

Super Bowl Project: Results, Analysis and Findings

[Fellow Americans](#) + [Swayable](#)

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Introduction

For the majority of the year, Americans live in media bubbles. We consume news, entertainment, sports and social media content that rarely crosses partisan lines. Once a year, millions of Americans come together to watch the Super Bowl. Major corporations take advantage of this moment and buy incredibly [expensive](#) advertising to reach these viewers. The choices they make with these ads have been the subject of scrutiny every year. But we rarely learn what effect these ads are having on the people who view them.

In 2020, Fellow Americans created and tested hundreds of videos designed to persuade targeted audiences about critical issues (like COVID, BLM, and climate change) as well as political issues (participation and support). We also partnered with many of the largest progressive organizations operating, enabling comparisons across programs. One abiding takeaway from meta analysis of this dataset was that even when many of our ads were successful at convincing voters to turn out or support a candidate or policy, they often simultaneously had the effect of eroding social and institutional trust along the way. We were alarmed by this and aimed to find approaches that achieved shorter term political/policy goals while building social cohesion.

Swayable, the technology team that brought 24 hour digital RCT content testing to the campaign world, has now tested thousands of such ads, with millions of respondents, both for Fellow Americans as well as a large fraction of the country's top advocacy and campaign organizations. With its fastest-growing set of users being commercial marketers, many telling stories both about their brands as well as the broader social context they operate in, the teams combined forces to ask a set of questions with major implications: what impact is this commercial advertising having on American's trust in each other, and in the institutions we need to solve a set of overlapping national crises? Can commercial marketers use enormous audiences for campaigns like those during the Superbowl to do good both for their businesses, as well as for the communities they operate in? And for brands that do take on the challenge, how can they best succeed?

To answer this, the teams identified 25 top Super Bowl ads in each of a set of 8 categories to measure what kinds of social effects they were having, as well as what impact they were having on brand favorability and purchase consideration. The ads were exposed to thousands of people and their responses were compared to those in a control group that was not exposed to any of the ads, enabling us to gather data about brand perceptions, social and institutional trust,

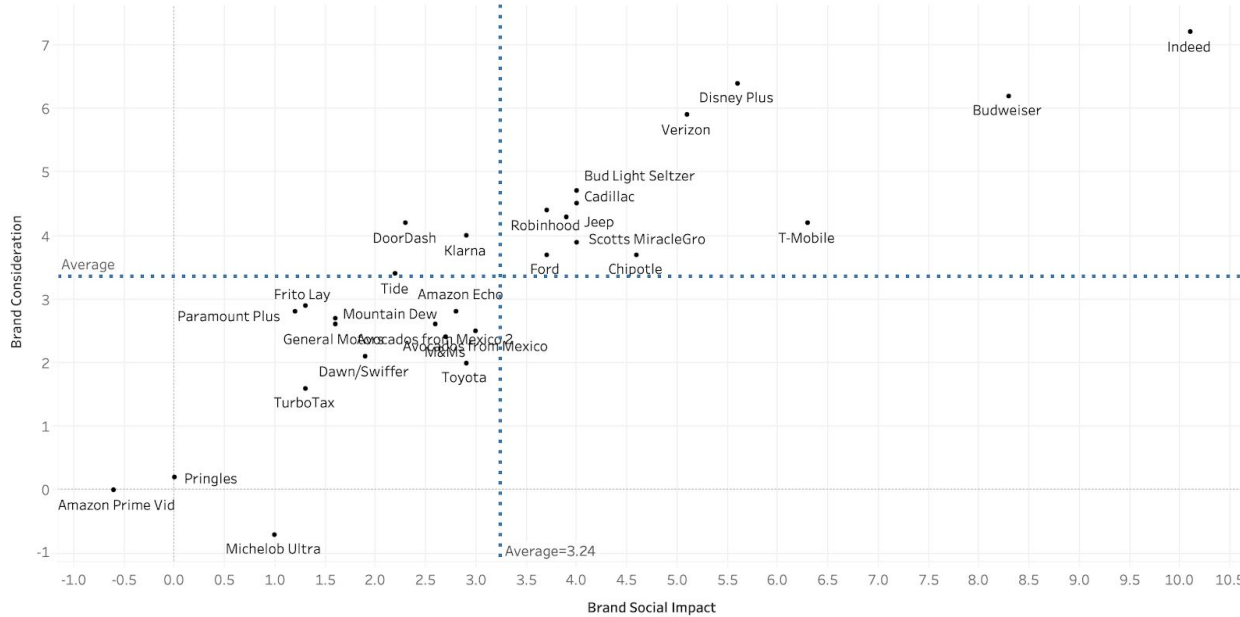
how they made people feel about groups like the police, immigrants, climate activists, their neighbors, or things like the COVID vaccine. This methodology also allowed us to compare results from this corporate context to the results we saw in 2020 for material that was produced for a more political set of goals. And Swayable’s broader benchmarking and norms database let us understand this impact in the context of what has been achieved by top advocacy and commercial storytellers in related contexts.

Findings

- 1. Increases in positive brand perceptions are strongly correlated with increased brand consideration.

A strong relationship exists between changes in a brand’s perception as being positive for the community and viewers reporting that they will consider the brand the next time they are in the market for a similar product or service. The more a brand’s ad made viewers’ think they were socially responsible, the more likely viewers were to consider purchasing goods or services from them. The correlation coefficient visualized below is 0.87.

Brand Social Impact vs. Brand Consideration



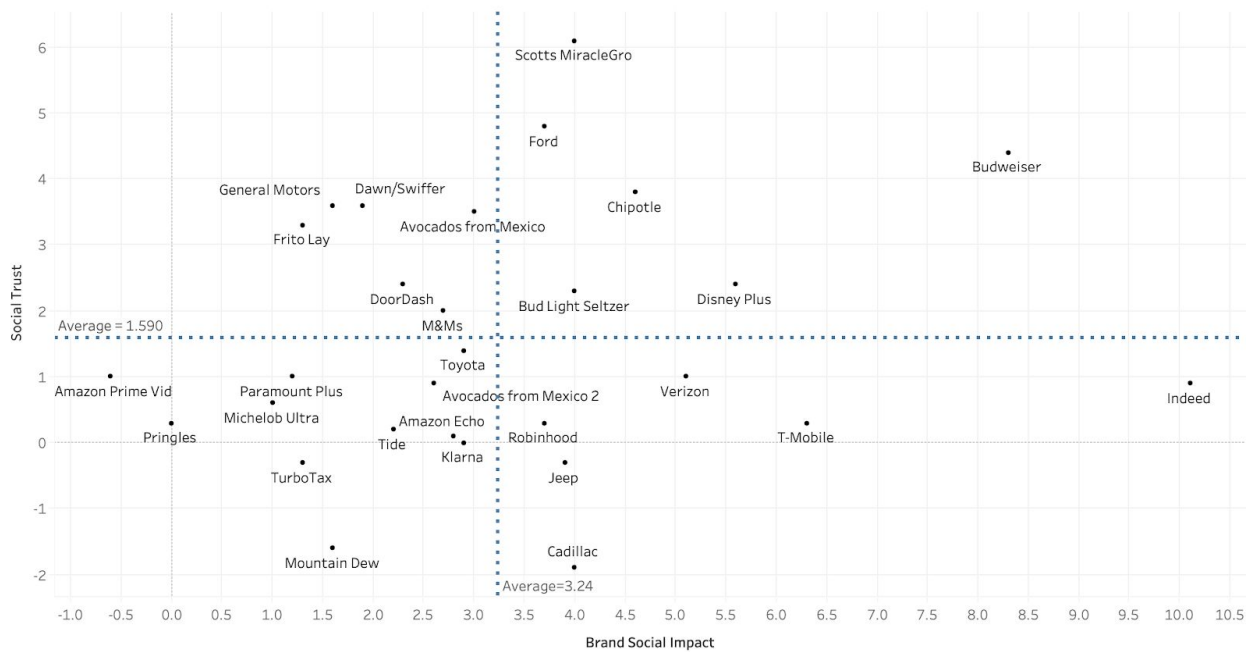
- 2. Super Bowl ads had some positive social effects on average. But this did not translate into positive institutional trust.

The ads had widely variable effects on social measures. On average, they increased the idea that people try to act fairly. And through the stories they told and the protagonists they featured, many increased trust in immigrants, neighbors, the COVID vaccine, and some even in the police or climate advocates. Observing the content qualitatively, it’s apparent that many brands were conscious of this political moment and the public’s perceptions of challenges in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, and designed campaigns to respond to that moment.

Despite this setup, none of the ads translated into increased institutional trust. Some even moved this measure negatively. In fact, ads that were particularly successful at increasing trust in large or small businesses, decreased institutional trust, especially in government. Even ads that addressed the pandemic head-on, while raising confidence in the vaccine, did not increase institutional trust.

A number of ads increased specific aspects of social trust, like [Scotts Miracle-Gro](#), [Dawn and Swiffer](#), [Ford](#) and [Frito-Lay](#). These ads were most successful at increasing social trust among people who already described themselves as socially connected (meaning they feel they have many people they are connected with and rely on in their lives). Among the socially isolated, this measure rarely moved positively. A lack of social connectedness is believed to be correlated with support for many anti-social viewpoints and susceptibility to conspiracies like Q-Anon and far-right political beliefs.

Brand Social Impact vs. Social Trust



Social trust increases were correlated with increases in trust in neighbors, immigrants, the covid vaccine, small and large businesses and sometimes climate activists or the police. When these ads had positive social effects, they were distributed across segments. For example, [Ford](#) had positive effects on social trust basically across the board, including among the socially isolated.

On the other hand, [Jeep](#) -- one of the most talked-about ads after the Super Bowl and featuring Bruce Springsteen -- had some positive effects mostly among moderates and increased a sense of responsibility to others among Black viewers. The message of “unity” at the center of the [Jeep](#) commercial resonated with moderate but not very liberal or very conservative viewers. This finding is also consistent with political results from last year, where the ads which generated the most social engagement were often not the most effective for persuasion.

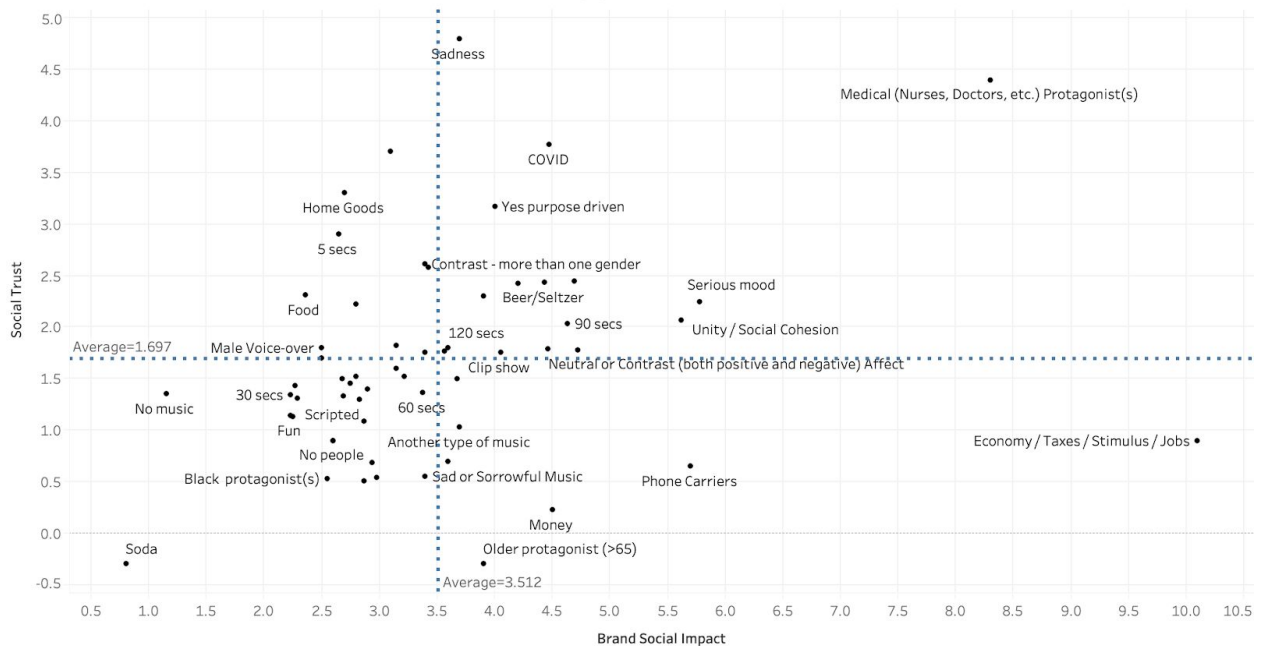
- Attributes of ads that increased social trust during the Super Bowl matched attributes that did the same in politics.

In a meta analysis of our 2020 findings in politics, we found several attributes of content that predicted positive impact on social trust. These included:

- Discussions about social issues
- Optimistic tones
- A diverse slate of protagonists on screen
- Appeals to sadness, pride or empathy

When tagging Super Bowl ads in a similar manner, the results follow similar patterns. Specifically, positive tones, depicting struggle and hope, and featuring everyday people telling their stories in inspiring ways each increased likelihood of positive movement on social trust.

Brand Social Impact vs. Social Trust Tagging Results (2)



[Budweiser](#), which elected to not buy a traditional Super Bowl ad but created a 90-second video showing inspirational clips and announcing an investment in COVID-relief, [Ford](#), and [Scotts Miracle-Gro](#) were among the brands that received the most positive movement on perceptions of their social impact. They also increased social trust the most. These ads had some of the qualities we saw succeed in political messaging, too: many real people, especially front line health care workers, depicted on screen, earnest tones that acknowledge struggle but look forward in hopeful ways, and messages that encourage unity.

In other words, they were rewarded for (unknowingly) following the playbook we saw in 2020.

Conclusion

Overall, these ads achieved their main purpose (as we expected to see): they introduced viewers to these brands, increased viewers' consideration of buying their products, and increased positive perceptions of these brands. Some were more successful than others, but on balance, the brand effects were positive. In many cases, they even had spill-over effects to other brands or products in their categories.

Beyond their immediate brand effects, however, these ads had complex social effects. Many ads increased trust in neighbors, immigrants, the covid vaccine and large or small businesses. Some also increased trust in the police or climate activists. However, this rarely translated into increased trust in government. Ads that took a more direct, socially conscious approach, like [Ford](#), [Jeep](#), and [Indeed](#) had the most positive impacts on social measures like responsibility to others and trust in neighbors.

Over the course of 2020, we studied hundreds of political ads. In this Super Bowl analysis, we saw positive social impacts when brands made certain choices like talking about social issues or telling positive stories about our country. But we also saw that most of the goodwill these ads created, flowed to either the brand themselves or groups like neighbors, large and small businesses or immigrants. Trust did not increase, however, in government.

Over the year, as viewers see hundreds of hours of ads like these on TV and online, we are concerned that trust in government will stagnate or decrease. As brands succeed in increasing trust in business, government trust falls by the wayside. If government groups are not doing similar work to tell positive versions of their story, we may end up with a lopsided sense of institutional trust in America.

Notes

How we asked about social trust: *Which statement comes closer to your views? (A) Most people will try to take advantage of you if they get the chance, or (B) Most people try to be fair.*