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MASS CUSTOMIZATION: DO CREATIVE PRODUCT CONFIGURATIONS IN ADS DRIVE BEHAVIOURAL INTENTION AND PERCEIVED PRODUCT QUALITY?

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Abstract: *This conference paper presents the results of an online survey about the impact of perceived advertising creativity on consumer behavioural intentions and perceived product quality. To this end, 300 participants evaluated one of three fictitious miadidas sneakers ad, which was manipulated through the use of different product configurations. The results show that perceived advertising creativity is a very good predictor for behaviroual intentions such as the customer's willingness to try customizing the product, and that the higher the perceived creativity, the higher the behavioural intention. The correlation between perceived creativity and perceived quality is weak and negative.*

Key Words: ***Mass Customization, Advertising, Creativity, Behavioural Intention, Perceived Product Quality, Consumer Behaviour, Sneakers***

1. INTRODUCTION

The underlying idea of mass customization (MC) is to produce customized products to satisfy individual customer needs at a similar price of mass-produced products [1]. With the help of smart factories, cyber-physical systems and the internet of things, generally referred to as Industry 4.0 [2], companies may finally be able to successfully combine the two conventional manufacturing strategies that were traditionally considered to be mutually exclusive: mass production on one hand and craft manufacturing on the other hand. After more than 30 years of research, the goal of producing customized products with mass production efficiency is now closer within reach than ever before.

However, although there is some research about consumer behaviour, consumer motivation, and consumer preferences in MC, little is known about how companies should advertise their MC products. As advertising creativity increases the perceived value of the advertised product [3], the focus of this work is to find out whether the use of more creative MC product configurations in advertisements impact on customer's behavioural intention, e.g. the willingness to visit the company's website, and perceived product quality through the perceived level of creativity of MC products in advertising.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Researchers confirm that MC is a noteworthy research area [4], as it is one of the most important competitive strategies [5] and one of the most relevant production trends in developed countries [6], which is also becoming more diffused in developing countries [7].

One trend in MC is to offer interactive, web-based sales-configurators that allow customizing the product [8]. Typically, such a configurator guides the user in generating or searching for product configurations, supplies information in real time on the customization feasibility, price and other technical details, and generates a sales offer [9], which then may be accepted by the final consumer.

From a consumer perspective, the value of MC products is determined by intrinsic (hedonic, price) and extrinsic (utilitarian, individualism/uniqueness, self-expression) drivers [8, 10, 11]. Customers derive benefits from the possession of the customized product and from the experience of customizing the product itself [11]. What makes the experience during the customization process valuable to the customer is twofold: First, the gamification of the process [11], which results in benefits that derive from the pure experience of customizing a product even if the process is not completed [12] because it allows customers to "come up with new and creative combinations" [13, p. 127], and second, the pride of authorship [13] that leads to creative-achievement benefits when the customization is completed and the customer felt that he or she had control over the process [12]. The benefits that are obtained from the possession of customized products can also be grouped in different categories: utilitarian benefits, such as better fit and increased comfort, the facilitation of self-expression, and the assertion of personal distinctiveness and uniqueness [11, 14, 15].

Individualism, uniqueness, self-expression, and distinctiveness are concepts related to creativity, which literally means "create", "invent", and "discover" [16] and generally refers to the development of novel and

useful ideas or products [17, 18, 19]. MC research has been focussing on the actual customization stage, but not so much on the pre-customization stage, i.e. the advertising of MC products and online sales-configurators. Advertising creativity is an unexplored area in MC literature.

2.1. Advertising Creativity

Research revealed that advertising creativity impacts on cognitive, affective, and conative variables [20]. Advertising creativity has, for example, a positive effect on the recall and recognition of slogans in an incidental learning context [21]. Smith et al. [20] found that advertising creativity has an effect on each hierarchy-of-effects stage, which acts as a mediator, and also exerts a direct (unmediated) effect on brand awareness and brand liking. In a more practically oriented study, Reinartz and Saffert [22] demonstrated a "dramatic variation" in creativity scores with an average score of 2.98 (on a scale of 1 to 7), with only 11 out of 437 campaigns receiving an overall score above 5. They further found that these scores had a significant influence on the success of advertising, as a dollar invested in a highly creative ad campaign almost doubled the sales impact as compared to a non-creative campaign.

Although researchers largely agree on the value of creativity and see it as an essential component of advertising [23], it may not always work. For example, the impact of creativity on sales differs by product category [22]. Reinartz and Saffert [22] showed that especially for functional products that are oriented toward clear consumer goals (e.g. detergents), novel approaches are less preferable.

Dahlén et al. [24, p. 329] summarize the role of creativity in advertising with "advertising creativity matters", while Belch and Belch [25, p. 395] underline that "creativity, which has been shown to impact the success of a product […] will continue to remain an important factor in marketing communications into the future".

2.2. Hypotheses Development

There are many reasons why consumers engage in MC and design their own product. Several studies show that MC creates value through the exciting experience of the customization on the one hand, and by offering consumers the possibility to develop differentiated, unique products on the other hand [26, 27]. Before consumers actually engage in MC or any other activity, they consciously and/or subconsciously [28] develop a certain degree of intention to behave or to not behave in a specific way, i.e. consumer behavioural intention, which is a function of attitude toward the behaviour [29] and defined as "the degree to which a person has formulated conscious plans to perform or not perform some specified future behavior" [30, p. 214]. Depending on the field of study, behavioural intention includes different activities that are most relevant for the underlying problem.

From a MC perspective, important objectives of advertising are to invite and convince customers to visit the website and to try out the online sales-configurator. Furthermore, the possibility to customize a product can be communicated either directly by the company through advertising or indirectly through word-of-mouth (WOM), which is defined as the act of exchanging marketing information between consumers [31]. Previous research has pointed out the importance of consumer's willingness to recommend MC to their friends [32], or in other words the importance of WOM. For the purpose of this study, we therefore define consumer behavioural intention as the combination of willingness to visit the company's website, to try out the customization of the advertised product, and to generate WOM.

According to the theory of planned behavior [33], perception, e.g. the perception of an advertisement, influences attitudes, and attitude is an antecedent to behavioural intention. As it has repeatedly been shown that high levels of advertising creativity influence attitudes and enhance consumer behavioural intentions [20, 34, 35, 36, 37], it is hypothesised that more creative product configurations, i.e. illustrations of MC products that are perceived to be, for example, unique and novel, impact on consumer behavioural intentions. Formally:

H1: The use of more creative product configurations when advertising mass customization products has a positive effect on consumer behavioural intention.

Another important aspect in MC is consumer's trust in the company's ability to meet promised quality levels [38]. Marketing research has repeatedly pointed out the importance of perceived product quality, i.e. the consumer's judgment about a product's overall excellence [39], which—in contrast to objective or physical quality—is subjective and exists in consumers' minds [40]. Previous research has shown that perceived advertising creativity implicitly communicates and therefore positively impacts on perceived product quality [3], for example because a high level of creativity signals greater effort by the advertiser [24, 41]. It is therefore hypothesised that:

H2: The use of more creative product configurations when advertising mass customization products has a positive effect on perceived product quality.

3. METHOD

The data presented in this article was collected in May 2018 through an online survey. Using the network of a professional agency, consumers were invited to participate until 300 fully answered questionnaires from Saudi nationals aged 18 to 25 were recorded. Incomplete questionnaires are not included for data analysis. The respondents were randomly shown one of three fictitious advertisements for customizable sneakers and answered 17 questions, which took them about four minutes on average. They did not see or use the web-based sales-configurator. Rather, the situation was intended to simulate a situation in which a potential customer sees an advertisement before visiting the website, using the configurator and/or telling his/her friends about the offer.

As Saudi consumers, especially younger generations, can understand English questions of a medium to high complexity, e.g. because of frequent international travel and the use bilingual product packaging in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [42], both the stimulus and the questions were English.

In the following, details about the stimulus, the questions, and the participants are provided.

3.1. Stimulus

Three versions of a fictitious advertisement for customizable sneakers from miadidas, adidas' custom shoes and apparel division, were created by a professional creative from a leading advertising agency. The product used is adidas' "MI I-5923" model, which can be customized on www.adidas.com/us/customize for a price of $150. The advertisements included the miadidas logo, the adidas logo, a visualization of the online product configurator showing both some configuration options and the sneaker, the price ($150.00), and a call for action (DESIGNYOUROWN > adidas.com), which greatly corresponds to real miadidas ads. The three versions of the advertisement were manipulated by changing the product configuration only, using three designs with low, medium, and high levels of creativity (see Fig. 1, Fig. 2, and Fig. 3).

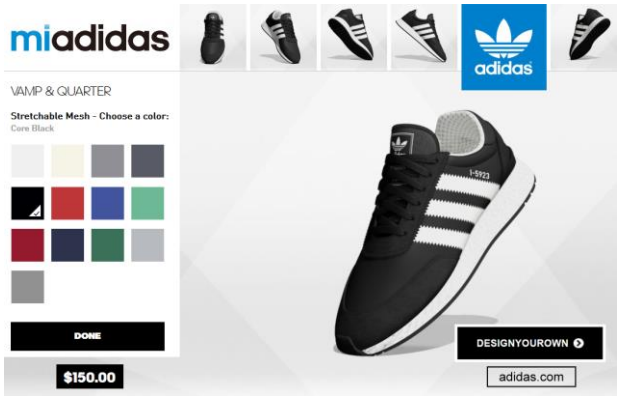

Fig. 1. *Advertisement with low creativity model*

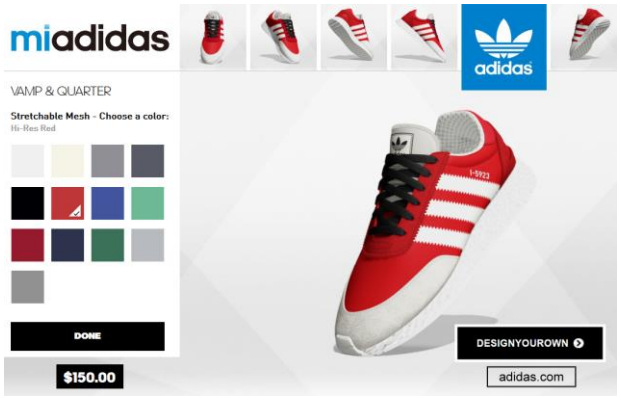

Fig. 2. *Advertisement with medium creativity model*

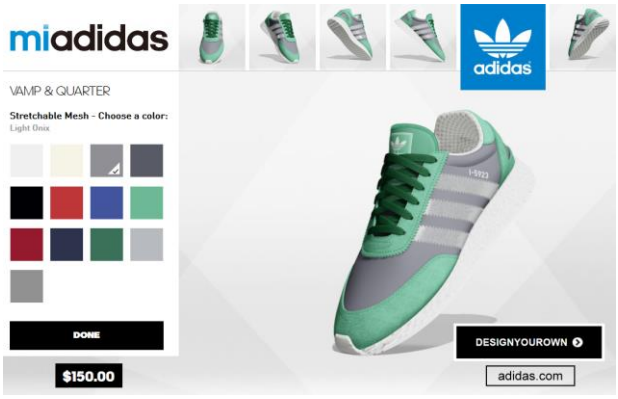

Fig. 3. *Advertisement with high creativity model*

Perceptions of consumers are subjective and can vary a lot [43], i.e. one respondent may perceive a product configuration to be highly creative, while the same version may be perceived to be significantly less creative by another. This means that the present research could also have been carried out by using just one sneaker version rather than three. Although the actual level of perceived creativity in itself is not relevant for this study, it was important to make sure that all levels of perceived creativity are covered equally. Therefore, a pre-test amongst Saudi students was carried out to identify three product configurations with a low, medium, and high level of perceived creativity. To this end, 20 students from the author's institution were selected through systematic sampling and asked to evaluate the level of creativity of nine different sneaker models using the same five items described in section 3.2. The model with the lowest, an average, and highest level of creativity were selected. The differences between the level of perceived creativity of the models were significant ($sneaker_{low}$=3.44 vs. $sneaker_{medium}$=4.13; t(19)=3.851, p<.01 and $sneaker_{medium}$=4.13 vs. $sneaker_{high}$=4.60; t(19)=2.312, p<.05).

3.2 Measures

The online questionnaire included 17 questions. The three demographic questions were placed at the beginning, as they included two screening questions (age and nationality). In addition, respondents indicated their gender. The fourth question was related to product involvement. Next, the respondents saw the stimulus, which was randomly selected from the three versions of the fictitious advertisement. The stimulus was followed by five questions to measure perceived creativity, three questions regarding behavioural intentions, and five questions about perceived product quality.

As product involvement is an important dimension in consumer behaviour, e.g. as it acts as a motivator for WOM [44] and moderates consumer behavioural intentions [45], it was included as a measure in this study. In line with Donthu et al. [46], who used a 4-point single-item scale and argued the use of single-items scales can be advantageous despite the many complex constructs established in literature, product involvement was measured using a 7-point single-item scale. Respondents were asked "How relevant or important are sneakers to you?" and could choose a value between 1 (not at all relevant or important) to 7 (extremely relevant

or important). However, the Pearson correlation coefficients show that product involvement (M=3.97, SD=2.00) is not significantly correlated to any other construct under study, i.e. perceived creativity (M=3.76, SD=1.53; r(299), *p*=.931), behavioural intention (M=3.82, SD=1.56; r(299), *p*=.671), and perceived quality (M=4.88, SD=1.11; r(299), *p*=.563). Product involvement is therefore not included in further analyses.

To assess perceived advertising creativity, five items measuring the novelty dimension from O'Quin and Besemer's [47] Creative Product Semantic Scale were used. In line with the approach of White and Smith [48], who assessed advertising creativity of several ads, respondents saw one of the three ads and indicated on a 7-point semantic differential scale whether the advertisement is overused-fresh, predictable-novel, usual-unusual, ordinary-unique, and conventional-original. The internal consistency of the construct is excellent (Cronbach's alpha=.916).

Consumer behavioural intention measures the self-reported likelihood that a person will engage in a specific action [49]. In this study, consumer behavioural intention was measured using three items, namely intention to visit the website (I will definitely visit the website), intention to try customizing the product (I will definitely try customizing the sneakers), and intention to tell others about the possibility to customize sneakers on adidas.com (I will definitely tell my friends about the possibility to customize sneakers on adidas.com). Seven-point Likert-type scales were employed (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The internal consistency of the construct is good (Cronbach's alpha=.855).

Finally, five items taken from Dodds et al. [50] were employed to assess perceived product quality. As in the original paper, the indicators and 7-point rating scales were as follows: The likelihood that the product would be reliable is: (very low to very high), The workmanship of the product would be: (very low to very high), This product should be of: (very poor quality to very good quality), The likelihood that this product is dependable is: (very low to very high), This product would seem durable (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The internal consistency of the construct is acceptable (Cronbach's alpha=.763).

All items within each set of questions about perceived creativity, behavioural intentions, and perceived product quality were presented in random order through computer-generated random ordering. The order of each scale was randomly either positive-negative or negative-positive. For data analysis, all scales were adjusted and are presented from negative (1) to positive (7).

3.3. Participants

All participants (n=300) were mobile phone users and answered all questions on their own device. Both age (18-25 years, M=21.62, SD=2.23) and nationality (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) were exclusion criteria. Overall, 48.3% of participants were male. The gender of the sample is also balanced regarding the three designs with low (48% male), medium (48% male), and high (49% male) levels of creativity.

4. RESULTS

To assess H1, a simple linear regression was calculated to predict behavioural intention (M=3.82, SD=1.56) based on perceived creativity (M=3.76, SD=1.53). A significant regression equation was found (F(1,298)=677.152, *p*<.001), with a R^2 of .694. The consumer behavioural intention is equal to .624+.852 (perceived creativity) when behavioural intention and perceived creativity are measured on a 7-point scale. Behavioural intention increased .852 for each level of perceived creativity (see also Fig. 4). Thus, H1 is supported.

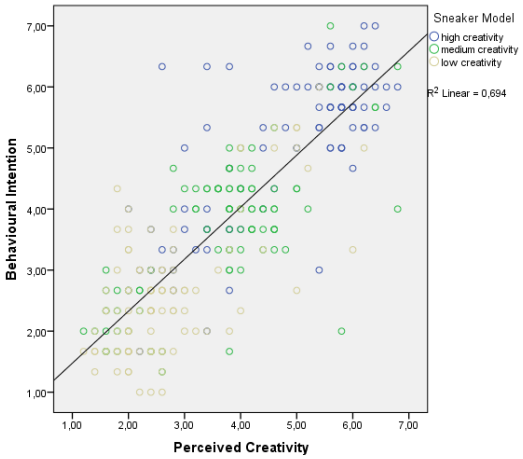

Fig. 4. *Scatterplot of perceived creativity with behavioural intention by sneaker model*

H2 was also assessed using a simple linear regression with the goal to predict perceived quality (M=4.88, SD=1.11) based on perceived creativity (M=3.76, SD=1.53). With *p*=.043, the regression equation found was barely significant (F(1,298)=4.137, *p*<.05), with R^2 of 0.014. The perceived product quality is equal to 5.196–.085 (perceived creativity) when perceived quality and perceived creativity are measured on a 7-point scale. Perceived quality decreased .085 for each level of perceived creativity (see also Fig. 5). Thus H2 is not supported, as the hypothesised relation was positive and not negative.

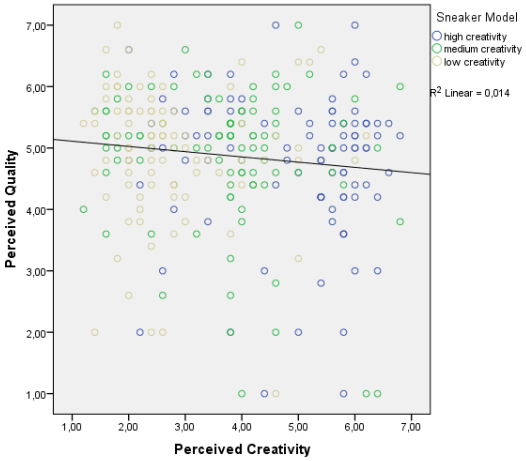

Fig. 5. *Scatterplot of perceived creativity with perceived quality by sneaker model*

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

It is shown that more creative product configurations lead to stronger behavioural intentions, i.e. consumers are more likely to visit the website, try out the customization process and tell their friends about the advertised product if they perceive the advertisement to be more creative. As outlined before, advertising creativity is manipulated through the use of different product configurations, which means that companies can employ more unique and unused designs in their ads to trigger positive effects. To determine whether consumers perceive a specific product configuration to be more or less creative, it is necessary to conduct pre-tests. Alternatively, companies may use A/B testing with different product configurations, which is especially easy to implement in social media advertising.

When it comes to perceived product quality, the perceived level of advertising creativity does not to have a large impact. In contrast to what was hypothesised, the perceived quality slightly decreases with an increase in creativity, which may have an impact on advertising decisions by companies who sell products to very quality-oriented consumers or operate in a sector where product quality is known to be a decisive factor. However, given that the results indicate that the relationship is very weak, the implications resulting from H1 may prevail and overcome the risk of a slightly lower perception of the product's quality when more creative product configurations are used in advertisements.

The results of this study are limited by some natural exclusion criteria that may prevented some participants from taking part in the study, i.e. a good knowledge of English, as the questionnaire was not offered in Arabic, and the ownership of an internet capable mobile device.

In addition, as some researchers highlight, advertising creativity is certainly important, but not sufficient to win new customers [51]. Amongst others, ads need to be meaningful to the target segment [51], which is a variable that was not measured. Finally, Csikszentmihalyi [52, p. 325, as cited by 53] came to the conclusion that creativity cannot be studied "by isolating individuals and their works from the social and historical milieu in which their actions were carried out". This means that perceived creativity depends on the social context in which it occurs or, in other words, on culture [53, 54]. For example, the perception and impact of advertising creativity in Korea with its collectivistic, holistic population may be influenced by cultural values such as the collectivistic Confucian norms of the society [55]. The findings of this research should therefore be seen in this light, as the sample consists exclusively of young Saudi consumers. Future research should assess the impact of advertising creativity in other cultural contexts and with different age groups.

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