The Brand Safety Effect
How unsafe ad placement impacts consumer brand perception

October 2018
Executive Summary

CHEQ, Magna & IPG Media Lab set out to quantify the effects of unsafe ad exposure on consumer brand perceptions. These are the key findings:

Many consumers view unsafe ad placement as an intentional endorsement of the negative content

“It’s disturbing that they are generating revenue through disaster”

“Looks like they’re exploiting shock value”

“They’re stating that they agree with the negative content”

With unsafe ad placement, consumers’ perception of the brand declines significantly across key brand metrics

Consumers are less willing to associate with the brand

2.8X Decline

When displayed next to generally unsafe or brand / vertical averse content

Consumers’ purchase intent is stifled

2X Decline

When displayed next to generally unsafe or brand / vertical averse content

Consumers are less likely to feel the brand cares about them

4.5X Decline

When displayed next to generally unsafe or brand / vertical averse content

Consumers are less likely to feel the brand is “in the know”

3X Decline

When displayed next to generally unsafe or brand / vertical averse content

Consumers’ brand quality perception drops

7X Decline

When displayed alongside generally unsafe and brand / vertical averse content

Consumers are less likely to recommend the brand

0.5X Decline

When displayed alongside generally unsafe and brand / vertical averse content
The digital landscape is filled with content brands don’t want to be near

Brands are increasingly concerned about where their ads are being displayed. Many advertisers have pulled ads over brand safety violations and are actively seeking solutions for safe ad placement both in-house and with 3rd parties.

The scope of concern is growing as well, as more and more subjects become taboo, and as political and social sensitivities continue to grow. This means that if unsafe content was once simple to define, we must now broaden our definitions to include new categories.

Unsafe Categories of Content

- Violent
- Offensive
- Disgusting
- Disrespectful
- Hateful
- Tragic
- Criminal
- Controversial
- Fake or Misleading
- Politically Sensitive
- Brand Averse
- Vertical Averse
So we set out to answer the question on every brand’s mind:

*How does unsafe ad placement affect consumers’ perception of the brand?*
Research methodology

We used controlled online lab testing

Participants
Participants recruited from nationally representative online panel across PC and Smartphone (n = 2,364)

Survey
Initial survey with demographic and media consumption questions to ensure representativeness

Ad Exposure
Participants randomized into test cells (safe/unsafe content) and selected a website to visit based on their preferences

Measurement
Post exposure survey to measure traditional brand metrics and qualitative feedback
Research methodology

2 verticals
We collaborated with BMW and Hulu to test the effect of unsafe content on brand perceptions in a controlled online environment.

4 types of content
We displayed 4 different types of content alongside the ads ranging from safe to generally unsafe, brand averse and vertical averse.

2 types of pre-roll ads
We displayed BMW and Hulu brand video ads to the test group, while the control group was shown various PSA ads.

2 devices
We displayed the content on both desktop and mobile to make sure we captured and reflected consumers’ genuine ad viewing experience.
Examples of 4 types of content we tested (for BMW & Hulu)

All ads were displayed in a “test” environment

- **Safe Content**
  - Talk Show Segment
  - Displayed in a “test” environment

- **Generally Unsafe Content**
  - School Shooting
  - Displayed in a “test” environment

- **Brand Averse Content**
  - BMW Related Incident
  - Displayed in a “test” environment

- **Vertical Averse Content**
  - Dangers of Binge Watching
  - Displayed in a “test” environment

* Images are for illustration purposes only
The Key Findings

Brand perception shows demonstrable decline when brands’ ads are displayed alongside generally unsafe or brand/vertical averse content.
Consumers are less willing to associate with the brand when displayed alongside generally unsafe or brand/vertical averse content.

Consumer Feedback

“I will stay away from the brand in the future”

2.8X Decline

Willingness to Associate

- Safe Content: +9%
- Unsafe Content: -5%

▲ = Statistically significant difference between test and control at >= 90% confidence
Safe n=818; Unsafe n=1,542
02 Key Findings

Consumers’ purchase intent is stifled
When displayed alongside generally unsafe or brand / vertical averse content

"After seeing a video like that, it’s hard to think about buying a new car"

▲ = Statistically significant difference between test and control at >= 90% confidence
Safe n=818; Unsafe n=1,542
**Key Findings**

Consumers are less likely to feel that the brand cares about them

*When displayed alongside generally unsafe or brand / vertical averse content*

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**Consumer Feedback**

“It’s disturbing that they don’t care”

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**Brand Cares About Me**

- **Safe Content**
- **Unsafe Content**

▲ = Statistically significant difference between test and control at >= 90% confidence

Safe n=818; Unsafe n=1,542
Consumers are less likely to feel that the brand is “In the Know”
When displayed alongside generally unsafe or brand / vertical averse content

Consumer Feedback

“Not smart to place your brand next to negative content”

Brand is “In the Know”

▲ ▲

Not statistically significant difference between test and control at >= 90% confidence
Safe n=818; Unsafe n=1,542
We also measured the effect of unsafe content when it directly clashes with the brand or vertical
Key Findings

Consumers’ brand quality perception drops
When displayed alongside generally unsafe and brand / vertical averse content

Is a Quality Brand

Deltas (Test-Control)

-1%

-7%

7X Decline

▲ = Statistically significant difference between test and control at >= 90% confidence
Generally Unsafe n=401; Unsafe + Brand / Vertical Averse n=365

In collaboration with
Key Findings

Consumers are less likely to recommend the brand when displayed alongside generally unsafe and brand / vertical averse content.

▲ = Statistically significant difference between test and control at >= 90% confidence
Generally Unsafe n=401; Unsafe + Brand / Vertical Averse n=365
Additional Findings
Additional Findings

Content that clashes with the brand or vertical still causes damage even when that content is generally safe

Impact of Brand Averse Content by those who recognized connection between ad and content.

▲ = Statistically significant difference between test groups at >= 90% confidence

Brand Averse: Ad Was Relevant n=150; Ad Was Not Relevant n=36

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Statistically Significant Decline</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is a Quality Brand</td>
<td></td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a Good Reputation</td>
<td></td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand is in The Know</td>
<td></td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is a Trustworthy Brand</td>
<td></td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cares About its Customers</td>
<td></td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to Associate</td>
<td></td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Additional Findings

Many consumers view the ad placement as an intentional endorsement of the content. They're stating that they agree with the negative content. It's disturbing that they are generating revenue through disaster.

Consumer Feedback

"Seems manipulative. I’d prefer a company that doesn’t use that kind of technique."

"They’re stating that they agree with the negative content."

"Looks like they’re exploiting shock value."

"I think the brand is taking advantage of people’s emotions."
Additional Findings

Consumers’ aversion to associate with brands is driven by “offensive” content

Impact of Content Offensiveness on Willingness to Associate: Deltas (Test – Control)

Most Offensive Content
Willingness to associate
0% Decline

Least Offensive Content
Willingness to associate
0% Decline

According to the study, consumers’ aversion to associate with brands is driven by “offensive” content. The impact of content offensiveness on willingness to associate is measured by deltas (Test – Control) and is presented in the table below:

- Most Offensive Content:
  - Willingness to associate: 13% Decline

- Least Offensive Content:
  - Willingness to associate: 0% Decline

▲ = Statistically significant difference between test and control at >= 90% confidence
Most Offensive n=178; Neutral n=459; Least Offensive n=1,169

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What we’ve learned

01 Consumers tend to assume each ad placement is intentional
This means that when they see ads next to unsafe content, they view the brand as “not smart” (at best) and “manipulative” (at worst)

02 Consumers view the ad placement as an endorsement of the content
This means that by being near certain types of content, it’s seen (by the consumer) as taking a position

03 Measuring unsafe ad exposure without preventing it could seriously hurt the brand
Once the consumer has viewed ads alongside unsafe content, the damage to the brand is already done, and measuring becomes futile

04 Brands must go beyond “bad” content and avoid content which counters their brand
Traditionally unsafe content like “crime” and “terrorism” does damage, but so does neutral content, if it clashes with the brand / vertical
Thanks

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