Mass media advertising: Information or wallpaper?

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Summary and conclusions

Claude – Zola's fictional character in ‘Une Victime de la réclame’ (1866/1997) – lived in a daily hell, just because he followed every recommendation in the advertisements. Every day, mornings and evenings, Claude read the newspapers searching for ads (‘his counsellors’) which advised him what to buy, where to live, what to wear, what books to read, what to think, and finally ... how to die. As a result Claude became a bold headed idiot and died sadly by taking a bath that should have made him look sixteen again.

Nobody uses advertising like Claude did: searching for information in newspaper ads looking for rules to live his life. The question to be answered in this dissertation was: how do people use advertising in various media? Do people choose advertising and search for it? And if confronted with it, are they prepared to look at it, or will they try to avoid it as much as possible? Furthermore, why do (or don’t) people use advertising? Are they searching for information or watching commercials because they are funny? Are they avoiding them because they perceive advertising as irritating? Understanding as well as explaining advertising use was the main focus in the previous six chapters. In the first two chapters the concept ‘advertising use’ was described, put in a theoretical framework, and compared with the studies of others in the field of advertising research. Based on these insights a conceptual model was developed and tested in the remaining chapters. A summary and explanation of these findings are presented in Sections 7.1 and 7.2. These findings are further discussed in terms of implications for the field of media planning and advertising (Section 7.3) and future research (Section 7.4).
Theories about media use – especially the Uses and Gratifications approach and the Expectancy Value theory – were used as a theoretical framework for conceptualising ‘advertising use’. This Uses and Gratifications approach is used as theoretical framework because it is one of the few widely used theoretical approaches that focuses on the user side of the communication process. Furthermore, this approach is part of the tradition in audience research that aims to explain and predict choices, reactions and effects (the so called ‘behavioural tradition’) which matches the aims of our research project. An alternative tradition in audience research is the ethnographic or cultural tradition (McQuail, 1997). This latter tradition aims at understanding the meaning of use in a social and cultural context (for instance by means of reception analysis).

Central in the Uses and Gratification approach is the assumption that media use is linked by the audience to their needs. Based on the Expectancy Value theory this linkage is specified by the assumption that media use can be explained by the opinions people have regarding characteristics of that medium or medium content and the expectation that use of the medium will have an effect (‘beliefs’). These beliefs are evaluated in terms of positive or negative value judgements (‘evaluations’) and can result in motives for using the medium (‘gratifications sought’). Effects of media use – ‘gratifications obtained’ – are based on media content as well as the use itself or the social situation. These gratifications obtained can be sought or can be unexpectedly obtained. This theoretical framework is applied to a specific kind of media content, namely advertising. Advertising is seen as a ‘specific’ kind of media content, because most people will not use a medium because of this type of media content. In addition, advertisements are not part of the editorial content, but ‘paid for’ messages from advertisers that serve a certain purpose (for instance to tell the consumer to use a new kind of diapers or to feel confident in choosing a certain life insurance policy). Only a few others have ‘borrowed’ the Uses and Gratifications approach to explain advertising behaviour. Royne Stafford and Stafford (1996), for instance, applied the Uses and Gratifications approach to study motives for zipping and zapping television commercials.

Advertising use is defined as the behaviour of media users with regard to advertising in these media. This behaviour consists of the selection (or avoidance) of advertising in various media (before exposure), the exposure to the ads themselves (confrontation) and the amount of attention which is paid to them (during exposure). Borrowing the insights of the Uses and Gratifications approach and the Expectancy Value theory not only presented a tool for understanding the concept,
but offered a framework for explaining use as well. Concepts from this framework (pictured in Figure 1.3 of Chapter 1) as well as studies of others were used to build the conceptual model.

The studies of others were analysed by meta-analysis, which is another word for a systematic literature search and comparison of findings. In Chapter 2 this method as well as the results of 50 studies on advertising use were described. An overview showed that television advertising was the focus of most studies and that only a few studies tried to compare broadcast with print advertising. About 50% of the studies focused on avoidance of television commercials, measured directly by means of an electronic meter or indirectly by means of self-reporting. The other half of the articles dealt with the measurement of the degree of attention paid to advertising on television and radio, and in print media. The term ‘attention’ was used to summarise various types of advertising behaviour having some kind of measurement of ‘open eyes in front of advertising space’ or attention to advertising content in common. This behaviour was mostly measured by observation, recording (in an experimental setting) or self-reporting methods such as survey or copy-test.

Results of the meta-analysis showed the ‘state of the art’ (up to March, 1997) in research on explaining advertising use. Avoidance of advertising was most often related to the situation of use (such as other viewers or day of the week), medium related variables (commercial breaks and programs around these breaks) and demographics. Only a few studies included ‘psychological’ user related variables (the ‘soft’ measures), such as attitudes or opinions about advertising. A few studies showed that beliefs about the irritation caused by (television) advertising and a negative evaluation of (television) advertising were positively related to zapping behaviour. Studies on attention put relatively more emphasis on the influence of ad content and the psychological user characteristics such as someone’s evaluation of advertising (attitudes, beliefs). It appeared that a positive evaluation of advertising results in more attention to advertising content. An extra analysis of 26 studies on this evaluation component showed that the more people believe that advertising has benefits and is well executed, the more they like it (positive attitude). Conversely, the more they perceive it as ‘too much’, offensive or deceptive, the less they like it (negative attitude). Moreover, it was shown that advertising can serve different functions for individuals such as a source of entertainment or information about products or services. These functions appeared to be positively related to liking of advertising (positive attitude).

A summary of the previous set of variables and relationships was used to translate the theoretical framework into our conceptual model which was presented in Chapter 3 (Figure 3.1). The focus in this model is the relation between advertising use and the following user characteristics: their beliefs about irritation, information and entertainment, their
attitude towards advertising, medium use and demographics. Comparison with the summary model of the meta-analysis showed that the user characteristics are included, while most medium characteristics as well as situation of use were excluded in our research (the exception being the medium characteristic 'pacing', see also Section 7.4). Table 7.1 summarises the research questions.

Table 7.1: Overview research questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>How do people use advertising? In other words: to what extent do medium users (claim to) select or avoid advertising in a particular medium, and; (if exposed to it) to what extent do they (claim to) pay attention to advertising in various media?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</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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<tr>
<td>3</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) and other user characteristics, such as medium use and demographics?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>To what extent are advertising use and its explanation different for the different media?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</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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In fact, what is dealt with in the first research question is perceived or claimed advertising use (in a medium), because different types of use (selection/avoidance, attention) are measured by asking people what they do with advertising (self-reporting measurements) instead of observing their behaviour. Asking people how much advertising they saw for instance (self-reported rate of exposure to advertising) could be subject to under- and overestimation due to memory mistakes or social desirability. The advantage of using self-reporting in this research project is that the non-observable 'soft' measures (attitudes and beliefs) could be measured at the same time. The disadvantage, however, is the chance that these self-reporting measurements are not always accurate. Especially questions about low-salience behaviour - such as media behaviour, according to Price and Zaller (1993) - are expected to be biased towards over-reporting levels of exposure. Following Clancy (1992) and Price and Zaller (1993), the respondents of the second study (see further) were asked to recall the last time they were using the medium (when, with whom, why and for how long) and then asked to estimate their exposure to advertising in that medium. This procedure aimed at making the respondents’ use more salient and thereby more easy to recollect. Finally, in order to know to what extent perceived advertising use is related to ('actual') exposure to specific advertisements, advertising use is related to the recall and recognition of specific ads (research question 5).

The five research questions were answered by means of different methods. Besides the literature review (meta-analysis), several other studies were conducted: in-depth interviews (study 1), a nation-wide
telephone interview with follow-up by mail (study II), an experiment (study III) and a small scale face-to-face survey with copy-test (study IV). The subject of these studies was advertising use in different media. These media differ for instance in their technical possibilities to display advertising, their perceived functions and mood while being used, social context of use and their possibilities in terms of pacing of information. The focus in this dissertation was on advertising in the 'traditional media'; mass media which are mostly used for their non-advertising content. More specifically, media with internal pacing (newspapers and magazines) and external pacing (radio and television) were studied. Print media (or search media) are media with internal pacing: the users decide at what moment and speed they use these media. The broadcast media (or display media) on the other hand, are media with external pacing: it is the medium that controls moment and speed of confrontation. The results of the four empirical studies were described in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. These empirical findings are summarised in the next section.

7.2 Empirical findings

The first two research questions refer to the understanding of the concepts use and evaluation of advertising in various media. By means of the qualitative interviews (study I) as well as the survey data (study II), respondents' perception of their use and evaluation were sketched in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, advertising use was explained by testing the model (research question 3). In both chapters the results for the four media were compared to answer the fourth research question about inter media comparison. The results of the final studies, which were presented in Chapter 6, were used to answer the fifth research question on recall and recognition of specific advertisements.

Research question 1: How do people use advertising?
The in-depth interviews of the first study showed that print and radio advertising were poorly attended to whereas television advertising was mostly avoided. Consequently, it appeared difficult for the interviewees to describe what kind of advertising they pay attention to or what they generally do with advertising in the media they use. To make the respondents' use more salient in the subsequent study (study II), they were first asked to recall their last instance of medium use (when, with whom, where, for how long) and then to estimate their exposure to advertising during this last time use. Again, respondents found it difficult to recall their exposure to the medium as well as to the advertisements. The respondents who were able to give an estimation (only about one-third of the sample), claimed to note (on average) twice as many print ads as broadcast ads. They also paid more attention to print advertising. As well as these estimates, all respondents were asked
to what extent they pay attention to advertising and avoid (broadcast) advertising. On average, television was often avoided by zapping or leaving the room. The avoidance strategy ‘muting’ (turning the volume down) is seldom done for television commercials. Moreover, all avoidance strategies (zapping, muting, doing something else, leaving the room) are seldom done for radio commercials. Television and (especially) radio commercials are on average only ‘sometimes’ watched/listened and paid attention to. Contrary to broadcast commercials, print advertisements are sometimes selected in advance (‘searched for’) and more often paid some attention to. As avoidance strategy, print advertisements are ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ skipped by respondents when confronted with them while reading the newspaper or magazine.

The difficulty in remembering exposure to advertising and the difference between the use of print and broadcast advertising is possibly explained by the wallpaper function of broadcast advertising. Broadcast commercials (especially radio commercials) are perceived as part of the continuous flow of images and sounds and therefore perceived as wallpaper, which one pays less attention to. This ‘wallpaper’ function of broadcast media was referred to several times in the in-depth interviews of our first study. Also the recent Dutch study ‘People Make The Media’ on media perception (Platform ‘95, 1998) and the Time Budget Survey (Faasse & Van Meerem, 1997) showed that very often television and radio are used as a secondary activity.

Research question 2: How do people evaluate advertising?

Television and newspaper advertising not only differ in terms of use, but in terms of evaluation as well. Newspaper advertising is (on average) evaluated as most positive - it scored highest on the dimensions ‘information’ and ‘liking’, and lowest on ‘irritation’ - while television was perceived as most negative: television advertising scored highest on the belief dimension ‘irritation’ and lowest on ‘information’ and ‘liking’. Radio and magazine advertising are perceived less extreme. Magazine advertising is evaluated as more or less the same as newspaper advertising, that means: as informative and entertaining. Radio advertising is evaluated as ‘neutral’ in terms of average scores on ‘liking’ and the three belief dimensions. Our qualitative study (study I) showed that newspapers - including its advertisements - are perceived as a medium that provides information. Television is evaluated as having an entertainment and relaxation function. The commercials around or within the television programs are mostly perceived as unwanted confrontation (which leads to irritation), because they interfere with these functions of entertainment and relaxation. The functions of magazine and radio use on the other hand are perceived as more diverse than television and newspaper use. Magazines are evaluated as entertaining, offering relaxation as well as providing information about (new) products and ideas. This diversity is reflected in the perceptions of
magazine advertising: it is evaluated as informative as well as entertaining. Also radio is evaluated as providing information as well as entertainment and it is listened to while doing other things. This background function is reflected in the ‘neutral’ perception of radio advertising as well.

In conclusion, respondents perceive their use and evaluation of advertising differently for print and broadcast media. Print advertising is more positively evaluated in terms of information, and paid more attention to. Television advertising is less positively evaluated, more associated with irritation, and avoided more often. Radio commercials in particular are ignored and perceived as part of the background function of the medium itself. Two explanations were given to account for the media differences. First, broadcast commercials are not paid much attention to because they are perceived as part of the ‘wallpaper’ provided by the medium. Second, television advertising is negatively evaluated because – contrary to newspaper advertising – commercials are perceived as an interruption in the ‘entertainment’ function of the medium. For newspaper advertising, the medium as well as the advertisements are evaluated for their information. Radio and magazine advertising are less extremely perceived, because the function of the medium is more diverse.

**Research question 3: Why do people use advertising?**

As was mentioned in the previous section, the theoretical framework and the meta-analysis were used to formulate hypotheses on relationships between advertising use, evaluation and other user characteristics. It was first hypothesised that beliefs about advertising in a medium would be indirectly related to advertising use via a general evaluation of liking or disliking advertising in that medium (‘attitude’). The results of the survey (study II) showed that this hypothesis could not be accepted. The beliefs about information, entertainment and irritation of advertising in newspapers, magazines, radio or television were indirectly as well as directly related to advertising use. This mediation role of liking was therefore rejected. The first hypothesis was reformulated in the expectation that attention to advertising in all media could be explained by a positive evaluation of advertising and that avoiding (broadcast) advertising could be related to a negative evaluation. All hypotheses are summarised in Table 7.2.
Table 7.2: Summary of accepted and rejected hypotheses (based on study II)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis (H)</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1:</td>
<td>Liking (positive attitude) as well as beliefs about the information and entertainment function of advertising are positively related to advertising use, while beliefs about irritation of advertising will be negatively related to advertising use (Hypothesis 1a). Since advertising use refers to attention (all media) as well as avoiding (broadcast media), it is also hypothesised that evaluation of advertising is positively related to attention and negatively to avoiding advertising (Hypothesis 1b). Accepted for all four media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2:</td>
<td>Younger people evaluate advertising more positively and pay more attention to advertising than older respondents. Accepted for broadcast advertising use and evaluation; accepted for evaluation of magazine advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3:</td>
<td>Men are more negative about advertising (evaluation), pay less attention to advertising and avoid (broadcast) advertising more often than women. Rejected for all four media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4:</td>
<td>People living in large households are more positive about advertising, pay more attention to advertising and avoid advertising less often. Accepted for television advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5:</td>
<td>The more time available for medium use, the more people evaluate advertising as positive and the more they pay attention to advertising (and the less they avoid broadcast advertising). Accepted for magazine and broadcast advertising, but in the reversed direction: the more hours people work, the more positive they are about advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6:</td>
<td>Advertising use and evaluation of advertising are related to education (no direction specified). Rejected for all four media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H7:</td>
<td>Advertising use and evaluation of advertising are related to use of the medium (no direction specified). Accepted for radio advertising use and for evaluation of television advertising (positively related).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These hypotheses were tested by means of regression analyses. LISREL was used to test the complete explanatory models. These models explained on average 25% of the variance in attention to advertising and on average about 11% of the variance in avoidance of broadcast advertising. An explanation of 25% is relatively good – compared with other studies in the social sciences – but still indicates that 75% of the variance could not be explained. Part of this unexplained variance could be attributed to the exclusion of the medium related variables and ad content (see Section 7.4). Attention to newspaper and magazine advertising are explained relatively well (33% and 29%, respectively). Attention to and avoiding of broadcast commercials is explained less well (16% [17%] and 15% [6%] for attention to [respectively avoidance of] television and radio commercials).

Research question 4: Inter media comparison
The total standardised effects of the four exploratory models were compared to answer the fourth research question on differences between media. It was generally shown that evaluation in terms of entertainment
was important for all four media. Differences were found for the variable age, which was important in explaining attention to broadcast advertising. Evaluation in terms of information was more strongly related to attention to print advertising.

This difference between broadcast and print advertising was already described in answering the first two research questions on the average perception of advertising use and evaluation of advertising. It was shown that television advertising was negatively evaluated because commercials are perceived as an interruption in the 'entertainment' function of the medium. For newspaper advertising, both the medium and the advertisements are evaluated as information. Radio and magazine advertising were less extremely perceived, because the functions of the media are diverse as well.

An second explanation of the difference between print and broadcast media is that the information function is only relevant when the medium allows the user some degree of control, which is the case in the search media (i.e. print media or media with internal pacing). When advertising is displayed to the user – which is the case for broadcast media or media with external pacing – a general evaluation in terms of liking/disliking and (absence of) irritation is more appropriate.

Another difference found between broadcast and print media is the extent to which other user characteristics add to the explanation. Demographics and medium use appeared less important in explaining attention to print advertising: the explained variance increased by only one percent point by adding these variables to the analyses. The explanation of broadcast advertising use increased by eight (radio) and six (television) percent points when demographics and medium use were added to the analyses. As mentioned before, age appeared especially important in explaining broadcast advertising use. Younger people – used to television advertising – evaluate broadcast advertising more positive and claim to pay more attention to commercials than older people.

Research question 5: Perceived use and awareness of specific ads
As described in the previous section, the question is to what extent advertising use – measured by means of self-reported behaviour – is related to 'actual' noticing of advertisements. Results of our final study (study IV) showed that recognition of specific ads was significantly related to attention paid to (magazine) advertising. In other words: respondents who claimed to pay attention to advertising (advertising use), indeed recognised more advertisements than others. Although moderately correlated ($r=0.30$), it was shown that claimed advertising use can be seen as an indicator of actual behaviour.
7.3 Practical implications

The relevance of studying advertising was introduced in the first chapter by sketching the difference between its dominant presence in everyday life (in terms of advertising expenditure and the public’s perception of confrontation with advertising on television and in the streets) and its almost complete absence in communication theory. The literature study presented in the second chapter showed that this ‘absence’ was a little overstated. A lot of studies were published on attention to advertising or avoiding of advertising, although their main focus was on television advertising. In this sense, there still exists a significant difference between advertising expenditure in for instance press media and studies on advertising. Moreover, only a few other studies tried to compare the perception of advertising in different media, as we did. In this sense, this dissertation enhances what we know about people’s behaviour and attitudes towards the phenomenon of advertising in different media. This knowledge could have implications for the media planner – who uses ratings and segmentation techniques to select media – and the advertiser who wants to attract the audience’s attention.

Ratings only tell part of the story

One of the criteria in media planning is (quantitative) reach which is a measure of how many different households or audience members were exposed at least once to one or more media (Sissors & Bumba, 1991). These measures of reach or ratings are based on standardised nationwide studies. In The Netherlands ratings are based on SUMMO’s readership survey for print use (Appel, 1998), Intomart’s people meter (the so called ‘Intometer’) for television ratings (Van Meurs, 1998b) and Intomart’s panel for radio listening (Ekelenkamp, 1996; De Vos & Vanden Berg, 1998). Our research project shows that these figures only tell part of the story.

Print ratings (‘reach’) are based on data of the so-called ‘SummoScanner’. Every day of the week, a portion of the Dutch population is interviewed by telephone about their readership of newspaper and magazine titles. These figures give information about what part of the audience was recently exposed to a title. In fact, what is measured is ‘open eyes in front of a newspaper or magazine’ (so called ‘reach of title’) in stead of the advertisements (‘ad reach’). Our study showed that only part of the advertisements in a title was noted (‘has been seen before’).

Based on electronic measurement of the viewing behaviour of more than 2200 panel members (1000 households), Intomart’s television ratings give information about how many people were watching television at what time, for how long and on what channel. With respect to commercials, it is electronically registered how many viewers switch channels to avoid (part of) the commercial breaks and how many viewers
stay tuned. It is assumed that these latter viewers have their 'eyes open in front of advertising space' ('ad reach'). Our studies showed that people not only switch channels ('zapping') but use other avoidance strategies (which are not electronically measured) as well. Avoidance was also done by leaving the room or by paying no attention to the commercials. More than half of the respondents 'often' uses one of the avoidance strategies. In other words: a part of the television audience – as measured by the meters – does not have their eyes open for advertising space.

Radio ratings are measured by means of diaries in which the panel members (about 10000 respondents) note their radio use for seven succeeding days. They do this every other month (six times a year). Groups of respondents complete this diary for different weeks in order to collect radio figures of 48 weeks per year. Each respondent is asked to note in a scheme what channel they were listening to for every 15 minutes of the day. The question is whether these respondents are able to recall what channel they were listening to between (for example) 7:15 and 7:30 PM. This is especially difficult when they try to recall these time periods at the end of the day (or even later). The commercial breaks are not noted in this diary. When taken our research results into account, one must question whether these radio figures are very valuable for media planners. It was shown that radio is often poorly attended to and it appeared difficult to recall specific moments of exposure.

An extra tool for media planning
The first question media planners ask is 'To whom should we advertise?' To answer this question they will define one or more target audiences or segments. Historically, various concepts or variables have been used in market segmentation. In this respect, there has been a shift from general concepts such as demographics to more specific concepts such as lifestyles, or more recently, domain-specific market segmentation (Bronner, 1998). For media planners, it is not only important to choose the right segments, but to determine whether these groups can effectively be reached through advertising as well. Media planners would like to know if the selected audience is receptive to the planned advertising campaign and through what media.

As part of a paper presentation at the Advertising Research Foundation, the sample of study II was divided in different 'Affinity-clusters' (measured by the belief statements), such as the 'Sceptics', the 'Information seekers' or the 'Rejecters'. These groups of respondents not only differ in their affinity for advertising in a medium, but on their attention paid to advertising as well (see for details: Smit & Neijens, 1997). A comparison of different media showed that some people were positive about one advertising medium and negative about another, while others were positive or negative about all media. 26% of the respondents were for instance positive about newspaper advertising and negative about television advertising. An implication for media
planners is that print media form the best vehicle to reach this latter group. A similar implication can be drawn for the (much smaller) group of 10% that was sceptical about print advertising but enthusiastic about television advertising. The media planner will love a third group of about 35% of the respondents: these persons love both forms of advertising. On the other hand, media planners will ‘hate’ the group of more than 23% of the respondents who dislike both forms. On the basis of this study, one should include the measurement of affinity (the nine belief statements) in media reach research. If so, it enables media planners to select the media for which the target persons are more ‘open’ to advertising.

The importance of being liked

In the first theories on advertising effectiveness – the AIDA-model of St Elmo Lewis in 1898 – as well as more recent theories which focus on different sequences of persuasion in different situations (Franzen, 1998), exposure and attention are seen as necessary steps in processing advertising messages. One of the clearest findings of this research project is that people pay attention to advertising in a medium when they evaluate advertising positively. It was shown that a positive evaluation – in terms of liking and beliefs about information and entertainment – resulted in a willingness to pay more attention to advertising in newspapers, magazines, on radio and television. Moreover, it was shown in the final study that likeable advertisements were more recognised than other advertisements. Beliefs that advertising would irritate resulted in avoidance of (broadcast) advertising. For the advertiser, this finding implies the importance of making ads that inform or entertain. Especially broadcast commercials should be entertaining (message) and likeable (execution) in stead of an unwanted confrontation with an unrealistic, non-credible and over-repeated commercial. Some advertisers assume that irritation has positive effects, because an irritating commercial gets attention and will therefore be remembered. The idea is that in the long run, this irritation will be forgotten while the brand name is remembered. Research on advertising effects, however, shows that a negative evaluation of the ad highly correlates with a negative evaluation of the brand. Associations with the brand sustained also negative in the long run (see Smit, et al., 1997 for an overview of studies and results).

7.4 Discussion and further research

This dissertation started with a theoretical framework based on the Uses and Gratifications approach and the Expectancy Value theory. The question to be discussed in this section is to what extent this framework was useful in understanding and explaining advertising use. Moreover, a comparison of our findings with the findings of others (the summary
model of the meta-analysis) presents relevant clues for further research. In other words: what new variables are also useful in explaining attention to or avoidance of advertising? Finally, issues of measuring advertising use will be discussed.

Advertising use in terms of the theoretical framework

Important difference between an advertisement and other medium content is that advertising is mostly not selected in advance. Most of the time, the user (or consumer) is confronted with advertising whilst using the medium for other reasons: watching or listening to programs, surfing on the Internet, skimming the morning paper or reading a magazine. At the moment of confrontation, one is allowed to make a choice to pay or not to pay a certain amount of attention to the ad. Within the Uses and Gratifications approach, this kind of medium use refers to ‘ritualistic use’ or habitual use with less activity: someone does not actively select exposure to advertising, but can unintentionally be exposed to something interesting. Only print media, outdoor and some of the Web advertisements allow people to search for information themselves (although one should doubt the plausibility that someone will wander through a city, searching for posters about clothing advise). Compared with broadcast, print advertising use can be part of the ‘ritualistic use’ as well as the ‘instrumental use’ or goal-directed use. Since this research project was largely based on the Expectancy Value theory – which fits the instrumental part more than the ritualistic part – print advertising use is probably better explained by the theoretical framework than broadcast advertising use. Print advertising use indeed appeared to be better explained by beliefs about information and entertainment (namely about 30%) than broadcast advertising use.

Ritualistic use was only explicitly part of the first study in which in-depth interviews were used. These interviews showed how difficult it was for the interviewees to recall their rather passive (‘mindless’) exposure to advertising and reasons for using advertising. The passive or ritualistic use of advertising should be an important part of theorising on how advertising works. Although ritualistic use can promote involvement when unintentionally exposed to something interesting, most ritualistic use is thought to occur with less mental activity. This kind of behaviour refers to processing information in low involvement situations. According to Krugman (1981), advertising content is learned as ‘meaningless nonsense material’ and should thereby studied as ‘learning without involvement’. The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Petty and Cacioppo (1986), for instance, shows the different ways of information processing when motivation to process the information differs. A focus on information processing of individuals in low involvement conditions can be a valuable addition to our theoretical framework.

However, the problem remains to make low involvement behaviour ‘mindful’. In other words: the interviewee or respondent has to be made
aware of his behaviour in order to measure this behaviour. This aspect of thinking about the role of media and media content was noticed by one of the first researchers on motives on using media. Berelson (1949) 'discovered' what the daily newspaper meant to people (besides 'to get informed') after the deliverymen of eight major New York City newspapers went on strike (June 30, 1945). They remained on strike for over two weeks and during that period most New Yorkers were effectively deprived of their regular newspaper reading. Since a research design based on an 'advertising-free period' is rather unrealistic, the question is what (other) methods could be useful. This question will be dealt with at the end of this section.

**Compared with findings of others**

Section 7.2 showed what variables were more and less important in explaining advertising use in four media. Compared with the results of the meta-analysis of Chapter 2, emphasis was put on user characteristics in stead of medium characteristics and situation of use (see Figure 7.1). The variables used in studies II and IV are presented in the next figure in **bold**. The direction of the effect is shown as well.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 7.1: Comparing findings with the summary model of Chapter 2**

This figure shows that most of the user characteristics found in the literature are measured in this research project. Most expected relations were confirmed by our research. Some differences were found for the variables 'sex', 'education' and 'medium use'. The first two variables appeared not to be significantly related to attention or avoidance. In other words: our studies did not show that men and lower or higher
educated people are more negative about advertising and use advertising less often. The amount of medium use did significantly relate to advertising use, which was also the case in other studies. However, the meta-analysis showed that those studies were not conclusive about the direction of this relation. Based on our study, one should expect a positive relation.

One variable, which was not part of the meta-analysis, was added to this study. Based on the in-depth interviews it was expected that the more time available for medium use the more attention would be paid to advertising. Free time was measured indirectly by the hours respondents work on average (paid and non-paid). This variable appeared to be related to evaluation and attention/avoiding, but in the opposite direction (only for radio). Our study showed that the more hours people work, the more positive they are about radio advertising. This relation could be explained by the fact that radio is often listened to in cars or at work. Another addition of this study is that effects differ for the different media (shown by the interaction effect of ‘pacing/control’). What effects were found for what media was already described in Table 7.2. Overall, the demographics and the medium use variables were only significant for television and radio advertising.

As previously mentioned, less emphasis was paid to the medium characteristics ‘scheduling’ and ‘ad content’, variables which are more or less under control of the media planner. A comprehensive Dutch study on the ‘medium side’ of avoidance of television commercials (especially switching behaviour) is described in the dissertation of Van Meurs (forthcoming, see also Intomart, 1996; Van Meurs, 1998). On the one hand, this Intomart study showed that about 60% of the decrease in audience ratings could be explained by break characteristics (for example more switching at end breaks) and the audience profile of the programs before and after the break (whether these programs are directed to young people and whether the age of the expected audience differs before and after the break). On the other hand, electronically measured switching behaviour could not be explained by commercial characteristics (whether the product category is expected to be irritating and whether the commercials have been shown frequently on television). However, our study – based on the opinions of the audience itself instead of the electronically registered switching behaviour of the Intomart panel – showed that the perception of the frequency and irritating elements of commercials were important in the negative evaluation of television advertising.

The other variables that were left out in our research project were variables with respect to ‘situation of use’. Our first qualitative study, however, gives some indication that these variables could have been important in explaining advertising use. The interviewees did tell us that it makes a difference whether they are in possession of a remote control (which almost everyone does) or (more importantly) a car radio with pre-set stations. Also the other two variables – ‘temporal variables’ and
'other viewers' (Figure 7.1) — were mentioned, especially for television use. The interviewees claimed to watch commercials differently and pay more attention at the beginning and end of the evening (“less disturbing; the television set is on because I'm just curious to see what's on”) and when watched together with others (“you're less inclined to use your remote control, because you're together. And when we're watching with the others, we're making jokes about the commercials. Then it's more fun to watch”).

In sum, variables that could have explained the unexplained part of our study are situation of use, program and break type, and — although not confirmed by the Intomart study — ad characteristics. Since these variables are mostly based on television studies, more emphasis should be paid to content of ads in other media as well as their context (the context — ‘Umfeld’ — of for instance print ads).

**Further research on advertising use**

In the first chapter the specificity of the measurement subject was discussed. Different levels were distinguished, varying from 'advertising in general' to 'a specific ad for brand X'. In order to compare different media in one study, a more general level ('advertising in a medium') was chosen in this study. The advantage of this choice is the intermedia comparison. The disadvantage, however, is the difficulty of respondents to recall their 'general advertising exposure'. During the research process different attempts were made to facilitate this recollection. Firstly, respondents were asked (in the second study) to recall their last time medium use, which still proved to be difficult. Secondly, respondents were questioned about their reactions to specific advertisements in the final two studies. Recalling behaviour towards specific advertisements appeared easier for the respondents than giving a global indication of exposure. To be able to generalise to a more general perception of advertising in a medium, an enormous amount of observations is needed, which will be expensive.

The previously mentioned Platform'95 study (1998) measured media perception on a more specific level. Like our second study, the Platform'95 researchers asked the respondents to recall their latest moments of media consumption. The respondents were then interviewed at length about a randomly chosen moment of watching/listening to a specific program or reading a specific title. It was shown indeed that their perception differs for different program types and print titles. The question remains whether an even more specific measurement than 'program' or 'title' is needed. Studies on reactions to specific ads show that people vary in their evaluation of specific ads (see for instance the Media Observer of The Media Partnership and the Advertising Reaction Research (the ‘RRO’) of Admedia, the Netherlands).

Another option for measuring advertising use on a specific level is to use observation techniques. A recently introduced method to register attention to print ads is Verilex of Verify International (Parker Brady,
1997; Pieters, 1998). This method registers the eye movements of (for example) magazine readers by means of a camera (so called ‘eye-tracking research’). Although measured in a laboratory situation, this kind of measurement gives information about the number of ads looked at, the part of the ad that is focused on, the duration of attention and the sequence of scanning the advertisements.

A final recommendation for further research is to see to what extent advertising is used in other media than the traditional four. Our first study gave us some information about the perception of outdoor and direct mail; media that are not used for reasons other than advertising. These media were indeed perceived differently. Another interesting medium is the Internet, and more specifically the World Wide Web. A lot of studies emphasise the increasing amount of money spent on this medium and focus on the registration of the number of users. It would be interesting to know to what extent the advertisements in this medium are perceived in terms of pacing (internal or external). Moreover, it would be interesting to see to what extent expectations with respect to sites, banners and other advertising forms are related to behaviour with respect to Web ads (attention paid, clicking on banners, etceteras) (see Elberse & Smit, 1998).

7.5 Information or wallpaper?

One of the most striking findings of this research project was the difficulty of respondents to recall their behaviour with respect to advertising. For most consumers advertising is less important than advertisers might think. Advertising appears to function as ‘wallpaper’ which not only decorates the walls inside our homes but our streets as well. Radio advertising appeared to be most difficult to recall, since most radio listeners use radio as background noise during household activities, at work or in their cars. Radio is said to be on without attentive listening to it. A rather extreme example of this is based on the in-depth interviews of the first study. A couple who listen all day to one of the Dutch commercial channels even denied hearing any of the commercials: “There is little advertising on the radio, no, especially not on this channel. On this channel, you never hear commercials, there is the news, and ... no, no commercials. That’s why we have this channel on. We listen to the music, the news, ... no commercials at all!”. A remarkable detail is that ‘this channel’ was on during the interview. While listening to the recorded interview, we could hear several commercials.

The question is whether ads will be noticed when often perceived as part of the ‘wallpaper’. The advertiser wants the consumer to use his advertisement as a piece of information, for example when standing in front of a shelf thinking what kind of detergent is ‘best’ or ‘cheapest’. Mass mediated advertising campaigns should therefore at least function as a reminder when making all kinds of decisions between brands and
products/services. In other words, an advertisement (more importantly the brand name) should at least have entered memory and have left a trace. Results of this study showed that it appeared difficult for respondents to recall the number of advertisements seen or the amount of attention paid to advertising. It was also shown that only a small portion of the respondents who claimed to have seen the advertisement could prove this by filling in the missing brand name.

The wallpaper function of advertising is not unique for advertising: commercial messages are dealt with like all kinds of information in our information affluent society. The rapid development of new communication technologies and the improvement of infrastructure have both led to an abundance of information which is sent and received via mass media on a daily base. Because a person's mental capacity to deal with information is limited ('information overload'), people adjust to the information society by scanning their media environment and by paying less and less attention to content (Van Cuilenburg, 1998). Whether a message is successful in getting noticed will increasingly depend on its relevance for the consumer who asks himself 'What is it in for me?'. This development does certainly not mean that all advertising money is wasted or that all advertising 'falls on deaf ears' (Ducoffe, 1995). It does however imply that it is important to keep track of the users, to create messages that are relevant and likeable, and to realise that advertising is often 'the weaker influence'. According to Ehrenberg (1998), advertising works in a lower-key way, by nudging brand awareness, by reinforcing existing attitudes, and protecting a brand's position in the consumer's mind ("Here I am"). "What is required of an ad is not heavy persuasion of either the already experienced customer or of the unconcerned newcomer, but just to 'Tell a good story well'. This is to get and maintain attention, memorability, and salience for the brand" (ibid., 1998, p.10).
Notes chapter 7

1 The first two questions of the overview in the first Chapter (Table 1.2) are not included in this overview. These questions deal with the conceptualisation of advertising use, which was already discussed.

2 AIDA stands for 'attract Attention, maintain Interest, create Desire, get Action' (Franzen, 1998, p.188).

3 As was mentioned in Chapter 6 (Section 6.3), the reverse is possible as well.

4 The concepts 'mindless' and 'mindful' refer to different states of mind. Mindless refers to passive information processing in which the individual rather automatically relies on distinctions previously drawn, as is the case with habits (for example the way we brush our teeth). Mindful is the opposite of mindless and is defined by Langer and Piper as "the process of drawing distinctions, creating categories, making the unknown known, or making the novel familiar. When people are mindless, on the other hand, they are relying on rigid distinctions or on familiarity without an awareness of other ways the object (person, event, idea) might exist" (1988, p.250; see also: Smit, 1992; Velthuijsen, 1996).
Mass Media Advertising: Information or Wallpaper?