

# Attitude Towards Advertised Brands: A Comprehensive Guide

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## Introduction and Definition of Attitude toward the Ad ( $A_{ad}$ )

The concept of **Attitude toward the Ad ( $A_{ad}$ )** represents a fundamental construct within consumer psychology and advertising research. It is formally defined as a predisposition or tendency to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner to a particular advertising stimulus during a specific exposure occasion. Unlike traditional models of persuasion that focused solely on the cognitive processing of message arguments,  $A_{ad}$  acknowledges that the execution, tone, and overall aesthetic quality of the advertisement itself elicit emotional and evaluative responses that significantly impact consumer behavior. This attitude is distinct from, though causally related to, the **Attitude toward the Brand ( $A_b$ )**. While  $A_b$  reflects the consumer's overall evaluation of the product or service itself,  $A_{ad}$  captures the immediate feelings and judgments evoked by the vehicle--the advertisement--used to convey the brand message. Understanding this differentiation is crucial because a highly persuasive message can fail if the advertisement vehicle generating the message is perceived negatively, leading to avoidance or rejection of the subsequent brand evaluation.

Historically, advertising effectiveness research often operated under the assumption that persuasion was primarily a rational process, where consumers weighed product attributes presented in the message. The introduction of  $A_{ad}$  in the early 1980s, driven by researchers like Shimp, Mitchell, and Mackenzie, marked a significant paradigm shift. These studies demonstrated empirically that the affective reaction to the advertisement often served as a powerful mediator, or even a direct cause, of the attitude formed toward the brand. For instance, an advertisement featuring pleasant music or an attractive spokesperson might generate positive feelings ( $A_{ad}$ ), which are then non-consciously transferred to the brand, even if the message content provided little new factual information. This recognition validated the massive investments advertisers make in creative execution, humor, and production quality, confirming that how something is said is often as important as what is said in the context of commercial communication.

Furthermore,  $A_{ad}$  is generally considered to be context-specific and transient, though its impact on long-term brand equity can be profound. An individual's attitude toward a specific commercial for Brand X may change upon repeated exposure, or it may differ depending on the program context in which it is viewed. Despite its potential transience, the immediate positive or negative evaluation embedded in  $A_{ad}$  initiates the consumer processing sequence, determining whether the consumer will pay attention to the brand arguments or simply tune out the message. Therefore,  $A_{ad}$  serves as an initial gatekeeper for the message and significantly influences the depth and nature of subsequent cognitive elaboration regarding the advertised product, making it a pivotal variable in comprehensive models of advertising response.

## Theoretical Foundations: The Dual Mediation Hypothesis (DMH)

The most influential theoretical framework explaining the relationship between  $A_{ad}$  and  $A_b$  is the **Dual Mediation Hypothesis (DMH)**, developed and rigorously tested by Mackenzie, Lutz, and Belch. The DMH posits that  $A_{ad}$  influences the final attitude toward the brand ( $A_b$ ) through two distinct and simultaneous pathways. This model moved beyond simple linear causality, providing a nuanced understanding of how affective and cognitive processes interact in response to advertising stimuli. The first pathway, often termed the direct or affective route, suggests that positive feelings generated by the advertisement itself are directly transferred to the brand, independent of the consumer's thoughts about the product attributes. This is a powerful mechanism, particularly relevant in situations characterized by low consumer involvement or where the product category is primarily hedonic.

The second critical pathway involves the mediation of cognitive responses. In this route,  $A_{ad}$  influences how the consumer processes the substantive arguments presented in the advertisement. Specifically, a favorable attitude toward the ad tends to suppress counter-arguing--the tendency for consumers to generate negative thoughts in opposition to the claims made by the advertiser. Conversely, a poor or irritating advertisement may trigger immediate skepticism and defensive processing, leading to increased counter-arguing and rejection of the message claims, even if those claims are objectively strong. Thus,  $A_{ad}$  functions indirectly by biasing the consumer's assessment of the source credibility and the believability of the product claims, subsequently shaping the cognitive structure (Brand Cognitions,  $C_b$ ) that underlies  $A_b$ .

The DMH emphasizes that  $A_{ad}$  is not merely an endpoint but a crucial mediator. Empirical research consistently supports the notion that  $A_{ad}$  exerts both a direct impact on  $A_b$  (affective transfer) and an indirect impact via  $C_b$  (cognitive bias). The relative strength of these two paths, however, is highly contingent upon situational variables, especially the consumer's level of involvement with the product category. For instance, when purchasing laundry detergent (low involvement), the direct affective path ( $A_{ad} \rightarrow A_b$ ) might be dominant. However, when selecting a new automobile (high involvement), while the affective path remains relevant, the indirect path ( $A_{ad} \rightarrow C_b \rightarrow A_b$ ) through biased cognitive processing becomes substantially more important, as consumers are actively scrutinizing the evidence presented.

## Antecedents of Attitude toward the Ad: Execution and Context

The formation of  $A_{ad}$  is influenced by a complex array of factors, which can be broadly categorized into execution factors, message factors, and contextual factors. **Execution factors** relate to the creative elements of the advertisement that are peripheral to the core product claims. These include the use of music, visual aesthetics, cinematography, casting choices (source

attractiveness, credibility, and likability), use of special effects, and overall production quality. High-quality execution tends to elicit positive aesthetic responses, increasing the pleasure derived from viewing the advertisement, thereby generating a higher  $A_{ad}$ . For example, the strategic use of nostalgic music can evoke positive, warm memories, transferring that affective response directly to the ad evaluation. Conversely, poor lighting, jarring sound effects, or an unlikable spokesperson can rapidly drive  $A_{ad}$  scores downward, regardless of the strength of the underlying product message.

**Message factors**, while primarily designed to influence  $C_b$ , also contribute significantly to  $A_{ad}$ . These include the perceived informativeness of the advertisement, its clarity, its relevance to the viewer's needs, and its complexity. Advertisements perceived as highly informative tend to generate positive  $A_{ad}$  because they satisfy the viewer's need for knowledge, leading to a sense of utility and appreciation for the communication effort. However, messages that are overly complex or confusing can generate frustration and cognitive overload, resulting in a negative  $A_{ad}$ . Furthermore, the perceived manipulation or lack of honesty in the message can trigger defensive responses, where the viewer feels the advertiser is attempting to deceive them, leading to strong negative affect toward the advertisement itself.

Finally, **contextual factors** play a subtle yet powerful role in shaping  $A_{ad}$ . These are variables external to the advertisement itself, primarily encompassing the programming or media environment surrounding the ad placement. The mood induced by the television show, magazine article, or website content immediately preceding the advertisement can spill over and influence the consumer's attitude toward the ad. For example, an advertisement placed within a highly engaging and positive program (e.g., a comedy show) is likely to benefit from mood congruence, inheriting some of the positive affect, resulting in a higher  $A_{ad}$ . Conversely, placing an advertisement within depressing or highly contentious content may suppress positive  $A_{ad}$  formation. Other critical contextual factors include advertising clutter (the number of competing ads in a break) and the frequency of exposure, as repeated exposure can initially increase  $A_{ad}$  due to familiarity but eventually lead to wear-out and irritation.

## Components and Dimensionality of $A_{ad}$

Attitude toward the Ad is not a monolithic construct but rather a multi-dimensional psychological phenomenon, encompassing both cognitive and affective components. The **affective component** refers to the emotional and feeling states generated during the advertisement exposure. These feelings can range widely, including warmth, joy, excitement, irritation, boredom, or disgust. Researchers often categorize these affective responses into broader dimensions such as pleasure, arousal, and dominance. It is the immediate, visceral reaction that often occurs prior to deep cognitive analysis, and this component is particularly influential in shaping  $A_{ad}$  for products where emotional utility (hedonic value) is paramount. The strength and valence of these affective

responses largely dictate the success of image-based or transformational advertising campaigns that aim to associate the brand with a specific feeling or lifestyle.

The **cognitive component** of  $A_{ad}$  involves the thoughts and beliefs a consumer generates specifically about the advertisement itself, rather than the product. These are often evaluative judgments regarding the execution quality and purpose of the communication. Examples of cognitive responses directed at the ad include thoughts like, "That was a creative concept," "The music was distracting," or "This ad was clearly biased." These thoughts reflect the consumer's assessment of the advertisement's utility, credibility, and overall quality as a piece of communication. In high-involvement situations, consumers are more likely to generate detailed cognitive responses about the ad, which then feed into the overall  $A_{ad}$  score. A highly informative ad may score well on the cognitive dimension ("It was useful"), even if the execution is not particularly entertaining.

The interplay between these dimensions determines the final  $A_{ad}$  score. While the affective component often provides the initial emotional thrust, the cognitive component provides the rational justification or critique. For many advertisements, especially those utilizing humor or strong emotional narratives, the affective dimension is the primary driver. However, sustained positive  $A_{ad}$  often requires that the advertisement also avoids generating negative cognitive responses, such as perceived manipulation or annoyance due to excessive repetition. Measurement of  $A_{ad}$  typically uses semantic differential scales that attempt to capture both dimensions simultaneously (e.g., Good/Bad, Favorable/Unfavorable, Pleasant/Unpleasant), reflecting the holistic nature of the attitude formed.

## The Moderating Role of Involvement and Motivation

Consumer involvement and motivation serve as crucial moderators of the  $A_{ad}$  process, fundamentally altering the pathways through which attitude toward the ad impacts brand attitude. This relationship is best understood through the lens of elaboration likelihood models (ELM). When consumers exhibit **high involvement**--meaning the product is personally relevant, carries high risk, or requires significant financial outlay--they are motivated to engage in central route processing. In this scenario, consumers focus intently on the quality of the message arguments (product claims, evidence, facts). While  $A_{ad}$  still plays a role, particularly in biasing the perception of the message (the indirect path of the DMH), the primary determinant of  $A_b$  becomes the cognitive assessment of the product attributes ( $C_b$ ). A highly irritating ad might still achieve persuasion if the core message arguments are overwhelmingly strong and relevant to the consumer's high-priority needs, though the effort required for persuasion is significantly increased.

Conversely, when consumers exhibit **low involvement**--when the product is inexpensive,

frequently purchased, or holds low personal relevance--they are less motivated to expend cognitive effort. They rely on peripheral route processing. In this context,  $A_{ad}$  becomes a vastly more potent predictor of  $A_b$ . Peripheral cues, such as the attractiveness of the source, the pleasantness of the music, or the general positive feeling generated by the ad, serve as simple heuristics for brand evaluation. The consumer essentially bypasses deep scrutiny of product claims and uses their positive attitude toward the advertisement as a substitute for a reasoned attitude toward the brand. For low-involvement goods, therefore, the direct affective transfer pathway ( $A_{ad} \rightarrow A_b$ ) dominates the persuasion process, making creative execution and positive emotional tone the most critical strategic elements for advertisers.

Furthermore, the concept of motivation relates not only to product involvement but also to the consumer's goal during exposure. If a consumer is motivated to seek information (informational motivation), they are more likely to focus on the cognitive aspects of the message and the ad's perceived informativeness. If they are motivated primarily by entertainment or emotional gratification (hedonic motivation), the affective component of  $A_{ad}$  gains prominence. Advertisers must therefore strategically tailor their creative execution to match the likely motivational state of their target audience in the media context. An advertisement for a financial service placed during a news program (high informational motivation) must prioritize credibility and informativeness to secure a positive  $A_{ad}$ , whereas an advertisement for a soft drink during a sports match (higher hedonic motivation) can rely more heavily on positive affective cues and imagery.

### $A_{ad}$ and Purchase Intention

The ultimate objective of advertising is to influence **Purchase Intention (PI)**, which is the consumer's conscious plan or decision to purchase a specific brand.  $A_{ad}$  contributes to purchase intention primarily through its strong causal relationship with  $A_b$ . The generally accepted hierarchy of effects suggests that a positive attitude toward the ad leads to a positive attitude toward the brand, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of purchase intention. Therefore,  $A_b$  typically functions as the direct antecedent to PI, mediating the effect of  $A_{ad}$ . If an advertisement successfully generates high  $A_{ad}$  and subsequently high  $A_b$ , the consumer is primed to include that brand in their consideration set and exhibit a higher propensity to buy when a purchase opportunity arises.

However, under certain specific conditions,  $A_{ad}$  can exert a direct, unmediated influence on Purchase Intention. This direct link is most likely to occur in scenarios involving low-risk, impulse purchases, or when the consumer is exposed to the ad immediately prior to the purchase decision (e.g., point-of-sale advertising). In these cases, the consumer may not have the time or motivation to fully integrate  $A_{ad}$  into a stable  $A_b$ . Instead, the immediate positive affect generated by the ad serves as a temporary, salient cue that directly drives the intention to acquire the product.

This phenomenon highlights the power of emotional resonance in time-constrained decision-making processes.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of  $A_{ad}$ 's influence on PI, particularly over time. While  $A_{ad}$  is highly predictive of initial  $A_b$  formation, the persistence of the attitude is crucial. If there is a significant delay between advertisement exposure and the purchase opportunity, the strength of the  $A_{ad}$  effect may decay, especially if the consumer is subsequently exposed to competing advertisements or negative word-of-mouth. Furthermore, the link between  $A_{ad}$  and PI can be broken if the product experience itself is disappointing. A brilliant advertisement can generate high PI, but if the product fails to deliver, the long-term  $A_b$  and future PI will suffer, demonstrating that  $A_{ad}$  is a powerful tool for initial brand entry but cannot compensate for poor product quality in the long run.

## Measurement and Methodological Considerations

Accurate measurement of  $A_{ad}$  is critical for assessing advertising effectiveness, yet it presents several methodological challenges. The standard approach involves the use of **semantic differential scales**, where respondents rate the advertisement on a series of bipolar adjectives. Common scales used to capture the overall attitude include:

Good / Bad

Favorable / Unfavorable

Pleasant / Unpleasant

Like / Dislike

These scales are typically seven-point measures designed to capture the holistic evaluative judgment. To capture the multi-dimensional nature of  $A_{ad}$ , researchers often supplement these overall measures with scales focusing specifically on the cognitive (e.g., Believable/Unbelievable, Informative/Uninformative) and affective (e.g., Warm/Cold, Irritating/Not Irritating) dimensions, allowing for factor analysis to separate the underlying components.

A primary methodological challenge lies in the difficulty of capturing genuine, non-conscious emotional responses. While self-report measures capture explicit attitudes, they are susceptible to **social desirability bias** (respondents reporting what they believe is expected) and rely on the consumer's ability to articulate their feelings accurately. To address this, researchers increasingly employ implicit measures and physiological techniques. Implicit Association Tests (IATs) can measure the strength of automatic associations between the advertisement and positive or negative concepts, bypassing conscious filtering. Furthermore, physiological measures, such as Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) or facial coding analysis, are used to track arousal and emotional valence experienced during exposure, providing objective data on affective engagement that complements self-report data.

Another consideration is the timing of measurement.  $A_{ad}$  is highly dynamic. Measuring it immediately after exposure captures the initial, vivid reaction, which is often crucial for immediate purchase decisions. However, measuring it after a delay or after multiple exposures allows researchers to track the effects of wear-out and persistence. Researchers must also control for the context of exposure, ensuring that laboratory settings do not artificially inflate or deflate the attention paid to the advertisement compared to real-world viewing conditions, where distraction and clutter are high.

## Strategic Implications for Advertisers

The robust findings concerning  $A_{ad}$  have profound strategic implications for advertising management. Foremost among these is the necessity for advertisers to treat the creative execution of the advertisement as a strategic variable equal in importance to the message content. For products in highly competitive, low-differentiation markets (parity products), the ability to generate a positive  $A_{ad}$  through superior entertainment value, aesthetic appeal, or emotional resonance is often the single greatest source of competitive advantage. In these scenarios, the goal shifts from communicating unique selling propositions (USPs) to creating unique feeling propositions (UFPs).

Secondly, the DMH dictates that advertisers must rigorously pre-test advertisements not only for message comprehension but specifically for the affective responses they generate. Identifying potential sources of negative  $A_{ad}$ --such as perceived irritation, source dislike, or confusion--is essential, as a negative  $A_{ad}$  can effectively neutralize even the most compelling product claims. Pre-testing allows for the identification and modification of elements that might trigger counter-arguing or avoidance behaviors, thus optimizing the advertisement's ability to act as a positive gatekeeper for the brand message.

Finally,  $A_{ad}$  informs media scheduling and placement strategy. Recognizing that  $A_{ad}$  is moderated by context, advertisers can strategically select media environments that are mood-congruent with the desired affective response. For instance, placing heartwarming campaigns during programs known to elicit positive family emotions can maximize the probability of positive affect transfer. Furthermore, managing the frequency of exposure is key. While some repetition is necessary for memory encoding, excessive frequency leads to wear-out, diminishing returns on  $A_{ad}$ , and eventually negative irritation. Strategic planning involves finding the optimal exposure threshold where familiarity is achieved without incurring the costs of viewer annoyance, thereby maintaining a positive long-term attitude toward the advertising effort and, consequently, toward the brand.