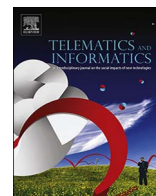




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Telematics and Informatics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tele

An experimental study on the effect of ad placement, product involvement and motives on Facebook ad avoidance

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Facebook
Ad effectiveness
Ad placement
Ad avoidance
Product involvement
Facebook motives

ABSTRACT

Facebook users do not visit the social networking site to see advertising. They are either just surfing the platform or searching for information. Therefore, advertising content is vulnerable to ad avoidance. In this study, the effect of two Facebook ad placements, sidebar ads and message stream ads, on ad avoidance intention was investigated through an online experiment. Sidebar placements are put next to the content stream, while message stream advertising is interwoven with the original Facebook content. 253 Respondents ($M_{age} = 39.4$, $SD = 8.7$, 50.2% female) were given either a searching or surfing task. The intention of respondents to avoid ads placed in the message stream was significantly higher than to avoid ads placed in the sidebar. Through multiple moderation analysis, we found that Facebook motivations and product involvement were significant moderators of the effect of ad placement on ad avoidance intent. Our results point to the crucial role of the degree of product involvement when targeting Facebook ads to the right audience and choosing the appropriate ad placement. We discussed implications for research and the professional field.

1. Introduction

Advertising is one of the most important revenue streams of media companies. When new media are introduced, it never takes long for companies to find a way to place commercial messages in the novel outlet. Advertising, however, is not the principal reason people use a certain medium (Săvulescu, 2011; Wilson et al., 2012). Therefore, finding the optimal way to place these ads, in order to minimize advertising avoidance and maximize ad effectiveness has always been a challenge (Speck and Elliott, 1997; Van den Broeck et al., 2017). Researchers and professionals have consequently searched for the optimal placement and positioning of newspaper and magazine ads (Speck and Elliott, 1997), the most effective timing and scheduling of television and radio ads (Abernethy, 1991; Speck and Elliott, 1997), and the optimal placement of online advertising (Cho and Cheon, 2004). Yet, the latter form of advertising has evolved spectacularly over the course of the last decennium. Social networking sites (SNS), and Facebook in particular, provide a unique online environment where seemingly never ending streams of content are inter-woven with options for social interactions. Due to this unique environment and Facebook's capabilities to target specific audiences with personalized ads, Facebook turned into one of the biggest advertising platforms in the world (eMarketer, 2015). Traditional online advertising formats such as skyscraper ads and other banner ads are not adapted to this environment anymore. Facebook currently provides a variety of different ad formats on their (desktop) website, ranging from image ads over video ads to newer formats as carousel ads and canvas ads (Facebook, s.d.; Lafferty, 2015). Yet, irrespective of the format, there are only two options of placement of the ads in the Facebook webpage: message stream placement and sidebar placement (Van den Broeck et al., 2017). The first is characterized by being served "in-stream" in the

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2018.01.006>

Received 17 November 2017; Received in revised form 9 January 2018; Accepted 15 January 2018
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Facebook content flow. This type of advertising is also known as ‘native advertising’ (Campbell and Marks, 2015). The sidebar placement option is positioned out-stream, next to the main Facebook content. The choice for the optimal Facebook ad placement was found to be an important predictor of the degree to which users accept the Facebook ad, meaning the extent to which they perceive the ad to be appropriate and a fair practice (Van den Broeck et al., 2017).

The evolution towards more varied and more personalized online ads ran parallel with criticism and more defensive attitudes toward ‘unethical’ persuasive attempts among internet users, as well as an increased interest towards principles of ad avoidance in popular and scientific literature (Bang and Lee, 2016; Strong, 2013). Ad avoidance became one of the biggest online marketing challenges in years (Bang and Lee, 2016; Cho and Cheon, 2004; Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2017; Jung, 2017). Next to avoiding ads on a cognitive and behavioral level, by ignoring or scrolling past ads, the internet has facilitated avoiding even more by providing mechanical means in the form of ad blockers (Jung, 2017; Kelly et al., 2010; Strong, 2013). As prior negative ad experiences may lead to ad avoidance (Cho and Cheon, 2004), the accumulation of negative experiences with advertising could trigger the internet user to automate ad avoidance by installing an ad blocker and avoid future ads all together. Providing the best possible ad experience, that can counter ad blocking and other forms of avoidance, became a key concern for the advertiser (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2016, 2017).

Research has uncovered several predictors of ad avoidance, first in traditional media (Speck and Elliott, 1997), later online on websites (Baek and Morimoto, 2012; Cho and Cheon, 2004) and on social media (Bang and Lee, 2016). As personalization is a defining characteristic of the Facebook platform not only in terms of advertising incomes but also in terms of user experience, it cannot surprise that privacy-related variables are frequently studied and have proven to be important predictors of Facebook ad avoidance (Boerman et al., 2017; Jung, 2017; Kelly et al., 2010; Smit et al., 2014). However, studies on newspaper (Smit et al., 2013; Speck and Elliott, 1997) and web page ad effectiveness (Cho and Cheon, 2004; Duff and Faber, 2011; Ying et al., 2009) have shown that a second factor, the placement of an advertisement, also has a significant effect on ad exposure, brand evaluations, perceived intrusiveness and ad avoidance, among others. Since the crucial role of ad placement in ad effectiveness on traditional advertising platforms has been proven, it is striking that research on the influence of ad placement on SNS ad evaluations and ad avoidance is still limited (Bang and Lee, 2016; Yu, 2014). Interestingly, in a recent study of Van den Broeck et al. (2017), the role of ad placement in determining ad acceptance on SNS was even greater than that of more widely studied privacy-related factors in the context of SNS.

The present study seeks to build on these findings by studying the effects of Facebook ad placement on ad avoidance intent. Moreover, we look at how these effects are influenced by the degree of product involvement, and two frequently studied Facebook motives: a surfing motive and a goal-oriented or searching motive (Bang and Lee, 2016; Joinson, 2008; Taylor et al., 2011). Two ad placements were implemented in an experimental design: ads shown in the Facebook message stream and ads shown in the right sidebar. These variables were measured and manipulations were performed to answer the central question of this study: “What is the impact of the two main options of Facebook ad placement (message stream and sidebar) on ad avoidance intent and how does product involvement and Facebook motives moderate this relationship?” (CRQ)

2. Theory

2.1. Online ad avoidance

Ad avoidance is defined by Speck and Elliott (1997, p. 61) as “all actions by media users that differentially reduce their exposure to ad content”. Ad avoidance can take place in three possible manners: 1) cognitive avoidance: by ignoring the ad (for example not paying attention to posts labeled as ‘sponsored’), 2) physical avoidance: by not looking at the ad (for example avoiding to look at the right sidebar), and 3) mechanical avoidance: by using mechanical aids to not see the ad (for example ad blockers) (Speck and Elliott, 1997). The avoidance of advertising messages is a strategy that fits within the wider framework of advertising coping strategies identified in the classic work of Friestad and Wright (1994), which was later confirmed by Fransen et al. (2015) as a major strategy for resisting persuasion attempts. Kirmani and Campbell (2004) coined ad avoidance a “persuasion sentry” coping strategy, as opposed to a goal-seeking approach towards persuasion attempts, for resisting the advertiser’s argumentation.

Bang and Lee (2016) found that ad avoidance of SNS ads is more triggered by attributes related to the habitual appearance of SNS ads, such as the placements on the right sidebar, than by processing of the information in the ad. As mentioned, a similar outcome was found with regard to acceptance of advertising (Van den Broeck et al., 2017). When investigating the importance of the effect of ad appearance characteristics on online ad avoidance, characteristics of the ad including size, timing, location and placement, have been found to be key predictors, and are often described with the umbrella term ‘ad clutter’ (Bang and Lee, 2016; Cho and Cheon, 2004). A study from Ying et al. (2009) confirms the finding that ads can be avoided on basis of placement. Yet, they remark that ads first will be evaluated on the degree that they impeded the goals of the viewer. Placement itself is not a sufficient reason to turn to ad avoidance. In this regard, recent literature indicates that native ad placements, such as the message stream placement in this case, lead to less persuasion knowledge, under the condition that the advertisement reflects the interests of the user (Fan et al., 2017). When ads are served in-stream, but are inconsistent to the message stream content, ads were found to hinder users in their activities, spark persuasion knowledge and, subsequently, lead to ad avoidance (Cowley and Barron, 2008; Fan et al., 2017). Since the internet is generally a goal-oriented medium, the hindrance of the internet task is an important variable to consider (Ham, 2016; Kelly et al., 2010; Ying et al., 2009).

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