

# How do mental availability metrics respond to advertising?

Exploring the usefulness of the mental availability metrics in identifying advertising effects on consumer memory.

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# Abstract

For a brand's advertising to be effective it is commonly agreed that it must affect consumer memory (du Plessis 2005; Ehrenberg et al. 2002). Far more contentious is how to measure this effect. This thesis focuses on the memory construct of *mental availability*, which is defined as the propensity of a brand to be noticed or come to mind for individuals in buying or consumption situations (Romaniuk 2013a; Romaniuk & Sharp 2004; Sharp 2013). Literature explains that memory largely determines selection when faced with a brand choice (du Plessis 2005; Franzen & Bouwman 2001; Nedungadi 1990; Wright 2016)}. The relevance of a brand's mental availability for marketers is therefore to ensure the brand has presence in the minds of consumers, and is linked to relevant cues encountered in buying and consumption situations.

To provide a suitable measure of a brand's mental availability, and give marketers insight into the number of brand associations in consumer memory, Romaniuk (2013) developed a set of four mental availability (MA) metrics: *Mental Market Share (MMS)*; *Associative Penetration (Ab)*; *Association Rate (Aw)*; and *Share of Mind (SoM)*. These metrics are akin to common behavioural brand performance measures, but are calculated using brand perception data. On introducing these new metrics Romaniuk (2013a) called for more research to fully understand their meaning and value. The objective of this thesis is to address this gap in knowledge by exploring the usefulness of the MA Metrics in identifying advertising effects on consumer memory. The design of this research is both exploratory and descriptive in nature, and takes a many sets of data (MSOD) approach to identify whether regularities and consistent patterns arise across varying conditions (Bass 1995; Ehrenberg 1995). Secondary datasets previously collected as part of Brand Health Trackers are analysed to provide insight into a brand's mental availability pre- and post-advertising activity. These data include brand perception measures, a suitable proxy measure for advertising awareness and brand usage information. These final data consists of 14 data sets, across seven categories, with confirmed advertising activity for 10 brands in the UK and Australia.

The key results and contributions of this thesis are:

1. The MA Metrics do respond when a brand advertises, showing they are potentially useful in assessing the impact of advertising on consumer memory. Analysis across 10 brands shows three of the four MA Metrics increased, on average, after the brand's advertising activity commences. The positive effect is most evident for the MMS and SoM metrics with eight of the 10 brand level observations moving in a positive direction. This means these eight brands received a greater share of associations from all respondents in the sample.

2. Advertising affects the memory differently for brand users and non-users. The observations for both consumer groups show a consistent positive change in three of the four MA Metrics, following advertising activity, however, the size of this positive change was greater among the brand's non-users, compared to users. On average, the increases for non-users were 9.4% for MMS, 3.5% for Aw and 11% for SoM. This compares to a lesser change for the brand users on the same metrics of 3.8%, 0.9% and 5.1% respectively.

A decline was evident for both brand users and non-users for the Ab metric, meaning fewer consumers have at least one association with the brand, following advertising activity. The pattern for this metric was reversed with change greater for the brand users of -3.7%, compared to -0.7 for non-users. As a smaller proportion of users and non-users were aware of the brands advertising (compared to not aware), the ability to build new associations in consumer memory with advertising is limited to those who take interest and encode brand information into memory.

3. Brand users and non-users, who were aware of the brand's advertising, have superior mental availability for the brand than users and non-users not aware of the advertising. The positive effect of advertising is most evident among brand non-users – across all four MA Metrics, with 31 out of 36 observations greater for those aware (compared to those not aware). The pattern is similar for brand users; however, only 25 out of 36 observations were greater for brand users aware of the advertising.
4. Brand users showed greater mental availability for a brand, than non-users, highlighting the importance of conducting separate analyses for these two consumer groups. This finding is consistent with the well-documented usage bias in brand-equity and advertising effectiveness measures (Bird et al. 1970; Romaniuk et al. 2012; Sharp et al. 2001, 2002).

The results of this thesis contribute to existing knowledge about how advertising affects consumer memory. This thesis specifically contributes to current knowledge by determining how brand advertising affects mental availability, identifying that the new MA Metrics are sensitive to recent advertising activity. A brand should expect a positive response (on average) for three of the four metrics, following advertising activity. For the three metrics that increased (MMS, Aw and SoM) the magnitude of change is small, between 2.0 to 4.9%. This result is in line with literature that describes advertising works as a gentle 'nudge' to a consumer's propensities to notice or select the brand, which occurs through refreshing and reinforcing memory structures linked to the brand (Barnard & Ehrenberg 1997). If a brand's advertising

is successful in positively influencing a brand's mental availability, the number of associative links connected to the brand will increase. As a consequence, the propensity of the brand to be noticed or come to mind will also increase. With more cues linked to a brand, the more likely the brand will be associated with a cue encountered in a purchase or consumption situation (Romaniuk & Sharp 2004).

In putting the new MA Metrics to an initial test, the results of this thesis demonstrate that when using brand health tracking data, the MA Metrics are sensitive to recent advertising activity and do change. For marketing practice this provides evidence that MA Metrics are useful in assessing the impact of a brand's advertising on consumer memory. As the brand's mental availability may be calculated using brand perception data, the impact on data collection costs will be minimal (where brand perceptions are already captured), meaning there are few barriers to using the MA Metrics.

The results suggest that advertising's greatest effect is when it reaches the brains of category buyers who do not currently buy the brand. The effect of advertising on non-users is most evident in the Ab metric, with those aware being on average 1.6 times more likely to have an association with the advertised brand. This compares to 1.2 times among brand users. This result further demonstrates the importance of analysing the MA Metrics separately for brand users and non-users, but also among those aware and not aware of the brands advertising. As more users and non-users were *not aware* of the brands advertising, the positive influence on those *aware* is masked when only considering the MA Metrics among brands user and non-user groups. A declining pattern in the Ab metric was evident, however, when further considering the MA Metrics for those aware and not aware, the result was positive. Users and non-users aware of the advertising had greater Ab, than those not aware.

This greater effect on brand non-users has important implications for marketers when considering the many empirical studies showing that brand growth comes from attracting new customers (for example see Anschuetz 2002; Baldinger et al. 2002; Romaniuk et al. 2014). To increase the propensity of the brand to be noticed or come to mind for non-users in buying and consumption situations, advertising should be produced with the aim to cut-through and gain non-users attention, in order to build, refresh and/or reinforce the associations linked to the brand.