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Natasha Braunwart
Portland State University

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Animals in Advertising

Eliciting powerful consumer response, resulting in enhanced brand engagement

Natasha Braunwart

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Portland State University

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Abstract

The use of live animals as a communications tool has been seen in thousands of commercials, many of which have received international attention through online channels. As the Internet becomes a prevalent sharing platform, the reactions from viewers can be better understood with quantifiable metrics. A new perspective on why live animals are used in advertising is given, with consideration of three branches of study. These include (1) the role of animals in advertising, (2) the role of animals in human's everyday life, and (3) the development of brand engagement. The 2015 Super Bowl commercial line-up is looked at, and Budweiser's *Lost Dog* commercial is closely examined. *Lost Dog* is presented as an exemplary case demonstrating how these three branches work together to create successful engagement with consumers. Recommendations to further research consumer responses are made.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Literature Review	5
Role of Animals in Advertising	6
Role of Animals in Everyday Human Life	7
Development of Brand Engagement	10
Methods	11
Results & Discussion	13
Conclusion & Recommendations	19
Bibliography	20

Introduction

Animals have been featured in different advertisements for decades doing anything from talking, to walking, to interacting with an owner, to simply appearing in the background. Animals can be found in television commercials all over the world and have the ability to excite and encourage brand engagement from consumers. I consider not just the role animals' play in mass media advertising, but also the role they play in human's every day lives. Since animals are prevalent in all forms of human communication, and increasingly used in advertising, I aim to better understand what kind of responses and outcomes marketers can achieve when utilizing them as a communications tool. Consequently, my research attempts to answer the question *how does the use of animals in advertising influence consumer brand engagement?*

Advertising utilizes the human-animal relationship in order to leverage different associations with brands. The history and strength this relationship has, even from a basic human biological standpoint, allows for a much deeper connection to occur between the consumer and brand. This in turn, enhances consumer's brand engagement.

In this paper, the term *brand engagement* follows the definition offered by Bobby J. Calder and Edward C. Malthouse as can be found in the literature review on page 8. This definition states *brand engagement* as any experience beyond other easily forgotten experiences. This could mean sharing a post on Facebook, talking about an advertisement to a friend because it was funny, or simply thinking about it again later after viewing it. Brand engagement does not have to be a significant, life-changing experience, but it does go beyond basic brand awareness. In the larger context of the advertising field, this type of involvement moves viewers from stage-to-stage of

the Awareness – Interest – Desire – Action (AIDA) model. The topic of this paper focuses on animals as a communications tool, which could be considered as a tool to move viewers from the awareness stage to the interest stage.

The following section offers a review of literature within the three areas of study considered.

This review reveals why animals are such powerful tools for evoking emotional reactions from people, and why utilizing them in advertising is effective in developing brand engagement.

Literature Review

The human-animal relationship has been illustrated in the media for hundreds of years, yet has very little discussion of how or why it is utilized within the advertising industry. In preparation of researching this topic, three areas became important to the discussion: the role of animals in advertising, the role of animals in everyday human life, and the development of brand engagement. These three topics present a gap in research where a relationship exists but has yet to be articulated. The use of live animals in advertising continues to grow (Christian). I argue this is because humans subconsciously bond with animals. This subconscious relationship is triggered when people see live animals in the media, and in turn leads the consumer through a primarily affective, and secondarily, cognitive information process. The following is a literature review of different scholarship examining these three categories. When linked together, these areas of study form a synthesis, which begins to explain how and why animals are used in advertising.

Role of Animals in Advertising

Some analysis on how animals play a role in advertising currently exists. For example, *Animals, Archetypes, and Advertising (A³): The Theory and Practice of Customer Brand Symbolism*, written by Stephen Lloyd and Arch Woodside in 2013, thoroughly explores the cultural and symbolic use of animals to help transfer meaning to a brand. Lloyd and Woodside review work acknowledging animals are given meaning by cultural schemas. They argue the use of animals in advertising allows for consumers to activate these associations, and then apply them to the brand meaning. They claim animals are a very strong symbol and contribute to brand engagement, thus brand equity – meaning the brand becomes so recognizable to the point of having a higher value than competitors. Animals are strong symbols because they act as a mode of transport (defined as “an experience with great relevance to positive engagement”) and enable consumers to have a transformative experience. This experience may not be drastic or life altering, but at a minimum may be a *thought*-altering experience. This allows consumers to change the way they think or feel about a specific brand or product. Lloyd and Woodside also identify gaps within the field of study and discuss examples used in different advertisements. They recognize this research is currently limited to print advertisements and then use print advertising examples to create a deeper understanding of what has been done so far.

In another scholarly study, Spears et al. first introduced the Symbolic Communications Model (SCM Model) in their 1996 work titled the *Symbolic Role of Animals in Print Advertising: Content Analysis and Conceptual Development*. This model made the first link between animals and their culturally symbolic use in advertising. By looking at the types of animals, categories of products, and representation of animals (anthropomorphic vs. nonanthropomorphic), this model can help better understand how animals are utilized in advertising. The results of this study

solidify the use of animals help associate the brand with some other feeling or understanding of another object/symbol. An overarching strength of this study was the results section. The conclusions made as to *how* animals are used in advertising gave great insight. Two examples include (1) wild animals being more likely to be anthropomorphized than domesticated and (2) dogs and cats are the most used in pet supply commercials. These conclusions made from hundreds of analyses show great promise, but still fail to answer the question of *why* these animals are used in such ways (other than just satisfying the need to associate a brand)? The next sensible questions would be why do we like these animals enough to use them in the mass media? And why do they seem to have such a strong affect on how we, consumers, interpret or engage with the brand?

Role of Animals in Everyday Human Life

In *Why Do We Like or Dislike Animals?*, written by Social Spatial Analyst Maarten Jacobs, lies a discussion about the complex feelings and emotions humans experience from animals. Jacobs argues that Emotional Theory can generally explain this emotional connection. Phylogenesis (biological development), Sociogenesis (cultural development), and Ontogenesis (individual development) each influence the ways in which humans react emotionally to animals. What Jacobs does particularly well in his discussion is reviewing the concept of the “unconscious human mind” and how we are biologically wired to react certain ways in relation to animals. Our genetic make up comes from these creatures, which makes many of our bodily reactions recognizable from species to species. Jacobs gives two examples that seem particularly relevant to the conversation of animals in advertising. The first was an experiment with two-day-old babies who were shown two different videos. One video illustrated a figure of a walking hen made up of spotlights. The other video portrayed the same movement but randomly generated in

an unknown physical form. The babies favored the walking hen, which indicates the fascination of viewing animals starts at a very early age. The second example Jacobs gives is the image of happy cows grazing in a field. These cows are not running or visually strained, which, to humans, indicates safety and happiness. While cows may not have a particular association with every individual, this pleasant scene of cows grazing elicits a positive emotion, and in turn constitutes that same positive feeling toward liking the animal. Jacobs claims that these emotions are not a conscious effort, but a biological development. Acting as indicators of safety or danger, the identification of emotions in other beings (animals) helps us survive. If we see scared, running cows, chances are we will turn around and run with them. This survival mechanism has caused humans to develop an unconscious understanding of many animals, allowing us to relate without consciously knowing it. The unconscious understandings are part of what makes us like or dislike animals. These types of examples strongly suggest that animals can elicit positive emotions even at the most basic and subconscious (even unconscious) level.

The Biophilia Hypothesis, edited by Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O. Wilson, elaborates on this idea that humans have a tendency to focus on animals due to a deep connection developed with animals over time (Kellert and Wilson, 186). Biophilia is defined as “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (Kellert and Wilson, 331). This theory asserts how humans separate inanimate objects from living objects. It also reinforces how animals have contributed to human survival as Jacobs’s idea suggests. They claim animal presence, touch, and attention have contributed to the pattern of social dialogue that helps maintain human health (Kellert and Wilson, 187). Throughout this book, Kellert and Wilson discuss evidence proving animals have become part of human’s social society. They argue that due to animal’s physical and emotional similarities to humans, their role in our lives has become culturally relevant, especially through

symbolism. In the time since humans became less connected to animals in nature, the desire to include them in our everyday lives (through symbolism, domestication, or therapeutic use) has increased. Wilson claims biophilia has power not just through the interaction between humans and animals, but also through animal symbolism. This symbolism is driven by biological, behavioral, and political influences. Kellert and Wilson do a superb job linking biological examples of humans understanding animals. They also effectively explain how animals have become remarkably relevant to human's everyday lives. Our biological need to relate to the wild is fulfilled by associating with animals. These creatures are capable of eliciting diverse reactions from humans, anything from a longer gaze, to an emotional cry. This is why the fascination and use of animals in our culture has become so valuable.

Both emotion and reason play a role in marketer's ability to persuade consumers. This is why the hunt for persuasive tools (such as animals) persists. In *Emotion and Reason in Persuasion: Applying the ARI and CASC Scale*, an alternative approach to

Figure 1 (Buck, Ross, Anderson, Chaudhuri, and Ray)

understanding how these two elements function in the process of persuasion. The Affect – Reason – Involvement Model (ARI Model), explains how affect and reason are connected to one another and how this relationship influences involvement. As can be seen in Figure 1, Buck et al. explains how even when one is persuaded with an increasing level of reasoning, the affective influence never reaches zero. This means there is always an affective influence in persuasion, no matter how logical the argument may seem. Human emotion will always play a role in

persuasion. A new terminology of what the subjective experience of emotion (affect) is also considered. Many researchers consider emotion (affect) and reasoning (cognition) to be two completely disconnected things, yet Buck et al. suggests otherwise. In reference to DM Tucker's neurological research, he suggests the immediate "syncretic cognition" (affective) reactions versus the linear "analytic cognition" (cognitive) reactions are linked. Buck et al. suggests that "affect" is its own type of knowledge (Buck, Ross, Anderson, Chaudhuri, and Ray 648). This idea is relevant, showing how once an emotional experience or learned attitude/behavior has occurred, it becomes part of the human understanding, also known as cognition. This framework can be directly applied to long-established human-animal relationships. Not only does this relationship elicit an emotional response because of the history and subconscious understanding of one another, but it also elicits a cognitive, knowledge driven response. This is because once an emotional experience has occurred it is stored as a factual record of the past and becomes more knowledge driven even though it did not start out that way. For example, if the first experience someone had with a dog was being cuddled then it becomes a cognitive understanding for that person that they like dogs. The combination of affective and cognitive reactions, according to many in the field, and addressed by this article, leads to involvement. Involvement is also closely related to engagement, which will be further discussed next.

Development of Brand Engagement

In *Media Engagement and Advertising Effectiveness* Bobby J. Calder and Edward C. Malthouse review the discussion of engagement. They start out with what they consider experiences to be - *part of a conscious feeling of an event leading somewhere*. They can be profound, but most often they just stand out from the ones that are easily forgotten. At the very minimum, Calder and Malthouse claim what constitutes a form of engagement is any experience that stands out from

an ordinary experience. Calder and Malthouse claim one can be engaged with something whether or not they like it, so it “makes sense” to separate hedonic experiences from the discussion of engagement. While it may be possible to engage with something you do not care for, taking hedonic experiences out of the discussion completely is deficient. Just as many students who attend college change their major multiple times, they do so because they feel that they are more interested and *like* something else better. They feel that they will be able to engage with the subject or field easier because of this. This same concept applies to liking or disliking an advertisement. If a consumer strongly dislikes an ad, it is probable they will have a harder time engaging with it. Yet, when hedonic experiences are completely cut out of the discussion, this theory has no chance at being proven or disproven. I would argue hedonic experiences have significance and must stay in the conversation when considering brand engagement.

Methods

For this project, ten commercials were documented as examples of live animals being used as a communications tool in advertising. For the sake of relevancy and consistency, the selection process for these ads consisted of a focus on only Super Bowl 2015 commercials posted on YouTube that included live animals as a significant part of the message communicated. Of the 69 that commercials received airtime during the 2015 Super Bowl, nearly 35% featured animals (including those that were digitalized or anthropomorphized). Of that percentage, ten commercials (41%) featured live animals (“Super Bowl 49 at NFL.com...”). This substantial percentage of commercials using live animals as a communications tool makes the Super Bowl commercial line-up the perfect content to study. In addition to heavy use of live animals in its content, the Super Bowl averaged over 114 million viewers per minute in 2015, offering an abundance of data to be analyzed and discussed (Riccobono).

Another reason this research specifically focuses on Super Bowl 2015 commercials posted to YouTube is the trend of digital media, especially mobile platforms, becoming the rule rather than the exception (“Top 5 Trends in Digital Media for 2015”). As this trend gains traction, marketers continue to try and understand the best ways to reach their audience. By focusing on digital media rather than other media types (such as print or outdoor), this research may offer insights to optimizing the use of communication tools for this channel.

This selection requirement also allowed for hard metrics. Metrics that were recorded during this research process include *views*, *likes*, *dislikes*, *comments*, and *consumer recall* in order to begin to understand how consumers interact with each of the recorded brands. Other pieces of information recorded included the title of the commercial, what animal type featured, the brand name, what type of product it was advertising, and in what context the animal was being used. Whether or not the commercial was part of a larger campaign with multiple spots was recorded as well. All of this information was recorded as preliminary research to begin identifying patterns in which animals are being used as communication tools.

While there are benefits and reasons behind focusing on Super Bowl 2015 commercials, there are also biases to recognize in this method. Since YouTube has over 1 billion members that can post nearly anything they want, there are multiple users who have the ability to post the same video to different accounts (“Statistics”). This creates a selection bias that is important to acknowledge within this project. For example, a company like Android may post its Super Bowl commercials on their YouTube channel, but then any random consumer may also post it on a personal YouTube channel simply because they like the commercial. This then allows anyone

searching on YouTube to find the same video in multiple locations and consequently lead to one receiving 300 views and the other receiving 170,000 views. For the sake of this research, the first organically generated video after searching the commercial title in YouTube was selected. This often resulted in videos that carried the most views, likes, and comments. If this research were to be continued with more time and in depth, consideration of the fragmented viewing opportunities on YouTube would be required.

After recording data from the ten Super Bowl 2015 commercials, one was selected to discuss in detail exactly how live animals were used as a communications tool. The commercial details that were previously recorded will be laid out. Then, how the animal(s) were used to create different associations, if any, will be discussed. Following this we will look at how these animals were used to create a deeper connection between the customer and brand. Finally, the success of the brand engagement based on utilizing these animals will be analyzed.

Results & Discussion

After viewing and recording the ten Super Bowl 2015 commercials featuring live animals, a few main product types surfaced. Figure 2 shows the five different product categories that used animals as part of their communications

Figure 2

strategy. As can be seen in Figure 2, half of the commercials that utilized live animals as part of

the communication were selling some type of food or drink. While the remaining categories varied, they all had the commonality of selling some type of service. After recognizing these product type categories, one additional significant pattern emerged. Each commercial utilizing live animals also established one of two relationship types: animal – animal or animal – human. The animal – animal relationships demonstrated animals being friends with one another while the animal – human relationships demonstrated various forms of interaction.

As Figure 3 shows, 20% were animal – animal relationships, like Android’s *Friends Furever* showing unconventional animals hugging, playing, or cuddling. The other 80% of commercials established an animal – human

Figure 3

relationship type. This relationship type varied in context. Some commercials, such as Discover’s *Surprise*, featured a screaming goat surprising a man walking into his apartment. Others, such as Doritos’s *When Pigs Fly* featured a boy playing with his pig, eventually creating a contraption to make the pig fly. Then there were commercials such as Budweiser’s *Lost Dog* spot that featured a rancher with his puppy and Clydesdale horses making his life complete with their friendship, which will be further discussed in the following section. These different relationship types were significant in relating to and eliciting emotional reactions from viewers, which led to all kinds of feedback online in the form of likes and comments. Some comments even lead to viewer interaction, developing relationships online through comments. These comment conversations consisted of viewers telling personal stories relating to the commercial

with other viewers commenting back and starting a completely new conversation about their own lives and how they related. The use of animals as a communications tool in these cases did not just elicit brand engagement, but also developed new relationships *because of* the brand. As Lloyd and Woodside suggested in *Animals, Archetypes, and Advertising (A³)*, these featured animals created a connection with consumers and developed into brand engagement, which then formed into various levels of transformative experiences for viewers.

The Super Bowl 2015 spot selected for discussion in this paper is Budweiser's *Lost Dog* commercial. This commercial was selected because it exemplifies the type of relationship mentioned prior, which consumers so strongly respond and relate to. Budweiser, a highly recognized beer brand, has become well known for its long-standing Clydesdale horse and adorable puppy commercials when it comes to the Super Bowl. This commercial also represents successful brand engagement with viewers. For the second year in a row, Budweiser has ranked number one in USA TODAY's Ad Meter's consumer panel of nearly 7,000 voters who rank Super Bowl commercials every year. (Horovitz)

Lost Dog is a sequel to Budweiser's Super Bowl 2014 puppy commercial. Each 60-spot is part of a larger advertising campaign called "Best Buds." *Lost Dog* features the same Clydesdale horses and golden retriever puppy as the previous 2014 commercial, but this year a wolf was added to the mix. The 60-second spot begins with actor Don Jeanes bringing the Clydesdale back to his stall where the golden retriever puppy waits. After the two friendly animals are separated, the puppy goes searching for his friend in the back of a horse trailer where he is accidentally trapped and taken away from the ranch. Escaping the trailer after reaching the city, the puppy begins his journey home. Viewers see clips of the puppy in strenuous conditions while also seeing clips of

his distressed Clydesdale friend with Don Jeanes. Then, just as the puppy makes it to the peak of a hill leading home to the ranch, a wolf appears. Now in danger, the puppy barks to grab the attention of his Clydesdale friend in the barn. As the scared and quivering puppy faces off with the wolf, the Clydesdale breaks free from the barn stall and brings all of the other horses to save his “best bud.” The heroic Clydesdales are then seen galloping home with the puppy leading the way. Don Jeanes looks from the kitchen window to finally see his lost puppy has found its way home. The commercial ends with the puppy, Clydesdale, and Don Jeanes (holding a beer) in the barn happily reunited as shown in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4 (abcnews.go.com)

The message communicated through this spot is “best buds never [let] you down,” as explained by Brian Perkins, Vice President at Budweiser (Macatee). The campaign has led to an impressive 78% ad recall, countless articles written about the spot by companies such as E! Online, the Huffington Post, Cleveland news, the Washington Post, USA TODAY, the NY times, the Super Bowl’s official site, and many more (Heine). It also resulted in well over 2 million shares on Facebook, Twitter, and various blogs. As of February 2015, *Lost Dog* is also titled the Fourth Most Shared Super Bowl Commercial of all time (Tomalin). Research specific to this paper has

revealed *Lost Dog* received 28,563,968 views, 14,579 likes, and 7,688 comments on Budweiser's official YouTube channel as of April 22nd, 2015, just shy of three months after the Super Bowl. The symbolic associations of horses, dogs and wolves for viewers were strong ammunition for emotionally invested comments online regarding the spot. Different associations and meanings for these animal types drawn from history, folklore, religion, and culture place horses parallel to virility and masculinity, dogs with companionship and friendship, (Spears, Mowen, and Chakraborty), and wolves with an appetite for freedom, danger, or a lack of trust (Harris). Each association is built around cultural schemas, just as Llyod and Woodside suggest in *Animals, Archetypes, and Advertising (A³)*. Cultural schemas, in combination with emotional ties, are why these animals are so successful in eliciting complex reactions via YouTube comments. These animals are strategically used in Budweiser's advertising because they communicate something about the brand to viewers. The horse, puppy, and wolf represent every aspect of the beer brand (i.e. masculinity, friendship, freedom), which is notably a commodity product, therefore lacking in emotional direction by nature. These animals also hit home with those who are the biggest consumers of the product.

Comments from viewers all over the world flood Budweiser's official YouTube channel, many regarding the animals and the emotions they evoke. Some of these comments even developed into full conversations relating to the commercial as well as relating to other viewers and their comments, as noted earlier. Comments such as those below demonstrate the outpour of emotion around the commercial.

Figure 5 (youtube.com)

Figure 6 (youtube.com)

Flor Candela's comment (Figure 5) received 20 replies of like-minded people who also were struck emotionally after viewing the spot. Clearly, the use of these animals struck a chord with many viewers that left them with a positive association with the brand.

While there are many positive responses to the animals in the spot, there are also a fair number of negative responses regarding how the commercial relates to the brand. The comments below, in Figure 7, were from viewers who discussed the relationship between the storyline and use of animals and selling beer.

Figure 7 (youtube.com)

These comments display a disconnect in logical relevance for some viewers. While these comments are a form of brand engagement, it is hard to tell whether or not this disconnect is causing a negative perception of the brand or not. It is also difficult to tell if either type of response (positive or negative) to the commercial has any connection to purchase intention.

Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, animals have deep rooted connections with humans on multiple levels. These connections are seen in how animals are used in advertising, how they evoke different levels of emotional and logical interaction with humans on a daily basis, as well as how they successfully develop brand engagement with consumers.

Due to resource and time constraints, this paper was only able to offer a small look into why animals are a successful communications tool in advertising and how they engage consumers. Further in-depth research should be done with a larger sample size to get a better picture of consumer engagement patterns with commercials that feature live animals. In addition, future research should attempt to reveal if a relationship exists between negative comments and brand perception. This information may also lead to research in the future seeking whether or not a relationship exists between brand engagement and purchase intention. More specifically, research on if advertisements using animals increase measures of brand engagement, and whether or not those measures of engagement can be connected to purchase intent.

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