

Viral marketing and music videos: When shock tactics backfire

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ABSTRACT

Given the increasing importance of electronic word-of-mouth for consumer-generated promotion of goods and services, many brands have used shock tactics to break through the advertising clutter in attempts to “go viral.” The present study assesses how level of involvement with music moderates the impact of disgust on music consumers’ intentions to pass along content and attend a concert by the band. High involvement consumers exposed to disgust appeal were less likely to pass along the content, and less likely to attend a concert by the band. Interestingly, however, low involvement consumers were more likely to pass along disgusting content and attend a concert by the band using disgust appeal. Promotion managers need to understand the trade-offs involved in the use of disgust appeals.

Keywords: viral marketing, music videos, shock, disgust appeal, pass-along, electronic word-of-mouth

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INTRODUCTION

Since the launch of MTV in 1981, music videos have become part of the fabric of mainstream America's commercial and entertainment programming, considered by many to be an indispensable means of promotion for recording artists (Banks, 1996). Initially a form of commercial entertainment television, music videos today enjoy a global Internet audience which has the opportunity to participate in the promotion and distribution process by passing along recommendations, links, or files of the content itself to others via electronic communication.

Viral marketing, or electronic word-of-mouth communication about brands, or in this case bands, can help artists break through the clutter when consumers make positive recommendations about an artist. A single fan, for example, might forward a video message from a favorite band to 500 "friends" in an email campaign (Parker, 2000). Fans who email links of YouTube videos to friends, or who recommend music videos via Twitter, for example, are becoming increasingly more important to the marketing of music videos. But, as one industry observer noted, "it's impossible to predict whether or when a video might go viral" (Bruno, 2010).

Industry representatives espouse various, sometimes conflicting, theories about how best to go viral. Vague recommendations to have "a fresh idea" or "something that is new and feels special," to engage in "stunts" or "novelties," or to "make happiness contagious" are all suggestions that have been voiced (Bruno, 2010). Some suggest that innovative technologies work (Allen, 2009; Bruno, 2010), while others recommend that "lo-fi and off the cuff" approaches are effective (Bruno, 2010). Ultimately, many music videos use shock tactics, employing content that startles some audience members by violating social, sexual, or moral codes, to attract attention (Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchanda, 2003).

Shock Appeal as a Music Marketing Tool

The controversial nature of music videos has generated a substantial amount of research, but only a handful have investigated their impact on individuals, and these studies have been limited to the social implications rather than the effect on consumer attitudes and behaviors. Studies have investigated, for example, the impact of music video content on sexual attitudes and behaviors (Calvin, Carroll, and Schmidt, 1993), academic aspirations (Johnson et al., 1995), social modeling (Brown, Campbell, and Fischer, 1986) and personal identity (Hansen and Hansen, 1991). Previous research has not investigated the ways in which controversial music video content affects consumer decision making.

FOCUS OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the present study is to explore the impact of shock appeal in music videos on consumer intention to pass along content or attend a performance by the band.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Two streams of research are relevant to the present study. First, investigators have studied the content factors that predict pass-along of electronic communication, and second, researchers have examined consumer responses to shock appeals in advertising.

Content Factors that Predict Viral Marketing

Research has shown that emotions appear to play a role in whether or not a message will go viral. Chiu, Hsieh, Kao, and Lee (2004) reported that ad messages which cause joy, entertainment, or happiness are more likely to be disseminated. These results are consistent with the findings of Eckler and Bolls (2011), who reported that ads with pleasant emotional tones are more likely to be forwarded.

On the other hand, Brown, Bhadury, and Pope (2010) found that negative emotions result in decisions to disseminate the material. They reported that the greater the comedic violence in an ad, and the more severe the consequences of the violence, the higher the probability of pass-along.

Phelps et al. (2004) found that emails that spark emotions, whether positive or negative, are more likely to be forwarded. Similarly, Siefert, et al. (2009) used physiological measures of emotional engagement and determined that audience members' emotional engagement was significantly correlated to "online buzz," or the number of times the ads were downloaded and viewed, as well as the number of times audience members commented on the ads online.

The findings indicate that both positive and negative emotions result in greater pass-along.

Controversial Advertising

Research investigating the effects of controversial advertising content on consumer decision making is limited, and the results far from conclusive. Previous research has examined the impact of shock on early stages of consumer decision making, primarily measuring attention, recall, and attitudes rather than behavioral intent to pass along or consume the content.

Provocative advertising has been shown to result in negative attitudes toward the ad and the brand (De Pelsmacker and Van den Bergh, 1996; Vezina and Paul, 1997). Similarly, nude and erotic advertising has been found by some to have a negative effect on attitude toward the ad and the brand (LaTour, Pitts, and Snook-Luther, 1990; Smith et al. 1995).

On the other hand, Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchanda (2003), found that shock resulted in greater attention, recall, recognition, and compliance with the advertised message. The sexual nature of the shock content in their study was rated as likeable by their study subjects, however, which may have led to the positive findings.

Research on the impact of shock appeal has yielded inconsistent findings.

Product Involvement as a Moderating Variable

A few studies suggest the utility of product involvement as a moderating variable for understanding the mixed findings on shock appeal.

Huhmann and Mott-Stenerson (2008) found that controversial ads have different effects on ad comprehension depending on the viewers' level of involvement with the product. For individuals with high product involvement, ad comprehension is higher for controversial ads; low-involvement viewers have better comprehension of non-controversial ads. Similarly, in their study of disgust appeals, Dens, De Pelsmacker and Janssens (2008) found that disgust interacted with product category involvement such that high involvement consumers

demonstrated significantly more negative attitude toward the disgust ads than low involvement consumers.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Based on the review of the relevant literature, the present study seeks to determine the impact of shock appeal in music videos on consumer intent to pass along content or attend a performance by the band. The study also seeks to determine whether product involvement moderates the impact of shock..

Because some types of shock (such as sexual appeals and comedic violence) elicit positive emotions which may serve to confound results, the study uses an inherently negative shock tactic—disgust—to determine whether high involvement music fans, who hold intrinsically positive attitudes toward music, would have significantly different reactions from low involvement audience members to the shock tactic of disgust as a promotional appeal.

The study addresses the following research question: What is the impact of a disgust appeal on high and low involvement music consumers' intentions to pass content along to others or attend a performance by the artist?

METHOD

To address the research question, a between-subjects experimental design employing disgust and non-disgust appeals and two levels of product involvement was used to test for the effects of disgust on intentions.

Subjects

Netpop™, an annual tracking study of online consumer behaviors, reports that 90% of people 18 to 24 years of age use Email, and 40% use text messaging—more than any other age group—and that 68% use instant messaging or chat functions, second only to younger teens (Riegner, 2007). Given the importance of targeting a realistic market segment for viral music marketing, undergraduate students served as the subjects for the study.

Fifty-five students ranging in age from 20 to 26 were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions and run in small groups. Thirty-three percent were males.

Treatment Conditions

The independent variable in the study was the presence or lack of disgust (two levels). In the disgust condition, subjects viewed a music video with images including several bleeding or injured people in what appears to be a hospital emergency room. One of the patients, of questionable gender, gives birth to a full-grown man. The images accompany a non-disgusting, melodic tune. Subjects in the non-disgust condition heard only the music without seeing the accompanying video. Subjects were not familiar with the video or with the song.

Perceived disgust was measured using the three-item semantic differential employed by Dens, et al. (disgusting, distasteful, repulsive, 2008 (Cronbach's alpha=0.95)). Scores were summed across the three seven-category items. The music video was perceived as significantly more disgusting ($M=16.73$) than the music-only stimulus ($M=6.07$) ($F(1,53)=137.432, P<.000$).

Moderating Variable

Involvement with music as a product category served as the two-level moderating variable, measured using the ten-item seven-category Revised Personal Involvement Inventory by Zaichkowsky (important/unimportant, boring/interesting, relevant/irrelevant, exciting/unexciting, means nothing/means a lot to me, appealing/unappealing, fascinating/mundane, worthless/valuable, involving/uninvolving, not needed/needed, 1994 (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.96$)). Scores were summed across the ten items and respondents were divided into two categories based on a median split, with Involvement with Music scores categorized as High or Low.

Subjects in the disgust and non-disgust conditions did not differ in terms of their involvement with music (Pearson $r = -.099$, $P < .473$).

Dependent Variables

Intentions to pass along the content and intention to attend a concert by the band were measured using the same eleven-point scale (no chance/0 in 100 to certain/99 in 100).

ANALYSES

To determine the effect of disgust on consumer attitudes and intentions toward a music presentation, one-way analyses of variance were conducted, comparing the main effects of the two treatment conditions (disgust versus no disgust) and accounting for the moderating variable of level of involvement with music (high versus low).

FINDINGS

For both of the dependent measures, disgust and involvement yielded significant interaction effects but no significant main effects. Interaction effects only were found for intentions to pass along content and to attend a performance by the band. In both cases, involvement had a polarizing effect on intent: Specifically, high-involvement subjects in the nondisgust condition were most likely of all groups to pass along the content ($M=5.20$); those in the disgust condition were least likely of all ($M=2.25$). The low-involvement consumers fell in between, with those in the disgust condition more likely to pass along ($M=3.29$) than those in the nondisgust condition ($M=2.57$, ($F(1,54)=5.073$, $P < .029$)).

A similar pattern occurred for intention to attend a performance by the band, with high-involvement subjects occupying the most likely and least likely positions among the four groups. Subjects who reported being the most likely to attend a concert by the band were the high involvement subjects who experienced the no disgust condition ($M=6.07$); least likely to attend were the high involvement subjects who experienced the disgust condition ($M=2.33$). Low involvement consumers occupied the middle positions, with those in the disgust/music video condition ($M=4.43$) more likely to attend than those in the no disgust/music only condition ($M=2.50$, $F(1,54)=11.427$, $P < 0.001$).

DISCUSSION

Findings indicate that disgust appeal has a differential effect on low-involvement and high-involvement consumers' intentions to go viral or to become proactive consumers. High involvement consumers are polarized by disgust appeal, with those exposed to disgust being the least likely to pass along content or to attend a concert by the band, and those exposed to the non-disgusting treatment most likely to pass it along or attend a concert. The low involvement consumers, however, evidence a different effect on both pass-along probability and likelihood of attending a performance. For low-involvement consumers, disgust has a positive effect on the likelihood of passing along content and attending a performance by the band. The low involvement respondents indicate that disgust increases their interest in going viral and in going to a concert.

IMPLICATIONS

A marketing strategy designed to attract new consumers from among less-involved market segments may benefit somewhat from the shock value of disgust appeal. Less-involved consumers in this study were more likely to pass along the content and attend a concert by a band using disgust appeal. Disgust appeal may facilitate increased awareness among otherwise disinterested consumers.

The benefit in increased awareness, however, may come at the expense of the more involved consumers. In the present study, market segments with high music involvement were the most likely to pass along content and attend concerts by artists whose music presentations are not perceived to be disgusting, and were least likely to pass along content and attend concerts of artists whose music presentations they perceive to be disgusting.

Thus, while a disgust appeal may draw consumers previously uninvolved in the category, it may also alienate current consumers highly involved with the product. Identifying the proportions of high involvement and low involvement consumers in target market segments would help to determine the actual trade-off in numbers of consumers and sales affected. Marketing communication goals to increase awareness should be carefully weighed against the potential negative effects in terms of loss of affection and commitment of high involvement consumer segments.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In order to present realistic stimulus materials, the study did not fully balance treatment conditions by creating artificial, non-disgusting videos to accompany the music. Rather, the decision was made to maintain production quality of materials presented. Differences in visual and auditory processing might be explored in future research, to determine whether a treatment condition that included non-disgusting visuals to accompany the music would mitigate the apparent impact of the disgusting video presentation.

In addition, the subjects in the present study were unfamiliar with the music and the band used in the two treatment conditions. Additional research might investigate responses to disgusting presentations by familiar bands and might also investigate the cumulative effects of disgusting presentations over time, to determine whether consumers become immune to the disgust.

Finally, future research might investigate the pass-along probability in response to disgust appeal among other consumer segments for product categories besides music.

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