feedback** Advertising does not appear to differ greatly from
other communication functions in regard to either receiver variables or feedback. All four types of communication content are strongly impacted by receiver differences such as gender, age and income, as well as personality factors. Feedback is potentially most important in interpersonal communication. The receiver can continually give both verbal and non-verbal signals, which allow the communicator to alter the message based on this feedback. Feedback occurs in the other forms of communication as well, but not nearly to the same extent. In mediated communication, feedback occurs in the form of marketplace action based on audience size or brand purchases. Feedback here is much less instantaneous and less critical than it is with interpersonal communication. The impact of advertising feedback in the form of brand purchasing is most similar to the importance of audience size for television programs or films. As a result, advertising does not appear to be inimitable in regard to either feedback or receiver variables.

Noise
The final structural variable is noise. Noise is anything that interferes with the delivery of the message (Dominick, 1983). Marketing communication is considered to contain a lot of noise (Leavitt, 1975). Some of this is created by all of the competing messages that are being sent at the same time. Advertising is somewhat distinctive in the number of competing messages arguing for different brands and providing alternative reasons for each choice. In some product categories there can be well over a dozen different brands promoting competing messages. Estimates of the total number of promotional messages people encounter in an average day range from a few hundred (Brit et al., 1972) to well over a thousand (Larson, 1995). There are far fewer competing messages for news, entertainment and even interpersonal communication. Thus, clutter represents a final way in which advertising may differ from other forms of communication.

Prior research on the unique elements
A review of the structural elements of communication suggests that consumer skepticism, repetition, message coordination and a cluttered and competitive environment are the unique elements that distinguish advertising from other forms of communication. Therefore, they should be considered in developing advertising theory and should be included in work that seeks to apply broader theories to advertising to determine if they serve to mediate or moderate these theories. Here we review prior research on these unique attributes of advertising and suggest ways in which they may be important in theory building and testing.

Consumer skepticism
Conceptually, skepticism toward advertising has been defined as consumers' negative attitudes toward the motives of, and claims made by, advertisers (Boush et al., 1994). Advertising theories, especially those derived from a sociological perspective, seem to assume consumers will accept or believe most messages.
However, this may not be the case. Calfee and Ringold (1994) examined data from national surveys of consumer attitudes toward advertising conducted by major polling organizations from 1930 to 1992. They found that about 70 percent of consumers thought that advertising is often untruthful and seeks to persuade people to buy things they do not want. The percentage of consumers who held such disbelief toward advertising remained remarkably stable across the entire time period examined.

Some researchers suggest that consumer skepticism toward advertising may be learned (e.g. Mangleburg and Bristol, 1998; Boush et al., 1994). Through a longitudinal study of adolescents' socialization process, Boush et al. (1994) found that as adolescents learned more about advertisers' persuasion tactics, their skepticism toward advertising was heightened. Mangleburg and Bristol (1998) argue that important socialization agents such as parents, peers and the mass media contribute to adolescents' skepticism. They also posit that the effects of specific types of socialization are mediated by teens' marketplace knowledge. Thus, skepticism toward advertising seems to be an outcome of increased knowledge about advertisers' motives and tactics.

One reason consumer skepticism is important is that it may influence the processing of advertising. Perhaps the most comprehensive account of the way skepticism toward advertising influences consumer processing of persuasive communication messages comes from Friestad and Wright's (1994) Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM). According to the PKM, consumers learn knowledge about marketers' motives, strategies and tactics from various sources such as marketplace experience and social interactions. Consumers then draw on such persuasion knowledge when interpreting and responding to advertising presentations.

The PKM suggests that skepticism toward advertising will fundamentally change the way consumers respond to an advertiser's persuasion attempt. Skeptical consumers may dismiss the arguments made in an advertisement and/or generate more counter-arguments or source derogations. This model also indicates that skeptical consumers may detach themselves from the interaction with the advertising messages and thus prevent further comprehension and elaboration of the information presented.

Repetition

Perhaps the most important feature of advertising that distinguishes it from other general communication messages is its highly repetitive nature. A consumer may be exposed to the same advertisement several times a day, and such intensity may last for months. Therefore, researchers have examined the effects of repetition on common advertising effectiveness measures such as recall, recognition, attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention. The general finding has been that an advertisement needs a certain number of exposures in order to wear-in (i.e. ad exposure starts to have some positive effects on one or more of the advertising effectiveness measures), and the positive effects keep
increasing until at a certain level of repetition the advertisement starts to wear-out (i.e. ad exposure no longer has any effect or it has negative effects on the advertising effectiveness measures) (Batra and Ray, 1986; Cacioppo and Petty, 1980; Ray and Swayer, 1971). Thus, the relationship between repetition and advertising effects is typically the shape of an inverted ‘U’.

Most of the studies on repetition effects employed a laboratory experimental design, using a procedure that involves forced, massed repeated exposures (i.e. repeated exposures occurring within a short time period, typically less than one hour) and immediate response measurement (i.e. measuring advertising effects immediately after repeated exposures) (Pechmann and Stewart, 1988). In general, it has been found in these laboratory studies that repetition has a strong effect on memory measures such as recall and recognition, which increase in a linear fashion until about the fourth exposure, after which they start to level off (Batra and Ray, 1986; Cacioppo and Petty, 1980; Ray and Swayer, 1971). The effects of repetition on attitudes remain less conclusive. Ray and Swayer (1971) found that attitude toward the brand was not significantly affected by ad repetition while other researchers (e.g. Cacioppo and Petty, 1980; Calder and Sternthal, 1980) found that attitude was most favorable at the third exposure and less favorable with fewer than three, or more than three, exposures. On the other hand, purchase intention tends to be positively affected by initial exposures (ranging from three to five) and levels off at additional exposures (Ray and Swayer, 1971; Rethans et al., 1986).

In a natural scenario, exposures to the same advertisement are voluntary rather than forced, and are typically distributed over the course of several days or months rather than massed (Pechmann and Stewart, 1988). In addition, consumers do not make purchase decisions immediately after seeing ads. Thus, the ecological validity of laboratory studies has been frequently questioned. Field studies that employed more natural settings and measured repetition effects after a delay were conducted to complement laboratory studies (e.g. Grass and Wallace, 1969; Greenberg and Suttoni, 1973). Results from both field studies and laboratory studies are generally consistent, although in field studies more repetition is needed for an advertising effect to reach its highest level. This may be because ad exposures are distributed rather than massed in field studies.

Some researchers have also investigated the process through which repetition influences advertising effects. Studies with such a purpose generally look at mediating variables. Cacioppo and Petty (1980) found that the effects of repetition on outcome variables such as persuasion were mediated by the number of positive and negative thoughts generated during repeated exposures to communication messages. Their findings gave rise to the modified two-factor theory, which posits that persuasion is the net of both positive and negative thoughts generated during an exposure. This theory suggests that persuasion will increase initially as the number of positive thoughts increases with increasing exposure, then decline as the influence of negative thoughts exceeds that of positive thoughts (Nordhielm, 2002).
Messages coordination

Marketers are increasingly using multiple communication options (e.g., TV, magazine, radio, etc.) to reach their customers. The emergence of the Internet provides marketers with additional means to inform, persuade and entice consumers. Coordination of brand messages through multiple communication options is often called Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC). Keller (2001) posits that an integrated marketing communications program involves the development, implementation and evaluation of marketing promotions using multiple communication options where the design and execution of any communication option reflects the nature and content of the other communication options that also make up the campaign. While criticism of IMC is a longstanding part of its history as a concept (Gould, 2000), marketers continue to adopt multiple communication options to reach their customers and label such efforts as IMC.

While an integrated marketing communications campaign serves the ultimate goal of selling brands to consumers, each communication option within such a program may serve a different specific goal. One communication option may be used to establish brand awareness while another may be used to communicate a specific brand association. Thus, very different brand messages may be conveyed via different communication options. Yet, in general, all IMC programs try to achieve harmonization or consistency among communications delivered through different sources (Fill, 2001).

Communication options that are available to marketers are often grouped into broad communication or media types such as media advertising, direct response advertising, public relations, etc. When a combination of communication options is adopted, a target consumer may be exposed to brand messages (same or different) via one or more options. Figure 1 illustrates the different patterns of exposure different groups of target consumers may fall in under an IMC program.

In Figure 1, a, b and c are market segments reached by only a single communication option (the specific brand message that segment c receives is different from that received by both segments a and b). Most advertising theories are based on considerations of exposure to brand messages from only a single source. However, as shown in Figure 1, under an IMC program some market segments are exposed to brand messages from more than one source. Market segment d is exposed to the same brand message from two different sources; market segments e and f are exposed to different brand messages from two different sources; and market segment g is exposed to three brand messages, one of which is different from the other two. This is just a simplified example that deals with only three possibilities and doesn’t bring in repetition within a given communication form or different messages from a single medium or message form. An actual advertising or brand communication environment presents a picture that is far more complicated than what is depicted here and what is typically assumed in most advertising theories. Understanding how consumers’ beliefs and attitudes toward a brand are changed or reinforced by multiple exposures to brand messages delivered by the advertiser.
via different communication options is fundamental for establishing theories that account for the uniqueness of contemporary advertising.

How might multiple exposures to brand messages influence consumers’ view of the advertised brand? According to the encoding variability principle (Unnava and Burnkrant, 1991; Young and Bellaza, 1982), exposure to the same information in different formats or media may facilitate learning. This may be because variable encoding of stimulus information will result in multiple retrieval cues that improve retrieval ability and increase information accessibility (Keller, 2001). Less is known about the potential effects of exposure to different brand messages from different sources. Depending on how ‘different’ the brand messages are, they will presumably lead to very different effects. If, for example, the brand messages are different only in terms of degree of detail (e.g. TV commercials depict a brand of car as having a powerful engine and then magazine ads for this brand of car list relevant data to support this claim), exposure to such different brand messages would probably result in better memory for the advertised brand association (e.g. a powerful engine). If, on the other hand, the brand messages are different in terms of the type of brand association delivered (e.g. TV commercials depict a brand of car as having a powerful engine while magazine ads tout a great transmission), exposure to such different brand messages may result in memory interference, weakening consumers’ memory for both brand associations. In addition, it is still unclear whether exposure to coordinated brand messages would change or reinforce consumers’ affective responses toward the advertised brand as well.

So far, very few studies have explored the impact of coordination of brand
messages on consumers. However, a few exceptions exist. Dickson (1972) investigated the influence of message coordination between TV commercial and Point-Of-Purchase display on sales. Edell and Keller (1989) examined consumer response to coordinated radio and TV ads. With a greater focus on integrated communications, more of these types of studies are needed. Advertising theories that address how various communication messages interact would go a long way toward making advertising theory and research of greater value to practitioners, as well as offering insights into how memory works and how it can best be facilitated.

The cluttered and competing environment

An advertisement does not exist in isolation; it typically appears in a medium (e.g. TV) that contains its own programs and other non-programming content (such as public service announcements), as well as numerous other advertisements. Some authors define clutter in terms of all non-programming content (Brown and Rothschild, 1993). Others define it only in terms of advertising. For instance, Ha (1996) defines clutter as the amount of advertising space in a medium, and Zhao (1997) defines it as the total number of ads in a pod other than the specific advertisement of interest.

Clutter has been addressed sparingly in advertising research (Brown and Rothschild, 1993), even though practitioners have voiced much concern over the cluttered advertising environment. In general, it has been found that a higher level of advertising clutter decreases viewer attention, memory and recognition, and cognitive responses (Webb, 1979; Webb and Ray, 1979; Zhao, 1997). The impact of the level of clutter, however, is less clear-cut when it comes to attitude and purchase intention (Keller, 1991; Webb and Ray, 1979; Zhao, 1997). Perhaps the best explanation for advertising clutter effects is that it creates information overload. People are information processors with limited capacity, therefore clutter will reduce the likelihood that any given message will be processed or remembered. Another important factor that may account for clutter effects is that seeing too many ads may cause irritation, which will negatively influence evaluation of succeeding ads.

Kent (1993) elaborated on the distinction between non-competitive clutter and competitive clutter (i.e. the airing of ads for directly competing brands). He argues that competitive clutter may be more detrimental to advertising effectiveness than non-competitive clutter. According to the interference theory from cognitive psychology, memory losses are due to the learning of information that is similar in structure or meaning to test information, rather than the learning of unrelated information or the mere passage of time (Klatzky, 1980). The negative effects of competitive clutter have been demonstrated in several studies (Burke and Srull, 1988; Keller, 1987, 1991; Kent and Allen, 1997; Law, 2002). For instance, Burke and Srull (1988) observed both retroactive (i.e. competing ads appear before the target ad) and proactive (i.e. competing ads appear after the target ad) effects of competing ads on memory. Keller (1991) examined the effects...
of competitive clutter on memory and brand evaluation. He varied the number
and valence (i.e. relative distinctiveness of an ad and the advertised brand in terms
of appeal of ad execution and persuasiveness of ad claims) of ads in a pod, which
represented the two dimensions of clutter. Keller hypothesized that the more
competing ads and the more similar the valence of the competing ads, the more
competitive inference would occur. This hypothesis was supported for both recall
and brand evaluation.

Many advertisers have been cognizant of the negative impact of competitive
clutter and tried to avoid competitors’ ads when buying media (Kent and Allen,
1997). However, given the intense competition for limited media space, con-
fronting competitors’ ads within relatively close proximity may be unavoidable,
especially for heavily advertised product categories like automobiles and fast
foods. Kent (1993) content analyzed the competitive clutter present in both day-
time and prime-time network television. He found that on average 31 ads were
shown during one hour of daytime TV and 20 ads were shown during one hour
of prime-time TV. In the most highly cluttered hours, about half of the ads aired
were competing ads. Thus, advertising theories seeking empirical support in a
non-cluttered environment may lack external validity.

Based on previous studies, competitive and non-competitive clutter may have
an impact on consumer attitude (e.g. attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the
brand, etc.). The impact may not be uniform – in some cases it may be positive
while in others in may be negative. According to Keller (1991), a ‘bad’ ad may
benefit from being placed in an ad pod that contains both ‘bad’ and ‘good’ ads
while a ‘good’ ad may perform more poorly when it is placed in the same condi-
tion. This may, to some extent, explain why some ads that performed very well in
copy tests did not live up to expectation when they were aired.

Reassessment of current advertising research

To develop a better indication of the prior consideration of the key elements of
advertising we identified, we analyzed advertising-related articles appearing in six
leading academic advertising/marketing journals over the past 10 years (1993–
2002). We used the key word ‘advertising’ and the Business Source Premier
data-base to locate advertising-related articles appearing in Journal of Advertising,
Journal of Advertising Research, Journal of Current Issues and Research in
Advertising, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research and Journal of
Consumer Research. We focused only on empirical studies that examined adver-
tising’s persuasive effects (i.e. advertising’s effects on consumer beliefs, attitude
and behaviors). We then documented the number of articles that incorporated at
least one of the four key advertising elements (i.e. repetition, clutter/competition,
consumer skepticism, and message coordination) as an independent variable (see
Table 2). While this is by no means an exhaustive review of all empirical advertis-
ing studies, it can provide a rough idea of the current state of advertising research.

As can be seen from Table 2, advertising studies that addressed even one of the
four key elements identified here are limited. Of the total 184 empirical studies analyzed, only 7.1 percent (13 articles) included clutter/competition as an independent variable; 6.5 percent included repetition; 2.2 percent examined consumer skepticism; and none of the studies addressed the effects of brand message coordination. Greater consideration of the variables that make advertising unique is needed to enhance advertising’s standing as a distinct variable field.

Table 2

Number and proportion of empirical advertising effects studies that addressed key elements of advertising: 1993–2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Number of articles incorporating consumer skepticism as an independent variable</th>
<th>Number of articles incorporating repetition as an independent variable</th>
<th>Number of articles incorporating brand message coordination as an independent variable</th>
<th>Number of articles incorporating clutter/competition as an independent variable</th>
<th>Total number of empirical studies of advertising effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Advertising</td>
<td>3 (5.1%)</td>
<td>1 (1.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (3.4%)</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Advertising Research</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (7.1%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (14.3%)</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Consumer Research</td>
<td>1 (2.5%)</td>
<td>3 (7.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3 (7.5%)</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Marketing Research</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (13.8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (6.9%)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Marketing</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (15.4%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (15.4%)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4 (2.2%)</td>
<td>12 (6.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>13 (7.1%)</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contributions to advertising theory

In the development of science, level fields have contributed the most to the development of the methodologies and basic theories that other disciplines utilize. Variable fields offer insights as to specific variables we should think about in extending and developing theories. Advertising has a number of unique attributes that make it different from other forms of communication and other disciplines. However, to date, most of our research and theories have ignored these unique characteristics.

The failure to focus on what makes advertising distinct from other fields of study has contributed to a loss of identity for the field. The crisis of identity is not unique to advertising research. Similar problems exist in many of the variable fields. For example, Simonson et al. (2001) have argued that it is sometimes unclear what differentiates consumer research from other disciplines, except for the experimental stimuli used (e.g. choice between cars versus choice between bets) and the research positioning. The same can be said for a number of variable fields. An essential step toward finding an identity for advertising (and other variable fields as well) is to focus more on the key elements that make each of these fields unique. By utilizing these elements, variable fields like advertising can develop unique theories that best reflect the central focus of their field as well as enhance theories from other disciplines.

In this article we have shown that by crossing the structure and functions of communication, we can suggest four possible elements of advertising that appear to make it distinct from other forms of communication. It would seem that these should be central in defining the field of advertising and are deserving of greater attention in the process of theory building. The variables proposed here are skepticism, repetition, message coordination and clutter. These are not presented as being the only variables advertising contributes, but rather as examples of key attributes of advertising. While some research has been done regarding each of these topics, the amount of focus they have received is relatively minor compared to their potential importance. More importantly, when theories from other disciplines utilize advertising messages as stimuli, these important variables are rarely included.

A recent study of citations in articles appearing in major advertising journals found that between 1992 and 1995 the most cited article was Petty et al.’s (1983) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Pasadeos et al., 1998). This reflects advertising’s focus on persuasion and the importance of attitude change theories for the field of advertising. The major contention of the Elaboration Likelihood Model is that people may be persuaded by either peripheral cues (e.g. endorser expertise) or central cues (e.g. argument strength), depending on the consumer’s ability, opportunity or motivation to process information. Despite its popularity among advertising researchers, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (and other related attitude change models) does not take into account the unique elements of advertising.

Friestad and Wright (1994) have pointed out that the ELM provides no explicit
role for audience members’ persuasion knowledge. These authors argue that skepticism may be important in assessing central message cues, especially when topic knowledge is limited. This would alter the expectations provided by the ELM for the use of central message content in situations of low ability to process a message. They suggest that consumers might use skepticism to evaluate central message points and this evaluation could influence attitude change. Thus, skepticism may be an important additional variable to consider in the ELM.

The other variables that have been identified here as making advertising unique may also be important contributors to better understanding this theory. For example, while advertising messages are repeated and compete with other messages, the ELM does not provide an account for these contingencies. The relative strength of competing messages should certainly influence central processing of alternative advertising claims. The frequency of advertising repetition for competing brands should affect the accessibility of content from these different ads. The accessibility of peripheral cues should then affect choice in decision-making situations. Finally, as we have argued, advertising messages are often coordinated. Consumers’ attitudes toward a product are frequently formed based on a series of coordinated messages instead of a single advertising message. Again, research on the ELM fails to consider the role of message coordination in attitude change. The integration of these variables into the ELM would certainly make for a stronger overall theory and one that is far more able to account for the normal advertising situation.

Theories originating from level fields such as the ELM often do not take into account the unique features important in a variable field such as advertising. Thus advertising researchers can contribute to these broader theories by identifying the unique elements of advertising and incorporating them in tests of these theories. Advertising researchers often complain that there are no genuine advertising theories. We believe part of the reason for this is the failure to identify advertising’s crucial elements and utilize these when applying broader theories to the study of advertising.

Consideration of the unique elements of advertising may also help to influence the paradigms we bring to bear on advertising and alert us to the importance of new dependent variables and the broader ways in which advertising may operate. For example, the notion that advertising exists in a cluttered and competitive environment implies not only that ads are competing for attention with other ads within relatively close proximity, but also that the advertised brand is competing with other brands. When making a purchase decision, consumers typically form a consideration set and then choose from it a brand that is relatively superior to other brands. Thus, advertising exists in a competitive environment in which relative merits of brands, rather than their absolute merits matter.

However, in most advertising studies only absolute advertising effectiveness measures are considered. Thus, many advertising theories are built on the so-called replacement model from modern learning theory (Stewart, 1989). The replacement model assumes that incorrect responses tend to be replaced by correct responses with increasing exposure or practice. On the other hand, a
competing model, the accumulation model, assumes that correct response
tendencies increase steadily with exposure or practice and compete with incorrect
response tendencies (Stewart, 1989). Applied to advertising research, the replace-
ment model emphasizes absolute measures of response (e.g. absolute recall,
preference and intention associated with the target brand) while the accumulation
model emphasizes relative measures of response (e.g. recall, attitude and intention
scores relative to those for competing brands). Since advertising exists in a
competitive environment and consumers tend to make decisions based on the
relative merits of brands, the accumulation model, as Stewart argues, may be more
relevant for developing advertising theories (1989).

While we believe that the four variables discussed here are important charac-
teristics of advertising, there are probably a number of others that could, and
should, also be considered. Hopefully, by raising this issue of what makes adver-
tising messages distinct, other people will begin to utilize these and other unique
elements in the development of advertising theories.

Notes

1 This theory was derived from Berlyne’s (1970) two-factor theory, which proposes
that positive habituation and tedium mediate the effects of repetition on affective
responses. At initial repeated exposures, positive habituation leads to positive affective
responses. However, as the number of exposures continues to increase tedium
leads to negative affective responses.

2 This explanation is best supported by Webb and Ray’s (1979) finding that people
could only recall a certain number of brands, regardless of the number of brands seen
in the program tape.

3 Based on this criterion, theoretical studies were excluded. Also excluded were studies
that do not examine advertising’s persuasive effects (e.g. context effects, content
analysis, consumer characteristics, etc.).

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articles


Advertising building blocks
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