



# Understanding Interactive Online Advertising: Congruence and Product Involvement in Highly and Lowly Arousing, Skippable Video Ads

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## Abstract

Interactive online media are an increasingly preferred format for users and advertisers, and skippable online video advertisements are common on social media networks such as YouTube. The specific features and influences of this interactive marketing tool demand further consideration. Focusing on effective tactics, this article investigates the influence of introducing high-arousal and low-arousal stimuli on skippable ad effectiveness (i.e., ad acceptance, ad attitude, brand attitude, and ad intrusiveness), with the potential moderation of context congruency and product involvement. A pretest and three studies confirm that high-arousal ads are watched for longer time and are more effective in congruent contexts. Users' product involvement determines the intrusiveness of high- and low-arousal skippable ads. These findings, along with their practical implications for this novel setting, provide further directions for research too.

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*Keywords:* Interactive online advertising; Ad effectiveness; Arousal; Congruency; Involvement

## Introduction

In the relatively brief history of online advertising, various formats have emerged in the pursuit of more effective forms, moving from static banners to interactive audiovisual ads (Li and Lo 2015). Such developments reflect users' demands, as well as the rapid evolution of interactive technologies that can effectively disseminate commercial messages, e.g., social media, mobile devices, high-speed Internet (Hussain and Lasage 2013). In particular, online videos offer substantial value, due to their potential for increasing consumers' attraction to, interaction with, and control over online advertising (Pashkevich et al. 2012). Accordingly, online advertising challenges the dominance of traditional advertising media (e.g., newspapers, television), such that it now represents more than one-quarter of total global advertising spending (eMarketer 2015a), a 6.0%

increase over its position in 2014 (eMarketer 2015b). That is, modern companies are shifting their marketing strategies online, due to both the relatively poor efficiency of traditional channels (Pescher, Reichhart, and Spann 2014) and consumers' intensive uses of technology (Krawford 2011), especially among the millennial or "digital native" generation (CNN 2012).

Despite the differences in their capabilities and audiences though, many websites seem to adopt commercial designs devised for television advertising (Pashkevich et al. 2012), oriented toward a "captive audience" that has no choice but to be exposed to the ads (Ha 2003). Yet online media attract an "active audience" that may choose to consume media content, at whatever pace they prefer. In recognition of this distinction, some companies grant users greater control over the advertising content, such that they interact freely with these media (Huang, Lurie, and Mitra 2009; Li, Edwards, and Lee 2002; Logan 2013). In particular, interactive, skippable videos significantly increase users' active role. Consumers are not required to sit through commercial information before they may access the content they seek; instead, they decide whether to watch the

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advertising videos voluntarily, which implies a new perspective on the traditional concept of ad acceptance (Sultan, Rohm, and Gao 2009).

Users' interest in and tolerance of a commercial format depend on the level of control they perceive (e.g., voluntarily exposition) and the liveliness of the content (Huang, Lurie, and Mitra 2009; Logan 2013; Raney et al. 2003). In this respect, allowing users to skip advertising improves their attitudes toward the site and their purchase intentions (Yoo and Stout 2001); lively, interactive, audiovisual formats also help increase users' interest in and acceptance of online ads (Fortin and Dholakia 2005). Previous research in traditional media settings confirms that the introduction of high-arousal stimuli can increase consumers' attraction and attention to an ad (Heath, Brandt, and Nairn 2006), which tends to improve advertising effectiveness (Kensinger and Corkin 2003).

The level of users' control over advertising has evolved together with interactive social media like YouTube. Each month, more than one billion people visit this video-sharing platform to watch more than six billion hours of video (or nearly 60 minutes for every person on Earth); the number of people subscribing to this community continues to triple every year (Pashkevich et al. 2012; YouTube Statistics 2015). The YouTube monetization model is based on the insertion of advertising messages, at some time during visitors' exposure to their sought-after audiovisual content (Pashkevich et al. 2012). Placing video ads before the viewed content has proved effective, but it is also the most intrusive form of advertising on this social platform (Pashkevich et al. 2012). To solve this problem, YouTube introduced skippable video ads (formally, TrueView pre-roll ads) in December 2010. This prototypical interactive format, which has gradually replaced non-skippable ads, allows users to watch the ad to completion or to skip it after 5 seconds, enhancing their active role (Pashkevich et al. 2012).

Pashkevich et al. (2012) note that the introduction of this relatively basic interactive mechanism has influenced consumer opinions and attitudes but also has transformed the industry. In 2014, this new format grew 45% and was used by all top 100 global brands (Connolly 2015). Both YouTube and other reports suggest the benefits of this interactive format for users, video-sharing platforms, and advertisers (Dorai-Raj and Zigmund 2010; YouTube Advertise 2016). Some limited research on skippable video advertising confirms that its controllability increases user satisfaction with the website and reduces negative ad consequences by 30% (Pashkevich et al. 2012). For users, interactive formats enable them to choose what, when, and where to watch ad content, leading to perceptions of a more user-friendly platform geared to enhancing their pleasant experiences (Raney et al. 2003). Greater control over an interactive environment also increases users' motivation and loyalty, which helps firms meet their advertising objectives (Raney et al. 2003). Finally, advertisers only pay for delivered ads, that is, those played completely or at least for 30 seconds (YouTube TrueView 2016).

Following previous research, we posit that high-arousal stimuli in skippable video ads represent a compelling strategy to increase online video ad effectiveness (i.e., ad acceptance, ad

attitude, brand attitude, and lower intrusiveness). To advance this research a step further, we examine circumstances in which highly arousing, skippable ads might be more or less effective. For example, prior research suggests influences of context congruency (e.g., Gunter et al. 2002) and product involvement (e.g., Bian and Moutinho 2011) on both offline and online advertising. Despite vast literature devoted to understanding the effects of congruency and involvement on advertising, we know little about how they might determine users' acceptance or effective processing and evaluation of highly arousing stimuli in skippable advertising. Specifically, we seek to determine if a situational variable, such as context congruency, can moderate the efficacy of highly and lowly arousing, skippable advertising. We also investigate whether a personal variable, product involvement, might moderate this efficacy as well.

With these research goals, we aim to shed more light on the interaction between online users and skippable video advertising—a relevant and current trend in interactive social media with direct implications for management (Li and Lo 2015; Pashkevich et al. 2012).

## Literature Review and Research Framework

### *Arousal as an Antecedent of Advertising Outcomes*

Marketers commonly seek to increase arousal in their efforts to attract viewers (Lang 1990). Consumers select and react to certain stimuli, such that they pay more attention to stimuli that generate a high level of arousal (e.g., sex, risky behaviors, unexpected movement) (Bakalash and Riemer 2013). Some ad design features, such as novel contents, are often used as arousal triggers (Bialkova and van Trijp 2010).

From a physiological perspective, arousal reflects the degree of energization, activation, inner tension, or alertness a person feels; from a psychological perspective, it is a state of wakefulness (Shapiro, MacInnis, and Park 2002). The principal challenge for research in this field is the difficulty of measuring and analyzing arousal (Öhman and Birbaumer 1993). Traditionally, consumer behavior research has relied on self-reported scales (Shapiro, MacInnis, and Park 2002), but increasing numbers of researchers suggest combining traditional with neurophysiological techniques to gain more precise, objective measures of arousal (Ariely and Berns 2010; Poels and Dewitte 2006). Both the psychophysiological nature of arousal, and its frequent use in advertising suggest that marketers should stimulate users' arousal as an antecedent of effectiveness in online video advertising.

### *Ad Effectiveness*

Communication effectiveness depends on the goals of the campaign and the specific ad. Prior research uses attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand as two principal indicators of ad effectiveness (Goldsmith, Lafferty, and Newell 2000; Mehta 1994). Lutz (1985, p. 53) defines attitude toward the ad as “a predisposition to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner to a particular advertising stimulus during a

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