toluna

WHITEPAPER

The future of advertising research looks surprisingly human

Creative Effectiveness at AI Speed:

What Synthetic Personas Teach Us About Great Advertising

As all roads lead to Rome, good advertising can take many forms and shapes. Predicting if an ad is good goes beyond checking the obvious rules of the playbook. That's why **Toluna Synthetic Personas (TSPs)** are designed to engage with a wide range of topics, including advertising, in a more natural and general way. They are not specifically trained to answer advertising questions or optimized on large sets of past ads in a way that would predetermine their responses.

When exposed to advertising, **TSPs** respond in similar ways to humans. One of the golden market research principles such as sample size still matters. That's why we deploy **n=200 for each ad that we test**. These **200 TSPs** act as distinct individuals that are designed to respond to a wide range of themes, including advertising. Therefore, it's crucial that our **TSPs** reflect differences across advertising formats as well as cultures and markets.

At the launch of Creative Pre-Test Instant, we demonstrated that testing ads with Toluna Synthetic Personas (TSPs) can reliably identify stronger and weaker advertising.

Country & Match Rate

Global/Overall*	**83%**
Australia	89%
Brazil	80%
France	90%
Germany	82%
Indonesia	78%
Italy	73%
Mexico	79%
Netherlands	80%
Saudi Arabia	87%
Singapore	87%
Spain	90%
South Africa	86%
Thailand	92%
United Kingdom	75%
United States	83%
Vietnam	81%

Ad Format	Global Match Rate
TV	82%
Online Video	82%
Social Video	82%
TikTok/Reels/YT Shorts/ Stories	82%

Because we know how important having confidence in the results can be, we take that understanding further. Rather than just validating outcomes, we explore the underlying ways in which **TSPs** process and evaluate advertising. Do the same creative principles that consistently drive business impact also emerge naturally in how Personas respond?

Using a structured framework, we analyzed ads across key elements such as brand integration, message clarity, ease of processing and memory building, and linked these directly to performance. What emerged is strong consistency in the patterns of how humans and **TSPs** respond to advertising. Like humans, they reward ads that are clear, memorable, emotionally engaging and easy to process.

This analysis shows that **TSPs** do not follow pre-defined rules, they evaluate advertising in a nuanced, human-like way. And now, thanks to **Creative Pre-Test Instant** and our extensive benchmarks, you can leverage them to assess your creative effectiveness with confidence, consistently, instantly and at scale.

What do Synthetic Personas teach us about great advertising?

Learning

Toluna Synthetic Personas respond strongly to emotional storytelling

Emotion is a strong driver of attention, and **Toluna Synthetic Personas** consistently pick up on emotional intensity in advertising. This is not limited to one specific cue *(e.g., a crying baby, a smiling face)* but also reflects the overall emotional load of the ad: It takes into account storyline, human interactions, expressions, messaging and visuals.

Ads with the clearest emotional cues delivered up to **2x higher attention** stopping power compared to ads with little or no emotional presence. This shows that **TSPs** respond to emotional storytelling in a human-like and nuanced way, rather than simply reacting to isolated signals.

Learning

Toluna Synthetic Personas actively evaluate how well brands show up and reward integration that feels meaningful

Our Synthetic Personas don't just detect branding *(as in brand logo or mention in voice-over)*; they interpret how naturally it fits into the experience. They consistently favor executions where the brand plays a clear, integrated role in the story, rather than appearing as an afterthought.

When the brand is embedded as a central character in the narrative, Toluna Synthetic Personas are over **2x more likely** to register strong branding impact. Poorly integrated branding by contrast is often noticed but discounted. This mirrors how human audiences respond to superficial brand presence.

Learning

Toluna Synthetic Personas recognize relevant usage moments like real consumers do

Our **TSPs** process advertising in a similar way to humans. Ads that are easy to follow, with a clear flow and manageable amount of information, perform significantly better. When too many visuals, messages, or story elements compete for attention at once, Synthetic Personas show the same drop in attention and message understanding seen in human audiences. Ads with an optimal cognitive load (i.e., not too simple, not too overwhelming to process) are up to **3x more likely** to generate strong Attention, while overly complex ads can reduce Attention and Message Clarity by **up to 30%.**

Learning

Synthetic Personas recognize category entry points like real consumers

Our **Personas** respond strongly to ads that connect the brand to a relevant usage or buying moment, also known as a **Category Entry Point (CEP)**. These are everyday situations where consumers may think about or need a brand. When these moments are clearly embedded in the storyline and feel relevant to the product, personas are persuaded more strongly and recall ad messages better, **up to 1.5x higher** than ads where these cues are weak or absent. This demonstrates that Synthetic Personas pick up on the same memory-building signals that drive effective advertising in the real world.

Conclusion

Good advertising can take many forms. **Toluna Synthetic Personas** are designed to see, interpret, and respond to advertising in ways that closely mirror human respondents. They are not simply scoring models trained to recognize "good ads," but AI-driven respondents capable of engaging with advertising in a more natural and human-like way.

Creative Pre-Test Instant does more than predict scores and contextualize them through benchmarks: it reflects the same underlying principles that drive effective advertising, captures attention, builds memory and creates impact, while allowing for different creative routes to success.

And as **Toluna Synthetic Personas** are not bound to rigid templates or predefined patterns, they are not only able to evaluate familiar advertising approaches, but also creative ideas that are entirely new. Helping to make better ads at the scale and speed modern marketers need.

toluna

About Toluna

Toluna is the leading global research and insights provider that empowers clients to make smarter data-driven decisions. For 25 years, we've partnered with our clients to deliver greater business impact through our advanced platform, end-to-end solution portfolio, deep industry expertise, and expansive global first-party panel.

From DIY to full-service consultancy, our unique approach can be tailored to fit any time, budget, and resourcing needs. From creative testing to brand tracking, and from packaging optimization to e-commerce understanding, Toluna's range of solution suites provide brands with the insights required to drive growth, relevance, and profitability.

With over 40 offices across the globe, we deliver research in 70+ countries to the world's leading brands. Recognized as a top innovative company by GRIT in 2024, we are at the forefront of insights innovation and excellence.

www.tolunacorporate.com

About the authors

Niels Bovee
Lead Insight Director – Creative Excellence

Niels has a unique role, overseeing Insight that is delivered from Toluna's Creative Excellence solutions.

He blends instinct, academic and AI forward creative insight into stories that fuel big picure learning for clients so they consistently improve their creative quality.

Contact one of our experts →