

## **STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS ADVERTISING IN THE NEW DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the attitudes that students have towards advertising. It is a replication of a study by Beard in 2003 and utilises the same questionnaire to examine ethical, economic, social and regulatory concerns across a sample of students in a UK university. The results indicate that the views of students are generally negative, as has been found in earlier research. Consumer empowerment has not led to a more positive perception of advertising. There is a strong call for more truthful and realistic advertising and a growing concern that advertising is manipulating people and more regulation is needed.

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper explores the views of students on advertising in terms of its ethical, economic, social and regulatory consequences. It is undertaken at a UK University and replicates a study by Beard in 2003 who undertook the same survey at a US University. He utilised a survey questionnaire which consists of 26 statements which was originally administered by Larkin (1977). Although Beard (2003) has been cited often, there has been no replication of the study, to the authors' knowledge, and yet the advertising industry has changed fundamentally during this thirteen year period. The same statements are therefore used in this study so that direct comparisons can be made. The word "advertising" is used here in a generic sense to represent all marketing communications including paid, owned and earned media.

This paper will firstly examine the importance of advertising trust and how it is influenced by the ethical behaviour of the advertising industry and the self-regulatory processes in place to encourage ethical behaviour and protect consumers. Various studies that have examined the attitudes towards advertising will then be discussed, with emphasis being placed on those examining the views of students. The results of this study are then presented and also directly compared with those of Beard in order to identify the main differences for discussion.

### **Background**

In order for advertising to be effective it is necessary for the public to trust it and believe in the messages that are being communicated (Beard, 2003). However, trust can be destroyed very easily through unethical behaviour which can sometimes be financially beneficial to an organisation, and therefore attractive, if only in the short term (Parsons and Schumacher; 2012). Examples of such unethical behaviour include misleading or offensive communications. The importance of trust in marketing is well established and has been approached from many angles, including relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and brand trust (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Minton (2015) refers to these examples as relational trust because there is a relationship between two people or between a person and a brand. However she also identifies marketplace trust which is a person's overall attitude towards advertising. Soh, Reid and King (2009) identified trust in advertising as being a multidimensional construct made up of the consumer's perception that advertising is reliable and useful, along with a positive attitude and a willingness to rely on it to make decisions.

Ethics in advertising is seen by many as somewhat of an oxymoron when the industry is often linked to manipulation and materialism (Beard, 2003). This view is endorsed by Drumwright and Murphy (2004) who examined how advertising professionals viewed ethics and found that many practitioners either did not notice ethical issues or chose to ignore them. However it is

acknowledged that advertising ethics is essential if consumer trust is to be maintained (Snyder, 2008). In a special issue on Advertising Ethics in *Journal of Advertising Research* in 2011, Beltramini (2011) called for academics and practitioners to work together to put advertising ethics on the map. In the same issue, Snyder (2011) expressed the need to convince practitioners that advertising ethics was key to strengthening customer loyalty and trust. He posited that maintaining trust was increasingly difficult when consumers struggle to clearly identify commercial activity from editorial content on line, e.g. endorsement on blogs, and feel that their privacy is being invaded by on-line behavioural advertising (OBA). He concluded by stating that advertising professionals needed to be guided by their personal ethics if an increase in Government legislation was to be avoided. Drumwright and Murphy (2009) also noted that new technologies meant that “the temptations, risks and rewards of unethical behaviour in the business of advertising are greater than ever” (p. 83).

In order to protect the reputation of the industry and protect consumers, the advertising industry comes together in many countries to create some kind of self-regulatory organisation (SRO) which attempts to enforce regulations to ensure that marketing communications are “legal, decent, honest and truthful” and impose codes to identify unacceptable behaviour (Boddewyn, 1989). Such an approach is generally seen to be preferable to government regulation, although the two systems need to operate smoothly in parallel (Shaver 2003). However, the power, influence and objectivity of such institutions is often questioned (Boddewyn, 1989; Knox, 2008).

### **Attitudes to advertising**

A number of studies have been conducted on general attitudes towards advertising (e.g. Pollay and Mintel, 1993; Petrovici and Marinov, 2007; Jin and Lutz, 2013). O’Donohoe (1994) compared the British and American research in this area and found that attitudes were multidimensional and there was some ambiguity in how attitudes were being measured. She did find evidence to suggest that British people felt more positive about advertising generally than their American counterparts, which is interesting when one compares that finding with Nielson (2015) in their Global Advertising Trust report which revealed that levels of advertising trust were found to be lower in Europe compared with other countries, although liking and trust are obviously two different constructs.

A number of studies have been specifically conducted into students’ attitudes towards advertising, although not recently. The views of students are considered important because they have a significant influence over their peers, they may create long-term brand relationships and they will have a high disposable income after graduation (Beard, 2003). Larkin (1977) found that more than half of the students held strong 'anti-advertising' beliefs and perceived advertising as having a low economic and social value. Sandage and Leckenby (1980) confirmed this rather negative perception but did identify a difference between the views of students on advertising as an institution and their views on advertisements, with the students being more positive about the institution than the advertisements.

Beard (2003) examined the views of students at a US university and utilised the same questionnaire as that utilised by Larkin in 1977 so that comparisons could be made. The statements were grouped to address ethical, economic, social and regulatory concerns. He found that students in 2003 were less concerned about ethical issues than those in 1977, although the majority still felt that there was a need for advertising to be more truthful. Beard (2003) suggested that this difference may be a result of students having lower expectations of advertising. The students were also more ambivalent on the economic consequences of

advertising. They were positive about the contribution of advertising to the economy but linked advertising to higher prices. Views on the social consequences of advertising were quite similar across the two studies, with a strong belief that advertising can persuade people to buy things they don't need and that it causes materialism. Lastly, the majority of students in the Beard study did not see the need for more government regulation although they felt that there should be a ban on the advertising of harmful or dangerous products.

The last study of students' attitudes to advertising was conducted in US in 2003. The purpose of this study is to examine what the views of students are now and how they may have changed over this thirteen year period. Since 2003 the advertising landscape has changed fundamentally. For example, figures suggest that the use of social media sites by 18 – 29 year olds increased from 9% to 90% during the period of 2005 to 2014 and 67% of these young people are now visiting these sites on their phones (Pew, 2016). Not surprisingly, companies are following their customers and spending an increasing percentage of their communications budget on digital to not only communicate with customers but also encourage them to engage in a dialogue about brands. The literature suggests that this changing environment brings new challenges for the advertising industry in ensuring that they operate in an ethical manner and thereby maintain the trust of their customers. This study explores what impact these changes have had on students' attitudes towards advertising.

### **Methodology**

This research was undertaken at a UK university. The same 26 item questionnaire, utilised in the Beard (2003) study was created on Google docs software and a link was distributed to students across the University via internal course and module sites. The statements were organised to examine four attitudinal areas; ethical consequences, economic consequences, social consequences and advertising regulation. They were presented on a 5 point likert scale. These results were collated to give descriptive statistics in the form of means and a percentage score for overall agree and overall disagree, in the same way as Beard presented his findings, so that direct comparisons with his results could be made.

Responses were received from 335 students, a number which compares favourably with both the Beard (2003) and the Larkin (1977) study. The profile of students was similar to Beard in that they attended a range of courses, mainly in the areas of advertising, business, marketing and entrepreneurship. Females accounted for 73% of the sample, compared with 64% in the Beard study, with three quarters of them being between 18 and 21 years old.

### **Results**

Results from this research will be discussed firstly, before comparisons are made with the Beard study. The results, in the form of item means and percentages of agreement and disagreement are presented in Table 1 and 2. Findings are discussed in the four sections so that general trends can be observed.

#### *Ethical consequences of advertising (Table 1)*

The results indicate that students do have ethical concerns about advertising. The majority (65.9%) feel that advertising needs to be more truthful. This is supported by the fact that 58.8% of the participants feel that there is presently too much exaggeration and that trivial differences between products are being emphasised (54%). However, it is a rather mixed picture, with half the students undecided on whether advertisements present a true picture of the products being promoted and only 40% agreeing that advertising is false and misleading (with again a large percentage being ambivalent).

### *Economic consequences of advertising (Table 1)*

The majority of students (60%) agree that Advertising is essential for the prosperity of the economy. However they seem unclear about how this manifests itself. It is not seen to lower prices (57.6%), a finding which is supported by 46.6% agreeing that it increases prices. But views on its impact of standard of living and quality of products are fairly evenly distributed across the spectrum of views. Interestingly only 20% agree that advertising just moves sales around with 45.7% actively disagreeing.

### *Social consequences of advertising (Table 2)*

This section generally created a stronger response with 72.2% of students agreeing that advertising persuades people to buy things they should not buy, supported by 67.5% agreeing that it makes us more materialistic. There is also a strong feeling that advertisements should be more realistic, which supports the findings on truthfulness in the Ethical section. Views on taste, silliness and confusion are more divided and spread across the spectrum.

### *Regulatory consequences of advertising (Table 2)*

The strongest opinions in this section are related to the advertising of harmful products, which 64.2% of students feel should be banned. Although only a quarter of the students think that there should be less advertising, it is worth noting that 42.15% believe that there should be more government regulation. However, the majority (53.1%) do not identify TV as being the worst form of advertising.

### **Identification of trends across the two studies**

Due to space restriction, it is not possible to make comparisons across all 26 statements between the two studies. Table 3 therefore presents the main differences, this being defined as a 10% or more difference. With a sample of 335 participants, it was felt that a shift of over 30 students was worth highlighting. Table 4 presents the same results in a more visual form for ease of comparison.

### *Ethics*

Overall, this is the section with the least change from the 2003 study, with one exception. Fewer students (35.5%) feel that advertisements do not present a true picture of the advertised product, with more of them now not sure (24.9% increase to 48.9 %) and a smaller increase in those who feel that advertisements do present a true picture (10.6 % increase to 21.5%).

### *Economic*

Opinions in this area are more negative overall, with five of the seven statements showing a 10% change. More students think that advertising is not essential, although that is still only 14% with 60% of students believing that it is. Views are more divided on whether advertising raises standards of living. The number of students who believe that it does not has increased to 36.7% with the other students split fairly evenly across the two other responses. More students also feel that advertising does not result in lower prices, which now stands at 57.3% which is confirmed by an increase in those who believe that it increases costs (46.6%). There is also an increase in those that believe advertising just moves sales around, from 5.5 % to 20%, obviously still a small number but a significant increase.

### *Social*

The main changes in this section are students moving away from being neutral to having an opinion. More students now agree and disagree with the statement that advertising is persuading us to buy things that we don't need, although the number that disagree has increased slightly

more. But the biggest change in this area is the call for advertisements to be more realistic which increased by 29.4%. This is supported by more students thinking that advertisements are confusing (13.9%).

### *Regulations*

The question on whether there should be less advertising has created an interesting response, resulting in more students agreeing and disagreeing with the statement. However, it should be noted that there is still only 26.6% agreeing. The most substantial change in this section is the 18% increase in the number of students who feel that there should be more government regulation of advertising.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The results from this study reinforce previous findings which reveal that students' attitudes towards advertising are generally negative and indicate that overall this negativity is increasing. There is a strong feeling that advertisements need to be more truthful, and this has changed very little from 2003 to 2016, with concerns over exaggeration and triviality. What has changed however is a stronger recognition that advertising needs to be more realistic. This need for truthfulness and realism seems to be in line with the fact that the UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) deal with more complaints about misleading advertisements than any other issue.

More fundamentally perhaps, is the view that advertising persuades people to buy things they do not need leading to a more materialistic society, which was strong in 2003 and is still strong today. There are also strengthening demands for an increase in government regulation of advertising. It is possible that this may be a response to the level of personalisation that companies are now able to achieve on-line, which is seen by some customers as intrusiveness. A study by Lerman (2014) on personalisation found that the most accurate targeting can be perceived as "creepy". Whatever the reason, this finding should be of concern to the advertising industry because these young people will expect their voices to be heard. They have grown up in the world of e-wom and on-line petitions where views can be expressed strongly, widely and instantly (Mortimer and Kerr, 2014) and the industry and the SROs need to take heed to ensure that their trust is not lost or the Government may feel it necessary to introduce more legislation, particularly on products that are seen as harmful which could include such items as sugary drinks, which is being discussed presently in the UK.

This increase in scepticism is an interesting outcome when one considers that changes in the digital landscape, throughout the world, have enabled consumers to have more control over the information they receive, and companies are adopting a more pull rather than push marketing approach in recognition of this shift in power (Kerr et al, 2012) However, this empowerment has not had a positive impact on students' perception of advertising.

Some limitations to this study need to be addressed. Firstly, the study was based in the UK and is being compared with the 2003 study which was undertaken in US so it is difficult to establish whether differences are due to time and/or location. For example, The Nielsen study on global advertising trust found that Europeans are generally more sceptical about advertising and this may account for some of the disparity between the two studies. It would therefore be worthwhile to undertake the study again in the US. A more qualitative approach would also provide a deeper understanding of the attitudes of students and the reasons behind them. It should also be noted that this questionnaire was only distributed at one University in the UK. This sampling approach is identical to the Beard study but does present a weakness in terms of generalising the results.

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Table 1

**ETHICAL AND ECONOMIC ITEMS  
MEANS AND PERCENTAGES OF AGREEMENT/DISAGREEMENT**

	Item	Mean	% Agree	% Dis- agree
<b>Ethical</b>	In general advertisements present a true picture of the products advertised.	2.92	21.5	29.6
	There is a critical need for more truth in advertising.	3.75	65.9	13.6
	Too much of today's advertising is false and misleading.	3.25	39.4	20.6
	There is too much exaggeration in advertising today.	3.57	58.8	15.2
	There should be less stress on sex in advertising.	3.31	38.8	22.4
	Too many of today's advertisements attempt to create a trivial or imaginary difference between products that are actually identical or very similar in composition.	3.55	54	10.1
<b>Economic</b>	Advertising is essential to the prosperity of our economy.	3.65	60	14.3
	Advertising helps raise our standard of living.	2.89	29.3	36.7
	Advertising results in better products for the public.	2.98	32.8	32.5
	In general advertising results in lower prices.	2.43	13.7	57.6
	Advertising increases increase the cost of goods and services.	3.36	46.6	18.8
	Advertising fosters monopolies.	3.21	33.1	19.1
	Advertising is socially wasteful since it only transfers sales from one manufacturer to another without actually adding any new money to the economy.	2.6	20	45.7

*Note:* Items measure on a scale of agreement, with 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. Agree  $\geq 4.00$  and Disagree  $\leq 2.00$

Table 2

**SOCIAL AND REGULATORY ITEMS  
MEANS AND PERCENTAGES OF AGREEMENT/DISAGREEMENT**

	Item	Mean	% Agree	% Dis- agree
<b>Social</b>	Advertising often persuades people to buy things they don't need or should not buy.	3.81	72.2	15.2
	Most advertising insults the intelligence of the consumer.	2.85	28.1	38.5
	There is a crying need for better taste in most of today's advertisements.	3.2	41.2	23.6
	Advertisements should be more realistic.	3.74	66.6	14
	Too many of today's advertisements are silly and ridiculous.	3.2	40	29
	Advertising should be on a more adult level.	2.83	23	37.3
	Advertising just tends to confuse people by presenting them with a bewildering choice of items and claims.	2.99	34.9	35.8
	Advertising is making us a nation of conformists.	2.99	30.4	31.3
	Advertising is making us a materialistic people - interested in owning and getting "things".	3.74	67.5	15.8
<b>Regulatory</b>	There should be less advertising.	2.73	26.6	43.6
	There should be a ban on advertising of harmful or dangerous products.	3.76	64.2	19.4
	There should be more government regulation of advertising.	3.17	42.1	29.6
	Television is by far the worst form of advertising.	2.49	21.8	53.1

*Note:* Items measure on a scale of agreement, with 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. Agree  $\geq 4.00$  and Disagree  $\leq 2.00$

Table 3

**COMPARISON OF STATEMENTS ACROSS THE TWO STUDIES**

<b>Descriptor</b>		<b>Study</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Dif.</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Dif.</b>	<b>Dis-agree</b>	<b>Dif.</b>
<b>Ethical</b>	In general advertisements present a true picture of the products advertised.	Beard	10.9	10.6	24	24.9	65.1	-35.5
		Our Study	21.5		48.9		29.6	
<b>Economic</b>	Advertising is essential to the prosperity of our economy.	Beard	64.4	-4.4	33.2	-7.5	2.4	11.9
		Our Study	60		25.7		14.3	
	Advertising helps raise our standard of living.	Beard	31.8	-2.5	51.9	-17.9	16.3	20.4
		Our Study	29.3		34		36.7	
	In general advertising results in lower prices.	Beard	13.9	-0.2	44.3	-15.6	41.8	15.8
		Our Study	13.7		28.7		57.6	
	Advertising increases increase the cost of goods and services.	Beard	34.9	11.7	48	-13.4	17.1	1.7
		Our Study	46.6		34.6		18.8	
	Advertising is socially wasteful since it only transfers sales from one manufacturer to another without actually adding any new money to the economy.	Beard	5.5	14.5	39.5	-5.2	55	-9.3
		Our Study	20		34.3		45.7	
<b>Social</b>	Advertising often persuades people to buy things they don't need or should not buy.	Beard	70.5	1.7	23.1	-10.5	6.4	8.8
		Our Study	72.2		12.6		15.2	
	Advertisements should be more realistic.	Beard	37.2	29.4	37.2	-17.8	25.6	-11.6
		Our Study	66.6		19.4		14	
	Advertising just tends to confuse people by presenting them with a bewildering choice of items and claims.	Beard	21	13.9	35.5	-6.2	43.5	-7.7
		Our Study	34.9		29.3		35.8	
<b>Regulatory</b>	There should be less advertising.	Beard	18.6	8	43.4	-13.6	38	5.6
		Our Study	26.6		29.8		43.6	
	There should be more government regulation of advertising.	Beard	24.1	18	34.8	-6.5	41.1	-11.5
		Our Study	42.1		28.3		29.6	

Table 4: VISUAL COMPARISON OF STATEMENTS ACROSS THE TWO STUDIES

Descriptor			
<b>Ethical</b>	In general advertisements present a true picture of the products advertised.	2003	
		2016	
<b>Economic</b>	Advertising is essential to the prosperity of our economy.	2003	
	Advertising helps raise our standard of living.	2003	
		2016	
	In general advertising results in lower prices.	2003	
	Advertising increases increase the cost of goods and services.	2003	
		2016	
Advertising is socially wasteful since it only transfers sales from one manufacturer to another without actually adding any new money to the economy.	2003		
<b>Social</b>	Advertising often persuades people to buy things they don't need or should not buy.	2003	
	Advertisements should be more realistic.	2003	
		2016	
Advertising just tends to confuse people by presenting them with a bewildering choice of items and claims.	2003		
<b>Regulatory</b>	There should be less advertising.	2003	
		2016	
	There should be more government regulation of advertising.	2003	
		2016	

■ agree ■ neutral ■ disagree