

# **Does ad liking ( $L_A$ ) improve correct branding?**

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Competitive paper

## **Abstract**

Evidence suggests that “ad likeability” ( $L_A$ ) a better predictor of sales than many other measures (ie recall, persuasion, etc) (Cramphorn 1992, Haley and Baldinger 1991, Polsfuss and Hess 1991, Spaeth, et al. 1990, Thorson 1991).

One way that  $L_A$  could have impact (ie produce sales) is through encouraging customers to watch and remember particular ads, thus enhancing the ads ability to increase brand salience. For this to occur, respondents have to correctly associate the right brand with the ad. Yet there are reasons to assume that making an ad likeable might make it more difficult to effectively brand. This would undermine the salience explanation of why  $L_A$  is associated with effectiveness. For this reason we investigated the relationship between  $L_A$  and brand ambiguity. Hierarchical logistic regression is used to model the relationship.

The modelling was conducted on data from an advertising tracking monitor in a residential service industry. Data was collected on approximately 20 individual television ads, from over 6000 respondents resulting in more than 10,000 individual ratings.

A very clear association, at the aggregate level, between  $L_A$  and brand ambiguity is

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demonstrated showing that ads that are more likeable tend to have higher rates of correct brand identification. This suggests a hierarchy of advertisement quality, and effectiveness.

At the individual ad level there were clear exceptions to the aggregate pattern. That is, for some advertisements, respondents who liked the ad were more likely to incorrectly brand the ad, and respondents who could correctly brand the ad were less likely to like it. The ability of the modelling to identify these “dysfunctional advertisements” is very useful.

This individual level finding supports our original assertion that the relationship between  $L_A$  and (lack of) brand ambiguity is not necessarily a strong causal one. Having a well-liked advertisement will not guarantee that people will correctly identify the brand, and having a well-branded ad will not necessarily make it likeable. However, there are executions that can achieve both (and neither).

This paper is important not only for its findings but also as a demonstration of the difference between individual and aggregate level analysis. The difference between the aggregate and individual results suggest that caution is needed when interpreting some ad testing/tracking data, that analysis at both levels is important when looking for patterns in data, and it has the added benefit of revealing something about the causal mechanisms.

## **Introduction**

There is a great deal of advertising effectiveness tracking which is used, amongst other things, to decide on the future of campaigns. The measures of effectiveness are critical to understand as they directly impact on advertisers profitability. Specifically they affect how much is spent on developing marketing communications, and sales, either positively or negatively, by the choices they influence (ie which ads are cut and when).

In this paper we provide some results from a research program concerned with advertising effectiveness measurement. Our particular focus is on explaining the construct ad likeability ( $L_A$ ), which has been shown to be a key predictor of ad effectiveness (ie sales). As a construct  $L_A$  is not fully understood as can be seen from its varied interpretations in the academic literature.

Based on analysis of a considerable database it has been suggested that both  $L_A$  (measured as enjoyment) and branding are critical to successful communication (Hollis 1995). And while Gallup & Robinson found  $L_A$  to be positively correlated with Brand Rating (Greene 1992), other research found little evidence for  $L_A$  contributing to registration of the brand name (Walker and Dubitsky 1994). A lack of evidence is surprising considering the association between  $L_A$  and sales. Thus this paper uses a distinct database and approach to investigate the relationship between these variables.

The question of the association between  $L_A$  and brand ambiguity is also important because it is quite feasible that making an ad more likeable could conflict with other objectives such as

ensuring low levels of brand ambiguity. We wanted to know if achieving both these objectives was possible, and how often this is achieved. Or whether tradeoffs between  $L_A$  and correct branding are necessary.

We begin this paper with a theoretical overview of the mechanisms by which  $L_A$  could have impact (ie to produce sales), then introduce our data, analytic approach and results.

### **Ad likeability**

While Wells in (1964) proposed that to predict subsequent sales, one just had to ask people to rate the ad, it was not until 1990 that  $L_A$  was really highlighted in the literature as being a key measure of effective advertising.  $L_A$  was found to be a better predictor of sales than other copy test measures in the ARF Copy Research Validity Study (Haley 1991, Haley and Baldinger 1991). The findings of this pivotal study have been supported and extended by a wide range of researchers and key industry players (Appel 1992, Biel 1990, Biel and Bridgwater 1990, Cramphorn 1991, du Plessis 1994, du Plessis 1994, Greene 1992, Hollis 1995, Polsfuss and Hess 1991, Spaeth, et al. 1990, Stapel 1994, Thorson 1991, Walker and Dubitsky 1994).

While there is some controversy concerning whether  $L_A$  is the best measure of advertising effectiveness (Hollis 1995, Jones 1996, Jones 1996, Rossiter and Eagleson 1994) there is little doubt that it is an extremely useful measure. Not only because of its relationship with advertising effectiveness but also because of the simplicity of the measure (Spaeth, et al. 1990).

What  $L_A$  really measures is an unanswered question, despite the studies that have attempted to determine the attributes that make ads likeable. These include du Plessis (1994, 1994) who suggested that  $L_A$  is comprised of the dimensions; relevant news, empathy, entertainment, (brand reinforcement, familiarity, confusion, alienation); and Biel and Bridgwater (1990) who revealed that  $L_A$  goes far beyond mere entertainment and was most related to how meaningful and relevant ads seemed to viewers.

There is some consistency in the literature (eg  $L_A$  and involvement are generally considered linked). However, there is confusion and disagreement, for example Hollis (1995) suggests that  $L_A$  is just one facet of the more complicated construct of “involvement”, while du Plessis (1994) suggests that involvement is one dimension of  $L_A$ . Biel and Bridgwater (1990) believe that viewer involvement and perceived relevance are factors that link  $L_A$  to persuasion. The construct has also been confused with “enjoyment” (Hollis 1995) and a general attitude measure (Thorson 1991).

There has been some investigation of how  $L_A$  relates to other constructs such as interest (Stapel 1991, Stapel 1994) and recall, attention and branding (Walker and Dubitsky 1994). Despite all that we know, there is more to learn.

### **Theoretical overview of the L<sub>A</sub> to sales link**

A number of potential explanations of the L<sub>A</sub> to sales relationship have been proposed (eg Biel 1990, Walker and Dubitsky 1994). Two dominate and are reviewed here. The first is based on an attitudinal “strong” theory of advertising and the second is based on a non-attitudinal salience theory distinguished as separate theories in (Sharp, et al. 1996). Thus it is suggested that:

- 1. L<sub>A</sub> leads to brand liking and preference, which in turn leads to sales<sup>2</sup>; and**
- 2. L<sub>A</sub> increases the probability that an ad will get viewers attention which raises brand awareness / salience which in turn leads to sales<sup>3</sup>.**

The first of these is a traditional cognitive approach. In suggesting that L<sub>A</sub> results in brand liking which in turn leads to sales, or as Biel (1990, 1990) suggests positive affect is transferred from the ad to the brand, it appears to assume more thought on the behalf of consumers than they are likely to apply to most advertising. This hypothesis would appear to be the most commonly assumed approach to explain L<sub>A</sub> especially among American researchers.

The second approach, while still cognitive does not make any assumptions about attitude to behaviour links. Instead it suggests that L<sub>A</sub> results in attention being given to the ad, or in other words it increases awareness or salience, which in turn results in sales. This hypothesis sits with the suggestion that viewers are less likely to either mentally or physically “zap” a liked commercial and thus L<sub>A</sub> influences the actual reach of the advertising (Biel 1990, Franzen 1994). This perspective is consistent with the view that there is limited processing of advertising by viewers (Krugman 1965), and evaluation processes do not require effortful processing of ad content (Ehrenberg 1974). This also reflects the notion that viewers can have feelings without thinking as there is a separate affective response system (Zajonc 1980, Zajonc and Markus 1982).

With both of these explanations one would expect that liked ads should generate less brand ambiguity than less liked ads. The first explanation directly specifies the link from L<sub>A</sub> to brand liking/preference. If viewers are transferring the “liking” from the ad to the brand, it assumes a good link between the brand and the ad. The other explanation suggests that more attention is paid to liked commercials. This creates extra opportunity to see the ad and thus the brand, and thus more opportunity to create the link with the brand name.

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<sup>2</sup> Presumably via some conscious choice mechanism or through some attitude-based heuristic, or affect transfer (like the ad, like the brand) (Walker and Dubitsky 1994).

<sup>3</sup> This could occur because salience enhances the probability of inclusion into the consideration set and/or choice from this set, alternatively salience may affect choice via buyers use of the heuristic of choosing (best) known brands (Macdonald and Sharp 1998).

## **Brand linkage / ambiguity**

Most advertising aims to promote a particular brand or make of product in a competitive situation (Ehrenberg 1974). It has been suggested that more than ever the brand will have to be an integral part of its advertising (Franzen 1994). With the proliferation of brands around the world (many with little functional differences) it is important that we are sure we are advertising for our brand and not someone else in the category. It is not sufficient just to advertise for the category assuming our brand will benefit. Product class advertising (ie buy more cars as opposed to buy Ford) generally has only minor effects (Ehrenberg 1974).

Millward Brown in an attempt to replicate the objective of the ARF's Copy Research Validity Project identified that brand linked TV ad awareness was a good predictor of sales response (Hollis 1995). While their measure is not a simple one to replicate the importance of a brand linked measure to sales is no surprise.

Brand linkage has been found to be subject to different objectively measurable treatments of the brand name (Walker and von Gonten 1989). High-linkage was likely to occur where the name was literally descriptive of the products function, a promised end benefit or an obvious and differentiating product characteristic, where the brand overwhelmingly dominates the product class or where the names were literally represented by an object or visual device (Walker and von Gonten 1989). It was also likely to occur where the first brand name was mentioned within the initial 8 seconds of the ad and/or it was mentioned 3 or more times (Walker and von Gonten 1989).

It is specifically this frequency factor that is one that was hypothesised to conflict with  $L_A$ . It would be expected that one could generate high correct branding by constantly repeating the brand name in an ad, but at the price of boredom and reduced  $L_A$ .

With the previous research on both  $L_A$  and brand ambiguity suggesting that both measures are important and related, this study empirically investigates the relationship between the two looking at both individual and aggregate response to advertising using hierarchical logistic regression.

### **The data set**

Several months of advertising tracking data was selected to investigate  $L_A$  and its relationship to brand ambiguity. The particular data set contained tracking of the advertising of all the main players in a residential service industry. The advertising was monitored on a weekly basis and data collected via telephone interviewing. Unaided and prompted data was collected to track in detail the performance of a subset of key ads.

In total, data was collected on approximately 20 individual television advertisements, with

over 6000 respondents resulting in more than 10,000 ratings for individual advertisements. The same measures were used in each period so it was possible to examine the extent to which patterns in the data existed for different advertisements and individuals.

### **The measures**

The specific measures analysed in this paper are those used in a commercial setting for a large corporation.

#### **Ad likeability ( $L_A$ )**

The key construct,  $L_A$  was asked of all respondents who recalled (category prompt) or recognised (verbal description) one of the selected ads. These respondents were asked to state if they agreed or disagreed “that it was a likeable and entertaining ad” and also how strongly they agreed or disagreed. These responses were re-coded onto a 5 point scale with 2 strongly agree, 1 somewhat agree, 0 neither agree/disagree or not sure, -1 somewhat disagree and -2 strongly disagree.

On average the advertisements were slightly more liked than not liked; the mean was 0.46 above the centre of the scale with a standard deviation was 1.16. This is a consistent pattern in advertising tracking, as few respondents actively dislike individual commercials (Biel and Bridgwater 1990).

#### **Brand linkage / ambiguity**

The other main construct selected to investigate was brand ambiguity which was dichotomous (ie respondents either correctly branded an ad or they did not).

We use the term brand linkage (or its conversely brand ambiguity) rather than "correct branding" because "correct branding" is a measurement/testing term. It is the operationalisation of brand linkage / ambiguity. It is confusing because it sounds like something the company does when in fact it is a respondent perception.

In terms of the specific measure, the respondents were asked to name, without prompting, the correct brand for the advertisement. Their answers were coded into a dichotomous variable; yes, the ad was correctly branded = 1 and no, the ad was not correctly branded = 0. Across all observations 75% of advertisements were correctly branded.

It is recognised that correct branding is a measure of the awareness and memory of both the advertisement and its brand. It is possible for an advertisement to raise awareness of the brand with there still being low recall of the advertisement. As a single measure correct branding will understate the impact of an advertisement.

## Analysis

The data provided an excellent opportunity to assess a series of propositions regarding  $L_A$ . The structure of the data allowed for analysis at several levels:

**Table 1: Levels of analysis**

Level of analysis	Level Name
1. The measures were examined by averaging to the level of the ad;	Ad average
2. The measures were examined at the individual respondent level but without reference to the ad to which the measure related; and	Individual
3. The measures were analysed at the individual respondent level but separately for each ad.	Individual by ad

In each model that will be discussed, the analysis was conducted with combinations of levels, (ie levels 1 and 2, or 1 and 3 combined). The analysis used modelling techniques, which examined the entire data set but simultaneously considered the differences between ads and the interactions of the measures.

Throughout the analysis level 2 was not significant. This was due to the considerable variation between ads. For some ads the effects were positive and for some the effects were negative. In the analysis at level 2, these counter effects fought against each other rendering non-significant or trivial overall effects. Extending the analysis to level 3, where the effects could vary from ad to ad, models were generated that fitted the data and explained the phenomena better.

### Finding 1

*$L_A$  varies from ad to ad.  $L_A$  for each ad varies from person to person.  $L_A$  varies more between people within any one ad than between ads.*

A simple analysis of variance for  $L_A$  between ads was significant ( $P < 0.001$ ). The average  $L_A$  for the ads varied from -0.1 to 1.4, where  $L_A$  was measured on the five-point scale (-2 to +2). Thus there was considerable variation in  $L_A$  between ads.

The standard deviation for the ad average  $L_A$  was 0.4. By contrast the average of the standard deviations of the individual  $L_A$  by ad was 1.0. Thus  $L_A$  varied considerably from ad to ad and even more so from person to person. The data supported proposition 1.

This finding supports a study from the early 80's that found a spectrum of response rather than a single monolithic reaction among women's responses to advertising but with overall patterns of response clear (Bartos 1980).

It implies that in testing  $L_A$  for any one ad, one clearly needs a sufficiently large sample size of respondents. That is sufficiently large to know what the results are going to reflect the overall response pattern that will be found and not suffer from sampling effects that could be substantial due to the variation that will be found. Testing ads in a couple of focus groups is clearly dangerous.

Specifically taking the known average standard deviation of the 5-point  $L_A$  scale of the ads in this data set we would recommend a sample size of at least 175 for a result which is accurate to a level of 0.1 on the scale with 95% confidence.

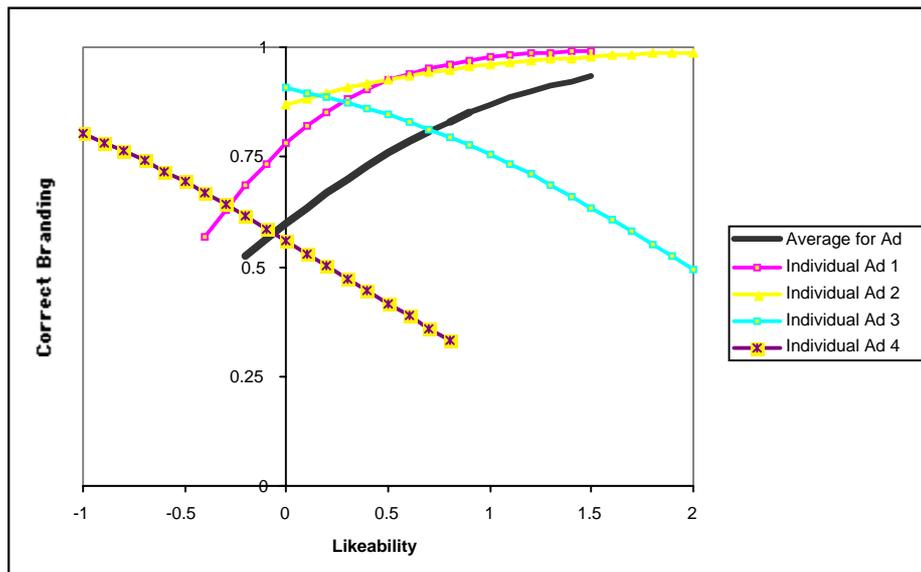
### **Finding 2**

*The association between  $L_A$  and correct branding does not always hold at the individual ad level.*

Hierarchical logistic regression was undertaken to examine the impact of  $L_A$  on brand ambiguity. The dependent variable was the dichotomous correct branding variable. The independent variables were the  $L_A$  measures covering the three levels of analysis discussed in Table 1.

Plot1 provides an overview of the results. The solid black line shows the impact of the average level of  $L_A$  on correct branding. The other lines indicate the individual level results for four specific ads. The four ads were selected to show the extremes in the data. Three of the ads selected (1, 2 and 3) had high average  $L_A$ . The fourth ad had lower average  $L_A$ . At the individual level, two of the ads (1 and 2) had increased correct branding for increased individual  $L_A$  while for the other two ads (3 and 4) the trend was opposite – as individual  $L_A$  increased the correct branding reduced.

**Plot1: The impact of  $L_A$  on correct branding**



*A strong aggregate relationship is evident but with huge variation between ads!*

Ads 1 and 2 in Plot1 were the two ads where an increase in the individual  $L_A$  had the greatest impact on correct branding. However, it can be seen from the plot that the increase in average  $L_A$  had just as big an impact on average correct branding.

The rate of impact of correct branding of the individual  $L_A$  of each ad varied from ad to ad. This is shown in the different slopes for the lines in Plot1. The black line shows that average  $L_A$  had a strong impact which is consistent with the theoretical hypothesis (ie increased  $L_A$  reduces brand ambiguity).

To investigate the relationship in more detail we examined the output of the models. One output of the logistic models was an estimated probability of individually correctly branding any one ad. These estimated probabilities varied considerably, as can be seen by the range of values on the vertical axis in Plot1. This was due to substantial variation (1) across the ads and (2) in the individual  $L_A$  for each ad. This was evidence of a strong statistically significant difference between ads in the slopes of the lines in Plot1. It was also evidence of a good fit of the model. The model indicated that there were substantial differences between ads and between individuals.

Finally the statistical significance of the models was examined. The results are presented in Table 2. The four models for estimating individual correct branding were:

1. A model in which  $L_A$  was not considered;
2. A model in which the ad average  $L_A$  was included (level 1);
3. A model where the individual by ad  $L_A$  was included (level 3); and
4. A model including (a) the ad average  $L_A$  and (b) the individual by ad  $L_A$  (level 1 and 3).

All models were statistically significant. All improvements to the models by including extra variables were also statistically significant. The table does not include the level 2 models, where individual  $L_A$  was included but without differentiation between ads, as these models were not significant. Of the successful models the ad average  $L_A$  was a slightly stronger driver of correct branding than individual by ad  $L_A$ .

**Table 2: Results of the various logistic regression models**

Model	Description	-2LL difference cf Constant	P
1	Constant		
2	Average $L_A$	523	<.0001
3	Individual $L_A$	581	<.0001
4	Average $L_A$ Individual $L_A$	942	<.0001

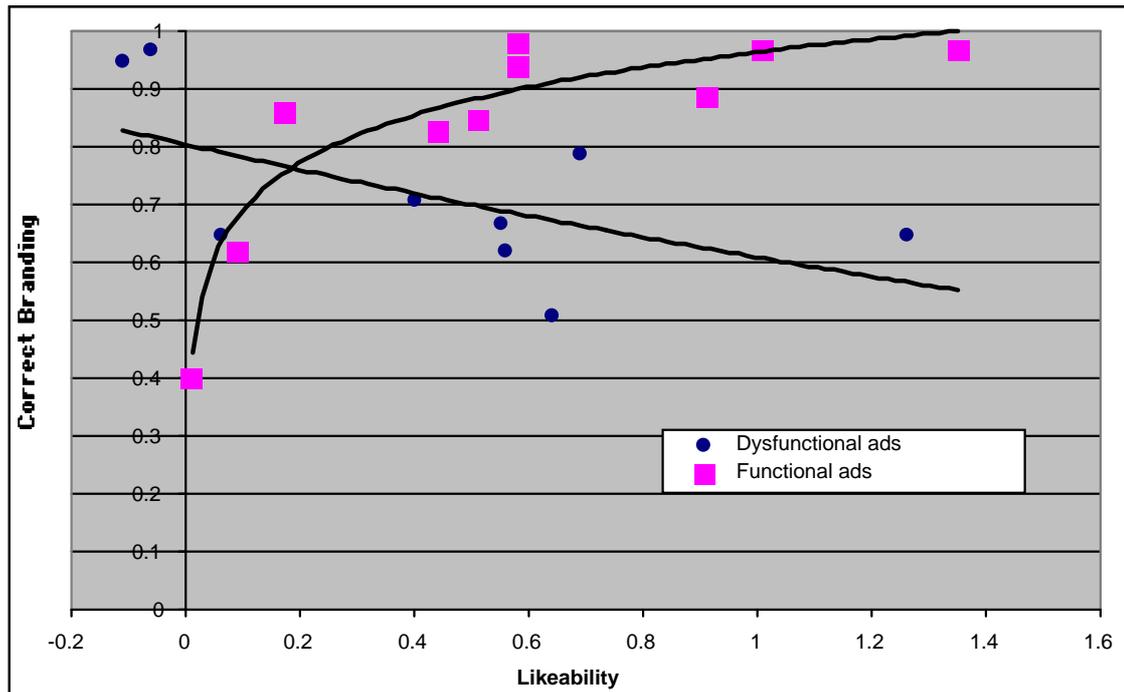
Having determined that particular ads produced results that went against the pattern that we had hypothesised and found at the aggregate level, it was decided to investigate the relationship in greater detail.

The ads were divided into two groups:

1. Functional ads – at the individual level a higher  $L_A$  score correlated with higher correct branding. Or more specifically those ads with a positive  $b$  coefficient. (ie the line in Plot1 slopes upward); and
1. Dysfunctional ads - at the individual level a higher  $L_A$  score correlated with lower correct branding. Or more specifically those ads with a negative  $b$  coefficient (ie the line in Plot1 slopes downward).

The average result for each of the groups of ads was calculated and is shown in Plot 2. Amongst the functional ads, the average effect of  $L_A$  was greatest amongst those ads with lower  $L_A$  scores. The result for the dysfunctional ads was even more interesting. For these ads even at the average level the higher the  $L_A$  score the lower the correct branding results.

**Plot 2: The impact of  $L_A$  on correct branding - Functional versus dysfunctional ads.**



*Dysfunctional ads have higher correct branding if the average  $L_A$  is lower.*

Thus the data only partially supported the proposition. Generally, the greater the average and individual  $L_A$  the greater the correct branding. Average  $L_A$  was only a slightly stronger influence on correct branding than individual  $L_A$ . But most importantly, it was possible to identify dysfunctional ads where at both the individual and average level greater  $L_A$  correlated with lower correct branding. It is clear from the data that the relationship between  $L_A$  and correct branding exists as a generalisation but varies considerably from ad to ad.

In more useable terms all liked ads will not result in lower levels of brand ambiguity. It is also unlikely that all liked ads will be sales winners. A clear pattern exists between  $L_A$  and correct branding in the aggregate with other patterns evident at different levels. Overall the findings suggest that it is not sufficient to measure  $L_A$  in isolation, however, in general  $L_A$  is one ad quality that is worth producing.

The value in being able to distinguish between dysfunctional and functional ads can be shown through a hypothetical example.

**Table 3 Same average scores but with different response patterns**

A functional ad			A dysfunctional ad		
	Correct branding	L <sub>A</sub> score		Correct branding	L <sub>A</sub> score
Person 1	1	5	Person 1	2	5
Person 2	1	5	Person 2	2	5
Person 3	1	4	Person 3	2	5
Person 4	2	2	Person 4	1	1
Person 5	2	2	Person 5	1	2
Person 6	2	1	Person 6	1	1
<i>Average</i>	<i>50% correctly branded</i>	<i>3.2</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>50% correctly branded</i>	<i>3.2</i>

**Correctly Branded =1, Incorrectly branded=2, low L<sub>A</sub> = 1, high L<sub>A</sub> = 5**

Thus as shown in the above table with the functional ad, those who liked the ad correctly branded it, while with the dysfunctional ad those who liked it did not brand it correctly. At the aggregate level the response to both ads is identical (ie 50% correct branding and a mean liking of 3.2). While it is possible to pick the pattern with this small sample example, it is not necessarily so simple when one is working with multiple ads and larger samples. Thus having a means of differentiating dysfunctional and functional ads (ie the *b* coefficient or slope) and knowing to check for this relationship is a valuable finding for those involved in advertising research.

On a different note, this analysis is important as a demonstration of the difference between individual and aggregate level analysis. Many people do not really understand this difference. Such a difference is, being noticed as important in attitude measurement in particular (for examples see Dall'Olmo Riley, et al. 1998, Dall'Olmo Riley, et al. 1997). The difference between the individual and aggregate results highlights the importance of recognising the level of analysis that one is conducting and also the value in conducting analysis at different levels when looking to understand patterns in data. If only individual analysis had been conducted the clear patterns in the relationships between these variables would remain uncovered.

## Discussion

The general result was that L<sub>A</sub> had a strong (negative) association with brand ambiguity. That is, ads that are more likeable were also more often correctly identified by respondents.

From this we might infer a *causal* relationship between L<sub>A</sub> and brand identification as

hypothesised, in that liked ads might be watched more attentively. The other causal direction (ie brand identification causing  $L_A$ ) appears less plausible, however there is some support that attitude to the brand (or usage of the brand) can influence attitude to the ad (Walker and Dubitsky 1994). Clearly further research is required.

Overall, however, we do not see this finding between  $L_A$  and brand ambiguity as suggesting a strong *causal* relationship, in either direction. Instead we interpret the association as representing a continuum of increasing sophistication and effectiveness. Some ads are better than others, and these tend to be more liked and more correctly identified.

The individual level associations support this view. There were very substantial variations between advertisements regarding the impact of individual respondents rating of likeability for the advertisement and their ability to correctly brand. For some advertisements high individual  $L_A$  correlated with a high ability to recall the brand. For some advertisements it was the opposite. These advertisements we labelled as “dysfunctional” in that those individuals who liked the ad were less likely to know who the ad was for, and those viewers who did correctly identify the brand were less likely to like the ad. These ads are likely to be less effective than their average likeability or brand ambiguity score might indicate.

So while for many ads, viewers who see the ad as likeable are more likely to correctly brand it, there are also “dysfunctional” ads where viewers who like the ad are less likely to correctly know which brand the ad is for. We attribute the latter occurrence to incidences where introducing the brand name interferes with the flow or entertainment content of the ad by reminding the viewer that this is a commercial selling attempt. Those who noticed/registered this are less likely to like the advertisement. An important outcome of our modelling is the ability to identify such dysfunctional ads.

An important methodological finding from this research is that it shows that it would be easy to draw erroneous findings from a single study of a single ad looking at the individual responses. That is, some such studies would infer that  $L_A$  causes lower levels of brand ambiguity and some would conclude the opposite. And some would conclude that brand ambiguity caused higher  $L_A$ , and some would conclude that it caused lower  $L_A$ .

The difference between the aggregate and individual level modelling results tells us something about how to interpret some ad testing/tracking data and, it tells us something about the causal mechanisms.

So in summary, our results do not suggest a strong causal relationship between  $L_A$  and brand ambiguity, despite the strong aggregate association. Instead we suggest that the observed association highlight that ads vary in the quality of their total execution on these two dimensions.

Therefore we are not saying that if you want likeable ads then the brand must be displayed clearly. Nor are we saying that if you want low levels of brand ambiguity then you must make likeable ads. Instead we have uncovered a continuum of ad quality, we are saying that it is possible to have both high  $L_A$  and low brand ambiguity just as it is possible to have really poor ads (low  $L_A$  and high brand ambiguity).

There are many possible reasons for the differences between high and low “quality” ads (ie confusion levels, relevance, etc). Whatever, the causal mechanisms they must be complex otherwise these variables would be expected to show strong associations with ad effectiveness, ie stronger than  $L_A$ . There is obviously still much to learn about how advertising works. For now we have shown an important association that clearly illustrates that it is possible for  $L_A$  and lack of brand ambiguity to be achieved simultaneously.

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