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Shuo Yan  
*Florida State University*

Sindy Chapa  
*Florida State University, [sindy.chapa@cci.fsu.edu](mailto:sindy.chapa@cci.fsu.edu)*

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# What Happens after You are Shocked? An Investigation of Emotional Response, Brand Attitude, Attitude toward AD and Purchase Intention of Shock Advertising in Chinese Consumers

Shuo Yan

Sindy Chapa

Florida State University

## ABSTRACT

*The goal of this paper is to validate the emotion toward the ad scale among Chinese consumers as well as test several well-accepted hypotheses in advertising literature in shock advertising setting. The results of our study suggested that emotion was correlated with attitude toward ad ( $A_{ad}$ ), the casual relationship between  $A_{ad}$  and Attitude toward brand ( $A_b$ ), and the correlation between  $A_b$  and purchase intention (PI). A validated emotion scale was also proposed to measure emotions after viewing ads in Chinese consumers. A 17-item feelings toward ads (emotion) scale was finalized by using EFA. Suggestions for future research were discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1980s, consumers around the world were astonished by Benetton's shock advertising strategies initiated by its Creative Director and Photographer, Oliviero Toscani. Benetton Group is an Italian transnational corporation which has broad product manufacturing and distribution lines of clothing, undergarment, shoes, cosmetics and accessories. It also owns brands such as United of Colors of Benetton (UCB), Sisley, PlayLife and Killer Loop. Moreover, the company expands its brand by selling licenses to manufacturers of sunglasses. Stationery, cosmetics, linens, watches, toys steering wheels, golf equipment, designer condoms and luggage. Since Benetton Group employs nontraditional communication strategy to draw viewer's attention to the brand. Its former Creative Director and Photographer Oliviero Toscani, emphasizes creativity in advertising. Therefore, a series of shocking advertising campaigns were launched in 80s and 90s. Surprisingly, most of Benetton's advertisement and campaign do not include its products or anything related to its products. Instead, the advertisement uses shocking value and the power of photography to grab people's attention. Benetton's advertising campaign concentrates on the portray of social and political issues. Unconventional or even controversial themes such as AIDS, racial integration, war, poverty, child labor, death, pollution are utilized in the advertising campaigns. For example, three identical human hearts are displayed in one of its advertisement, with ethnic labels "White, Black Yellow", conveying a message that all humans are the same inside no matter what the skin color is outside. Only the brand logo is shown at the lower right corner of the advertisement. The brand successfully increases its awareness with these unconventional advertisements initially. However, after employing the unconventional shock advertising strategies for over 15 years, after its Creative Director and Photographer resigned in 2000, Benetton declared that it decided to embrace the traditional advertising strategies instead of the use of shock advertising since it elicits controversy and opposition against the brand

among various groups such as consumers, retailers, government, and international non-profit organizations.

Nowadays, many For-profit or nonprofit organizations still utilize shock advertising to capture people's attention to break through the clutter (Dahl, Frankenberger & Manchanda, 2003). The empirical support from research is mixed. Some studies confirmed the effectiveness of shock advertising on increasing attention (Parry, Jones, Stern & Robinson, 2013), brand awareness (Waller, 2004), and benefiting memory and behavioral change (Dahl, Frankenberger & Manchanda, 2003). While other scholars found shock advertising was not as effective as expected because of the increasing immunity of the audiences (Parry, et al., 2013), negative image being created about the brand in consumers which could potentially lead to the boycott toward the brand or the loss of sales. (Andersson, Hedelin, Nilsson & Welander, 2014; Hodge, 2007; Klara, 2012). In addition, previous studies revealed socio-demographic factors such as religion, moral principles, age and gender as moderators to the perception of shock advertising (Vézina & Paul, 1997; Virvilaite & Matuleviciene, 2013). Cultural dimensions such as individualism-collectivism and high-low language context also moderate the impact of shock advertising (Virvilaite & Matuleviciene, 2013). Other scholars showed interests in consumer's emotional response toward shock advertising (Parry, et al., 2013; Virvilaite & Matuleviciene, 2013). Despite shock advertising receives considerable research interests on its effectiveness of breaking through the clutter, few studies have been done to investigate the dynamics between emotion, brand attitude, attitude toward ads and purchase intention among consumers after viewing shocking advertisements. Meanwhile, no study known to date has created validated emotion scale to inquire consumers' emotional response after viewing shock advertising in different cultures. Therefore, this paper is proposed to explore the relationship between emotion, brand attitude, attitude toward ads and purchase intention after the exposure of shock advertising. Moreover, it aims at providing a validated scale to measure consumers' emotional response to shock advertising.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Definition of Shock Advertising**

The definition of shock advertising varies from scholar to scholar. For example, Gustafson and Yssel (1994) defined a shock advertising appeal is the one which intentionally offends its audiences. Others defined it as the application of intentionally offensive, controversial stimulus aiming at capturing attention and selling ideas or products (Pickton & Briderick, 2005; Castellon, 2006). Dahl and his colleagues (2003) conceptualized shock advertising content as "Shocking advertising content is that which attempts to surprise an audience by deliberately violating norms for social values and personal ideas" (p.269).

### **Types of Shock Appeals**

Dahl, et al. (2003) proposed seven types of shock appeals that are usually used by marketers to create shock in the audiences: 1. Disgusting images, which refer to the inclusion of images of blood, body parts, diseases, parasites, death or bodily harm. 2. Sexual references to masturbation, nudity or sexual acts. 3. Profanity/obscenity features the use of swear words, rude gestures or racial epithets. 4. Vulgarity contains crude acts such as farting or nose picking. 5. Impropriety/indecency refers to the violation of social norms. 6. Moral offensiveness is

characterized by innocent people or animal being harmed, using children in uncomfortable situations, the unfair situation such as uncalled violence and sex. 7. Religious taboos, the inappropriate use of religious gestures or symbols.

### **Empirical Support**

Although shock advertising has been widely applied by advertising executives to break through the clutter (Dahl, Frankenberger & Manchanda, 2003), researchers' conclusions about the effectiveness of shock advertising vary. For example, Waller (2004) suggested that shock advertising possibly elicited increased brand and awareness and its sales. Parry, Jones, Stern and Robinson (2013) concluded that shocking images for both for-profit and nonprofit organization were effective on capturing people's attention. Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda (2003) investigated the effectiveness of shock advertising in the context of AIDS/HIV prevention, the results revealed that shock advertising significantly enhanced attention, increased memory and behavioral changes among university students.

On the other hand, many scholars criticized the ineffectiveness of shock advertising. Parry, et al. (2013) found out the usage of shock advertising was not deemed as justifiable as in for-profit organizations than nonprofit organizations, and participants were more immune and acceptable to shock advertising. Other scholars claimed that shock advertising could create negative image of the brand in consumers, thus alienated them to boycott and brand (Hodge, 2007; Klara, 2012). Andersson, Hedelin, Nilsson and Welander (2014) revealed that the shock advertising could generate a negative image toward the brand in consumer's mind, therefore lead to loss in sales. Although some studies provided empirical evidences on the effectiveness of shock advertising on reinforcing brand or product awareness, the long-term effects of shock advertising remain unknown (Sandikci, 2011). Due to the inconsistency of the findings in shock advertising literature, the effectiveness of shock advertising needs support from more empirical studies.

### **Emotion and Attitude toward Brand**

Emotion was defined by Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer (1999) as "mental states of readiness that arise from appraisals of events or one's own thoughts" (p.184). According to Lazarus (1982), cognition was a necessary condition of emotion. He claimed the cognitive appraisal of relationships in the environment could either increase or reduce the intensity of an emotion (Lazarus, 1982). In addition, emotion and cognition were highly interdependent instead of being independent subsystems (Lazaraus, 1982). When viewing advertisements, consumers cognitively evaluate the ads and have emotional responses to the ads. Therefore, the  $H_1$  is proposed:

$H_1$ : There is a relationship between Emotion and  $A_{ad}$ .

## The affect transfer hypothesis (ATH)

According to MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch (1986), the affect transfer hypothesis which presented a causal relationship between  $A_{ad}$  to  $A_b$  received a wide attention from advertising scholars. This traditional advertising model was also tested by Huang, Su, Zhou & Liu (2013) in interactive advertising setting, the results implied affect transfer hypothesis was applicable to viral video advertising. Based on the literature, affect transfer hypothesis is proposed to understand consumers' attitudes in shock advertising:

H<sub>2</sub>:  $A_{ad}$  predicts  $A_b$  in shock advertising.

In advertising literature,  $A_b$  and PI were investigated overwhelmingly in terms of brand evaluation, brand extensions (Nancy & Surendra, 2004). The authors (2004) confirmed in their study that  $A_b$  and PI were two separate but correlated dimensions. Thus, H<sub>3</sub> is proposed:

H<sub>3</sub>:  $A_b$  is correlated with PI in shock advertising.

## METHODS

### Participants

This study employed a 2(ads: shock/non-shock) × 2(organization: for-profit/nonprofit) between subject design. 128 Chinese participants in this study were recruited via invitation emails by snowball sampling. Each participated were asked to forward invitation emails to people they know. After the data cleaning process, 43 responses were dropped from the total sample due to incomplete questionnaires. This procedure resulted in 85 valid responses. Among the 85 valid responses, female took up to 70.6% (n = 60), 29.4% are male (n = 25). 36.4% (n = 31) of the participants were 18-24 years old, 55.3% (n = 47) were between 25 to 34 years old, 8.3% were 35 or older.

### Independent Variables

**Shock advertising.** Shock advertising is conceptualized as the application of intentionally offensive, controversial stimulus aiming at capturing attention and selling ideas or products (Pickton & Briderick, 2005; Castellon, 2006). Half of the messages contain shock advertising, half not.

**Non-shocking advertising.** Advertising that utilizes conventional strategies (the display of the product with its brand logo) to promote the ideas or products.

**Organization.** All the ads are either sponsored by a nonprofit organization or a for-profit organization.

### Dependent Variables

**Emotion.** Feelings toward ads were rated on a 65-item seven point Likert scale developed by Edell and Burke (1987). The scale consists three factors: upbeat factor (32 items), negative factor (20 items) and warm factor (13 items). The participants rate each adjective by indicating the degree of agreement with the adjectives.

**Attitudes toward brand ( $A_b$ ).** Attitudes towards brands was operationalized as how one feels about the brand. It is rated on a seven-point, three-item semantic differential scale (Cronbach



alpha = .71). Participants indicated whether they feel good/bad, dislike very much/like very much, pleasant/unpleasant on the scale (Gardner, 1985).

**Attitude toward ads ( $A_{ad}$ ).** Attitude toward the ad was measured on a four-item seven point Likert scale (Mitchell & Olson, 1981). The participants indicated their attitude toward the ad on four bipolar evaluative items (good-bad, dislike-like, not irritating-irritating, uninteresting-interesting). Cronbach alpha of this scale is 0.78.

**Purchase intention (PI).** Purchase intention was measured by a single bipolar item. Participants were asked to rate how likely they are going to buy the product mentioned in the ad. For nonprofit organization, participants indicated the likelihood that they are going to support the organization's campaign.

### **Stimuli**

Stimuli were created by using an existing shocking advertisement but was never shown in China. However, the name of the organization and product in the ad were replaced by a fictitious company name and a nonprofit organization name to rule out the existing attitude toward both organizations. As a result, four advertisements were created for four conditions. In the shocking/for profit condition (first condition), an Asian little girl was playing with a meat grinder. In the meat grinder, there was an alive chicken. The flesh ground chicken came out from the meat grinder. The ad was sponsored by a Chinese brand called "Beishi" (means baby watch). A slogan of the company was in the lower right of the ad, presenting "Beishi – the best children wireless video monitor." In the shocking/nonprofit condition (second condition), only the slogan was replaced by "Chinese Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals". The rest of the content of the ad remained the same. In the nonshocking/for-profit condition (third condition), the meat grinder was replaced by a basket of fuzzy chicken. The slogan of Beishi company was presented in the lower right corner of the ad. In nonshocking/nonprofit condition (fourth condition), everything was as same as the third condition except the slogan of Beishi company was replaced by "Chinese Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals". To ensure the selection of attributes of the messages, a pretest was performed by asking 10 students to rate the presence and absence of the shocking content and the depicted organizations. Two shocking ads were selected initially, after the pretest, one ad was discarded due to unclear depiction of the product.

### **Procedure**

An online experiment was conducted by sending invitation emails to Chinese participants and each participant was asked to send the invitation email to people they know. By clicking on survey link, participants were reading the consent form and indicated if they were willing to participate the experiment. By clicking on "continue" button, they were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. In each condition, participants answered questions designated to the specific organization. At the end of the survey, they indicated their demographic information. The experiment took approximately 6-8 mins to complete.

### **RESULTS**

After cleaning data, recoding values and computing variables, 85 valid responses were used in data analysis. Reliability tests were conducted to evaluate the reliability of each scales. The Cronbach alpha for  $A_{ad}$  and  $A_b$ , were .82 and .85 respectively. Factor analysis was performed to

assess the variance explained by the items in a scale. According to the data, 62.36% of the variance was explained by  $A_{ad}$ . 71.6% of the variance was explained by  $A_b$ .

$H_1$  aims at exploring the relationship between Emotion and  $A_{ad}$ . A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between outcome variables. The result of data analysis revealed positive emotions were positively correlated with  $A_{ad}$ ,  $r = .717$ ,  $n = 85$ ,  $p < .01$ . Negative emotions were negatively correlated with  $A_{ad}$ ,  $r = -.618$ ,  $n = 85$ ,  $p < .01$ . Moreover, positive emotion ( $\beta = .571$ ,  $t(84) = 8.92$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .669$ ) and negative emotion ( $\beta = -.42$ ,  $t(84) = -6.206$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .669$ ) significantly predicted  $A_{ad}$ . Therefore,  $H_1$  is supported.

$H_2$  proposed a causal relationship between  $A_{ad}$  and  $A_b$ . Data from Pearson product-moment correlation matrix revealed that  $A_{ad}$  had a strong positive correlation with  $A_b$ ,  $r = .652$ ,  $n = 85$ ,  $p < .01$ . In addition, linear regression was executed to assess the predictive power of  $A_{ad}$  on  $A_b$ . Data showed  $A_{ad}$  significantly predicted  $A_b$  ( $\beta = .652$ ,  $t(84) = 7.83$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .425$ ). Therefore,  $H_2$  is supported.

$H_3$  is concerned with the relationship between  $A_b$  and PI. Based on the data analysis, there was a positive weak correlation between  $A_b$  and purchase intention,  $r = 0.294$ ,  $n = 85$ ,  $p < .01$ . Linear regression was executed to assess the predictive power of  $A_b$  on PI. Results showed  $A_b$  significantly predicted PI,  $\beta = .294$ ,  $t(84) = 2.8$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .086$ .

#### **Scale Validation.**

An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was executed using principal component analysis as extraction method and Varimax as rotation method. In round one, 81.95% of the variance was explained by nine factors. Items that had cross loadings bigger than .3 were deleted from the scale, which resulted in 25 remaining items. In round two, 68.78% of the variance was explained by three factors. Same criterion was applied to delete items which cross loadings were bigger than .3. This procedure led to 17 remaining items. In round 3, 73.18% of the variance was explained by two factors. All factor loadings were above .6. No item was deleted since no cross loadings were bigger than .3. Therefore, the final feelings toward ads scale had 17 items, 10 for positive emotion factor, 7 for negative emotion factor (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Standardized Solutions for Emotions**

Items	Positive Emotions	Negative Emotion
Active	.621	
Carefree	.731	
Alive	.854	
Amused	.824	
Joyous	.904	
Lighthearted	.897	
Lively	.904	
Pleased	.851	
Moved	.786	
Touched	.728	
Defiant		.795
Depressed		.798
Dubious		.868
Lonely		.884
Regretful		.885
Skeptical		.86
Suspicious		.93

## DISCUSSION

The goal of this paper is to validate the emotion toward the ad scale among Chinese consumers as well as test several well accepted hypotheses in advertising literature in shock advertising setting. The results of  $H_1$  confirmed that emotion had a correlation with  $A_{ad}$ .  $H_2$  tested the causal relationship between  $A_{ad}$  and  $A_b$ . The affect transfer hypothesis (ATH) was supported by a significant predictive power of  $A_{ad}$ , indicating that  $A_{ad}$  affects  $A_b$ . The last hypothesis assumed there was a relationship between  $A_b$  and PI. As a result, there was a weak positive relationship between  $A_b$  and PI. The result of regression analysis indicated  $A_b$  significantly predicted PI. EFA was executed to validate the emotion scale toward the ad. Items that had cross loadings equal or bigger than .3 were used as a criterion of item deletion. The finalized emotion toward ad scale had 17 items which load onto two factors: positive emotion and negative emotion. The finalized scale explained 73.18% of the variance.

The results of our study suggested that emotion was correlated with  $A_{ad}$ , which is consistent with Lazarus (1982)'s claim that emotion and cognition were interdependent subsystems.

Interestingly, the regression test revealed both positive emotion and negative emotion significantly predicted  $A_{ad}$  with a large proportion of total variance explained. These results only clarified the relationship between emotion and  $A_{ad}$ . However, according to Bagozzi et al. (1999), emotion was defined as a state after cognitive appraisal, which potentially directs the research attention to the causes of emotion. Future research is needed to investigate cognitive processing of shock advertising. Furthermore, since shock advertising is defined as the content that violate social norms and personal values, it is possible that consumers will develop stronger emotional



responses than nonshock advertising. It is suggested that scholars should investigate the effects of cognitive emotion on  $A_{ad}$ .

Moreover, this study confirmed the casual relationship between  $A_{ad}$  and  $A_b$  by testing affect transfer hypothesis (ATH), indicating  $A_{ad}$  affects  $A_b$  in shock advertising. This conclusion is consistent with testing ATH in viral video advertising setting (Huang et al., 2013). Since advertising is a diversified field, it is proposed that further research might focus on testing ATH in other advertising settings. Also, researchers have been strived for gauging  $A_{ad}$  as a mediator in evaluation of advertisement effectiveness, which could be applied to future shock advertising research as well.

$H_3$  advocated the correlation between  $A_b$  and PI, which is consistent with Nancy and Surendra's (2004) finding that  $A_b$  and PI were two separate but correlated dimensions. Further regression analysis suggested  $A_b$  significantly predicted PI, however, this did not explain a large proportion of variance, indicating that other factors could potentially affect PI. More research is needed to analyze the potential factors that impact consumers' PI in shock advertising setting.

Last, this study also proposed a validated emotion scale to measure the emotional response toward advertisements in Chinese consumers. Repetition is needed to test the validity and reliability of this scale in measuring Chinese consumers' emotional response.

## LIMITATIONS

Small sample is the biggest threat to this study. The researchers only invited participants by sending invitation emails or by asking the participants to invite other potential respondents to participate the online experiment. no incentive was used. These procedures potentially affect the response rate. Additionally, the researchers adopted the complete emotion toward ad scale by Edell et al. (1987), which contains 65 items. Participants might get bored or tired when they rate the items, especially when the meaning of items are similar. This led to the high incompleteness rate – 43 participants chose to quit the questionnaire. What is more, although  $A_b$  has significant predictive power on PI, the small value of  $R^2$  is problematic since it indicates the existence of other powerful factors that may affect PI other than  $A_b$ . Further research is suggested to explore the factors that impact PI in shock advertising.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Shuo Yan accomplished her master degree in IMC (Integrated Marketing Communication) at Florida State University. She is currently a doctoral student now.

Dr. Sindy Chapa Dr. Sindy Chapa recently joined the FSU School of Communication as an Assistant Professor. She is also serving as the Associate Director for the School's Center for Hispanic Marketing Communication (HMC). With over 10 years of teaching experience, Chapa has taught marketing courses in the U.S., Mexico and Chile. Previously she worked as an Assistant Professor and Associate Director of the Center for the Study of Latino Media & Markets at The School of Journalism & Mass Communication at Texas State University (TSU) since 2008.