

Strelow, Enrique; Talke, Katrin; Heitmann, Mark

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On the Potential of Dialogs in Advertising

In this paper, we argue and empirically show that the use of dialogs in advertisements can increase preference for the advertised brand. Dialogs should both facilitate ad content processing and appeal to consumers' dialogical self, thus enhancing affective brand response. We also show that the effect is amplified when dialogs are embedded in a story.

Dr. Enrique Strelow, Prof. Dr. Katrin Talke, Prof. Dr. Mark Heitmann

Indisputably, the content of an ad is a key driver of success (Eastlack & Rao, 1989). The rhetorical format, however, in which ad content is communicated deserves more attention. When reviewing highly influential advertisements (e.g., the 10 most-watched ads on YouTube in 2019), five out of ten use dialogs between two or more conversers. Dialog theory (e.g., Graff, 2003) emphasizes the benefits of conveying arguments in a dialogic format, and the effectiveness of dialogs has been shown in many disciplines, such as educational psychology (Branigan, Catchpole, & Pickering, 2010), developmental psychology (Fogel, Koeyer, Bellagamba, & Bell, 2002), and brain science (Lewis, 2002).

Drawing from dialog theory we argue that a dialogical communication format leads to an easier, more intense and more favorable processing of ad content. Appeals to consumers' dialogical selves should thus positively influence their affective response to a brand. In addition, we use evidence on storytelling in ads to propose that the effect is amplified when a dialog is embedded in a story. We test our propositions empirically on a sample of 2,500 consumers and 94 audio-visual ads from a single domain (candy). Since the results support our expectations, they should be interesting to managers as they imply that dialogs may be a powerful communication format to stimulate consumers' inner discourse about communication content, particularly when executed in a story format.

Dialogs in Advertising: Effects on Brand Preferences

Ad content can be communicated in a variety of rhetorical formats. The verbal ones include monologs and dialogs. Monologs are speeches made directly

to the audience by a single character. In a dialog, two or more characters converse directly with one another. The audience can hear what is said but is not included in the conversation.

Dialog theory (e.g., Graff, 2003; Walton, 2007) assumes that the relationship between the individual and the society is dialogic. It emphasizes the close connection between social and individual cognition and perceives the human self as a locus of dialog rather than a center of monologic consciousness (Billig, 1987). As a psychological concept, the "dialogical self" thus stands in contrast to the idea of a "bounded, masterful self" (Cushman, 1990). It emphasizes the mind's ability to imagine conversations with others and to anticipate in an internal dialog the different positions of participants with whom agreement must be reached (Bernstein, 1983). Internal dialogs serve as a tool for evaluating new knowledge and making decisions. In such inner discourses individuals mimic discussions with other persons, in which a statement (about a product, for instance) is assessed with a series of logical arguments until a conclusion (attitude or behavioral intention towards the product) is reached (Kuhn & Crowell, 2011).

Concerning the format of ad content, dialog theory suggests that individuals process information more efficiently and favorably when listening in on dialogs compared to monologs. Unlike monologs, dialogs contain different perspectives of the conversers. For any topic, there is a chance that a listener will not share the same perspectives as a speaker. Lack of shared perspectives can impede listeners' understanding (Fox Tree, 1999). If disparate perspectives arise in monologs, listeners can be lost for the remainder of the speech. In dialogs, however, listeners

Dr. Enrique Strelow

Department of Shopper Neuroscience, Ferrero Deutschland, Frankfurt am Main, Germany
enrique.strelow@ferrero.com

Prof. Dr. Katrin Talke

Faculty of Economics and Management, Department of Marketing, Technical University of Berlin, Berlin, Germany
katrin.talke@tu-berlin.de

Prof. Dr. Mark Heitmann

Hamburg Business School Department of Marketing & Customer Insight, Hamburg, Germany
mark.heitmann@uni-hamburg.de

Management Summary

In this paper, we shed light on dialogs as a rhetorical format of audio-visual advertisements. Drawing from dialog theory we argue that a dialogic format should lead to more favorable processing of ad content and positively influence consumers' affective responses to a brand. We expect that the effect is amplified when a dialog is embedded in a story. We can confirm our expectations in an online experiment with a sample of 2,500 consumers and 94 audio-visual ads as stimuli from a single domain (candy).

have another opportunity, in the form of other conversers' contributions to the discourse, to catch the drift of the conversation.

Findings from educational psychology have shown that individuals understand more when listening to instructions produced by two people engaged in a conversation than instructions produced by a single person (Fox Tree, 1999). In addition, dialogs were found to lead to deeper, more comprehensive processing of complex arguments and opposing positions (Zavala & Kuhn, 2017), and argumentation was found to be an effective way to improve individuals' comprehension. Given the low involvement of an ad audience in times of information overload and ad clutter, such measures to increase consumers' understanding of an ad message appear important.

Related empirical evidence also implies that dialogs may increase the perceived credibility of the information provided. When two persons converse on a common perspective they can agree on, this perspective appears more grounded than a claim from a single person (Clark, 1996). In addition, arguments presented in a dialog foster an openness to different points of view and encourage listeners to take alternative perspectives and acknow-

For many years,
creative con-
siderations have
been the main
impetus behind
campaign
decisions.

ledge that they all contain elements of truth (Sarkissian, Park, Tien, Wright, & Knobe, 2011). This may be particularly relevant for ad content, which can lack subjective credibility, can appear manipulative and driven primarily by firm motives, resulting in reactance (Wright, 1973).

Dialogs, on the other hand, are less likely to trigger listeners' reactance towards the communicated content compared to monologs. Monologs can be described as a self-narrative voice which believes that it is self-sufficient (Bakhtin, 1984). The monologic voice claims privileged knowledge. By telling the listeners what the speaker already knows and what they must learn, information flows one way from the speaker to the listener. According to Smith, Collinson, Phoenix, Brown and Sparkes (2009), the audience may feel

as if asked to assimilate their selves to the speaker's. The monologic voice also tends to claim the final word. In dialogs, in contrast, the speaker merges with the others (Bakhtin, 1984), so that negative responses, such as reactance, towards the communicated content in an ad are less likely.

Finally, dialog theory posits that observing a conversation between people is more involving than listening to a monolog. Being able to choose between identification targets increases the likelihood that listeners empathize and connect both cognitively and emotionally with one or more speakers (Fox Tree & Mayer, 2008). In addition, dialogs remind listeners of social interactions. This appeal to the dialogical self stimulates an inner discourse about the communicated content (Fox Tree, 1999) and enhances the feeling of connectedness to the content. The more closely content is linked to the self, the more meaningful it was found to become (Escalas, 2004b).

Based on these arguments, we posit that dialogs lead to a more favorable and comprehensive processing of advertisement content. Appealing to the dialogical self should also increase the connection between the featured brand and consumers' selves, which in turn should enhance brand preference (Escalas, 2004a). Hence, we hypothesize:

H1: Audio-visual advertisements containing dialogs have a more positive effect on brand preference than advertisements lacking dialogs.

Interaction Effect of Embedding Dialogs in a Story

In various disciplines, such as philosophy, sociology and psychology, scholars postulate that individuals make

sense of their experiences by attempting to integrate them within stories (e.g., Bruner, 1986; Olson, 1990). The notion of a ‘storied self’ (Dunne, 1996) postulates that individuals organize their experiences, gain perspective, and make evaluations when locating themselves within a repertoire of stories. Incoming information is then processed in a narrative fashion (Kerby, 1991), which means that individuals attempt to find a match with episodes


stored in their memories to comprehend this information.

The relational structure and temporal dimension of stories allow individuals to draw conclusions about a story and its potential link to their self-concept (Kleine, Kleine, & Allen, 1995). In addition, stories are easier to process due to their structural similarity to information acquired in life experiences (Adaval & Wyer, 1998). Stories also induce holistic instead of piecemeal in-

formation processing. When listening to stories, individuals have been found to be transported by the narrative and immersed into a situation (Green & Brock, 2000). In the process, individuals simulate events mentally and imagine themselves in that situation (e.g., Paivio, 1986).

When advertisement content is embedded in a story, feelings towards the ad and the featured brand were shown to be more positive than in a no-story

Table 1: Examples of Advertising Material

	Storytelling	No storytelling
Dialog	 <p>A young man picks up his girlfriend at the university. She is excited to have passed an exam. To celebrate this event, he invites her to a café. There she chooses a Kinder Bueno from the large selection of treats and explains her decision to him.</p> <p>She: “Hello.” He: “Well, how was the exam?” She: “Passed!” Him: “Bravo! What did they ask you?” Her: “Get me something tasty first, then I’ll tell you!” Him: “Take as much as you want!” Her: “Do you want me to burst at the seams? I’m fine with a Kinder Bueno!” Him: “Why, is it something special?” Her: “Yes, it’s something good à la Kinder and it’s Bueno!”</p>	 <p>A young man picks up his girlfriend. When she asks him, he explains that he has installed a refrigerator in his car especially for her so that he can offer her Kinder Riegel, her favorite chilled candy, at any time. She is thrilled and they drive off.</p> <p>He: “Hi. Are you in a good mood?” Her: “Yeah, sure. What’s that?” Him: “It’s a refrigerator!” Her: “No radio in the car, but a refrigerator ...” Him: “Especially for you ...” Her: “Kinder Riegel!!!” He: “Well ... you like them best when well chilled.” She: “Great!!!”</p>
	 <p>A woman picks up her husband. When he sees that she has a pack of Rocher pralines on the passenger seat, he pockets them. At a café, she looks in her bag for the Rochers. Smiling, he gives one to her. Later, during a walk, she snatches the Rochers out of his pocket, only to comfort him with one when he finds a parking ticket on his car.</p> <p>“The evening sometimes brings the best of the day. Simply chocolate is not enough. The evening belongs to Rocher, Rocher by Ferrero.”</p>	 <p>A woman is shown driving a car through Piedmont. She is introduced as a representative of Mon Chéri. At an orchard, she is shown taking great care to select only the best cherries for Mon Chéri.</p> <p>“This is Claudia Bertani. On the road on behalf of Mon Chéri. All over the world she selects the best cherries. Only the really plump, firm and hearty ones can become the Piedmont cherry, because she knows the secret of Mon Chéri is in the cherries.”</p>

Source: Ferrero, Germany.

scenario (Escalas, 2004b). Consumers engaged in mental simulations became absorbed by their thoughts, which distracted them from thinking critically about the advertisement and led them to think more favorably about the ad content and the brand.

We thus expect that the positive effect of using dialogs in ads is likely amplified when consumers can easily match the incoming advertisement content with stories in their memories. Dialogs embedded in a story thus should be even closer to individuals' natural style of thinking and arguing (Taylor, 1991). They should also encourage the mental construction of hypothetical scenarios in which individuals imagine themselves in the decision situation pondering the pros and cons or fantasize about themselves in future usage events (e.g., Taylor & Schneider, 1989). Hence, we hypothesize:

H2: Dialogs in audio-visual ads have a particularly positive effect on brand preference if they are embedded in a story compared to a no-story scenario.

Study Design

To investigate the above effects, we studied 94 professional audio-visual advertisements all employed by Ferrero in the same broadcasting period to advertise a diverse set of 20 candy brands (e.g., Rocher, Giotto, Mon Cheri). Note that isolating the impact of dialogs in audio-visual advertisements is challenging because of confounds with other factors (e.g., required text modifications, protagonists behaving differently, different camera angles and film cuts). Hence, we decided against producing qualitatively inferior artificial ads for scientific purposes since their artificiality might have led

to additional effect differences. We recruited a sample of 2.500 German subjects of the target group (female consumers between the ages of 18 and 65) from a representative online access panel. We excluded 137 participants who failed an attention check, leaving 2.363 participants for the subsequent analyses.

To classify the content of each ad, we used the following operationalizations of the study variables: 'Use of dialog' was operationalized as two or more characters that converse directly with one another with at least two conversational turns (Graff, 2003). 'Use of storytelling' was operationalized as a coherent plot that chronologically progresses from a beginning to an end and has few but central characters that evolve personally (Stern, 1994). To provide more detailed insights into the advertisement material used, table 1 shows film stills and texts of four well-known Ferrero spots for different sub-

brands which illustrate our main categories 'dialog vs. no dialog' and 'story vs. no story'.

We also included several control variables that might influence brand preference (e.g., Chandy, Tellis, Macinnis, & Thaivanich, 2001). Specifically, it was to be assessed whether the brand is (vs. is not) prominently featured, whether the product plays the main (vs. supporting) role, whether the ad appeal is (vs. is not) rational, whether the ad appeal is (vs. is not) emotional, whether at least one protagonist is (vs. is not) personally introduced, whether the protagonists are of the same gender (vs. of mixed genders), whether the ad features more than two (vs. two or fewer) protagonists, whether the product is (vs. is not) jointly consumed by the protagonists, whether the product is (vs. is not) endorsed by a celebrity, whether the context is (vs. is not) connected to particular work-related activities, and whether the setting is realistic (vs. fictional). Following the consensual approach proposed by Kumar, Stern and Anderson (1993), we trained two coders in the use of our operationalizations; they evaluated the content of each ad independently. Across all variables, agreement was 90.4%. We then asked them to discuss assessment differences and agree on one assessment.

To conceal the primary purpose of the investigation, the dialogs were manipulated as a between-subjects factor. We thus had sets of dialogic and non-dialogic advertisements. For each of these sets, we randomly selected either 3 or 4 advertisements to test the remaining factors and address potential primacy or recency effects. Each participant was then randomly assigned to a set of advertisements. Prior to viewing the actual ads, participants answered questions on general brand appeal and

Main Propositions

Dialog theory suggests that individuals process information more favorably when listening in on dialogs compared to monologs. This proposition is related to

- the increased understandability of the information provided,
- the higher perceived credibility of the information provided,
- the lower likelihood of reactance, and
- the stimulation of an inner discourse.

purchase frequency for each brand, to be able to control for these variables.

While the process of judging ad content requires cognitive effort (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000), consumers typically pay scant attention to an ad (Sengupta & Gorn, 2002). It is important, therefore, to acknowledge their superficial processing of ad content. We therefore measure brand preference by collecting spontaneous responses in a format similar to the implicit association test (IAT) (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Basically, the IAT is a speed categorization task in which participants classify affective stimuli as quickly as possible in categories such as emotionally positive vs. negative, using two alternative keyboard keys. Since stronger subconscious attitudes come to mind more quickly, intuitive responses without delay provide rich information on brand preference strength. Several scholars have demonstrated that the IAT is a reliable, valid, and sensitive indirect measure of brand preferences (e.g., Gattol, Sääksjärvi, & Carbon, 2011).

We used 18 practice tasks, which instructed subjects to indicate as quickly as possible whether or not image–word pairs were a match. After each response, subjects received feedback whether their selection was correct or not. In doing so, we trained subjects to make correct judgments as quickly as possible. These practice tasks direct participants' continuous attention to unrelated topics. Therefore, we also used them as a memory interference filler task. This means that the audio-visual advertisements were shown to each respondent before the practice task, and all dependent variables were collected subsequently.

To make responses comparable, we made sure all participants viewed

the full advertisement before allowing them to proceed to the remainder of the questionnaire. Subsequent to the practice tasks, the logo of the featured brand was presented and participants were asked to indicate whether they

“like – dislike” this brand and perceive it as “desirable – undesirable”. This procedure was repeated for each brand advertisement displayed to respondents. Each task was presented at random time intervals to control for re-

Table 2: The Impact of Dialogs and Storytelling on Implicit Brand Appeal

Variables		Model 1 Odds Ratio (SE)	Model 2 Odds Ratio (SE)
Brand appeal	β_1	4.096 ** (0.201)	4.092 ** (0.201)
Purchase frequency	β_2	3.247 ** (0.212)	3.300 ** (0.217)
Dialog	β_3	1.336 ** (0.133)	1.107 (0.129)
Story	β_4	1.117 (0.096)	0.688 * (0.122)
Brand prominence	β_5	0.853 (0.074)	1.104 (0.089)
Product as main act	β_6	0.903 (0.070)	0.948 (0.075)
Emotional appeal	β_7	1.122 (0.084)	1.174 * (0.090)
Rational appeal	β_8	1.006 (0.076)	1.009 (0.077)
Protagonist introduced	β_9	0.765 ** (0.059)	0.794 ** (0.062)
Protagonist same sex	β_{10}	1.050 (0.106)	1.027 (0.104)
Protagonist group	β_{11}	0.721 ** (0.065)	0.712 ** (0.064)
Joint consumption	β_{12}	1.104 (0.092)	1.166 (0.100)
Celebrity endorsement	β_{13}	1.255 (0.163)	1.073 (0.150)
Work-related context	β_{14}	1.068 (0.098)	1.169 (0.113)
Realistic setting	β_{15}	0.999 (0.084)	1.067 (0.092)
Dialog x story	β_{16}		1.942 ** (0.416)
Constant	β_0	0.003 ** (0.000)	0.003 ** (0.000)

Note: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, standard errors (SE) in parentheses, implicit brand appeal measured with the ‘quantilope implicit research module’.

Source: Own illustration.

flex conditioning. The responses serve as the dependent measure.

Analysis and Results

To investigate the main and interaction effects of dialogs in advertisements on spontaneous brand affect, we set up logistic regression models. We first estimated a base model on the main effects of all variables (Model 1). Next, we extended the base model by including the interaction term (Model 2). We ran both models, controlling for individual level heterogeneity (e.g., advertisement response, category interest) and the repeated measures (i.e., each participant was randomly assigned to a set of advertisements) in our data by adding random intercepts. We also controlled for 11 additional characteristics of the ads, namely brand prominence, the role of the product in the ad, rational ad appeal, emotional ad appeal, personal introduction of protagonist, sex of protagonist, number of protagonists, joint consumption context, celebrity endorsement, work-related context, realistic setting. Table 2 summarizes the results.

As expected in H1, Model 1 reveals that including dialogs in ads has a significant main effect on spontaneous brand affect (OR = 1.336, $p < .01$). This means that the odds of brand preference are 33% higher for ads with dialogs than those without dialogs while controlling for prior brand loyalty and preference. Hence, our results confirm H1 and indicate that dialogs are indeed an effective means for driving brand preferences over and above prior brand predisposition.

We also find support for H2. The results of Model 2 confirm a stronger impact of dialogs when embedded in a story than without storytelling (OR = 1.942, $p < .01$). This also means that

the effect is almost three times as high as the effect of mere dialogs without storytelling (94% vs. 33%). Note that we did not mean center the respective variables when computing the interaction effect. The effect of dialogs in Model 2 is therefore the simple effect when the interacting variables have a value of 0, i.e., the effect of dialogs without storytelling. This results in an attenuated and non-significant effect of dialogs compared to Model 1.

Discussion

So far, marketing research offers little guidance to practitioners on the rhetorical format in which ad content should be communicated. We therefore discuss the conceptual benefits of dialogs in more detail. Specifically, we argue that dialogs stimulate an inner discourse about the ad and the featured brand, in which new know-

ledge is more easily understood, appears more credible, is evaluated more favorably, and appears more meaningful.

We can also empirically confirm the positive impact of using dialogs in ads on brand preference in a representative study with 94 actual audio-visual ads. This finding may also be related to consumers being increasingly used to communicating on social media channels where content (posted by firms) often is discussed in interactive online conversations. Literature on online conversations shows that content becomes more interesting when consumers discuss their experiences, opinions, and feelings about products with other users (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). In addition, online dialogs were found to support social bonding and the development of meaningful relationships between consumers and brands which affect consumers' brand involvement and brand attitude (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Similar effects may also manifest for ads where consumers overhear dialogs instead of actively engaging in them.

Another important finding is that dialogs have a particularly positive effect on brand preference if they are embedded in a story. Indeed, ad content conveyed in stories of dialogic action seems to be even closer to consumers' natural style of thinking and arguing and to encourage consumers to imagine themselves in a relevant usage situation. This finding adds to the body of literature on the positive effects of using stories to convey self-relevant messages to consumers (Escalas, 2004b; 2006; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010). Our results may also add to a study by Wentzel, Tomczak and Herrmann (2008), who showed that narrative ads are evaluated more positively when the advertiser's mani-


Lessons Learned

1. Dialogs are a powerful communication format to stimulate consumers' inner discourse about the content of audio-visual ads.
2. Ad content conveyed in stories of dialogic format is even closer to consumers' natural style of thinking and encourages consumers to imagine themselves in a relevant usage situation.
3. Dialogs in audio-visual ads have a particularly positive effect on brand preference if they are embedded in a story.

pulative intent is not salient. While the authors used rhetorical questions, dialogs may be a different approach that should disguise manipulative intent better than a monolog.

All these insights may be helpful to managers when considering the appropriate communication format for their advertising campaigns. Dialogs are a powerful communication format to stimulate consumers' inner discourse about communicated content.

Empirical
findings suggest,
dialogues and
stories have
untapped potential.

While our empirical results are limited to low involvement brands, from a theoretical point of view similar effects appear likely in other domains as well. For example, when managers are faced with advertising products with debatable features (e.g. genetically modified ingredients, autonomously driving cars, etc.), dialogs are a promising approach. Conversers discussing various arguments are likely more effective in informing consumers about the different points of view. Similar logic may apply to complex products. With dialogs, the usability of features can be discussed in a question-and-answer format to increase the listener's comprehension. Future research may thus analyze whether conveying ad content in a dialogic format is equally or potentially more effective for complex products or products with debatable features. 

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