

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reaction to Deceptive Advertising in Brazil

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Abstract

This paper examines the Brazilian consumers and their reaction to deceptive and non-deceptive advertisements. Two versions of the same ad – one without and another with deception – were exposed to 359 respondents and reactions compared using the Wells scale. It was found that consumers tend not to claim their rights in court when faced by deceptive advertisement. Also, the emotional quotient (EQ) of the deceptive advertisement exceeds that of the non-deceptive, indicating that consumers perceive greater appeal in a deceptive advertisement than in the non-deceptive. The deceptive advertisement is even perceived as more honest than the non-deceptive.

Keywords: *Deceptive Advertising, Reaction, Brazil, Consumers.*

Introduction

Considering the strong competitiveness existing in current markets, companies strive to convince their target audience that they are the best option in the market to meet the requirements or wishes of the demand. However, very often such persuasion occurs in an anti-ethical, socially irresponsible manner, as when organizations seek to promote themselves and their products in detriment to the wellbeing of the society. For example, a manufacturer that convinces its clients about the value of its product will probably succeed in selling it; but if this manufacturer also causes pollution whose cost is higher than the benefit of the resulting product, the net outcome for the society will be a loss.

The most common tool that the marketing area provides for persuasion is advertising [3], although there are other elements of the marketing mix, such as other types of promotion, the product itself, some pricing techniques and distribution that convince the target-customers about the value of the offer. Adler and Rodman [1] say that persuasion is considered ethical if “it is adapted to established standards”, although such standards vary from one situation to another. Advertising obviously shows the positive side of what is being advertised, but there may have advertising pieces that give only half-truths about the advertised product (or service).

Consumers are more prone of having a positive belief or perception about the advertised product or service in response to deceptive advertising [14]. So consumers may perceive the product as more valuable than it really is, when it is communicated through deceptive advertisement. To prevent such situation, there are codes of ethics to be followed, drafted by different agencies, one of the best-known being the American Marketing Association (AMA) in the USA, but in most cases there is no evidence that they are adopted. This raises doubt about ethics in advertising.

In today's competitive environment there are many ways to attract customers, but few studies investigate whether the customer ceases to admire a firm that uses deceptive advertising. In principle, it may seem obvious that the public's perception toward such companies will be negatively affected, but it does not always happen in that way. Presumably, if deceived customers do not react to deception, its use will continue, since there is no negative counterpart or penalty for the company.

The purpose of this study is to identify how the Brazilian consumer reacts to companies that disseminate advertising with false or misleading

information, announcing unrealistic benefits to the target audience. The contribution is to identify whether consumers' reaction to a company, once having felt harmed by its advertising or publicity, may influence or reinforce companies to promote even more harm to consumers.

Reaction to Advertising

Advertising is a communication tool closely related to persuasion [16], and the reaction to an advertisement is somewhat relevant when analyzing how the consumer perceives the dissemination of a product. A reaction can be understood as a response to some previous action, or stimulus. Thus, if advertisement is understood as a stimulus, reactions could result from exposure to it.

Khan [12] believes that human behavior is affected by perception. This would be understood as a process consisting of five sub-processes – Stimulus, Registration, Interpretation, Feedback and Reaction. When an individual is exposed to some interesting stimulus, s/he will focus her/his attention on it. Interpretation occurs when meanings are attributed to the sensations felt, which are retained by memory and can lead to consumer behavior with positive or negative feedback for the individual. After interpreting the stimulus and the situation that is grasped by the person's memory, reaction follows in the form of buying or consuming.

Scales have been proposed to measure reactions from exposure to advertising. The best known is the Emotional Quotient Scale (EQ) by Wells [13;18], starting with a list of expressions and words corresponding to consumer reactions to print advertising. From this list, items assessed empirically as having high or low emotional appeal were identified, consisting of three dimensions, as seen in Table 1. The scale "capture, from the consumer perspective, the immediate emotional reaction to print advertisements" and "measure how effective is the advertising" [13]. Vieira, Costa, Montaña, & Dill [17] explain that, from the Wells scale, it was possible to develop "a scale of the reaction profile

for the ads", built to identify the reactions of consumers to the advertising that targeted them.

Wells scale is suitable for differentiating the appeal perceived by the target audience of the advertising, so it would help identify between two advertisements which the consumers perceive as having more or less appeal. This could be applied

when comparing two advertisements-for example, one misleading and one non misleading. In this case, Wells [18] uses 12 phrases referring to the advertising or commercial transmitted, six favorably worded and six unfavorably worded, all rated on a 5-point scale varying from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree", (1- I find this advertising very attractive; 2- I would probably not pay attention to this advertisement if I saw it in a magazine; 3- This is a warm advertisement and affects the emotional; 4- This advertisement makes me want to buy the announced product; 5- I find this advertisement boring; 6- I don't like this advertisement; 7- This advertising makes me feel good; 8- This is a wonderful advertisement; 9- This kind of advertising is easy to forget; 10- This is an attractive advertisement; 11- I'm tired of this kind of advertising; 12- I'm indifferent to this advertising), where the favorably-worded phrases are numbers 1, 3, 4, 7, 8 and 10, and the rest unfavorable. The agreements with the favorable items are added to the disagreements of the unfavorable items and the total is divided by 12 and multiplied by 100, thereby producing a number between 0 and 100. Multiplying by 100 in this case is only to eliminate the decimal points. The rating of a certain advertisement would be obtained from the average of the total ratings of each respondent. Wells scale indicates how much the audience of the advertising is attracted to it: the higher the rating, the more attraction [13].

In addition to Wells scale, other scales were developed for similar purposes specifically for TV commercials. This shows that different authors have been interested in studying reaction to advertising, although the Wells scale is more appropriate for print advertising, which explains why it was used in this research. A summary of the dimensions assessed in each can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1:Dimensions of prominent response profiles, according to the authors mentioned

Wells (1964)	Leavitt (1970)	Wells, Leavitt & McConville (1971)	Schlinger (1984)
Attractiveness; Vitality; Meaningfulness.	Energetic; Amusing; Personal relevance; Sensual; Authoritarian; Romantic; Familiar; Separated.	Humor; Vigor; Sensuality; Singularity; Personal relevance; Irritation; Familiar; Confident.	Entertainment; Confusion; Relevant news; Brand reinforcement; Empathy; Familiarity; Alienation.

Source: Adapted from Zinkhan & Zinkhan [19]

Striving for Consumer Rights

Marketing professionals have for a long time used emotional and rational appeals to promote ideas, goods and services [6]. The reaction to such appeals can determine a decision in favor or against what is being offered to the consumer. According to Petty & Cacioppo [15], researchers in the advertising field are concerned with emotional and cognitive reactions to advertising. Two kinds of persuasion have been defended: central, which is analytical and cognitive, and peripheral, which is holistic, synthetic and of an emotional nature. Some companies mislead their customers, and even when they perceive such malevolence they remain loyal to them. Apparently, these customers are ignorant of their basic rights, with some variations across countries.

The first time basic consumer rights were strongly addressed was in 1962, when US President John F. Kennedy, in a speech in Congress, presented the four basic consumer rights (Consumers' Bill of Rights), which, although not definitive, were the basis for consumers to now feel that they had a certain protection in relation to their interests in the relationship with companies that wanted only to obtain advantages over customers and were not concerned with their satisfaction [3;8]. These rights are originally: (i) the right to safety (refers to the protection against goods and services that may cause a hazard to health or life for the consumer, when used regularly); (ii) the right to be informed (means that the consumer must be given necessary – and enough – information to make intelligent and safe decisions, based on an informed choice, protected against misleading, cheating, illusory or fraudulent appeals displayed in advertisements, labeling, packaging and so on); (iii) the right to choose (this addresses guaranteed access to a wide range of goods and services at reasonable and competitive prices, with satisfactory quality); and (iv) the right to be heard (to have the assurance that consumer interests will be considered when formulating and putting in place government policies, and fair treatment will be provided, including consumer compensation when required).

In the USA, the consumer rights movement began in 1936 when the Consumers' Union was set up – today with millions of members, and whose focus is on performing tests on goods and services and providing information to consumers [11]. In Europe, the Consumer's Council, inaugurated in 1947 in Denmark and determined consumer consciousness, leading to the emergence of similar

agencies in other countries [7]. In developing countries this movement is more recent; in Brazil, for example, it only began in the 1970s with the creation of PROCON (Program for Consumer Guidance and Protection) and INMETRO (National Institute of Metrology, Standardization and Industrial Quality), with its focus on increasing safety of products offered on the market by industry. It was only in the 1980s with the rise of the National Consumer Protection Council that there was a more substantiated direction, which originated the Consumer Protection Code, including the rights addressed in the Brazilian Constitution [11].

Proliferation of deceptive advertisements presumably occurs due to consumers failing to react against the contrivances created to deceive them. Broadbridge and Marshall [5], when investigating the behavior complaints and protests of consumers, noticed that on several occasions they do not complain to the provider of the demanded product or service, in what is described as *Do-nothing* behavior. This occurs with customers of supermarkets (70% do not complain of anything that has been harmful to them), cosmetics (45%) or of durable goods (30%), generally because consumers think that “it is not worth spending time and effort” [5]. Our study focuses on Brazilian consumers, bearing in mind that they have less experience with claiming their rights, since their consumer protection code is much recent than those in more developed countries, so the hypothesis to be tested is:

H1: Consumers tend not to claim their rights in court when faced by deceptive advertisement.

Method

The study was undertaken in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, between June and July 2012. The sample of 359 interviewees was made up of 49% men and 51% women. Their academic level shows a prevalence of people with complete high school and incomplete university education (44.6%), coherent with the predominant 18-24 age group (42.1% of the sample), 17.2% over 51 years old, 12.7% in the 25-31 age group, 11.4% between 32 and 38 years old, and 10.0% between 39 and 45 years old. The majority (59.3%) of respondents were single.

We performed an experiment using two groups: one group was exposed to deceptive advertisements and the other to the same advertisements in their non-deceptive version. A test was also performed to check about differences

between respondents of both groups, but no difference was found: the variables were tested for gender ($t=1.237$; $p\text{-value}=0.217$), age ($t=0.859$; $p\text{-value}=0.391$), marital status ($t=-0.617$; $p\text{-value}=0.538$), social class ($t=0.832$; $p\text{-value}=0.406$), education ($t=-0.634$; $p\text{-value}=0.527$) and occupation ($t=1.624$; $p\text{-value}=0.106$), and in none of these cases was the zero hypothesis of equality between the groups rejected, which indicates the homogeneity among the respondents.

To test the H1 hypothesis, respondents received a printed advertisement of tooth paste in the deceptive ($n = 190$) and non-deceptive ($n = 169$) versions, and answered a questionnaire. The deceptive version contained several contrivances against the codes regulating advertising in Brazil, while the non-deceptive was completely lawful, adopting all necessary details so as not to be misleading. The product was chosen because it is used by 98.4% of adults who brush their teeth [10], therefore it would not be a novelty for practically any respondent. The participants in the study answered whether they considered such advertising deceptive or not, and what they would do after looking at it. The idea, in this case, is to assess, among those who perceive deceptive advertising, their later behavior, noting whether

they would take action with some specific agency, would tend to buy the product, would complain about it or would do nothing (this option would be the expected answer by whoever considered the advertisement non-deceptive, since it would make no sense to exercise their rights when they perceive nothing wrong with what was presented). We adapted the scales of Baker and Churchill [2] and Bower [4], using 5-point Likert to identify what the respondent would do based on the information received, and also used the Emotional Quotient Scale (EQ) [18].

Results and Analysis

After selecting the respondents who considered the advertisement deceptive ($n=241$), we identified those who agreed (or strongly agreed) that would do nothing – that is, the consumers who would not exercise their rights – although they had felt harmed by the contents of the advertisement (regardless of being actually deceptive or not, since what was analyzed here is perception), as shown in Table 2.

Testing if the average in the case exceeds 4, the minimum value that represents agreement with the affirmative that they would do nothing, the

Table 2: Answers to “Have you already taken action against some company that you felt deceived you with some commercial or advertisement?”

No, although having been cheated by a company, I've never acted against it	36.7%
No, I've never felt cheated by a company	30.1%
Yes, I called the company's customer support and asked for compensation	16.5%
Yes, I took it to court	9.3%
Yes, I went to the consumer protection agency and filed a complaint	7.4%

Source: Field survey (2012)

result was: $n = 241$; $\bar{x} = 4.2407$; $s = 4$; $s = 1.23835$; where: n : Size of sample; \bar{x} : Average of sample; s : Value used to compare with \bar{x} ; s : Sample standard deviation.

H1 was accepted ($t = 3.017$; $p = 0.00$), which leads to rejection of the null hypothesis of equality between the quantities of consumers that intend to claim their rights in the legal sector, and those who have no such intention. So, the quantity of consumers who would do nothing after feeling cheated by an advertisement exceeds those who would do something (such as complain to the relevant agencies or to the company that disseminated the advertisement), meaning that consumers tend not to claim their rights in court when faced by deceptive advertisement. □□

Wells scale [18] was used to analyze the consumers' reaction to deceptive and non-

deceptive advertising. First, the emotional quotient (EQ) was calculated for both advertising pieces to compare their values, which would consequently indicate the emotional appeal of each type of advertising, in the eyes of the public in the study. In practical terms, the higher the score, the greater the appeal of the advertisement.

In the present case, the field results are found in Table 3:

Based on the data shown in Table 3, EQ was calculated, with the following results: $EQ_{\text{non-deceptive}} = 12.09$; $EQ_{\text{deceptive}} = 12.84$. Although there was little difference, it is found that the emotional quotient of the deceptive advertisement exceeds that of the non-deceptive. In other words, consumers perceive greater appeal in a deceptive advertisement than in the non-deceptive advertisement. This result makes sense, bearing in mind the reality of the markets; to call

Table 3: Field date for calculating the EQ

	Non-deceptive advertising					Deceptive advertising				
	SD	D	N	A	SA	SD	D	N	A	SA
I find this advertising very attractive	136	16	15	5	1	142	19	12	10	11
I would probably not pay attention to this advertising if I saw it in a magazine	25	33	21	24	70	48	25	12	38	71
This is warm advertising and affects the	127	20	17	8	1	162	12	8	1	11
This advertising makes me want to buy the advertised product	140	19	12	2	0	154	20	3	4	13
I find this advertisement not very interesting	14	13	13	22	111	30	10	9	33	112
I don't like this advertisement	3	8	26	21	115	13	12	43	32	94
This advertisement makes me feel good	120	19	23	5	5	123	16	39	3	12
This is a wonderful advertisement	137	15	13	2	6	152	12	11	4	15
This kind of advertising is easy to forget	13	32	27	30	71	10	11	17	37	119
This is attractive advertising	121	24	15	9	3	130	28	17	7	11
I'm tired of this kind of advertising	15	9	53	27	67	16	6	69	21	75
I'm indifferent to this advertisement	13	26	34	25	74	13	3	30	17	122

Source: Field survey (2012)

Legend: SD=Strongly disagree; D=Disagree; N=Neutral; A=Agree; SA=Strongly agree.

consumers' attention there is always an ethical limit to be followed, and if all companies bore in mind that such a limit has to be respected, they would all be restricted somehow to a specific threshold. When companies that use bait or contrivance attract the attention of potential customers, this limit would be exceeded, and attractions, which will never be delivered or respected, will call consumer attention. Deceptive advertising where the announced price is extremely low tends to attract more attention – and therefore more appeal – of those interested in the product in question. The later disappointment does not contribute for consumers to mistrust beforehand the commercial addressed to them.

Wells [18] proposes yet another scale to compare the reaction of the interviewees to the displayed advertisements. Using a semantic differential scale (created by Wells [18]), each group of

respondents individually assessed each advertisement (deceptive or otherwise) to comprise the reaction profile for each. The scale consisted of adjectives shown in Table 4, which should be rated on a scale of seven (7), with the results shown in this table:

It is found that bad adjectives predominated for both advertisements. Both the deceptive and non-deceptive version did not please the respondents, but there was a slight difference in favor of the deceptive, which had a general rating of 4.92 against 5.23 for the non-deceptive (higher ratings mean worse results). The non-deceptive advertising exceeded the deceptive only on the "easy to remember" item, as shown in the Fig. 1, presented to ease the comparison of the results. Thus, it is apparent that the general reaction to deceptive advertising tends to exceed that in relation to the non-deceptive.

Table 4: Field results using the scale of semantic differential of Wells [18] for deceptive and non-deceptive advertising

	In blue:	In red:	
Beautiful	5.90	5.67	Ugly
Pleasant	5.52	5.22	Unpleasant
Gentle	6.04	5.39	Harsh
Appealing	5.01	4.65	Unappealing
Attractive	4.99	4.68	Unattractive
In good taste	5.44	4.91	In poor taste
Exciting	5.53	5.05	Unexciting
Interesting	5.58	5.32	Uninteresting
Worth looking at	5.63	5.17	Not worth looking at
Comforting	4.68	4.42	Frightening
Colorful	4.09	4.01	Colorless
Fascinating	5.31	5.10	Boring
Meaningful	5.24	5.09	Meaningless
Convincing	5.71	5.24	Unconvincing
Important to me	6.07	5.56	Unimportant to me
Strong	5.86	5.34	Weak
Honest	4.93	4.48	Dishonest
Easy to remember	4.64	4.80	Hard to remember
Easy to understand	3.69	3.44	Hard to understand

Worth remembering	5.66	5.33	Not worth remembering
Simple	3.63	3.22	Complicated
New	5.40	5.34	Ordinary
Fresh	5.47	5.06	Stale
Lively	5.38	5.14	Lifeless
Sharp	5.40	5.27	Washed out

Source: Field survey (2012)

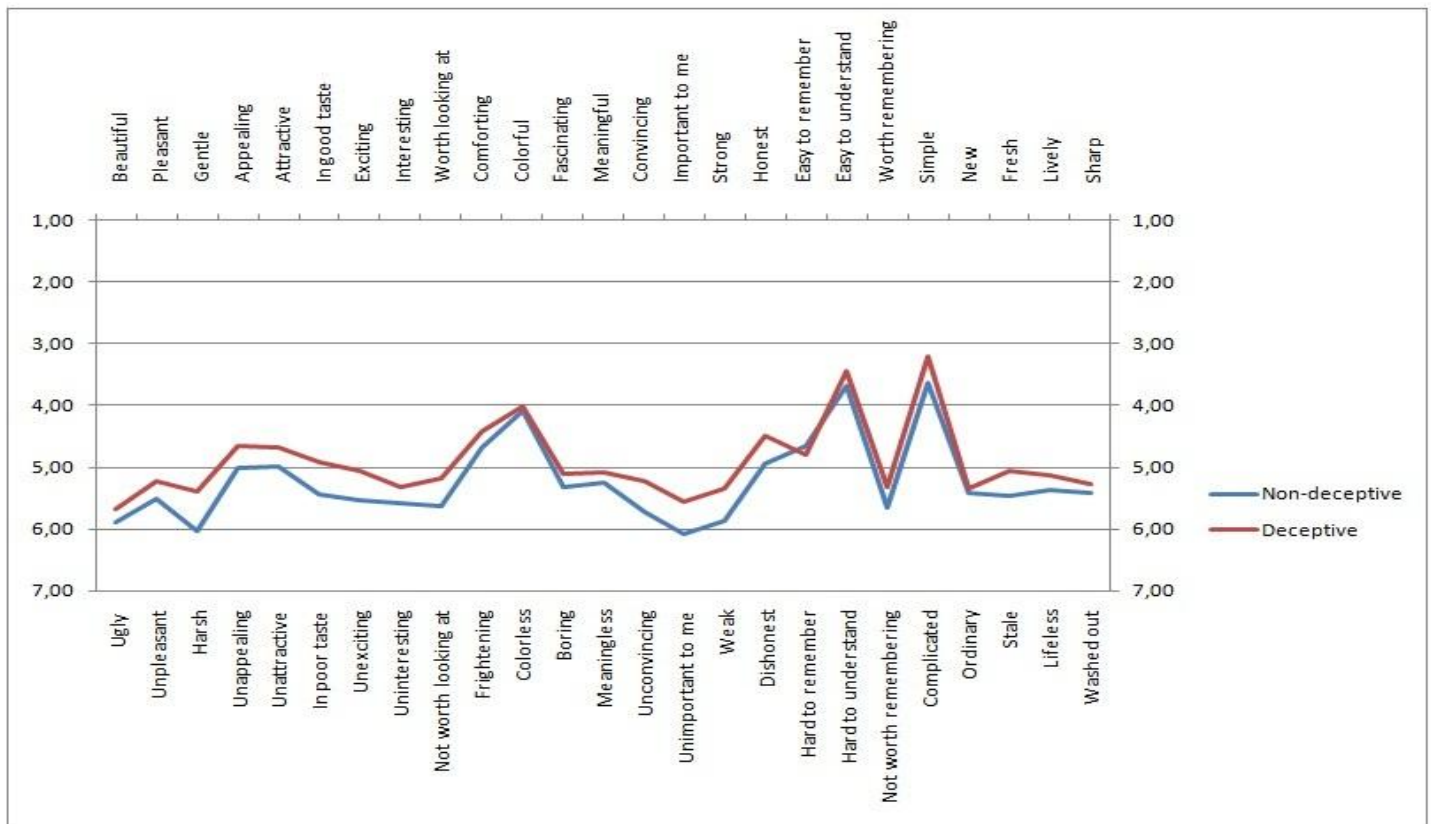


Fig.1: Semantic differential scale

Source: Field survey (2012)

It cannot be said that there is a considerable difference between the averages (for $\alpha=0.05$, $p=0.225$ is obtained, and $t=-1.229$), but the slight difference observed demonstrates that the population proves to be no great admirer of non-deceptive advertising, nor perceives major differences between versions with and without bait advertising. This indicates that possible future stricter control by responsible agencies for the distribution of general advertising might be necessary to moderate the degree of contrivance released to the consumer market in advertising.

The deceptive advertisement is even perceived as more honest than the non-deceptive. This could turn into a future problem for the government, when trying to create public policies to advertising (which does not exist in Brazil presently). When consumers accept dishonest ads as a usual way to communicate with them, the whole society seems to be in danger, and the adequate entity to regulate the communication means is the government. So, aiming at the future wellbeing, this entity should be aware of what is happening in the market.

A factorial analysis was undertaken of the components in the reaction profile to deceptive and non-deceptive advertising. Starting with the reaction to non-deceptive advertising, three factors were obtained – just as also measured by Wells [18], who called them Attractiveness, Meaningfulness and Vitality –, as shown in Table 5. Before performing such an analysis, KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) statistics were calculated (using the SPSS v18 software), which is a measure of joint correlation that assesses the suitability of the sample with regard to the partial correlation degree between the variables [9]. For non-deceptive advertising, this value was 0.935, which means excellent suitability for using such analysis, since values close to 1 indicate close correlation between the variables. The first factor in this case, called Attractiveness, explains 52.4% of the accumulated percentage of the observed variance. The second factor, Meaningfulness, explains another 6.78%, and the third factor, Simplicity, another 6.0%.

In the case of deceptive advertising, the KMO

value was 0.946, also indicating excellent suitability [9]. When doing the factorial analysis, the factors obtained were shown in Table 6. In this case, the first factor (Attractiveness), explains 54.0% of the accumulated percentage of the observed variance. The second factor, Meaningfulness, on the other hand, explains 8.23% and the third factor, Simplicity, explains 5.9% of the variance. It is apparent that the

component variables of the factors referring to deceptive and non-deceptive advertising are quite similar. The first factor (which explains a much higher percentage of the variance) in both cases indicates that the advertisements apparently emphasize aspects linked to the audience's emotions, since most of their component variables are of this nature.

Table 5: Factors – non-deceptive advertising

	Component		
	1	2	3
Beautiful	.737	.343	.100
Pleasant	.761	.390	.141
Charming	.760	.371	.021
Appealing	.816	.163	.166
Captivating	.812	.218	.225
In good taste	.723	.399	.151
Exciting	.694	.371	.110
Interesting	.644	.566	.055
Comforting	.635	.140	.063
Colorful	.520	.325	.343
Lively	.558	.539	.191
Worth looking at	.402	.662	.133
Fascinating	.499	.591	.142
Meaningful	.383	.715	.184
Convincing	.438	.688	.128
Important to me	.442	.684	-.011
Strong	.512	.667	.073
Honest	.112	.602	.303
Easy to recall	.188	.619	.376
Worth remembering	.311	.755	.118
Fresh	.187	.763	-.027
Modern	.493	.515	.098
Penetrating	.222	.683	.254
Easy to understand	.166	.204	.876
Simple	.148	.121	.878

Source: Field survey (2012)

Table 6: Factors – deceptive advertising

	Component		
	1	2	3
Beautiful	.743	.384	-.043
Pleasant	.787	.287	.070
Charming	.740	.463	-.061
Appealing	.816	.230	.127
Captivating	.831	.221	.120
In good taste	.833	.252	.085
Exciting	.723	.433	.160
Interesting	.719	.526	.004
Worth looking at	.689	.482	-.015
Comforting	.735	.174	.137
Convincing	.670	.511	.038
Honest	.660	.141	.150
Fascinating	.589	.640	.094
Meaningful	.571	.643	.132
Important to me	.608	.610	-.104
Strong	.484	.680	.090
Easy to remember	.361	.496	.355
Worth remembering	.560	.594	.029
Fresh	.292	.691	-.226
Modern	.207	.682	-.005
Lively	.195	.821	.062
Penetrating	.285	.807	-.025

Colorful	.135	.422	.475
Easy to understand	.107	-.033	.856
Simple	.043	-.135	.825

Source: Field survey (2012)

Final Remarks

This study investigated the reaction of consumers when exposed to deceptive advertisements, observing that most of them do not exercise their rights after encountering a situation in which they have been harmed by a deceptive advertisement. Only a few mentioned searching for legal entities to seek compensation for possibly suffering some damage. The results ratify the findings of Broadbridge and Marshall [5], who mentioned the behavior called *Do-nothing*; that is, when consumers, even when feeling harmed by their purchase, fail to complain. For the Brazilian consumers in the study, this conduct prevails.

Using Wells scale [18], the consumer reaction was analyzed in relation to deceptive and non-deceptive advertisings. The general reaction to deceptive advertising exceeded, although with little difference, the reaction to the non-deceptive. Thus, it can be said that the deceptive advertisements presented are more attractive than the non-deceptive. This is one more topic that deserves researchers' attention, since attractiveness has not yet been analyzed in the literature when comparing anti-ethical and ethical messages, in advertising or any other communication tool.

This study contributes to furthering the knowledge regarding consumer reaction to

deceptive advertising: most respondents did not seek for their rights, even perceiving that they were exposed to deceptive ad. So, in weaker regulated markets advertising agents could create deceptive or anti-ethical commercials, without causing major commotion among those who would be the target of the disseminated messages. It is a hazardous situation for the society that strives to prevent the proliferation of such communication. The same results can also be felt as indicative of what occurs in TV commercials and the Internet – a suggestion that this could be a future subject of new studies. A typical example of such a situation would be the widespread spams to mislead the consumers targeted for these kinds of deceptive advertising. Public policy implications include the dilemma of strengthening the legislation in nations where the society is not affluent enough to regulate itself, leaving to the nation state the role of regulating the market.

Since the sample of this study consisted only of Brazilians, whose reality is different from that of consumers in other countries, the advancement of this study in other markets may be performed for comparative analysis. Another suggestion for future research would be to analyze the reaction to abusive advertising – commercials that incite violence, discrimination, environmental disrespect or that induce consumers to behave in detriment to their health or safety.

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