



## The effect of advertisement choice, sex, and need for cognition on attention

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### ABSTRACT

A recent study showed that choice of advertisement content affected attention for female but not male viewers (Nettelhorst & Brannon, 2012). This study extended that work by assessing the effect of choice difficulty and the moderation of viewers' need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) on attention. Participants were either allowed or not allowed to choose which advertisement to watch after watching a television skit. Next, participants watched an advertisement and rated their amount of attention towards it. Results showed that males were not influenced by the choice manipulation, but females had significantly greater attention after making the difficult choice. Similarly, high need for cognition individuals were not influenced by the choice manipulation, but low need for cognition individuals had significantly greater attention after making the difficult choice. These results suggest that choice in of itself is not a sufficient means of increasing viewer attention towards an advertisement. Instead the choice must be between options which are attractive to the viewer. In addition, advertisement choice should be an effective marketing tool particularly for female viewers or those with low need for cognition in general.

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### 1. Introduction

One relatively recent form of web marketing allows web users to choose which advertisement to be exposed to. For example, individuals are typically exposed to multiple advertisements within a 30 min span when they stream video content online using websites such as hulu.com. Due to the exposure to advertisements on various websites, some companies (e.g. hulu.com) allow their viewers to choose which advertisements to watch. In comparison to past forms of marketing within the web or traditional media (e.g. television, radio, etc.), advertisement choice allows users to selectively expose themselves to persuasive material (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, 2005; Hart et al., 2009; Jonas, Schulz-Hardt, Frey, & Thelen, 2001). This form of dynamic marketing is strikingly different from traditional forms of marketing which use a one size fits all approach or tries to predict interest in an advertisement using various factors (e.g. age demographics). Because of its contrast to tradition forms of marketing, the effects of advertisement choice on various persuasive processes is also likely to contrast somewhat with persuasive processes found through traditional means (Friedrich, Fetherstonhaugh, Casey, & Gallagher, 1996; Haugtvedt, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1992; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979, 1984; Petty, Cacioppo, & Heesacker, 1981; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). However,

research assessing the effect of advertisement choice on persuasion processes such as attention, comprehension, yielding and retention (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953) or reception and yielding (McGuire, 1968) remains scarce.

When examining the effect of choice on various attitude constructs, multiple studies found that making a choice increases product desirability (Brehm, 1956) through dissonance effects (Festinger, 1957), can make attitudes toward the product more resistant to counterattitudinal information (Freedman & Steinbruner, 1964), and can increase positive attitudes toward a product (Schlosser & Shavitt, 2009). However, none of these choice manipulations reflect how web users typically experience choice in on-line marketing settings. Neither Brehm (1956) nor Freedman and Steinbruner (1964) used advertisements at all in their choice manipulations while Schlosser and Shavitt (2009) had viewers choose advertisements which varied in emphasizing different aspects of the same product. Schlosser and Shavitt also provided the choice through a company's website itself rather than a third party provider. For most viewers who watch various types of video content online through websites such as hulu.com or youtube.com, the choice cannot be attributed to the product's company itself and is usually between different types of products. Thus it is not known if the findings of these studies generalize when the choice of advertisement content reflects the choice made by viewers who watch video content online.

A more recent study examining the effect of advertisement choice on viewers' attention towards the advertisement found that choice increased the amount of attention for female viewers but

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not male viewers (Nettelhorst & Brannon, 2012). This study's manipulation of choice required participants to choose between different products specifically where the choice was not sponsored by or could be attributed to any of the products' brands/companies. The moderation of viewer sex was not surprising since some research suggest that the impact of choice in educational settings is moderated by the amount of interest in the topic where choice is allowed (Ackerman & Gross, 2006; Schwartz, 2004). A study conducted by Ackerman and Gross (2006) found that interest in the domain where choice was allowed moderated the effect of choice on desire and satisfaction of the item being selected (here a college academic minor option). Additionally Ackerman and Gross, as well as Schwartz (2004), made direct comparisons between choice in their educational settings and marketing settings. Thus interest in marketing contexts should moderate the effect of choice. Several studies demonstrate that females find shopping more desirable than males (Alreck & Settle, 2002; Dholakia, 1999), spend more time shopping and make better consumer decisions than males (Campbell, 1997; Miller, 1998), show larger affective and behavioral effects in advertising research (Anschutz, Engels, van der Zwaluw, & Van Strien, 2011; Moore, 2007; Okazaki, 2007), and find web advertisements more informational (Wolburg & Pokrywczynski, 2001). Thus viewer sex as a proxy for interest moderated the effect of choice in the advertisement choice context. However, the findings of Nettelhorst and Brannon (2012) leave many unanswered questions.

One important unanswered question is whether or not choice in of itself is a sufficient means of increasing attention for female viewers. Attention in this sense is defined as, "a concentration of mental activity (toward an object)" (adapted from Matlin (2005)). In Nettelhorst and Brannon (2012), choice was manipulated using no choice and choice conditions rather than varying the difficulty of the choice itself. Choice difficulty here is defined as the desirability of the products when viewers are presented with the choice. One potential issue with this research is the implication that choice in general leads to various positive outcomes when that might not be the case. One possibility exists that the effect of choice dissipates when the choice clearly favors one option (i.e. one attractive vs. one relatively unattractive option). This possibility seems supported by Brehm (1956) which found greater cognitive dissonance effects in his choice paradigm when the choice options became more similar to one another in desirability. Thus it is possible that a choice between options which have different amounts of desirability will not lead to the same change in attention as a choice between options with similar amounts of desirability. Thus its theoretical and practical importance led to its assessment in this study.

A second important unanswered question is whether or not the interaction of choice and viewer sex on attention is moderated by other individual difference variables. One prominent personality variable worth examination is need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) because of its predictive use in the marketing and persuasion literatures. Need for cognition as a construct is defined as an individual's intrinsic motivation to think in general. Its value to the marketing and persuasion literatures is profound as it has been used as a factor in over 100 published empirical manuscripts (Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein, & Jarvis, 1996). In several of these studies, a predominant finding is that low need for cognition individuals (LNCs) are less motivated and do not process stimuli like advertisements in an in-depth manner in comparison to high need for cognition individuals (HNCs) (Haugtvedt et al., 1992). In the advertisement choice situation, it seems likely that need for cognition can moderate the choice-sex interaction as HNC and LNC individuals are likely to differ in their motivation to attend to the advertisement before the choice is made. Because HNCs are typically motivated and think about advertisements compared to LNCs,

it seems likely that advertisement choice will not provide the impetus to pay more attention to the advertisement. For this group, there is no reason to pay more attention to the advertisement since they are already doing so; thus the use of choice is not likely to have a significant impact. However, for LNCs who typically lack the motivation to devote cognitive resources to advertisements relative to HNCs, advertisement choice may provide a legitimate rationale for doing so. If so, then it seems likely that advertisement choice would influence this group specifically. Due to its importance in the marketing and persuasion literatures and well as its potential moderating influence of choice, its inclusion in this study was warranted.

This study extended the work of Nettelhorst and Brannon (2012) by exploring the interactive effect of advertisement choice, viewer sex, and need for cognition on attention toward the advertisement. To assess this interaction, male and female viewers with varying degrees of need for cognition were either allowed to choose a specific advertisement to watch or were not given a choice. For those that were allowed to choose, some viewers were given an easy choice with one attractive and one unattractive option while other viewers were given a difficult choice with two attractive options. The following hypotheses were created to reflect the findings of Nettelhorst and Brannon (2012), Brehm (1956), and other research involving need for cognition effects:

H1: Attention towards the advertisement will be significantly higher for female viewers who make a difficult choice compared to an easy choice or no choice.

H2: Attention will be significantly higher for female viewers who make an easy choice compared to no choice.

H3: Attention towards the advertisement will be significantly higher for LNC viewers who make a difficult choice compared to an easy choice or no choice.

H4: Attention will be significantly higher for LNC viewers who make an easy choice compared to no choice.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Two hundred three students from a large Midwestern university participated in this study. One hundred fourteen students (56.2%) were female. One hundred sixty-six students (81.8%) were self-identified Caucasians. Students' average age was 18.96 years. All students were enrolled in an introductory psychology class at the time of participation, and students were compensated with course credit for their participation.

### 2.2. Materials

All materials for this study were taken from Nettelhorst and Brannon (2012). A pretest measuring participants' attitudes of 28 different consumer products including various electronic, appliance, clothing, furniture, and sporting equipment items was used to determine which product options to include for the advertisement choice manipulation. Fifty-seven students from the same university participant pool completed the pretest. Pretest attitudes were measured using three 9-point Likert items. The specific items assessed participants' general attitude, purchase interest, and enjoyment of commercial watching for each of the 28 products. General attitude used an extremely negative/extremely positive continuum; purchase interest used a not interested/very interested continuum; and commercial enjoyment used a low/high continuum. Higher values on these items represented more favorable attitudes, higher purchase interest, and greater commercial watching enjoyment.

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