Tourists’ Awareness and Liking of Outdoor Advertising*

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Tourism has been a fast growing industry in the world in the past decade. However, research that investigates the effectiveness of outdoor ads targeting to tourists has far lagged behind. This study aims to assess the awareness of outdoor ads and to provide insight into effective advertising that target tourists. Pedestrians intercepted in downtown Hong Kong were surveyed using a questionnaire and quota sampling. They were presented with images of seven outdoor advertisements currently displayed in the neighborhood and their recall and impressions of the ads were surveyed. The survey sampled 465 local residents and tourists aged 15 and above. Among the tourists, the awareness of the seven ads ranged from 19 to 49 percent with an average 30 percent. They displayed more positive perceptions of outdoor advertising than the locals, but had lower awareness. Practical suggestions for outdoor advertisers targeting tourists are proposed.

Keywords: intercept survey, advertising effectiveness, out-of-home media, Hong Kong

Introduction

Tourism has become one of the largest and fastest growing businesses in the world over the recent decades. Total international tourist arrivals increased from 674 million in 2000 to 1,035 million in 2012 (World Tourism Organization, 2013). International tourism receipts in 2012 reached US$1,075 billion worldwide, documenting a 20% increase over 2009 (World Tourism Organization, 2013). World tourism is expected to continue growing in both number of arrivals and receipts.

Comparatively speaking, tourists are relatively ready to spend as they seek food and beverages, amusement, attraction visits, and cultural experiences on each day of their stay at a destination. Their readiness to spend can make tourists an important target of advertisers (Chan & Cheng, 2012). However, due to language barrier, tourists are often uninterested in local TV and print media such as newspapers and magazines (Chan & Wong, 2012). Instead, they are more likely to be exposed to out-of-home (OOH) media. Indeed, OOH media is commonly used in locations where tourists cluster (Wilson & Till, 2008), as they try to reach mobile consumers who spend time travelling rather than staying indoors (Francese, 2003). With the fast growing development in tourism industry and the expansion of tourist’s market, there is a need to investigate the response of tourists to outdoor advertising. This study was therefore designed to compare local residents’ and tourists’ awareness, liking for and general perceptions of outdoor advertising.

Literature Review

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The Effectiveness of Outdoor Advertising

In the US, a considerable portion of all advertising spending is devoted to OOH media (Wilson & Till, 2008), reflecting their popularity. Increasing spending on OOH media has also been observed in Hong Kong (admanGo, 2012). Advertisers often see OOH media as channels for building brand and product recognition. They are also considered effective for reaching large local populations with high exposure frequency if outdoor ads can be displayed at locations that are densely trafficked (Chan & Cheng, 2012).

Academic researchers have attempted to study the effectiveness of outdoor advertising using measures such as brand awareness, ad recognition, and ad message recall (e.g. Bhargava et al., 1994; Chan & Cheng 2012; Donthu et al., 1993; King & Tinkham, 1990; Meurs & Aristoff, 2009; Osborne & Coleman, 2008; Wilson & Till, 2008). Factors such as color of an ad, length of an ad copy, location, technical format of a billboard are found related to ad awareness (e.g. Donthu et al., 1993; Osborne & Coleman, 2008). In some metropolitan cities such as Hong Kong, outdoor billboards are often clustered at locations where competition for audience attention is fierce. Chan and Cheng (2012) surveyed pedestrians at a business-cum-tourist location in Hong Kong asking about eight billboard ads displayed in the area. Ad awareness among posters ranged from 18.7 to 48.7 percent with an average awareness of 35 percent (Chan & Cheng, 2012).

Sometimes, billboards are displayed in captive audience environments such as subway stations (Chan 1994; 1995; Chan & Fung, 2013) and airport terminals (Wilson & Till, 2008). Chan and Fung (2013) tested the awareness of 16 advertisements displayed in a subway network in Hong Kong. The results showed that ad awareness ranged from 18 to 80 percent with an average awareness of 43.5 percent. Wilson and Till (2008) surveyed adult passengers in an airport concourse asking about 28 advertisements displayed in the airport. The results showed that ad awareness ranged from 0 to 37.5 percent, with an average awareness of 16.2 percent.

Attitudes Towards Outdoor Advertising

Studies have found that attitudes towards advertising are related to advertising awareness (e.g. Chan & Cheng, 2012; Donthu et al., 1993; King & Tinkham, 1990; Osborne & Coleman, 2008). Respondents who are able to recall more ads often hold positive attitudes towards advertising (Donthu et al., 1993; Osborne & Coleman, 2008). However, there are studies supporting the idea that consumers have different attitudes towards ads in different media (Speck & Elliot, 1997).

Speck and Elliot’s findings prompted Chan and Cheng (2012) to develop a set of attitude statements specifically to measure responses to outdoor advertising. The results of their study show that respondents who were more positive about outdoor advertising had greater awareness of the billboard ads tested. The respondents also reported that they would pay attention to billboards that were creative, vivid in color, or larger-than-life (Chan & Cheng, 2012). The current study was designed to extend that research, focusing on the responses of tourists.

Research Objectives

This study was designed to measure:
(1) awareness and liking of outdoor advertisements among tourists;
(2) perceptions of outdoor advertisements among tourists.

Methodology

Sampling
A questionnaire was used to survey tourists in Hong Kong’s Tsim Sha Tsui (TST) tourist district. The TST district is one of the busiest business-cum-tourist spots in Hong Kong. There are tourist attractions such as museums, but also shopping malls, hotels, and commercial buildings in the area. TST is also a transportation hub as a busy interchange point between mass transit and other public transportation systems. The choice of the location facilitated sampling both local residents and tourists, and a variety of demographic groups. Quota sampling was used in an attempt to interview equal numbers of males and females, equal numbers of local residents and tourists, and equal numbers of respondents from the 15-24, 25-34, 35-44, and over 45 age groups. A group of students from a university in Hong Kong was recruited as interviewers. They intercepted pedestrians and interviewed them at seven pre-determined locations in TST. All the interviews were conducted on the same weekday morning in November 2011 from 10:15am to 11:45am. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese, or in English, or in Mandarin as required.

**Ad Prompts and Questionnaire**

Seven outdoor poster ads were selected as prompts for the study. All the ads had been displayed for at least one week in at least one location in TST prior to the survey. Table 1 summarized the characteristics of the ad prompts. The ads were selected to ensure a variety of executional cues, such as the use of language, color and celebrities. The ads embraced different products that spanned from the categories of consumer products to personal services, including jewelry, fashion, insurance, medical service, and restaurants. Five of the seven ads were in full colors while the rest were in black and white. For the language of copy, three ads adopted Chinese, 3 adopted English and 1 used both. The number of words used in the copy ranged from two to 205. One ad featured a Hong Kong local celebrity. A false ad was also included to assess the extent of false positives. It promoted a restaurant chain with no branches in Hong Kong and which had never been advertised there. Each of the prompts showed an ad with some of its nearby display environment, in full color, but at one-fourth of A4 size. Due to executional difficulties, the order of presentation among these prompts was not randomized.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part solicited data about awareness of and liking for the ads. The prompts were shown to the respondents and they were asked if they had seen the ads in TST. They were also asked to rate how much they liked each ad using a six-point Likert scale (1 = dislike very much; 6 = like very much).

The second part of the survey involved nine statements relating to the respondent’s opinions and perceptions of outdoor advertising in general. “I pay attention to outdoor ads of international brands” was one example. Other statements related to situational stimuli such as “I tend to pay attention to outdoor ads where pedestrian flow is high”. The statements were modified from those used in previous studies about OOH advertising in Hong Kong (Chan & Cheng, 2012; Prendergast & Chan, 2005). The respondents were asked to rate the statements on a six-point Likert scale (1 = disagree strongly; 6 = agree strong).

Demographic information about the respondents was solicited in the third part of the questionnaire. Gender, age, education level, occupation and monthly income were asked. The respondents were also asked to indicate how many times they had been to TST in the previous week and if they were local residents or tourists. Tourists were asked how many days they had stayed in Hong Kong on that particular trip and where they came from. The questionnaire was first developed in Chinese and then translated into English. Accurate translation

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1 In this study, the interviewers only approached respondents who spoke Chinese or English. Tourists who do not understand these two languages were excluded from the study.
was ensured by the two bilingual researchers. Back-translation to Chinese was not conducted as the questions were simple and straightforward.

**Findings**

**Respondent Profile**

Altogether 465 questionnaires were completed and they were all considered valid. There were slightly more female respondents than male respondents. A large proportion of the respondents reported having received education at university level or above. One-fourth of the respondents reported that they were in white collar employment, while one-third of them selected “others”. A majority of the respondents reported that they earned less than HK$15,000 per month (around US$2,000). More than a half of them reported that they had visited TST one to two times in the previous week. Slightly more than a half of the tourists came from mainland China or Taiwan, with the rest mostly from Europe, North America or Australia.

Chi-square tests were employed to test the significance of the demographic differences between the two groups. The tourists as a group were older, better educated, more likely to be professionals, had higher personal income, and had visited TST less often in the previous week than the local residents \((p \leq 0.00)\).

**Tourists’ Awareness, Liking, and Perception of Outdoor Ads**

The percentages of respondents who reported having seen the advertisements and their mean liking scores are shown in Table 1. All together 19.4 percent of the respondents reported that they had seen this ad. Among tourists, the awareness of the seven genuine ads ranged from 19 percent to 49 percent. Chow Sang Sang jewelry yielded the highest awareness while Bistro on the Mile yielded the least (see figures 1 and 2). Awareness of Bistro on the Mile was similar to the awareness of the filler ad. Independent sample t-tests were employed to test the significance of the differences between the local residents and the tourists in their awareness of outdoor advertisements. The overall advertising awareness among residents was 36 percent, which was significantly higher than that among the tourists \((t = 2.6, p \leq 0.05)\), mostly due to their greater awareness of the AXA insurance and Chow Sang Sang jewelry ads.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertisements</th>
<th>Ad awareness %</th>
<th>Liking (mean)</th>
<th>Color used</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>No. of Chinese characters(C)/ English words(E)</th>
<th>Use of Celebrities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chow Sang Sang jewelry</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>14(C)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GUESS washed jeans</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>B/W</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>10(E)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AXA insurance</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>78(C)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emperor jewelry</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Chinese/ English</td>
<td>4(C)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APSC stem cell science</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>205(C)</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ermenegildo Zegna fashion</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>B/W</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>2(E)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bistro on the Mile</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>30(E)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Red Lobster restaurant (filler ad) 19.4
TOURISTS’ AWARENESS AND LIKING OF OUTDOOR ADVERTISING

Table 2

Poster Awareness and Liking Among Residents and Tourists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Poster awareness (%)</th>
<th>Liking (mean)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residents (N = 232)</td>
<td>Tourists (N = 233)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AXA insurance</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ermenegildo Zegna fashion</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chow Sang Sang jewelry</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APSC Stem cell science</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bistro on the Mile</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emperor jewelry</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GUESS washed jeans</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average of above</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average no. of ads reported as seen</td>
<td>M = 2.5</td>
<td>M = 2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. *indicates significance at the p ≤ 0.05 (***p ≤ 0.001) confidence level in a two-tailed test.

Figure 1. The ad with the highest awareness among tourists.

The total number of ads reported as seen ranged from zero to seven. The average number among the tourists was 2.1, which was significantly lower than that among the residents (see Table 2).

Among tourists, the best liked ads were Guess washed jeans followed by Ermenegildo Zegna fashion, Chow Sang Sang jewelry and Bistro on the Mile. The least liked ads were AXA insurance and APSC stem cell science. Independent sample t-tests confirmed that the tourists liked the advertisements significantly more than local residents. The liking seems to have extended over the various product categories (see Table 2).
TOURISTS’ AWARENESS AND LIKING OF OUTDOOR ADVERTISING

Figure 2. The ad with the lowest awareness among tourists.

Table 3 summarizes the ratings of the nine perception statements about outdoor advertisements and the situational stimuli that attract the respondents’ attention. Among the tourists, the level of agreement on three of the nine statements averaged over 4.4. These were “Outdoor ads that are creative attract my attention”, “Outdoor ads with vivid colors attract my attention”, and “The larger-than-life outdoor ads attract my attention”. The tourists rated the first two of those statements and three others significantly higher than local residents did. The others were “I like to pay attention to outdoor ads”, “Outdoors ads give me a lot of information about what is in fashion”, and “Outdoor ads help me kill my boredom when waiting on the street”. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the nine statements was 0.87, indicating that they were measuring a similar construct. In light of the high alpha, a mean score was compiled for all nine statements to represent the overall perceptions of outdoor advertising. The tourists’ mean score was significantly higher than that of the residents, indicating that the tourists held more positive perceptions of outdoor advertising than the local residents did (see Table 3).

Table 3
Perceptions of Outdoor Advertising Among Residents and Tourists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Perception of outdoor advertising (mean)</th>
<th>( t )-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor ads that are creative attract my attention</td>
<td>residents (( N = 232 )) = 4.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tourists (( N = 233 )) = 4.8</td>
<td>-2.6*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor ads with vivid colors attract my attention</td>
<td>residents (( N = 232 )) = 4.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tourists (( N = 233 )) = 4.6</td>
<td>-2.6*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The larger-than-life outdoor ads attract my attention</td>
<td>residents (( N = 232 )) = 4.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tourists (( N = 233 )) = 4.5</td>
<td>-1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tend to pay attention to outdoor ads when I am at a spacious outdoor</td>
<td>residents (( N = 232 )) = 4.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>environment</td>
<td>tourists (( N = 233 )) = 4.2</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>T-value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I pay attention to outdoor ads of international brands</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like to pay attention to outdoor ads</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor ads give me a lot of information about what is in fashion</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor ads help me kill my boredom when waiting on the street</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tend to pay attention to outdoor ads where pedestrian flow is high</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall perception of outdoor advertising</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. *indicates significance at the $p \leq 0.05$ confidence level in a two-tailed test.

To better inform advertisers about targeting tourists effectively, several secondary tests were conducted to identify factors influencing awareness of outdoor ads. Independent sample t-tests showed that the number of ads seen was significantly higher among those respondents who reported having visiting TST at least three times in the previous week ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.7$, $t = -5.4$, $p \leq 0.001$). Perceptions of outdoor advertising were positively correlated with the total number of ads reported as having been seen ($r = 0.20$, $p \leq 0.001$). Those who had a positive perception of outdoor advertising were more likely to recall having seen more outdoor ads.

**Discussion**

Some limitations need to be mentioned before discussing the implications of these results. In this study the intercept interviews with a questionnaire were conducted in the morning on a single weekday. The results might vary if the study were conducted at another time of the week or at other locations. In addition, the non-probabilistic sampling means that the results cannot be generalized to the larger population.

These limitations aside, this study found that the seven selected outdoor posters yielded awareness that ranged from 19 to 49 percent with an average awareness of 30.3 percent among tourists. This result is comparable to that of a similar study by Chan and Cheng (2012). Outdoor billboards in Hong Kong face fierce competition from other street distractions. These billboards, however, yielded levels of awareness similar to those produced by OOH media in a captive environment (e.g. Chan, 1994, 1995; Chan & Fung, 2013; Wilson & Till, 2008) or among frequent commuters who are exposed to stand-alone billboards along the highway with fewer distractions (Donthu et al., 1993). It is evident that outdoor advertising in Hong Kong can reach tourists and effectively create ad awareness among them.

The poster with the highest awareness was an advertisement for a jewelry shop (i.e. Chow Sang Sang, see Figure 1). High awareness was registered among both residents and tourists. The poster was displayed at a location right next to the exit of the mass transit railway, where the exiting passengers may be exposed to the ad easily when they walk up from the underground station. The ad also has a simple layout in which a female model was featured and was encompassed by the brand name with a short copy. Wilson and Till (2008) suggest that location was crucial in ad awareness, while Donthu et al. (1993) found that a shorter copy in outdoor ad creates better cognitive effects on viewers. These might explain why the ad yielded high awareness.

The poster with the lowest awareness was an advertisement for a restaurant inside a hotel (i.e. Bistro on the Mile). Low awareness was registered among both residents and tourists. As tourists are expected to be interested in advertisements of restaurants, the failure of the poster will most likely be attributed to poor creative execution. A close examination of the advertisement (Figure 2) finds it comprise of a series of models dressed in cultural costumes, with the brand name at the far right hand. It requires the audience to integrate the pictures to make sense of it. The low awareness of this advertisement indicates that a complicated visual layout does not facilitate viewers’ attention.
The tourists in particular said they would pay attention to outdoor ads if they are creative, with vivid colors and are larger-than-life in size. In previous studies, executional elements such as creative and novel ideas (Thorson & Zhao, 1988; Till & Baack, 2005), use of color and pictures (Beattie & Mitchell, 1985; Fernandez & Rosen, 2000; Lohse, 1997) and ad size (Finn, 1988; Hanssens & Weitz, 1980) have been identified as enhancing motivation to process ad information. The results of this study further affirm that these elements effectively enhance audience awareness of the billboard ads.

The tourists were also more likely to agree that outdoor ads give them a lot of information about what is in fashion. They also agreed that outdoor ads can entertain them (“help them kill their boredom”) when waiting on the street. Both help explain why they expressed better liking for paying attention to outdoor ads. They were motivated to pay attention. Tourists may find informative outdoor ads relevant to their needs because they tend to have a high intention to spend (Chan & Cheng, 2012) and probably have a greater need to seek novel experiences at a destination. They are therefore more motivated to seek information through informative and creative advertising.

The results also show that in general tourists held more positive perceptions of outdoor advertising than did the local residents. Previous studies have demonstrated that one’s attention to an ad message varies according to their perceptions of and attitudes towards advertising in general (e.g. Shavitt et al., 1998) as well as attitudes towards the specific medium (e.g. Donthu et al., 1993; Mehta, 2000). James and Kover (1992) have suggested that perception of advertising influences one’s motivation to involve oneself in ad message processing, and that results in varying amounts of time spent looking at an ad. The results of this study are in line with that proposition. Among all the respondents, those who held more positive perceptions of outdoor advertising reported having seen more ads.

Though the tourists held more positive perceptions of outdoor advertising and demonstrated greater motivation to attend to it, their awareness of outdoor ads was significantly lower than that of the local residents. That is probably because their infrequent visits to the district decreased their exposure. Frequency of visiting TST was significantly related to ad awareness, and tourists reported visiting TST significantly less often than the residents. When tourists travel to a city they normally explore different parts of the city. For them, exposure can be enhanced by repeating the same ad in different locations, and this should promote greater awareness (Wilson & Till, 2008). In practice, advertisers would have to investigate tourists’ itineraries and display their ads along the routes they frequent, or cluster their ads in multiple tourist spots.

Significantly fewer tourists reported having seen the ad for AXA insurance. Not only is insurance less relevant to the needs of tourists, but the copy in the ad was predominantly in Chinese, incomprehensible to many of the tourists. Such language barrier experienced among half of the audience will of course result in lower ad awareness. Advertisers targeting tourists should of course avoid using unintelligible copy and should include pictures to help deliver their messages.

**Conclusions**

Tourists represent an important market for many consumer goods and services. Because of possible language barriers and lack of interest in the local media, out-of-home media are an important means of reaching them for advertisers. The results of this study confirm that out-of-home media can in fact reach tourists. On average, advertising awareness of outdoor posters was 30 percent, and a well-executed poster could achieve 49 percent awareness.
The average billboard awareness among tourists was comparable to that found among residents (about 36 percent). This is similar to the level of awareness of advertising among captive audiences in Hong Kong and elsewhere. Tourists expressed more positive attitudes toward outdoor advertising and expressed greater liking for poster ads than did local residents. Both results indicate that tourists are interested by outdoor advertising. In terms of advertising execution, the tourists showed appreciation of outdoor ads that are creative, with vivid colors, and in larger-than-life size. Tourists are not, however, interested in all types of products.

As tourists are less likely than residents to visit the same locations repeatedly, exposure frequency among tourists should be developed through careful selection of sites on the typical tourist’s itinerary. Advertisers should avoid using local celebrities, wordy advertising copy, and unfamiliar language to reach the tourist market segment. Vivid colors, pictures, and a clean layout will help billboard posters stand out from the advertising clutter.

References


Chan, K. (1994). Size doesn’t always matter when it comes to advertising in HK’s MTR. Media, July 8, p. 18.


