

## Predicting attitudes toward television advertising

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**Perception of television advertising in Hong Kong**

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Perceptions of television advertising in Hong Kong

Abstract

A survey on a quota sample of 691 Hong Kong consumers was conducted to investigate what they think and feel about television advertising in Hong Kong. Results indicated that Hong Kong viewers held positive attitudes toward television advertising. They valued the market information and entertainment value of television advertising. They did not think that advertised brands were necessarily better and they agreed less on the social image information function of television advertising. Their major concern was that prices went up as a result of television advertising. They agreed that the government should step up control on commercial content but they did not call for restriction on advertising repetition nor banning of advertising in children's program. A majority of viewers attended to other things during commercial breaks. Respondents' perception of television advertising were used to predict their opinions toward government's regulation on advertising and their behaviours during commercial break.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Through unassuming or off-beat mini-dramas, descriptive or ethereal image pieces and/or mushy or outright hard-sell pitches, television advertising is the preferred means of delivering compact marketing messages to “captive,” targeted audiences. By entering homes and personal spaces via an intrusive mass medium, television advertising tirelessly impacts on consumers to communicate the availability of products and services, to recall brand names, to establish favourable user images and to induce immediate purchase actions.

When television advertising was fresh and eagerly awaited by mass audiences, consumer attitudes toward it were almost universally positive. But as the novelty dimmed and new technologies, such as the Internet’s graphical World Wide Web (WWW), began to take the spotlight in the West, televised commercial matter has begun to operate in a more critical, less tolerant marketplace. Television advertising has been increasingly seen as a contaminant of social mores and as an impediment to informed consumer decision-making. The result has been “faint praise and harsh criticism” (Mittal, 1994). Such criticisms have been characterized by diminished overall consumer attitudes and recommendations for stricter governmental regulations.

In Asia, and, in particular Hong Kong where this study originates, television advertising is still perceived as favorable and totally appropriate for a free-wheeling capitalistic society. Nevertheless, the global television advertising industry must continuously keep tuned to negative audience emanations and respond proactively. So too must governmental agencies that are empowered to set policy and manage the telecommunications industry; ostensibly for the public good. Statistically-based predictions of the nature, roles and impacts of television advertising, generated from audience attitudes, may be a step towards keeping television advertising as an effective, viable option for marketing communicators.

## 2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study seeks to investigate the overall perception of television advertising in Hong Kong. And how the perception influences consumers’ *opinion* on governmental involvement and possible regulation of commercial, and their *behaviors* during commercial breaks.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

**Functions** In his seminal work, Lasswell (1948), proposed three key functions of the media. From that start, Bauer and Greyser (1968) pioneered the identification of economic and social functions of advertising. This body of knowledge was enlarged with specific research efforts in a number of areas. Key studies among those were Haller (1974) and Muehling (1987) who showed how advertising has relevance in terms of *information value*: telling consumers about product features and uses. Television advertising was demonstrated to be a builder of vital *buyer confidence*. It does so by elucidating consumer benefits most notably in likable commercials (Biel and Bridgwater, 1990). Television advertising’s *entertainment value* was discussed by Aaker and Bruzzone (1981); Aaker and Stayman (1990); and Haley and Baldinger (1991). Sutherland and Galloway (1981) emphasized how television advertising reflects consumer beliefs that are socially acceptable.

**Consequences** That television advertising insidiously penetrates individual and collective consciousness of audiences and manipulates their thoughts is debatable (see Krugman, 1965). Because the medium of commercial television is omnipresent, advertising can hit hard and deep through repetition. But the entire story about cumulative effects on cultural values, acceptable social roles and idiomatic language is untold and unfolding.

When audiences internalize or externalize the effects of television advertising to their routine interpersonal relationships, the notion of *consequences* comes into play. These consequences may either be intended or not (see Pollay, 1990). Larkin (1977) and Leiss (1976) both discussed *materialism* as a consequence of television advertising. Related to this is the *manipulation* of consumer tastes and establishing conscious brand loyalties (Nelson, 1974, 1975). Kirkpatrick (1981) described two social criticisms of advertising namely that it changes consumers' tastes by forcing them to accept producer desires and that it facilitates social decay because advertisements insult common intelligence or presents morally offensive products as "must haves".

Overall *gender perceptions* were studied by Larkin (1977) and Whipple and Courtney (1989). The choices on this topic faced by television advertisers are varied and complex. Cultural aspects also come into play. In Hong Kong, nearly 60% of the viewing audience feel women are depicted correctly in advertisements (Hong Kong Broadcasting Authority, 1994). Foreign, outside observers may think otherwise.

A considerable amount of debate has been generated on the possible *effects of television advertising on children* (National Science Foundation, 1978; Rossiter, 1979). This genre of study focuses on such observables as inappropriate standards being set; selfish behaviors being promoted and children learning irrational methods of selecting products.

Television advertising's *impact on the economy* and, in particular, *consumer prices* was the focus of an investigation (Farris and Albion, 1980). The key question is if the consumer pays higher prices because of advertising or whether advertising increases price sensitivity thus encouraging competition and lower prices? Finally, the *tradeoffs* a society cedes to the commercial world by allowing "free" television has also been the theme of investigations (Durand and Lambert, 1985; Schudson, 1984).

While other consequences have been suggested as concerns, Mittal (1994) has validated these six consequences as representative of current concerns about television advertising (in the United States).

**Behaviors** The typical television viewer has three conative choices when advertisements appear on the television screen. Audience can opt to remain glued to the set and attend to the commercial message(s), to switch channels, or to leave the viewing area to attend to chores such as going to the toilet. Mittal (1994) calls this commercial-avoidance activity a way of *coping* with television advertising.

#### 4. RESEARCH METHOD

The study was conducted in Hong Kong using a structured questionnaire in Chinese. Communication studies students at the Hong Kong Baptist University were asked to collect at least eleven questionnaires based on a quota sample set on sex and occupation. They either conducted personal interviews or delivered the questionnaire for self-administration. Data were collected during the period April 5 to April 26, 1995.

The questionnaire started with two questions on overall attitudes toward television advertising. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they considered television advertising to be good or bad; and, whether they liked or disliked it. Averaging the scores on these two questions generates an overall attitude score toward television advertising.

The questionnaire followed with statements on functions and perceived consequences of television advertising and on opinions on the regulation of television advertising. Respondents were asked to rate these statements on a 5-point scale (5 = strongly agree to 1

= strongly disagree). An additional four questions were asked about what the respondents did during the television commercial break using a 4-point scale (1 = never to 4 = always). The questionnaire closed with demographics questions.

Altogether 691 questionnaires were collected. Fifty-seven percent of the respondents were females with most between the ages of 20 to 29, living in private housing, and having secondary or above education levels. Nearly 70 percent had a monthly personal income between HK\$6,001 and HK\$19,999 (US\$800 and \$2,600). About half were production, clerical and service workers and 30 percent were managers, executives or professional employees. The sample was slightly skewed toward the younger age group. As a younger age was associated with more favorable attitudes toward advertising in the data, the possible sampling bias in favor of television advertising should be noted.

## 5. RESULTS

**Overall attitude** Hong Kong consumers have a positive overall attitudes toward television advertising (see Table 1). Sixty-three percent of the respondents consider television advertising very good or somewhat good. Only five percent of the respondents consider it bad. Fifty-nine percent of the sample strongly or somewhat like television advertising. Only eight percent of the sample express a dislike for it.

The mean score on the bad/good scale is 3.74 which is slightly higher than the mean score of 3.61 on the dislike/like scale. The Pearson correlation between the two scores is 0.42. This indicates that a good evaluation of television advertising is positively related with a liking for it. The high correlation coefficient also justifies the compilation of an overall attitude score toward television advertising.

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Table 1 about here  
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**Perceived functions of television advertising** The mean and standard deviation of consumers' perceived functions of television advertising are summarized in Table 2. Offering market information about goods and services is considered to be the basic function of advertising. Results indicate that the knowledge function is well known among Hong Kong consumers. A majority of the sample say television advertising helps them keep updated about new products and services as well as provides information about brand features and benefits. However, respondents are not satisfied with the current information level of the commercials. They find them too emotional.

Hong Kong consumers are neutral about the buying confidence function of television advertising. They are skeptical about trustworthiness of commercials. About 40 percent of the respondents disagree that one can put more trust in advertised brands. There are roughly equal numbers of people who agree and disagree on whether television advertising helps them to get the best buy and whether consumers have more difficulty making purchase decisions if there was no television advertising.

Hong Kong consumers least agree with the social image function of television advertising. A majority of the respondents does not think that television advertising helps them select products that are readily accepted by others or reflects their own personal lifestyles.

The entertainment function of television advertising is well received by respondents. The good news from the survey is that a majority of the consumers finds some commercials

enjoyable and takes pleasure in recalling them. Respondents agree that sometimes commercials are even more enjoyable than television programming. Significantly, more respondents disagree that commercials are boring (46 percent disagree versus 21 percent agree).

Alpha coefficients indicating the internal validity of each of the four functions were compiled. Two items were found not to fit with the rest and were deleted for subsequent regression analysis. The alpha coefficients for all functions passed the acceptable level of 0.4 when the two items were excluded.

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Table 2 about here

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***Perceived consequences of television advertising*** The mean and standard deviation of consumers' perceived consequences of television advertising are summarized in Table 3. One major area of criticism about advertising concerns its negative social effects. A majority of the respondents agrees that television advertising encourages an interest in buying and owning things as well as creating a fantasy world. There are roughly equal numbers who disagree or agree that television advertising makes people buy unaffordable products. Furthermore, respondents generally perceive that television advertising portrays women in dependent roles. But they neither agree or disagree that there is too much sex in television advertising.

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Table 3 about here

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A majority of the respondents accuses television advertising of having adverse effects on children. They agree that television advertising leads children to pester their parents and takes undue advantage of children. Despite these criticisms, Hong Kong consumers still appreciate the role of television advertising in educating children about what products are good.

Respondents perceive well the economic costs of television advertising on consumers. They generally believe that television advertising increases the costs of products and hope that some advertising money could be reserved for product improvements. However, respondents do not favor the complete elimination of television advertising.

Despite the perceived undesirable economic costs of television advertising, respondents seem to accept the legitimacy and economic contributions of it. A majority recognizes that television advertising supports free programming and acknowledges that television advertising improves Hong Kong peoples' quality of living.

Does television advertising manipulate consumers? The answer is yes and no. Over 40 percent admit that they have been, at some time, 'out-of control' buying things simply because of commercial manipulation. There are roughly equal proportions of respondents who agree or disagree that television advertising encourages people to buy what they do not need. The manipulation consequences of television advertising are perceived stronger on themselves than on others.

Alpha coefficients indicating the internal validity of individual conceptual dimensions were compiled. One item did not fit with the rest and was therefore deleted in subsequent regression studies. The alpha coefficients for all concepts were found acceptable at over 0.4 except for perceived economic benefits and manipulation of consumers. In view of their low

alpha coefficients, these items were not be grouped for regression analysis.

**Call for government regulation** Respondents strongly object to the proposition that television advertising content should be free from government control. But, they strongly urge some control over the content of television advertising. Still, respondents do not support regulations to limit the number of times a commercial is run. Despite the strong perception that television advertising has adverse effects on children, respondents generally disagree that advertising should be banned from children's programming (see Table 4).

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Table 4 about here

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**Behavioral response to television advertising** With high advertising clutter, especially during prime time period and from frequent repetition of advertising, it is not surprising to find Hong Kong respondents are not loyal commercial watchers. There are roughly equal numbers of respondents who report that they often or always leave the television set, attend to other things, switch channels or keep watching during the commercial break (see Table 5).

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Table 5 about here

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**Prediction analysis** To aid in interpretation, composite scores are computed for each category of variables. The composite score for each of the four functions of television advertising is compiled by taking an average of its constituent items. Likewise, the average scores on the constituent items for perceived consequences on materialism, gender, adverse effect on children and economic costs are also computed. For the economic benefit and manipulation effects of television advertising, no composite scores are compiled because of the low alpha coefficients.

Three categories of variables are predicted. These include respondents' overall perception of television advertising, opinion toward government regulation and behavioral response during the commercial break. Again, composite scores are compiled for each of these variables by taking the average of their constituent items.

Results of regression analysis for predicting overall attitudes; a call for government regulation; and, audience behaviors during commercial breaks are summarized in Tables 6, 7, and 8 respectively.

For the prediction of overall attitude toward television advertising, a statistically significant R square value of 0.270 was obtained. This indicates that 27 percent of the total variation of the overall attitude is explained by perceived functions and consequences of television advertising. Seven out of 12 perceptions are significant. Among these perceptions, perceived entertainment and perceived economic benefit of improving living standard are major correlates of a favorable overall attitude. Perceived manipulation on consumers to buy unnecessary things and economic costs are major correlates of unfavorable overall attitudes.

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Table 6 about here

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For the prediction of opinions toward government regulation, a statistically significant R square value of 0.191 was obtained. This indicates that 19.1 percent of the total variation of opinion is explained by the perceived functions and consequences of television advertising.

Again, seven out of 12 perceptions are significant. Those who perceive stronger economic costs, knowledge function, unfavorable gender portrayal and adverse effects on children are more likely to call for stricter control of television advertising. Those who perceive stronger social image and entertainment functions and those who believe that television advertising improves living standards are less likely to support tighter government regulations.

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Table 7 about here

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For the prediction of consumers' behavioral responses during commercial breaks, a statistically significant R square value of 0.144 was obtained. This indicates that 14.4 percent of the total variation of consumers' behaviors is explained by the perceived functions and consequences of television advertising. The R square value was much lower than that obtained in the previous two predictions. This indicates that there are increased difficulties in predicting behavior rather than attitudes or opinions. Six out of 12 perceptions were significant. Those who perceive stronger economic costs of television advertising and those who believe television advertising encourages materialism, manipulates people to buy non-essential things and has adverse effects on children are more likely to attend to other activities during commercial breaks. Those who find television advertising entertaining and appreciate the social image information are more likely to keep watching.

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Table 8 about here

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Only two out of the 12 predicting variables influenced all three predicted variables. They were perceived entertainment and perceived economic costs of television advertising. It suggests that these two perceptions act as a set of core beliefs that affects respondents' overall attitude toward television advertising, opinions about government control and reactions to commercials.

Past research often concerns itself with evaluating the effects of demographic and psychographic profiles of viewers. Six demographic and psychographic variables including sex, age, education, monthly personal income, self-reported degree of modernity versus traditional, and Chinese versus Western orientation were added as possible source of influences.

The additional contributions in multiple regression R square values for overall attitude, opinion toward government regulation and behavioral responses during commercial break were 1.3 percent, 2.5 percent and 2.7 percent respectively. This suggests that after the effects of perceived functions and consequences of television advertising are controlled, the demographics and psychographic characteristics yield little additional predictive power.

## **6. DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION**

The study reveals that Hong Kong consumers hold positive attitudes toward television advertising. This contradicts many research findings that consistently report increasing distaste of television advertising in the West (Alwitt and Prabhaker (1992); Mittal (1994)).

Results indicate that the entertainment and knowledge functions of television advertising are well received while the buying confidence and social image functions are not readily accepted among respondents. This suggests that Hong Kong consumers are rational and mature. They enjoy watching television advertising and utilize it to gain market information about products, services, brands and features. However, they place a healthy

skepticism on advertising claims and they do not put more trust on advertised brands.

The social image function is least acceptable among respondents as they do not perceive that television advertising helps in selecting products that fit with their lifestyles. The current study shows that television advertisers in Hong Kong are not very successful in getting consumers to identify with the types of people who are using their products and services. This may be due to that Hong Kong television advertising contains a higher proportion of informative advertising communicating features than emotional advertising communicating mood, feelings and lifestyles (Chan, 1994).

For the consequences of television advertising, the perceived economic benefits including free television programming and improvement in living standards were well received by respondents. On the other hand, the major criticisms are its economic costs; perceived adverse effects on children; and, encouragement of materialism.

Perceptions on gender portrayal and manipulation on consumer decisions were weak among respondents. This indicates that Hong Kong consumers are practical. Their major concerns are about economic costs and benefits of television advertising. Among all social impacts of television advertising, Hong Kongers are concerned more about the effects on children than gender and manipulation issues.

Table 1: Overall opinion on television advertising

Item	Percent
1. Overall, do you consider TVA a good or a bad thing?	
Very good	16
Somewhat good	47
Neither good nor bad	32
Somewhat bad	5
Very bad	0
<b>Mean bad/good score on 5-point scale = 3.74</b>	
2. Overall, do you like or dislike TVA?	
Strongly like it	10
Somewhat like it	49
Neither like nor dislike	34
Somewhat dislike it	7
Strongly dislike it	1
<b>Mean dislike/like score on 5-point scale = 3.61</b>	

Notes:

TVA = TV advertising

Table 2: Consumer perceptions of the functions of television advertising

<b>Function</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. dev.</b>
<b>Knowledge (alpha = 0.53)</b>		
TVA helps me keep up-to-date about products and services.	4.00	0.65
TVA is a main source of information about products and services.	3.65	0.81
TVA tells me which brands have the features I am looking for.	3.56	0.75
TVA is too emotional and does not provide sufficient product information. [D]	3.23	0.82
<b>Buying confidence (alpha = 0.45)</b>		
If there were no TVA, deciding what to buy would be difficult.	3.04	0.95
TVA helps the consumer buy the best brand for the price.	2.99	0.91
One can put more trust in products seen in TVA than in those not in TVA.	2.71	0.81
<b>Social image (alpha = 0.62)</b>		
TVA tells me what people like me are buying and using.	2.92	0.86
TVA helps me know which products will or will not help me reflect the sort of person I am.	2.85	0.85
From TVA I learn what is in fashion and what I should buy for keeping a good social image.	2.83	0.83
<b>Entertainment (alpha = 0.66)</b>		
Some TV commercials make me feel good.	4.11	0.73
Sometimes I take pleasure in thinking about what I saw in TVA.	3.80	0.80
Sometimes TV commercials are even more enjoyable than TV programs.	3.43	0.93
Most TVAs are boring [D]	2.73	0.85

Notes:

TVA = TV advertising

\* Pearson correlation significant at <0.05 level.

[D] These items are deleted in the compilation of alpha coefficient as well as in subsequent regression analysis.

All items are in 5-point scale with larger number indicating agreement to the statement.

Table 3: Consumer perceptions of the consequences of television advertising

<b>Consequence</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. dev.</b>
<b>Materialism (alpha = 0.55)</b>		
TVA is making us a materialistic society -- interested in buying and owning things.	3.46	0.88
TVA sometimes makes people live in a world of fantasy.	3.29	0.89
TVA makes people buy unaffordable products just to show off.	3.03	0.92
<b>Gender (alpha = 0.31)</b>		
TVA always portrays women in dependent roles.	3.22	0.84
There is too much sex in TVA.	3.01	0.91
<b>Effects on children (alpha = 0.46)</b>		
TVA leads children to make unreasonable purchase demands on parents.	3.54	0.89
TVA takes undue advantage of children.	3.44	0.77
TVA plays an important role in educating children about what products are good for them. [D]	3.26	0.90
<b>Economic costs (alpha = 0.47)</b>		
TVA increases the cost of products.	3.93	0.83
It would be better to save money on TVA and invest it on product improvements instead.	3.29	0.92
If TVA was eliminated, consumers would be better off.	2.48	0.75
<b>Economic benefits (alpha = 0.27)</b>		
We need TVA to support TV programming.	3.85	0.76
TVA improves people's standard of living.	3.54	0.84
<b>Manipulation (alpha = 0.16)</b>		
Sometimes I have bought things simply because of a TV commercial.	3.13	0.92
TVA encourages people to buy what they do not need.	2.97	0.87

Notes:

TVA = TV advertising

\* Pearson correlation significant at <0.05 level.

[D] These items are deleted in the compilation of alpha coefficient as well as in subsequent regression analysis.

All items are in 5-point scale with larger number indicating agreement to the statement.

Table 4: Consumer opinion on the regulation of television advertising

<b>Opinion</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. dev.</b>
<b>Call for regulation (alpha = 0.51)</b>		
The content of TVA should be more closely regulated by the government.	3.57	0.89
There should be a limit on how many times a TV commercial may be repeated.	2.92	1.00
TVA should be banned on children's programs.	2.71	0.82
TVA should be free from government control so that advertisers may say what they want to. [R]	1.97	0.80

Notes:

TVA = TV advertising

\* Pearson correlation significant at <0.05 level.

[R] The score for this item is reversed in the compilation of the alpha coefficient as well as in the subsequent regression analysis.

All items are in 5-point scale with larger number indicating agreement to the statement.

Table 5: Behavioral response to television advertising

<b>Behavior: what people do during a TV commercial break (alpha = 0.59)</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. dev.</b>
Attend to other things	2.32	0.55
Leave the television set	2.25	0.50
Keep watching [R]	2.23	0.50
Switch channels	2.21	0.65

Notes:

All items are in 4-point scale with 1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often and 4 = always.

\* Pearson correlation significant at <0.05 level.

[R] The score for this item is reversed in the compilation of the alpha coefficient and the composite score.

Table 6: Summary of regression analysis for predicting overall attitudes towards TV advertising

<b>Perceived function and consequence</b>	<b>Parameter estimate</b>	<b>Standard error</b>	<b>Standardized estimate</b>	
Knowledge	0.11	0.05	0.09	*
Buying confidence	0.06	0.04	0.06	
Social image	0.06	0.04	0.06	
Entertainment	0.28	0.04	0.27	***
Materialism	0.01	0.04	0.01	
Gender	-0.05	0.04	-0.05	
Adverse effect on children	-0.10	0.04	-0.10	*
Economic costs	-0.14	0.04	-0.13	***
Improve living standard	0.11	0.03	0.14	***
Free TV	0.08	0.03	0.10	*
Manipulating people	-0.10	0.03	-0.14	***
Manipulating me	0.01	0.03	0.02	

Multiple regression R square = 0.270

Notes:

\* p < 0.05

\*\* p < 0.005

\*\*\* p < 0.001

Table 7: Summary of regression analysis for predicting the government's regulation on advertising

<b>Perceived function and consequence</b>	<b>Parameter estimate</b>	<b>Standard error</b>	<b>Standardized estimate</b>	
Knowledge	0.17	0.04	0.15	***
Buying confidence	0.00	0.04	0.00	
Social image	-0.11	0.04	-0.12	**
Entertainment	-0.11	0.03	-0.11	**
Materialism	0.02	0.04	0.02	
Gender	0.11	0.03	0.13	***
Adverse effects on children	0.12	0.03	0.14	***
Economic costs	0.23	0.04	0.23	***
Improve living standard	-0.06	0.03	-0.09	*
Free TV	-0.01	0.03	-0.01	
Manipulating people	0.02	0.02	0.03	
Manipulating me	-0.03	0.02	-0.05	

Multiple regression R square = 0.191

Notes

- \* p < 0.05
- \*\* p < 0.005
- \*\*\* p < 0.001

Table 8: Summary of regression analysis for predicting behavior during commercial break

<b>Perceived functions and consequences</b>	<b>Parameter estimate</b>	<b>Standard error</b>	<b>Standardized estimate</b>	
Knowledge	-0.05	0.03	-0.07	
Buying confidence	-0.02	0.03	-0.03	
Social image	-0.06	0.02	-0.11	*
Entertainment	-0.08	0.02	-0.13	***
Materialism	0.05	0.02	0.09	*
Gender	0.01	0.02	0.02	
Adverse effects on children	0.05	0.02	0.08	*
Economic costs	0.11	0.02	0.16	***
Improve living standard	-0.01	0.02	-0.02	
Free TV	-0.02	0.02	-0.03	
Manipulating people	0.04	0.02	0.09	*
Manipulating me	-0.02	0.02	-0.04	

Multiple regression R square = 0.144

Notes

- \* p < 0.05
- \*\* p < 0.005
- \*\*\* p < 0.001

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