

# An integrated model of advertising clutter in offline and online media

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The rapid growth of online advertising raises concerns about advertising clutter in the online media environment. This paper proposes an integrated model of advertising clutter that addresses the unique characteristics of the online media environment. We review the structural, information processing and functional approaches to advertising clutter, and integrate these approaches into a new comprehensive framework that explains consumer response to advertising clutter by differentiating consumer-centred analysis from media-centred analysis. The differences between online media and offline media are compared in terms of audience control and advertiser control. Attitudes towards advertising in general and in specific media contexts, and task orientations are introduced as mediating factors that affect the perception of and the subsequent response to advertising clutter. This paper offers a set of propositions on the factors affecting perception of advertising clutter, the relationship between physical characteristics and perception of advertising clutter, and how perception of clutter creates negative advertising effects. Managerial and theoretical implications of this framework are discussed.

## Introduction

The rapid growth of advertising on the internet calls for a return visit to the issue of advertising clutter. More and more advertising in various formats is now propagating online, and advertising has become the most important form of revenue for consumer websites. The Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) and PricewaterhouseCoopers reported that US internet advertising revenues reached an estimated new record of US\$10 billion for the first half-year of 2007 (Interactive Advertising Bureau 2007). Although advertising practitioners are concerned about capitalising on the internet as

a new advertising medium and maximising its effectiveness, no comprehensive framework on consumer response to advertising clutter has been offered for this new media environment, which is characterised by its interactivity and high user control. This paper proposes an integrated model of advertising clutter that incorporates factors influencing the perceived clutter level and the physical attributes of advertising presence in a media vehicle in predicting the effect of online advertising clutter.

### **Definition of advertising clutter**

Advertising clutter is usually perceived as the presence of a large amount of non-editorial content in an editorial medium. Media put large quantities of ads in one pod due to the high demand for advertising space; when the amount exceeds a consumer's acceptance level in an editorial media vehicle, it is viewed as clutter and is often perceived as an undesirable phenomenon by both advertisers and consumers (Ha 1996). Because the consumer's acceptance level for the amount of advertising perceived as 'clutter' is often subjective and can be influenced by different factors, we will focus on factors that affect consumers' perception of advertising clutter. Hence, this paper will:

- re-examine the concept of ad clutter
- propose a new analytical framework for online ad clutter that incorporates the differences between the online and offline media environments
- differentiate the physical presence of ad clutter and perceived ad clutter
- explain perceived ad clutter by consumers' attitudes towards advertising in general, and in specific media contexts and task orientations, to form an integrated model of ad clutter.

Based on this model, we offer a set of propositions as predictors of perceived ad clutter, the relationships between physical attributes and perceived advertising clutter, and how they act together in creating negative advertising effects.

An editorial media vehicle, by definition, is a medium primarily consumed for its editorial content. Advertisements are assumed to be the string attached to editorial media content. Advertising clutter is a state of a high degree of intrusiveness and high frequency of advertising in an

editorial vehicle. By being in a cluttered media environment, advertisers believe that their advertisements will receive less attention from consumers for the following reasons. First, consumers will be irritated by the advertisements and subsequently avoid the ads altogether. Second, consumers simply won't be able to remember the ads if too many are presented at the same time, because of their limited memory capacity. However, some argue that advertising clutter is a necessary evil for successful ad-supported media because the media need a large amount of advertising for increased revenue and profit, yet their audiences may not like the advertising and it may lower the perceived editorial quality of the media (Ha & Litman 1997). Television and radio (the latter to a lesser extent) are the media at the forefront of criticism of advertising clutter because they are considered a captive medium, where skipping ads is not as easy as in other self-paced media, such as newspapers and magazines. With the advent of the internet as a new form of mass communication channel and the fastest-growing advertising medium, whether the concept of advertising clutter still applies to the online environment is the main concern of this paper. The internet, with its dual characteristics of being both a captive and a self-paced medium, calls for a new concept of clutter as advertisements of different formats are being used on the internet.

## **Literature review**

### *Structural approaches to explain consumer responses to advertising clutter*

The major paradigms that have been used to examine consumer responses to advertising are the structural, functional and information processing approaches. The structural paradigm focuses on the structural characteristics of the advertising presented in media content. Within this paradigm, scholars have attempted to examine what constitutes advertising clutter (e.g. Rodgers & Thorson 2000). The structural approach to ad clutter examines it by measuring and identifying the physical attributes of advertising messages in a medium, such as the number of ads (Frazer & McMillan 1999). Ha (1996) defines the three dimensions of ad clutter as quantity, intrusiveness and competitiveness. Quantity is the proportion of advertisements in the media vehicle. Intrusiveness refers to the degree to

which the advertisements interrupt the flow of an editorial media content unit. Competitiveness is the degree of similarity of the advertised products or advertising messages in the same pod. The media industry and most studies of advertising clutter focus on the increasing quantity of advertising or degree of commercialisation (Webb & Ray 1979; Mord & Gilson 1985; Ray & Webb 1986; Pillai 1990; Mandese 1992; Pieters & Bijmolt 1997; Riebes & Dawes 2006), and they generally find that increased quantity will lead to lower recall of advertising or a perception of reduced editorial quality. Clear Channel, the largest radio group in the United States, in an effort to retain advertisers' confidence, now sets an upper limit on the amount of advertising accepted, in order to curb the negative effect of advertising clutter from the quantity dimension (Hernandez 2004). In recent years, intrusiveness has been more commonly studied because advances in advertising technology, such as pop-up ads, have facilitated forced exposure to advertising (e.g. Li *et al.* 2002; Cho & Cheon 2004; Moe 2006). Competitiveness is created by the presence of the advertising messages of different brands in the same product category. Product exclusivity is a common advertising contract term, which aims to avoid the presence of competitors from the same product category in the same advertising pod. This can confuse consumers in a captive medium such as television or radio, where the flow of content is not under the control of the consumer. However, in a self-paced medium where pages, say, can be flipped through easily, competitiveness is found to have little impact because consumers can easily skip the ads without exposure to ads of multiple competing products (Ha 1996).

### *The functional approach to consumer responses to advertising clutter*

The functional approach explains consumer response by how the media fulfil the needs of the consumer. Because consumers use media to perform different functions, advertising clutter will be perceived differently depending on the reason for consuming the media. The online environment allows consumers to be more active in their usage of the medium. Rodgers and Thorson (2000) examine consumer response to online advertising from both a functional and a structural perspective. They suggest that internet use motives (whether the use is goal-directed or playful

consumption) and the interactivity of online advertising formats influence information processes and consumer responses.

The functional approach focuses on consumers' perception of the ad clutter in a medium. It differs from the structural approach in its emphasis on the active role of consumers in their uses of a medium: 'audiences' become 'users of a medium' and process advertising messages to fulfil certain goals. This approach examines the impact of ad clutter by how consumers engage in various types of behaviours – namely exploring, information seeking, entertaining and shopping – during the consumption process (see Parasuraman & Zinkhan 2002). The several related streams of research have also used the functional approach to identify the motives behind consumers' use of the internet medium (e.g. Eighmey & McCord 1998; Flaherty *et al.* 1998; Papacharissi & Rubin 2000). The main purpose of this approach is to understand what motivation drives consumers to use the internet medium, prior to the message process (or advertising process).

The uses and gratifications approach has been used to explain consumers' processing of advertising messages on the basis of fulfilling their desires and the reasons for consumers' use of a medium. MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) suggest that the advertising communication process is based on need, motivation and opportunities for the consumer to process advertisements. When advertising is seen as offering useful product information, as part of the media content or as entertainment, then it will not be viewed by consumers as a negative externality. Instead, it becomes desirable content because it provides uses and gratifications for consumers. If the effort to skip the ad and the risk of missing the editorial content are high in a captive medium such as television, then the consumer is less likely to exhibit avoidance behaviour in a cluttered media environment.

### *The information processing approach to consumer responses to advertising clutter*

The informational processing approach, on the other hand, views the impact of ad clutter as determined by consumers' ability to process advertising messages (e.g. Webb 1979; Pillai 1990; Brown & Rothschild 1993). Researchers employing the informational processing perspective have relied mainly on 'overload theory' to explain why clutter will reduce

advertising effectiveness, based on the limited capacity of individuals to process messages (Miller 1956; Malhotra *et al.* 1982). Originating from the study of brand choice, overload theory proposes that, when an individual is overloaded with too many advertisements at one time, the absorption of one piece of information will be at the expense of another piece of information (Schneider *et al.* 1984). Similarly, 'selective attention theory' provides a rationale of how consumers break away from the constraints of a captive medium. Selective attention to objects by an individual is a protective mechanism, which human beings use to allocate their limited attentional resources according to their needs (Wickens 1984; Seamon 1980; Smith & Buchholz 1991). Consumers' decisions not to pay attention to advertising are the result of perceived lack of relevance of the ads to their lives because their attention resources are reserved for editorial content.

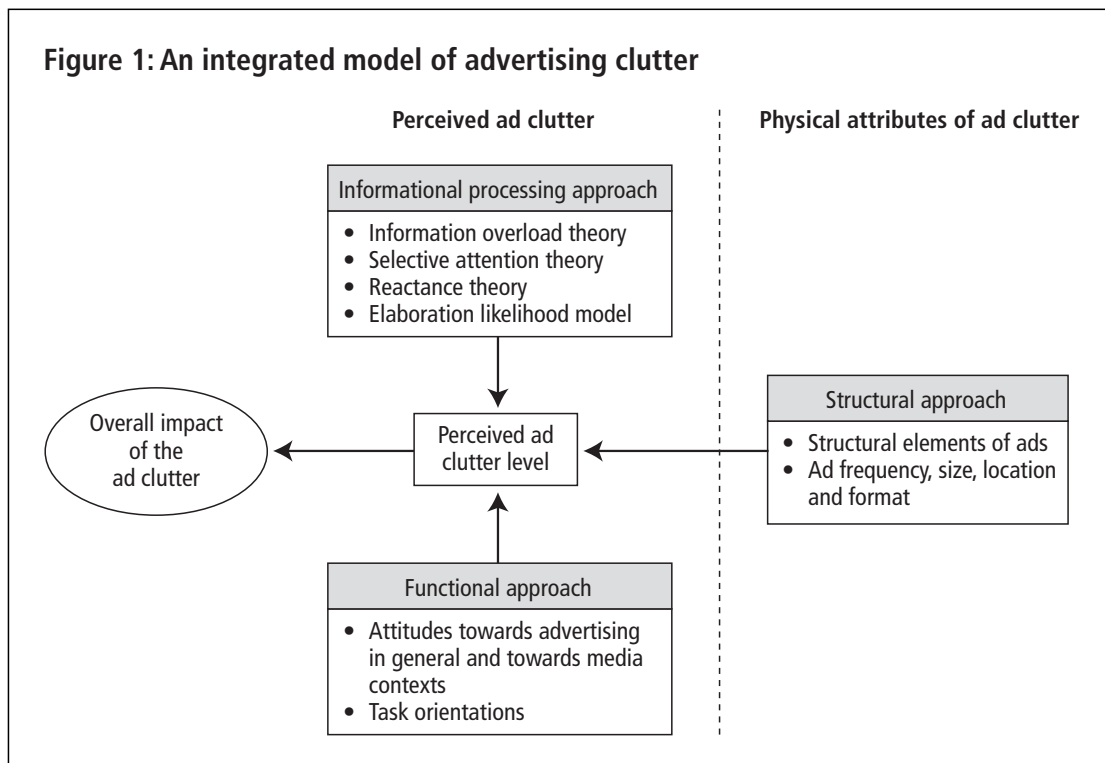
The Elaboration Likelihood Model proposed by Petty *et al.* (1983) explains the effects of advertising by the degree of elaboration of the message through either a high-involvement central processing route or a low-involvement peripheral processing route. If consumers are highly involved in an advertised product when exposed to the ad, they are very likely to ignite the central processing route, where consumers will expend a great deal of effort in processing the message, and elaborate on ideas in the message. However, if they are not involved in the products, then advertising is processed in a peripheral route where peripheral cues such as colour and execution determine whether the advertising message gets processed. To facilitate consumers' processing of advertising messages in a cluttered environment, the presence and successful use of peripheral cues (advertising execution) become a decisive factor in terms of which of the advertising messages can be recalled (Ha 1999).

'Reactance theory' has also been used to explain the resistance to and avoidance of clutter, especially if the advertising is seemingly forced upon the consumer. Brehm and Brehm (1981) describe as 'reactance' the negative reaction of consumers to something perceived as violating their freedom to do things. Coercion will not achieve compliance. Rather, consumers become more resistant to being exposed to the advertising messages by avoiding them all together (Clee & Wicklund 1980).

## Proposed conceptual framework for advertising clutter, and research propositions

### *An integrated paradigm of ad clutter*

Our proposed conceptual framework incorporates the functional and structural approaches with the information processing approach to explain a consumer’s perception of ad clutter level in response to the structures of ads presented in different media channels. In other words, we propose that audiences’ processing of advertising (information processing) and perceived ad clutter responds to the structural characteristics of ads in a medium. Perceived ad clutter is mediated by consumers’ differing attitudes towards advertising in general and in that specific medium, and their task orientations. Hence, the impact of ad clutter is created by the compounding effect of multiple factors, including the objective physical attributes of ads in a medium and subjective perceived clutter. Figure 1 illustrates the integration of the structural, information processing and functional approaches in the analysis of consumer responses to advertising clutter.



### *Differences between online and offline media environments*

The reason for employing an extended functional approach to examine perceived ad clutter in the online media environment is the discernment of a different characteristic of online media consumers from their offline counterparts. One major difference that distinguishes online from offline media environments is that, in the online environment, the concept of 'audience' is replaced by that of 'users', because consumers actively use online media with specific goals, and online media have interactive capability with user input and advertisers' programming control. Even when online users are surfing the internet, they have to pay attention to the computer screen to understand what is going on. Offline media users, in contrast, can treat media such as television and radio as background noise without any specific goal of consumption. Therefore, online 'users' are more specifically goal-orientated than the 'audiences' of offline media, although the general goals of information and entertainment are basically the same for online users and the traditional media audience. Our effort to specify consumers as users is an attempt to explain the unique characteristics of internet consumers, who actively 'use' the medium (users) rather than passively receiving content from offline media (audiences).

### **Consumer and advertiser control**

Another distinction that can be made between online and offline media is that in offline media, such as television, even the medium is captive: the television screen is relatively under the control of the consumer. Advertising can easily be avoided or ignored as consumers can skip the commercials using a remote control (zapping), by leaving the room during the commercial break or by just turning off what is on the screen. In the online environment, the basic conceptualisation of advertising clutter discussed above will be deficient in two respects. First, advertising formats vary greatly in online media, compared to standard units in offline media. The 'captivity' of the advertising to the audience is determined not by the ad medium, but by the *ad format*. Pop-up ads or pre-roll ads are captive formats that force users to pay attention to the ads by not allowing them to proceed until the ad display is on top of the content. At one end of the spectrum of user control in online advertising is no user control: with some

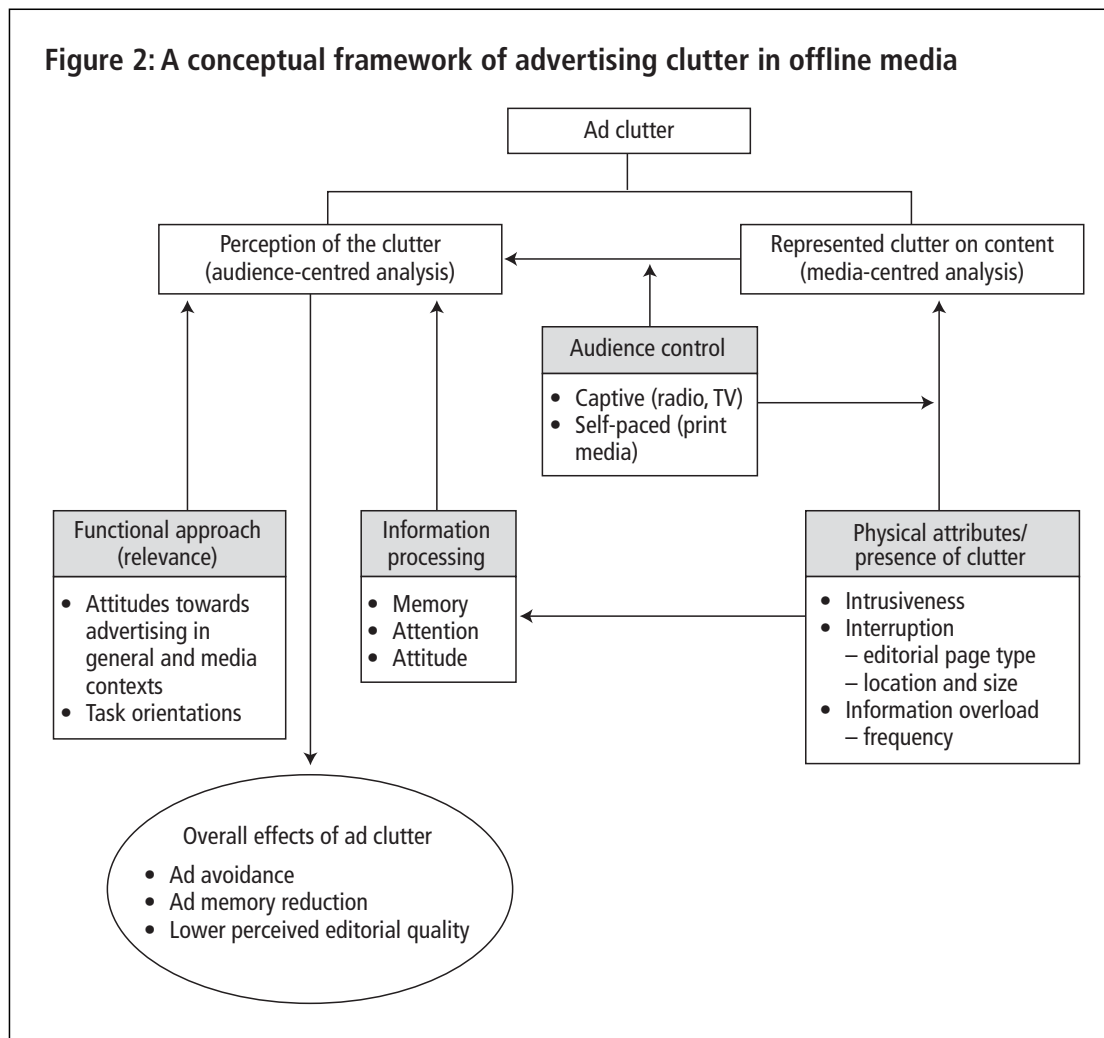
extreme forms of pop-up ad, users have no control over what they can do because the ad freezes the screen so that the user cannot click on anything until 15 or 30 seconds later. The only way out for the user is to turn off the computer altogether. Yet, unlike television, computer programs take time to load and log off. Hence, turning off computers is such a great inconvenience to the consumer that the consumer is forced to wait for the ad to finish displaying. At the other end of the spectrum is a self-paced format with high user control. Online ads can be very similar to editorial content, such as sponsored hyperlinks or a regular banner ad that is similar to a display print ad. Therefore, the online medium possesses the dual characteristics of a captive medium and a self-paced medium; with computer programming, the level of captivity in online ads can be higher than that for traditional media. Yet, at the same time, the non-linear design of web page content facilitates self-paced consumption by linking users to totally different content page with the ease of a mouse click.

According to the Interactive Advertising Bureau (2006), there are many interactive online advertising formats, which can broadly be differentiated as pop-up and pop-under ads. Pop-up ads are the types of ad that appear in a separate window on top of content already on screen, which directly block the view of the user. A pop-up transitional ad is displayed in a separate ad window during the transition between content pages. The display of a transitional ad may finish before or after content rendering is complete, similar to ads in a commercial break on television. Pop-under ads are the types of ad that appear in a separate window beneath an open window, which will not be displayed until the top window is closed, moved, resized or minimised. Pop-under ads are captive but less obviously so than pop-up ads.

The compulsiveness of the online ad format is caused by the advertising delivery time setting. An online ad can be set to be delivered immediately or after a certain time delay, thanks to the interactive capability of the online medium. Delay in timing has been shown to be very conducive to positive responses because it removes the perceived compulsiveness of the online advertising in message (Moe 2006). Variation of animation speed in banner ads is also an option, and can elicit higher arousal in audiences (Sundar & Kalyanaraman 2004). These timing manipulations are under the control of the advertiser or the medium, not the audience. No offline media can offer such a high degree of display control by advertisers.

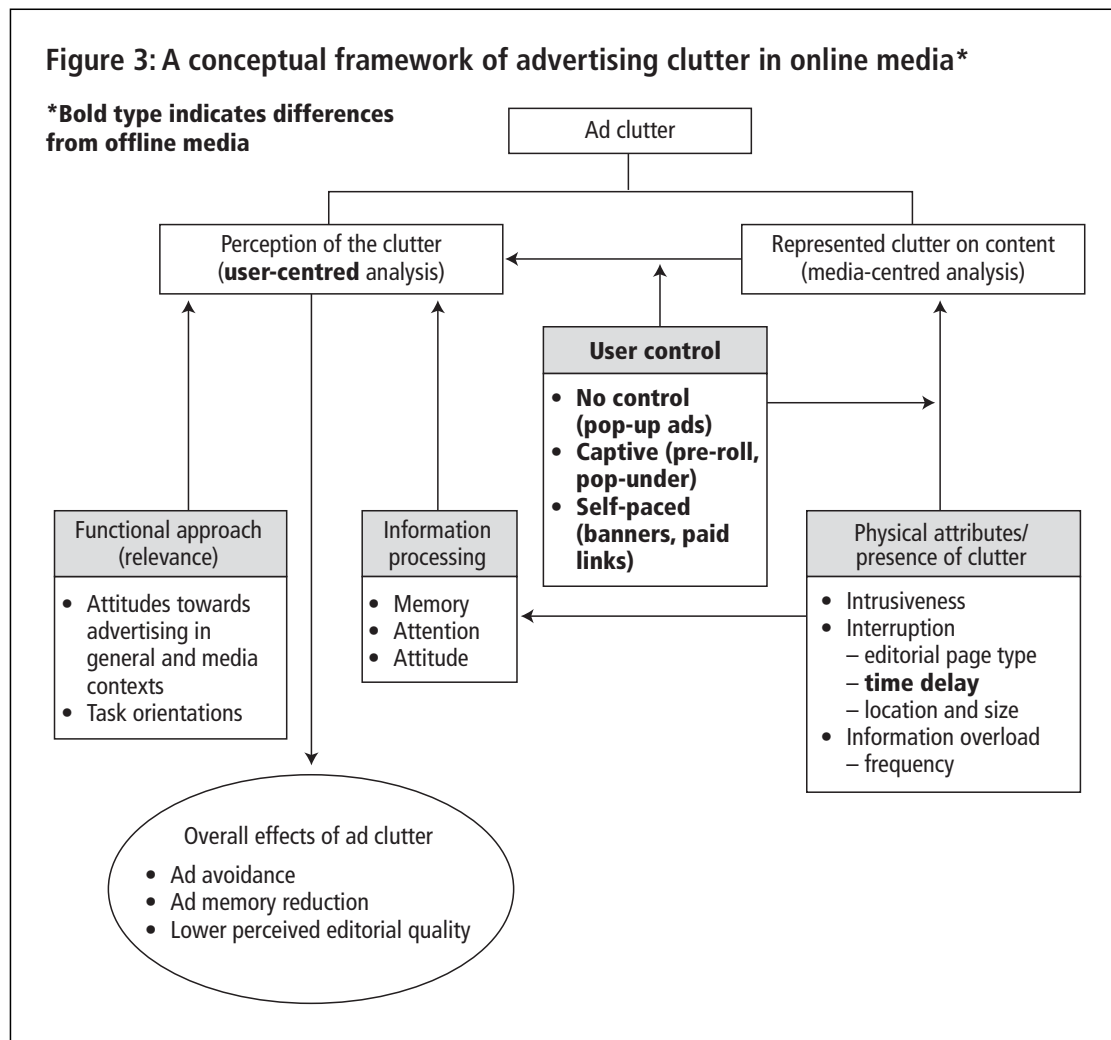
### *Distinction between media and consumer-centred analyses*

In addition to the differentiation between online and offline media, our framework also emphasises the distinction between media-centred (grounded in structural paradigm) and consumer-centred analysis (grounded in a combination of informational processing and functional paradigms). Such distinction is vital for ad practitioners because it shows which aspects of ad clutter are controllable or uncontrollable by advertisers. Within the structural paradigm, the assessment of ad clutter can be viewed as a media-centred analysis, and focuses on the physical attributes of the ads – such as types, formats, sizes and frequencies – presented in a medium. These attributes are all controllable by the advertiser. Under the informational processing paradigm, the perceived advertising clutter (con-



sumers' evaluation of the ads in a medium) will affect a user's ability and willingness to process ad messages. Consumers' perceived advertising clutter level may or may not correspond to the physical attributes of ad clutter in a medium: some audiences will perceive a higher level of clutter than others with the same amount of advertising. The consumer-centred analysis reveals, essentially, that advertising clutter can also be an individual difference phenomenon that is beyond the advertiser's control.

Figure 2 shows our conceptual framework, which explains the difference and relationship between the audience-centred and media-centred analysis of advertising clutter in the traditional media environment. Figure 3 adds to the framework the unique online media characteristics and the idea of consumers as active users, showing the dual-pace characteristics of online media.



## **Media-centred analysis: the physical attributes of advertising clutter**

### *The intrusiveness of advertising*

In our conceptualisation, the physical attributes of the ad clutter presented in a medium create intrusiveness for consumers. The intrusiveness of ad clutter presented in media content can be explained from both interruption and information overload perspectives. Interruption is conceptualised as the degree of task *interference* of the advertising presence with audiences' task performance, while information overload is conceptualised by the *quantity* of ads that exceeds the information processing capacity of the consumer.

### *The structural attributes of online advertising*

Current online advertising studies have paid particular attention to context as a factor in determining the degree to which an ad is perceived as interruption rather than additional information. The concept of context is specified as time delay, editorial page type and visibility of ads. Moe (2006) found that pop-up messages delayed within the page increase the click-through rate of pop-up promotions. Thus, we can deduce that delayed ads are less likely to be perceived as interruptive when reading a content page, due to their lack of compulsiveness. In addition, the context of the task interruption perspective can also be defined in terms of the editorial page type: whether it functions either as a navigational page or a destination page. A navigational page – such as a page that includes the table of contents (usually the home page) – functions mainly to connect users with actual content; thus, it has a transactional function, directing users to link to the featured information by listing titles or topics. A destination page, on the other hand, contains content that a user needs in order to obtain detailed information. Studies have shown that pop-up ads are more likely to be perceived as an interruption on a navigational page than on a destination page (Moe 2006). Last but not least, the physical attributes of ads, in terms of their interruptive capacity, relate to the location and size of the ads within a unit. This in turn relates to the concept of visibility.

The editorial unit in an online environment refers to a screen that is visible without scrolling down, where the location and size of ads influence the user's perception of the effects of the clutter level. From this perspective, the more centrally located and larger-sized ads cause a higher level of interruption.

In the online environment, information overload refers to the condition when a user responds negatively to ads due to the high quantity of ads present, which interferes with the user's information processing. Yet researchers have been unable to establish consistent results for information overload effects on message processing (Speier & Valacich 1999). Nevertheless, we attempt to provide guidelines on when and how online ad clutter can constitute information overload. In our conceptualisation, information overload is identified by amount of ads, which is largely determined by the frequency of ads presented in each task. Specifically, frequency refers to the number of online ads occurring during a user's task period. The term 'task' here is consistent with the term used in the interruption perspective, such as locating the desired content on a navigational web page.

From a media-orientated analysis perspective, we propose (following Cho & Cheon 2004) that online advertising clutter be defined as a high number of online ads, in various formats, appearing on a single web page. In addition, these ads are placed in highly visible locations that interrupt the media content consumption process. Adding the user-orientated analysis, perceived online advertising clutter is operationalised as the user's perception of the number of online ads, and thus the degree of interruption to editorial content consumption, appearing on a single web page.

### **Physical characteristics of online ad clutter and perceived ad clutter levels**

The identified intrusiveness of ad clutter presented in web content broadly includes interruption and information overload. Interruption can interfere with users' task performance, thus resulting in a higher perception of ad clutter (Kirmeyer 1988; Zijlstra *et al.* 1999). In addition, an increase in the quantity of ads has an impact on perceived advertising clutter, based on overload theory.

### *Ad clutter as interruption to web content consumption*

Following our conceptualisation, three main physical attributes of online advertising that interrupt a user's task are: (P1) time delay; (P2) type of editorial content; and (P3) visibility of ads. The time delay refers to how compulsive is the advertising exposure. The more immediate and forceful the display, such as pop-up ads, the more it is seen as an interruption and a higher level of ad clutter. Related to editorial content, ads that appear on a navigational page are more likely to be perceived as an interruption than if they appear on a destination page, because such ads hinder a user's control of browsing or direction to the intended page. The visibility of the ad is largely determined by the location and size of the ad in an editorial unit. Large and centrally located ads are more likely to be seen by the consumer. Therefore, if online ads are presented in large sizes and in a central location, where the consumers cannot ignore them, they will be perceived as a higher level of ad clutter.

- P1:** Time delay affects perceived online ad clutter level: a user perceives lower ad clutter when the display of online ads is delayed or non-compulsive, such as static banner ads, than when their display is immediate and compulsive, such as pop-up ads.
- P2:** Editorial page type affects perceived online ad clutter level: a user perceives higher ad clutter levels on navigational web pages than on destination pages.
- P3:** The location and size of ads affects perceived online ad clutter level: centrally located ads or large-sized ads in an editorial unit lead to higher perceived ad clutter levels than ads shown in other locations and at smaller sizes.

In addition to intrusiveness, the sheer frequency of ads (P4) can also affect perception of ad clutter.

- P4:** The frequency of ads affects perceived ad clutter level: the higher the number of ads on a web page in online media, the higher is the consumer-perceived ad clutter level.

## **Audience/user-centred analysis: perceived ad clutter**

Audience-centred analysis of ad clutter in our study refers to an assessment of consumers' (audiences in traditional media, users in online media) perceived clutter. We define perceived ad clutter as a consumer's subjective evaluation of the level of advertising clutter, as opposed to an objective measure of the amount of advertising represented in media content. Many factors may explain perception of ad clutter level. We have chosen to focus on two factors that have been studied empirically with strong evidence. Both determine the relevance of advertising to the consumer. One of the two factors that can affect the perception of clutter level is the consumer's attitude towards advertising in general and in specific media contexts.

### *Attitudes towards advertising, advertising scepticism and advertising avoidance*

Attitude towards advertising is a common research concept to examine consumers' attitudes towards advertising as a social institution and as part of media content (e.g. Reid & Soley 1982; Muehling 1987; Andrews 1989; Mittal 1994; O'Donohue 1995). These attitudes are believed to affect the processing of advertising and receptivity to advertising. A study by Pollay and Mittal (1993) identified seven segments of consumers based on their different attitudes towards advertising in general, and found that personal utility values and perceived socio-economic effects of advertising determine these attitudes. More recently, researchers have found that consumers have different expectations of and attitudes towards advertising in different media. Their attitudes towards print advertising are much better than those towards electronic media, for example (Ha 1996; Elliott & Speck 1998; Grusell 2007). Hence attitudes towards advertising in general and in specific media contexts can affect perceived clutter level. Time orientation is attributed as a factor influencing attitudes towards advertising. Past-orientated consumers, who value the past and tradition, are much more negative towards advertising than are future-orientated consumers (Rojas-Méndez & Davies 2005).

A negative attitude towards advertising in general, or disbelief in advertising, has been conceptualised as advertising scepticism (Obermiller *et al.* 2005). Advertising sceptics distrust advertising because of its persuasive and commercial nature. No matter how low the amount of advertising is in relation to the editorial content of the media, they will see it as clutter because every advertisement is irrelevant, misleading and annoying. In the United States, for example, there are quite a number of anti-advertising activist groups, such as Adfreeblog.org, which encourages bloggers not to carry advertising, and the Media Foundation's *Adbuster* magazine, which examines 'the erosion of our physical and cultural environments by commercial forces' (adbusters.org 2008). A more moderate form of advertising scepticism relates to the amount and execution of advertising. For example, if the advertising amount is low, the advertised product is relevant to the consumer and the advertising presentation is entertaining, informative and non-offensive, then advertising can be acceptable. Inversely, if the amount is high, the advertised product is irrelevant or the ad execution is dull or offensive, then advertising is viewed as clutter, annoying and unacceptable.

One common consumer response to advertising clutter is advertising avoidance. One may even argue that advertising avoidance on the internet is more likely to occur than in traditional media because of the ease of moving from one web page to another. Cho and Cheon (2004) propose that goal impediment, perceived ad clutter and prior negative experience cause consumers to avoid online advertising. Hence, advertising clutter continues to be an important consideration in the online media environment. In online media, some advertising formats require the user's voluntary action, such as clicking a banner or hyperlink. Apart from ignoring the advertising, non-action from the user can be seen as an indication of indifference to advertising messages. Hence we can propose that (P5) general attitude towards advertising is negatively related to perceived ad clutter level.

**P5:** Negative general attitudes towards advertising in general and advertising in specific media outlets will lead to higher perceived ad clutter level: the more negative the consumer's general attitudes towards advertising and advertising in the specific media outlet, the higher the consumer's perceived ad clutter level.

### *Task orientation and goal impediment*

Goal impediment is attributed to the cause of the perceived intrusiveness of advertising clutter (Edwards *et al.* 2002). If advertising clutter is placed within editorial content, it will disrupt consumption of that editorial content and be viewed as a nuisance because most consumers use a media vehicle for its editorial content. In the proposed conceptual framework, we have to first identify the goal of consumers when using a media vehicle to predict their perceived advertising clutter level. We propose that there are four different task orientations in media consumption: (1) information; (2) entertainment; (3) shopping; (4) exploration.

When the goal of media consumption is to find information that is unrelated to shopping for specific products, then advertising is perceived as impeding the process of obtaining the information because consumers have to make an extra effort to screen out the ads irrelevant to their purpose. Likewise, when the goal of media consumption is for entertainment, advertising clutter disrupts the flow of the entertainment content and will be perceived as a nuisance, yet may not be perceived as as much of an impediment as it is in the information-orientated task. It is based on the assumption that the information-orientated task has a stronger directional goal than the entertainment-orientated task. The exploratory task orientation refers to media consumption as just surfing or browsing the editorial content of the media, with no particular goal. The consumption of media is for sensory pleasure only. In online media, the hedonic value of internet media content, whether advertising or editorial, is the criterion of acceptance by internet surfers (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982; Babin *et al.* 1994; Cotte *et al.* 2006). Consumers with an exploratory task orientation will not see advertising as clutter if it has high entertainment value to them, while they are more likely to ignore it if the advertising execution is dull. In general, consumers with an exploratory orientation do not distinguish the difference between editorial content and advertising.

If a consumer's goal is to shop for products, then the advertisements can be relevant to the shopping goal of the consumer because they offer various alternatives to consumers with product information. In this case, resistance to ads will be greatly reduced due to their matching goal and relevance to the products – consumers may even welcome the clutter. However, not all products being advertised will be relevant to them; those

that are irrelevant will not be welcomed by the user. Hence, even if shopping is the goal of consumers when using a media vehicle, goal impediment can still apply in determining the perceived advertising clutter level of the consumer. By setting the relevance of the ads to the consumer, task orientations can determine the perceived clutter level of the consumer. When advertising clutter perception is formed based on the goal impediment factor, consumers with exploration task orientation will perceive a lower level of advertising clutter than the other three task orientations, which have a clear goal in their media consumption (P6).

**P6:** Task orientations affect perceived advertising clutter levels: informational search, task-orientated consumers have a higher perceived ad clutter level than entertainment-, exploration- and shopping-orientated consumers; exploration-orientated consumers will perceive the lowest ad clutter level; shopping-orientated consumers will perceive high clutter level for advertising that contains products that are not on their shopping list, and low clutter level for advertising that contains products they are shopping for.

### **Responses to online ad clutter**

Our six propositions argue that the physical characteristics of advertising in the media, individual differences among consumers in terms of attitudes towards advertising in general, and in a specific media context, and task orientation, all affect consumer responses to ad clutter. Our analytical framework shows the difference between the physical presence of advertising clutter and the perception of advertising clutter, which may not correspond to each other because the perception can be influenced by individual differences that are not controlled by the advertiser or the media. For advertising clutter to create any negative effect, the physical presence alone is not adequate. It is mediated by the perception of advertising clutter. Online and traditional (offline) media go through essentially the same process. But because of the dual media pace characteristics and controllability of display time in online media by advertisers, and the internet user's active role in the media consumption process, we have to consider additionally the online advertising formats and the delay in display time in considering perception of advertising clutter.

As discussed in the literature review, information processing approaches such as overload theory, reactance theory and selective attention theory explain why clutter will have negative advertising effects. Common measures of the negative effects of advertising clutter are advertising avoidance, lower memory of ads and lower perceived editorial quality (Mord & Gilson 1985; Ray & Webb 1986; Pillai 1990; Ha & Litman 1997; Edwards *et al.* 2002; Cho & Cheon 2004). Hence, we postulate in P7 that, when the users or audience perceive high advertising clutter, negative responses to advertising will occur. The effects of physical advertising clutter in media – such as location, frequency and editorial context – are mediated by perceived advertising clutter levels, which differ by attitudes towards advertising and task orientation. In online media, captive formats such as pop-up ads and immediate display of advertisements can increase perceptions of advertising clutter level. This leads to our final proposition:

**P7:** When consumers perceive a high level of advertising clutter, online negative advertising effects will occur, such as advertising avoidance, advertising memory reduction and perception of lower-quality editorial content.

### **Managerial and theoretical implications**

Our proposed framework and the propositions of the factors affecting perception of ad clutter have several important implications for advertisers and media firms. First, we have identified a set of controllable variables that advertisers and media can use to minimise perception of clutter, such as amount, size, editorial page type, time delay and location of ads. Second, we have identified a set of uncontrollable factors that are beyond the control of advertisers and media: individual differences in attitudes towards advertising and in specific media outlets, and task orientation in media consumption.

How should advertisers and media make use of this framework? We suggest that media firms can focus on improving the physical characteristics of advertising clutter, such as limiting the number of ads to a level that will be perceived as low clutter by most of its users and giving priority to advertisers who have well-executed advertisements in the most visible location of the editorial unit, in order to reduce resistance. The judicious

use of time delay and less compulsive formats can also create a more receptive advertising environment.

Advertisers should evaluate the advertising environment of the media by examining the advertising formats they choose online, and the placement of ads in the specific page type. If advertisers desire detailed processing of ad messages by consumers, they should probably advertise on destination pages, even though the reach may be smaller than for navigational pages. Users' receptiveness towards advertising should be a criterion in selecting an advertising media vehicle. Media firms should also study attitudes towards advertising, and the media contexts and task orientation of their audiences, so that media can determine their audience's receptiveness towards advertising. Through this effort, they can show advertisers that they have a receptive audience that will be favourable to advertising messages. For example, they can study the proportion of their users with exploratory and shopping tasks. The higher the proportion of users with those tasks, the more receptive they are to advertising and the higher their tolerance level to advertising clutter.

### **Theoretical implications**

The integrated model proposed in this paper has several important theoretical implications for advertising researchers. First, advertising effect is a combination of an individual audience's difference in perception of the advertising and the physical attributes of the advertising. In the specific application of advertising clutter, the amount of advertising may play only a small role in creating negative advertising effects. We have identified several physical characteristics, such as visibility and time delay, in online advertising that affect perceived advertising clutter level. Second, the value of an audience to advertisers is determined by its receptiveness to advertising. Such emphasis on receptiveness towards advertising signifies the voluntary nature of media consumption and the importance of creating a receptive media environment for advertisers. Such receptiveness is affected by attitudes towards advertising, and the task orientations of consumers. Finally, the comparison of online and offline media characteristics helps explain the similarities and differences in achieving advertising effectiveness in these media, and underscores the importance of advertising formats in the study of online advertising. The propositions presented

in the paper will facilitate rigorous empirical testing of the factors affecting the perception of advertising clutter and the effects of online advertising clutter.

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