

# **ATTITUDE TOWARDS ADVERTISING AMONG YOUNG ADULTS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BY ETHNICITY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to determine the attitude of young adults towards advertising from the perspective of ethnicity. Specifically, it seeks to find out how young adults from the Iban, Chinese and Malay communities perceive advertising so as to understand the implication of ethnicity and culture on the subject matter. A seven-factor belief model is adopted to decompose the theory of reasoned action. As such, it provides theoretical basis to explain similarities and differences of beliefs and attitude towards advertising across the three ethnic groups. Given its quantitative stance, a questionnaire-based survey was administered at universities. 316 out of 400 copies were then collected for analyses. The findings show that despite cultural differences embedded in ethnicity, beliefs and attitude of the three ethnic groups towards advertising are found largely to be similar. They can only be set apart by the effect of beliefs on the formation of attitude towards advertising. Implications and future studies are provided.

**Keywords:** Advertising; Attitude; Belief; Culture; Ethnic; Young Adults.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Advertising by nature is a socio-cultural phenomenon (Wang & Sun, 2010). While it is commonly known to play a key role in economic development, it also stimulates societal activities, and affects even the manner people live (Pollay & Mittal, 1993; Wang, *et al.*, 2009). Given the rapid development of digital technology, younger generations are becoming more exposed to advertisement than those who were of the same age a decade ago (Purosothuman, 2008; Tai, 2007). Information computerization, especially seen in the Internet and social media, is believed to have accelerated the shaping of modern society (Kluver, 2000). As a result the ways they receive and convey messages, and develop relationships have changed drastically in recent years (Syrett & Lammiman, 2004). This makes the understanding of young consumers' view about advertising more intricate but, at the same time, essential than ever before.

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Cultural impact on advertising view has been well documented in marketing literature (Durvasula & Lysonski, 2001; La Ferle, *et al.*, 2008). In fact culture and advertising are profoundly connected with each other (Wang & Sun, 2010). Given the scenarios of both communication technology and cultural effect, this study is aimed to investigate the attitude of young adults towards advertising in the contemporary setting. Understanding young adults is of particular interest because they are the most highly Internet-connected age group (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). As culture is embedded in ethnicity, how young adults from different ethnic groups perceive advertising will be looked into. Therefore the three most dominant ethnic groups in Sarawak, namely the Iban, Chinese and Malay, which account for more than 80% of the total population in the state, are included in the study. It is believed that the attitude of the present young adults towards advertising, and the implication of cultural differences on the subject matter will be elucidated. Hence knowledge about advertising in the context of young consumers with multi-ethnic and cultural background will be extended.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Attitude towards Advertising

For many years, the topic of attitude towards advertising has received substantial attention in the marketing literature because such attitude has been shown to have effect on attitude towards specific advertisement, attitude towards brands and purchase intention (Ha, *et al.*, 2011; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; Mehta, 2000; Mittal, 1994; O'Donohoe, 1995). Attitude towards advertising is largely known as "a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner to advertising in general" (Lutz, 1985, p. 16). In order to articulate the formation of attitude towards advertising, past studies have also delved into its antecedents and determinants in order to assess their relationships. One of the most recognized preceding variables found in earlier empirical studies is the belief about advertising. It is described as specific statement about the attributes of an object (Brackett & Carr, 2001; Ducoffe, 1996; Pollay & Mittal, 1993; Wang, *et al.*, 2009). Hence, it is able to provide more explanation to attitude towards advertising. As such the theory of reasoned action (TRA) developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1980) is adapted to provide theoretical basis to investigate beliefs and attitude towards advertising in the present study.

The seven-factor belief model by Pollay and Mittal (1993) is adopted to construct beliefs about advertising. The model has been used extensively in advertising-related studies because of its relevance and validity (Korgaonkar, *et al.*, 2000; Korgaonkar, *et al.*, 2001; Munusamy & Wong, 2007; Ramaprasad & Thurwanger, 1998). Two dimensions are proposed in this model, and they are personal utility, which are made up by four factors, and socioeconomics, which are in turn made up by three factors. Among the seven factors, product information describes advertising as a provider of information. Social role and image reflects the belief that advertising affects people's lifestyle and development of social status. Hedonism or pleasure indicates that advertising can be amusing and entertaining. Good for the economy denotes the view that advertising facilitates economic activities and improves standard of living (Belch & Belch, 2009). Notwithstanding its positive aspects, advertising is also criticized for promoting materialism, falsity and corrupting values especially among the youths. Therefore attitudes

toward advertising are measured by both positive or negative beliefs about advertising (Singh & Vij, 2007).

## **2.2. Culture and Ethnicity**

Culture reveals group-wide patterns of human thoughts and practices (Drake, 1994; Lau, *et al.*, 2001; Legoh'ere, *et al.*, 2009). Goodenough (1971) described culture as a set of beliefs or standards, shared by a group of individuals that have an impact on the behaviour of an individual. Similarly, Hall (1976) defined it as "the way of life of people, for the sum of their learned behavioural patterns, attitudes, and material things" (p. 20). Ethnicity, in turn, involves a common cultural heritage, a sense of belongingness that is passed from one generation to another (Renzetti & Curran, 1998). As ethnicity is a dominant embodiment of culture (Usunier, 2000), it is apparent that the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of individuals are hinged upon the ethnic groups that they belong to (Legoh'ere, *et al.*, 2009). Due to its prevailing influence, cultural value priorities can be seen in the manner of living in each ethnic group (Schwartz, 1999), and they become traditions and norms to advocate what is appropriate and what is not in various situations.

One specific and sizeable group of young-adult population in Malaysia is university students (De Run, *et al.*, 2010; Mokhlis, 2009). Even though their income comes mainly from educational loans and parental contributions, they make up a substantial percentage in the country's population, and have a considerable level of purchasing power and influence now and again (Beard, 2003; Morton, 2002; Wolburg & Pokrywcznski, 2002). As one of the most populous states in Malaysia, Sarawak is predominantly made up by the Iban (30%), Chinese (27%) and Malay (24%) communities, and they hold distinctive ethnic identities and cultural values (De Run, 2007; Statistics, 2010). Hence, university students from these three ethnic groups are selected purposively to assess their present attitude towards advertising and find out the implication of cultural differences on such attitude.

## **3. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND HYPOTHESES**

Notwithstanding the profound effect of culture, technological advancement, especially in the meteoric rise and use of digital products among the young adults, and its subsequent impact on them cannot be overlooked (Eze & Lee, 2012; Waller & Fam, 2000). This phenomenon is believed to have increased worldwide exchanges of information, including national and cultural resources (Al-Rodhan, 2006), thus intensifying human reliance and conformity. Despite having marketing-related studies which use ethnic groups in Sarawak as understudied samples (De Run, 2007; Ting & De Run, 2012b; Ting, *et al.*, 2012), little is known about the implication of culture on attitude of the present young adults towards advertising. Moreover, studies on advertising attitude of Malaysian young adults represented by university students are still found wanting when compared to the West (Munusamy & Wong, 2007; Ramaprasad, 1994), and they do not necessarily show consistent results (De Run & Ting, 2013; Kwek, *et al.*, 2010; Ramaprasad, 1994; Rashid & Sidin, 1987). Hence it is mandatory to keep up with the current view of this specific segment by ethnicity to gain insights on how they perceive advertising.

Due to the differences of culture embedded in ethnic groups, it is postulated that the seven factors of belief about advertising across the Iban, Chinese and Malay young adults will be different; hence the following hypothesis:

*H1: Beliefs about advertising among the young adults across three ethnic groups will be significantly different.*

Since beliefs about advertising are postulated to be different, attitude towards advertising and the effect of beliefs on attitude towards advertising across the three ethnic groups will also be different; hence the following hypotheses:

*H2: Attitude towards advertising among the young adults across three ethnic groups will be significantly different.*

*H3: The effect of beliefs about advertising on attitude towards advertising among the young adults across three ethnic groups will be different.*

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

Students from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak (SUTS) were chosen to constitute the population of the study. The former is the most populous public university and the latter the most populous private university with its own campus in Sarawak. Moreover, although these students are from all over Malaysia, Sarawakian students from different divisions and districts in the state can be easily found and approached on campus. Students who are from foreign countries and have outgrown young adulthood were not included in the study. Using past studies on young adults as a general guide, the age range of between 19 and 25 was used to describe young adults for this study.

Judgmental and snowball sampling approaches were used to ensure that the intended people were selected purposefully to accomplish the aim of the study (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007), and the numbers of students sampled from the three ethnic groups reflect the actual distribution of population in Sarawak (Ting & De Run, 2012a). A self-administered questionnaire based survey was utilized to collect data. A seven-point Likert scale where 1 indicates 'strongly disagree' and 7 indicates 'strongly agree' was adopted for all items pertaining to beliefs and attitude towards advertising. All continuous items were randomized to address issues with common method variance. Before finalizing the questionnaire, a pre-test of 30 respondents using debriefing method was conducted to eliminate potential problems with questionnaire design, and ensure that the questions would accomplish what was expected of them (Bazera, 1996; Hunt, et al., 1982). A total of 400 copies were distributed on the two campuses concurrently by enumerators, and 316 usable copies were collected in two weeks time in March 2013. Data were then keyed-in into the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) for subsequent analyses.

## 5. FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the demographic details of 316 young adults sampled from the public and private universities. Given the number of questionnaire copies distributed and collected, a response rate of more than 60% is adequate to ensure survey quality and minimal effect of response error (Richardson, 2005; Nulty, 2008).

**Table 1:** Respondent Profile

	Frequency	Percent
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	132	41.8
Female	184	58.2
<i>Ethnic</i>		
Iban	118	37.3
Chinese	105	33.2
Malay	93	29.4
<i>Age</i>		
19	21	6.6
20	64	20.3
21	81	25.6
22	40	12.7
23	40	12.7
24	32	10.1
25	38	12.0

Descriptive analysis was used to obtain Mean values for the seven factors of belief and attitude towards advertising. They are presented both as an overall result and by ethnicity as shown in Table 2. In addition, Cronbach's alpha values for each factor are presented to indicate their reliability scores.

**Table 2:** Mean and Reliability Values by Ethnicity

Factor	Item	Overall		Iban		Chinese		Malay		Cronb. Alpha
		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Information	3	5.52	1.03	5.48	1.00	5.48	1.04	5.62	1.07	79.6
Social Role	3	4.81	1.21	4.86	1.34	4.54	1.03	5.04	1.19	78.3
Hedonism	3	4.97	1.16	5.01	1.17	4.89	1.11	5.03	1.19	72.9
Economy	3	4.92	1.15	4.89	1.23	4.78	1.10	5.10	1.07	79.5
Materialism <sup>R</sup>	4	3.29	1.39	3.23	1.53	3.31	1.27	3.36	1.35	86.4
Falsity <sup>R</sup>	3	3.47	1.35	3.42	1.39	3.54	1.37	3.46	1.29	84.6
Corruption <sup>R</sup>	2	3.57	1.30	3.51	1.28	3.62	1.32	3.60	1.31	78.8
Attitude	3	4.92	0.93	4.90	0.95	4.86	0.88	5.02	0.96	73.6

**Notes:** <sup>R</sup> indicates reverse-coding used therefore Materialism should read as Not Materialistic, Falsity as Truthfulness and Corruption as Not Corrupted to Youth

In order to test whether the factors under investigation differ significantly across the three ethnic groups, one-way ANOVA with post-hoc comparison using the Duncan's range test was used. Table 3 shows the Mean and F values of beliefs and attitude towards advertising by ethnicity.

**Table 3:** Differences in Beliefs and Attitude towards Advertising by Ethnicity

Factor	Iban (Mean)	Chinese (Mean)	Malay (Mean)	F value
Information	5.48	5.48	5.62	0.622
Social Role	4.86	4.54a	5.04b	4.491*
Hedonism	5.01	4.89	5.03	0.464
Economy	4.89	4.78	5.10	1.972
Materialism <sup>R</sup>	3.23	3.31	3.36	0.228
Falsity <sup>R</sup>	3.42	3.54	3.46	0.193
Corruption <sup>R</sup>	3.51	3.62	3.60	0.248
Attitude	4.90	4.86	5.02	0.708

**Notes:** \*  $p < 0.05$ ; <sup>R</sup> indicates reverse-coding used therefore Materialism should read as Not Materialistic, Falsity as Truthfulness and Corruption as Not Corrupted to Youth. Means with different superscripts indicate that they are significantly different at  $p < 0.05$ . Means without superscripts are not significantly different from the Means with superscripts.

In order to assess the effect of each belief factor on attitude towards advertising, Multiple Linear Regression was used. Table 4 shows the effect of the seven factors of belief about advertising on attitude towards advertising by ethnicity.

**Table 4:** Effect of Beliefs about Advertising on Attitude towards Advertising by Ethnicity

Factor	Attitude		
	Iban (Beta)	Chinese (Beta)	Malay (Beta)
Information	0.091	0.429**	0.300**
Social Role	0.174*	0.000	-0.021
Hedonism	0.235**	0.106	0.219*
Economy	0.294**	0.201*	0.278**
Materialism <sup>R</sup>	0.278**	-0.081	-0.056
Falsity <sup>R</sup>	-0.003	0.294**	0.059
Corruption <sup>R</sup>	0.038	0.123	0.013
F value	11.613	13.329	9.107
R <sup>2</sup>	0.425	0.490	0.429
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.388	0.454	0.382

**Notes:** \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (one-tailed); <sup>R</sup> indicates reverse-coding used therefore Materialism should read as Not Materialistic, Falsity as Truthfulness and Corruption as Not Corrupted to Youth.

## 6. DISCUSSIONS

At the outset, the findings have shown young adults from the three ethnic groups, despite being culturally different, have similar level of agreement on beliefs about advertising. All of them agree that product information is the most dominant belief about advertising while social role, hedonism and good for a nation's economy are almost as important. They have also expressed their consensus on the negativity about advertising. They believe advertising is causing the society to become more materialistic, and is not necessary truthful. Although they are still in their early adulthood, they believe advertising can corrupt values among the youngsters.

However the only significant difference that can be observed in the test of difference is the belief about social role of advertising between the Chinese and Malay young adults. As the Malays generally put a lot of emphasis on Islamic faith and the way of life (Asmah, 1983), these young adults may have responded to the current social trend differently from the Chinese. Apart from that, it can be concluded that the beliefs of Iban, Chinese and Malay young adults about advertising are largely similar. However, due to the difference observed between the Chinese and Malay young adults on the social role of advertising, the first hypothesis is thus partially supported. Moreover, notwithstanding the profound impact of culture on values and behaviours, the attitudes of the Iban, Chinese and Malay towards advertising are found to be not significantly different. As such, the second hypothesis on the presupposed difference in attitude is not supported.

The last findings, in turn, infer that the specific beliefs that actually contribute to the formation of attitude towards advertising are likely to be dissimilar by ethnicity. Although such comparison does not imply empirical differences across ethnic groups, it is still useful in revealing which attribute of advertising has stronger effect on attitude towards advertising across the ethnic groups. Aside their similarities, the Ibans' attitude towards advertising tend to be more strongly affected by social role and materialistic aspect of the advertising. As for the Chinese, the falsity of advertising plays a major role in shaping their attitude towards advertising. The findings about the Malays do not seem to suggest there is any standout belief about advertising when compared to that of the Ibans and Chinese. This may well imply the three ethnic groups in Sarawak have mutually adopted their cultural resources, with the Malays being the most dominant ethnic group (Brumbaugh, 2002; De Run, 2007). Since the effects of beliefs on their attitude are observed to be dissimilar, the third hypothesis is thus supported.

## 7. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Despite being in different ethnic groups with distinctive cultural values and practices, the Iban, Chinese and Malay young adults seem to have shared common beliefs about advertising. Subsequently, they hold similar attitude towards advertising. Only the social role presented by advertising is found to be significantly different between the Chinese and Malay young adults. This may well suggest that the development of information technology in recent years have gradually infiltrated the stronghold of culture. Consequently, young adults begin to share their cultural resources, issuing in stronger mutual adoption of values and practices (Sorrells, 2012). This justifies why a common set of beliefs about advertising in a broader sense and in a national context which surpasses the boundary of ethnicity is found in this study. From

the managerial perspectives, managers and marketers need to devise marketing strategy and advertising campaign meticulously to include what is shared across ethnic groups, and preclude what is not. In particular, when targeting the young adults who have extensive access to the Internet and digital products, it is imperative to know what attributes of advertising all ethnic groups believe and adopt. It is equally important to recognize what sets them apart and causes them to avert due to cultural differences. This will ensure advertising effectiveness in multi-cultural societies.

This study is limited in a sense that it only looks at attitude towards advertising in general. Moreover, it is conducted only in the state of Sarawak. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized to young adults in Malaysia as a whole and in other countries. Furthermore, the study does not provide empirical evidence on the causal link between the development of information technology and the impact of cultural values. Therefore, a nationwide study will be much needed to reassess the view of young adults about advertising in a more comprehensive manner in order to articulate the implication of technological phenomena and cultural adoption on this matter. Comparative studies between young and full adults, and adolescents can also be conducted so as to determine if generational differences play a part in defining the characteristics of the young adults.

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