



Skip or Not to Skip: Impact of Empathy and Ad Length on Viewers' Ad-Skipping Behaviors on the Internet

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Abstract. This exploratory research paper examines how viewers' empathy toward the spokesperson in a skippable, in-stream advertisement influence their skipping behaviors. Based on the emotional empathy theory (Batson et al. 1997), the current study predicted that the heightened empathy induced by the spokesperson in the ad may make it difficult for viewers to avoid (i.e., skip) the person to whom they empathize in the ad. Further, the longer the exposure to the spokesperson in the ad, the higher the level of empathy with the spokesperson, the better the ad-effectiveness (Escalas and Stern 2003). Results are three-fold. First, viewers' empathy with spokesperson in the ad mediated the effect of the ad length on skipping likelihood. The longer the ad the higher the empathy, resulting in less likelihood of skipping ad ($-0.99 < CI < -0.01$, $b = -0.50$, $z = -1.98$, $p = .04$). Second, empathy with spokesperson in the ad did not significantly mediate the effect of the ad length on viewing duration and on the click-through rate. The results provide initial evidence that empathy may be effective in reducing likelihood of viewers' ad-skipping.

Keywords: Skippable ad · Ad skip · Empathy

1 Introduction

The growth of online advertising is overwhelming. With the spread of the Internet's wider bandwidth, in 2015, the market size of the Internet advertising was estimated about \$51.64 billion, almost one third of the total advertising spending in the United States (Advertising Age 2015). Particularly remarkable is the growth of the in-stream commercial—which is video advertising that appears pre-, mid- or post-roll while watching the chosen content (YouTube 2016). Spending on in-stream commercials increased by 42% from 2014 (\$5.24 billion) to 2015 (\$7.46 billion) (eMarketer 2016). This growth may reflect the audience's changing viewing behavior. Compared to 2012 (35 min), Americans spent 27 more minutes (62 min) on digital video media per day (Advertising Age 2015). More and more video contents (whether user- or broadcaster-created) attract viewers to the video sharing platform. The uploaders of these videos can allow the in-stream commercials to appear before or in the middle of their videos for monetary incentives. Compared to television commercials, in-stream commercials have

advantages such as the likelihood of matching consumers with relevant advertising based on their search behavior or choices of and preferences toward online video contents (Evans 2009). The cost of this advertising is about 0.09 dollars, which is relatively cheaper compared to traditional media channels (Carter 2016). One successful in-stream commercial brought about 450,000 impressions, 80,000 video views per month, and 3,500 website visits (Carter 2016). Consumers may understand that in-stream advertising is a tradeoff for watching a free content (AOL 2012); in other words, viewers are somehow willing to pay the cost of watching their chosen content in advance. Here the cost is likely to be “watching” the in-stream commercial. However, as research reported, viewers hate to wait and sit through the in-stream commercials (Burst Media 2008). While waiting for their chosen video content, viewers may want to know when the negative event—waiting for an ad to end—will end. Therefore, although viewers may watch the commercial, they are likely to be irritated by having to wait until the ad ends (Burst Media 2008). Perhaps this adverse impact of waiting experience is one of the reasons why in-stream commercials may have been unsuccessful so far.

To relieve viewers’ irritation, Ad Skip button is available for viewers. Those ads that can be skippable are often called “skippable ads.” Google reported that skippable ads are more effective than conventional non-skippable ads (Pashkevich et al. 2012). However, the Industry reports and managers’ views on the skippable ads are not as rosy as Google predicted (Gesenhues 2014). Viewers are more likely to skip the ads than complete viewing (Gesenhues 2014; Kevin 2017). Also major media outlets such as NBC, FOX, and CBS may fear that the feature of skipping ad may jeopardize their financial foundations (Peralta 2012). With the rapid growth of the skippable ads, thus, it is indispensable for the media industry to find out the best message strategies to keep the viewers watch the whole ad instead of skipping or avoiding their advertisements.

For marketers and message designers, thus, it is indispensable to make in-stream commercials that delay or prevent viewers’ skipping of ad, particularly given that the effectiveness of advertising is indexed by the amount of time that viewers spend on watching the ad (Teixeira et al. 2010). This raises a question: how can an ad delay or prevent viewers’ skipping of ad? Despite its urgency of finding out the solutions, only few research has been done on how to reduce viewers’ skipping behavior. The present study answers this question by showing that empathy may be another key component of a message that can reduce viewers’ skipping behavior.

2 Literature Review

One previous study found that emotion can be used to reduce viewers’ likelihood of ad skipping (Belanche et al. 2017). The study shows that the higher the arousal the ad content elicits in viewers the less viewers are likely to avoid (i.e., skip) the ad (Belanche et al. 2017; Heath et al. (2006). Along with arousal, the present study identifies and tests the other emotional concept that may be useful in reducing viewers’ skipping behavior: empathy. Empathy refers to “another-oriented emotional response congruent with the perceived welfare of another person (Batson 1990, p.339).” Simply put, empathy is the experience of another person’s emotion. Previous research shows that empathy can

promote prosocial behavior (e.g., helping people in need) (Bagozzi and Moore 1994; Basil et al. 2008; Eisenberg and Fabes 1991; Leith and Baumeister 1998; Roberts et al. 2014; Shelton and Rogers (1981)). While these studies accumulated a large amount of evidence that empathy can change attitudes and behaviors, what is less known in the literature is the relationship between empathy and avoidance of message. Given that empathy can be seen as “an emotional engagement” (Busselle and Bilandzic (2009), the present study predicts that if viewers' empathy with the person appearing in advertisements is triggered and aroused, then viewers will pay attention to what the person says. Thus, the higher the empathy toward the spokesperson in the ad, the less likely viewers click the skip ad button; the longer viewers watch the ad. Also, the present study predicts that longer ad (e.g., 30 s ad) is typically more effective than short ad (e.g., 15 s) because empathy needs a certain amount of time to be aroused in viewers (Schacht and Sommer 2009).

3 Methods

A sample of 57 college students were randomly assigned to either short (15 s) or long ad condition (30 s). Across all conditions, participants were given a choice of 4 titles for 4 “different” animal-related videos, which actually lead to the same single animal video. Once they chose a title and starts viewing the video, an unexpected skippable ad appears. This skippable ad was shown from a video experiment platform that was developed for research purpose (see Fig. 1) The ad used for this study was a campaign by American Heart Association. In the ad, a NBA star Paul George appears as a spokesperson talking about his experience about his mother's heart attack and how to cope with such a sudden event. Participants can skip the ad after 5 s elapsed. Also, they can click the link for more information about the ad.

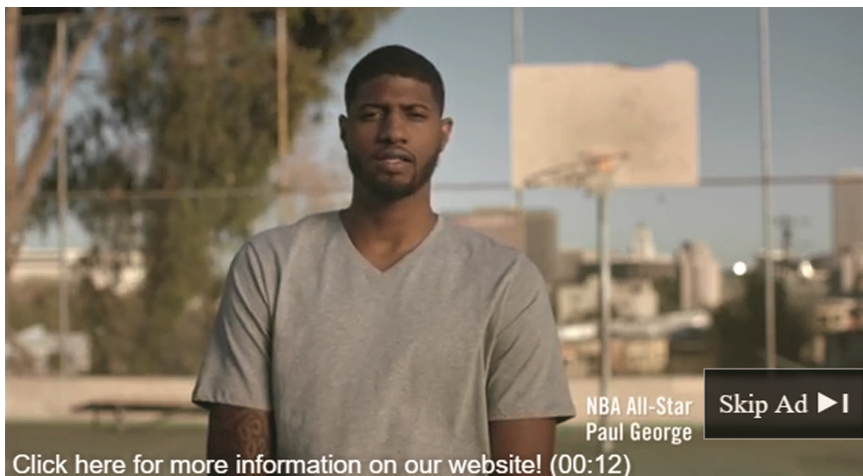


Fig. 1. A screen shot of the skippable ad.

In terms of measurement, participants' skipping behaviors including whether or not participants click the "Skip Ad" button and how long they stayed on the commercial were recorded in the server. In addition, participants' clicking on the "more information on our website" appearing on the bottom of the screen was also recorded. To measure participants' empathy toward the spokesperson in the ad, Batson's 7-item scale of empathy was used. After viewing the videos, participants were asked to rate to what extent they feel "sympathetic," "compassionate," "softhearted," "warm," "tender," and "moved." (on a scale of 1[not at all] to 9[extremely]) Also, there were asked "while viewing the ad, to what extent did you concentrate on feelings of the spokesperson in the ad."

4 Results

The results showed first that the longer the ad the higher the empathy level ($\beta = 1.11$, $SE = .48$, $t = 2.28$, $p = .02$, $.14 < CI < 2.07$). Next, the empathy significantly mediated the effect of the length of the ad (15 vs. 30 s) on viewers skipping behavior (whether or not viewers clicked the skipping button, 0 = not clicked vs 1 = clicked), ($\beta = -.50$, $SE = .78$, $Z = -1.98$, $p = .04$, $-.9 < CI < .0061$). Yet, the mediation model was not significant with the other outcome variables, the duration of watching the ad ($-.39 < CI < .31$) and the clicking on the link ($-.22 < CI < 1.43$).

5 Discussion

The current study provides some evidence that empathy might be effective in reducing viewers' skipping behavior. The results showed that the longer the ad the stronger the empathy viewers experience. The aroused empathy then reduced the likelihood of viewers' skipping behavior. This is an initial evidence with a small sample size. Thus, the results await further examinations with more studies.

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