

Comparative Analysis of Conventional and Digital Advertising Effectiveness: A Literature Review

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Abstract: This literature review analyzes the effectiveness of traditional versus digital advertising by examining studies published between 2020 and 2026. It consolidates findings on various factors including reach, attention, trustworthiness, engagement, purchase intent, sales, measurability, personalization, and cost-effectiveness. Recent evidence indicates that digital advertising excels in targeting, interactivity, personalization, real-time tracking, and conversion monitoring. Conversely, traditional advertising maintains advantages in credibility, contextual presence, extensive reach, and memory retention. However, findings also show that neither medium is consistently superior; effectiveness can differ based on audience traits, marketing goals, product types, message design, attention levels, and media contexts. Research involving print, television, paid search, display, and social media reveals that integrated campaigns can yield synergistic effects, enhancing overall performance. Therefore, the review suggests that advertising effectiveness should be assessed using metrics specific to objectives and audiences rather than through direct channel comparisons alone. Future studies should focus on cross-media experiments, long-term outcomes, attribution issues, and emerging digital technologies across various markets and contexts.

Keywords: Advertising Effectiveness, Traditional Advertising, Digital Advertising, Consumer Behavior, Integrated Marketing Communication

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Introduction

Advertising remains a crucial element of marketing communication, allowing organizations to build awareness, convey value propositions, shape consumer attitudes, boost demand, and enhance brand strength. Yet, the landscape of advertising has evolved significantly with the advent of digital technologies, social media, mobile devices, search engines, and data-driven marketing strategies. As a result, companies increasingly grapple with whether to invest in traditional advertising, digital platforms, or a hybrid approach.

Traditional advertising typically encompasses offline media such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards, and direct mail, while digital advertising includes formats like search ads, display ads, social media ads, online video content, mobile ads, and email promotions. Despite the rapid growth of digital channels, current literature does not assert that they have entirely supplanted traditional advertising. Rather, research demonstrates that the effectiveness of each medium is influenced by the advertising goal, target demographic, product category, message attributes, level of consumer attention, and measurement criteria.

For example, a study by Bayer et al. (2020) involving 1,651 companies found that both online display and paid search ads positively impacted sales and firm value when compared to offline methods. However, the efficacy of digital formats is not uniform across all scenarios. Van Ewijk et al. (2021) discovered that online display advertising had minimal effect on average consumer

packaged goods brands but yielded significant results for a select group of brands. These investigations reveal that the pertinent question is not simply whether digital advertising is superior to traditional forms, but rather the specific conditions under which each medium is most effective.

Furthermore, recent studies highlight that traditional advertising retains vital benefits. For instance, Venkatraman et al. (2021) discovered in experimental studies that print ads foster stronger engagement and memory encoding compared to digital ads, although long-term recognition levels did not differ significantly. Digital advertising, meanwhile, faces issues such as ad clutter, avoidance, fraud, measurement challenges, privacy worries, and consumer annoyance (Çelik, 2023; Gordon et al., 2021).

This literature review, therefore, seeks to compare the effectiveness of traditional and digital advertising based on recent publications from 2020 to 2026, specifically focusing on aspects such as reach, attention, engagement, credibility, personalization, consumer response, sales outcomes, measurement, and the growing significance of integrated advertising strategies.

Defining Advertising Effectiveness

Advertising effectiveness denotes how well an advertising campaign fulfills its communication or marketing aims, which may include generating awareness, improving brand perceptions, fostering engagement, influencing purchase intentions, increasing

sales, enhancing customer loyalty, or building long-term brand equity.

A challenge in assessing traditional versus digital advertising lies in the varying operational definitions of effectiveness. Traditional advertising has typically been measured through criteria such as reach, frequency, recall, recognition, brand awareness, attitudes, and sales figures. Digital advertising has broadened the scope of measurable metrics to encompass impressions, clicks, click-through rates, engagement levels, conversions, costs per acquisition, and other real-time indicators.

Gordon et al. (2021) note that digital advertising markets encounter significant measurement obstacles despite their apparent transparency. Issues related to attribution, ad fraud, ad blocking, and channel friction can complicate interpretations of digital performance. Consequently, having more data does not necessarily lead to clearer conclusions about digital advertising effectiveness.

Shankar et al. (2022) similarly highlight that digital marketing communication should be viewed through various dimensions, including communication goals, platforms, content, and consumer responses, suggesting that advertising effectiveness is multidimensional rather than a singular outcome.

Effectiveness of Traditional Advertising

Reach and Mass Communication

One core advantage of traditional advertising is its capacity to reach broad audiences. Media such as television, radio, newspapers, and outdoor advertising can simultaneously expose large consumer groups to a brand. This remains especially pertinent where access to digital technology is limited or where consumption leans heavily toward traditional media.

Thus, traditional advertising continues to possess value for organizations aiming for mass awareness rather than precise targeting. Specifically, television and outdoor ads offer high visibility and repeated exposure, contributing to brand legitimacy and consumer familiarity.

However, mass reach can become constraining when advertisers seek targeted messaging. Unlike digital platforms, traditional media generally provides fewer chances for advertisers to focus on detailed behavioral, demographic, or interest-based consumer characteristics.

Attention and Memory

Recent evidence strongly favors traditional advertising concerning consumer attention and memory retention. Venkatraman et al. (2021) compared print and digital advertisements using various methods, including eye tracking and biometric analysis, revealing greater engagement and encoding in print advertisements. Moreover, print ads activated brain regions associated with memory processing more robustly than digital counterparts.

These findings are significant because digital advertising often faces competition from multiple stimuli on a single screen, leading consumers to potentially scroll past ads or multitask while encountering numerous advertisements. As such, while digital advertising provides advanced targeting capabilities, traditional media may inspire deeper cognitive processing.

This does not imply that print advertising is always superior, but rather that the media format can influence the way

consumers process advertising messages. Thus, advertising effectiveness should account for cognitive and memory-related outcomes beyond immediate clicks or conversions.

Effectiveness of Digital Advertising

Targeting and Personalization

A key benefit of digital advertising lies in its ability to precisely target specific demographic segments. Digital platforms enable advertisers to utilize demographic, behavioral, geographic, contextual, and interest-based data to deliver tailored advertisements to distinct consumer groups.

In a meta-analysis involving 88 empirical studies, Lütjens et al. (2022) pinpointed informativeness, entertainment, irritation, and credibility as crucial factors shaping consumer attitudes towards digital advertising. They also identified emerging themes such as personalization, privacy concerns, and interactivity, highlighting the evolving sophistication of digital advertising effectiveness.

Personalization can enhance ad relevance for consumers. For instance, Geng et al. (2021) found that both personal and social relevance positively influenced consumer engagement with social media ads, while platform trust enhanced some of these dynamics.

Nonetheless, excessive personalization can lead to negative reactions if consumers perceive the advertisements as invasive. Therefore, the success of personalization hinges on finding the right balance between relevance and privacy.

Consumer Engagement and Interactivity

Digital advertising allows for direct consumer interaction, differing fundamentally from traditional ads, which are primarily one-way communications. Consumers engaging with digital advertisements can click, comment, share, visit websites, or communicate with brands directly.

Research by K. V. Sriram et al. (2021) indicates that the characteristics of social media advertising shape consumer perceptions, thereby influencing purchase intentions. Likewise, Pelet and Ettis (2022) found that originality, likability, credibility, and irritation significantly affect attitudes toward social media ads, which, in turn, influence purchase decisions and brand recommendations.

Social media thus transcends being a mere advertising platform, creating an environment where consumers can respond to, modify, share, and amplify advertising messages.

Effectiveness in Conditions of Low Attention

A prevalent misconception is that digital advertising requires full consumer attention to be effective. Santoso et al. (2020) demonstrated through experiments that digital advertising can sway consumer choices even when attention is limited. Their research suggested that ads remain influential regardless of consumer attention levels, with variations dependent on brand familiarity and product attributes.

In a similar vein, Santoso and Wright (2022) ascertained that exposure to digital ads under low attention contexts can enhance brand consideration and choice, finding that incidental attention can yield significant outcomes, particularly for emotionally charged advertisements.

These findings contest traditional beliefs that consumers need to actively engage with ads for them to impact behavior. They also reveal that digital advertising can be effective through more subtle forms of exposure.

Comparative Analysis of Traditional and Digital Advertising

Reach and Targeting

While traditional advertising excels in mass reach, digital advertising shines in precise targeting. Television, radio, outdoor ads, and newspapers can deliver messages to large audiences, but advertisers often relinquish control over who receives the message.

Digital advertising allows for more focused consumer targeting. For instance, search advertising can connect with consumers based on their active searches, while social media advertising can reach users based on demographic and behavioral data.

Consequently, digital advertising is particularly well-suited to scenarios where segmentation and individual communication are paramount, whereas traditional advertising is effective for broad awareness.

Credibility and Trust

Credibility plays a significant role in advertising effectiveness. Traditional media benefits from established institutional reputations and physical visibility, resulting in advertisements like those on professionally produced television or in newspapers being perceived as indicators of organizational legitimacy.

Digital advertising, in contrast, grapples with challenges pertaining to privacy, misinformation, fraud, and intrusive ad content. Çelik (2023) highlights advertising avoidance as a growing concern stemming from rising exposure to digital advertisements.

Furthermore, Lütjens et al. (2022) argue that credibility remains a pivotal factor shaping consumer attitudes towards digital advertising. Hence, the effectiveness of digital ads relies not only on targeting and personalization but also on consumer perceptions of the advertisements' trustworthiness.

Engagement and Interactivity

Digital advertising affords superior interaction capabilities, enabling consumers to respond instantly to ads, visit websites, purchase products, and share content. Traditional ads, on the other hand, provide fewer immediate opportunities for consumer interaction.

The interactive aspects of digital media can enhance consumer engagement. Research on social media illustrates that relevance, originality, credibility, and various aspects of advertising can influence how consumers engage with ads and brands (Geng et al., 2021; Pelet & Ettis, 2022).

However, it's crucial to interpret engagement metrics with caution. A high volume of clicks, likes, or comments does not necessarily correlate with actual sales or long-term brand value.

Measurability

Digital advertising offers advertisers extensive performance metrics, allowing for near-instantaneous tracking of impressions,

clicks, conversions, and other indicators. This provides the flexibility to adjust campaigns on the fly.

Conversely, measuring traditional advertising effectiveness at the individual consumer level is often more challenging. Despite this, digital measurability does not inherently guarantee greater effectiveness. According to Gordon et al. (2021), issues related to ad fraud, ad blocking, channel friction, and measuring actual advertising effects complicate matters.

Thus, while digital advertising may offer enhanced measurement capabilities, the quality of these measurements is contingent upon the validity of attribution methodologies and how well digital metrics correlate with actual business performance.

Sales and Firm Performance

An essential basis for comparison is the direct relationship between advertising and firm performance. Bayer et al. (2020) observed advertising expenditure trends across 1,651 firms over seven years, uncovering positive effects of both paid search and online display advertising on sales and company value.

However, van Ewijk et al. (2021) found that online display advertising did not yield consistent results for consumer packaged goods brands, as its success depended on specific brand and spending conditions.

Recent findings indicate that digital ad effects may also extend beyond the immediate platform where the ad appears. A large-scale randomized field experiment by Byte Dance revealed significant spillover effects, with exposed users more likely to engage outside the platform than within it (Chen et al., 2025). This complexity underscores the challenges of accurately measuring the effectiveness of digital advertising, as platform-specific conversion data may underestimate the broader impact of campaigns.

Making the Case for Integrated Advertising

Emerging literature increasingly suggests that organizations need not choose exclusively between traditional and digital advertising; evidence indicates that the two can work synergistically.

Van Ewijk et al. (2021) researched online display advertising both in isolation and alongside television and print ads, suggesting the relationship between online and offline advertising varies among brands and depends on spending levels.

Likewise, Voorveld (2021) contends that the interplay between advertising and media should not be simplified as a traditional versus digital dichotomy. Many challenges associated with digital advertising are extensions of long-standing advertising issues, and integrating media can allow traditional and digital formats to complement one another.

Leveraging both channels can lead to multiple benefits. Traditional advertising is effective for creating widespread recognition and credibility, while digital advertising excels in providing targeted messaging, interactive engagement, retargeting, and conversion opportunities. For instance, a television ad might introduce a brand to a vast audience, while search and social media ads can follow up with individuals demonstrating interest in that brand.

This supports an integrated marketing communication perspective, where advertising effectiveness is evaluated based on

overall campaign results rather than assessing each channel in isolation.

The Unique Role of Social Media Advertising

Social media advertising warrants special consideration as it merges advertising, social engagement, content creation, and electronic word-of-mouth.

A bibliometric analysis by Paharia et al. (2024) of 474 journal articles highlights consumer behavior and brand engagement as major themes in the study of social media advertising, emphasizing the growing significance of social platforms in advertising research.

However, social media advertising is not without its challenges due to ad clutter. Research from a 2021 eye-tracking study indicated that advertising clutter can lead to competition for attention, although personalization may help draw focus (Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing, 2021). This suggests that simply increasing the volume of social media advertisements does not necessarily enhance effectiveness.

Moreover, the effectiveness of social media advertising relies on the quality and relevance of creative content. Yousef et al. (2021) explored the impact of various advertising appeals, demonstrating that social media can effectively drive consumer engagement and actions beyond the platform itself.

Thus, the success of social media advertising hinges on the interplay among content quality, relevance, personalization, platform characteristics, trust, and consumer motivation.

Addressing Advertising Avoidance

One notable drawback of digital advertising is the potential for advertising avoidance. Consumers can skip ads, use ad blockers, scroll past sponsored content, or disregard promotional messages altogether.

Çelik (2023) identifies digital advertising avoidance as a critical issue for researchers and marketers, exacerbated by an increase in consumer exposure to ads. Excessive advertising can lead to consumer frustration and diminish receptiveness.

This challenge also exists within traditional advertising. Consumers have the option to switch television channels, bypass radio ads, ignore newspaper ads, or simply overlook billboards. Nevertheless, digital technologies offer consumers increasingly sophisticated tools for regulating their exposure to ads.

Lütjens et al. (2022) show that irritation remains a prominent factor influencing attitudes towards digital advertising, although its impact has evolved over time. Therefore, advertisers must focus not only on reaching consumers but also on minimizing negative reactions.

Theoretical Insights

The literature reviewed supports a contingency perspective on advertising effectiveness, suggesting that no advertising channel is universally effective. Instead, effectiveness is determined by how medium characteristics interact with contextual factors.

Four primary contingency factors arise from this body of research.

First, consumer characteristics affect effectiveness; for instance, younger or more digitally engaged consumers may

respond better to social media and online advertising, while other demographics might react more positively to traditional media.

Second, the advertising objectives play a crucial role. Digital advertising is often more suitable for direct response campaigns, lead generation, and tracking conversions, while traditional advertising excels in building mass awareness and brand identity.

Third, product characteristics influence how advertising is received. Santoso et al. (2020) illustrated that the effectiveness of digital advertising under low attention varies based on product attributes and brand familiarity.

Fourth, the characteristics of messages themselves can impact effectiveness. Factors such as informativeness, entertainment value, credibility, personalization, emotional appeal, and relevance all shape advertising success (Lütjens et al., 2022; Yousef et al., 2021).

Consequently, advertising effectiveness should be viewed as a function of the interplay among medium, audience, message, objective, and context, rather than as an intrinsic quality of either traditional or digital media.

Identifying Gaps in the Literature

Despite the significant growth of advertising research, several gaps persist.

Need for Direct Cross-Media Experiments

Many studies investigate digital advertising in isolation from traditional formats. More randomized experiments that compare similar advertisement types across television, print, outdoor, search, social media, and online video could enhance the evidence base.

Focus on Short-Term Outcomes

Numerous digital advertising studies prioritize immediate results such as clicks, engagement levels, or purchase intentions. Future research should delve into long-term effects like brand equity, consumer lifetime value, retention, and sustained sales.

Attribution Challenges

Although digital advertising produces vast amounts of data, correlating consumer behavior with specific advertising exposures remains complex. Future studies should develop comprehensive cross-channel attribution methodologies that encompass both online and offline consumer journeys.

Exploration of Emerging Technologies

Technologies such as artificial intelligence, generative advertising, automated media buying, augmented reality, and virtual reality are redefining advertising landscapes. Research from 2020 to 2026 has laid a foundation, but future investigations must explore how these innovations reshape the comparative effectiveness of traditional and digital advertising.

Inclusion of Developing-Market Perspectives

Much of the advanced advertising scholarship originates from North America, Europe, and other highly digitized regions. More research is needed from emerging markets in Africa, Asia,

and elsewhere where television, radio, outdoor advertising, mobile communication, and social media often coexist.

Conclusion

The literature published between 2020 and 2026 indicates that the debate regarding the effectiveness of traditional versus digital advertising cannot be settled by declaring one medium as universally superior. Digital advertising offers critical advantages in terms of targeting, personalization, interactivity, flexibility, measurability, and conversion tracking—particularly for advertisers seeking measurable actions and segmented communications.

On the other hand, traditional advertising remains valuable for its mass reach, physical presence, credibility, attention retention, and memory impact. Experimental findings suggest that print advertisements can achieve superior engagement and memory encoding under specific conditions (Venkatraman et al., 2021).

These insights support a complementary perspective where digital and traditional advertising fulfill different but interrelated roles in the consumer decision-making process. The optimal advertising strategy should consider organizational objectives, target audiences, product categories, budgets, messaging, and market contexts.

Ultimately, advertising effectiveness should be evaluated using a range of metrics rather than relying on a single measure such as reach, clicks, engagement, or sales figures. Future advertising strategies should thus shift from a simplistic "traditional versus digital" debate toward a comprehensive, evidence-driven approach that identifies the most effective combination of media for specific objectives and audiences.

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