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## THE ASSOCIATIVE NETWORK AS A METHOD FOR STUDYING EFFECTS OF ADVERTISING

— *Erich Kirchler*

In this paper, a technique developed for the analysis of social representations - the associative network - is being presented and its usefulness for investigating effects of advertising is shown by an example of three Benetton-ads.

### Introduction

In the field of consumer research, social psychology, and anthropology, it has been shown that consumers not only purchase and use products for their functional aspects, but also for the symbolic meaning embedded within them.

The predominant aims of every advertising campaign relate to attracting the attention of potential consumers, providing information about the offer, and creating meaningful associations, these being, in most cases, feelings and emotions. Advertising campaigns which touch to a particular degree socially sensitive and taboo subjects such as birth, death, violence and voyeurism, executions of AIDS, are not only observed but also form the stimulus for involvement and discussion.

The present study seeks to establish, by means of the method of associative networks, why the publicity content of certain advertising posters should have caused excitement. In addition to assessing attitudes, particular attention is paid to appraising the development of emotional reactions during observation over the period involved.

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## Assessing Attitudes

The applied social sciences offer a rich repertoire of elaborate apparatus techniques in order to determine the effect which advertising has on attracting attention, and provide more or less complete scales for assessing cognition and feelings.

In a well known model of attitude, it is assumed that the attitude of a person to an object, such as a specific product, is a function of the perceived and subjectively-evaluated properties or consequences of the product, and that the product is purchased (or not) as a function of the assessments made of it, and the internalising standards of a potential customer.

Even if the value of attitude models and scales is beyond dispute, it should nevertheless be emphasised that spontaneous purchases in particular are not made after level-headed considerations, but are dependent on emotions which are called to life without their being necessarily clearly conscious, or necessarily having a direct relationship to the purchase.

Advertising techniques are aimed, above all, at establishing connections between brand names and feelings, links which are spontaneously activated generate an urge to buy when a brand name is perceived.

It is to be assumed, on the basis of traditional laws of conditioning, that, after steady repetitions, the consumer will associate those feelings which are brought to life as a result of the romantic context with the product or brand name, so that later, only the perception of the product or the brand will be sufficient to activate those feelings. The product will not then be purchased for itself, but rather for the sense of romance which is associated with it.

In order to assess the spontaneous emotional reactions to products or to the content of product advertising, it is essential to confront people with an object of incentive, and to record the immediate thoughts and sensations which are brought to mind. One possibility for this lies in the use of projective techniques, such as in the collection of free associations, which are spontaneously established. The associations which are spontaneously uttered are not the result of decision processes, but it is to be assumed that decisions and selective actions are determined by the feelings which occur spontaneously.

In social psychology, free associations are predominantly regarded in research into social representations (Di Giacomo, 1985, Moscovici, 1981, Wagner, 1994) as projective techniques for the acquisition of knowledge. A technique which is particularly well-suited to acquiring attitudes has been developed in Italy under the name of "associative network" by De Rosa (1993, 1995).

## The Associative Network

The associative network is used to acquire the latent, evaluative aspects of a social concept or issue in relation to its different factual contents and aims towards recording spontaneous reactions, primary feelings and thoughts which arise in connection with a factual content.

In research into the impact of advertising, non-reflective reactions are important, because it is to be assumed that the very first feelings and thoughts which arise in connection with an advertising message, are associated in a very specifically close relationship with the goods being offered, and provide information about the preferences for or rejection of the item. If, for example Benetton\* advertises its company name, or the products manufactured, by means of ambivalent, socially-relevant themes, then recipients may react on the one hand with fear and disgust to the contents presented, such as body parts marked "HIV positive", or scenes of violence. After the initial shocked reactions, however, recipients may grasp the themes which are being presented as being themes which are relevant in terms of social policy, and therefore, evaluate the Benetton advertising campaigns in a positive light. The first spontaneous reaction would be negative, while the subsequent reactions, with strong cognitive foundations, would be positive.

The name "associative network" was chosen because the participants in the study not only indicated the subjective significance in each case of the factual contents or stimuli presented, but are also asked to note the sequence of the concepts arising in their mind to indicate the value of the associations, and, finally, to categorise the concepts noted by connecting the associated concepts with one another by lines. The task of the participants, therefore, is to record the thoughts and feelings which arise spontaneously in connection with an object of incentive, to evaluate whether an association is of positive,

\*Benetton: Marketing campaigns by the textile fashion company

neutral, or negative content, and, finally, to indicate the connections between the associations in such a way that all the impressions are collected to form a network, i.e., the associative network.

## Benetton

The association network allows (a) on the one hand for an analysis of the quality of the associations. (b) It is also possible to record the attitude towards a stimulus on the basis of evaluations of the associative contents. (c) In view of the fact that the sequence of the association is documented, sequences of thoughts and feelings can also be analyzed. The sequence of associations can be regarded as an account of reaction to the stimulus while the question can in any event be researched as to which feelings and thoughts come into the conceptualisation in the beginning, and what changes occur thereafter. For the purpose of research into advertising, it would be possible to draw a distinction between spontaneous associations and reflective evaluations, between uncontrolled thoughts and feelings and considered comments. (d) Eventually, the associative network offers the possibility of examining the subjective connections between associative contents, and, with a sufficiently high number of research participants, all the information gathered can be analyzed in combination.

## METHOD

### Research Participants

The present investigation looked into the spontaneous experiences and thoughts regarding three pictures from the Benetton advertising campaign and was conducted in Austrian schools. A total of 42 male and 40 female school students, aged between 15 and 19, took part, and each saw one of three advertising posters of different content, from Benetton.

The participants in the study were contacted in their school classes, where the associative network and the individual stages of the study were explained to them. The stimulus words "I" and "Benetton" were then presented one after another, and free associations, the sequence of associations, and degree of positivity were recorded. Finally, one of the three advertising posters was presented in order to

obtain the free associations related to them. The procedure lasted for a total of 30 minutes.

## Photos

One poster showed a scene in which a man has been caught by other people, and has been thrown to the ground, while a reporter holds a microphone to his mouth. This scene, referred to from now on as the "interview scene", was shown to 36 participants. 16 people were confronted with an image which shows part of a body on which the words "HIV positive" have been stamped. This picture will be referred to from now on as the "HIV positive picture". 30 participants provided their comments on a scene with an albino girl. This picture, referred to as the "albino girl", shows a group of black people, in the middle of which an albino girl is standing.

Attitudes towards the advertising content can be computed on the basis of various indices. De Rosa (1993) proposes a polarity index (difference between positively and negatively evaluated words, related to the total number of words per person), and a neutrality index (number of neutrally evaluated words, related to the number of words per person).

One the basis of the attitude index, the conclusion was drawn that the persons expressed positively evaluated words related to themselves, and showed positive self-assessment. The word "Benetton", too, achieved high positive attitude values. With regard to the image contents, there were perceptibly more negative associations expressed, particularly with regard to "interview scene" but also to "HIV positive". Neutral associations were enumerated in about 20 percent of cases; the highest number of neutral associative words were expressed with regard to the "albino girl" picture. This result is reflected in the emotionality index, which is at its highest when the proportion of neutral associations comes out at its lowest.

To summarise, it can be repeated that the views expressed about themselves are better than those expressed about "Benetton". The attitudes towards Benetton as a company, however, are all of them more positive than those regarding the three advertising pictures under examination, and particularly the image with the "HIV positive" motif and the "interview scene".

### Associative Contents

The next step was to analyze the freely-associated words. In total, 899 words were counted for the three advertising pictures; 506 of these were different. After an initial survey of the word designations, seven categories of words with neutral sentiments and nine categories for emotionally-loaded words were formed for the advertising pictures. A distinction was further made as to whether a feeling was mainly society-related, refers to the person(s) depicted, or expressed the experiences of the observer. The category scheme was explained to a total of 18 students in psychology, they subsequently sorted the associations for the three pictures into the 16 categories. The associations to the stimulus words "I" and "Benetton" were not analyzed any further.

It was observed that the scene with the "albino girl", which achieved the most positive values in the attitude index, is described as a scene for which words are incurred which could be described by "culture" and "Africa". The feelings which were associated with this image were loneliness, contrast, and discrimination, but also hope; in other words, the picture represented positive and negative both kinds of feeling throughout, which related to the main figure and to the society. The "interview scene" was described as a picture of journalistic reality; the feelings associated with this are described as violence, interest, and attentiveness, as well as suffering. It may be said that here the feelings throughout referred to the negative social aspects. The image with the piece of arm stamped with "HIV positive" incurred the most marked negative emotions in relation to the observer of the image: Fear and a sense of being trapped were the predominant categories of feelings. The picture evoked associations of sex and drugs, and recalled predominantly the negative consequences of drug-taking and unprotected sex. Of particular interest here is the difference between the images with negative attitude values: While the negative feelings which are evoked by the "interview scene" are directed towards society, the "HIV positive" image incurs intense feelings from which the observers are unable to free themselves. Perhaps a situation which creates this kind of impression, in which fear and entrapment are associated, can only be removed by the devaluation of the stimulus.

It was also observed that the first immediate reactions to the stimulus words "I" and "Benetton" were evaluated positively. With increasing confrontation with the stimuli, neutral words are mentioned more frequently. This may be an indication of the fact that sentiment-stressed associations take place spontaneously, and lead to reflection, providing "cool" considerations. The process from emotional to cognitive descriptions can be identified in the first ten associations. The results after the first 10 to 15 associations are unstable because of the increasingly low observation figures, and are scarcely open to interpretation.

With regard to the neutrality values, no difference can be identified over the course of time, but a distinction can indeed be seen in the emotionality of the associations. It becomes clear overall that, as confrontation with the images increases, so the emotional elements in the associations start to decrease. The picture with the "HIV positive" stamp in particular triggered emotionally-marked associations at the beginning; as the irritant confrontation increased, so the proportion of emotionality dropped, and oscillated around the level of the emotionality proportions of the two other pictures. Again, the first ten associations are sufficient to make this process clear. The results from the twelfth to the fifteenth associations are unstable.

### Conclusion

The aim of this study consists, on the one hand, of demonstrating the usability of the "associative network" in research into the impact of advertising, and, on the other, of the analysis of advertising posters from Benetton. The results show that the association technique presented here is usable in making differentiated measurements of attitudes. Not only considered judgements of an irritant or incentive object were recorded, but also spontaneous reactions and impressions immediately after the confrontation with stimulus. The recording of direct, sentiment-emphasised reactions and of reflected judgements is necessary in estimating the effect of the advertising message in the appropriate manner. Attitudes contain cognitive elements, which are based in the deliberate confrontation and processing of the attitude object, as well as emotional aspects which are experienced directly. It is the emotional aspects of an advertising message in particular, however, which allow the experience content to be determined which, eventually,

is associated with the brand on the basis of emotional confrontation processes, which remain effective despite passivity of thought.

In relation to the Benetton ads, the associative network has led to the following recognitions: The attitudes to the pictures, calculated on the basis of the subjective assessment of the associations, are throughout more negative than those attitudes which the participants have in relation to themselves, or to the "Benetton" brand. The associations with the "interview scene" picture, evoking violence and suffering, were especially negative. This picture, and that with the body part and the inscription "HIV positive" frequently engendered emotionally-loaded, or rarely neutral, associations.

When the attitudes and feelings directly aroused with regard to both pictures are negative, then the question arises of whether it is acceptable on business management grounds to carry out publicity using these pictures. It is now known that Benetton excited recognition with its publicity, and used the attention to make the brand name well-known. Because of the low neutrality elements and polarisation in the associations, it is to be anticipated that the pictures under discussion in particular are well suited to arousing attention and exciting discussion.

If the content of the associations to the pictures is analyzed, it can be seen that in one case violence, journalistic effect and suffering are experienced, while in the other fear, and the claustrophobic sensation of being trapped, as symbolised by fatal diseases. On the one hand, negative emotions are engendered by the picture, which can be attributed to the main figure represented, while, on the other, the feelings stick with the observer; it is not possible to attribute death and disease to the part of the body shown, and the persons observing this, predominantly young people, sense these emotions and see themselves as confronted with the problems arising. The direction of the emotionality is different in the two pictures, and this appears to be significant.

The analyses of the temporal sequence of the associations show a further relevant difference in the impact of both pictures: it is true that the associations with "HIV positive" and to the "interview scene" may be negative relative to those of the stimulus words "I" and "Benetton", and in both cases, in the course of time, remain at the initial starting level. However, the emotion elements in the very first associations are

different. Above all, the "HIV positive" picture initially triggers intensively emotional associations, which do not start to recede until confrontation starts to increase. This result can be interpreted as an indicator that the immediate confrontation with the picture, and therefore with taboo subjects such as "sex" and "drug abuse", and their possible consequences, have a shock effect. The observers are not given the chance to project their considerably negative feelings onto a represented figure. As a result, only one possibility pertains of withdrawing from the onset of fears and anxieties with the distancing of oneself from the image, and from those who created it.

Pictures from Benetton give rise to lively social debate, and are either called good or condemned as heresies. The data presented here indicates that the discussion is triggered off on the basis of considerable emotions, with the immediate contemplation of the pictures, and the subsequent pressure to clarify those emotions. If considerable emotions are created because of the representation without any cosmetic effect of socially-relevant problems, then that representation may appear justified, and Benetton regarded as an instance which creates attention, and not only for the products being offered. The heated debate may indeed signify the success which Benetton is striving for, and both the scenes with the albino girl as well as that with the prisoner and the journalist appear to be suitable advertising pictures for achieving the desired goals. However, whether the picture of the limb with the inscription "HIV positive" had the desired effect is doubtful. The fear which this engenders does not seem to detach from the observers, or directed towards social consequences. It may well be that attention was attracted, bewilderment generated, but discussion was quieter. To wear pullovers from a company which goes into social problems in this way may be assessed as an expression of solidarity and courage; Benetton pullovers signify being in line with people who "tackle" social problems, and signify a differentiation from groups of people who shy away from these issues. However, whether potential consumers would like to wear those pullovers, the brand name of which creates a sense of fear and being under attack, is questionable.

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