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### Consumer responses to creative advertising

*a literature review*

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## Consumer Responses to Creative Media Advertising: A Literature Review

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – This chapter provides an overview of the state of knowledge about creative media advertising; choosing a novel medium that implicitly communicates the message. It explains what creative media advertising is and how it differs from other unconventional marketing communication formats. It addresses the theoretical mechanisms that explain how creative media affects consumers. Its final purpose is to review all the empirical findings about creative media advertising effects.

**Methodology/approach** – This chapter presents a systematic literature review of all the empirical research about creative media advertising that explicitly compares its effectiveness with traditional media advertising. The 11 reviewed articles with 16 experiments appeared between 2005 and 2015.

**Findings** – Overall creative media advertising generated positive evaluative outcomes (e.g., brand attitude) and behavior (e.g., word of mouth and sales). These effects were often mediated by a feeling of surprise and an increase in positive thoughts. It remains unclear whether creative media are perceived as persuasion attempts. Mixed findings exist for cognitive outcomes. Creative media advertising seems beneficial for creating strong brand associations, but brand memory might

suffer from the technique if solving the link between the medium and the message takes away mental resources for the brand elements in the advertisement.

Originality/value – By reviewing all the literature about creative media advertising, the authors make recommendations for future research and for using creative media in practice. They emphasize potential boundary conditions and ideal circumstances of using creative media advertising.

**Keywords:** Creative media advertising; unconventional marketing; guerilla marketing; ambient communication; branding; literature review

## Introduction

Arriving at the train station after work, one of the authors of this chapter was exposed to two remarkable persuasion attempts (see Figure 1). First, she saw a huge inflatable slide that connected the upper platform with the lower one. On the slide, a telecom provider promoted its new 4G network providing super fast mobile broadband internet. She imagined passengers go down the slide hurrying to catch the next train. Second, around the corner, she passed a booth where free soup was served. On the cup of soup, the checking account of a bank was promoted. Surely, the two “advertisements” were less traditional than, for example, the billboards that travelers pass by in the station. As such, consumers may be less likely to avoid those advertisements (Smit, Van Meurs, & Neijens, 2006; Speck & Elliott, 1997) and more likely to be affected by them. We



**Figure 1:** Two Non-Traditional Ambient Marketing Campaigns Make Use of the Public Space in the Central Station of Antwerp, Belgium. The Left One Represents the Creative Medium Advertisement because Its Medium Is More Uniquely Connected to the Advertised Message (Fast Slide – Fast Internet Connection) than the Right One (Free Soup – Free Checking Account). Photos: Authors.

say nothing new when we highlight that advertisers search ways to circumvent advertising clutter in traditional media (Pieters, Warlop, & Wedel, 2002). The two described persuasion attempts use a non-traditional medium. Both can be considered guerilla marketing actions (Levinson, 2007), because they are unexpected by the audience, and both are a form of outdoor advertising or street marketing (Saucet & Cova, 2014). However, in this chapter we argue that there is an important difference between the two non-traditional persuasion attempts that influence the persuasive impact: the creativity of the chosen medium.

Creative media advertisements have recently started to gain interest of researchers (e.g., Dahlén, 2005; Dahlén, Friberg, & Nilsson, 2009; Eelen & Seiler, 2016; Rauwers & van Noort, 2016; Wottrich & Voorveld, 2016). Creative media advertising is a new form of unconventional marketing communication in which the medium is carefully chosen to communicate something about the brand. In the examples above, the telecom provider made use of a creative medium. The fast slide emphasized the speed of the telecom provider's 4G network. A medium (e.g., the slide) is creative when its features (e.g., fast connection between platforms) repeat the message of the advertisement (e.g., fast internet connection). By definition (see the section "Defining Creative Media Advertising"), an unconventional medium cannot be considered creative when its features do not show a specific connection to the features of the brand. For example, the cup of soup did not highlight anything about the bank's checking account. Does the choice for a creative medium help the advertised brand? If so, what are the persuasive outcomes? This chapter deals with those questions and provides an overview of the state of knowledge about creative media advertising. Next to new advertising formats such as social media advertising (Van Noort, Antheunis, & Verlegh, 2014), brand placements in advertiser-funded television programs (Verhellen, Eelen, Dens, & De Pelsmacker, 2015), and mobile advertising (Gupta, 2013), creative media advertising is a strategy that advertisers may apply to stand out and to create effective ads.

In the theoretical part of this chapter, we first present the definition of creative media advertising, give examples of the strategy, and demonstrate how it distinguishes itself from related concepts, such as guerilla marketing and viral marketing. Next, we discuss theoretical explanations for the persuasive impact of creative media advertising effects. Subsequently, we present a literature review that includes all empirical findings of creative media effect research to date. This empirical part consists of two sections. We first coherently summarize the evidence for cognitive, evaluative, and behavioral consumer responses. Second, we discuss empirical proof for underlying psychological mechanisms that drive creative media advertising

effects. We highlight how those mechanisms create boundary conditions to the effectiveness of using creative media that practitioners and researchers should be aware of. Finally, we make recommendations for follow-up research and for successful marketing actions when using this advertising strategy.

## Defining Creative Media Advertising

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Creative media advertising is a specific case of *unconventional marketing communication*. In general, unconventional marketing communications are often classified as *guerilla marketing*. Levinson (2007) introduced the term guerilla marketing in 1984 to make professionals aware that they could use unconventional – almost warfare – tactics to advertise on a small budget. He emphasized that campaigns had to be shocking and unique to be noticed, to create buzz and reach a larger audience. Hutter and Hoffmann (2011, p. 4) defined guerilla marketing as “an umbrella term for unconventional advertisement campaigns which aim at drawing the attention of a large number of recipients to the advertising message at comparatively little costs by evoking a surprise effect and a diffusion effect.” Bigat (2012) depicted a similar definition of guerilla marketing. Nowadays, researchers are increasingly using the term *ambient communication* when referring to unconventional marketing communications (Gambetti & Schultz, 2015). Ambient communication uses elements of the environment, including nearly every available physical surface to convey messages that elicit customer engagement (Gambetti, 2010). As for guerilla marketing, Gambetti argues that ambient communication is less expensive and more cost-efficient than traditional advertising media. Essential in this concept is the idea that all environmental elements that surround consumers, even a building (Bargenda, 2014), can be used as media for creating brand value. In sum, many unconventional forms of marketing communication arise and can be labeled as guerilla or ambient marketing because they are unexpected and invent new ways of using media or environments to carry brand messages. Creative media advertising is one instance of unconventional marketing communication that can be distinguished from other types: choosing a creative medium is a means for marketers to highlight certain features of their brand.

The first to use the concept of creative media advertising was Dahlén (2005). He defined a creative medium as a non-traditional, novel medium that implicitly communicates the message. We adhere to that definition in this chapter. It is unconventional when advertisers implement promotional materials into media that are not seen as traditional carriers of advertisements, such as waste bins,

elevators, and eggshells. However, most importantly, the medium should not only be new, it should also be chosen to specifically communicate the message itself. There needs to be a clear association between the message of the brand and the medium that consumers are able to identify. One example of a creative medium is a straw promoting a yoga center depicting a woman holding her hands up on the flexing part of the straw. When the straw is flexed, she bends over and as such the straw expresses that visiting the yoga center will make one a flexible person (Eelen & Seiler, 2016).

Creative media advertising can be distinguished from other types of unconventional marketing communications by means of its core features: the medium previously was not considered a traditional medium for advertising and it strengthens the brand's message. There is no exhaustive list of phenomena, but different types of unconventional marketing have been described in the literature (Hutter & Hoffmann, 2011; Saucet & Cova, 2014). *Viral marketing* or *buzz marketing* (Van der Lans, van Bruggen, Eliashberg, & Wierenga, 2010) has the main purpose of being shared online. An example is the selfie that Ellen DeGeneres took with her Samsung camera at the Oscars in 2014. It became the most retweeted message of all time. Note that creative media advertising can be used as a means in viral marketing. It is not unlikely that a creative medium advertisement goes viral, for example, when consumers take pictures of the slide in the central station and the message gets shared and liked on Twitter and Facebook. However, not each viral campaign (like the Oscar selfie) depicts a creative medium advertisement. Another type of unconventional marketing is *ambush* or *parasitic marketing* where a brand hijacks a public event without sponsoring it. A widely discussed stunt during the 2010 FIFA World Cup was when a group of Dutch female supporters of the Dutch-Mexican game wore a short orange dress of the Dutch brewery Bavaria, whereas the official sponsor was Budweiser. The stunt was repeated during the Dutch-Danish game and all women were arrested. Some authors speak of *street marketing* or outdoor advertising (Levinson, 2007; Saucet & Cova, 2014) when the public space is used to advert a brand in an unconventional way. Again, there can be overlap between the concepts of street marketing and creative media advertisements, but they are not the same. Creative media advertisements can be an instance of street marketing when encountered outdoors, but not all street marketing actions are creative media advertisements. For example, a sticker with a brand logo on the sidewalk may be unconventional and encountered in the streets (Hicks, 2009), but it only becomes creative when the "sticker" medium emphasizes the message of the brand, such as a sticker marking a parking lot on stairs showing that a Jeep can be parked anywhere (Jeep: Parking Space, 2007).

In this arena of unconventional advertising strategies, why is it important, both theoretically and managerially, to examine creative media advertising in isolation? First, creative media advertising is a particular case of marketing in which the brand does not merely surprise and attract attention but also shows an interesting overlap with the medium. For communication science and practice, it is relevant to find out whether the medium can reinforce the intended communication effects (Biraghi, Gambetti, & Graffigna, 2014). Second, there may be specific mechanisms of information processing at play when being exposed to creative media that call for future research. Third, creative media have recently gained much attention from researchers and it is time to present the overview of what we have learned about the phenomenon so far.

## Theorizing about the Effectiveness of Creative Media Advertising

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For consumers, the use of creative media in persuasion is new and unexpected, because such persuasion attempts differ from the advertisements that people are familiar with. Moreover, unlike other ambient marketing techniques, the use of creative media adds meaning to the advertised message. Explanations for how creative media advertising influences consumers can be found in diverse psychological theories with roots in motivation and memory.

First, literature about newness suggests that the newness of the creative medium can trigger both positive and negative reactions in consumers. Berlyne's theory of novelty (1950) describes two opposing behavioral mechanisms that occur in animals and humans when confronted with novelty: *curiosity* and *anxiety* to find out what the new stimulus entails. Anxiety is an emotion that entails a reaction of avoidance. For example, many people are afraid of complex technological innovations (Mukherjee & Hoyer, 2001). In order to induce curiosity rather than anxiety, Berlyne emphasized that the novel stimulus should feel at least somewhat familiar. In consumer behavior research, these ideas were translated in the theory of *consumer innovativeness and novelty seeking* (Hirschman, 1980). Hirschman argued that consumers have a drive to discover new products, because those products may have (future) advantages in comparison to the existing ones. Theories of curiosity highlight that this mindset arises when people experience a *gap in information* and feel that there is more to know and learn (Loewenstein, 1994). Empirical findings have demonstrated that subtle novel things lead to explorative reactions (Berlyne, 1950; Eelen, Van den Bergh, & Verlegh, 2015; Wang & Mitchell, 2011). Research findings in the context

of advertising (Cox & Locander, 1987; Pieters et al., 2002; Sheinin, Varki, & Ashley, 2011) and new product development (Goldenberg, Lehmann, & Mazursky, 2001; Steenkamp & Gielens, 2003; Van Trijp & van Kleef, 2008) support the idea that moderate novelty leads to positive effects among consumers. For example, the research of Eelen et al. (2015) showed that exploring new products led to positive outcomes for cognition (e.g., attention), evaluation (e.g., brand attitude), and behavior (e.g., trying out a product). Altogether these theories and findings indicate that well-chosen (not too extreme) novel creative media can positively affect cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral responses to advertising.

Second, for consumers the use of a creative medium for advertising is unexpected. And this might lead to the experience of *surprise*. Surprise is often considered one of the basic emotions, but is more like a state that readies the body and mind to explore and learn about the unknown (Ortony & Turner, 1990). Surprise comprises physiological reactions, behavioral responses, and a subjective feeling (Meyer, Niepel, Rudolph, & Schützwohl, 1991). When confronted with something unexpected, people are slower to undertake action, focus their attention on the surprising stimulus, and consciously experience a feeling of surprise. As such, it can be hypothesized that creative media will lead to increased cognitive responses. Hutter and Hoffmann (2014) review literature about surprise and indicate that surprise is a neutral emotion that amplifies ongoing evaluations (see Noordewier & Breugelmans, 2013 for a debate about the valence of the feeling of surprise). If a creative medium is considered a positive experience, the experience of surprise could *amplify* those feelings (Hutter & Hoffmann, 2014). Through the process of *affective priming* (Murphy & Zajonc, 1993), positive feelings can spillover to the advertised brand or product. When it comes to behavioral responses, there is empirical evidence that surprise is one of the driving forces of diffusion in (electronic) word of mouth (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Derbaix & Vanhamme, 2003; Dobele, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme, & van Wijk, 2007). This may partly be due to selective *self-enhancement concerns* (Berger & Iyengar, 2013): individuals are most likely to share with others what they think will make them look interesting and they might believe that surprising things are considered more interesting.

A third explanation for creative media advertising effects can be found in *schema theory* (Jurca & Madlberger, 2015). Schema theory states that a person's knowledge is organized into units called schemata (Roedder & Whitney, 1986; Warlaumont, 1997). More specifically, a schema is a cognitive network of related information that specifies the essential aspects of a specific stimulus domain (Fiske & Linville, 1980; Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977). In order to recognize and understand the commercial purpose of an advertising message,



consumers rely on their *brand schema* and *advertising schema*. The brand schema refers to all the thoughts and feelings a person ascribes to a specific brand (Dahlén, Rosengren, Törn, & Öhman, 2008; Halkias & Kokkinaki, 2011), whereas the advertising schema is one's complete understanding about advertising (e.g., how can you recognize it, and what is its purpose; Dahlén & Edenius, 2007; Friestad & Wright, 1994). According to Rauwers and van Noort (2016), the key difference between creative and traditional media advertising is that creative media advertising does not activate consumers' advertising schema. They reason that a creative medium is not previously used for advertising (i.e., schema-incongruent; Dahlén, 2005), and therefore, it is not able to function as a cue for the activation of consumers' advertising schema. If the advertising schema is not activated, consumers are possibly less aware of the persuasion attempt, and have less resistance toward the ad (see Franssen, Verlegh, & Kirmani, 2015 for an overview of resistance strategies) and consequently might be more persuaded by the ad. Another effect of the schema incongruity is that individuals intentionally need to find or create new links in memory. They want to understand why the medium was chosen to communicate the message. If the advertising schema is activated in memory and the creative medium does not fit into it, interruption of ongoing events takes place in order to solve the schema incongruity. Therefore, creative media might give rise to surprise and an increase in elaborate processing. The outcome of this processing might be that consumers find the link between the medium and the message. Solving the puzzle can give rise to positive feelings. Empirical evidence for this reasoning has been found in research about humor in advertising. When humor in advertisements is used, it is often left implicit what the pun is. Once consumers understand what is funny about the advertisement, positive feelings arise, preceded by increased thinking (Strick, Holland, van Baaren, van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 2013). In sum, departing from schema theory surprise, perceived persuasive intent, perceived fun and more elaborate thinking might underlie creative media advertising effects.

A fourth theoretical explanation derives from human associative memory (HAM) theory (Anderson & Bower, 1973; van Osselaer & Janiszewski, 2001). HAM theory posits that human memory is a network of concept nodes that are connected to each other through associative links. These associative links are created or strengthened when two stimuli are presented at the same time. As we outlined above, a key feature of creative media choice is the overlap between the medium communicating the message and the brand depicted in it. In terms of associative memory, a specific association (e.g., flexible) of a specific medium (e.g., a drinking straw) is transferred to the accompanying brand (e.g., yoga center YPlus). This learning

process might lead to stronger brand associations in memory than for advertisements of which the medium does not reinforce associations (i.e., when traditional media or incongruent unconventional media are used). These associations can be very persistent. Even if the brand is no longer featured in the medium, associative links may endure over time (Dahlén et al., 2009). Associative strength enhances the likelihood of retrieval of the association over time. This means that the closer the association between the creative medium and the brand is, the more likely it is that consumers will retrieve the medium when thinking about the brand and vice versa (Dahlén et al., 2009). In this respect, Dahlén et al. suggested that familiar brands may benefit more from creative media advertising because consumers who are familiar with a certain brand have already stored knowledge about that brand in memory (Campbell & Keller, 2003) and richer structures in memory are more easily retrieved.

## Reviewing Empirical Evidence for Creative Media Advertising Effects

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We follow the common structure of a literature review (Schwarz, Mehta, Johnson, & Chin, 2007). Based on a predefined list of search terms, we consolidated all articles discussing ambient communication, creative media advertising/marketing, and guerrilla marketing. As explained above (see the section “Defining Creative Media Advertising”), unconventional marketing campaigns can be considered creative media campaigns when the chosen medium is novel and inherently emphasizing a feature of the brand. In order to be able to detect such cases, the search terms were not restricted to creative media. The literature search took place in February 2015. The search terms we used were creative media AND advertising; creative media AND marketing; ambient communication; guerilla marketing. Using the Communication and Mass Media Complete database, we retrieved a total of 61 hits and 53 unique articles, including two book reviews and an editorial. From the articles, we selected all articles that experimentally tested effects of creative media advertising by comparing it explicitly to traditional media advertising. We also checked the reference list of relevant papers to search additional papers and we included some very recent book chapters in our review. In total, we reviewed 11 articles, with 16 studies, that appeared between 2005 and 2015 in five different outlets (e.g., *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Marketing Communications*). We also refer to work in progress where it can add insights. Because consumer responses can be divided into three

overall categories of outcomes (i.e., cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses; e.g., Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999), we organized the results sections accordingly. We acknowledge that because of the classification, we might force too much structure on the researchers' findings. For instance, brand associations are discussed in the section about cognitive responses, because brand associations in general make up the brand's knowledge structure in memory (Keller, 1993). However, brand associations can also be affective in nature (for a discussion, see, e.g., Verhellen et al., 2015). Relatedly, the section of affective outcomes does not exclusively focus on feelings and emotions, as it includes variables that potentially have underlying cognitive components. For instance, brand attitude, or consumers' overall evaluative judgment of the brand can be based on feelings, but also on beliefs about the brand's performance, its price fairness, etc. To bear the potential overlap in mind, we label the section "Evaluative Responses" in our review. Overall, we believe the structure helps in creating a comprehensive overview and presenting related findings. After reviewing the different consumer responses, mediating processes are discussed. An overview of the different articles is presented in Table 1. In many articles, multiple outcomes or mediating processes are examined. If so, we provide detailed information about the design of the study and the manipulation of creative media advertising used, the first time we describe the study in the review.

## Cognitive Responses

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The cognitive effects of creative media advertising were investigated in eight studies of six articles. Overall positive cognitive effects were found (but see Eelen & Seiler, 2016). The studied cognitive effects were attention, ad and brand memory (i.e., the strength of brand associations, the medium as a reminder of the brand, ad thoughts, brand recall), and beliefs about the brand (i.e., perceived consumer care).

First of all, four studies measured how much attention the advertisements received. However, attention was not always the core interest of the researchers and the difference between traditional and creative media advertising has not always been reported (Dahlén et al., 2009; Eelen & Seiler, 2016). The two studies that reported the findings, both found positive effects of creative media advertising on attention. Hutter and Hoffmann (2014) conducted a field study in which they compared three unconventional street marketing campaigns for a shoe store with a control condition (no campaign). Individuals who walked in a shopping street saw nothing unusual ( $n=258$ ), or were confronted with a giant shoebox placed on the sidewalk ( $n=622$ ), printed footsteps toward the

**Table 1:** Summary of Reviewed Empirical Articles Studying Consumer Responses to Creative (vs. Traditional) Media Advertising.

| Article                         | Type of Response  |  | Tested Underlying Mechanisms    | Method                |
|---------------------------------|---|--|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
|                                 | Cognitive   | Evaluative   |                                 |                       |
| Dahlén (2005)                   | Brand associations  | Ad credibility<br>Attitude toward the ad<br>Attitude toward the brand                                | Surprise                        | Experiment            |
| Dahlén and Edenius (2007)       |   | Persuasive attempt<br>Ad credibility<br>Attitude toward the ad                                       |                                 | Experiment            |
| Dahlén et al. (2009)            | Medium's ability to remind the brand<br>Brand associations (direct and delayed measure) | Attitude toward the brand  |                                 | Field experiments (2) |
| Dahlén (2009)                   | Brand-related thoughts<br>Brand associations  | Attitude toward the ad<br>Attitude toward the brand<br>Ad credibility<br>Perceived value             | Brand-related thoughts          | Experiments (2)       |
| Dahlén, Granlund, et al. (2008) |   | Purchase intention<br>Word-of-mouth intention  |                                 | Experiment            |
| Eelen and Seiler (2016)         | Brand recall<br>Website recall<br>Ad-related thoughts                                   | Attitude toward the ad<br>Attitude toward the brand<br>Willingness to share<br>Word-of-mouth valence | Surprise<br>Ad-related thoughts | Online experiment     |

Table 1: (Continued)

| Article                            | Type of Response            |   | Tested Underlying Mechanisms                    | Method  |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|---|---|
|                                    | Cognitive                   | Evaluative  |   |   |
| Hutter (2015)                      | Attention                   | Attitude toward the ad  | Purchase intention                              | Content analysis  |
| Hutter and Hoffmann (2014)         | Attention                   | Attitude toward the brand<br>Experience of surprise<br>Attitude toward the ad | Shop visits<br>Sales<br>Word-of-mouth intention | Experiment<br>Field experiment<br>Follow-up experiments (3) |
| Rauwers and van Noort (2015, 2016) |                             | Surprise<br>Humor<br>Persuasive attempt                                       |   | Online experiment   |
| Rosengren et al. (2015)            | Perception of consumer care | Attitude toward the ad<br>Attitude toward the brand                           | Purchase intention                              | Experiment  |
| Wotruch and Voorveld (2016)        |                             | Perceived value<br>Attitude toward the ad<br>Attitude toward the brand        | Purchase intention<br>Word-of-mouth intention   | Field experiment  |

entrance ( $n = 881$ ) or shoes toward the entrance ( $n = 703$ ). From all the unconventional stimuli used, according to our definition of creative media advertising, the shoe path is a creative medium because shoes literally trigger people to walk toward the shoe store (in contrast with the shoebox) and shoes are less common as a medium than floor graphics are. Two observers coded how much attention individuals had for the shoe store (ranging from not noticing, noticing but uninterested, noticing and looking around, to entering the shoe store). Absence of attention for the shoe store went down from 97% (no treatment) to 81% for the shoebox, 35% for the footsteps, and only 20% for the shoe path. In an online experiment by Hutter (2015, Study 2), 234 consumers ranging from 18 to 58 years watched the image of a billboard advertisement for a coffee brand (traditional medium) or of an ad on a manhole (by means of a sticker) out of which coffee steam seemed to evaporate (creative medium). In the creative medium condition the participants reported a higher level of attention for the ad than those in the traditional medium condition.

In three papers with a total of five experiments, Dahlén and colleagues found positive effects of creative media advertising on the strength of *brand associations*. In a first paper, Dahlén (2005) conducted a paper and pencil experiment during seminar breaks among 589 business students with a 2 (fictitious brand: energy drink vs. insurance company)  $\times$  2 (medium: traditional [newspaper] vs. creative [egg, elevator])  $\times$  2 (congruence between medium and brand: yes vs. no) between-subjects design. The participants were exposed to a scenario containing a photograph of a creative medium, a traditional medium, or an incongruent-creative medium. Note that by definition the latter is essentially not a creative medium. In the congruent-creative advertisement, the brand name and slogan were printed on an eggshell in an egg carton for the insurance company (careful protection) and on an elevator for the energy drink (uplifting). For the incongruent advertisements, the eggshell was used for the energy drink and the elevator for the insurance company. Brand associations were measured by asking participants to what extent certain words (of which some were target features, and other were fillers) could describe the brand. Dahlén found that exposure to a congruent-creative media ad resulted in stronger target brand associations than exposure to a traditional medium or to an incongruent-creative medium. In another paper, Dahlén (2009) conducted two studies to investigate the effect of creative media choice on ad and brand evaluations and brand associations for two online tabloids. Study 1 had a 2 (media choice: creative vs. traditional)  $\times$  2 (brand reputation: high vs. low) between-subjects design and was conducted among 157 business students. The creative medium was “bake-off” bread that can be freshly made last minute, to emphasize

those characteristics of the online tabloid. The traditional medium was a poster. Both media contained the same advertising message (“The latest”) and were photographed and included in the questionnaire. Participants imagined being in the grocery store and seeing one of the advertisements for one of the brands. Study 2 had the same  $2 \times 2$  experimental design as Study 1 and was conducted among 398 students. The students were exposed to the picture of one of six real international creative media campaigns (adapted to domestic brands) or to a picture of a poster advertisement that also contained the brand name and slogan. The results from both studies showed that brand associations were stronger for the creative medium condition than for the poster condition and that the effect was stronger for the low-reputation brands than for the high-reputation brands. According to Dahlén, low-reputation brands could benefit more from using creative media, because these brands have fewer positive brand associations stored in memory than high-reputation brands and therefore more to gain from additional positive associations. Finally, Dahlén et al. (2009) investigated in another two-study paper whether a creative media choice produced more persistent target brand associations than a traditional medium and whether it generated more spontaneous brand reminders than a traditional medium. In the first study, a field experiment with a  $2$  (media choice: creative vs. traditional, between-subjects)  $\times$   $2$  (time: immediate measurement vs. measurement one week later) design was conducted among 411 university students. Participants were exposed to a fire extinguisher or a poster ad, both depicting a salsa sauce label and the slogan “Burning sensation!” Responses were measured immediately after exposure and one week later. The results of Study 1 demonstrated that in the creative medium condition, there were no significant differences between the immediate and delayed responses (brand associations), whereas in the traditional medium condition the brand associations were less strong in the delayed condition than in the immediate condition. Hence, Dahlén et al. concluded that the immediate brand responses persisted over time due to the creative medium. Moreover, the creative medium led to stronger spontaneous reminders of the brand than the traditional medium. In Study 2, the main findings from Study 1 were replicated employing a different brand and creative medium. Furthermore, the effects were only measured one week after exposure, a new measure of brand associations was used, and new measures of exposure effects were included. The second field experiment had a  $2$  (media choice: creative vs. traditional)  $\times$   $3$  (exposure: no repeat exposure vs. repeat exposure vs. altered repeat exposure) between-subjects design. A total of 370 students were exposed to a loudspeaker or a poster ad with a throat-clearing lozenge brand and the slogan “Come again?” on it. One week after exposure, respondents were either asked to fill in a

questionnaire without an additional exposure, after repeated exposure, or after an altered repeated exposure. Results of Study 2 replicated the findings from Study 1: Respondents in the creative media choice condition had stronger target associations and were reminded of the brand to a greater degree when thinking of the medium than in the traditional medium condition. Moreover, the findings demonstrated that a creative media choice was a cue that evoked brand associations even if the brand was absent on the medium. Finally, Dahlén et al. (2009) found that an altered version of a creative media choice was able to transfer new associations to a brand.

To date, only one study investigated *brand recall* and found a negative effect of creative media advertising. Eelen and Seiler (2016) found a negative impact of creative media advertising on brand recall. In their online experiment, 287 participants between 18 and 76 years of age read a scenario about being in a juice bar. Half of the participants imagined flipping through a magazine and were exposed to an ad for a yoga center (i.e., the traditional medium). The other half imagined noticing that their drinking straw depicted a woman who could bend backward when the straw was flexed (i.e., the creative medium, stressing the association between yoga and flexibility) and were exposed to a picture of the straw. Both ads contained the same visual elements: a woman bending backward, the name of the yoga center, and the URL of the website. The focus of the study was on word of mouth, but at the end of the study participants were asked to recall the brand name and the website. The participants who were exposed to the creative medium were less likely to recall the brand (7%) than those who were exposed to the traditional medium (14%). Few participants recalled the website and no differences were found between conditions.

Somewhat in between cognitive and evaluative responses are *brand beliefs*, as consumers often have a positive or negative connotation attached to them. Rosengren, Modig, and Dahlén (2015) investigated *perceptions of consumer care*. They conducted a one-factorial between-subjects design experiment (advertising format: congruent-creative vs. incongruent-creative vs. traditional) among 293 individuals ( $M_{\text{age}}=40$ ) who were waiting in a train station. Participants were exposed to a picture of an ad for a fictitious coffee brand with the ad message “Time for a coffee break.” In the creative condition, the coffee ad was advertised on a clock (congruent-creative), whereas in the other conditions the ad was placed on a dog (incongruent-creative) or in a newspaper (traditional). Results demonstrated that participants in the congruent-creative medium condition believed the brand cared more about consumers than participants in the other two conditions.

Finally, two studies have shown a positive impact of creative media advertising on positive *ad and brand elaboration* as indicated



by the presence (vs. absence) of positive (vs. negative) thoughts (see mediating mechanisms, Dahlén, 2009; Eelen & Seiler, 2016).

## Evaluative Responses

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Several studies examined the effects of creative media advertising on consumers' evaluative responses. More specifically, the following evaluative responses were investigated: ad attitude and brand attitude, perceived value of the ad, and ad credibility.

Six studies in five articles found direct positive effects of creative media advertising on *ad attitude and brand attitude* (Dahlén, 2005, 2009; Dahlén & Edenius, 2007; Hutter, 2015; Rosengren et al., 2015). Hutter and Hoffmann (2014) did not report differences in effectiveness between the different unconventional campaigns they tested. Eelen and Seiler (2016) found a direct positive effect of creative media use on ad attitude, but not on brand attitude. The overall trend in the findings of creative media advertising research is that exposure to a creative media ad has a positive effect on consumers' ad and brand attitude.

Other studies on creative media advertising investigated the *perceived value* of the advertisement. This construct was operationalized by Rosengren et al. (2015) as the ad being "interesting," "worth attention," and "of value" and by Dahlén, Granlund, and Grenros (2008) as "valuable," "useful," and "important." In both studies, the creative media ads were rated as having higher perceived value than the traditional media ads, and this effect was stronger for low- than for high-reputation brands (Dahlén, Granlund, et al., 2008). Rosengren et al. (2015) showed that perceived value of the ad mediated the impact of creative media advertising on ad and brand attitude. However, we chose not to include the variable in the section of underlying mechanisms because it is conceptually very close to attitude toward the ad and it has not been referred to by any of the theories as a working mechanism behind creative media effects.

Two studies examined the effects of creative media advertising on *ad credibility* (Dahlén, 2005; Dahlén & Edenius, 2007). Both studies found similar effects, showing that a creative media ad was perceived as more credible than a traditional media ad. In the study by Dahlén and Edenius (2007), 417 students filled in a questionnaire on campus. The participants were exposed to an advertisement with the brand name and slogan either presented on a photographed congruent-creative medium (on an eggshell or elevator, see Dahlén, 2005) or in a traditional newspaper advertisement.

Mixed findings exist about creative media advertising being experienced as a *persuasion attempt*. Dahlén and Edenius (2007)

found that the creative media were seen less as persuasion attempts, and categorized less as being advertisements than the traditional medium. In contrast, Rauwers and van Noort (2016) did not find significant differences in the perception of a persuasion attempt. Work in progress by Rauwers and van Noort (2015) even shows that the creative medium is perceived as a stronger persuasion attempt than the traditional medium in a field study.

## Behavioral Responses

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Our review indicates that creative media advertising led to promising positive behavioral outcomes. Even though most studies have focused on behavioral intentions such as purchase intention and word-of-mouth intention, two recent studies have investigated actual word of mouth (Eelen & Seiler, 2016) and shop visits and sales (Hutter & Hoffmann, 2014) and found positive outcomes of creative media advertising.

The results for *purchase intention* are mixed. Several reviewed articles indicated that exposure to a creative medium has a positive effect on consumers' purchase intention. The online experiment of Rosengren et al. (2015) demonstrated that, compared to the incongruent-creative and traditional media ad, the creative media ad evoked a higher purchase intention. The same result was obtained in the experiment of Dahlén, Granlund, et al. (2008). Other studies did not find a direct positive effect of creative media advertising on purchase intention. Hutter (2015) found no difference in purchase intention between conventional and creative media advertising. Hutter and Hoffmann (2014) did not report direct effects. Still, Wottrich and Voorveld (2016) demonstrated that effects on intentions were mediated. In a field experiment among 89 students at a large university campus with a 2 (media choice: creative/traditional)  $\times$  2 (brand familiarity: familiar/unfamiliar) between-subjects factorial design, it was found that that creative media advertising had no direct effect on purchase intention, but that ad and brand evaluations mediated the positive effect of creative media choice on purchase intention. The stimulus material resembled Dahlén et al.'s (2009) fire-extinguisher experiment.

The reviewed studies show evidence that creative media choice leads to higher *word-of-mouth (WOM) intentions* (Dahlén, Granlund, et al., 2008; Eelen & Seiler, 2016; Hutter & Hoffmann, 2014). Only Wottrich and Voorveld (2016) did not find an effect on WOM intention in their field experiment. Maybe WOM fits the online context better, which makes it harder to find WOM intentions in an offline field experiment. In the online context, Eelen and Seiler (2016) requested participants to write a message about

the advertisement on social media. The participants in the creative medium condition wrote more positive messages about the advertisement than the participants in the traditional medium condition did. However, they were less likely to mention the product in their WOM.

Most importantly, Hutter and Hoffmann (2014) demonstrated that exposure to a creative medium did not only positively affect purchase intention, but also real *shopping* and *purchase behavior*. The chance that individuals visited the shoe store in front of which the outdoor advertisement was placed was higher when the advertisement was creative (see the section “Cognitive Responses”). Investigating actual sales figures from the shoe store, they showed that more surprising creative media led to higher sales.

## Underlying Mechanisms

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As discussed in the theoretical section, the literature suggests several underlying mechanisms that drive creative media advertising effects. To date only few studies measured and tested variables related to those mechanisms. In this section, we provide an overview of the tested variables.

### PERCEIVED CURIOSITY

Because of its newness, a creative medium can trigger curiosity and positive reactions. Only one study verified this mechanism indirectly (Hutter & Hoffmann, 2014, follow-up study C). It cannot yet be concluded how impactful this mechanism is. Moreover, curiosity was highly correlated with surprise.

### PERCEIVED SURPRISE

Schema theory, but also theories of newness and unexpectedness would assume that perceived surprise underlies positive effects of creative media choice in advertising. Indeed, the literature shows consistent evidence that exposure to a creative media ad activates perceived surprise (Dahlén, 2005; Eelen & Seiler, 2016; Hutter, 2015; Hutter & Hoffmann, 2014; Rauwers & van Noort, 2016; Rosengren et al., 2015). It has been demonstrated that creative media were more surprising than traditional media and subsequently led to more attention (Hutter, 2015; Hutter & Hoffmann, 2014), positive ad and brand attitude (Dahlén, 2005; Eelen & Seiler, 2016; Hutter, 2015; Hutter & Hoffmann, 2014), more positive WOM (Eelen & Seiler, 2016; Hutter & Hoffmann, 2014), more positive affect, higher purchase intention and higher interest in shopping

coupons (Hutter & Hoffmann, 2014). Some authors did not find the mediation effect of surprise on purchase intention (Hutter, 2015; Rosengren et al., 2015), and on brand attitude (Rosengren et al., 2015). With respect to cognitive brand responses, non-significant or even negative mediation effects were found. Eelen and Seiler (2016) found no effect of creative media advertising through surprise on brand recall or mentioning the product in WOM. In contrast, they even found that participants who were more surprised had more positive thoughts about the advertisement but were less likely to mention the brand name in their online WOM message. In their work in progress, Rauwers and van Noort (2015) were unable to find a mediation effect of surprise on brand recall and brand recognition. It is remarkable that Dahlén (2005) did only report mediation analyses with surprise on ad and brand attitude but not for brand associations. In sum, there is evidence that surprise (at least partly) explains the positive outcomes of creative media on evaluative consumer responses, but surprise does not seem to explain positive outcomes on cognitive brand responses and sometimes even has a negative impact on brand memory.

#### PERCEIVED PERSUASIVE ATTEMPT

Schema theory would predict that creative media are less recognized as persuasion attempts, because they are incongruent with the advertising schema. Two studies investigated whether creative media advertisements are less or better recognized as persuasion attempts than traditional media and found mixed results (see the section “Evaluative Responses”). However, those studies did not investigate whether that variable mediated other effects of creative media advertising. In contrast with expectations, work in progress now shows that creative media were perceived as stronger persuasion attempts, which subsequently resulted into more positive behavioral responses (Rauwers & van Noort, 2015).

#### POSITIVE BRAND-RELATED THOUGHTS AND INCONGRUENCE RESOLUTION

In line with schema theory, Hutter and Hoffmann (2014) confirmed that participants who resolved the incongruence of the unconventional marketing campaign felt more positive affect that spilled over to a more positive attitude toward the ad. Other researchers also found evidence for this idea (Dahlén, 2009; Eelen & Seiler, 2016). Both articles demonstrated that placing an ad on a creative medium enhanced positive brand and ad-related thoughts compared with placing the same ad on a traditional medium. Dahlén (2009) demonstrated that the activation of positive brand-related thoughts

mediated the effect of exposure to a creative medium on consumers' ad attitude, brand attitude, ad credibility, and brand evaluations. Dahlén concluded that a creative medium advertisement could function as a rhetorical figure, inviting consumers to solve the puzzle of the message and elaborate on the ad message of the brand. Eelen and Seiler (2016) described a similar logic and revealed positive indirect effects through positive ad-related thoughts on ad attitude, brand attitude, willingness to write about the advertisement on social media, and the positivity of WOM. Importantly, however, Eelen and Seiler (2016) also found a negative effect of the amount of positive thoughts. The more positive thoughts participants had listed, the less likely they were to mention the brand name in WOM. This is in line with previous research showing that elaborating on the advertisement might take away resources for the brand (Strick et al., 2013).

#### PERCEIVED HUMOR

It is suggested that creative media ads are perceived as humorous or fun, and that this feeling spills over to positive feelings toward the brand and ad. The underlying reasoning is close to the idea that solving the puzzle leads to positive affect (see above). Rauwers and van Noort (2016) tested the assumption that creative media are more humorous but did not find support for this assumption. However, their work in progress (Rauwers & van Noort, 2015) yielded the effect: a creative media ad was perceived as more humorous than a traditional media ad which contributed to positive effects on attitudes and purchase intention.

## Conclusion and Discussion

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The aim of this chapter was to present a comprehensive literature review of creative media advertising effects. All empirical findings of creative media research to date (comparing the impact of creative media advertising with traditional advertising, i.e., 16 experiments in total) were systematically discussed in three consumer response categories: cognitive, evaluative, and behavioral responses (see Table 1 for an overview).

Several conclusions can be drawn. First, affective or evaluative responses (such as ad attitude and brand attitude) to creative media advertising were studied frequently and overall positive effects were found. Often these effects were mediated by surprise (see the section "Underlying Mechanisms"). This is in line with theories about dealing with novelty, unexpectedness, and schema (in)congruity (for an overview of the different theoretical explanations, see

the section “Theorizing about the Effectiveness of Creative Media Advertising”). Additionally, creative media generated positive thoughts, which also generated positive affect. It has been shown that resolving the puzzle of the campaign leads to positive affect (Hutter & Hoffmann, 2014), which follows from schema theory. Second, there are mixed findings about the effectiveness of creative media for cognitive responses. Our review shows that creative media can strengthen brand associations, even over time (e.g., Dahlén et al., 2009). Those findings are in line with the theory of human associative memory but need further replications to demonstrate robustness. In contrast to these positive cognitive effects, insignificant and negative findings were found for brand recall and mentioning product-related information in word of mouth. These effects were not mediated by surprise or positive thoughts or even influenced negatively by these factors. Therefore, it has been suggested that creative media advertising can be fun and absorbing but might reduce attention for the brand elements if those are not central in the puzzle between medium and message that needs to be solved (Eelen & Seiler, 2016). In that case brand memory may not always benefit from creative media advertising. Third, only two studies have investigated real behavioral responses. The effects found are promising: creative media advertising increased sales and shop visits (Hutter & Hoffmann, 2014), and word of mouth became more positive (Eelen & Seiler, 2016). Purchase intentions and word-of-mouth intention were generally considered more positive for creative media.

The overview of the literature also exposes many interesting venues for future research. First, creative media advertising conceptually clearly differs from other unconventional advertising formats such as ambush, parasitic, ambient, or street marketing (see the section “Defining Creative Media Advertising”), but the question is whether consumer responses are different too. We theorized that creative media are surprising, curiosity invoking, and increasing elaboration to solve the link between the medium and the message. The crucial difference between creative media advertising and other unconventional formats may be that for creative media there is a puzzle that can actually be solved. Research findings indicated that incongruent-creative media with a poor fit between the medium and the message did not lead to positive consumer responses. To date, only one empirical article compared different unconventional advertising formats in one research design (Hutter & Hoffmann, 2014), and it was not the focus of their work. In their described series of studies, what we call creative media advertising turned out most effective. Future research should compare advertising formats more explicitly to show differences in effectiveness. A related suggestion is that future research should test theories more explicitly against each

other. The underlying mechanisms tested so far cannot tell us exactly how creative media work. Instead, we should create opposing predictions about creative media effects based on different theories. For instance, schema theory predicts that creative media work for consumer who solve the incongruity but not for those who don't. If elaborated processing of the ad is necessary to solve the puzzle of the creative medium, then factors like multitasking, advertising clutter, and low involvement in the audience can have detrimental effects on its effectiveness. The theory of novelty seeking would not make these predictions, but would claim that extreme unfamiliar formats of advertising might induce anxiety rather than curiosity among consumers. The theory of human associative network can explain why brand associations are stronger for creative media but its predictive power for other outcomes remains to be tested. Hence, more research is required to come to a full understanding of the ideal circumstances to make creative media advertisements work. Specifically the variables discussed here (i.e., multitasking, advertising clutter, involvement, degree of novelty) could be measured or manipulated to find out why and how creative media advertising works.

A second line of thoughts concerns the ecological validity of the effects. Most studies measured consumer responses directly after exposure to the advertisement (but see Dahlén et al., 2009), and by asking explicit questions about it (but see Hutter & Hoffmann, 2014). However, consumers do not often consciously reflect about how advertisements make them feel (Shapiro & Krishnan, 2001). Hence, practitioners should interpret the positive evaluative outcomes with care. It should be investigated whether the effects are replicated with implicit measures and whether they are enduring over time. The insignificant and negative findings for brand memory should be tested with implicit measures too, because implicit brand memory effects cannot be revealed by self-reported measures (Vandeberg, Murre, Voorveld, & Smit, 2015).

One might question whether creative media advertising is worth the effort when the aim is to reach many potential consumers, but the omnipresence of social media in consumers' lives could counter this doubt. In a real-world setting, creative media campaigns are geographically bounded; in some cases only a handful of consumers can be reached as compared to TV or radio ads, banners and magazine ads. Additionally, one should take into account the cognitive boundaries: not everyone pays attention to a creative media ad when walking, cycling, or driving around in the public domain. However, if the advertisement is shared online by consumers (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011), or written about by the press, it might "go viral" and reach a larger audience in the end (Van der Lans et al., 2010). Also, most studies exposed participants

to pictures of creative media instead of exposing them to the media directly and still found effects. Thus, it could be argued that encounters of the stimuli online might also be effective. The research findings of Eelen and Seiler (2016) show promising results for online sharing, but more research in this area should be conducted.

Another paradoxical remark is about adopting creative media advertising strategies to stand out. The central idea for marketers is to raise attention and get the message across by being different than other advertising messages (Pieters et al., 2002). A critical issue in this respect is the context in which creative media advertising takes place. This context is often an outdoor and public setting. Consumers are confronted with messages while they are walking the street, taking the metro, going up the stairs in a mall, and so on. As we explained above, in this context many factors may disturb the cognitive processing of the message and hinder its effectiveness. Another issue is that creative media advertising might become less effective over time if the majority of marketers choose to adopt it. Rosengren et al. (2015) argued that creative media campaigns might no longer be considered as surprising to consumers as they were before. Though other researchers who conducted creative media ad studies in the same time frame were still perceived as more surprising than traditional media, high adoption rates of this advertising strategy might diminish positive outcomes over time. Also, consumers might learn that all objects can be advertising media, and thereby adjust their advertising schema, and start avoiding creative media advertisements like they do for more traditional persuasion attempts.

Finally, we would like to remark that, in general, creative media advertisements make a link between the medium and the product (e.g., flexible drinking straw – yoga center; fire extinguisher – hot salsa sauce) more often than between the medium and the brand. Therefore, it is not unlikely that competitive brands can profit from the campaign too. Eelen and Seiler (2016) argued that brand memory suffers when consumers are elaborating on the puzzle of the ad (what is the link between the medium and the message?) without the brand being essential for solving it. Therefore, we believe it is important to translate the brand into the creative media. For instance, Autodrop is a Dutch brand of licorice candy with “car” in its name. In that way, a driving wheel on a shopping cart can be an advertisement for Autodrop but not for other candies. In their ongoing work, Rauwers and van Noort (2015) actually show that brand recall of Autodrop was higher when consumers used such a shopping cart (in comparison with a traditional poster in the supermarket) instead of lower. Even though the effect may have been driven by exposure time (the steering wheel was with the consumer during the whole shopping experience), it highlights that the brand should be incorporated well in the creative medium.



In this review, we elaborated on creative media advertising to deepen our understanding of this new advertising format. Overall the review shows that creative media advertising can lead to positive cognitive, evaluative and behavioral outcomes. By being unexpected and by implicitly communicating the message, creative media advertisements have benefits for marketers and are interesting to consumers. In our view, creative media advertising is clearly distinct from other unconventional advertising formats, and much research is still needed to reveal the boundary conditions and the ideal circumstances to make creative media as effective as possible. We are only starting to discover its unique working mechanisms.

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