

Media Preferences for Open Distance Learning Advertising Activities

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine prospective learners' preferred media channel with regards to open distance learning advertisements. This research focuses on two types of media channels, i.e. traditional and new media. This paper segments prospective learners based on their demographical characteristics, such as gender and age. A descriptive study was conducted to assess the media preferences based on generational cohort, and to measure the differences in perception between genders. Self-administered questionnaires were used to obtain meaningful data from 234 potential learners in Malaysia. The study was conducted from February to March 2020. Based on the findings, there is a significant difference in perception towards open distance learning advertisements between genders, in which female respondents appear more receptive towards advertisements. A majority of the generational cohort rates social media as the most preferred media channel, followed by newspaper and television. However, each generation has its respective media preferences. The ANOVA results have revealed a slight difference in academic advertisements and media likeability among generational cohorts. This study adds to the literature of integrated marketing communication. The findings have strong implications to both academic and open distance learning institutions, particularly in the aspect of prospective learners' acceptance of advertisements in media channels.

Keywords: Advertising, Media Channel, New Media, Open Distance Learning, Traditional Media

Introduction

The emergence of Internet technology has changed the landscape of academic delivery (Bozkurt et al., 2015; Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2015). Personal computers, mobile phones, and the Internet are major inventions that further revolutionise the range of distance education. Based on the history, a full online learning offering a bachelor's degree and master's degree can be traced back to as early as 1989 (Siemens et al., 2015b). Since then, many website-based universities have been launched and are slowly but steadily gaining acceptance by the community. By the late 1990s, online distance learning has become an important component of the educational system and proven to be very useful in areas where traditional universities have difficulty to meet the increasing demand of working adults around the globe (Caruth & Caruth, 2013).

The trend of online distance learning has continued into the 21st century (Siemens et al., 2015a). Online learning is moving beyond conventional face-to-face and classroom methods to become a collaborative and personalised experience that generates two important things: first, a motivation for lifelong learning; and, second, a unique experience that brings pleasure of participating in online learning, rewarding and creating a valuable social network (Ossianniilsson et al., 2015). Distance learning has moved beyond one-way communication. To date, distance learning is also referred to as online education or open distance learning (ODL). Working adults are becoming more familiar with ODL, while the younger generation has greater exposure in blended learning (Chen & Tat Yao, 2016; Zembylas, 2008). A majority of students today are currently enrolled in at least one online course in their university studies.

Though online distance learning has become a popular trend in many countries, a crucial issue exists in creating awareness about higher education providers that offer quality ODL programmes (Aydemir et al., 2015; Yiong et al., 2008). At this juncture, promotional marketing using traditional and new media plays an important role. From the marketing point of view, the media is a mass communication channel involving broadcasting, publishing, with or without the Internet regarded collectively (Danaher & Rossiter, 2011).

Traditional media is any form of mass communication available before the advent of digital media (Armstrong & Kotler, 2015), whereas new media generally refers to a range of applications that merges traditional media with digital technology to create interactive and dynamic publications, tools, and uses (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and outdoor advertising are examples of traditional media. On the other hand, new media comprises mobile phones, digital radio, digital television or digital computers. Promotional activities in the new media can be in the form of social media, email, search engine optimisation, pay-per-click advertising, or content marketing (Talafuse, 2015).

Conducting advertising activities using the right media channel is very important. Promotional advertising plays a role in creating awareness, as well as persuading and remind existing and prospective customers about the existence of an organisation, its products and service offerings (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Previous studies have shown that a proper advertising design and the right choice of media channel have a significant relationship with the consumers' awareness regarding promotional activities (Odhiambo, 2012; Tancharoen, 2016). However, the selection of the media channel is based on budget, impact, and coverage. It is common knowledge that every person has his or her own favourite media channel, and it is a fact that traditional media remains relevant today (Danaher & Dagger, 2013; Danaher & Rossiter, 2011). Advertisements in the right media channel must consider the popularity of the media. This is to avoid a low response rate from the targeted market segment. In the meantime, the selection of media channel must take into account its exclusivity (Oh, 2013). This is to build a favourable perception of the reputation of the ODL institution and its offerings.

In the context of demographical factors, it is interesting to identify how prospective learners choose the media. Previous studies have shown mixed results on the role of gender in the decision-making process (De Acedo Lizárraga et al., 2007; Mitchell & Walsh, 2004). Apart from that, there is another important issue to be explored, which is the age of the prospective learners. Different age groups may have different perception towards types of media channels (Besedeş et al., 2012; Bruine de Bruin et al., 2012). This is due to multiple reasons such as knowledge, social influence, and attitude towards traditional and modern media channels (Ting & de Run, 2015). These issues have made this research more interesting in the context of Malaysia.

To date, many educational institutions face the dilemma of choosing the right media channel to promote their programmes, products, and services (Aksu et al., 2018). This is due to the reason that every channel has its own advantages. Radio, television, newspapers, and outdoor advertising companies always claim that they are more effective than other media channels. Conversely, others may believe that online advertising is more impactful. A one-sided view often produces an adverse result. Some information about media channels can also be found to be misleading and containing bias (Faerber & Kreling, 2014; Kariyawasam & Wigley, 2017). In fact, it is the prospective learners who are the ones deciding which media channel suits their lifestyles. Thus, primary information about their current media preferences for ODL promotional activities may provide a better understanding and can be very useful for future promotional strategies.

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

- RQ1: What is the most preferred media channel in the context of Malaysian consumers?
- RQ2: Is there any significant difference between genders in terms of media preferences for ODL advertising activities?
- RQ3: What is the breakdown of generational cohort and the trend of media preferences for ODL advertising strategies?
- RQ4: Is there any significant difference between generational cohorts in terms of their choice of media advertising?

Research Objectives

To obtain answers for the research questions, the researchers have identified three objectives, which are:

- RO1: To assess the most preferred media channel in the context of Malaysian prospective learners.
- RO2: To measure the difference of prospective learners' media preferences based on gender.
- RO3: To examine the prospective learners' media preferences based on generational cohort.
- RO4: To measure the difference between generational cohorts in terms of their choice of media advertising.

Literature Review

Choosing the right major advertising media channels

Previous studies have shown that the choice of media has a direct relationship with the establishment of consumers' confidence against products or services (Danaher & Dagger, 2013; Mohd Nazri et al., 2013). The marketing team of any educational institution must understand the capacity of the major advertising media types to ensure the reach, frequency, and impact of advertisements (Armstrong & Kotler, 2015). Each media channel has its own respective advantages and limitations as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Profiles of major media channel

Media Channel	Advantages	Limitations
Radio	Low cost; High geographic and demographic selectivity	Audio presentation only; Lower attention than television
Television	Appealing to the senses; High attention; High reach	High absolute cost; High clutter
Newspapers	Flexibility; Good local market coverage; Timeliness	Short life; Small "pass-along" audience
Outdoor	Flexibility; High repeat exposure	Limited audience selectivity; Creative limitations
Internet	High selectivity; Interactive possibilities; Relatively low cost	Increasing clutter

Source. (Kotler & Keller, 2012)

The major media channel profiles indicate that the wider the market coverage, the lower the relative cost will be. It is good to understand this concept, although the prospective learners' convenience must also be taken into consideration. Advertisements can be pushed through any media channel, although whether the audience watches or skips them is more important. In marketing, consumers will give selective attention and retention to product and service advertisements that are compatible with their lifestyles (Jessen & Rodway, 2010). This is also applicable to media channels. More attention will be given to the media channel that is convenient for them (Danaher & Rossiter, 2011).

Gender and Media Preferences

Existing studies have found that male and female consumers have different attitudes. They also behave differently due to genetics and social interactions (Brennan, 2015). Females tend to be more communal-minded, while males are more self-expressive and goal-oriented. Females are more concerned with facts and figures in their immediate environment, but males will only focus on the part of the environment that helps them to achieve their goal. Another study has found that males often need to be invited to touch and feel a product whereas females are likely to test something without prompting. Males will carefully read product information but females may relate to a product on a more personal level (Roberts & Cunningham, 2008).

According to several studies, females have been found to play the role of important decision-maker (Brennan, 2015; Grau & Zotos, 2016). They control or influence over 80% of purchasing consumer goods and services. 75% of female consumers play a significant role in the decision to buy a new home, while 60% also play a significant role in decisions on purchasing a new car. Based on the literature, it can be noted that marketers can reach female consumers via television networks, magazines, and websites, whereas males can be reached through television and magazines (Grau & Zotos, 2016).

Generational Cohort and Media Preferences

Each generation is commonly influenced by the time and environment in which its members grow up. The members of a particular generation will share the same outlooks and values (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Marketers will develop products and services to meet the interests of the targeted generation. Generally, in marketing, the classification of generations is described in Table 2.

Table 2

Group of consumers based on generation

Generation	Year of Birth	Features
Gen Z	1995 – 2015	Grew up in a hyper-connected world. Smartphone is their preferred method of communication. Spend most of their time on their mobile devices.
Gen Y (Millennial)	1980 – 1994	Always opt for streaming rather than wired network. Still watch television but more comfortable with mobile devices.
Gen X	1965 – 1979	They are social media users. However, they still read newspapers, listen to the radio, and watch television.
Baby Boomers (BB)	1944 – 1964	The most prominent consumers of traditional media. Embrace products and lifestyles that allow them to turn back the hands of time.

Source. (Lissitsa & Kol, 2016)

Table 2 indicates that different generational cohorts will portray different inclinations in their choice of media. It is also interesting to note that these studies were conducted in the US and UK (Chen & Shoemaker, 2014; Kotler & Keller, 2012; Lissitsa & Kol, 2016; Parment, 2013; Reisenwitz, 2009). The start and end of birth years of these generations are somehow very subjective. However, at the very least, the range can be adopted as a basis for this study pertaining to the age of the prospective learners and their media channel preferences.

Research Methodology

This research focuses on analyses that are relevant to achieve the three objectives mentioned in the earlier part of this article.

The sampling design and study setting

Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 300 prospective learners in West Malaysia. The convenience sampling technique was adopted as a method of data collection because this approach is convenient, accessible to the researchers, and requires a low budget. Combinations of face-to-face and online surveys were applied to obtain the respondents' feedback before the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Enumerators were appointed in several states such as Johor, Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang to assist in obtaining a better response from the respondents. A pilot test was conducted prior to the distribution of the questionnaires, which yielded results that have shown a good internal consistency with the Cronbach's Alpha value reported at 0.87 (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). The data were collected from February to March 2020. The researchers' interference was kept at a bare minimum in a non-contrived setting to avoid bias in response. A total of 234 valid responses were obtained for this study, with a response percentage of 78.0%. It is important to note that the researchers were very concerned about the sample size and power of the test. According to Sekaran and Bougie

(2013), the power of a test is very dependent on the sample size obtained in the study. However, in social science studies, the power is not an issue for sample sizes exceeding 100 (Pallant, 2013).

The development of measured items

The measured items were adapted and modified from past studies related to the marketing discipline. They consist of the respondents' backgrounds and common media channels in Malaysia. The backgrounds consist of age, gender, educational level and occupation. The common media channels comprise common traditional and new media, such as television, radio, newspaper, billboard, and Internet-based media.

The method of analysis

Data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using SPSS Version 22.0 to examine the respondents' profiles and their preferred media channel. Data are presented in table form. The results show the percentage and frequency based on the respondents' answers. To measure the significant difference between genders, a t-test was applied to the data (Pallant, 2013). With regards to the t-test, parametric techniques assume that data should be obtained using a random sample from the population. However, according to Pallant (2013), this is often not the case in real-life social sciences research. When the sample size is big (i.e. more than 100 respondents), non-probability sampling techniques can be applied without violating the assumption of the t-test analysis (Pallant, 2013; Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). Additionally, a one-way ANOVA test was also conducted to measure the differences between generational cohorts and their preferences towards media and academic advertisements. Interpretations of the results are based on the significant level of 0.05.

Findings

A thorough analysis was conducted to understand how prospective ODL learners demonstrate their preferences for ODL advertisements. Choices of media channels are the focus of this research. As can be seen in Table 3, the number of respondents who work in the public sector is as high as the number of those in the private sector. With the increasing number of civil servants in Malaysia, this statistic is not surprising. 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 further studies. Meanwhile, easy access to education has given many people equal opportunities to obtain a higher degree. This research has discovered a good trend whereby a total of 80% of the respondents already possess tertiary education. The remaining 20% still have an opportunity to pursue their tertiary education through ODL based on admission via the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL).

Academic qualification is very important in this research as it may indicate how the potential learners perceived academic advertisements and what their preferred media channel is. The majority of the respondents constitute those from Gen X between the ages of 41 and 55 (39.3%). For Open University Malaysia (OUM), it is good to note that the high percentage of Gen Y (26 to 40 years) and Gen Z respondents (under 25 years) offers a great opportunity for the sustainability of this academic institution. As such, valid information obtained from the respondents have made the findings of this research even more meaningful and interesting.

Table 3*Demographical characteristics of the respondents*

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender (n=234)</i>		
Male	101	43.2
Female	133	56.8
<i>Generational Cohorts (n=234)</i>		
Under 25 years old (Gen Z)	44	18.8
26-40 years old (Gen Y)	70	29.9
41-55 years old (Gen X)	92	39.3
56-76 years old (Baby Boomers)	28	12.0
<i>Educational Level (n=234)</i>		
LCE/SRP/PMR	1	0.4
MCE/SPM	26	11.1
HSC/STPM	11	4.7
Certificate	9	3.8
Diploma	43	18.4
Bachelor's Degree	80	34.2
Master's Degree	64	27.4
<i>Occupation (n=234)</i>		
Private Sector	93	39.7
Public Sector	76	32.5
Self-Employed	25	10.7
Unemployed	40	17.1

Table 4*The preferred media channel and general opinion about advertisement*

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 on Advertisements (n=234)</i>		
I like academic advertisements because they give information about programmes offered by a particular university.	178	76.1
I don't like academic advertisements because they are irritating.	56	23.9

As shown in Table 4, the majority of respondents rated social media as the most preferred media channel for ODL advertising activities (41.5%). Newspapers and television were perceived as the two most popular traditional media channels (16.7% and 12.8%, respectively). Social media has gained popularity among many people in Malaysia. A good

combination of creative content with catchy messages can attract many people to selectively pay attention and continue to watch and listen to the advertisement (Mohd Nazri et al., 2013). In the meantime, advertising budget must also be allocated for paper-based and electronic newspapers as many people continue to accept them. It is also important to understand that the majority of Malaysians still have a positive view of academic advertisements. 76.1% of the respondents believed that academic advertisements would expose them to necessary information and knowledge about programmes offered by a particular university. This finding is consistent with existing studies that have discovered that advertisements of academic programmes are important to increase the level of awareness among prospective learners (Bennett, 2007; Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). This means that advertisements, particularly via social media are still relevant to improve OUM's popularity as a leading ODL provider in Malaysia.

Table 5

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	2.361	232	.047
	Equal Variances Not Assumed			1.351	92.394	.025

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

Table 5 indicates the scores for gender and media preferences among the respondents. The significance level of Levene's test is higher than 0.05 ($p = 0.432$) and does not violate the assumption of equal variance (Pallant, 2013). Therefore, the researchers used the equal variance assumed to report the t-value. The value in the Sig. (2-tailed) column is lower than 0.05 ($p = .047$), thus indicating 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 that there is a difference in perception between male and female prospective learners with regard to academic advertisements. Female respondents are more receptive towards advertisements. Past studies have shown that female consumers are very concerned and pay a higher degree of attention towards advertisements (Hassan, 2015; Padival et al., 2019). Therefore, the content of ODL advertisements must consider gender-based preferences and disinclinations.

Table 6

Generational cohort and media preferences

	Newspaper	Radio	Television	Billboard	Website	Social Media
Gen Z	8	4	3	3	6	20
Gen Y	12	6	5	11	7	29
Gen X	12	8	17	9	12	34
BB	7	1	5	0	1	14

Table 6 shows that newspaper is the preferred channel of both Gen X and Gen Y respondents. Meanwhile, radio, television, and advertisements in websites are very effective to capture the attention of Gen X respondents. Gen Y respondents also like to look at outdoor advertising. This is possibly due to the brief amount of time needed to understand

the advertised messages. Usually, outdoor advertising uses the power of images because a picture speaks louder than words. All generational cohorts have chosen social media as the best media channel to convey promotional messages. This means that ODL institutions must optimise the usage of YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other similar forms of social media to best capture the attention of all audiences, regardless of their generational cohort. Although some people perceive Baby Boomers as not IT-savvy, this perception seems no longer valid. The emergence of technologies has made them more sophisticated and also changed their lifestyles. A number of previous studies have shown the same trend, in which Baby Boomers were found to have a low level of technological anxiety and high level of experience on the usage of technology (Litchfield & Matteis, 2016; Niemelä-Nyrhinen, 2007). The preference to social media advertising is emphasized as it attracts all generations.

Table 7

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on generational cohorts

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	11.542	3	3.847	3.536	.016
Within Groups	250.274	230	1.088		
Total	261.816	233			

A one-way ANOVA in Table 7 indicates that there are significant differences in the media preferences and academic advertisements among generational cohorts, $F(3,230) = 3.536$, $p < .05$. Meanwhile, least significant difference (LSD) comparisons in Table 8 revealed that there is a slight difference in the mean score for each generational cohort in terms of their likeability towards media. Baby Boomers have a significantly higher mean score ($M = 4.2857$) than Gen X ($M = 3.7174$), Gen Z ($M = 3.5909$), and Gen Y ($M = 3.5571$). This means that Baby Boomers are more receptive towards advertisements in the media. The findings are consistent with existing studies that have found Baby Boomers to be more inclined to respond favourably toward advertisements that are associated with the cognitive (Stewart et al., 2015; Zurcher Wray & Nelson Hodges, 2008). This is due to the reason that they have higher disposable income as compared to the other generational cohorts (Stewart et al., 2015; Zurcher Wray & Nelson Hodges, 2008). Thus, the preferences of generations particularly Gen Y and Gen X must be taken into consideration in advertising decisions.

Table 8

Multiple comparisons using Least Significant Difference (LSD) on generational cohorts

(I) Age	(J) Age	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Below 25 years old (Gen Z)	Gen Y	.03377	.20069	.867	-.3617	.4292
	Gen X	-.12648	.19120	.509	-.5032	.2502
	Baby Boomers	-.69481*	.25218	.006	-1.1917	-.1979
26 - 40 years old (Gen Y)	Gen Z	-.03377	.20069	.867	-.4292	.3617
	Gen X	-.16025	.16545	.334	-.4862	.1657
	Baby Boomers	-.72857*	.23325	.002	-1.1882	-.2690
41 - 55 years old (Gen X)	Gen Z	.12648	.19120	.509	-.2502	.5032
	Gen Y	.16025	.16545	.334	-.1657	.4862
	Baby Boomers	-.56832*	.22514	.012	-1.0119	-.1247
56 - 76 years old (Baby Boomers)	Gen Z	.69481*	.25218	.006	.1979	1.1917
	Gen Y	.72857*	.23325	.002	.2690	1.1882
	Gen X	.56832*	.22514	.012	.1247	1.0119

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Conclusion

The growing concern regarding the effectiveness of advertising strategies has compelled ODL institutions to consider the best media channel to promote the universities and their programmes. The results of this study portray a unique perspective of Malaysian prospective learners towards advertisements in the major media channels. An empirical investigation has confirmed that the majority of the generational cohorts feels comfortable with 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 genders in terms of their views about advertisements. Female respondents are more inclined to see advertisements compared to male respondents. This is in tandem with the research findings that have discovered the majority of the Malaysian people still have a positive perception of advertisements. There might be some other factors, such as cultural and technological efficacy, level of income, and access to the Internet that will influence the participants' responses. Future research can explore the influence of those factors to gain a better understanding of ODL advertising strategies.

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