Forced Vs. Voluntary Exposure Web Ads: Immediate and Long-Term Impact of Ad Avoidance on Communication Outcomes
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Generating long-term memory for an ad and the advertised brand are challenges in natural media environments, especially on the Web where ad avoidance is a norm rather than an exception. Large (vs. small) advertisement sizes and forced (vs. voluntary) ad exposure formats can improve ad recognition and brand recall outcomes immediately after ad exposure but their long-term effects are largely unknown. Prior research on endurance of implicit/explicit memory and memory for subgoals supports our findings that gains from using forced exposure ads accrue when ad sizes are small and negative impact of intrusiveness decay over time.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Generating long-term memory for an ad and the advertised brand are key advertising objectives since most choice and purchase decisions are made after a temporal delay from ad exposure. However, in natural media consumption environments, ad avoidance is a norm rather than an exception. This issue is especially relevant in the Web medium as advertisers grapple with banner blindness and declining clickthrough rates and use increasingly intrusive and large ad formats. Little is known if increasing ad sizes and using forced exposure ad formats can improve communication outcomes and if these gains generated immediately after ad exposure persist over time.

We investigate the role of advertisement size (large vs. small) and ad exposure format (forced vs. voluntary) on immediate and delayed brand recall, ad recognition, and brand attitude in web-based media. Drawing upon prior research in advertising, consumer behavior, marketing, and psychology we propose that ad exposure format induces consumers to cognitively or physically avoid ads. Voluntary exposure ad formats like banners and text ads are more likely to be cognitively avoided since it is an automatic, subconscious process that occurs in parallel with the browsing activity and does not require any behavioral action by the consumer. Forced exposure formats that interrupt browsing activity and demand immediate response are more likely to be physically avoided by closing them.

Cognitively avoided ads are preattentively processed, consumers have implicit memory for the ad but not explicit memory for the brand. Physically avoided ads generate explicit memory for the ad and brand through heightened attention and hence immediate recall and recognition measures are likely to be higher for forced exposure rather than voluntary exposure ads. Further immediately after ad exposure the strength of (implicit or explicit) memory traces will be higher for large ad stimuli compared to smaller stimuli. However in delayed conditions explicit memory for forced exposure ads will decay rapidly however implicit memory can endure over time for the same level of ad exposure. Hence delayed brand recall and ad recognition measures will lower for forced exposure and large ads compared to voluntary exposure and small ads.

Trafton’s memory model suggests that the interruption of browsing activity by large forced exposure ads leads to negative brand attitudes immediately after ad exposure compared to voluntary exposure ads. However after a delay, the ad context will be forgotten while familiarity based sleeper effect will contribute to higher brand attitude for forced exposure ads in delayed condition. Further, brand attitudes are not expected to differ across small forced and voluntary exposure ads.

The experimental design for our experiment had two between-subjects factors (two ad exposure conditions; banner ad (voluntary exposure) vs. pop-up ad (forced exposure) and two ad size conditions; large vs. small) and one within-subjects factor (time of measurement – immediate vs. delayed). One hundred sixty three undergraduate students participated in the study to evaluate a student newspaper site and provided measures in three stages.

Mixed model ANCOVA results indicate that forced exposure ads generate higher immediate recognition and recall of the advertised brand but lower brand recall in delayed conditions. Gains in recognition from using forced exposure ad format accrue when ad sizes are small, i.e. recognition scores for small banner ads significantly decayed over time, but not for small pop-up ads. Hence small pop-ups perform better both immediately after ad exposure and over time. There were no significant differences for large ad sizes for recall and recognition measures.

Brand attitude for banner ad was significantly higher than pop-up ads in immediate and delayed conditions. The significant two-way interaction of ad format and time under large ad size condition indicates that the negative impact of large pop-up ad use on brand attitude does not decay with time. In the small ad size condition, brand attitude for small banner ad was significantly higher than small pop-up ad immediately after ad exposure but not in delayed conditions.

Our results indicate that online advertisers face a formidable challenge in generating memory (especially recall) for their brand even when using intrusive ad formats. Recall scores are significantly lower than recognition scores indicating that few ads are centrally processed. However most ads are preattentively processed and endure over time, so recognition measures and use of large size ads with similar features will generate higher returns over time. We suggest practical implications for advertisers in selection ad execution features in optimizing immediate and long-term communication outcomes.