

## **Attitudes Towards Free-to-Air TV Advertising in East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** Advertising boosts the broadcasting industry's earnings, making a sustainable broadcast and media ecology possible. However, broadcasters are finding it challenging to thrive since advanced digital platforms have driven away their revenue.

**Objective:** This paper investigated the potential of using viewing preferences on free-to-air (FTA) television (TV) to improve Malaysian broadcast TV and media landscape through content development to restore broadcasting advertising revenues.

**Method:** This study collected data from August to September 2023 using a survey research design, selecting 403 participants through a multi-stage sampling procedure.

**Results:** The results revealed that viewers in the East Coast region made a motivated choice to either watch or ignore commercial breaks on FTA TV channels. However, they still held positive opinions regarding commercial breaks.

**Conclusion:** Despite the difficulties brought by streaming services and digitalisation, broadcasters in Malaysia can leverage their distinct position to maintain and grow their advertising revenue, focusing on FTA TV content development and advertising arrangements that suit viewers' demands.

**Unique contribution:** This study provided direction to media companies looking to use FTA TV as a viable business model and ready to respond to the changing broadcast media landscape, particularly in regions where local identity is still strong and reliance on digital media may be lower.

**Key recommendation:** Based on the overall results, broadcasters should identify, understand, and use viewers' viewing profiles and habits to produce relevant and East Coast-focused content while customising their advertisement approaches to suit viewing preferences. The same method should also be used to produce FTA TV advertisements to allow brands to connect with consumers or viewers while immersing them in the show.

**Keywords:** Advertisement, broadcasting, free-to-air TV, revenue, viewing preferences

## Introduction

Although digitalisation has transformed the broadcasting industry and improved Malaysian living standards, more is needed for a sustainable broadcast and media ecology. This is because advertising is one of the sources of revenue for FTA TV channels. The emergence of digital media has reduced FTA TV advertising's popularity. Since the internet and digital advertising, such as social media, offer greater innovative possibilities, many advertisers are shifting away from FTA TV (Bruce et al., 2023). Kee et al. (2015) asserted that the complexity of the conventional media landscape has been further affected by divergence. This has caused the fragmentation of audiences into diverse niches, making it even more difficult for advertisers to tap into potential consumers among FTA TV viewers.

Hence, the FTA TV industry must focus on regaining broadcasting advertising revenues by exploring FTA TV content development that aligns with viewing preferences. Advertisers often decide to purchase commercial slots based on the ratings of shows. According to Roy (2013), the show in which a TV commercial is placed affects its effectiveness. As platform providers, broadcasters need to give input to advertisers into how consumers or viewers perceive and respond to advertisements on various TV channels and in different situations (Bettiga & Noci, 2024). Because advertising creates brand awareness that would lead to profit growth, targeted advertising that leverages consumer data to construct direct advertisements for specific audiences should be explored.

For these reasons, this study used a cross-sectional quantitative survey to learn more about how many viewers in the East Coast states, Terengganu, Kelantan, and Pahang, think favourably of the ads running on FTA TV stations. The data will help inform broadcasters of appropriate advertising strategies that consider viewing habits. Although many TV viewing studies were conducted in Malaysia, little could be found related to viewers in the East Coast region of Peninsular Malaysia that looked specifically at preferences towards commercial breaks.

Besides, this study is also worth studying as it could offer a guide to broadcasters and content producers in developing programs to accommodate viewing experiences.

### **Research Objectives**

This article focuses on how recent and evidence-based data on FTA TV viewing preferences could be used to improve Malaysian broadcast TV and media landscape. This paper's specific objectives are:

- 1) To examine how Peninsular Malaysia's East Coast viewers watch FTA TV.
- 2) To investigate viewers' attitudes towards FTA TV commercials on Peninsular Malaysia's East Coast.

### **Literature Review**

#### **TV Viewing**

TV offers entertainment and information that appeals to various viewers' interests and demands. TV has specialised slots (Wok & Mohamed, 2008) and comes in diverse forms, such as talk shows, sports, variety shows, games, children's programming, news, and documentaries. In order to address issues that impact the political, economic, and social well-being of its audience, TV also serves a range of normative purposes in society, including providing education, entertainment, and information (Governor et al., 2024). Despite the surge in internet usage a few years ago, TV remains vital in Malaysia and continues to be a popular means of reaching broad audiences, particularly during peak hours. For instance, TV3, a private TV station, has an extensive viewership for its news program, Buletin Utama (Jerome et al., 2023). This demonstrates that TV is still an essential provider of news.

In addition to regular TV, Malaysian audiences also watch portal TV. The prime-time news *Berita Perdana*, aired on the government-owned station Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), is accessible to viewers via mobile applications such as MyKlik. During pandemics, TV became a reliable source of information, as did social media, which has also grown into a popular news source. The World Health Organisation (WHO) stated that social media was primarily accountable for spreading fake news, misinformation, and disinformation during Covid-19. To counter this situation, conventional media responded innovatively by distributing its news on online portals and social media platforms to reach a larger audience and enhance participation (Ghazali et al., 2022). This strategy has proven to counteract misinformation and infodemics while encouraging the use of conventional media, such as TV, radio, and newspapers, as the most trustworthy medium. This paper argues that TV will continue to become an entertainment-seeking platform while allowing people to remain up-to-date on the latest news and prosper in the digital era.

#### **TV Advertising**

Commercial breaks are designated to be filled out with advertisements and public service announcements (PSAs). Over the years, the concept of advertising has undergone significant development. It has developed into a primary business driver due to its ability to sell products and services. Besides creating brand awareness, advertising effectively passes on lifestyles and values. Bindah (2019) stated that TV advertising profoundly affects life satisfaction. It offers people information, education, entertainment, and motivation, which significantly affects their

views of life experiences. Adalon et al. (2021) suggested that despite numerous advertising options, TV advertising offers far more benefits than other platforms, making it a worthwhile investment. This view is consistent with Weibel et al. (2019), which asserted that TV commercials appeared to inspire greater attention and pleasant emotions than internet advertisements.

TV advertising offers various advantages for marketers and broadcasters alike. According to Bindah (2019), FTA TV is an effective instrument for raising brand recognition, and business owners benefit from informing viewers about their goods and services. Effective TV advertising could influence customer purchasing decisions. Adalon et al. (2021) revealed that marketers use dramatisation and silliness as humour strategies in TV commercials to draw viewers to their products. They added that viewers are more receptive to opinion when they watch a humorous commercial than a serious or educational one. Despite the popularity of digital advertising, Weibel et al. (2019) compared TV commercials to smartphone advertisements, stating that they have a more significant impact on viewers than smartphone advertisements. They described that viewers tend to develop favourable feelings, hence paying more attention to the commercials. One of the determining factors is the ability of advertisements to influence emotions, whereby positive opinions could be generated on the advertised product, affect desires to buy, and improve impressions regarding the product (Adalon et al., 2021; Weibel et al., 2019; Bindah, 2019). Weibel et al. (2019) further explained that criteria, such as coverage (reach), time use, and mode of presentation, should all be considered when determining the efficiency of advertising platforms. These approaches allow TV commercials to influence unconscious long-term memory and lead to purchasing decisions. Meanwhile, Bettiga and Noci (2024) called for a shift in focus to study advertising effectiveness by exploring its context. For example, commercials after highly arousing movies are more likely to influence viewers positively. They argued that the order of advertisements during a commercial break could also influence this efficiency. On this basis, broadcasters should be mindful of the programs they air, as it could affect the effectiveness of commercials.

However, the excessive number of advertisements on FTA TV during commercial breaks has some drawbacks. Viewers find multiple commercials during commercial breaks frustrating; hence, they prefer to avoid watching (Danso, 2017). Avoiding commercials could eliminate exposure to the advertisements, diminishing the effectiveness of messages altogether (Song et al., 2021). Viewers who experience sudden commercial breaks are less likely to have favourable views on advertisements than those who do not (Roy, 2013). Positive commercial break experiences encourage purchasing decisions, whereas unfavourable advertisement impressions decrease interest in the advertised products and purchasing behaviour (Kantar, 2022). However, Danso (2017) argued that active viewers are more likely to continue watching commercial breaks because they are informative and entertaining, and they prevent them from missing the following scene in a show (Danso, 2017; Song et al., 2021). On this note, advertising is not about putting all information for consumers to process. It involves making the right decisions on practical marketing tools using suitable platforms during the appropriate time. This requires greater attention to understanding how viewers perceive and react to commercial breaks and what goes into them.

## **Theoretical Framework**

There is growing evidence of selective exposure, which highlights the active selection of information for media use. The notion of selective processes borrowed from psychology can be applied in communication studies (Danso, 2017). According to Baran (2011), the selective processes, which include selective exposure, selective retention, and selective perception, assist audiences in choosing information they wish to take in, retain, and interpret in an individually significant way. Selective exposure can be drawn from Lazarsfield, Berelson, and Gaudet's work in 1944, which examined voters' media consumption during the U.S. presidential campaign. Selective exposure has been associated with how people attend to or avoid political messages. Danso (2017) argued that selective exposure also extends the uses and gratifications (U&G) framework, which focuses on how and why people actively seek out specific media content. According to Severin and Tankard (1997), U&G is a psychological communication perspective that looks at individual use and choice by asserting that different people can use the same mass medium for different purposes. Since this study investigated selective exposure activity, such as what audiences think and do during a commercial break and when and what to watch, the selective exposure theory is considered relevant.

## **Methodology**

### **Study Design and Sampling**

Following a quantitative research design, this study used a survey method. A questionnaire was used as a research instrument and was distributed from August to September 2023 to viewers on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed in data gathering to ensure the representativeness of data. The first stage involved cluster sampling, as it was suitable for a large population. The total population of this study was 5,515,223, of which 2,131,427 came from Terengganu, 1,792,501 from Kelantan, and 1,591,295 from Pahang. The second stage used a stratified sampling method based on the respondents' characteristics (i.e., gender, professional background, and TV viewing platform) with a 0.007% multiplying factor. As calculated using the Raosoft calculator, the appropriate sample size was 385. Five hundred copies of the questionnaire were distributed, while only 403 surveys were completed in this study.

### **Pilot Study**

There were three sections in the survey questionnaire: 1) demographic profiles, 2) FTA TV viewing behaviours, and 3) attitude towards FTA TV commercial breaks. Items in sections 1 and 2 were entirely self-constructed, while part of the content in section 3 was modified from Danso (2017). In July 2023, a pilot study was carried out to confirm the reliability of the instruments. This study used Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) value to evaluate the instruments' internal consistency reliability. Table 1 presents that every variable was reported to meet the minimum Cronbach's alpha value ( $\alpha > .07$ ).

**Table 1. Reliability test of the pilot study and the actual study**

Variables	Cronbach's alpha		Items
	Pilot Study (N=33)	Actual Study (N=403)	
Attitudes towards FTA TV commercials	0.897	0.908	14

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive and inferential statistics were run to explore the respondents' FTA TV viewing behaviour. Descriptive statistics are important in determining the central tendency, variability, and frequency distribution. Meanwhile, inferential statistics, such as the one-sample t-test, are valuable in measuring the mean differences.

### Results and Discussions

#### Demographic Profiles & FTA TV Viewing Behaviours

Table 2 presents the demographic profiles and FTA TV viewing behaviours in the East Coast region of Peninsular Malaysia.

**Table 2. Viewers' demographic profiles and FTA TV viewing behaviours**

No.	Items	Details	Frequency	%
1	Gender	Male	190	47.1
		Female	213	52.9
2	Age Group	20 and less	15	3.7
		21-30	132	32.8
		31-40	142	35.2
		41-50	54	13.4
		51-60	31	7.7
		61 and more	29	7.2
3	Residential Area	Urban	258	64.0
		Rural	145	36.0
		Total	403	100.0
4	Ethnicity	Malay	348	86.4
		Chinese	32	7.9
		Indian	19	4.7
		Others	4	1.0
5	Region of Residence	Kuala Terengganu	54	13.4
		Pekan	15	3.7
		Kuantan	68	16.9
		Marang	28	6.9
		Dungun	38	9.4
		Kuala Nerus	36	8.9
		Pasir Mas	34	8.4
		Kuala Krai	15	3.7

		Kota Bharu	81	20.1
		Bentong	14	3.5
		Temerloh	20	5.0
6	Frequency of watching FTA TV	Every day	160	39.7
		2-3 times a week	132	32.8
		Once a week	61	15.1
		4-5 times a week	50	12.4
7	Amount of time spent on watching FTA TV	1-3 hours	192	47.6
		4-6 hours	108	26.8
		Less than 1 hour	62	15.4
		7-9 hours	28	6.9
		More than 9 hours	13	3.2
8	Means of accessing FTA TV channels	MYTV services	207	51.3
		Astro services	194	48.2
		Others	2	0.5
9	Time of the day in viewing FTA TV channels	Night	196	48.6
		Evening after work	73	18.1
		Early morning	52	12.9
		Noon	45	11.2
		Break during work	24	6.0
		Midnight	13	3.2
10	Selecting FTA TV channels	I simply watch any channel or programme	190	47.1
		I turn on FTA TV channel to watch a specific programme that I have decided	80	19.9
		I will keep changing channels until I find one programme that interest me	133	33.0
		<b>Total</b>	<b>403</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The analysis of the respondents' characteristics captured the FTA TV viewing experiences in the East Coast region. By examining the demographic data, broadcasters might better understand their audiences to assist them in dividing viewers into different groups and customising programs to suit their preferences. This research tried recruiting a fairly distributed sample to obtain data representative of each category to explain their viewing experiences. It is vital to note that respondents were, however, not fairly distributed in terms of ethnicity, which depicted the actual geographic distribution of the population, thus providing evidence-based FTA TV viewing data in the East Coast region. Comprised of Pahang, Terengganu, and Kelantan states, the East Coast region of Peninsular Malaysia is known for its lively population. Each state has a specific culture and viewing preferences. Exploring region-specific viewing experiences is useful since TV content that reflects society and culture engages viewers and instils a sense of belonging (Martinez, 2015). Bindah (2019) explained that TV is part of a social technology that makes viewers feel like they belong to an imagined community.

In addition, this study revealed that East Coast viewers were inclined to use traditional TV sets through MYTV services, highlighting the importance of home entertainment. This setting is ideal for an entire family to enjoy watching TV shows together because it offers entertainment and relaxation that may strengthen family bonds (Bindah, 2019). Broadcasting time also influences viewing habits among respondents (Song et al., 2021). This study measured the time of the day that respondents watched FTA TV channels. Almost half of them (48.6%) said they watched FTA TV channels at night, with only 18.1% watching after work. Viewing FTA TV channels at night is considered a form of entertainment for unwinding after a long day at work. Bindah (2019) added that TV viewing activity provides excitement. This assertion explains why viewers maintained consistent engagement with FTA TV programs. As reported, 39.7% of the respondents tuned in to FTA TV channels daily, and another 32.8% watched 2 to 3 times a week. Regarding the hours of watching, 47.6% spent 1–3 hours per day watching FTA TV channels, followed by those who spent 4–6 hours (26.8%). In channel selection, almost half of the respondents (47.1%) claimed not to be selective and to watch whatever was available on FTA TV, while 33.0% actively searched for channels to find programs. The diversity in viewing preferences and channel selection presented thus far reflected the potential content that broadcasters could offer based on audience groups. As access to a variety of TV programming could lead to higher life satisfaction (Bindah, 2019), broadcasters’ role in planning program schedules that suit viewing habits is becoming more crucial.

**Table 3. Agreement level on the usage of streaming services**

No.	Items	Agree		Disagree		Total	
		Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
1	Netflix	326	80.9	77	19.1	403	100.0
2	MYTV mana-mana	306	75.9	97	24.1	403	100.0
3	Awesome TV	295	73.2	108	26.8	403	100.0
4	AlHijrah Plus	287	71.2	116	28.8	403	100.0
5	Tonton	283	70.2	120	29.8	403	100.0
6	Astro Go	281	69.7	122	30.3	403	100.0
7	Disney Channel	268	66.5	135	33.5	403	100.0
8	Viu	256	63.5	147	36.5	403	100.0
9	Unifi TV	252	62.5	151	37.5	403	100.0
10	RTM Klik	243	60.3	160	39.7	403	100.0
11	Sooka	230	57.1	173	42.9	403	100.0
12	Apple TV	228	56.6	175	43.4	403	100.0

The internet gives viewers the liberty to watch online TV streaming. Table 3 presents streaming services as part of the respondents’ viewing habits. According to Isa et al. (2021), audiences in urban locations were highly skewed towards global media like Netflix. Similarly, the respondents in this study used streaming services such as Netflix, Viu, and Disney Channel. Despite having access to paid and specific content, they were still interested in watching FTA TV channels through the MYTV Mana-Mana, Awesome TV, AlHijrah Plus, and Tonton streaming services. The interest could be due to the diverse content library and on-demand nature of these services (Isa et al., 2021) that offer flexible functionalities that support viewers’ customisation of viewing (Steinkamp, 2010). The insights gathered from this analysis



underscore the importance of providing an engaging viewing experience that resonates with the tapestry of viewers in this region.

### Attitudes Towards FTA TV Commercial Breaks

The way respondents feel about commercial interruptions affects their attention to FTA TV shows. This section answered the study’s second objective using a one-sample t-test. Table 4 shows that all eight (8) items measuring attitudes were significant.

**Table 4. One sample t-test of attitudes towards commercial breaks on FTA TV channels**

No.	Attitude (N=403)	M	SD	%	t	df	p
1	I have no problem with product placement in a TV programme in FTA TV	3.511	1.082	70.2	9.483	402	0.000
2	I prefer commercial slot at the end of a show	3.258	1.167	65.2	4.441	402	0.000
3	I continue watching FTA TV during commercial break	3.256	1.160	65.1	4.424	402	0.000
4	I prefer ad insertion in a TV programme in FTA TV	3.171	1.123	63.4	3.060	402	0.002
5	I prefer commercial slot before a show	3.156	1.231	63.1	2.549	402	0.011
6	I prefer commercial slot during a show	2.859	1.198	57.2	-2.370	402	0.018
7	I don't mind the repeated commercials during a show on FTA TV	2.824	1.185	56.5	-2.985	402	0.003
8	I bought after watching commercial station	2.767	1.218	55.3	-3.845	402	0.000
<b>Mean Attitude</b>		<b>3.100</b>	<b>0.885</b>	<b>62.0</b>	<b>2.272</b>	<b>402</b>	<b>0.024</b>

\*On a five-point scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* (1–20%), 2 = *disagree* (21–40%), 3 = *slightly agree* (41–60%), 4 = *agree* (61–80%), and 5 = *strongly agree* (81–100%).

\*\*Test value = 3

This study found that viewers had no problem with product placement and preferred ad insertion in a TV program. The results were consistent with the concept of in-content advertising, which involves the incorporation of advertisements into content that has already captured viewers’ attention (Kantar, 2022). Respondents also preferred a commercial slot at the end of or before a show and continued watching during commercial breaks. Even though respondents’ attitudes were significant, they disfavoured commercial breaks or repeated commercials during a show. Danso (2017) revealed that multiple advertisements during commercial breaks could lead to avoidance. Understandably, even a program with a high rating may still lose its viewership during commercial breaks (Song et al., 2021). As a result, watching commercial stations was not translated into product purchases. Despite these issues, 62.0% of them had a positive and significant attitude towards commercials on FTA TV channels ( $M=3.100$ ,  $SD=.885$ ,  $t(402) = 2.272$ ,  $p=.000$ ). In line with Danso (2017), viewers watched commercial breaks due to their motivations as active audiences. It can be inferred that selective exposure influenced viewers’ attention towards commercial breaks. Thus, this study can conclude that the viewers from the East Coast did not mind watching commercials when they enjoyed their favourite shows on FTA TV channels.

### **Limitations**

There are two limitations of this study. Firstly, this study only offered data specific to viewers in the East Coast region, which would limit the generalisability of the findings in Malaysia. Hence, future research should extend the surveys to other regions in Malaysia, including rural areas, to offer more comprehensive insights into FTA TV advertising propositions. Secondly, there is a possible response bias since this research used a self-administered survey whereby respondents may answer without honestly reflecting on their viewing habits and perceptions toward commercial breaks. Incorporating analytics data from broadcasters could be one suggestion to cross-check the survey results.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

This study explored the FTA TV viewing profiles, viewing habits, and perceptions towards commercial breaks among the viewers in Terengganu, Kelantan, and Pahang. This study showed that most viewers had positive attitudes towards advertisements broadcasted on FTA TV channels. The findings also revealed that viewers perceived ad insertion and commercial breaks before and after a show as non-intrusive. This inferred that they were less favourable to intrusive advertisements characterised by uninformative and long commercials. Although some viewers found advertising less appealing, it did not affect their viewing as they kept watching FTA TV programs. In addition, the study discovered that the viewers were still interested in FTA TV channels despite having access to Netflix and Viu streaming services. This calls for broadcasters in Malaysia to leverage their distinct position with a focus on FTA TV content development and advertising arrangements to maintain and grow advertising revenues.

This study proposes several recommendations. Firstly, FTA TV broadcasters should concentrate on producing meaningful and value-added programs, such as Islamic elements, that align with the values of the East Coast audiences. Secondly, broadcasters could employ several advertising techniques and avoid long advertisements, too many commercial breaks, as well as uninteresting ads as they could be interruptive. This method is crucial as it will likely lead viewers to purchase the advertised products (Kantar, 2022). Among the types of non-intrusive commercials, as admitted by the respondents, were product placement and built-in advertisements.

Thirdly, broadcasters should offer advertisers regional virtual advertising technology to customise their advertisements according to their geographic target audiences. This will stop viewers from viewing advertisements unrelated to them (Goldman, 2023). Figure 1 illustrates the appearance of a virtual advertisement of the American Red Cross in the upper left corner, with static advertisements in the field below it (Goldman, 2023).



**Figure 1.** Virtual advertising in a sports match, which combines virtual and static advertisements

This study further highlights two contributions: theoretical and practical. This study contributes to theoretical discussions on selective exposure by confirming that respondents actively and selectively pay attention to commercial breaks that resonate with their preferences, such as when and how advertisements should be shown and choosing more interesting and less disruptive ones. From the lens of selective exposure, existing preferences among viewers may influence their decision to watch or ignore advertisements during commercial breaks. This view confirms other studies that viewers are not passive TV consumers (e.g., Danso 2017; Bettiga & Noci, 2024) and provides a case study of how FTA TV advertising can remain relevant despite digital competitions. In terms of practical contribution, this study's findings are purposeful for broadcasters in developing programming and acceptable advertising plans. This investigation allows broadcasters to identify, understand, and utilise viewing profiles and habits to produce relevant, localised, East Coast-focused content while customising their advertisement approaches to suit viewing preferences.

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