

Attitudes toward advertising: the views of UK and US millennials

Abstract

Adopting an institutional theory perspective, this paper explores and compares the attitudes of late-Millennial University students toward advertising's economic, social, and ethical features and consequences in the United Kingdom and the United States. Tracking and explaining such attitudes are important because Millennials are a large generational cohort, and today's youngest, "Digital Native" segment are the first to be targeted with digital advertising throughout their entire lives. Their views matter as studies indicate attitudes toward advertising in general are related to message processing, favourable brand attitudes, as well as attitudes toward specific ads and campaigns. More importantly, negative attitudes toward advertising can lead to problems for marketers in the form of support for more restrictive advertising regulations. Data collection took the form of an online survey of late-Millennial students at two universities, one in the UK and one in the US. Findings offer an update to the research literature on attitudes toward advertising, indicating that the most negative attitudes overall are towards its truthfulness. On the other hand, respondents substantially agree that advertising is essential to economic prosperity, and while attitudes are slightly more favourable toward more government regulation of advertising among UK Millennials, they are mainly neutral in both countries.

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Introduction

Since the 1960s, scholars and industry observers have proposed that advertising, the most visible and, arguably, least appreciated feature of the marketing enterprise, derives much of its legitimacy as a societal institution based on its economic contributions (Carey, 1989; Rotzoll, Haefner, & Sandage, 1989). Favourable attitudes toward advertising's economic effects provide a justification for advertisers' efforts to persuade consumers and continued support for the industry's right to robust systems of self-regulation in most Western societies. Institutional theory also provides a defence for criticisms regarding detrimental social consequences, such as advertising's relentless encouragement of consumption.

Policy makers, marketers, and advertising decision makers should understand how attitudes toward advertising might encourage support for future regulation as well as impact the success of ads and campaigns. Defever, Pandelaere, and Roe (2011) found that consumers with positive attitudes responded more favourably to advertising messages. This is consistent with earlier studies suggesting positive attitudes can result in increased levels of print ad involvement (James & Kover, 1992), greater recall of outdoor ads (Donthu, Cherian, & Bhargarva, 1993), and a higher level of persuasion (Mehta, 2000). Favourable attitudes have also been found to correlate positively with brand attitudes (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989), while negative attitudes encourage avoidance of TV advertising (Abernethy, 1991; Clancey, 1994). Similarly, audience perceptions of unethical advertising can negatively influence evaluations of ads (Beard, 2008; LaTour & Henthorne, 1994; Simpson, Brown, & Widing, 1998).

Consumer concerns and threats of increased regulations regarding paid bloggers, social media marketing, the use of gender stereotypes, behavioural targeting, and increasingly invasive and covert data collection practices highlight the importance of understanding attitudes toward advertising. This study contributes an update by exploring, describing, and explaining the attitudes of late-Millennial and early-Generation Z consumers, important consumer segments. The study's purposes are (1) to explore attitudes toward advertising's economic, ethical, and social consequences and effects among Millennials in the UK and US, (2) to identify differences in attitudes toward advertising, and (3) to assess the likelihood that late-Millennials and even younger Generation Z consumers might favour more restrictive regulations of advertising or reductions in advertising overall.

Measuring attitudes toward advertising

Since the 1960s, researchers have been describing and assessing attitudes toward advertising in general. Bauer and Greyser's (1968) seminal work identified two constructs: advertising as an institution and advertising as an instrument (i.e., individual ads). Their scale was used extensively and further developed by Pollay and Mittal (1993), who identified seven attitudinal dimensions: product information, social roles and images, pleasure, good for the economy, materialism, falsity, and value corruption. This scale was subsequently used by Petrovice and Marinov (2005), Defever et al. (2011), and Jin and Lutz (2013).

In the late 1970s, Larkin (1977) developed an instrument including 26 items designed to measure the attitudes of US Baby Boomer college students toward advertising's economic, ethical (mostly in regard to truthfulness), and social effects, and future government regulations. These items were later utilised by Beard (2003) for his survey of early-Millennial, "Generation Y" college students.

Li, Edwards, and Lee (2002) developed a scale measuring an important dimension of negative attitudes: the extent to which consumers perceive advertising to be excessively intrusive. Indeed, the intrusiveness of advertising as a dimension of negative attitudes was well established by Bauer and Greyser (1968). And while some scholars predicted that digital

advertising might be less intrusive thanks to its interactivity and personalization (e.g., Rust & Varki, 1996), research confirms that online advertising is perceived to be especially intrusive and annoying (Tanyel, Stuart, & Griffin, 2013), likely to elicit negative attitudes, and that this likely affects the processing of ads (Li et al.).

Millennials, advertising, and attitudes in general

Millennials are often defined as a cohort born between about 1980 and 2000 (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010), although other sources define individuals born between 1995 and 2015 as Generation Z (Kasasa, 2019). These young adults are the first generation to come of age with the Internet. Millennials are the largest cohort in both the US and UK, overtaking Baby Boomers in size and purchasing power (Fry, 2016; Khomami, 2015; Pankoke, 2016), with approximately 80 million in the US and 16.2 million in the UK. Taylor (2018) observes they are a multi-dimensional generation and, thus, it is important to study both within and between group differences. An especially important segment consists of “Digital Natives,” which currently includes those up to about the age of 24.

Today’s young adults are of special interest to marketers because they are (1) early adopters of technology, (2) currently reaching major life milestones (Gray, 2015), (3) influence the consumption of other cohorts, (4) happily share brand preferences and experiences with others via social media, (5) contribute to the co-creation of advertising content (Gower, 2014), and (6) respond poorly to traditional media advertising (Newman, 2015). Many are also college students who have significant influence over their peers, often create long-term brand relationships, and have a higher disposable income after graduation (Beard, 2003).

The youngest Millennials’ relationships with the digital world are different from older cohorts. The average American Millennial spent 2.35 hours per day on his or her phone in 2016, and 54 minutes of that time were spent with social media (WARC, 2017). As a reflection of this trend, UK mobile ad spending in 2018 was predicted to increase by nearly 25% from 2017, representing 70% of all digital ad spending (eMarketer, 2017). An international study of 1,800 Millennials found that a large majority willingly connect with marketers and share personal information via social media (Thomas & Chatalic, 2016), although they expect to receive something in return (SDL, 2015). Consequently, trust is very important. The Nielsen Global Trust in Advertising Survey (2015) found that Millennials had a higher level of trust than other cohorts across the traditional, online, and mobile advertising media.

Studies of younger consumers, largely based on college students, have found that attitudes are generally not positive. Larkin (1977) found that more than half the late-Baby Boomer students he surveyed held strong “anti-advertising” attitudes and perceived it as having limited economic and social value. Sandage and Leckenby (1980) confirmed this rather negative perception, but also found that students held more positive attitudes toward advertising’s status as an institution compared to individual ads. Beard (2003) concluded that his early-Millennial respondents were less concerned about ethical issues than Larkin’s Boomers, although the majority still held negative attitudes toward advertising’s truthfulness. Beard’s respondents were mostly ambivalent regarding the economic effects of advertising. While they were positive about advertising’s overall contribution to the economy, they blamed it for higher prices. Views on the social consequences of advertising were quite similar across the 1977 and 2003 studies, with a strong belief that advertising could persuade people to buy things they didn’t need and that it encouraged materialism. The majority of respondents in the Beard study did not see the need for more government regulation.

The most recent study of young adult attitudes toward advertising is Tanyel et al.’s (2013) survey of a quota sample of US Millennial students. They used ten items, some the same as Larkin (1977) and Beard (2003), to measure attitudes across four media: TV, print,

outdoor, and the Internet. They reported that Millennials had generally negative attitudes toward advertising. This negativity was stronger towards the Internet versus other media, and included agreement that there is not enough regulation of Internet advertising.

Comparisons between the US and UK

Although both the UK and US consist of individualistic/low context cultures (Hofstede et al., 2010) and share a common history, culture, and language, there is evidence there may be important differences in attitudes. A survey by Ipsos MORI (2017) reports UK Millennials tend to be more liberal than their US counterparts. They also trust businesses less, are more likely to buy unbranded products, and are less concerned about brand ethics. These findings are supported by the Nielsen (2015) study, which also found lower levels of trust among European Millennials across both social and traditional media, and they report being less influenced by value orientated advertisements. An earlier study by O'Donohoe (1994) compared British and American citizens in general and found the British held more favourable attitudes toward advertising generally than their American counterparts.

More recently, Laurie, Mortimer, and Beard (in press) examined how Millennials in the UK and US differ in how they define the concept and practice of advertising. Although some differences were evident, their respondents' perceptions were similar in that they see advertising as a commercial activity intended to encourage people to buy products and services. They also concluded that respondents don't distinguish much among the various marketing communication tactics (e.g., public relations, sales promotions), generally grouping all of them under the umbrella term of "advertising." With recent support in the UK for further restrictions on advertising relying on gender stereotypes and a possible decline in favourable attitudes toward capitalism, free markets, and unrestricted free speech among young adults in the US, now seems an especially appropriate time to assess and compare their attitudes toward advertising.

Method

An online questionnaire utilising Larkin's (1977) and Beard's (2003) 26 items was distributed to undergraduate students across several courses at two universities, one in the UK and one in the US, thereby utilising purposive samples. Today's students are a good representation of the Digital Native segment of the youngest Millennials, with nearly 40% of all 18 year olds attending college in both countries (NCES, 2017; UCAS, 2017). They are also the most important segment of young consumers from a marketing perspective because they will likely have more disposable income, are trend setters, and significantly influence the purchase behaviour of others (Tanyel et al., 2013). Thus, although statistical generalizations to broad populations are not appropriate, findings may well be indicative of the attitudes of other young Millennials, as well as those who some suggest might more appropriately be defined as the oldest members of Generation Z.

Respondents indicated agreement, using five-point Likert-type items ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Because the sample sizes are large ($n > 30$), t-tests were used to analyse the differences in attitudes between UK and US respondents. Correlation tests were also undertaken to explore any relationships between key statements.

Analyses and findings

The survey produced 587 responses, 345 from the UK and 242 from the US. The majority of respondents in both samples were between the ages of 18 and 21 (UK, 75.4%; US, 91.0%). Majorities of both samples were also female (UK, 71.0%; US, 68.5%), a likely reflection of recent trends in both countries for female students to outnumber males.

With a neutral score equal to 2.50, one important finding (see Table 1) is that respondents substantially agreed with all but one of the five items that capture attitudes regarding advertising’s truthfulness (i.e., Items 2-4, Item 6). These attitudes regarding advertising’s veracity are also reflected in agreement with another item “Advertisements should be more realistic” (Item 17).

Another interesting finding is that respondents were fairly neutral regarding advertising’s economic effects. There are, however, two exceptions, one favourable and the other less so. Firstly, respondents agreed that “Advertising is essential to the prosperity of our economy” (Item 7). Secondly, and conversely, while they were neutral regarding the statement that advertising results in lower prices (Item 10), they agreed marginally with the statement that “Advertising increases the cost of goods and services” (Item 11). It’s also important to note that respondents expressed only slight agreement with the statement that “There should be more government regulation of advertising” (Item 25). Moreover, they were neutral in response to the statement that “There should be less advertising” (Item 23).

Table 1
Survey Item Means, Standard Deviations, and Sample Sizes

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	n
1. In general, advertisements present a true picture of the product advertised.	2.89	.821	586
2. There is a critical need for more truth in advertising.	3.98	.930	586
3. Too much of today’s advertising is false and misleading.	3.47	.915	586
4. There is too much exaggeration in advertising today.	3.73	.926	570
5. There should be less stress on sex in advertising.	3.51	1.083	586
6. Too many of today’s advertisements attempt to create a trivial or imaginary difference between products that are actually identical or very similar in composition.	3.66	.868	582
7. Advertising is essential to the prosperity of our economy.	3.76	.944	587
8. Advertising helps raise our standard of living.	3.03	1.022	585
9. Advertising results in better products for the public.	3.14	1.049	583
10. In general, advertising results in lower prices.	2.44	.967	586
11. Advertising increases the cost of goods and services.	3.22	.963	584
12. Advertising fosters monopolies.	3.17	.886	572
13. Advertising is socially wasteful since it only transfers sales from one manufacturer to another without actually adding any new money to the economy.	2.49	.918	581
14. Advertising often persuades people to buy things they really don’t need or should not buy.	3.95	1.016	585
15. Most advertising insults the intelligence of the consumer.	2.79	1.033	582
16. There is a crying need for better taste in most of today’s advertisements.	3.35	1.008	579
17. Advertisements should be more realistic.	3.72	.998	584
18. Too many of today’s advertisements are silly and ridiculous.	3.18	1.096	585
19. Advertising should be on a more adult level.	2.78	.983	582
20. Advertising just tends to confuse people by presenting them with a bewildering choice of items and claims.	2.90	.950	584
21. Advertising is making us a nation of conformists.	2.96	1.062	575
22. Advertising is making us materialistic people—interested in owning and getting “things”.	3.68	1.039	583
23. There should be less advertising.	2.60	1.169	582

24. There should be a ban on advertising of harmful or dangerous products.	3.61	1.244	583
25. There should be more government regulation of advertising.	2.98	1.147	581
26. Television is by far the worst form of advertising.	2.44	1.166	582

Further analysis revealed nine statistically significant differences between the UK and US participants (see Table 2). The US respondents held more negative attitudes toward three of the items regarding advertising's truthfulness, "There is a critical need for more truth in advertising" (Item 2), "Too much of today's advertising is false and misleading" (Item 3), and "There is too much exaggeration in advertising today" (Item 4). They also felt more strongly that "There should be less stress on sex in advertising" (Item 5). Conversely, the UK respondents held more negative attitudes regarding some economic effects with a stronger disagreement that "Advertising helps raise our standard of living" (Item 8) and stronger agreement that "Advertising increases the cost of goods and services" (Item 11).

The US respondents agreed significantly more with the statement that "Advertising should be on a more adult level" (Item 19). On the other hand, UK participants felt more strongly that "Advertising is making us a nation of conformists" (Item 21) and, more importantly, that "There should be more government regulation of advertising" (Item 25).

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics and Results of t-tests for Attitude Variables

Item	Group						95% CI for		t	df
	UK			US			Mean Difference			
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n				
1	2.93	.790	344	2.84	.861	242	-.044, .227	1.328	584	
2	3.85	.963	344	4.17	.848	242	-.468, -.165	-4.111**	584	
3	3.37	.913	344	3.62	.900	242	-4.00, -.101	-3.291**	584	
4	3.66	.935	340	3.83	.907	240	-.319, -.013	-2.134*	578	
5	3.35	1.102	344	3.74	1.017	242	-.557, -.205	-4.252**	584	
6	3.63	.867	341	3.71	.869	241	-.230, .057	-1.179	580	
7	3.77	.959	345	3.75	.924	242	-.130, .182	.328	585	
8	2.92	1.050	343	3.18	.964	242	-.428, -.093	-3.057**	583	
9	3.08	1.061	343	3.23	1.027	241	-.329, .017	-1.775	581	
10	2.41	1.008	345	2.49	.904	241	-.233, .086	-.910	584	
11	3.29	.993	342	3.12	.913	242	.012, .329	2.118*	582	
12	3.17	.837	332	3.16	.952	240	-.135, .160	.162	570	
13	2.48	.922	341	2.51	.915	240	-.184, .121	-.408	579	
14	3.97	1.045	343	3.93	.974	242	-.122, .213	.530	583	
15	2.82	1.051	341	2.73	1.007	241	-.077, .264	1.079	580	
16	3.29	1.020	340	3.42	.988	239	-.291, .043	-1.463	577	
17	3.71	1.044	343	3.74	.931	241	-1.99, .131	-.408	582	
18	3.20	1.090	344	3.15	1.106	241	-.131, .231	.542	583	
19	2.66	.393	342	2.94	1.021	240	-.422, -.120	-3.426**	580	
20	2.95	.963	343	2.83	.928	241	-.029, .284	1.600	582	
21	3.07	1.039	334	2.81	1.039	241	.080, .431	2.866**	573	
22	3.74	1.050	342	3.61	1.020	241	-.037, .305	1.535	581	
23	2.53	1.174	341	2.69	1.157	241	-.358, .028	-1.681	580	
24	3.66	1.230	343	3.54	1.264	240	-.088, .323	1.120	581	
25	3.17	1.100	340	2.70	1.159	241	.283, .655	4.955**	579	
26	2.47	1.211	341	2.40	1.099	241	-.126, .259	.680	580	

Note: all t-tests are two-tailed, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Respondents expressed only slight agreement there should be more government regulation of advertising and were neutral regarding the number of ads to which they are exposed. Still, it is important to assess the extent to which other attitudes might help explain these key ones. As one might predict with a fairly large sample, almost all the items were positively and significantly correlated with the two dependent variables of interest: the extent to which respondents agreed there should be less advertising (Item 23) and hold attitudes favouring more government regulation (Item 25). Although many of the coefficients are trivial (i.e., $r < .20$), five indicate weak but conceptually important relationships (see Table 3). The three strongest correlates with respondents' negative attitudes toward the amount of advertising they see are beliefs that advertising is socially wasteful (Item 13), that television is the worst form of advertising (Item 26), and that too much advertising is false and misleading (Item 3). More importantly, agreement that there should be more government regulation of advertising is most strongly correlated with agreement that ads should be more realistic (Item 17) and that television is the worst form of advertising (Item 26).

Table 3
Statistically Significant Pearson Correlation Coefficients

Item	23	25	3	13	17	26
23. There should be less advertising.	---					
25. There should be more government regulation of advertising.	.239	---				
3. Too much of today's advertising is false and misleading.	.276	.114	---			
13. Advertising is socially wasteful since it only transfers sales from one manufacturer to another without actually adding any new money to the economy.	.301	.106	.213	---		
17. Advertisements should be more realistic.	.165	.298	.288	.058	---	
26. Television is by far the worst form of advertising.	.356	.278	.113	.239	.127	---

Note: all significance tests are one-tailed and statistically significant ($p < .01$).

Discussion, conclusions, and recommendations for future research

With their extensive use of digital media and the widespread adoption of Internet and social media marketing during their young lifetimes, no previous generation has been exposed to as much advertising as today's young people. Marketers, their advertising agencies, and other decision makers should be mostly encouraged by the findings of this study. Creating advertising that effectively captures attention, changes attitudes, and motivates behaviour will remain the challenge it has always been. However, findings indicate that widely shared negative attitudes toward advertising's economic and social consequences and ethical limitations among today's young adults are unlikely to represent serious problems for advertisers or advertising's status as a societal institution. Findings suggest, however, that some problematic issues do exist. For instance, Millennials often question the truthfulness of the advertising they see, and these attitudes are significantly more negative in the US compared to the UK. Survey respondents in both countries, moreover, agree with older cohorts that advertising often causes people to buy things they shouldn't and encourages materialism.

In conclusion, this study measured attitudes in general and did not focus on online or mobile media, consumer privacy, “native advertising”, increases in the installation and use of online ad-blocking software or other trends and developments. However, it’s important to note that the existence of widespread negative attitudes toward such trends and tactics would likely have been captured with this survey. Perhaps most obviously, negative attitudes in regard to the proliferation of advertising in social and mobile media would likely have been reflected in attitudes toward the amount of advertising to which Millennials are exposed. Likewise, negativity regarding the transparency of social media user data collection and subsequent use in consumer targeting would likely have been captured with the item measuring respondents’ attitudes toward the desirability of further regulation. Still, future research should continue to investigate emerging issues that could encourage negative attitudes, and, ideally, utilise more generalizable samples.

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