

# A Segmentation Study of Attitudes About Advertising

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*ABSTRACT: Five factors emerge from a study designed to examine attitudes about advertising. The first factor, labeled the Institutional Backers, supports advertising and denies that it is merely used to manipulate consumers. The Self-Determining Individualists seek information and use advertising in making decisions. The Angry Social Critics condemn advertising as well as business, marketing, and consumers, and react particularly negatively to ads dealing with sexual roles. The Amused Observers, unlike the others, find little of self importance in advertising, considering it a novelty and even incidental to consuming. Although they find little pleasure in advertisements, the Self-Reliant Copers use information from ads, but feel they make up their own minds. Discussion focuses on the motivational aspects of advertising and, methodologically, on the limitations of unidimensional approaches to measurement.*

**A recurrent finding in survey studies of attitudes about advertising is that advertising is not a matter of great concern**

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to most Americans. Such findings must reassure advocates for advertising, who may conclude that since few people really are concerned about advertising, things must be fine. At the same time, such findings must frustrate the critic, who grows angry that people don't care, that people just stand like cattle and let themselves be "channelled into unthinking habits that serve industry." Significantly, it is only the arguments for and against that get heard, and those are the arguments of two small groups, each with vested interests, it would seem. No one else is heard.

Why is that? It certainly cannot be that the great majority of people have "no attitude" about advertising. It is because such studies define *attitude* as a point on a scale ranging from "completely favorable" to "completely unfavorable." With such a beginning, the result is to find that some small percentage of subjects are "completely unfavorable" and some similarly small percentage are "completely favorable." Thus the only persons represented are two tiny minorities -- the apologists and critics of advertising.

The purpose of this study is to give voice to the rest, to discover groups of persons with quite different attitudes about advertising and to examine attitude content for each group. Thus one gets the opportunity to learn issues and priorities important to consumers, not just those that happen to stir the interests of apologists and critics.

### *Methodology*

The process used to discover groups with different attitudes about advertising is, of course, Q method. The study began with focused interviews to help a diverse selection of persons say whatever they would about advertising. Interviews were completed with undergraduates in several majors chosen for the likelihood of producing diverse opinions -- music, education, advertising, business, political science, and others.

Several hundred statements of opinion about advertising emerged, from which 59 were chosen as representative of the diversity. These became the Q sort which subjects then used

to model their attitudes about advertising. The 78 persons who completed Q-sorts included undergraduates from a diversity of majors, several members of the faculty of the Michigan State University Department of Advertising, and a number of adult nonstudents. Respondents sorted the statements into a quasnormal forced distribution on a 13-point scale, from strongly agree (+6) to disagree (-6). The sorts were scored and the data factor analyzed using the principal axes method. The analysis produced evidence for five interpretable factors, designated A, B, C, D and E. Thus 56 subjects emerged in simple structure in five groups.<sup>1</sup> Data for individual Q sorts, weighted by the factor loadings for subjects, were used to construct a single sort for each group, arrayed by z scores from most agree to most disagree.

### *Interpretation*

Interpretation of attitudes depends primarily upon the array of opinion statements for each group. For an array that proves difficult to interpret, the investigator may choose a subject having a high, pure loading on the factor and have that person project on discriminating statements for that factor. That procedure was used in this study.

### *Consensus Opinions*

Consensus opinions are opinions on which all groups agree, and 9 of the 59 statements in this sort emerged as consensual.<sup>2</sup> All groups agreed, for example, that consumers

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<sup>1</sup>Some 56 subjects had significant loadings on one and only one factor. Significant factor loadings are determined by computing the standard error for a zero correlation coefficient:  $\sigma = 1/\sqrt{N}$ , where N is the number of statements. In this case,  $\sigma = 1/\sqrt{59} = 0.13$ . Thus, loadings in excess of  $2\frac{1}{2}(0.13) = 0.33$  are significant,  $p < .01$ .

<sup>2</sup>A consensus opinion is defined as a statement the factor scores for which differ by less than 1 standard error across the five factors. All statements and their factor scores are available from the author.

exercise the most fundamental influence on advertising, primarily through purchase choices, but also through complaints. They also agreed that with advertising, one holds consumers responsible to think for themselves; however, views of the competence and responsibility of consumers differed greatly across groups. Additionally, all groups agreed that ads do indeed have an impact, while disagreeing on the nature of advertising effects and whether effects were positive or negative. Subjects did not find dealing with ads frustrating or confusing, and subjects did not equate ad repetition with advertising effectiveness. Nor did they fear undue advertiser influence on mass media, nor look to government as having primary responsibility for regulating advertising.

#### ***Group A: Institutional Backers***

Six of 7 members of the Advertising Department faculty, 19 of 23 advertising majors, 3 journalism majors, and 2 accounting majors emerged in group A. A retail clerk and 2 students in non-advertising-related majors were also represented in the group. Nineteen were men, and 15 were women.

Subjects in group A took a position clearly in support of the advertising institution. They saw the most important function of advertising as educating consumers, bringing needed information and knowledge about products and services. The group emphasized the value of local advertising that tells consumers where to find products and services and their prices, and emphasized the value of new product advertising.

Institutional Backers saw most consumers as rational, as independent, and as knowing themselves better than advertisers do. With that view of reasonable and sensible consumers, the group did not view advertising as an exploiter. Instead, the group saw most advertisers as honest and as not forced by competition into undesirable advertising practices. The group held that most advertising is neither deceptive nor unduly exaggerated.

For Institutional Backers, the positive view of how consumers use advertisements extended into institutional matters as well. The group rejected the idea that big business uses advertising as a tool to manipulate consumers, as well as the proposition that consumers are exposed to too many advertisements. Not surprisingly, Institutional Backers reject additional government controls.

### **Group B: Self-Determining Individualists**

Six persons emerged in group B, including one member of the advertising department faculty, two advertising majors, one accounting major, a biological science major, and a government auditor. All were men.

The subjectivity of this group is of interest. On the surface it appears to run counter to the strengthening social value for equality of the sexes. Responses to two of the statements might suggest group B as seemingly in favor of showing women as "cuties" and pleased by sexually suggestive advertising. A "sexist" or "male chauvinist" label for such an attitude comes quickly to mind.

Such tempting labels, however, would be inappropriate. In the study of subjectivity, it is axiomatic that each subject is the authority about his or her own subjectivity, and that includes not just reporting or *describing* the subjectivity at issue, but in *interpreting* it.<sup>3</sup> This axiom enters into a strategy for interpreting data in the following way. First, care must be exercised in avoiding a negative interpretation, one that brands subjects as "stupid" or "snobbish" or "immoral" or "sexist," because they usually do not regard themselves in that way. Persons whom *others*, including the researcher, may regard as snobbish may think of their own positions as "up-

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<sup>3</sup> Kerlinger (1973) notes that one of the advantages of Q sorting is that most subjects enjoy it, perhaps because the task is "challenging and realistic" (p. 595). It seems of central importance that attitude instruments enable subjects to describe their own subjectivity about the topic at issue, that data analysis preserve the description, and that the interpretation also preserve the subjectivity in its "natural state."

holding tradition" or "appreciating finer things" or the like. Thus the person interpreting subjective data should act as the subject's agent, and should not attempt to judge or describe the subjective position from the investigator's viewpoint, but from the subject's. For the duration of interpretation, the observer should consider the other's position as legitimate and fully justified, which may, for the duration of the task, require an ardent liberal to consider and even defend a right wing position.

If the researcher is not able to develop an interpretation that appears positive or at least defensible, it is likely that the subjective position at issue has not been understood, and that the researcher is unable to discharge his or her scientific duty as a naturalist in describing the phenomenon under study. In such cases, the researcher can seek out subjects with high loadings on the factor and invite them to project on discriminating statements. Under such conditions, the researcher may then discover an "entrenched anarchist" as, in the eyes of the subject, a "frustrated idealist."

Such a strategy aided the interpretation of group B, labeled *Self-Determining Individualists*. While two of the statements suggest the label "male chauvinist," one guesses, correctly, that the group B subjects do not see their own position in this way. One of the subjects, projecting on the discriminating statements for group B, revealed a different viewpoint indeed, that of an individualist who keenly feels both the need and the responsibility for maintaining his own values and for finding successful ways to make his values manifest. The subject projected the same need and responsibility on others, even when their values were different from his own. Not surprisingly, the subject showed a strong live-and-let-live ethic.

This subject's values clearly entered into his position about advertising. As revealed in his factor arrays, he felt that it is ultimately the consumer's responsibility to satisfy consuming needs and wants, and that too often consumers fail that responsibility. Too many persons consume not to satisfy themselves, he felt, but to impress others. The consumer is all too

likely to buy things for trivial reasons or for "hidden" psychological reasons, and hence is "bent" by advertising to believe what the advertiser wants him to believe. The Self-Determining Individualist holds that consumers don't know enough about advertising, or that they bring such trivial motives to bear that they do not or cannot discriminate between "truth" and "mere imagery."

Whereas this factor was comprised wholly of males, the subjectivity involved seems not to be exclusively masculine. The likely reason the factor was all male is that discriminating items referring to members of the opposite sex involved feminine rather than neutral referents, a flaw in constructing the items. In later work, changing the sexual references in discriminating items from feminine to neutral produced female as well as male Self Determining Individualists.

Self-Determining Individualists value their own beliefs and those of others, even when the others differ from their own. It is not surprising, then, that they also value fair and impartial treatment of others. Factor scores indicate that they want advertisers to behave in this way, but instead find them exploitative and cleverly manipulating reality to their own ends. They feel the consumer's best response is to take the advertiser's messages with a huge grain of salt, to decide for themselves. The view is serious; they do not see advertising as mere entertainment, nor do they believe that advertising lowers product prices by stimulating mass consumption. Indeed, for this group, consuming is an individual matter.

The group B priority for self-determination and for coexistence of divergent values enters into beliefs about sex in advertising. Self-Determining Individualists find it pleasant to see attractive members of the opposite sex, in advertising as in life. They enjoy such portrayals, even in sexual roles, as long as it is done within standards of good taste. Such roles do not demean the opposite sex to this group. They see no reasons for such portrayals to be seen as demeaning by "the public" because, for the Self-Determining Individualist, self-worth is self-determined, and advertising has nothing to do with that.

In summary, Self-Determining Individualists view advertising in the light of their need to find successful ways to manifest their own values and to deal with things that block that function. They see themselves as using "information" from ads to make their own decisions, as disliking advertising's attempts to thwart or circumvent that process, and as gaining minor, pleasant stimulation from attractive, tasteful portrayals of the opposite sex.

### *Group C: Angry Social Critics*

Eight persons -- 6 women and 2 men -- emerged in group C, labeled Angry Social Critics. One woman works as a cashier. One man is a drummer in a band. Others were students in non-advertising majors: music, social sciences, education, art education, history, and political science.

Group C stands in crisp contrast to the first two groups. Where group A clearly favors the institution of advertising, group C firmly condemns it. Where group B apparently wants to live in the world on its own terms, group C appears to feel it necessary to live with the world on interpersonal terms, and is perhaps not completely comfortable in doing so.

The group C position is clearly that of angry social critic, angry not only at advertising, but critical of business and marketing and consumers. There is evidence that the reaction is personal as well as social; the group rejects not only the institution of advertising, but the people who make advertising and individual ads as well.

The Critics react most negatively to advertisements that deal with sexual roles, both in the personal and social sense. The offense that group C takes against such advertisements is generalized to other ads, to the number of ads, to the people who make ads, and to advertisers themselves. The critic denies the need for advertising in the socioeconomic system, in supporting mass media, in informing consumers.

While the Critics share some of the blame with other "too materialistic" consumers, they do not feel that advertising has power over consumers. The Critics feel that when consumers



respond to advertising, they fail to exercise enough intelligence, less than they themselves exercise. What the consumer should do, hold the Critics, is to become more responsible, to use power as a buyer and as a voter to regulate advertising. They favor councils of consumers to regulate advertising, and want the councils to be free of advertisers and government.

Angry Social Critics appear to deal with the world on personal, even intimate terms, an approach that carries with it the responsibility, sometimes the burden, to respond to the needs of others. With that approach comes the need to protect themselves from "insensitive" behavior that punishes their approach. The emergence together of "social" and "personal" motives is not unique to this study. In a study of attitudes about dental health (Tschirhart, Mauldin & Simpkins, 1974), the group most concerned about "social" matters (e.g., about making dental care available to everyone, about more rapid improvement of dental health care) was also the group most concerned about personal matters -- about their breath, about the appearance of their teeth, about the possibility of someday wearing dentures. This recurring finding suggests that when persons are intensely socially conscious, they are extending personal self-concerns to embrace others (even masses), that they are externalizing motives which are intimately self-directed. Sensitivity to sexual portrayals in advertising reflects a wish for less intimacy because they live their lives on more intimate terms than others.

It is interesting to note that the Angry Social Critics extend intimate concerns even to masses, while the Self-Determining Individualists, in their quest to live their own values, appear to isolate themselves from intimate contact with others, and reject "mass" concerns. Perhaps the special attraction of sexual portrayals of members of the opposite sex is loneliness, a desire for more intimacy, just as the Angry Social Critics, who live life intimately, appear to wish for protection from intimacy.

**Group D: Amused Observers**

All four subjects who comprise group D are students: 1 advertising major, 2 business majors, and 1 education major. The advertising major was a woman. Group D was labeled Amused Observers since, for them, advertising offers morsels of amusement and information, but, beyond that, is no burning issue -- not a social issue, not an economic issue, not a personal issue.

As revealed in the factor scores, a predominant characteristic of the group D position on advertising is that these subjects enjoy the immediate experience of advertising, and even admire "the cleverly intelligent persons" who produce the ads that Amused Observers sometimes like better than surrounding program content. However titillating the ads may seem, Amused Observers still see themselves as limiting their use of advertising. With their enjoyment of ads, Amused Observers see themselves as using ads primarily for learning of the existence of new products. They apparently take this position out of distrust for advertising claims, which they feel are mostly deceptive or exaggerated. Interestingly, the Amused Observers do not make a moral judgment about the claims they regard as deceptive or exaggerated. They do not *expect* the advertiser to be impartial: "the advertiser is just trying to sell products." They see the purpose of advertising not so much as bringing information and knowledge to the public, but as manifesting the advertiser's right to advocate, to try to persuade. Advertising offers the additional advantage of making mass media possible in this country, a matter of more importance to Amused Observers than to others.

Amused Observers do not see the consumer as being fooled, although "that curious animal," the consumer -- who knows when "deception" is being practiced -- sometimes *allows* him or herself to be persuaded. They conclude that perhaps we don't know enough about advertising's effect on consumers.

In summary, Amused Observers, unlike previously discussed groups, bring little of self-importance to advertising. As advertising enters their lives, it enters almost totally as

immediate experience, as a matter of novelty or amusement. They see advertising as incidental, or perhaps coincidental, to consuming.

### **Group E: Self-Reliant Copers**

The four persons who comprise group E included an advertising major, a journalism major, a nursing major, and a pre-medicine major. Two were women and two men. Those in group E might be called "Self-Reliant Copers": they see the basis of successful consuming as being able, for themselves, to choose what they want. They also see themselves and others as being smart enough about ads, and as knowing what they want and don't want. Unsuccessful consuming results when the consumer "goofs," i.e., fails to use common sense, to ask questions, to listen to information sources. They see the consuming problem as a matter of using one's head, as making a decision. The consumer may use advertising for information, but should make up his or her own mind.

Copers do not see advertising as a mysterious process. They credit advertisers with using "psychology," but merely to find out what consumers want, not to find out "how consumers tick." They think advertisers may sometimes know what consumers want better than consumers do. They accept wants as legitimate and the process of want-satisfaction as simple and open.

Copers do not feel unfairly manipulated or put upon by advertising, perhaps because they do not feel put upon by "the system" in general. They support the economic system and see the role of advertising as useful to consumers and as necessary to the socio-economic system. Copers dislike the idea of more control of advertising, either by government or by consumer councils. Copers do not see the need. They feel competent to deal with advertising without further controls, and apparently attribute their own competence to the populace. Copers are unruffled about advertising; they are neither apologists nor critics.

Advertising serves as a convenience to Self-Reliant Copers. Like Amused Observers, they appear to bring little of self importance to advertising. Unlike Amused Observers, they do not regard advertising as a source of immediate pleasure, of amusement or novelty. Consuming, for them, is a simple matter of knowing what one wants and of satisfying those wants; savers feel competent with both. They see advertising as providing news about wants, some of which may indeed be their own. They see the advertiser's use of psychology as a process that allows consumers to input wants into a satisfactory system for satisfying wants.

### *Discussion*

Presumably the basis for an attitude lies in one's feelings. The basis for differing attitudes, then, lies in differing feelings as we are able to observe them reflected in data. In this study, Q method has provided evidence for five different attitudes about advertising, and evidence as well about the feelings that make each attitude unique, different from others.

The evidence indicates that advertising is in itself motivational to some persons. It is not surprising that a large number of advertising majors and faculty feel this way. For them, advertising is personal in that they have chosen it as a way to make a living. It is not surprising, then, that they *like* advertising, that they would emphasize good things about advertising.

Other attitudes about advertising appear grounded in quite different feelings, and this study has revealed those feelings. In some, we find an attitude about advertising shaped by the need by some individuals to protect themselves and others from intimate, personal psychological pain. In others, an attitude about advertising is a manifestation of a desire to live their lives by their own values and, to achieve that, to allow others to do the same. It is a lonely philosophy that results in a desire for intimate contact with others. In others, an attitude about advertising is shaped by the enjoyment of novelty

and amusement. In still others, the attitude reflects a desire for news to help them express and satisfy wants.

The evidence suggests that attitudes about advertising are rooted in the individual's personal and interpersonal life. It is likely then that changes in those attitudes would also be rooted in changes in the individual's personal and interpersonal life.

Changes in advertising content, then, are not likely to have a significant impact on attitudes as long as there is variance in the "intimate" content of advertisements. The relative infrequency of such "anti-social" behavior by advertisers may be a statistical fact of interest to Institutional Backers, but it has little salience to Critics. The Critics' sensitivities are, from their viewpoint, brutalized at some frequency by advertising. The Critics find offensive much advertising not offensive to others and some advertising attractive to others. The Critics find especially offensive advertising that calls sexual competence into question, that portrays interpersonal encounters in overly sexual or overly intimate ways, that portrays intimate care products, or that they perceive as personally offensive to others. Such advertising confirms the Critics' attitude and provides yet another symptom that the system should be changed.

This study suggests that a unidimensional approach to measuring attitude is of limited usefulness, inadequate to enable discovery, description, interpretation, and understanding of different subjective positions. It might be further suggested that any approach is useful to the degree that the process of constructing instruments, collecting data, analyzing data and interpreting data preserves the "natural state" of the subjectivity. Perhaps the best measure of the validity of a study that purports to measure attitudes is the degree to which subjects can recognize their own positions in the results.

## References

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*In future issues....*

**William Stephenson, *Ulysses and Finnegans Wake: A Q-Methodological Look at Profundity* (in 2 parts)**

**David M. Goldstein, *Q Methodology and Control Theory: II. General Considerations***

**Harriette Marshall, *The Social Identities of Women Lawyers***