



Does Internet Advertising Alienate Users?

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Contents

	Page
Introduction	1
Conceptual Framework	1
Attitudes to Advertising in General	1
Internet Advertising	1
Models of Internet Advertising	2
Attitudes to Internet Advertising	3
Factors which Affect Attitudes to Internet Advertising	3
Methodology	4
Data Analysis	4
Results	4
Discussion	6
Research Limitations	7
Conclusion	7
References	8
Figures	
Figure 1: Internet Advertising Model	2
Tables	
Table 1: Usage Statistics	5
Table 2: Attitudes to Advertising	5
Table 3: Internet Advertising is Annoying	6

Abstract

This paper attempts to explain the dramatic decline in click-through ratings in terms of a change in consumer attitudes to Internet advertising. Although previous researchers found fairly positive attitudes to Internet advertising, our research found more negative attitudes.

We used quantitative research to identify attitudes to Internet advertising, and found that for many respondents Internet advertising is annoying, and that many had left websites because of the advertising. The level of annoyance with Internet advertising was significantly related to length of usage, frequency and volume of usage.

Our findings relate to evidence that surfers actively avoid looking at advertising banners, with more experienced surfers showing different scanning patterns.

Does Internet Advertising Alienate Users

Introduction

By 2004, US Internet advertising is expected to reach \$16.5 billion (Piras *et al* 2000) and, in the UK, is expected to reach £625 million (Forrester Research, 2000). However, in the last four years, click-through rates have fallen from 5 per cent to less than 0.5 per cent and continue to fall. A report by Forrester Research found that the Internet is the “least trusted medium” (Walsh, Mcquivey and Wakeman, 1999). This paper examines consumer attitudes to Internet advertising.

Conceptual Framework

Attitudes to Advertising in General

Gallup (1959) found that US respondents generally liked advertising, finding it informative and preferring advertised products. Focusing on television advertising, Zanot (1984) found less positive attitudes, with most of their respondents believing advertising was misleading. Similarly negative results were found by Andrews (1989), Mittal (1994), and Alwitt and Prabhaker (1994). In the UK, the Advertising Association (1995) found increasingly negative attitudes towards advertising. Barnes (1982) argues that increasingly negative attitudes towards advertising are related to the growth in the volume of television advertising.

Attitudes are not entirely negative; in a study by Heyder *et al* (1992), 84 per cent of respondents expressed some positive opinions. Similarly, Shavitt, Lowrey, and Haefner (1998) found that TV advertising was often perceived as funny, enjoyable or clever. They also found that gender, age and income affect consumer attitudes to advertising, for instance, higher income is associated with more negative attitudes. Thus, the demographic profile of Internet users could have an effect on attitudes to Internet advertising.

Internet Advertising

Interactive advertising is defined by the editors of the *Journal of Interactive Advertising* as “the paid and unpaid presentation and promotion of products, services and ideas by an identified sponsor, through mediated means involving mutual action between consumers and producers” (Leckenby and Li, 2000). This paper focuses on PC Internet advertising (ie excludes interactive television and mobile Internet).

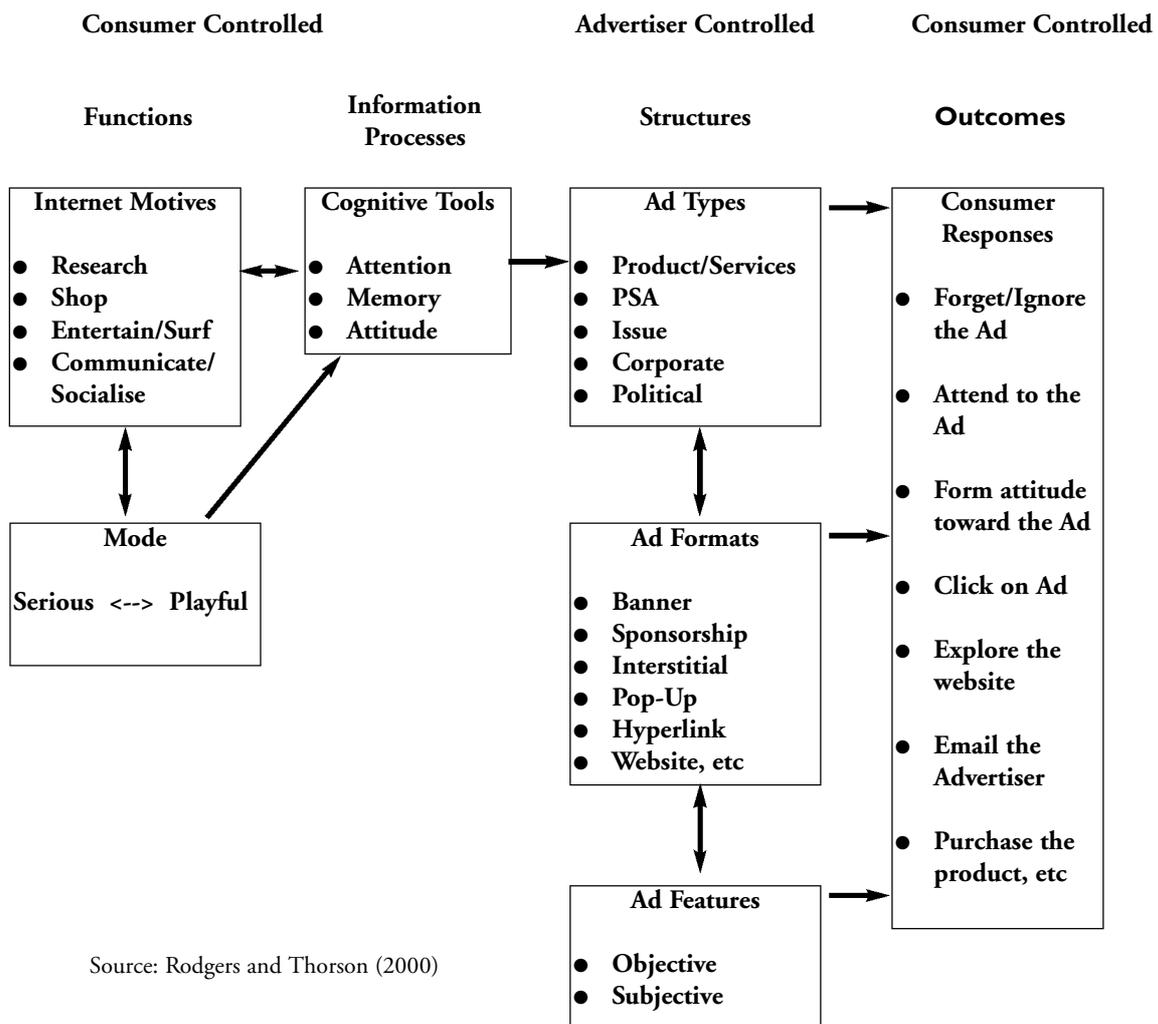
Ducoffe (1996) found that the distinction between Internet editorial and advertising is blurred, with 57 per cent of respondents classifying Internet pages as advertising. This suggests that consumer comments about ‘Internet advertising’ need to be interpreted carefully, because they may refer to the web pages themselves rather than to the advertisements they carry.

Models of Internet Advertising

Pavlou and Stewart (2000) maintain that interactivity is a characteristic of the consumer, not the medium, and point out that consumers have a choice about whether they respond or not. They argue that the focus of advertising evaluation should include both processes and outcomes. Processes include the purpose for which consumers seek information, their expertise, and the prior beliefs of the consumer. Outcomes include satisfaction, trust, persuasiveness, and brand equity.

Rodgers and Thorson (2000) also recognise the importance of the role of the consumer, and propose an interactive information-processing model of Internet advertising (IAM), see Figure 1. This model includes both consumer-controlled aspects: Internet motives, 'modes' and processes, and advertiser-controlled aspects: advertising type, format and features. The model suggests the motives for using the Internet affect the processing of Internet advertising. For instance, if a consumer is surfing rather than communicating he may be more responsive. Similarly, whether the mode is playful or serious will affect response.

Figure 1: Internet Advertising Model



Attitudes to Internet Advertising

Mehta and Sivadas (1995) found newsgroup users held negative attitudes toward Internet advertising, but the business executives researched by Ducoffe (1996) did not find Internet advertising either irritating or annoying.

Gordon and De Lima-Turner (1997) studied advertising on the Internet from the perspective of a social contract between advertisers and Internet users. Overall, respondents were passive, accepting Internet advertising as long as it was clearly identified, and well targeted.

GVU's World Wide Web 10th User Survey (GVU, 1998) found that surfers dislike Internet advertising slightly more than general advertising, (38% vs 32%). Advertising banners which take too long to download were seen by GVU respondents as the "biggest problem in using the web", with 62 per cent agreeing.

Schlosser, Shavitt and Kanfer (1999) studied attitudes to Internet advertising using a similar questionnaire to that used for general advertising by Shavitt *et al* (1998). They compared the results of a demographically matched sample from the two studies. Respondents were polarized: 38 per cent liked Internet advertising, 35 per cent disliked it, and 28 per cent were neutral. Advertising in general was more liked than Internet advertising, (46% vs 38%), and less disliked, (25% vs 35%). However, when looking at specific attitudes, Internet advertising attitudes were sometimes more positive, eg 48% vs 38% felt they could trust Internet advertising. Shavitt *et al* conclude that the nature of Internet advertising makes it less irritating to consumers, "fewer respondents felt insulted, offended, and misled". However, this may be because Internet advertising is less pervasive, less intrusive, and less persuasive, rather than because consumers prefer it.

In focus group research Rettie (2001) found respondents were extremely negative about advertising, as in this quotation a group member: "Annoying. (I) Just completely ignore them. You just immediately know, that's adverts, get rid of it."

Negative attitudes to Internet advertising mean that surfers may deliberately evade advertisements. Drèze and Hussherr (1999) found that surfers purposely avoid looking at banner advertisements during their online activities, which helps to explain low click-through rates. Using eye tracking, they found that surfers were significantly less likely to look at an advertising banner than elsewhere on the page. They also found significant differences in eye pattern movements between novices and experts; for instance, experts are quicker and look at fewer parts of a web page. Drèze and Hussherr (1999) also measured advertising recall, brand recall, and brand awareness effects, finding that these were all higher than click-through rates. This supports an earlier finding by Briggs and Hollis (1997) which showed that banner advertisements have an impact on consumers' attitudes to a brand, independent of click-through.

Factors which Affect Attitudes to Internet Advertising

Sukpanich and Chen (1999) used the theory of reasoned action to develop a scale of attitudes to Internet advertising. They found three constructs that affect Internet advertising attitudes: awareness, preference, intention or motive.

For example, an advertisement for a preferred brand is likely to result in a more favourable attitude.

Stafford and Stafford (1998) found that respondents who were using the Internet for communication were least likely to notice advertising. Rodgers and Thorson (2000) also suggest that different consumer motives affect attitudes to Internet advertising. Testing this hypothesis, Li and Bukovac (1999) found that although information seeking respondents paid more attention to advertisements than surfers, the difference was not significant, possibly because of motive switching.

Whether a surfer is in flow is also likely to affect his attitude to advertising. Flow is “the holistic experience that people feel when they act with total involvement” Csikszentmihalyi (1975: 36). Hoffman and Novak (1996: 57) identify flow as a key characteristic of consumer behaviour on the Internet, “flow is the ‘glue’ holding the consumer in the hypermedia Computer Mediated Environment”. Rettie (2001) found advertising was particularly irritating when in flow, so that while flow may retain surfers at a website where they are subject to advertising, it may adversely affect their response to that advertising.

Other factors that affect Internet usage, and which are therefore likely to affect attitudes to advertising, are length of use, frequency of use, and location of use (Rogers and Sheldon, 1999; Emmanouilides and Hammond, 2000).

It is likely that the effectiveness of advertising will be depend on attitudes to the medium in which it appears. Attitudes to general advertising have deteriorated with increasing volume and consumer exposure. It is probable that attitudes to Internet advertising will also deteriorate as Internet users become more used to the medium. Our research agenda was to evaluate attitudes to Internet advertising, and to determine how these were affected by the extent of Internet experience. Dimensions of experience include the length of time the respondent has used the Internet, frequency of usage and volume of use.

Methodology

The research consisted of a questionnaire that was piloted and administered to 100 student Internet users; 63% of respondents were male, and 37% were female. This was in line with the UK Internet population at the time of the survey, which was 39% female (Nielsen, 2000).

Data Analysis

In the tables the ‘Agree’ and ‘Disagree’ columns show re-coded scores, amalgamating the agree and disagree scores from the original five-point Likert scales. Significance has been tested using the Pearson Chi-square test on the recoded scales, unless otherwise stated.

Results

Respondents were asked how long they had been using the Internet, how often they used it, and the number of hours they used it per week. Usage statistics are shown in Table 1. Length of use and quantity of use were not related to gender, but there was a relationship between gender and usage frequency (Significant at 99% confidence level, $p = 0.009$)

Using Likert scales, respondents were asked whether they enjoyed TV and Internet advertising. Although 36% agreed or agreed strongly that they enjoyed TV advertising, only 13% enjoyed Internet advertising, with disagreement or strong disagreement from 49% of respondents. The

Using Internet less than 3 years	42%
Using Internet more than 3 years	58%
Use daily	53%
Use less frequently	47%
Light user: Less than 5 hours per week	47%
Heavy user: More than 5 hours per week	53%

Valid cases: 100

means of the two questions were 2.88 and 3.5 respectively, and a paired sample t-test showed that they were significantly different at 99% confidence level ($p = 0.000$, t value = -5.595)

Table 2 shows agreement and disagreement with twelve Internet advertising attitude statements. There was some agreement that Internet advertising 'was a good way to reach interesting sites' but most disagreed that it was interesting or useful. There is some polarization, while 45% agreed that 'Internet ads were a time wasting diversion'. Only 62% would 'prefer sites not to have advertising'. Despite this, only 13% 'never click on Internet ads'.

There was most agreement that 'Internet ads are annoying as I have little control over them'. Although 62% would 'prefer sites without advertising', 69% agreed that advertising was acceptable as 'it paid for site content'; none of the respondents would subscribe to keep sites free

	Agree %	Neither %	Disagree %
Good way to reach interesting sites	28	41	31
Internet ads are informative	17	45	38
Internet ads are useful	13	50	37
Internet ads a time wasting diversion	45	40	15
Prefer sites not to have advertising	62	29	9
I never click on Internet ads	13	22	65
Internet advertising annoying	42	36	22
Internet ads are annoying as have little control	63	31	6
Try to avoid looking at ads	12	69	19
Ads offering 'free' prizes deceptive	45	42	13
Accept ads as pay for content	69	23	8
Would subscribe to ad free sites	0	31	69

Valid cases: 100

of advertisements. Two-thirds claimed to have left an Internet site because of time wasting advertising, but only 12% consciously avoided looking at Internet advertisements.

For 42% Internet advertisements were annoying. As shown in Table 3, those who had used the Internet for more than three years, used it daily, used it for more than five hours per week and accessed from a university were significantly more likely to find Internet advertising annoying. Main use was usually information search (71%) or entertainment (22%). Respondents, who mainly used the Internet for entertainment, were significantly more likely to find Internet advertising annoying.

Discussion

These results were much more negative than the findings of Ducoffe (1996) or Schlosser (1999), however, the dramatic fall in actual click-through rate is consistent with a deterioration in consumer attitudes to Internet advertising. The results may be partly attributable to the student sample, but Shavitt, Lowrey and Haefner (1998) found that although dislike of advertising in general increased with education, it also decreased with age, so that in students these two biases may compensate one another.

Predictors of Internet usage: location of access, length of use, frequency and heavy use were all related to annoyance. This may help to explain the change in attitudes; in the last three years length of usage, frequency and volume have increased.

As anticipated by Rodgers and Thorson (2000), motives affect attitudes, with information seekers being less annoyed than those seeking entertainment. This is consistent with Li and Bukovac (1999) who found that that information seekers pay more attention to advertising. Our results also support the view of Internet advertising as a social contract (Gordon and De Lima-Turner 1997) tolerated because it subsidises content.

Research Limitations

The convenience sample was small and not representative of the total Internet population. The paper compares UK attitudes to earlier US research, cultural rather than temporal differences may account for the disparity. The research assumed that respondents understood the term 'Internet advertisements' and could differentiate Internet advertisements from web pages.

Internet Advertising is Annoying Significantly related to	Pearson Chi-square	Degrees of Freedom	p
Length of use: More/less than 3 years	34.544	2	0.000
Frequency of use: Daily/less than daily	28.448	2	0.000
Quantity of use: More/less than 5 hours p/w	34.287	2	0.000
Point of access: University/home/work	33.467	4	0.000
Main use : Entertainment/information	20.464	2	0.000

Valid cases: 100

Conclusion

Internet advertising annoys many consumers. The danger is that they may register the brand, even though they do not click-through. If this evocation of the brand is accompanied by annoyance, it could have an adverse effect on the brand advertised. As users become more experienced, Internet advertising becomes more annoying, so that we should expect annoyance, and consequently click-through to increase. These findings do not auger well for the industry.

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