Mass media advertising: Information or wallpaper?

Smit, E.G.

Citation for published version (APA):
This dissertation is about advertising, a subject treated with a lot of scepticism by audience members as well as academics. In 'party-talk', advertising is often treated as silly or irritating. Everyone knows the commercial in which product A is compared with product B ("always the same, how stupid"), or that huge billboard in the streets ("it is too large, too ugly, it's a shame"). Advertising is not something we all need or love. According to one of the interviewees, advertising is "that stuff you immediately avoid when confronted with it". Also academics write about advertising in terms of its negative influence. Advertising is said to create unnecessary consumer demands, to reflect only materialistic values, to be harmful for vulnerable (easily influenced) groups in society - like young children, the elderly, and minorities - and to be persuasive in terms of Vance Packard’s warning in 1957. After examining literature on social effects of advertising, Pollay (1986, p.6) summarised: "what may be shocking ... is the veritable absence of perceived positive influence". Most criticism of advertising is based on its social role, whereas most of the defence comes from those who emphasise its economic functions. To put it simply, advertising is criticised as an intruder with negative impact on cultural values in society (such as heightening materialism and commercialism) and as a 'distorted mirror' (Pollay, 1986). On the other hand, advertising is defended in terms of economic benefits, such as helping media to be autonomous from politics or facilitating marketplace efficiency. As a result, the image of advertising varies from extremely negative — "a source of many of the most serious ills that beset our modern consumerist society" — to somewhat positive: "an aid to the marketing and selling of goods" (Jowett in Fowles, 1996, p.xi).
1.1 Relevance

The relevance of studying such an 'unpopular' subject is twofold: advertising's dominant presence in everyday life and its almost complete absence in communication theory. Advertising is present in terms of the amount of money spent. In the Netherlands, the total amount of advertising expenditure was 7844 million Dutch guilders (approximately 3942 million US Dollars) in 1996 (VEA, 1997). This is a rapid increase: 7.6% higher than 1995, 37.1% higher than 1991, and almost twice the expenditure of 1987 (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1: Advertising expenditure in the Netherlands (current prices in million guilders)²

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<td>press</td>
<td>2785</td>
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<td>3537</td>
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<td>audio-visual</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>810</td>
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<td>outdoor</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>277</td>
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<td>direct</td>
<td>533</td>
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<td>778</td>
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<td>other</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>438</td>
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<td>total</td>
<td>3998</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>5695</td>
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Advertising is not only present financially, but also in terms of presence in the media we use, the streets in which we walk, in the pubs we visit, or on the Internet. The number of commercials on Dutch television³, for example, has increased enormously in the past few years. In 1994, on average 726 commercials were aired daily, compared with 144 commercials in 1989 (Boelé & Van Niekerk, 1995). This presence is also perceived as such: 76% of the Dutch public claimed to be daily confronted with television advertising, 58% with outdoor advertising, 46% with radio advertising, and 34% with advertising in newspapers (Sikkema, 1996, p.176; Smit, Dokter & Smith, 1997).

Advertising is studied from many different perspectives. From a marketing perspective advertising is studied at a macro level in terms of the effect of advertising on economies, on markets and on brands within markets, or at an institutional level in terms of the relationship between advertising expenditure and sales. In this marketing perspective, advertising is seen as one of the instruments of the marketing communication mix: thematic and 'above the line'⁴ (Fauconnier & Van der Meiden, 1993, p.19-20). The micro level is about people's responses to advertising. In this research domain advertising is mostly studied from the perspective of psychology and communication. Although a lot of advertising research is done at this micro level, a theoretical basis against which to analyse advertising and to test findings is still lacking. To quote McDonald (1992, p.136): "There are a number of academic disciplines, such as communication theory, which could usefully be
applied to this problem [meaning the lack of theory, ES], but with rare exceptions it has not been seriously attempted. The commercial justification for such an effort would be that it would give us greater confidence, not only in spotting what may be wrong with an advertisement, but knowing how to put it right”.

This dissertation tries to enhance what we know about people’s behaviour and attitudes with respect to the phenomenon of advertising. More specifically, this study is about what people ('the audience') do with advertising, in other words how they use advertising. Do people choose advertising and search for it, or are they unwillingly confronted with it? And if unwillingly, are they prepared to look at it, or will they try to avoid it as much as possible? Answers to these questions are not only interesting for advertisers — in terms of more ‘effective reach’ of their target audiences — but also for those interested in gaining knowledge about the audience’s use of mass communication.

The aim of this first chapter is to introduce ‘advertising use’ and conceptualise this concept by referring to communication theories about media use. In short the Uses and Gratifications approach will be explained, followed by criticism and a revision of this approach (Section 1.2). Based on these theoretical insights, advertising use will be further defined in Section 1.3.

1.2 Media use in terms of uses and gratifications

‘Uses and Gratifications’ is not a theory but an approach based on several theories and studies on media use. In the forties, early research in this tradition was descriptive in nature, without any conceptual and methodological basis. Later, in the sixties, emphasis was put on measuring social and psychological variables to explain patterns of media use, resulting in typologies of media use, based on functions of use (Palmgreen, Wenner & Rosengren, 1985). The assumptions of this approach are: “(1) the audience is active, thus (2) much media use can be conceived as goal directed, and (3) competing with other sources of need satisfaction, so that when (4) substantial audience initiative links needs to media choice, (5) media consumption can fulfil a wide range of gratifications, although (6) media content alone cannot be used to predict patterns of gratifications accurately, because (7) media characteristics structure the degree to which needs may be gratified at different times, and, further, because (8) gratifications obtained can have their origins in media content, exposure in and of itself, and/or the social situation in which exposure takes place” (Palmgreen et al., 1985, p.14). The important assumption of this approach is that media use is linked by the audience to their needs and has to compete with other functional alternatives. Effects of media use — the ‘gratification obtained’ — are based on media content, as well as the use itself or the social
situation. Moreover, media characteristics play an important role in structuring the degree of these effects.

**Criticism**

Critics of the Uses and Gratifications approach state that media use is explained insufficiently, and is therefore flawed, because of the theoretically and empirically unclear conceptualisation of media use (Elliot, 1977; Palmgreen et al., 1985). Some tried to solve this confusion of concepts by incorporating the *Expectancy Value theory* (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1982). This attitude theory assumes that people act based on the positive expectations they have regarding that behaviour. When applied to media use, it means that media use can be explained by the opinions people have regarding the characteristics of that medium or medium content and the expectations that medium use will have an effect ('beliefs'). These opinions are evaluated in terms of positive or negative value judgements ('evaluations') and can result in motives for using a medium ('gratifications sought'), and thus in media use or 'media consumption' (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1985, p.64). The effect of this use is called 'gratifications obtained', which can be based on the gratifications sought (expected gratification) or can be unexpectedly obtained. Figure 1.1 shows these concepts.

The 'X' in this figure is the object of the beliefs, evaluation or gratification and can be some medium, program or content type. Based on Fishbein's Expectancy Value theory (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), the gratification sought is - like an attitude construct - the result of the
A combination of beliefs and evaluations, in formula (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1985, p.63):

\[ GS = \sum_{i=1}^{n} b_i e_i \]

where ‘GS’ is the gratification sought, ‘\(b_i\)’ is the belief ‘i’ about X’, ‘\(e_i\)’ is the evaluation of attribute ‘i’ and ‘n’ is the number of attributes.

Another ‘flawed concept’ of the Uses and Gratifications approach is its central concept of audience activity (McQuail, 1994, p.317). Based on a review of different meanings and concepts of audience activity, Biocca (1988) suggests five different versions: selectivity, utilitarianism, intentionality, resistance to influence, and involvement. Activity appears to vary from manifest behaviour to a mental state. Moreover, the different versions of the audience activity concept do not all refer to the same point in time in relation to the actual media use. They may relate to advance expectations and choice, or to activity during the experience, or to the post-exposure time (McQuail, 1994, 1997). This distinction in type and sequence is also reflected in Levy and Windahl’s (1984) two dimensions of audience activity. The first dimension is the type of activity or audience orientation. The second dimension describes the moment of exposure or ‘audience sequence’. Based on these dimensions Levy and Windahl describe three types of audience activity in more detail: selectivity before exposure, involvement during exposure, and utility after exposure. Selectivity means that a person makes a choice for a specific medium type (or content) before exposure. This first type of activity corresponds with the Expectancy Value theory. Involvement during exposure, the second type of activity, is the mental activity during processing of media content, resulting in attention to and interpretation of messages. The third type of activity is the personal use of the message/content after exposure. People talk for instance about what they read or listened to, or use the information in their everyday lives.

Another criticism (besides the previous confusion of concepts) is that the Uses and Gratifications approach as well as the Expectancy Value theory, presume that people are capable of describing their interests, motives, and needs. Media use out of habit is thereby excluded. Rubin and Perse (1987) distinguish therefore instrumental and ritualistic use. Ritualistic use is media use out of routine or habit, while instrumental use is motivated by intention (goal directed): “[ritualistic use] ... is a less intentional and non-selective orientation, a time filling activity, and a tendency to use a medium regardless of its content. Instrumental use, though, is more intentional and selective, and reflects purposive exposure to specific content” (ibid., p.59). For the ritualistic media user the medium itself is more important than the content, i.e. watching television regardless of the programs, while the instrumental user makes a choice for specific medium content (Perse, 1990), for example choosing to read this dissertation. Also the motives for use differ.
Ritualistic use can be based on time filling, dispersion, habit, escape, relaxation or convenience. Instrumental use on the other hand, can be based on learning, rules of behaviour, entertainment, or excitement (Rubin, 1984).

The fact that instrumental use is characterised by involvement during exposure (because of active orientation), does not mean that ritualistic use is thus passive or without involvement. It is possible that these persons can unintentionally be exposed to something interesting that will promote involvement. The difference between the two types of use is mainly based on the activity (selectivity) before exposure. Before exposure media users can differ in the benefits they expect from engaging in specific media behaviour. In this light a distinction is often made between content gratifications and process gratifications (Royne Stafford & Stafford, 1996). Content gratification is sought from use of the message (like in instrumental use), possibly to gain information from a program. Like in instrumental use, the content of the message itself provides satisfaction. In process gratification, the satisfaction stems from being involved in the communication process itself. This type of gratification is more like ritualistic use of media as mentioned before.

Uses and Gratifications revisited
The critical statements about confusion of concepts and habitual media use resulted in a call for reformulation of the basic proposition of the Uses and Gratifications approach. The old description was that the approach was concerned with “(1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones” (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitz, 1974, p.20). Later research specified motives, and reduced influence of needs and put more emphasis on social background, experience and expectations from media. Also media use out of habit is included in McQuail’s (1994, p.319) new statement, which is: “(1) Personal social circumstances and psychological dispositions together influence both (2) general habits of media use and also (3) beliefs and expectations about the benefits offered by media, which shape (4) specific acts of media choice and consumption, followed by (5) assessments of the value of the experience (with consequences for further media use) and, possibly, (6) applications of benefits acquired in other areas of experience and social activity”. Helped by the concept of expectation this new statement is more open to investigation (Expectancy Value theory). The essence of expectation is to view media use behaviour as depending on a belief that a particular kind of media content has attributes which are perceived to carry a positive or negative value. According to McQuail (1994, p.320): “this simple proposition opens the way to a clearer formulation of the research task: relevant attributes of media or content can be identified;
respondents can be asked how they value each attribute and whether or not they apply to specific content (or media)”. Another advantage of using this theory is that it also covers the fact that media use is shaped by avoidance based on a negative evaluations of the potential gratifications expected from media.

Based on this new description it is clear that media use consists of ‘specific acts of media choice and consumption’ (see previous point 4), also defined by McQuail (1994, p.303) as “the act of choosing or attending to media”. Choosing refers to audience activity before exposure (‘selectivity’), and attending refers to audience activity during exposure (‘involvement’). Audience activity after exposure refers to what people do with the experience afterwards (points 5 and 6) and is named ‘consequences of use’.

McQuail’s revisited description offers three clusters of explanatory variables as well: people’s background in terms of social circumstances and psychological dispositions; their habits of media use; and their expectations about these media and media content. Also media characteristics play an important role in structuring the degree of media use and consequences of use. This factor is not explicitly incorporated in the revisited version, but mentioned in the old basis assumptions and in McQuail’s (1994, 1997) general overview of viewer and media influence on media use (see Figure 1.2). In this ‘pragmatic model of audience choice’, McQuail (1997, p.76) tries to incorporate his Uses and Gratifications approach as well as alternative models on explaining media use. One of these alternative ways of theorising is worth mentioning, namely the ‘social action’ model of Renckstorf (1989), which is based on phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. The emphasis in Renckstorf’s model is on interpreting media use as meaningful in a certain social situation, rather than on trying to find a structural or behavioural cause (studies in which this model is applied: e.g. Bosman, Hollander, Nelissen, Renckstorf, Wester & Van Woerkum, 1989; Renckstorf & Nelissen, 1989; Frissen, 1992; Nelissen, 1992).
In this figure different variables are presented which vary in the moment they influence the process of media choice behaviour (the bold arrows). This process consists of general preferences regarding media content – which are primarily influenced by social cultural factors and media use in the past – and a choice for specific content. This specific choice is influenced by factors closer in time to the moment of actual media use (see left to right in the foregoing model), such as the availability of media content, the degree in which the user is aware of other possibilities and the way in which this content is offered by the medium (publicity, timing/presentation).

The Uses and Gratifications approach or alternative models are applied to various media and media content, such as radio (Herzog, 1944), newspapers (Berelson, 1949), television (Barwise & Ehrenberg, 1988; Frissen, 1992; Overste, 1978; Webster & Wakshlag, 1983), interactive television news (Elberse, 1998; Lichtenstein & Rosenfeld, 1983; Perse & Courtright, 1993) or to a comparison of various media (De Bock, Wilthoit & Weaver, 1980; Lichtenstein & Rosenfeld, 1983). Some applied the approach to a specific kind of media content, namely advertising. Royne Stafford and Stafford (1996, p.27) ‘borrowed’ the Uses and Gratifications perspective from communications theory to “provide an initial understanding of the motivations that stimulate zipping (fast-forwarding through pre-recorded programming) and zapping (switching channels during commercial breaks) behaviour”.

Mass Media Advertising: Information or Wallpaper?
1.3 Advertising use

Advertising is all commercial communication, meaning “paid-for messages” (Fowles, 1996, p.13), around us. Moreover, advertising is obviously something we all recognise when we see it. It is something that the entire population experiences, as Pollay (1986, p.18) describes it: “It surrounds us no matter where we turn, intruding into our communication media, our streets, and our very homes”. Moreover, he describes it as “designed to attract attention, to be readily intelligible, to change attitudes, and to command our behaviour. Clearly not every advertisement accomplishes all of these aims, but just as clearly, much of it must - otherwise, advertisers are financially extravagant fools”. Thus, advertising is not merely value free information around us, it has a specific purpose, it is designed and mediated to tell us something; for example to buy a product, to like the name of a company, or to feel confident in using a particular brand. In this dissertation, advertising is defined as “paid-for mass mediated information about products, services, or ideas, with the function to influence the opinions, attitudes, or behaviour of target audiences” (based on Floor & Van Raaij, 1993, p.23; Fowles, 1996, p.13).

An important aspect of advertising is its mass mediated nature. Most advertising messages are still carried by ‘traditional’ media such as television, magazines, radio or newspapers. The rest is carried by ‘new’ media, such as the World Wide Web, or specific advertising media, such as outdoor or direct mail. The mass mediated nature of (in particular) the traditional media implies that advertising is part of the audience’s use of the medium. While using (for example) television the audience is confronted with advertising. Especially as far as ‘traditional’ media are concerned, it is not possible to use advertising without using (part of) the medium. Moreover, these media are mostly used for the non-commercial content.

As advertising is ‘by definition’ part of media content, it is interesting to see in what way advertising use can be understood in terms of media use. Like McQuail’s previous description of media use, advertising use can be considered in terms of choosing and attending to advertising as part of media content. That is, advertising use refers to behaviour or activities of media users (or in marketing terminology ‘consumers’) with regard to advertising. This behaviour can vary from active selection or avoidance of advertising to mere (non-selective) confrontation with advertising. In terms of Levy and Windahl’s distinction in time, emphasis is put on the selection of advertising before exposure and attention during exposure. To sum up: advertising use is defined as the behaviour of media users with regard to advertising in these media. This behaviour consists of selecting or avoiding advertising in various media, the exposure to the advertisements.
themselves (confrontation) and the amount of attention which is paid to them.

Borrowing insights from the Uses and Gratifications approach and the Expectancy Value theory, not only offers a way to conceptualise advertising use, but a framework for explaining this use as well. Based on these two approaches, advertising use will be explained by the expectations ('beliefs') people have concerning a specific part of that medium, namely advertising, and their general evaluation of advertising ('attitude'). Beliefs and attitude are seen as separate entities, which congruence is not necessarily. This widely accepted view in attitude theory is described in Chapter 3. Besides these concepts, advertising use is also expected to be influenced by general user characteristics, such as demographics and people's habits of medium use. Finally, advertising use is expected to be structured by the situation of use and characteristics of the media in which advertising appears. Media differ on many aspects. One of these aspects is 'pacing'. Pacing refers to the perceived control of moment of use and speed of use (Neijens & Smit, 1996, 1998; Van Raaij, 1991). Print media on the one hand are said to be internally paced (users determine when and for how long they use the medium), while broadcast media on the other hand are externally paced. This difference between print and broadcast media is also described as the difference between 'search media' and 'display media' (Bedrijfsfonds voor de Pers, 1997, p.40-41). The medium user can decide to search for information, in for instance the daily newspaper, or can decide to watch the show that is displayed to him on television. Figure 1.3 pictures the theoretical framework.

Figure 1.3: Framework for explaining advertising use
The concept 'advertising use' is used to indicate different types of advertising behaviour, which not only vary in terms of activity and time (before or during) but in terms of specificity as well. More specifically, advertising use can concern advertising in general, advertising in a specific medium (for example print), advertisements in a specific title (for example the Dutch newspaper de Volkskrant), advertisements in a part of that title (for example the first section of de Volkskrant), or an advertisement on a specific page. Use can also relate to a specific advertisement: a person sees or reads for instance an advertisement for Topform (a couch). These levels of specificity are presented in the next figure (see Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4: Different levels of advertising use compared with reach and advertising effects

The most specific level of advertising use – paying attention to the Topform advertisement – matches the concepts ‘ad reach’ ('open eyes/ears in front of advertising space') and ‘recall of Topform'; concepts derived from the research domain of media reach and the domain of effect research. In order to compare different media in one study, a more general level ('advertising in a medium') is chosen in this study. This medium level is related to a more specific level of advertising use, namely the recollection of having seen specific advertisements.
1.4 Research questions and guide to this dissertation

This dissertation aims to describe advertising use – what people do with advertising in terms of behaviour – and to explain this use. The question guiding this dissertation is as follows:

How and why do (or don’t) people use advertising in mass media?

The ‘how’ in this question refers to the description of the way people use advertising in mass media, or ‘traditional media’ (questions 1 to 4, see Table 1.2), while the explanation is captured by ‘why’ (questions 5 and 6). This central question is further developed by the following research questions.

Table 1.2: Research questions

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<td>1</td>
<td>What is advertising use?</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>How and with what results do others measure advertising use?</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>How do people use advertising? In other words: to what extent do medium users select or avoid advertising in a particular medium, and (if exposed to it) to what extent do they pay attention?</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>How do people evaluate advertising? In other words: to what extent do people agree or disagree with beliefs about advertising in a particular medium and evaluate advertising positively or negatively (attitude)?</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Why do these people use advertising? In other words, to what extent is advertising use related to: the users’ evaluation of advertising (beliefs and attitude), their background characteristics (demographics), their use of the medium, and their situation of use?</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>To what extent are advertising use and its explanation different for the different media?</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>To what extent is (claimed) advertising use related to awareness of specific advertisements? In other words: to what extent is people’s claimed behaviour related to their recollection of exposure to specific advertisements?</td>
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To be able to estimate how people use advertising (question 1), it was first necessary to determine what can be understood by advertising use. Based on theories on media choice behaviour, such as the Uses and Gratifications approach and the Expectancy Value theory, advertising use was defined in this first chapter as behaviour with regard to advertising in different media. This behaviour consists of the selection (avoidance) of advertising and paying attention to advertising as part of media content. ‘As part of media content’ means that the focus is on how people experience advertising in media that are mostly used for reasons other than advertising.

A second step is to see what kind of advertising behaviours were studied in the field of advertising research (question 2). The next chapter presents an overview of different types of advertising behaviour based on a meta-analysis of studies on this subject. This meta-analysis also offers a refinement of the theoretical framework.

In order to answer the remaining research questions, different studies were conducted. First, several exploratory interviews were held
to further explore advertising use and to collect statements for the subsequent studies. The data of the second study, which are collected by means of a telephone survey with follow-up by mail, are central in this dissertation. As a supplement to this study, two smaller studies were conducted to investigate the relationship between what people claim to do with advertising (in a medium) and awareness of specific advertisements (question 7). The designs of the four empirical studies are described in detail in Chapter 3. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the results of these studies. As will be shown in this dissertation, advertising is often perceived as ‘wallpaper’, which not only decorates the walls inside the homes but our streets as well. However, advertising is not meant to function only as decoration. Advertising has a specific purpose; it is designed and mediated to tell us something, for example to buy a product, to like the name of a company, or to feel confident in using a particular brand. The advertiser wants the consumer to remember his particular brand when standing in front of a shelf thinking what kind of detergent is ‘best’ or ‘cheapest’. Mass mediated advertising campaigns should therefore at least have the function of a ‘mnemonic device’. In other words, an advertisement (i.e. the brand name) should at least have entered memory and have left a trace. Whether advertising can function as a reminder when often perceived as wallpaper, will be discussed in the final chapter.
Notes Chapter 1

1. As a first exploratory phase of the research project, eighteen people were interviewed about their ideas on advertising in general (see Chapter 3).

2. This figure represents the media spending or advertising costs ('media-bestedingen'), for instance the costs of airing a television commercial. The production costs of making this commercial are not included.

3. That is, the three public channels and the two commercial channels RTL4 and RTL5.

4. 'Above the line' refers to the old payment system in the advertising industry, in which the media industry (instead of the advertiser) paid the advertising agencies a commission. The term 'above the line' is used in marketing to exclude all marketing and promotion techniques (which are 'below the line').

5. The notation is based on Fishbein's development of the Expectancy Value Model (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p.108).

6. This definition is based on Bronner (1986), Den Boon and Van Niekerk (1992) Knecht and Stoelinga (1988). Knecht and Stoelinga (1988, p.75, translated by author) define reach as "number of persons that is confronted with that part of the medium that is used for advertising content" (in Dutch: "het aantal personen dat wordt geconfronteerd met een door een concrete reclame-uiting ingenomen deel van het medium").

7. Advertising effects consist of the effects of processing (Reclameverwerking), which are defined as "immediate reactions of consumers to an advertisement or commercial: attention, learning, acceptance, affective reactions" (Floor & Van Raaij, 1989, p.281, translated by author), and final effects (Reclamewerking), which are the effects of advertising on "what consumers ultimately feel, think and do regarding the product or brand" (Pieters & Van Raaij, 1992, p.54, translated by author). Franzen (1994) on the other hand, distinguishes '(psychological) advertising responses' and 'brand responses' to stress the difference in intermediate and final effects of the campaign. The first type of effects are closer in time to exposure and relate to the advertisements itself, the second type is concerned with responses to the brand (such as someone's attitude to the brand, the image of the brand or someone's intention to buy the brand).