The True Winners and Losers of 2019's Super Bowl Ads, According to Neuroscience

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Trending

On Super Bowl Sunday, 33 people sat in a California bar watching a boring football game. Some watched intently; some focused on their food and drink. These weren't ordinary fans, though. They had been recruited by Dr. Paul J. Zak, the director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies at Claremont Graduate University, to partake in a study about Super Bowls ads.

For the entire game, each person watched the broadcast with a band wrapped near the crook of their arm. The sensor, created by Dr. Zak's company Immersion Neuroscience, is called the INBand. It measures the neurochemical oxytocin, which scores how immersed people are in stimuli like movies, TV shows, and Cardi B Pepsi commercials. According to Dr. Zak's research over the last decade, higher levels of oxytocin increase empathy, help people recall information accurately, and encourage them to take action. For a brand spending $5.25 million just on airtime, that has huge implications.

Dr. Zak's goal is to separate opinion from objectivity. "Feelings are flimsy," he told me a few days before the Super Bowl. "I don't really care that you like an ad. I don't care about good. I care about impact in the marketplace. And if something has a big enough impact on your brain, it'll have an impact in the marketplace."

That's an important goal because most of the discussion about Super Bowl ads gets stuck on arbitrary creative preferences. Publications like Adweek, Ad Age, The New York Times, and even CNN wasted no time throwing up their immediate takes on the best and worst spots of the night. USA Today posts data from its long-running Ad Meter, which may be a bit closer to the truth, but that's still just a compilation of people rating ads on a scale of 1-10.

But to Dr. Zak's point, just declaring something "good" doesn't make it so. In my opinion, the best Super Bowl ad of my lifetime is "The Force," Volkswagen's spot from 2011. It's cute, clever, economical, and connects to the product. It includes a distinct beginning, middle, and end. There's no dialogue, which

gives it a refreshing simplicity. I'd easily rate it a 10, but I can assure you, I have absolutely zero desire to buy a Passat after watching it, mostly because I never plan on buying a Passat.

So in the spirit of truly ranking the impact of 2019's slate of Super Bowl ads, here are the winners and losers, according to Dr. Zak's neuroscience study.

A brief methodology

The INBand registers a few different scores:

Immersion Quotient (inQ), the most important metric here, calculates how immersive an experience is to someone. The higher the immersion score, the more likely someone is to take an action or make a purchase.

Peak Immersion Experiences (inP) looks at the length and depth of the immersion. As Dr. Zak told me, "It correlates with memorability."

The 33 people picked by Dr. Zak represent different ages, races, and genders. Per Immersion Neuroscience, the predictive accuracy of inQ ranges from 82 percent to 95 percent, depending on the experience and the outcome measure.

The Winning Super Bowl Ads

Mint Mobile: "Chunky Style Milk"

https://youtu.be/LhkcQbhiOiM

Ad Age panned Mint Mobile in its recap for "a lazy gag that goes for the gross-out factor—and has nothing to do with the product actually being advertised." For what it's worth, that's a fair point. I wouldn't call it lazy or the worst ad of the night, but a chunky milk spoof is pretty weird.

However, the neuroscience data does not back up that conjecture. Mint Mobile received the highest immersion score—4.75—out of all 86 commercials that played throughout the game. Perhaps the simple message and deal from an unknown company influenced the result. Its peak immersion experience of 3.3 is actually below the average of 3.6. That might explain why bloggers found it to be subpar or unmemorable. But on the bright side, that score of 3.3 would still beat the Rams.

Michelob Ultra: "Pure Gold"

https://youtu.be/LXmlN9BAddg
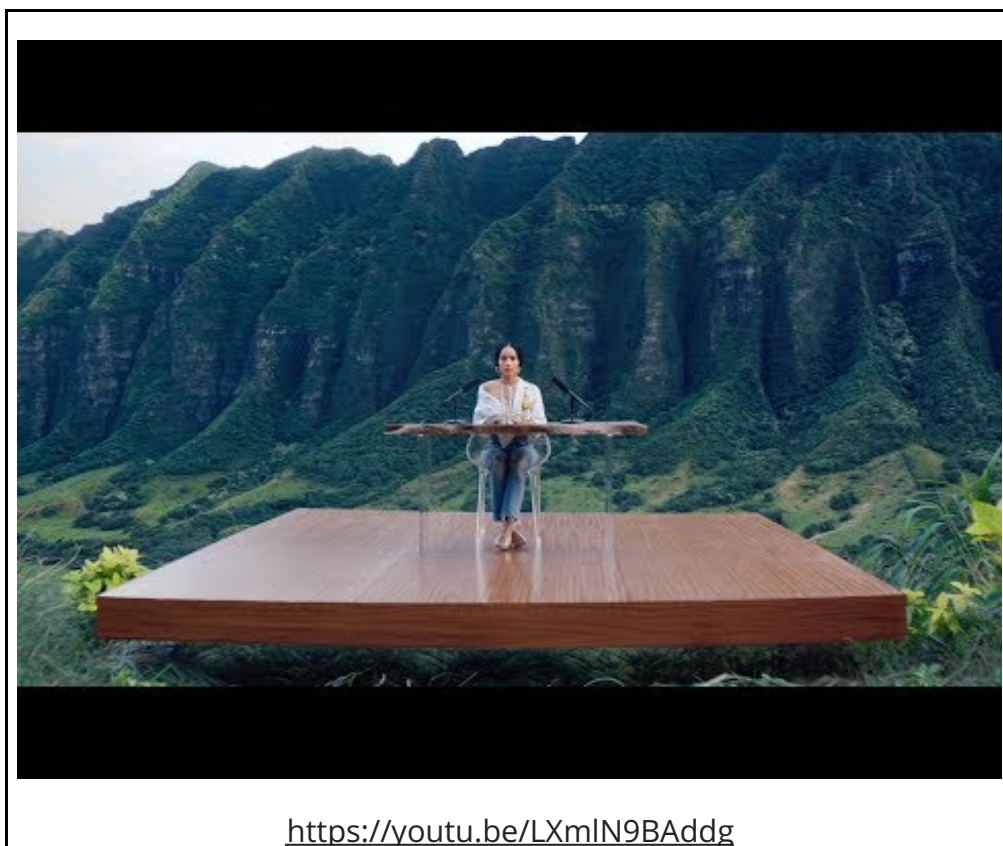
"Pure Gold" is all about tone. The ad features Zoë Kravitz whispering about organic beer surrounded by a lush forest. It's possibly the first ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) Super Bowl commercial, and it finished third in immersion overall.

The public reviews seemed to be mixed. Adweek did an Instagram perception roundup, and Michelob got 50 percent thumbs up and 50 percent thumbs down. Whichever side of the fence you stand on here, I think it's reasonable to say this was one of the more unique ads from Sunday, and its immersive quality shouldn't be a surprise.

Amazon: "Not Everything Makes the Cut"

https://youtu.be/8y-1h_C8ad8
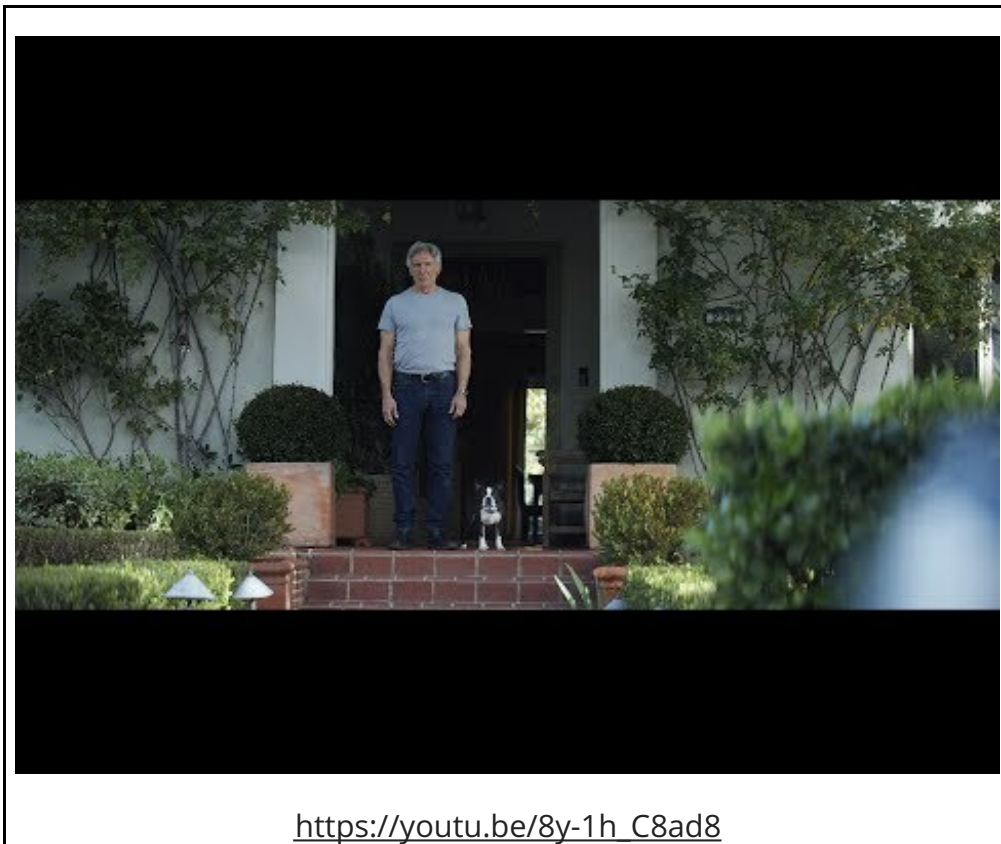
Amazon turned to a risky gameplan: calling out the negative implications of its technology. The spot features a lovably gruff Harrison Ford and presents a clear narrative, but it also associates Amazon with problematic products their consumers can't control. Nonetheless, this resonated with the study's subjects, ranking 13th in immersion. For a company that has had image problems over the last few years, that counts as a victory.

T-Mobile: "We'll Keep This Brief" & "We're Here for You"

T-Mobile aired four different commercials during the broadcast, one per quarter. Each spot showed a text conversation on screen. In the first and third quarters, that strategy resonated. In the second and fourth quarters, not as much. (More on that later.)

The first quarter commercial ranked 20th in immersion, and the third quarter spot came in at eight. T-Mobile differentiated itself with a text-only story and bright copy. People had to read the screen to figure out what was going on. Naturally, this also led to above average peak immersion scores that other brands with traditional approaches lacked.

The Losing Super Bowl ads

Doritos: "Now It's Hot"

https://youtu.be/WTMzlZhI7q8

I happen to like both Chance the Rapper and The Backstreet Boys, but this one played like celebrity Mad Libs. Putting famous people together isn't a good creative strategy on its own, especially if those people have nothing to do with each other.

Like every other ad, if you look hard enough, you can find it on a best-of list (Wired, if you're curious), but according to the data, this had the second lowest immersion score of the night at 3.98. For what it's worth, The Backstreet Boys shouldn't get too down if they're reading this. That same day, they found out they had the top album in the country for the first time since 2000.
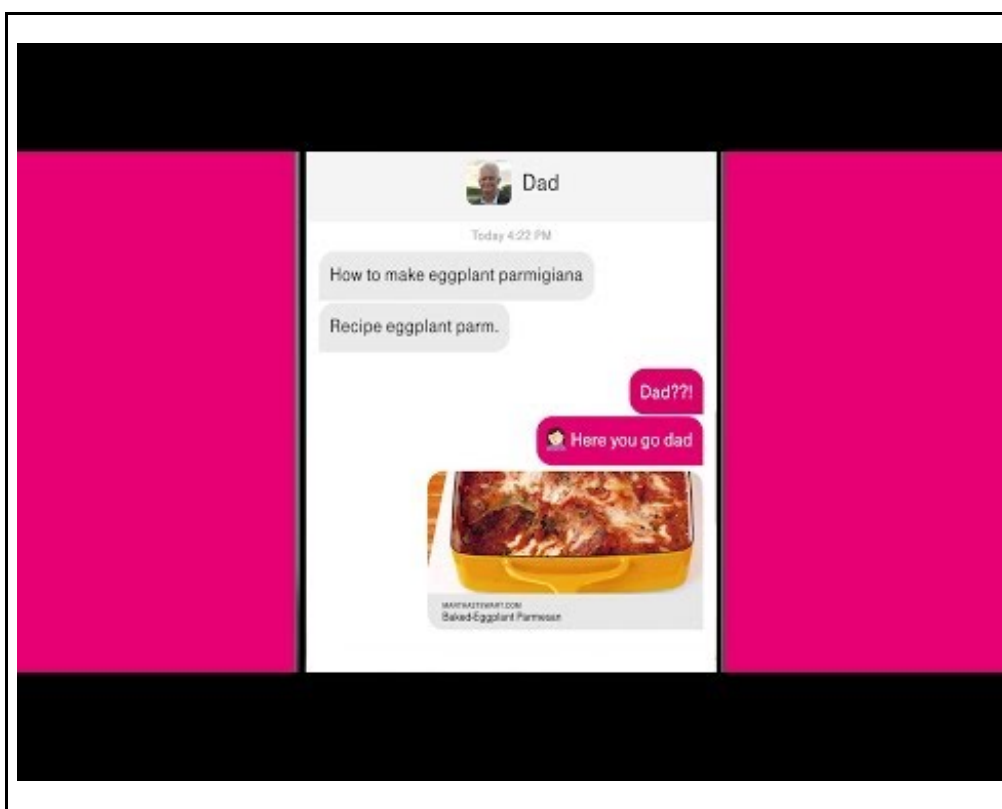
Stella Artois: "Change Up the Usual"

https://youtu.be/IX8TMYRk6_w

This commercial ranked 77th out of 86 for immersion. So ditto to everything I wrote above about putting celebrities together for no reason. The only real difference is neither Sarah Jessica Parker nor Jeff Bridges have a hit album this week.

T-Mobile: "Dad" & "What's for Dinner?"

For T-Mobile, the difference between winning and losing is, well, nothing. The brand managed to do both on Sunday. Its second quarter commercial promoting free tacos from Taco Bell didn't sit well with the group. That spot came in at 81st out of 86 for immersion. The final clip, about an oblivious dad struggling with his smartphone, didn't fare much better at 70th.

T-Mobile probably suffered from too much exposure. They had the most Super Bowl ads of any brand and could've benefited from scarcity—saving millions in the process.

WeatherTech: "Scout" & "CupFone"
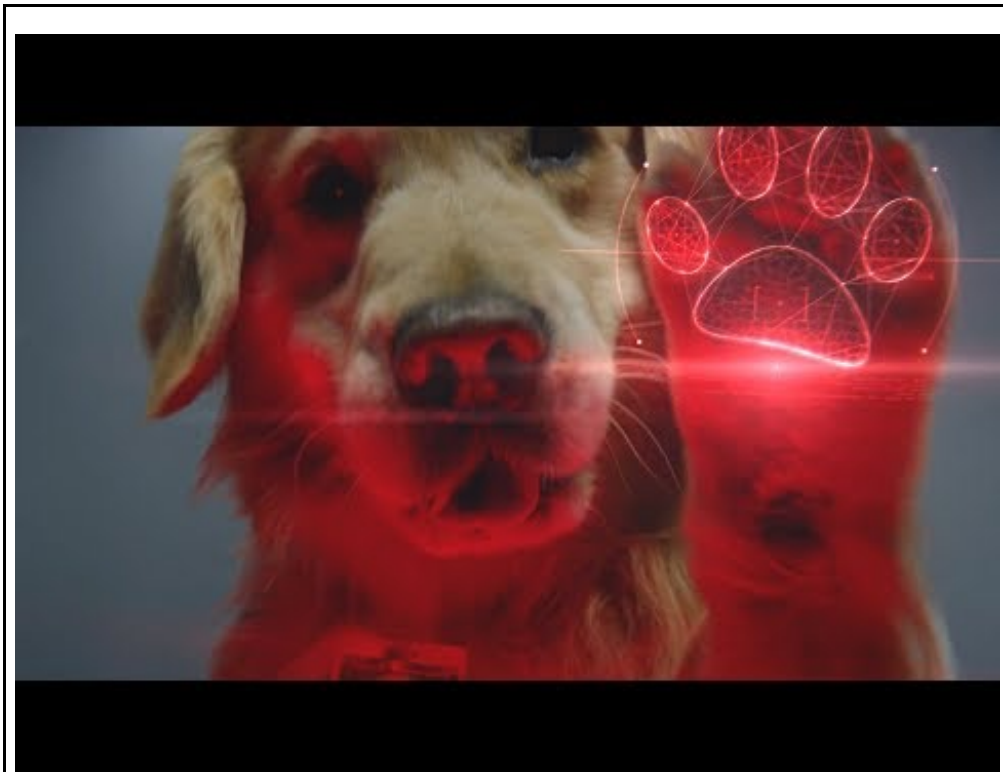
https://youtu.be/EpKX_xQRTd4

Per Dr. Zak's data, only Jared Goff had a worse night than WeatherTech. The company paid for two ads that finished fifth-last and dead last in immersion.

For those who watched, the commercials seemed out of place. They brought an infomercial style to an arena that always tries to push marketing boundaries. WeatherTech's one creative flourish was including a cute dog in "Scout," but that didn't mesh with the tone or content of the clip. It's an instance where the media and the scientific data aligned.

Image by iStockPhoto