

Ads Affect Actions

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Ben Stansell
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Technical Project Team Members
Cameron Woodward

On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received
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Signature Ben Stansell Date 5/9/21
Ben Stansell

Approved Richard D. Jacques Date 08 May 2021
Richard D. Jacques, Ph.D. Department of Engineering and Society

Introduction

Advertisements are everywhere. They are on the TV shows we watch, on the sides of web pages, on the radio. Ads can be craftier than that: they are also in the TV shows that we watch (product placement) and many web pages are sponsored by companies. The number of ads that people see daily is staggering. Most consumers recognize the widespread affliction of ads and understand why they exist. However, there are many consequences of ads that are not often thought about that should be considered and regulated. Advertisements as a whole have been around for generations, although it has taken many different forms over the years. There have always been some concerning elements in advertising, for example the United States Federal Trade Commission issued a statement regarding the dangers of TV ads for children and how to educate children to help mitigate this in 1996. In 2017, adults in the US watched an average of 41 hours of television every week (Barwise, 2020). There are about eight minutes of ad time per half hour of TV, so that gives the average adult about five and a half hours of television ads per week. This does not even begin to tell the story of how much ads interrupt everyday lives. Social Media, billboards, internet ads on search results, internet ads on web pages are a few more places where paraphernalia are dangled under people's noses for them to buy. It is inescapable in modern society. The way that ads are specifically targeted to individuals has also evolved to show the most enticing merchandise for each and every person. With all of these ads thrown at us hourly, they are not only a nuisance and time waster, but they can also change our attitudes and behaviors over time. It is important that we understand how advertisements can affect our minds, our elections, and the lives of our children so that we can make informed decisions about how we consume advertisements and how they should be regulated by the government.

Advertisements Work

A common response to advertising is to think, “They don’t work on me.” It is easy and appealing for individuals to believe that this is the case. One would like to think that if you’re smart enough and always make logical decisions, advertisements won’t make you bat an eye. But the billions of dollars that US companies spend (over \$240 billion in 2019) bets against this proposed imperviousness to persuasion. All of this investment from companies comes from studying the results for years. The ads may not make viewers jump out of their chair to buy the product (although it could happen on rare occasion), but a good ad will work its way into the viewer’s idea of the company. A jingle or catchphrase can keep a product in a viewer’s mind for years or decades, which can subtly influence purchase decisions down the line with a positive association with the product. Many advertisements are harmless or even informative and helpful, but they can also lead us to choices that are detrimental. For example, after doing thorough analysis of smoking ads on TV and the trends in smoking, Thomas concludes that “These analyses provide consistent evidence that television did affect smoking behavior, particularly for 16- to 21-year-olds, an age group that is already at high risk of smoking initiation.” (Thomas, 2019). Cigarette ads on television have since been banned, but there are still some forms of advertisement that are legal for tobacco companies, not to mention cigarette’s ever-prominent location in gas stations (FDA 2021). In this case the advertisements significantly increased the number of active customers for cigarette companies, but many people who otherwise would have never had cigarettes tried them and bore the cost. With increased regulation on tobacco product advertisement, people are not being influenced in this way to buy tobacco products. Although most ads and products don’t have as many negative consequences as tobacco, people can still be

swayed to buy something against their better judgement. Despite the fact that TV ads have success, there are other methods of advertising that do even better. With the modern internet, ads are targeted in multiple ways, including the use of influencers to access niche markets. Social media influencers often have an audience for a particular hobby, and this can help advertisers efficiently target consumers who are already more inclined to buy their product. Even within social media influencer marketing, advertisers can get even more devious. There are a couple theoretical frameworks that are relevant to influencer advertisement: technological determinism and social learning theory. The central idea of technological determinism is that society is shaped solely by communication technology and technology in general. In this case, it applies that the platform of social media is what is shaping the consumers' decisions. Social learning theory posits that humans observe others to gain knowledge of how to better survive. From an advertising perspective, this was most relevant in the past with word of mouth from friends and family. But social media influencers can now be seen as friends to their fanbases because of the seemingly personal (although one way) relationship. In a study done by the Universidad del Zulia, it was found that "influencer marketing brought in more total sales than sponsored posts." (JARRAR, 2020). This conclusion was statistically significant and the null hypothesis was rejected. This is shown in the below graphs where ads were placed in the respective manners and the sales outcomes and total calls were tracked. While it can be clearly seen that influencer advertising caused more sales, it is also interesting to note the pattern of sales. After the influencer marketing, there was an immediate uptick in sales the next day, but it tapered off after that; whereas in the sponsored advertisement sales were constant. It is also interesting that the

sales peak for influencers was day 1, while the calls peak was day 2.

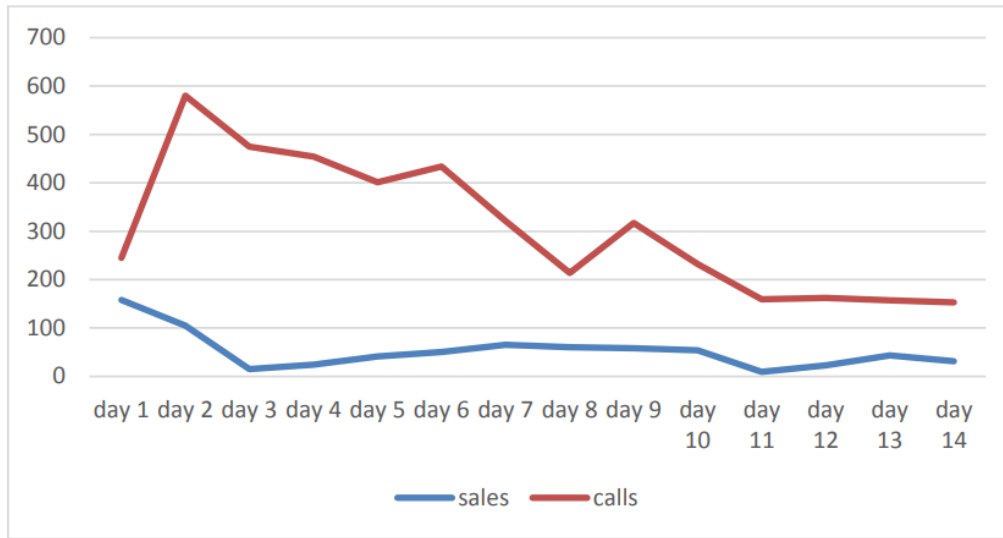


Figure 3. Sales vs. calls for influencer marketing

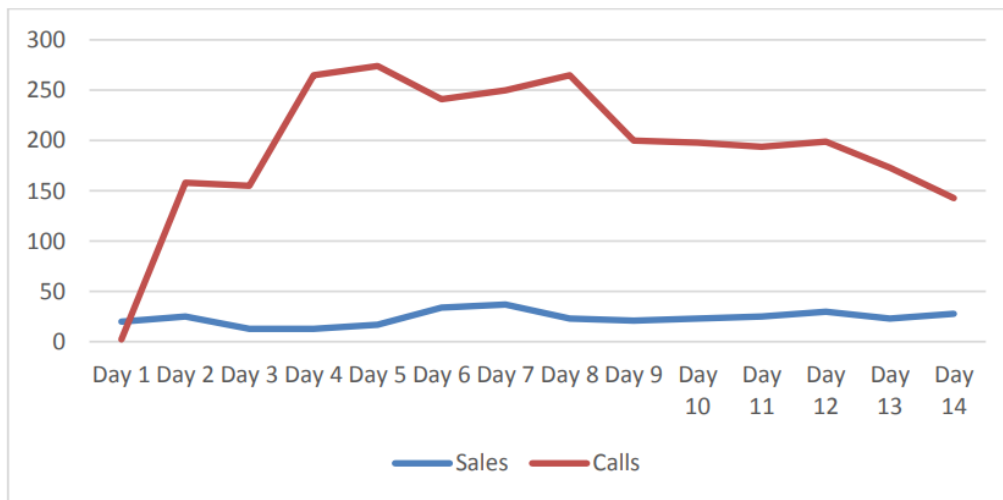


Figure 4. Sales vs. Calls for sponsored advertisements

A similar study was done on the effects of Athlete Brand Image (ABI) on behavioral intentions of generation Z. Extensive research was done on which aspects of an athlete made them a better target for a company’s sponsorship and they found that “when the image of an athlete brand and an endorsed product matched, members of Generation Z in Korea were attracted to the advertisement, which, in turn, had a positive effect on their purchase intention and WOM [word of mouth] communication” (Shin, 2021). The study found that if the image of the brand and the athlete didn’t match each other, that participants had trouble even remembering what the

advertisements were for, so the congruency of the athlete's brand image and the endorsed product was a key factor in determining the success of the marketing. It should be noted that in all of these studies, it is a given that the adverts bias consumer decisions towards the product in question. For the advertisers it is just a question of how to most effectively adjust the consumers desires to purchase their products. If consumers think themselves invulnerable to these advertisements, it is yet another advantage to the companies advertising. This common misconception among consumers is partly caused by how they think ads are intended to work. Consumers should be aware that the ads are there to build positive feelings towards a product or company, so that these feelings will subtly influence purchase decisions down the line.

Political Ads

Ads are used for a wide variety of merchandise, and they are also heavily used in other fields, such as political campaigns. Political campaigns use many of the same techniques as merchandise ads, but to shape viewers' opinions of candidates instead of soda. Political ads are an area that need special attention from regulators because of the sweeping implications that they can have. In recent years with the heightened tensions in the United States, political ads have increased, especially those targeting young people and students. It is once again easy to think that political ads in particular have no effect on voting outcomes because everyone already believes what they believe and no ad can change that. Also because, as seen in a study by Atkinson (2020), students marked campaign ads with "simultaneous skepticism regarding advertising, as well as trepidation or dread of campaigns for elected office." There is some truth to this, as those who are devoted to a particular candidate will not be swayed by any number of ads from an opponent, but the effects of ads can still be felt on elections. In addition, with the supreme court's ruling on Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission, there is more

money than ever put in to political campaigns (this allowed corporations to use unlimited general treasury funds to make expenditures expressly for or against a candidate). While campaigns are required to disclose the contributors, there are some loopholes that corporations can exploit such as putting ads on YouTube. Another major contributor, specifically in the 2016 US Presidential election, was a Kremlin-linked Russian company called the Internet Research Agency (Beyersdorf, 2020). During the 2016 election process, Facebook sold over \$100,000 worth of ads to the Internet Agency and Google sold more than \$4,700 to Kremlin linked accounts. In a response to this Amy Klobuchar, Mark Warner, and John McCain introduced the Honest Ads Act requiring companies to disclose the identity of those buying ads online. However, this Act has not been passed for various political reasons. So, tech companies will have to continue to hold themselves accountable (or not). Unfortunately, this is largely the story for internet ads and the internet in general. Silicon Valley has been lobbying to keep as much regulation as they can away from the internet, and they have the money to accomplish this.

Children and Ads

Much of the way that ads affect market participants are easily understood by those who participate in the transactions. But Children are “unskilled and unwitting participants in the marketplace” and should not be subject to ads that can influence and corrupt their outlook (Browne, 2018). This is somewhat regulated, as ads involving tobacco and alcohol products cannot be targeted at children. Some claim that advertising to children at all is inherently unfair because they lack the mental capacity and life experience needed to comprehend what the intentions of the media they consume are (Kunkel, 2004). Children have not developed all of the critical thinking and understanding of market systems that adults have, and as such they are more susceptible to adverts. One particular area of concern for children is how ads influence their food

choices and lead to obesity. When the Institute of Medicine (IOM, 2006) studied the correlation between advertisements and obesity found that exposure to advertising influences key dietary precursors among children (ages 2-11), including their food-related beliefs, preferences, purchase requests, and short-term choices. “There was also a correlation between advertising exposure and children’s adiposity (body fatness), though a causal relationship has not yet been established” (Moore, 2007). While the lack of causal relationship does weaken the argument somewhat, the correlation between all the factors to cause obesity and obesity itself at least should cause some concern among parents. Both of these studies were conducted primarily with the idea of TV advertisement in mind, but young children are also increasingly present on the internet. As compared with traditional TV ads, the internet forces children to be active in viewing the content various different ways. For one, the child must be actively paying attention to the screen to even be served an ad, whereas the TV advert could just be background as they talk with their friends or siblings during a commercial break. Internet ads can go a step further with children, even creating “Advergames” (Moore, 2007). This has children move through a simple computer game, but the game’s sole intention is to promote a specific brand. It is estimated that visitors of all ages spend an average of 25 minutes on a gaming site (Bertrim, 2005). With such heavy involvement, it is easy to see why these ads are so convincing to children. There is even an organization called the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood who are vocal condemning many practices of ads for children. The co-founder of this group says that advertising and marketing are factors in childhood obesity, eating disorders, precociousness, irresponsible sexuality, youth violence, underaged drinking, and tobacco use (Moore, 2008). This is quite an impressive list of claims, and much more research is required to begin to be able to back this up, but the idea cannot be dismissed out of hand. As children increasingly use the

internet, give their data to companies, and get targeted ads, the influence of ads on them can grow. To help children from making unwise decisions that have consequences for them later in their lives (such as establishing poor eating habits), there needs to be more regulation of advertisements to children. Children should not be able to give their consent for their data to be used by corporations to target them because at certain ages, they have no chance of knowing what they are signing themselves up for and there seems to be no alternative.

Conclusion

Modern life involves swimming in an ocean of ads, and it is important to remember that anyone can drown. Time after time it has been shown that ads change public opinion and purchase decisions, so it is important to keep that bias in mind when making decisions. Important elections dominate the ad landscape when it is their time, and more regulation is needed so that the public can understand the angle that an ad is coming from and what motives the advertiser might have or what affiliations they might have. Some of this regulation is in place, and it is a part of the duty of American citizens to check the source and validity of ads that they see and to help those around them do the same. It is important as a viewer to always understand where an ad is coming from and how it will affect you in the future. Children have not developed as much as adults and cannot do this on their own. More regulation is needed to help prevent negative outcomes for children as a result of advertisement. In the meantime, Adults must help children understand what is going on with the advertisements that they see and draw attention to the fact that they are being manipulated.

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