

Internet Advertising: An Assessment of Consumer Attitudes¹

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ABSTRACT *Given the increasing popularity of the Internet as a medium to convey advertising messages, limited empirical research has been published concerning Internet consumers' attitudes to advertising on the Internet. This paper investigates consumer attitudes to Internet advertising, and specifically focuses on Internet users' beliefs and attitudes about Internet advertising. Based on a primary structure of beliefs and attitudes about advertising, the research identified the existence of relationships between Internet users' attitudes towards advertising and their online experience, and a strong negative attitude to advertising in general and the societal effects of advertising, in particular.*

Keywords: Internet advertising, consumer attitudes towards advertising, advertising research, the Internet, marketing communication.

Introduction

The Internet originated as a communication channel, evolving from communication needs, where distributed computer networks provided the infrastructure to share information for work or educational purposes.² In the early 1990s, electronic commerce emerged impacting on the previously 'free' channels of communication on the Internet. Increased commercialisation has raised concerns that advertising 'clutter' and other commercial traffic will drown out public speech and limit the social benefits of a much needed public forum.³ Others have argued that consumer privacy will be a serious barrier to the ultimate commercialisation of the Internet and involves issues of consumer trust of marketers and specifically advertisers.⁴

Currently, Internet market research is dominated by online demographic research aimed at establishing baseline statistics to profile online consumers,⁵ or consumer involvement in electronic commerce.⁶ However, given the increasing commercial 'push' of Internet technologies, there has been limited research published detailing Internet users' attitudes to commercial, or business activity via the Internet. To date, research about the impact of new technology on marketing paradigms lacks a consumer-based perspective. The research undertaken in this study⁷ begins to bridge this gap and investigates how Internet consumers perceive the practice of traditional commercial techniques in electronic media.

Arguably, the Information Superhighway has 'the potential to be more interactive rather than passive, customised rather than mass, dynamically heterogeneous rather than relatively homogenous, and aesthetically more compelling'.⁸ Yet it will be the consumers using new interactive technologies who will offer a new perspective on consumer

research, as these new electronic consumers are 'active' not 'passive' consumers of advertising messages. Other researchers state that continuing development in the area of new information and communication technologies will represent *the* most important influence on the future of the advertising industry for the next 10–15 years.⁹ Determining how and why digital consumers use new media will be of central importance to advertisers, marketing practitioners and academics now, and in the future.

The Structure of Attitudes towards Advertising

Many researchers have commented on the ambivalence of consumers' attitudes towards advertising.¹⁰ Such ambivalence would indicate that consumer attitudes to advertising have several dimensions. Specifically, the work of Bauer and Greyser¹¹ has been extremely influential in this area. Research by Pollay and Mittal,¹² based on an extensive literature review of attitudes to and criticisms of advertising, and extending Bauer and Greyser's original two-dimensional model, has proposed a more extensive seven-factor model. Pollay and Mittal's comprehensive model of consumer attitudes towards advertising in general distinguishes between advertising as an instrument and an institution, and between personalised and generalised attitudes. This model includes micro-level personal beliefs about advertising and macro-level societal beliefs about advertising. These dimensions include three personal utility factors (product information, social image information and hedonic amusement) and four socio-economic factors (good for economy, fostering materialism, corrupting values and falsity/no-sense).

In the current study, the research focused on Internet users' attitudes to Internet advertising. Thus, based on the primary structure of beliefs and attitudes about advertising in general, originally proposed by Pollay and Mittal, the research adapted this model to conceptualise Internet consumers' attitudes to advertising on the Internet. The objectives of the research were to become familiar with basic facts about Internet consumers and to generate ideas and tentative theories about Internet consumers' attitudes towards advertising messages delivered in an electronic marketplace.

The Research Rationale

Those companies that have adopted a leading role in the operation and expansion of the world's information infrastructure have been profoundly affected by it.¹³ How customers of these organisations are affected by the adoption of new technology for commercial purposes is of increasing interest to businesses and academics across the globe. Consumers' attitudes regarding the commercialisation of new technology is therefore an area worthy of academic research. Figure 1 illustrates several practical and theoretical grounds that justify the research effort.

The conceptualisation of Internet marketing and the evolution of a new marketing paradigm for electronic commerce have received academic attention.¹⁴ However, the majority of the literature is dominated by a supply-side evaluation, which is technologically deterministic focusing on the potential business opportunities and tends to lack a consumer conceptualisation of the issues of a market-oriented approach in electronic media. The exploratory research presented in this paper investigated topics and issues involving the emergence of advertising in an electronic marketplace and is some of the first¹⁵ consumer-based research offering an empirical study on attitudes towards advertising in new media.¹⁶

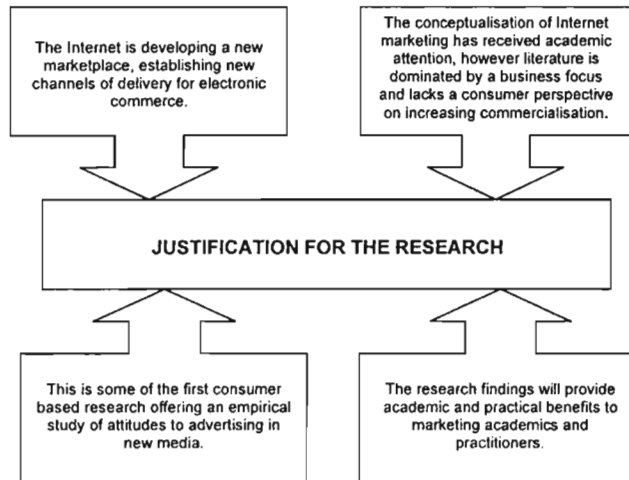


Figure 1. Research justification.

Research Hypotheses

Two hypotheses from the research have been presented in this paper. The first hypothesis aimed to explore if Internet users' attitudes to advertising on the Internet were influenced by their beliefs about the institution of advertising. This is premised on the idea that attitudes about individual advertisements on the Internet would be influenced by perceptions of advertising in general. Therefore *given the commercial free beginnings of the Internet, it was expected that Internet users would have a negative attitude toward the institution of advertising.* This hypothesis investigated if negative attitudes towards the institution of advertising were sustained over time,¹⁷ and if these attitudes were grounded in concerns about the increase in the volume of advertising on the Internet, the growth of consumerism and rising concerns about the social responsibility of the advertising industry in general. In addition, the findings from this hypothesis extended the findings of Raj Mehta and Eugene Sivadas¹⁸ undertaken in 1994, which indicated that respondents react negatively to untargeted 'cyberjunk' in newsgroups, but were more favourable toward targeted marketing communication efforts.

Examination of consumer attitudes to commercialisation of the Internet was further explored by an encompassing analysis of consumer attitudes to the functionality and benefits of advertising in general. Key advertising constructs were replicated¹⁹ from earlier advertising research and examined attitudes to advertising based on the proposition that Internet users with more online experience²⁰ would have different attitudes to Internet users who are new arrivals to the electronic marketplace and who would be more accustomed to commercial activity on the Internet. The second hypothesis stated that *it was expected that Internet users with more online experience would have a more negative attitude towards Internet advertising, than Internet users with less online experience.*

Methodology

The research approach was to survey Internet users for purposes of description, to determine tentative relationships between attitudes towards advertising on the Internet at the time of the study, and Internet users' online experience. The research instrument was a self-administered questionnaire, which partially replicated previous attitude research²¹

including primary determinants: *product information, social role and image and hedonic pleasure*, and a societal factor: *good for the economy*.²² Survey questions were adapted to include direct reference to the Internet, enabling the findings to make statements directly relating to the Internet as a medium conveying advertising messages. This is a strategy in agreement with other advertising researchers who argue that attitudes towards overall advertising consists of two dimensions: (1) an attitude towards the institution of advertising; and (2) an attitude about the media which conveys the advertising.²³

The questionnaire predominantly utilised five-point Likert scales to measure attitude responses. Likert scales were employed primarily as they offered advantages of speed, ease of coding for SPSS and administration²⁴ and were also used by the replicated study.²⁵ Internet users answered the survey either in a 'traditional' paper copy, or electronically, via e-mail or the WWW.

Sample Selection

A convenience sample of 256 respondents was generated from 147 electronic volunteers and 109 student volunteers from university lectures. The focus was on current Internet users and therefore encompassed a research approach that directly sampled active online users of the Internet who participate in *Usenet*, *Liszt-mailing lists* (LIZT: www.liszt.com/), e-mail discussion groups, as well as Internet users who *surf the WWW*. 'Calls to participate' were distributed to online users via contact with discussion groups. This method was successful for other Internet research²⁶ and is used extensively by the GVV Survey research team, which has monitored the growth of the Internet population, through survey method, since 1994. Therefore, the survey announcement strategy included:

- e-mail announcement with pre-notification: an e-mail survey was sent on receipt of consent to participate;
- direct 'call to participate': public e-mail groups received a simple request to participate in a survey and a pointer to the WWW survey site;
- contact with human administrators: a 'call to participate' was sent to human administrators to be forwarded to the discussion group. This enabled the announcement to be distributed amongst 'closed', or moderated groups with permission;
- survey WWW site: the WWW survey URL (<http://www.bus.qut.edu.au/opinion/>) was forwarded to 'submit it' a program which lists WWW pages to search engines and aimed to target WWW surfers.

Following modifications to the sample selection, a convenience sample of university students²⁷ was also included, to enhance the response to the electronic survey. Questionnaires were distributed during the lecture period, and then collected at the end of the lecture. University students were considered an appropriate sample population as Internet profiles of users report higher levels of further education.²⁸ In addition, inclusion of university students did not cause serious issues with the originally defined sample, 'Internet users' that were defined as 'an eclectic mix of universities, research laboratories, computer engineering and telecommunication companies, government sites and, increasingly, private individuals who purchase online time from private communication firms'.²⁹

Results

Frequency distributions were carried out to summarise the attitude data describing Internet advertising. The data is presented under the attitude dimensions, which defined

Table 1. Personal use—product information

	Strongly agree/agree %	Strongly disagree/disagree %
Learn about product and service availability	68.8	16
Find brands with features	48.9	29.3
Up to date product and service availability	59.8	25

Table 2: Personal use—social role and image

	Strongly agree/agree %	Strongly disagree/disagree %
Learn about trends ... impress others	17.6	55.1
What similar others buy on the Internet	19.3	48.4
What reflects me	7.8	64.5

Table 3. Personal use—hedonic/pleasure

	Strongly agree/agree %	Strongly disagree/disagree %
Amusing/entertaining	44.2	25.4
Better than other media content on the Internet	29.1	49.4
Pleasure in recall	35.2	38.3

Table 4. Societal effects—good for the Internet economy

	Strongly agree/agree %	Strongly disagree/disagree %
Help's build Internet economy	62.9	15.2
(Not) wasteful of resources	34.4	46.5
Beneficial competition	55.1	20.7

Table 5. Generalised attitudes—global attitudes to Internet advertising

	Strongly agree/agree %	Strongly disagree/disagree %
Advertising on the Internet a good thing	54.3	23.4
Opinion of advertising on the Internet is unfavourable	33.2	46.9
	Strongly like/like	Strongly dislike/dislike
Overall, do you like or dislike Internet advertising?	38.2	33.6

the personal and societal functions of advertising. The results are presented in Tables 1–4. Also presented separately are respondents' attitudes to advertising in general (see Table 5). The measures for respondent's attitudes toward advertising were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree'.

Overall, respondents believed that Internet advertising provides product information. Approximately 69% of respondents learn about products and services from Internet advertising, 48.9% find brands with the features they are looking for through Internet advertising and 59.5% believe that Internet advertising keeps them up to date on product information. Table 1 presents the results below.

Overall, the responses to the construct of 'social role and image' were very negative. Very few respondents recognised this dimension of advertising, or did not identify with it on a personal level. The majority of respondents did not believe they used Internet advertising to find products which impressed other Internet users (55.1%), nor reflect the sort of person they are (64.5%), nor to provide information about lifestyle and product purchases (48.4%).

Approximately 44% of respondents found Internet advertising amusing and entertaining. However, nearly 50% found Internet advertising less enjoyable than other media content on the Internet and only some (35.2%) found it pleasurable on recollection. Table 3 illustrates these results.

Survey respondents in general felt that Internet advertising helped build the Internet economy (62.9%) and 55.1% of respondents believed that Internet advertising promotes competition which benefits consumers. However, only 34.4% believe that Internet advertising does not waste Internet resources. These results are illustrated in Table 4.

The overall global attitude toward Internet advertising indicates relatively positive attitudes from respondents. These responses show that approximately 54.3% of the sample thought that Internet advertising was a 'good thing', and 46.9% of respondents generally held a favourable attitude toward Internet advertising. Of the sample, 38.2% liked Internet advertising, whereas 33.6% did not. Table 5 summaries the findings.

Attitudes to Advertising in General

General attitudes to the institution of advertising were mostly negative (see Table 6 below). Only 20.4% saw advertising as essential. In general, the majority of respondents believed that advertising did not provide economic benefits. Only 25.7% believed that

Table 6. Institution of advertising

	Strongly agree/agree %	Strongly disagree/disagree %
Economic		
Overall essential	20.4	61.6
Better living		
Raise standard of living	25.7	46.5
Better products	36.8	41.4
Costs: lower prices	27.3	48.4
Social		
Falsity/not sense		
True picture of goods	14.8	68.4
Insults consumers intelligence	42.6	32.4
Materialism: should not buy	46.1	30.9

Table 7. Economic and social benefits of advertising

Variables	No of cases	Mean value	t-value	df	Significance
Economic					
Overall: essential	255	3.57	7.620	254	p < 0.05
Better living					
Raises standard of living	256	2.66	- 5.069	255	p < 0.05
Better products	256	2.88	- 1.656	255	p < 0.05
Costs: lowers c goods	256	2.66	- 4.828	255	p < 0.05
Social					
Falsity/no sense					
True picture of goods	256	2.28	- 12.840	255	p < 0.05
(Does not) insults intelligence	256	2.83	- 2.469	255	p < 0.05
Materialism: should not buy	256	2.83	- 2.487	255	p < 0.05

advertising raised the standard of living, 36.8% believed that advertising led to better products, and 27.3% believed that advertising resulted in lower prices. The majority of respondents believed that advertising in general insults consumers' intelligence (42.6%), encourages materialism (46.1%) and does not present a true picture of the product (68.4%).

Do Internet Users Display Negative Attitudes to Advertising?

Hypothesis 1 examined the relationship between Internet users and their attitude towards advertising in general. As much advertising research has shown that consumers are suspicious of advertising,³⁰ this test assumed that this would also be true of Internet consumers. The relationships were tested using one-sample t-tests.

The results for Hypothesis 1 are presented in Table 7. Overall, respondents displayed negative attitudes towards the institution of advertising, from both a societal and economic perspective. An analysis of the variables, which defined social aspects, suggested that respondents believed that advertising was based on falsity and materialism. Responses to this construct showed a pronounced negative attitude to advertising in general. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected as respondents believed that advertising insults the intelligence of the average consumer (t-value: -2.469), does not present a true picture of products and services (t-value: -12.840) and encourages consumers to purchase products they should buy (t-value: -2.487).

Respondents' beliefs about the economic benefit of advertising were also negative and therefore support rejecting the null hypothesis. Analysis suggests that consumers did not believe that advertising raises the standard of living (t-value: -5.069), results in better products for the public (t-value: -1.656), nor lowers the price of products (t-value: -4.828). However, although the results suggested that the respondents had a negative attitude to advertising in general, there was no evidence to suggest that the respondents believed that advertising in general is not an essential (t-value: 7.620) part of business and commerce.

Are there Relationships between Attitudes to Advertising and Internet Experience?

Hypothesis 2 explored the relationship between Internet users' experience online and their attitude to Internet advertising. This was proposed as users who have been online

for 4 years or more would have joined the Internet community prior to the rapid development of the WWW by commercial operators. Newer users, however, who have been online for 1 year or less, are assumed to be less sensitive to advertising as their experience has been gained whilst commercial practices have become more prevalent.

A step-wise discriminant analysis was utilised to explore hypothesis 2, as it enabled the study of differences between two or more groups with respect to several variables simultaneously. Therefore the main hypothesis and subsequent hypotheses assume that several variables may be good predictors of attitudes towards advertising of users with 'one year or less experience' on the Internet ($n = 65$), and those users with 'four or more years' of experience on the Internet ($n = 43$).

The analysis 'grouped' 67.59% cases correctly. Overall the discriminating power of the model is acceptable at 0.793 and the between-group difference accounts for approximately 21% of variance in the following predicting variables:

- Internet advertising is a good way to learn about what products and services are available (− 0.63026).
- Internet advertising tells me what people with life styles similar to mine are buying and using (0.62268).
- Overall, do you like (dislike) Internet advertising? (0.87918).

Therefore, the explained variance between more experienced and less experienced Internet users can be defined by: their beliefs about Internet advertising providing information about products and services available on the Internet; their beliefs about Internet advertising's portrayals of social role and image; and their overall like or dislike of Internet advertising.

Research Implications

These research findings have implications for both the advertising industry and advertising theory in general.

Implications for the Advertising Industry

There are three distinct benefits to advertising on the Internet: (1) a low overall cost; (2) a large audience reach; and (3) a message delivery combining sight and sound.³¹ However, the critical factor for Internet advertising is that digital consumers self-select advertising messages. Therefore, if digital consumers continue to be sceptical about Internet advertising, this may undermine its effectiveness, or even lead to calls for greater regulation.

Implications for Advertising Theory

It has been argued that what underlies advertising research is largely unrecognised, and that 'a theory of advertising persuasion will remain incomplete if restricted to studying how advertising accomplishes business goals to the exclusion of how it furthers the aims of consumers'.³² In an electronic marketplace, where consumers self-select advertising messages, furthering the aims of the consumer will become a central requirement. Digital consumers are no longer 'passive' receivers of the advertisers' message, but will actively select the advertising message or completely disregard it. New theoretical models are emerging to explain the many-to-many communication processes evolving from Internet communication. However, theorising and further research needs to extend beyond the

process to the structure of attitudes to Internet advertising, as has been proposed by the current research.

Conclusion

The current literature on Internet advertising and marketing focuses on a supply-side, technologically deterministic approach which overlooks the critical role empowered consumers will play in the future evolution of the marketing communication mix. This exploratory research presents some of the first consumer-based research offering an empirical analysis of attitudes towards advertising in new media. Further research is needed to develop and test a model that incorporates the unique interactive features of the Internet in the advertising model and to profile a more representative sample of the Internet consumer population. Extending the current research findings by further investigation of the relationships between Internet users' beliefs and attitudes, with their online experience and behaviour, will contribute to a better understanding of the emerging digital consumer.

Researchers have described the Internet, and more specifically the WWW, as the first new medium since television.³³ Incorporating this new medium in the marketing communication mix however, has important implications. Primarily, marketers need to acknowledge that digital consumers have the ability to self-select a firm's marketing message, shifting the 'power' from the marketer to the consumer. Therefore, the Internet presents marketers and advertisers with still-to-be-met opportunities and challenges, including the need for more systematic research.

Notes and References

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5. There is little agreement on the true scope of public involvement on the Internet, or consumer involvement in electronic commerce. Currently, estimates of Internet and online usage differ widely. Specific studies which focused on tracking the demographic profiles of Internet users include the Graphics, Visualization and Usability (GVU) Centre <http://www.gvu.gatech.edu/user_surveys/> who pioneered the entire files of web-based surveying in January 1994, and the CommerceNet/Nielsen Internet Demographics Survey involving D. L. Hoffman and T. P. Novak, <<http://www2000.ogsm.vanderbilt.edu/>>.
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10. S. O'Donohoe, 'Attitudes to advertising: a review of British and American research', *International Journal of Advertising*, 14, 1995, pp. 245–61.
11. R. Bauer and S. Greyser, *Advertising in America: The Consumer View*, Harvard University Press, Boston, 1968. This work developed a scale measuring the social and economic effects of advertising and is the framework from which much of this research has emerged.
12. Key advertising constructs have been replicated from the research by R.W. Pollay and B Mittal, 'Here's the beef: factors, determinants, and segments in consumer criticism of advertising', *Journal of Marketing*, 57, July 1993, pp. 99–114. Pollay and Mittal proposed a comprehensive seven-factor model of consumer attitudes towards advertising, which includes three personal utility factors (product information, social image information and hedonic amusement) and four socio-economic factors (good for economy, fostering materialism, corrupting values and falsity/no-sense).
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14. Hoffman, *op. cit.*, see Note 6.
15. The research commenced in 1996, and the data was collected between October 1997 and February 1998.
16. Ducoffe in his paper cited above presented empirical findings from an intercept survey focusing on the *perceived value* of Web advertising to consumers and discusses value perceptions that relate to key consequent constructs, attitudes toward advertising in general and attitudes to individual ads; R. Mehta and E. Sivadas, 'Direct marketing on the Internet: an assessment of consumer attitudes', *Journal of Direct Marketing*, 9, 3, 1995, pp. 66–83, presented empirical findings on direct marketing on the Internet, prior to the World Wide Web explosion, and primarily focused on advertising in newsgroups; I. Maignan, 'Nature and uses of the Internet: a qualitative inquiry', *Proceedings of the American Marketing Association Educators' Conference, Enhancing Knowledge Development in Marketing*, American Marketing Association, 1996, pp. 44–5 questioned interviewees about commercial activity on the Internet and developed social use of technology categories, to ascertain purposes, and or an intuitive purpose for using Internet technologies.
17. O'Donohoe, *op. cit.*, p. 247.
18. Mehta and Sivadas, *op. cit.*, surveyed newsgroups to ascertain attitudes toward advertising and direct marketing in Internet newsgroups.
19. *Ibid.*
20. In this research, Internet users online experience was calculated as 'time online'.
21. Essentially, the research utilises the classical measures of perceived social and economic effects of advertising, originally proposed by Bauer and Greyser in 1968 in their study 'Advertising in America: the consumer view'. These measures were adapted by Pollay and Mittal to be included in a survey instrument, which surveyed Americans about their attitudes towards advertising in general. Bauer and Greyser's research created a benchmark for subsequent studies concerning attitudes towards advertising by establishing a fundamental tool for measuring the *economic and social role or effects* of advertising (Pollay and Mittal, *op. cit.*, p. 100). These are principle constructs, which researchers in the past (J. C. Andrews, 'The dimensionality of beliefs towards advertising in general', *Journal of Advertising*, 18, 1, 1989, pp. 26–35; and L. N. Reid and L. C. Soley, 'Generalised and personalised attitudes towards advertising's social and economic effects', *Journal of Advertising*, 11, 3, 1982, pp. 3–7) have argued, convey consumers overall attitudes towards advertising in general.
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27. Convenience sampling of university students creates sample biases in the research. However, the limitations of student sampling were considered minimal, as a great deal of research on the structure of attitudes towards advertising is based on student samples (O'Donohoe, *op. cit.*). Holbrook (1978, cited in O'Donohoe) argued that student's psychological processes and attitude structures should not differ dramatically from those of the broader consumer population. However, other researchers have disagreed and challenge the validity of research based on student samples (e.g. W. D. Wells, 'Discovery-oriented consumer research', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19, 1993, pp. 489-504). Nevertheless, when it is borne in mind that response rates to sample surveys are often low and declining (Goyder, cited in A. Bryman and D. Cramer, *Quantitative Data Analysis with SPSS for Windows: A Guide for Social Scientists*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 104) 'the difference between research based on random samples and convenience samples in terms of their relative representativeness is not always as great as is sometimes implied'.
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33. *Ibid.*