

The Mere Exposure Effect: Understanding how marketers can optimise emotional responses to OOH ads

Jennie Roper and Dr Alistair Goode

Source: WARC Exclusive, March 2019

Downloaded from WARC

Media company Kinetic turned to the Mere Exposure Effect to gain a better understanding of how to apply behavioural cognitive science to today's advertising industry, and made several discoveries.

- Ads 'wear in' and 'wear out', have a saturation point and can reach peak effectiveness.
- Kinetic's research used VR technology to recreate a 'real-life' environment without forcing exposure, inducing an authentic reaction from participants.
- The participants favoured ads up to the point of nine exposures, but between nine to 12 exposures, the emotional response peaked and then began to decrease.
- Marketers can use the findings to tailor their campaigns to maximise a positive emotional connection associated with a particular product or brand for consumers.

In brief

Media company Kinetic had a hypothesis based on how the more familiar we become with something initially, the more we grow to like it, non-consciously. We wanted to understand more deeply how familiarity works from a brand perspective, and its value to advertisers. To put this theory to the test, we conducted research based on the psychological phenomenon the Mere Exposure Effect (MEE) in an advertising setting, to see how marketers can gain better insight to optimise their communications.

The OOH media landscape

For many years, Kinetic delivered media plans referencing reach with little mention of frequency. This was because the OOH media landscape consisted mainly of paper and paste poster sites that could be booked on a two-week in-charge, generating cost and logistic implications if a poster ran out of a two-week in-charge period.

Furthermore, only roadside formats were measured on Postar, the former OOH media currency.

However, two significant changes in the UK OOH landscape moved effective frequency up the media planning agenda. In 2013 we saw the launch of Route, a new OOH media currency, to measure the reach and frequency of multiple OOH formats. By 2016 over a third of OOH ad spend was on digital formats. As digital out-of-home (DOOH) formats don't have the same physical posting limitations as traditional OOH sites, there was now a greater deal of flexibility than the previously fixed two-week in-charge period. As a result of these changes, it became a lot easier to measure frequency as well as deliver varied OOH frequencies.

Due to these changes, we felt it was important to understand how the frequency of exposure to an OOH advert can affect a consumer, and whether it is possible to measure an optimum level of exposure.

The methodology

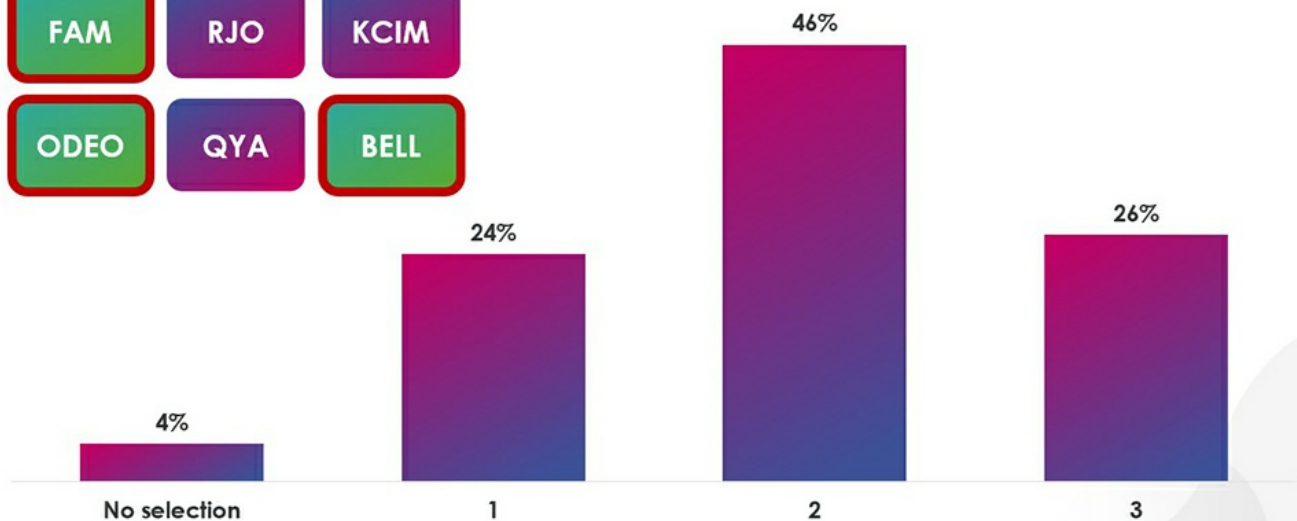
We turned to the Mere Exposure Effect to gain a better understanding of how we can apply behavioural cognitive science to today's advertising industry.

MEE is defined by increases in liking of a stimulus, such as an advert. However, as exposure to the stimulus increases, there follows a decrease in favourability or liking towards it. This can be deployed to understand advertising effectiveness, and by measuring a viewer's awareness of an ad.

Our research mirrored other MEE findings revealing that people's emotional response to any given stimulus will increase to a peak, before decreasing again at the point of over-exposure. Understanding this phenomenon can provide marketers with the insight needed to optimise their communications and make their media more efficient.

To explore this further, we asked 1,000 people to choose three examples from six options of three letter combinations. With all things being equal, the experiment should have worked out that any combination should only have been selected 5% of the time. However, 26% chose the three options with letter combinations that formed a word in the English language (BELL, FAM and ODEO). In contrast, most participants chose to avoid the letter combinations that seemed unfamiliar (FJO, QYA and KCIM).

The odds of people picking the highlighted combination are 1 in 20



Base: All respondents (n: 1000). Imagine you have decided to see your finance manager about investing in stocks. Your bank manager tells you to choose from 6 stocks, she says they all have the same probability to be successful. Choose 3 stocks that feel like a good choice for you.

Naturally, understanding how familiarity works from a brand perspective could be invaluable for advertisers. However, the relationship between exposure and likeability isn't linear. For example, once a song becomes 'over-played' on the radio, listeners will quickly switch off – even if it was once their favourite tune.

We wanted to confirm this finding with ads, showing a pattern of 'wear in' and 'wear out' to understand the optimum number of times people should see an OOH ad. We teamed up with Clear Channel, Primesight and blowUP media to find out just how long it would take for ads to reach peak effectiveness.

Working with our research partner Gorilla in the Room, we set up 325 willing participants with a VR headset. During the study, we gave them varied exposure to four OOH adverts from global brands as they explored a virtual high street. To mimic a natural experience of OOH ad exposure, we didn't tell the respondents the research was about advertising. Instead, they were told that it was a study about observation in VR and should look around each of the street scenes as they desired, thereby allowing them to experience the adverts as they would in real life. The methodology involved filming eight locations and then using CGI to add the appropriate creative.



Location before CGI creative added



Location with CGI creative added

As MEE would be influenced by any past exposure to the ads, we used campaigns that would be new to the respondents. We chose familiar brands so as not to draw respondents' attention to anything 'new' and allow the

results to be generalised. As such we chose four creative examples from the US for international brands that would be familiar to participants based in the UK.

Ads tested



We used a measure from cognitive science that had previously been used to show MEE's impact on advertising. Importantly, this got participants to report how they felt so responses could be inferred as being participants' own emotional reaction. As such, this design allowed us to assess emotional response to the adverts, which participants had seen, alongside the ones they had not. We could therefore compare scores for the ads at different exposure rates, which could then be measured against a base line response if no exposure.

Please look at these ads and respond as to how they make you feel
(where 1 = negative and 10 = positive)



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



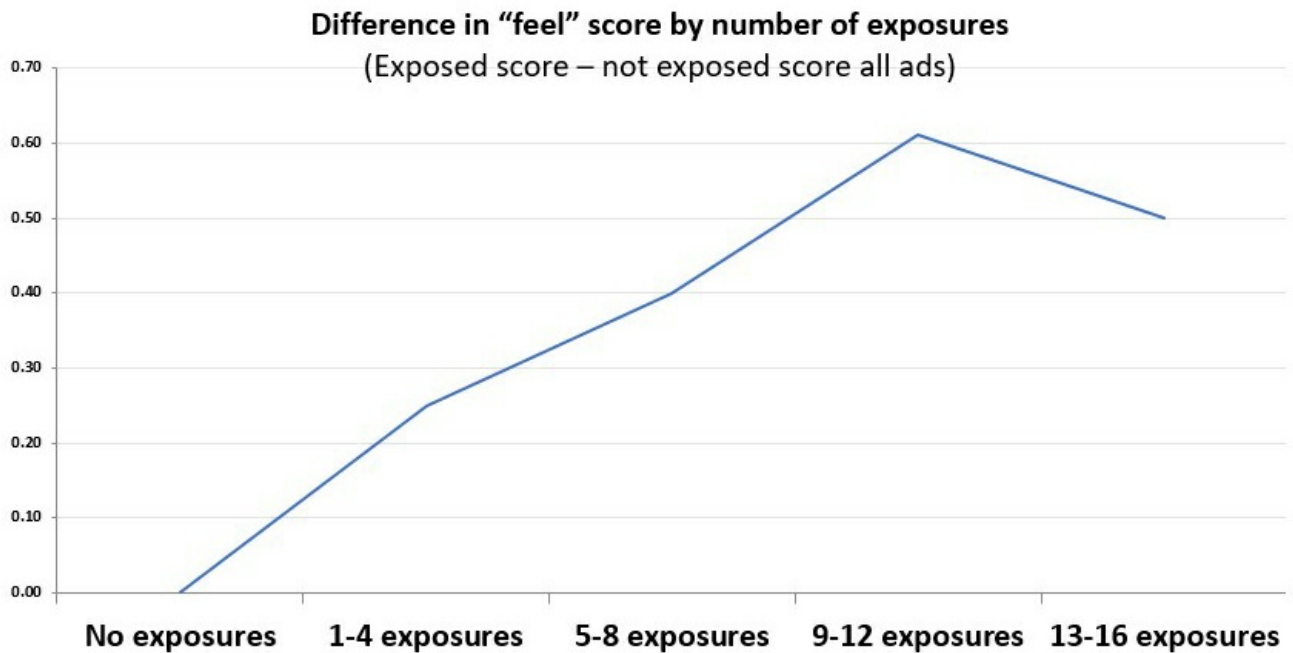
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Reaching the saturation point

Our findings reflected the 'wear in' and 'wear out' curve we were expecting – and surfaced some exciting insights that will help us deploy clients' OOH campaigns more effectively. In line with MEE, the results showed that up to nine exposures the participant favoured that particular advert. However, between nine to 12 exposures, the emotional response peaked and then began to decrease as the participant became used to it.



The findings

The results have given us greater insight into the impact of adverts on consumers, and we have since been able to use the research as part of our everyday operations. Indeed, marketers could use this information to tailor OOH media so consumers become just familiar enough to make an emotional connection with maximum effectiveness.

We are able to tailor the frequency of exposure, and where frequency is already high, we have worked to run multiple creative messages that we know will create an impact on the consumer at the right time. Our findings have since allowed us to know how to create greater efficiency for an OOH campaign to drive better effectiveness for our clients.

In scientific terms, this curve reflects an emotional evolutionary response. This pattern of increase and decrease in liking is derived from the brain's aim to pay attention to new stimulus such as an advert in order to fully understand. The positive emotion reflects how the brain rewards itself for understanding something new. As such, this response grows, driving the brain to give it more attention up until the advert has been fully understood. The emotional response decreases as the brain acknowledges that any more attention will yield little new information.

Indeed, this information could prove extremely useful to marketers. By tailoring advertising campaigns so consumers are exposed to them the optimum number of times, they will succeed in driving the maximum positive emotional connection with that particular product or brand.

We are now looking to see how we can test MEE beyond traditional billboards to look at DOOH ads, testing the

psychology behind the digital versus traditional debate. If digital is more relevant to today's tech-centred society, is it more likeable for the modern consumer? Not only that, will digital media evoke the same 'wear in', 'wear out' curve that we saw from traditional OOH campaigns? Watch this space.

In summary

In the OOH environment, as well as the general media landscape, an understanding of the Mere Exposure Effect can enable marketers to establish how often a consumer needs to view an advert in order to reach peak effectiveness.

Kinetic had a hypothesis and proved it using thorough, effective research with the end result providing a solution that can link directly back to clients' sales data.

The methodology of our research, employing virtual reality technology, enabled us to recreate a real-life setting to make the experiment as accurate as possible.

The findings show that there is huge opportunity for marketers to tailor their OOH media campaigns to maximise an emotional connection with their key target audience and boost sales in the long term. This research will form a solid basis for further study into this area, looking at digital activations in the OOH media space, as today's digitally connected market demands.

About the author

Jennie Roper

Head of Insight, Kinetic UK

Dr Alistair Goode

Cognitive Scientist, Gorilla in the Room

© Copyright WARC 2019

WARC Ltd.

Americas: 2233 Wisconsin Ave NW, Suite 535, Washington, DC 20007, United States - Tel: +1 202 778 0680

APAC: OUE Downtown 1, #44-03, 6 Shenton Way, 068809, Singapore - Tel: +65 3157 6200

EMEA: 33 Kingsway, London, WC2B 6UF, United Kingdom - Tel: +44 (0)20 7467 8100

www.warc.com

All rights reserved including database rights. This electronic file is for the personal use of authorised users based at the subscribing company's office location. It may not be reproduced, posted on intranets, extranets or the internet, e-mailed, archived or shared electronically either within the purchaser's organisation or externally without express written permission from Warc.

