Jeffrey Loewenstein, Rajagopal Raghunathan, & Chip Heath

The Repetition-Break Plot Structure Makes Effective Television Advertisements

The plot structure in television advertisements can enhance consumers' brand attitudes and foster increasing consumer and industry recognition. A corpus analysis of contemporary television advertisements shows that advertisements using the repetition-break plot structure are a small percentage of television advertisements but a large percentage of Clio and Effie award–winning advertisements. They are also likely to attain postings and views on YouTube. Three experiments using television advertisements from contemporary brands show that repetition-break advertisements are persuasive, leading to more favorable brand attitudes and greater purchase intentions than similar plot structures and that this effect is attributable in part to the advertisements being more engaging. Thus, a theoretically explainable and generic plot structure yields effective advertisements. The result is a new and flexible tool for marketing professionals to use to generate advertisements, with guidelines for when and why it should and should not be effective.

Keywords: repetition-break, advertising, narratives, ad structure, surprise, engagement

Advertisers seek to increase consumer engagement with brands (Allen, Fournier, and Miller 2008; Polyorat, Alden, and Kim 2009). However, consumers vary in what they find engaging and, as such, enhancing consumer engagement has been a challenge (Homberg, Steiner, and Totzek 2009; Rumbo 2002; Yankelovich and Meer 2006). One means of addressing this challenge is to tell better and more universal stories to draw consumers in—that is, to develop engaging advertising by spurring thinking and transporting consumers in narratives (Adaval and Wyer 1998; Wang and Calder 2009; Wentzel, Tomczak, and Herrmann 2010). We report novel evidence that an old narrative structure found in folktales around the world (e.g., the Three Billy Goats Gruff; Barbeau 1960; Chophel 1984; Zipes 2002), called the repetition-break plot structure (Loewenstein and Heath 2009), is surprisingly potent in modern advertisements. In doing so, we contribute to marketing research showing that broadly valued and exceptionally creative communications can be generated through predictable underlying recipes for structuring advertising content. In support of this possibility, some existing effective advertisements use the repetition-break plot structure, so called because it uses a repetitious series of similar events to establish a pattern that is then extended or broken by a final event to generate new meaning (Loewenstein and Heath 2009). The similarity of the initial events spurs people to compare them and thereby generate a novel expectation, which sets up an opportunity for the final event to deviate and generate surprise. For example, one of the most successful advertising campaigns of the past 20 years is MasterCard's "Priceless" campaign. The first advertisement ran during the 1997 World Series: "Two tickets: $28. Two hot dogs, two popcorns, two sodas: $18. One autographed baseball: $45. Real conversation with 11-year-old son: priceless." It was a surprising and poignant advertisement, spurring MasterCard, previously a distant second in the credit card market to Visa, to parity in growth and spawning a campaign that translated easily into more than 100 countries.

The 2010 Grand Clio award for the best television advertisement also used the repetition-break plot structure. In the advertisement, Tasmanian water is said to be magic. It shows a series of parallel, dramatic transformations: A bicycle enters the water and turns into a motorcycle, a humble ukulele enters the water and turns into a beautiful guitar, an old kayak turns into a new speedboat, and, in the final key transformation, ordinary beer turns into Boag's Draught, the beer that is the subject of the advertisement. The previous campaign for Boag's Draught suggested it was a humbler product, showing construction workers laying pipe to deliver freshly brewed beer. Thus, the initial repetition of transformations established a pattern that was then extended, surprisingly, to the final item: Boag's Draught beer must be special. The new campaign spurred double-digit growth.

We suggest that the repetition-break plot structure, exemplified by the MasterCard and Boag's Draught adver-

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tisements, provides a general recipe for generating surprising and engaging narratives. By articulating the critical elements of the repetition-break plot structure and documenting empirical evidence in support of its effectiveness, we add to the body of marketing research collecting and organizing ways to structure the content in advertisements, such as by using templates (Goldenberg, Mazursky, and Solomon 1999), rhetorical devices (McQuarrie and Mick 1996), and visual compositions (Pieters, Wedel, and Batra 2010). We contribute to work on ad structures by examining whether a plot structure, or a specific pattern for structuring events in a narrative, can be an effective tool for enhancing consumer engagement with advertisements. Prior research on plot structure has largely focused on plot structure advantages for comprehension and recall (e.g., Bartlett 1932; Thorndyke 1977) rather than engagement and has typically examined structure generated by causal and temporal relations (e.g., event A led to event B) rather than structure generated by event similarity (e.g., event A, event A′, event A″, event B). We also contribute to work on narratives in advertising (e.g., Stern 1994) by examining particular narrative plot structures and, in particular, the repetition-break plot structure, which integrates elements of classical linear narratives and vignette narratives. Finally, we contribute by providing not only a relatively simple and easy-to-implement recipe but also an explanation and tests of the processing account for when and why the recipe should (and should not) be effective. Accordingly, in what follows, we ask and test whether repetition-break advertisements leverage surprise to engage consumers and increase their involvement with brands. We provide a theoretical explanation for why the plot structure is an effective recipe, examine the scope of its potential, and document its effectiveness. The result is evidence that the repetition-break plot structure is an underused, flexible, and valuable tool for marketers.

Comparison-Generated Surprise

In the face of complaints that the audience is increasingly fragmented and disconnected, previous observations about the role of surprise in narratives have come up short because they provide no general guidance about how to engage a nonhomogeneous audience that may not share underlying expectations. Central to prior discussions of why particular advertisements are engaging is that they surprise viewers by deviating from viewers' expectations (Lee 2000; Peracchio and Tybout 1996), leading them to resolve the incongruity (Speck 1991). The combination of surprise and resolution is the primary explanation for why humorous advertisements are engaging (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee 1993; Woltman Elpers, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2004) and why creative advertisements are engaging (Yang and Smith 2009). Critically, surprise is also a key factor in why ad structures—such as rhetorical figures (McQuarrie and Mick 1996, 2003) and templates (Goldenberg, Mazursky, and Solomon 1999)—are effective. The advertisement structures provide recipes for how to deviate from consumers' prior expectations to surprise and engage them. A general consistency, then, in prior discussions of humor, creativity, and advertisement structures is the assumption that viewers come to the advertisement with the expectation that it will disrupt. Repetition-break advertisements differ in that they first teach the expectation that they later disrupt. The repetition-break plot structure creates surprises endogenously.

Creating surprise by teaching expectations that are then disrupted is powerful because it allows advertisements to be engaging in novel ways and to a broad array of viewers. Marketers have the challenge of appealing to an increasingly diverse and fragmented array of consumers. With the repetition-break plot structure, marketers do not need to rely on just those consumers who already have the right expectation or depend on consumers having consistent expectations. For example, McQuarrie and Mick (1999) find that some advertisement structures failed to be effective for foreign consumers and argue that the structures failed because these consumers did not have the requisite background expectations. Because repetition-break advertisements teach expectations, they can avoid this problem. Repetition-break advertisements can create surprises with novel expectations, such as by constructing a narrative logic relying on magic Tasmanian water, a fiction that could not be commonly known or expected among consumers. Because the repetition-break plot structure both generates an expectation endogenously and then violates it to generate surprise, it provides a complete recipe for generating consumer engagement.

Our explanation for why the repetition-break plot structure is effective rests on psychological research on comparison and surprise (Markman and Loewenstein 2010). The repetition-break plot structure leads people to draw comparisons by relying on surface similarity and close temporal succession of the initially repeated events, which encourage people to compare the events (Loewenstein and Gentner 2001). When people draw comparisons, it encourages them to attend to commonalities and prompts them to form generalizations (Gentner and Markman 1997). As a result of these psychological tendencies, the initial repetition phase of the repetition-break plot structure leads people to compare events and form an expectation about how subsequent events should unfold. The expectation could be familiar or novel to viewers. Critically, however, all viewers should have the information from comparing the initial repeated events to form the expectation, and viewers drawing comparisons to form the expectation is the first reason people find repetition-break advertisements engaging.

The expectation derived from comparing the initial events sets up the possibility for a final event in the repetition-break plot structure to deviate from the pattern and generate surprise. Deviating from the pattern spurs cognitive efforts to resolve the incongruity and make sense of the final event and the larger meaning of the narrative. This should generate further engagement with the advertisement and brand. Generating surprise is important because it heightens affective responses (Mellers 2000). Thus, repetition-break advertisements should influence consumers' cognition and affect, key drivers of ad effectiveness (Vakratsas and Ambler 1999). Repetition-break advertisements should also be involving because they engage viewers by leading them to form an expectation, experience a disruption and thus sur-

prise, and then resolve the expectation with a heightened level of affect.

Repetition-break advertisements can surprise and engage viewers for a variety of purposes. Because the repetition-break plot structure should invoke surprise and incongruity resolution, it is a means for generating humor (Speck 1991). It overlaps with what in comedy is called the "law of threes," whose typical form is "setup, setup, punch line." However, our explanation and empirical evidence suggest the law of threes is a bit of a misnomer because a repetition-break plot can use any number of repetitions to set up the initial schema before the break. For example, the "Priceless" campaign typically uses a "law of fours" structure, with three repetitions before a break, and it sometimes uses as many as 20 initial repetitions.

More important, the repetition-break plot structure is not just a recipe for humor. Repetition-break advertisements can be engaging without being funny. Some of the "Priceless" advertisements, for example, are funny, but many others are touching, like the first one shown during the World Series. A Peruvian Cancer Foundation advertisement, a 2005 Clio gold medal winner, provides a powerful example of a non-humorous repetition-break advertisement. It shows a street magician repeatedly performing tricks and collecting money. The break in the sequence comes when his final trick is to regrow the hair on a child bald from cancer treatments—the implication being that giving money to physician–magicians for cancer research enables seemingly magical cures for sick children. (The advertisement made our research assistants cry.) If there is a common result of engaging consumers with repetition-break advertisements, we suggest it is to increase consumers' interest in and affective responses toward products and brands.

Overview of the Studies

This article makes a contribution to the literature by showing when and why repetition-break advertisements are effective. There is initial support for the repetition-break structure contributing to jokes, folktales, and music being liked and being socially selected (Loewenstein and Heath 2009; Rozin et al. 2006). These studies provide initial data showing that the repetition-break plot structure contributes to people's evaluations of the narrative itself. We extend these findings by showing that the plot structure is persuasive. Not only do we show that advertisements with repetition-break plot structures themselves are evaluated positively, we go on to show the important next step, namely, that engagement with the advertisements also creates positive attitudes about brands.

The studies make several additional contributions. Demonstrating repetition-break effects in the domain of television advertising is consequential. Tests of real-world advertising effectiveness show that substantial variance is due to the quality of the advertisements themselves. Advertising expenditures only extend the effectiveness of good advertisements; they do not improve the effectiveness of weak advertisements (Hu, Lodish, and Krieger 2007). The implication is that repetition-break advertisements are important to examine because they could provide a concrete and flexible tool for structuring effective advertisements, provided they have more backing than a few anecdotal successes. We provide evidence that the repetition-break plot structure yields advantages both for social selectivity in the form of YouTube postings and for industry selectivity in the form of major industry awards.

Finally, the current studies provide tests of the psychological processing account for why the repetition-break plot structure is effective. An advantage of the repetition-break plot structure, compared with some other proposed advertisement structures, is that we provided an analysis of the underlying psychological processing for its success. This led us to test, for example, whether comparison is critical to the plot structure's success. We examined whether repetition-break advertisements are engaging by both observing self-report measures and testing whether repetition-break advertisements stand out from the clutter of being exposed within sequences of multiple advertisements. We examine different kinds of outcomes to show the scope of the repetition-break plot structure's effectiveness and find that it is not particularly effective for generating baseline brand awareness but is specifically important for spurring brand involvement. The result is a substantial extension of the evidence supporting the understanding of when and why the repetition-break plot structure works.

Study 1

We have argued that the repetition-break plot structure should generate surprise and interest in broad audiences because it generates the expectation it relies on to generate surprise. In this study, we show that industry judges disproportionately select repetition-break advertisements for being creative and effective. We also show that consumers select repetition-break advertisements, posting and viewing them on YouTube with greater frequency than other types of advertisements.

To examine these possibilities, we examined cross-sections of advertisements at three levels of industry selectivity: low selectivity in the form of advertisements recorded straight from television, moderate selectivity in the form of advertisements included in an industry database, and high selectivity in the form of advertisements winning gold medal industry awards. We predicted that as the level of selectivity increases, the proportion of television advertisements using the repetition-break plot structure would increase.

We also examined consumers' selectivity by tracking the number of times consumers posted and viewed advertisements on YouTube. We predicted that repetition-break advertisements should promote posting and viewership.

To provide points of comparison, we also tracked advertisements using two related plot structures: repetition and contrast. We defined the two related structures according to their likeness to the repetition-break plot structure and suggestive findings in the literature. For our purposes, a television advertisement with a repetition plot structure consists of a series of similar events, similar to the beginning of a repetition-break plot structure. It differs in that it does not have a break. For example, an advertisement might consist of a series of events, each showing a consumer happily

using a product, as is common in vignette advertisements (Stern 1994). Note that our definition of "repetition" pertains to the repetition of events in an advertisement, in contrast to most prior discussions of repetition in advertising, in which it is defined as seeing a given advertisement multiple times (e.g., Campbell and Keller 2003). Closer to our use is prior work on repetition in narratives, which has emphasized the importance of repetition of events as well as repeated words and phrases for making narratives memorable (Rubin 1995). Repetition in the form of repeated use of a word or image has also proved to be effective as a rhetorical structure in advertisements (e.g., McQuarrie and Mick 1996). Thus, if repeated events function similar to other uses of repetition, the repetition plot structure should help make advertisements memorable. Still, because a repetition plot structure does not have a break to generate surprise, we suggest it should be less likely than the repetition-break plot structure to generate engaging, effective advertisements.

The second alternative plot structure we considered is the contrast plot structure. In our use, advertisements with a contrast plot structure consist of showing two related but differing events. For example, an advertisement might show an event before buying the product and an event after buying the product or an event by a nonuser of the product followed by an event by a user of the product. The contrast plot structure is similar to the repetition-break structure in that there is a break or shift between events, but there is just one initial event rather than several. At least some forms of contrast have been shown to be effective (Goldenberg, Mazursky, and Solomon 1999), and resolving contrasts has been argued to be critical for generating humorous advertisements (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee 1993). However, the contrast plot structure lacks the initial comparison, which should make it less engaging than the repetition-break plot structure. Furthermore, if advertisements need to be easily interpretable (as, e.g., Woltman Elpers, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2004 argue), this could limit advertisers to drawing contrasts along easy-to-identify dimensions, such as bad–good, old–new, and boring–exciting. Alternatively, some consumers could fail to grasp more novel contrasts. Either way, advertisements using contrast plot structures are at risk of failing to surprise and engage consumers.

The repetition and contrast plot structures are similar to the repetition-break plot structure and draw on some of the same mechanisms, which makes them useful bases for comparison. Still, because the repetition plot structure does not generate a change and the contrast plot structure cannot as readily establish a new expectation or ensure that consumers will form the same expectation, we predict that these plot structures should not confer as much of an advantage for industry and consumer accolades as the repetition-break plot structure.

Methods

Materials. We generated corpora including a total of 957 television advertisements representing three levels of industry selectivity. As a proxy for a low level of social selectivity, we recorded advertisements shown during daytime and prime-time television shows. We recorded four one-hour segments of television from four networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX). We recorded segments between the hours of 9:30 A.M. and 7 P.M. for the daytime sample and 7 P.M.–10 P.M. for the prime-time sample, randomly sampling time slots over two three-day periods. We coded every unique advertisement shown over those 16 hours for consistency with the other samples, which did not include multiple instances of the same advertisement, though the statistical results are unchanged if we include the full sample. We found that 9% of the daytime sample and 25% of the prime-time sample appeared more than once, yielding 232 unique daytime and 253 unique prime-time advertisements.

As a proxy for a moderate level of industry selectivity, we sampled advertisements from a selective online database, Adforum.com's Creative Library. According to its website, Adforum's goal for the database is to provide the "best of advertising creativity worldwide," collected from an array of awards shows, agencies, and production companies. We gathered 300 advertisements by drawing random samples from the Adforum.com database from four national markets (United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia) and four product categories (apparel, retail, consumer electronics, and beverages). As a marker of the selectivity of the advertisements in the Adforum.com database, 29% of the advertisements in our sample had won some kind of industry award or honor.

As a proxy for a high level of industry selectivity, we gathered advertisements winning gold medal Clio or Effie awards. The Clio awards are one of the largest and most prestigious competitions in the advertising industry and, according to the Clio website, are given to "celebrate and reward creative excellence." Effie awards are granted specifically to reward effective advertising, and the largest component of the judges' scores is their evaluations of results—evidence that the advertising led to meeting and exceeding campaign objectives, such as for increasing sales, market share, and performance relative to competitors. We selected advertisements winning awards in a product or service category, such as automotive, beverages, and consumer electronics. We ignored advertisements winning Clio awards for animation, music, and the like. We used the Adforum.com database and the Clio website to collect 66 Clio and 106 North American and European Effie gold medal–winning television advertisements for a product category given from 2001 through 2009.

Coding. Two raters blind to the hypotheses of the study coded all the advertisements into one of four plot structure categories: repetition-break, repetition, contrast, and other. This coding was done solely by evaluating the events in the advertisements: whether there were multiple events in the advertisement and, if so, if those events related to each other in the patterns specified by the repetition-break, repetition, or contrast plot structures. The overall level of agreement was 86%, $\kappa = .72$. Coders resolved disagreements with discussion. We present their consensus judgments; their original individual judgments yield the same qualitative pattern.

YouTube searches. To generate measures of consumer recognition of advertisements, we generated YouTube searches for every repetition-break, repetition, and contrast advertisement from the Adforum.com sample (moderate selectivity). Thus, we were not looking at the proportion of advertisements with a given structure but rather whether one particular structure, the repetition-break plot structure, tended to generate more recognition. The searches had a standard form, combining the word "ad" (pilot testing showed it equivalent to "commercial"), the brand name, and the advertisement name (listed on Adforum.com). If no advertisement was found, we dropped part or all of the advertisement name from the search and examined the listings. We searched all advertisements without knowledge of their plot structure to avoid bias. We recorded the number of instances of the advertisement present on YouTube (any given advertisement could be posted more than once) and the total number of views across all instances as of July 9, 2010.

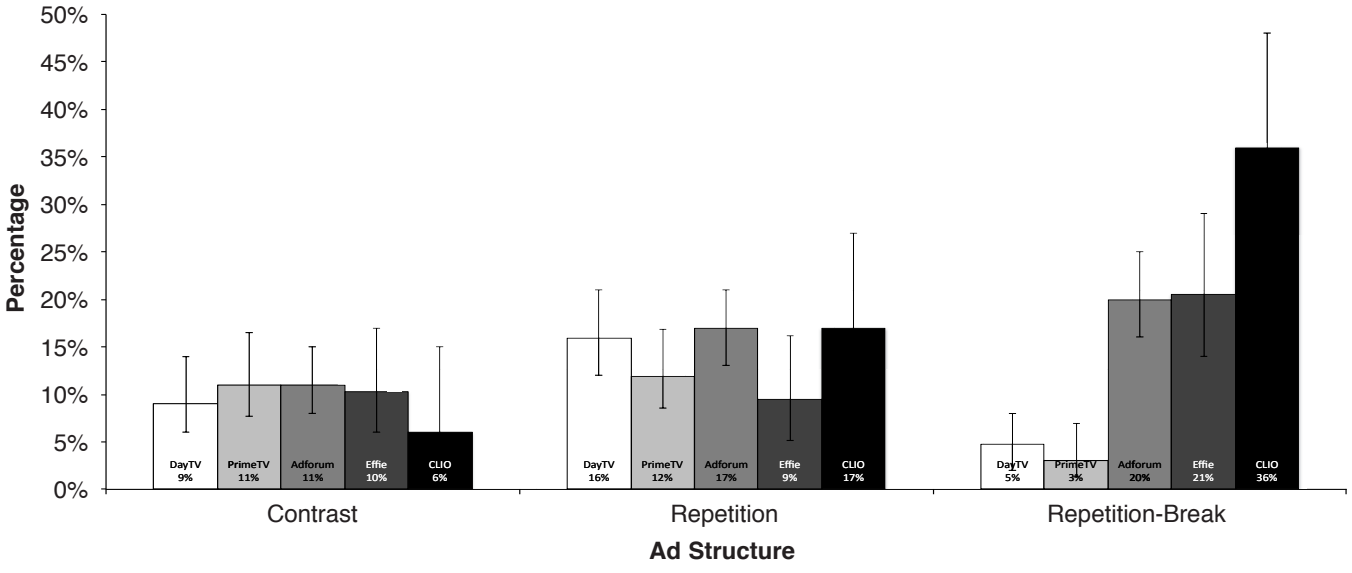
Humor ratings. Because of the potentially close relationship between the plot structures and humor, we generated ratings of the humor of the most selective advertisements as a check for whether humor was necessary for an advertisement's success. We had each of the Effie and Clio gold medal–winning advertisements that were coded as using repetition-break, contrast, or repetition plot structures rated by 15 participants recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk online community as to how funny they were (1 = "not at all funny," and 7 = "very funny") and how funny they thought the advertisement was intended to be (1 = "not supposed to be funny," 2 = "supposed to be a little funny," and 3 = "supposed to be very funny").

Results

We found that repetition-break television advertisements increase in proportion as the level of industry selectivity increases. Specifically, we found relatively few repetition-break advertisements in the low-selectivity samples from daytime (5%; 95% confidence interval [CI]: 3%–8%) and prime-time (3%; 1%–7%) television. We found more in the moderate-selectivity sample from Adforum.com (20%; 16%–25%) and the high-selectivity samples from the Effie gold medal winners (21%; 14%–29%) and the Clio gold medal winners (36%; 26%–48%). The trend for the proportion of repetition-break advertisements to increase with increasing levels of selectivity was reliable ($\chi^2(4, N = 958) = 85.42$, $p < .0001$, Cramer's V = .30; see Figure 1). The implication is that repetition-break television advertisements are substantially overrepresented, compared with their low base rate in the population of advertisements broadcast on television, in samples of industry-recognized advertisements. This is consistent with our claim that repetition-break plots provide an advantage for industry selection.

We found little support for claiming that the repetition and contrast plot structures provide advantages for industry selection. The percentage of advertisements using a repetition plot structure was stable across low, medium, and high levels of industry selectivity: daytime television 16% (95% CI: 12%–21%), prime-time television 12% (9%–17%), Adforum.com 17% (12%–22%), Effie gold medal award winners 9% (5%–16%), and Clio gold medal award winners 17% (10%–27%). The percentage of advertisements using a contrast plot structure was also stable across levels of industry selectivity: daytime television 9% (6%–13%), prime-time television 11% (8%–16%), Adforum.com 11% (8%–15%), Effie gold medal award winners 10% (6%–17%), and Clio gold medal award winners 6% (2%–15%). The implication is that repetition and contrast advertisements are selected in rough proportion to their base rates. Thus, these structures can be the basis of effective advertisements, but we do not have evidence consistent with these plot structures conferring selection advantages.

FIGURE 1
Percentage of Advertisements Using Contrast, Repetition, and Repetition-Break Plot Structures



Repetition-break advertisements appear more likely to be selected by industry judges than repetition and contrast advertisements. In the Clio sample, the proportion of repetition-break advertisements was greater than the proportions of repetition advertisements (MacNemar test, $p < .05$) and contrast advertisements (MacNemar test, $p < .0001$). In the Effie sample, the proportion of repetition-break advertisements was greater than the proportion of repetition advertisements (MacNemar test, $p = .05$) and showed a tendency toward being greater than the proportion of contrast advertisements (MacNemar test, $p = .08$). Thus, the repetition-break plot structure seems to contribute, and contribute more than two closely related narrative structures, to industry selection. This supports our claim for the importance of the specific form of the repetition-break plot structure.

Turning to the data on consumer selectivity, we examined the YouTube views for repetition-break, repetition, and contrast advertisements from the Adforum.com sample. Because there were 142 such advertisements and the number of views was strongly skewed (ranging from 1 to 7,062,049), we used the natural log of YouTube views for our analyses. We also combined the repetition and contrast advertisements into one group because of the relatively low number of contrast advertisements and the similar patterns shown by the two types. We found that repetition-break advertisements (M = 5.33, SE = .65) gathered more YouTube views, on average, than repetition or contrast advertisements (M = 3.43, SE = .53; $t(140) = 2.27$, $p < .05$). This means that the repetition-break advertisements gathered, on average, about six times more YouTube views than repetition or contrast advertisements. We also found that 38% of the repetition-break advertisements had been posted to YouTube more than once, whereas just 15% of the repetition and contrast advertisements had been ($\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 10.48$, $p < .01$). Thus, repetition-break advertisements appear more likely to be recognized by consumers; in other words, people choose to share and watch them more than advertisements with related plot structures.

We used the corpora to probe for the advertising contexts in which repetition-break advertisements might be particularly effective but found little sign of systematic patterns. Examining the Adforum.com corpus, which was generated according to systematic sampling from national markets and product categories, we found no clear effects of national market (United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia) or product category (apparel, retail, consumer electronics, and beverages) in the proportions of repetition-break, repetition, or contrast advertisements. Across all the corpora, we found that repetition-break advertisements appeared in a broad array of national markets, including the United States, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, South Africa, Australia, Malaysia, and Thailand. We found them used for a broad array of product categories, including apparel, automotive, banking, beverages, consumer electronics, insurance, Internet sites, media, retail, and public service. We found repetition-break advertisements for major global brands, including Adidas, American Express, Budweiser, Honda, IKEA, Levi's, and Wal-Mart, as well as much smaller brands, including Aristoc, Bluewater Shopping Centre, Bonjour Paris French School, German Ministry for the Environment, and Nomis shoes. The implication is that the repetition-break plot structure has the potential for broad application.

One interesting consideration, raised by reviewers, was whether in practice the repetition-break plot structure is merely a proxy for humor in advertising. To address this consideration, we gathered ratings for the Effie and Clio gold medal award winners and found that the repetition-break advertisements (M = 3.25, SE = .14) were no funnier, on average, than repetition advertisements (M = 3.09, SE = .24; $t(64) = .58$, $p = .56$) or contrast advertisements (M = 3.24, SE = .28; $t(59) = .01$, $p = .99$. All the plot structures' average ratings were below the midpoint of the scale ($t_{min} = -2.64$, $p_{min} = .02$), implying that in general, the advertisements were not experienced as being particularly funny. (We also note that ad duration was inconsequential here; there was no relationship between humor and the duration of the advertisements [$r(81) = -.09$, $p = .42$], nor did a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) show a relationship between duration and ad structure [$F(2,78) = 1.59$, $p = .21$].) In addition, we found a similar pattern in raters' interpretations of the advertisers' intentions for the advertisements to be funny: The repetition-break advertisements (M = 1.97, SE = .07) were not viewed as having been intended to be funnier than repetition advertisements (M = 1.88, SE = .10; $t(64) = .79$, $p = .43$) or contrast advertisements (M = 2.06, SE = .12; $t(59) = -.65$, $p = .52$). Thus, repetition-break, repetition, and contrast advertisements can all be funny, yet repetition-break advertisements are not distinctly funnier than the other structures, and generating humor is not critical for these plot structures to generate highly effective and creative advertisements.

Discussion

Taken together, our results provide support for the claim that the repetition-break plot structure fosters industry and consumer selection of advertisements. The proportion of television advertisements using the repetition-break plot structure increased with higher industry selectivity and accounted for approximately a quarter of two top industry awards in the past decade. This differed from our findings for repetition and contrast, which showed no clear signs of contributing to industry selection. Moreover, repetition-break advertisements gathered more views on YouTube and were more likely to be posted multiple times than contrast and repetition advertisements, evidence that the repetition-break plot structure fosters consumer selection. This evidence is consistent with our claim that there is specific value to the particular sequence of events comprising the repetition-break plot structure.

We argue that the repetition-break plot structure is useful for generating surprise and for more than just humor. We found support that even for Clio and Effie gold medal winners, the repetition-break plot structure is frequently used for other reasons than to be funny. This is supported by some of the comments generated by raters who gave advertisements the lowest humor ratings but clearly found them engaging and effective, such as "It was not funny, but it was

exciting to watch, and was definitely attention getting" and "I would rate this as a powerful ad. Hits one in the gut. Highly memorable."

Marketers could use the repetition-break plot structure far more than they do currently. Only about 4% of advertisements drawn straight from television used the plot structure. This is consistent with Goldenberg, Mazursky, and Solomon's (1999) finding that only 2.5% of non-award-winning advertisements used the recipes they identified for award-winning advertisements. However, we suspect there is opportunity for using the repetition-break plot structure more frequently, because across our entire corpus we found repetition-break advertisements for almost every product category and national market we examined. If the plot structure is unfamiliar to marketers, if they have an implicit understanding of it rather than understanding it explicitly as a generic plot structure, or if they believe it is just about having three events or just about being humorous, the evidence in this study provides reasons the format could be used productively much more often than it is currently.

Study 2

In addition to television advertisements using the repetition-break plot structure generating industry and consumer attention and accolades, we suggest that repetition-break advertisements should also be persuasive and influence individual consumers' involvement with brands. To examine this, we generated an experiment to test individual brand attitudes toward ads with and without repetition-break plot structures.

We gathered multiple repetition-break advertisements from the Adforum.com database. Then, for each advertisement, we generated two kinds of controls. The first control is a check on our processing account for why repetition-break advertisements are effective and, specifically, our claim that the initial repetition is useful to prompt people to draw comparisons and thus generate expectations. In these controls, we edited out the second, third, or further events that repeated the initial event, leaving the initial event and break event intact. We call these "contrast" controls, which arguably remove only redundant information and leave intact the shift from the initial event to the final event that provides a basis for generating surprise. For example, in one advertisement, a driver waits at a traffic light and a bicycle rider stops and rests his hand on the driver's car, annoying the driver. Traffic advances, the driver once again stops at a traffic light, and then the rider once more stops and rests his hand on the driver's car, annoying the driver again. At the third light, the driver backs up just as the bicycle rider arrives and begins to lean on the car, so the rider falls. The driver gets his revenge for someone touching his precious car, indicating how attached drivers are to this brand of cars. In the edited version of the advertisement, we removed the second event so that the first event led directly to the break event. This meant we used repetition-break advertisements with cleanly separable events and both auditory and visual shifts with the final event so that our edits were no rougher than the originals. Our corpus analyses suggest these are not limiting restrictions.

The second kind of control is a check on the general effectiveness of features of repetition-break advertisements unrelated to its plot structure, but that surely contribute to its effectiveness—the brand, tagline, scenery, music, actors, voiceover talent, production values, and so forth. For this second kind of control, which we call "alternative" controls, we identified non-repetition-break advertisements from the same campaign in which repetition-break advertisements appeared. Specifically, yoked to each advertisement, we gathered television advertisements from the same campaign, national market, design firm, and year that did not use a repetition-break plot structure. Whenever possible, we gathered a randomly drawn set of three, rather than just one, non-repetition-break advertisement per campaign so that our results would not be unduly biased by our selection of one particular alternative advertisement. Still, our search was restricted to campaigns that we could access, with multiple advertisements with different plot structures. We attempted to compensate by maximizing the range of product categories and levels of brand familiarity that the target advertisements covered and by using multiple alternative advertisements per repetition-break advertisement. The result was a collection of three kinds of advertisement (repetition-break, contrast, and alternative) for each of seven brands. We expected advertisements with repetition-break plot structures to generate more favorable brand attitudes than the contrast and alternative advertisements not using the plot structure.

Methods

Participants. A total of 136 junior and senior undergraduate students participated as part of a larger study to earn course extra credit. Their mean age was 21.2 years, 59% were female, 49% were white, and 80% were native English speakers. Exploratory data analyses revealed no notable relationships between these demographic variables and the attitude toward the brand dependent measure.

Materials and procedure. We gathered advertisements from Adforum.com because it tracks useful information about advertisements and because it enabled us to leverage our corpus analysis. We identified the subset of repetition-break advertisements whose events were separated by editing cuts, thereby allowing us to form edited controls with minimal disruption to the advertisements. Of these, we removed those for which Adforum.com did not have additional advertisements available from the same campaign to serve as alternative controls. Next, we removed any sets for which there were differences among the advertisements in any awards they had won, according to the listings in the Adforum.com database. Finally, we dropped sets for brands from the same product category. The result was that we identified sets of advertisements for seven target brands: Adidas, Budweiser, Cotton, Fiat, IKEA, Nabob Coffee (a Kraft brand sold in Canada), and Wal-Mart. We used the characteristics of the final set of advertisements (e.g., product categories, years in which they were shown) to identify non-repetition-break advertisements from three comparably distinct brands to use as fillers: Crocs, Sony, and Wendy's.

Participants each watched ten advertisements (seven targets and three fillers) and, after each one, gave a series of ratings. Participants rated filler advertisements first, to become familiar with the ratings scales and procedure, and then subsequently rated the target advertisements. Each participant saw a randomly selected kind of advertisement—repetition-break, contrast, alternative—for each of the seven target brands, presented in one of six randomly generated orderings. Thus, each participant saw, on average, two or three repetition-break advertisements, two or three contrast advertisements, and two or three alternative advertisements. Across participants, every kind of advertisement was rated for every brand in each order. For each advertisement, participants first rated their attitude about the brand (e.g., Grier and Deshpandé 2001), which consisted of bipolar seven-point scales assessing their attitude toward the brand in the advertisement they had just seen: "favorable/unfavorable," "good/bad," "pleasant/unpleasant," and "high quality/low quality" ($\alpha = .94$). Participants were also asked whether they had seen the advertisement before.

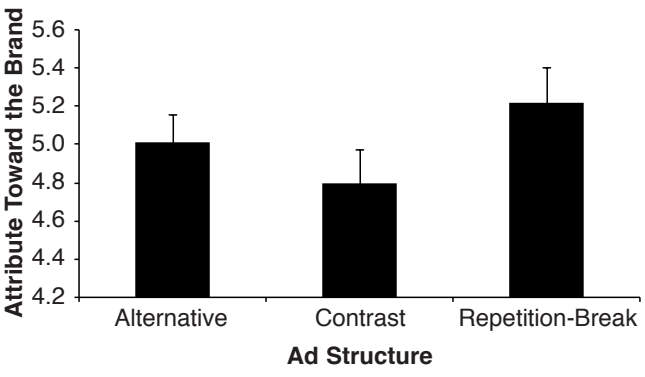
Results and Discussion

We found clear effects of the narrative structures in the advertisements. We used a 3 (structure: repetition-break, contrast, alternative) × 7 (Brand: Adidas, Budweiser, Cotton, Fiat, IKEA, Nabob Coffee, and Wal-Mart) mixed-measures ANOVA to examine the attitude toward the brand measure, controlling for participant and order of presentation. We found main effects of structure ($F(2, 787) = 7.91$, $p < .001$) and brand ($F(6, 763) = 53.51$, $p < .001$). We followed up the main effect of structure with planned contrasts. We found that participants had more positive attitudes about the brand after seeing the repetition-break advertisements for the brand ($M = 5.22$, $SE = .09$) than the contrast advertisements ($M = 4.79$, $SE = .09$; $F(1, 781) = 15.82$, $p < .001$) and the alternative advertisements ($M = 5.01$, $SE = .08$; $F(1, 806) = 4.67$, $p < .05$; Figure 2). The repetition-break plot structure is persuasive, generating an advantage for people's brand attitudes.

Examining both contrast and alternative controls helps rule out some possible explanations for the repetition-break advantage. Contrast controls offer the same advertisement, preserving the underlying shift between initial event and break, but without the arguably redundant repetitions. Alternative advertisements offer intact versions of comparable advertisements from the same advertising campaign. Contrast controls are, by definition, shorter than the repetition-break advertisements from which they were derived. Although we had no theoretical reason to expect that duration would enhance ratings—longer advertisements provide more opportunities to be tedious (Woltman Elpers, Wedel, and Pieters 2003)—we nevertheless ran an analysis to assess the relationship between ad duration and ratings. We examined the relationship between duration (ranging from 15 to 61 seconds) and mean brand attitude ratings for the alternative and filler advertisements because this gives the cleanest assessment of the effects of ad duration separate from any effects of the repetition-break plot structure. We found no clear relation between duration and ratings ($r(18) = .198$, $p = .43$; absent one outlier, the correlation drops to .02). Thus, we have a stronger basis for claiming that there is something important about the structure of the advertisements than for claiming that it is their duration that was the critical factor.

The main effect of brand that we found indicated that advertisements for the different brands generated varying brand attitudes. From highest to lowest brand attitudes, they were as follows: Adidas ($M = 5.89$, $SE = .12$), IKEA ($M = 5.66$, $SE = .11$), Cotton ($M = 5.50$, $SE = .11$), Budweiser ($M = 5.16$, $SE = .11$), Fiat ($M = 4.61$, $SE = .11$), Wal-Mart ($M = 4.43$, $SE = .11$), and Nabob Coffee ($M = 3.81$, $SE = .11$). The differences across brands are large relative to the effect of plot structure, suggesting that the nature of the brand and overall choices for the ad campaign (in terms of style, music, setting, tagline, and so forth) set an intercept for participants' ratings, which was then modulated by plot structure. The advantage of the repetition-break plot was robust across brands. As a simple indication, the qualitative patterns of the raw means shows that the repetition-break advertisement was more highly rated than the contrast advertisement for six of the seven brands and was more highly rated than the alternative advertisement for five of the seven brands. Thus, we find robust support for the claim that advertisements using the repetition-break plot structure provide an advantage for influencing people's brand attitudes.

FIGURE 2
Attitude Toward the Brand Ratings for Alternative, Contrast, and Repetition-Break Advertisements from Study 2



Study 3

Study 3 examines repetition-break advertisements in more detail. The first extension was that in addition to asking participants for their attitudes toward the brand, we also examined how engaging they believed the advertisement itself was. We follow research suggesting that advertisements requiring attention and involvement on the part of consumers, such as to decode resonance (McQuarrie and Mick 1992) or be transported by a narrative (Wang and Calder 2009), are likely to be engaging and therefore effective. Because our interest was in whether the repetition-break plot structure could yield engaging advertisements, we asked about aspects of an advertisement's effectiveness that reflected the full progression of engagement. Specifically,

we asked people for their impressions of how surprising the advertisement itself was because part of the logic for the effectiveness of the repetition-break plot structure is that it should generate surprise with the break. We asked about the appeal of the story conveyed in the advertisement because we suggest that the comparison and surprise generated by the repetition-break plot structure should generate engaging narratives. We also asked whether people would be likely to share the advertisements with others because strong engagement predicts a willingness to share stories (Heath, Bell, and Sternberg 2001). Thus, in contrast to existing attitude toward the ad measures, which tend to focus on the surface appeal of the advertisement (Is the ad attractive or eye-catching?), we were concerned with a more substantial level of engagement in the advertisement; therefore, we incorporated multiple indicators of that engagement. Our prediction was that an advertisement with the repetition-break plot structure should be more engaging than one without. Moreover, engagement should mediate the effect of the plot structure on people's attitudes toward the brand.

The second extension was that we varied how we presented the advertisements. In Study 2, participants viewed them one at a time and then rated them immediately. In this study, we varied the presentation of advertisements, showing them either in isolation or embedded in a sequence of mundane advertisements. Because television advertisements are often shown in sequences of four to nine advertisements in breaks during or between shows, we sought to address whether the effect of the repetition-break plot structure would be maintained, heightened, or suppressed when an advertisement using the structure was embedded in a sequence of mundane, non-repetition-break advertisements. We had reason to believe that the advantage of the repetition-break plot structure might be heightened, given that we have argued that advertisements using the structure should be more engaging than those not using it, helping them to be distinctive. To ensure that we were comparing attitudes toward ads in isolation versus ads embedded in a mundane sequence rather than immediate responses versus recollections, we gave all participants a brief filler task between viewing and rating the target advertisement. As a result, in Study 3, we compared repetition-break and contrast versions of an advertisement when it was shown individually and when it was shown embedded in a sequence of filler advertisements, looking for differences in engagement and brand attitudes.

Methods

Participants and design. We gathered data from 276 participants using online survey subject pools. The participants were 63% female, 83% white, and 97% native English speakers. They averaged 37 years of age (SD = 13 years), the modal education level was to have completed a bachelor's degree, 58% were currently employed, and on average they had worked full time for 13 years (SD = 12 years). We drew from two online recruitment sources, Amazon's Mechanical Turk community (n = 162) and a major business school's online pool (n = 114). Because demographic differences (e.g., the business school's pool participants were, on average, four years older) and differences in measured variables of interest (e.g., a dummy variable coding for recruitment source yielded no effect) between these groups were minimal, we collapse across them in presenting the results. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions according to a 2 (structure: repetition-break or contrast) × 2 (presentation: isolated or embedded) design.

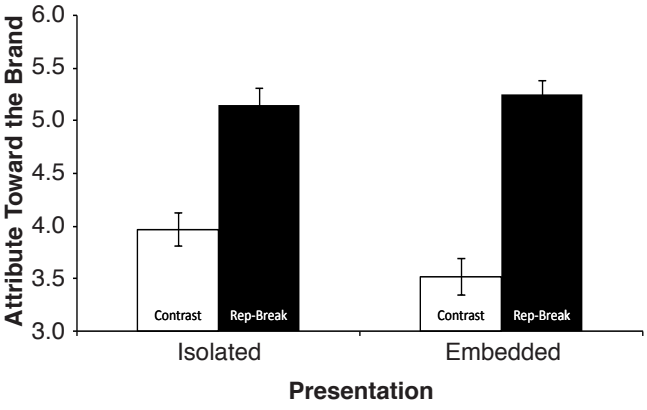
Materials and procedure. We presented participants with the repetition-break and contrast versions of the Adidas television advertisement used in Study 2. Participants in the embedded condition saw the target Adidas advertisement in the middle of a stretch of seven advertisements, the other six being filler advertisements for Sony, Wendy's, Crocs, IKEA, Cotton, and Wal-Mart. After an unrelated task lasting approximately one minute, participants were shown still frames from the target Adidas advertisement to identify the advertisement of interest. Then they were asked how engaging it was, their attitude toward the brand Adidas using the scale from Study 1 (α = .94), and whether they had seen that advertisement before (4.7% had). Our measure of engagement consisted of three questions (α = .80): How surprising was the ad (1 = "not at all surprising," and 7 = "very surprising")? How appealing did you find the story in the ad (1 = "not at all appealing," and 7 = "very appealing")? and How likely are you to show the ad to someone else (1 = "not at all likely," and 7 = "very likely")? Last, they provided demographic information.

Results

We replicated the advantage for the repetition-break plot structure over the contrast plot structure from which we removed the initial repetition. We used a 2 (structure) × 2 (presentation) ANOVA to examine people's attitudes about the brand. Because we were using one target advertisement and had a more diverse sample, we considered covariates for sports experience, sex, age, education level, filler task delay, and whether participants had seen the advertisement before, but these did not substantively change the pattern of results. We found a main effect of structure ($F(2, 275) = 11.83$, $p = .001$, mean square error = 1.68) because repetition-break advertisements (M = 5.52, SE = .10) prompted more favorable brand attitudes than contrast advertisements (M = 4.96, SE = .12). There was no main effect of presentation ($F(1, 275) < 1$), but there was a marginal interaction of structure and presentation ($F(1, 275) = 3.59$, $p = .059$). This trend was due to the advantage of the repetition-break version over the contrast version being larger when the advertisements were embedded in a longer series of advertisements (5.65 vs. 4.84) than when they were shown in isolation (5.38 vs. 5.07; Figure 3).

Extending these findings, we also found an advantage for the repetition-break plot structure over the contrast plot structure on participants' engagement with the advertisements. A parallel 2 (structure) × 2 (presentation) ANOVA indicated that repetition-break advertisements (M = 5.20, SE = .11) were more engaging than contrast advertisements (M = 3.75, SE = .12; $F(1, 275) = 81.50$, $p < .001$). Again, there was no reliable main effect of presentation ($F(1, 275) =$

FIGURE 3
Attitude Toward the Brand Ratings for Contrast and Repetition-Break Advertisements from Study 3



1.86, $p = .174$), but there was an interaction between structure and presentation ($F(1, 275) = 3.98$, $p < .05$). This was due to the advantage of the repetition-break plot structure over the contrast structure being larger when the advertisement was embedded (5.25 vs. 3.51) than when it was shown individually (5.15 vs. 3.97).

The parallel findings for ad engagement and attitude toward the brand were related. Participants' degree of engagement with the advertisements partially mediated the effect of plot structure on brand attitudes. Using Baron and Kenny's (1986) method, we concluded that plot structure predicted engagement (B = 1.43, SE = .16, t = 9.00, $p <$ .0001). Engagement predicted attitudes toward the brand (B = .65, SE = .05, t = 14.37, $p < .0001$). In turn, we saw that plot structure predicted attitudes toward the brand (B = .55, SE = .16, t = 3.53, $p < .001$), and this effect was significantly reduced (Sobel Z = 7.61, $p < .0001$), though still reliable (B = .37, SE = .14, t = 2.76, $p < .01$), when engagement was in the model. We found consistent evidence of mediation using Preacher and Hayes's (2004) bootstrapped method. This analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of plot structure through engagement on attitudes toward the brand, with the size of the effect being .93 (SE = .13, 95% CI: .70–1.20).

Discussion

Experiment 3 provides increased evidence for the advantages of the repetition-break plot structure. We replicated the key finding that a television advertisement using the repetition-break plot structure yields more favorable attitudes toward the brand than that same advertisement with the initial repetition removed. We shed further light on the effect by showing that the repetition-break plot structure seems to confer broad advantages for people's engagement with an advertisement, encompassing increased surprise, increased appeal for the story conveyed by the advertisement, and an increased interest in sharing the advertisement with someone else. In turn, participants' level of engagement partially mediated the effect of plot structure of people's brand attitudes. This is initial suggestive evidence that the repetition-break plot structure can make for more compelling advertisements and, because of that, is persuasive in that it enhances perceptions of the brand.

We also found that the advantage of the repetition-break plot structure held up or increased when we presented the advertisement embedded in a series of advertisements. Participants watching a string of advertisements might have become bored or numb to the particulars of the advertisements but instead seemed drawn in by the repetition-break advertisement. The implication is that by being engaging, the repetition-break plot structure can help advertisements stand out from a crowd.

Study 4

Our account of why repetition-break advertisements work suggests they are engaging and persuasive. We have initial support for the claim that repetition-break advertisements increase brand attitudes and do so because they are engaging. In Study 4, we broaden the empirical support for this claim and separate these claims from related concerns. We extend Study 3 by continuing to examine the effectiveness of a target advertisement embedded in a sequence of advertisements, expanding our sample to three target brands and including alternative controls. We again examine brand attitudes and ad engagement and also ask about purchase intentions. We contrast these involving, persuasive measures with a simpler brand attention measure: Do people recognize and recall the brands they saw advertised? We do not predict that repetition-break advertisements should yield an advantage for the brand attention measures relative to the contrast and alternative advertisements. It is even plausible that they do worse. Because repetition-break advertisements tend not to mention the target brand until the break event (note that this is a tendency we have noticed, not a requirement of the plot structure), they might yield lower performance on brand attention measures than advertisements that mention the target brand throughout the advertisement. Thus, our processing account leads us to predict that repetition-break advertisements should yield advantages on persuasion measures but not brand attention measures.

As a secondary point, we wanted to separate the engagement that we argue is critical for repetition-break advertisements from humor, which we argue is just one of multiple possible ends to which repetition-break advertisements can be aimed. Accordingly, we gathered participants' assessments of how humorous the advertisements were so that we could compare humor and engagement as drivers of the effect of the repetition-break plot structure on involving, persuasion measures such as brand attitudes and purchase intentions.

Method

Participants. A total of 220 junior and senior undergraduate students participated as part of a larger study to earn course extra credit. Their mean age was 20.7 years, 61% were female, 44% were white, and 68% were native English speakers. Exploratory data analysis revealed no interactions between these demographic variables and the key dependent measures, so we do not discuss them further.

Materials, design, and procedure. Participants saw one of three target advertisements (for the brands Adidas, Fiat, or Cotton), embedded in the middle of six filler advertisements (for the brands Wal-Mart, Nabob, Diet Coke, Sony, KPMG, and Wendy's). The target advertisement was a repetition-break, contrast control, or alternative control. Thus, we used a 3 (structure: repetition-break, contrast, alternative) × 3 (brand: Adidas, Fiat, Cotton) design. After viewing the advertisements, participants engaged in an unrelated filler task for an average of eight minutes and then answered a series of questions about the advertisements.

First, we measured brand attention. We asked participants to recall all the brands for which they saw advertisements and tallied whether they correctly wrote the target brand as a measure of brand recall. We then gave participants a list of brands and asked them to identify their degree of confidence that they did or did not see an advertisement for each brand as a measure of brand recognition. Half the brands they had seen before and half they had not, and we included as foils brands from the same product category as the target brands.

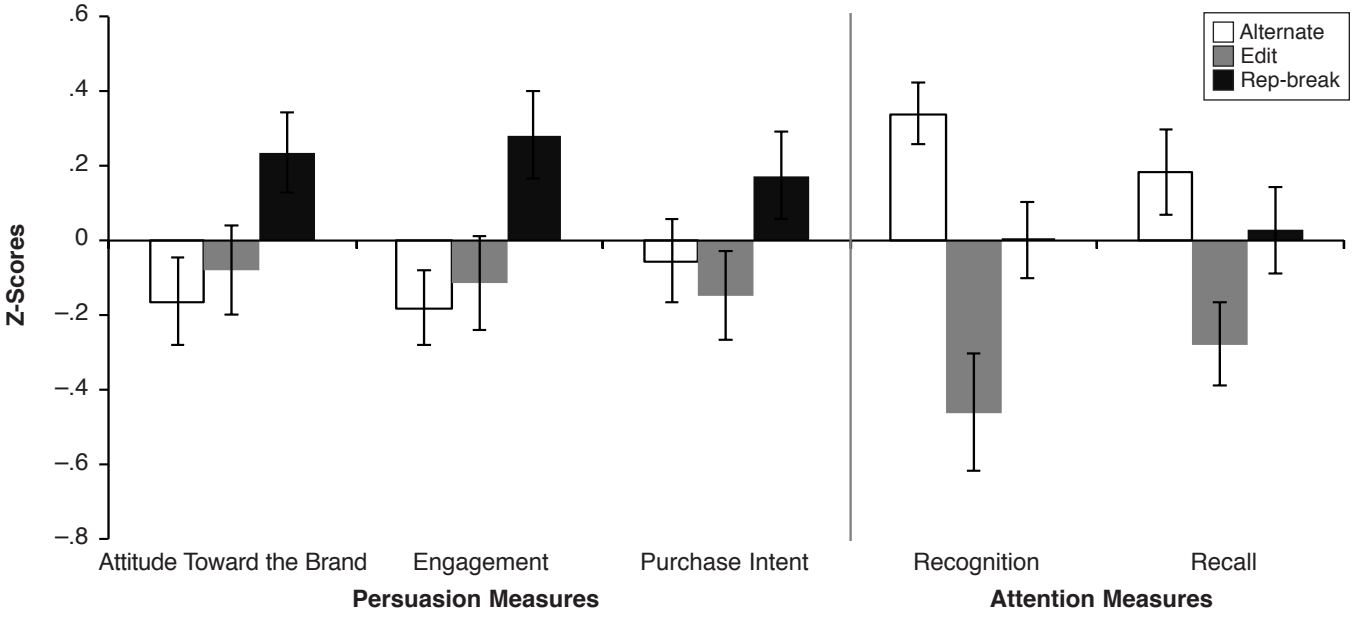
Next, we gathered persuasion measures. We showed participants three frames from the target advertisement and then asked them to answer the brand attitude ($\alpha = .94$) and engagement ($\alpha = .87$) items used in Study 3. We assessed their purchase intentions by asking the degree to which they agreed with two statements ($\alpha = .94$): "The next time I need [product type], I intend to consider [brand]," and "The next time I consider buying [product type], I intend to purchase a [brand] product." We also asked them to rate how funny the advertisement was (1 = "not at all funny," to 7= "very funny"), as well as whether they had seen the advertisement before.

Results

As predicted, we found that repetition-break advertisements garnered higher evaluations than the contrast and alternative controls on the persuasion measures but not on the brand attention measures (Figure 4). To reach this assessment, we conducted a series of 3 (structure: repetition-break, contrast, alternative) × 3 (brand: Adidas, Cotton, Fiat) ANOVAs to examine each measure—brand attitudes, engagement, purchase intentions, brand recognition, and brand recall. These showed consistent main effects of structure as well as predictable orthogonal main effects of Brand consistent with Study 2. Therefore, to save space in what follows, we emphasize planned contrasts between repetition-break and contrast advertisements and between repetition-break and alternative advertisements.

We assessed three persuasion measures: attitudes about the brand, engagement, and purchase intentions. We found that repetition-break advertisements ($M = 5.50$, $SE = .17$) yielded higher brand attitudes than contrast advertisements ($M = 5.00$, $SE = .19$; $F(1, 219) = 2.09$, $p < .05$) and alternative advertisements ($M = 4.86$, $SE = .18$; $F(1, 219) = 2.86$, $p < .01$). We found that repetition-break advertisements ($M = 4.32$, $SE = .21$) yielded higher levels of engagement than contrast advertisements ($M = 3.62$, $SE = .22$; $F(1, 219) = 2.91$, $p < .01$), and alternative advertisements ($M = 3.51$, $SE = .18$; $F(1, 219) = 3.66$, $p < .001$). We also found that repetition-break advertisements ($M = 3.42$, $SE = .22$) yielded stronger purchase intentions than contrast advertisements ($M = 2.82$, $SE = .22$; $F(1, 219) = 2.27$, $p < .05$) and a marginal trend toward stronger purchase intentions than alternative advertisements ($M = 3.00$, $SE = .21$; $F(1, 219) = 1.69$, $p = .09$). Taken together, these results support our prediction that repetition-break advertisements, even, or perhaps particu-

FIGURE 4
Persuasion and Attention Measures (Transformed to z-Scores for Comparability) for Alternative, Contrast, and Repetition-Break Advertisements from Study 4



larly, those embedded in a string of other advertisements, would generate higher levels of involvement and persuasion than contrast and alternative advertisements.

We assessed two brand attention measures: brand recall and brand recognition. We found a markedly different pattern for these measures than for the persuasion measures: The alternative advertisements tended to prompt the strongest performance. The brand recognition measure showed that repetition-break advertisements (M = 8.70, SE = .37) were more confidently recognized than contrast advertisements (M = 7.05, SE = .22; F(1, 219) = 3.33, $p < .01$) but less confidently recognized than alternative advertisements (M = 9.91, SE = .29; F(1, 219) = –2.64, $p < .01$). The brand recall measure showed that repetition-break advertisements (M = .38, SE = .06) tended to be more likely to be recalled than contrast advertisements (M = .23, SE = .05; F(1, 219) = 1.96, $p = .05$) but, if anything, were less likely to be recalled than alternative advertisements (M = .45, SE = .06; F(1, 219) = –1.07, $p = .29$). Thus, as we predicted, repetition-break advertisements show no particular advantage on brand attention measures and tended to lead toward worse performance on the attention measures than alternative advertisements.

The data also support our claim that being engaging is important to the effectiveness of repetition-break advertisements, irrespective of whether they are funny. Overall, repetition-break advertisements (M = 3.48, SE = .14) were rated as funnier than alternative advertisements (M = 2.48, SE = .14; F(1, 219) = 5.76, $p < .001$) and showed a nonsignificant tendency to be funnier than contrast advertisements (M = 3.03, SE = .17; F(1, 219) = 1.35, $p = .18$). However, in mediation analyses examining engagement and humor as mediators of the effect of the repetition-break plot structure on brand attitudes and purchase intentions, we found that greater engagement and *lower* humor ratings predicted brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Specifically, using Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes's (2007) approach, we found a positive coefficient for the indirect effect of repetition-break through engagement on brand attitudes (.30; SE – .11, 95% CI: .11–.53) and a negative coefficient for the indirect effect of repetition-break through humor on brand attitudes (–.12; SE – .06, 95% CI: –.26—.03). Similarly, we found a positive coefficient for the indirect effect of repetition-break through engagement on purchase intentions (.20; SE = .08, 95% CI: .06–.44), and a negative coefficient for the indirect effect of repetition-break through humor on purchase intentions, (–.23; SE = .09, 95% CI: –.47 to –.07). Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that repetition-break advertisements need not be funny to be effective.

Discussion

We found that repetition-break advertisements are persuasive. They lead to advantages in engagement and, thus, advantages in brand attitudes and purchase intentions compared with contrast versions that eliminate the opportunity to draw comparisons and alternative advertisements from the same campaign that did not use repetition-break plot structures. We found no particular advantage or even disadvantages in brand attention measures (i.e., brand recognition and brand recall). Thus, repetition-break advertisements are not an all-purpose tool for marketers. If the function of an advertisement is mainly to remind consumers of a brand in between purchase cycles, a repetition-break plot structure may not be the best choice. Instead, repetition-break advertisements are useful for high-involvement concerns such as attempts at increasing, rather than reinforcing, brand attitudes and purchase intentions.

We also found that humor was distinct from engagement and that repetition-break advertisements did not need to be funny to be effective. As indicated by the Peruvian Cancer Foundation advertisement, the original "Priceless" World Series advertisement, and the findings in Study 1, repetition-break advertisements can engage and persuade consumers without being funny.

General Discussion

We investigated a new kind of advertisement structure, the repetition-break plot structure, thereby bridging research on narratives in advertising (e.g., Adaval and Wyer 1998; Stern 1994) and research on advertisement structures (e.g., Goldenberg, Mazursky, and Solomon 1999; McQuarrie and Mick 1996; Pieters, Wedel, and Batra 2010). We have shown that the repetition-break plot structure generates engaging advertisements. Using empirical and experimental studies, we gathered evidence that naturally occurring advertisements for contemporary brands that use repetition-break plot structures are more likely than those with related plot structures or those from the same campaign to be selected by industry judges, to be posted and viewed on YouTube, and to enhance people's brand attitudes. We found that removing the initial repetition from repetition-break advertisements led to lower brand attitudes, consistent with our claim of the importance of comparing initial events. We found that repetition-break advertisements generated more favorable brand attitudes than those with different plot structures from the same campaign, providing further support that there is value to the plot structure beyond other campaign choices. Thus, we have robust and varied evidence of the value of the repetition-break plot structure in television advertisements.

We also have evidence for why and when the repetition-break plot structure is effective. We found that engagement with the narrative in the advertisement served as a mediator between the plot structure and people's brand attitudes. Repetition-break advertisements are more engaging than otherwise similar advertisements. We found signs that a repetition-break advertisement generated a greater advantage over a version edited to remove the initial repetition when the advertisement was viewed in a block of advertisements, indicating that the repetition-break plot structure helps advertisements stand out in a cluttered media environment. We found that repetition-break advertisements are effective for persuading and enhancing brand attitudes but are not particularly effective and possibly counterproductive for maintaining brand awareness. As a result, repetition-break advertisements are not all-purpose advertising solutions but an ad structure targeted for specific marketing purposes. We can guide marketers in why and when to use the repetition-break plot structure in their campaigns.

Our theoretical description of the repetition-break plot structure clarifies how the structure uses comparison to engage viewers and set the basis for endogenous surprise, which does not depend on differing from preexisting expectations. Using comparison to generate an expectation gives advertisers more flexibility in creating engagement in a diverse audience whose members may not share similar expectations. Managers face a daunting challenge in attracting multiple segments of consumers. The repetition-break plot structure provides a promising, flexible tool for engaging a broad array of consumers in a cluttered media environment.

From a practical perspective, there is much room for expanded use of the repetition-break plot structure. We found instances of advertisements using the plot structure for product categories ranging from apparel to public service and in countries ranging from Argentina to Thailand. Nonetheless, the plot structure is infrequent in day-to-day use: A mere 3% of prime-time television advertisements employ it. Therefore, we believe there is a large untapped potential for them.

Repetition-break advertisements are likely to be particularly helpful in competitive situations for which advertisers need to engage with consumers to enhance brand attributes, reposition their already established brand, create social buzz by generating advertising that people are likely to want to pass along, or challenge a dominant competitor. In these situations, the additional engagement provided by the repetition-break plot structure will be particularly useful. Our results show that the repetition-break plot structure is a way of enhancing the degree to which consumers think and feel about an advertisement and the brand that sponsors it. Repetition-break advertisements will be particularly useful in situations in which an advertiser needs a consumer to engage intellectually with the brand (e.g., to understand a novel product benefit) or to engage emotionally with the brand (e.g., to be moved enough to try an upstart brand or donate to a nonprofit).

For example, it is no accident that MasterCard gained strong benefits from the repetition-break plot structure in its "Priceless" campaign against the more dominant Visa brand. But MasterCard was already a well-established brand, and this structure may be even more productive when resources are constrained, as for a Peruvian cancer center that is trying to get attention on a nonprofit budget. One of the most widely reposted and viewed advertisements on YouTube was an advertisement for Pure Blonde beer, then a new Carlton brand for the low-calorie beer market, which contributed to what *Australian Financial Review* reported was a 137% sales increase. In an environment in which companies are increasingly interested in the power of social media, the repetition-break plot structure provides an easy way for increasing the odds that someone will pass along a piece of advertising. Through their actions, individual consumers are at least implicitly recognizing that this plot structure might engage a wide variety of their colleagues and friends to respond predictably with laughter or tenderness, even if differences among their social network might produce more heterogeneous responses to a different form of advertisement.

Our findings show there are qualifications to using repetition-break advertisements: There are times when marketers should probably not use them. Specifically, when the marketers' objective is to build or sustain brand awareness, alternative plot structures may work as well as or better than the repetition-break plot structure. If a marketer's objective is convey multiple pieces of information rather than one focused claim, repetition-break advertisements will probably be less effective than other approaches as well because the structure is geared toward focusing viewers on one focal point. In additional research, we also found that when viewers have very low levels of cognitive capacity (e.g., due to a strong cognitive load manipulation), plot structure effects are attenuated. The implication is that consumers need to have the capacity to become engaged for the repetition-break plot structure to contribute to an advertisement's effectiveness. This is consistent with McQuarrie and Mick's (2003) conclusion that consumers must have the ability, opportunity, and motivation to process an advertisement that uses rhetorical structures. Alternatively, it is possible that there are ways to use the repetition-break plot structure that require less cognitive effort (Rozin et al. 2006), such as keeping the repetitions identical and the break minimal, that marketers could pursue. Still, the choice to produce repetition-break advertisements should be evaluated against both the marketer's objectives and the context in which consumers are likely to view the advertisements.

There are two promising lines for further research. The first is to examine the time course of the engagement produced by the repetition-break plot structure. In the current studies, we used self-report measures of people's accounts of engagement and integrated multiple aspects of engagement. However, the processing account we provide suggests that initial comparisons should be engaging and critical to establishing surprise at the break, which should then further heighten engagement and generate appeal for and attributions about the product and brand. Moment-by-moment analyses have proved useful for examining humor in advertising (Woltman Elpers, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2004). Close analysis of the time course of involvement with repetition-break advertisements could also prove fruitful.

The repetition-break plot structure is just one of many possible plot structures that might serve as a recipe for structuring effective advertisements. Accordingly, a second area we suggest for further research is to examine additional plot structures and eventually develop a taxonomy of plot structures. Scholars have generated taxonomies to organize findings showing that there are multiple effective types of strategic functions (e.g., promoting a brand image or positioning relative to a competitor; Frazer 1983; Laskey, Day, and Crask 1989) and multiple effective modes of influence (e.g., informational or emotional; Aaker and Norris 1982; Vakratsas and Ambler 1999). These frameworks are useful for articulating an advertisement's high-level goals. Work on recipes for structuring advertising content offers a complementary purpose—namely, to show how an advertiser could construct high-performing advertisements. Repetition-break advertisements are an additional step toward building a library of effective advertising recipes.

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