



## Research Report

## Be careful what you wish for: The impact of advertisement choice on viewers' expectations

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## ABSTRACT

Advertisement choice is an online marketing technique where viewers of videotaped content are allowed to choose the advertisement they want to watch during a commercial break. The purpose of this study was to examine how this choice influenced viewers' expectations of the content they were about to witness. Two hundred seventy-one students participated in a between-participant quasi-experimental study. After watching a YouTube video, one group of participants chose to watch a MP3 advertisement instead of an advertisement for a digital camera. The other group of participants was not given a choice and watched the same advertisement. Participants' expectations were measured using six 7-point Likert items. The results of the study found that participants who chose to watch the MP3 option had significantly higher expectations of the upcoming advertisement than the participants who did not get a choice. These results parallel previous findings for female but not male online viewers. As a result, female viewers may go through a different series of cognitive processes when encountering advertisement choice compared to their male counterparts. Regardless of any cognitive differences, increases in advertisement expectations could potentially influence other important online marketing outcomes such as advertisement avoidance behaviors.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the start of the new millennium, it seems that people in the United States and around the world are spending increasingly more time on the Internet. According to the [International Telecommunication Union \(2014b\)](#), 3 billion individuals (40% of the global population) are expected to use the internet by the end of 2014. This growth is astonishing considering that an estimated 495 million individuals (8% of the global population) were using the Internet in 2001 ([ITU, 2014a](#)). In addition, approximately 44% of households worldwide are expected to have Internet access by the end of 2014 ([ITU, 2014b](#)). This percentage has greatly increased from over 13% in 2002 ([ITU, 2014a](#)). Not surprisingly, this growth occurred within the United States as roughly 46% of individuals reported using the Internet in 2000 compared to 87% using the Internet in 2014 ([Pew Research Center, 2014](#)).

Whether it is used for business ([Outlook](#), [Linkedin.com](#), etc.), or personal reasons ([Facebook.com](#), [Twitter.com](#), etc.), online use is quickly replacing various traditional mediums. This transition is also taking place within the entertainment domain as more individuals are using various online sites ([YouTube.com](#), [Hulu.com](#), etc.) to watch television and movie content through their computer. In 2003, approximately 74% of households worldwide owned at least one television while 16% had Internet access ([ITU, 2014a](#)). In 2010, the proportion of households worldwide with a television slightly increased to 79% while the proportion of households with Internet access almost doubled to 30%. In 2006, approximately 44% of the United States population reported that it would be very difficult to give up their television while 38% made the same claim for the Internet ([Pew Research Center, 2014](#)). Currently, 35% of the United States population would face significant difficulty removing their television while 53% would encounter the same difficulty regarding their Internet. Not surprisingly, marketers have noticed this trend and are spending significant amounts of money and effort to connect with the demographic groups that they target.

One advantage of advertising online is the ability to use more focused approaches when displaying persuasive communications.

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A well-known example of this is the use of banner advertisements. In television, commercials are selected and displayed based on the show airing at the time. Banner advertisements, however, focus on websites that a specific computer has visited recently (Goodrich, 2011). Any major web browser (Chrome, Firefox, Internet Explorer, etc.) will create cookies to track which websites a computer has visited, and marketers will display advertisements pertaining to those websites later on. In addition, online advertisers can track various top (direct website traffic), mid (page view lift), and bottom-funnel (total leads) metrics that are not available to their counterparts working in television (Batra, 2014; Callahan, 2013; Cohan, 2012). However, while this practice is common for those using text-based websites, it does not appear to be as relevant for various streaming sites. As an alternative, some streaming sites attempt to increase user interest by using techniques such as advertisement choice (Nettelhorst & Brannon, 2012a, 2012b).

Advertisement choice is an online marketing technique where marketers give the user control over what type of advertisement to be exposed to. Thus, advertisement choice is a more user-driven approach to marketing compared to other traditional methods. Advertisement choice is a broadly defined concept where viewers can choose across a variety of elements pertaining to the advertisement itself. These elements could include the semantic focus of the message (Schlosser & Shavitt, 2009), the product being marketed (Nettelhorst & Brannon, 2012a, 2012b), and the length of the message. Regardless of the element being chosen, advertisement choice is considered a method of selective exposure (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, 2005; Hart, Albarracín, Eagly, Lindberg, & Merrill, 2009; Jonas, Schulz-Hardt, Frey, & Thelen, 2001) where viewers are expected to experience some amount of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Despite being a recent technique, past research has explored the influence personal choice has on individuals' psychological states both within and outside of marketing contexts.

The original research on choice involved participants' compensation for completing an experiment (Brehm, 1956). After finishing a bogus experiment, Brehm either allowed participants to choose their compensation (from a variety of products) or selected the compensation for them. Once the participants were given their product, they were asked to indicate their attitude toward it. Brehm found that participants who chose their product had more positive attitudes of it than those who did not make the choice. In a different examination of choice, Freedman and Steinbruner (1964) had participants evaluate a student's application to graduate school. After reading the application, the participants were placed into a high or low choice condition. Participants in the high choice condition were instructed, "You are free to rate the person any way you want" (p. 679). Participants in the low choice condition were instructed, "You are thus virtually forced to make this decision, so you do not have much choice on the first question" (p. 679). Participants then rated the graduate candidate using 7-point Likert scales. After their evaluation, the participants were exposed to counterattitudinal information about the candidate and asked to re-evaluate the candidate with this new information. Freedman and Steinbruner found that an individual's ability to control his/her own evaluation made the evaluation more resistant to contrasting pieces of information. In a test of choice within an educational setting, Ackerman and Gross (2006) found that students' ability to choose which classes to include within a marketing minor option increased their expected satisfaction with and desire towards that option. The change in satisfaction and desire were particularly greater in those who had more interest in the option to begin with.

The initial examination of choice within online contexts exposed participants to a fictional webpage for sunglasses (Schlosser & Shavitt, 2009). After reading product information

about the sunglasses, the participants in the choice condition were allowed to choose the semantic focus of an advertisement for the glasses. The options included advertisements focused on the quality, style, and value of the glasses. The participants in the no choice condition did not get to choose which type of advertisement to be exposed to. Schlosser and Shavitt found that participants' attitudes of the sunglasses were more positive and more resistant when they were allowed to choose the target advertisement than when the choice was made for them. A related series of studies found that female viewers paid more attention to an advertisement that they choose to watch compared to an advertisement that is chosen for them (Nettelhorst & Brannon, 2012a, 2012b). In contrast, males paid the same amount of attention towards the advertisement in the choice and no choice conditions. This pattern converged nicely with the findings found in Ackerman and Gross (2006) since the group thought to be more interested in advertisements (i.e. females; Alreck & Settle, 2002; Campbell, 1997; Dholakia, 1999; Miller, 1998; Moore, 2007; Okazaki, 2007; Wolburg & Pokrywczynski, 2001; Wolin & Korgaonkar, 2003) was influenced by the choice manipulation.

While it is important to assess the potential benefits of advertisement choice, it is equally important to study the limitations of this technique to help marketers identify when this technique is useful. For example, Nettelhorst and Brannon (2012b) found that not all choices increase females' attention toward the advertisement. Instead, the authors found that the choice must include desirable options in order to impact female viewers' attention. Additionally, the authors found that some personality types are not influenced by advertisement choice. Participants high in need for cognition (HNC; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) did not increase their attention after making an advertisement choice because they already exhibit high intrinsic motivation to think about the advertisement in general. The present study attempts to further the marketing community's understanding of advertisement choice by examining if advertisement choice affect viewers' expectations about the persuasive material they were about to witness.

Unfortunately, empirical research in marketing and social psychology has not yet explored how various treatments or manipulations affect viewers' expectations of an advertisement per se. While some studies have explored how different advertising appeals influence consumers' expectations of products (Goering, 1985; Jaeger & MacFie, 2001) and services (Clow, James, Kranenburg, & Berry, 2006), consumer expectations of the advertisement itself was not used as an outcome. This absence is particularly troubling since some studies show that consumer expectations can have a significant impact on a number of marketing outcomes. In one study, Müller et al. (2009) showed that viewers' negative expectations of publicly displayed advertisements can significantly reduce the amount of attention given to them. In addition, Palanisamy (2004) showed that consumer expectations can significantly impact the perceived effectiveness of banner advertisements for certain individuals. Thus, it seems essential for marketers to better understand the antecedents of viewers' expectations of advertisements given the effects this variable can have and the notion that consistent exposure to advertising increases viewers' expectations of what they should have (Richins, 1995). Given the important role that consumer expectations can have within marketing, this study specifically investigated how advertisement choice affected viewers' expectations of the upcoming persuasive message. Since no studies have used advertisement expectations as an outcome, the hypothesis for this study was derived from previous work on advertisement choice (Nettelhorst & Brannon, 2012a, 2012b). More specifically, the authors predicted that:

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