

Skippable and Pre-Roll Ads: Literature Review

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Literature Review

Introduction

In an increasingly media-saturated world, video has begun dominating communication. As of 2014, 78.4% of internet users reported that they watch online videos of some format (Joa, 2018, as cited in Statista, 2016) and Pew Research found that 90% of young adults say they use the video platform YouTube (Kessel, 2019). With the unprecedented popularity of video-based websites, the usage of skippable ads and short advertisements has become an integral part of media marketing.

According to research done by Anthony Dukes, skippable ads were implemented into video sites like YouTube to make themselves more attractive to the viewer by giving the viewer more flexibility in their viewing choices (Dukes, 2018, p. 2). With skippable ads and short advertisements becoming a crucial part of the advertising world, we wanted to know how effective said ads are, specifically skippable ads. With the option to skip an ad, what keeps viewers watching, or do they stop watching altogether? We analyzed the effectiveness of skippable ads using the uses and gratifications theory and the reactance theory.

Many of our sources conclude that viewers don't react or engage with skippable and pre-roll ads because of the behaviors explained by the uses and gratifications theory, specifically when video ads interrupt users from information seeking and entertainment, both common gratifications mentioned in our sources (Kahn, 2017). Our sources also conclude that viewers don't react or engage with skippable ads because of the behaviors explained by the reactance theory, specifically feelings of frustration and irritation when users experience an "intrusive" ad (Belanche, 2017). In addition to these theories, this literature review addresses counterarguments to our claim that users skip the ad they are presented when they have the option. These

counterarguments highlight the tactics some marketers can use to keep consumer attention on the advertisement even when they are presented with the “skip ad” button. Furthermore, we plan to perform our own research on skippable ads, using eye-tracking technology. We hypothesize that we will have the opportunity to support the research we have gathered in this literature review.

Uses and Gratifications

In exploring audiences’ attention to video advertisements, especially pre-roll and skippable ads, the theory of uses and gratifications facilitate a greater understanding of the motivation behind audiences’ use of social media platforms, and in turn, a greater understanding of audiences’ attention to video advertisements. M. Laeeq Kahn paraphrases McQuail’s description of the uses and gratifications theory in media as “shedding light on the important question of why and for what people use media” (as cited in Kahn, 2017, p. 238). Elihu Katz, Hadassah Haas, and Michael Gurevitch dive deeper in formulating three objectives of uses and gratifications: “to explain how people use the media to gratify their needs; to unearth the motives for media use; and to identify the positive and negative consequences of media use” (as cited in Kahn, 2017, p. 238). These definitions provide an effective framework in identifying the uses and gratifications behind audiences’ use of platforms where video ads can be found.

In his article, *Social media engagement: What motivates user participation and consumption on YouTube?*, M. Laeeq Kahn recorded the results of his research focusing on the uses and gratifications when using YouTube. Kahn surveyed 1,507 participants and discovered that viewers use YouTube for a variety of gratifications including information seeking, information giving, social interaction, and relaxing entertainment (Kahn, 2017). Kahn also found the specific uses influenced by the said gratifications were: liking and disliking motivated by the

relaxing entertainment gratification, commenting and uploading motivated by social interaction, sharing motivated by information giving, and reading comments motivated by information seeking (Kahn, 2017). Kahn's research suggests that advertisers can use YouTube to satisfy the needs and gratifications of users through video advertisements, thus increasing the chances that users focus on the video advertisement instead of the "skip ad" button.

In another article addressing the uses and gratifications theory in YouTube skippable ads, Snehasish Banerjee explored the motivation specifically behind skipping video advertisements online. Banerjee's qualitative research outlined in his article *Skipping Skippable Ads on YouTube: How, When, Why, and Why Not?* reveals the how, when, why, and why not in relation to skipping ads. Through in-depth interviews, Banerjee discovered that "skippable ads are skipped due to repetitions, time constraints, lack of personalization, and users' negative attitudes towards advertising" (Banerjee, 2020, p. 1). The research reveals that many users skip ads out of habitual skipping, skipping unconsciously, and emotional skipping, which is described as not pressing the "skip" button but not giving the ad full attention. Banerjee also organizes the responses of when users *do not* skip the ad into three categories of gratifications: Grabbing attention, Personalization, and Relaxation (Banerjee, 2020). In sum, Banerjee's research contributes to the uses and gratifications conversation, specifically through the qualitative analysis of how and why online video advertisements are skipped. The results of the study suggest that users not only seek to gratify their needs by using the YouTube platform but are more likely to skip ads when their needs are not gratified through video advertisement.

Pivoting the user audience specifically to millennials, Chaitanya Sachdeva studied the motives behind millennials skipping ads as well as installing ad avoidance tools in her doctoral dissertation, *Creative strategies of advertising to break the barrier of advertisement avoidance*

on Youtube. From a business advertiser's perspective, Sachdeva outlines the creative strategies that gratify user's needs when watching YouTube ads. In conducting in-depth interviews with nine participants, Sachdeva found that eight of the nine participants argued that the YouTube advertisements either interrupt or do not "fulfill my viewing purpose" (Sachdeva, 2020, p. 43). Additionally, participants were asked about installing ad-blockers and if they would do so to avoid ads on YouTube. Many admitted they would not install an ad-blocker. Some attributed it to the fact that they enjoy a portion of the advertisements they see on YouTube, while others said they do not install ad-blockers as long as they have the option to skip the ad. For many, the gratification aspect of the ads the participants saw heavily influenced the likelihood of the participants skipping the ads or letting them play out (Sachdeva, 2020, p. 45). Sachdeva's research suggests that the Uses and Gratifications theory plays a role in the users' motivation to watch or skip the ad, as well as allowing ads into their feed rather than installing ad-blocker software.

In exploring the gratifications behind using platforms and choosing to skip ads or not, control becomes an important gratification for the users that can be satisfied with the option to skip the ad, as opposed to no option at all. In a study done on consumers' attitudes toward full-length video ads versus skippable video ads, irritation increases for the full-length advertisements without a "skip" option (Aslam, 2021). The authors of the study further discovered that when users consider full-length advertisements entertaining, valuable, and emotionally appealing, their attitudes become more positive. In contrast, when users consider skippable ads informative only, their positive attitudes increase (Aslam, 2021). The results of this study suggest that when consumers gratify their need for control in skipping or not skipping video advertisements, positive attitudes toward the video increases in general. In this way, this

research further contributes to the uses and gratifications conversation in online video advertising.

Reactance Theory

In this section, we study how reactance theory causes consumers to react to skippable ads in relation to their desire to maintain freedoms (Cialdini, 2009). Using this theory, we postulate that reactance theory will cause consumers to focus on the skip button or countdown clock and limit engagement with the advertisement (Jeon, 2019). We focus specifically on the level of stimulus which skippable ads contain (Belanche, 2017) and the manner in which this affects ad irritation and the level of reactance caused, discussing the level of ad irritation as the determiner of the level of psychological reactance experienced (Jeon, 2019). Further, we find that this theory suggests that skippable ads are preferable to full-length pre-roll ads in the level of reactance that they create (Kim, 2018).

Reactance theory explains the tendency for consumers to react against that which limits their freedoms, including their freedom to choose and consume goods and services. In this reactance, consumers aim to preserve their “established prerogatives” (Cialdini, 2009, p. 205). The established prerogative of YouTube consumers is entertainment and information fulfillment (Tandyonomanu, 2018). When ads block this prerogative, they limit the freedoms of the consumer and cause reactance against that which is limiting: ads, even skippable ads. This in turn reduces ad effectiveness as consumers judge the product being advertised by their emotions experienced (Jeon, 2019).

This reactance, in many studies, is described in terms of ad irritation. We see this explicitly noted in one study which observes that “heightened ad irritation elicited by forced

exposure to an instream commercial can result in psychological reactance” (Jeon, 2019, p. 146). The study applies this to skippable ads by further explaining that waiting, even for the shorter periods which skippable ads allow for, is unpleasant and causes irritation (i.e., reactance) in consumers since they are not able to fully control their experience. This reactance causes consumers to focus not on the ad itself, but “pay attention to the skip-ad button even when they are just waiting to click it” (p. 155) as they seek to escape the limitations to their freedoms.

The level of reactance can, however, be mitigated. One study explains the reactance towards the interruption of their “desires to gain information and be entertained” in terms of “frustration and irritation” and “intrusiveness” (Belanche, 2017, p. 77). The study suggests that within skippable ads, perceived intrusiveness of—i.e., reactance to—skippable ads is lower when the content is highly stimulating especially when the ad content is congruent with the expected content of the video. Moreover, the simple state of being a skippable ad reduces levels of reactance by increasing perceived control. While interruption inevitable in pre-roll advertisements, considered to be the “most intrusive” (p. 77) form of advertising causes irritation and decreases website loyalty, the increased control in skippable ads “reduces negative ad consequences by 30%” (p. 76) and encourages website loyalty. Another study postulates that the presence of skip-ad buttons, in comparison to pre-roll advertisements without one, will decrease irritation, the root cause of reactance, through the opportunity to restore lost freedoms (Kim, 2018).

Other Factors and Counterarguments

While much of the research we looked at supported our theory that the uses and gratifications and the reactance theory influenced viewers’ attention towards skippable ads, we

also found some research that compelled us to look in a different direction. While the findings below do not negate the aforementioned research, we found they were helpful in adding to the conversation as a whole through addressing adjacent factors and identifying limiting circumstances.

The studied sources in this literature review highlight many factors that contribute to the success of skippable ads outside of the uses and gratifications and reactance theories. In this review, “success of skippable ads” refers to factors that contribute to the audience’s desire to watch the full ad rather than to skip the advertisement. For example, Danang Tandyonomanu’s article *Ads on YouTube: Skip or Watch?* explores reasons users watch skippable ads (not skipping, but having the option), reasons users watch non-skippable ads, and the type of content the ads fall under (e.g. ad in music, ad in a tutorial, ad in a vlog, etc.). Based on survey responses, the author found that 65% of users watch skippable ads if the ads are attractive, 24% of users watch if they have interest in the product, and 12% watch for the actor in the ad. In contrast, only 20% of users watched non-skippable ads if the ad was attractive to the user, 11% watched if they were interested in the product, and 70% watched the un-skippable ad if they found the video content interesting (Tandyonomanu, 2018, p. 327). This study suggests that the attractiveness of the ad encourages users to continue watching the skippable YouTube ads, whereas the video content of non-skippable ads encourages users to continue watching rather than switching tabs or dividing their attention. Tandyonomanu’s research also suggests that the entertainment factor of the ads greatly contributes to the success of skippable ads. This counters our approach as Tandyonomanu’s research suggests that ads do not feel intrusive and don’t irritate or frustrate viewers if they are attractive and engaging. Tandyonoamnu’s research

indicates that reactance theory may not always have as big an impact on viewer's attention to skippable ads as we thought.

While, as mentioned above, the main use of YouTube is attributed to entertainment and, to a lesser degree, learning (Tandyonomanu, 2018) there are other factors that influence the site's attraction of consumers, which in turn affects how and why consumers experience uses and gratifications and reactance when presented with pre-roll ads. One of the main prerogatives for consumers is to "join an interactive community" (Zaitceva, 2018, p. 27). This, in turn, helps to explain findings in other studies which show one-on-one interactive advertising "may lead to higher attention than do other forms of online advertising" (Kim, 2018, p. 9).

A study done by The YouTube Insights Team had similar results as it suggests that while many people use the "skip" feature when viewing skippable ads, advertisers can prevent viewers from using the skip option by making skippable ads more engaging, especially the first five seconds. Once the first five seconds of a YouTube ad have passed, viewers can choose to skip the rest of the ad at any moment for the remainder of the ad's duration. They even suggest that all ads are "skippable" whether there is a button for it or not. If an ad is not engaging, viewers will pick up their phone, change the channel, or find another way to metaphorically hit skip. Most of the team's research involved setting the right tone for the ad. The team put ads into 10 different categories that included "humorous", "emotional", and "calming". They found that humorous ads normally kept viewers watching the longest, but not always (The YouTube Insights Team, 2015). The team discovered that humorous ads tended to keep viewers interested the longest, but they also found that there is no formula or equation to know when a viewer will hit the skip button and when they won't. This rebuts our claim that the uses and gratifications theory influences viewer's tendency to skip ads as it suggests that the only reason people use

video sites is in seeking humor as it claims humorous ads are more engaging and effective than other tones in ads whether it is what the viewer was seeking or not.

Another study focusing on Generation Y consumers had similar findings as they indicated “engagement influences the effectiveness of YouTube advertising”. Using a quantitative approach and focusing their sample on Malaysian consumers, they found that if the advertiser did not grab the engagement of viewers, the ad was not effective (Cher, 2019). Focusing on a generation that was more inclined to use streaming websites like YouTube proved beneficial and we looked into another study that focused on a similar age group. Sachdeva, in research of their own, suggests that the reason millennials don’t stay engaged with ads longer is that their attention span doesn’t last that long. Sachdeva looked into the average attention span of a human and found that the average attention span had decreased from 12 seconds to 8 seconds since 2000 (Sachdeva, 2020, p. 24, as cited in Meltzer, 2017). With the average attention span of the human decreasing, allowing a skip option was beneficial for the advertiser as it allowed viewers who weren’t engaged in the ad more freedom (Sachdeva, 2020, p. 24). This claim suggests that the reason younger age groups of video consumers skip ads is not related to uses and gratifications or the reactance theories, but rather suggests that they simply don’t have the attention span to watch an ad longer than a few seconds as it isn’t engaging enough.

The study on temporal certainty in skippable and pre-roll ads (Jeon, 2019), discussed in our section on psychological reactance, added to the conversation in two additional notable ways. First, that while the presence of a countdown clock which created temporal certainty lessened ad irritation and increased purchase intentions in ads that were 5 seconds in length, the presence of the timer had the opposite effect on ads of a longer length, such as 15 or 60-second ads. Second, it noted that while temporal certainty reduced irritation when no skip ad was present

in shorter ads, including both a skip-ad button and a countdown clock increased ad irritation regardless of ad length.

Conclusion

Many of our sources conclude that viewers don't interact or engage with skippable ads because of the behaviors explained by the uses and gratifications theory and the reactance theory. In research surrounding uses and gratifications (Khan, 2017), this evidence includes both qualitative and quantitative studies showing that the motivations behind the use of YouTube do not include the motivation to watch advertisements. This helps us understand the attitudes toward ads that lead to users' reactance against advertisements as explained by reactance theory (Cialdini 2009). Because viewing advertisements are not part of the motivation for users to utilize social media, users feel irritation and a sense of lost freedoms, who then, per reactance theory, react against this loss of freedom and its cause, pre-roll ads (Kim, 2018). This reactance, we believe, will manifest itself in a refusal to acknowledge the advertisement and increased attention paid to the skip button and countdown clock (Jeon, 2019). This reactance will, however, be mitigated by entertaining and congruent ads which at least partially gratify the use that consumers were originally seeking (Belanche, 2017).

Although many studies also show that advertisers can create content that will keep the user focused on the ad itself through high-arousal stimuli, our research includes overwhelming evidence that many ads are skipped because the content of the ad does not captivate or engage the user through sufficient arousal (Belanche, 2017). Our research contributes to the conversation on the skippable ads through exploring attention paid in the specific realm of YouTube skip ads

and situating it in previously completed research on uses and gratifications theory and reactance theory.

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