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Factors Affecting Readership of News and Advertising in a Small Daily Newspaper

Readers of a small daily newspaper are selective about their exposure to advertising as well as to news and entertainment content, a survey of 316 readers finds. Gender was a strong predictor of how frequently which readers read which ads, and closeness to the community was associated with reading of automobile and classified advertising.

Today, newspaper readers' needs and interests are rapidly changing, forcing the owners and operators not only of major dailies but of smaller dailies and weeklies as well to stay abreast of consumer trends, including patterns of readership that affect advertising.

In Fall 1986, the publisher of a family-owned daily newspaper with an average weekday circulation of 11,931 and an average Sunday circulation of 12,645 in a five-county area in central Kentucky contracted with the University of Kentucky School of Journalism to conduct a readership survey and market analysis.

The primary objectives of the project were to determine the characteristics of both readers and nonreaders of the newspapers, to compare the relative amount of time readers spend with the

newspaper and with other local and regional media, to evaluate the perceived credibility of the editorial content of the papers among both readers and nonreaders, to assess the impact of advertising in the newspaper on the readers, and to investigate the link between newspaper readership and consumer shopping patterns and attitudes.

This study reports findings from that project bearing on two central questions: 1. Is exposure to newspaper advertising linked to reading of other types of newspaper content, and if so, how? 2. What factors are associated

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with frequency of exposure to specific types of advertising in the newspaper?

While hundreds of studies have examined readership of news in American newspapers, only a limited amount of research has been devoted to patterns of use of newspaper advertising. Advertising is the major source of income for most media owners, and it also serves important social functions for readers.

For example, advertising fulfills a "surveillance" function, providing community residents with information they use to make decisions about what to purchase, how to spend their leisure time, and how to take advantage of other opportunities. A survey of readers of an Oklahoma newspaper, for instance, found that advertisements were perceived as a major source of information about the local community.¹

Advertising also creates social awareness of the norms and mores of the local community. Fashion advertising, for example, often conveys a powerful impression of what is acceptable and expected in a particular community.

Demographics and Advertising

Previous studies of advertising use have tended to focus on the demographics of the audience. The literature on consumer behavior suggests, for instance, that persons at different levels of social status have different consumption, shopping, spending and saving patterns.² However, Abrams, Kaul and Ma found that lower-class respondents did not indicate lower perceived utility

for advertising than upper-class consumers.³

Another important individual characteristic affecting readership of advertising is gender. Hartman found that advertising readership was twice as high for women as for men,⁴ and Abrams, Kaul and Ma reported that three-fourths of the respondents in their study who found advertising more useful than news were women.⁵ Grotta and Larkin also reported heavier use of advertising by women than by men.⁶

Other demographic factors that have been found to affect use of or attitudes toward advertising are educational level and political conservatism.⁷

A few studies have looked at how personal characteristics of readers relate to use of different types of advertising. Troidahl and Jones studied characteristics of newspaper ads and found different patterns of reading depending on the type of product being advertised.⁸

Advertising & Ties to the Community

Another factor that may be relevant to how residents use advertising is their relationship to the community in which they live. For example, in phone surveys of rural, suburban and urban Minnesota communities, Tichenor, Donohue and Olien found newspaper reading associated with whether residents shopped within or outside their own communities for goods and services.⁹

The Minnesota study is in the tradition of a sizable body of research that has

developed on the possible link between newspaper reading and community attachment or identification, sometimes called "community closeness."¹⁰ These studies have employed somewhat different measures of community attachment, but they have generally focused on the psychological closeness of individuals to their community. For example, Tichenor, Donohue and Olien used a scale measuring feelings of closeness to five areas of community life, including churches, social clubs, friendship groups, neighborhood activities and organizations.¹¹

The approaches have differed, and the results of these studies of community attachment and media use have been somewhat mixed. Furthermore, there is still no consensus on the direction of causality; some researchers assume that community ties lead to increased use of local media, while others believe that media use increases feelings of attachment. In addition, some studies find weak associations, regardless of the direction. For instance, Shoemaker, Danielson, Miller and Han cite their own data as challenging the causal relationship between community ties to place and newspaper reading hypothesized earlier by Stamm and Fortini-Campbell.¹² Shoemaker, Danielson and Han note that specific political and demographic variables were generally better predictors of media use than community ties to place measures.¹³

However, the Minnesota data suggest that the way attention to newspaper content affects consumer behavior is

different in different types of communities. Tichenor, Donohue and Olien found that individuals' use of the newspaper was more strongly associated with local shopping in a small, homogeneous community than in large, urban areas.¹⁴

The community examined in this study is larger and more heterogeneous than the small rural village in the Minnesota study, but not as large as the next largest community, the regional center of St. Cloud. The nature of the area suggests that community closeness may be associated with how often respondents read advertising content.

News Content

To put advertising readership into perspective, it is necessary to compare advertising exposure with reading of other types of content in the newspaper. Studies that have made such a comparison have found mixed results. Grotta and Larkin found advertising had the highest readership of any type of content in a small Oklahoma daily newspaper.¹⁵ O'Keefe, Nash and Liu found that community residents rated newspaper ads as more useful than other media content,¹⁶ while Abrams, Kaul and Ma found a strong correlation between the perceived utility of advertising and of news content.¹⁷ Hale found more than half of respondents said they spend more time reading news than reading ads, but advertising was rated more favorably than any other category of content.¹⁸

Reading of advertising content also may be affected by use of media other

than the local community's newspaper. The area studied here is within the circulation "umbrellas" of two major metropolitan newspapers, and both have high rates of penetration and readership in this community.

Another potential factor is attention to television. While there is a commercial television station in the study community, its programming is aimed primarily at an urban area about 40 miles away, and it carries very little local advertising. In addition, the signals from four stations in the nearest city cover the area under study here.

Methods

A sample of 430 residents of the five-county circulation area of the newspaper was interviewed by telephone between Jan. 5 - 19, 1987. The sample was drawn using random digit dialing so that every residential telephone number, including unlisted numbers, in the geographic area surveyed had an equal probability of being selected. The numbers were generated at random using the set of telephone area code-prefix combinations that cover the five counties. Within each household contacted, one respondent aged 18 or older was randomly selected to be interviewed. All interviewing was conducted by professional interviewers at the University of Kentucky Survey Research Center. The survey's margin of error was plus or minus five percent.

Among the 430 persons interviewed, 114 said they never read the newspaper being studied. Only the data from the remaining 316 respondents, who said

they read the newspaper at least once a month, are analyzed here.

The questionnaire used in this study included measures of several demographic variables. Each respondent was asked for information on:

- years of education completed;
- marital status;
- number of children in the house;
- annual family income.

As measures of community closeness, each respondent was asked:

- how long he or she had lived in the area;
- whether the family owns or rents its home; and
- whether he or she planned to move in the following year.

These questions are taken to be direct measures of economic, family and personal history ties that are important components of closeness to the community.

As measures of media use, each respondent was asked:

- how often he or she read the local daily newspaper, each of two metro dailies that circulate in the area, and any other newspaper;
- how much time he or she spent the previous day watching television.

Frequency of reading advertising and other content in the newspaper was measured by asking each respondent: "You mentioned that you read the (newspaper name). Please tell me which of the following things in the (newspaper) you read always, often, sometimes, rarely or never. First, how about the business news?" The list of content categories read to each respon-

dent was: business news, national news, state news, sports, local news, classified ads, comics, Dear Abby, obituaries, police news, stock quotations, weather, Looking Back (a column on events in history), TV schedule, international news, religion, food section, editorials, Off the Wire (a roundup of wire service items), News Briefs (short reports on local events), grocery advertising, department store advertising, car advertising, Weekend section, medicine and health news, and news from counties other than the one you live in.

Reading of Newspaper Content

The answers respondents gave indicate that there are substantial differences in the frequency of reading different types of newspaper content. Table 1 shows the categories of content, arranged in order of the proportion of respondents who said they always read that type of content. Nearly three-fourths of the sample said they always read local news, the top category, compared to only 11.4 percent who said they always read car advertising.

It is interesting to note that some types of content often considered very popular, such as Dear Abby, comics, and sports, rank only in the middle of all the types of content examined here. Fewer than half of the 316 respondents said they read these items always or often. This result may indicate that respondents felt some social pressure to rank serious news content higher and underestimate their use of entertainment items. However, the results are quite different among different news catego-

ries. For instance, fewer than one-third of respondents said they always read international news, news about surrounding counties and business news. It is plausible, then, that the entertainment function of the newspaper, for this audience at least, is not as important as other functions, particularly that of providing information about local happenings.

Of the four categories of advertising, three are in the top half of the content rankings. About half of all respondents said they always or often read grocery ads, department store ads and classified ads. Car ads, however, are the lowest-ranking of all the 26 categories; fewer than one-eighth of respondents said they always read car ads.

Over all, these results indicate that patterns of use of newspaper advertising are quite different for different types of ads. Almost everyone reads classified ads from time to time (only 8.9 percent said they never read them), but only a few are regular readers. On the other hand, although the percentage of regular readers is nearly the same for classified and grocery ads, the proportion who never read grocery ads is twice as high as those who never read classifieds. Use of grocery ads appears likely to be role-specific. The person responsible for grocery buying, who may be a housewife in a traditional household or anyone in a single-person household, probably makes frequent purchases and reads ads regularly to find out about sales and to acquire coupons. Use of classified ads, on the other hand, appears to be situation-specific. When a

TABLE 1: Frequency of Reading Different Kinds of Newspaper Content

<i>Content Category</i>	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
Local News	74%	14%	8%	3%	1%
Obituaries	50	13	14	11	12
Police News	50	18	20	6	6
State News	47	21	18	9	5
Weather	46	10	15	9	20
National News	45	16	17	14	8
Grocery Ads	39	16	17	9	20
Weekend Section	37	15	25	12	18
Dept. Store Ads	36	15	25	9	15
Sports	36	8	15	15	26
Classifieds	36	17	26	13	9
Dear Abby	36	14	23	9	19
Comics	34	6	14	12	23
Food Section	33	12	16	13	26
News Briefs	32	15	29	8	16
International News	32	11	28	10	18
TV Schedule	30	11	17	10	31
Other County News	30	15	33	12	8
Editorials	29	15	32	11	12
Business News	27	16	24	19	14
Medicine & Health	25	10	24	13	27
Religion	23	12	29	12	23
Looking Back	23	8	21	15	31
Off the Wire	16	6	24	12	37
Stock Quotes	12	4	13	18	53
Car Ads	11	7	25	16	41

(Number of respondents ranged from 304 to 316 for each category)

person is in need of particular information about jobs available, homes to buy or rent, or other opportunities, he or she is likely to read classified ads until that need is met and then to ignore them until the next need develops.

To further explore the patterns of use of news and advertising content, the responses on frequency of reading the

26 content categories were factor-analyzed.¹⁹

The factor loadings after varimax rotation place grocery and department store advertising in the first factor, along with the food section and medicine and health news.

Loading heavily on Factor 2 are national news, state news and interna-

tional news, indicating a cosmopolitan news interest. Factor 3, which includes heavy loadings for police news, local news and obituaries, appears to be a local-interests factor.

Factor 4 is composed primarily of three types of columns that round up or summarize current and past events. Factor 5 is characterized by loadings for car ads, sports and stock quotations, and Factor 6 by TV schedules and religion. Business news alone forms Factor 7, and Factor 8 appears to be an entertainment factor, composed of loadings for comics, Dear Abby and the Weekend section.

The factor analysis results confirm the similarity of patterns of reading grocery and department store advertising, and indicate that exposure to these types of advertising is tied to the interests of persons in the role of nurturing the family. Use of car ads, however, is more similar to use of stock quotations. An interesting result of this analysis is that classified advertising does not load heavily on any of these factors. Other content categories that do not have any loadings greater than .35 on these eight factors are weather, editorials and news from other counties.

Ad Reading

To examine what factors predict frequency of reading different types of advertising, the responses on the measures of ad reading were divided as evenly as possible into groups with high and low frequency of reading. For classified, grocery, and department

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store ads, respondents who said they read those ads always or often were considered heavy users, and all other respondents were classified as light users. For car ads, those who reported reading always, often or sometimes were considered heavy users. The heavy and light users of each type of ad were then compared on a range of demographic, community-ties and media use variables.

As Table 2 shows, the most striking differences between heavy and light users are gender differences. Women were much more likely to be heavy users of grocery and department store ads than men, but men were much more likely to be heavy readers of car ads. The gender differences are significant except for reading of classified ads.

Significant differences between heavy and light readers of grocery ads are found not only on gender, but also on income, geographic location, whether there are children in the home, and whether the household subscribes to the local paper. Heavy grocery ad readers tend to be less affluent; only 43.6 percent have annual family incomes of \$25,000 or more, compared with 55.6 percent of light readers. More of the heavy-use group lives in the county where the newspaper is published, and fewer of them have children in the home. Heavy users are more

likely to be subscribers to the local newspaper than light users.

Characteristics that differentiate heavy from light users of department store advertising, besides gender, are marital status and subscription to the local paper. A higher percentage of heavy users of department store ads were married, and subscribed to the local paper. The only significant difference between heavy and light users of classified ads was that fewer heavy classified users have annual family incomes above \$25,000. The only significant factor distinguishing heavy and light users of car ads is gender.

Variables that did not discriminate between heavy and light users of any type of advertising were the number of

years in the area, the level of education, home ownership and regular reading of any other newspaper.

To assess how well demographic, community-ties and media use variables would predict frequency of reading the different types of advertising, each ad reading measure was used as a dependent variable in a hierarchical regression using a set of 15 potential predictors. The demographic variables of gender, family income, education, marital status and number of children in the home were entered as a block first. Next came the community-ties variables: number of years in the area, home ownership, whether the respondent planned to move in the next year, and whether he or she lived inside the newspaper's home county. Finally, a block of media-use variables was en-

TABLE 2: Characteristics of Heavy and Light Ad Readers.

Level of Use	Kind of Advertisement							
	Classified		Grocery		Dept. Store		Cars	
	Lt.	Hvy.	Lt.	Hvy.	Lt.	Hvy.	Lt.	Hvy.
Percentage Female	53	60	33	76 ^c	42	70 ^c	68	40 ^c
Mean Yrs. in Area	27	27	26	28	28	26	29	25
Mean Yrs. Education	13	12	12	12	12	12	12	12
Income \$25,000+ (%)	57	42 ^b	56	44 ^a	52	46	48	50
Rural Residents (%)	63	59	67	56 ^a	66	56	62	60
Children at Home (%)	43	46	55	36 ^c	49	41	40	50
Own Home (%)	83	75	79	79	79	78	83	74
Married (%)	67	70	69	67	63	74 ^a	68	69
Subscribe to NP (%)	66	64	58	71 ^a	59	70 ^a	67	63
Read Other NPs (%)	73	75	76	73	74	74	72	77

^a X² significant at p<.05; ^b p<.01; ^c p<.001

tered, consisting of the frequency of reading the local newspaper, the two metro dailies with substantial circulation in the area, and any other newspaper; whether the local newspaper is received by subscription; and amount of time spent watching TV in the previous day.

Results of the regression analyses show that this set of variables accounts for 26 percent of the variance in reading grocery store ads, and about 16 percent of the variance in reading department store ads. These variables are much less useful for predicting reading of car ads and classified ads. The full set of variables accounts for only 10 percent and just under 6 percent, respectively, of the variance in these measures.

The regression analysis also serves to emphasize even more the association of gender with grocery, department store, and car ad reading. Gender alone accounts for more than half of the variance explained for department store and car ad reading, and more than three-fourths of the variance explained for grocery ad reading. The only other variables that contribute significantly to predicting grocery ad use are marital status and the number of children in the home. Marital status is the only significant predictor of reading department store ads, other than gender. No other demographic variable is significantly related to reading of any of the four types of advertising.

Among the set of community-ties variables, there are two significant relationships, after demographics are controlled for. Home ownership is a

significant predictor of reading classified ads, and heavier users of car ads are more likely to live outside the county where the newspaper is published.

None of the media use variables is significantly related to any type of advertising readership. How often the respondent reads the local newspaper accounts for nearly one percent of the variance in department store ad reading, but the relationship is not statistically significant at the .05 level.

Altogether, these results suggest that the mix of demographic and community-ties variables associated with frequency of reading advertising depends to a considerable extent on the type of advertising. For grocery and department store advertising, demographics alone account for virtually all of the explained variance. For classified ads, the only significant predictor is a community-ties variable, and for car ads another community-ties variable is the only significant predictor other than gender.

Summary and Discussion

In this study of 316 readers of a small daily newspaper, different patterns are seen in the use of different types of newspaper advertising. In line with findings from previous studies, gender was found to be a strong predictor of frequency of reading three types of advertising. Automobile advertising appeals primarily to males, while grocery store and department store advertising are significantly more likely to at-

tract a female audience. One of the more interesting findings is that the use of classified advertising does not appear to be related to gender or to any other

demographic variable examined in this study, and of all the categories of advertising, classified is the least likely to be read regularly.

A factor analysis revealed more details about how patterns of advertising readership relate to the reading of other types of content. Readership of department store ads and grocery store ads aligns with reading of the food section and health and medicine news, while car advertising is linked to sports and stock quotations.

Regression analyses indicate that demographics and communities variables play different roles in predicting readership, depending on the type of advertising. A large amount of the explained variance in reported reading of grocery store advertising was accounted for by demographics, particularly gender, but demographics accounted for almost none of the variance in reading classified ads. Communities variables were predictors of reading classified ads and car ads.

The overall picture that emerges from analysis of these data is a pattern of audience segmentation for advertising content as well as for other types of content. The newspaper readers studied here are selective about what they read,

and that selectivity applies to advertising as well as to news, information and entertainment content.

The close links between some types of

Emerging from analysis of these data is a pattern of audience segmentation for advertising content as well as for other types of content.

ads and news content, such as grocery store advertising and food-related stories, raise an

important question: to what extent is the similarity in reported patterns of use of these types of content due to compartmentalization of the newspaper? Are readers attending to food ads and food-related stories primarily because they are packaged together? Or do they perceive them as similar in function, credibility and usefulness? Particularly in smaller newspapers, editorial matter in food sections often consists of little more than reprints of press releases and recipes from packaging and marketing firms. If research shows that readers pay more attention to these items only because they are near grocery store ads, then publishers might choose to use the space taken up by food-related items for local or national news instead.

On the other hand, readers may be interested in both ads and nutrition information and perceive having them packaged together as a service to them. Then it would seem reasonable, for this newspaper at least, to experiment with placing department store ads in the food section as well, based on the similar interest patterns seen here.

Generalizations from the findings of this study are clearly limited by the fact that the study is confined to a single

community, which has characteristics that distinguish it from most daily-newspaper communities. The city is smaller and more homogeneous than most, but is the center of a relatively large area not served either by any other local community dailies or by many stores outside the town where the newspaper is published. In areas that may be more typical for this size newspaper, with other centers for shopping and services nearby, the relationship between community ties and reading of particular types of advertising may be different. The findings point to the need for more comparative studies of how media are used in different communities. The community factors not ad-

ressed in this study include the geographic dispersion of stores and service outlets through the region, the existence and nature of competition among local media, and the extent of occupational, economic and other ties between the local community and nearby urban areas.

Advertising is a feature of mass communication that is ubiquitous and widely read, but one that also is characterized by complex patterns of use about which we know too little. The findings from this study clearly demonstrate the need to look at particular types of newspaper advertising in readership studies, rather than advertising in general.

NOTES

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16. Garrett J. O'Keefe, Kathleen Nash and Jenny Liu, "The Perceived Utility of Advertising," *Journalism Quarterly* 58 (Winter 1981): 536-542.

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19. A principal-components factor analysis was followed by varimax rotation. The analysis yielded eight factors, each with an eigenvalue greater than one. To be used to define a factor, a content category had to have its largest loading – at least .375 – on that factor. The factors accounted for 61 percent of all variance.

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