



# Positive Effects of Disruptive Advertising on Consumer Preferences

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## Abstract

Advertisers want to get consumers to love the advertised products, but they often try to do this by annoying them with unwelcome and disruptive advertising. This creates a possible contradiction between the negative feelings elicited by the advertising and the positive feelings the consumers are supposed to develop towards the advertised products. One may assume that the negative feelings towards annoying advertising are transferred to the advertised brands. This assumption was tested in a series of five experiments. Participants were disrupted by annoying pop-up ads while playing a popular computer game. In a two-alternative forced choice (2AFC) test, participants were required to choose between advertised and new brands. The advertised brands were preferred over the new brands, even though the ads were perceived as annoying. The positive effects of disruptive advertising can be attributed to the enhanced fluency of advertised brands. These findings demonstrate that disruptive advertising can be effective in increasing brand preferences, which may help to explain the widespread use of this type of advertising in practice. However, before recommending the use of disruptive advertising, it should be taken into consideration that it may also have undesirable side effects such as increasing advertising avoidance.

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## Introduction

Advertisers want to get consumers to love products, but they often try to do this by annoying them with unwelcome and disruptive advertising. This creates a possible contradiction between the negative feelings elicited by the advertising and the positive feelings the consumers are supposed to develop towards the advertised products. To illustrate, we asked 24 students in a course on Consumer Psychology to rate the degree to which they perceived the ads they encounter every day as annoying. Nearly half of the students (45%) reported that they found ads “almost always” annoying, and half of the students (50%) reported that they found ads “sometimes” annoying. Upon inquiry, the one person who stated that she was “almost never” annoyed by ads admitted that she had installed an ad blocker on her computer,

and that she did not watch television at all, which suggests that she was probably just very good at avoiding ads altogether. This is of course only anecdotal evidence, but the negative view of advertising is also reflected in large-scale surveys on this issue (Cho and Cheon 2004; Edwards, Li, and Lee 2002).

Ads can be annoying in a number of ways—they can have shocking and offensive content or can be presented in an annoying way. In the present study, we are interested in disruptive advertising (e.g., pop-up ads) that distract from important or pleasant activities, or may even disrupt these activities entirely. Perceived interference with task-related goals was found to be the most important factor in explaining negative attitudes towards Internet ads (Cho and Cheon 2004). Pop-up ads that directly interfere with ongoing tasks are known to be perceived as particularly annoying (Edwards, Li, and Lee 2002). However, while it is clear that intrusive pop-up ads are perceived as annoying, it is unclear whether this annoyance is transferred to the advertised brands. If so, this would defeat the purpose of advertising because it would hurt the advertised

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brands. However, the fact that disruptive advertising is so widely used in practice may suggest that the assumption that annoyance is transferred to the advertised brands is false, and that, quite to the contrary, disruptive advertising has positive effects on consumer preferences.

From a psychological perspective, the effects of disruptive advertising on consumer preferences are unclear because two broad classes of theories lead to conflicting predictions. According to the first class, annoying advertising leads to negative effects on consumer preferences. When the association between a brand and annoying advertising is obvious to consumers (e.g., because it can still be retrieved from memory), they may show reactance (Edwards, Li, and Lee 2002) by deliberately choosing to avoid the brand. Even when the association with the negative experience can no longer be explicitly retrieved, brand preferences may be negatively affected. For instance, pop-up ads that disrupt pleasant activities such as playing a computer game or browsing the internet are evaluated very negatively by consumers (Edwards, Li, and Lee 2002). This negative evaluation may transfer to the brand via evaluative conditioning (De Houwer, Thomas, and Baeyens 2001; Hofmann et al. 2010), either due to an associative transfer of the negative affect to the brand (consumers may attribute their annoyance to the brand), or due to propositional reasoning (consumers may ascribe less desirable properties to brands associated with annoying advertising) (MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch 1986; see also McCracken 1986). In sum, these theories imply that annoying advertising should lead to reduced preferences for the advertised products.

According to the second class of theories, in contrast, the involuntary processing of the ads should lead to an increase in brand preferences. It is well known that people prefer previously experienced over novel stimuli. One reason for this may be that previously experienced stimuli are processed more fluently than novel ones, which is experienced as affectively positive (Lee 2001; Winkielman et al. 2003). If advertised brand names are processed more fluently than novel brand names, the experience of fluency could lead to increased preferences for the advertised brands (Fang, Singh, and Ahluwalia 2007; Janiszewski 1993).

However, theoretical models differ in their prediction about how these effects should be modulated by explicit knowledge that the stimuli have been experienced before. The popular misattribution model (Bornstein and D'Agostino 1994) predicts that the effects of repeated exposure crucially depend on how the feelings of fluency are attributed. When fluency can be correctly attributed to prior exposure, it is discounted as a cue for preference. A clear implication of this model is that positive advertising effects should only be found *when fluency cannot be easily attributed to prior exposure* (Bornstein and D'Agostino 1994). In contrast, the primacy-of-affect model (Kunst-Wilson and Zajonc 1980; Winkielman, Zajonc, and Schwarz 1997; Zajonc 1980) implies that preference judgments are generated quickly and automatically, without deliberate reflection. Therefore, fluency leads to an immediate and genuine positive affective response (Fang, Singh, and Ahluwalia 2007; Winkielman et al. 2003) that is independent of higher-order cognitive operations such as attributional inferences (Kunst-Wilson and Zajonc 1980;

Winkielman, Zajonc, and Schwarz 1997; Zajonc 1980). This view implies that positive advertising effects should *always* be found, regardless of whether or not the stimuli are recognized as having been experienced before (Lee 2001; Stafford and Grimes 2012) because fluency leads to an immediate positive affective response that is not further scrutinized.

Knowing how annoying advertising affects brand preferences is of obvious relevance for marketing decisions. Negative effects of disruptive advertising have already been well documented. As outlined above, people show negative affective responses to disruptive advertising, which may lead to ad avoidance (Cho and Cheon 2004; Edwards, Li, and Lee 2002). However, given these well-documented negative effects on the consumers' evaluation of the ads, it seems surprising that disruptive advertising is so ubiquitous in practice. This might indicate that disruptive advertising may have positive effects on consumer preferences despite being experienced as annoying.

The present experiments were designed to test this hypothesis. As yet, there are only a few direct tests of whether people avoid or prefer products associated with annoying advertising. In most previous studies, the ads were irrelevant to the participants' tasks, but not designed to be particularly annoying (e.g., Duff and Faber 2011; Fang, Singh, and Ahluwalia 2007; Yoo 2008). A notable exception is the study of Acquisti and Spiekermann (2011). In this study, participants were required to play a Tetris-like computer game. During breaks in the game, participants were repeatedly disrupted by ads for a particular brand. Regardless of whether or not the participants could close the ads by clicking on them, the interruptive ads decreased the participants' willingness to pay for a mug with the logo of this brand relative to a mug with another logo, suggesting that the preference for the logo was negatively affected by the interruptive ads. However, it seems possible to speculate that the ads for the same brand may have caused the participants to see the branded mug as a promotional giveaway, which may have decreased their willingness to pay for it. Therefore, it is important to determine the effect of disruptive advertising on other consumer behaviors before drawing general conclusions.

## Experiment 1

The present study examines whether, and how, disruptive advertising affects brand preferences. As in the study of Acquisti and Spiekermann (2011), participants played the popular computer game Tetris. Annoying advertising often disrupts pleasant, intrinsically motivating activities such as playing computer games, browsing the internet, or watching TV. We assumed that playing Tetris would be a pleasant activity for the majority of our student sample. To anticipate, this was confirmed by the participants' positive ratings of the game in all experiments reported here. At the same time, the game requires constant attention, which means that pop-up ads are particularly disrupting. Acquisti and Spiekermann presented the ads during breaks between the rounds of the game to spare their participants an "unnecessarily annoying experience" (p. 229). In the present study, in contrast, pop-up ads containing brand logos appeared during the game, and were therefore particularly

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