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A typology of consumer strategies for resisting advertising, and a review of mechanisms for countering them

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This article presents a typology of the different ways in which consumers resist advertising, and the tactics that can be used to counter or avoid such resistance. It brings together literatures from different fields of study, including advertising, marketing, communication science and psychology. Although researchers in these subfields have shown a substantial interest in (consumer) resistance, these streams of literature are poorly connected. This article aims to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, and serve as a starting point for future research. Our ACE typology distinguishes three types of resistance strategies: Avoiding, Contesting, and Empowering. We introduce these strategies, and present research describing advertising tactics that may be used to neutralize each of them.

Keywords: persuasion; resistance; reactance; persuasion knowledge

Introduction

Advertising is designed to persuade consumers – by creating brand and product awareness, or by communicating social, emotional or functional product benefits. But consumers are not always open to advertising, and often resist its attempts at persuasion. This resistance is nothing new: 20 years ago, Calfee and Ringold (1994) reviewed six decades of research on consumers' opinions about advertising; they showed that scepticism abides, and that the majority of consumers (about 70%) feel that advertising tries to persuade people to buy things they do not want or need. This defensive response to advertising has been studied in several streams of research. In marketing and consumer research, for example, Friestad and Wright (1994) developed the persuasion knowledge model to describe consumers' responses to persuasive attempts. The model has become one of the key theories in marketing research, and is widely applied to understand when and how consumers respond defensively to marketing communications, ranging from traditional TV ads to advergames and social media applications (Panic, Cauberghe, and De Pelsmacker 2013; Van Noort, Antheunis, and Verlegh 2014). In addition to the persuasion knowledge model, there has been a substantial amount of work focusing on topics such as scepticism, selective exposure, and reactance, which may all be classified as resistance to advertising. Unfortunately the literature does not provide a clear overview of the different ways in which consumers may resist advertising, and the tactics that can be used to counter or avoid such resistance. This article fills this gap by providing an overview of the different types of resistance that consumers may show, and by discussing the ways in which resistance may be countered.

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The article should not only be interesting for practitioners, but also for academics, as it brings together literatures from different fields of study, including advertising, marketing, communication science and psychology. Although researchers in these subfields have shown a substantial interest in (consumer) resistance, these streams of literature are poorly connected, and this paper aims to facilitate the exchange of knowledge between these subfields. The presented framework for organizing the different types of strategies provides further integration of different findings, and should serve as a starting point for further exploration of the defensive strategies employed by consumers.

This paper develops a typology of the main types of consumer resistance and provides some (evidence-based) strategies for coping with this resistance. We refer to this as the ACE typology, since it distinguishes among Avoiding, Contesting, and Empowering types of resistance strategies that consumers can use. We first introduce these strategies, and then suggest some advertising tactics that may be used to neutralize each of these types of resistance. The typology is summarized in Figure 1.

ACE – a typology of resistance strategies

Knowles and Linn (2004) emphasize that resistance is a motivational state, in which people have the goal to reduce attitudinal or behavioural change or to retain one's current attitude. Following their conceptualization, we view the mitigation of attitudinal or behavioural change as a (possible) outcome of the strategies that are employed by consumers who are motivated to resist persuasion. In this section, we will define the

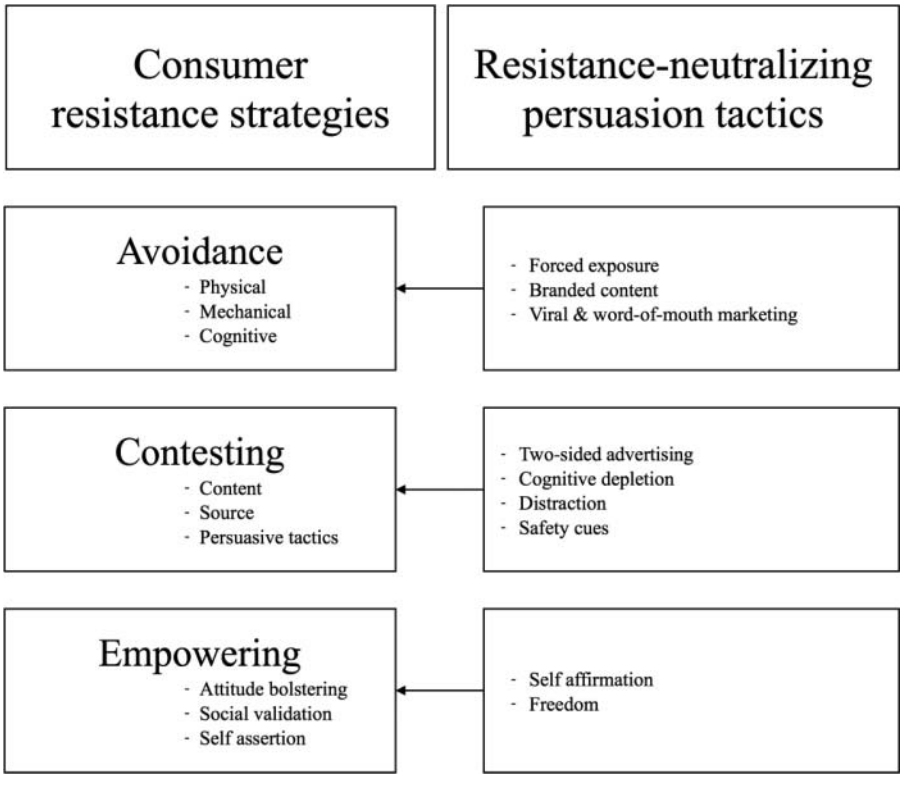

Figure 1. The ACE typology of consumer resistance strategies.

Avoidance, Contesting and Empowerment strategies. Further elaboration can be found in Fransen, Smit, and Verlegh (2014).

Avoidance strategies

Advertising avoidance is a well-studied phenomenon. Speck and Elliot (1997) investigated advertising avoidance in magazines, newspapers, radio and television. They identified several ways that people avoid advertising; (a) physical avoidance; (b) mechanical avoidance; and (c) cognitive avoidance. Physical avoidance entails a variety of strategies aimed at not seeing or hearing the ad. These include leaving the room or skipping the advertising section in a newspaper. In an insightful ethnographic study, Brodin (2007) found that TV viewers use commercial breaks to talk to others, go to the bathroom, or engage in other behaviours that purposefully or accidently lead to advertising avoidance. Using an eye tracking methodology, Drèze and Hussherr, (2003) found that consumers actively avoid looking at banners when using the Internet. In fact, consumers can employ the modern methods of physical avoidance, such as blocking online ads, filtering email, or subscribing to 'do not email', 'do not call' or 'do not track' programs (Johnson 2013).

Mechanical avoidance includes zapping, zipping, or muting the television or radio when the commercials start. The literature shows that a high percentage of television viewers zap (Tse and Lee 2001) or zip (Sternberg 1987) during commercial breaks. 'Block zipping', blocking two or more commercials at the same time, seems the most prevalent form of zipping (Cronin and Menelly 1992). Stafford and Stafford (1996) adopted the uses and gratifications perspective from communication theory to explain why people engage in mechanical avoidance. Boredom was found to explain both zipping and zapping behaviour whereas curiosity predicted only zapping behaviour.

Cognitive ad avoidance means not paying attention to specific advertisements. Consumers may engage in 'selective exposure' and 'selective attention'; the tendency to avoid or devote less attention to persuasive communications that are likely to contain messages that contradict with existing beliefs or opinions (Freedman and Sears 1965; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 2009). In other words, people are motivated to seek information that is consonant with their beliefs and attitudes and to avoid information that is dissonant with their beliefs and attitudes. Most research on selective exposure is conducted in the fields of political and health communication (for a review see Smith, Fabrigar, and Norris 2008).

Research on the determinants of avoidance behaviour demonstrates that viewers are less inclined to avoid commercial messages that are emotional and entertaining, and more inclined to avoid messages that are informational (Olney, Holbrook, and Batra 1991; Woltman, Wedel, and Pieters, 2003). In addition, viewers are less likely to avoid advertisements on regularly purchased products (Siddarth and Chattopdahyay 1998).

An interesting question is whether there are differences between active (conscious) avoidance and passive (unconscious) avoidance. To show active avoidance, consumers have to be aware of the fact that an ad is there, but have to somehow force themselves not to see or hear it. Passive avoidance on the other hand does not necessarily require such action, and might therefore call for different types of neutralizing strategies.

Contesting strategies

In addition to avoiding advertising messages, consumers may resist advertising by using a contesting strategy. Contesting strategies involve actively refuting the ad by challenging

it. An ad can be countered by considering different characteristics of the ad, (a) the advertising message itself (the content), (b) the source of the ad or (c) the persuasive tactics that are used in the ad.

In the persuasion literature, contesting the content of persuasive messages has been referred to as counter-arguing (e.g., Buller 1986; Wright, 1975; Jacks and Cameron 2003). Defined as a thought process that decreases agreement with a counter-attitudinal message, counter-arguing is often described as a mediating variable between a persuasive message and outcomes such as attitudes and behaviour (Festinger and Maccoby 1964; Silvia 2006). People who engage in counter-arguing scrutinize the arguments presented, and subsequently try to generate reasons to refute them.

Contesting the source of a message, referred to as source derogation, occurs when individuals dismiss the validity of the source. For instance, consumers may question the source's expertise, trustworthiness, or motives (Jacks and Cameron (2003). As a consequence, the message will lose credibility, which reduces its impact. Source derogation is often used when the source can be construed as biased (Wright 1973). Batinic and Appel 2013) demonstrated that information from commercial sources (i.e., advertising) is perceived to be less trustworthy than information from non-commercial sources, such as consumer recommendations or word of mouth.

Contesting the persuasive tactics used in a message has often been examined in the context of the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright (1994). When consumers become suspicious of the advertiser's manipulative intent, they resist the advertising message. For instance, Campbell (1995) finds that borrowed-interest appeals, whereby marketers use consumers' interest in an (unrelated) topic (e.g., celebrities or puppies) to trigger interest in their product or service, can lead to negative attitudes towards the advertiser. Similarly, consumers are more likely to become suspicious of advertisers' motives when ads feature negative comparisons to the competition (Jain and Posavac 2014) or incomplete comparisons (Kirmani and Zhu 2007). Finally, consumers may counter-argue the ad and derogate the source when the advertiser is perceived as spending too much money, such as when the ad is repeated often (Kirmani 1997).

Empowering strategies

Empowering strategies are related to the recipients themselves, not to the content of the persuasive message. They involve reassuring the self or one's existing attitude. Three types of empowering strategies have been described in the literature: *attitude bolstering*, *social validation*, and *self-assertion*.

Consumers who engage in attitude bolstering focus on defending their existing attitudes and behaviours rather than refuting or challenging a message. To achieve this, they generate thoughts that are supportive of those attitudes and behaviours when they are exposed to a persuasive message that challenges them (Lydon, Zanna, and Ross 1988; Meirick 2002). For example, a person who is 'pro-choice' might resist a message against abortion by actively thinking about arguments that are in support of their own position, rather than considering the arguments presented in the message.

A second empowering strategy is social validation, which entails validating one's attitude with significant others (Jacks and Cameron 2003). Consumers who use this strategy will actively look for (significant) others who share their existing beliefs, in order to confirm their current attitudes or behaviours. Social validation is related to the concept of 'social proof'; when uncertain about how to behave, people have the tendency to look at the behaviour of others (Cialdini 2001). Jacks and Cameron (2003) argue that people may

use a similar heuristic when they seek to defend themselves against an unwanted persuasion attempt. They demonstrated that people who are presented with a persuasive message that is incongruent with their existing attitude think of others who share their existing beliefs. Their current attitude or behaviour is validated in this way, which makes them less susceptible to the influence of dissonant messages.

In their research on resistance strategies, Jacks and Cameron (2003) observed a third empowerment strategy: asserting the self. When using self-assertions, people remind themselves that they are confident about their attitudes and behaviours, and that nothing can be done to change these. Self-assertion provides a boost to one's self-esteem, which reduces susceptibility to persuasive messages (Rhodes and Wood 1992; Leary and Baumeister 2000). In addition to boosting confidence in one's own opinions, this strategy reduces the extent to which consumers feel social pressure to conform to the norms that are imposed by others (Levine and Moreland 1990).

Now we have introduced our typology of Avoidance, Contesting and Empowering resistance strategies, the next section examines tactics that can be used by advertisers to neutralize these three types of resistance strategies.

Resistance-neutralizing persuasion tactics

Advertisers have available to them a range of persuasion techniques to create successful advertisements. These tactics often focus on making a message more attractive by using, for example, humour, celebrities, or music. Knowles and Linn (2004) refer to these traditional persuasion techniques as 'alpha strategies', strategies that focus on increasing approach towards the attitudinal object. In contrast, they propose the term *omega strategies* for tactics that are aimed specifically at reducing consumer resistance to persuasion. These strategies explicitly focus on reducing avoidance forces, in other words: decreasing the motivation to move away from the attitudinal object. Hence, omega strategies aim to neutralize resistance that people may experience when exposed to an ad.

We argue that such resistance-neutralizing tactics should be more effective when they are tailored to the specific resistance strategy that is adopted by consumers. In this section, we will therefore describe for each of the ACE strategies, the advertising tactics that are most likely to reduce resistance and enhance effectiveness.

Neutralizing avoidance strategies

By nature, avoidance-type resistance strategies are perhaps the most difficult to counter, because the avoidance behaviour itself cuts off the possibility of communication. One obvious strategy for preventing avoidance is the use of *Forced Exposure*. For example, in an online context people are often forced to view or hear commercials when they watch a video stream or listen to a radio channel. Hegner, Kusse, and Pruyn (2014) found that consumers perceive such ads to be intrusive, although this perception is weaker when the ad has a (positive) emotional appeal (a finding that is reminiscent of the finding that TV ads are less likely to be avoided if they are emotional rather than informational – Olney, Holbrook, and Batra 1990). Another form of forced exposure is so-called horizontal advertising blocks, in which television stations broadcast advertisements simultaneously. Research by Nam, Kwon, and Lee (2010) demonstrated that such horizontal advertising blocks are effective in reducing zapping behaviour. This tactic is, however, also perceived as intrusive and may lead to a negative image.

Although some research demonstrates that forced exposure may lead to negative responses and negative associations with the advertiser (e.g., Edwards, Li, and Lee (2002), there are also studies suggesting that 'any' advertising exposure can be beneficial. Greyser's (1973) classic work on irritation in advertising suggested for example that marketers often believe that irritating ads help raise brand awareness. Skurnik and colleagues (2005) found that consumers may forget the valence of previously encountered information about a brand, while (positive effects of) familiarity remain. It therefore remains to be investigated how consumers respond to such forced exposure. One interesting possibility is that, while consumers may have a negative explicit response to forced exposure, they could still have a positive (implicit) response to the advertised product. It should be noted however, that consumers who cannot avoid advertising may also adopt different resistance strategies.

Rather than forcing exposure to advertising, marketers may choose to prevent avoidance by disguising the persuasive intent or the sender of the message. Marketers have developed a wide range of strategies to achieve this (cf., Kaikati and Kaikati 2004). One strategy that seeks to downplay the persuasive nature of marketing messages is to embed branded messages into the editorial content of a medium, so that consumers are less likely to recognize these messages as persuasive attempts. Such brand placements may occur in magazines, TV and radio shows, movies and games (van Reijmersdal, Smit, and Neijens 2010). In response to rising ethical concerns about this practice, the FTC and FCC have formally expressed their concerns, and the European Union has even developed regulation that requires marketers to inform consumers of the commercial intent of such messages. Several recent studies have examined consumers' responses to such disclosures. In general, this research seems to suggest that such information often activates persuasion knowledge and has negative consequences for consumers' evaluations of the advertised brands (Boerman et al. in press; Campbell, Mohr, and Verlegh 2013).

Marketers may also counter avoidance by enlisting consumers to share brand-related messages with others. Typically, consumers have greater trust in information provided by their peers than in information provided by marketers. Consumers may share brand-related information via online or offline word of mouth, which can be stimulated through word-of-mouth marketing programs. The power of word of mouth lies in the fact that messages received by friends are not perceived as persuasive attempts, reducing the motivation to avoid such messages. The effectiveness of word of mouth marketing depends on the extent to which consumers attribute the message to enthusiasm about the brand or product rather than ulterior motives (Verlegh et al. 2013). Marketers who make use of such strategies should thus take care to avoid such attributions, and seek to maintain the informal and friendly character of word of mouth as an exchange of information among friends (Tuk et al. 2009).

In addition to exchanging information, viral marketing may stimulate consumers to share branded content. In crafting viral campaigns, marketers often use humorous, surprising, sexual or otherwise appealing content (cf., Golan and Zaidner 2008). It is important, however, to keep in mind that such campaigns should also convey brand-relevant information in order to achieve marketing communication goals such as enhancing brand awareness or attitude (Akpinar and Berger 2014).

Neutralizing contesting strategies

Several techniques are available to advertisers seeking to reduce consumer contesting of their messages. A direct and well-established strategy of coping with counterarguments is

two-sided advertising. A two-sided advertisement includes both positive and negative elements. When people are also exposed to negative features of a product or service, they are less likely to come up with counterarguments themselves. Often marketers directly refute the negative elements or diminish its importance in the ad. Moreover, advertising is perceived as more trustworthy when it includes (some) negative information, so that the overall impact of the ad increases (Eisend 2006). In a classic paper on one− versus two-sided advertising, Kamins and Assael (1987) found that two-sidedness is effective in reducing source derogation. In practice, however, the use of two-sided advertising is not very common, as marketers are wary of spreading negative information about their products. One exception is product failure, where brands often acknowledge their mistake (i.e. negative element) and then present their solution (i.e., positive element). Doing so prevents consumers from generating (perhaps more persuasive) negative elements (Fennis and Stroebe 2013).

There are also more indirect ways of coping with contesting strategies, which reduce the, ability, opportunity or motivation to generate counterarguments or engage in other contesting strategies (cf., Burkley 2008). Knowles and Linn 2004) demonstrated for example that participants generated significantly less counterarguments to a target message when it was presented at the end (versus the beginning) of a series of (seven) persuasive messages. Their finding illustrates the possibility of using cognitive depletion as a tactic for reducing consumers' ability to contest messages. Recently, similar results were obtained by Janssen et al. (2014), who demonstrated that mentally depleted consumers were less able to resist advertising, even when they received a forewarning that informed them of the persuasive intent of the message.

In addition to cognitive depletion, marketers may use distraction to reduce consumers' opportunity to engage in contesting strategies. An example is given by the 'disrupt then reframe' technique, which is often used in personal selling (Fennis, Das, and Pruyn 2004). In this technique a subtle, unexpected twist (i.e., disruption) in the sales script, which distracts people's attention, is followed by the persuasive conclusion of a message (i.e., the reframe). For example, when selling apples one could say 'these apples are 250 cents, that is only 2.5 dollars, it is a bargain!' This simple disruption (i.e., 250 cents) in combination with the reframe (i.e., it's a bargain!') distracts people and thereby reduces their efforts to contest the message.

Finally, to reduce the motivation to use contesting strategies, marketers may offer safety cues and warrants to minimize the perceived risk associated with a purchase. Research by van Noort, Kerkhof, and Fennis (2008) demonstrated that the presence of safety cues on websites provides people with a safe feeling. When people feel safe they are less inclined to contest the information on the website. Another way of providing a sense of safety is by postponing the payment, e.g., 'Buy now, pay later'. These offers will reduce resistance and the use of counter-arguing, especially when the distance between the purchase and payment increases (Knowles and Linn 2004).

Neutralizing empowerment strategies

To neutralize resistance strategies that involve asserting the self or an existing attitude, marketers need to focus on the consumer rather than the message. Interestingly, Jacks and O'Brien (2004) found that people who are self-affirmed are actually more open to persuasive messages, suggesting that self-affirmation may also be used to enhance rather than reduce persuasion. Take, for example, an ad that urges consumers to stop smoking. Smokers may perceive such an ad as threatening to their self-view, because it reminds them of their unhealthy behaviour. This threat may be mitigated, however, by reminding them of

their previous successes or important values (Steele 1988). When people are self-affirmed, they are more open to messages that are dissonant with their attitudes and behaviour because they do not feel the need to protect their self-view. Pursuing this logic, it might be possible for advertisers to focus on enhancing consumers' self-esteem and self-efficacy. One strategy could be to emphasize the experience and knowledge of consumers when addressing them: 'As a mother, you know that. . .'. Indeed, several studies have shown that assigning expertise and affirming people's positive self-views may reduce the perceptions of persuasive intent and reduce resistance (Dolinski, Nawrat, and Rudak 2001).

A second way to neutralize the motivation to adopt empowering strategies is to provide consumers with control over the situation; for example, by having consumers decide which ads they want to watch. This strategy may also reduce other forms of resistance, of course. The online television platform Hulu, for example, offers viewers the opportunity to select the ads they want to watch. Permission-based advertising is another way to provide consumers with more freedom. Tsang, Ho, and Liang (2004) demonstrated that advertisements that are received with permission are evaluated more positively than advertisements that are received without permission (e.g., spam). Asking consumers permission provides them control, which fosters acceptation and reduces resistance.

Conclusion

Advertisers can use a wide range of tactics to counter consumers' resistance to persuasion. Knowles and Linn (2004) suggested using the term 'omega strategies' for persuasion strategies that explicitly deal with resistance that consumers may experience when exposed to (unwanted) advertising. In this paper, we argue that such resistance-neutralizing tactics should be more effective when they are tailored to the specific resistance strategy that is adopted by consumers. We have introduced the ACE typology, and have discussed specific tactics for addressing the different strategies that consumers use to resist persuasion. This overview should be helpful for marketers who are interested in applying communication strategies that enhance persuasion by reducing consumer resistance. To further the development of such strategies, more research is needed to better understand the various ways in which consumers provide resistance to persuasive messages. We see a particular need for research that goes beyond the study of individual strategies, and tries to establish personal and situational characteristics that favour one strategy over another. Such research could ultimately help to predict which types of resistance are likely to be triggered by a specific message, or in a specific market context. This knowledge, in turn, allows marketers to design communications that avoid these types of resistance. To facilitate this, we need research that establishes the extent to which specific marketing tactics can effectively counter the avoidance, contesting and empowering strategies that are distinguished in our typology.

Disclosure statement

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