

# THE EFFECT OF COUNTER-EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING COMMUNICATION ON SATISFACTION AND REPURCHASE INTENTION

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## ABSTRACT

*Counter-experiential marketing communication* refers to a marketing message that runs contrary to what a customer has actually experienced through product or service use. The impact of counter-experiential communications on consumers, as measured by levels of customer satisfaction and repurchase intention, is analyzed through an empirical study. It is demonstrated that after a negative experience, a positive message about the product leads to lower levels of satisfaction and repurchase intention as compared to when that negative experience is followed by a more neutral message. Recommendations are offered to best prevent the detrimental effects of *de facto* counter-experiential advertising in the face of negative consumption experiences. Direction for future research in this area is provided.

## INTRODUCTION

A consumer's expectations and subsequent satisfaction level are often shaped by marketing communications. Marketing communications, such as advertising, serve as a source of information and motivation for the consumer before the purchase is made, and continue to inform prospective, current, and past customers even while a product is in use. As such, marketing communications present the focal product or service in the best light. There are many strategic and creative approaches that a marketer might take toward presenting a product offering using marketing communications, such as advertising, with the overall effect of displaying benefits while creating and managing consumer expectations.

For the most part, purchases (whether provoked by marketing communications directly, indirectly, or not at all) have outcomes that are

satisfying, or at least satisficing, with the performance of the product or service measuring as expected. However, when the service or product performance is below acceptable standards, customers suffer from the disappointment of their suboptimal consumer experience, what might be called a product-harm crisis (Dawar and Pillutla 2000), with the consumer blaming the company for the experience (e.g., Laufer, Silvera, and Meyer 2005). This is reflected in the loss of time, money, and other costs associated with an unexpectedly inequitable exchange. If the purchase outcome somehow goes awry, negative thoughts and feelings, such as dissatisfaction, anger, and regret, might be expected to follow. Consider, for example, two different purchases:

1. A woman living in the Midwestern United States purchased a living room set from a well-known regional furniture retailer whose light-hearted and family-oriented ads appealed to her. The actual purchase process was time-consuming and difficult, filled with delays, unfriendly service representatives, and the arrival of damaged goods. After several months' worth of arguments and poor service, the woman's furniture finally arrived in an acceptable state.
  2. A college student purchased an MP3 player from an online store. Shortly after it arrived, the device suffered breakdowns of its hardware and pre-installed software, and seemed to spend more time in transit between the customer's apartment and the
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manufacturer's service center than it spent playing music.

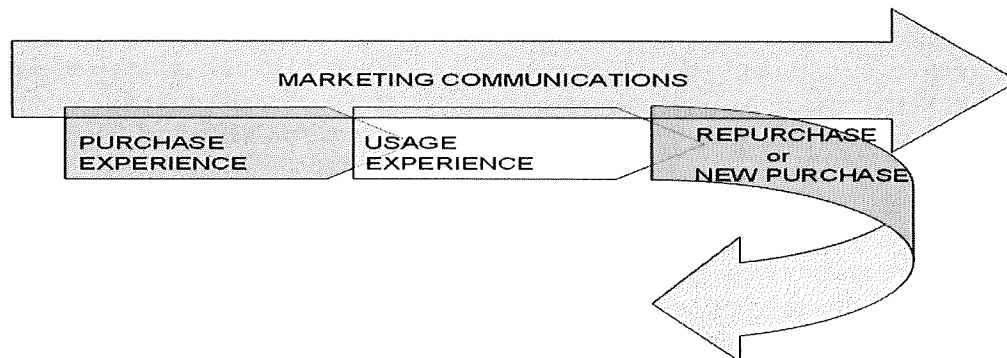
These examples illustrate two vivid scenarios of the possible outcomes involved in the consumer decision-making and acquisition process. The stories serve as illustrations of the monetary and nonmonetary costs of a dissatisfying consumer experience. With that in mind, consider these next steps in our two scenarios:

1. The furniture store from which the woman made her purchase bore its founder's name, and was familiar to many through its frequent and playful television advertisements depicting the founder's adult children engaging in gentle teasing and amiable sibling rivalry. Long after the furniture arrived and was arranged in the woman's home, it is not the product but the commercials that continue to rankle and fill this customer with anger and unpleasant reminders of her experience.
2. The college student with the faulty MP3 player watched in frustration as the

manufacturer grew in terms of success and size, and its advertising increasingly boasted of the numerous industry awards that its products and service had won. The company continued to advertise in many magazines that our student read, much to his chagrin.

While advertising and other forms of marketing communication are generally meant to stimulate purchase or at least trial among prospective customers, many ads are seen by current product users; in fact, the purpose of the message itself might be to serve as a reminder to accelerate repurchase (e.g., a new version of this product is available and I should try it; or, that reminds me, I'm running low on this product) or initiate the search process. There are also examples of expressly post-purchase marketing communications, such as thank you letters from salespeople to their customers confirming the wisdom of their purchase, and television ads from movie studios urging customers to see a movie for a second time. A general look at the timing of marketing communications in relation to usage experience is presented visually in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
**The Timing of Marketing Communications**



As presented above, marketing communications do not occur only before a purchase is made. Post-purchase marketing communications are prevalent in the mass and direct media, and recent research includes consumer interaction with advertising as related to past consumption activity (e.g., Braun and Loftus 1998; Smith 1993). There are many opportunities to be satisfied or dissatisfied (Oliver 1997) and an advertisement for any given product may be seen by current, past, or potential customers at any stage of their product decision-making cycle. Many marketers pay hundreds of thousands of dollars toward research to carefully target their most inviting and responsive consumer segments, yet despite these attempts to reduce the likelihood of a current or lapsed customer receiving marketing communications meant for a potential customer, such misdirected communications do exist.

Customer expectations are often not met by the marketer's product or service, and dissatisfactory outcomes may be experienced, as presented above. What, then, is the impact of marketing communications, designed to create positive expectations and stimulate purchase or repurchase, when seen by a customer who has had a negative experience with a product or service; that is, what is the influence of a counter-experiential communication on a dissatisfied customer?

The term "counter-experiential marketing communications" is thus introduced and its meaning is straightforward: an advertisement or other marketing message that runs contrary to that which a customer has actually experienced in terms of product or service performance. The counter-experiential message is not necessarily an outright lie about what a customer should expect from a product or service (the ethical responsibilities of marketers and advertisers are relevant but beyond the scope of this current research) but does reflect a promised reality or level of satisfaction (e.g., prompt delivery of a package or a high level of product quality) that the customer knows, from experience, did not happen.

The current research has four main objectives. The first is to examine consumer response to counter-experiential communications from the perspective of the existing literature. The second

objective is to analyze, through use of an empirical study, the impact of counter-experiential communications on consumers as measured by levels of customer satisfaction and repurchase intention. The third objective is to offer recommendations to businesses and advertisers as to how they can best prevent the detrimental effects of *de facto* counter-experiential advertising in the face of negative consumption experiences. The final objective is to offer direction for future research in this area.

## BACKGROUND

While there is ample research in the areas of customer satisfaction (e.g., Yi 1990) and marketing communications there is very little overlap between the two areas (Braun, Ellis, and Loftus 1999). This is surprising, given the frequent use of the expectation disconfirmation model of customer satisfaction and the role that marketing communications play in the formation of consumer expectations. Therefore, this study approaches the phenomenon of counter-experiential marketing communications from the perspectives of expectation formation, marketing communication responses, and customer satisfaction and repurchase intention, key variables in the present study.

### Customer Satisfaction and Expectation Formation

The most widely used theory of customer satisfaction is the expectation disconfirmation model (Oliver 1997) wherein satisfaction is based on a customer's outcome meeting, exceeding, or failing to meet, expectations. Expectations can be affected by experience such that expectations levels, and therefore criteria for disconfirmation, are modified based on consumption experiences (McQuitty, Finn, and Wiley 2000). Customer expectations are also to a large extent created through the many forms of marketing communications, such as advertising. Marketing communications can be expected to have an influence on the expected future relative attractiveness (Andreassen and Lervik 1999) of a focal product or service by virtue of the information value of the communications, even to

the point of possibly causing confusion between the external message and the experience itself (Braun, et al. 1999).

### **Responses to Marketing Communications**

Research on social judgment theory suggests that a consumer's reaction to marketing communication will be a function of how the message is perceived. In light of this, since a counter-experiential message will run contrary to the consumer's most accessible perspective toward the focal product or service, the contrast effect might be expected. That is, the receiver of the message might perceive such communication to be even further removed from his or her actual experience than in the case of a more neutral message, or a more neutral experience. The subsequent resistance to the message is suggested by Tormala and Petty (2002), who found that a strong yet contradictory message can lead to a bolstering of one's initial attitude. Along these lines, reactance, wherein the dissatisfied consumer resists this communications-based denial of her experience, might also provoke a boomerang effect, a strong contrary response against the marketer (Eagly and Chaiken 1993).

A consumer's response to marketing communications can take several forms. Wright (1980) found that cognitive responses to communications can be organized in different ways, including counterargument, a supportive argument, or derogation of the source of the message. Wright found that consumers' cognitive responses rely more on mental images and personal experiences more than on the content of the ad itself, experience that in the case of the current research would involve a negative outcome.

Responses such as counterargument and source derogation can be expected to preface or coincide with resistance to the message. Ahluwalia (2000) offered three forms that such resistance might take. More specifically, resistance can be take the form of biased assimilation (that is, the denial of contrary information); a relative weighting of attributes, (or a reduction of the weight given to an attribute or attributes negatively influenced by the information); and recognition of the impact of

negative information on other attributes not specifically mentioned in the message. These are among the approaches that might be used by consumers who are trying to cope with the dissonance between they what experienced and the counter-experiential message to which they are subsequently exposed.

### **Repurchase Intention**

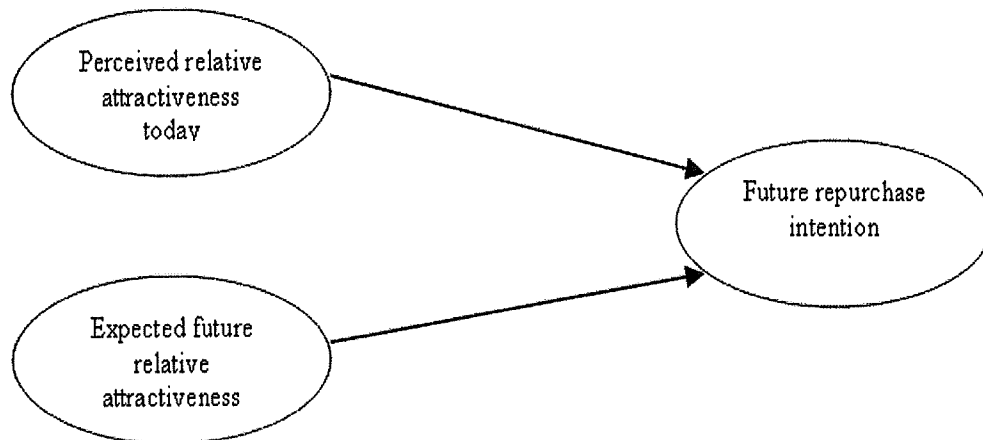
Future repurchase intention is recognized as a positive consequence of customer satisfaction (e.g., Anderson, Fornell, and Lehmann 1994; Hellier, Geursen, Carr and Rickard 2003). Many of the issues raised in past research are of relevance to the current study. Repurchase might be negatively influenced by consumer grudgeholding, a lasting feeling of hostility toward a firm (Aron, Judson, Aurand, and Gordon 2006) that might be caused by the negative purchase outcome and then compounded by what might be seen as a disingenuous advertisement. The issue of perceived equity is one of interest, along with perceived value (Hellier, *et al.* 2003). Equity might be seen in the effect of an episode of counter-experiential communication, such that a product user who is disappointed in the outcome might happen upon an advertisement that contradicts the actual experience. This would promote an imbalance in equity from the perspective of fairness or normative outcomes. The perceived value of a product might be among the elements embedded in the overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction measure. Customer satisfaction, in the context of the current research, is included as a dependent variable.

A more basic conceptual model of repurchase intention helps to establish the relationships of interest. As presented in Figure 2, Andreassen and Lervik's (1999) conceptual model of future repurchase intention (RPI) presents RPI as a function of the "Perceived relative attractiveness today" and of "Expected future relative attractiveness" of a focal product or service, essentially, how happy is the customer currently, and how much pleasure does the customer believe a subsequent purchase would yield (Andreassen and Lervik 1999).

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Figure 2

**The Andreassen and Lervik Conceptual Model of Repurchase Intention  
(Andreassen and Lervik 1999)**



This conceptual model serves as a starting point in the exploration of the possible interaction between the two attractiveness variables. Experiences leading to perceived relative attractiveness might leave consumers with varying degrees of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, ranging from an ecstatic, "I can't wait to tell my friends and then buy myself another one of these" delight to a despondent "There must be some way to get my money back or otherwise hide my shame" sort of dissatisfaction. The Andreassen-Lervik model suggests that expectations borne of negative experiences will lead to a lower RPI than would positive expectations.

### THE CURRENT RESEARCH

As described above, there are overlaps in the purchase process such that consumer experience and marketing communications interact, with little research involving the effect of post-purchase communications on previous consumer experience. The research question is: will a counter-experiential marketing communication following a consumption experience have an effect on consumer response, in terms of reported satisfaction level and repurchase intention? More specifically: will a counter-experiential, positive

advertisement following a negative experience make the consumer's response even more negative? Or will the positive message weaken or even negate the existing negative attitude toward the focal product? These questions lead to the following research hypotheses:

**H<sub>1a</sub>:** Given a positive experience with a product, respondents exposed to positive marketing communications for that product will experience a higher level of satisfaction compared to respondents exposed to a neutral communication.

**H<sub>1b</sub>:** Given a positive experience with a product, respondents exposed to positive marketing communications for that product will experience a higher level of repurchase intention compared to respondents exposed to a neutral communication.

**H<sub>2a</sub>:** Given a negative experience with a product, respondents exposed to positive marketing communications for that product will experience a lower level of satisfaction compared to respondents exposed to a neutral communication.

**H<sub>2b</sub>:** Given a negative experience with a product, respondents exposed to positive marketing communications for that product will experience a lower level of repurchase intention compared to respondents exposed to a neutral communication.

Pham 1999) and have been shown to produce results consistent with those of direct manipulation (Robinson and Clore 2001). Both phases of the project are discussed in the following sections.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The concept of counter-experiential marketing communication is intuitively compelling, yet the interaction of this sort of marketing communication with a customer's level of satisfaction and repurchase intention has not been explored empirically. Because of this, the current research is meant to gain a greater understanding of how counter-experiential communication is perceived by consumers, and then to attain an understanding of how consumers are affected by and respond to by these communications.

This research has been conducted through two studies. The first study is a preliminary survey that serves as a foundation for the convergent validity of the simulated advertisements created for a fictional product as compared to genuine, published ads for several other products and services. The second, larger-scale study of this project measures the interaction of these fictional advertisements with scenarios devised to manipulate the experimental conditions to which subjects were exposed. Scenarios have been used in the induction of a variety of emotional responses (e.g., Roseman 1991; Raghunathan and

## **The Preliminary Study**

### **Respondents**

The respondents in the preliminary study were students enrolled in an introductory marketing course at a university located in the Midwestern United States. Students were free to participate in this study, which was positioned as an evaluation of print advertising, or select an alternative assignment. All students chose to participate in the study. A total of 134 respondents participated in the main study, generating 129 usable surveys.

### **Experimental Design**

Respondents were presented with one of five single magazine-style black and white print advertisements. Three of these ads were genuine ads for one of three existing products: Children's Memorial Hospital, Isomil Advance baby formula, and Sandals Resorts. These ads are displayed as Figures 3, 4, and 5, respectively.

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Figure 3: Children's Memorial Hospital advertisement  
 Figure 4: Isomil baby formula advertisement  
 Figure 5: Sandals Resorts advertisement



Figure 3

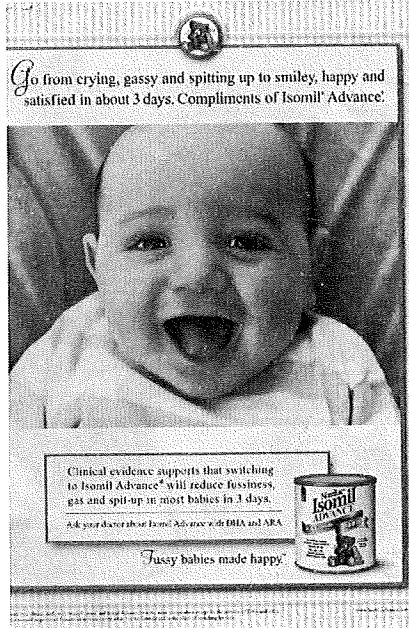


Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 6  
 Positive Advertisement for Digigo



Figure 7

## Neutral Advertisement for Digigo



The other two ads were for the focal product, the fictional Digigo MP3 player. The fabricated ads were developed to be either positive (including positive reviews, news of awards, and testimonials) or neutral (no reviews, awards, or testimonials). These ads had been created by a group of undergraduate advertising students and are presented as Figures 6 and 7.

### Procedure

Respondents were instructed to look at the advertisement and answer questions about what the ads meant to them. After viewing the ad, respondents were presented with the following

two questions, to be answered on a seven-point scale:

- The ad is believable
- The advertiser is trustworthy.

The scales were anchored at one extreme by “Not at All,” at the other extreme by “Extremely,” and in the middle by the label “Neutral.”

### Results

The mean scores for the two questions, regarding the believability of the ads and the trustworthiness of the advertisers, were compared. The mean scores are presented in Table 1.



**Table 1**  
**Advertisement Believability and Trustworthiness Mean Scores**

Advertisement	<i>n</i>	"This Ad is Believable" Mean Score	"This Advertiser is Trustworthy" Mean Score
Children's Hospital	27	4.37	4.70
Isomil	27	4.11	4.00
Digigo- Neutral*	24	4.00	3.96
Digigo- Positive*	23	3.96	3.87
Sandals	28	3.82	3.79

\* Fabricated advertisement N=129

This preliminary study was conducted to confirm that the fabricated advertisements were at least, on the surface, believable to the respondent sample. Importantly, the positive and neutral Digigo messages demonstrated no statistical differences in terms of believability ( $t = -0.19, p = 0.85$ ) and trustworthiness ( $t = -0.37, p = 0.71$ ) in a two-tailed *t*-test.

### The Main Study

#### Respondents

Subjects were marketing students enrolled in multiple sections of a Principles of Advertising course at a university located in the Midwestern United States. Students were free to participate in this study, which was positioned as a measurement of attitude toward the advertisement, or they could select an alternative assignment. All 150 students chose to participate in the main study.

Given the sample of respondents, the choice of digital music players as the subject of the advertisements is logical. A great many college students own MP3 players, and digital music player sales continue to grow. Sales of the market-leading iPod surpassed 3.72 million units

(representing 80% of the market) before the 2005 holiday shopping season (Bloomberg 2006).

#### Experimental Design

The valence conditions were dictated by the nature of the fictional advertisement (as described above) and by a fictional character's outcome with an MP3 player. The outcomes of this experience were either positive or negative, as expressed directly (e.g., "Chris is very unhappy with the Digigo player") and in terms of the performance of a number of product-specific attributes such as battery life and song capacity. This established a 2x2 experimental design: Product Experience Valence (Positive or Negative) x Advertisement Valence (Positive or Neutral). Therefore, respondents were in one of four conditions:

- Positive experience and positive ad
- Positive experience and neutral ad
- Negative experience and positive ad
- Negative experience and neutral ad

#### Procedure

Subjects were handed a packet containing one page of instructions, a one-page scenario related

to a fictional student's experience with a particular product (an MP3 player), three filler ads, and one focal, fabricated ad related to the product in the scenario. The distracter ads were identical for respondents in all conditions, while the fabricated ad for the fictional MP3 player was among the manipulated variables. One version of the MP3 player ad was designed to be highly positive, effusive in its praise of the digital music player, and displaying multiple awards and recommendations. The second version was visually similar to the first, but without the awards and offering only neutral comments regarding the product performance.

Respondents were instructed to read through every page of the packet, and were told that they would read a story about "Chris, roughly your age, who has had a purchase experience." The directions indicated that there would be questions to answer, and that the respondent should "imagine that you are Chris."

The scenario was a brief description of Chris, whose name was selected as gender-neutral. Chris was described as having devoted substantial effort toward finding one particular product, the fictional Digigo MP3 player. Chris was depicted as having undertaken "several weeks of research and anticipation" in the selection and purchase of "the perfect MP3 player" Details of the effort expended by Chris were then presented to the respondents, identical for both the positive and negative outcome conditions. The scenario describes several attributes of this digital music device, including its price, its song capacity, its battery life, the availability of songs to download, and its playback features. This description is held constant between the positive and negative conditions. The scenario then takes one of two directions: Chris is described either as "happy" or "unhappy" with the purchase. In the "happy condition," the outcome is described as follows:

Chris is very happy with the Digigo player. The sound quality is wonderful, the player holds as many songs as expected, many favorite songs are available for downloading, and there are no technical problems to speak of.

In contrast, Chris's unhappy outcome is described in this way:

"Chris is very unhappy with the Digigo player. The sound quality is terrible, the player doesn't hold as many songs as expected, many of Chris's favorite songs are not available for downloading, and there are several other technical problems as well, such as the MP3 player frequently shutting itself off in the middle of a song."

After reading one of these scenarios, respondents then viewed a series of magazine-style print ads, including three actual ads meant to serve as a distraction, followed by one of two versions of the fabricated Digigo ad.

The distracter ads included magazine ads for Children's Memorial Hospital, Isomil Baby Formula, and Sandals Resort vacations. These actual ads were chosen because they were not necessarily vivid or engrossing yet would create some distraction with unrelated pictures of dogs, babies, and vacationing adults. These ads were selected with the expectation that they would not, in and of themselves, stimulate further processing of the scenario that had been read.

The focal ad was the last one in all conditions, an ad for the Digigo MP3 player depicted in the scenario. After comparing the three distracter ads and the ad that served as one of the manipulated variables, respondents were presented with the following two questions, to be answered on a seven-point scale:

"How likely do you think Chris is to purchase the Digigo brand MP3 in the future?" anchored by "Extremely Unlikely" and "Extremely Likely" with "Neutral; neither likely nor unlikely" at the center.

"In terms of customer satisfaction, how would you describe Chris's response to this situation?" anchored by "Extremely Dissatisfied" and "Extremely Satisfied" with "Neutral; neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" at the center.

The first question is meant to measure the repurchase intention based on the interaction of the scenario and the advertisement. While repurchase intention is an important variable in the areas of customer satisfaction and loyalty, no definitive scale has been established in the literature. Two examples of recent work that involved repurchase intention as a dependent

variable support the straightforward approach that the current research has taken. Andreassen and Lervik (1999) measured repurchase intention in the context of the insurance industry by way of a 10-point Likert scale, with anchor points including “very likely” and “very unlikely.” This scale was used to answer the question “How likely or unlikely is it that you will continue to use your insurance company in the future? Similarly, these authors asked “How important is it to you to continue your relationship with your insurance company?” with the 10-point scale anchored by the terms “important” and “not important.” A similar approach to measuring repurchase intention was used by Mattila and Wirtz (2000), in the multiple contexts of a beauty center, a dental

clinic, a rollercoaster ride, and the passport section of an immigration department. In this study, repurchase intention was measured on an 11-point rating scale anchored at one end by “Certain I’d do it again” and at the other by “No chance I’d do it again.” The measure of repurchase intention used in the current research is faithful in spirit to the approaches mentioned above. The second question is meant as a general measure of satisfaction with Chris’s purchase outcome.

Upon the completion and return of each survey, respondents were thanked for their participation and excused.

**Table 2**

**Repurchase Likelihood and Satisfaction Mean Scores for Scenario and Ad Conditions**

Variable	Condition			
	Positive Scenario, Positive Ad	Positive Scenario, Neutral Ad	Negative Scenario, Positive Ad	Negative Scenario, Neutral Ad
Repurchase Likelihood <sup>1</sup>	2.10	1.08	-2.63	-1.83
	$F = 6.65, p = .012$		$F = 5.59, p = .021$	
Customer Satisfaction <sup>2</sup>	2.05	1.33	-2.26	-1.51
	$F = 4.55, p = .036$		$F = 3.77, p = .056$	
<i>N</i> = 150	n = 41	n = 36	n = 38	n = 35

<sup>1</sup>Repurchase Likelihood: -3 = Extremely Unlikely; 3 = Extremely Likely

<sup>2</sup>Customer Satisfaction: -3 = Extremely Dissatisfied; 3 = Extremely Satisfied

## Results

A survey administered to 150 undergraduate advertising students consisting of two Likert-type scales was employed to capture and evaluate responses toward counter-experiential marketing communications. The survey data was subsequently edited, coded, and entered in SPSS 13.0 for analysis. A total of 150 surveys were completed and submitted for analysis.

As illustrated in Table 2, there were strong interaction effects involving the scenarios and the marketing communications. Not surprisingly, the positive outcome followed by a positive ad drew the highest satisfaction and repurchase intention scores, supporting the first hypothesis. Through analysis of variance (ANOVA), it is clear that the repurchase likelihood is greater when a positive message follows a positive experience, as compared to the subsequent neutral message (mean scores 2.10 vs. 1.08 respectively on a scale from -3 to 3;  $F = 6.65$ ,  $p = .012$ ). The same holds true for the level of customer satisfaction in these conditions (mean scores 2.05 vs. 1.33 respectively;  $F = 4.55$ ,  $p = .036$ ). Therefore, both parts of the first hypothesis, that given a positive experience with a product, respondents exposed to positive marketing communications for that product will experience a higher level of satisfaction and a higher repurchase intention compared to respondents exposed to a neutral communication, is supported.

An ANOVA was also conducted regarding the second hypothesis, concerning the responses to a negative experience followed by a positive marketing communications message. When a negative experience is followed by a positive message, as compared to a neutral message, the repurchase intention is even lower than otherwise (with mean scores -2.63 vs. -1.83 respectively;  $F = 5.59$ ,  $p = .021$ ). This supports the second part of this hypothesis. However, the first part of the second hypothesis, regarding the satisfaction level, offered similar results in terms of mean scores but only to the point of approaching statistical significance (mean scores -2.26 vs. -1.51 respectively;  $F = 3.77$ ,  $p = .056$ ). Therefore, given a negative experience with a product,

respondents exposed to positive marketing communications for that product did experience a significantly lower repurchase intention, and a numerically (but not statistically significant) reduced level of customer satisfaction compared to respondents exposed to a neutral communication.

These results are presented graphically as Figures 3 and 4. The effect of counter-experiential communication is apparent in the results from the interaction between the negative scenario and the positive advertisement. As shown in Table 2, the lowest scores for repurchase intention and for level of customer satisfaction both occur when a negative experience is followed by an advertisement that is perceived to run contrary to the actual consumer experience.

## DISCUSSION

A good message can make a good experience even better, but even a positive marketing communication cannot overcome a bad experience. This is the risk and consequence of counter-experiential advertising.

It was demonstrated through an empirical study that given a positive experience with a product, respondents exposed to positive marketing communications will experience a higher level of satisfaction and repurchase intention compared to respondents exposed to neutral communication. This result seems intuitive, in that a customer with a positive experience would likely assimilate any supporting information, such as a positive marketing message. The more provocative finding is that given a negative experience with a product, respondents exposed to positive marketing communications for that product will experience a renewed expectancy disconfirmation and an even lower level of satisfaction and repurchase intention compared to respondents exposed to a neutral communication. The degree of support of this final hypothesis lends credence to the presence of, and importance of, counter-experiential marketing communications.

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Figure 3: Customer Satisfaction Scores for Scenario and Ad Conditions

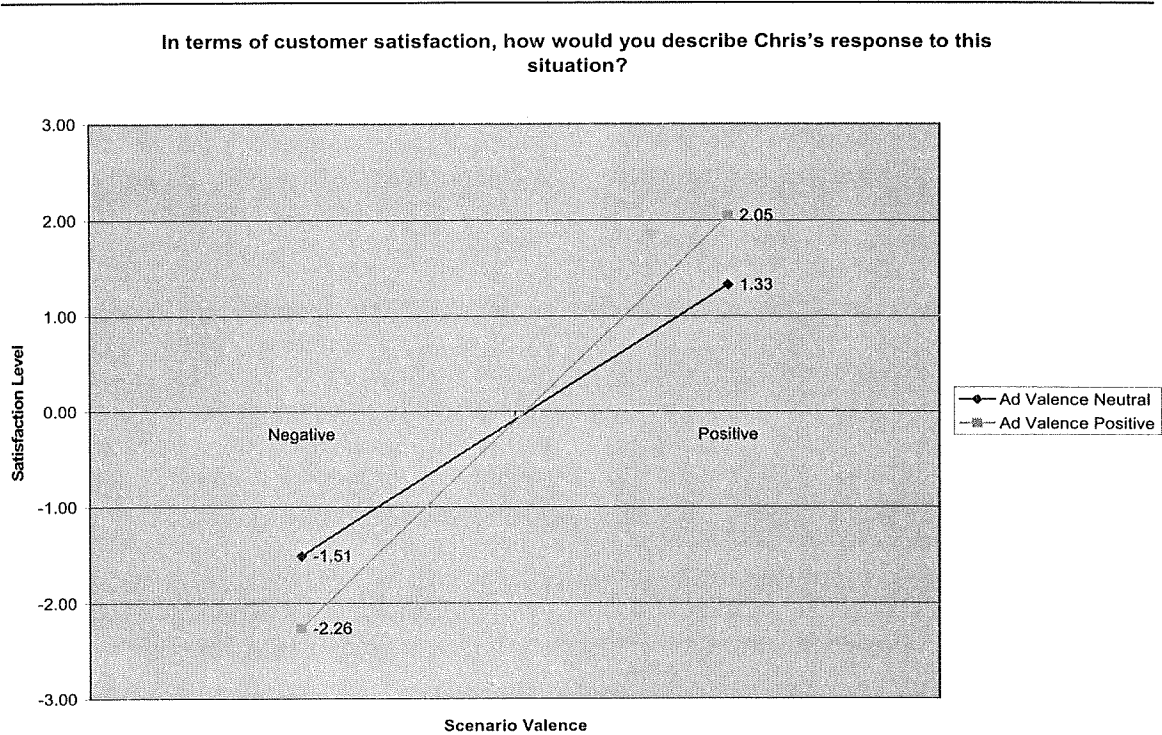
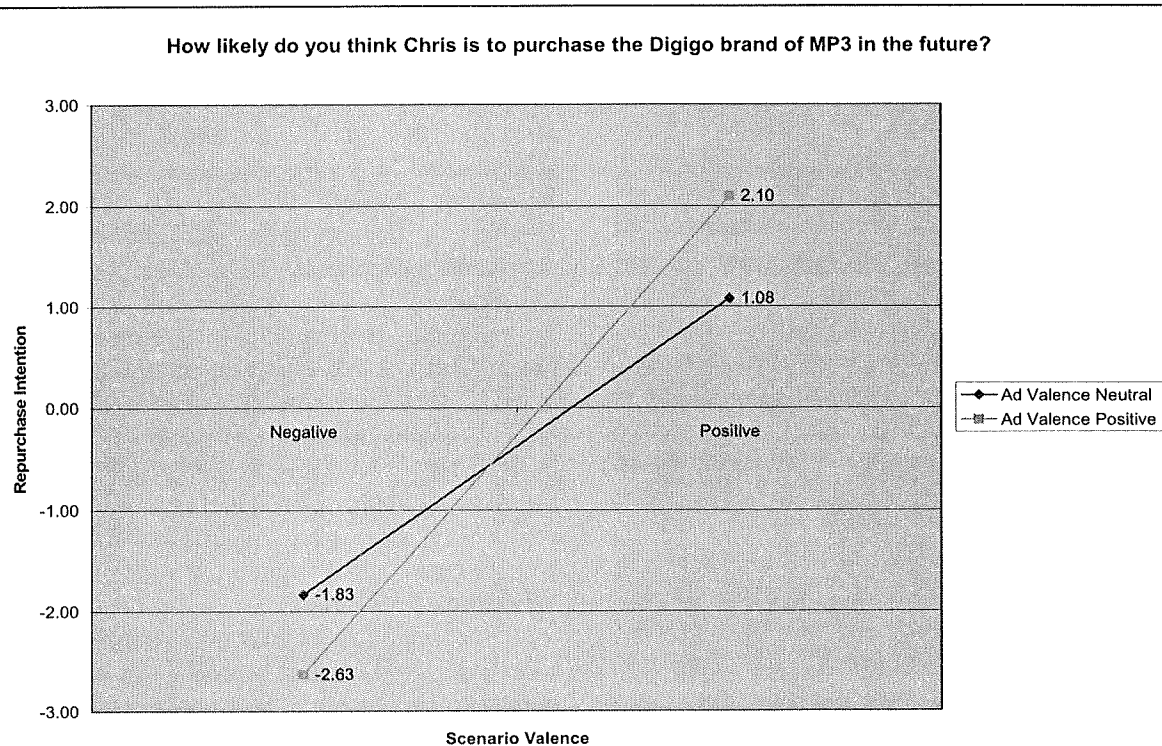


Figure 4: Repurchase Intention Scores for Scenario and Ad Conditions



The impact of the interaction between the experience and the message is clear when a negative experience is followed by a positive and therefore counter-experiential message. This leads to a paradox that stands in contrast to the reconstructive memory processes suggested in earlier research (Braun, et al. 1999). The positive message does not replace the negative experience; in fact, using satisfaction level and repurchase intention as measurements, it seems instead to intensify the negative experience. This is evident when the results of the negative experience/positive message are compared to the results of the negative experience/neutral message interactions.

This resistance to the marketing communication might be explained by considering the relative strengths of the communications. Tormala and Petty (2002) found that when people resist persuasion, they can actually become even more certain of their initial attitudes. A consumer whose attitude is based on a negative experience would, as demonstrated in the current study, maintain this negative attitude, especially given the highly positive nature of the message. Tormala and Petty (2002) found that this bolstering of the initial attitude occurred when the contradictory message was perceived to be a strong one, in this case, highly positive as opposed to neutral.

In addition to the effect of the perceived strength of the message, the strength of the experience also plays a role in the resistance to counter-experiential marketing communications. The experience itself becomes information that an external message simply cannot refute. From another perspective, given the negative experience, a neutral message might be harder to refute in that the message really does not offer much new information besides the continued existence of the product, while the positive message offers substantially more information that can be counter-argued and therefore more easily resisted (Ahluwalia 2000)

With reference to the elaboration likelihood model, Garretson and Burton (2005) found that the way in which consumers view and process advertisements may determine the degree to which particular cues receive elaboration and become encoded. A happy customer, however,

might not be motivated to process an ad at all, whether it was positively valenced or neutral; a happy customer simply might prefer to stay happy (Isen 1987). Unhappy customers might be motivated to process a message in a more central way, perhaps to find explanation for their plight. Failing that, an ad that is positive, and therefore counter-experiential, would simply add to the frustrating outcome and perhaps even provoke reactance against a firm that dares to suggest that the negative outcome that a customer experienced is in some way unusual, and implicitly, not because of the marketer or its product. As the results indicate, the new counter-experiential information is so dissonant that a preferred coping mechanism is manifest in a polarized attitude, making the processed communication easier to dispute but not ignore.

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The current study supports the notion that counter-experiential marketing communications can have a decidedly negative impact on customer satisfaction and repurchase intention. On the surface this does not seem like a novel finding, that unhappy customers are not likely to repurchase the product that caused their unsatisfactory outcome. However, there are situations in which a consumer is tied into a relationship (e.g., the furniture store example introduced earlier) or has limited purchase alternatives due to their local competitive or regulatory environment. In addition, the timing of the product or service malfunction as well as an organization's own policies regarding returns and other forms of redress (particularly for a time-intensive or service-intensive offering) may make redress inconvenient, unavailable, or otherwise insufficient. The current study addresses this situation and others, in which a consumer must cope with a negative experience followed by counter-experiential communications from the offending organization.

The relationship between communications, specifically advertising, and its impact on post-purchase satisfaction, has remained relatively unexplored in the customer satisfaction literature.

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The current research adds an important dimension to understanding the relationship between marketing communications and customer satisfaction, in that a positive message, when received not by a prospective customer but by a current customer, can have a counterintuitive and unexpectedly detrimental effect on that person's repurchase intention. Simply put, marketers must be careful not to overemphasize the positive attributes of their offerings to consumers who, due to negative experience, are predisposed to deny or counter-argue against such claims.

The advice to downplay the positive attributes of an offering seems to go against the nature of marketing communications in general. However, marketers must know their customers and their usage outcomes. Counter-experiential marketing communications can serve as a negative experience unto itself. Consider the experience of the MP3 player owner introduced at the beginning of this study. "How can you lie like that?" this student might exclaim. This also raises implications regarding the goal-orientation of the upset customer. Is this customer looking out for his or her own self-interest? Or are they looking out for others, so friends and associates don't make the same mistakes? Or is the motivation revenge, beyond an equitable return on the investment, against the marketer?

The results of this study in terms of customer satisfaction and repurchase intention are relevant to firms that look beyond a consumer's first experience with a product offering. This applies to marketers in general, advertising agencies, and customer service representatives. If a firm's customers are dissatisfied already, yet their repeat business is desired, the marketer should have knowledge about this sentiment before embarking on a promotional campaign. Smith (1993) found that when a negative experience precedes the exposure to advertising, the cognitive evaluations toward subsequent advertising are more negative. To expand upon this, as suggested by the current study, excessively positive, boasting, award-winning, chest-thumping advertising will just make unhappy customers feel worse by reminding them of their original expected outcome, likely a positive one. The counter-experiential communication can be expected to reduce satisfaction levels and repurchase intention. Even

if a marketer is less concerned with repeat business, it would be a bad idea to provoke complaining or negative word-of-mouth from unhappy customers that might drain firm resources and inform future customers.

In contrast, a positive experience coupled with a positive ad will lead to a higher repurchase intention and more satisfaction. This might be explained by the inherent confirmation of previously held, positive beliefs. The positive message would, in effect, become like another successful use of the product. This is the ideal situation for everybody involved. Of course, this fortunate outcome is easier said than done.

Marketers must therefore consider who is receiving their communications. Recall that such marketing communications occur throughout any individual's (or segment's) stage of the consumer decision-making and purchase process. Organizations must bear in mind what kinds of experiences its customers are having, and what sort of information the customer is including in her or her schema regarding the product and its alternatives. In this sense, a consumer's history and level of involvement with a product or service and its alternatives is an important avenue for future research.

Another imperative for marketers might be outside the realm of marketing communications, and that is to dedicate more resources toward improving the product or service itself. That is, research time and money that might be used to gauge the satisfaction level of current customers can be used preemptively, to make the firm's offering less likely to break down. Of course, research on customer satisfaction should not be ignored; it might just be more within the organization's capabilities to make product improvements that lead to satisfied customer who may react more favorably to reinforcing marketing communications.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study presented has revealed an important interaction between the purchase outcome and subsequent marketing communications, and the impact of this interaction on customer satisfaction



and repurchase intention. Some of the limitations of this research open the doors for subsequent investigation.

The design of the study was devised to establish the impact of counter-experiential marketing communications. Future research on this topic should consider a longitudinal approach, capturing *a priori* measures of the key dependent variables, satisfaction and repurchase intention. Along these lines, a more elaborate design would also recognize inherent limitations to the scenario-based approach, and take the concept of counter-experiential communications into a broader-based study, built upon real-world consumer experiences. Scenarios place the respondent in a contrived situation that can only approximate the behaviors and decision-making exhibited in a more natural setting. This casts the findings in a tentative light that must be developed further, perhaps via a more field-based study.

Regarding the instrument, the similarity of effects on customer satisfaction and repurchase intention suggests the need for a scale that goes beyond the seven-point scale used. The effect of the filler ads on short-term memory should also be considered (e.g., Garretson and Burton 2005).

Subsequent research might include different forms of marketing communication. While the current set of print advertisements were used based on their surface validity, the provocative results suggest that wider variety of communications, including comparative ads (negative toward one product or brand), news stories (perceived to be more objective), even product reviews, can expand upon the comparison between positive and neutral messages, even expanding toward negative or more ambiguous communications.

The current research has demonstrated the impact of counter-experiential marketing communications on customer satisfaction and repurchase intentions. Given the competition for customers and their loyalty and the clutter of marketing communication that customers are exposed to on a daily basis, it is vital that marketers target their communications carefully, and maintain an awareness of their current and prospective customers' purchase outcomes.

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