

Exaggerate or understate?

The effects of unexpected levels of claim extremity and message explicitness on advertising effectiveness.

What is the preferred level and form of claim extremity in brand communication? Imagine Czech car maker Skoda's next ad campaign, promising "The most exclusive car in the world". Maybe not the most intuitive ad you would think of. Since a high-level claim is not what consumers might expect from a brand like Skoda, the message would probably meet friction when entering the minds of the consumers. Or would it?

This thesis sets out to determine how brands can optimise the effectiveness of advertisements by communicating with the right level and form of claim extremity. Historical research in the field of claim extremity has revolved around *message acceptance*, as it relates to *source credibility* and *consumer scepticism*, which are important variables when the brand is situated at extreme levels on a credibility scale. Furthermore research has not taken into account the possibility of negative effects created by certain levels of claim extremity.

This research expands existing theory by measuring how ad effectiveness changes, from negative to positive, depending on two main variables; 1) the match between expected and executed level of claim extremity and 2) the level of message explicitness - thereby contributing to theory within positioning strategy and advertisement production by giving practical implications on how to construct more efficient advertisement claims.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Intro

A picture says more than a thousand words. So let's paint a picture here. Imagine the ad for a new perfume fragrance named Donald Trump, and yes, it is the Millennium Gold Edition. Can you see it? The level of humility is so warm and overwhelming you would want to cry. On the other side of the street, the competing perfume by GAP advertises its new summer fragrance called Grey. You mentally congratulate GAP of the fit between the name of the product and the layout of the ad.

As you contemplate the two, and conclude that they look exactly as you would expect, you also wonder what your reaction would have been if the brands had switched advertisements. Donald Trump's Grey and Gap Millennium Gold Edition - thereby completely contradicting your expectations.

Two main elements of advertisements start to form in your head as you walk down to your ad agency or marketing department. Because that is where you work. You immediately decide that as soon as you get to the office you will tell your boss how, firstly, the level of claim extremity in relation to consumer expectations, and secondly, the level of message explicitness, are two variables of ad efficiency that are as foreseen as they are important.

1.2 Background

Browsing through a contemporary glossy magazine you quickly find that the ingredients consist of one part advertising and an equivalently large portion of editorial content, of which an unknown amount is motivated by commercial interests. The recipe would probably look roughly the same in most media products currently on the market today. Looking at the constitution of the advertisements you find that not all of the brands say what you expect them to say. The incongruity provokes reactions in the minds of the consumers, and causing reactions is what good advertisements do, the challenge though, is not being able to provoke a reaction – that is easy. The challenge lies in predicting the reactions and using the provocative drivers to your brand's advantage.

Advertising is aimed at generating preferable effects on target groups – and from the consumers' point of view, advertisements are used to collect information. Advertisements are thus valuable for both parties. Running parallel to the brands' efforts at improving advertising effectiveness, are the perceptive abilities consumers develop that detects uninteresting advertisements and filter those that are actually interesting (D. Rumbo 2002). One of the signals that advertisements transmit is self-confidence, or possibly the lack of it. Self-confidence is a signal of the object's own belief in itself. This signal is considered credible since self-confidence is difficult to display in a credible way without having a solid ground on which to build it (J. Aaker 1997). It is difficult to fake. An object's self-confidence or lack thereof, affects our perception and attitude towards the object, regardless of it being a brand or a person. All signals that are credible strongly affect our mental picture of the object transmitting it, consciously or unconsciously, and self-confidence is likely to be a strong example of one such signal.

Signals of self-confidence can appear in many shapes and forms in advertisements. One of the most apparent is the advertising claim, which effects on the advertisement effectiveness this thesis sets out to measure. One could argue that only strong brands can afford high levels of claim extremity and that weak brands are supposed to remain loyal to their weakness all the way by claiming less. On the other hand, might it not be positive to display self-confidence by claiming less, thereby placing trust in the consumer and strengthening the perceived image? Either way, we will soon find out on which side of the consumers' expectations, over or under, the level of claim extremity is best situated.

Moving back to the picture we painted at the beginning of this section - the claims made by the two competing ads are promises to the consumers. However, the promises are not only what is said explicitly. Implicit messages can also communicate claims.

Implicit messages can consist of pictures, symbols, semantics, prices and also the possible absence of such markers e.g. prices (McQuarrie and Phillips 2005). The use of pictures in advertising doubled during the time period from 1954 to 1999 (McQuarrie and Phillips 2003). Low levels of message explicitness opens up for multiple interpretations and is, in opposite of explicit claims, likely to lessens the brands accountability of the claims in post purchase evaluation. When producing advertisements, particularly positioning and copy-work, the parties involved could stand to gain from considering not only the level of claim extremity but also its form. Form in this instance denotes the level of message explicitness – explicit or implicit.

The claim forms expectations in the minds of consumers as to the type and level of value the product will deliver after purchase (D. A. Aaker 1991). This is information that the brand itself transmits. However, the information that will reach the consumer, and even more importantly, the information that will be accepted – are not necessarily the same. Plenty of research has been done to find the determinants behind message acceptance. In social psychology the answer to what shapes conditions for a message acceptance has been source credibility (R.E Petty 1997). If a source is known to lie then each claim made by that source will be considered less credible and less likely to be accepted. Conversely, when a claim is made by a source that is known to always tell the truth, the claim has a great chance of being accepted. The notion of source credibility has served as a starting point for most marketing studies conducted on the subject (M.E Goldberg et. al.1990). However, most brands do not find themselves on either end on the credibility scale (T. Erdem et. al. 2004). Most brands are neither known for lying nor always telling the truth. Brands are, amongst other things known for saying whatever they possibly can to make consumers buy their products, and consumers know this (T. Erdem et. al. 2004). That is a major reason why new determinants and drivers of message acceptance need to be developed. So far, research has missed out on finding relevant determinants for optimal levels of claim extremity for brands located on the moderate range of the credibility scale. Level of claim extremity in relation to expectations and message explicitness could serve as two such determinants.

Wrong positioning strategy can cost companies large amounts of market share (M.E. Porter 1985). The right positioning strategy on the other hand, with optimal claim extremity and

message explicitness included, is likely to have a positive affect on brand perception and consumer behaviour.

Brand communication influences the consumers' perception of the brand. Consumer perception of the brand shapes attitudes towards the brand, and attitudes form consumption behaviour (P. Kotler 2000). Ad claim extremity and message explicitness are central parts of positioning strategy and therefore important determinants of brand and company success.

As stated above - prior research on the subject of advertising claims has measured advertising effectiveness in relation to credibility (M.E Goldberg et. al. 1990). Earlier research is also limited in the sense that ad claim effects were only measured in relation to the extent to which they improved ad effectiveness, and not whether they could have negative effects.

To sum up: Research on advertisement claim optimisation is limited to brands being either extremely credible or extremely non-credible, thereby leaving the majority of brands without relevant claim optimisation determinants. It is also limited by only measuring the potential positive effects of certain claims, which is a knowledge gap this test will bridge. Ad claim extremity and message explicitness are important variables in positioning strategy. Their effects on ad effectiveness have not until now been measured together and not in relation to expectations. They will be used as the new determinants for claim optimisation.

1.3 Problem area

The issue of relating to, and communicating, one's own strengths and weaknesses is an ever present question. The potential perception of a brand, from positive to negative, is based on two fundamental pillars; the brand's real abilities and constitution, and the brand's capabilities of communicating and marketing those real abilities. In this sense brands find themselves at a sort of starting point from which marketers have to base decisions. This is what we have - what can we claim? This thesis sets out to deliver decision support with regard to the complex relationship between expectations and delivery in brand positioning.

As mentioned in the background there are gains to be made and challenges to be met when dealing with claim extremity choices. If the consumers believe the brand to be mediocre in the midst of all competition then the brand might not benefit from high claim extremity. Most brands try to convey in one way or another that they are the best choice. Some with credibility

and some without it. Some remain in line with expectations, while others stray. The message recipient most often has a preconceived image of the brand and thus a certain expectation as to what an ad should look like from a specific brand. The match between the receivers' expectations and the brand's message impacts upon the outcome of the advertisement.

This is a question of strategy and positioning. What can the brand afford to claim, and what is the optimal level? Can a badly chosen claim induce negative effects? Low status brands might want to explicitly claim as much as possible, whereas really strong brands might not benefit from stretching in that direction. When a brand sets out to form new associations in the minds of the consumer, it has to make a clear analysis of what is possible in a period of time, and what is not. If Brand A wants to be seen as the top quality choice, but is currently not even included in the consideration set, then brand A cannot simply go out and claim it is the quality choice number one without knowing what this will incur.

To get a rough estimate of the frequency of unexpected claims, and what level of claim extremity is most often used; ten different popular magazines were examined. A sample group of four people aged 18 to 28 were introduced to the subject and the variables and set to the task of examine the magazines. They were asked to state whether the ads were perceived as understated or exaggerated and whether they consisted of explicit or implicit messages. The respondents' data showed that about fifty percent of the ads had used unexpected levels of claim extremity. Eighty percent of those fifty were considered to be exaggerated, and twenty understated. Seventy percent of the ads had elements adhering to both explicit and implicit messages but with different calibrations of the two. The remaining thirty percent of the ads consisted of an equal amount of implicit messages only and explicit messages only.

Filling the theoretical gap presented in the background will have plenty of commercial situations to improve. Basically, the problem here is that there is an uncertainty for decision makers in knowing 1) how to optimise the claim and 2) what determinants to base their decisions on. Expected levels of claim extremity and message explicitness will serve as a framework for that decision making.

1.4 Purpose

The purpose is to produce new evidence on how to shape and optimise a significant dimension of advertisements - the claim, thereby facilitating decision making in ad-production. More specifically, the thesis sets out to determine the effects on ad-effectiveness of communicating with unexpected levels of claim extremity and the effects of doing so with implicit and explicit messages. The aim is to conclude how brands should relate to their perceived brand strengths or weaknesses. Should they exaggerate or understate?

By satisfying purposes one and two, the thesis will increase the understanding and the uses for two new and measurable variable relationships. In doing so the thesis builds evidence and theoretical support on how to construct more efficient ad claims.

Purpose

1. Determine what level of claim extremity in relation to expectations that, has the most positive effects on ad effectiveness.
2. Determine what level of message explicitness has the most positive effects on ad effectiveness.

1.5 Delineation

The test includes two existing brands with similar brand status and knowledge in the eyes of consumers. The study focuses on exploring the effects of two intertwined ad elements, deviation from expected levels of claim extremity and the level of explicitness at which this is communicated. The different “levels” of claim extremity used in this thesis refers solely to two types of claims - level of claim extremity that are either, 1) *over* expectations or 2) *under* expectations. Optimal levels of claim extremity are therefore only tested and shown in two places on a scale of extremity – not more.

1.6 Contribution

Advertising claim studies have so far only measured absolute levels of advertising claim and have not taken into account consumers’ claim expectations (e.g. the major study done by Goldberg and Hartwick 1990). Prior studies have thus not been able to measure whether the chosen claim level could actually have a negative effect on brand evaluation – only the level of positive effectiveness, low or high. The thesis will hopefully measure whether a badly chosen claim could potentially harm the brand.

The new determinants will have clear practical implications by constituting as reference points. For example, the expected level of claim extremity, from which the advertiser can choose optimal claim level – before changing advertising strategy. Also giving practical implications and evidence for strategy, copy and AD-work on type of tonality and unique selling points to use and how outspoken the benefits should be presented in brand communication.

Furthermore this thesis brings up the issue of handicap principle which has not been used in this context before. The handicap principle can deepen the understanding of ad claim effects by explaining reactions to what seem to be exaggerated attributes or waste of resources.

Goldberg and Hartwick (1990) claim that the optimal level of advertising claim extremity depends on the credibility of the source. The issue of the consumers' prior encounter with the brand and the expectations on future advertising claim extremity level was not taken into account. Their research analysed what happens with effects of different claim levels dependent on the reputation of the firm, bad or good. Most brands have quite neutral brand reputations or at least not extreme in any way. Furthermore it is highly questionable how many brands consumers believe to be so bad or dishonest that they would consider lying to the consumer about being number one or number two.

Brands try to optimise and twist and turn every argument and claim to persuade the consumer in the best way possible – and consumers know this. If the ad says “The number one detergent” then most consumers know that this is what the brand itself believes according to its own definition, but not necessarily the number one detergent according to the consumers' definition. Another example: Car maker BMW claims it has the best offer in town, as do Mercedes and Skoda. It is more a question of meeting or deviating from expectations and showing subtle signs of confidence that determine claim acceptance. However in source credibility extremities, such as well known companies accused of fraud, and on the other side of the scale, public organisations, source credibility becomes more relevant as a determinant. But between those two sides there are other aspects that determine the outcome of claim ambition. Source credibility is therefore not as relevant as a determinant of message claim acceptance. Implications will strive for relevance in board rooms as well as in ad agencies.

2. THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

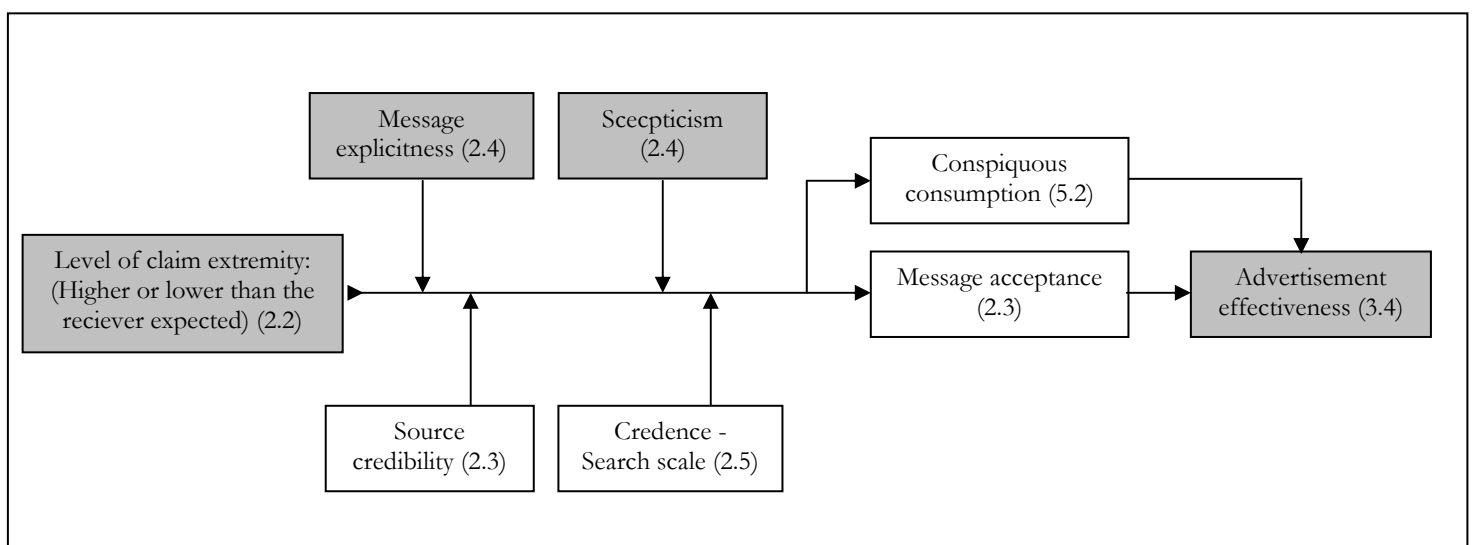
The theory section includes theories that are closely linked to the thesis subject and are suitable for building hypotheses.

2.1 Introduction to theory

The effects of advertisement, of using unexpected levels of claim extremity and the moderate variable message explicitness is a black spot on the consumer behaviour map. The theories included are chosen as to explain the context of the variables and the problems which are tested in the thesis. The hypotheses will appear respectively after each relevant theory.

The main purpose of the thesis is to investigate preferable levels of claim extremity in relation to expectations and the effects and interaction effects of message explicitness. The main test-variables relating directly to the purpose are to be found in the grey boxes in the flow scheme below. The white boxes depict variables that will be used in discussions and hopefully lead to additional findings – thereby taking full advantage of the test already set up and also taking into account the context in which the main variables exist and by which they are most likely to be affected. Source credibility and Credence - Search scale will be tested. Conspicuous consumption and Message acceptance are theoretical background and basis for discussion.

The model below describes the process of message acceptance including a selected pick of the most used variables historically in this research field. The model shows the theories that have been relevant in the area historically, it shows the relations between the variables that are tested in this thesis and the ingredients of this theory section.



Model 1.

2.2. Expectations

The thesis isn't what you'd hoped for so far? Wait until you read the findings.

From an expectation management point of view, the quote above might not be a good choice. On the other hand the consumers of this thesis might think it is a delightful read and much more interesting than expected. As the sender of information it is hard to tell how you'll match the expectations of your audience. Plenty of research has been done to structure and theorise the complexity of expectations – expectations form both conditions and results for advertisements.

It is all connected. The advertisement claim forms expectations on delivery, and expectations form conditions for evaluation and consumer satisfaction (M. Söderlund 2001). If expectations are high then the brand will have to try hard to satisfy the consumer. When expectations are low the brand will have an easier time satisfying or even surprising the consumer in a positive way. Common for both situations is that surpassing expectation is the critical factor in attaining customer satisfaction and loyalty. Expectation is a mental picture in the consumers' mind that has been built up from the first time he got any stimuli from the brand in question. This mental picture gradually builds up with new nuances every time the consumer comes in contact with the brand. Over time the mental picture fades if no new input occurs.

The consumers' mental picture of the brand forms attitudes - and expectations are a result or at least a part of that attitude. The implication of this is that every piece of information that reaches a consumer about the brand could affect brand expectations. Therefore there is a constant challenge in keeping the brands' delivery and communication congruent with what is expected. Since unexpected brand communication has an impact on consumer feelings for the brand (G.T Ford 1990) it is fair to assume that certain unexpected properties of communication, and level of claim extremity in particular, also have an effect on the consumers mental relationship towards the brand. This will be indirectly tested in the coming hypotheses. That is, do unexpected levels of claim extremity have effects on ad efficiency? It might seem trivial but it is a symbolic gain noting this since it hasn't been tested before.

Consumers expect advertising to put the brand in the most positive light as possible. They don't expect a brand to undersell itself. Results from the pre test and this study indicate this. The majority of exaggerated claims perceived in the ten magazines examined by the four respondents might also be a result of this skewed perception. Understated ads do not seem natural, unless it particularly obvious that it is an conscious understatement. A conscious understatement though,

could possibly even strengthen the brand: the understatement indicates confidence, by putting trust in the consumer to understand and see the understatement for what it is. This is a question more relevant when considering brand strength and we will come back to this in the sections *Discussion* and *Further research*. Since consumers subconsciously seem to expect brands to claim as much as possible, and an understatement promises unexpectedly little, the effects should be negative. Negative effects of unexpected claim extremity will be indirectly tested in the hypotheses to come.

Incongruence in expectations and delivery has not been researched upon regarding advertising claims before. As concluded earlier, the level of congruency in expectation and delivery of a product affects consumer satisfaction (M. Söderlund 2001). Negative incongruence in product or service delivery has negative effects on consumer evaluation. Negative incongruence in communication could therefore possibly also have negative effects upon ad effects. Since consumers expect brands to claim as much as they can there is reason to believe they would react negatively on unexpectedly low levels of claim extremity. Low levels of claim extremity would lead consumers to think that the brand has tried its best but has still not been able to claim much in absolute terms.

H1: Unexpectedly low levels of claim extremity decrease ad effectiveness.

Conversely, theory suggests that positive surprises affect the receiver positively (M. Söderlund 2001). A claim however is not a delivery, it is a promise of a delivery. So it is questionable whether it is actually a positive surprise at all. One can assume though, since the claim is a hint of what can be expected, that an unexpectedly strong claim would have positive effects on the consumer.

H2: Unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity increase ad effectiveness.

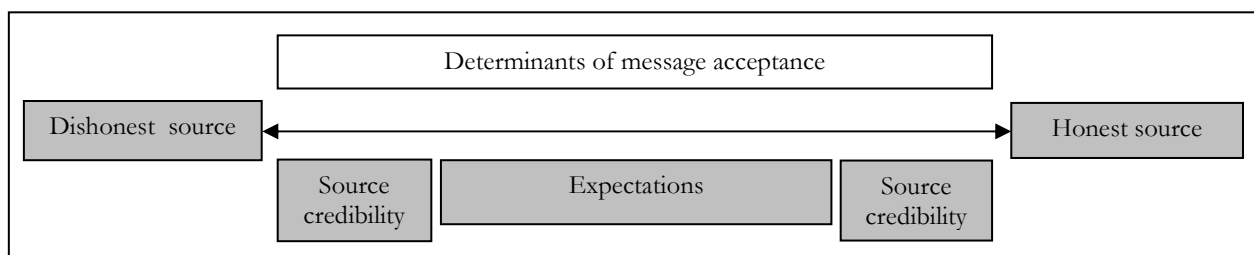
Theory also suggests that objective claims have greater chance of getting accepted even at high levels of claim extremity, rather than subjective claims (G.T Ford 1990). This notion leads us on to the next theory in line, namely the issue of source credibility.

2.3 Source credibility

*Endless possibilities*TM (Enron 2000)

Social psychology theory suggests that the answer to what level of claim extremity is optimal, is dependent upon the level of source credibility (Aronson et. al. 1963 and Bergin 1962; Bochner and Inso 1966). When the source has low credibility the relationship between claim extremity and attitude change is curvilinear with maximum attitude change at intermediate levels of claim extremity. When the source has a high credibility, the attitude-claim relationship is positive. However even with high credibility sources the attitude change levels off when the claim becomes extreme enough. These findings have been translated into commercial applications by (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). Basically concluding that the probability that a brand's message will be accepted is dependent on the source's credibility.

Consumers are more likely to accept messages if spoken by a high-credibility source and the opposite when spoken by a low credibility source. Also the potential for attitude change is affected the most when the claim extremity is high. Low extremity claims are likely to be accepted with both high-credibility sources and low-credibility sources. However with low levels of claim extremity the potential for message acceptance and attitude change is also low. On the other hand when claim extremity is high, the potential for attitude change is high and source credibility becomes an even more critical determinant. This also implies the relevance and contribution of this test. Since most brands are not considered dishonest or very honest and therefore we need additional variables from which to choose optimal level of claim extremity from e.g. expectation and message explicitness. Source credibility is nonetheless an important variable in message acceptance as a whole and will be used occasionally in the discussion part. If a brand is placed on extreme levels on the scale shown below, source credibility becomes important and a certain type of response is provoked in the mind of the consumer. That response is described in the next topic. The model is useful for understanding the contribution and discussions in this study.



2.4 Scepticism

Wow, is that washing detergent really the best in the whole world?

Scepticism relates to this study's topic by serving as historical background in this theoretical field. It has been one of the major variables in message acceptance theory. It also contributes as an additional driving force in the complex process of message acceptance and possibly a variable that is affected by unexpected claim extremity and message explicitness.

Consumer scepticism towards advertisements has been defined as a cognitive response to the motives of advertisement claims made by advertisers (Boush et al. 1994). It is important though to distinguish between general mistrust and disliking of advertisements and scepticism for a specific message or claim. Scepticism in terms of general mistrust of advertisement is more of a cynical attitude that affects the interpretation of all perceived information. Scepticism of a specific ad is a targeted and provoked reaction from something in the ad itself. The latter is the one included in this test.

Scepticism occurs depending on two fundamental forces: The constitution of the communication and the constitution of the receiver's personality and attitude (S.J. Tan 2002). Some receivers react more easily and some are less likely to be provoked. Regardless of which, consumer scepticism is no longer as relevant as when advertisement and its effects was a secret of the trade. Furthermore the concept of consumer scepticism is mostly relevant when measuring effects from communication from companies either being seen upon as very honest or very dishonest – of which the minority of companies are included right now. However, scepticism is likely to be provoked not only dependent on the attitude towards the brand in the first place but also in reaction to advertisement in hindsight – as the coming hypothesis will test.

It has been a paradigm change during the last couple of decades where advertisement and its drivers have become common knowledge and a topic for public discussions – thereby becoming more transparent. In this process consumers have become more aware of the motives of advertisements and the techniques behind it implying somewhat of a constant consumer scepticism or a filter if you will (F. Shaw 2002).

In the light of the modern consumers supposedly high awareness there is still reason to believe that certain communicative elements could provoke a higher or lower level of sceptical reaction.

Since the level of scepticism affects conditions for message acceptance (C. Obermiller 1995) and therefore the effectiveness of ad campaigns, it could be interesting to see whether form and level of claim extremity affect the consumer scepticism. Since the exaggerated ads raises the consumers' attention the most, and attention leads to awareness and awareness to scepticism → extreme levels of claim extremity should lead to increased scepticism..

H3: Unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity increases consumer scepticism.

Explicit messages yields greater awareness and awareness facilitates scepticism. Thereby hypothesising the following:

H4: Unexpectedly high levels of message explicitness increases consumer scepticism.

The presence of consumer scepticism differs depending on the constitution of the communicated product or service which brings us to the next topic in the theory section – the Credence-Search scale.

2.5 Credence-Search scale

How will I know that your therapy advice is good?

The probability of message acceptance is, in parallel to other variables, also dependent on the constitution of the product or service that is being evaluated. R. B. Ekelund et. al. 1995 has developed a framework that concludes where in the buying process the goods possibly can be evaluated. Where in this process the good can be evaluated depends on the constitution of the good. And dependent on where in the process the good can be evaluated, claim scepticism becomes more or less prevalent.

The framework is constituted by a scale of which products and services can be put, ranging between Credence and Search. Credence attributes is attributes of a product or service that cannot be confirmed either before or after the purchase, such as services involving high expertise such as car maintenance or law practise. Then there is Experience attributes, which are attributes that can be confirmed after the purchase such as hairdressing or restaurants. And lastly we have Search attributes that can be confirmed prior to the purchase such as cars and clothes.

Depending on where on this scale a certain good is placed, its conditions for making claims are limited or facilitated. Goods adhering towards the credence side of the scale are likely to be faced with claim scepticism because the consumer can not confirm that the claim is actually true or not. Such as the quote in the beginning of this section referring to a therapists advice. On the other hand, goods ranging towards the search side of the scale have less reason to believe that a claim would be untrue since they can actually confirm the truthfulness prior to purchase. And therefore have high claim acceptance buffer when hearing or seeing a claim from that sort of good. Goods placed on different sides on the credence search scale should therefore be affected differently by certain levels of claim extremity. Specifically meaning that:

H5: Easily evaluated products or services get better ad effectiveness from communicating with unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity than products and services evaluated with difficulty.

2.6 Message explicitness

These pair of jeans will get you laid in a matter of minutes.

Some benefits are best to communicate implicitly. Others explicitly. Message explicitness refers to the form in which the message is delivered. Explicit messages is the message the receiver with ease can perceive. E.g. what is said in words. Implicit messages are those which the receiver most often only interpret unconsciously in terms of pictures and symbols (J. Aaker 1997).

Consumers tend to prefer to figure out themselves what to think about brands (M. Dahlén et. al 2003), and since explicit messages per definition means to literally tell the consumer what to think, implicit messages might be preferable – especially when the messages are extreme and unexpected and therefore likely to make the consumer even more aware of the message.

H6: Low levels of message explicitness increases ad effectiveness when communicating extreme levels of claim extremity.

Since explicit messages makes the receiver more consciously aware of the claim (J. Aaker (1997), it is likely to presume that a high level of explicitness will enhance the effects of unexpected claim extremity. That notion does not however answer the question on what the effect would be in terms of positive or negative. Since there is a positive relation between explicitness and awareness

and awareness and scepticism, the interaction effect between unexpected levels of claim extremity and message acceptance should be the following:

H7: Unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity yield the most positive ad effectiveness when communicated with implicit messages.

2.7 Handicap principle

Message acceptance and ad effectiveness is the theory about finding the right key for each mind's lock. The recipe for success is complex and heterogeneous dependent on situation, objective and recipient. Sometimes a really persuasive message can make the receiver to actively withstand the message just because he or she through self examination feels handled or manipulated. The recipient wants to feel it is his or hers own choice and own critical evaluation that has led to the attitude change. Since the recipient needs to feel confident in the evaluation process and outcome it is important to trust the critical mind and evaluation process of the recipient. Evaluations take into account many subtle signals of which one of them is the handicap principle. Sociobiological research has dealt with a phenomenon that can cast light on the issue of message acceptance. "Signals are reliable if the cheater cannot gain by using them" (Zahavi and Zahavi, 1997, p. 27). It serves as an additional perspective on forces behind message acceptance.

The handicap principle originally adheres to biological research where scientists have found that animal individuals that have handicapping attributes, such as extra long feathers or fins, are perceived by other individuals as highly capable. This is explained by the fact that if the individual can afford to be handicapped in such an extent then it has to be highly capable of the fundamental demands that is demanded. Finding food and defending against enemies comes first, beautiful feathers second. And the beautiful feathers are taken as evidence that the individual has overcome the difficulties of basic demands.

This can be translated into claim theory as the following. A high claim handicaps the brand in the sense that it raises the expectations and is therefore more likely to disappoint the consumer in the event of a purchase if the promise is not kept. Anyone can make a high level claim but on the other hand a brand with a higher claim than it actually can deliver will not survive in the long run. A high claim is a handicapping signal.

Since high level claims can be interpreted as handicapping in the sense that the handicap phenomenon refers to – there is reason to believe that high claims have positive effects on the recipient. Conversely low claims should have negative effects. Which is being tested in **H4**.

2.8 Advertisement effectiveness

Commonly used effects that describe ad effectiveness are consumer attitude change and change in consumer intentions (Rossiter and Percy 1987). Both variables can be seen as broad descriptions of two main elements in the consumers' relationships to the brand. One of which describes the relationship in terms of planned actions (intentions) and the other one (attitude) in terms of preferences. Both main variables include vast numbers of more specified variables such as e.g. intentions for word-of-mouth (telling someone about a product/brand) or brand liking (how attractive the brand is perceived to be).

The dependent variables in this test were chosen as to create a high relevance towards practitioners, still maintaining an academic height. Doing so by measuring effects that in a buying process are close to the purchase in the minds of the consumers yet using variables commonly used in ad-stimuli ad effect tests. The advertisement effectiveness variables of this thesis are Perceived brand attractiveness, Consumer intentions and Scepticism. Perceived brand attractiveness, including preferences towards owning, buying and getting as brand as present, describes the consumers mental attitude towards the brand in terms of liking and possession preferences, which correlates positively with consumption behaviour (Rossiter and Percy 1987). So does the consumer intentions – intentions are even closer connected to buying behaviour – in this instance constituted by buying intentions, word of mouth intentions and store visiting intentions. Scepticism, in the test present as perceived reliability of the brand, induce negatively on buying behaviour.

Consumer attitudes make out conditions for buying behaviour in the sense that positive attitudes create strong buying intentions – and strong buying intentions correlate with consumer behaviour (Dahlén & Lange 2003). These dependent variables (attitudes, intentions and scepticism) satisfy theoretical comparability with other existing theories, including the same variables since they are used plentiful in marketing and consumer behaviour research, and also have proven implications on real consumer behaviour – as derived above. They are therefore relevant for this study – by enabling theoretical comparability and the strong predictive implications on consumer behaviour.

2.9 Summary of hypotheses

Q1: What level of claim extremity is preferable?

H1: Unexpectedly low levels of claim extremity decrease ad effectiveness.

Q2: What level of claim extremity is preferable?

H2: Unexpectedly low levels of claim extremity increase decrease ad effectiveness.

Q3: Does level of claim extremity affect consumer scepticism?

H3: Unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity increases consumer scepticism.

Q4: What level message explicitness is preferable?

H4: Unexpectedly high levels of message explicitness increases consumer scepticism.

Q5: What is the preferable level of claim extremity depending on credence search constitution of the product or service?

H5: Easily evaluated products or services get better ad effectiveness from communicating with unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity than products and services evaluated with difficulty.

Q4: What level of message explicitness is preferable?

H6: Low levels of message explicitness increase ad effectiveness when communicating extreme levels of claim extremity.

Q6: What sort of message explicitness is preferable dependent on level of claim extremity?

H7: Unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity yield the most positive ad effectiveness when communicated with implicit messages.

3. METHOD

This section includes descriptions and motives for the methods chosen to investigate the hypothesis.

3.1 Theoretical stance

The thesis adapts a conclusive approach á la Malhotra 2004, by adding existing theoretical variables into new variables e.g. level of claim extremity in relation to expectations and message explicitness. Applying those variables onto a new problem area, for example; Can certain claims have negative effects? And from that draw conclusions. Choice on quantitative test instead of qualitative tests like focus groups and interviews, was done to facilitate the validity and strength of evidence produced by the thesis. Discussions and qualitative reasoning is added on top of the quantitative evidence.

3.2 Pre-test

To explore how brand effectiveness is affected by unexpected levels of claim extremity and message explicitness, the test relies on survey generated data. The test was initialised with a pre-test that was set to determine whether the ads that were going to be used in the main survey were perceived in the ways meant to.

→ That means confirming that ad number X is actually considered claiming more than expected and ad number Y claiming less and so on.

The pre-test consisted of manipulated ads on which the respondent was to look at and afterwards fill in a series of questions confirming or declining the fact that the ads were perceived to have unexpectedly high or low levels of claim extremity. The ads and the questions are shown in the appendix.

The process of testing complex variables and measuring effects in a complex human reaction was characterised by trade-offs between validity and measurability. On the one hand you would ideally lift out the variable you are testing as the only visible variable so that the stimuli of the measured variable becomes strong. Doing so you risk the effect of the ad being perceived as unrealistic, and in this case possibly even provoke a laugh as the reaction from the respondent. The issue of isolation and enforcing a certain variable and still keep an acceptable amount of realism is a challenge for masters. In this case the challenge was managed through showing the manipulated ads continuously to respondents, starting with extreme ads and step by step lowering the extremity until a reasonable level of variable profile was found.

3.2.1 Sample

The sample consisted of an equal amount of men and women, all students at Stockholm University, with an age between 18 and 28, being adults but not having families of their own. Same prerequisites were applied for the distribution of main test survey material. The sample requirements that was chosen, was to inhabit a high enough level of brand awareness and still be heterogeneous enough to be transferable for a larger population. The sample from Stockholm University in the chosen age span can be generalised with most Swedish urban student populations in the same age, including student from different institutions and fields of interest. Unlike Stockholm School of Economics for example, that can be considered being more homogenous. Survey distribution was executed during a two week period.

3.2.2 Choice of category

To further the validity of the test, two product/service categories was included. This was done for two reasons. The first one was to prove whether the tested effects were differed between credence search capacities, and the second was to gain validity if the effects turned out to be category independent. One of the chosen categories was thus an offering that could not easily be evaluated before purchase and usage – “Idre fjäll” (Idre mountain), a ski resort in Sweden. The second brand of choice was Swedish shoe seller “Din Sko” (Your Shoe).

3.2.3 Choice of brands

The brands had to satisfy a reasonable level of both brand knowledge and brand status in the population chosen. Regarding brand knowledge the choice fell upon using real brands and not fictive ones. Non fictive brands are more suitable in the scope of this thesis and are also honest in the sense that it is harder to question the validity of brand associations and they are easier to generalise. As you can benefit from the brands already existing associations in the minds of the consumer, you will also have to conform to them. Regarding the brand status the choice fell on mid status brands, not having too cemented associations nor too fixed images in the minds of the consumer, yet satisfying a high enough level of brand knowledge from which to form expectations. The preference towards mid status brands was also due to the fact that it is easier to produce manipulated ad claims perceived as over or under expectations for such brands than for extreme status brands. The pre-test included questions determining the brand knowledge and the moderate level of brand status required, such as:

- How familiar are you with brand X? 1=Not at all, 7=Very well

Mean value of Brand Knowledge was 5,1 for Idre fjäll and 5,8 for Din Sko. Variance: 1,2. Brand knowledge was thus satisfactory with a high knowledge and a low variance.

- *Would you consider brand X to be a high status brand? 1=Not at all, 7=Very much so*

Mean value for Brand Status was 3,7 for Idre Fjäll and 3,4 for Din Sko. Variance 2,3. Thereby satisfying moderate levels of brand status and showing a non collectively cemented brand association with a bit higher variance than the brand knowledge one.

Din Sko has one hundred shoe stores in Sweden, selling quite cheap shoes for kinder garden kids, old grandma and fashionista women and men. Or at least they try to. Stores are often located in shopping malls and are well represented in small and medium sized cities. Normal brand communication is seen in subways, TV-commercial and print pushing price and fashion in a blurry mix. Din Sko is according to survey material *“not the kind of brand you’d brag about”* at the same time another respondent said *“I think they make perfectly good shoes and wear a pair just now”*.

Idre fjäll is a ski resort offering alternatives to both families and youth, having discos as well as ski school for the small ones. Idre has consumer associations more towards the family part since competing resort offerings focus more on the party section. This fact was capitalised on in the manipulated ad using party associations as a means to claim more than expected. Idre fjäll is according to a respondent *“every Swedes slope”*.

3.2.4 Choice of ads and visual elements

As mentioned before there was a challenge in raising the profile of the tested variables and still keep a reasonable level of credibility in the ads. The task was to provoke a reaction to the level of claim extremity, and also include the variable of message explicitness. The pre-test, and thus the main test as well, included eight ads in total. The dimensions were as follows. Two different brands (Idre fjäll/Din Sko), two different levels of message explicitness (implicit/explicit) and two levels of claim extremity (over expectation/under expectation). That is 2*2*2 number of ads. Since the test only was supposed to depict the brand, the ads did not include any specific image of the actual product to distract the respondent, only brand name and logo. The ads were designed to induce as few associations as possible other than claim strength but still being realistic.

No pre-test was done to determine what is perceived as implicit or explicit message. Assumption is, and theory suggests, that explicit messages are the ones written explicitly in words or numbers and implicit messages are the ones done by images, pictures and symbols.

In specific, the elements chosen to depict a low level of message explicitness were pictures that contained common associations for consumers. Luxurious symbols such as champagne bottles and posh parties were used for the ads meant to unexpectedly exaggerate (over/implicit). The ads meant to understate included pictures inhabiting no or weak associations in the minds of the consumers, claiming basically just being able to deliver the service. By communicating low values and weak arguments the ads were to be perceived as understated. All other elements except the tested ones were kept to a minimum and were included respectively on the comparable ads.

The explicit ads literally claimed flat out in words what the value of the specific brand was supposed to be perceived as. For example the exaggerated Din Sko ad stated “The most exclusive shoe”. The explicit ads that under claimed did so by claiming only being able to deliver the basics of the service not implying any extra worth at all. The pre-test included batteries of question to increase validity. Answer scaled between 1-7 with qualitative descriptions at each end.

3.2.5 Results of pre-test

20 respondents got to look at each ad, 2 ads per pre-test survey, totalling 80 respondents. The term “over claimed” were not used in the pre-test survey, instead other types of words and phrasing were used to get the respondents to answer the critical question without knowing it. Response from three questions were added into one to gain validity, and satisfied Crombach’s Alpha (0,7) with the figure 0,88.

Questions were:

- *From what you can see in the ad, do you think the brand has a reasonable estimation of its own brand value?*
- *Do you interpret Din Sko to promise more or less than you would expect?*
- *Do you think Din Sko shows more or less self esteem than you’d expected?*

Respondents exposed to the ads with unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity strongly interpreted the ads as over claims, with an average significantly over 4, ending up at 5,5 on a Likert type scale (scale points 1-7) for the three chosen questions. Significantly separated on a 0,01 percent level by 0,017. Important to note here is that the questions posed to the respondents

were still not intuitive so there is reason to believe that some respondents could have answered that they thought the brands under claimed when in fact the respondent unconsciously felt an exaggerated claim. That of course, could have gone in the opposite direction as well. This in addition to the three questions added to one variable determines the general perception of the ads as having unexpectedly high level of claim extremity.

The mean values for the understated ads were below the middle 4-value. However not as much as the exaggerated ones were above 4. Understated ads were perceived as counter intuitive according to respondents. When having more qualitative approach and asking the respondents on their thoughts of understated claims one of them summarised, "*understating is not a natural thing for commercial interests and brands to do*" - and the result is a mirror of that collective thought. With that hindering human perception as a background the mean value of 3,1 for the same questions posed to exaggerated ads becomes more conclusive.

To further the economy and validity of the pre-test a second go-around was done for the understated ads (and for the exaggerated ones for comparability). To overcome the unnaturalness of understatement a question, at the same time educational and also investigative, was asked to 30 respondents:

- *Is this ad positively exaggerated or negatively understated?*

28 persons responded *understated* for the ads meant to be understated and 30 respondents responded *exaggerated* for the exaggerated ads.

Favourable perception of the ads is thus accepted with and without the counter intuitive background of understated claims – though the exaggerated claims should be seen as testing the variables with a stronger stimulus.



Explicit

Implicit

The top row ads 1.1, 1.2, 2.1 and 2.2 are exaggerated and the others (1.3, 1.4, 2.3 and 2.4) are understated. Derived from the three questions, point scale 1 refer to very understated ads and 7 to very exaggerated ads:

From what you can see in the ad, do you think the brand has a reasonable estimation of its own brand value?

Do you interpret Din Sko to promise more or less than you would expect?

Do you think Din Sko shows more or less self esteem than you'd expected?

Results:

Ad 1.1 (Exaggerated): 5,9

Ad 1.2 (Exaggerated): 5,7

Ad 1.3 (Understated): 2,9

Ad 1.4 (Understated): 3,0

Ad 2.1 (Exaggerated): 5,3

Ad 2.2 (Exaggerated): 5,2

Ad 2.3 (Understated): 3,3

Ad 2.4 (Understated): 3,4

3.3 Main test

Once the eight manipulated ads in the pre-test had been confirmed there was only to decide on what kind of advertisement effects they were going to be tested against – to be able to use them in the main test. This had been decided upon earlier on but were added to and subtracted from as the thesis work progressed. The decision on dependent communication variables were done with the ambition to include as many variables as possible without risking to bore the respondents. This enabled the test to insure findings. Main dependent variables were Consumer Intentions and Brand Attractiveness. Main test can be found in the appendix.

The Scale of which the respondents could choose to put their answers was designed as a Likert type scale ranging from 1 to 7. The variables *Brand Attractiveness* and *Consumer Intention* consisted of three questions each, combined into one variable respectively to enhance the reliability of the results. Both combined variables reached the critical level of Crombachs Alpha 0,7 with the figure 0,82 and 0,79.

Brand Attractiveness

Would you like to; (1) Get it as a present? (2) Buy it? (3) Own it?

Consumer Intention

Are you planning on; (1) Buying? (2) Looking in shop? (3) W-o-m-ing?

Scepticism

Do you perceive the brand to be reliable?

3.3.1 Survey delivery and control

The survey was delivered at Stockholm University to respondents consisting of an equal amount of men and women with ages between eighteen and twenty-eight. In total there were forty respondents assigned to respond to each manipulated ad and thereby reaching a satisfying level of respondents. 160 surveys were delivered including two different ads each representing one of the two brands. Only 8 surveys were incomplete or erroneous and were later replaced by same amount of complete and satisfying ones.

3.4 Tools

To analyse the collected data, the statistical data analysis program SPSS using the two way ANOVA-test to find differences between groups and interaction effects between groups was needed. Level of significance was accepted at 10 percent.

3.5 Reliability and validity of test

The reliability of the test is challenged by three factors. Since the test was carried out by survey and not interview questions, there is reason to believe that the inter – rater reliability, which measures the likelihood of consistency in results of the same test done by different persons, can be considered as strong. The questions were identical in all surveys and were also pre-tested towards a supervisor as to not being biased from the authors' perspective or hypothesis. Since respondents got to decide for themselves when to answer the survey during their lunch break, the influx of time pressure was reduced. Also, time of day should not have any effect on response. Therefore the strength of test – retest reliability can also be considered as strong.

And finally, we have the internal consistency for the two main variables, which has already been stated above being satisfactory with Crombach's Alpha well above 0,7. In summary, the reliability of the test is strong.

Since the tested variables are complex signals and a part of a web of perception forces and stimuli, the validity is harder to measure and also harder to achieve than the reliability in this specific case. As stated in earlier sections, the task of isolating only the two variables was a demanding one, having to raise the profile of the variables to a high level without risking an unrealistic appearance. Starting at the top we can conclude that the construct validity is relatively high, since the basic design of the test is a normal and successful method in a test where an ad stimuli is supposed to provoke an investigated reaction. Manipulated ads on the other hand, can be considered as a weak stimuli, and far from the reality of multimedia ad campaigns. The scope of the thesis limited the test to manipulated ads only, and should according to thesis standards be satisfactory, even though the validity of course could have been strengthened by more and stronger stimuli. The face validity which in this case can be seen as if the ads really provoke the “right” reactions can according to the pre-test be considered as satisfactory. More so in the case of unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity than the unexpectedly low claims. Importantly though is the communicative validity, which in this case have been enhanced through including all test results, satisfactory and non-satisfactory, in the thesis and also the complete surveys and ads in the appendix. In all, the validity was harder to achieve but in the light of the interdependence of communicative effects and trade-offs being made the validity is strong enough. Furthermore the two brands will be tested as one data group since they in the test showed no significant differences in between.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the results and possible explanations and drivers behind the results. Several hypotheses are intertwined and adhering to the same data test.

4.1 Initial control

Incomplete or non-serious surveys were discarded and replaced with new ones (8). Data collection and structuring in SPSS were conducted during an as short period of time as possible to minimise inconsistency errors. Most of the initial work laying the basis for test was done in the pre-test activities.

4.2 Effects of unexpected claim extremity

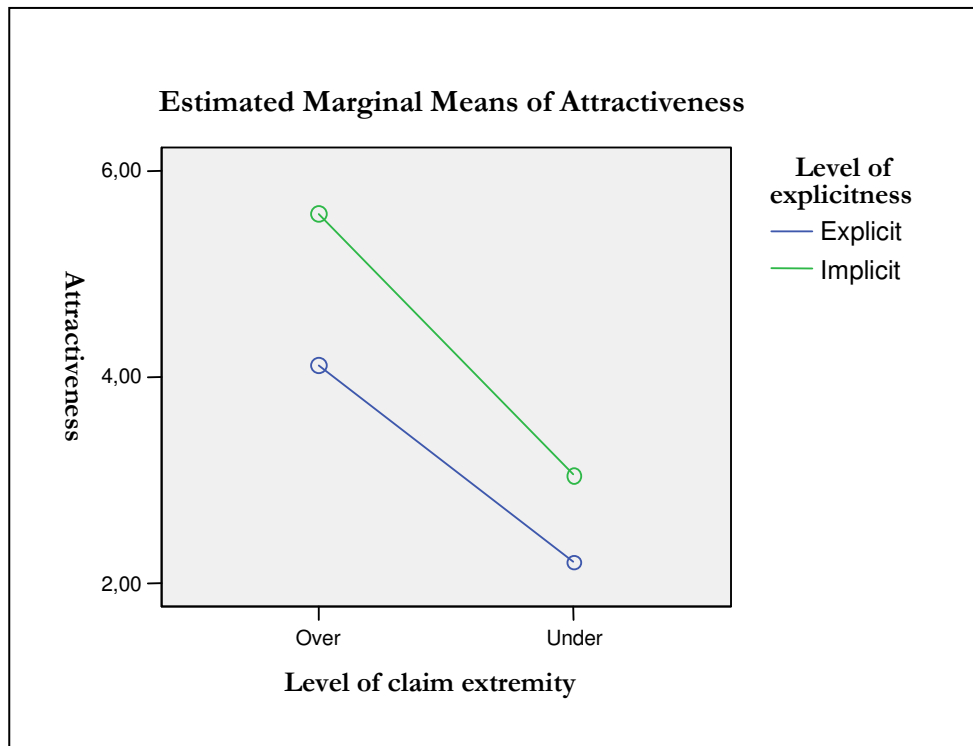
The first hypothesis was based on the notion that deviations from expectations have effects on human perception and evaluation in general. Effects are therefore also likely to occur when unexpected communicative messages are delivered to consumers – referring to claim extremity in particular. To test whether and how there were significant differences between the groups, and interaction effects between groups, a two-way ANOVA was done in SPSS. As said - no differences on communication effects were found between the different brands so they will be dealt with as one data group. Now moving on to **H1** and the effects of exaggerated and understated ad claims.

Two-way ANOVA

Communication effect	Independent variable	Significant	Mean Over	Mean Under
Intention	Claim extremity	0,023**	4,4	2,6
Brand attractiveness	Claim extremity	0,020**	4,9	2,7

****Significant on a 10% level**

The results showed that both of the dependent variables intentions and perceived brand attractiveness were affected by what type of claim extremity (Over/Under) they belonged to. With significant figures on a 5% level the differences between groups are proven. Moving on to the hypotheses. The graphs 1. and 2. show the specific effects of unexpectedly levels of claim extremity.

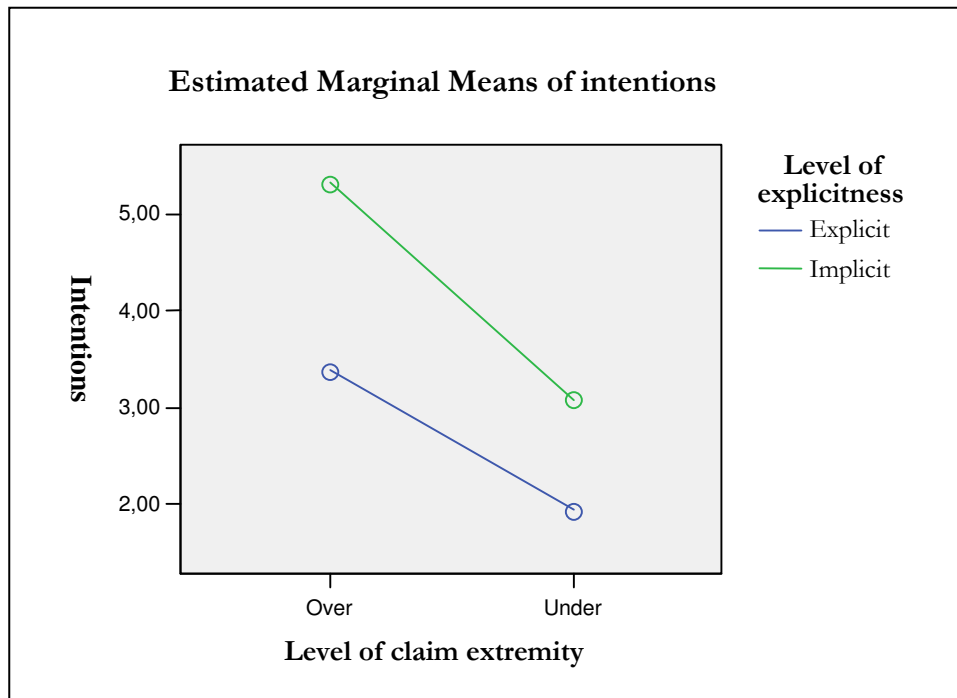


Graph 1.

The ANOVA-plot in the graph above points out that claims made with an unexpectedly low level of extremity have negative effects on the dependent variable perceived brand attractiveness. In graph 2. the effects upon consumer intentions point in the same direction resulting in more negative intentions when understating the brand. With mean values significantly separated from the exaggerated claims the negative effect is concluded. Also interesting is the fact that the mean values are below the middle value of 3,5 for the respondents not exposed to the manipulated ads – pointing out that understated ads have negative effects in absolute measures in comparison to the effects where consumers haven't been exposed to the ads at all.

H1: Unexpectedly low levels of claim extremity decrease ad effectiveness. **ACCEPTED**

This result could be explained by the fact that consumers believe that brands try to claim as much as possible. If the brand then claims unexpectedly little, and at the same time has tried to claim as much as possible with regards to the constraints made by consumer post purchase evaluation, it points out a poor service or product in the eyes of the consumer. Now let's see whether the same reasoning is applicable for exaggerated claims in **H2**.

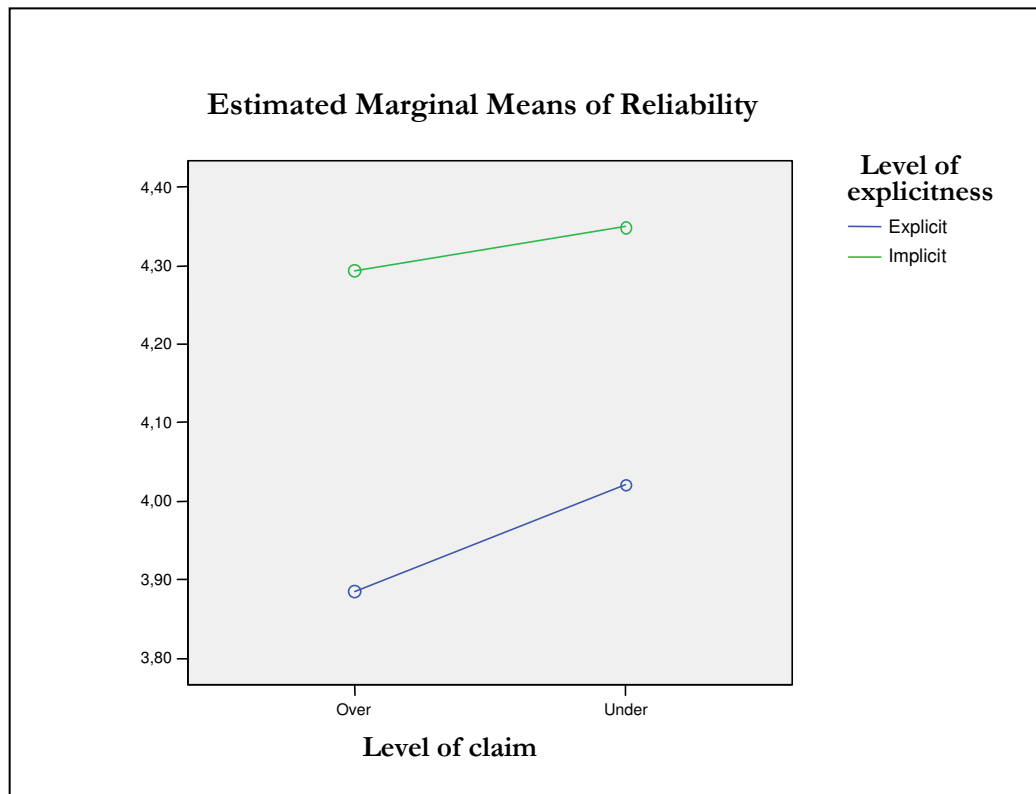


Graph 2.

Looking at Graph 1. and 2. and the mean values and significance in table 1. the most favourable level of claim extremity in terms of brand attractiveness and intentions are the ones communicated above expectations. Exaggerated claims boost the perception of the brand in a positive direction. With mean values of 4,4 for intentions (drawn for both brands), 4,9 for brand attractiveness and significantly separated groups, we might be wrong in dismissing brand braggers like Mr. Trump and the like.

H2: Unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity increase ad effectiveness **ACCEPTED**

Moving on to **H3** and **H4** and examining the possible effects of unexpected claim extremity and message explicitness have on scepticism we find less conclusive evidence. No significance can be found in differences between groups, that is, differences between scepticism created by exaggerated or understated claims, nor from the explicitness of the message. However, even though the effects do not differ between the groups, they might yet induce scepticism.



Graph. 3

Two-way ANOVA

Communication effect	Independent variable	Significant
Scepticism	Claim extremity	0,649
Scepticism	Explicitness	0,080

**Significant on a 10% level

The graph clearly shows that the significant difference is to be found between the level of message explicitness and not the level of claim extremity. The specific question in the main test being: - *How reliable do you find the brand to be?* (Very unreliable=1, Very reliable=7) → The lower the score, the less reliable the brand is perceived to be – and therefore shows that the consumers is sceptical about the brands reliability. The significance figure for level of claim extremity gives us the following:

H3: Unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity increase consumer scepticism. FALSIFIED

Moving on to the message explicitness we can clearly see that communicating unexpectedly with pictures and symbols has less effect on the dependent variable scepticism. And explicit claims have the reverse effect. The level of significance confirms the hypothesis.

H4: Unexpectedly high levels of message explicitness increases consumer scepticism.
ACCEPTED

4.4 Credence Search scale

As noted in the beginning of this section there were no differences to be found between the different brands.

Two-way ANOVA

Communication effect	Independent variable	Significance
Intention	Brand	0,634
Brand attractiveness	Brand	0,688
Intention	Brand*Claim	0,87
Brand attractiveness	Brand*Claim	0,864
Intention	Brand*Claim*Explicit	0,576
Brand attractiveness	Brand*Claim*Explicit	0,925

From the figures collected in this test we can conclude that there were from the beginning no significant differences between the brands in terms of intentions or brand attractiveness. Nor were there any significant interaction effects on a second or third dimension. Communication effects refer to the dependent variables.

→ This test points out that the effects of claiming more or less than expected are category independent. What we can conclude here is that there are no interaction effects between Credence Search capacities and unexpected claim extremities – and that category independence therefore is likely.

H5: Easily evaluated products or services get better ad effectiveness from communicating with unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity than products and services evaluated with difficulty.
FALSIFIED

4.3 Message explicitness

When forming a message in advertising there are at least two ways of doing so. One way is to say whatever you are trying to say explicitly using words, making it almost impossible for anyone not to understand what it is you claim. The other way is to sneak the message into the minds of the consumer with implicit techniques using pictures and symbols. This crossroad is well known in the ad community and is a subject of a strategic decision that determines the amount of impact the art director or the copywriter will have on the production.

As concluded in **H4**, the level of message explicitness affects the consumer scepticism in the most preferable way when executed implicitly. Now let's see whether message explicitness affects intentions and brand attractiveness in **H6**, and also the interaction effects in **H7** – interaction effects meaning what level of explicitness is preferred depending on the level of claim extremity.

Two-way ANOVA

Communication effect	Independent variable	Significant	Mean Explicit	Mean Implicit
Intentions	Explicitness	0,038**	3,6	4,3
Brand attractiveness	Explicitness	0,015**	3,9	5,6
Intentions	Claim extr. *explicitness	0,311	-	-
Brand attractiveness	Claim extr. *explicitness	0,454	-	-

**Significant on a 10% level

The results in the graphs 1. and 2. and the significance in the differences between groups points out that there are significant differences in effects by the two different levels of explicitness. Look at the graphs in particular for a visual explanation of the differences. Implicit messages infer a higher level of intention and a higher value of brand attractiveness, with means differing 1,82 scale points on average. This data confirms that low levels of message explicitness are preferred. This conclusion is, however, very general and the complexity is of course much too great to be able to paint the big picture. In this specific case though, pointing out advertisements with unexpected claims in particular the evidence can be seen as conclusive that implicit messages are preferable. → So if planning to claim something unexpected – do it implicitly!

H6: Low levels of message explicitness increases ad effectiveness when communicating extreme levels of claim extremity. ACCEPTED
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An additional ambition with including the variable message explicitness was to investigate whether it had any interaction effects on the different levels of claim extremity. That could for example mean that implicit messages are preferable when claiming unexpectedly much, and explicit messages are preferable when claiming unexpectedly little. Results were not conclusive on whether it actually had any interaction effects. Message explicitness is therefore found to transcend the dimension of claim extremity. Implicit claims are preferable when communicating unexpected levels of claim extremity, regardless of level of claim extremity.

H7: Unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity yield the most positive ad effectiveness when communicated with implicit messages. **FALSIFIED**

4.5 Summary of results

The level of claim extremity in relation to consumer expectations has effects on ad effectiveness and is therefore important for ad producers to consider. A high level of claim extremity has positive effects on ad effectiveness and mostly so using implicit messages. Choosing wrong kind of claim level extremity, a low one, can impact negatively on ad effects. Consumer scepticism is enhanced by explicit messages when using extreme claims. Lastly, the accepted hypotheses transcends the different the credence search capacities.

H1: Unexpectedly low levels of claim extremity decreases ad effectiveness. **ACCEPTED**

H2: Unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity increases ad effectiveness. **ACCEPTED**

H3: Unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity increase consumer scepticism. **FALSIFIED**

H4: Level of message explicitness affects consumer scepticism. **ACCEPTED**

H5: Easily evaluated products or services get better ad effectiveness from communicating with unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity than products and services evaluated with difficulty. **FALSIFIED**

H6: Low levels of message explicitness increases ad effectiveness when communicating extreme levels of claim extremity. **ACCEPTED**

H7: Unexpectedly high levels of claim extremity yield the most positive ad effectiveness when communicated with implicit messages. **FALSIFIED**

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This section includes implications and elaboration on results presented in the previous section as well as pointing out limitations and critics of the study and topics for further research.

5.1 Match purpose

Purpose

1. Determine what level of claim extremity in relation to expectations that, has the most positive effects on ad effectiveness.
2. Determine what level of message explicitness has the most positive effects on ad effectiveness.

1. The results show that exaggerated claims increase brand attractiveness and consumer intentions, both in relative and in absolute terms. With the results as background, purpose number one can be considered fulfilled.

→Exaggerate!

2. Implicit messages have positive effects on advertisement effectiveness regardless of the claim being exaggerated or understated. The message explicitness elements tested in this study affect the consumer scepticism most favourably when done implicitly.

→Claim implicitly!

3. By satisfying purpose one and two the thesis has increased the understanding and the uses for two new and measurable variable relationships. In doing so the thesis has built evidence and theoretical support on how to construct more efficient ad claims. The test has shown that expectations can serve as a good variable to decide the optimal level of ad claim. In addition the result has also determined what kind of level and what kind of shape the claim is best executed. The thesis has thereby contributed to understanding claims, their effects and the possibility to improve ads in a real business context.

→Use expectations as a benchmark, and execute accordingly!

5.2 Discussion

Moving back to where we started in the intro, you might by now have found a bit more respect for Mr. Donald Trump and his exaggerated perfume ad. Exaggerated claims for medium strong brands have positive ad effects. And a tower on Manhattan with his name on it suggests the same.

The basic conclusion is that exaggerations work both in relative terms and in absolute terms. Exaggerated claims have positive effects – we now know that, both in relation to understated advertisements and also in comparison to the cases where the respondents haven't been exposed to any advertisements except the ones seen prior to this study. Consumers seem to react positively to promises, which claims are basically all about, even though they are exaggerated and unexpected.

One can also look upon the phenomenon of claims, or brand promises if you will, as a zero sum game. Most brands stretch when they claim. Looking through ten popular magazines in different categories from December 2007 a clear majority of the ads have an appearance of being the best choice. And why shouldn't they? The only brand in each category which does not in the short run, have to claim pole position, would most likely be the one actually seen as category leader. All the rest will obviously not settle for second, third or fifteenth best. So if everybody else claim that they are the best, no one affords claiming less. Zero sum game.

A contradictory reasoning would say that this is an opportunity for differentiation. Using the fact that most brands exaggerate as a way to get attention through claiming less. However in the case of mid status brands the results do point out negative effects when using understated claims. The pre-test indicated that understated claims are counter intuitive and thereby not only affecting the consumer negatively in terms of intentions and perceived brand attractiveness but probably also produces confusion. This being said, not implicating that brands tend to understate deliberately. What might happen though is that brands sometimes do not claim as much as they could and in relation to the competing claims in the category, their claims get perceived as understatements. This implies that not only is the expectation of the consumers important, but also the competing brand claims in the category - indirectly forming expectations.

Optimising claims will however only get you so far unless you manage the actual delivery as well. Considering the consumer will eventually evaluate the brand or product after purchase – the

claim will fade in importance as the buying process progresses and the new and true input from the brand becomes the critical determinant for intentions and brand attractiveness. That being said, the claim and all surrounding brand communication still forms the way the consumer look upon the delivery. After all the perception of objects is the truth, nothing else is.

The perception and evaluation however, referring to claims in particular, is likely to be affected by the degree of which the consumer can evaluate the deliver with or without ease. This is where hypothesis five becomes relevant implying that easily evaluated products or services benefit more from exaggeration. This was not the fact according to the test. Instead the results suggested that the positive effects of exaggerations transcend credence Search-Scale capacities and are generally applicable. However the readers should be aware of the fact that the test did not include brands which were placed on extreme levels of the Credence Search scale. For moderately, and the majority of suppliers of products and services included, encompassed in the Credence Search range between a ski resort and a shoe maker, the results should be conclusive.

Several of the hypotheses in the test were accepted but a considerable portion of them were also falsified. This is not a failure since all hypotheses exploring untouched theoretical ground and some of them actually accepting the opposite conclusion by falsifying the original. The category independence of claim extremity effects due to credence search scale capacities is one of them.

Moving on to message explicitness, we have found that sneaking the message in by a back door is preferable, and mostly so when done through an exaggerated claim. It seems like the implicit messages takes the edge of the exaggeration and gives it the packaging it needs to create as little friction as possible when entering the minds of the consumers. By “back door”, no one should think it means without the notice of the consumer. Most people know that a champagne bottle symbolises luxury. Although it might not be a question of being aware or not aware – the explicitness might still affect the level of awareness. This can be seen in the fact that scepticism were more prevalent when using explicit messages than implicit ones implying that the awareness is the factor binding scepticism and explicitness together..

Plenty of research, this one included, concludes that consumers are becoming more aware and educated about the advertising world, thereby becoming smarter and harder to mould and steer towards commercial interests. On the other hand we time after time see that consumers are still restricted and affected by physical and mental conditions shaped thousands of years ago.

Marketing signals adhering to scarcity and the handicap principal for example are still important, and affects consumers and other animals as they have for thousands of years. Claims, expectations and explicitness can also be included in the group of variables that affect our perception and hopefully the results have shed some light onto them.

Moving to the backbone of this thesis which is expectations, one additional thought has to be lifted. As we strive to affect the consumer, and thereby touch on an activity by some considered as manipulation, a different perspective can be used. By understanding how the consumer react to certain stimuli we can try to accommodate and entertain rather than manipulate. Consumers like to feel smart. They like to feel as they are the ones making the decision and that they are the ones who have understood a complex offering or message. No one likes to be told what to think, just look at all types of comedy, literature and art. With this as a background, commercial messages should dare to challenge the consumers. This is a phenomenon the fashion industry lives on, by creating new things that expands the imagination of the consumers, trusting them to go out on a limb to actually accept the products, thereby forcing them to either hate or love. The results of the thesis resonate with this thought. By trusting the capacities of the consumers enough to create something unexpected, something that needs the elaboration of the consumer, like an exaggerated claim for example – you should be able to gain better advertisement effects.

Finally moving on to a theory that is in a sense contradictory to prior studies in the field such as Goldberg et. al 1990, claim studies – hereby including conspicuous consumption as a variable in play. It is questionable whether the message actually has to be accepted to induce a positive impact on the receivers' attitude and/or behaviour. Maybe the sheer existence of a high claim, regardless of how unrealistic it may seem, constitute a value to the consumer?

Picture the following: Fishing equipment-brand Reznik work actively with claims in their advertisements. Consumers have the same perceived brand image and brand knowledge about Reznik. The brand is perceived as a low-end budget producer of fishing rods and fishing tackle. Reznik corp. decides to change communication on the different markets. Reznik claims to produce the “The fisherman’s Rolls Royce”. Assuming that not all consumers will see that the claim is ridiculously high – some consumers will actually find the claim to be true. Maybe some consumers hear about the claim through a friend or maybe consumer don’t pay enough attention to realise it is unrealistic. So, let’s say that five percent of the consumers will actually think it is the Rolls Royce of fishing gear just because the claim said so –that will in addition constitute a value

to the remaining ninety five percent. Consumers value the admiration of others and five percent of the consumers will think that the fishing rod you just bought is the Rolls Royce of fishing gear. The take away with this specific thought is that there is an intrinsic value in high levels of claim extremity working separately and in parallel to the process going through message acceptance, as you can see in model 1.

5.3 Implications

Promise the moon

Exaggerate with reason. Ads perceived as understated will yield negative results, exaggerated ones positive results. This is applicable regardless of product/service category as long as it is on moderate levels on the Credence Search scale and brands on moderate levels of brand status. Claim as much as possible at the same time taking long term post purchase evaluation as a limiting factor in your decision process. If you have the earth, and you can promise the stars – maybe the moon is an appropriate compromise of a claim.

Exaggerate implicitly

Rub of the bad friction that explicit messages creates and use implicit messages to easily affect the minds of consumers when exaggerating or understating.

Monitor and manage consumer expectations

Get to know your customers expectations and use them as a benchmark for ad production, and not only product production.

5.4 Criticism

As most ad stimuli/ad-effects tests encounter, there is a challenge in isolating and enhancing one particular stimulus without risking being interpreted as unrealistic or possibly provoke reactions unwanted – at least when the scope of the test is limited. This predicament was discussed in the pre-test section where it was concluded that the pre-test results satisfies critical levels, but at the same time they would have enhanced the strength of the main tests results even more if the stimulus would have been even stronger. A larger scope of testing, including manipulated TV ads, and possibly a manipulated sales store for Idre Fjäll and Din Sko would obviously have been preferable.

One weakness of the thesis is the fact that no practitioners input have been included in the empirics. A couple of short questions put to employees at advertisement agencies and marketing departments would have enhanced the evidence on areas of usage and thereby thesis relevance. Even though practitioners have not been included – the consumers have. So the problems, the findings and the possible ad improvements are as present anyway – rhetorical evidence on this however, could have been made stronger.

A more specific critic of the study is the layout of both the pre- and the main test. Manipulated ads and questions were put on different pages thereby decreasing the impact of the manipulated ads on the consumers' already existing mental picture of the brands. If the manipulated ads were to have been put on both a separate page and also in the margin next to the actual questions, the impact of the ads are likely to have been greater.

5.5 Further research

Exaggerations and understatements affect several advertising effects. The implications however have most significant implications on brands on a moderate level of brand status. It is likely to presume that brands perceived as extremely strong or extremely weak have different from those found in this study. For example extremely strong brands might benefit from deliberately understating, since this might point out confidence in their own products and thereby enhance the perceived brand strength.

There is also the question of what a consumer expectation really is? Are there maybe two, or more, kinds of expectations? There might be the ones that are in present relation to what the consumer thinks, and also in relation to what the consumer thinks that other consumers might think. Those two should make up for two different kinds of expectations and might possibly, even likely, to have been mixed in the test. Those would be interesting to see more research upon.

Also the different effects of the variables tested in this thesis but dependent on personal relevance of product or service. Thereby mirroring the Credence Search scale hypothesis by testing the effects of exaggeration/understating and message explicitness dependent on the likelihood of ad elaboration. Further research could for this objective preferably use the well served theoretical area of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM).

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7. APPENDIX

7.1 Pre-test

Examenssuppsats Handelshögskolan i Stockholm

1. Jag är ☐ Kvinna ☐ Man
2. Jag är ____ år gammal
3. Hur väl känner du till följande skovaranmärken?
Något
- Mylchet dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Din Sko ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Mylchet dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Gucci ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Mylchet dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Sko punkten ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Mylchet dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Prada ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Mylchet dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Vagabond ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Mylchet dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
4. Hur väl känner du till följande skedningsmärken?
Äre
- Mylchet dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Idre fall ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Mylchet dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Lindvallen ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Mylchet dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Riksgården ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Mylchet dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Ronne ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Mylchet dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Vendalen ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl
- Mylchet dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl

→ DU SKANU TITTA PÅ TVÅ ANNONSER
OCH SEDAN SVAR PÅ FRÅGOR OM DESSA.
TA EN I TAGET...

5. Tycker du att Din Sko visade på mer eller mindre självförtroende i annonsen än vad du skulle kunna förvänta dig i en annons av Din Sko? (Känner du dig osäker kan du titta på annonsen igen)
- Mylchet mindre ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket mer
6. Känns det som att Din Sko lovar mer eller mindre än vad du kunde förvänta dig i en annons av Din Sko?
- Mylchet mindre ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket mer
7. Utifrån vad du ser på annonsen: Tycker du att Din Sko överkattar eller underkattar värdet av sitt varumärke?
- Underkattar ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Överkattar
8. Hur väl stämmer det att annonsen var överdrivet höftig mot vad du kunde förvänta dig i en annons av Din Sko?
- Stämmer mycket dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Stämmer mycket bra
9. Hur väl stämmer det att annonsen var överdrivet förtäktig/mesig i sin framtoning mot vad du kunde förvänta dig i en annons av Din Sko?
- Stämmer mycket dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Stämmer mycket bra
10. Hur gärna skulle du vilja få ett par skor från Din Sko i födelsedagspresent?
- Inne så gärna ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket gärna
11. Vad tycker du om annonsen?
- Mylchet dålig ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket bra
12. Vad har du för inställning till reklam generellt?
- Tycker illa om ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Tycker mycket om

13. Tycker du att Ida Ejll visade på mer eller mindre självförtroende i annonsen än vad du skulle kunna förvänta dig i en annons av Ida Ejll? (Ännu mer än vad du skulle förvänta dig i en annons igen)
- Mjukt mindre ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mjukt mer
14. Kan du det som att Ida Ejll lovar mer eller mindre än vad du kunde förvänta dig i en annons av Ida Ejll?
- Mjukt mindre ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mjukt mer
15. Utifrån vad du ser på annonsen: Tycker du att Ida Ejll överstämmer eller understämmer vadet av att varumärket?
- Understämmer ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Överstämmer
16. Hur väl stämmer det att annonsen var överkänslig påtagligt mot vad du kunde förvänta dig i en annons av Ida Ejll?
- Stämmer mycket dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Stämmer mycket bra
17. Hur väl stämmer det att annonsen var överkänslig för ålders/mening i sin framtoning mot vad du kunde förvänta dig i en annons av Ida Ejll?
- Stämmer mycket dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Stämmer mycket bra
18. Hur gärna skulle du vilja få ett par skor från Ida Ejll i födelsedagspresent?
- Inne så gärna ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mjukt gärna
19. Vad tycker du om annonsen?
- Mjukt dålig ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mjukt bra
20. Vad har du för inställning till reklam genom sociala medier?
- Tycker illa om ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Tycker mycket om

TUSEN TACK FÖR DIN MEDVERKAN!

7.2 Manipulated ads

Explicit advertisements

Over

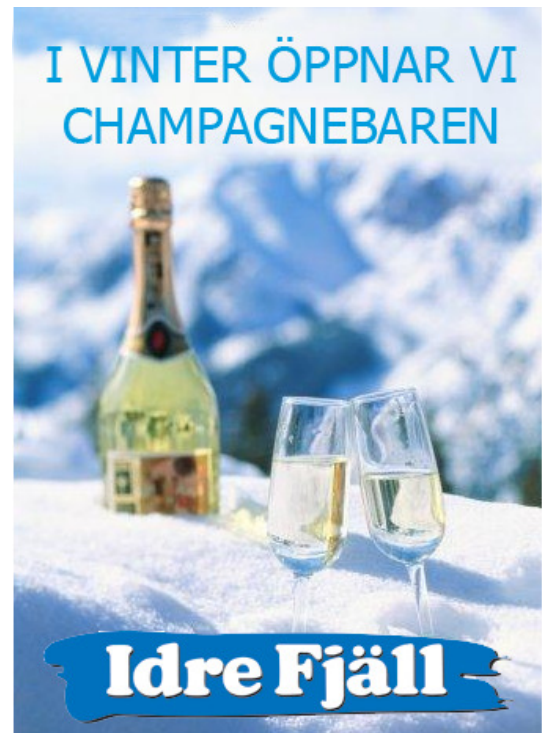
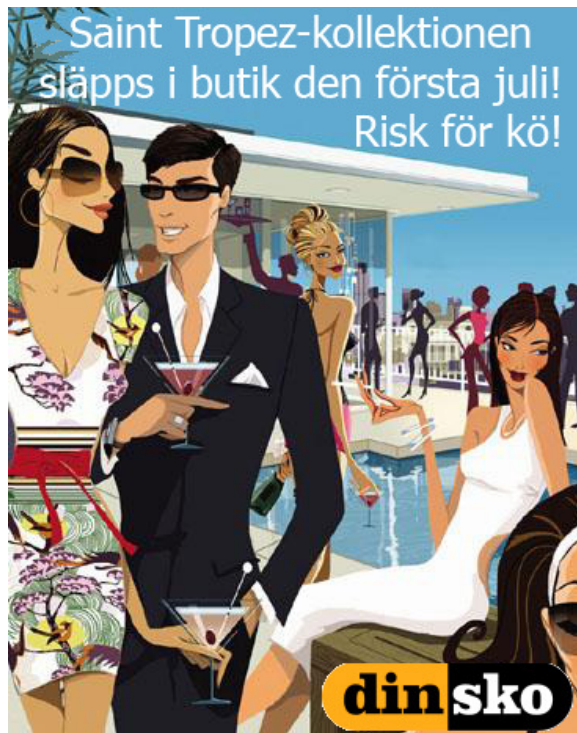


Under



Implicit advertisements

Over



Under



Examensuppsats Handelshögskolan i Stockholm

1. Jag är ☐ Kvinna ☐ Man

2. Jag är ____ år gammal

→ NU FÖLJER TVÅ ANNONSER MED
TILLHÖRANDE FRÅGOR, TA EN I TAGET

TITTA EN STUND PÅ ANNONSEN OCH SVARA
SEDAN PÅ FRÅGORNA

1. Hur gärna skulle du vilja köpa en semester i Idre Fjäll? (Du får gärna titta på annonserna igen)

Inte så gärna ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ **Måcket gärna**

2. Hvilgema skulde du vilja tilbinga en semester i Idre Fjall?

Inte så gärna ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket gärna

3. Hur gärna skulle du vilja få en semester i Lide Fjäll i födelsedagspresent?
 Inte så gärna ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket gärna

4. Kommer du att titta närmre på vad Idée Fjäll har att erbjuda?
Inte så gärna ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket gärna

5. Kommer du bevittna för mågan om Icke Fjäll?
Inte så gärna ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket gärna

6. Kommer köpa en semester i Idre Fjäll?

Inte alls troligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket troligt

[illegible]

8. Hur gärna skulle du vilja lära dig mer om Icke Fjäll?

[illegible]

9. Vilken kvalitet tror du skidnålgängingen i Öre Fjäll har?

Mjycket dålig ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mjycket bra

10. Vad fick annonsen dig att känna?

Irreierend/störend	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unterhältend/stimulierend

11. Hur säker känner du dig på dina svar?

Mjcket osäker ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☒ **Mjcket säker**

12. Vad tycker du om annonsen? (Du får gärna titta på annonsen igen)

Mycket dålig ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket bra

13. Hur kostsam tror du annonseren var att producera?

Mycket billig ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☒ ☐ Mycket Dyrt

14. Vad har du för inställning till reklam generellt?

Tycker illa om ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Tycker mycket om

15. Hur väl känner du till Idre Fjäll?

Mjcket dligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mjcket vl

16. Hur gärna skulle du vilja köpa ett par skor från Din Sko? (Du får gärna titta på annonsen igen om du känner dig osäker på frågan)
 Inte så gärna ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket gärna
17. Hur gärna skulle du vilja gå runt i ett par skor från Din Sko?
 Inte så gärna ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket gärna
18. Hur gärna skulle du vilja få ett par skor från Din Sko i födelsedagspresent?
 Inte så gärna ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket gärna
19. Kommer du titta närmre på Din Skos skor i butik?
 Inte alls troligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket troligt
20. Kommer du berätta om Din Sko för dina vänner?
 Inte så troligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket troligt
21. Kommer du köpa en sko från Din Sko?
 Inte så troligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket troligt
22. Hur påtagligt upplever du att Din Sko är?
 Opåtagligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Påtagligt
23. Hur gärna skulle du vilja låta dig mer om varumärket Din Sko?
 Mycket ogärna ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket gärna
24. Vilken kvalitet tror du skorna från Din Sko har?
 Mycket dålig ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket bra
25. Vad fick annonsen dig att känna?
 Irriterad/störd ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Underhållad/stimulerad
26. Hur säker känner du dig på dina svar?
 Mycket osäker ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket säker
27. Vad tycker du om annonsen? (Du får gärna titta på annonsen igen)
 Mycket dålig ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket bra
28. Hur kosträtt tror du annonsen var att producera?
 Mycket dålig ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket Dyr
29. Vad har du för inställning till reklam generellt?
 Tycker illa om ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Tycker mycket om
30. Hur väl känner du till Din Sko?
 Mycket dåligt ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Mycket väl

TUSEN TACK FÖR DIN MEDVERKAN!