



## The Preferred Type of Messages in Open Distance Learning (ODL) Marketing Advertisements

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to examine the prospective learners' preferred media channel with regards to the Open Distance Learning (ODL) advertisements. Two types of media channel - the traditional and new media become the centre of attention. This paper segmentised the prospective learners based on demographical characteristics such as gender and age. A descriptive study was conducted to assess the media preferences based on the generational cohort and to measure the difference in perception between gender. Self-administered questionnaires were used to obtain meaningful data from 262 potential learners' in Malaysia. The study was conducted from February 2020 to March 2020. Based on the findings, there is a significant difference in perception towards ODL advertisements in media between genders. Female respondents are more receptive towards advertisement. Thus, it is noteworthy to develop advertisements with emotional attachment to attract the audience's attention. Social media is rated by majority of the generational cohort as the most preferred media channel followed by Newspaper and Television. Generally, the results from this study helps the ODL institutions to be more focused upon designing their promotional activities. This study adds to the literature of integrated marketing communication. The findings have strong implications to both academic and ODL institutions particularly on the aspect of prospective learners' acceptance pertaining to the advertisements in media channel.

**Key words:** *Media channel, Traditional media, New media, Generational cohort, Gender, Open distance learning*

### INTRODUCTION

In a competitive business environment, advertising is always perceived as a central element in a marketing communication programme [1]. Advertising is generally viewed as any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods or services by an identified sponsor. It can be done through print media, broadcast media, network media, electronic media and display media [2], [3]. Advertising represents the voice of a company and its offerings by which a company can establish a message and build relationships with customers [4]. As part of marketing communication, advertising attempts to inform, persuade and remind customers either directly or indirectly [5]. Effective advertising strategy can contribute to a brand equity by establishing the brand in the consumers' memory and creating a brand image [6], [7].

A right advertising message plays an important role in raising the consumers' awareness, building a favourable attitude, hence establishing long-term relationships [8]. To-date, advertising is widely used as an important tool by many educational institutions to promote their programmes [9]. For instance, Open University Malaysia (OUM) allocates a significant amount of budget for advertisement annually. Since its first inception, the management of OUM perceived that advertising is a fine technique to create awareness about more than 40 programmes offered via Open Distance Learning (ODL). The university is very serious in making strategic efforts to create and maintain sustainability through competitive advantage by harnessing the impactful usage of resources which available in the ODL existing environment through institutional reputation, technological advancement, e-learning modules and learning centres [10].

The online distance learning has become a new learning trend since the outbreak of pandemic COVID-19 [11], [12]. The learning process is currently moving beyond the existing classroom setting. The ODL offer at least four benefits such as a personalised lifelong learning, valuable social network, and time and cost saving for both institutions and learners. Nowadays, the adults are more familiar with ODL while the younger generation have shown their interest to explore the value of online learning [13]. In fact, many conventional face-to-face universities have advised their students to enroll for online courses as a kickstart for a smooth transition into the new learning culture [14]. The number of online programme also shows an increasing trend. The choices of programme depends on the prospective learners' interest. It ranges from certificate to PhD level. Many of the programmes also received accreditation from professional bodies. Hence, it lies ahead on the creativity of the university to promote their programmes to the public.

A decision to promote ODL programmes must be carefully made by the university. This is due to the fact that the money spent on advertising must provide something in return. Therefore, the decision must consider the popularity of the media. This is to ensure satisfactory response from the targeted audience. The selection of media channel and types of messages must also take into account its exclusivity [15]. This is to portray a good image of the ODL institutions and its programmes. Creative messages add value to the advertisement and change the consumers' perception. In an effort to win the consumer's heart, various types of creative messages are crafted. Many promotional activities execute messages about products and services through website, social media, newspapers, television, radio, magazines and billboards in a creative way. However, as the business environment is currently becoming more competitive, more and more companies orchestrating a closer harmony between their advertisement messages and consumers' preference.

From the aspect of demographic, it is interesting to identify how the prospective learners look at advertisement. Previous marketing studies have shown a mixed result about consumers' selective attention and retention on advertisement. Therefore, different age may have different perception towards types of messages in advertisement. This is due to some reasons such as consumers' prior experience, knowledge, social interaction, and their attitude towards media channels and brand [16]. These issues have made this research more interesting in the context of Malaysia.

Many educational institutions are searching for the best strategy to promote their programmes [17]. They developed the advertising story board and find some catchy words or taglines to attract the audience. Copywriting is among one of the popular strategies that is popular among advertisers. In some cases, educational institutions will outsource the task to professional advertising agencies. However, one point that is very important when developing an advertising programme is the advertiser must always start by identifying the target market's motives. It is common that the way the prospective learners perceive educational institutions' advertisement is different from the general product and service advertisements. Some prefer informative advertising messages while others consider persuasive messages as a better choice. In the meantime, there are advertisers who developed a reminder or reinforcement advertisement [2]. Therefore, it is timely to identify the prospective learners preferred types of advertisement messages. In fact, the prospective learners are the ones who decide which types of messages that will influence them to enrol into a particular programme. Thus, the information obtained from this study may provide a better and more useful understanding about the future promotional strategies for ODL institutions.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

There are a number of important questions to be explored in this research. It relates to the issue of the preferred types of messages for ODL advertising activities. The research questions are as follows:

- RQ1: What are the types of advertising messages preferred by the prospective learners that will attract them to pursue their studies at ODL institutions?
- RQ2: Is there any significant difference between gender in terms of their preferred types of messages in the ODL advertisement?
- RQ3: What is the breakdown of the generational cohort and types of preferred advertisement messages?

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

To obtain answers for the research questions, the researchers have identified three objectives to be achieved. The objectives are as follows:

- RO1: To assess the types of advertising messages preferred by the prospective learners that will attract them to pursue their studies at ODL institutions.
- RO2: To measure the difference between gender in terms of their preferred types of messages in the ODL advertisement.
- RO3: To examine the breakdown of the generational cohort and types of preferred advertisement messages.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### THEORY UNDERPINNING THE STUDY

One of the main issues in advertising research is to identify factors that will attract consumers' attention to engage with messages carried by the advertisers [18]. Previous traditional advertising research revealed that the effectiveness of any advertising campaign should be based on how consumers react to the advertisement. The main factor that continuously gain multiple interests by many researchers is to understand the attitude towards advertising. The Advertising Value Model is a good model to comprehend perceptions toward advertising in traditional and electronic environment [18]–[21]. The value of advertising can be described as consumers' subjective assessment about the significance or usefulness of the advertisement. The model suggested three determinants, which can be applied to envisage and explicate consumers' perception about the advertising value. The three determinants were labeled as entertainment, informativeness and irritation [20], [21].

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Advertising messages can be classified according to whether the aim is to inform, persuade, or to remind the targeted audience. The development of the research framework for this study is based on the dimensions discussed in the Value of Advertising Model. A few dimensions are added to make the framework more comprehensive.

### INFORMATIVE ADVERTISING MESSAGE

In marketing, it is common that consumers require a useful and sufficient amount of information to achieve the highest possible satisfaction before and after purchasing activities [5], [21]. Most importantly, they look forward to an advertisement that is well suited with their preference and relevant to them. Informative message reinforces consumers' belief about a particular advertisement which leads to an exceptional approval. The approval will be then translated into economic benefits to the business. The greater the degree of information, the greater will be the formation of positive view about the value of an advertisement. In traditional advertising, informativeness has turned out to increase consumers' likeability about an advertisement. A number of studies found that informativeness has a significant effect on consumers' attitude towards advertisement [22].

Existing studies recognized informativeness as one of the important variables that motivates consumers to engage with advertisement. A high quality of

consumer-relevant advertising messages also found to have direct influence on consumers' perceptions about the company and its offerings hence crafting a positive attitude towards advertisement [23].

Advertising studies pointed out that the dimension of informativeness strongly related to consumers' attitude. The dimension of informativeness plays a vital role on consumers' intention to attach themselves with the experiential and the goal-directed attitude. Therefore, it can be hypothesised that:

H1: Informative advertising messages have a significant relationship with the intention to pursue studies at ODL institution.

### PERSUASIVE ADVERTISING MESSAGE

Persuasive is the act of making a person do or believe about something by giving him a good reason to do it. The objective of persuasive advertising message is to build the consumers' liking, conviction, and preference [24], [25]. Persuasive advertising also may convince the consumers of a certain belief that leads to a particular behavioural action such as purchasing a product or service. Persuasive advertising uses various techniques to appeal to the logical and emotional sides of the decision-making process. Not all consumers are strictly rational and purely emotional in their purchasing decisions. There is always room for both objective facts and creativity when it comes to influencing the consumers' beliefs and behaviour [26].

There are persuasive advertising messages that use comparative advertising as a strategy. The advertisement will make an explicit comparison of the attributes of close competitors [27]. Previous studies have found that the persuasive advertising message works best when it stimulates the consumers' cognitive and affective process especially when they try to understand the advertisement in a detailed and analytical mode [28], [29]. In the meantime, some advertisers use the authority figure and emotional tactic to attract the attention of the targeted market segment [4].

Previous studies have shown a positive relationship between the persuasive advertisements and consumers' purchase intention [28], [29]. Hence, in the context of this study, it can be hypothesised that:

H2: Persuasive advertising messages have a significant relationship with the intention to pursue studies at ODL institution.

### **REMINDER ADVERTISING MESSAGE**

This type of advertising message focuses on stimulating the consumers' intention to re-purchase the products or services [30]. Reminder advertising is used by primarily by established brands or in a follow-up to a more extensive ad campaign in order to remind the consumer about the product or service, or to introduce new life or new theme into existing campaigns [31].

Reminder advertising messages also serve to enhance the top-of-the-mind awareness of the brand and to reinforce the key messages of the brand value and the recent offerings. The strategy applied in this type of advertising is by mentioning the name of the product and testimonials of existing customers. The messages will be repeated many times to keep the targeted consumers interested in, and aware of, a well-established product that is most likely at the maturity stage or the end of the product life cycle [32]. Previous studies have shown a significant impact of the reminder advertisements and consumers' next course of action. Therefore, it can be hypothesised that:

H3: Reminder advertising messages have a significant relationship with the intention to pursue studies at ODL institution.

### **REINFORCEMENT ADVERTISING MESSAGE**

The purpose of reinforcement advertising message is to convince the existing consumers that they have made a right choice. Consumers are aware of the cognitive dissonance especially after purchasing products or services. To avoid such issue, consumers will continuously search for information that is aligned with their interest. Advertisement messages with an element of reinforcement will endorse their purchase decision while enhancing the motivation to do more purchase in the future. Another purpose of reminder advertising is to maintain a company's market share. Messages that support the purchase decision will influence more consumers who have the same interest towards products and services. Past studies indicated that the reinforcement advertising messages have influenced the consumers to engage with the advertisement and improve their attitude towards purchasing activities. In the context of this study, it can be hypothesised that:

H4: Reinforcement advertising messages have a significant relationship with the intention to pursue studies at ODL institution.

### **GENDER AND PREFERRED TYPE OF MESSAGES**

Existing studies have found that men and women have different attitudes. They also behave differently due to genetics and social interactions. Women tend to be more communal-minded whereby men are more self-expressive and goal-oriented. Women are more concerned with facts and figures in their immediate environment, but men will only focus on the part of the environment that helps them to achieve their goal. Another study has found that men often need to be invited to touch and feel a product whereas women will test it without prompting. Men will carefully read product information but women may relate to a product on a more personal level [33].

### **GENERATIONAL COHORT AND PREFERRED TYPE OF MESSAGES**

Each generation is commonly influenced by the time and environment which they grew up. They will share the same outlooks and values [34]. Marketers will develop messages about products and services to meet the interests of the targeted generation. Generally, in marketing, generations can be grouped as follows:

Table 2.0: Group of Consumers Based on Generational Cohort (Source: [35])

Generation	Year of Birth
Gen Z	1995 – 2015
Gen Y (Millennial)	1980 – 1994
Gen X	1965 – 1979
Baby Boomer	1944 – 1964

### **METHODOLOGY**

An appropriate methodology for data collection and analysis is important to produce meaningful results [36]. This research focuses on the analyses that are relevant to achieve the three objectives mentioned in the earlier part of this paper.

### **THE SAMPLING DESIGN AND STUDY SETTING**

Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 300 prospective learners in Malaysia. The convenience sampling technique was adopted as a method of collecting the data because this approach is convenient, accessible to the researchers, and require low budget. Data were collected from July to August 2020. A total of 262 valid responses were obtained for this study and the percentage of response is 87.33 percent.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEASURED ITEMS

The measured items were adapted and modified from past studies related to advertising. The respondents' background consists of age, gender, education level, and occupation. The measured items developed are based on the variables such as informative, persuasive, reminder, reinforcement, and the intention to pursue studies in ODL mode.

## THE METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using SPSS Version 22.0 to examine the respondents' profile and their preferred types of messages. Data are presented in a table form. The results show the percentage and frequency based on the respondents' feedback. To measure the significant difference between gender, t-test is applied to obtain the results. Interpretation of the results are based on the significance level at 0.05 [37]. SMARTPLS will be used to examine the target endogenous variable variance, inner model path coefficient sizes, outer model loadings, indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and the structural path significance in bootstrapping.

## RESULT ANALYSES AND DISCUSSIONS

A thorough analysis is conducted to understand how prospective ODL learners prefer to see the ODL advertisements.

Table 3.0: Demographical Characteristics of The Respondents

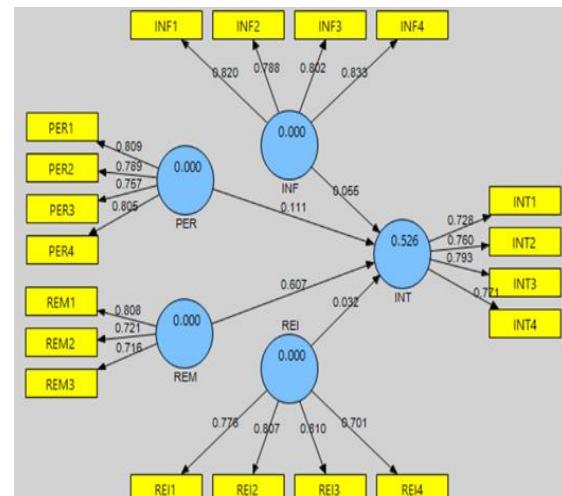
Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender (n=262)</i>		
Male	128	48.9
Female	134	51.1
<i>Generational Cohort (n=262)</i>		
Below 25 years old (Gen Z)	58	22.1
26 – 40 years old (Gen Y)	86	32.8
41 – 55 years old (Gen X)	35	13.4
56 – 76 years old (Baby Boomers)	83	31.7
<i>Educational Level (n=262)</i>		
LCE/SRP/PMR	13	5.0
MCE/SPM	31	11.8
HSC/STPM	16	6.1
Certificate	16	6.1
Diploma	32	12.2
Bachelor Degree	98	37.4
Masters	56	21.4
<i>Occupation (n=262)</i>		
Private Sector	112	42.7
Public Sector	81	30.9
Self-Employed	37	14.1
Unemployed	32	12.2

As can be seen in Table 3.0, the number of respondents who work in the public sector is as high as of those who work in the private sector. With the increasing number of civil servants in Malaysia, this statistic is common. However, it can be seen that the percentage of respondents who are unemployed is considerably high. Perhaps, this could be based on the reason that many of them are still searching for a suitable job or considering to pursue their studies.

Meanwhile, an easy access to education has made many people have an equal opportunity to obtain a higher degree. This research discovered a good trend where a total of 71 percent of the respondents have tertiary education. The remaining 29 percent still have an opportunity to pursue their tertiary education through Open Distance Learning (ODL) based on the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) admission.

Academic qualification is important in this research as it may indicate how the potential learners prefer academic advertisement messages. Majority of the respondents are Gen Y between 41-55 years old (32.8 percent). For Open University Malaysia (OUM), it is good to note that the high percentage of Baby Boomers (56 – 76 years old) and Gen Z (Below 25 years old) offer a good opportunity for institutional sustainability.

Figure 1.0: SMARTPLS Reflective Model for Preferred Advertising Messages and Intention to Pursue ODL Studies



Note: INT – Intention, INF – Informative Advertising, PER – Persuasive Advertising, REM – Reminder Advertising, REI – Reinforcement Advertising

Figure 1.0 indicates that the coefficient of determination,  $R^2$  is 0.526 for INT endogenous latent variable. This means that the four latent variables (INF, PER, REM, and REI) moderately explain the variance in INT (52.6%). The inner model path coefficient suggests that REM has the

strongest effect on INT (0.607), followed by PER (0.111), INF (0.066), and REI (0.032). The hypothesised path between REM, PER and INT are statistically significant. However, the hypothesised path relationship between INF, REI and INT are not statistically significant. The standardised path coefficient (0.066 and 0.032) are below than 0.1. Hence, it can be concluded that REM and PER are both predictors of INT, but INF and REI did not directly predict the INT.

Table 4.0: Results Summary for Reflective Outer Model

Latent Variable	Indicators	Outer Loadings	Indicator Loadings	CR	AVE
INF	INF1	0.8201	0.6726	0.884 6	0.657 3
	INF2	0.7876	0.6203		
	INF3	0.8016	0.6427		
	INF4	0.8328	0.6936		
INT	INT1	0.7279	0.5298	0.848 0	0.582 6
	INT2	0.7596	0.5770		
	INT3	0.7931	0.6290		
	INT4	0.7712	0.5947		
PER	PER1	0.8094	0.6551	0.869 3	0.624 5
	PER2	0.7886	0.6219		
	PER3	0.7567	0.5726		
	PER4	0.8052	0.6483		
REI	REI1	0.7759	0.6020	0.856 9	0.600 3
	REI2	0.8074	0.6519		
	REI3	0.8101	0.6562		
	REI4	0.7007	0.4909		
REM	REM1	0.8083	0.6533	0.793 1	0.561 7
	REM2	0.7206	0.5193		
	REM3	0.7161	0.5128		

Table 4.0 indicates that all Composite Reliability are more than 0.70. This means that the measured items have the Internal Reliability consistency. As for the Convergent Reliability, all Average Variance Extracted (AVE) are higher than 0.50.

Table 5.0: Discriminant Validity

Indicators	AVE	Square Root
INF	0.6573	0.8107
INT	0.5826	0.7633
PER	0.6245	0.7903
REI	0.6003	0.7748
REM	0.5617	0.7495

Table 6.0: Fornell-Larcker Criterion Analysis for Discriminant Validity

	INF	INT	PER	REI	REM
INF	<b>0.8107</b>				
INT	0.3538	<b>0.7633</b>			
PER	0.3619	0.5184	<b>0.7903</b>		
REI	0.5105	0.4618	0.5920	<b>0.7748</b>	
REM	0.3988	0.7144	0.6067	0.5527	<b>0.7495</b>

Table 7.0: Checking the Significance Level of the Inner Model Using Bootstrapping

	T-Statistics
INF → INT	1.3915
PER → INT	2.1741
REI → INT	0.5038
REM → INT	14.1392

Table 7.0 indicates that the PER → INT and REM → INT T-Statistics are greater than 1.96. Therefore, only these two variables have shown the evidence of a significant relationship.

Table 7.0: The Preferred Media Channel

Measured Items	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Preferred Media Channel (n=234)</i>		
Newspaper	39	16.7
Radio	19	8.1
Television	30	12.8
Billboard (Outdoor Advertising)	23	9.8
Website (University or other websites)	26	11.1
Social Media (Facebook, Instagram YouTube etc.)	97	41.5
<i>General Opinion About Advertisements (n=234)</i>		
I like advertisement because it gives information about products or services	178	76.1
I don't like advertisement because it is irritating	56	23.9

As can be seen in Table 7.0, Social Media is rated by the majority of the respondents as the most preferred media channel for ODL advertising activities (41.5 percent). Newspapers and Television remain as the two most popular traditional media channel perceived by the respondents (16.7 and 12.8 percent). Social Media has gained a popularity among many people in Malaysia. A good combination of creative content with catchy messages will attract many people to have a selective attention and retention to watch and listen to the advertisement [38]. In the meantime, advertising budget must also be allocated for the paper-based and electronic newspapers as both medium are accepted by many people. It is also noteworthy to understand that majority of Malaysian people still have a positive view on advertisements. 76.1 percent of the respondents believed that advertisements will expose them to necessary information and knowledge about products and services. This means, advertisement is still relevant to increase the popularity of OUM as a leading ODL provider in Malaysia. Thus, Research Objective 1 is achieved.

Table 8.0 indicates the relationship between the scores of Gender and Media Preferences among the respondents. The significance level of Levene's test is larger than 0.05 ( $p = 0.432$ ) and did not violate the assumption of equal variance [36]. Therefore, the researchers used the equal variance assumed to report the t-value. The value in the Sig. (2-tailed) column is less than 0.05 ( $p = .047$ ) thus indicating that there is a significant difference in the mean scores of media preferences between the two groups, male ( $M = 1.56$ ,  $SD = 0.497$ ) and female consumers ( $M = 1.59$ ,  $SD = 0.496$ , 95% Confidence Interval: -.178 to .123). This means, there is a different perception between male and female prospective learners with regards to the academic advertisements. Female respondents are more receptive towards advertisements. Therefore, the content of the ODL advertisement must have some creative elements related to emotional attachment. Hence, Research Objective 2 is achieved.

Table 8.0: Independent Sample T-Test for Gender and Media Preferences

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Gender	Equal Variances Assumed	.619	.432	-.361	232	.047
	Equal Variances Not Assumed			-.361	92.394	.025

Note: Levene's Test for Equality Variances ( $F = .619$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ); 95% CI = -.178 (Lower), .123 (Upper)

Table 9.0: Generational Cohort and the Preferred Advertisement Messages

	INF	PER	REM	REI
Gen Z	4.20%	9.54%	5.34%	3.05%
Gen Y	4.96%	16.79%	7.63%	3.44%
Gen X	3.44%	18.70%	5.34%	4.20%
BB	2.29%	5.73%	2.29%	3.05%
Total	14.89%	50.76%	20.61%	13.74%

Table 9.0 portrays that Persuasive Advertising Message is highly preferred by all generations. Meanwhile, Reminder Advertising Message is also effective to capture the audience attention. However, the Baby Boomers can accept Reinforcement Advertising Message. This means, ODL institutions must be creative in adopting the Persuasive or Reminder advertising messages in their YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc. to capture the attention of the prospective students. Thus, Research Objective 2 is achieved.

## CONCLUSION

The growing concern about the effectiveness of advertising strategies have made ODL institution to consider the best media channel to promote the university and its programmes. The results of this study portray a unique perspective of the Malaysian prospective learners towards advertisements in the major media channels. An empirical investigation has confirmed that majority of the generational cohort feel comfortable with the advertisements in Social Media due to the elements of sound and sight. In the meantime, it was found that there is a significant difference between gender in terms of their view about advertisement. Female respondents would like to see advertisements more compared to the male respondents. Hence, ODL advertisements must incorporate the emotional connection to attract more audience in the future. This is in tandem with the research findings which discovered that majority of the Malaysian people still have a positive perception towards advertisement.

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