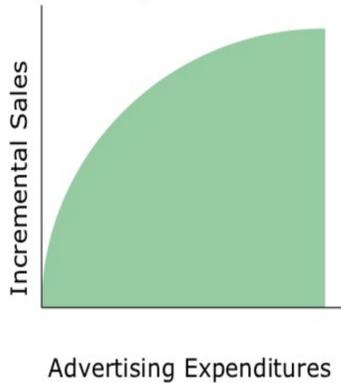


Advertising, Vulnerable Populations, and Demographic Targeting in Colleges and Universities

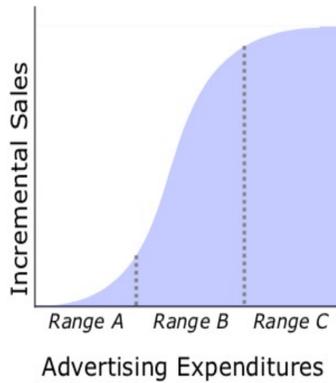
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 SOC 315: Media Effects
 Davidson College, Davidson NC 28035

Advertising Sales/Response Functions

A. Concave-Downward Response Curve



B. S-Shaped Response Function



Advertising Theory

- Advertising media effects is a field of study that exploded in the mid-20th century. Its research findings have been used for the benefit of companies and corporations to increase the effectiveness of their ads, as well as informing the general public of the targeting mechanisms used by advertisements.
- Early research posited that advertising communication effects were extremely powerful. Dubbed the “magic bullet” or “hypodermic needle” model, early advertisement communications research suggests that the media injects its messages straight into the passive audience, who is immediately affected by these messages. The public essentially cannot escape from the media's influence, and is therefore considered a "sitting duck" (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, p. 16). This theory was derived from observations of Nazi propaganda and other effective ad campaigns of the mid-20th century.
- As decades passed the magic bullet/hypodermic needle model was considered to be obsolete, or at least incomplete. At the heart of most advertising models today is the *advertising response function*. This is the relationship between the number of advertisement exposures and a dependent variable such as purchase probability or product familiarity.
- Advertising response function has been the subject of considerable debate in the field of communications. However, general consensus models it one of two ways: either as an ogive function with a rapidly rising level of effectiveness that plateaus with increasing ad exposure, or as an S-curve function that indicates there is a certain threshold of exposures in order to have any impact, a few more exposures past that threshold to reach maximum impact, then a declining marginal impact (Stewart, 1989). *Reference graphs on left

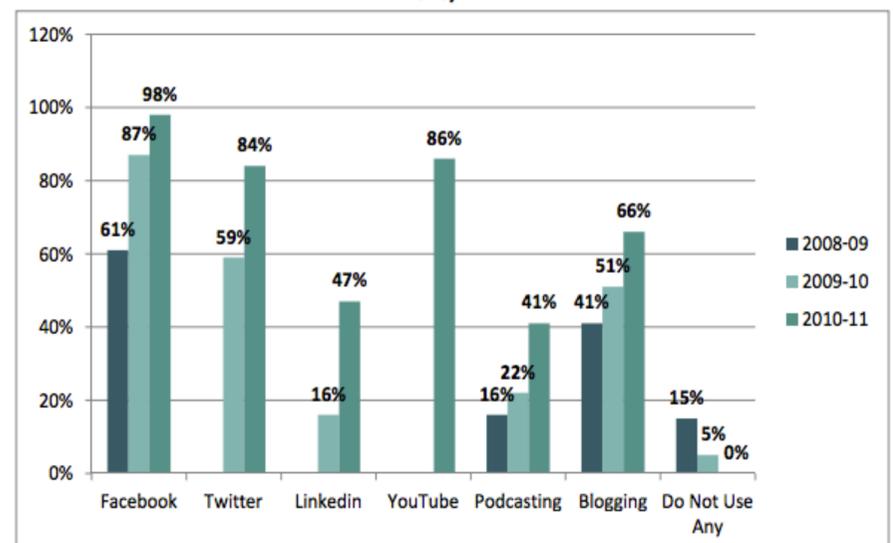
Advertising and Vulnerable Populations

- Research showed that 50% of all children-targeted ads in the United States are for candies, snacks, sugary cereal, and fast food. This is part of the explanation as to why Americans spend more than 6 billion US dollars yearly on holiday candies. Therefore, it is not surprising that 1/3 of American children are overweight or obese. This demonstrates how marketing activities targeted directly to kids can adversely affect their lives (Thomas, 2007)
- Cancer patients and individuals who are anxious about the development of cancer are particularly vulnerable because the disease is so feared. Cancer marketing by hospitals and cancer centers focus on emotion rather than fact, which be misleading, but it helps the market increase market share (Holcombe, 2015).
- Public health takes advantage of the research of social media by enlisting it for “infoveillance”. Organizations can use social media for syndrome surveillance, by monitoring the frequency of searches related to particular illness, enlisting the public to report infections or symptoms, and mapping outbreaks with new tools and data mined from existing social networking sites (Center of Disease Control and Prevention, 2010, p. 7).
- Studies analyzing the usage of health related information on the internet found that in the majority of cases it was useable, feasible, and effective in reaching the target audiences; youth and adolescents. (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, p. 14).
- Older adults have been cited as important target populations, with recommendation for communications through social media for the prevention and reduction of severe strokes (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, p. 17).

Demographic Targeting in Colleges and Universities

- A point of debate in institutional portrayals of diversity questions whether an institution can portray itself as more diverse than its true demographic makeup in order to attract more diverse identities in the long term, or whether an institution must portray itself truthfully within its current demographics (Boyer et al., 2006, p. 147).
- A 2006 homepage content analysis of 163 colleges and universities from the U.S. News list of “Best Comprehensive Colleges and Universities” found that the diversity portrayed on the homepage of a school correlated more to the geographic location of the school than the actual racial and ethnic demographics of the school (Boyer et al., 2006, p. 146).
- Within a sample of private and public colleges and universities in the United States from 2010-2011, 98% had Facebook, 86% were on YouTube, 84% had twitter, 66% had a blog presence, and 41% had a podcast presence (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 10, Barnes & Lescault, 2012). Given the current popularity of social media as an advertising and branding tool for colleges and universities (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 10) these social media mediums may more currently address questions of how institutions accurately or dishonestly represent their demographics.

Figure 1.1: Trends in Social Media Usage Among U.S. Colleges and Universities, 2008/09 – 2010/11



Source: Center for Marketing Research, U-Mass Dartmouth²¹

Hanover Research. (2014). *Trends in Higher Education, Marketing, Recruitment, and Technology*. Washington, DC: Hanover Research.

Next Steps

We plan to contextualize this literature within Davidson College through a questionnaire for current students regarding:

- The degree to which they feel the demographic makeup of Davidson was originally marketed accurately to them
- The degree to which they feel the existence of support services for various student identities and needs were originally marketed accurately to them