

## **Ad-Haters: Why do they hate the ad and will they still buy the brand?**

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### **Abstract**

Viewers are increasingly able or inclined to voice their dislike for advertisements. Some ads are deliberately created to be disliked, in order to gain cut-through and additional reach through publicity. We explore peoples general dislike of ads and the effect disliking an ad has on purchase probability. We find the majority of people are unable to remember a disliked ad, of those that could only few could specify why they disliked ads. The most common reasons for disliking an ad was that they were ‘annoying’, ‘fake’ or ‘boring’. As a result of seeing a disliked ad, as expected people’s propensity to purchase that brand drops. However offensive ads have a much larger effect on purchase propensity.

Key words: Ad-liking, controversial advertising, advertising annoyance

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## **Introduction and Background**

Australian advertisers spend hundreds of millions annually on creating and placing advertisements (World Advertising Research Center, 2008). Marketers invest this substantial sum in an effort to communicate their brand to as many people as possible. Ultimately, advertising aims to stimulate brand sales or at least refresh existing memories of the advertised brand. Recent empirical evidence shows that advertisement copy is the single biggest determinant of immediate sales response (Wood, 2009). Furthermore a wealth of academic studies into how advertising content affects campaign outcomes, emphasise the concern for developing advertisements of high creative standard (eg, Stewart and Furse, 1986; Stanton and Burke, 1998; du Plessis, 1998; Romaniuk, 2009). This paper explores people's dislike of ads and the effect disliking an ad may have on purchase probabilities.

## **Disliked ads**

Consumer studies illustrate peoples harboured dislike for some advertising (Bauer and Greyser, 1968; Alwitt and Prabhaker, 1994). Industry evidence suggests that this negative sentiment is increasing. In 1998 the Australian Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB) recorded around 1300 complaints, and by 2009 this figure had trebled. While the ASB is a formal channel for viewers to voice concern, many people turn to less formal, easily accessible channels, specifically online forums. The digitalisation of public discussion provides many options for consumers wanting to publicise their opinion, and connect with other like-minded 'haters' (see for example, [www.commercialsihate.com](http://www.commercialsihate.com), or <http://tvs-worst-adverts.co.uk>, and Facebook groups such as 'Death to Mrs. Todd – the chick from the AAMI ad and 'I hate Rivers Ads'). Therefore, nowadays, negative attitudes towards a disliked ad are likely to have wider reach, in comparison to conventional word-of-mouth, which has far smaller reach potential given its face-to-face distribution restriction. While ads may be disliked due to poor creative decisions, some marketers intentionally (rather than accidentally) create disliked ads. We discuss the reasons a marketer may strive to create disliked advertising copy.

## **The Benefits and Risks Associated with Disliked Ads**

Gaining viewers attention is increasingly challenging for marketers. Paech et al (2003) reviewed advertising avoidance literature and concluded that only around one-third of the TV audience actively view advertisements; with the remaining two thirds split between actively avoiding (eg switching channel, leaving the room, etc), or passively avoiding (eg muting the sound, talking, carrying out other activities, etc). Another related marketing challenge is the sheer amount of advertising (clutter) and its affect on consumer's attention (Green, 2003). Consequently a key objective for marketers is to generate advertising that can cut-through to viewers faced with a battering of competing messages.

We posit that marketer's commission advertising that is likely to be disliked by viewers in order to gain viewer's attention. A review of practitioner-generated literature illustrates this issue is widely recognised in the advertising industry (Verklin and Kanner, 2007; Sullivan, 2008; Othmer, 2009). Indeed, these authors argue that the best advertising is that which is unexpected, innovative, and 'rule breaking' thus implying that advertising agencies are comfortable in taking risks in an effort to gain attention. This rationale links to the academic discussion on advertising attention. Unusual, irritating or shocking content may be used as a

way to circumvent this issue (Waller, 1999; Waller et al, 2005; Cotte and Richie, 2005). Thus advertisements that stand out – even though they do so by offending or annoying us, may be more likely to capture waning viewer attention, and therefore improve their likelihood of cutting-through to the audience.

Furthermore advertising that is disliked can also generate publicity for the brand itself if it is disliked for reasons that are cited in mainstream media. The recent sexually overt Advance Medical Institute (AMI) campaign received substantial coverage in the Australian media. While much of this publicity was negative (for example public disapproval from church and family groups), any publicity that generates a talking point or propels a brand in the public's eyes is arguably a positive outcome for advertisers (Hume, 1985). Interestingly, often risky or offensive ads that warrant formal complaint to the ABS attract substantially *positive* publicity. For example, the Kotex U-Tampons 'Beaver' ad received 185 formal complaints to the ABS, making it Australia's most complained about ad in 2008 (Halliday, 2009). The same ad recorded 440,000 page views on YouTube and 120 comments (only a handful of which were negative), as well as wide coverage in broadcast media such as TV, radio and print. This disparity may imply that ads that attract formal complaints or which receive negative feedback in mainstream media channels may actually encourage people to seek out the ad (thereby adding to the reach and cut-through achievements of the campaign). These ads may even prompt those who like the ad to retaliate and verbalise their opinions. Even negative coverage of ads may be immensely valuable to an advertiser in terms of media space alone.

Despite the potential gains from creating offensive or annoying advertisements, such ads might also encourage people *not* to buy the advertised brand in their next category purchase opportunity, or they may actively avoid the ad next time it is on TV. The extreme repercussions of creating a disliked campaign is that it risks being condemned by the Advertising Standards Bureau, and in turn pulled from media networks. This is a particularly undesirable outcome for advertisers as the dollars spent on creating the copy are wasted on ads that are not seen by the market.

### **Reasons for Ad Dislike**

To this point all disliked ads have been referred to as one common group of ads, however past research has identified numerous reasons for disliking ads, these are now explored.

Offensive, controversial, disgusting or 'shocking' advertising images may upset or alienate viewers. Ad content that is offensive, controversial or shocking is commonly accepted as having a negative impact on brand image (Dahl, Frankenberger and Manshandra, 2003).

Certain product categories may be more 'prone' to attract distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage amongst viewers. Product categories classified as 'unmentionables' (such as underwear, women's hygiene products or condoms), by Wilson and West (1981) are "products, services, or concepts that for reasons of delicacy, decency, morality, or even fear" are difficult to advertise.

Viewers may have a negative opinion towards advertising if they feel it is misleading or is unrepresentative of reality. Boush, Friestad and Rose (1994) found that adolescent children became more disbelieving of advertising as they developed a more adult understanding of the tactics advertisers employ.

A recent article in New York Ad Age (Steinberg, 2008) (without evidence) claimed that repetition was the primary root of hatred, as seeing the same ad over and over irritates viewers.

Past research has explored the relationship between ad liking and consumer behaviour (e.g. Schwerin, 1986; Cook 1992; Bergkvist and Rossiter 2008) however only a small number of studies have explored the reasons for disliking advertising and the relative influence on brand perceptions and purchase (e.g. Rich et al, 1978). This understanding would benefit marketers in future creative copy development. Thus we propose the following research question.

*RQ1.* What are the main reasons people dislike ads?

Regardless of the reasons for disliking an ad, it is also important to consider what effect disliked ads have on people's perceptions of the brand, especially in terms of future purchase behaviour. The rationale here is that disliked ads influence viewers' perception of the brand, and therefore decreases their propensity to purchase it (Muehling, 1987). It is important to not only understand the overall effect of disliked ads on purchase probabilities, but also whether ads that are disliked for different reasons have different effects on future purchase. For example does a 'fake' ad decrease the likelihood of purchase more than a 'boring' ad? This has led to the following question.

*RQ2.* Do those who dislike or hate the advertising intend to avoid the brand in future purchase occasions? Does this intention vary depending on the reason for disliking the ad?

### **Research Approach**

The data collection was carried out in Australia in 2009 using a random telephone survey of metropolitan respondents. In total 1262 respondents completed the questionnaire. To address RQ1 and RQ2 we asked respondents four questions.

Initially, respondents were asked, "*Of the ads you have seen recently, which have you disliked the most?*". They were required to write in a description of the ad. Respondents could recall any ad from any category. We then asked, "*Why did you dislike it?*". Respondents then wrote a brief reason. An open ended questioning style was employed to ensure that respondents were able to describe *any* ad and provide *any* reason for disliking it. We avoided leading respondents with a list of possible reasons for dislike, and also ensured that responses could be sourced from ads from any product category.

To assess the effect of disliked ads on purchase propensities, respondents were asked the following two questions: "*What was your probability of buying the brand before you saw the ad?*" and "*Now that you've seen the ad, what is your probability of buying the brand now?*". To measure the probability of purchase an 11-point Juster scale was used. We acknowledge that by asking both these questions together is a methodological weakness, as a result claimed levels of pre-purchase and post-purchase propensities are expected to be low. However this study is predominately interested in comparing the relative drops in propensity, dependent on the reason for disliking the ad, and not with quantifying the drops in propensity. For example if a respondent disliked a 'loud' ad, does his or her propensity to purchase decrease more or less than someone who disliked a Fake ad?

### **Results**

Respondents were asked to mention an ad that they have seen recently that they disliked, then describe why they didn't like it. All verbatim responses were collected and classified into one of twelve categories. Of the total sample of 1262 people, only 437 described an ad they disliked and the reason for disliking it. Those that did not describe an ad they disliked were excluded from further analysis.

A sixth (17%) of the respondents who did write a reason for disliking an ad were unable to specify why they disliked it –instead stating that they ‘just didn’t like it’. A further 10% of people stated that they just don’t like ads generally. A sixth of respondents stated that the ad was ‘annoying’; while around 10% of people claimed that the ads were ‘fake’ and ‘boring’. Around 5% of respondents stated that the ads were disgusting. ‘Cheap’ (7%), ‘loud’ (6%), ‘offensive’ (6%) and ‘repetitive’ (6%). A small proportion (3%) of respondents said that they disliked an ad because of the brand or the ad content was hard to understand.

Respondents were then asked to rate the probability of purchasing the brand prior to and post viewing the ad using an 11-point Juster scale. A mean of 3.3 indicates that the on average the respondents had a 33% probability of purchasing the brand. From this we calculate changes in the mean (all of which were decreases). ‘Don’t like the ad’ and ‘don’t like ads’ are presented separately in the table, as these ads were disliked due to factors other than the content of the ad (outside of creative’s control).

**Table 1. Propensity to purchase: Pre/post viewing averages.**

Reason		Pre viewing	Post Viewing	Difference	% drop
Offensive	cited by 6%	3.8	1.6	2.2*	58
Loud	cited by 6%	4.7	2.5	2.2*	47
Disgusting	cited by 5%	3.4	1.9	1.5*	44
Hard to understand	cited by 3%	3.9	2.2	1.7*	43
Annoying	cited by 16%	4.2	2.9	1.4*	33
Fake	cited by 10%	3.9	2.6	1.3*	33
Boring	cited by 10%	3.5	2.5	1.0*	29
Cheap	cited by 7%	3.2	2.6	0.7	21
Repetitive	cited by 6%	2.4	2.0	0.3	13
Don’t like the brand	cited by 3%	1.5	1.4	0.1	9
Don’t like the ad	cited by 17%	3.5	1.7	1.8*	52
Don’t like ads (in general)	cited by 10%	3.3	2.5	0.8*	25
Average		3.3	2.2	1.2*	36

\* Differences between pre and post viewing are significance at  $p < .05$

With the exception of ‘cheap’ ‘don’t like the brand’ and ‘repetitive’, all decreases in purchase probability were found to be significant. Table 1 shows that overall, viewer’s propensity to purchase the brand (on average) dropped by a third (36%) after seeing an ad they disliked. However the purchase propensity of those who disliked the ad because it was ‘offensive’, ‘loud’ or ‘disgusting’ had relatively higher mean decreases in purchase probability than those who disliked the ad because they ‘don’t like the brand’, found it ‘repetitive’ or ‘cheap’.

## Discussion

A majority (871 of 1262) of the respondents could not even think of an ad they disliked; and of the ones that could, around half provided a reason (437). Around 20% of those who provided a reason said they ‘don’t like the ad’. This means that only around a third of the total sample could identify an ad, and articulate a reason for disliking the ad. That is, changes in purchase probability only apply to people that could cite an ad and reasons for hating it: the majority of our respondents could not do this. This corresponds with wider advertising research indicating that most people are indifferent or favourable towards advertising (see for

example, Shavitt, Lowrey and Haefner, 1998).

Most people don't really know why they dislike ads, of those that could articulate a reason commonly said the ad was annoying, fake or boring. This highlights that for many people, the ads they disliked the most are not offensive and controversial in nature, thus unlikely to generate ASB complaints (all investigated ASB complaints must be grounded in reasons within the responsible/ethical advertising charter, not simply 'annoying'). Furthermore these results indicate that most disliked ads are unlikely to benefit from negative publicity in mainstream media that would increase campaign reach and cut-through.

A key reason for creating offensive ads is that, despite being disliked, they also attract a lot of publicity, and thereby gain greater exposure. While disliked, offensive ads are uncommon (only a 6% of people disliked the ad due to its offensive nature), offensive ads have more detrimental effects on viewers' purchase propensities than the average (58% c.f. 36%). Thus ads that are offensive (i.e. the ones likely to be reported to the ABS) make up a minority of disliked ads, but are more likely to negatively affect the brand perceptions of those who do dislike them.

People that don't like the brand start with a very low propensity to buy the brand (1.5 out of ten). After seeing the advertising their propensity only decreases slightly (9%). This reflects that there is little scope for these people to *decrease* their purchase probability. That is, if a respondent has a purchase probability of 1 (i.e. 1 chance in 10), they have only one scale point below, and nine scale points above to which they could change their probability (East, 2008). While our sample for each type of disliked ad is too small to test purchase probability changes at the individual respondent, this question warrants further research. Many shoppers will (at a given point in time) have a close to zero purchase probability, then any memorable (whether likeable or irritating) exposure may have a positive effect, as purchase probability cannot go much lower (Ehrenberg *et al.*, 2002).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This paper is one step towards a better understanding of ad disliking. Many related research questions pertaining to the implications of disliked ads are still to be answered.

At what point is it worth sacrificing a few unhappy viewers to achieve the extra publicity generated from a controversial campaign? If the ad is disliked, but not unusual enough to warrant coverage in mainstream media, did the campaign 'fail'? Do people of different ages/genders dislike different things about ads?

Most ASB complaints relate to TV and outdoor ads; do the findings we see in this study hold in other media like mobile and internet which are considered particularly intrusive advertising media? To truly understand the relative benefits (or costs) of employing advertising that viewers dislike considerable further research is needed.

Brand usage was not considered. This may be useful in future to see if there are any differences between brand user and non-users' exposures to disliked ad content.

We also note there are limitations in using purchase intention to predict *actual* future sales, but note that intermediary variables such as recall, intention, brand linkage are commonly used by the ad industry and advertising academics to benchmark advertising performance.

Also a key limitation to this study is that the pre and post purchase probabilities are asked in the same survey. This is highly likely to bias the stated pre and post purchase likelihoods to purchase. As a result the average pre and post purchase probabilities are lower than expected.

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