

## THE ATTITUDES OF MALAYSIAN STUDENTS TOWARDS ADVERTISING

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### Introduction

Advertising is one of the four components in promotion mix. It has been considered as an important tool by firms directing persuasive communication to potential buyers. The purpose is to enhance buyer's response to the products or services offered by the firm, thus increasing its profitability.

In Malaysia, the advertising industry has been experiencing an average annual growth of about 20% since 1976. It reached the highest growth rate 23% in 1983, but experienced a declining trend due to sluggish economy in Malaysia between 1984-1986. In 1986, the advertising expenditure amounted to more than \$390 million, or 7.7% of the Gross Domestic Product contributed by finance, insurance, real estate and business services. This suggests that a considerable amount of money is spent on advertising in a developing country, thus providing an important contribution to the gross national income.

The impending growth in advertising has incited several criticisms. Advertising is believed to have influenced and manipulated consumer's everyday lives (Packard, 1957). It has provided advertising agencies the skills in moulding buyers' thought processes and purchasing decisions. According to Lutz et al. (1983), the attitude towards advertising was a significant mediator of purchase attitude for both low knowledge/low importance products and high knowledge/high importance products. They suggest that affective reactions to the advertisement appear to be almost automatic and require minimal processing any influence affective reactions to the advertised brand. Positive (or negative) feelings associated with the advertisement may become associated with the advertised brand, usually without consumers' awareness. Gardner (1985) found that brand attitudes formed a non-brand set appear to be influenced by both attitudes advertisement and brand related beliefs.

Much research has shown that consumers' brand related beliefs affect brand attitude formation, and further research evidence indicates that brand attitudes may be affected by consumer's attitudes toward the advertisement themselves (Gardner, 1985; Mitchel and Olsen, 1981). Krugen (1965) asserted that attitude

change may follow behaviour change. When the product involvement is low, advertising acted directly on behaviour without changing the attitude towards the product. The influence advertising for these low involvement products was supposed to be gradual and facilitated by message repetition. This conclusion is supported by Sawyer (1971) and Silk and Vavr a (1974).

While the influence of advertising on consumer behaviour is inevitable, consumers generally hold quite negative attitudes towards it. According to Greyser and Reese (1971), American executives were increasingly uneasy about the truthfulness and social impact of advertising. This view is consistent with Haller's (1974) conclusion that consumers are doubtful of the presentation, and annoyed by the timing and advertising appeal. In a study conducted by Rossiter (1977) on children's attitudes toward TV commercials, he found that the respondents disagreed with the truth of TV commercials. About 90% of the respondents did not believe in the commercials, and about 89% disagreed that the advertised products are the best products to buy. On the whole, about 62% of the respondents did not agree that they like television commercials. Thus, based on Rossiter's findings, it appears that consumers' generally have a negative attitude towards advertising. Such conclusion is also evident in Taylor's found that about 90% of the respondents disagreed that advertising potrays people the way they really are, and about 55% of the respondents disagree that lower prices results from advertising because it causes increased sales. On the contrary about 61% of the respondents agreed that advertising is necessary.

It appears that consumers have mixed attitudes towards advertising. Nonetheless, negative attitudes towards advertising could affect its effectiveness and dampen the profitability of the producer of goods and services. Therefore, it is the purpose of this study to examine the student attitudes towards advertising. The focus on students as a consumer group is important as they represent a considerable size in the Malaysian demography. Though they may have a relatively low level of purchasing power, they provide significant impact on special consumer goods such as clothing, magazines, cigarettes, bottled drinks, music, and others. This study would provide pertinent information to advertising agencies in developing their advertising strategy. Finally, it is hoped that this research would provide greater insights on the theoretical framework of students in consumer behaviour courses.

### **Methodology**

A questionnaire was administered to students in a local university. A total of 124 students (about 50% response rate) responded to the survey.

In the sample, about 68.5% of the respondents were male, and the remaining were female. In terms of ethnic group composition, 83.1% of the total respondents

were Malays, 9.7% were Chinese and 4% were Indians. The religious composition consists of 86.2% Muslims, 6.5% Christians, and 5.7% buddhist.

About 43.8% of the total respondents originated from the rural areas. In terms of geographical distribution, about 24.2% of the respondents were from the south of Peninsular Malaysia (Johore, Malacca, and Negeri Sembilan), about 16.9% were from the central region (Selangor and Wilayah Persekutuan), about 29% were from the north of Peninsular Malaysia (Perak, Penang, Kedah and Perlis), and the remaining were from East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak).

In the samples, about 58.5% of the respondents had working experience with the average of 5.8 years. About 16.2% of the working respondents had worked in the private sector, and 47.1% had worked in the government department; while the remainder worked in various statutory bodies. In terms of job positions about 26.9% were formerly assistant managers, and 19.4% were managers. The rest were formerly teachers, clerks, and research officers. The average age of the respondents was 26.9 years. About 59% of the respondents were bachelors, and 40.2% were married.

Attitudinal statements based on Taylor's (1982) study and others were formulated in the questionnaire. The respondents were asked to rate on five-point scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

### **Findings**

Table 1 shows the attitudes of students towards advertising. The results showed that about 91.9% of the respondents agreed that advertising is necessary. About 57.3% agreed that it raises the standard of living. This suggests that students have positive attitudes towards these aspects of advertising. While relating it with Taylor's study, these statements reflected the economic impact of advertising. Moreover, 52.9% of the respondents disagreed that advertising of one brand against another is wasteful. Thus, it appears that students have positive attitudes on the economic impact of advertising.

About 82.5% of the respondents agreed that advertising is a good source of information. As such, it is not surprising to find that they are more influenced by advertising than most consumers in some product categories. These suggests the positive attitudes on the effects of students by advertising. This is consistent with Taylor's (1982) findings in the United Kingdom, and others in the United States.

While analysing the price effect of advertising, the results showed that the respondents have negative attitudes towards advertising. About 86.3% agreed that

**TABLE 1**  
**Students' Attitudes Towards Advertising**

Statements	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree
1. Advertising raises the standard of living	57.3	22.6	20.2
2. Advertising adds cost to the products, thereby increasing the price	86.3	4.0	9.7
3. Advertising is a good source of information	82.3	6.5	11.3
4. Students are less influenced by general advertising than most consumers	41.5	22.0	36.6
5. Advertising persuades people to buy things that they don't need	69.9	11.4	18.7
6. The audience is usually irritated by advertising	43.9	34.1	21.9
7. Advertising is necessary	91.9	5.6	2.4
8. Higher prices result from advertising	63.7	8.9	27.4
9. Students are more influenced by advertising than most consumers in some product categories	49.2	19.4	31.4
10. Advertising has an unhealthy influence on children	76.6	14.5	8.9
11. People have more confidence in advertised products than in unadvertised ones	75.6	13.0	11.4
12. Most people don't pay too much attention to advertising	24.2	25.8	50.0

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Statements	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree
13. Advertising potrays people the way they really are	21.8	24.2	54.1
14. Students are more influenced by the presentor of the advertising message than most consumers	26.6	30.6	42.7
15. Overall, the potrayal of women in advertising is changing for the better	33.6	30.3	36.0
16. Advertising one brand against another is wasteful	25.2	22.0	52.9
17. Advertising gives an accurate portrayal of women's place is in home	20.2	24.2	55.6
18. Advertising will not change the price of the product	8.9	13.7	77.4
19. Advertising generally suggests that a women's place is at home	19.4	24.2	56.5
20. Lower prices result from advertising because it causes increased sales	22.8	21.1	56.1

advertising adds cost to the product, thereby increasing the price. The reliability of the response was confirm when 56.1% of the respondents disagreed that lower prices result from advertising. Similarly 77.4% disagreed that advertising will not change the price of the product.

In relation to the audience effect of advertising, about 69.6% agreed that advertising persuades them to buy things that they have more confidence in the advertised products than those unadvertised. Further, in relation to statement 12, it appears that the influence of advertising is considerable. About 50% disagreed that people do not pay attention to advertising. As such, it would appear logical that the respondents (about 43.9%) were irritated by advertising. Further, it would also be reasonable that the respondents viewed advertising as an unhealthy influence

on children. This, therefore, suggests the persuasive message affect of advertising. In other words, the respondents have negative attitudes towards advertising in so far as it has significant influence on the consumers, and secondly, such an influence was not viewed as favourable to the audience.

In analysing the portrayal aspect of advertising, the respondents have a negative attitude towards advertising. About 54.1% disagreed that advertising portrays people the way they really are. Furthermore, 55.6% disagreed that advertising gives an accurate portrayal of women's place at home, and about 36% disagreed that the portrayal of women in advertising is changing for the better. These suggest that students do not believe in what the people in commercials say or do. These findings are consistent with that of Rossister (1977) and Taylor (1982). On the contrary, our results contrasted with Taylor on the portrayal of women in advertising is changing for the better. This may be due to the fact that Malaysian advertisements focus on the more conservative role of women in the Malaysian society. While it may be true that advertising does not portray that the women's place is at home, it does not necessarily reflect better roles of women in the advertisements. Therefore, the portrayal aspect of advertising would suggest that advertisers could not convince the audience on the advertisements.

One implication of the findings is the negative attitudes on the portrayal aspect, and this must be considered with caution by advertising agencies when developing advertisements. In other words, it appears that advertising agencies will have to develop a more convincing form of presentations for the actresses or actors to reflect the positive image of advertisement. The fact that the respondents disagreed that it does not portray the women's role at home suggests that the role of women in advertising is beyond the family circle or home atmosphere. Although the role of women have been well exploited by advertisers, it has yet to reflect a better image of women's changing for the better.

### **Conclusion**

The findings showed that students have positive attitudes on the economic impact, student effect, and audience effect of advertising while showing attitudes in relation to the price effect and portrayal aspects of advertising. These findings suggest that the students (as a consumer group) attitudes towards advertising depend on the possible consequences of advertising to them. For instance, the positive attitude towards the economic impact might suggest that the students realised the importance of advertising in reflecting the socio-economic image of the consumers. This is particularly true as the consumers might have considered that such an image suggests improvements of their economic status. Similarly, the positive attitude of the students and audience effects, suggest the important influence and the persuasive message effect of advertising. On the contrary, the negative attitudes may be due to the fact that these aspects have moral issues underlying their attitudes.

Similarly, the unfavourable influence of advertising are related to moral and ethical views of the consumers.

One implication of this research suggests that student attitudes towards advertising may be different due to socio-cultural contexts. Specifically, this research proposed that the students attitudes towards advertising would reflect the portrayal effect, audience effect, persuasive message effect, price effect, and socio-economic impact. Although this proposition is consistent with the findings of Haller (1974), Rossiter (1977) and Taylor (1982), but we also found that there are many differences in interpreting the dimensions of the consumers' attitudes. Following this, it is believed that our proposition of the dimensions of the students attitudes provide an alternative framework of consumers attitudes towards advertising in a developing country, like Malaysia. To enhance the generalization of our proposition, further research should be conducted.

To the advertising agencies, this findings should provide strategic implications towards developing advertisements in Malaysia, particularly when the products are meant for students as (consumers). Advertisers must be sensitive to the negative attitudes and develop new ways of advertising to resolve the unfavourable image effects of advertising.

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