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# When New Commercials Do Not Meet Expectations

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**The present research investigates whether a brand's prior commercials create expectations against which consumers compare its new commercials. Extending the expectation–disconfirmation paradigm, this article proposes that the degree to which consumers' expectations are disconfirmed affects their attitudes toward a new commercial, which then influence their brand attitudes. Studies 1, 2, and 3 tested these predictions by exploring consumers' expectations with regard to creativity, humor, and specific ad features (e.g., spokescharacters) in new commercials. The findings support the predictions; both value-laden and value-neutral expectations exert the proposed influences.**

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From their prior experiences, people develop expectations about products, services, or even promotion campaigns. For example, consumers expect a Sony TV to be reliable and Starbucks personnel to be friendly; they also may expect an ad campaign for AXE body products to be creative and risqué. Prior consumer research has explored how advertising shapes product expectations and thus helps determine satisfaction with a product or a service, but not how prior advertising shapes consumers' expectations about new advertisements, which might influence how much people like a new ad and the advertised product.

Take Super Bowl commercials as prominent examples. For years, when watching the broadcast, people have also enjoyed watching the commercials at the breaks, which also attract media attention (Elliott 2012). If people have watched the game every year, they likely expect to see creative Doritos commercials, because in their prior experience Doritos offers creative Super Bowl commercials (ADBOWL, 2012). If a new commercial for Doritos is less creative than expected, consumers may feel disappointed. Similar phenomena may describe people's responses to new ad campaigns in general. They may

expect a new ad campaign for AXE or IKEA to be creative and entertaining, because these brands have been known for delivering creative and interesting ad campaigns. These observations suggest that the important factor is not simply whether an ad is creative but also whether it is as creative as or more creative than consumers expect.

Expectancy–disconfirmation (ED) theory suggests that product evaluations depend on people's expectations (Churchill and Surprenant 1982); this theory also applies to explain the influence of advertising on brand evaluations. In one salient research stream, prior literature has focused on advertising as a source of the formation of product expectations, which indirectly affect brand evaluations (Kamins, Assael, and Graham 1990). A second relevant stream covers ad expectations, noting that expectations of content and persuasive tactics in advertising can determine consumers' evaluations of the ads and the advertised products (Hunt and Kernan 1984; Lee 2000). Despite its notable contributions, this stream ignores the important consideration of how the performance of a brand's prior advertising affects consumers' expectations of a new ad. Therefore, this article offers an initial prediction that prior advertising shapes these expectations: A discrepancy between expectations and performance should determine people's attitudes toward a new commercial, with negative disconfirmation generating less favorable attitudes than positive disconfirmation, which in turn should affect attitudes toward the advertised brand.

To extend expectation–disconfirmation theory, this study also distinguishes desirability from expectations. In an advertising context, expectations of how a new commercial should perform (e.g., be creative and humorous) are usually value laden, and more of these characteristics prompt favorable evaluations. However, not all expectations are associated with such values. For example, the audience may expect to find certain elements in a new commercial because the advertised brand has always featured such elements, such as spokescharacters (e.g., Green Giant, Energizer bunny), visual images, or background music. If expectations determine ad evaluations, the failure to meet those expectations may result in deteriorated attitudes toward the new commercial and the brand attitudes, whether those expectations are based on value-laden

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characteristics or features that are not associated with strictly positive or negative values. Three studies test these predictions. Studies 1 and 2 explore the proposed expectancy–disconfirmation effects with regard to two value-laden characteristics: ad creativity and humor. Study 3 tests the proposed effects by exploring the presence or absence of a common, largely value-neutral ad feature (spokescharacters).

The findings offer several key contributions to advertising literature. First, in filling a persistent research gap, they show that the extent to which people like a new commercial depends on the audience's expectations, which are based on prior advertising performance. Second, the degree of expectation disconfirmation affects brand attitudes, through its influence on attitudes toward the new ad. Third, both types of expectations (value laden or value neutral) exert the proposed influences. The findings have important implications for practitioners as well.

### EXPECTANCY DISCONFIRMATION AND ADVERTISING

Expectancy–disconfirmation theory occupies a central position in the satisfaction literature; it suggests that consumer dissatisfaction reflects the degree of discrepancy between prepurchase expectations and actual product performance (Anderson 1973; Bearden and Teel 1983; Kopalle and Lehmann 1995, 2001; Oliver 1980). As Churchill and Surprenant (1982) note, the satisfaction formation process involves multiple steps: People form expectations, and then when they experience the product or service they form perceptions about its performance. Next, they compare their perceptions of the performance with their expectations, determine the degree of disconfirmation, and experience some level of satisfaction, according to the degree of disconfirmation. A meta-analysis confirms the significant influences of disconfirmation on satisfaction (Szymanski and Henard 2001).

Expectations are central to this process, because they provide a frame of reference for comparative judgments. Oliver (1980) draws on adaptation theory to explain this mechanism: People perceive stimuli in relation to a prevailing norm or adaptation level, so a small object can be perceived as large when a smaller, versus larger, anchor is imposed (Helson 1958). Whether a product appears good or bad thus depends on its comparison standard. If performance fails or exceeds expectations, it disconfirms expectations, negatively or positively. Assuming product performance is fixed, higher expectations should lead to lower perceived satisfaction.

In an advertising context, expectancy–disconfirmation may be more complicated, pertaining to expectations about products or advertisements. The first research stream focused on product expectations, where authors argue that advertising can shape expectations of product performance, which then determine consumers' evaluations of the advertised products. For example, Kamins, Assael, and Graham (1990) show that

pretrial ad exposures affect people's expectations of product performance; the discrepancy between ad-based expectations and trial experiences determines product evaluations. Anderson (1973) demonstrates that a large gap between advertising claims and actual product performance lowers ratings of the advertised products. According to Kopalle and Lehmann (2006), advertised quality affects expectations, and the discrepancy between expectations and performance determines satisfaction.

Another research stream refers to ad expectations, with the prediction that people develop different expectations about advertising performance that affect their evaluations of the ad and the advertised brand. Two paradigms dominate. First, people might have expectations of "typical" ads, so advertising with unexpected content or features generates more favorable evaluations (e.g., Lee 2000; Lee and Mason 1999). Second, consumers might establish expectations of the ways persuasive tactics usually are employed in advertising, in which case negative violations of the expectations likely enhance product evaluations (Hunt and Kernan 1984). These paradigms pertain to general expectations of persuasiveness, though; they are not under the direct control of advertisers.

This article proposes a third potential paradigm: People infer how well a new campaign should perform, according to prior campaigns by the same brand. Specifically, the performance of prior advertising campaigns (over which marketers have direct control) determines people's expectations about the performance of a new advertisement; the discrepancy between these expectations and perceived performance then influences evaluations of the new ad and its advertised brand.

In consumer literature, people's experiences with a product have been shown to serve as important inputs when they formulate expectations of how that product should perform (Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins 1983). Such experience-based expectations, or norms, reflect the performance distribution of the brand over time (Oliver and Winer 1987). When applied in an advertising context, this evidence suggests that consumers' prior exposures to a brand's advertising campaigns serve as inputs when they develop expectations about how a new ad should perform. In other words, just as consumers form expectations toward a product on the basis of their prior experiences with it, they also may develop expectations about a brand's new commercial on the basis of their prior experiences with watching the brand's ads. To the degree a new commercial disconfirms those expectations, consumers rate the ad and brand less favorably.

### IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS IN AD CAMPAIGNS: CREATIVITY

In consumer research, product expectations pertain to beliefs that a product should feature certain positive attributes (Swan and Trawick 1981). Similarly, ad expectations refer to

beliefs that an ad should feature certain positive characteristics. Creativity is one such important element (Till and Baack 2005) that is also value laden, in that people often like creative commercials more (Stone, Besser, and Lewis 2000). Study 1 thus examines expectations and performance in relation to an ad's creativity, an important, value-laden evaluation attribute, with the following prediction that reflects ED theory (see Figure 1):

**H1a:** The perceived creativity of a brand's prior advertisements increases expectations of creativity in its new ad.

**H1b:** The discrepancy between expectations and performance with regard to the perceived creativity of the ad significantly affects ad attitudes, such that positive disconfirmation generates more favorable ad attitudes than negative disconfirmation.

Ad attitudes influence brand attitudes (see Brown and Stayman 1992). If a discrepancy between expectations and performance affects ad attitudes, it likely also influences brand attitudes indirectly, through its influence on ad attitudes. Moreover, people may make inferences about advertised brands on the basis of ad performance. For example, prior research shows that when a brand's advertising expenditures are high, consumers infer that it is of high quality (Kirmani and Rao 2000) or is more popular (Chaudhuri 2002). Following a similar logic, if a new ad exceeds prior performance in terms of creativity, people may make positive inferences about the brand (e.g., "It is improving" or "It is striving to be the best"). Brand attitudes are important predictors of purchase intentions (Brown and Stayman 1992), so the influences of any discrepancies on brand attitudes are of great concern to advertisers.

**H1c:** Ad attitudes mediate the effects of a discrepancy between creativity expectations and perceived performance on brand attitudes.

As noted previously, disconfirmations can be positive or negative, though their functions are asymmetric. For example, satisfaction is significantly more sensitive to negative disconfirmation than to positive disconfirmation (Anderson and Sullivan 1993). Prior research into product quality perceptions also shows that advertising claims that suffer negative

disconfirmation exert more impact than a claim with an equal degree of positive disconfirmation (Kopalle and Lehmann 1995). Patrick, MacInnis, and Park (2007) suggest that consumers expect to experience certain emotions when using a product and compare their actual experience with the forecasted version. Their findings also indicate that negative disconfirmation exerts greater influences on product evaluations than does positive disconfirmation. These findings suggest that consumers punish a brand more for negative disconfirmation than they reward it for positive disconfirmation. Similar trends should emerge when people evaluate a new commercial.

**H1d:** Negative disconfirmation of creativity predictions exerts greater influences on ad attitudes than does positive disconfirmation.

## STUDY 1

### Design and Procedures

A university sent a recruitment ad in an e-newsletter to all registered undergraduate students; the first 80 students (average age = 21.01 years, SD = 2.06, representing 27 departments) who responded became the participants and received payment for their participation. To reduce the confounding influence of gender across the different conditions, equal numbers of male and female participants were recruited and randomly assigned to the manipulated conditions. This randomized block design thus used gender as a blocking variable (Keppel 1991). All participants were informed that they would watch five commercials for Audi, each one corresponding to a year from 2007 to 2010, and one new ad for 2011, which was scheduled to be aired near the end of the year. Participants then were randomly assigned to one of two ad performance conditions: In the best condition, the target ad (or new ad for 2011) attained the best creativity ratings among the five ads, whereas in the worst condition, the target ad suffered from the lowest creativity ratings (refer to Table 1). This between-subjects factor thereby altered the variations in the disparity between the performance of prior commercials and the new target commercial.

Because this study addresses an issue that established brands face, to increase ecological validity it tested real brands. Audi served as the target brand for two main reasons.

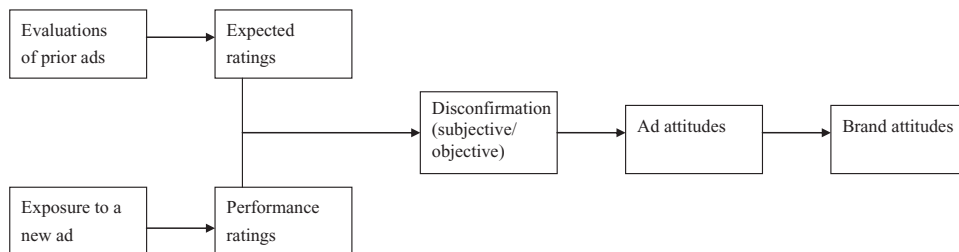


FIG. 1. Disconfirmation of expectations on ad and brand attitudes for Study 1 and Study 2.

TABLE 1  
Design of the Three Studies

Participants' view	First four ads	Last ad
Study 1		
Condition 1: Most creative	Ad 2, Ad 3, Ad4, Ad5 (random order)	Ad 6
Condition 2: Least creative	Ad 2, Ad 3, Ad4, Ad5 (random order)	Ad 1
Study 2		
Condition 1: Getting better trend, last = most humorous ad	Ad 2, Ad 3, Ad4, Ad5 (in this order)	Ad 6
Condition 2: Getting better trend, last = least humorous ad	Ad 2, Ad 3, Ad4, Ad5 (in this order)	Ad 1
Condition 3: Getting worse trend, last = most humorous ad	Ad 5, Ad 4, Ad3, Ad2 (in this order)	Ad 6
Condition 4: Getting worse trend, last = least humorous ad	Ad 5, Ad 4, Ad3, Ad2 (in this order)	Ad 1
Study 3		
Condition 1: Bunny present	Ad 2, Ad 3, Ad4, Ad5 (random order)	Ad 1
Condition 2: Bunny absent	Ad 2, Ad 3, Ad4, Ad5 (random order)	Ad 6

Note. Refer to Table 2 for links to each ad.

First, international brands such as Audi often create many commercials, and not all of them air in any specific market. Therefore, it was possible to find a commercial not aired in the market in which this study took place and introduce it as a new commercial for 2011 without arousing suspicion. Second, Audi is known for its advertising campaign creativity and has won many Clio awards.

Participants sat in front of a computer and put on ear-phones. They were told to follow the instructions on the screen. They first viewed one ad that was introduced as having aired in 2007. Next, they rated the degree to which they found the ad creative (0 = *Not at all creative*; 100 = *Extremely creative*). They repeated this process for the ads that reportedly aired in 2008, 2009, and 2010. Next, the instructions suggested that Audi would run a new campaign near the end of the year (2011) and asked the respondents to rate how creative they expected the ad to be. After they watched the target ad, they rated its creativity, using the same 0 to 100 scores. In addition, they indicated their brand attitudes, ad attitudes, and subjective expectation versus performance disconfirmation. Finally, they noted what they thought the purpose of the study was.

### Stimuli

Two research assistants identified brands that had won multiple Clio awards, including Audi. Because Audi won Clio awards for visual effects and digital techniques, which should be well appreciated by most audiences, it was selected as the target brand. Ten graduate students helped select 13 Audi ads available on YouTube that they rated as creative. Another pretest ( $N = 24$ ) helped determine, among these commercials, which was the most creative and which was the least. Participants in this pretest reviewed each of the 13 ads, presented in random order. After they watched each commercial, they rated how creative it was using the 0 to 100 scores. Creativity scores for all ads were significantly greater than 50, the midpoint of the scale (all  $t_s > 8.05$ , all  $p_s < .01$ ). The pretest indicated one ad with the highest score to represent the most creative ( $M = 86.21$ ,  $SD = 9.00$ ) and one ad with the lowest score to represent the least creative ( $M = 73.67$ ,  $SD = 12.82$ ; refer to Table 2) version. Finally, four ads were randomly selected from the remaining pool to represent the ads for 2007 to 2010 in the experiment.

In the main study, the 2011 ad in the most creative condition ( $M = 90.93$ ,  $SD = 7.37$ ) generated significantly higher

TABLE 2  
Means in Pretests for All Ads

Ad	Audi	Creativity Ratings	IKEA	Humor Ratings	Duracell	Liking Ratings
1	Imagination ad	73.67 (12.819)	Lamp ad	62.08 (28.450)	Racing ad	76.42 (10.17)
2	Gymnastics ad	76.33 (16.018)	Twin ad	66.83 (20.470)	Rock climbing ad	77.00 (11.31)
3	Skiing ad	78.92 (11.159)	Peeking ad	75.12 (17.218)	Street ad	77.67 (10.91)
4	Robot ad	81.21 (12.269)	Teenager ad	77.08 (12.531)	Gym ad	76.50 (11.48)
5	Box ad	83.75 (7.356)	Glass ad	80.37 (11.348)	Soccer ad	77.29 (12.62)
6	Green ad	86.21 (8.954)	Nanny ad	83.87 (10.948)	Postman ad	75.88 (10.05)

scores than the ad in the least creative condition ( $M = 81.63$ ,  $SD = 12.10$ ;  $F(1, 79) = 17.22$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This finding confirmed the creativity manipulations.

## Measures

**Creativity performance.** Adopting Baack, Wilson, and Till's (2008; see also Dahlén, Rosengren, and Törn 2008; Smith et al. 2007) approach, participants rated the overall creativity of each commercial they saw, using a scale from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating greater creativity. Participants' ratings of the four ads (2007–2010) prior to their exposure to the 2011 target ad were averaged to represent their perception of the creativity of prior advertisements.

To reduce the fatigue that would arise from asking participants to rate multiple items repeatedly, participants rated all the ads using one item (i.e., how creative the ad is) to tap the overall perceived creativity of each ad. However, participants rated the 2011 ad first, using the one-item overall creativity scale, then applied a multi-item creativity scale that reflected the three subdimensions identified by Ang, Lee, and Leong (2007): novelty ("The ad is original" and "The ad is out of the ordinary"), meaningful ("The ad helps convey the product benefits" and "The ad relates to the main message"), and connected ("The ad connects with my past experiences" and "The ad identified with me"). Therefore, it was possible to test whether the one-item scale significantly correlated with subdimensions of creativity. In the main study, the rating of the overall creativity of the 2011 ad correlated significantly with items pertaining to novelty (Pearson's  $r = .62$ ,  $p < .01$ ), meaningfulness (Pearson's  $r = .51$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and connectedness (Pearson's  $r = .62$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Therefore, using the one-item overall creativity scale did not appear to exclude any important subdimensions of creativity.

**Creativity expectations.** As described previously, participants rated how creative they expected the new 2011 commercial for Audi to be, using 0 to 100 scores.

**Disconfirmation.** Two types of disconfirmation appear in prior literature: subjective (e.g., Churchill and Surprenant 1982) and objective (e.g., Patterson 1993). This study tested both. To calculate objective disconfirmation, the expected ratings were deducted from the performance ratings; positive scores indicated the ad performed better than expected, whereas negative scores indicated the opposite. The subjective disconfirmation measure used two items: "The ad was better than I expected" and "The ad was worse than I expected" (R), adapted from Oliver's (1980) commonly used, single-item scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ). Positive scores indicated that the ad was better than expected. As expected, the correlation between the two responses was significant, with Pearson's  $r$  equal to .66 ( $p < .01$ ).

**Ad and brand attitudes.** Participants rated how much they liked the ad using Holbrook and Batra's (1987) scale, with four items: "I like the ad"; "I react favorably to the ad"; "the

ad is good"; and "I feel positive toward the ad" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .95$ ). For their attitudes toward the brand, participants used Chang's (2005) scale: "I like the brand"; "I feel good about the brand"; "I feel positive toward the brand"; "It is a pleasant brand"; and "It is a brand of high quality" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ).

## Results

As expected, the creativity performance of prior commercials significantly predicted the expected ratings of creativity in the new commercial ( $\beta = .80$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .64$ ), in support of hypothesis 1a. The calculated discrepancy between expectations and performance with regard to creativity (objective disconfirmation) significantly predicted ad attitudes ( $\beta = .68$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .47$ ). The results remained the same when subjective disconfirmation served as a predictor ( $\beta = .86$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .74$ ). Thus, the objective and subjective disconfirmation findings both supported hypothesis 1b.

The test of the simple mediation of the indirect effects of the disconfirmation on brand attitudes through changes in the mediator (ad attitudes), as proposed in hypothesis 1c, used Preacher and Hayes's (2004) bootstrapping methodology, with 5,000 bootstrap resamples, to describe the confidence intervals (CIs) of the indirect effects. The bootstrap results confirmed the mediation model; the 95% CI surrounding the indirect effect did not contain zero (.02, .05) when using objective disconfirmation as the input, and the indirect effect did not contain zero (.04, .45) when using subjective disconfirmation as the input, in support of hypothesis 1c.

To test hypothesis 1d, objective disconfirmation was regressed on ad attitudes among those generating positive disconfirmation (objective disconfirmation  $> 0$ ,  $N = 37$ ) and those generating negative disconfirmation (objective disconfirmation  $< 0$ ,  $N = 38$ ). The impact of objective disconfirmation was not significant in the former group ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p = .29$ ,  $R^2 = .03$ ) but was in the latter group ( $\beta = .42$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .18$ ). Fisher's  $Z$  test did not indicate that objective disconfirmation explained significantly more variance in ad attitudes among those who experienced negative rather than positive disconfirmation ( $Z = 1.12$ ,  $p > .05$ , one-tailed).

When subjective disconfirmation was regressed on ad attitudes among the respondents generating positive disconfirmation (subjective disconfirmation  $> 4$ , or midpoint of the scale,  $N = 52$ ) and those generating negative disconfirmation (subjective disconfirmation  $< 4$ ,  $N = 18$ ), both impacts were significant (positive  $\beta = .60$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .36$ ; negative  $\beta = .72$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .51$ ). That is, both positive and negative subjective disconfirmation affected ad attitudes, and even though disconfirmation explained relatively more variance in ad attitudes among those generating negative disconfirmation rather than positive disconfirmation, the difference was not significant ( $Z = .71$ ,  $p > .05$ , one-tailed). Although the patterns were as

expected, there was no significant difference, so hypothesis 1d was not supported.

## Discussion

The average performance of previous commercials, in terms of creativity, exerts a significant impact on expectations for a new commercial. The influences of disconfirmation on ad attitudes are significant, regardless of whether the disconfirmation is objective or subjective. However, the latter form explains more variance than the former. To the degree that the ad performs worse than expectations, people like the ad less, leading to less favorable brand attitudes. Even though objective and subjective disconfirmation explain relatively more variance in ad attitudes among people with negative disconfirmation than those with positive disconfirmation, Fisher's  $Z$  tests indicate that these differences are not significant.

## IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS IN AD CAMPAIGNS: HUMOR

In addition to creativity, people expect to find other value-laden characteristics in a good commercial, such as humor, which is frequently featured in television commercials. Toncar (2001) shows that 28% of U.S. television commercials and 33% of U.K. commercials use humor. People also enjoy commercials with humor to a greater degree than ads without humor, according to robust findings (e.g., Cline, Altsech, and Kellaris 2003; Zhang and Zinkhan 2006). Therefore, Study 2 tests the expectation–disconfirmation hypotheses with regard to humor in ads as a specific value-laden characteristic. The predictions are similar to those in Study 1, but in this case the disconfirmation effects pertain to ad humor (see Figure 1):

**H2a:** The perceived humor of a brand's prior advertisements increases expectations of humor in its new ad.

**H2b:** The discrepancy between expectations and performance with regard to the perceived humor of the ad significantly affects ad attitudes, such that positive disconfirmation generates more favorable ad attitudes than negative disconfirmation.

**H2c:** Ad attitudes mediate the effects of the discrepancy between humor expectations and perceived performance on brand attitudes.

**H2d:** Negative disconfirmation of humor expectations exerts greater influences on ad attitudes than does positive disconfirmation.

## STUDY 2

### Design and Procedures

The method from Study 1 again applied to recruit volunteers for Study 2 ( $N = 80$ ; 50% male; average age = 21.05 years,

$SD = 1.64$ ; representing 30 departments), which took place in a lab. The procedures were similar to those adopted in Study 1. However, Study 2 featured two between-subject factors: performance trends (getting better versus getting worse over time) and performance of the new ad (best versus worst). Including the performance trend reveals whether trends or average performance exert more influence on expectations.

### Stimuli

This study used IKEA as the focal brand because (1) it was the 2011 recipient of the prestigious Advertiser of the Year Award, presented to innovative advertisers (Campaign Brief 2011); (2) this international brand produces many commercials worldwide, so it was possible to find a commercial not aired in the market in which this study was conducted and thereby reduce possible suspicion when an ad was introduced as a new commercial for 2011; and (3) approximately 36.7% of consumers aged 20 to 24 years visited IKEA in 2011 (E-ICP 2012).

Twelve graduate students first selected 13 IKEA ads from YouTube that they perceived as humorous. A lab pretest ( $N = 24$ ) helped determine the degree of humor that each IKEA ad triggered. Participants watched each of the 13 ads, presented in random order, and after watching each commercial, they rated the degree to which they found it humorous (0 = *Not at all humorous*; 100 = *Extremely humorous*). The results showed that all the ads were perceived as humorous (significantly greater than the midpoint, all  $t_s > 2.08$ , all  $p_s < .01$ ). The ad with the highest score represented the most humorous (i.e., nanny ad:  $M = 83.87$ ,  $SD = 10.95$ ), whereas the ad with the lowest score represented the least humorous (i.e., desk lamp ad:  $M = 62.08$ ,  $SD = 28.45$ ) version. The other four ads differed in their perceived humor: twin ad ( $M = 66.83$ ,  $SD = 20.74$ ), peeking ad ( $M = 75.12$ ,  $SD = 17.22$ ), teenager ad ( $M = 77.08$ ,  $SD = 12.53$ ), and glass ad ( $M = 80.37$ ,  $SD = 11.35$ ). A repeated measures analysis of variance showed that the linear contrast of the six ads was significant when moving from the ad with lowest humor score to that with the highest ( $F(1, 23) = 8.86$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .40$ ). In the "getting better" performance trend condition, the four ads appeared in the following order for 2007 through 2010: twin, peeking, teenager, and glass. In the "getting worse" performance trend condition, the four ads were in reverse order (refer to Tables 1 and 2 for the design and ads in each condition).

In the main study, the humor scores similarly increased in a linear pattern over time in the "getting better" performance trend condition ( $F(1, 39) = 26.21$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .40$ ), from the 2007 ad ( $M = 68.93$ ,  $SD = 15.51$ ) to the 2008 ad ( $M = 76.38$ ,  $SD = 14.69$ ) to the 2009 ad ( $M = 78.43$ ,  $SD = 15.53$ ) to the 2010 ad ( $M = 80.28$ ,  $SD = 10.10$ ). In contrast, the humor scores decreased significantly in a linear pattern over time in the "getting worse" performance trend condition ( $F(1, 39) = 26.56$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .41$ ; 2007  $M = 80.33$ ,

$SD = 10.40$ ; 2008  $M = 78.20$ ,  $SD = 12.61$ ; 2009  $M = 70.18$ ,  $SD = 19.34$ ; 2010  $M = 70.15$ ,  $SD = 13.71$ ). The manipulation checks were successful. Finally, the 2011 ad in the most humorous condition ( $M = 86.83$ ,  $SD = 8.12$ ) generated significantly higher scores than the 2011 ad in the least humorous condition ( $M = 53.48$ ,  $SD = 31.49$ ;  $F(1, 79) = 42.08$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This finding confirmed the manipulations of the performance of the last commercial.

## Measures

**Humor performance.** Following an approach similar to that in Study 1, participants rated how humorous each ad was, using a scale from 0 to 100. Participants' humor ratings of the four ads (2007 to 2010) prior to their exposure to the 2011 target ad were averaged to represent their perception of humor in prior advertisements. Similar to Study 1, they rated the 2011 ad using the 0 to 100 scores, as well as Lee and Lim's (2008) multiple-item scales for perceived humor on a seven-point Likert scale ("The ad is funny/playful to me/humorous," Cronbach's  $\alpha = .97$ ). The correlations of the responses to the one-item and the averaged responses to the multiple-item scales were high and significant (Pearson's  $r = .85$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Humor expectations.** Participants rated how humorous they expected the new 2011 commercial for IKEA to be using 0 to 100 scores.

**Disconfirmation.** Similar to Study 1, the objective disconfirmation calculation deducted the expected ratings from the averaged performance ratings, such that positive scores indicated that the ad performed better than expected and negative scores indicated that it performed worse than expected. The subjective disconfirmation measure contained the same items as in Study 1 (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$ ), with positive scores indicating that the ad was better than expected. As expected, the correlation between objective and subjective disconfirmation was high and significant (Pearson's  $r = .78$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Ad and brand attitudes.** Participants rated the ad and brand using the same ad attitudes scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .95$ ) and brand attitudes scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .97$ ) as in Study 1.

## Results

As expected, the regression results showed that evaluations of prior advertisements significantly predicted the expected humor ratings for the new commercial ( $\beta = .79$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .63$ ), in support of hypothesis 2a. When the performance trend (getting better versus getting worse) appeared in the equations, its influence was not significant ( $\beta = .02$ ,  $p = .80$ ). That is, average experiences played more important roles in determining expectations than did performance trends.

The calculated discrepancy between expectations and performance with regard to humor (objective disconfirmation)

significantly predicted ad attitudes ( $\beta = .81$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .66$ ). The results remained the same when subjective disconfirmation served as the predictor ( $\beta = .89$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .80$ ). That is, the findings supported hypothesis 2b, regardless of whether subjective or objective disconfirmation provided the predictors.

The test of simple mediation of the indirect effects of the disconfirmation on brand attitudes through changes in the mediator (ad attitudes), as proposed in hypothesis 2c, used Preacher and Hayes's (2004) bootstrapping methodology, with 5,000 bootstrap resamples, to describe the CI of the indirect effects. The bootstrap results confirmed the mediation model; the 95% CI surrounding the indirect effect did not contain zero (.01, .05) when using objective disconfirmation as inputs, and the 95% CI surrounding the indirect effect did not contain zero (.24, .64) when using subjective disconfirmation as inputs, in support of hypothesis 2c.

To test hypothesis 2d, this study regressed objective disconfirmation on ad attitudes among the participants who generated positive ( $>0$ ,  $N = 32$ ) and negative ( $<0$ ,  $N = 43$ ) disconfirmation. The impact of objective disconfirmation was not significant in the former group ( $\beta = -.08$ ,  $p = .67$ ,  $R^2 = .01$ ) but was in the latter group ( $\beta = .70$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .50$ ), in line with hypothesis 2d. Fisher's  $Z$  test also confirmed that objective disconfirmation explained significantly more variance in ad attitudes among those generating negative rather than positive disconfirmation ( $Z = 3.25$ ,  $p < .01$ , one-tailed).

When subjective disconfirmation was regressed on ad attitudes among respondents generating positive ( $>4$ ,  $N = 38$ ) and negative ( $<4$ ,  $N = 38$ ) disconfirmation, both impacts of subjective disconfirmation were significant (positive  $\beta = .46$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .21$ ; negative  $\beta = .81$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .64$ ). Although both positive and negative subjective disconfirmation affected ad attitudes, Fisher's  $Z$  test indicated that subjective disconfirmation explained significantly more variance in ad attitudes among those generating negative rather than positive disconfirmation ( $Z = 2.57$ ,  $p < .01$ , one-tailed). These results supported hypothesis 2d.

## Discussion

Similar to the findings from Study 1, the average performance of prior commercials in terms of humor has a significant impact on expectations of humor in the new commercial. The influences of a disconfirmation between expectations and performance on ad attitudes are significant for both objective and subjective disconfirmation. The findings again indicate that the degree to which the ad performed worse than expected caused people to like the ad less, which then prompted less favorable brand attitudes. For both objective and subjective disconfirmation, the findings suggest an asymmetric loss function for ad attitudes, with negative as opposed to positive disconfirmation exerting greater influences.



Furthermore, the influence of the performance trend on expectations was not significant, though manipulations checks suggested that participants rated the ads prior to the target ad significantly differently in the “getting better versus worse” conditions. Two possible reasons might explain this effect. First, the commercials appeared one after another, in close time proximity, so participants might not have had sufficient time to perceive a trend. Second, all the commercials are humorous, so the differences among them in terms of their level of humor might not be salient enough for participants to sense the trend subjectively.

Studies 1 and 2 focused on two characteristics of prior ad campaigns—creativity and perceived humor—that are always associated with positive values. However, as Wirtz and Mattila (2001) argue, desirability and expectations represent two distinct constructs. Thus, it is important to show that expectations themselves, rather than expectations of a desirable outcome, predict satisfaction. To affirm an ED effect using a value-neutral feature, Study 3 tests whether viewing a new commercial without a common element (e.g., Duracell’s pink bunny) leads consumers to perceive it as a disconfirmation of their expectation and if this disparity affects their ad and brand attitudes (see Figure 2).

**H3a:** When a common element is missing from a new commercial, consumers perceive that it negatively disconfirms their expectations.

**H3b:** The degree to which people perceive a commercial to disconfirm their expectations significantly reduces ad attitudes.

**H3c:** Ad attitudes mediate the effects of the discrepancy between expectation and performance on brand attitudes.

### STUDY 3

#### Design and Procedures

The method from Study 1 served to recruit volunteers again ( $N = 80$ ; 50% male; average age = 21.00,  $SD = 1.27$ , from 27 departments) for this lab study. The procedures were similar to those for Study 1. Both Duracell ads in non-North American markets and Energizer ads in North American markets feature pink bunnies; this study used Duracell ads. Participants were exposed to four Duracell ads, reportedly from 2007 through 2010, all of which featured the pink bunny. However, the new target ads differed, depending on which condition the participants randomly joined: presence or absence of the ad element.

In a post hoc test ( $N = 30$ ) to ensure that creativity and humor, but not spokescharacters, were value laden, participants used 7-point scales to rate two semantic differential items related to each characteristic (i.e., more creative, more humorous, or featuring a spokescharacter): “To what degree do you agree that a . . . ad is more positive/negative?” and “To what degree do you agree that a . . . ad is more favorable/less favorable?” The averaged responses provided the overall score. As expected, creativity ( $M = 5.73$ ,  $SD = .74$ ) and humor ( $M = 5.73$ ,  $SD = .90$ ) scored significantly above the scale midpoint (creativity  $t(29) = 12.84$ ,  $p < .01$ ; humor  $t(29) = 10.58$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and therefore were value laden; spokescharacters ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = .99$ ) did not have scores significantly different from the midpoint ( $t(29) = 1.38$ ,  $p = .18$ ) and were not value laden.

#### Stimuli

Two graduate students identified 10 ads with the pink bunny and two ads without the pink bunny but with different animated characters from YouTube. A pretest ( $N = 24$ ) conducted in a lab helped select the bunny-present ads and bunny-absent ads that did not differ in terms of their liking. They viewed each of the 12 ads, randomly presented, then rated the degree to which they liked each ad using 0 to 100 scores. As a result of this pretest, the bunny-absent ad (postman ad,  $M = 75.88$ ,  $SD = 10.05$ ) provided liking scores that did not differ significantly from five bunny-present ads: soccer ( $M = 77.29$ ,  $SD = 12.62$ ;  $t(23) = .90$ ,  $p = .38$ ); rock climbing ( $M = 77.00$ ,  $SD = 11.31$ ;  $t(23) = .48$ ,  $p = .64$ ); street ( $M = 77.67$ ,  $SD = 10.91$ ;  $t(23) = 1.63$ ,  $p = .12$ ); gym ( $M = 76.50$ ,  $SD = 11.48$ ;  $t(23) = .64$ ,  $p = .53$ ); and racing ( $M = 76.42$ ,  $SD = 10.17$ ;  $t(23) = .36$ ,  $p = .72$ ). The racing ad served as the new bunny-present ad for 2012 (refer to Tables 1 and 2).

#### Measures

Participants rated the same subjective disconfirmation scale as in Study 1 (Cronbach’s alpha = .85). The responses were averaged, with higher scores indicating better outcomes than expected. They also rated the same ad attitudes scale (Cronbach’s alpha = .95) and the same brand attitudes scale (Cronbach’s alpha = .97) as in Study 1.

#### Results

As expected, compared with respondents who viewed the new ad with the bunny ( $M_{\text{bunny}} = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ), those who

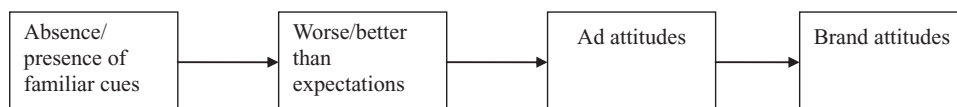


FIG. 2. Disconfirmation of expectations on ad and brand attitudes for Study 3.

viewed the new ad without the bunny ( $M_{\text{no bunny}} = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) generated lower “better than expected” scores ( $F(1, 73) = 4.76$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ ). These results confirmed the predictions of hypothesis 3a. The degree to which the ad was better than expectations also significantly affected ad attitudes ( $\beta = .79$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .56$ ), in support of hypothesis 3b.

The test of the simple mediation of the indirect effects of the worse than expected rating on brand attitudes through changes in the mediator (ad attitudes), as proposed in hypothesis 3c, used Preacher and Hayes’s (2004) bootstrapping methodology, with 5,000 bootstrap resamples, to describe the CI of the indirect effects. The bootstrap results confirmed the mediation model; the 95% CI surrounding the indirect effect did not contain zero (.02, .38), in line with hypothesis 3c.

## Discussion

As expected, when a new commercial does not feature Duracell’s familiar pink bunny, people offer lower “better than expectations” scores, which further reduces their ad attitudes and decreases brand attitudes. Therefore, the same ED process emerges, even when the expected feature is not associated with positive values. Study 3 extends Studies 1 and 2 by showing that even when the missing element is neutral, an ad that fails to meet the audience’s expectations leads to disconfirmation that can reduce ad and brand attitudes. However, the findings should not be taken to mean that changing ad elements always leads to deteriorated ad and brand evaluations. Studies 1 and 2 indicate instead that subjective, positive disconfirmation can improve ad attitudes. If new ad elements are better than expected, such as a new campaign that features a more likable celebrity than those in prior marketing campaigns, participants may experience positive disconfirmation, leading to improved ad and brand attitudes.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

### Findings and Contributions

Extant advertising research mainly focuses on how ad content—such as appeals (e.g., narrative, comparative, emotional, sexual, humorous), characteristics (e.g., creativity, credibility), and elements (e.g., endorsers, visuals, music, slogans)—or the advertising context—such as editorial content, competitors’ ads, consumers’ affective states, or activated goals—affect consumers’ evaluations of advertising. All these appeals, features, and contextual factors influence evaluations of the ad and advertised brands. Yet most studies compare different types of appeals or the presence or absence of certain elements, without addressing the role of expectations. In particular, no prior studies have explicated how the effectiveness of an advertisement might hinge on the prior advertising performance of the same brand.

Findings from three studies confirm that advertisers set the standards against which consumers evaluate new ads. If a brand’s prior commercials are creative or humorous, consumers expect its new commercials to be creative or humorous too. If its prior commercials feature a specific spokescharacter, they expect to find the spokescharacter again in new commercials. If a new commercial is not as creative or humorous as expected or fails to feature a specific spokescharacter, participants generate less favorable attitudes toward the new commercial, which further decreases their brand attitudes. In an extension of prior consumer literature, this study shows that the influence of expectations holds for both value-laden and value-neutral advertising elements.

In separate examinations of the effect of positive and negative objective disconfirmation, only the influence of negative disconfirmation (not that of positive disconfirmation) is significant on attitudes toward the new ad, and the differences of their relative impacts emerge as significant only in Study 2. Considerations of the separate effects of positive and negative subjective disconfirmation instead reveal that both are significant predictors of ad attitudes, even though negative subjective disconfirmation explains significantly more variance in ad attitudes in Study 2 and not in Study 1. These results imply that the zone of indifference (i.e., disconfirmation to which people react indifferently; Oliver 2010) might be wider for positive than for negative disconfirmation. If positive disconfirmation exceeds the zone of indifference, it could exert significant impacts on evaluations. Additional research should explore this possibility.

### Further Research Directions

The reported findings establish the role of expectations in ad evaluations and thus open doors to new advertising research. For example, researchers might explore features, domains, types and sources of ad expectations, the mechanisms of expectation disconfirmation, and the moderating roles of individual characteristics and situational factors in the process.

Beyond humor, creativity, and spokescharacters, other important features demand research attention too, such as ad-evoked warmth. If a brand is known for running “warm fuzzy” commercials, people may expect a new commercial to trigger warmth as well. Other potentially influential ad features include ad models, brand signatures, jingles, music, or key visuals. People may expect the presence of these features if they are commonly used in prior ad campaigns.

People could form expectations related to media domains too. Many marketing campaigns involve different media, vehicles, and events; some brands are known for their creativity in employing outdoor billboards, ambient media, or other untraditional channels. Consumers then may form expectations about creativity in these different domains. If an advertiser that previously provided surprises for consumers by

adopting new and creative media switched to conventional media strategies in its new campaigns, people may find it disappointing.

In terms of types of expectations, satisfaction literature suggests three types related to product performance: product category expectations, ideal product expectations, and focal brand expectations. This research has manipulated and tested only focal brand expectations, but the other types of expectations also may help explain ad campaign effects. For example, consumers might expect the category of soft drinks, but not cooking oil, to run creative campaigns. Moreover, their different expectations may interact (Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins 1983). If consumers perceive commercials as similar across brands in a product category (e.g., most ads in that category are creative), they likely develop product category expectations. In contrast, if they have different experiences with commercials across brands, they may adopt focal brand expectations instead.

In addition to prior ad performance, there are other possible sources of expectations. For example, people may form expectations of ad campaigns on the basis of the brand's positioning. Certain brands are positioned as adventurers, so consumers likely expect their ad campaigns to be nontraditional. Other brands are positioned as fun and easygoing; consumers then may expect their campaign ads to be humorous. Brand positioning as a basis for campaign ad expectations needs to be tested further.

The mechanism by which disconfirmation influences ad attitudes offers another important topic to explore. For example, the mechanism may differ for ad characteristics versus ad features. In the case of creativity and humor, they likely trigger entertainment, which improves ad and brand attitudes. Ad features instead might facilitate perceptual or processing fluency, which is associated with more favorable attitudes (Bornstein and D'Agostino 1994). Further research should compare the similarities and differences of psychological processes triggered by ED for value-laden characteristics versus value-neutral ad features.

Expectations also may vary across consumers with different characteristics. For example, loyal consumers of a brand may have higher expectations of its marketing campaign activities than less loyal consumers, because they identify strongly with that brand. Similarly, ED effects may differ for various consumers. In the product satisfaction literature, Kopalle and Lehmann (2001) identify some people who are more sensitive to disconfirmation than others. Similarly, some people may be more creative or have a higher need for humor and thus react more negatively when ad campaigns fail to be as creative or humorous as expected.

Finally, situational factors may serve as important moderators. In the consumer satisfaction literature, Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins (1983) propose that different goal contexts alter the reference point against which people compare product performance. Different goals might determine the

types of expectations to which people compare their experiences and affect the degree to which ED gets taken into account. In this sense, consumers also may have expectations about how much information an ad should provide or how authentic an endorsement should be. These different expectations may be rendered accessible in various goal contexts. For example, when consumers plan to purchase a product, they may expect an ad to be informative and facilitate their decision making. To the degree that it fails to include this information, the disconfirmation may affect their attitudes toward the ad or even the brand.

### Implications for Practitioners

The findings of this study have significant value for practitioners. In a variation on an old saying, advertisers are their own worst enemy. They must not only outcompete their competitors but also surpass their own past performance. If advertisers are known for their creative, humorous campaigns, consumers expect to find creativity and fun in new ads. If they do not, consumers punish advertisers, because they have suffered negative disconfirmation. It is thus crucial for advertisers to test and ensure that to-be-aired commercials meet consumers' expectations—unless their goal is to adopt a new positioning strategy, in which case they can launch distinctive ad campaigns that reflect the changes.

If the advertisers tend to rely on certain elements (e.g., spokescharacters), consumers also expect to find them again. When advertisers hire new advertising agencies, the new creative talent frequently suggests changing some elements, such as a familiar spokescharacter, a celebrity sponsor, a slogan, or a jingle. If the new elements are not more desirable or if no well-justified reasons exist for the change (e.g., adopting a new positioning, introducing new elements for brand rejuvenation), it may be a better idea to retain the old elements.

### Limitations

The findings of these three studies should be interpreted within the limitations of this research. First, participants viewed the four commercials within a very short time frame. Even though none of the participants questioned this procedure, it might have rendered their focal brand expectations highly accessible and reduced external validity. Further research should consider other procedures to test the proposed framework.

Second, creativity and humor consist of many dimensions (Ang, Lee, and Leong 2007; Ang and Low 2000), though researchers generally measure overall creativity and humor (Baack, Wilson, and Till 2008; Smith et al. 2007). The studies used one item to tap participants' direct responses (how creative an ad is, how humorous an ad is) to each of the four ads, prior to the target ad. Multiple items generally are appealing, but the three studies relied on single-item measures for two

reasons: Asking consumers to rate multiple items repeatedly (i.e., five times for five ads) may generate fatigue, and various studies have demonstrated that there is no difference in the predictive validity of single- versus multiple-item scales (Bergkvist and Rossiter 2007). Thus, multiple-item measures are not always necessary and can be substituted by single-item measures in many cases (e.g., Bergkvist and Rossiter 2007; Drolet and Morrison 2001; Rossiter 2002). To be safe, Study 1 established the high and significant correlation between the one-item score and scales tapping subdimensions of creativity, and Study 2 established high and significant correlations between the one-item scale and the multi-item scale. However, further research should examine the proposed relations using multiple-item scales.

Third, the ads used in each study differed in other important characteristics that might have confounded the findings, such as their newness, familiarity, and the innovativeness of the featured product models. Additional research could control for these characteristics.

Overall, though, the findings of the three studies in this article provide consistent support for the predictions and extend extant research by demonstrating that the effectiveness of a new ad hinges on the standards that the brand itself has established in advance.

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