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ABSTRACT

To examine the impact of offline URL advertising, a quantitative study among internet users and non-users is carried out. For internet users, the results reveal a significant impact on each level of the hierarchy of effects. Respondents remembering an offline URL ad are more aware and have a higher knowledge of the site, show a more positive attitude towards the site, and indicate a higher intention to visit/revisit the site. Remarkably, offline URL advertising not only is able to attract internet users to the site the first time, but also to generate an impact over and above site experience by increasing the likelihood of revisiting the site. For internet non-users, offline URL advertising is significantly less effective.

INTRODUCTION

The past five years have witnessed a boost in the use of URL (Uniform Resource Locator) addresses in offline advertising messages. Practitioners clearly seem convinced of the value of using URLs in traditional media to attract consumers to their website. However, except for Maddox and Mehta (1997), little academic research has been undertaken to measure the impact of URLs in advertising. Maddox and Mehta (1997) observed a positive impact of URLs in mass media advertising on visiting the website as well as on the company's image. Their study was done in 1997 in the US, a gap the current research wants to fill in. The objective of the current study is to extend the study of Maddox and Mehta (1997) in several ways. Not only will a larger set of outcome variables (cognitive, affective and behavioral measures) be measured, also another culture characterised by a less pronounced internet penetration (Belgium instead of the US) will be investigated in a time in which Internet and dot.coms are not that hot anymore. Indeed, during the past five years a lot has changed in the Internet world. General Internet penetration has risen, but at the same time the Internet has lost some of its magic while Internet users have become used to the medium.

Throughout history, hardly any technology has spread more rapidly than web technology. In the year 2000, close to five million websites epitomizing over a billion web pages were accessible through the Internet (Chaffey et al. 2000), while currently more than 162 million computer systems are connected to the Internet (ISC 2002). According to a 36-country study by Taylor Nelson Sofres Interactive (TNSi) some 31% of the total adult population are Internet users, while the number of Internet shoppers worldwide has increased by 50% in the year 2001 (Pastore 2001). A recent study in the US and Belgium shows that, although Internet penetration in Belgium is lower than in the US, in both countries some 50% of the Internet users also buy on the Web (Breneman et al. 2003). Although the Internet population forms an attractive target group for marketers, the overload in the amount of available web sites dramatically reduces the chance that the Internet users end up at a non-communicated website.

One way to resolve this problem is to put web addresses in traditional media, a method many managers seem to believe in. Business people express the importance of offline advertising by recognizing its impact on cognitive (awareness by a larger public), affective (brand image, ad and brand attitudes) and conative (traffic, purchase) components of the traditional hierarchy of effects model for this type of advertising. Sandom from OgilvyOne New York claims that a company cannot build a brand (image) simply on the Internet, but that

it has to go offline (Freeman 1999). According to Ken Burke, CEO Multimedia Live, it is imperative to drive traffic to your site immediately after creation: “*However, the method the most overlooked and underestimated to do this is offline communication. A mistake made by many, is solely marketing e-commerce sites online...*” (Amire 2000). According to others, a website needs a proactive approach in order to attract visitors. E-mail might be a good means to try to motivate people to visit a website, but traditional media can and should also be used to perform this function since these media have a broader penetration and do facilitate the searching process for the consumer who is on-line (Bandyopadhyay 2001). The same point of view is shared by other professionals advising not to “put all your eggs in the Internet basket” (Krishnamurthy 2000). Not only do managers say they believe in offline URL advertising, they also seem to practice what they preach. Indeed, since the prime-time TV audience is filled with potential customers, several marketers have gone offline in order to woo customers who are not already familiar with “www.yourcompanynamehere.com” (Rich 1998). As a consequence, Web addresses in traditional media are becoming more and more prevalent (Chaffey et al. 2000) and enormous amounts of money are being spent in this field worldwide (Kover 1999). A content analysis of the top 20 US-magazines showed that of the 1,249 ads in the sample 42 % contained a web address (Pardun and Lamb 1999). This percentage varied according to the target group of the magazine. Some 80% of the ads in Business Week include a web address, while only 11% of the ads in Woman’s Day feature the company’s URL address. Also in Belgium, a country with low Internet penetration and low daily users average, the spending of in particular dot.com companies in offline media is growing (Anonymous 2000). A possible explanation for this is that advertisers are trying to educate the market, next to building a brand image right from the beginning. Nevertheless, in countries with high Internet penetration (USA, UK, Sweden), companies also massively choose for offline campaigns.

Although the foregoing clearly illustrates that business people believe in offline advertising and spend huge amounts of money in it, little academic research has been undertaken to measure the role and effect of URLs in advertising. Several studies give an indication by focussing on the medium the visitor claimed to have used to discover the website (e.g. Crawford 2000). However, this does not tell anything concerning the effectiveness of offline media, because the extent to which these media are employed to promote the website is not taken into account. Certain media may be mentioned less often either because they are used to a lesser extent, or because they have less impact. Therefore, to measure the effectiveness of offline advertising, one should start from websites for which

offline advertising is used. This approach is followed by Maddox and Mehta (1997) in a study on the role of web addresses in advertising among Internet users and nonusers. Their study reveals that web addresses in advertising are noticed by 83% of those surveyed, and of those 83% some 13% also visited the website afterwards. Moreover, the mere existence of an URL in an ad seems to enhance the advertiser's image. More specifically, advertisers with web addresses are perceived as more customer-oriented, more responsive, more informative, more "high-tech", more sophisticated and more likely to stay in business longer.

In view of the enormous budgets spent on offline URL advertising and the importance of the subject both to advertiser researchers and practitioners, the objective of the current study is to extend the Maddox and Mehta study to investigate the impact of offline URL advertising on a consumer's awareness, knowledge, attitude and (re)visiting intention. In other words, the impact of offline URL advertising will be investigated on a cognitive, affective and behavioral level. We believe such a study is called for since up to now only one study in this domain has been carried out. Moreover, that study was conducted five years ago. As a consequence, current knowledge is limited to one country and one point in time. Maddox and Mehta (1997) conducted their study in the US in the middle of the Internet hype. It remains to be demonstrated that similar effects can be observed 1) in another culture, namely in a European country with a lower Internet penetration such as Belgium, 2) in another time, namely at a moment where the Internet and dot.coms are not "hot news" anymore, and 3) in another situation, namely one in which general Internet penetration has risen enormously and people have become used to the Internet.

In the pages to follow, we briefly discuss the research questions and research hypotheses. Next, we report the results of a Belgian study on internet users in which the impact of recalling offline URL advertising on consumers' cognitive, affective and behavioral level is investigated. The study is complemented with an offline telephone survey amongst internet non-users for which the effect of offline URL advertising on site awareness and site knowledge (cognitive level) will be reported.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

For several decades it was assumed that consumers process information in a rational, systematic way in which every attribute of a brand is weighed (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975, Barry and Howard 1990). Afterwards the attention shifted from cognition to affect. By now, the fact that feelings and attitudes towards an ad (Aad) can be carried over to the brand (Ab) and to purchase intention (Pi), is well accepted (Morris et al. 2002, Pham 1998, Pham et al. 2001, Schwarz and Clore 1996, Shimp 1981, etc.). However, not only did cognition lose importance in favour of affect, also behavior or product experience was put more in the spotlights (Deighton, Henderson and Neslin 1994, Kempf and Lacznik 2001). Importantly, it is recognized that one theory cannot explain it all. Several integrative theories have been formed, the most famous being the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo 1986), the FCB-grid (Vaughn 1986), the Rossiter-Percy Grid (Rossiter and Percy 1997), the integrative framework of MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) and the Relevance-Accessibility Model (Baker and Lutz 2000), all proclaiming different information processes depending on the product, the situation and/or the consumer. However, all these models have some basic elements in common, namely cognition, affect and behavior. Not surprisingly, the conclusion of the academic literature to date is that all three basic elements are important and should all be incorporated in measuring advertising effectiveness (Barry 2002, Vakratsas and Ambler 1999), a suggestion that will be followed in the current study.

Not only in an offline context, but also in an online context the impact of advertising on cognitive, affective and behavioral measures, and the relation between attitude towards the ad, or for that matter attitude towards the site, and attitude towards the brand has been demonstrated (e.g. Briggs and Hollis 1997, Bruner and Kumar 2000, Chen and Wells 1999, Gordon and De Lima-Turner 1997, Philport and Arbittier 1997). The foregoing studies all pertain to the relation between online ad exposure and online brand or site evaluation, while the current study focuses on the impact of offline ad exposure on awareness, knowledge, attitude and (re)visiting intention of the promoted website.

Because of a scarcity of empirical results in this domain, following hypotheses are largely based on the results obtained in a fully offline (offline ads and offline brand responses) or fully online (online ads and online site responses) context, and on the offline/online study by Maddox and Mehta (1997):

- H1a: Users of the Internet are more likely to remember offline URL advertising than non-users.
- H1b: Users of the Internet are more likely to have a better knowledge of websites mentioned in offline URL advertising than non-users.

Maddox and Mehta (1997) report that 83% of their respondents mentioned that they had seen advertising that contained a Web address. No differences were found between Internet users and non-users. Since there is quite a difference between knowing that there are advertisements around carrying Web addresses and remembering that a certain company or brand used such advertising, we expect to find differences between Internet users and non-users for the latter measure. In light of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) and the relevance-accessibility model (Baker and Lutz 2000), we expect the URL to function as a more relevant argument for Internet users than for Internet non-users. As a consequence, Internet users are more likely to process this information, to store it in memory and to remember it afterwards.

- H2: Internet users, as well as Internet non-users, remembering offline URL advertising show a higher level of knowledge of the promoted website than consumers who cannot remember offline URL advertising.

One of the reasons why companies use URL advertising is to educate and inform consumers that the site exists. A consequence of the abundance of websites available on the Internet is that most sites are relatively unknown by the consumers at large. Therefore, consumers who remember offline URL advertising, either because they considered this message as relevant (central processing) or because the message was repeated many times (peripheral processing), can be expected to have a higher awareness and knowledge of the promoted Website than consumers who cannot remember the URL advertisement.

H3a: There is a significant positive relation between the attitude towards the ad and the attitude towards the promoted site of Internet users remembering offline URL advertising.

To what extent can the attitude towards an offline URL advertisement (Aad) carry over to the attitude towards the site (Ast)? This question is closely related to the question to what extent the attitude towards a regular ad transfers to the attitude towards the promoted brand. Concerning the latter, an ad may influence brand evaluations in two different ways. First of all, an ad may induce an assimilation of brand responses toward what the ad context made the consumer feel or think (i.e. the assimilation effect). Secondly, consumers may partial out the effect of the ad induced affect or thoughts (i.e. result in no effect, or a contrast effect in case of over adjustment) (De Pelsmacker, Geuens and Anckaert 2002, Martin, Seta and Crelia 1990, Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1997, Schmitt and Zhang 1998, Venkataramani Johar and Simmons 2000). Contrast effects are likely to occur only when ad information or ad-evoked feelings are deemed irrelevant or inappropriate for the promoted product, and when consumers are able and willing to expend cognitive resources to processing the message (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993, Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1997, Meyers-Levy and Malaviya 1999). Because of the extra effort the consumers have to expend to partial out the impact of an ad, assimilation effects seem to be more the rule and contrast effects the exception. In this study, no provoking or extreme ads will be tested. Therefore, we expect an assimilation effect in the sense that Aad carries over to the attitude towards the site.

H3b: Internet users remembering offline URL advertising indicate a more positive attitude towards the promoted site than Internet users who do not remember offline URL advertising

Several researchers indicate that advertising may generate predictive or diagnostic framing effects (Deighton et al. 1994, Smith 1993, Kempf and Laczniak 2001). A predictive framing effect occurs when consumers evaluate a product experience more positively when they have been exposed to an ad prior to their product experience than when they were not exposed to an ad before. A diagnostic framing effect can be defined as evaluating a product experience more favourably when a person is exposed to an ad after product experience than when no ad followed their product experience. Both in case of predictive and diagnostic framing effects, we can expect that consumers remembering offline URL advertising express

a more positive attitude towards the site than consumers who cannot remember such advertising.

H4: Internet users remembering offline URL advertising show a higher intention to (re)visit the website than Internet users who do not remember offline URL advertising.

According to Rossiter and Percy (1997) communication effects start with brand awareness, and the impact of brand awareness on brand choice and brand purchase is substantial. In the assumption that consumers remembering offline URL advertising, have a higher awareness of the Website, they are also likely to have a higher visiting intention than consumers who do not remember offline URL advertising. Maddox and Mehta (1997) found that 13% of the persons remembering a URL ad actually visited the site. Although no numbers were available of people who did not remember such advertising, it seems likely that the percentage of visitors arriving at a non-communicated website is lower.

RESEARCH METHOD

An online questionnaire, available in three different versions, was announced on 17 Belgian websites during a period of 6 weeks. Depending on the preference of the site-owner, banners, buttons, news items or pop-ups were used as announcements of the questionnaire. For each version of the questionnaire, the 17 participating sites were included, next to a varying list of about 12 sites per version. This resulted in examining 53 sites in total. Besides an online study, telephone interviews were conducted in order to also include non-users of the Internet. In order to reduce the interviewing time, only questions concerning the 17 sites participating in the study were included.

Samples. In total, 8,798 respondents filled in the online questionnaire, of which 59.2% are male and 40.8% female. 34.2% of the respondents are younger than 24 years, 54.6% between 25 and 44 years and 11.1% is older than 44 years. 28% of the participants holds a university degree, 34.5% possesses a college degree and 37.1% finished secondary school. Concerning experience with the Internet there is a balanced distribution: 14.7% of the respondents have less than one-year experience with the Internet, 23.7% between one and two

years, 22.4% between 2 and 3 years, 16.2% between 3 and 4 years, and 23.0% more than 4 years. Since people who do not use the Internet cannot fill in an online questionnaire, non-users were interviewed by telephone. The interviews took place in the same month as the online questionnaire was posted on the websites. A quota sample of 407 consumers, representative for the Belgian population on age, gender and place of residence (Flanders, Wallonia), was interviewed. Males constitute 46% of the sample and women 54%. About 12.5% of the respondents are younger than 24 years, 39% is aged between 25 and 44 years and 51.5% is older than 44 years. 7.11% of the participants hold a university degree, 17.4% has a college degree, 36% finished secondary education, and almost 9% received a vocational education.

Measures. On a cognitive level five variables were measured. “*Unaided site awareness*” is measured by asking respondents to list some websites they know. “*Unaided advertising recall*” probes whether respondents remember any URL advertising in offline media (print, television, magazine and/or radio). “*Aided advertising recall*” reflects for each site in the questionnaire whether respondents remember an offline advertisement for the site. “*Aided site awareness*” is determined by asking the respondents whether they have ever heard of each of the sites listed in the questionnaire. The variable “*category knowledge*” is the result of the respondents categorising the participating sites using a given inventory (portal site, Internet shop, recruiting site, auction site, etc).

With respect to the affective level both Aad and Ast were measured. The *attitude towards the ad* (Aad), is measured by means of a 5-point Likert type scale, ranging from 1= totally disagree till 5= totally agree. The scale contains 7 items based on amongst other Geuens and De Pelsmacker (1999), Lord, Lee and Sauer (1995) and Ellen and Bone (1998) (Coefficient Alpha = .85). *Attitude towards the site* (Ast) is measured by means of the 5-item scale developed by Chen and Wells (1999) (Coefficient Alpha = .73). Each item was measured on a 5-point Likert type scale, ranging from 1= totally disagree till 5= totally agree.

Finally, the “*intention to (re)visit the site*” is measured by asking the respondents whether they will (re)visit the participating sites in the future on a five point scale (1= certainly not, 5 = absolutely).

For non-users of the Internet the questionnaire was restricted to unaided site awareness, unaided advertising recall, aided site awareness, aided site recall, site knowledge, and intention to go online.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Comparing Internet users and non-users, we see that all Internet users are able to name some websites (unaided site awareness), while 82.4% of the non-users is not able to mention any website at all ($\chi^2_{1,95\%} = 7472.934$, $p < .001$). According to the first hypothesis, Internet users are more likely to remember offline URL advertising and to know more about the advertised sites than Internet non-users. Looking at unaided advertising recall, 86.1 % of the Internet users is able to mention an offline URL ad, while only 4.7 % of the Internet non-users can do so ($\chi^2_{1,95\%} = 1791.895$, $p < .001$). Constricting the analyses to the 17 sites investigated for both Internet users and non-users, 46.3 % of the Internet users remember having been exposed to an offline ad mentioning the URL of the site, while this is only 19.9 % for the Internet non-users ($\chi^2_{1,95\%} = 951.320$, $p < .001$). So, for aided advertising recall the difference is less pronounced, but still very significant. Aided site awareness reflects the following: 70.4 % of the Internet users is aware of the site as compared to 25% of the non-users ($\chi^2_{4,95\%} = 14797.519$ $p < .001$). Concerning site knowledge, 62.8 % of the Internet users fulfil the classification task successfully versus only 8.9 % of the Internet non-users ($\chi^2_{1,95\%} = 4295.823$, $p < .001$). On the basis of the foregoing, we can conclude that the data lend support for H1 and contradict the results of Maddox and Mehta (1997). Offline URL advertising seems to have a more pronounced impact in Internet users than non-users.

Insert Table 1 About Here

To test H2, hypothesizing that Internet users and non-users remembering offline URL advertising are more knowledgeable of the site than consumers who do not remember offline URL advertising, a chi square analysis with on the one hand “aided ad recall” and on the other hand “category knowledge” was carried out (see Table 2). This procedure was followed both for Internet users and non-users.

Insert Table 2 About Here

About 63.9% of the Internet users remembering the offline URL ad assigned the site to the correct site category, while this percentage drops to 47.4% for the Internet users not remembering the offline URL ad ($\chi^2_{1,95\%} = 4036.9$, $p < .001$). Of the Internet non-users who remembered the offline URL ad, 31.1 % fulfilled the categorisation task successfully as opposed to 4.3 % not remembering the ad ($\chi^2_{1,95\%} = 424.065$, $p < .001$), again leading to a significant difference in the hypothesized direction. Therefore, both for Internet users and non-users the data support the second hypothesis indicating a significant impact of offline URL advertising on consumers' cognitive level.

Variables indicative of consumers' affective and behavioral processing level were only measured in the online questionnaire. As a consequence, all results shown in the remainder of this paper pertain to the Internet users only. A Pearson's correlation coefficient of 0.41 ($p < 0.001$) between Aad and Ast indicates a positive correlation between the variables, lending support for H3a (Aad transfer). Furthermore, the result of an independent samples t-test (see table 3) with "aided ad recall" as independent variable and "Ast" as dependent variable, shows that consumers remembering the ad developed a more positive attitude towards the site ($M_{\text{recall}} = 3.93$, $M_{\text{no recall}} = 3.80$, $t(8593) = 10.24$, $p < .001$), which confirms H3b (framing effect). However, it has to be added that from the current analysis the direction of causality can not be inferred.

Insert Table 3 About Here

Hypothesis 4 suggests that consumers remembering offline URL advertising show a higher intention to visit the website than people who do not remember offline URL advertising. In order to get a better idea of the direction of causality, two analyses are carried out: one for consumers who have not yet visited the site and one for people who already visited the site. In the former case, the intention to visit the site, while in the latter case the intention to revisit the site is investigated. Both intention to visit and intention to revisit the site prove to be higher for respondents who remember offline URL advertising as compared to

consumers who do not recall having been exposed to offline advertising (see Table 3) ($t(58888.5) = 66.31, p < .001$ and $t(32477.73) = 35.46, p < .001$, respectively). This finding is in line with H4 and suggests the direction of causality flows from ad familiarity to liking the site and willing to visit the site and not vice versa.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The results of this study clearly show that offline URL advertising is effective and leads to a higher awareness of the site, better knowledge, a more positive attitude towards the site and a higher intention to visit/revisit the site. Especially the latter is striking. Over and above the impact of site experience, offline advertising seems to be able to encourage Internet users to revisit the site. The huge amount of money invested in offline URL advertising clearly seems to pay off, not only to attract visitors to the site for the first time, but also to make them revisit the site. Noteworthy is that in our study a substantial difference can be observed between Internet users and non-users which was not the case in a previous study (Maddox and Mehta 1997). The current results imply that offline URL advertising is especially rewarding for target groups that already are online and that it almost goes unnoticed by non-online groups. In view of the fact that the non-users in the current study had a very low intention to go online in the future (lower than 2, measured on a five point scale going from very unlikely to very likely), this conclusion is not surprising. Any information pertaining to the Internet is deemed irrelevant by non-online consumers and, as a consequence, is not processed.

The advantage of the current study is that advertising effects are not measured in a laboratory setting in which respondents may respond artificially or in which fictitious ads for fictitious brands are used. On the contrary, responses to advertisements that had been in offline media during the months prior to the study were measured. Furthermore, a very large sample was obtained, in which both genders, different age groups, and different internet experience levels are well represented. However, the current approach certainly has some drawbacks. Because of the non-laboratory setting, we were not able to control whether respondents claiming (not) to have been exposed to an ad, really had (not) been exposed to the ad in question. Therefore, we worked with the variable “ad recall” instead of “ad exposure”. Furthermore, we could neither control how often the respondents had been exposed to a certain ad, nor in how many different media exposure took place. A controlled experimental

design as a follow-up study would therefore be very useful. Finally, we only measured main effects and did not include possible moderator variables in the study. Obviously, variables such as brand familiarity and interest in the specific product category (De Pelsmacker and Geuens 1999), advertising message involvement (Lee 2000), online search objectives and search behavior (Muyllé, Moenaert and Despontin 1999), and individual differences such as scepticism towards advertising (Hardesty, Carlson and Bearden 2002), need to evaluate (Fennis and Bakker 2001), need for cognition (Cacioppo et al. 1996, Geuens and De Pelsmacker 2002), etc. may well moderate the relationship between offline URL advertising and ad impact. Moreover, future research could concentrate on which media are most effective in generating positive communication effects. In this study off-line advertising in general was studied without making a distinction between TV, radio, magazine, and outdoor advertising. Knowing that offline URL advertising works is one thing, knowing which media to use in order to spend advertising budgets most efficiently is something else. Finally, it is useful to know whether there is a difference between “pure players” (companies selling only online) and “clicks and bricks” (companies selling online and offline) concerning the impact of offline URL advertising.

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TABLE 1

The difference between Internet users and non-users on cognitive variables concerning URL advertng and Internet sites.

	Internet users	Internet non-users	Significance
Unaided site awareness	100%	17.6%	< .001
Unaided advertising recall	86.1%	4.7%	< .001
Aided advertising recall	46.3%	19.9%	< .001
Aided site awareness	70.4%	25.1%	<.001
Category knowledge	62.8%	8.9%	< .001

TABLE 2**The impact of remembering offline URL advertising on cognitive measures**

	Internet users			Internet non-users		
	Ad recall	No ad recall	p	Ad recall	No ad recall	p
Category knowledge	63.9%	47.4%	<.001	31.1%	4.3%	<.001

The results of the Internet users pertain to 53 different sites, while for Internet non-users only 17 sites were investigated

TABLE 3**The impact of remembering offline URL advertising on attitudes and intentions**

Dependent variables	Ad recall		No ad recall		T-test	
	M	s	M	s	t	p
Attitude towards the site	3.93	.57	3.80	.56	10.24	<.001
Intention to visit the site	2.56	1.00	2.17	.90	66.31	<.001
Intention to revisit the site	3.86	1.07	3.50	1.18	35.46	<.001

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