

**SPEAKING VOLUMES THROUGH SILENCE:
STRATEGIES FOR CREATING SUCCESSFUL SOUNDLESS VIDEO ADS**

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Abstract

Video advertising is increasingly prevalent, appearing in more and more places across the web and on social media. In many of these contexts ads are typically viewed without sound, possibly impacting their effectiveness and meaning. In this paper we draw on advertising and screen media research, analyze ads drawn from both articles and an agency dataset, and also interview advertising professionals experienced with soundless video in order to build novel understanding of the phenomenon of soundless advertising. Our analysis reveals four strategies and associated operational tactics that advertisers can employ to develop more successful ads for soundless environments.

Management Slant

- Video ads created for a sound-on environment typically do not perform well when viewed without sound, and subtitles are typically not an effective solution.
- In order to be successful in an online environment, video advertising should be designed assuming it will be played soundlessly.
- Silence removes an important source of information for viewers and necessitates the use of compensatory strategies to remain effective.
- Advertising testing should be conducted with sound both on and off.

Keywords: Video advertising, online advertising, silence, sound

Introduction

Video advertising is a growing form of online advertising with spending up 85% in the last two years (IAB, 2016) and expected to grow at a faster rate than other forms of online display advertising (eMarketer, 2017). This is not surprising given increases in bandwidth and a general shift toward watching video online, a trend most apparent in millennials and teens who respectively watch 47% and 64% less television than adults 35 and older (O’Neill-Hart and Blumenstein, 2016). Leveraging the popularity of online video, advertisers are placing video ads in more places across the web and social media.

In many of the places where video ads appear, online sound does not play automatically. This is sometimes by design, following industry guidelines stating sound should only play when the context means consumers expect sound (IAB, 2015). Many social media sites similarly require users to click to enable sound for video ads, although most users do not. In fact, ad agencies estimate between 82% and 94% of users watch videos on social media soundlessly because sound in some environments, such as workplaces or public transit, is socially undesirable (Maheshwari and Benner, 2016). While Facebook is re-enabling sound on videos in 2017, they will give users control over this feature as well as respect mute settings. Even after sound is re-enabled, a majority of users are likely to continue to view ads without sound.

Viewing a video advertisement without sound likely changes an ad’s effectiveness, reducing its ability to attract attention and be understood. This may make soundless video ads doubly avoided since consumers in an online environment are already prone to ad avoidance (Cho and Cheon, 2004; Duff and Faber, 2011; Edwards, Li, and Lee, 2002). Silence may also affect an ad’s very meaning. Therefore, ads for a soundless environment likely require different strategies. Facebook’s own internal research shows “41% of videos were basically meaningless

without sound” (Maheshwari and Benner, 2016). Industry articles also outline tips for agencies, further reinforcing that soundless ads require a different approach (Fontein, 2016; Hall, 2016). While existing academic literature suggests going soundless might hurt a video ad’s performance (MacInnis, Moorman, and Jaworski, 1991; Mackenzie, 1986), research has yet to address the phenomenon of soundless online video advertising.

In this paper we identify strategies that will help advertisers develop successful video ads for soundless online environments. These strategies include anything that fosters persuasion in the absence of sound, but especially focus on gaining and maintaining viewer attention. We adopt a qualitative approach utilizing three sources of information. We develop preliminary findings using ads drawn from both an industry dataset and ads identified in industry publications. We corroborate our findings through interviews with advertising professionals who create and distribute soundless ads. Triangulating between these data, we explicate four strategies for creating effective videos for silent environments.

The Power of Sound: Research from Advertising and Screen Media

Sound is one tactic advertisers use to increase consumers’ motivation, opportunity, and ability to process advertisements (MacInnis et al., 1991; Mackenzie, 1986). Sound, along with a variety of other techniques, influences motivation to attend to a particular ad. Opportunity can be enhanced through repetition of the ad itself, as well as repetition of key information within an ad. Finally, creating ads that are easier for consumers to understand enhance ability. This can be achieved by linking an ad to information already established in consumer memory, or by using techniques such as jingles, analogy and demonstration to ease learning of new information.

Sound demonstrates a range of possible effects on all three drivers of ad processing.

Loudness affects the amount of attention and subsequent motivation to view an ad (Berlyne, 1960; Kellaris, Cox, and Cox, 1993; MacInnis et al., 1991). Research on sound in advertising focuses on music, finding it able to create a mood, stir emotions, and increase arousal levels (Lantos and Craton, 2012). Screen media research finds other structural arrangements such as pitch, timing, timbre and tempo influence affective judgments and mood (Boltz, 2001; Rigg, 1964; Smith, 2003). Music in film can draw audiences into the “fantasy-illusion” of a moving image and facilitate audience identification with depicted situations (Gorbman, 1987; Kassabian, 2001). All of the effects above work to increase viewer motivation to engage with an ad.

Viewer opportunity and ability to process advertising also are enhanced by music. Music aids in the recall of existing memories, schemas, and associations, as well as the formation of new associations (Fraser, 2014; Hung, 2001; Lantos and Craton, 2012; North, Sheridan, and Areni, 2016; Oakes, 2007; Scott, 1990). Screen media research finds soundtracks influence remembering of filmed events, foreshadows possible future narrative scenarios, and contributes to comprehension of story and plot (Boltz, 2001; Boltz, Schulkind, and Kantra, 1991). Broadly, sound in film, whether music, ambient noise or dialogue, is a powerful device that adds emotive and informative value, while framing understanding and memory (Boltz, 2001; Chion, 1994; Gorbman, 1987; Kassabian, 2001; Smith, 2003). Music directs viewer attention and assists interpretation, making it easier to understand and remember video advertising. Taken together, these findings explain music’s effects on advertising outcomes such as attitude change and purchase (Allan, 2007; Fraser, 2014; Lantos and Craton, 2012; North et al., 2016; Oakes, 2007).

Compensating for Silence: Research from Film

While advertising research has yet to address soundless viewing, literature in screen media

examines the role of silence. Without the framing, linking and signposting qualities of sound, perception of a moving image may be different, with shots appearing fragmented or abstracted (Chion, 1994; Link, 2007; Lossef and Doctor, 2007). This may be why silent movies were sometimes screened with live musical accompaniment (Altman, 2007). Silence signals limitlessness, abstraction, and undifferentiated time (Brooks, 2007; Doctor, 2007; Losseff and Doctor, 2007; Picard, 1989). Indeed, films use silence as an aesthetic device to invoke a sense of dislocation or disjointedness (Link, 2007). The challenges of a soundless environment therefore necessitate greater attention to the only remaining channel of impression: the visuals (Chion, 1994).

From early silent cinema, films have used visual style to complement, experiment with, or compensate for, the dynamics of silence and sound. Early silent filmmakers developed “expressive” visual techniques to deepen emotional involvement of the spectator (Thompson, 2004). Distinctive backlighting, emphasis of facial expression, gesture and mime acting, baroque sets and staging, and depth of field, offered artistic flair beyond the basic plot (Thompson, 2004). These devices form some of the creative palette still utilized to develop visual intrigue and prompt interest. Over time, filmmaking activity emerged that combine these “expressive” techniques with the movement of bodies and objects within shots, camera techniques (such as zooming or panning), and editing (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 2016; Vernallis, 2013). Together, these visual techniques form their own pulses of movement and stasis even in the absence of sound (Chion, 1994).

The Absence of Sound: Impact and Potential Remedies

While no research we are aware of examines how removing sound affects consumers, it is

reasonable to assume that it will decrease ad effectiveness. Consumers are especially prone to avoid ads online, since they are in a goal-directed state (Cho and Cheon, 2004; Edwards et al., 2002; Goodrich, Schiller and Galletta, 2015; Korgaonkar and Wolin, 1999). Online consumers see ads as slowing achievement of their goals, making them even less motivated to view advertisements (Cho and Cheon, 2004; Duff and Faber, 2011; Edwards et al., 2002). Silence likely compounds this problem. Based on advertising and screen media literature, other ad characteristics may compensate for a silent ad's inability to call out for attention. Such characteristics may include depictions of deep emotions, use of film techniques such as motion or cuts, and arresting scenes or likenesses (MacInnis et al., 1991).

Video ads without sound may be inherently more difficult to process. To facilitate processing, silent video ads might include simpler, more concrete messages and plots (Hung, 2001) and increased repetition (MacInnis et al., 1991). Ads may also allude to existing cultural references as well as rely on gestalt understanding (MacInnis et al., 1991; Scott, 1990). Informed by existing literature, our research qualitatively explores techniques to improve effectiveness of soundless video advertising.

Methodology and Data

Appropriate to our exploratory investigation, we adopted a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2013; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) that we executed in three stages, reflecting our three sources of information. Three data sources were used in order to enhance the reliability of our findings:

Ads from an Agency We obtained access to ads from Unruly, a global programmatic online video ad distributor. Our dataset includes 3,484 unique English-language video ads aired in

predominantly soundless online environments over a two-year period. On average, ads were seen soundlessly by 87.7% of viewers. We sorted our dataset by in-view time, a metric representing the average amount of time each ad is visible on viewers' screens. We did this based on the assumption that consumers would view more successful soundless ads for longer durations while viewing less successful soundless ads for shorter durations. This is predicated on the belief that an ad is a key factor causing consumers to spend more time on a webpage on which an ad is playing. While in individual cases there could be other factors causing consumers to spend more time on a webpage containing an ad, over a large number of ads and webpages these differences should counterbalance. Given that a single programmatically placed ad can play across thousands of different websites, we believe this assumption to be reasonable. This logic led us to select the fifty longest-viewed ads (average in-view time of 28.6 seconds) and the fifty shortest-viewed ads (average in-view time of 6.6 seconds) from the dataset for qualitative coding. Comparison between these two sets of ads would help in the identification of characteristics that discriminate between more and less successful soundless ads. There was no significant difference in ad length between the more successful ($M_{\text{more successful}} = 83.9$ seconds, $SD = 117.3$ seconds) and less successful ads ($M_{\text{less successful}} = 96.9$ seconds, $SD = 107.4$ seconds, $t(98) = 0.58$, $p = 0.56$).

Ads from Articles We searched for articles on soundless video advertising. From these articles we gathered a total of 29 ads identified as successful in soundless environments. These ads are listed in Table 1.

Interviews with Advertising Professionals We interviewed eight professionals who develop or create soundless video advertising (see Appendix A for the interview guide). These

included creative directors and strategists from small and large advertising agencies, as well as freelance filmmakers and copywriters (see Table 2). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Quotations illustrating the strategies we identify are included in our findings section.

Table 1 – Successful Soundless Ads Identified in Popular Press Articles

Article	Brands	Link
1. “Are Silent Movies the Future of Advertising?”, Jack Neff, Ad Age, 2015.	Amopé Lysol.	http://adage.com/article/digital/reckitt-genuine-silent-movies-future-ads/298039/
2. “Silence is Golden: Be Quiet and Let your Video Speak for Itself”, Andy Smith, Tubular Insights, 2015.	Liver Transplant Foundation Epic Games.	http://tubularinsights.com/tips-silent-videos/
3. “Marketers, Creative Ad Execs Adjust to Video Ads with No Sound”, Mike Shields, Wall Street Journal, 2015.	Ben & Jerry’s Heineken Light Burberry	http://blogs.wsj.com/cmo/2015/06/08/marketers-creative-ad-execs-adjust-to-video-ads-with-no-sound/
4. “Six Tips from Facebook for Using Silent Video Better”, Emma Hall, AdAge, 2016.	Sainsbury’s UNHCR Airbnb Wendy’s	http://adage.com/article/digital/silent-video-speaks-volumes/307254/
5. “Hillary Clinton Just Made the Best Use of Silent Autoplay With This Social Video Ad”, Kristina Monllos, Adweek, 2016.	Hillary Clinton Campaign	http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/hillary-clinton-just-made-great-use-silent-autoplay-facebook-twitter-and-instagram-173610
6. “Creative Hub Gallery”, Facebook, 2016.	Netflix Netflix	https://www.facebook.com/ads/creativehub/gallery/1198097433586579/ https://www.facebook.com/ads/

	Volkswagen Huggies	creativehub/gallery/699368733574707/ https://www.facebook.com/ads/creativehub/gallery/1297142370296409/ https://www.facebook.com/ads/creativehub/gallery/693874540760130/
7. “Building Video for Mobile Feed”, Facebook Business, 2016.	Finish Well’s Fargo Wrigley’s	https://www.facebook.com/business/news/building-video-for-mobile-feed
8. “Capture Attention with Updated Features for Video Ads”, Facebook Business, 2016.	Kleenex Seda Sun silk Absolut Vodka	https://www.facebook.com/business/news/updated-features-for-video-ads
9. “How to create Facebook video ads that cater for silent autoplay”, Jack Simpson, Econsultancy, 2016.	Hotels.com Kraft Foods (A.1. Steak Sauce) AdCouncil Mercedes-Benz	https://econsultancy.com/blog/67442-how-to-create-facebook-video-ads-that-cater-for-silent-autoplay/
10. “Making Video Ads That Work on Facebook’s Silent Screen”, Sapna Maheshwari and Katie Benner, The New York Times, 2016.	Geico Chips Ahoy	https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/26/business/media/making-video-ads-that-work-on-facebooks-silent-screen.html?_r=0
11. “From the 8 th Annual Shorty Awards: Silent Ads Winner in Facebook”, Shorty Awards, 2016.	Hotels.com	http://shortyawards.com/8th/silent-ads

Table 2 – Interview Informants

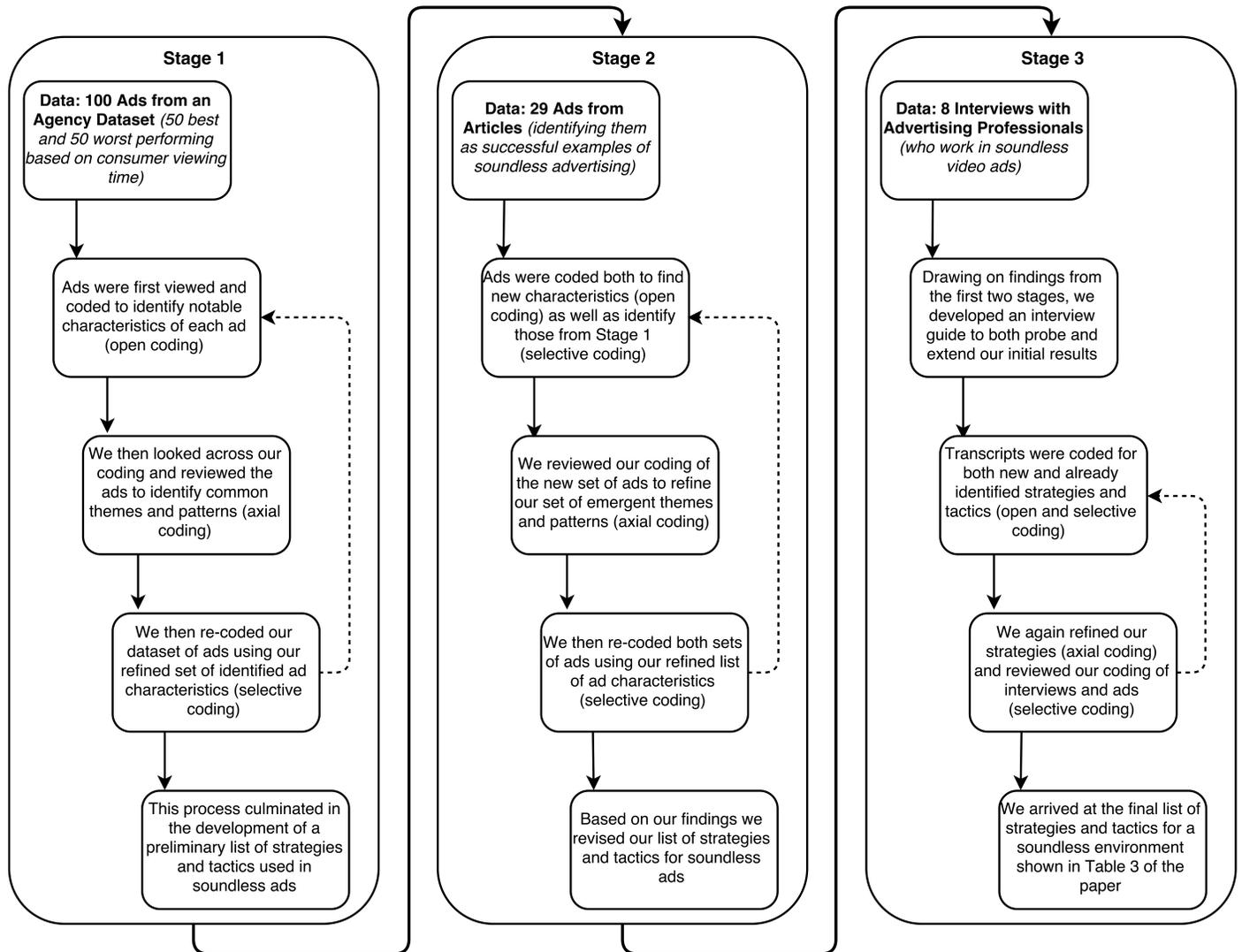
Name*	Position	Firm	Years of Experience with Online Video
Gary (42)	Managing Director	Creative Agency (Large)	12
Simon (38)	Film Director	Production Company (Small)	8
Andrew (42)	Business Director	Creative Agency (Mid-size)	9
Sid (28)	Film Director	Freelancer	11
Harry (31)	Copywriter/Strategist	Freelancer	8
Heather (34)	Content Supervisor	Media Agency (Large)	3
Dan (50)	Creative Director	Creative Agency (Mid-size)	3
Peter (28)	CEO and Co-Founder	Creative Agency and Video Distributor (Mid-size)	6

**Names anonymized*

While qualitative research is somewhat subjective, our analysis is strengthened by the independent coding carried out by both researchers and by triangulation between the three data sources (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Also, since one of the researchers is in marketing and the other is in screen media, they brought distinct perspectives that enriched the investigation (Creswell, 2013). Our qualitative analysis proceeded in three stages and is overviewed in Figure 1. At all stages involving coding, advertisements and interview data were first individually coded by each researcher before differences were reconciled through researcher discussion. The existing literature was consulted throughout the analysis process as themes and patterns emerged (Spiggle, 1994).

The first stage of qualitative analysis involved examination of the soundless ads identified from the agency dataset. This dataset included the 50 most successful and 50 least successful soundless ads based on the length of time consumers viewed them. This selection is

Figure 1 – Description of Qualitative Analysis Process



based on the assumption that more successful ads would be viewed for longer times. Each researcher first viewed each of these ads, open coding for notable characteristics of each ad that might explain their performance. These included characteristics such as cuts, pacing, evoked emotions, use of subtitling, salience of brands, and use of celebrities. Following open coding of all of the 100 ads, each researcher then reviewed their coding in order to identify common themes and patterns inherent to either the successful or less successful groups of ads. This axial

coding led to refinement based on patterns that emerged within and between the two groups of ads. It also led to the identification of more abstract categories of ad characteristics that suggested further potentially relevant ad characteristics. We then viewed each of the 100 ads again and selectively coded for our more refined list of ad characteristics. Constant comparison both between ads as well as existing literature helped distill thematic patterns (Spiggle, 1994) and led to the development of a preliminary list of strategies and tactics used in successful soundless ads. At this stage, identified strategies and tactics generally focused on the effect of more overt visual elements such cuts, camera motion, and subtitle use.

In the second stage, we used a sample of 29 video ads identified as successful in articles (see Table 1) to both refine and extend our findings from the first stage of analysis. A similar process as the first stage was used with each researcher first individually coding all 29 ads for notable characteristics. Open coding was again reviewed in order to identify repeated patterns and themes. These were then discussed and refined before being used to re-code the ads drawn from both articles and the agency dataset. Findings were used to revise and extend our emergent list of strategies and tactics used in successful soundless ads. Specifically, this phase more clearly pinpointed the technique of referencing shared understandings as well as use of visual rather than verbal storytelling.

Finally, in a third stage, we interviewed eight advertising professionals who develop or create soundless video advertising (see Table 2). These interviews were used to probe for additional ad characteristics as well as synthesize and check our emergent findings. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, the interviews developed better understanding of why and how the techniques identified through our analysis might operate. An interview guide was developed based on our findings from the first two stages (see Appendix A). Transcripts were coded

following a similar process to the first two stages. Each researcher first read each transcript to code for new and existing strategies before turning to look across the interviews to identify commonalities and new insights. In this third stage, support was found for the broad strategies and tactics earlier identified. Insights from the interviews provided understanding of the mechanisms causing these strategies to be effective, as well identification of additional means of operationalizing them. These insights led us to review our coding of the interviews and ads once more, making only minor changes. This review, coupled with the rich and corroborating insights provided by interviewees, lead us to conclude that theoretical saturation had been reached. We then distilled our findings into the final list of strategies and tactics detailed in our findings section and overviewed in Table 3. We next describe these strategies and tactics, including quotations from our interviews that illustrate and explain our findings.

Results

Analysis of the three data sources reveals four broad strategies, and associated tactics, for creating successful soundless ads (see Table 3). We now discuss each strategy in detail, including relevant ad examples from Stage 2 of our methodology to illustrate key points and quotes from our Stage 3 interview participants.

Visual Rather than Verbal Storytelling

Analysis of our coding revealed that more successful soundless ads rely on visual storytelling. This is likely because removing sound reduces one of the major mechanisms through which an ad can communicate. As interview participant Harry points out, “with a sound ad, I have the layer of effects, visuals, tone of voice, the pace of the music.... with a soundless ad, you've got

the visuals and the text. And that's basically it. That narrows down the possibilities of how I can play with it as a creative.” For this reason successful soundless ads tend to be simpler, relying on less complex plots. As Dan states, soundless “has forced us to tell visual stories in a crisper, clearer, shorter way.” Peter further explains, “the key is to be visual and drive a very simple message. What is the essence or core that I'm trying to tell somebody? And how do I visually depict that?” According to Simon, “the ideal soundless ad would be conceived for a soundless environment from the get-go... you would show, rather than tell.” For example, Huggies’ “Hug the Mess” ad (see Table 1, sixth article) adopts a child’s perspective, cleverly limiting the story to the visual. Use of a close, point-of-view shot approximating a child’s line of vision contextualizes the simple, easily understood storyline of a child creating a mess and focuses attention on the child’s actions and gestures. Other techniques to orient viewer attention evident in coding include closer shots, zooms, tilts or blurring all but a focal object.

Inclusion of verbal dialogue should be avoided since it either alienates viewers or necessitates the use of subtitling. Dan states when “writing for social you strip away as much dialogue as possible.” Actors are therefore constrained to the visual, with depiction of strong emotion conveyed through close-up shots often used to command attention and develop plot. Simon explains, “if you are getting your emotional information from the audio and there is none of that, then there is scope for performances to be heightened.” Similar to silent cinema, actors in more successful soundless ads tended to make “bolder choices” physically, overtly miming and gesturing. Volkswagen’s “Park Assist” ad (see Table 1, sixth article) illustrates a woman’s reaction to the car self-parking through overt hand gestures and ecstatic facial expression. Dan explains the logic, stating “we won't show someone who's a little bit irritated... We'll show someone who's furious...because seeing someone irritated is not that arresting whereas seeing

Table 3 – Strategies for a Soundless Environment

Soundless Strategy	Tactics
<i>Visual Rather than Verbal Storytelling</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simpler ad storylines communicated by “showing” rather than “telling” • Avoidance of scenes depicting dialogue unless meaning can be inferred • Deliberate shot framing • Use of emotion-laden or emotion-inducing shots • Increased kinesthetic movement such as miming and gesturing • Reliance on slapstick humor, and visually-depicted irony
<i>Reference to Shared Understandings</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alluding to well-known books, movies, and film (e.g. Cinderella) • Referencing well-known cultural events and public figures • Use of stereotypes
<i>Increased Visual Intensity and Energy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starting with an arresting image • Avoidance of long “establishing shots” • Shorter shot length • Increased or continuous motion within shots • Use of varied shot types • Use of “aggressive” or exaggerated camera angles, zooms, tilts, and focus • Use of editing to impart rhythm
<i>Avoidance or Tactical Integration of Subtitles</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoidance of subtitles • If necessary, subtitling at the thought or idea level rather than verbatim dialogue • Attention to placement of subtitles in both space and time, avoiding obscuring or distracting from other activity within a shot • Strategic use of subtitles (to direct eyes) • Styling text to visually express emotion or meaning

someone furious is.” Relatedly, humor in successful soundless videos is limited to visual forms.

Simon describes how soundless ads “rely on good strong visual jokes - either contrasting images side by side, or fish out of water images... or slapstick.”

Reference to Shared Understandings

Another strategy successful soundless ads often employ is extensively drawing on an audience's existing shared knowledge. One technique observed in the data involves relying on universal human narratives. Harry describes how “you try to find things that everybody can relate to ... that are globally known. Everybody knows how it feels to be embarrassed, everybody knows kids... everybody knows happiness, joy, birthdays, things which are celebrated around the world.” Heather explains universal narratives “come across easier for the target that you're trying to reach.” Using “something that every parent goes through” rapidly conveys meaning so that “even without the context behind it or the words being said they know what's going on.” Sainsbury's Christmas ad “The Greatest Gift” (see Table 1, fourth article) cleverly uses this strategy, depicting not only the festive mood, but widely shared experiences. The main character endures an old woman counting change at the post office and an awkward Christmas party. In a distinctly British reference, the character suffers train delays caused by a single snowflake on the track, a common in-joke amongst commuters using the national rail service. Success of this strategy depends on a target audience recognizing and understanding a chosen reference. As Harry explains, “you always have to think: what's my audience? ... I need to know if people can relate to the image I'm showing.”

Similarly, reference to well-known public figures or celebrities can quickly trigger existing schemas. Harry states “if you have an ad showing Morgan Freeman or Judy Dench, you immediately have their voice in your mind whilst reading the subtitles.” Allusion to well-known storylines and characters similarly enables audiences to rapidly understand complex concepts.

A.1. Steak Sauce's “New Friend Requests” ad (see Table 1, ninth article) plays with the complexities of modern dating. Through the lens of Facebook updates, the ad follows A.1.

falling both “in a relationship” with steak and then out again, as first pork and then many other protein “suitors” appear, humorously signaling A.1.’s ability to pair with almost anything.

Heather notes references to cultural meaning “make it easier to create content that someone will be able to identify and relate to without having to listen.”

Increased Visual Intensity and Energy

Without sound, silent video ads can feel slower and less exciting. As Andrew states, “if you take sound off, there are certain pauses, especially for comedy videos, which create a very slow feel.” Simon explains “without audio, your film will necessarily be a bit more jerky...it will feel less unified and homogenized...your perception of time changes if you're watching something without audio to take in.” He offers, “maybe there is less information so you can process shots faster ... I think it would subtly change the way you would cut a film; definitely the way you would go about shooting it.”

To compensate, successful silent advertisements increase their visual intensity or energy. One technique evident in the data is avoiding longer and slower shots. While such shots can feel dramatic or suspenseful with music or voice-over, without sound it can feel dreamlike, hypnotic, or worse, tedious. Likewise, reliance on a single, fixed camera angle imparts a sluggish, documentary-style feel, inviting viewer distraction. Successful ads instead employ a variety of shot types, often involving a high degree of camera motion, and are cut shorter. “Skinny Dip” for Wrigley’s Five chewing gum (see Table 1, seventh article) illustrates this, employing handheld roving camerawork, split-second editing, and varied angles to convey the rush of excitement before trying something new. The ad illustrates Simon’s assertion that without sound “you've got to really go for it...and you use everything in your toolkit from jarring and contrasting cuts, to

beautiful images, to swiftly moving camera.” Peter explains that, used effectively, “pacing can make a 30 second video feel like it's only ten seconds.”

Continuous camera motion is another technique seen in the data for increasing the liveliness of an ad. Dan explains that “... you want to make sure that you have swooping shots, quick pans, quick zooms, quick tilts... because you don't have words, you have to make up for it with movement.” Hotels.com’s “Piano” ad (see Table 1, eleventh article) illustrates this, using a single, rapidly swooping shot that grabs attention as well as naturally focuses on the ad’s main character. In other observed cases, aggressive or exaggerated camera zooms or shots are used to amplify emotions or visually “scream.” Such techniques can be difficult to create post-hoc.

Avoidance or Tactical Integration of Subtitles

Successful soundless advertisements generally eschew subtitles. Sid describes how subtitles make it feel “like you're reading an article rather than watching entertainment. The brain has to work a bit harder... It definitely makes it less entertaining.” Simon states distraction is problematic given “advertising is almost always so compressed, trying to tell a story that's too big for the time you've been given to tell it in” making you “very particular about where you direct people's attention.” Harry views subtitles as disrupting flow, “[diluting] the whole emotional thing, the whole fun aspect that comes with the pace of it.” The disruption caused by subtitles is especially evident with humor.

Subtitles distract attention, creating tension in viewers torn between paying attention to either the visuals or subtitles. Simon is sensitive to this, stating, “if you're not picking up key visual information, there's a real danger that you'll lose the point of the ad.” Successful ads slow visual action if subtitles are included. Harry explains, “it's quite important that [a subtitled

soundless ad] is calmed down. Because if you've got to read a bit of text, and you've got to watch a film or an animation, then it can't be too distracting.” Included subtitles, Harry states, should be “quite precise, quite clear” and focus on essential information. Gary tries to develop ads that “you don't really ever need to turn the sound on for it to be good.” He sees subtitles as a form of cheating, explaining “advertising that’s quite well crafted tends to work without sound.”

Our data shows successful ads using subtitles leverage them as a creative tool. Sid explains that if using text, he “[uses] it expressively ... to try and convey the emotion of what's being said in the text. If someone was shouting and they were getting louder as they were talking, the text would get bigger and bolder as it was going on.” This changes an otherwise mechanical “crutch” into a visual tool. For Dan, what works is to “bring creativity to it, to use color, size, fonts, and positioning to bring out the dialogue... the subtitling becomes an element of the creativity.” An example of this is Wendy’s “4 for \$4 Meal” ad (see Table 1, fourth article) which uses captions popping-out from different locations to guide attention. The movement of the captions forces a viewer’s gaze around the frame.

Discussion

This paper seeks to understand the challenges of video advertisements being viewed without sound and techniques used to overcome these challenges. We analyzed ads from both an agency dataset and articles, as well as interviews with advertising professionals experienced with soundless video. We identify four broad strategies to compensate for viewing without sound that are informed by existing research in advertising (Mackenzie, 1986; MacInnis et al., 1991) and screen media (Bordwell, 2002; Thompson, 2004; Vernallis, 2013). Our findings build novel understanding relevant to online video advertisers while also extending existing research to a

new environment.

The strategies and tactics we identify both moderate and extend MacInnis, Moorman and Jaworski's (1991) framework to identify techniques applicable in a soundless environment. At a broad level, our findings demonstrate that in a soundless environment several of the ad characteristics identified in their framework simply are not available to advertisers. These include ad characteristics that would otherwise enhance viewer motivation, such as loud music and changes in voice or silence, as well as those that enhance viewer ability, such as verbal framings. At the same time, our findings highlight the added importance a soundless environment places on other characteristics identified as enhancing motivation (MacInnis et al., 1991). These include characteristics such as unusual cinematography, edits and cuts, visual complexity, action, and use of metaphors. Finally, our findings suggest nuance in the manner in which some ad characteristics are conveyed in a soundless environment. For instance, while emotion is still important in a soundless environment, the way in which it is created and conveyed changes. Since voice and music are not available, the responsibility actors have for portraying emotion increases. The same is true for directing and cueing attention; a soundless environment places that task on actors, cinematographers, and graphic designers. Taken together, our findings suggest that an ad created for a typical sound-on environment would likely perform worse when viewed soundlessly. However, the strategies and tactics we detail, in conjunction with understanding of how they detract, enhance, or modify aspects of MacInnis, Moorman and Jaworski's (1991) framework, should enable creation of more effective soundless ads.

Our findings also reaffirm the importance of storytelling even in a soundless environment (Stern, 1994). Our findings add depth to this literature, describing specific techniques for constructing and conveying a story without sound. One strategy, reference to shared knowledge

to facilitate comprehension, reasserts the value of understanding an audience's knowledge base (Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell, 2009), as well as the larger system of "shared meanings" comprising culture (Hall, 1997). In a soundless context such knowledge takes on even greater importance since it can be leveraged to craft more efficient or more complex ads.

Our investigation highlights the value of an interdisciplinary approach to understanding soundless advertising. Many screen media concepts are useful for understanding our findings. One example is acting in silent cinema, which demonstrates greater physical motion and heavily stressed gestures (Pearson, 1992). This contrasts with more subtle and restrained contemporary acting styles. Likewise, the idea of instilling "visual energy" within a soundless ad draws from and extends the theory of "expressivity" in silent cinema, which describes a series of artistic techniques aimed to "deepen the spectator's emotional involvement in the action" by heightening visual style (Thompson, 2004, p. 254). This is especially relevant for capturing consumer attention and increasing motivation. The concept of visual energy reflects a trend in American filmmaking towards more rapid editing, closer framing in dialogue scenes, and free-ranging camera techniques (Bordwell, 2002). YouTube videos demonstrate further acceleration of these practices, displaying an aesthetic that highlights pulse and musicality (Vernallis, 2013). Successful soundless videos draw from and intensify these editing and cinematographic techniques.

Use of essential words, rather than verbatim subtitles, offers creative potential. Our findings suggest text and subtitling are more appropriately conceptualized as images (Bolter, 2003). This implies special attention be paid to their design and style. Unlike other contexts, text in soundless video is not likely to be read in a linear order (Bolter, 2003).

Managerial Implications

We provide a set of clear, readily actionable strategies for creating successful soundless video advertising. Each strategy is described conceptually and operationally, with germane examples and explanations from advertising professionals. Together, these strategies are relevant to anyone tasked with developing or creating ads for soundless environments.

Our findings suggest changes in the way soundless advertising is approached. Current practices frequently treat soundless advertising as an afterthought. At best, a director may consider the soundless environment when filming; at worst, a junior staff member may be tasked with making post-hoc edits to an ad created for a sound-on environment. Such an approach is shortsighted since many of the strategies for creating successful soundless ads need special consideration when an ad is conceptualized and ideated, rather than simply shot or edited. Even the most successful directors and editors are limited if an ad's underlying concept is incompatible with a soundless environment.

Strategists and creative directors need to be proactive when conceiving ideas, explicitly considering soundless environments and recognizing soundless ads typically perform better with simpler, visually-driven plotlines. "Visual scripts" or storyboards are useful tools to bring a visual focus into relief. Strategies for creating successful soundless ads work by increasing the visual comprehensibility of an ad, complementing comprehension driven by music or dialog. Advertisers who improve visual comprehension are likely to have their message both more readily and more universally understood.

The challenges of a soundless viewing environment call for the creation of distinct versions of ads. Our findings call for purposeful editing, with focus on pace, directing attention, and eliciting emotions. Even ads conceived for a soundless environment may benefit from minor

tweaks compared to sound-on versions. Relatedly, any testing of advertisements should include testing both the sound-on and soundless versions.

Finally, creatives, whether freelance directors or in-house creative staff, have the potential to impact the visual execution of an ad. The techniques we outline constitute an emerging “creative palette” that forms a distinct visual style for soundless environments. Brands looking to excel at soundless video must find professionals who are able to “speak soundless”. In major markets such distinct competencies may suggest the emergence of specialist agencies and professionals devoted to soundless ads.

Limitations and Future Research

As with any research, this work is not without limitations. Since our study is exploratory, additional strategies and techniques for creating successful soundless ads may exist beyond those we detail. Likewise, while we sampled from multiple data sources, including an agency dataset spanning two years and multiple countries, our data may not be representative of all soundless ads. We therefore encourage further research expanding upon and developing further the strategies we outline. This might include focus groups or interviews with consumers to better understand their perspectives. While we employed three different data sources in our analysis, we recognize that these data sources are not without limitations and, in some cases such as Stage 1, underlying assumptions. For this reason we also encourage use of additional data sources that more clearly isolate ads as the sole driver of differences in resulting consumer response. For instance, experiments testing and comparing the effectiveness of the techniques we outline are a natural step toward better understanding how consumers respond to soundless ads.

To the best of our knowledge this is the first academic study to address soundless

advertising and we believe multiple avenues exist for future research on the topic. First, research could seek better understanding of the underlying mechanisms driving the effectiveness of the strategies and tactics we identify. While the interview data we report provides valuable insights concerning these mechanisms, more focused research on them would help to build theoretical understanding. Such insights could potentially allow for further generalization. Research might draw on theories related to visual processing and perception when examining why certain tactics attract visual attention. Likewise, theories related to mutual meaning (e.g. Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell, 2009) or how ads communicate (e.g. Stern, 2013) might help in understanding why particular strategies enable ads to better communicate in a soundless environment. While experiments would be a natural choice when testing underlying process, further qualitative work may also prove fruitful at this early stage.

A second area for future research to explore is moderators and boundary conditions to our findings. Such research could work to not only identify limits to the strategies and tactics we identify, but more importantly also develop associated understanding of what drives operation of the moderators and boundary conditions. For instance, different viewing contexts, such as mobile vs. computer, may affect consumer motivation, ability, and opportunity to attend to an ad (MacInnis, Moorman and Jaworski's, 1991) and thus impact the effectiveness of the soundless strategies we identify in this paper. Similarly, the degree to which an ad or the context in which it is placed elicits perceptions of annoyance or intrusiveness (Cho and Cheon, 2004) may also limit use of some soundless strategies. At a more basic level, the perceived relevance of an ad (Zaichkowsky, 1994) likely also operates to either enhance or detract from the effectiveness of the different soundless strategies we describe. Testing of these different moderators and boundary conditions could take place using lab, online, or even field experiments. Working in

conjunction with a partner agency, field experiments could test the effect of placing the same ad on different device types or websites. Soundless ads could also be purposefully manipulated in order to test the effectiveness of different strategies and tactics in such different environments. This could readily be accomplished through online experiments or, in conjunction with an agency, creating distinct versions of ads and testing them using small ad buys.

Future research might also examine strategies encouraging consumers to turn sound on. At present such an approach may be limited due to reluctance to play sound publicly at work or on transit, but increased adoption of wireless headphones may make the strategy increasingly relevant. Certain types of appeals or frames, such as fear of missing out or attempting to arouse curiosity, may prove more effective than others (e.g. Novemsky and Kahneman, 2005; Smith, 1996). Reactance might also be a means of encouraging viewers to turn on their sound (Brehm, 1966). Geico used a similar approach in their “Unskippable” pre-roll ads. By explicitly encouraged viewers to skip their ads after five seconds the advertiser subtly encouraged viewers to instead continue watching (Nudd, 2015). Experiments either in lab or field settings would be well suited to investigate the effect of these techniques to encourage consumers to turn on sound.

Finally, while this paper focuses on strategies to make silent ads more compelling, it would be interesting to explore when ads may actually perform better without sound. While quiet contexts or environments such as offices or transport are obvious candidates, certain types of ads may lend themselves to soundless viewing. Since soundless ads can sometimes feel disconnected or dreamlike, this might include ads purposefully attempting to induce experiences such as flow (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990) or narrative transportation (Escalas, 2004). Experiments manipulating the effect sound-on vs. sound-off advertising has on these variables, as well as resulting downstream effects, would be interesting to undertake. As viewing continues to shift to an online

environment, understanding how consumers respond to soundless ads will become increasingly important.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. How long have you been creating video ads? (*if no, ineligible for the study*)
2. Tell me more about your experience creating video ads
3. Have you been involved in creating videos that are soundless or expected to be viewed soundlessly? (*if no, ineligible for the study*)
4. Tell me more about the soundless video ads you have worked on
5. How do you think having the sound off affects consumers? (i.e. What challenges does this create for you as an advertiser?)
6. What strategies do you use (or might you use) to get around or overcome these challenges? (*Ask this open-ended first and only prompt the topics below if participants have not already brought them up*):
 - Text
 - Motion
 - Color
 - Exaggeration
 - Allegory (reference to known things)
 - Emotion
 - Shot types
7. Are there any standout examples of effective soundless ads you can think of?
8. How do you think captions affect how consumers view soundless videos?
9. Would a video created for a soundless environment work equally well in a sound-on environment? Why?
10. Is there anything else that you think would be relevant to know about how consumers respond to soundless ads or how you craft them?
11. Demographic questions (age, gender, education, title, size of company)