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Creative Approach in Advertising as a Tool to Influence Audiences

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Abstract. The use of creative elements in advertising is considered to be an effective way to influence the audience, but their perception is subjective and is associated with several factors. Many empirical studies using quantitative methods show that creative content is more appealing and better remembered than ordinary commercials. Studies using physiological measurements are few and focus on the ability of creative advertisements to retain attention and memorability. The main hypothesis of the study is that original and unexpected elements in advertisements can distract the audience's attention from the brand. The research methods included an experiment on tracking eye movement using an infrared eye tracker, supplemented by a survey of experimental participants. The authors analyzed oculomotor activity indicators, gaze movement graphs, and heat maps. As a result of the study, a comparative analysis of metrics (Returns, Saccade count, etc.) showed a greater desire among the participants of the experiment to consider and study creative visual content. Measurements of the two areas of attention in the image and the analysis of heat maps confirmed the main hypothesis. The second stage of the study (the survey) also showed that associative ideas stimulated by non-trivial creative content were not always associated with the product advertised. However, according to the respondents, creative advertisements sufficiently convey the meaning of the commercial offer. The survey made it possible to summarize other issues and risks that need to be considered when applying a creative advertising strategy. The research results provide advertisers with the opportunity to achieve a balance between creativity and commercial goals, as well as reduce the risk of losing product focus in advertising.

Keywords: creative advertising, advertising perception, eye-tracker, attention focus, associative ideas

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Креативный подход в рекламе как инструмент влияния на аудиторию

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Аннотация. Применение креативных элементов в рекламе принято считать эффективным способом воздействия на аудиторию, однако их восприятие субъективно и связано с рядом факторов. Многие эмпирические исследования с применением количественных методов показывают, что креативный контент более привлекателен для аудитории, а также лучше запоминается, чем обычная реклама.

Исследования с применением физиологических измерений малочисленны и сконцентрированы на изучении способности креативной рекламы удерживать внимание и запоминаться. Основная гипотеза исследования: оригинальные и неожиданные элементы в рекламе способны отвлекать внимание аудитории от бренда. Методы исследования: эксперимент по отслеживанию движения глаз с помощью инфракрасного глазного трекера, дополненный опросом участников эксперимента. Проведен анализ показателей глазодвигательной активности, графиков движения взгляда и тепловых карт. Результаты исследования: сравнительный анализ метрик (Returns, Saccade count, и др.) показал большее желание участников эксперимента рассматривать и изучать креативный визуальный контент. Измерения двух областей внимания на изображении и анализ тепловых карт подтверждают основную гипотезу исследования. Второй этап исследования (опрос) также показал, что ассоциативные идеи, стимулируемые нетривиальным креативным контентом, не всегда связаны с рекламируемым продуктом. Однако, по мнению респондентов, креативная реклама в достаточной степени передает смысл коммерческого предложения. Проведенный опрос позволил нам обобщить другие проблемы и риски, которые необходимо учитывать при применении креативной рекламной стратегии. Использование результатов исследования предоставляет рекламодателям возможность достигать баланса между креативностью и коммерческими целями, а также снижать риск потери фокуса на продукте в рекламе.

Ключевые слова: креативная реклама, восприятие рекламы, глазной трекер, фокус внимания, ассоциативные идеи

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Introduction

Global competition and digitalization of all spheres of life lead to weakening consumer loyalty. Manufacturers are forced to look for effective communication tools that can attract and retain the attention of audiences. Original creative advertising solutions often solve both tasks. Research shows that creative advertising generates distinction and is a sign of high quality in the eyes of consumers [Terkan, 2014]. On the other hand, there is an opinion that companies using a creative advertising strategy may be perceived as "frivolous" and "unreliable" [Melnikova et al., 2024].

A study of works on creative advertising reveals various interpretations of this concept. We assume that creative ideas and solutions are unique. The mechanisms of impact of different creative advertising products on the audience may also differ.

The creative element is the core of a commercial offer presentation. It transforms the key message into a symbolic form. A.V. Karyagina [Karyagina, 2017] notes that the advertised object in this case acquires "additional semantic load", identifying belonging to a certain type of behavior. Creative advertising, as opposed to standard commercial content, can differentiate itself from norms or experiences, for example by employing unique visual or verbal solutions. A creative idea must have relevance to target audiences in addition to being imaginative or unique. Relevance, however, means that the advertisement has commercial value for the target market, distinguishing content from art [Jin et al., 2022]. Other authors argue that in addition to the semantic load, advertising should carry an original idea and an element of understatement [Ivanova et al., 2015]. Creative advertising implicitly conveys information that often includes an unusual idea, some form of artistic expression, and novelty of execution [Shen et al., 2021]. An ambiguous and incongruent message challenges the recipient and makes them want to unravel the meaning [Smith et al., 2008]. Also, the creative solution is a kind of projection of the author's personality, his or her values, principles, views and temperament [Dmitrieva, Shishova, 2010].

Many authors emphasize that the main characteristic of creative advertising is commercial effectiveness, that is, the ability to influence sales growth [Markina, 2018; Makusheva,



Shchelkonogova, 2019]. V.L. Muzykant [Muzykant, 2009] writes that only creative advertising is guaranteed to provide a return on investment. A.A. Arstambekova [Arstambekova, 2023] considers that creativity implies the use of innovative approaches. In addition, the result should be surprising and unpredictable for content consumers, different from other messages, causing positive emotions, and attractive. It is important to create positive emotions in the customer, resulting in a desire to make repeat purchases [Rechkova, Melnikova, 2017]. The task of creativity in advertising is to create an image that can clearly convey the idea of the sender of the message, to evoke pleasant impressions in consumers and make them act [Pavlova, 2013].

Yermakov Yu.V. and Starobinskaya N.M. [Yermakov, Starobinskaya, 2019] consider innovation, imagination, influence, originality, memorability and formation of a new style as signs of creative advertising. Other authors suggest that the elements of creativity are surprise, humor, and contrast [Drewniany, Jewler, 2008]. Among other things, the creative idea must be relevant, i.e. it must be in line with the promotional strategy [Koslow et al., 2003]. The creative images should be able to change the mindset of potential consumers and influence their desire to purchase [Dolzhenkova, Yamalova, 2016].

Many empirical studies show that creative content is more attractive to audience and is also remembered better than conventional advertising [Ang et al., 2007; Baack et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2008]. Within the framework of this research, we put forward the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Original and unexpected elements in advertising can distract the audience's attention from the brand.

Hypothesis 2. Associative ideas stimulated by non-trivial creative content may be weakly related to the product advertised.

Materials and methods

The study included the following stages:

1) the stage of advertisement samples selection. At this stage, a group of young men and women (20 people) viewed advertising content. Two images were selected from 10 content samples: the first was a sample of standard advertisement (an ice cream advertisement) identified by the test subjects as the most successful one that communicates the meaning of the commercial offer well; and the second sample, which was selected by most of the test subjects as a creative and relevant advertisement (a Yandex disk advertisement);

2) the preparatory stage. At this stage, a new group of test subjects (12 young women and 12 young men, aged from 17 to 20) was formed to exclude the “learning effect”. Instruction and eye position calibration were conducted for the participants of the experiment;

3) conducting measurements. The test subjects were shown two advertisement samples (the first one with standard content, and the second – with creative content). The research method consisted in an eye movement tracking experiment using an infrared eye tracker. The experiment was conducted under conditions of complete opacity of the research objectives and hypotheses;

4) using post hoc questionnaires to interpret the quantitative data.

The study was conducted at the Center for Social Communications Research of the Graduate School of Media Communications and Public Relations (Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University).

Results and discussion

Table 1 summarizes the main results of the eye-tracker measurements when the test subjects viewed the two advertisement samples. In both groups of subjects (female and male), the second advertisement sample (the creative one) was evaluated as the most attractive (the lowest value of Fix before in the data series and a high value of Fix time). Higher values of Returns, Saccade count, and Saccade amplitude common were also recorded when viewing the second sample compared to the first sample. These results show a greater desire of the experiment participants to review and study creative visual content in detail. Moreover, studying the second advertisement

sample (the creative one) is associated with a higher level of cognitive load. The high level of interest in creative advertising is also evidenced by the high values of the All Fixations indicator. When viewing the second advertisement sample, measurements in the groups of young men and women demonstrated higher values of Saccade amplitude. Presumably, this means that the participants of the experiment “scanned” the presented content in search of meaningful elements.

Table 1
Таблица 1

Oculomotor activity metrics (mean value, median value, standard deviation)
Показатели глазодвигательной активности
(среднее значение, медиана, стандартное отклонение)

Metrics	Ad sample No. 1					
	Females			Males		
	mean	med	std	mean	med	std
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
fix before	16.44	16	9.09	40.22	27.5	33.52
tff	1.24	1.03	0.86	2.32	1.41	1.98
fix time	2.85	2.31	2.05	3.24	2.83	1.85
returns	5.89	7	2.26	13.10	13	8.58
mean fix	0.11	0.08	0.08	0.07	0.04	0.06
all fixations	23.33	23	9.24	67.7	82	59.6
saccad ampl	1.11	1.03	0.27	1.14	1.12	0.28
saccad count	14.8	14	9.66	53.6	64.5	51.89
saccad ampl common	15.58	13.19	10.75	58.01	69.21	74.69

End of Table 1
Окончание табл. 1

Metrics	Ad sample No. 2					
	Females			Males		
	mean	med	std	mean	med	std
1	8	9	10	11	12	13
fix before	13.6	5	23.8	8.7	8	8.11
tff	1.39	0.51	2.73	0.50	0.36	0.62
fix time	3.45	3.13	2.08	4.54	3.02	4.65
returns	6.2	6.5	3.71	17.1	16.5	9.09
mean fix	0.14	0.14	0.08	0.06	0.04	0.05
all fixations	26.6	27	10.9	88	86.5	53.96
saccad ampl	1.69	1.72	0.38	1.57	1.46	0.35
saccad count	19.4	19	8.62	69.9	66	50.15
saccad ampl common	31.28	34.19	11.61	100.63	91.59	63.69



We did not set out to study gender differences in the perception of creative content. However, in this group of subjects, men demonstrated a greater degree of engagement and interest in creative advertising than women.

We also conducted a detailed analysis of the metrics of oculomotor activity while viewing the second sample (we considered separately two areas of attention in the image - water and logo). The results of the measurements are summarized below (Table 2).

Table 2
Таблица 2

Measurements of attention distribution across different areas in the image
Измерение распределения внимания по различным областям изображения

Metrics	Number of fixations, count		Returns (transition to AOI)		Saccade count	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Ad sample No. 2 AOI 1 (logo)	22	77.4	8.9	28.5	12.1	47.9
Ad sample No. 2 AOI 2 (water)	41	77.6	11.8	27.3	28.2	49.3

The measurements show that the flow of water in the image was more interesting for the test subjects than the company logo and additional information about the commercial offer. This result confirms our hypothesis.

Next, we analyzed the associations (Table 3 and Table 4) in both groups of subjects.

Table 3
Таблица 3

Association series based on the results of the women survey
Серия ассоциаций, основанная на результатах опроса девушек

Ad sample No. 1	Desire to eat; cold, sweet taste; typical summer and use of ice cream; summer, American movies, sweet; peace, calm; beach, heat; no specific associations, ordinary image; brightly colored ice cream; summer, warm weather; strawberries, something bright, childlike, delicious
Ad sample No. 2	Expression, sea, memories; nice to watch; wave=yandex wave; sea of content; Jumanji game; movie premiere; target audience slang; want to review; conveys dynamics; metaphor, wordplay; quest; Fort Bayard; original idea; university; data sharing

Table 4
Таблица 4

Association series based on the results of the men survey
Серия ассоциаций, основанная на результатах опроса юношей

Ad sample No. 1	Taste of childhood; tasty treat; summer; school and childhood, as it looks very much like a slide from a school presentation; childhood; food, happiness, pleasure; ice cream - home, comfort, calm; desire to buy ice cream and eat it; evening with friends having ice cream
Ad sample No. 2	Tsunami, cataclysm; successful slogan; apocalypse movie; liked the wordplay; liked the visuals; emotions of delight; what we need; humor for students; on a roll; was fun to watch; Titanic; distance learning

In most cases, the first advertisement sample evoked in the women's group associations related to the product itself and to situations of product use. The analysis also allows us to evaluate this advertising content as very successful, as it evokes positive emotions and arouses the desire to buy or use the product.

In the second advertisement sample, the creative idea stimulates the emergence of non-standard, unconventional associations in young women (e.g., a sea of content; a game of Jumanji, etc.). Also, several women noted the originality of the idea and wordplay. The number of associations directly related to the service offered in the advertisement is insignificant. As for the men's group, the first sample of advertisements evoked positive emotions; the associative series was mainly associated with the product and situations of its consumption (an evening with friends having some ice cream; the taste of childhood). The young men describing their associations with the second advertisement also used several words not related to the essence of the commercial offer (an apocalypse movie, the Titanic). At the same time, they quite clearly voiced the idea that this was the kind of advertising they were interested in (they liked the play of words; the visual solution; emotions of admiration; “that is just what we need”, humor for students).

In answers to the question “Which of the samples conveys the meaning/advertising message best?” in both groups of respondents, the second sample advertisement leads with a slight advantage (Fig. 1). 50% of the young women and 70% of the young men surveyed identified the second advertisement sample as the most memorable (Fig. 2). Heat map analysis. In the case of the young women, when studying the first advertisement sample, the ice cream cone received the most attention (fig. 3). Each of the women held her gaze at it. Also, each woman read the inscription on the image (slogan) but did not spend much time on it. Most of the respondents in this group paid attention to the background and looked at the image briefly. Another important object was the company logo on a cocktail glass. Holding the gaze on the logo of “Baskin Robbins” makes us realize that people pay attention to the brand, so the advertisement will be more recognizable and effective.

The male audience viewed this image in a more pointed manner. More time was spent on large objects, such as the ice cream cone and the cocktail glass. Also, their eyes lingered on the slogan for a longer period than the women's. When studying the second sample, women paid more attention to the top part of the image (windows, water flowing from the windows, students at their desks). The text attracted less attention than the visual elements of the content (Fig. 4). Only two women participants studied the text in detail, including the link at the end of the text.

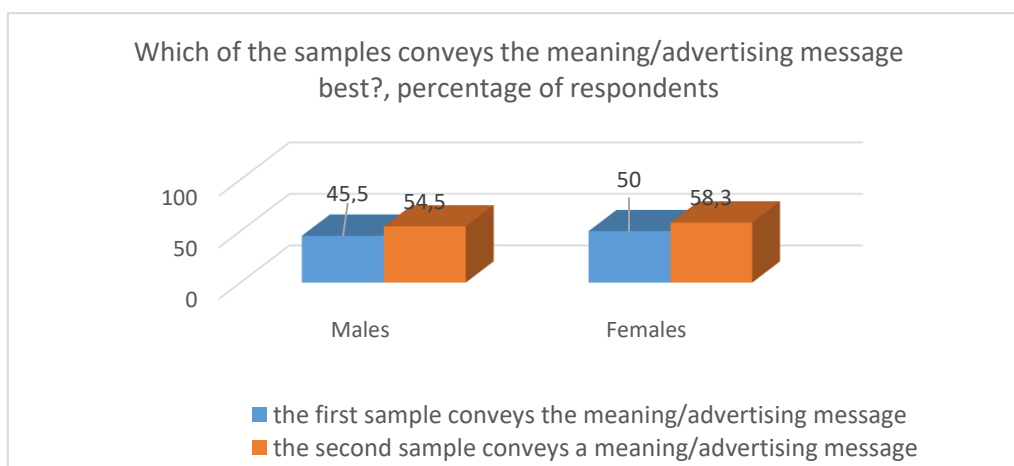


Fig 1. Answers to the question “Which of the samples conveys the meaning/advertising message best? “, %

Рис. 1. Ответы на вопрос «Какой из образцов лучше всего передает смысл/рекламное сообщение?», %

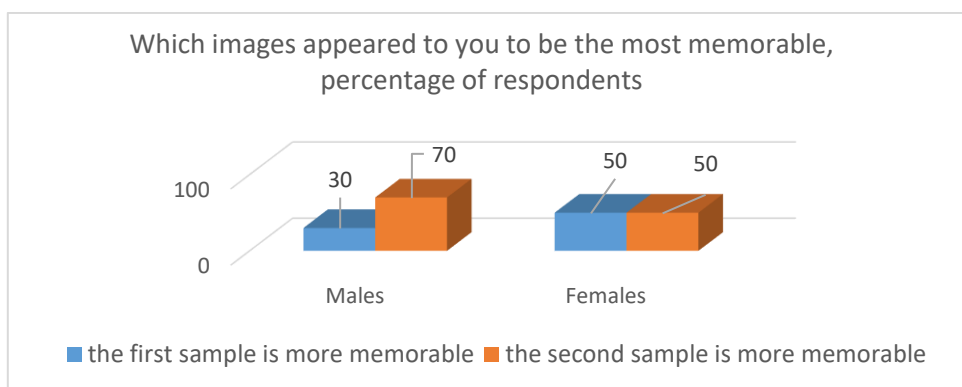


Fig 2. Answers to the question “Which images appeared to you to be the most memorable?”, %
Рис. 2. Ответы на вопрос «Какие изображения показались вам наиболее запоминающимися? », %



Fig 3. Heat map (the first sample of advertisement)
Рис. 3. Тепловая карта (первый рекламный образец)



Fig 4. Heat map (the second advertisement sample)
Рис. 4. Тепловая карта (второй рекламный образец)

The same results were obtained when analyzing the heat maps of young adults.

Creative brand communication is associated with certain problems and risks:

- the problem of interpretation. The original form of information presentation in creative content implies a greater degree of freedom in interpreting (deciphering) the message. At the same time, there are risks of incorrect (distorted) understanding of the content. In the extreme version, the content can be perceived as non-trivial and incomprehensible at the same time;

- the problem of shifting emphasis. Unique content may draw the focus of attention, while branded elements may remain on the periphery. Consequently, creative advertisements can demonstrate high rates of memorability. However, the recipient sometimes remembers the original idea, but does not remember the brand advertised;

- the problem of associative connection (relevance) of content. The original solution in communications is not always related to (associated with) the product advertised;

- the problem of persuasiveness. Advertisements should persuade the consumer to make a purchase or take another action (information gathering, participation in a contest, subscription to a newsletter, etc.);

- the problem of brand trust. It is difficult to predict in what way the use of creative content will influence a particular consumer and his/her attitude towards the brand. To some extent we can rely on more or less successful cases, but such a basis is not enough to predict success;

- brand image problem. There is an assumption that companies implementing a creative advertising strategy may be perceived as unserious, unreliable and unprofessional.

Summarizing the research findings, we note that both hypotheses have been confirmed. Creative advertising content appeals to the audience under study. According to the respondents, it sufficiently conveys the meaning of the commercial offer. At the same time, visual elements of creative content attract attention to a greater extent than textual ones. Also, the hypothesis that creative advertising stimulates various associations that are not related to the essence or characteristics of the advertised product is true. Consequently, creative content can be part of a company's advertising strategy and solve various problems (from attracting the attention of the audience to improving the brand image). The use of creative content is associated with several risks that need to be considered. No potential conflict of interest has been reported.

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