

Attitudes Toward Advertising Implications for the World Wide Web

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Abstract

This research replicates a framework for the investigation of attitudes held toward advertising, in a new environment. Given the explosion in the use of the web throughout the western world especially as a commercial tool, a more thorough understanding of the attitudes held toward web advertisements and what influences these attitudes is of importance to managers wishing to produce more effective web advertising campaigns. Based on previous models used to measure attitudes held toward advertising, three dimensions exploring attitude-toward-web-advertising are suggested: an institution dimension, an instrument dimension, and a function dimension. It is predicted that these three dimensions will explain the majority of the variance in influencing and shaping consumers attitudes toward web advertising. Several belief items are also suggested which are predicted to influence these dimensions and hence provide greater understanding to the specific beliefs held toward web advertising.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers examining attitudes held toward traditional forms of advertising have moved beyond merely describing the attitudes held toward the advertising medium as being just favourable or unfavourable (Zanot 1984; Barnes 1982), to trying to understand what influences these attitudes (Pollay and Mittal 1993; Mittal 1994; Alwitt and Prabhaker 1992). It has been identified that favourable attitudes held toward advertising-in-general have a positive direct influence on the attitudes held toward specific advertisements and an indirect influence on both brand attitudes and consumers' intentions to purchase a brand (MacKenzie, Lutz & Belch 1986; Ryan and Bonfield 1975). Whilst an attitude reflects a consumers general evaluation of a product or idea (eg I like advertising), a belief measures an evaluation of a product or idea on some attribute (eg advertising helps raise the standard of living) (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). Beliefs about advertising influence the attitudes held toward advertising (Bauer and Greyser 1968) and knowing which beliefs and their importance in influencing attitudes toward web advertising would allow managers to create more effective web advertisements.

Numerous studies have been conducted to explore the attitudes held toward traditional forms of advertising such as television, print or just advertising in general (Bauer and Greyser 1968; Alwitt and Prabhaker 1992; Lee and Lumpkin 1992; Mittal 1994; Pollay and Mittal 1993). This paper adapts two frameworks developed to measure attitudes held toward television advertising (Alwitt and Prabhaker 1992; Mittal 1994) and a framework used to explore advertising in general (Pollay and Mittal 1993), providing a theoretical framework predicting the dimensions and beliefs that will influence attitudes held toward web advertising. By also retesting these existing frameworks, further validity and reliability of the measures suggested in these earlier studies would be demonstrated.

Based on the consistent results of previous studies showing generally unfavourable attitudes held toward traditional forms of advertising (Bauer and Greyser 1968; Mittal 1994; Anderson, Engledow and Becker 1978; Zanot 1984; Alwitt and Prabhaker 1992, Barnes 1982) it is predicted that the attitudes held toward web advertising will also be unfavorable. However, of greater importance are the predictors of these attitudes. This research will explore several predicted beliefs held toward advertising with the goal of realising which of these beliefs are of significance in influencing consumers attitudes toward advertising on the web.

Due the differences in the use and purpose of the web compared to other advertising mediums (Jupiter 1999), the beliefs and dimensions adopted from previous studies used in this study will likely differ in their significance and strength when influencing attitudes toward web advertising. For example the web serves primarily as an information resource, unlike television which serves primarily to entertain. We would therefore expect consumers' expectations and evaluations of web advertising to differ from those about other types of advertising. For this reason generalisations cannot be made across all forms advertising, but rather investigation of each advertising medium needs to be conducted. Whilst this research is grounded in theory pertaining to traditional

advertising mediums, future research may develop dimensions and beliefs which are considered exclusive to web advertising. The first step in this process is the extension of existing theory in this new environment.

THE DIMENSIONS AND BELIEFS OF ATTITUDES TOWARD WEB ADVERTISING

Institution Dimension

The first in-depth study into the nature of consumers' attitudes toward advertising concluded that attitudes are made up of our beliefs toward the social effects of advertising and our beliefs toward the economic effects of advertising (Bauer and Greyser 1968). This early research, which has subsequently been reaffirmed by later studies (Mittal 1994; Pollay and Mittal 1993) suggests that when advertising is seen as benefiting society as a whole consumers will likely hold more favourable attitudes toward the advertising. The perceived economic and social benefits or costs of web advertising is also predicted to influence consumers' attitudes toward web advertising. As the importance of the web in everyday life continues to grow, the perceived significance of web advertising is also likely to change.

It has been suggested that adopting only these two measures, the economic and social belief items of advertising which are encompassed in the institution dimension, limits attitude measurement to only addressing advertising as an institution, ignoring the instrument or practices of advertising (Mueling 1987; Sandage and Leckenby 1980). Numerous additional dimensions of attitudes toward advertising have therefore been suggested and tested as also influencing attitudes toward advertising. The instrument and function dimension have been found to have a significant effect of attitudes toward television advertising (Alwitt and Prabhaker 1992; Mittal 1994) and advertising in general (Pollay and Mittal 1993).

Instrument Dimension

Our perceptions toward the executional qualities of advertising have long been the focus of studies exploring advertising effectiveness and the attitudes held toward advertising. Numerous executional qualities have been measured, such as the information value of advertising (Haller 1974; Durand & Lambert 1985), poor taste and sex in advertising (Larkin 1977) and the need for government regulation in advertising (Durand & Lambert 1985). Research has since identified the influence that the executional qualities of advertising have on the attitudes held toward advertising (Sandage and Leckenby 1980; Alwitt and Prabhaker 1992; Pollay and Mittal 1993). This research explores three of those beliefs toward the executional qualities of advertising which have been shown to significantly influence our attitudes toward advertising.

Sex in Advertising

Although having been previously shown that sex in advertising does not significantly influence attitudes toward advertising (Pollay & Mittal 1993; Mittal 1994), the prolific amount of sexual content on the web and in web advertising is predicted to influence attitudes held toward web advertising. This predicted difference in the significance of sex in advertising most likely results in the differences in the laws regulating sexual content in advertising. While many countries have strict laws regulating what can be shown in advertising, the web due to its global presence and hence no tightly regulated governing body, has no restrictions on what can be displayed on the web. This has allowed certain countries such as the United States to exploit this legal loophole and make available a disproportionate amount of sexual content and sexual advertising on the web.

Advertising Frequency

Television and radio advertising is passive in the sense that the consumer has little choice to watch an advertisement when it interrupts programming. A recent survey (Jupiter Communications 1999) found television advertising to be the most intrusive of all advertising types. Although consumers seem to tolerate the amount of television advertising now interrupting our programming as being just part of the viewing experience and is often viewed as being entertaining anyway (Johnson, Slack & Keane 1999), consumers have not yet become so impartial to the amount of web advertising. The above survey also found web advertising to be the second most intrusive type of advertising type, with most consumers citing banner advertising as being shown so often as to be a major source of negative feeling toward web advertising. When users go online they are actively seeking out information and continual interruptions and the amount of advertising only hinders this process.

Deceptive and Offensive

Advertising is often seen as purposively misleading, trivial, silly, annoying or confusing (Pollay and Mittal 1993). The majority of consumers continue to find pop-up web ads annoying (Johnson, Slack & Keane 1999) with 20 percent of viewers finding pop-ups so annoying that they consider never returning to the site (Jupiter Communications 1999). At the extreme, advertising may be seen as influencing consumers to change basic values or perform certain behaviours against his or her will (Andrews 1989). Research has indicated that regardless of the type of advertising, deceptive and offensive advertising will have a negative impact on consumers' attitudes toward the advertising (Pollay and Mittal 1993; Mittal 1994) and it is expected that web will be no different, with the ability of virtually anybody with web access to advertise on the web only intensifying this problem.

Function Dimension

The third dimension included in this study reflects the functions of advertising, or why we may watch, listen to or read advertising (Alwitt & Prabhaker 1992). While the instrument dimension reflects the personal beliefs about advertising's executional features, the function dimension reflects the *personal* beliefs about the benefits the consumer gains from viewing advertising, such as being entertained, providing a social image role or providing information.

Hedonic Function

Advertising can serve as a source of entertainment or pleasure (Alwitt & Prabhaker 1992; Pollay & Mittal 1993). The more entertaining or pleasurable advertising is seen the more it is liked by consumers, with research showing that the hedonic function is significant in influencing favourable attitudes toward television advertising (Alwitt & Prabhaker 1992; Mittal 1994). Although the web provides entertainment capabilities such as streaming video or Flash animation, most web users perceive the web and use the web as an information resource rather than as an entertainment source (Johnson, Slack & Keane 1999). Forty-eight percent of respondents in a survey indicated the web served primarily a utility function, fulfilling information needs (Johnson, Slack & Keane 1999) unlike television advertising which is a primary source of entertainment (Alwitt & Prabhaker 1992). Although the entertainment value of advertising will influence more favourable attitudes toward the advertising, the nature of the web may distort the significance of this function for a web context.

So long as the web continues to serve this information purpose, consumers will also look for web advertising to be generally more informative than entertaining (Johnson, Slack & Keane 1999). Although advertisers continue to try and produce more entertaining web advertisements, the primary purpose of the web is an information resource and not as a source of entertainment like television (Johnson, Slack and Keane 1999). While web advertisers have indicated their intention to produce more informative ads, many continue to focus on making web ads as entertaining as possible (Jupiter Communications 1999). Johnson, Slack & Keane (1999) state that just "because Internet ads can be as entertaining as TV ads does not mean that they should be. Consumers expect a different experience online than they get via TV."

Social Role and Image Function

Advertising aids in the development of a consumer's self-image (Richins 1991) and product meaning (Friedmann & Zimmer 1988), with many consumers paying premium dollars for branded clothing featuring prominent logos, slogans and other corporate designs (Pollay and Mittal 1993). When web advertising helps consumers develop their own identity or style, attitudes toward web advertising will be positive. Although in principle this may seem logical, previous research has in fact indicated that while the social role advertising plays is important, consumers generally do not believe advertising reflects their image (Mittal 1994). The web which is often disjointed and without any clear branding is likely to also suffer from a lack of definition of self-image. The inability for web advertising to depict lifestyle images and feelings is likely to effect the importance this function will play in influencing attitudes toward web advertising.

Product Information Function beliefs

Research has advocated the importance of advertising as a provider of information, leading to greater marketplace efficiencies, as consumers are better able to match their needs and wants against producers offerings (Norris 1984). Although some research has shown information having little influence on attitudes toward television advertising (Alwitt and Prabhaker 1992), other research has shown the product information provided

through advertising as being a significant determinant of attitudes toward advertising in general and an important part of advertising (Pollay and Mittal 1993; Mittal 1994). Mittal (1994) found product information being the most significant factor influencing attitudes toward television advertising. Information content of advertising is also important on the web with 40 percent of respondents in a survey indicating that the ads they found most grabbing were those that were informative (Jupiter Communications 1999). Research has also shown that consumers are more responsive to web advertising that is informative rather than entertaining (Johnson, Slack & Keane 1999). The amount of information provided in web advertising will be an important dimension and have a positive effect on attitudes toward web advertising. However it is predicted that consumers will find web advertising lacks product information due the current importance of banner advertising as the most common type of web advertisement which are inherently lacking in information due to their restrictive size constraints.

IMPLEMENTATION

This research has identified several dimensions and belief items that are predicted to influence consumers' attitudes toward web advertising. A survey will be administered to a convenience sample recruited from student and non-student groups to test the significance and importance of the aforementioned dimensions of attitudes toward web advertising. Items used to measure the beliefs and dimensions discussed above will be adapted from the studies of Alwitt and Prabhaker (1992), Pollay and Mittal (1993) and Mittal (1994). Modifications to these items have been made to achieve content validity and further refined to achieve consistency with the literature.

Accurate theory building lies in the importance of replication to provide support for the continued use and development of the aforementioned advertising theory (Anderson, Engledow and Becker 1978). In advertising research, replication based studies are of increased importance in light of continual developments in communication technologies. In addition, management implications of the testing of these dimensions and beliefs toward web based advertising would aid in explaining and understanding why advertising on the web is effective. The identification of the significant dimensions of web advertising, would also aid the effectiveness of campaign design and implementation.

FURTHER RESEARCH

This research tests the dimensions and beliefs held toward traditional advertising in a new environment. Further research may explore additional dimensions and beliefs appropriate to web advertising. It may be discovered that some dimensions and beliefs are universal to all forms of advertising, however differing in their strength and significance, while other dimensions and beliefs may be exclusive to a single advertising medium.

With the development of broadband technology, allowing the web to stream video footage similar to that on television, and the adoption of television based web technologies, such as web TV and internet access via arcade games or television connected modems and cable, the differences between these two advertising mediums may converge. While we now consider these two mediums to be very different, in a few years we may consider them to very similar.

CONCLUSION

This research has proposed three dimensions which are predicted to influence attitudes held toward web advertising- an institution dimension reflecting consumers perceptions toward the social and economic benefits of web advertising, an instrument dimension reflecting consumers beliefs about the executional qualities of web advertising, and a function dimension reflecting consumers beliefs about the purpose of web advertising such as being entertaining or informative. Several belief items have been proposed which influence these dimensions. These dimensions have been adapted from previous research and will be measured using a convenient survey of students and non-students. The results of this research will re-examine the validity of the continued use of these dimensions and provide managers with a new resource allowing more effective web advertisements to be produced.

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