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The Effects of Self-Referential Advertising on Consumers’ Evaluative
Ad and Brand Responses

Research Master’s Thesis

Author: Alkmini Mouratidou (12288357)

Address: Zeilstraat 22, Amsterdam, 1075SH, The Netherlands

Contact: alkmini.mouratidis@gmail.com, +46 703336719

Date of Birth: 09/09/1995

Research Master’s Program Communication Science (Professional Track)

Graduate School of Communication Science, University of Amsterdam

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Supervisor: Mw. dr. H.A.M. (Hilde) Voorveld

Supervisor’s contact: H.A.M.Voorveld@uva.nl

Abstract

Self-referential advertising campaigns have to date been employed by various brands as a form of creative advertising. According to industry reviews, self-referential advertising is a form of advertising which utilizes irony and cynicism to openly comment on and defy traditional advertising tactics. However, until now, research has been scarce on how self-referential advertising affects consumers' evaluative responses toward the ad itself and the associated brand. In the present study, we suggest that self-referential advertising, contrary to conventional emotion-based copy formats, enhances consumers' evaluations of ad atypicality, affecting in turn levels of persuasion knowledge and attitudes toward the ad and brand. In an online experiment, participants ($N=110$) were presented with a set of identical advertisements with either self-referential or non-self-referential accompanying copy. Results showed that self-referential advertising increased atypicality evaluations, which in turn decreased consumers' critical feelings toward the persuasive attempt, thereby increasing subsequent attitudes to the ad and brand and brand ability evaluations. These favorable evaluative responses to self-referential (vs. non-self-referential) advertising emerged despite the participants' awareness that the item viewed is an ad, suggesting that ad formats novel to consumers may mitigate skepticism and reactance to persuasion attempts in advertising.

1. Introduction

Creativity is a recurrent theme in the advertising industry. So much so that as Lenhart notes, the sentence: “Johnson, grab the *creative* [ad] from the *creative* [employee] deliver it to the client, and make sure they think it is *creative* [original] enough...” would make sense for most marketers (2010, p.8). The practical importance of creativity in advertising is substantiated in the existence of a multitude of awards; Clio, Cannes Lions, Golden Eggs (in Sweden), D&AD, OAAA, OBIE and Cresta are all examples of awards granted to the most creative advertisements and campaigns across all media. Often, they function as evidence of a winner agency’s ability to develop valuable work, attracting more potential clients (West, Carana, & Leelapanyalert, 2013).

The present study suggests that a particularly interesting manifestation of the industry’s never-ending quest for creativity is self-referential advertising. Self-referential advertising relies on the creative use of copy material to poke fun at cliché advertising tactics. The most well-known example of self-referential advertising in practice comes from Oatly (see Appendix I: Examples of self-referential advertising). When in 2014 Oatly decided to rebrand after almost 15 years in the market, it employed a fully self-referential campaign approach (Fiedler, 2018). Using innovative self-referential copy for its ads, Oatly openly defied and mocked stale, conventional advertising tactics; a choice that resonated deeply with their Gen Y and Gen Z target audience (Klara, 2019). Albeit known among popular press and industry (De Luce, 2019; Hammett, 2020; Rogers, 2020; Schoolcraft, 2019; KesselsKramer, 2012), academic studies examining advertising self-reference are, to the best of our knowledge, lacking.

While practice-based accounts view self-referential advertising as an efficient alternative to conventional advertising approaches (Morgan & Devoy, 2019; Morgan & Holden, 2012), there is to date no academic empirical evidence supporting this notion. Prior advertising creativity studies have focused on the effects of creative media placement (Dahlén, Friberg, Nilsson, 2009), brand slogans (Dahlén, Rosengren, Törn, 2008; Toncar & Munch, 2001) and perceived creativity in award-winning (vs. conventional ads) on ad and brand outcomes (Baack, Till, Wilson, 2008; Lenhart, Till & Carlson, 2013; West, Koslow & Kilgour 2019). We extend this line of research by focusing on the effects that creative self-referential advertising *copy* may have on consumers’ evaluative responses to the ad and brand. With this, we contribute to the

field by providing a tentative account of the effects of advertising self-reference, an ad message element that has not been tested in prior studies.

The present paper attempts to bridge the gap in knowledge about self-referential advertising by examining the extent to which consumers' ad and brand evaluations differ for self-referential and non-self-referential (conventional) advertising. Specifically, it aims at exploring the underlying procedures that may explain this diverging evaluation process. Drawing from Schema Theory (Roedder & Whitney, 1986) and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), we argue that consumer perceived ad atypicality and persuasion knowledge may explain the effects of self-referential advertising on consumer's evaluations both independently and sequentially. Empirical findings have supported the notion that atypical ad formats (*i.e.* formats not normally used in ads) manage to mitigate consumers' negative predispositions to ads and to facilitate favorable evaluative responses (Dahlén & Edenius, 2007; Evans & Park, 2015). Accordingly, we test the extent to which perceived message atypicality in self-referential ad copy may leverage consumer skepticism toward the ad. We finally examine how this sequence of effects might in turn influence subsequent consumer attitudes to the ad the brand and brand ability evaluations. We ask:

RQ1: To what extent do self-referential versus non-self-referential ads differ in terms of consumer evaluations of the ad and brand?

RQ2: To what extent can intervening variables, such as perceived ad atypicality and level of activated persuasion knowledge, help explain the effects of self-referential versus non-self-referential ads on consumer evaluations of the ad and brand?

Taking the above into account, the present study aims to add to advertisers' insight by being the first to systematically examine the extent to which self-referential advertising may be a viable alternative to conventional advertising approaches. Specifically, it seeks to enhance professionals' understanding of how creative self-referential ad copy may impact consumers' ad and brand evaluations. The study's empirical evidence about how self-referential advertising influences consumers' evaluative responses may further serve as a framework that professionals in the industry can use to justify the adoption of such self-referential ad tactics.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1.1. *Self-referential advertising: an overview*

Self-referential advertising is not a novel phenomenon. The first example of such copy was Volkswagen and DDB's 1959 "Lemon" and "Think Small" ads (see Appendix I: Examples of self-referential advertising). By breaking all rules associated with conventional advertising both in general and within its product category, the campaign managed to go down the hall of advertising fame. Self-referential advertising, albeit not new, seems to lack an academic definition and to be going by various names such as anti-marketing or anti-advertising. In absence of recommended definitions, self-referential advertising in the present paper is understood as:

...a campaign or spot that defies the conventional marketing messages and instead makes fun of traditional advertising with a tone of self-awareness. It connects with consumers by letting them in on a shared joke: yes, the ad is indeed about "selling" (Fait, 2019, n.p.). Self-referential anti-ads may advocate against buying the advertised product, may poke fun at the product, or the advertising itself (De Luce, 2019, n.p.).

From a semiotics perspective, self-referential advertising copy relies on the use of metatextual forms of discourse (Bishara & Nöth, 2007). Metatextuality, often encountered in metafictional art, is a literary device through which a text is presented as a critical commentary of itself (Mirenayat & Soofastaei, 2015; Nöth, 2009). Metafictional and metatextual works draw attention to the process of their own creation, intentionally blurring the boundaries between the final creative product and the background processes that brought it into existence (Kester, 2013; Klinkowitz, 2017). Similarly, self-referential advertising draws consumers' attention by recognizing itself as advertising and by ironically exposing a seemingly hidden, marketer-driven persuasion mechanism (Holt, 2002).

Although self-referential advertising may initially appear as an absurd facet of creativity, it is not bereft of strategic considerations. Empirical findings have supported the notion that the increasing amount and similarity of advertising messages likely decreases the efficacy of individual ads (Ha & McCann, 2008; Riebe & Dawes, 2006). This increasing volume of ads is

also met with heightened consumer ad avoidance strategies and anti-marketing sentiments¹ (Speck & Elliott, 1997; Rumbo, 2002). Examining the issue inductively, Holt suggests that to overcome such obstacles, brands must communicate with consumers in ways that go beyond mere commercial interests (Holt, 2002; 2003). According to his “postmodern branding paradigm”, self-referential advertising communications play with notions of transparency and often aim “...to forge distance between the brand and its competitors’ hard sell commercialism” (Holt, 2002, p.84).

Even though systematic examinations of consumer responses to self-referential advertising are lacking, industry experts seem to understand the concept and its effects. In an interview about the self-referential campaign developed for the Hans Brinker Budget Hotel (see Appendix I), Erik Kessels² suggests that this form of cynical advertising allowed to “...get through the Brinker’s young, jaded, suspicious audience” (KesselsKramer, 2012, n.p.). Marketers understand that while the approach does not work for every client, “...admitting your faults and telling people about your product as straightforwardly as possible is still a virgin territory” (KesselsKramer, 2012, n.p.). The main point is that being one of the many brands which advertise their products as “the best” is neither believable nor human enough to allow consumers to identify with the ad or brand (Schoolcraft³, 2019). Contrary, using cynicism, irony, and self-awareness, self-referential advertising permits the brand to be portrayed as a communicator of opinions, rather than a commercial entity seeking to increase sales.

2.1.2. The relationship between self-referential and creative advertising

Despite the lack of recommended theoretical and operational frameworks on advertising self-reference *per se*, the present paper borrows its conceptual foundations from the well-established, broader research field of advertising creativity. Both industry and popular press accept self-referential advertising as inherently creative for two overarching reasons; it breaks traditional brand communication narratives and rules (Schoolcraft, 2019) and manages to create content that stands out and generates buzz in dense product categories (KesselsKramer, 2012). Therefore, the

¹ An important manifestation of these heightened anti-branding sentiments are platforms such as the Canadian magazine *Adbusters* (click [here](#)), dedicated at reclaiming the cultural space from advertising communications (Rumbo, 2002).

² Co-owner and past creative director of creative communications agency *KesselsKramer* (click [here](#)).

³ Creative director at *Oatly* (click [here](#)).

exploration of advertising self-reference is here preceded by a brief overview of key findings derived from advertising creativity research. Adapting assumptions from prior advertising creativity studies allows us to contextualize self-referential advertising and to speculate about its potential effects on consumers' evaluations.

2.2.1. The role of creativity in advertising

The two main streams of academic ad creativity research are what West, Koslow and Kilgour call “the stream of creative development” and “the stream of creative effectiveness” (2019, p.102). The present study belongs in the latter category. Creative development studies focus on investigating the processes prior and during campaign development and the agencies' micro (e.g. organizational culture) and macro (e.g. media buying) environment factors (El-Murad & West, 2003; Koslow, Sasser, & Riordan, 2003; Reid, King, DeLorme, 1998). On the other hand, creative effectiveness studies examine consumer responses to developed creative advertising (West et al., 2019). Various executional elements have been examined, including creative media choice (Dahlén et al., 2009) and creative textual content (via rhetorical figures) (Dahlén et al., 2008; Toncar & Munch, 2001). We propose that self-referential advertising is a similar creative executional element expressed in the ad's message (copy) level and that it is potentially able to influence consumers' evaluative responses to the ad and brand.

2.2.2. Determinants of advertising creativity

Prior research in the creative development stream shows the leading predictor of ad creativity to be “originality, divergence, novelty, unusualness, uniqueness” (Smith, MacKenzie Yang, Bucholz, & Darley, 2007; Koslow et al. 2003; Modig & Dahlen, 2019). Does the ad bring something new or fresh to the world? There is mixed evidence on which dimensions constitute the second predictor of ad creativity. This involves notions of consumer perceived “relevance, appropriateness, meaningfulness, usefulness” (El Murad & West, 2004; Koslow et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2007). Meaningfulness refers to the extent to which an advertising piece is relevant and responds to consumers' needs (Lehnert, 2010). Interestingly, the relative weight placed upon originality and relevance seems to differ between marketing professionals and consumers. The latter place more importance on appropriateness when judging ad creativity compared to professionals; potentially because evaluations of advertising originality are frequent among professionals but may lie beyond consumers' sphere of interests (Modig & Dahlén, 2019).

2.2.3. The effects of creative self-referential advertising copy on ad and brand evaluations

Since in the present study we view self-referential advertising as a creative format, we, in turn, expect ad and brand effects usually detected for creative pieces to surface for self-referential ads as well. Literature suggests positive links between increased advertising creativity and attention to the ad, motivation to process, depth of processing, ad and brand attitude (Smith, et al. 2007; Pieters, Warlop & Wedel, 2002), ad recall and liking, corporate image, resistance to advertising wear-out (Baack et al., 2008; Lenhert et al., 2013; West et al., 2019), enhanced perceived marketing effort, brand ability, liking, quality, interest as well as purchase intentions (Dahlén et al. 2008; Modig & Dahlén, 2019). There is broad academic agreement that enhanced creative effort is associated with more favorable consumer evaluations of the ad and brand.

Taking the above into account, we choose to focus our analysis on exploring the effects of self-referential (vs. non-self-referential) ads on attitude towards the ad and brand, as well as perceived brand ability. Attitude towards the ad and brand are constructs regularly employed to measure consumers' affective responses to the ad stimulus and its source. As mentioned, empirical findings suggest that increased creativity generates more positive consumer attitudes toward the ad and brand (Smith, et al. 2007; Pieters et al., 2002). Similarly, prior research shows that increased ad format creativity leads to more favorable brand ability evaluations via signals of increased brand effort (Dahlén et al., 2008). Perceived brand ability refers to beliefs held by consumers regarding the advertised brand's smartness, ability to cater to consumer needs and ability to develop valuable products (Dahlén et al., 2008; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006). Based on such observations, we hypothesize that:

H1: Participants exposed to self-referential ads will have more positive attitudes toward (a) the ad and (b) the brand and more positive (c) brand ability evaluations compared to those exposed to non-self-referential advertising.

2.3. The influence of self-referential advertising on consumer perceived ad typicality

The positive effects of self-referential (vs. non-self-referential) advertising on consumers' ad and brand evaluations may be partially explained by the role of atypical stimuli in consumers' information processing tendencies. To cope with the complexity of the environment's stimuli, individuals tend to organize information according to existing knowledge stored in memory.

Novel incoming information is organized relative to prior existing schemas. “A schema is an organized unit of knowledge for a subject or event” routinely employed to “...guide current understanding or action” (Pankin, 2013, p.1). These schemas dynamically develop into categories represented by typical members.

The representativeness heuristic allows for quick judgements generated through matching the new stimulus to the appropriate category already stored in memory (Kahneman, 2011; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973; van der Pligt & Vliek, 2017). Categorization failure or inability to match the stimulus with an exemplar of a category, leads to more attention and controlled analytical processing, or what Goodstein calls “piecemeal processing” (1993, p.87-88). Contrary, successful matching of the stimulus to its category, leads to routine, category-based processing (Stafford & Stafford, 2002). Instead of being evaluated as a sum or average of its parts, the new stimulus is perceived according to the characteristics of the category it belongs allowing for snap evaluations (Sujan, 1985).

Advertising schemas function in a similar manner. “Schemas are developed through repeated exposure within a domain, and advertisement repetition and regularity (e.g., redundant semantic, physical, and structural features) theoretically suggest that ad-related schemas exist” (Goodstein, 1993, p.89). Research has shown that atypical advertising likely impacts the levels of instantiation of these schemas. Atypical ads have been found to produce longer viewing times, greater processing depth, more extensive impression formation (Goodstein, 1993; Sujan, 1985) more favorable ad and product attitude (Stafford & Stafford, 2002). Novel ad stimuli elicit a positive disruption of pre-existing schemas potentially through consumer perceived surprise (Rauwers & van Noort, 2016; Santos, Leve, & Pratkanis, 1994).

We suggest that, since self-referential advertising has only been used by a handful of brands to date, consumers may not “...readily form a mental representation of it as advertising” (Dahlén & Edenius, 2007, p. 39). Put differently, since consumers have been much less exposed to self-referential advertising copy, they may evaluate it more favorably than non-self-referential advertising because they perceive it to be more atypical, unique, and different. Audiences exposed to saturated ad messages seem to “...simply make the rather automatic assessment that ‘here’s another one of *those* ads... no need to pay attention” (Stafford & Stafford, 2002, p.26). However, as self-referential ad messages are less often encountered, they may not yet be a part of

consumers' dominant advertising schemas. We assume that by not using message executions commonly found in conventional advertising, self-referential ads stand out as unique, facilitating more positive ad and brand evaluations. We hypothesize that:

H2: Participants exposed to self-referential advertising will have more positive attitudes toward (a) the ad and (b) the brand and more positive (c) brand ability evaluations, via decreased ad typicality evaluations, compared to those exposed to non-self-referential advertising.

2.4. The influence of self-referential advertising on consumers' conceptual and attitudinal persuasion knowledge

The present study further suggests that the positive effects of self-referential (vs. non-self-referential) advertising on ad and brand evaluations may also be explained by the levels of activated persuasion knowledge among consumers. The Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) explains how increased consumer experience with advertising tactics results in heightened skepticism upon exposures to persuasive messages. Like advertising schemas, persuasion knowledge assumes that consumers' awareness of advertising tactics is dynamic; it develops and changes throughout the lifespan to facilitate coping mechanisms against newer forms of persuasive attempts.

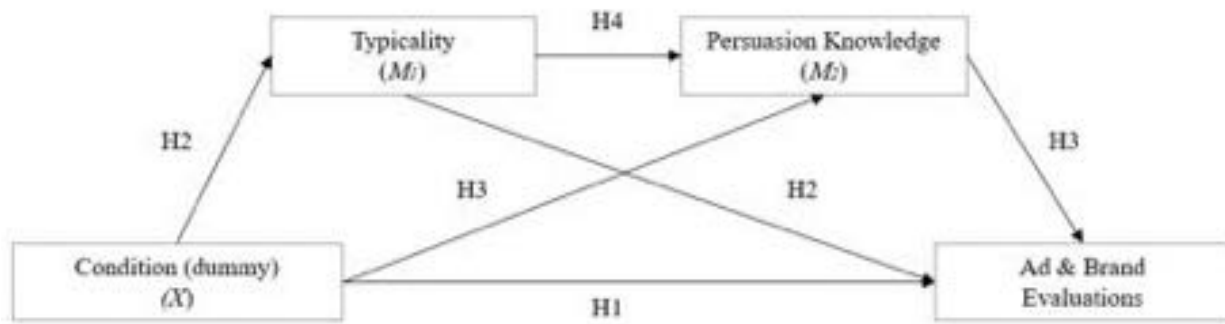
Persuasion knowledge is often conceived as consisting of a conceptual (cognitive) and an attitudinal (affective) dimension (Boerman, Neijens, & van Reijmersdal, 2012; Boerman, Willemsen, & van der Aa, 2017). The activation of the conceptual persuasion knowledge (*i.e.* recognition of an ad as a persuasive episode) likely leads to the activation of the affective dimension. The latter refers to attitudes, feelings and beliefs consumers develop over time regarding the "...appropriateness and fairness..." of marketing tactics (Boerman et al., 2017, p.85). It encompasses evaluations about the level of perceived honesty, trustworthiness, and credibility of advertising messages. The recognition that through the ad, the brand has ulterior motives and attempts to manipulate, likely leads to heightened consumer reactance and skepticism against the ad and brand.

As mentioned, self-referential advertising attempts to downplay its commercial intent and reinforce a rule-breaker brand persona (Schoolcraft, 2019; Morgan & Holden, 2012). However,

structural elements of conventional ads remain present in self-referential advertising; brand names are mentioned, packaging and products are shown or, at least, implied. We imagine that the paradox presented in the self-referential copy may be able to facilitate more positive affective reactions (attitudinal PK) and ad and brand evaluations, even among consumers who understand self-referential advertising as advertising due its apparent structural features (Evans & Park, 2015). That is because self-referential, unlike conventional advertising, paradoxically recognizes the fact that it is advertising, often with good humor. By letting consumers know that it is better to be nonsensical than being as repetitive and cliché as most conventional ads, self-referential advertising emphasizes its intent to entertain rather than persuade (Morgan & Devoy, 2019). This obvious (but not frequently made) explicit acknowledgement may rub off onto consumers' activated levels of persuasion knowledge. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H3: Participants exposed to self-referential advertising will have more positive attitudes toward (a) the ad and (b) the brand and more positive (c) brand ability evaluations, via decreased persuasion knowledge activation, compared to those exposed to non-self-referential advertising.

Fig. 1. Conceptual model of the sequential effects of self-referential (vs. non-self-referential) advertising on ad and brand evaluations



2.5. The serial mediation effects of ad typicality and persuasion knowledge on consumers' ad and brand evaluative responses to self-referential advertising

Combining principles from both the Schema Theory and the PKM, we further hypothesize that the decreased consumer skepticism to self-referential (vs. non-self-referential)

advertising may be partially explained by perceived ad atypicality. In a study by Dahlén and Edenius (2007), consumers were exposed to ads placed in an atypical versus a conventional medium. Their findings show that the atypical format was perceived as more credible, although participants in both conditions recognized the stimulus as advertising (Dahlén & Edenius, 2007, p.37). These findings imply that categorization of a message as advertising may not automatically lead to increased attitudinal persuasion knowledge. They instead provide support for the idea that increased ad atypicality may mitigate consumer skepticism toward the advertising message. This leads us to expect that similar patterns may emerge for the relation between perceived copy atypicality and consumers' persuasion knowledge for self-referential advertising. We test whether this sequence of effects eventually leads to more positive ad and brand evaluations. We hypothesize that:

H4: Self-referential, compared to non-self-referential advertising, will result in decreased typicality evaluations thereby decreasing consumers' persuasion knowledge activation and eventually leading to more positive attitude toward (a) the ad, (b) the brand and to more positive (c) brand ability evaluations.

3. Method

3.1. Pretest

3.1.1. Stimuli Development

To design the study's stimuli, we followed procedures commonly used in advertising creativity studies. Research of the effects of ad creativity relies mostly on what El Murad and West (2004) call "... 'post-hoc' measures", that is evaluations of creativity of already developed and published advertising content. Studies have exposed participants to (sets of) real advertisements sampled from various pools (e.g. advertising award shows, random TV/ print ads) and pretested with expert and/or consumer panels (Baack et al., 2008; Lenhert et al., 2013; Lenhert, Till & Ospina, 2014; Modig & Dahlén, 2019; Smith et al, 2007; 2008; White & Smith, 2001). Nevertheless, as Geuens and De Pelsmacker note "advertising stimuli used in experiments have to strike a balance between realism and control" (2017, p. 85). As such, exposing participants to (several) real ads suggests the stimuli vary along multiple uncontrolled dimensions. Thus, the isolated effect of advertising creativity becomes difficult to pinpoint. Such

lack of experimental control, even when combined with random assignment to conditions, is prone to bias due to extraneous confounding variables (Vargas, Duff, & Faber, 2017, p.103).

Taking the above into account and to limit such potential confounds, we developed one set of outdoor (bus-stop) poster ads for a fictional candy-bar brand named Snackzy. We chose to focus our analysis on a low involvement, hedonic product. Purchase decisions for low involvement products (e.g. soft-drinks, confectionary) necessitate little prior market knowledge; goods are typically inexpensive and bear minimal consumer costs in the case of a wrong choice (Belch & Belch, 2015). These product category features are expected to be a better match with the sample studied; the latter are expected to consist mostly of younger student individuals⁴ who are not in the market for higher risk, expensive products (e.g.: luxury cars) due to low disposable income (Vargas et al., 2017). Hedonic (vs. utilitarian) products are those selected primarily based on the feelings and experiences associated with their consumption (e.g. room decor, sports car) and to a lesser extent based on functional, practical needs (e.g. toothpaste) (Stewart, et al., 2019). Prior research suggests that hedonic products are better suited for non-functional appeals such as self-referential advertising (Geuens, De Pelsmacker, & Fasseur, 2011; Wu, 2013).

To this end, two advertising planning models were consulted to identify a representative product from the low involvement, hedonic category: Vaughn's FCB grid (1980) and the Rossiter - Percy Grid (Rossiter, Percy, & Donovan, 1991). Candy bars were selected as an appropriate exemplar of both categories. The product has been previously validated as low-involvement and hedonic in product involvement studies (e.g.: Geuens et al., 2011; Rossiter et al., 1991; Stewart et al., 2019; Vaughn, 1980; Wu, 2013) and is considered suitable for both non- and self-referential copy.

The use of a hypothetical (vs. real) brand was more likely to prevent stimulus, product and/or brand specific effects and allowed increased control over potential confounders such as consumers' prior brand associations, beliefs, attitudes and feelings (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017). Second, it allowed the use of self-referential advertising without creating a potential brand – ad incongruity. Self-referential advertising has been used by a limited number of brands and is in most cases more than episodic; it reflects a broader brand strategy, positioning, and profile. For example, using self-referential advertising for an existing brand with an entirely different or

⁴ Due to the convenience – snowball sampling method employed in the main study.

conventional communications approach (e.g. *Apple, Arla*) may result in high brand – ad incongruence and dilute the study's results. On the other hand, using an existing brand that employs self-referential advertising (e.g. *Oatly*) may bias the results due to prior brand associations and memory effects. Bearing these tradeoffs in mind, the use of a fictional brand allowed both for control over confounding prior associations and for realism in terms of fit between the brand and the examined self-referential ad.

The last step toward the development of the stimulus material regarded the creation of the poster ad itself. Typically, poster ads include three main constituent parts; the artwork (design, pictorial), text (copy, call-to-action), brand identifiers (logo, signature) (Dahlén et al. 2008; Bean – Mellinger, 2020). Accordingly, we here kept the artwork and brand identifiers constant and manipulated only the accompanying copy to reflect the presence or absence of advertising self-reference. Fourteen (seven self-referential, seven non-self-referential) mock *Snackzy* poster ads were developed using Adobe Photoshop CS6 (see Appendix II: Candidate copy posters). To ensure that the pairs of ads effectively communicated the intended presence or absence of self-reference, the material was pretested with $N=13$ advertising professionals from two communication agencies.

Expert participants rated on a 7-point scale (1= Strongly Disagree, 7= Strongly Agree) the extent to which the randomly presented advertising copy was self-referential as well as funny (for item wording see Attachment I: Expert panel pre-test). To maintain some uniformity regarding the understanding of the concept of self-referential advertising, definitions were provided with each question. Because several studies have found ad funniness to positively influence ad and brand outcomes (e.g. Smith, 1993; Strick, van Baaren, Holland, & van Knippenberg, 2009; Eisend, 2009, Krishnan & Chakravarti, 2003) we sought to identify the final pair of ads that differ in degree of perceived self-reference but not in degree of perceived funniness.

Since the expert panel sample size was relatively low ($N=13$) we abstained from conducting formal significance tests, which necessitate sample sizes with at least thirty participants (Field, 2013). To select the final self- and non-self-referential stimuli, we identified the pair of posters that had the largest mean difference in perceived self-reference while having the smallest mean difference in perceived funniness (see Appendix III: Expert panel descriptive

results). A similar means-based stimulus selection approach is found in previous studies by Dahlén and Edenius (2007) and Rauwers and van Noort (2016).

Poster 6 was deemed suitable for the self-referential condition ($M_{self-reference} = 6.62$, $SD = 0.77$ and $M_{funniness} = 5.31$, $SD = 1.38$) and poster 8 for the non-self-referential ($M_{self-reference} = 2.62$, $SD = 1.90$ and $M_{funniness} = 5.00$, $SD = 1.82$) (see Figure 2 below). Expert participants perceived both posters as relatively funny (both above scale midpoint) while noting a difference in terms of degree of self-reference with each poster scoring above and below the scale mid-point respectively. We concluded that the posters were suitable to be used as stimuli in the main study.

Fig. 2. Stimuli in the non-self-referential condition (left) and the self-referential condition (right).



Note: Participants in the main study were (randomly) presented to the posters after a brief instruction. A 'next' button enabled participants to continue after ten seconds of exposure.

3.2. Main Study

3.2.1. Design, Participants and Procedure

To empirically test the proposed effects of self-referential (vs. non-self-referential) advertising on ad and brand evaluations, an online between-subjects experimental design was employed. Participants older than 18 years old were recruited on a snowball sampling basis. The study was administered only in English and was shared on social media platforms (Facebook,

Reddit, Instagram); participants were requested to further share the study among their social circle. Data collection took place during the last two weeks of December 2020. In total, 145 individuals participated in our research. Nevertheless, participants that did not complete the study, that failed the quality control or failed to provide their informed and definite consent were removed from further analysis. This left us with 110 participants ($M_{age}=29.8$, $SD = 8.76$) out of which 57.3% identified as female, 41.8% as male and 0.9% as non-binary. Most of our sample had completed a bachelor's (56.4%) or a master's degree (35.5%). Participants largely reported current residence in Greece (37.3%) and in the Netherlands (39.1%). All other countries reported (all with counts lower than 5) were included in the category "Other" (23.6%) (see Appendix IV: Sample demographics).

When accessing the experiment participants were exposed to an informed consent guaranteeing respondent anonymity, voluntary participation, and free withdrawal. A brief explaining the study's purpose followed. To prevent priming to the scope of the study, the brief informed participants that the study sought their opinion about the introduction of a new candy-bar product in the market. Participants were instructed imagine they encounter the mock Snackzy poster while waiting for the bus. They were instructed to study the poster thoroughly and to pay close attention to text on it. Thereafter, they were randomly exposed to either the self-referential or the non-self-referential version of the ad. To ensure enough attention was given to the items, we used a 10-second-long forced exposure. After 10 seconds, participants had the option to use the next button or further view the item. After random exposure, respondent's scores were obtained according to the sequence of measures⁵ proposed by Geuens and De Pelsmacker (2017, p. 88) (for item order see Attachment 2: Main study's measurement instrument).

3.2.2. Measures

3.2.2.1. Dependent Variables

Attitude toward the ad

Attitude toward the ad was measured with a three-item seven-point semantic differential scale (Dahlén & Edenius, 2007). Participants were asked about their thoughts regarding the

⁵ "Introduction/Briefing → Manipulation → Dependent Variables → Quality Control → Mediating & Moderating Variables → Potential Confounds – Filler Items → Manipulation Check → Sociodemographics → Debriefing".

poster they just saw about Snackzy. The three opposing ends included 'very bad/ very good, 'very unpleasant / very pleasant' and 'very unfavorable / very favorable' ($\alpha = .94$, $M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.50$).

Attitude towards the brand

Attitude toward the brand was measured with the same three-item seven-point semantic scale as attitude towards the ad (Dahlén & Edenius, 2007; Vargas et al., 2017). The three anchors included 'very bad/ very good, 'very unpleasant / very pleasant' and 'very unfavorable / very favorable' ($\alpha = .94$, $M = 3.99$, $SD = 1.33$).

Brand ability

Perceived brand ability regards consumers' beliefs and thoughts about the brand's competence and innovativeness capability (Dahlén et. al. 2008; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006). Brand ability was measured according to Dahlén et al. (2008), with a three-item seven-point scale. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement ranging from 'strongly disagree (=1) to strongly agree (= 7)' with the statements "I think that as a brand, Snackzy seems to be..." 'smart', 'good at solving consumer problems' (reversed) and 'likely to develop valuable products' ($\alpha = .72$, $M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.06$).

3.2.2.2. Mediators

Conceptual & Attitudinal Persuasion Knowledge

Participants' level of attitudinal persuasion knowledge was measured according to Boerman et al. (2012) with a five-item, seven-point scale. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement ranging from strongly disagree (=1) to strongly agree (= 7) with the statement "I think the message on the Snackzy poster was..." 'honest' (reversed), 'trustworthy', 'convincing', 'biased' and 'credible' ($\alpha = .74$, $M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.00$) (Boerman et al., 2012, p. 1054). High scores of attitudinal PK indicate more critical feelings, while low scores correspond to more trust. Similarly, conceptual persuasion knowledge was measured with a single item on a seven-point scale. Participants were asked to indicate to what extent they thought the message on the Snackzy poster was advertising (1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree) ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.41$) Again, higher scores of conceptual PK indicate a higher level of understanding of the persuasive intent of the advertising message and its source (Boerman et al., 2012).

Ad Typicality

Ad typicality was measured with a three-item, seven-point scale (Goodstein, 1993). Participants indicated the extent to which they thought the Snackzy message was 'typical' (reversed), 'different', and 'unique' relative to messages of other candy-bar brands (1=Strongly Disagree, 7= Strongly Agree) ($\alpha = .88$, $M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.56$).

3.2.2.3. Control Variables

Since it is possible that the self-referential copy is perceived as more humorous compared to the non-self-referential one, we measured level of funniness by asking participants to rate how 'funny' and 'amusing' the message on the Snackzy poster was. The two-items were measured on a 7-point Likert type scale (1= strongly disagree. 7= strongly agree (Smith, 1993; Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2002). Together, they formed a relatively reliable scale ($r(108) = .78$, $p < .001$, $M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.68$). Moreover, we measured attention dedicated to the stimulus in both conditions by measuring the seconds participants spent on viewing the Snackzy item, additionally to the ten forced-exposure seconds ($M = 20.80$, $SD = 27.02$). Lastly, we measured brand familiarity ($M = 1.16$, $SD = .52$) to rule out the possibility that any detected effects may be due to prior brand associations. Participants were asked to indicate how familiar they were with the candy-bar brand Snackzy before participating in this study (1= very unfamiliar, 7= very familiar).

Lastly, to make sure that the product category was indeed perceived as low-involvement and hedonic, we measured product and type of involvement (Mittal & Lee, 1989; van Ooijen Verlegh, Fransen, & Smit, 2015). Product involvement was measured with a three-item 7-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree) ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.59$) (for item wording see Attachment 2: Main study's measurement instrument). The product hedonic value subscale was used to measure perceived hedonic versus utilitarian involvement type (Mittal & Lee, 1989). It consists of three items measured on a 7-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree) ($\alpha = .82$, $M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.46$) (for item wording see Attachment 2: Main study's measurement instrument). Participants in both groups seem to have perceived the product category as relatively low-involvement⁶ ($M_{self-referential} = 3.32$, $SD = 1.59$ and $M_{non-self-referential} = 2.75$, $SD =$

⁶ There were no statistically significant differences between groups in average product involvement, $t(108) = -1.87$, $p = .064$, 95% CI [-1.16, .33].

1.55), but not of high hedonic value⁷ since mean ratings in both groups were near the scale's midpoint ($M_{self-referential} = 4.40$, $SD = 1.32$ and $M_{non-self-referential} = 3.96$, $SD = 1.58$)

3.2.2.4. *Quality Control*

To be able to monitor and screen out inattentive responses, we included a quality control measure after the dependent variables (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017). The instructed response read as follows: "Please select number 4 on the scale below". The scale ranged from 1 to 5. Participants that failed the quality control ($n = 5$) were removed from all subsequent analyses.

3.2.2.5. *Manipulation Checks*

To assess whether the self-referential and non-self-referential content were indeed perceived as such, we asked participants to indicate on a 7-point scale their level of agreement with the statement "I think that the message on the Snackzy poster was self-referential" (1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree) ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 2.08$). Definitions were provided to explain the meaning of message (non-) self-reference (for item wording and definitions see Attachment 2: Main study's measurement instrument).

3.2.2.6. *Socio-demographics*

At the end of the survey, participants were asked to indicate their age in numbers, their gender (male, female, non-binary, prefer not to say), country of residence and education level (see Appendix IV: Sample Demographics).

4. Results

4.1. *Randomization Check*

To check whether covariates were equally distributed across experimental conditions, we conducted a series of randomization checks. First, an independent samples t -test was conducted with condition as the independent and age as the dependent variable. No statistically significant mean differences were identified between the groups ($M_{self-referential} = 28.95$, $SD = 7.23$ and $M_{non-self-referential} = 30.22$, $SD = 9.50$, $t(108) = .79$, $p = .431$, 95% CI [-1.93, 4.48]). Moreover, age was

⁷ The groups did not differ on average product hedonic value ratings, $t(108) = -1.59$, $p = .114$, 95% CI [-1.99, .11].

not related to ad attitude ($r = .01, p = .903$), brand attitude ($r = .02, p = .829$), or brand ability ($r = -.08, p = .389$).

For attention to the ad (measured in seconds of exposure to the stimulus), we conducted another independent samples t -test with condition as the independent variable. Again, no statistically significant mean differences were identified between the groups ($M_{self-referential} = 24.39, SD = 36.12$ and $M_{non-self-referential} = 17.07, SD = 10.95$), $t(108) = -1.45, p = .152, 95\% CI [-17.41, 2.76]$. Moreover, there were no significant correlations between attention to the ad and ad attitude ($r = -.02, p = .849$), brand attitude ($r = .01, p = .896$), and brand ability ($r = .03, p = .746$).

To examine participants' brand familiarity in each group we conducted an independent samples t -test which was statistically insignificant, $t(108) = -1.82, p = .072, 95\% CI [-.37, .02]$. Brand familiarity was low for both groups ($M_{self-referential} = 1.25, SD = .64$ and $M_{non-self-referential} = 1.07, SD = .33$) and was not related to ad attitude ($r = .11, p = .262$), brand attitude ($r = .10, p = .294$), or brand ability ($r = .09, p = .327$). This indicates that all participants were unfamiliar with the brand and that effects cannot be attributable to prior brand associations. Given the above results, we exclude age, attention to the ad and brand familiarity from further analyses, maintaining parsimony in our proposed models.

For gender, we conducted a chi-square test with gender⁸ as the dependent and condition as the independent variable. We found a significant (moderate) association between gender and condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 109) = 11.62, p < .001, Cramer's V = .33$. The distribution of gender between groups was not equal, with slightly more males in the self-referential ($n = 32, 57.1\%$) and more females in the non-self-referential condition ($n = 40, 74.1\%$). A bivariate correlation analysis showed no significant correlations between gender (dummy: 0 = male, 1 = female) and attitude to ad ($r = -.16, p = .096$) and brand ($r = -.12, p = .198$). However, there was a significant association between gender and brand ability ($r = -.22, p < .05$). Given the above, we include gender (dummy) as a control in all subsequent analyses.

As mentioned, it was theoretically meaningful to measure and control for potential group differences regarding average funniness ratings. An independent samples t -test showed that there is indeed a marginally significant mean difference between conditions, with those exposed to

⁸ To meet the assumptions for the chi-square test (no expected counts below 5), participants in the category "non-binary" and "prefer not to say" were dropped from the analysis.

self-referential advertising rating it as slightly funnier than those exposed to the non-self-referential copy ($M_{self-referential} = 4.06, SD = 1.59$ and $M_{non-self-referential} = 3.44, SD = 1.73$), $t(108) = -1.98, p = .050, 95\% CI [-1.26, .001]$. Please note that, despite the marginally significant p -value the confidence interval crosses zero, meaning that there may be no significant effect of condition on perceived funniness in the population. However, funniness is highly and significantly associated with all three dependent variables: ad attitude ($r = .48, p < .001$), brand attitude ($r = .44, p < .001$) and brand ability ($r = .52, p < .001$). Thus, considering that funniness has been proven to be an important driver of ad and brand outcomes in prior research and that results here point to a similar direction, funniness is included as a control in all main analyses.

4.2. Manipulation Check

Most importantly, to ensure that our manipulation of self-reference was understood as intended by the respondents, we conducted another independent samples t -test with condition as the independent and perceived self-reference as the dependent variable. We found a statistically significant mean difference between the groups ($M_{self-referential} = 5.73, SD = 1.46$ and $M_{non-self-referential} = 3.26, SD = 1.87$), $t(108) = -7.73, p < .001, 95\% CI [-3.11, -1.84]$. Given the above-mentioned results we can be somewhat confident that our manipulation of the stimulus was perceived by the sample as intended.

4.3. The effect of self-referential advertising on attitude toward the ad, brand, and brand ability evaluations

To test the effects of self-referential (vs. non self-referential) ads on ad (H1a) and brand attitude (H1b) and brand ability evaluations (H1c), we ran three OLS multiple regression models with the condition (dummy: 0= non-self-referential, 1= self-referential) as independent and perceived funniness and gender (dummy: 0= male, 1= female) as control variables. Condition did not predict attitude to the ad, $b = .32, p = .242, 95\% CI [-.22, .86]$ or brand, $b = .25, p = .325, 95\% CI [-.25, .74]$. Perceived funniness was the only statistically significant (positive) predictor of ad, $b = .40, p < .001, 95\% CI [.25, .56]$ as well as brand attitudes, $b = .33, p < .001, 95\% CI [-.19, .47]$. Gender was not a statistically significant covariate in either model. This means that the funnier participants thought the displayed ad was the more positive the attitude toward it and the brand, irrespective of self-reference. We did not find support for hypotheses 1a and 1b, so we accept the null hypotheses. Regarding hypothesis 1c, we found that, controlling for covariates,

self-reference was a positive predictor of brand ability evaluations $b = .42, p = .024$, 95% CI [.06, .78]. The results reveal that those exposed to the self-referential copy had more favorable thoughts about the brand's smartness and ability to develop valuable products compared to those exposed to the non-self-referential one. The results provide support for hypothesis 1c.

Table 1. Regression coefficients for the direct effects of condition and covariates on the outcome variables.

Antecedent	Consequent											
	Ad Attitude (Y_a)			Brand Attitude (Y_b)			Brand Ability (Y_c)					
	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p			
Condition (X)	a_1	.32	.27	.242	a_2	.25	.25	.325	a_3	.42	.18	.024
Funniness (C_1)	f_1	.40	.08	<.001	g_1	.33	.07	<.001	h_1	.30	.05	<.001
Gender (C_2)	f_2	-.17	.27	.537	g_2	-.08	.25	.749	h_2	-.18	.18	.322
Constant	i_1	2.44	.40	<.001	i_2	2.67	.36	<.001	i_3	2.68	.26	<.001
		$R^2 = .25$				$R^2 = .20$				$R^2 = .33$		
		$F(3,105) = 11.45, p < .001$				$F(3,105) = 8.86, p < .001$				$F(3, 105) = 17.36, p < .001$		

4.4. Typicality as a mediator of the effects self-referential advertising on attitude toward the ad, brand, and brand ability evaluations.

We hypothesized that self-referential (vs. non self-referential advertising) results in lower typicality evaluations, which in turn increases ad attitude (H2a), brand attitude (H2b) and brand ability evaluations (H2c). The hypotheses were tested with Hayes' PROCESS macro v.3.4 in SPSS. Given the simple mediation analyses examined, model 4 with bootstrapping (5000) was used for each outcome variable (Hayes, 2018). We entered condition (dummy: 0= non-self-referential, 1= self-referential) as the predictor, typicality as the mediating and attitude to ad, brand, or brand ability as the outcome variables in each model. Funniness and gender (dummy: 0= male, 1= female) were added as covariates in every model. The analysis revealed a positive effect of self-reference, $b = 1.35, p < .001$, 95% CI [.79, 1.91] on atypicality ratings. Controlling for funniness and gender, participants exposed to the self-referential copy, rated the ad as more atypical, different, and unique ($M = 4.99, SD = 1.26$) compared to the non-self-referential one ($M = 3.67, SD = 1.56$). However, atypicality was not a significant predictor of ad attitude (path b_1 in Table 2 below), brand attitude (b_2) or brand ability (b_3) meaning that ad typicality ratings did not affect ad and brand evaluations.

Condition did not directly affect ad attitude ($c'1$), brand attitude ($c'2$), or brand ability ($c'3$). The indirect effects of condition through typicality on ad attitude, $b = .22$, $SE = .15$, 95% CI $[-.02, .57]$, brand attitude, $b = .20$, $SE = .13$, 95% CI $[-.02, .50]$ and brand ability, $b = .11$, $SE = .11$, 95% CI $[-.08, .34]$, were also not statistically significant. Perceived funniness was the only positive significant predictor of ad attitude ($g1$), brand attitude ($h1$), and brand ability ($j1$). This implies that, although participants found the self-referential copy more atypical compared to the non-self-referential copy, this did not lead to more favorable ad and brand outcomes. The data provide no support for hypotheses 2a, b, c so they are rejected.

Table 2. Coefficients for simple mediation model predicting ad attitude, brand attitude and brand ability (H2a, b, c)

Antecedent	Consequent															
	Typicality (M)			Ad Attitude (F)			Brand Attitude (F)			Brand Ability (F)						
	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p				
Condition	$a1$	1.35	.28	<.001	$c'1$.10	.30	.745	$c'2$.05	.27	.861	$c'3$.31	.20	.124
Typicality (M)	-	-	-	$b1$.17	.09	.080	$b2$.15	.09	.089	$b3$.08	.06	.218	
Funniness (C)	$f1$.18	.08	.026	$g1$.37	.08	<.001	$h1$.30	.07	<.001	$j1$.29	.05	<.001
Gender (C)	$f2$.27	.28	.344	$g2$	-.21	.27	.434	$h2$	-.12	.25	.632	$j2$	-.20	.18	.271
Constant	10	2.85	.41	<.001	11	1.96	.47	<.001	12	2.25	.43	<.001	13	2.46	.32	<.001
	$R^2 = .24$			$R^2 = .27$			$R^2 = .21$			$R^2 = .34$						
	F (3,105) = 11.13, p < .001			F (4,104) = 9.55, p < .001			F (4,104) = 7.51, p < .001			F (4,104) = 13.47, p < .001						

4.5. Persuasion knowledge as a mediator of the effects of self-referential advertising on attitude toward the ad, brand, and brand ability evaluations

Before proceeding to the results of the analyses it is important to note that the models below consider only the attitudinal dimension of persuasion knowledge. This choice was made for two reasons. First, an independent samples t -test suggested that there was no significant mean difference between the groups in terms of conceptual persuasion knowledge ($M_{self-referential} = 5.45$, $SD = 1.26$ and $M_{non-self-referential} = 5.65$, $SD = 1.47$), $t(108) = .75$, $p = .320$, 95% CI $[-.33, .74]$. Second, our results showed that there was no significant association between conceptual persuasion knowledge and attitude to ad ($r = .08$, $p = .362$), brand ($r = .12$, $p = .196$) or brand ability ($r = .14$, $p = .186$). Thus, conceptual persuasion knowledge in the present study, cannot serve as a mediator that explains the relationship between self-referential advertising and attitude

toward the ad, brand, or brand ability evaluations (Baron and Kenny, 1986, p.1177). Therefore, we choose to focus our analysis only on the attitudinal dimension of persuasion knowledge.

To examine hypothesis H3a, b, c we again selected PROCESS model 4 with bootstrapping (5000) and entered condition (dummy: 0= non-self-referential, 1= self-referential) as the predictor, attitudinal PK as the mediating and attitude to ad, brand or brand ability as the outcome variable in each model. Funniness and gender (dummy: 0= male, 1= female) were added as covariates in every model. The analysis revealed a negative effect of condition, $b = -.57, p < .005, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.93, -.20]$ on attitudinal PK ratings (see path a_1 in Table 3 below). Controlling for perceived funniness and gender, participants exposed to the self-referential copy, evaluated the ad as more honest, trustworthy and credible ($M = 3.60, SD = .96$) compared to those exposed to the non-self-referential one ($M = 4.24, SD = .95$). In turn, attitudinal PK had a negative effect on attitude toward the ad (path b_1 in Table 3), the brand (b_2) and brand ability (b_3) meaning that low attitudinal PK leads to more positive attitudes toward the ad, brand and brand ability evaluations.

Table 3. Coefficients for simple mediation model predicting ad attitude, brand attitude and brand ability (H3a, b, c)

Antecedent	Consequent															
	Attitudinal PK (M)			Ad Attitude (A)			Brand Attitude (B)			Brand Ability (E)						
	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p				
Condition	a_1	-.57	.19	<.005	c'_1	.00	.26	.986	c'_2	-.10	.25	.667	c'_3	.12	.16	.464
Attitudinal PK (M)	-	-	-	b_1	-.57	.13	<.001	b_2	-.61	.12	<.001	b_3	-.52	.08	<.001	
Funniness (C)	f_1	-.20	.05	<.001	g_1	.29	.08	<.001	h_1	.21	.07	<.05	j_1	.20	.05	<.001
Gender (C)	f_2	-.17	.05	.349	g_2	-.27	.25	.293	h_2	-.19	.22	.410	j_2	-.27	.16	.084
Constant	inc	5.07	.27	<.001	ic_1	5.33	.77	<.001	ic_2	5.74	.68	<.001	ic_3	5.32	.47	<.001
		$R^2 = .22$				$R^2 = .36$				$R^2 = .36$				$R^2 = .52$		
		F (3,105) = 9.67, p < .001				F (4,104) = 14.60, p < .001				F (4,104) = 14.93, p < .001				F (4,104) = 28.13, p < .001		

Condition did not affect ad attitude directly (c'_1) but the indirect effect of condition on ad attitudes through attitudinal PK was significant, $b = .33, SE = .15, 95\% \text{ CI } [.08, .65]$. Similarly, condition did not have direct effects on brand attitude (c'_2), but the indirect effect of condition on brand attitudes through attitudinal PK was significant, $b = .35, SE = .14, 95\% \text{ CI } [.10, .66]$. Lastly, condition did not affect brand ability ratings directly (c'_3), but through the indirect effect of attitudinal PK on the latter, $b = 0.30, SE = .12, 95\% \text{ CI } [.08, .56]$. This finding hints to a full

mediation; meaning that participants who were exposed to self-referential copy (vs. non-self-referential), perceive the content as more honest and trustworthy and therefore adopt a more favorable attitude toward the ad, the brand and the latter's smartness and ability to develop valuable products. The findings provide support for H3a, b, c.

4.6. Typicality and persuasion knowledge as serial mediators of the effects of self-referential advertising on attitude toward the ad, brand, and brand ability evaluations

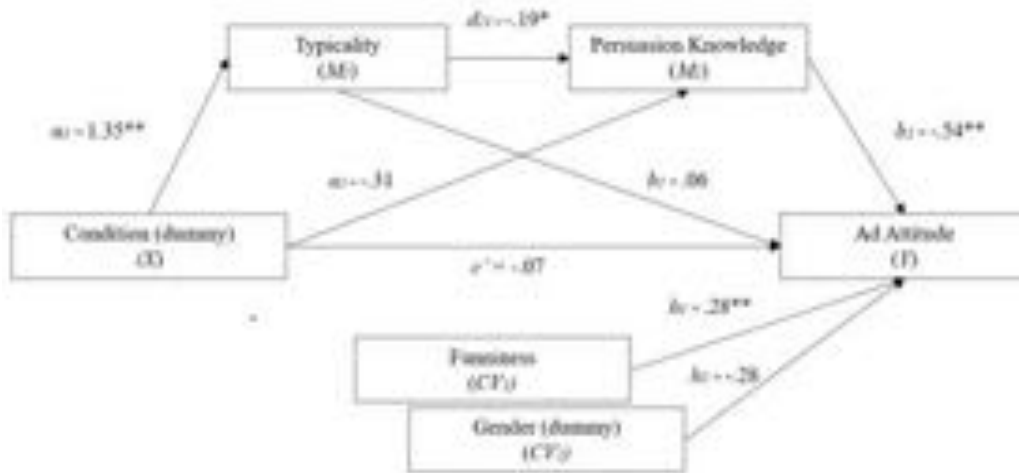
Hypothesis 4a stated that self-referential (vs. non-self-referential) advertising results in decreased typicality evaluations thereby decreasing consumers' persuasion knowledge activation and eventually leading to more positive attitude toward the ad (H4a), brand (H4b) and brand ability evaluations (H4c). The hypotheses were tested with Hayes' PROCESS macro v.3.4 in SPSS. Given the serial mediation analyses examined, model 6 with bootstrapping (5000) was used for each outcome variable (Hayes, 2018), with condition (dummy: 0= non-self-referential, 1= self-referential) as the predictor and funniness and gender (dummy: : 0= male, 1= female) as covariates. The serial mediation analysis revealed that the direct effect of condition on ad attitude, brand attitude and brand ability was statistically insignificant (see paths *c'* on Figures 3a, b, c below). However, the results show a marginally significant indirect effect of condition on typicality and, in turn, on attitudinal PK, which leads to more favorable ad attitudes, $b = 0.14$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI [.03, .31], brand attitudes, $b = 0.15$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI [.04, .32], and brand ability evaluations, $b = 0.14$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI [.03, .31] (for coefficients of all paths in the models, see Tables 4a,b,c under the Tables Section). The findings are indicative of a sequential, fully mediated relationship and they provide support for hypothesis 4a, b, c (see Figures 3a,3b,3c below).

Participants who viewed the self-referential copy, perceived it as more atypical ($M_{self-referential} = 4.99$, $SD = .1.26$, $M_{non-self-referential} = 3.67$, $SD = 1.56$); atypicality and funniness positively affected their evaluations of the honesty of the message ($M_{self-referential} = 3.60^9$, $SD = .96$ and $M_{non-self-referential} = 4.24$, $SD = .95$) leading to more favorable ad attitudes ($M_{self-referential} = 4.32$, $SD = 1.36$ and $M_{non-self-referential} = 3.69$, $SD = 1.58$) brand attitudes ($M_{self-referential} = 4.23$, $SD = 1.22$

⁹ High scores of attitudinal persuasion knowledge indicate more critical feelings, while low scores correspond to more trust.

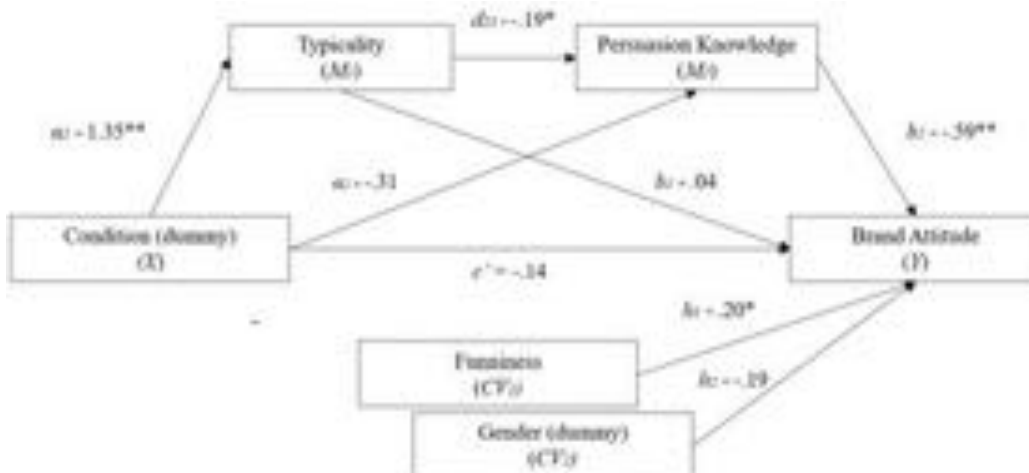
and $M_{non-self-referential} = 3.74, SD = 1.40$) as well as brand ability evaluations ($M_{self-referential} = 4.26, SD = .94$ and $M_{non-self-referential} = 3.59, SD = 1.07$).

Fig.3a. Serial mediation model for the effects of self-reference on ad attitude (H4a)



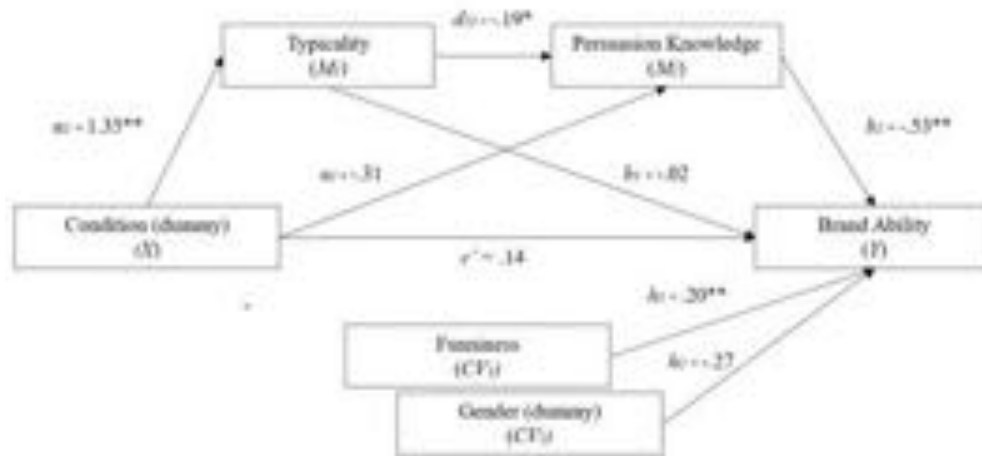
Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Fig.3b. Serial mediation model for the effects of self-reference on brand attitude (H4b)



Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Fig.3c. Serial mediation model for the effects of self-reference on brand ability (H4c)



Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The present study attempted to examine the extent to which self-referential (vs. non self-referential) advertising as a creative ad message element impacts the way consumers evaluate the ad and associated brand. In addition, it sought to understand the extent to which atypicality and persuasion knowledge explain the effects of self-referential (vs. non-self-referential) advertising on consumers' ad and brand attitudes as well as brand ability evaluations. We found that, indeed, self-referential advertising seems to impact consumer evaluations by being perceived as more atypical and by activating consumers' attitudinal persuasion knowledge to a lesser extent. This increased trust toward the self-referential item subsequently led to more positive attitudes about the ad, brand, and more positive brand ability evaluations.

More specifically, contrary to our expectations, self-referential (vs. non-self-referential) advertising did not directly lead to more favorable consumer attitudes toward the ad and brand. Nevertheless, we found that self-referential (vs. non-self-referential) advertising led to more favorable evaluations about a brand's ability to be smart, develop valuable products and cater to consumer needs. The latter finding is in line with previous research which shows that impressions about a brand's ability can be formed through associations transferred from the ad to the brand, and that these associations are more favorable when creative ads are used (Dahlén et al., 2008). It is worth noting that, although consumers in our study had no prior experience with

the brand, the use of self-referential copy likely sent signals about the source of the ad which were then used to make inferences about the brand's ability. As prior research suggests, the latter is an important owned brand asset; in markets crowded with alternatives, enhanced consumer perceived brand ability becomes an important competitive advantage for brand differentiation (Biehal & Sheinin, 2007; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Dahlén et al., 2008)

According to prior literature on the effects of advertising schemas (Goodstein, 1993; Rauwers & van Noort, 2016; Santos et al., 1994; Stafford & Stafford, 2002; Sujan, 1985), we suggested that the effects of self-referential advertising on ad and brand evaluations are explained by perceived ad atypicality. Our findings show that, although self-referential ads are considered more atypical compared to non-self-referential ads, atypicality does not in turn predict ad attitude, brand attitude, or brand ability evaluations. This finding suggests that consumers likely do operate within an advertising schema framework and are able to distinguish advertising messages that are more, or less representative of advertising typically encountered in the market (Sujan, 1985). However, the perceived atypicality of the self-referential ad does not seem to be a persuasive cue that affects ad and brand evaluations.

This observation could be explained by previous research suggesting that for consumers, factors such as ad execution and appropriateness may be more important for ad and brand evaluations than considerations of atypicality (Modig & Dahlén, 2019). While evaluations of originality are frequent among marketers because of the nature of their profession (Koslow et al., 2003), atypicality alone does not seem to directly predict ad and brand evaluations among consumer samples (Kover, Goldberg & James, 1995). In a similar vein, prior research has shown that while atypicality positively affects processing, claim recall (van Ooijen et al., 2015; Sujan, Bettman & Sujan, 1986) and amount and valence of associated thoughts (Stafford and Stafford, 2002; Sujan, 1985), it does not directly affect evaluative responses such as attitude toward the ad or brand (Stafford and Stafford, 2002, p.31; Sujan, 1985, p.40).

Furthermore, we examined the extent to which self-referential advertising outperforms non-self-referential formats in terms of consumers' levels of activated persuasion knowledge. Interestingly, consumers exposed to the self-referential (vs. non-self-referential) copy perceived it as more honest, trustworthy and credible (low attitudinal PK) despite being equally aware that the item evaluated is an ad (high conceptual PK). In turn, this decreased attitudinal persuasion

knowledge led to more positive ad and brand attitudes and more favorable evaluations about the brand's ability to be smart, cater to consumer needs and develop valuable products. Such findings are in line with previous literature which suggests that limited consumer experience with unconventional advertising formats such as self-referential advertising, creative media advertising (Dahlén & Edenius, 2007), or covert adverging (Evans & Park, 2015) may decrease attitudinal persuasion knowledge and in turn enhance subsequent consumer evaluations, regardless of the recognition of the item as advertising (conceptual PK).

To examine how ad atypicality may affect attitudinal persuasion knowledge, we utilized assumptions from both Schema and Persuasion Knowledge theory. We hypothesized that consumers may be less skeptical toward self-referential advertising precisely because it is atypical, and therefore it does not fit well their dominant advertising schema (Dahlén & Edenius, 2007; Nördfalt, 2005). In line with our expectations, consumers evaluated the self-referential (vs. non-self-referential ad) as more atypical which led to reduced attitudinal persuasion knowledge; this ultimately led to more positive attitudes to the ad and brand as well as more positive brand ability evaluations. It seems that, because self-referential ad messages have been scarce (compared to emotion- and/or argument-based conventional approaches), they deviate from consumers' expected advertising schema and they are perceived as more unique and atypical. These findings are in accordance with prior literature which suggests that unconventional advertising formats allow for the decreased activation of schema-based elaborations and the more favorable evaluation of the ad and brand (Rauwers & van Noort, 2016; Eelen, Rauwers, Wottrich, Voorveld & van Noort, 2016).

The relation between campaign approach innovativeness and credibility discussed above also resembles previous studies which discuss the use of uncommon executional tactics, not frequently used in advertising, as a way to leverage consumer skepticism toward sponsored content (Dahlén & Edenius, 2007, p. 39; Evans & Park, p. 159, Nördfalt, 2005, p. 26). We can imagine that, by putting in the forefront the brand's ability to reflect on itself and have a voice, self-referential copy avoids repeating corporate clichés, known among consumers (Schoolcraft, 2019). Essentially, in an ad market in which most brands compete to be 'the best', brands that expose and mock the banalities of conventional advertising with humor and self-awareness may resonate deeper with a post-modern, skeptical and largely ad literate consumer base (Morgan & Devoy, 2019, p. 62). That is, of course, until advertising self-reference also becomes a cliché

appeal itself. It might be that the more different brands employ self-referential advertising messages, the least prominent the effects of ad atypicality and attitudinal persuasion knowledge on consumers' ad and brand evaluations will become (Holt, 2002).

Implications for Theory

The above described findings contribute to current creative advertising research in several ways. First, in line with previous studies, we demonstrate that the self-referential (creative) format outperformed the non-self-referential (conventional) one in terms of consumers' evaluative responses (Baack et al., 2008; Dahlén et al., 2008; Dahlén & Rosengren, 2005; Rauwers & van Noort, 2016; van Ooijen et al., 2015). Second, previous studies, have found that atypicality likely affects attention allocation (Schoormans & Robben, 1997) processing depth, impression formation (Goodstein, 1993), purchase willingness, quality perception (van Ooijen et al., 2015), ad and product evaluations (Stafford & Stafford, 2002) as well as likeability of the message's sender (Santos et al., 1994). We add to the current body of knowledge by demonstrating that atypicality also influences perceived message honesty, credibility, and trustworthiness (attitudinal PK). However, further research is needed to explain in more detail how being perceived as unique relates to being perceived as more honest.

Lastly, our results show that stimulus atypicality may lead to higher consumer trust despite the recognition of the ad as such. This finding is in accordance with previous findings from Dahlén and Edenius (2007) and Evans and Park (2015), in that conceptual persuasion knowledge does not automatically lead to higher ad and brand skepticism. The results failed to provide support for the traditional view on persuasion knowledge, which assumes that consumer awareness of the persuasive intent leads to heightened resistance and distrust toward ads (Boerman et al., 2012; 2017). According to the latter paradigm, we would expect that since participants in both groups had high conceptual persuasion knowledge they would, as a result, display increased feelings of distrust toward the ad (high attitudinal PK). Instead, it seems possible that format atypicality overrides default schema-based associations and leads to lower attitudinal persuasion knowledge despite the recognition of the persuasive intent involved in the ad (Dahlén and Edenius, 2007; Evans & Park, 2015). Given these contradictory findings, future studies may focus on examining the ways by which a recognized advertising persuasion attempt leads to increased message credibility (Evans & Park, 2015). Similarly, future empirical studies

are needed to examine the extent to and the circumstances under which advertising is experienced as entertaining as opposed to persuasive in its intent.

Limitations

This study faced a series of methodological, theoretical, and design-related limitations. An important limitation to our study stemmed from the lack of an established tool to measure (perceived) advertising self-reference. We can imagine that, as a concept self-reference remains abstract, although definitions were provided. Similarly, we cannot rule out the possibility that perceived funniness in the present study acts as a confounder. Even though the models tested included funniness as a covariate, the order of questions in the measurement instrument may have slightly blurred the results. Following the guidelines of Geuens and De Pelsmacker (2017) we chose to measure confounds prior to our manipulation check. Thus, we cannot disregard the possibility that participants rated as more self-referential the content they had just rated as funnier. This may have happened due to failure to understand or read the definitions provided, or because the definitions themselves remained somewhat unclear (low measurement and construct validity). Further research should focus on developing a reliable measure for the construct of self-reference in advertising copy. It should also examine whether self-referential advertising should be considered as separate message (copy) execution, or as a subdimension of humor as an ad message factor.

Additionally, the study used a set of manipulated ads for a fictive brand to achieve increased control over our predictor and decreased interference from unmeasured confounding variables (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017; Vargas et al., 2017). Despite the use of a brand unknown to respondents, small but significant effects emerged. However, while the findings provide some evidence on how self-referential advertising may affect consumer evaluations, further research is needed to determine whether and to what extent our results can be generalized to self-referential campaigns employed by real brands in similar product categories. Future studies may need to expose participants to real self-referential advertising campaigns in various product categories and measure relevant ad and brand evaluations. Determining the extent to which advertising self-reference works in real campaigns, allows for the identification of boundary conditions; for example, it is well possible that self-reference works differently for different product categories or for brands that are more or less known among consumers.

Lastly, due to lack of resources, we managed to collect a relatively low amount of responses. Our low sample size implies low levels of statistical power. This increases susceptibility to Type II errors, decreases the study's ability to detect true effects, and harms the overall validity and replicability of our results (Asendorpf, Conner & De Fruyt, 2013; Ioannidis, 2005). Moreover, our study does not meet the assumptions that would permit causality claims; our mediator variables were observed (as opposed to manipulated) introducing bias to our design (Green, Shang & Bullock, 2010; Montgomery, Nyhan & Torres, 2018). This means, that causal inference should be made with extreme caution, if not completely avoided. Similarly, forced exposure to the stimulus likely prevents us from understanding if participants would have evaluated the ads similarly in a natural context (low ecological validity) (Vargas et al., 2017). This limitation is particularly important here since it is well possible that participants may, in real life, neither dedicate the time nor the cognitive resources to appreciate the paradox presented in self-referential advertising copy. Thus, generalizations of the findings in broader natural settings should also be done with caution.

Implications for Practice

The study's findings showed that self-referential advertising outperforms conventional ad copy approaches in terms of consumers' ad and brand evaluations. It is worth noting that successful self-referential advertising campaigns have in practice been employed at the broader campaign – brand strategy level. Practice has shown that although experimenting with advertising self-reference may work in some instances (e.g. Oatly, Hans Brinker Budget Hotel) it may not in others. While communications innovativeness is especially recommended for lesser-known brands in cluttered media (Koslow, 2015, p.7) and brands in highly stereotyped product classes (Stafford & Stafford, 2002), for established brands being unusual may translate into just being weird.

A notable example is Miller Lite's 1997, self-referential TV ad campaign featuring a fictitious creative copywriter "superstar" who presents nonsensical content ideas for the ad within the ad (see Appendix I). The irony-filled campaign failed to perform as it was exceptionally unusual for its audience (Farhi, 1999; Parris, 1998). Thus, while self-referential advertising seems to work well for unknown brands, it may be detrimental for leading brands if the approach is too inconsistent with consumers' expectations from the brand (Koslow, 2015;

White & Smith, 2001). Therefore, although our study provides support for the effectiveness of self-referential advertising, marketers are encouraged to first and foremost consider the extent to which the self-referential approach fits the brand's profile and is consistent with the target audience's expectations from the brand.

Tables Section:
Coefficients for Serial Mediation Models (H4)

Table 4a. Coefficients for Serial Mediation Model Predicting Ad Attitude from Antecedents (H4a)

Antecedent		Consequent										
		Typicality (M)			Attitudinal PK (M)			Ad Attitude (F)				
		Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p		
Condition (A)	<i>a1</i>	1.35	.28	<.001	<i>a2</i>	-.31	.20	.113	<i>c'</i>	-.07	.28	.793
Typicality (M)		-	-	-	<i>ab1</i>	-.19	.06	<.05	<i>b1</i>	.06	.09	.493
Attitudinal PK (M)		-	-	-		-	-	-	<i>b2</i>	-.54	.14	<.001
Fuzziness (C)	<i>f1</i>	.18	.08	.026	<i>g1</i>	-.17	.05	<.05	<i>h1</i>	-.28	.08	<.001
Gender (C)	<i>f2</i>	.27	.28	.344	<i>g2</i>	-.12	.18	.492	<i>h2</i>	-.28	.26	.274
Constant	<i>iw</i>	2.85	.41	<.001	<i>iw</i>	5.48	.39	<.001	<i>i</i>	5.01	.90	<.001
R ² = .24				R ² = .28				R ² = .36				
F(3,105) = 11.13, p < .001				F(4,104) = 10.17, p < .001				F(5, 103) = 11.72, p < .001				

Table 4b. Coefficients for Serial Mediation Model Predicting Brand Attitude from Antecedents (H4b)

Antecedent		Consequent										
		Typicality (M)			Attitudinal PK (M)			Brand Attitude (F)				
		Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p		
Condition (A)	<i>a1</i>	1.35	.28	<.001	<i>a2</i>	-.31	.20	.113	<i>c'</i>	-.14	.25	.581
Typicality (M)		-	-	-	<i>ab1</i>	-.19	.06	<.05	<i>b1</i>	.04	.08	.667
Attitudinal PK (M)		-	-	-		-	-	-	<i>b2</i>	-.59	.12	<.001
Fuzziness (C)	<i>f1</i>	.18	.08	.026	<i>g1</i>	-.17	.05	<.05	<i>h1</i>	.20	.07	<.05
Gender (C)	<i>f2</i>	.27	.28	.344	<i>g2</i>	-.12	.18	.492	<i>h2</i>	-.19	.23	.396
Constant	<i>iw</i>	2.85	.41	<.001	<i>iw</i>	5.48	.39	<.001	<i>i</i>	5.56	.79	<.001
R ² = .24				R ² = .28				R ² = .37				
F(3,105) = 11.13, p < .001				F(4,104) = 10.17, p < .001				F(5, 103) = 11.89, p < .001				

Table 4c. Coefficients for Serial Mediation Model Predicting Brand Ability from Antecedents (H4c)

Antecedent		Consequent										
		Typicality (M)			Persuasion Knowledge (M)			Brand Ability (F)				
		Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p		
Condition (A)	<i>a1</i>	1.35	.28	<.001	<i>a2</i>	-.31	.20	.113	<i>c'</i>	.14	.17	.411
Typicality (M)		-	-	-	<i>ab1</i>	-.19	.06	<.05	<i>b1</i>	-.02	.06	.692
Pers. Knowledge (M)		-	-	-		-	-	-	<i>b2</i>	-.53	.09	<.001
Fuzziness (C)	<i>f1</i>	.18	.08	.026	<i>g1</i>	-.17	.05	<.05	<i>h1</i>	.20	.05	<.001
Gender (C)	<i>f2</i>	.27	.28	.344	<i>g2</i>	-.12	.18	.492	<i>h2</i>	-.27	.16	.091
Constant	<i>iw</i>	2.85	.41	<.001	<i>iw</i>	5.48	.39	<.001	<i>i</i>	5.44	.55	<.001
R ² = .24				R ² = .28				R ² = .52				
F(3,105) = 11.13, p < .001				F(4,104) = 10.17, p < .001				F(5, 103) = 22.35, p < .001				

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Appendix I: Examples of self-referential advertising

Brand: Volkswagen, Creative Agency: [DDB](#), Campaign Release Year: 1959



Brand: Hans Brinker Budget Hotel, Creative Agency: [KesselsKramer](#), Campaign Release Year: 1996



Brand: Oatly, Creative Agency: (in-house) [Oatly Department of Distraction Services](#), Various Campaign Release Years



Brand: Emily Crisp, Creative Agency: [Clear Channel](#), Campaign Release Year: 2020



Brand: RXBar, Creative Agency: [Wieden + Kennedy Portland](#), Campaign Release Year: 2018

(Click on the items below to view the video ads.)



Brand: Miller Lite, Creative Agency: [Fallon McElligott](#), Campaign Release Year: 1997

(Click on the items below to view the video ads.)



Appendix II: Candidate Copy Posters*

* In the expert-panel survey (pre-test) posters were presented in a random order.

Intended Self-Referential Posters





Intended Non-Self-Referential Posters





Attachment I: Expert Panel Pre-test Measurement Instrument

(Double click on the paperclip icon to access the file.)



Appendix III: Expert Panel Survey Descriptive Results

Table I: Means and standard deviations for self-reference and funniness for each candidate poster.

Poster ID	<i>Perceived Self-Reference</i>		<i>Perceived Funniness</i>		<i>N</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
1	6.08	1.50	5.23	1.64	13
2	5.54	1.66	4.23	1.69	13
3	6.31	0.95	5.54	1.27	13
4	6.00	0.91	4.85	1.28	13
5	4.54	1.61	3.92	1.55	13
6	6.62	0.77	5.31	1.38	13
7	6.31	0.95	5.62	0.96	13
8	2.62	1.89	5.00	1.83	13
9	2.15	1.07	2.31	1.49	13
10	2.54	1.39	2.54	0.97	13
11	3.54	1.81	4.62	1.61	13
12	2.62	1.19	2.62	0.87	13
13	2.23	1.09	2.77	1.42	13
14	2.46	0.97	2.77	0.93	13

Attachment 2: Main Study's Measurement Instrument

(Double click on the paperclip icon to access the file.)



Appendix IV: Sample Demographics

Table 1. Sample Characteristics (Full & geo Conditions)

	Condition		
	Self-Referential	Non-Self-Referential	Full Sample
Gender			
Female	22 (43.3%)	43 (74.1%)	65 (31.3%)
Male	17 (33.3%)	14 (23.9%)	31 (15.0%)
Not Discard	1 (1.9%)	0	1 (0.5%)
Probs not to see	-	-	-
Age	<i>M</i> = 26.9 (<i>SD</i> = 7.25)	<i>M</i> = 36.1 (<i>SD</i> = 8.56)	<i>M</i> = 29.4 (<i>SD</i> = 8.41)
Education			
No schooling	-	-	-
Completed	-	-	-
Primary/ elementary school	0	1 (1.7%)	1 (0.5%)
Secondary school	6 (11.3%)	1 (1.7%)	7 (3.4%)
High school	-	-	-
Bachelor's degree	12 (23.3%)	18 (31.0%)	30 (14.6%)
Master's degree	28 (53.3%)	18 (31.2%)	46 (22.3%)
PhD	0	1 (1.7%)	1 (0.5%)
Country of Residence			
Canada	17 (33.3%)	24 (41.4%)	41 (19.7%)
Netherlands	27 (51.9%)	18 (31.2%)	45 (21.9%)
Other	18 (33.3%)	17 (29.4%)	35 (16.9%)
Total Sample Size	<i>n</i> = 50	<i>n</i> = 58	<i>N</i> = 108