

**The impact of 'likeability' on advertising effectiveness:
To what extent does liking an advert have a persuasive
influence on consumer behaviour?**

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The impact of 'likeability' on advertising effectiveness: To what extent does liking an advert have a persuasive influence on consumer behaviour?

ADVERTISING LIKEABILITY

In current society it has become increasingly difficult for advertisers to command the attention of their audience, and subsequently have an impact on their behaviour (Robinson, 1997). People don't want to waste time and effort looking at advertisements (Collett, 1994; Hollis, 1995). In fact, it has become normal for consumers to resent the manipulative techniques (Agee, 1997), regarding adverts as an unwelcome intrusion and a source of irritation. This often results in conscious effort to avoid adverts (Byrant & Zillman, 1994; Bishop, 1997) and refusal to respond to promotional messages (Cummins, 1996). An advertising strategy, which is often suggested as a way of overcoming this is 'likeability' (Sacharin, 2001). Adverts, which are liked, are claimed to be superior at interrupting the 'ad-scanning' phase; ultimately enhancing processing and creating positive judgements of the advertising-message and the actual brand.

For decades it was believed that the attitudes and opinions that consumers had towards advertising were irrelevant. All that was considered to be important was what consumers thought of the product or the brand (Fam, 2006). Advertising likeability was discounted in favour of ad-recall and brand-attitude shifts (Franzen, 1994). The focus on multi-attribute models of consumer choice processes, before the 1980's, meant that the literature took a very rational view of consumer choices, rarely considering the potential impact attitudes towards the actual advert could have upon brand attitudes (Fam, 2006). It was even proposed that enjoying an advert would detract from sales (Reeves, 1961).

It is now consistently recognised that advertising likeability has a very important role in an advert's influence on consumer behaviour (e.g. Biel & Bridgewater, 1990; DuPlessis, 1994a). Liking an advert has even been shown to be the strongest factor linked with persuasion and sales (Haley & Baldinger, 1991), and is thus considered a very important measurement of advertising effectiveness.

Advertising effectiveness

Advertising effectiveness has been researched by numerous methods, in the past mainly focusing on recognition, recall, opinion, brand-awareness, associations and ratings (e.g. Lucas & Britt, 1963).

However, 'effectiveness' has to ultimately be a measure of sales, and whether the money spent on the advert is returned by the consumer response (Wells, 1997). These other factors may act as channels or barriers between the advert and purchase (Colley, 1961; Schultz, 1990), but sales has to be the primary criterion.

Ways of measuring advertising likeability

The literature on advertising likeability can be divided into two approaches. Studies taking the first approach, known as profile studies, aim to determine what viewers think or feel after viewing an advert. Studies have asked target audiences to describe adverts by selecting adjectives (Aaker & Bruzzone, 1981; Biel & Bridgewater, 1990; Aaker & Stayman, 1990; Greene, 1992) or statements (DuPlessis, 1994a). The second approach involves studies which measure Attitude towards the advertisement (A_{ad}). A_{ad} studies focus on measuring attitude construct; in terms of affective and cognitive reactions, and relations with attitude towards the brand (A_b) (e.g. Batra & Ray, 1998; Lutz, 1985; MacKenzie, Lutz & Belch, 1986; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989).

Advertising likeability and A_{ad} are used interchangeably as concepts, so it is important to understand the degree to which these notions refer to one same construct. Cognitive theories (e.g. Greenwald & Levitt, 1984; Tsal, 1985) argue that affective processing is always mediated by cognition. Fishbein & Middlestadt (1995) propose that A_{ad} is a result of cognitive beliefs, which in turn predict consumer intentions and behaviour. However, emotion is now considered to be a large factor in forming attitudes (A_{ad}) (Morris, Woo, Geason & Kim, 2002), and is thought to even have an influence on behaviour (Allen, Machleit & Kleine, 1992). A_{ad} has been considered an affective response (Zhang, 1996), which represents the positive feelings towards the advert; where affect is independent of cognitive variables (Machleit & Wilson, 1983). It has therefore become acknowledged that A_{ad} is formed out of a combination of both cognitive and affective elements (Morris et al., 2002). Consequently, it has been claimed that advertising likeability and A_{ad} represent the same construct (DuPlessis & Foster, 2000), although their measurements may differ. For the sake of this paper, they shall be considered as one and the same.

The power of advertising likeability

Copy-testing, also known as pre-testing, is the way advertising practitioners can predict how effective an advertising campaign will be (Jones, 1995). It is based on the analysis of feedback from target audiences, before the advert is released, as a way of estimating how successful it will be and to identify potential improvements. Copy-tests have traditionally measured factors such as persuasion, salience, awareness and recall, (Wells, 1997). In the 1980's, a landmark piece of research was carried out by the American Advertising Research Foundation (ARF), which aimed to

analyse every possible copy-test measure. The Copy Research Validation Study (CRVP) (Haley, 1990; Haley & Baldinger, 1991) decided to simply ask the subjects whether they 'liked the advert'. The conclusions of the CRVP reported that all the major copy-test measures are predictive of advertisement success and product sales, to some degree, but '*ad-liking*' was by far the most predictive.

The results of this research were groundbreaking for the advertising industry. Researchers (notably Biel, 1990) used the ARF research to urge ad agencies to focus on creating adverts that would be 'liked'. However, advertising research companies saw this new measure as a threat to income, and tried to justify how the CRVP findings were invalid (DuPlessis, 2005). Despite this negative response, evidence supporting the importance of ad-liking kept being presented (Biel, 1990; Biel & Bridgewater, 1990; DuPlessis, 1994a, 1994b, Eagleston & Rossiter, 1994; Greene, 1992; Haley, 1990; 1994). In systematically controlled trials, likeable adverts have been shown to be up to two times more effective than the average advert (Biel & Bridgewater, 1990). Studies have even looked back at previous examples of successful adverts to demonstrate the pervasive impact of likeability (Thornsen, 1991; Jones, 1995).

Even while some question whether likeability is the best measure of advertising effectiveness (Hollis, 1995; Jones, 1996; Rossiter & Eagleson, 1994), it is indubitable that ad-liking is considerably useful; not just because of its strong association with advertising effectiveness and sales, but also due to the simplicity of the measure (Spaeth Hess & Tang, 1990).

As a note; the majority of the research is specifically focused on television and radio advertisements. However, there is research to suggest that likeability has the same role in print/poster advertising (Hermie et al., 2005).

WHAT DRIVES LIKEABILITY?

"If people are becoming less attentive and the variable that influences the penetrative ability of advertisements most is likeability, then one needs to have an operational definition of likeability."

- DuPlessis (1994b), p3

Concisely identifying the various attributes which make adverts likeable is currently an unanswered issue, although a very important one. Intuitively, it is thought that ad-liking is evoked simply through entertainment; however, the ARF revealed that likeable adverts are as likely to be informative as they are to be entertaining (Haley & Baldinger, 1991). The basis for likeability is in fact a complex concept: ad-liking is shown to be a multidimensional construct, with both affective and cognitive components (Alwitt, 1987). Identifying and understanding these numerous factors, and their relationships, is a very attractive prospect for an advertising practitioner, as a way of predicting the extent to which an advert will be liked, which could ultimately have a direct influence on its success.

The factors that make an advert likeable

Studies have attempted to discover what factors and characteristics underlie an advert which is liked. Biel & Bridgewater (1990) were the first to demonstrate likeability's relation to perceptual characteristics of the advertisement. Factor analysis, on responses to 80 commercials which were rated on 26 attributes, revealed five factors that were associated with likeability: 'ingenuity'; 'meaningfulness'; 'energy'; 'rubs the wrong way'; and 'warmth'. Multiple-regression-analysis subsequently revealed that 'meaningfulness' and 'energy' were the two strongest predictors of ad-liking. Aaker & Stayman (1990) used a similar methodology and reported the same five factors as Biel & Bridgewater, although worded slightly differently (Franzen, 1994), as well as four additional factors: 'believable'; 'confusing'; 'familiar' and 'dull'. The authors used the nine factors to create scores for each advert and submitted them to a clustering-algorithm. This resulted in 15 groups of ads with similar attributes. A separate regression was performed on each cluster with the independent-variables being the nine factors and the dependent-variable being likeability. All nine factors had a significant association with at least one of the ad-type clusters; but 'informative', 'irritating' and 'entertaining/humorous' had a significant relationship with over half of the ad-types.

There is also consistent evidence of a link between likeability and involvement (i.e. viewer participation). Biel and Bridgewater (1990) suggested that 'involvement', along with 'perceived

relevance', links ad-liking to persuasion in the first place. There has however been confusion in opinions; Hollis (1995) proposed that likeability was a facet of the complex construct of involvement; whereas DuPlessis (1994b) proposed involvement to be a dimension of likeability. Involvement has also been mistaken for 'enjoyment' (Hollis, 1995) and a general measure of attitude (Thorson, 1991).

These findings therefore demonstrate that there are various dimensions that are consistently associated with advertising likeability, and can help to comprehend how positive feelings towards an advert are attained. However, research up to this point is not extensive enough to robustly conclude specific factors that contribute towards ad-liking. It seems implausible to ever imagine that an exact 'formula' can ever be provided. In fact evidence has shown that likeability is dependent on a whole host of other variables, such as product category (Biel & Bridgewater, 1990) and culture (Fam, 2006a), which are discussed later.

HOW DOES LIKEABILITY HAVE AN IMPACT ON SALES?

The power of likeability is clear through the consistent findings. However, what remains questionable is an explanation accounting for the positive effects of likeability, and the link it has with consumer intentions and behaviour: In *what way* does advertising likeability contribute to advertising effectiveness?

In the 1980's, psychologists attempted to propose theories based on attitude models, to explain the link between ad-liking and consumer intentions. More recently, empirical evidence has been put forward to test these theories, and also to put forward further possible accounts for the link.

Attitude models: the causal role of attitude towards the advert

Much of the psychological literature on ad-likeability refers to the concept as 'attitude towards the advert' (A_{ad}). A_{ad} has been shown to be a significant factor in advertising effectiveness, and thought to be a mediating variable in the relationship between advertising and brand attitudes/purchasing-intentions (Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Shimp, 1981). The literature, based on general attitude-behaviour associations, offers four alternative structural models to illustrate how A_{ad} mediates this relationship.

Each explanation fits in with the already established, hierarchy-of-effects framework, which acknowledges the existence of the following causal links (see figure 1(a)):

- $C_{ad} \rightarrow A_{ad}$

Ad-related-cognitions (C_{ad}) have been shown to be a causal antecedent of A_{ad} (Lutz, MacKenzie & Belch, 1983; Lutz, 1985).

- $C_b \rightarrow A_b$

Cognitive response (Wright, 1973) and multi-attribute attitude (Mitchell & Olson, 1981) literatures have consistently documented the direct causal relationship between brand-attitude (A_b) and brand-related-cognitions (C_b).

- $A_b \rightarrow I_b$

Evidence has shown purchase-intention (I_b) to be determined by A_b (Fishbein model: Ryan & Bonfield, 1975).

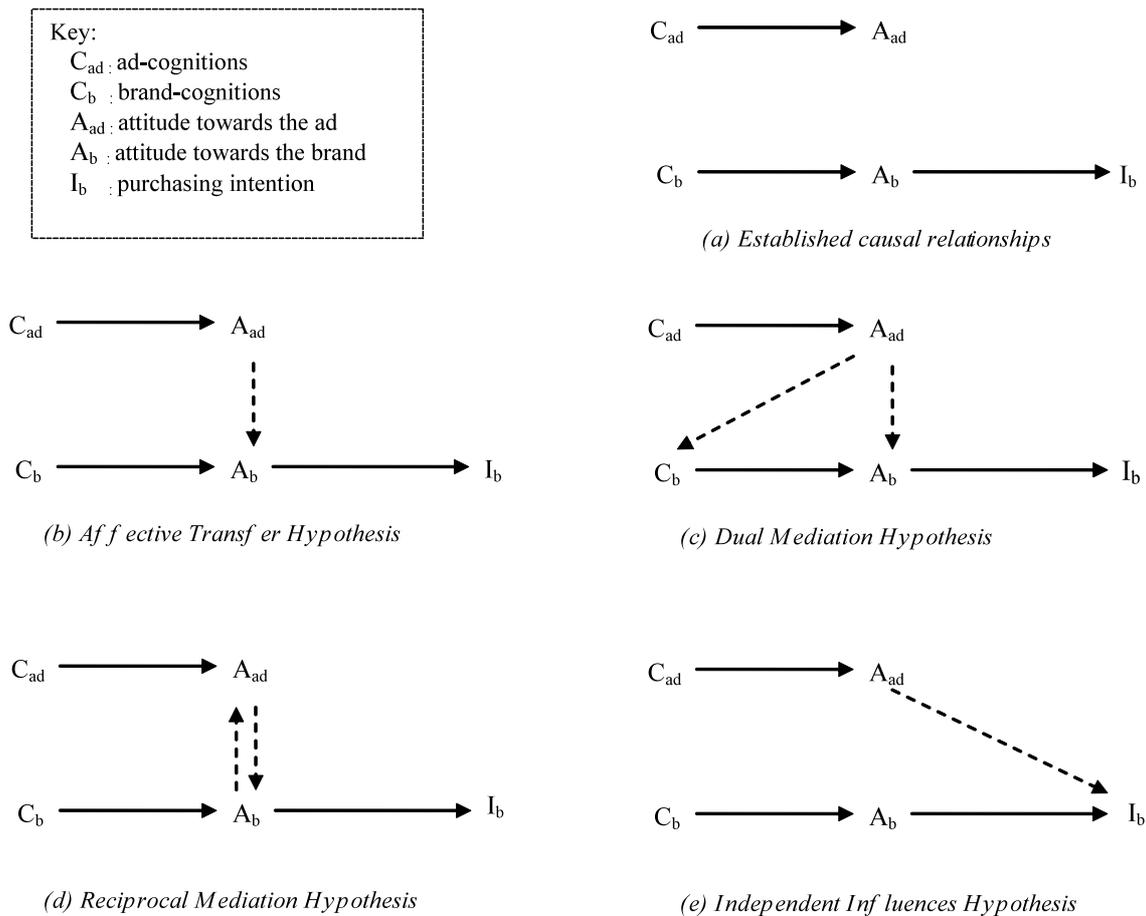


Figure 1: four alternative structural models to describe the mediating role of A_{ad}

Each model uses these established causal-links as a basis, with the main objective being to demonstrate how attitude-towards-the-ad (A_{ad}) influences purchase intention (I_b).

- **Affect Transfer Hypothesis (ATH)** (figure 1(b))

The ATH proposes a one-way, direct flow of causation from A_{ad} to A_b . Empirical support has reported that significant variance in A_b can be explained by A_{ad} (Mitchell & Olson, 1981); A_{ad} and A_b are linked by a positive linear-relationship (Moore & Hutchinson, 1983, 1985); and A_{ad} dominates the prediction of A_b , in terms of cognitive response measures (Park & Young, 1984), although this effect was only significant in low viewer-involvement conditions. Persuasion literature (e.g. Petty & Caccioppo's, 1981, elaboration likelihood model (ELM)) considers the $A_{ad} \rightarrow A_b$ link to represent the peripheral route to persuasion. This peripheral processing occurs when the viewer responds more to incidental factors (e.g. something that is liked) rather than the actual content of the persuasive message. Under low viewer-involvement conditions, the central-processing ($C_b \rightarrow A_b$) route is dominated by peripheral processing (Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Park

& Young, 1984). For example, the use of a cute baby in an advert generates positive affect in the viewer, which is peripherally transferred to the advertised brand, without effortful information processing, from the central route.

- **Dual Mediation Hypothesis (DMH)** (figure 1(c))

The DMH posits an indirect causal flow from A_{ad} , through C_b to A_b , as well as the $A_{ad} \rightarrow A_b$ link proposed by the ATH. Affective reactions towards an ad (i.e. advertising likeability) have an impact on the consumer's inclination to accept the information presented by the ad on behalf of the brand (Lutz & Swasy, 1977). The $A_{ad} \rightarrow C_b$ link places advertising likeability as a persuasion cue (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), that can enhance or limit acceptance of the claims made by the advert. In terms of Petty & Caccioppo's (1981) ELM, which did not consider that a peripheral persuasion cue (e.g. A_{ad}) could influence the central processing route to persuasion through the encouragement of message acceptance; the DMH can be seen to assert that peripheral and central processing routes are entwined, as opposed to being substitutes for each other.

- **Reciprocal Mediation Hypothesis (RMH)** (figure 1(d))

This theory attempts to show that the causal flow between A_{ad} and A_b is balanced, and that consumers sustain balanced cognitive relationships (Heider, 1946). Heider postulates a positive association between the advert and the brand, thus the consumer will try to maintain balanced configuration either by liking both the advert and the brand or by disliking them both. The RMH holds that the relationship between A_{ad} and A_b is reciprocal, with the causation between the two flowing in both directions. The potency of causation is dependent on the situation (Burke & Edell, 1984). E.g. with a mature brand, it would be expected that A_b would causally dominate A_{ad} , as brand attitude will have a significant impact on viewer's reaction to advertising of the established brand. Whereas, the causal flow would be stronger from A_{ad} to A_b for a new brand/product, as the advert may be the first exposure the viewer has of the brand.

- **Independent Influences Hypothesis (IIH)** (figure 1(e))

Contrary to the other three hypotheses, no causal relationship between A_{ad} and A_b is assumed in the IIH. This theory, instead, maintains that A_{ad} and A_b determine purchase intention independently. Howard (1977) distinguishes between 'brand concept' and 'impersonal attitude'. Brand concept relates to consumers' perceptions of the brand itself, and is seen as relatively stable, especially in terms of routine response behaviour; this therefore corresponds with A_b . Impersonal attitude, on the other hand is to do with feelings towards purchase conditions. The feelings are attitudes towards aspects of the purchase situation, which are not enduring properties of the brand itself. This encompasses factors, such as price, availability, and also ad-likeability (A_{ad}), which all potentially contribute to purchase intentions. The IIH therefore

postulates that both attitudinal constructs (A_b , A_{ad}) exert causal influence on purchase intentions (I_b) independently of one another; without any form of causal link between A_{ad} and A_b . The direct $A_{ad} \rightarrow I_b$ link is also supported; where consumers purchasing decisions have been shown to be influenced entirely by the advertisement, with no apparent evaluation of the actual product or brand (e.g. Gorn, 1982).

All of the above hypotheses are plausible. It is, however, extremely difficult to distinguish causal links and to identify which factor accounts for the most variance of I_b . Each model proposes a different way in which A_{ad} has an influence on I_b , be it a direct link between the two, or indirectly mediated by another factor. There is support for all the proposed causal-routes between A_{ad} (likeability) and I_b ; but it is not yet known which route has the biggest impact.

Empirical Evidence

More recently, controlled trials have been implemented with the purpose of providing empirical evidence for the way in which likeable advertising influences purchasing-intentions.

▪ ***Likeability as a 'gatekeeper' for further cognitive processing***

If an advert is liked, the viewer may be more willing to pay attention to it (Walker & Dubitsky, 1994) and is less likely to avoid the advert the next time it is shown (Biel, 1990); therefore it will get more exposure, because of the positive first impression. This awarded attention creates an opportunity to facilitate consumer involvement (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989), increasing the ability to motivate and affect behaviour (Brown, 1991). Liked adverts are therefore given more mental processing and likeability may even moderate whether the information in an advert is processed at all (Biel, 1990; Franzen, 1994). Furthermore, the increased repetition of viewing the ad, due to liking, enhances the salience of the advert in memory (Ehrenberg, 1974). This approach does not assume anything about attitude-behaviour links. It gives the viewer a more passive role; which reflects the notion that viewers are limited when processing adverts (Krugman, 1965) and do not require great effort to process the content (Ehrenberg, 1974). This theory is also consistent with the view that consumers have a separate affective-response-system (Zajonc, 1980; Zajonc & Markus, 1982), allowing them to have feelings without thinking.

▪ ***Likeability as a brand attribute, enhances credibility***

Likeability may be considered directly as a brand-attribute (Biel, 1990), subsequently affecting sales through contribution to the reputation of the promoted product. Associations with the brand may develop, thereby promoting consumer loyalty (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). This is particularly the case for product categories where the functional properties are perceived to be similar

across brands (Smit, Meurs & Neijens, 2006); likeability acts as a unique selling point. However, the causal direction of the relationship between the advert and the brand is debatable, often treated like a 'chicken and egg relationship' (DuPlessis & Foster, 2000), concurring with the RMH hypothesis (Heider, 1946).

▪ ***Likeability affects cognitive processing***

Liking an advert may influence cognitive processing of the advertising message (Aaker & Myers, 1987, Chung & Zhao, 2003). It is proposed that a liked ad may increase positive arousal, which in turn improves recall of the information within the advert and creates positive judgements of the information (Smit et al., 2006). The positive affect felt from the liked advert can be utilised by viewers when encoding, storing and retrieving the information (Youn, Sun, Wells & Zhao, 2001). The positive feelings have an impact on memory when encoding the advertising message, influencing the organisation of the information in memory and highlighting characteristics of the message that will later be retrievable (Zajonc, 1980; Lingle & Ostrom, 1981). The chance of the product/brand being recalled is enhanced (Kennedy, 1998), increasing the likelihood of purchase.

▪ ***Emotional Rub-off***

Liking an advert might directly translate to liking the product or brand (Biel, 1990). Simple positive emotions shown in an advert can evoke similar emotions in the viewer. It has been suggested that an induced positive emotion elicits a positive attitude towards the advert (e.g. DeCock & DePelsmacker, 2000) and possibly even a positive response to the message (Walker & Dubitsky, 1994). Moreover, ad-likeability may even transfer to the likeability of the brand, as proposed by the ATH hypothesis; resulting in an increased purchase intention (Smit et al., 2006). This theory follows a traditional cognitive approach, and assumes rationality of the consumer.

It can be seen that even the theories, based on empirical evidence, which often appeals to the structural attitude models, fail to provide a definitive explanation into exactly how ad-liking links with consumer intentions and behaviour. All the accounts are justified, which suggests that there is a web of psychological paths that link likeability to consumer behaviour. Research has yet to show which path is the most efficacious and how each links with one another, as a way of informing advertisers about what aspects of likeability to focus on.

OTHER FACTORS WHICH MEDIATE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIKEABILITY AND PURCHASE INTENTION

Advertising likeability may be a factor that has a considerable influence on consumer purchasing-intentions and thus the overall success of the advert. However, it must be acknowledged that much of the evidence which helps to postulate the power of ad-liking cannot be generalised to every situation. Many other factors and conditions mediate the relationship between advertising likeability and sales, and therefore must be considered when assessing the potential success of an advert.

Product Category

Wells (1980) hypothesised that the type of product is a critical factor in the 'liking equation'. Rossiter & Percy (1987) took this theory further by proposing that the importance of ad-liking depends on the position the product is placed within a matrix of consumer motives/needs for purchase and financial and psychosocial risks. Biel & Bridgewater (1990) revealed that "the relationship between likeability and persuasion is strongest in low-involvement categories such as fast-moving consumer goods, where the emotional component to persuasion is proportionately more important than the deliberate consideration of product attributes" (p43). More recent evidence (Youn, Sun, Wells & Zhao, 2001) showed a strong positive relationship between liking and memory for approach-products, but not for avoidance- or utilitarian-products. Advertisements for 'approach'-products (products that are enjoyed, e.g. clothes, food) tend to utilise emotional-appeal, evoking positive affective reactions (Geuns & DePelsmacker, 1998); it is therefore more probable that adverts for approach-products will be liked, thought about, rehearsed and repeated (Isen, 1993), thus increasing the chance of being remembering. Conversely, adverts for 'avoidance'- (products that would not be bought unless they helped to alleviate an unpleasantness, e.g. medicine, insurance) and 'utilitarian'- (products that are neither enjoyed nor used obligingly, e.g. paperclips) products tend to use a more rational message-oriented approach, emphasising performance or product information (Youn, 1998); this could produce avoidance whilst encoding the information, detracting from ad-liking.

Culture

Differences in cultural values can have an influence on the attitude a consumer has towards an advert, and whether or not it will be liked (Fam, 2006a). For example, promotion of condoms is likely to be more offensive to people of Islamic faith as opposed to an atheist (Fam, 2005). The belief-structure, determined by culture or religion, will therefore have a strong impact on the content

that is deemed appropriate to be in an advertisement. It should be recognised that the majority of the literature on advertising likeability is performed in the UK, USA, South Africa and other western nations, consequently, much of the findings outlined above will not apply to non-western cultures. For example Fam (2006b), through a five country study identified seven attributes of ad-liking. Three of the attributes were similar to the dimensions reported by Biel & Bridgewater (1990). However, four were identified as 'uniquely Asian'. Even differences between two similar Asian cultures (Hong-Kong and Thailand) have been noted, in terms of what ad-characteristics are liked (Fam, 2006a). Culture therefore must be taken into consideration when evaluating the effectiveness of an ad. It is clearly important to know what is liked before you can determine the effect likeability on purchase intentions.

Spokesperson

The actual spokesperson fronting the television or radio commercial can also be an intervening variable in the ad-liking → purchase intention relationship. Callcott & Phillips (1996) identified four dimensions of a spokes-character that likeability can depend on: personality, physical characteristics, humour and incongruity. The wrong variations of these characteristics can of course lead to disliking. Celebrity endorsers can very often help to evoke likeability in the consumer, when selected on the appropriate criteria; however research (Erdogen, Baker & Tagg, 2001) has shown that these criteria are also dependent on product category.

CONCLUSIONS

“Used in conjunction with other appropriate measures, liking measures add substantial value to the assessment and optimization of advertising effectiveness”

- Walker & Dubitsky (1994), p16

A variety of evidence has been presented that accentuates a number of different functions of advertising likeability in the advertising process. It is clear that liking an advert has a positive influence on the advert's effectiveness, in terms of increased brand liking and purchase intention. However, the nature of the ad-liking (or A_{ad}) → purchase intention relationship is still debated. Based on the evidence, nevertheless, it seems justified to maintain that a relationship between the two does exist. Discovering the details of this relationship will be invaluable to advertising practitioners, by allowing maximisation of the effects of likeability. This should consequently motivate future research.

It is crucial to reiterate the need to explicitly define likeability. It is clear from the research that the concept is a multifaceted construct, and is based on several factors. In addition, the influences of these factors, which evoke liking, are all dependent on other external variables, such as culture. A more consistent understanding of the potency of each factor is necessary, along with an understanding of how they combine with one another and fit into the complex matrix that underlies likeability. Without a comprehensive definition of likeability, it is impossible to robustly investigate how it links with consumer behaviour, which will limit any conclusions that can be drawn from research.

In conclusion, it seems unquestionable that advertising likeability has a considerable persuasive impact on consumer behaviour, and in some cases can be the most accurate predictor of advertising effectiveness and sales. However, it should not be assumed that advertising likeability independently provides the most effective indication of advertising success, without assessing the specific situation in context. It would be inaccurate to make conclusions solely based upon likeability, without considering other measures of advertising effectiveness (DuPlessis, 2005) and factors which mediate the relationship between advertising likeability and consumer purchasing-intentions.

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