How do Teenagers in Bahrain Respond to Online Advertising

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Abstract
In recent years, advertising has discovered a new forum: the Internet. Billboards are old-fashioned in the face of animation and live, digital streaming. The power inherent in this new advertising tool is hard to measure. And like all new things, it has yet to be perfected. The degree to which Internet advertising actually informs and influences Internet users depends on various factors, especially those that affect recall and recognition capacities. Marketing firms face a slew of questions. What is the most effective viewing mode? Does duration of viewing have significant effect on the success of an ad? How important is ad style, and is it more important than ad content? This study examines these key questions, among others, in an effort to understand which methods of Internet advertising make the greatest impact on the youth in Bahrain. Results have been surprising in some ways. But one thing holds true: in Internet advertising, as in all advertising, aesthetic appeal plays a crucial role.
Keywords Online advertising, Pop-Up ads, Banner ads, In-Text ads, online ad effectiveness, teenagers attitudes, teenagers attention, teenagers internet usage.

1. Introduction

Can you remember a time when you did not use the Internet on a daily basis? Perhaps. But if you have children, they would probably have a hard time imagining a world that functioned without cellphones and easy access to the worldwide web. In just a few decades, the Internet has become a global force, informing the way we learn, connect with friends, conduct research, even shop. It is thus no surprise that firms have found cyberspace to be an invaluable marketing opportunity. The diversity in the age, culture, and socioeconomic background of Internet users provides marketing firms access to a wide range of target groups. The rise of the Internet brings with it the promise of a revolutionized approach to advertising.

Although Internet advertising is in itself quite pervasive, little is known about the attitudes of Internet users toward online ads. To what degree do these ads influence their buying decisions? Which ads are most effective, and why? Can Internet advertising have a detrimental effect on consumer attitudes? Current literature reveals a bias in the field, as almost all studies that examine online advertising have been conducted in Western countries while other regions, especially Arab countries, lack such studies entirely. This study intends to increase the scope and depth of the existing literature by focusing exclusively on Internet advertising in Bahrain.

Bahrain is a particularly apt location for such a project, as the past five years have evidenced a significant increase in nation-wide Internet usage. Bahrain's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority's (TRA's) recent survey, conducted in October 2011, examined the usage and access of different telecommunication services by residential users, including fixed lines, mobile phones, and Internet services. The 2011 results reveal a staggering rise in Internet usage in Bahrain, especially when compared with the survey's 2007 results. The percentage of homes that have access to the Internet is up to 67% from 53% in 2007, and 73% of the survey's respondents claimed they used the Internet daily. But even more remarkable is the rise in broadband subscribers. While only 2% subscribed to broadband services of 2 Mbps or more in 2007, 65% of Internet users are now subscribers. In addition, the percentage of Bahrainis who access the Internet through a mobile device has leapt from 18% to 47% in the past four years. These results all point to the emerging importance of Internet usage in Bahrain.

The objective of the current study is to build on the TRA's findings and determine the effect of online advertising on Bahraini teenagers. To begin, the study aims to ascertain a basic understanding of how Bahraini teenagers relate to the Internet in general by answering the following questions: a) how much time, on average, do they spend surfing the net; b) what is the main purpose of their Internet usage; and c) what are their favorite search engines? Once this framework has been established, the study will narrow its focus onto online advertising. The first goal will be to clarify the attitude of Bahraini teenagers to online advertising in general by examining how often they notice online advertisements and how much interest they exhibit toward these ads.

The study will then get more specific in its examination of what style of ads Bahraini teenagers find most appealing, and what factors contribute to the attractiveness and effectiveness of the online ads. These results will inform the study's assessment of the positive and negative consequences of online advertisements on Bahraini teenagers, and to what extent the ads influence their buying decisions.

Ultimately, this project aims not only to evaluate the current state of online advertising and its effect on the teenagers of Bahrain, but to look toward the future. By analyzing the study's results, we hope to understand the challenges the field of online marketing will face in the coming years.

2.   Literature Review

The Internet has become a booming global marketplace (Mack, 2000; Chung and Ahn, 2007) and marketing firms are eager to target web users through online advertisements. The limitless potential of the worldwide web makes it an exciting but also a daunting forum for most firms (Lim, et al., 2011; Smith, 2011). In order to develop successful online ads, firms need to possess a thorough understanding of the factors that influence consumer response to their ads. As a result, extensive studies have been designed to determine how various types of online ads influence not only the response but the behavior of different viewers. Schlosser et al. (2008) conducted a study on 400 university students aimed to discern the attitude of young consumers towards online ads. Results showed an even split; one third of the students liked, disliked, and felt neutral the ads, respectively. While most respondents deemed the ads to be informative and trustworthy, they did not find them particularly compelling. A variety of different elements impact consumer attitudes to online ads, ultimately forming their buying decisions. When testing viewer recall capacity, Danaher & Mullarky (2003) observed that the longer a person is exposed to a web page containing a Banner advertisement, the more likely that person is to remember that banner advertisement. An additional study by Hrywna et al. (2007) examined online ads related to tobacco and geared specifically toward adults. The study found that these ads had higher rates of recall due to the fact that adults spend many hours online and were exposed to the ads for long periods. This result points to the importance of duration of viewing in determining an online ad's success.

Style and aesthetic appeal prove equally important. The composition of an ad and the visual allure of its images play a crucial role in the viewer's ability to recall content (Levie & Lentz, 1982). Najjar (1996) found that illustrations were more effective than text in ads aiming to communicate spatial information, a claim that is supported by other studies (Levi et al., 1987; Gorn & Goldberg, 1991; Baggett, 1979). Text without illustrative enhancement is a lot less likely to stick. Additional studies examining the effects of multi-media in advertising reported that the appeal and overall success of an ad surges if music is incorporated with visual elements (Gorn & Gardner, 1985; Alpert & Alpert, 1990). Ads that employ animation have a consistently higher number of hits than non-animated ads (Bayles & Chaparro, 2001). They have been proven to more effectively engage viewers' attention, thus enhancing ad recall (Li & Bukovac, 1999).

But overall, the results of these studies have been discouraging. Most respondents consider online ads to be disturbing (Reed, 1999), annoying (Wegert, 2002; Smith, 2011), and intrusive (Li et al., 2002). Although many also find online ads to be less intrusive than traditional media advertising (Rust & Varki, 1996), little praise or interest in online ads has been exhibited in studies. Even more unsettling is the study by Li et al. (2002), which found that the negative attitudes to online ads compel Internet users to avoid returning to certain sites. This claim is supported by Abernethy (1999), who reported that negative attitudes not only affect brand perception, but lead to ad avoidance. Such a finding is also supported by a study conducted in Britain, reported that most internet users consider online ads to be disturbing and irritating, and 73% of them avoided web sites with intrusive ads (Precision Marketing, 2008). When the ad is online, the only way to avoid it is to avoid the host site itself. Maccoy et al. (2007) went even further and asserted that negative response to online ads interferes with viewers' retention not only of ad content but of site content, as well. If these results are accurate, then online advertising is largely disadvantageous to host websites, and will not play a lasting role in the future of the worldwide web.

Pop-Up ads were found to be especially irritating and detrimental to recall, especially when compared with the more subtly-designed Banner ads. In this respect, Elkin (2002) reported that many internet users consider Pop-Up ads the most intrusive online advertising format. This is supported by Grosso (2003) who states that 'the most annoying thing about online advertising is the ubiquity of Pop-Ups that cannot be controlled'. Yet despite their tendency to annoy, some studies found that Pop-Up ads are recalled more readily than Banner ads (Diao & Sundar, 2004).

How does personality type come into play? According to Jin & Villegas (2007), the success of an online advertisement hinges on several personality variables. There are types who will tend to be distracted and annoyed by ads, and types that will find ads amusing. The varying levels of viewer-interactivity that the ads demand also have an effect on the response of different types of viewers (Schumann et al., 2000; Keng & Lin, 2006; Raman, 1996; Fortin, 1997; Klein, 1999). Some studies reported a direct relationship between

interactivity and effectiveness (Keng & Lin, 2006). Other studies examined how interactivity and aesthetic appealed worked in conjunction to enhance the effectiveness of an ad (Coyle & Thorson, 2001). It was also reported that an ad's style should complement the product advertised (Klein, 1998).

Of course all these ads are presented within a context, against a visual backdrop and specific layout. Studies have found that website structure has a direct effect on participants' attitude, memory, and behavioral intentions toward online ads (Chung & Ahn, 2007). Dreze & Zufryden, (1997) also examined the effect of website design, and observed that factors such as background color, picture size, and audio elements all play a decisive role in consumer perceptions of online ads.

Hoy & Lwin (2007) studied how disclosure statements, which are often present in Banner ads, affect viewer perception of the ads. They discovered that lengthy disclosures presented in unbroken blocks of text frequently repel users from noticing the ad's content. Many reported that they avoid clicking on ads due to their aversion to long disclosures. They also observed that the presence of hyperlinks on Banner ads tend to direct users' attention away from the content. Scrolling only seems to heighten this negative response, as only a very small minority of users will use the scroll function to access further information (Nielsen & Loranger, 2006). Although some studies report that consistent repetition of online ads will increase the likelihood of users noticing disclosures, especially when users are navigating a specific website rather than aimlessly browsing (Chatergee, 2005; Stewart & Martin, 2004), these results clearly evidence that all pertinent information in Banner ads should be displayed at the top or center of a web page to increase the number of viewers who actually process the information.

To increase the effectiveness of Banner ads, some companies attempt to incorporate animation in their online Banner ads, hoping to break through the ad clutter. To find out effects of the degree of animation on the internet users' recall and attitudes toward ads, Yoo et al. (2005) designed an experiment whose results showed a negative relationship between degree of animation and recall and attitude toward online Banner ads. To break through the ad clutter and attract the attention of internet users, some companies target children and teenagers through 'advergames' which is blending online advertising with interactive games (An et al., 2012).

Moller et al. (2011) studied effectiveness of online Banner advertising through the influence of cultural and socio-demographic variables. The authors collected online data from 7775 respondents from 34 countries. Their findings suggest that in designing online Banner ads, companies must consider the socio-cultural background of different markets.

Shin et al. (2012) studied the role of four antecedents in shaping attitudes and behavior of children in South Korea in response to online advertising: Family communication, time spent on the internet, online ad skepticism, and perceived internet competency. The study reported that children who found to have negative attitudes toward online ads are those with more skepticism toward online ads, who spent less time on internet, and were less competent in using internet.

3.   Methodology and Sample

A total of 500 subjects participated in this study. Respondents were intermediate and high school students in Bahrain between the ages of 13 and 19 years, 44% of were male and 56% female.

The primary data needed for this study was collected through personal interviews and a questionnaire designed specifically for this purpose. The questionnaire included 31 questions intended to generate data related to the study's objectives, such as Internet users' awareness, attention, attitudes, interest, action, evaluation, and criticism of online ads. The data was then integrated and analyzed with the goal of understanding the factors that influence online ad effectiveness. Although most of the questionnaires were completed on-site, some students preferred to take them home and submit them several days later.

4.   Findings

In establishing the average amount of time Bahraini teenagers spend on the Internet, this study expected to find that young, educated people spend a great deal of time using the Internet. While results indicate that, on average, the teenagers in Bahrain spend about 15 hours per week surfing the worldwide web (approximately two hours per day), a noticeable proportion of the teens (32%) have reported that they use the Internet less than 5 hours a week, or less than one hour per day. This result was largely unexpected, and raises the question of why Internet-usage is so low amongst such a large proportion of Bahraini teenagers. Are their schedules so overloaded that school students have little extra time to spend surfing the net? Do youth nowadays prefer alternate forms of entertainment, such as those provided by smart phones and gaming devices? The answer to these questions requires further investigation.

For the purposes of this study, it is more beneficial to focus on the results that fall more in line with expectations. A large number of respondents (19%) claimed they use the Internet between six and ten hours per week, 24%

state their usage falls between 11 and 20 hours peer week, and 25% claim they use the Internet for more than 20 hours in per week.

Examining more detailed results about how Bahraini teenagers use the Internet has revealed that most use it for chatting (68%), closely followed by entertainment (62%), and then searching for topics of interest (41%). There was a significant drop thereafter, wherein the respondents claimed they use the Internet most for shopping/gathering product information (18%) and other activities (10%). Results also show that people who primarily use the Internet for chatting and entertainment spend a greater amount of time online.

The vast majority of participants prefer to access the Internet from home (96%), while 2% of them go online at friends' houses, and 2% from public venues, such as coffee shops. A similarly noteworthy preference was exhibited when students were asked to name their preferred search engine. Google is clearly the favorite search engine of teenagers in Bahrain; 89% of the participants have reported that they use Google on a regular basis. Yahoo placed a far second with just 42% of participants claiming to use it, followed by 13% for Live Search, and 5% for other search engines.

The above statistics provide a foundation for the more specific results that this study strove to obtain. When the topic of online advertising was introduced, a startling majority of participants (80%) claimed that they rarely pay attention to online ads, and only 5% claimed that they always notice the ads. The remaining 15% stated they consistently ignore online advertisements.

It can then clearly be inferred that a significant proportion of Bahraini teenagers show little to no interest in online ads. This inference is supported by the statistics regarding the frequency with which the participants actually click on the Internet advertisements that appear on their screens. The majority reported that they almost never click on ads to access more information, with 42% stating they never do and 51% stating they sometimes do. Only 7% of respondents answered that they "always" open online ads to get more information. The picture was hardly more promising when the participants were asked how often they opened online ads for entertainment purposes. A mere 10% claimed they opened ads because the content might be entertaining, while 48% of them stated that they never find online ad content entertaining enough to open, and 42% said they sometimes do.

The lack of interest that participants exhibited in online ads is manifested through avoidance. When asked, "When you see a Pop-Up online ad, how often do you click on its window to close it?" 65% responded that they "always" close the ads, 30% said they do so "sometimes," and only 5% claimed that they never close the ads. This general lack of attention to and interest in online ads leads to negative purchase decisions. When respondents were asked: "Have you ever made a buying decision as a result of online ads?" the responses were overwhelmingly negative: 86% responded "never," 12% said "sometimes," and just 2% claimed that online "always" influence their purchasing decisions.

The next question the study strove to answer was to what extent people get annoyed when they see online ads. The outcome was different for different types of ads. According to the results, the majority of respondents (72%) find Pop-Up ads to be annoying all the time, 21% find them to be annoying "sometimes," while only 7% don't find Pop-Up ads annoying at all. These results clearly delineate Pop-Up ads as the most irksome type of ad. The results showed that In-Text ads are generally considered to be less irritating, as the majority (42%) finds them to be bothersome only "sometimes," followed by 26% who claimed they are never bothered by Banner ads, and 32% who find them consistently annoying. Banner ads fared the best in this regard, as only 12% of respondents find In-Text ads to be "always" annoying. Most of them (62%) find them to be occasionally irritating, and (26%) claim that In-Text ads "never" bother them. Regardless of the minor differences in percentages, one fact is overwhelmingly clear: in general, respondents find online advertisements to be an annoyance.

The negative attitude toward online ads exhibited by most participants is further evident in their responses to questions concerning the different characteristics of these ads. The highest proportion of respondents (70%) found online ads to be tedious and boring. A summary of participant responses is exhibited in Table 1.

Table 1: Teenager's attitudes towards online ads

Online ad characteristics	Yes	No
Fun to see	34%	66%
Important	15%	85%
Informative	24%	76%
Useful	11%	89%
Make you curious	22%	78%
Boring	79%	21%
Entertaining	28%	72%
Interesting	19%	81%

Among the characteristics reported in Table 1, it can be noticed that "fun to see" scored the highest in terms of positive attitudes (34%), closely followed by "entertaining" (28%). On the other hand, negative attitudes were significantly dominant, with 79% of participants deeming the ads "boring," followed by 89% answering "no" when asked if the ads were "useful."

As expected after noting the Bahraini teenagers' absence of interest in online ads, the recall scores were very low for all three types of online ads investigated in this study. For all three types of ads, the majority of respondents exhibited radically low recall capacity (62% could recall nothing of the viewed Pop-Up ads, 58% could recall nothing of the viewed Banner ads, and 74% could recall nothing of the viewed In-Text ads). While half the respondents (40%) were able to recall some content from Banner ads, only 30% of respondents were able to recall some content from Pop-Up ads, and 23% from In-Text ads. In terms of being able to recall a majority of the content viewed, Pop-Up ads took the lead with 8%, followed by Banner ads (5%) and In-Text ads (3%). The numbers correspond inversely the types of ads the youths find most annoying, implying that the more an advertisement annoys a viewer, the greater the potential for recall.

Not surprisingly, a significant majority of the respondents reported that they find online ads to be intrusive. Results found that In-Text ads (63%) are considered to be less intrusive than Pop-Up ads (94%) and Banner ads (69%). But the majority of respondents consider online advertisements to be intrusive in general.

It is reasonable to infer from these results that online advertisements are unwelcome distractions that irritate viewers. Consequently, the ads may have a negative effect on the viewers' attitudes toward the brand advertised, as well as the manufacturer of that brand. However, it was found that the negative effect of intrusiveness may be lessened if the online ads are related to the subject matter of the website the recipient is viewing. Approximately 60% of the teenagers in question supported this claim.

While other studies have found that online ads create a negative interference with viewers' ability to remember site content, the findings of this study do not fully support this claim. Many of the respondents reported that online ads have nothing to do with their ability to remember website content: 55% said Pop-Up ads have no effect, 58% said that Banner ads have no effect, and the majority (64%) said that In-Text ads have no effect. A very low percentage of participants claim that online ads do have a significant effect on their ability to recall website content. Of all three types, Pop-Up ads, also considered the most intrusive, were found to have the greatest significant effect on content recall (24%). But the percentages for Banner ads and In-Text ads were much lower—12% and 8%, respectively. A considerable group of participants found the ads to have some effect on recall capacity, with 30% claiming Banner ads have some effect, 21% claiming Pop-Up ads have some effect, and 28% claiming In-Text ads have some effect.

It seems from the findings that, regardless of the negative attitudes Bahraini teenagers harbor towards online ads, such ads do not prevent them from returning to the sites that host the ads. Only 7% of the participants said that annoying online ads "always" cause them to avoid host sites, while the majority (83%) said "never" and 10% said "sometimes."

The generally negative response toward online advertising spills over into the realm of aesthetics, as most respondents find online ads to be unattractive. When asked to rate the attractiveness of different types of ads, 72% of respondents said they find In-Text ads to be unattractive versus a mere 3% who claim to find this style of ad attractive. A similar discrepancy was found in the respondents' assessments of Banner ads, wherein 58% deemed them unattractive and 20% deemed them attractive. While the participants found Pop-Up ads to be slightly more attractive than the other two ad styles (26% found them attractive and 46% found them unattractive), the results reveal that online ads in general have a low-aesthetic appeal.

Results indicate that the participating teenagers generally find online ads containing both images and text more effective than those dominated by just one medium. When asked about what they find most effective in terms of ad composition, 24% of participants said they prefer picture dominant ads, 2% claimed to prefer text dominant ads, and 74% claimed they were most responsive to ads that combined text and image in balanced proportion. These responses imply that text-dominant advertisements are not effective at all.

Another factor that influences online ad attractiveness is the position of the ad on the screen. Survey results found that the best location for an online ad is the "top-right" of the screen (58%), followed by "top-middle corner" (39%). All other positions scored very low (5%–9%).

Yet the overall effectiveness of online ads does not depend solely on the ads' style, or positioning, or even its content. A variety of factors play a significant role in eliciting positive viewer responses. In this study alone, 13 such factors were examined to determine their importance in affecting the success of online ads. Table 2 ranks these factors in terms of their importance, and provides the corresponding percentages.

Table 2: Factors determining effectiveness of online ads (ranked in terms of their importance with "1" being the best, "2" is the second best, etc.)

Question: What is the importance of the following factors in determining effectiveness of online ads?		
Factors	**Rank**	**% responded in favor of the factor**
Ad size	1	72%
Ad type	2	65%
Product advertised	3	60%
Ad location on webpage	4	58%
Flashing ads	5	52%
Viewing mode	6	49%
Ad color	7	42%
Web page background	8	40%
Ability to close ads	9	38%
Site browsed	10	38%
Webpage context	11	32%
Duration of page viewing	12	30%
Relevance of ad to page content	13	28%

5.   Conclusion

This study's findings suggest that the teenagers in Bahrain spend an average of 15 hours per week on the Internet, and most of that time is used for chatting and entertainment purposes. A majority of the participants access the Internet from their homes, and their preferred search engine is Google.

This study also provides clear evidence that online ads do not attract the attention or the interest of Internet users between the ages of 13 and 19. The participants in this study expressed consistent negative attitudes towards online advertisements, and their response upon witnessing ads on the screen was almost unanimous: they closed the ads without reading them. An overwhelming majority of the participants deemed all three types of online ads examined in this study (Pop-Up, Banner, and In-Text) to be annoying and intrusive, particularly Pop-Up ads. But participants did concede that the ads were somewhat less intrusive if related to the subject matter of the website.

The findings indicate that online ads, in general, do not interfere with the participants' ability to remember site contents. This could relate to the minimal attention most participants pay to online ads when they do appear. The lack of attention and overall negative esteem in which most participants regard such ads resulted in the participants exhibiting low recall for the online ads they encountered while surfing the web. It was also found that negative attitudes toward certain ads may cause Internet users to avoid the websites that host those ads.

A positive correlation was found between the participants' general attitudes toward online advertising and their buying decisions. As the lack of interest in online ads suggests, the majority claimed that online ads have little influence on their buying decisions.

Most participants said they consider online ads, and In-Text ads in particular, to be aesthetically unappealing. When asked what type of medium they find most attractive and effective, participants exhibited a clear preference for ads containing a balanced combination of text and image, and those positioned at the top-right of the screen.

Finally, findings suggest that the most important factors in determining online ad effectiveness are ad size, ad style, the product advertised, and the location on webpage.

The results of this study are, for the most, congruent with the relevant literature. The ineffectiveness of many online ads can be pinpointed to Internet users' negative attitude toward online advertising, exhibited through a lack of attention to and absence of interest in the ads in general, resulting in a low recall capacity. A number of unattractive qualities present in the ads also play a role in deterring viewers from considering the information the ads present. Consequentially, online ads have proven to have little to no effect on consumer buying decisions.

These results paint a rather gloomy picture for the future of online advertising. What then, should advertisers do? It would be imprudent for marketing firms to abandon a media tool with as much global potential as online advertising. Rather, this study suggests that the field is in dire need of innovation and creativity. The concept of online advertising must be redesigned in such a way as to pique the interest of viewers, to entertain them, to seduce their imaginations. This is easier said than done. The questions of how this can be achieved, when, and by whom, remain unanswered. A winning solution to this problem demands bold and revolutionary thinking. The future of online advertising can be exciting; it's up to us to meet the challenge.

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