NEGATIVE APPEAL IN ADVERTISING: THE MODERATING EFFECT OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE ON AD RESPONSE

There is a growing interest in using negative emotions as advertising appeals. However, up to now there has been little theoretical and empirical development in understanding what factors moderate its effectiveness. The current study aims to expand the marketing research domain to include emotional intelligence as a potential moderator of customer’s response to advertising using negative emotional appeal. This study focuses on anger and anxiety, which have been identified as the two most prevalent negative emotions in advertising context.

The concept of emotional intelligence has been introduced in the positive psychology literature by Mayer, DiPaolo and Salovey (1990). Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to adaptively perceive, understand, regulate, and harness emotions in the self and others (Mayer, DiPaolo and Salovey, 1990). In other words, emotional intelligence refers to the ability to process competently information with emotional appeal and then to guide behaviour effectively. This highly publicised concept provided new hopes to improve interpersonal relations and communications to broader populations. It was further reinforced by research from the neuropsychological field, with the work of Damasio (1995), demonstrating that emotions were as important as cognitive skills in decision making processes. Ever since, the growing interest in this concept has grabbed academic attention from the psychology and social psychology field, trying to capture the distinctive nature of this alternative view of intelligence. Most of the research effort has been directed towards the assessment of competencies related to emotional intelligence and to the development of psychometric scales to measure all facets of this new construct. Surprisingly, the marketing field has devoted little attention to this new body of literature. This study is a first attempt at measuring the impact of emotional intelligence in an advertising context.

Emotionally intelligent individuals, because of their greater capacity to decode emotional cues, are expected to display higher ability to identify, to differentiate, and to understand the specific threat and consequences implied by advertising showing negative emotions. However, this relation should only hold for more complex emotional scripts such as anxiety (as opposed to anger for example). We assume that although being of the same valence, anger and anxiety nonetheless differ in important underlying appraisal dimensions. While anger is a powerful emotion, anxiety is considered as a powerless emotion that is more ambiguous to recognize, understand and cope with.

A shorter scale of emotional intelligence is adapted from the field of positive psychology and is used in an experiment measuring reactions to negative ad appeal (e.g. anxiety and anger). Results are tested through structural equation modelling. As expected, highly emotional intelligent individuals identify the protagonist in the anxiety condition as more anxious than individuals with lower emotional intelligence. The theoretical model, although not strongly supported, shows promising venues for future research on the moderating effects of emotional intelligence on customer responses.
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