

ADVERTISING REACTANCE IN THE DIGITAL ERA: FACTORS AND STRATEGIES FOR MITIGATION

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate advertising reactance in the digital era, focusing on the key factors that generate resistance and strategies to mitigate its effects. Advertising reactance, defined as users' negative responses to persuasive attempts, has intensified due to high exposure levels, interactive digital formats, and personalization practices. The methodology combines a literature review, analysis of empirical studies, and case studies of global advertising campaigns to identify causes of reactance and effective interventions. Results indicate that information overload, excessive intrusiveness, personalization perceived as surveillance, cultural differences, and individual psychological traits are major contributors to advertising reactance. Traditional mass advertising is often ineffective in this context, as users actively filter, ignore, or block intrusive content. Successful mitigation strategies include building trust and transparency, offering user control and choice, applying interactive and co-created content, and using emotional storytelling aligned with social values. The study concludes that advertising reactance is a multidimensional phenomenon requiring adaptive, user-centric approaches integrating psychological, technological, and cultural insights. Recommendations for marketers include limiting exposure frequency, designing non-intrusive content, clarifying data use, promoting interactivity, and localizing campaigns to cultural contexts. Case studies of brands such as Spotify, Nike, and Dove demonstrate the effectiveness of these strategies in enhancing engagement and brand loyalty. Overall, the research provides guidance for designing digital advertising that is relevant, meaningful, and minimally reactive.

Keywords: Digital marketing, personalization, interactive advertising, mitigation strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the development of digital technologies and social media, advertising has undergone a significant transformation, becoming an integral element of the user's daily communication environment. Traditional forms of media advertising are gradually being complemented and replaced by interactive, personalized, and dynamic formats, including video, games, social platforms, and mobile applications. In this context, advertising messages are no longer one-way but often require active user participation, creating both new opportunities for engagement and potential challenges related to content perception and acceptance.

Parallel to this evolution, the phenomenon of advertising reactance, the resistance or negative attitude of individuals toward attempts to influence their decisions and behaviour (Brehm, 1966; Fransen, Smit, & Verlegh, 2015), has intensified. In the digital environment, this process takes on new dimensions, as users are exposed to higher frequencies of advertising, more interactive and personalized formats, and greater amounts of information, increasing the likelihood of overload and perceived pressure. Frequent exposure to advertisements and their integration across digital platforms lead to cognitive fatigue, heightened negative emotions, and trigger reactance, which manifests both in avoiding ads and in active blocking strategies, such as ad blockers or skipping content (Edwards, Li, & Lee, 2002; Morimoto & Chang, 2006). Additionally, the growth of personalized advertising, while increasing message relevance, often generates a sense of being watched and intrusions into personal space, known as the "creepiness effect" (Aguirre et al., 2015). Users are becoming increasingly sensitive to how their data is collected, processed, and used, further intensifying reactance and undermining trust in advertisers. Social and cultural differences also influence the manifestations of advertising reactance. Research shows that in individualistic societies, resistance to intrusive or manipulative advertising practices is stronger, while in collectivist cultures, users may demonstrate higher tolerance toward advertising messages (Okazaki & Taylor, 2013). This implies that global digital campaigns must consider local cultural characteristics to avoid amplifying negative reactions. The issue of advertising reactance in the digital era has both academic and practical significance (Perloff, 2003). From an academic perspective, it raises questions about the interaction between cognitive and emotional mechanisms of the user, the frequency and format of exposure, and the socio-cultural context (McGraw, 2010). From a practical perspective, advertisers need to identify and implement strategies that reduce negative reactions by building trust, providing choice and user control, while simultaneously increasing the effectiveness of marketing messages (Martin & Hewstone, 2003).

This article aims to analyse the main factors driving advertising reactance in the digital era, outline the challenges associated with its emergence, and propose strategies for its mitigation through the practical application of transparency, interactivity, emotional engagement, and user choice. This analysis will provide valuable guidance for

marketing practice and for more effectively adapting advertising formats to the expectations and needs of the contemporary audience.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Advertising reactance in the digital era represents one of the most significant challenges for global marketing, as users are exposed to unprecedented levels of advertising and often demonstrate increasing sensitivity to intrusive or manipulative practices. Among the key factors driving this phenomenon are overexposure to advertisements combined with information overload. Online platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok integrate advertising formats into everyday content, creating a sense of excessive pressure and loss of autonomy. According to Edwards, Li, and Lee (2002), perceived intrusiveness is the leading cause of ad rejection, as information overload reduces the individual’s cognitive resources. Intrusiveness is particularly evident in formats that interrupt or disrupt the user experience, such as pop-ups and auto-playing videos. Morimoto and Chang (2006) emphasize that the feeling of disrupted personal control is one of the strongest predictors of negative attitudes toward advertising. Similar observations are confirmed by Cho and Cheon (2004), who note that unwanted interference in the user’s personal space leads to active resistance and avoidance of advertising content. Although personalization aims to increase relevance, it carries risks of amplifying reactance. Aguirre et al. (2015) describe the “personalization paradox” – the more precise the targeting, the more it can be perceived as a form of surveillance and control. Bleier and Eisenbeiss (2015) add that the effectiveness of personalized advertising depends not only on the content but also on the context and timing of exposure, indicating that strategies to reduce reactance must be dynamic and adaptive. Finally, cultural and social differences shape attitudes toward advertising. Fransen, Smit, and Verlegh (2015) emphasize that the motivation for resistance can be both cognitive (related to the preservation of autonomy) and affective (stemming from negative emotions). This explains why reactance is more pronounced in individualistic societies, whereas users in collectivist contexts demonstrate higher tolerance (Zhang & Gelb, 1996; Okazaki & Taylor, 2013). To systematize the factors and approaches for their mitigation, Table 1 presents a comparison of the main sources of advertising reactance and the strategies applied in the digital environment.

Table 1 Factors of advertising reactance and mitigation strategies

Factor	Manifestation	Mitigation Strategy
Overexposure and information overload	Frequent content interruptions, cognitive fatigue	Limit frequency; adapt to context and timing of exposure (Edwards et al., 2002; Bleier & Eisenbeiss, 2015)
Intrusiveness	Pop-ups, autoplay formats, disruption of user experience	Provide skip options; use non-intrusive integration (Morimoto & Chang, 2006; Cho & Cheon, 2004)
Personalization and perceived surveillance	“Creepiness effect” due to excessive targeting	Ensure transparency in data usage; employ trust-based communication (Aguirre et al., 2015; Goldfarb & Tucker, 2011)
Cultural differences	Varied sensitivity to manipulation	Adapt advertising messages locally (Fransen et al., 2015; Okazaki & Taylor, 2013)

Source: own compilation.

The table demonstrates that advertising reactance is not a one-dimensional phenomenon but results from the interaction of technological, psychological, and cultural factors. While some authors emphasize the cognitive aspect of overload (Edwards et al., 2002), others focus on emotional dimensions related to irritation and perceived loss of control (Morimoto & Chang, 2006; Cho & Cheon, 2004). Research on personalization reveals a paradox – it simultaneously increases advertising effectiveness and provokes feelings of surveillance (Aguirre et al., 2015; Goldfarb & Tucker, 2011). From a cultural perspective, while Fransen et al. (2015) highlight universal mechanisms of resistance, Okazaki and Taylor (2013) demonstrate that global campaigns require localization to avoid amplifying reactance. In conclusion, mitigating advertising reactance in the digital era requires a complex and adaptive approach that combines limiting exposure frequency, non-intrusive content integration, transparency in data management, and sensitivity to cultural differences (De Keyzer, F., et al. 2022). Only through such a multilayered model can advertising communication be perceived as useful, relevant, and aligned with the expectations of the contemporary consumer.

3. RESULTS

In the contemporary digital environment, advertising reactance poses a significant challenge for marketers, as users increasingly distance themselves from intrusive and manipulative messages. Several proven strategies are applied to overcome this resistance, combining psychological, technological, and emotional approaches. One of the main approaches is building trust and transparency (Payan & McFarland, 2005). Providing clear information about the purpose of advertising and how personal data is used reduces the perception of manipulation and strengthens user trust in the brand (Bleier & Eisenbeiss, 2015). Another effective approach is interactivity and co-creation of content. Advertisements that engage users through games, challenges, or opportunities for co-generated content are perceived more positively, as they transform advertising into an experience and reduce the distance between the brand and the audience (Calder, Isaac, & Malthouse, 2016). Emotional impact and storytelling also play a key role. Narratives related to values or social causes shift attention from purely commercial objectives to the emotional value of the message, leading to higher engagement and reduced reactance (Escalas, 2004).

Finally, providing user control and choice is a crucial mechanism for reducing resistance. The ability to skip an ad or select content at one's discretion creates a sense of autonomy, balancing the user's needs with the advertiser's strategic goals (Fransen, Smit, & Verlegh, 2015). To illustrate the practical application of these strategies, Table 2 presents specific brand cases that successfully reduced advertising reactance through a combination of trust, interactivity, emotional storytelling, and user choice.

Table 2 Example cases for mitigating advertising reactance

Strategy	Example Case	Effect on Reactance
Trust and Transparency	Spotify – informing users about how personal data is used for personalized playlists	Reduced perception of manipulation, increased engagement (Bleier & Eisenbeiss, 2015)
Interactivity and Co-Creation	Nike – Nike Run Club with challenges and social sharing	Increased engagement and positive emotions, reduced reactance (Calder et al., 2016)
Emotional Impact and Storytelling	Dove – “Real Beauty” campaigns featuring stories on self-esteem and social values	Increased trust and emotional engagement, reduced resistance (Escalas, 2004)
Control and Choice	YouTube – “Skip Ad” option for video advertisements	Users feel control and autonomy, reduced reactance (Fransen et al., 2015)

Source: own compilation.

A combined analysis of these examples shows that the most successful strategies for mitigating advertising reactance in the digital era are those that integrate transparency, interactivity, emotional engagement, and user choice. Brands' ability to adapt their approaches to the psychological and emotional needs of their audience has been proven to reduce negative reactions and enhance positive engagement. Comparing different cases indicates that while transparency is crucial for personalized services (Spotify), interactivity is more effective in socially engaging applications (Nike), and storytelling achieves the best results in campaigns focused on social and emotional values (Dove).

4. DISCUSSIONS

Advertising reactance in the digital era represents a complex phenomenon that encompasses cognitive, emotional, technological, and social dimensions. Research indicates that overexposure to advertising messages and information overload lead to cognitive fatigue, reduced attention, and decreased receptivity to advertising, thereby intensifying negative reactance (Edwards, Li, & Lee, 2002; Bleier & Eisenbeiss, 2015). Disruption of the user experience through pop-ups or auto-playing videos not only induces cognitive stress but also negative emotions such as irritation and frustration, further amplifying resistance (Morimoto & Chang, 2006; Cho & Cheon, 2004). These observations highlight that reactance is not a one-dimensional phenomenon but results from the interaction between cognitive load and emotional discomfort.

Although personalization increases relevance and potential effectiveness, it often generates a sense of intrusion into personal space, known as the “creepiness effect” (Aguirre et al., 2015). In this context, the timing and context of

exposure are critical, as proper management can reduce negative reactions. Bleier and Eisenbeiss (2015) demonstrate that dynamically adapting advertising formats and integrating them into the user experience plays a decisive role in reducing reactance while maintaining communication effectiveness. These findings emphasize the need for comprehensive strategies that combine personalization with respect for user autonomy.

Social and cultural differences also significantly influence ad perception. Studies show that individualistic societies exhibit higher reactance to intrusive and manipulative formats, whereas collectivist contexts demonstrate greater tolerance toward advertising messages (Okazaki & Taylor, 2013; Fransen, Smit, & Verlegh, 2015). Furthermore, social proof, positive feedback, and endorsements from influential figures can substantially reduce reactance, while negative feedback and public discussion of advertising campaigns on social media can amplify resistance (Cialdini, 2009; Zhang, Feick, & Price, 2015). In this sense, advertising reactance is not solely an individual psychological phenomenon but also socially constructed, interacting with networks of social influence and online communication channels.

Effective strategies for mitigating advertising reactance also show a multifactorial nature. Research demonstrates that transparency and clear communication about data collection and advertising objectives increase trust and reduce perceived manipulation (Bleier & Eisenbeiss, 2015; Aguirre et al., 2015). Interactive formats and co-creation of content transform advertising from a passive message into an active experience, enhancing engagement and reducing negative reactions (Calder, Isaac, & Malthouse, 2016). Emotional storytelling related to social causes and values directs the user's attention to the emotional value of the message, leading to deeper engagement and decreased reactance (Escalas, 2004). Providing control and choice, such as the option to skip ads, strengthens user autonomy and further reduces the perception of pressure (Fransen et al., 2015).

The synthesis of these studies indicates that advertising reactance results from a complex interaction between cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural factors. Successfully managing this phenomenon requires an integrative approach that combines limiting exposure frequency, non-intrusive content integration, transparency, interactivity, emotional engagement, and user choice. This model allows advertising communication to be perceived as relevant, valuable, and aligned with the expectations of contemporary users while maximizing the effectiveness of marketing campaigns in the digital environment.

In conclusion, the discussion emphasizes that advertising reactance is not a one-dimensional phenomenon but a complex and dynamic response of users to the digital environment. Modern marketing strategies must integrate theoretical knowledge of cognitive and emotional mechanisms, social influences, and cultural characteristics to achieve balanced audience engagement and reduce negative reactions. A comprehensive and adaptive approach based on transparency, interactivity, storytelling, and user control is a key factor for successful advertising communication in the digital era.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the contemporary digital environment, advertising reactance has emerged as an inevitable and increasingly significant phenomenon, driven by the rapid evolution of the media landscape, the proliferation of digital platforms, and the heightened interactivity of advertising practices. Users are constantly exposed to vast amounts of content across social media, streaming services, mobile applications, and websites, which amplifies both the opportunities and challenges for marketers. The emergence of advertising reactance is not attributable to a single factor but is the result of a complex interplay of multiple dimensions, including information overload, excessive intrusiveness of advertising content, cultural and social differences, ethical expectations, and individual psychological characteristics of users. In this context, traditional strategies of mass, one-way advertising, once highly effective in capturing attention, are increasingly insufficient, as users actively filter, ignore, or block content they perceive as intrusive or coercive (Oinas-Kukkonen & Harjumaa, 2008).

Successfully mitigating advertising reactance requires a fundamental paradigm shift in marketing and communication strategies (Oinas-Kukkonen & Harjumaa, 2009). Marketers must move away from manipulative, high-pressure tactics toward cooperative and user-centric approaches that prioritize trust, transparency, and mutual respect. Effective strategies involve implementing mechanisms that ensure clear communication of advertising objectives, transparent use of personal data, emotional engagement, content personalization, and provision of user control over the timing, frequency, and nature of interactions. By adopting such approaches, advertising can transform from a perceived imposition into meaningful, relevant, and valuable communication that fosters positive engagement, encourages informed decision-making, strengthens brand loyalty, and enhances the overall consumer experience.

Moreover, the success of these strategies is contingent upon the integration of psychological, technological, and cultural insights. Emotional storytelling, co-creation of content, and interactive engagement serve to humanize the advertising experience, reducing perceived pressure while enhancing user satisfaction. At the same time, sensitivity

to cultural and social contexts is essential, as individualistic and collectivist societies exhibit different thresholds for tolerance toward intrusive or persuasive advertising formats. These considerations underscore the importance of designing adaptive strategies that can respond to the heterogeneity of contemporary audiences.

In conclusion, effective advertising in the digital era is not characterized by its dominance over information flows but by its ability to integrate seamlessly into the everyday lives of users. It is advertising that is perceived as meaningful, relevant, and contextually appropriate that fosters engagement and minimizes resistance. Achieving this requires marketers and advertising professionals to conceptualize users as active collaborators in the communication process rather than passive recipients of messages. In the long term, this strategic transformation not only reduces advertising reactance but also enhances the efficiency, reach, and sustainability of campaigns in an increasingly fragmented and digitalized media ecosystem. Ultimately, embracing a user-centric, transparent, interactive, and culturally sensitive approach is key to sustaining the effectiveness and ethical integrity of advertising practices in the digital age.

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