

The Effect of Incongruity in Viral Advertising Design on Digital Recipient Engagement Levels

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Summary

The viral ad is based on digital recipient engagement with it, which helps the ad reach the largest audience. In the digital context such as the social networking site Facebook, there are different levels for the digital recipient engagement with the ad (i.e., click, like, comment, and Share). Sharing the ad is the highest engagement level and the most effective behavior for the ad viral success.

By searching for why someone shares content with others, we found according to the emotional broadcaster theory that social sharing is driven by the emotional arousal that follows encountering information that challenges deeply held beliefs and expectations. And surprise which arises from expectations violation is the key for content diffusion.

On the other hand, according to schema incongruity theory, we found that the incongruent ad with recipient expectations is more stimulating compared with the congruent one and the expectedness of the congruent ad may weaken its effect.

So, we are in need to find methods for designing the ad to be incongruent with recipient expectations, and then study its effect on digital recipient engagement levels as metrics for the ad viral success.

The research depends on the descriptive approach followed by an analytical study. The results suggest different incongruity methods generating surprise from not being congruent with recipient expectations. The results also reveal that incongruity will have positive effect on recipient evaluations and attitudes toward the ad, thus it will positively affect digital recipient engagement with the ad and the likelihood of going viral.

Key Words:

Viral advertising, Digital recipient engagement levels, Emotional broadcaster theory of social sharing, Surprise, Schema incongruity theory.

Introduction:

While members of the scientific and medical communities dedicate their time and resources to wage war against viral infection and fight relentlessly to stop the spread of viruses, marketers and advertisers run in the opposite direction, dedicate to create and encourage viral infection. In today's digitally magnified world of advertising, having a campaign 'go viral' is indeed one of the highest levels of achievement. (12- p:162)

With the traditional media, the media corporations primarily decided for consumers what was worth watching, what they would watch and what would become popular. Yet, over the years this situation has changed drastically due to rise and mass acceptance of new technologies of which especially the internet and social media has caused a powershift, allowing people to interact, share and even create their own content. This facilitated the beginning of a new phenomenon: virality.

With the gradual development and emergence of social media, the recipient became able to "like", "comment" upon and "share" the content with others. He/ She became more powerful than ever before. Within this newly shaped environment with a more powerful recipient, the word "share" obtained a new connotation. The viral process takes place when the presence of certain characteristics of content could make it 'sell' itself and make the sharing of this content via social media networks almost inevitable, possibly resulting in an exponential trend. (9- p:450) Thus, we need to find creative strategies for designing the ad to stimulate its viral success.

Overview and Background:

Viral Advertising is unpaid peer-to-peer communication of provocative content originating from an identified sponsor using the Internet to persuade or influence an audience to pass along the content to others. It focuses on creating contagious advertising messages that get passed from peer to peer in order to increase brand awareness through interactive digital platforms (1- p:185).

While viral advertising is based on recipient sharing the ad with others, one of the main tenets of the emotional broadcaster theory (EBT) argues that social sharing is driven by the emotional arousal that follows encountering information that challenges deeply held beliefs and expectations (25- p:5,6). So, we need to design the ad so that it can challenge the recipient expectations in order to increase the likelihood of the recipient sharing it.

According to schema incongruity theory, although schema congruent information may be judged favorably for its ease of comprehension, the expectedness of it may render it unimpressible (e.g., 'it is just another diaper ad with a baby'). On the other hand, incongruity can be seen as interruption of expectations, which can be stimulating while the subsequent resolution rewarding (e.g., 'A baby trading stocks? Oh, it's a metaphor for how easy it is to trade!') (24- p: 361,362). So, we expect in our study that designing the ad to be incongruent with the recipient expectations will increase the likelihood of sharing it with others and its viral success.

In our study, we will suggest methods for designing the ad to be incongruent with recipient expectations and then study its effect on digital recipient engagement levels (i.e., click, like, comment, and share) as metrics for the ad viral success.

Problem Statement:

The research problem focuses on trying to answer the following questions:

- RQ1. What are the creative methods for designing the ad to be incongruent with recipient expectations?
- RQ2. To what extent do incongruity positively affect digital recipient engagement levels with the ad (i.e., click, like, comment, and share) as metrics for the ad viral success?

Aims and Objectives:

- Finding approaches in advertising design that positively affect digital recipient engagement levels with the ad; and thus its virality.

Hypothesis:

- H1. There are different methods for designing the ad to be incongruent with recipient expectations.
- H2. Incongruity positively affects the first level of digital recipient engagement with the ad (i.e., click).
- H3. Incongruity positively affects the second level of digital recipient engagement with the ad (i.e., like).
- H4. Incongruity positively affects the third level of digital recipient engagement with the ad (i.e., comment).
- H5. Incongruity positively affects the fourth level of digital recipient engagement with the ad (i.e., share).
- H6. Incongruity increases the likelihood of the ad viral success.

Methodology:

The research depends on the descriptive approach followed by an analytical study for viral ads samples that based on incongruity.

Conclusion:

There are different methods for designing the ad to be incongruent with recipient expectations: unexpected combination of existing elements, unexpected modification of an element, absence of an expected element, incongruity between settings and situations, incongruity between verbal and visual elements, and incongruity between ad and brand. All of these previous methods generate surprise from not being congruent with recipient expectations. This result is consistent with hypothesis 1.

Incongruity positively affects the first digital recipient engagement level with the ad (i.e., click). Unusual twist and distinctive objects in an ad invoke surprise, trigger attention, heightened interest and arouse curiosity, as they challenge recipient visual memory. Any novel object triggers an orienting response. When something is unexpected, additional visual attention and processing is required to comprehend the discrepancy. So, Incongruity stimulates the recipient to "click" the ad. This result is consistent with hypothesis 2.

Incongruity triggers deeper level of processing and stimulates positive affective responses associated with the feeling of accomplishment felt after decoding the hidden meaning. The recipient will then look at the whole advertisement with a more favorable attitude which in turn affects brand attitudes. These positive attitudes toward the ad and brand encourage the

recipient to "like" the ad to express his/ her positive evaluations and attitudes. This result is consistent with hypothesis 3.

As incongruity leads to positive attitudes toward the ad and brand, thus the recipient may express these positive attitudes and evaluations by adding "comment" upon the ad via social media. Surprising ad encourages recipient to confer with others to resolve the discrepancies, thus it may encourage his/ her to comment upon it. This result is consistent with hypothesis 4. Incongruity renders the ad incomprehensible at first glance. This causes arousal and stimulates the recipient. While sharing according to emotional broadcaster theory is driven by the emotional arousal that follows encountering information that challenges expectations, so incongruity stimulates the recipient to "share" the ad. Extraordinary content causes surprise since the message diverges from the schema and increase the probability to forward the message. Also, surprising ad encourages recipient to confer with others to resolve the discrepancies. Thus incongruity may stimulate the recipient to "share" the ad with others. This result is consistent with hypothesis 5.

Since incongruity as an interruption of expectations positively affects digital recipient engagement levels with the ad (i.e., click, like, comment, and share) and the ad viral success is based on digital recipient engagement specially sharing behavior, thus incongruity increases the likelihood of the ad viral success. Also, Incongruity in advertising is related to some positive effects (e.g., humor, creativity, rhetoric, and processing pleasure) that lead to positive attitudes toward the ad and brand. These positive attitudes positively affect the digital recipient engagement levels with the ad and increase the likelihood of the ad viral success. This result is consistent with hypothesis 6.

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