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The role of facial expression in resisting enjoyable advertisements

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Chapter 6

Embodied Resistance to Persuasion: Implications of the Model

Summary of the ERP Model

In conclusion, we summarize all tenets constituting Embodied Resistance to Persuasion (ERP) in a process model of viewing amusing ads and the specific parts thereof that we tested in Chapters 3 through 5. We hypothesized that the complete process involved in embodied resistance to persuasion is the following: In the default situation of viewing a properly enjoyable ad, consumers feel a substantial degree of happiness, as typically they do not regulate their emotion in any way. The contents of the amusing advertisement are appraised as amusing, and a corresponding appetitive action readiness is automatically incited. These antecedent components cause emotional responses indicative of happiness. One is the subjective feeling of happiness, another is its expression through facial movement, and a third is appetitive attitudes – specified forms of the readiness to pleasantly engage with the ad, brand, or product as tested in Chapter 3.

Should a consumer be inclined to resist amusing ads, response-focused emotion regulation that suppresses appetitive attitudes will apply first to the facial expression response, because conscious control of facial expression is easy in comparison to other response systems. Likewise, we argue that in the event a consumer applies antecedent regulation, facial expression will again be primarily affected for the same reason, namely that facial expression is relatively easy to hold in check.

Because of the interrelatedness of emotional response systems and, perhaps more particularly, the relatedness of facial expression with the appetitive attitude response system, suppression of facial movements propagates to lower feelings of happiness and appetitive attitudes. Through a feedback mechanism, suppressed facial expressions of happiness also influence 1) antecedent components of the emotions, i.e., appraisal of the ad as funny, and 2) the emotional approach tendency toward the ad (Chapter 4). To the degree that this mechanism persists, the consumer exhibits embodied resistance to persuasion.

When the ad is part of a co-viewing experience, facial mimicry contributes to shared emotion regulation. Mimicry involves changes in the consumer's facial movement that is targeted by the ad, propagating subsequently to appetitive attitudes through facial feedback. Mimicking facial expressions compatible with the amusing ad enhances the target consumer's happiness and attitudes toward the ad, brand, and product, while mimicking ad-incompatible facial expressions will suppress happiness and attitudes (Chapter 5).

In summary, an ad simultaneously provokes certain subjective feelings, physiological responses, and bodily expressions, such as facial expressions. Then, the down-regulation of facial

expression by consumers changes their attitude toward the ad because of the inherent link between the expression, feeling, and the attitudes as explained by facial feedback and supported by our findings.

Implications

Theory

We believe that the studies presented in this thesis contribute to filling the surprising lack of research on the role of emotion and embodiment in resistance to persuasion. As revealed in Chapter 1, only a handful of non-specific resistance strategies have been identified. So far, none of these strategies is emotion-specific (e.g., Knowles & Linn, 2004; Fransen, Verlegh, Kirmani, & Smit, 2015). Comprehensive theorizing that models the dynamic, sequential, and componential nature of emotion and expression in persuasion is even more scant.

Resistance to persuasion. We addressed the lack of research and theorizing on emotion and embodiment in resistance to persuasion in two ways, observing that persuasion and resistance are intrinsically linked to each other. First, we proposed a new theoretical model that highlights the functional components of emotion and expression in resisting persuasion. Perhaps the most well-known model of persuasion that lacks explicit emotion components is the Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion (ELM; Petty, & Cacioppo, 1986). ELM focuses mainly on the high stimulus elaboration of an ad through the central route and low stimulus elaboration through the peripheral route, with the central route as a main path to lasting attitude change. Further, neither of these routes includes an explicit emotion component. However, Morris, Woo, and Singh (2005) argue that the affective (peripheral) route to attitude change is as important as the cognitive (central) route. Further, they argue that the lack of focus on intrinsic emotional implications is a shortcoming of the ELM, because even if the consumer processes a message cognitively, such elaboration often has an emotional component to it. Moreover, the emotional component in either peripheral or central elaboration (message processing) leads to attitude changes that last longer than if emotion is not incorporated in the model (Morris, Woo, & Singh, 2005).

The widely known Approach–Avoidance Model of Persuasion (Knowles & Linn, 2004) includes only so-called Alpha and Omega strategies for attitude change (respectively making the message more attractive or focusing on reducing resistance to it), both of which lack an explicit emotion component. A recent paper by Fransen et al. (2015) reporting three different types of resistance strategies (avoidance, contesting, and empowering) does not include emotion as a prominent component. In addition, however explicitly ELM states the paths of the model, it is not a

model of *resistance* to persuasion per se but of persuasion itself. Whereas Knowles and Linn (2004) as well as Fransen et al. (2015) present models of resistance to persuasion, their models are not explicit in stating their mechanism – in contrast with ELM, which is quite explicit. To address this shortcoming in the literature on resistance to persuasion, we experimentally tested how consumers resist persuasion of amusing advertisements by regulating their own emotional and bodily responses. We explicitly revealed the mechanisms of ERP as well as its boundary conditions and specific elements. Now that the mechanism is to some degree understood, we add an explicit model to the literature on (embodied) resistance to persuasion.

This thesis has further immediate implications for the theory of resistance to persuasion. For the first time, we showed the effects of a resistance strategy specifically tailored to the emotional content of an advertisement. We demonstrated that positive attitude effects of amusing advertisements might be counteracted through different forms of cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression, as well as incompatible facial mimicry. We furthermore proved that a model of regulation and resistance effects needs to take the expression of emotion into account.

A second theoretical contribution is that ERP incorporates the body into consumers' self-awareness and self-regulation. The possible underuse of embodied emotion regulation is somewhat ironic given the immediate, permanent accessibility of the resource in question. Our bodies link our internal perceptions and actions to situations and stimuli in the world. In principle, individuals have exclusive control over their bodies' movements. The body is the primary and most-trusted source of information on external situations and internal states, and an ever-available instrument to act. In some situations, controlling the body may be easier than controlling the mind, as in the case of cognitive depletion (Wheeler, Briñol, & Hermann, 2007). Competent consumers recognize that they can to a large extent be master of their thoughts and emotions because these are embodied and situated.

Emotion regulation. We also distinguished between two slightly different ways of regulating emotions, one through direct instruction and another through facial mimicry. We showed that the two work in a similar manner, with one important difference. Response-focused emotion regulation seemed to influence the expression and hence attitudes both upward and downward. However, in the case of facial mimicry, we found that it had only suppressive effects. That is, ad-compatible facial mimicry should have had amplifying effects, but we failed to observe these. One possible explanation of this result could be that when consumers' expressions are already compatible, they do not feel the need to mimic one another in order to up-regulate their experience.

However, that reasoning would contradict findings by Raghunathan and Corfman (2006). Another explanation would be a simple ceiling-effect, which could be tested by including more neutral or ambiguous advertisements instead of only amusing ads. In any case, this issue is left as an open question that awaits further investigation.

The role of facial expression. All the reported studies investigated appetitive attitudes that are immediate outcomes of consuming the advertising stimuli. Throughout, we forwarded and tested the proposition that facial expression predicts attitudes rather than the other way around. Hence, smiling at an advertisement means you like it more. However, situations are conceivable in which appetite attitudes may cause increased facial expressions of happiness. Short-term appetitive attitudes could potentially develop into long-term ones, becoming a priori *beliefs* about an ad or brand resulting from repeated exposure to the ad. Consequently, any time the ad is presented, beliefs are automatically activated, instigating the appropriate facial expressions. The studies reported in this thesis have only immediate post-viewing appetitive attitudes within their scope. Predictive effects of longer-term a priori beliefs on facial expression were left untested.

However, the studies did throw a consistent light on the direction of causality in the case of immediate viewing effects. We were faced initially with a causal direction issue: Do I smile because I like an object or, conversely, do I like it because I smile? In Chapters 3-5, we tested the latter possibility thoroughly and found it held up to scrutiny. Thus, we are confident to add to the literature on facial feedback a strong case for facial expression as a unidirectional causal condition for affective liking responses.

Advantages of measuring facial expressions. An often-used method to assess how consumers react upon amusing advertising is to explicitly ask them what they think about an advertisement and how they think they *feel* about it. However, asking people directly how they feel is not only cognitively demanding and difficult for the subject, that interrogative pathway also brings undesired effects into the mix, such as increased self-awareness (Pryor, Gibbons, Wicklund, Fazio, & Hood, 1977) and social-desirability (Arnold & Feldman, 1981). Moreover, as self-report measures they are incapable of capturing a number of biologically anchored emotional expressions that are inaccessible to the subject's awareness. Physiological registrations can offer a solution to the shortcomings of explicit verbal measures of cognitive and emotional states. One such physiological measure is automated analysis of facial emotional expressions. We demonstrated that this tool is well suited to measure specific emotional reactions toward entertaining advertisements in that it

objectively assesses facial expressions. The tool has shown reliability in that it consistently predicted people's inclinations to perform specific behaviors.

Practice – Implications

Consumer competence. Scholarly implications left aside, the insights into ERP are relevant for consumers, consumers' interest groups and governmental and non-governmental consumer policy organizations. This thesis aimed to increase consumer competence by empowering consumers with additional resistance “tools” to counteract deliberate persuasive attempts that use amusement. We use the definition of the competent consumer by the CONsumer COmpetence Research Training (CONCORT, 2015) network, in which the thesis research presented here is embedded. CONCORT has been funded by the European Commission's Marie Curie Actions, which judged Consumer Competence as a socially relevant topic. CONCORT defined consumer competence as “a broad set of abilities, knowledge and skills which help consumers to make sound economic decisions in today's complex marketplace [that] are aimed at enhancing the overall consumer experience and as such at increasing the general level of customer satisfaction” (CONCORT, 2015). We believe that understanding Embodied Resistance to Persuasion can be used to extend current consumer competence as defined in the project.

Consumer organizations, too, have emphasized the need for tools that help consumers to act autonomously when they are faced with consumer product supplies. The European consumer organization BEUC (Bureau Européen des Unions de Consommateurs), which represents more than four million consumers from a few dozen national consumer organizations across thirty-one European countries, has explicitly stated:

“Empowering consumers is the holy grail of current EU strategy and research. It is also a policy target for national governments, often in tandem with policies for smarter regulation or deregulation. It means that consumers take decisions and choices into their own hands where they can – provided that they have the right tools to do so. (...). If the 500 million EU consumers have all [right tools], they can influence markets with their collective power. (...). The reality, however, as our members tell us, is rather different. Numerous elements converge to disempower consumers (...). Too often companies make deliberate use of consumer information fatigue and their *behavioural biases* in their *communication strategy*” (BEUC, 2012; “EU Consumers' 2020 Vision,” p. 7, emphasis added).

In a consumer context, Embodied Resistance to Persuasion (ERP) holds promise as a tool empowering consumers and thus adding to their competence. The behavioral control that it involves adds to available elements of consumer competence such as counter-arguing or attitude bolstering. In addition, for special groups of consumers who can for one reason or another not efficiently resist appealing messages through counter-arguing or attitude bolstering, the body may be the only easily accessible resource for resisting persuasion. This is because one prominent advantage of ERP as a strategy is that it applies to behavioral expression in the first place.

We showed that resistance to persuasion is beneficial to consumers and deserves to be a part of their competence. As defined already, consumer competence is simply a stable set of developed skills, abilities, and attitudes that are formed over a long period. Competent consumers are assumed to be better off than the average consumer (e.g., Alba & Hutchinson 1987; 2000) because they can make proactive decisions that benefit themselves. We therefore propose that one component of consumer competence should involve the ability to regulate one's emotions when presented with temptation. Emotion regulation is in this respect the core competency required for consumers' control of attitudes and choices.

Disadvantaged groups. Specifically, consumers who are not proficient in generic resistance to persuasion and have difficulty dealing with cognitive instructions well can benefit from instruction to control their body expressions. For example, instructing such regular consumers to feign a specific facial expression, e.g., lowering their brows could help them to resist persuasion attempts. They might interpret their bodily act of brow lowering as the physical manifestation of their own thinking, possibly enhancing cognitive performance.

Consider that a young child who cannot yet counter-argue a persuasive message is already able to inhibit his or her smiling at an appealing object. Parents could show their child how to suppress facial expressions of happiness in response to a tempting ad, whereas they could not make the child comprehend and follow a verbal instruction to counter-argue the message. Parents can guide children in resisting persuasive messages by demonstrating how to counteract persuasion using their body. This assumption stems from and would be compatible with the findings from the well-known still-face paradigm in mother infant-interaction (Tronick, Als, Adamson, Wise, & Brazelton, 1979). The still face of the mother (an extreme case of incompatible mimicry) provokes clearly negative reactions in the infants, including withdrawal.

Marketing communication. Understanding Embodied Resistance to Persuasion (ERP) may not only inform pro-consumer institutions but also advertising agencies and corporate units of

market or consumer behavior analysis. For example, ad copy testing should include measures of behavioral expressiveness to check whether consumers engage in ERP.

Integrated marketing communication could deliver customized experiences based on consumers' embodied response profiles. That is, they should address consumers taking into account individual differences among them with regard to the nonverbal expression of emotions. In addition, the insights gathered in this thesis lead us to recommend salespersons acting in face-to-face situations to capitalize on naturally occurring mimicry responses of their audience. They should be able to influence purchase decisions of consumers by exhibiting facial expressions that when mimicked by the consumer, would increase their appetitive attitudes (studies by van Baaren, Holland, Steenaert, and van Knippenberg, 2003 and Wang, 2009 hint at such possibilities).

Our work is also relevant to marketers and advertisers who we know are using various "resistance-neutralizing tactics (...) tailored to the specific resistance strategy that is adopted by consumers" (Fransen et al., 2015, p.5). Marketers can benefit from understanding the mechanism behind the new consumer resistance strategy that we propose here.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

At least two exciting new avenues of research open up thanks to our findings. First, additional testing to determine which factors could moderate the causal paths in the ERP model is warranted. In the limitations section, we identify motivation, persuasion knowledge, advertising skepticism, and emotion regulation as a trait, all as likely candidates. Testing these would allow for further disentanglement of the mechanisms behind ERP and possibly for achieving greater control over it. Second, to further develop the embodiment part of the ERP model, various modes of expression of emotion should be included in tests. Suppression of additional modes of expressing the emotion could have different, additive, multiplying, or no effects at all.

Spontaneous ERP

One significant limitation of our model is that we did not test the role of consumers' motivation to resist the ads. Some people may believe, for instance, that they are not affected by the ads, so they do not have to resist them. The existence of such a belief could be explained by the third-person effect (Davison, 1983), which states that "a person exposed to a persuasive communication in the mass media sees this as having a greater effect on others than on himself or herself" (p.1). Further, another issue related to the role of motivation to resist is people's persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and their skepticism toward advertising (Obermiller &

Spangenberg, 1998). ERP could predominantly be a tool used by consumers with above average knowledge of persuasive communication strategies, or who are skeptical of advertising in general.

Yet another concept that dovetails with consumers' motivation to resist the ad in our model is emotion regulation as a stable trait. Emotion regulation is not only a temporal strategy moldable and sensitive to instruction, but also a chronic trait (Gross & John, 2003) measured through statements like, "When I want to feel more positive emotion (such as joy or amusement), I change what I'm thinking about" or "When I am feeling positive emotions, I am careful not to express them." The studies reported in this thesis are restricted to strategies induced by instruction. Interesting as it may be, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to investigate if spontaneous, and not instructed, emotion regulation stemming from individual differences would be equally effective in resisting advertisements.

Further research could test whether any of these variables influence the expression of emotion and subsequently consumer attitudes, and if so, at which moment exactly. For example, people who score high on the third-person effect could potentially judge their own expressions of happiness as less intense than the expression of their co-viewer even when, if objectively coded, the expressions have the same average intensity. Another interesting question is whether persuasion knowledge, advertising skepticism, or emotion regulation play a role in our ERP model when resistance is successful. We can hypothesize that those three trait-variables would kick in right before the expression of emotion and not afterwards because of the strong links between the expression and the attitudes, as postulated by the facial feedback theory (Buck, 1980).

Finally, likely the most important question is left open. Under which conditions is an embodied resistance to persuasion strategy more effective than a "standard" strategy? Going even further, can we hypothesize that under some conditions, engaging in both kinds of resistance at the same time would offer the greatest benefit to the consumer? However interesting as a possibility, this question remains to be tested.

Other Forms of Expression of Emotion

We did not test the role of expression of emotion outside of facial expressions, though our ERP model empirically allows for such possibilities. Alternative forms could encompass a head-down (sadness), clenched fist (anger), or straightened posture (pride). We did not test those expressions because there is no automated way to code for them at any larger scale, a prerequisite for quantifying and interpreting significance, as we did with facial expression thanks to the use of automated facial coding. For example, sadness and anger are clearly negative emotions (Ekman,

Levenson, & Friesen, 1983) and should therefore decrease positive attitudes toward an entertaining advertisement. However, pride is an ambiguous emotion that is likely positive but also qualitatively different from e.g., happiness and hence belonging to the same category as self-conscious emotions like embarrassment, shame, and guilt (Lewis, 2000). Thus, whether straightened posture would lead to lower or higher positive attitudes cannot be decided a priori.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, our findings contribute to the growing scientific evidence that consumers' bodily feedback has powerful regulatory effects on their behavior. In particular, our findings highlight the role of bodily feedback in consumer resistance to persuasive ads. The downplaying of one's emotional reactivity by either suppression or reappraisal empowers consumers, namely by helping them resist persuasive messages. We believe that our studies open up a new avenue for consumer research, showing empirically that bodily emotion regulation mediated through facial behavior influences attitudes. In short, what we bodily express influences not only how we feel and think but also whether or not we are persuaded.

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