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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF AUDIO BRANDING **--An Empirical Analysis--**

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Introduction

Audio branding joined the world of marketing in the United States in 1987 when American Airlines licensed Gershwin's famous Rhapsody in Blue (Minsky & Farley, 2017). In fact, as noted by M&F, the sound has survived at American Airlines even though the visual logo of the airline has changed. Since then, numerous firms have added audio logos to their marketing and promotion strategies. Audio branding is utilized because, as noted by Yalch (1991) "music (jingle, sound logo, or sound effects) is one of the best mnemonic devices to use for increasing brand recall." Moreover, according to research by Lindstrom, sound has a 41% influence on how people perceive brands (J. Chang 2006), or as Minsky & Fahey (2017) note, "the sounds should be so strong that listeners recall the brand and its emotional impression when they hear it, even without visual cues or words. This is particularly true when, as noted by Bindea, et.al. (2009), "the sound logo or other musical piece used in an advertisement is in 'perfect harmony' with the brand values." The authors use the Mercedes-Benz 3-note musical piece as being in "perfect harmony" with the 3-point Mercedes logo. This raised the questions: what is audio branding and how effective, if at all, is audio branding in consumers' recall of the brands of products or services that have an established audio brand?

Audio Branding

Audio branding, also called "sonic brands" are "sound identities that penetrate the emotional and logical mind...that work by harnessing music's power to trigger an emotional response" (Burnet 2009). As noted by Minsky and Fahey (2017) a sound brand or logo is "...a short, distinctive melody or sequence of sounds, mostly positioned at the beginning or end of a commercial that is often combined with a visual logo to enforce the recognition of a brand." Examples of well-known audio brands are: State Farm, Farmers Insurance, and Little Caesars. In fact, four of the top ten audio logos in the US are insurance companies: Liberty Mutual, State Farm, Farmers, and Nationwide and two of the next three audio brands are fast-food chains: Little Caesars and Arby's (Veritonic2020). Noteworthy is that none of the top ten audio brands in the US are consumer products, much less frequently purchased consumer products. In fact, the highest rated audio brand on a consumer product, for a men's grooming product, was rated at #11, yet was recalled by only 21% of respondents in the Veritonic 2020 Audio Logo Index.

Survey Design

In order to test the effectiveness of the 11th highest rated audio brand, a nationwide online survey of 400 consumers was undertaken. Qualified respondents were randomly assigned to one of four stimuli cells: 1) a control cell where there was no stimuli – consistent with prior research regarding recall of the brand when consumers hear the sounds, to test recall of the audio brand for the Selected Brand independent of any audio or visual stimuli; 2) the audio stimuli (the distinctive whistle sound associated with the Selected Brand) without any video stimuli – to test the extent to which, if at all, consumers associate the whistle audio brand sound alone with the men's grooming brand;

3) a 15-second television ad for the Selected Brand of a men's grooming product with a single message and the distinctive whistle audio brand sound at the end of the ad; and 4) a 30-second television ad for the men's grooming brand with a more complex message and the distinctive whistle audio brand sound at the end of the ad – to test whether the length of the commercials and the complexity of the message affected recall of the audio brand associated with the Selected Brand.

The online survey was designed to answer three survey questions: 1) when consumers in the target market recall the brand name of a men's grooming product, do they recall the audio brand associated with the brand; 2) when consumers in the target market for men's grooming products hear the distinctive audio brand (i.e., the whistle sound), do they associate it with the men's grooming brand; and 3) does the length of a broadcast (TV) commercial for a well-known men's grooming brand, which incorporates the distinctive whistle sound at the end of the commercial affect the recall of the audio brand?

The Screening Criteria. Respondents for the survey were drawn from the Vanguard panel of consumers who have agreed to participate in consumer surveys. Panel members who agreed to participate in the study were first screened to determine that they had purchased men's grooming products for themselves (male respondents) or a significant other (female respondents). The respondents were presented with a list of seven men's grooming products without brand names so as to avoid sensitizing respondents to the nature of the study or the subject brand of men's grooming product and asked which grooming products, if any, they had purchased in the prior three months. Those who had purchased any of the Selected Brand's men's grooming products, i.e., body wash, deodorant, after-shave lotion, for themselves or a significant other (n=400) were included in the survey.

Findings

Control Condition. Respondents randomly assigned to the control condition (no stimuli), were asked what brand or brands of men's grooming products they had purchased or considered purchasing in the prior three months. Those who had purchased the Study Brand (39%) of grooming products were asked whether they recalled any commercials for the Study Brand. Those who had (n=55) were asked what they recalled from the ad, with their verbatim responses recorded. Of those, only two of the 55 respondents (3.6%) recalled the whistle sound. Moreover, when asked in a closed-ended question what they recall from Study Brand ads they had seen, 20 of the 55 respondents (36.4%) recalled the distinctive whistle sound that exists at the end of all commercials for the Study Brand.

Whistle Condition. As noted in the methodology, respondents assigned to the "whistle condition" were presented with the Study Brand's distinctive whistle sound (with no visual stimuli) and asked whether they associate it with any product or brand. Sixty percent of the respondents (n=117) did associate it with a particular brand and, when asked to specify what brand 65.8% correctly identified the whistle sound with the Study Brand. Also, all of the respondents who associated the audio sound to a particular product identified the whistle sound with the Study Brand in a follow-up closed-ended question.

30-Second Ad Condition. Respondents assigned to the 30-second (Beach Scene) ad condition, after seeing the ad two times, were asked what they remember about the product or brand, with their verbatim responses recorded. Of those 195 respondents, only 7 (3.6%) recalled the whistle sound from the ad. On the other hand, when presented with a list of aspects of the ad, including the actor, the beach scene, the Study Brand name, and the whistle sound, 76 of the 196 respondents (38.8%) recalled the audio brand (whistle sound) in the ad.

15-Second Ad Condition. Respondents assigned to the 15-second (Man riding a horse backward) ad condition, after seeing the ad twice, were asked what they remembered about the product or brand. Of the 195 respondents, none recalled the audio brand whistle sound, while 104 of the 195 respondents recalled that the actor was "riding the horse backward". On the other hand, 59 of the 195 respondents (30.3%) identified the whistle audio brand sound from the ad, when the option was presented to them in a closed-ended question that listed aspects of the ad.

Analysis

Three points can be drawn from these data. First, the Selected Brand's audio brand, i.e., the whistle sound is recognized by consumers in the market for men's grooming products, as evidenced by the fact that, on an unaided basis, two thirds of respondents (66%) associate the whistle sound with the Selected Brand.

Importantly, significantly more respondents (65.8%) linked the sound to the brand (the whistle condition) than linked the brand to the whistle audio brand sound in the control condition (i.e., 36.4%).

Second, the audio brand does not raise to the level of awareness of the Selected Brand, either when asked independent of any association with the Selected Brand (i.e., the control condition) or after seeing a commercial for the Selected Brand when they hear the whistle audio brand sound independent of any visual cues. These results are consistent with prior research which found that a strong audio brand will result in a high likelihood of recall of the brand. In short, the audio brand is not a “take away” from the ad, whereas the ad copy/story is a “take away” from the ad. Thus, the results call into question prior research which suggests the importance of the audio brand in consumers’ recall of the brand,

Third, there is no significant difference in recall of the audio brand when respondents see a long (30-second) commercial with a somewhat complex story line (i.e., a beach scene and the actor appearing to be swimming) compared to a short (15-second) commercial with a simple story line (i.e., a man riding a horse backward). In both conditions, the audio brand gets “lost” in the story line. These findings call into question prior research (e.g., Miller 2006) which found that consumers can retain seven pieces of information in their short term memory. If this were true, then there should be a higher likelihood of recall of the audio brand whistle sound among respondents who saw the shorter, less complex Selected Brand ad.

The implication of these findings is to raise questions regarding the effectiveness of audio brands as a “selling proposition.” In other words, if a consumer doesn’t take away the audio brand on an un-aided basis after seeing a television ad, what benefit does the audio brand play? Put another way, is the audio brand in sufficient “harmony” with the Selected Brand to justify its inclusion in the promotion strategy of the brand?

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