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ABSTRACT

Advertising is one aspect of the American culture which is omnipresent in the public's daily life. Despite its ubiquity, there is a dearth of literature on the irritation-effectiveness issue. One of Bauer and Greyser's (1968) major findings of an inquiry into what the American public thinks about advertising and advertisements is that over 50 percent of categorized soap and detergent ads were considered annoying or offensive. In a follow-up study on Bauer and Greyser's work (1968), Bartos and Dunn (1967) found an increase in the percentage of respondents (from 43% to 59%) who reported that most advertising insulted the intelligence of the average consumer by being annoying or offensive.

The incidence of irritation in advertising has been fairly well established; also, concomittant caveats have been registered to the effect that without empirical evidence to the contrary, irritation may erode brand image and credibility (Bartos 1981).

Although irritation in advertising has been a topic of controversy for a long time, it has not been subjected to empirical scrutiny. An exploratory survey study was undertaken to investigate the possible effects of perceived irritation in advertising on consumers' brand awareness, ad recall, brand image, purchase intentions of the advertised product, and importance of advertising.

A sample of 111 adult residents of Long Beach, California, were interviewed. Respondents were first shown three nationally televised commercials about three brands of laundry detergents, Tide, Cheer, and Wisk. Only Wisk ad, with its slogan, "Ring around the collar" appeared to contain some elements of irritation. The task of categorizing the ads as being irritating and non-irritating was left to the respondents. Irritation was defined as the subjective impression of a consumer that an advertisement is annoying, insulting to the intelligence, intrusive, not informative, or simply not enjoyable. Thus, the degree of irritation was derived from the number of negative statements made in describing a particular ad on a 5-point Likert-type scale.

The dependent variables were cross-tabulated and the data were analyzed through Chi-square, Kendall's Tau, and Somer's D. A significance level of .05 was adopted in all cases.

Irritation on Brand Awareness. Results of Chi-square, Somer's D and Kendall's Tau C values indicated no significant relationships for all the determinants of irritation and the awareness of the three experimental brands. The data suggest that irritating ads may not have any greater or less effect than perceived non-irritating ads on brand awareness. This may mean that both irritating and non-irritating ads are equally capable to establish brand awareness.

Irritation on Ad Recall. Every cross-tabulation showed that there is a correlation between perceived irritation and ad recall. Overall, the data point to the direction that advertisements which had any kind of impression on the consumer, tended to increase the recall of the particular advertisement. In some cases, advertisements which were perceived as irritating were recalled even more frequently than non-irritating ads.

Irritation and Purchase Intention. A strong correlation between the describing statement, informative, and purchase probability was obtained for Tide and Wisk. Positive results indicate that the relationship is directly proportional. The stronger the positive attitude toward the ad is, the more likely consumers are to buy the brand. The more consumers disagree with the statement, Tide's or Wisk's advertisements are informative, the less consumers are prone to buy Tide or Wisk. The data show that annoying ads have negative influence on purchase intentions. This preliminary finding is consistent with one of Gelb and Pickett's (1983) conclusion that there is a strong relationship between primary use of a brand and liking a brand's advertising.

Irritation and Brand Image. Cross-tabulations indicated a strong relationship between image and perceived irritation. The degree of agreement to the statements, the ad is informative or not insulting to my intelligence, correlates with the overall rating of the brand. The data indicate a very strong association between image and perceived irritation. In the sense that, the less irritating a person feels an ad is, the more positively he or she tends to look upon the advertised brand.

Irritation and Importance of Advertising. Responses to the statements, Tide's ad is informative, and advertising is important were strongly correlated. Results suggest that the more informative the respondent stated the Tide advertisement to be, the more important he or she believed in the importance of advertising. This is consistent with Aaker and Norris' (1982) conclusion that informative commercials are perceived to be convincing, effective, and interesting. The statement Tide's ad is not annoying, showed the same tendency. The results seem to support the contention that non-irritating ads increase the believability and importance of advertising in general. These findings lend support to Bartos and Dunn's (1976) hypothesis that irritating ads harm the overall effectiveness of advertising.

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