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PROVOCATION IN ADVERTISING: A
CONCEPTUALIZATION AND AN EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

This paper offers a definition of provocative appeals as they are currently used in advertising, especially in the clothing and fashion industry. It also positions this execution strategy with respect to other execution strategies used and currently researched in advertising, and identifies relevant constructs useful to understand the effects of provocative appeals. These effects are measured through a preliminary empirical investigation which shows that provocation may be a valid strategy to attract attention, but may affect negatively the attitude toward the brand. However, it is not certain that it does affect negatively the behavior of consumers in any significant manner. More research is therefore needed on the roles of variables such as the level of product involvement, age, and gender which appear to moderate the effectiveness of provocation.

Provocation in Advertising: A Conceptualization and an Empirical Assessment

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1. Introduction

Execution strategies employed in advertising range from the informational to the emotional. Among those designed to stir emotions or rouse particular feelings, one finds: fear (Ray and Wilkie, 1970; LaTour and Zahra, 1988), humor (Sternthal and Craig, 1973; Gelb and Zinkhan, 1986), warmth (Aaker et al., 1986), irritation (Greyser, 1973; Aaker and Bruzzone, 1985), and sexual arousal (Bello et al., 1983; Severn et al., 1990).

Another execution strategy that has been gaining popularity in recent years is the recourse to provocation with the intention to shock particular segments of the population. Although the potential to shock has always been present in advertising (e.g. when for the first time photographs of women were incorporated into liquor advertisements; see Ogilvy, 1983, p.26), only recently has provocation been used as a full and deliberate communication strategy.

This paper has three primary objectives. The first objective is to provide a brief historical overview of the emergence of provocative appeals in advertising, thus demonstrating that the strategy is not simply a fad or an angle taken by a single firm. The second objective is to propose a definition of provocative appeals in advertising, and to identify some of the elements underlying this advertising appeal; this conceptualization, discussed in the third section of the article, provides an opportunity to review the relevant literature in advertising and persuasion. The third objective of this paper is to go further than the world media has in the treatment of this topic by presenting the results of one of the first empirical assessments of consumer reaction to provocative advertising. Finally, in the conclusion, directions for future research are highlighted since research on this topic remains yet in its earliest stages; in fact, the main contribution of this research, aside from defining provocation as a creative strategy in advertising and positioning it within the current research in the area, is to look at consumers’ reactions to well-known cases of provocative advertising hoping to trigger more empirical research on that topic.

2. The Emergence of Provocative Appeals in Advertising

The Italian clothing firm, Benetton, is most often credited with being the originator of provocative appeals in advertising. In the latter half of the 1980’s, Benetton’s visual advertising ceased to show the company’s products (clothing and fashion accessories) and featured, instead, such images as colorful leaves floating in water, or a parrot perched on the back of a zebra, and always the sole mention of the company slogan: United Colors of Benetton. Eventually, the images they used became increasingly provocative, referring, for instance, to racial issues (a black woman breast–feeding a white baby), religion (a priest in black kissing a nun in white), death and disease (a young man dying of AIDS) and war (the clothes of a soldier killed in Bosnia).

The strategy caught on quickly and was adopted by many other clothing and fashion brand names such as Esprit (who took a stand on the abortion debate in the United States with an advertisement in favor of free choice... "Unless George Bush is Available to Babysit") and Diesel (who continue to rely on high doses of cynicism in their series of so–called "How To" ads instructing people "How to Smoke 145 Cigarettes a Day" or "How to Feed a Dog"), and in other sectors as well (a Pirelli ad was recently banned in the U.S. because it showed American athlete Carl Lewis in high heels).
Despite recurrent news that Benetton is considering changing its now famous executional appeal (mostly because of complaints from franchisees, and not necessarily for reasons of ineffectiveness; see Blonsky and Calligaris, 1995), the Italian firm continues to persevere with this strategy: for instance, one of their latest ads (April 1996) features a very graphic picture of three human hearts with respective mention of "Black," "Yellow" and "White" above them—and still the slogan: United Colors of Benetton. Moreover, provocation is likely to remain a viable option for any advertiser striving to reach consumers in an increasingly tight and saturated commercial environment. The question now asked by many advertisers is: "How can we attract attention in today's commercial environment?", and to resort to shock and provocation may seem an appealing response.

The issue of provocation as an advertising strategy does, however, raise a set of important concerns. Despite the high level of publicity, by word–of–mouth and otherwise, garnered by provocative ads, it seems important at this point to assess the effect of such a strategy on individual consumers, and to compare the strategy with more traditional appeals used in advertising. Some of the issues raised by Silk and Vavra (1974) more than twenty years ago, when discussing hard–selling and irritating commercials, remain relevant to discussing the effects of provocative appeals in advertising today. For example, attempts to shock consumers may generate a high level of awareness, but may also result in a low level of acceptance or even a high level of disapproval. How do these conflicting results translate in terms of purchase intentions, especially in comparison with more traditional appeals? Is it possible for consumers to have a negative attitude towards an ad and still retain a positive attitude towards the brand advertised? Do consumers differ in their reactions towards provocative ads because of their age or their various levels of involvement?

The results of empirical research pertaining to these questions follow the definition and conceptualization of the term provocations as it relates to advertising.

3. A Definition of Provocation in Advertising

Although various advertising strategies and their effects are frequently reviewed (Percy and Rossiter, 1992; Laskey et al., 1989; Gelb et al., 1985), these reviews have yet to address the issue of provocation in advertising. Therefore, the first step in attempting to define such provocation is to determine its position relative to other strategies currently studied and used in advertising. We have already proposed, in the introduction, that provocation rests at the same conceptual and strategic levels as other execution strategies such as fear, humor, warmth, irritation and sexual appeals that are discussed in the above-mentioned reviews.

In fact, provocation bears close resemblance to some of these appeals. For instance, sexual appeals or nudity in the context of an advertisement often appear provocative, and can shock a significant portion of viewers in numerous cultures and countries. However, it is important at this point to distinguish provocative appeal from sexual appeals, the latter being a subset of provocative appeals when used in a context that has little or nothing to do with the product advertised (e.g. using a picture of a nude model to sell soap is not as provocative as would be a similar picture used to advertise a brand of toothpaste or a car). Provocative appeals encompass much more than sexual appeals since they can also refer, as they often do, to political or racial issues for instance.
It can also be said that provocation has the same equivocal effects that humor, fear or sex may have on consumers, as mentioned respectively by Sternthal and Craig (1973) of humor, Ray and Wilkie (1970) of the appeal of fear, or Bello et al. (1983) of sexual appeals: these three strategies may be highly effective in attracting attention, but may also be dysfunctional in terms of the remaining stages of the communication process - assuming that there is a hierarchy of effects. They also bear close resemblance to irritating ads, although the (negative) emotional reaction here appears to stem from either the product advertised or the copy execution (Aaker and Bruzzone, 1985), but not directly from the theme of the advertisement as is the case with provocative ads.

Despite similarities to existing appeals, provocation is an original and distinctive execution strategy, and although a portion of what is known about the effects of appeals such as fear and sex may be relevant to provocative appeals, provocation also deserves an equal amount of attention and direct investigation.

On the basis of an extensive examination of current advertisements and communication strategies, particularly within the fashion and clothing industry, a definition of provocation in advertising could read as **a deliberate appeal, within the content of an advertisement, to stimuli that are expected to shock at least a portion of the audience, both because they are associated with values, norms or taboos that are habitually not challenged or transgressed in advertising, and because of their distinctiveness and ambiguity.**

Thus defined, provocation in advertising alludes to and encompasses several concepts already studied or currently being studied in the field of marketing. A brief review of these concepts follows, and is organized around the three main components of provocation, namely: distinctiveness, ambiguity and transgression of norms and taboos.

### 3.1. Distinctiveness

An important element of a provocative advertisement is its distinctiveness. Regardless of content, an ad which could be perceived as similar to other ads would lose some of its provocative power. As a matter of fact, distinctiveness is at the heart of the innovative character of such a strategy, and imitation by competing advertisers may dilute the effect of an advertising strategy based on provocation—presumably, consumers tend to get used to a particular type of provocation. Therefore, part of the challenge for an advertiser using provocative appeals is the constant renewal of ads to maintain originality.

In the field of persuasion and advertising studies, the notion of distinctiveness is generally associated with, or grounded in, Helson's (1964) Adaptation–Level Theory. The theory has been tested in various experiments over the past decade (Childers and Houston, 1984; Beattie and Mitchell, 1985; Andrews et al., 1992), in which distinctiveness has often been utilized with the tangible aspects of the advertisement—aspects such as size, color, position or movement. Most of the experiment results mutually support the hypothesis that distinctive stimuli have a positive effect on the degree to which attention is attracted by the ad, the degree to which the ad is memorized and retrieved from memory (Childers and Houston, 1984) and on the evaluation of the brand (Beattie and Mitchell, 1985), although some restricting conditions such as the level of consumer involvement do apply (Andrews et al., 1992).
A related stream of research has also recently addressed the issue of distinctiveness, but focuses on the content of the message rather than solely on its form. The issue, therefore, becomes a matter of the congruity or incongruity of the communication as it relates to the existing consumer schema. For instance, Sujan, Bettman and Sujan (1986) showed that, in sales interactions, information processing is more extensive when salespersons do not meet consumers’ expectations. A more recent study by Heckler and Childers (1992)—in which incongruity was partitioned into two dimensions: expectancy and relevance of the information processed—showed that incongruity significantly affects the memorization of the content of the communication.

3.2. Ambiguity

Distinctiveness in itself is not sufficient to trigger provocation. An additional characteristic, with the potential to enhance the provocative dimension of an advertisement, is the extent to which the ad leaves room for various interpretations, if not of its content, at least of the intentions of the advertiser. The basic precept behind this intentional ambiguity is that a provocative message which contains no ambiguity is more likely to be dismissed immediately by those receivers that are shocked and, consequently, is more likely not to be processed at all. In other words, the basis of the provocative appeal of an advertisement is often the non-sense it deliberately manifests, thus making it arduous to decode ("What exactly is the message within this ad? What is it about?").

The notion of ambiguity in advertising has been addressed in a variety of ways, but mostly indirectly, within literature and research dealing with the general topic of persuasion. Howard and Sheth (1969), for example, postulated that stimulus ambiguity elicits arousal and eventually triggers some exploratory behavior. In their model, stimulus ambiguity is defined as "the lack of clarity of the stimulus display in communicating the descriptive and evaluative aspects of the brand, product class and the nature of motives" (Howard and Sheth, 1969, pp.158–9). However, further research has tended to show that a degree of comprehension is necessary for persuasion to occur (Eagly, 1974; Ratneshwar and Chaiken, 1991). Ambiguity also find echoes in the "conclusion drawing literature" (Kardes, 1988; Sawyer and Howard, 1991), and in studies such as Zinkhan and Martin (1983) in which, according to their results, the level of the complexity of the message has an impact on aesthetic responses to advertising.

Ambiguity and complexity are also central to the notion of resonance in advertising, as presented by McQuarrie and Mick (1992): following Eco (1976), attention is given here to the polysemy of the advertisements, or "the multiple meanings engendered by the structural relation of signs within the ad text" (McQuarrie and Mick, 1992, p. 184), and eventually provides opportunity for an aesthetic experience. In fact, a whole sector of research is emerging, in the field of advertising and consumer behavior, based on the subjective comprehension of advertisements (Mick, 1992) in which the level of ambiguity of ads (e.g. ads as open vs. closed text in the 1989 Mick and Politi analysis of four different ads) plays a central and determining role.

3.3. Transgression of Norms and Taboos

In the end, provocation is more likely to take place when the content of an advertisement refers to something that is generally considered by viewers as taboo. This element may be
the most crucial one: an advertisement which is only distinctive and ambiguous would hardly shock by itself, and would rather tend to be simply dismissed.

The transgression of norms and taboos has been recently attracting the attention of more and more researchers. Since Pollay's (1986) general comment that "Standards of public decency have changed much in the twentieth century, and advertising has been one of the elements contributing to changed norms" (p.28), it is now possible to find studies discussing the issue of decency in advertising (Shao, 1993; Pollay and Lysonski, 1993; Boddewyn and Kunz, 1991). It should also be pointed out that, reciprocally, changing social norms have probably also affected advertising practices.

As mentioned earlier, using sexual appeals in advertising can be considered as one specific case of transgression, since the subject of sexuality is considered taboo—to varying degrees—throughout the world. Current research on the use of sexual appeals in advertising tends to show that, despite the controversy surrounding these appeals, the sexual content of advertisements increases the amount of attention and interest garnered by the ads (Bello et al., 1983), as well as the level of purchase intention (Severn et al., 1990). These effects, however, often appear to be mediated by other factors such as the degree of congruence between the product and the sexual appeals, the context in which these ads are presented, and particular audience characteristics. Besides the issue of sexuality, it could certainly be hypothesized that other topics could maintain a similar degree of shock value across national and cultural boundaries. These topics could potentially include, drugs, violence and racial issues.

At this point, questions such as those posed regarding advertising using sexual appeals could also be asked with respect to provocative appeals: What is the effect of such appeals on consumers? Although the issue of provocation in advertising is widely discussed in newspapers and in social settings, never are these discussions founded upon the results of a direct assessment of consumer reaction. The following section represents a first attempt at doing so.

4. The Empirical Research

The primary objectives of the empirical research were to assess the effect of provocative advertisements on consumers, and to evaluate the impact if not the effectiveness of provocation as an execution strategy.

In order to assess these reactions, the most frequently used variables in advertising research of this kind were used. Most of these variables of advertising effectiveness originate from hierarchy–of– effects models (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961; McGuire, 1978) which posit that an advertisement should be able to guide consumers through a series of steps before it can be said to have an impact on sales. These steps typically range from the cognitive (awareness, knowledge), to the affective (liking, preference), to the conative (conviction, purchase) variables, and constitute the principal measures of advertising effectiveness. Another variable to add to this set of measures is that of attitude towards the ad (Aad) which has been suggested to be an important mediator within the persuasion process (Mitchell and Olson, 1981) and has prompted a good deal of interest and investigation in advertising research over the past fifteen years. Finally, in order to attain further insight into the nature of consumer reaction to provocative ads, the adjective check–list methodology (Mehrotra et al., 1981; Lavidge and Steiner, 1961)—often used when pretesting various ad copies—was also used.
The following research questions were formulated in keeping with the above–mentioned measures of advertising impact.

**Cognitive Variables**
1. Do provocative ads succeed in attracting the attention of consumers? (Awareness)
2. Do consumers remember the content of these provocative advertisements? (Knowledge)

**Affective Variables**
3. To what extent do consumers like provocative ads in general? (Attitude)
4. To what extent do consumers like specific provocative advertising messages? (Aad)
5. What is the nature of consumer reaction when exposed to provocative ads? (Adjective check–list)

**Conative Variables**
6. Do provocative ads have an effect on consumer purchase intentions?

Two additional research questions were added after uncovering research results showing that advertising impact often varies according to the consumer’s level of product involvement (see Petty et al., 1983) and according to a number of socio–demographic variables (see LaTour et al., 1990).

7. Does the level of product involvement affect consumer reaction to provocative ads?
8. Are there socio–demographic variables which account for differences in the reactions to provocative ads?

### 4.1. Methodology

A survey was conducted among a sample of 204 respondents on the campuses of two large Canadian universities; therefore, 85% of the group surveyed is comprised of students. Although such a sample does certainly not claim to be representative of the population, it does not call for the usual warrant since, not only are students heavy consumers, if not expert consumers, of clothing, but they are also known to demonstrate similar attitudes towards advertising as those expressed by the general public (Zanot, 1984). The data collection took place in two waves, as a bias towards business–administration students was detected in the first survey.

Fifty-three percent of those surveyed are men, averaging 25 years of age, 65% of whom are single. It should be noted that—due to the significant number of students included in the survey—56% of the participants reported an annual disposable income of less than CAN $10,000, thus placing them in the lower level of Canada's economic stratum. Again, although far from being representative of the greater population, this consumer sample is similar in many respects to market segments regularly targeted by firms in the clothing and fashion business. Informal comments from experts in the sector confirm that the survey group is in accordance with the consumer segment targeted by firms like Benetton, with the possible exception of the group’s average annual income (since Benetton's prices are usually above average in the market).

### 4.2. Measures
The data–collection procedure involved a questionnaire organized around the following themes. First, the level of involvement of the respondent with respect to clothing was measured. This particular product category was selected because the majority of the provocative ads found in the print media belong to brands in the clothing and fashion sector. Measures to determine the consumer's degree of involvement included a question about who is actually purchasing most of the respondent's clothes (him or herself, with or without help), and a series of scales to reflect the importance of clothing in the respondent's life from a financial ("Does clothing represent a large portion of your budget?"); personal ("Does clothing represent a way to express your values and personality?"); functional ("Do you mostly buy clothes to satisfy practical needs such as seasonal demands?"); and hedonist ("Do you regard clothing as a source of pleasure or a way to indulge yourself?") perspective, as well as a general question about the overall importance of clothing in his or her life.

Next, an assessment was made of the respondent's degree of knowledge and awareness of the different brands in advertising campaigns in the clothing and fashion sector, first in a spontaneous manner, then by a closed question in which a certain number of brands were specifically mentioned. Finally, specific questions regarding these brands' advertising campaigns were asked to measure the degree of the respondent's previous knowledge of these campaigns ("Have you seen or heard about an advertisement from [brand]?"; "Could you describe an advertisement for [brand]?").

These brands included, among others:
– One brand which generally uses a traditional appeal in advertising (Gap)
– One which uses, among several other types of ads, mildly provocative appeal based on nudity, but in a rather "artistic" and tasteful fashion (Mexx)
– And three brands which used some degree of provocation in their advertising campaigns (Moschino, Diesel, and Benetton).

The selection of these brands was based on preliminary content analyses of their advertisements to ensure that they would possess the required characteristics. However, in spite of these precautions, the manipulation checks revealed some confusion with respect to the degree of provocation triggered by at least two ads—Diesel and Moschino ads were less unanimously perceived as provocative, probably because of the highly ambiguous nature of the ads. The Mexx ad also showed some variance in terms of perceived level of provocation, but was nevertheless selected by respondents as the moderately provocative of the group since it played on nudity—which is ironic in the context of selling clothes—but in a tasteful manner. Therefore, the following results focus on three ads: Benetton, as the provocative ad, Gap as the traditional ad, and Mexx as the intermediate ad.

It was not possible to introduce a control for all the other possible variables that can intervene within the communication process—variables such as the fact that only one ad showed the actual product advertised (Gap) while the other two did not (Benetton, Mexx). Numerous other factors may also influence consumer reaction, such as the fact that some brand names are associated with retail chains. However, the three ads selected for the analysis are for brands with a number of similar characteristics. For instance, all three have stores identified with their brand names, and although Mexx has fewer stores than the others have (Mexx have 12 in Canada, versus 30 Benetton stores and 40 Gap stores), Mexx is also distributed in large department stores across the country. Therefore,
it could be said that each of the three brands enjoys a market coverage more or less equivalent to the others. In addition, they all offer clothes for men, women and children.

It should also be pointed out that all the ads included no text, but they differed from each other in terms of overall size (one page vs. two pages vs. a folding inset); these limitations, however, are inherent to any research using examples of real advertisements—as opposed to those created specifically for research purposes—because of the various levels of variables at work within such advertisements. Therefore, this empirical research is somewhat similar to "field" research and earns in external validity what it loses in internal validity.

The initial questionnaire was followed by a series of questions devised to assess the respondents' attitudes towards advertising in general, and in the clothing and fashion industry in particular, in order to verify that the above-mentioned variables did not pre-empt the effect of the provocative appeals. The overall degree of affinity for advertising in general, and for print advertising and advertising in the clothing and the fashion industry, was measured through 5-points Likert-type scales.

A series of questions was also asked to assess the general opinion and attitude of the respondents towards controversial advertising prior to exposure to specific advertisements. Respondents were asked to select three statements from among eleven, ranging from positive statements about provocative advertising ("These ads open new horizons," "These ads bring attention to important social problems," "These ads challenge me, and I like that"…) to more negative statements ("These ads exploit human problems to sell products," "These ads just want to shock for the sake of it, and I don't like that"…) and including more neutral statements ("I don't always understand them," "It is difficult to make the bridge between the ad and the brand or product," "These ads leave me indifferent"…).

Then, to conclude the data collection process, the respondents were invited to take a look at the five selected advertisements (Benetton, Diesel, Moschino, Mexx and Gap), to report if they had already seen these ads, and to indicate their degree of liking (on 6-point scales ranging from "Not at all" to "Immensely"). Next, borrowing from the numerous item-analysis scales published (see Wells, 1964, or Leavitt, 1970), a list of 16 adjectives (young, violent, cheerful, trite, peaceful, indecent, original, ugly, shocking, funny, too classic, sweet, sad, wise, disgusting, and tender) was submitted to the respondents, who were then asked to pick the three adjectives which they felt best represented their opinion of each ad. Measures of the respondent's conative responses were then employed in the form of a series of scales designed to assess what each of these ads was triggering in the respondent's mind (get information about the brand, visit a store to view that brand-name's products, soon buy a product of that brand, start positive word-of-mouth promotion of that brand, avoid that brand, start negative word-of-mouth discouragement of that brand, and do nothing). Finally, the usual socio-demographic questions were posed.

5. The Results

As mentioned earlier, the results are focused solely on the comparison between three advertisements: Benetton's controversial ad featuring a picture of a newborn baby with the simple mention, United Colors of Benetton, is considered the provocative ad; Mexx's ad showing a young woman lying nude on a bed with a young child, also nude, by the side
of the bed, with the simple mention of the brand name, is the mildly provocative ad (most subjects in the pretest mentioned that this ad was tasteful, but still non–traditional); and the Gap advertisement featuring a young and smiling model wearing youthful leisure clothes on a small pier with leisure boats pictured in the background, is considered the traditional ad.

5.1. Cognitive Variables

These results are the most difficult to interpret since awareness and knowledge of advertisements depend on various factors hardly measurable or controllable in the context of a survey. For instance, the advertising budgets, which determine the level of the ad's exposure (repetitions) of the brand–names selected for this survey remain unknown. Further possible confusion arises from the fact that consumer awareness may result more from exposure to stores (for Gap and Benetton) than from exposure to advertisements.

In any case, with respect to the first research question, "Do provocative ads succeed in attracting the attention of consumers?", Table 1 shows that Benetton appears to benefit from a high level of awareness since it ranked second of the forty–one brands mentioned spontaneously by the respondents, and second in terms of level of knowledge after Levi's. The latter variable appears to be significantly correlated with exposure to advertising, as is shown in Table 1–B. Indeed, Levi's is the brand for which the highest proportion of respondents claim to have seen an ad within the past few months (63%), again followed by Benetton (37%). But an important related result alludes to the operative effect of controversy (Table 1–B): although only 37% of the subjects mentioned having seen a Benetton ad, 15% said they had heard about Benetton ads (the highest score among all the brands), and 17% said they had seen examples of and heard talk of the Benetton advertising campaign (again, the highest percentage). These results, which draw Benetton nearer to Levi's in terms of the degree to which advertising effectively promotes overall awareness, would support (unofficial) claims that Benetton's creative advertising strategy allows them to operate with an advertising and promotion budget four to five times less than the industry average (Heuzé, 1992).

It should be noted that the differences in the level of consumer awareness between Benetton, Diesel, Gap, Mexx, Moschino and Levi's are all significant at the .001 level when compared one against the others.

Other conclusions with respect to awareness must be handled with some caution in the context of a field study such as this. For instance, the data in Table 1B show that awareness of Mexx's advertising (mildly provocative advertising messages) is higher than that of Gap's (more traditional type advertising). However, the two other brands included in the study which use provocative appeals (Diesel and Moschino), do not seem to benefit from the same type of awareness that Benetton secures. Benetton's success in this area is probably the result of having taken advantage of their pioneering efforts in seeking provocative appeals and/or the result of better store exposure. All other conclusions remain purely speculative at this stage.

With respect to the second research question, "Do consumers remember the contents of these provocative advertisements?", the level of knowledge was assessed by asking...
respondents to describe a recent advertisement for some of the selected brands. Results indicate that the level of objective knowledge of the content of ads is significantly higher for Benetton (26% of the respondents adequately describing an advertisement), than for the other brands (only 3% of the respondents could adequately describe ads for Mexx and Gap products).

Therefore, a first tentative conclusion concerning the impact of provocation in advertising would be that provocative appeals do lead to increased awareness with lower exposure. Although, as mentioned before, other factors could account for the higher score obtained by Levi’s (advertising budget? stores of the same name? a mature brand?) and the lower scores obtained by Diesel and Moschino (these brands having used provocative appeals in their advertising campaigns for a relatively shorter period of time). Thus, at first sight, answers to the first two research questions tend to be affirmative.

5.2. Affective Variables

First, in terms of opinions and attitudes towards advertising in general, the most popular statement—still on a 1 to 5 scale—is that advertising allows the respondents to get information about new products (4.28 / 5), followed by the perception of advertising as a source of entertainment (3.72 / 5). The three most negative statements regarding advertising, chosen from the list of 11 statements provided to the respondents, rank in the last three positions in the grading. With respect to advertising from the fashion and clothing industry more specifically, respondents express an even higher level of appreciation (3.64 / 5) than for advertising in general (3.47 / 5).

The third research question related to general attitudes towards the issue of provocation in advertising: "To what extent do consumers like provocative advertising in general?" When probed directly on the issue of provocation and controversy in advertising (defined to the respondent as "any type of message or communication that shocks or mentions information or opinions that are not shared by everyone in the audience"), the most popular statements chosen were those related to the fact that this type of advertising makes them think, reflect (57%) or makes them aware of particular social problems (42%). The three negative statements ("These ads exploit human problems to sell products", "These ads just want to shock for the sake of it, and I don't like that," and "These ads bother me") are the three statements selected the least often by the respondents. This last result is important to keep in mind: in the absence of exposure to provocative advertising, the respondents show tolerance and even interest towards provocation in advertising. It should be added, to reiterate the ambiguous element of provocative ads mentioned in the first section of this article, that 13% of the respondents stated that they "do not always understand their [the ads'] content." The issue of the level of comprehension of these ads (Mick, 1992) appears relevant, therefore, especially since one can hypothesize that the remaining 87% certainly do not agree as to the meanings of these ads.

But when faced with examples of the actual advertisements, the respondents' initial reactions were quite paradoxical. While they tend to proclaim a rather positive appreciation for provocative ads in the abstract, results in Table 2 show that in terms of Aad, the mildly provocative ad is better received, and the truly provocative ad scores much lower. Thus, answering the fourth research question, "To what extent do consumers like specific advertisements?", it seems that highly provocative ads are
disliked in terms of Aad, while somewhat provocative ads and traditional ads show no difference in this regard. All the paired comparisons of these figures are significant at the 0.05 level, except for the difference in Aad scores between Gap (traditional appeal) and Mexx (mildly provocative) which appears to be correlated ($r = 0.205$, $p = 0.004$).

Table 2 also presents the results of attitudes towards brands prior to exposure to the advertisements; but here the difference between liking for Benetton and liking for Gap is not statistically significant, nor is the difference in liking between Mexx and Gap. On the other hand, first examination reveals a positive linear correlation between Aad and the attitude towards the brand. The mildly provocative ad (Mexx) exhibits the highest level of Aad as well as ranking highest in terms of attitude towards the brand, while the most shocking ad results in both the lowest level of Aad and of attitude towards the brand. These results, however, should also be considered in context with the factors, other than Aad, that have an effect on the attitude expressed towards particular brands.

With respect to the fifth research question, "What is the nature of consumer reaction when exposed to a provocative ad?", the results are striking in many respects. The most frequently selected adjective for Benetton’s ad was original (43%), which does not carry any negative connotation, but the following two adjectives selected are rather extreme and negative: disgusting (28%) and shocking (27%). Gap’s more traditional ad resulted in near unanimity around three positive adjectives: young (57%), peaceful (48%) and merry (47%). Standing in between, the Mexx ad also raised some controversy, but at a seemingly lower level than Benetton’s: tender (47%) and sweet (43%) were the first to adjectives mentioned, but were followed by the more negative adjective, indecent (26%). Therefore, aside from the specific adjectives selected, the valence of the adjectives should be considered, as well as the level of unanimity of selection. It is important to add that a more thorough analysis of the responses obtained from the adjective checklist indicates that provocative appeals attract a wider range of adjectives than non–provocative ones. For instance, seven different adjectives were needed to reach the median amount of mentions for the Benetton ad, while only three adjectives were necessary for the Gap ad, and four for the Mexx ad. This factor can be interpreted in keeping with the previous discussion about the high degree of ambiguity in provocative ads, since more adjectives may indicate a wider range of interpretations. In addition, 17% of the respondents spontaneously added another evaluative judgement for the Benetton ad: "[The ad] has nothing to do with the product." This judgement certainly seems to indicate that the level of ambiguity is a relevant factor in the evaluation of advertisements.

It should also be noted that there is no significant relationship between the opinions expressed towards controversial advertising in general and the reactions expressed towards the ads (either in terms of overall affinity or in terms of the adjectives selected to qualify the ads).

5.3. Conative Variables

The sixth research question was concerned with determining the behavioral consequences of provocative appeals in advertising: "Do provocative ads have an effect on consumer purchase intentions?" Table 3 shows that the highest level of absence of reaction is for Benetton, which indicates that provocative appeals have no effect on consumer purchase intentions. Looking further to the type of behavior that respondents
would be likely to display, behavior patterns are slightly more negative for Benetton (avoid this brand, initiate negative word–of–mouth discouragement), and slightly more positive for the brand employing the most conventional ad (Gap) than for the brand with the mildly provocative ad (Mexx). Such a result is consistent with Pollay and Lysonski’s (1993) conclusions from their study on sexism in advertising and with several other similar studies: critical consumer attitudes towards a brand’s advertising strategy translates into a minimal reduction in purchase intention.

An additional analysis with respect to purchasing behavior indicates that for all brands there appears to be a significant correlation between Aad and the frequency of purchase of the brand advertised (Benetton: \( r = 0.20; p < 0.003 \); Mexx: \( r = 0.18; p < 0.004 \); and the two other provocative ads – Moschino and Diesel – used in the study), except for the more traditional ad (Gap) for which there is no significant correlation.

5.4. Product Involvement

Given that a review of relevant literature showed that the level of involvement with the product by consumers often determines the differences in consumer responses to advertisements (Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann, 1983), the seventh research question was: "Does the level of product involvement affect consumer reaction to provocative ads?"

In light of this potentially moderating variable, it should be first said that in general, and as expected, the respondents showed a high degree of involvement in their clothing purchases: 66% of the respondents claimed to buy their own clothes, and another 31% reported that their wardrobe consisted of both gifts and personal purchases. The five–point scales revealed that respondents value the clothes they wear (3.66 / 5), and that clothes do represent a way to express their self–image and values (3.89 / 5), while fewer felt clothes serve solely a utilitarian function (3.65 / 5). Finally, they reported achieving a good deal of pleasure when buying clothes (4.13 / 5).

Bivariate analyses with the involvement variable show, first, that there are significant correlations between this construct and the awareness variables: those who have seen and/or heard about an ad from Benetton, Gap and Mexx are significantly more involved in their clothing purchases than those who have not. Similarly, there are significant ( \( p = 0.001 \)) positive correlations between the level of involvement and the knowledge of the three brands under investigation. There is no significant effect between the level of involvement and the degree of liking of the ads showed to the respondents. Finally, looking at the conative variables, those who assert that the Benetton ad would lead them to avoid this brand are slightly less involved in their clothing purchases than those who do not select behavioral choice (\( t = -1.86, df = 198, 2\)-tail sig. = 0.065). The same effect can also be observed for Mexx, the moderately provocative ad (\( t = -2.96, df = 198, 2\)-tail sig. = 0.003). For this same ad, people who would tend to buy Mexx and to initiate positive word-of-mouth for this brand are also significantly more involved. Finally, people who would seek more information about the Gap brand following exposure to their ad are also significantly more involved than those who would not seek such information (\( t = 3.01, df = 198, 2\)-tail sig. = 0.003).
In summary, involvement appears to play a partial role in the evaluation of all three types of ads, although the nature of this impact is not unequivocal: traditional advertising may achieve better results in terms of triggering the curiosity of involved consumers but, at the same time, these same consumers will react less negatively or dramatically to provocative ads.

5.5. Socio–Demographic Variables

The last research question referred to differences in reaction to provocative ads because of socio–demographic variables: "Are there socio–demographic variables which account for differences in the reactions to provocative ads?" Two such variables appear to play a significant role in explaining different reactions to provocative appeals in advertising: age and gender.

Age does make a difference in the evaluation of the different ads: correlations between Aad and age are all in the anticipated direction, i.e. negative except for the conventional ad (Gap), although it should be pointed out that the levels of statistical significance of these relationships stand between $p = 0.09$ and $p = 0.15$.

With respect to the terms used to react to these ads, those who find the Benetton ad "violent" and "sad" are significantly older than those who do not, while those who find the same ad "original" are significantly younger (all significant at the 0.05 level or better). Inversely, people who find the Gap ad "original" are significantly older, while younger people find it "too classic" (again, these results are statistically significant at the 0.05 level). Finally, the six respondents who label the Mexx ad as "disgusting" are significantly older than those who do not use this term (significant at the 0.025 level). Moreover, a higher proportion of older respondents stated that the Benetton ad has "nothing to do with the product sold." Therefore, these first exploratory analyses of the data lead to the supposition that there is a segmentation issue that deserves to be further investigated with respect to the reactions to provocative appeals in advertising. Incidentally, this result contradicts Aaker and Bruzzone's (1985) results on irritating ads, in which the younger respondents were generally more irritated by advertisements; thus suggesting that provocation in advertising is different from irritation in terms of both content and effect.

At the same time, there also appears to be significant differences in terms of gender, with women reacting more favorably to the ad featuring a picture of a newborn baby, for instance: 22% of them chose the adjective "tender" (versus 3% of the men; Chi–square = 18.16, $p = 0.000$), and 19% of them chose the adjective "sweet" (versus 7% of the men; Chi–square = 7.3, $p = 0.007$) in their evaluative judgement. In general, women liked the traditional (Gap) ad more than men (t-value = -2.64, $p = 0.009$), with significantly more women qualifying it of "young" and "cheerful". On the other side, more men reacted favorably to the Mexx ad, in accordance with results found in previously documented effects of female nudity in print ads (LaTour et al., 1990). In fact, a significantly higher proportion of women (35% versus only 16% of the men) evaluated this ad as "indecent" (Chi-square = 9.89, $p = 0.002$). It should be added that the two other "provocative" - although ambiguous - ads (Diesel and Moschino) were less favorably evaluated by women than by men, in concordance with the results for the Benetton ad for which more men than women would initiate favorable word-of-mouth following exposure to this ad (Chi-square = 6.43, $p = 0.01$). Women, on their side, would tend more than men to visit a
6. Discussion

In summary, these preliminary results suggest the positive effect of provocation in advertising on the levels of brand awareness and knowledge, as well as on the level of knowledge of the advertisement's content. However, the amount of non-commercial publicity generated by provocative advertising strategies probably plays a determinant role in that phenomenon since the two other provocative messages (Diesel and Moschino) did not enjoy such effect. This topic should thus be investigated further, as advocated by Lord and Putrevu (1993), in order to improve the joint management of advertising and publicity strategies.

In other respects, the negative aspects of provocation seem to transfer and affect consumer attitudes towards brands employing provocative execution strategies. The amplitude of this affect remains to be investigated. In addition, exposure to extremely provocative appeals seems to lead to negative reactions, while a moderate level of provocation appears to have an equal or slightly superior effect than a conventional creative strategy. But it should also be noted that these results are based on short-term reactions registered immediately following exposure to the ads. It could be hypothesized that once this short-term effect blurs, the relative openness expressed by consumers toward controversial advertising in general, along with the strong cognitive effect of this type of creative strategy (mostly in terms of memorization), may turn out to have positive effects. In terms of the results of the selection of qualifying adjectives, it appears the "original" element may eventually outshine the "shocking" effect. Another interesting conclusion is that consumers tend to hold positive attitudes toward provocation in advertising in general, but react negatively when facing an example such of an advertisement. This phenomenon could point to a "distanciated tolerance" toward provocative appeals in advertising.

The results also indicated that provocation in advertising may ultimately translate into a valuable segmentation strategy since younger people, among others, show more positive reaction towards both the provocative strategy and the provocative appeal itself. But, in the absence of more data obtained from better-controlled experiments which would allow a better assessment of internal processes such as information processing, any guideline concerning such a creative strategy should take into account the risks inherent to the utilization of provocation in advertising. This fact raises the issue of the several limitations that presently apply to this research endeavor.

6.1. Limitations

Controlling for intervening variables is the most problematic factor in conducting research of this kind. An ideal methodology would probably result in an experiment in which the cognitive, affective and conative states of consumers who have never been exposed to provocative advertising (the control group), could be compared with consumers who have seen a given provocative ad, and with consumers who have yet to, but who would be exposed for the first time—this last group would allow assessment of at least the short-term effects of the provocative appeal. Unfortunately, time and financial constraints intervened; hence, the present survey can only provide descriptive results with many limitations. But as mentioned earlier, these are limitations inherent to any
field research which uses "genuine", existing material in order to maximize external validity. As suggested by Lord and Putrevu (1993, p. 77), such an approach is appropriate to highlight the differences in advertising strategies and, thus, to provide managers with an overall sense of the relative effectiveness of these strategies, which was an objective of this research.

Another limitation comes from using a convenience sample, which introduces bias with respect to age and income, among other variables. Theoretically, however, provocation could very well be a more efficient strategy for attracting young consumers, since it is when we are young that confrontation and questioning play critical roles in the development of personal identity. Older consumers, who have already been through this stage, may now seek to avoid such confrontation and react more negatively when confronted. But the relative uniformity of age within the consumer group tested forbids any authoritative conclusions on this matter.

Still a further limitation is the absence of a measurement of post–exposure attitude towards the given brands. Such a measurement was deleted from the actual research design to avoid contamination from the pre–exposure measure since little time elapsed between the two measures. A replication of this research could, however, improve the research design so that valid and reliable pre– and post–exposure measures could be compared in order to assess if, and to what extent, the negative Aad does affect attitudes toward brands. The post-exposure measures could even take place several days after the experiment in order to test for the vividness effect that a provocative appeal can trigger.

6.2. Future research

Aside from replications of this particular research model and the need for a more complete and systematic research program aimed at assessing the impact of various levels of provocation across a variety of product categories and markets, provocation as an execution strategy in advertising is an issue requiring still other research endeavors. For instance, other variables such as consumer dogmatism and need for cognition, or levels of fantasy / imagination, appear to be relevant factors for further analysis of consumer responses to such an execution strategy in advertising.

It may also be possible that the success or effectiveness of a creative strategy relying on provocation may depend on the nature of the product or service advertised, as well as on the market segment targeted. This particular research is focused on a category of products that is usually closely related to consumer self–identity. Buying and wearing clothes are activities often viewed as means to define a social role, or to express key personality traits and values. But it remains to be seen if provocation could also be used with some positive results for advertising other products and services.

The provocation under study here is associated with the advertising execution and not with the product advertised. Advertisements for firearms or for certain contraceptive methods, for instance, could be perceived, in many countries, as highly provocative even if the copy were presented in a traditional format using well–known appeals such as fear or information.

One of the most striking characteristics of the provocative ads in this study is their remote connection with the products advertised; in many cases, it is impossible to infer from the content of the ad what product is actually being promoted. Borrowing from a
recent distinction made regarding advertising strategies, it can be said that provocative appeals usually exhibit an extremely low level of focal integration, to the extent that the product is usually not a central element in the ad (MacInnis and Stayman, 1993). In addition, when these provocative appeals project a political or social point of view, they do so in areas that are not related to their business interests, which differentiates these ads from the realm of "advocacy advertising" in which corporations express their viewpoints on a variety of controversial issues, most often related to the corporation's own business or industry, and in keeping with the firm's interests (Cutler and Muehling, 1989). The notions of focal and emotional integration could be useful elements to investigate to better understand the effect of ambiguous provocative strategies in advertising.

Another stream of research which appears especially promising is into the various interpretations triggered by provocative ads such as Benetton's. The larger variance in the adjectives used to assess consumer reaction to provocative ads is certainly one of the most important results of this research, and supports the hypothesis of a higher level of complexity or ambiguity at play in provocative advertising (Zakia 1986). This issue could be tackled using other, more appropriate, methodologies drawn from the numerous interpretive approaches that are now emerging within consumer–behavior research. These approaches are focused on semiotics (McQuarrie and Mick, 1992; Mick, 1986), reader–response theory and advertising literacy (Scott, 1994; Ritson and Elliott, 1995), levels of subjective comprehension (Mick 1992), and /or, the persuasion–knowledge model developed recently by Friestad and Wright (1994). Clearly, when Benetton shows a picture of the clothes of a soldier killed in Bosnia, or the picture of a car bombed by terrorists with the sole mention of their slogan, they "strategically violate certain rules of the code, so as to activate overlapping and intertwining semantic chains that are normally not associated" (McQuarrie and Mick, 1992, p. 184, referring to Eco [1976]).

Finally, provocation is not a feature that an ad may possess, but is rather an intangible element measurable by degree. The results of this research tend to suggest that, as is the case for fear appeal in advertising, a moderate level of provocation appears to be slightly better than no provocation at all. Since, as mentioned earlier, the potential to shock is present within many advertisements, whether intentional or not, more research is necessary to better understand and eventually model the patterns of consumer response to provocation in advertising.

7. Conclusion

Theodore Levitt (1970) wrote that advertising was not solely a business tool, but also an artistic means of expression. Twenty-five years later, more and more firms are indeed using advertising as an object in itself, almost independently of the products and services offered to consumers. In doing so, advertising may enter the post-modern stage in which meanings are challenged or redefined, both from a strategic and from a content perspective. At the same time, the need remains for all firms to obtain tangible results in terms of sales and profits, and one could wonder how these innovative, more artistic approaches to advertising do translate in terms of consumers' responses.

This article represents an attempt at acknowledging such a strategy, in the specific context of provocative appeals, and, in addition, at assessing its effects on consumers. Because of the complexity of the phenomenon under study here, managerial recommendations regarding the adoption of a provocative creative strategy in
advertising should be made only with full awareness that more research is required to improve our understanding of the mechanisms underlying it. Although far from providing definitive results, this research will have reached its goal if it generates more complete and systematic consideration about the provocative dimension of advertising.
References


Heuzé, R. (1992), Pendant les provocations, les affaires continuent. La Tribune de l'Expansion, February 18, 8.


TABLE 1

Level of Awareness and Knowledge of the Brands
and of their Advertising Messages

A. Brand awareness and knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Spontaneous mention(^{b}) (% of respondents)</th>
<th>Aided recall (^{c}) (on a 1 to 5 scale)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Levi's</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>4.35 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph Lauren</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benetton</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>3.52 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esprit</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>3.54 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvin Klein</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexx</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>3.17 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...............</td>
<td>........</td>
<td>........</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>2.27 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moschino</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>1.18 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diesel</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>1.34 / 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. Advertising awareness and knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Levi's</th>
<th>Benetton</th>
<th>Mexx</th>
<th>Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never seen or heard about</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>64.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have heard about</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have seen</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have seen and heard about</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{a}\) Italics in Table 1 are for brands not included in the set of 5 advertising messages used in the survey.

\(^{b}\) The "spontaneous mention" was obtained through the first question of the questionnaire: "Name all the brands of clothing that you know and that come to your mind."

\(^{c}\) The "aided recall" was obtained through a closed-format question in which respondents were given a list of nine clothing brands and were asked to rate on a 5 points scale to what extent they didn't know that brand (1) or, at the other end, knew it very well (5).
### TABLE 2

**Attitudinal Dimensions of the Advertising Effectiveness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge of the brand (Mean on a 1 to 5 scale)</th>
<th>Liking of the brand (Mean on a 1 to 5 scale)</th>
<th>Attitude toward the ad (Mean on a 1 to 6 scale)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>See Table 1-A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benetton</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexx</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>4.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>3.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levi's</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE 3

**Behavioral Intentions Following Exposure to the Ads**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Benetton</th>
<th>Mexx</th>
<th>Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No effect</td>
<td>57.7 %</td>
<td>48.3 %</td>
<td>54.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid that brand</td>
<td>12.4 %</td>
<td>5.0 %</td>
<td>1.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiate negative word-of-mouth</td>
<td>11.4 %</td>
<td>4.5 %</td>
<td>1.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look for information</td>
<td>7.0 %</td>
<td>13.9 %</td>
<td>13.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit a store</td>
<td>10.4 %</td>
<td>22.9 %</td>
<td>28.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase that brand</td>
<td>1.5 %</td>
<td>7.5 %</td>
<td>9.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiate positive word-of-mouth</td>
<td>3.5 %</td>
<td>9.0 %</td>
<td>10.0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The respondents could select more than one course of action, which accounts for the fact that the total of the percentages per brand exceed 100.*