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Abena A. Yeboah-Banin

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Audience Expectations of Advertising during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Evidence from an Approach–Avoidance Theory Study in Ghana

Abena A. Yeboah-Banin

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6947-0452>

University of Ghana

ayeboah-banin@ug.edu.gh

Abstract

Covid-19 (an acronym for the coronavirus disease of 2019) has revised how businesses the world over act, including how they engage their targets. As audiences battle the barrage of Covid-19 information already fighting for their attention, the boundaries of the already complex task of catching and retaining their attention is being re-defined. A cursory observation would show that, during the pandemic, brand advertising has evolved. Promotional messages deployed during the pandemic, particularly at its onset and during peak times, often include references to the pandemic either by way of providing education or solidarising with consumers. How well is this strategy in advertising messaging fitted to audience desires and to what extent does it dis/encourage audience engagement? This article reports on a study that was informed by approach–avoidance theory and explored audience expectations of and responses to advertising messages during the Covid-19 pandemic. Survey data from a sample of advertising audiences in Ghana served as the basis of the exploration. It found that the audience deemed it appropriate for brands to include pandemic information in their advertising and were unreceptive to advertisements (hereafter ads) that have a self-serving (i.e. focused only on the brand) ethos. There were, however, nuances to preference levels towards different themes of pandemic message infusions. These, along with their theoretical implications are discussed in the article.

Keywords: Covid-19; approach–avoidance theory; advertising messages; audience expectations; advertising engagement

Introduction

Pandemics call for new ways of advertising in which brands take on more socially responsible and advocacy roles (Holland 2021). During a pandemic, both brands and their consumers face a formidable threat to their very existence. However, brands cannot afford to stay silent if they are to ensure their continued existence. Additionally, the onus falls on brands to demonstrate concern as they must be seen to have the interest of their targets at heart (Thomas and Kohli 2009). Yet, audiences can easily deem it insensitive for brands to advertise at such times (Holland 2021).

Scholarly evidence suggests that brands adopt “for public” rather than “for me” strategies to connect with their targets during crises (Derevianko 2019; Kavoura and Sahinidis 2015; Kim and Lee 2015). Thus, rather than using messages that focus solely on promoting the brand, in crisis situations, alternate logics that communicate brands’ social responsiveness and actions are deployed. For instance, at the heart of the Covid-19 (an acronym for the coronavirus disease of 2019) pandemic, the Ford car manufacturer in the United States announced the use of some of its factories for the manufacture of medical equipment in short supply to support the effort to curb the pandemic (Shipley and Loar 2020). There are reputational benefits for doing this as shown by Janssen, Sen and Bhattacharya (2015). In addition, it gives brands something to “talk about” without appearing insensitive to the plight of the crisis-facing audience.

On the sidelines of the pandemic, there is an emerging trend – a change in advertising messages. Perhaps driven by the need to show concern, brand advertising has taken a turn for blending in which instead of projecting a self-promotional intent, brands also demonstrate solidarity by sharing Covid-19 education tips and encourage protocol observance (Jiménez-Sánchez, Margalina and Vayas-Ruiz 2020). The strategic intent behind this is quite obvious – promote the brand while making the crisis-facing audience feel that the brand cares.

For example, a poster tweeted by Guinness Beer in March 2020 displays a couch and the company logo with a call to consumers to “Stay at home”, alluding to the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) admonition for social distancing.

Across some DSTV channels targeting African audiences, Dano Milk also launched its “Raise a glass to better days” campaign in which people recounted their hope for better days after the pandemic and in the meantime had the brand as their companion. Yet another example is the advertisement (hereafter ad) from Ghana’s Papa’s Pizza (see Figure 1):

**Aside delivering the
best pizza, our topmost
priority is your safety
and health.**

We are doing our utmost best in ensuring the wellbeing of our customers and staff. However, if you feel unsafe in public due to this outbreak we will always be glad to deliver to you.

Tel: 024 115 0555

Order online: www.papaspizzaghana.com or
Via short code: *844*10#




Figure 1: Papa’s Pizza ad
(Reprinted with permission: marketing@papaspizzagh.com)

Across ads adopting this dual ethos (promotional and social responsibility/advocacy), three core themes appear to have been blended with brand messages. Ads use any combinations of messages that: (1) provide audiences with information and education about Covid-19 and how to stay safe during the pandemic; (2) announce their actions towards ensuring consumer safety and wellbeing; and (3) express their solidarity with audiences as they battle with the risks and effects of the pandemic (Beer 2020). While some ads combine brands’ promotional messages with those that showcase their actions to fight the pandemic, others emphasise support and solidarity with their targets and frontline workers. Others also provide educational information about the pandemic to guide audience behaviour.

The trend raises some questions for advertising scholars and practitioners, such as: How well are these messaging strategies fitted to audience expectations? Should brands actively court a “we care for you” persona in their pandemic-era ads? When facing an existential threat to their lives, do audiences expect brands to “shut up” or adopt a “business as usual” approach to their advertising? Are there things brands can say to enhance the engagement prospects and impact of their ads?

The current study attempted to find answers to these important questions by exploring audience expectations of and engagement with ads during a pandemic. By “engage”, the researcher refers to the continuum of behaviours ranging from the mere “turning on”

(attraction) of consumers to a brand message (Malthouse and Calder 2011) to their interaction with and active processing of the message (Brodie et al. 2011).

The study has contributed to the advertising engagement scholarship by focusing on the dynamics that pandemic conditions introduce. Ordinarily, audiences are inundated with ads (Simpson 2017) to the point of hating them (Cohen 2018) and seeking ways to avoid them (Guttman 2018). During a pandemic, the information targeting audiences expands even more (e.g., infection statistics, stay safe education, interventions, etc.) and places ads under an even bigger threat. Scholars have suggested using subliminal messaging and quick message substance delivery to prevent audiences skipping ads (Bradley, Angelini and Lee 2007; Campbell et al. 2017). However, these apply to normal and predictable times, whereas pandemics call for new configurations in advertising (He and Harris 2020), the dynamics of which scholars know little about. Thus, the current study has provided a much-needed direction and scholarly understanding of these configurations and dynamics.

Further, the study has also extended scholars' knowledge of the implications of customer orientation in doing business as it relates to brand communications. Researchers have established that when brands adopt a customer orientation to promote customer benefits, the implications are positive (Homburg, Müller and Klarmann 2011). However, scholars' understanding of the manifestations of this benefit is limited to evidence from research into customer satisfaction and relationship quality (Macintosh 2007); sales performance (Homburg, Müller and Klarmann 2011); service performance (Brady and Cronin 2001); and so on. The study used approach–avoidance theory (Horowitz 1979) to show how taking the audience's (customer's) viewpoint in advertising during a pandemic can deliver benefits by way of audience engagement.

In subsequent sections, the theoretical foundation of the research questions and design is laid out, followed by a description of the research methodology. These are followed by the findings, which are discussed within the context of existing theorising, empirical evidence, and implications.

Ad Engagement during a Pandemic: An Approach–Avoidance Perspective

For centuries, psychologists have grappled with the foundations of motivation in an attempt to explain what makes people do things the way they do (Elliot 2006). Out of this quest has arisen the hedonism-inspired principle that people generally avoid pain and choose pleasure (Heider 1958). Under the rubric of approach–avoidance theory (Horowitz 1979), this principle has been widely employed to explain why and how people choose to act driven by a quest for good things and a corresponding quest to avoid bad things.

At its core, approach–avoidance theory argues that individuals gravitate towards pleasant stimuli/events and avoid those that are not, particularly those deemed hurtful

(Carver 2006; Horowitz 1979). This means that at the centre of approach–avoidance behaviour is the emotion associated with a stimulus. Irrespective of its nature, the affective evaluation and associations resulting from contact with stimuli determines whether individuals will expend mental energy to process them or not (Chen and Bargh 1999). This renders individuals’ evaluations and associations goal-oriented and behaviour-shaping (Bamford and Ward 2008).

Thus, approach and avoidance behaviours have purpose-driven antecedents. Avoidance strategies help individuals to reduce stress and anxiety, while approach strategies enable individuals to take advantage of situations and changes in them (Roth and Cohen 1986). Not surprisingly, much of the approach–avoidance theory led research focuses on goal achievement (Elliot and Thrash 2002). However, it is increasingly being applied to the study of audience response to market stimuli including advertising messages (Kelly, Kerr and Drennan 2010; Kelly, Kerr and Drennan 2020; Speck and Elliot 1997). The theory has proven useful in explaining how individuals engage with ads (see Kelly, Kerr and Drennan 2020; Speck and Elliot 1997).

It appears that individuals engage with ads that reward some need (e.g. provide needed information, entertainment, validation or aspiration, etc.) and avoid those that they find offensive, disruptive and irrelevant or lack resonance with their lifestyles and aspirations (Elliot and Thrash 2002). Thus, audiences either “turn off” (disengage) or “turn on” (engage) advertising depending on the benefit perceived in it (Kelly, Kerr and Drennan 2020). In other words, approach and avoid decisions about ads do not exist in a purpose vacuum. For instance, logic from the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) shows that cues, such as personal relevance, message comprehensibility and need for cognition, are critical determinants of approach–avoidance behaviour.

Owing to the plethora of ads and other information stimuli fighting for audiences’ attention, and the sheer volumes of other activities they must attend to, ad audiences use approach and avoid signals to make decisions. Indeed, in contemporary times, audiences even turn to ad-blocking software to avoid exposure (Brinson, Eastin and Cicchirillo 2018). During a pandemic, the need for and use of such cues may become heightened as the volumes of information increase. Besides seeking their own survival strategies, the already advertising-fatigued pandemic-era audiences are bombarded with information from governments, international agencies, local health agencies and officials, and more.

Approach–avoidance theory suggests that individuals will only stay to engage with ads that hold some value for them. Accordingly, brands seeking to advertise to audiences must have a “hook” that makes their ads relevant to the audiences’ survival or risk the “avoidance antenna” being directed at them (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 2004).

Previous theorising suggests that the perceived proximity between advertising messages and the audiences' pandemic circumstances is critical (Chang 2012; Wang 2006). Thus, there should be some merit to infusing some pandemic-related information in ads to enhance the proximity individuals perceive between them and advertising messages. Because people living through a pandemic actively seek survival information (Luge 2020), deploying advertising messages that transcend the usual brand promotion-only ethos to include pandemic education may provide a "hook" towards approach behaviour. In the study the "hook" is operationalised as audiences' preference and attention devoted to engaging with the message. Similarly, messages highlighting actions by brands to ensure consumer wellbeing and convenience during the pandemic, as well as those solidarising with consumers, would hold allure for audiences. In contrast, during a pandemic, messages that focus on promoting only the brands' interest may engender avoidance behaviour as they may appear insensitive to the audiences' plight.

Methodology

Setting

The study was conducted using survey data from a sample of advertising audiences in Ghana. The phenomenon under study concerns audiences, their expectations and the circumstances of their engagement (or otherwise) with advertising messages. That being the case, a quantitative survey offers the opportunity to gather the evidence with enough breadth to enable conclusive claims.

Ghana presented a suitable setting for the study due to the dynamics that emerged during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. The country was late in coming to the Covid-19 league table having only registered its first case in mid-March 2020 (Ministry of Health 2020). Thereafter, eradication and control measures announced by the government, including lockdowns and cross-border travel restrictions, introduced significant angst among the population. In its first wave (March to December 2020), the country suffered low transmission and death rates which left the populace complacent and less attendant to the protective protocols. However, this trend changed significantly in the second wave (early 2021). Across these pandemic waves and corresponding changes in people's behaviours, brands have not kept quiet, having rather faced a stronger need to stay relevant in their consumers' lives.

However, there has been a clear change in their advertising messages. Across media, brands' ads have taken on a hybrid tone where their messages are infused with Covid-19 information, frequently including education on Covid-19 protocols; encouragement to adhere to such protocols; announcements of safety measures instituted by brands; and so on. Ghana's economy, which is one of the fastest-growing in Africa (Signe and Johnson 2018), also made it a good empirical setting for such a study. Its 57% adult population (CIA 2020) is frequently targeted by ads from both local and multinational brands competing for their attention.

Data Collection

An online survey using Google Forms was used to gather data from a group of 541 conveniently sampled respondents. A select group of 10 former students of the researcher were engaged to share the research instrument via their social media pages to solicit participation. After two weeks of data collection including one round of reminder posts, 541 surveys were completed. Three additional surveys were attempted but left incomplete. These were not included in the analysis since they excluded data on critical variables (Hair et al. 2013). The survey was launched in the first week of lockdown in Ghana, Accra and Kumasi (between March 30 and April 20). This was the point at which people started feeling curtailed and directly impacted by the pandemic.

Measures

All constructs had single-item measures of which some were numerical and others categorical. The primary variable under investigation, ad engagement, referred to how the respondents responded to a focal ad that they remembered having been exposed to during the pandemic. It was measured as a categorical variable by which the respondents indicated what they did upon exposure (e.g. either paid attention to it or disregarded it). Advertising message focus was measured by asking the respondents to indicate the main substance of the focal ad they selected as the frame of reference (e.g. whether it focused on promoting the brand or providing some information about Covid-19). This was a categorical measure.

The respondents' perceptions about advertising in general and also about the idea of brands advertising during a pandemic were assessed with a three-point and five-point scale, respectively. The respondents' perceptions about the idea of brands including Covid-19 information in their ads were measured with a five-point scale assessing whether they found it appropriate or not. A three-point scale was used to measure the extent to which the respondents judged different message foci in ads during the pandemic (e.g. about operational changes, staying safe, brand promotion) to be appropriate.

Perception of information overload, that is, the sense of receiving too much information about the pandemic, was a categorical measure that asked the respondents to indicate whether they deemed themselves to have that sense. Measures on gender, education level, and employment status were all categorical, while the measure for age was numerical. Finally, a single dichotomous measure was used to assess whether the respondents had been targeted by any ads during the pandemic.

Analysis

Prior to analysing the data, constructs were assessed for the extent of their normal distribution to determine their suitability for analysis. This was a critical first step in deciding which statistical test was suitable for finding answers to the questions posed in the study. Across all constructs, the results of the normal distribution checks showed

that no assumptions were violated. Subsequently, a series of descriptive statistical tests were conducted to explore patterns in the data relative to the respondents' perceptions of and responses to ads they had been exposed to during the pandemic. Frequency distributions were used to assess the spread of respondents on all variables (i.e. demographic, attitudinal and behavioural). Further, cross-tabulations were used to assess patterns across variables (e.g. attitude to different advertising messages and engagement behaviour). To establish the actual nature of the relationships underpinning the patterns, however, the inferential statistical tool, Pearson's chi-squared test was used. This allowed the researcher not only to juxtapose one construct with another, but to test the existence of statistically significant links between them.

Findings

The respondents' gender ratio was 51:49 with females in the lead. Their ages ranged between 18 and 58 with the average age being 27 years. They were generally highly educated (91% tertiary) with a little over half being employed. They had a positive disposition towards ads, and at least 86 per cent of them thought of advertising as useful. Of the remainder, the majority had a neutral rather than negative posture towards ads. At the time of the data collection, most of the respondents (84%) had been targeted by and exposed to advertising messages in which something related to the pandemic was mentioned. Generally, the respondents did not express feelings of being overwhelmed by the plethora of pandemic-related information calling for their attention (see Table 1).

Table 1: Sample descriptives

Education level			Employment status			Gender		
Responses	Frequency	%	Responses	Frequency	%	Responses	Frequency	%
Up to secondary	13	2.5	Employed	270	52.1	Male	255	49.2
Up to tertiary	469	91.2	Volunteer	51	9.8	Female	263	50.8
Other	32	6.2	Un-employed	197	38.0	Total	518	100.0
Total	514	100.0	Total	518	100.0			
Perception of ads			Feeling about information being received about the pandemic			Targeted by ads during the pandemic?		
Responses	Frequency	%	Responses	Frequency	%	Responses	Frequency	%
Positive	451	86.1	More information is good	362	71.5	Yes	443	83.7
Neutral	65	12.4	There is too much information	144	28.5	No	86	16.3
Negative	8	1.5	Total	506	100.0	Total	529	100.0
Total	524	100.0						

Ads that targeted respondents during the pandemic had varied message foci including operational changes, brand building and promotion, and Covid-19 education. Across these message themes, however, it appears that the ads focused predominantly on the pandemic and its implications for the audience, and less on brands. Messages advising the audience on how to stay safe during the pandemic accounted for two-thirds of ads to which the sample had been exposed at the time of data collection (see Figure 2).

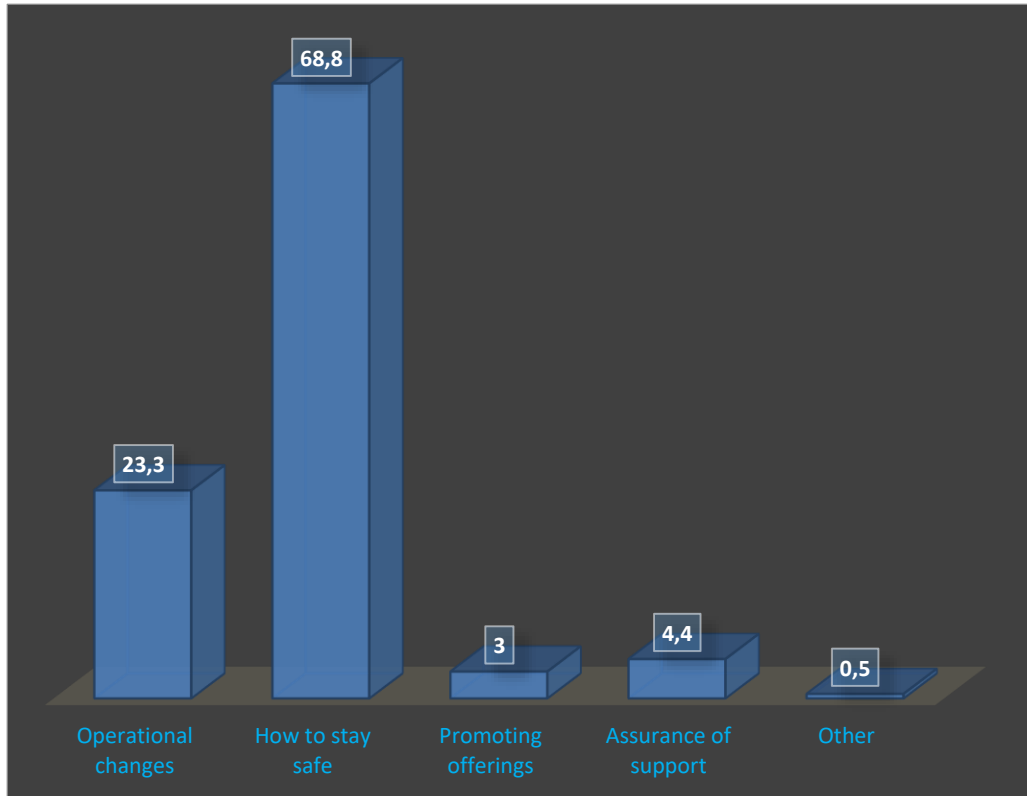


Figure 2: Focus of advertising messages

There appears to be consonance between what brands are saying and audience expectations of pandemic-era advertising content. As the word cloud in Figure 3 indicates, the respondents generally wanted to hear brands share in the stress of the pandemic with them. The most frequently appearing expectation expressed by respondents was “public education” indicating their need for brands to engage with them on matters relating to their well-being. Expectations, such as “safety measures”, “support measures” and “readiness to help”, also indicated their need for such audience-centred advertising messages. Besides these, respondents also expected brands to communicate adjustments to their offerings and processes to accommodate audience safety. Arguably, these are all messages that take the audience rather than the brand perspective.

Other themes discovered in this analysis of audience expectations are brand benevolence where the audience expects brands to communicate how they are actively contributing towards the fight against the pandemic, and to institute promotions, discounts and freebies. Altogether, it is evident that the audience expects brands to take their view and emphasise their (the customers') interest in ads.



Figure 3: Word cloud showing audience expectations of pandemic-era advertising messages

Source: Generated by author

The respondents were generally receptive to ads that included information that provided some education about the pandemic. The majority (69%) described such ads as either “very appropriate” or “appropriate. Interestingly, among those who did not see the idea of brands infusing messages about the pandemic into their ads as being appropriate, they tended more towards a neutral position rather than finding such ads to be inappropriate (see Figure 4).

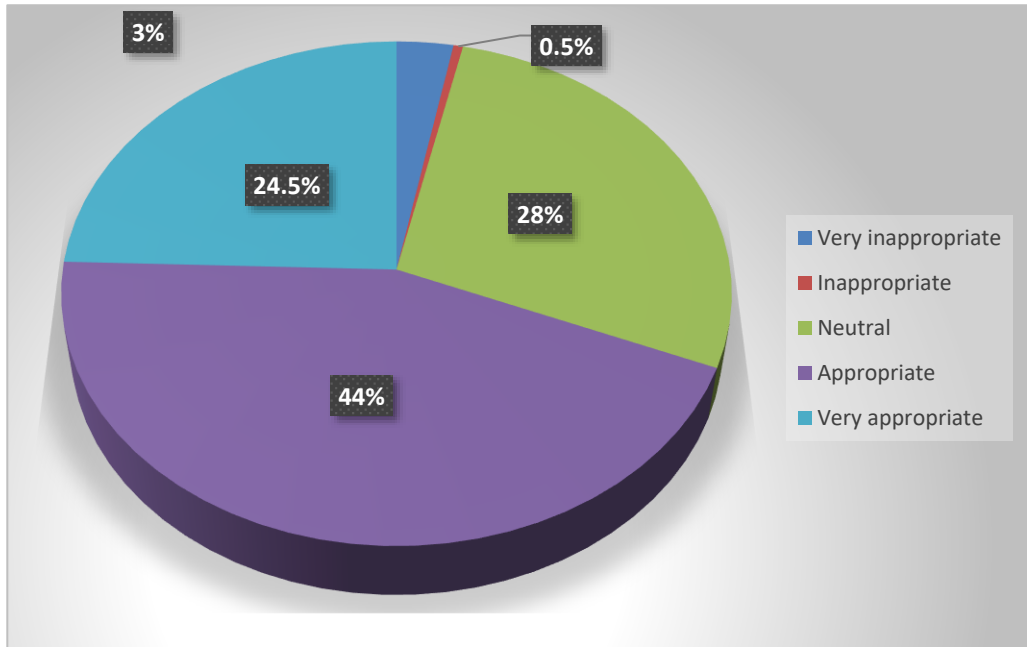


Figure 4: Perceptions about brands including Covid-19 information in their ads

The reverse was that they were more likely to frown upon messages that appeared to be self-serving and focused primarily on promoting the brands' interests. The respondents were least receptive to messages that appeared to seek only the brands' interests. As shown in Figure 5, ads that focused on promoting the brands' offerings were the most likely to be deemed inappropriate for the pandemic period. This suggests that advertising audiences do draw a line on what brands should and should not say during a pandemic.

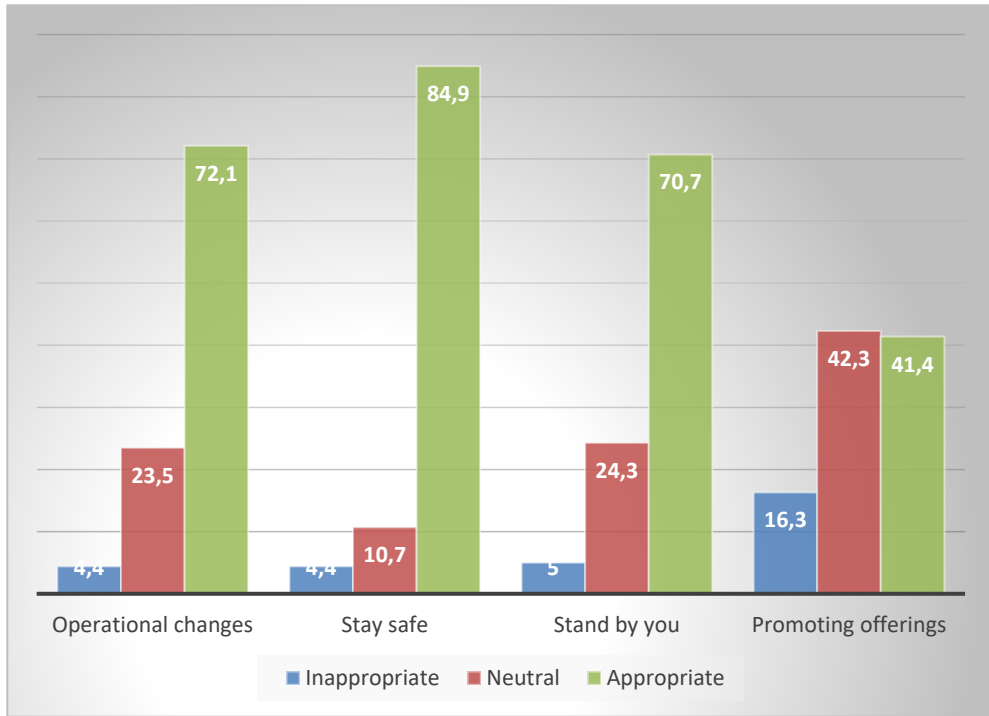


Figure 5: Attitudes towards different message foci of ads

Given this evidence that all advertising messages are not equal during a pandemic, two questions arise: “How do individuals respond to pandemic ads?” and “Does the focus of the message have any implications for audience engagement during a pandemic?” It appears that the respondents generally paid attention to ads during the pandemic, irrespective of the message focus. At least two thirds of the respondents (73.5%) said they paid attention to ads (see Figure 6). When the respondents could not immediately attend to the message, they were more likely to engage in message processing later than to disregard it altogether.

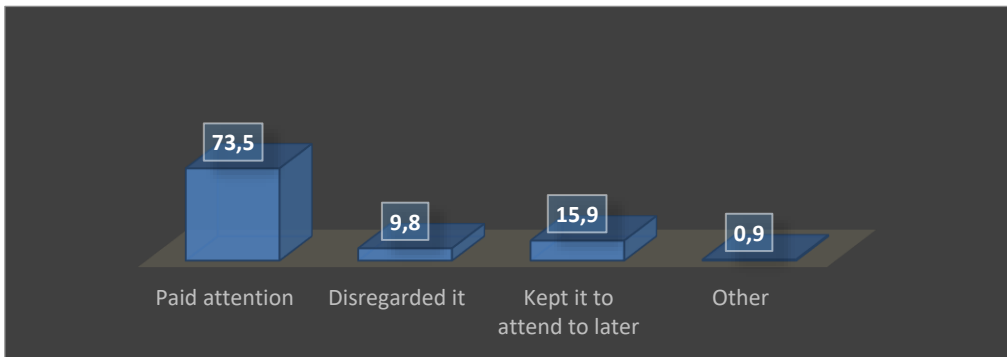


Figure 6: Respondents’ responses to ads

However, they were more drawn to advertising messages that included information to support their wellbeing (e.g. teaching them how to stay safe) than those that focused only on promoting brand-related elements. As shown in Table 2, the latter had a higher than average likelihood of being disregarded.

Table 2: Audience engagement with different advertising messages

Focus of advertising message	Engagement with advertising message				Total
	I paid attention to the content	I disregarded the content	I kept it in order to attend to later	Other	
Operational changes	64	8	27	1	100
	64.0%	8.0%	27.0%	1.0%	100.0%
Staying safe	229	24	39	3	295
	77.6%	8.1%	13.2%	1.0%	100.0%
Promoting offerings	7	5	1	0	13
	53.8%	38.5%	7.7%	0.0%	100.0%
Assurance of their readiness to stand by you	14	2	3	0	19
	73.7%	10.5%	15.8%	0.0%	100.0%
Other	2	0	0	0	2
	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Total	316	39	70	4	429
	73.7%	9.1%	16.3%	0.9%	100.0%

Accordingly, it would appear that the content of advertising messages has direct implications for audience engagement. To test the veracity of this suggestion, a Pearson's chi-squared test was run to determine the nature of the relationship between message engagement and message focus. The result showed that the association between the two variables was statistically significant ($\chi = 29.53$; $FD = 15$; $p = 0.01$).

Discussion

Prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, evidence pointed to audiences becoming overwhelmed with advertising (Zhou and Xue 2019) to the point of even experiencing ad fatigue (Bright and Logan 2018). Indeed, there was a rising trend towards the use of ad-blocking software to enable audiences to avoid exposure to advertising (Brinson, Eastin and Cicchirillo 2018). The demands of navigating even more information during a pandemic meant that the tendency to want to avoid advertising would be high. At the same time, reports on audience behaviour during the pandemic suggested that their information search activities increased and became opportunistic for brands seeking to connect with them (Haggin and Patel 2020; Hammet 2020).

A different evolution in advertising trends served as the basis of the current study. The observation was that brands were increasingly infusing Covid-19 information in their ads. Whether the purpose was to share solidarity; assure continued support; encourage

adherence; or applaud frontline workers, it was evident that brands were leveraging the pandemic and its direct impact on people's lives to create points of shared connection in their messages. The study sought to establish whether the audience had any expectations of what brands should (or not) say in their ads during the pandemic and whether such expectations favoured infusing pandemic-related information in ads. It also examined whether and how their preference for advertising messages linked to engagement, serving as a cue by which the audience decided whether to approach or avoid ads during the pandemic. These responses answered a key question of practical relevance to ad practitioners, brand owners and marketers: "Should brand advertising to pandemic-era audiences leverage the pandemic in their messages?"

Analysis of the data collected from the Ghanaian respondents showed that the audience did not consume ads in an expectation vacuum during the pandemic. When talking to a pandemic-era audience, brands need to revise their messaging in order to take on a more pro-consumer stance. The audience expects brands to demonstrate support and solidarity with their crisis condition. Through message infusions with information and education about the pandemic, safety tips, arrangements to ensure safe transactions, and so on, brands can demonstrate such solidarity and support.

While this is true of advertising audiences on any day, during a pandemic it becomes an instructive force. As the audience grapples with the pandemic, they seek out and are acutely aware of things that enhance their wellbeing (Marlow 2020). During a pandemic, it would appear that the audience would want brands to share in their quest to triumph by communicating messages that enable them to secure themselves. As Clapp (2020) reports, "consumers want security and positivity from advertising during Covid-19".

The finding corroborated erstwhile suggestions that audiences move towards messages that promise some value/reward for them and avoid those that do not (Rothman et al. 2006). Therefore, it may be concluded that during a pandemic, infusing pandemic-related content into ads may present a viable cue by which to move the audience towards approach behaviour. Marketing scholars have long espoused the benefits of brands assuming a customer orientation that drives them to be "concerned with satisfying customers' expressed needs" (Slater and Narver 1998, 1001). As the findings of the study show, such an orientation is just as rewarding during a pandemic when exploring strategies by which to secure audience interest in brands and their messages.

Over and above the question of whether brands should consider this message blending approach lies the question of what information bits should be included when infusing brand ads with pandemic-related things. As brands consider such infusions, what should they include? Is it basic educational information about the pandemic: emphasising protective and preventive measures? Is it special arrangements to ensure consumer security or is it announcements about brands' support to the fight, for example, through donations to the health system? As the study found, the respondents' attitudes about

different messages that brands could incorporate in their ads varied. Messages urging the audience to “stay safe” as well as showing them how to do so, attracted high engagement. Similarly, advertising messages that communicated brands’ support actions and, therefore, showed that they stand by consumers, attracted high engagement.

While the study has demonstrated the need for brands to fit their advertising messages to pandemic-related concerns, the need to be circumspect in employing this strategy must be pointed out. Extant knowledge from the corporate social responsibility literature has suggested the criticality of fit between brands’ benevolent activities and consumers’ perceptions of their ethos. As Kim and Lee (2015) show, brands’ benevolent activities risk being perceived as self-serving rather than public-serving if care is not taken to ensure appropriate levels of congruence. In other words, as brands strive to play the public service role of protecting their consumers, educating them and generally being kind to them, there can be a point at which they risk being seen as taking undue advantage of the pandemic to “score points”. This can generate scepticism towards brands (Kim and Lee 2015) which could in turn engender avoidance behaviour towards future messages from the brand (Elliot and Thrash 2002).

Although the current study did not test the boundary considerations that determine the inflection points at which the use of a given message theme (e.g. stay safe) may be deemed artificial and therefore cause reputational damage to brands, evidence from green marketing literature has shown the need to be tempered nonetheless. For instance, Schmuck, Matthes and Naderer (2018) found evidence that consumer perceptions of brands as overestimating their environmental credentials can harm brand and product perceptions. Similar evidence has been published by Zhang et al. (2018) who conclude by asking brands to ensure their messages only promote substantive initiatives rather than greenwashing claims. Therefore, the current study borrowed the logic of such findings to suggest that brands advertising during pandemics must be careful not to overstate references to the pandemic in a manner that presents them as “pandemic-washing” their ads.

Study Implications

From a scholarly point of view, the study has demonstrated the usefulness of approach–avoidance theory in analysing how audience expectations of and attitudes towards advertising messages may foreground their engagement decisions and behaviours during a pandemic. Importantly, the theory was not applied in isolation, but with recognition of widely accepted marketing (communication) logics such as the market (customer) orientation. It is hoped that this demonstrates not only the applicability of these theoretical lenses, independently, to analysing audience behaviour, but more importantly the promise of their juxtaposition in making sense of advertising responses. As the study has shown, in adopting a market-oriented (specifically a customer-oriented) stance in advertising during a pandemic, brands stand a good chance of enhancing the audience’s approach behaviour towards their messages.

For practitioners, these findings mean realising that pandemics call for revising advertising messages to take on a more pro-social tone. The self-promotional ethos of brand ads in ordinary times may not work during a pandemic. The audience expects brands to use their ads to show concern and provide support to their survival efforts during the pandemic. Brand communicators should, therefore, pay attention to de-emphasising the usual promotional ethos in favour of pandemic-related infusions. Importantly, brand communicators also need to realise that not all pandemic-inspired messages are treated equally. Messages that urge the public to stay safe or show them how to stay safe, and those that demonstrate brands' readiness to help consumers navigate the pandemic, are best prioritised.

Limitations and Future Research Suggestions

The study has contributed to scholarship but is not without limitations. The Covid-19 pandemic being new and the first in recent history, its impact provided a unique context to study how audiences relate to advertising messages under conditions of exigency. However, since the evidence presented was cross-sectional, it denies the opportunity for any categorical causal claims. Additional data during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic will allow time series analysis to discover enduring trends that warrant such categorical claims.

Further, while the selection of Ghana as an empirical site is justified both in relevance to the phenomenon under study and contribution of novel evidence to the otherwise Western and European saturated advertising literature, its conditions and circumstances are hardly universal. Thus, the findings may not apply universally. The limits to the universal applicability are deepened by the fact that the evidence gathered was based on convenience sampling which the researcher was constrained to adopt due to the exigency of the early days of the pandemic and the general lack of audience data from formalised databases. Future researchers may employ multi-setting data and more probability sampling procedures to correct for these limitations.

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