

Task Orientation and Ad Recall: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: - This paper investigates the relationship between task orientation of an advertising exposure situation and ad recall, suggesting that the relationship is mediated by ad avoidance behaviors and mitigated by the consistency between the ad and website context in which the ad appears. Findings confirm that ad avoidance leads to lower recall, and that task orientation during web browsing leads to more ad avoidance behavior. The impact of website-ad congruency is inconclusive.

Key-Words: - advertising, task orientation, ad processing, website advertising

1 Background

Advertising effectiveness has generally been assessed in the research literature by looking at the consumer attitudes towards banner advertisements due to their role in predicting purchasing behavior. Starting from ad credibility, ad perceptions, attitude towards advertiser, attitude towards advertising and mood (Lutz, Mackenzie and Belch, 1983) to brand reputation, product familiarity, website reputation (Szczepanski, 2006; Shandasani, Stanaland and Tan, 2001), to media context (MacInnis and Jaworski, 1989; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Derk and Arora, 1993) and other website characteristics (Bart, Shankar, Sultan and Urban, 2005), the main focus lays with assessing how central and peripheral cues can influence attitudes towards ads.

Limited interest was directed towards factors such as task orientation (Danaher and Mullarkey, 2003; Putrevu and Lord, 2003), context-ad congruity (Coulter, Zaltman, Coulter, 2001; Moore, Stammerjodan and Coulter, 2005; De Pelsmacker, Geuens and Anckaert, 2002) and their impact on attention and attitudes.

Danaher and Mullarkey (2003) argue that web page exposure is a reasonable measure of effectiveness of web advertising and that user involvement with the viewing/usage activity might trigger higher or lower recall and recognition of ads. While previous literature argues on both the positive and the negative effects of involvement with a media vehicle, Danaher and Mullarkey, find that separating

task orientation from program involvement may allow for a better and more accurate understanding of the way these two distinct factors impact advertising recall and recognition. Building on this distinction, Danaher and Mullarkey hypothesize that goal-oriented and surfing task modes are likely to trigger different responses to online advertisements. More precisely, they argue that goal-directed web page viewing results in lower recall and recognition than exploratory web page viewing.

Putrevu and Lord (2003) also argue that consumer involvement with the website topic will affect their processing of Internet advertising. Consumers with either a high or low level of involvement will focus attention on the elaboration of embedded banner ads, whereas moderate involvement will facilitate attention and elaboration of Internet advertising.

While Danaher and Mullarkey's study is helpful in understanding the role of task orientation on advertising recall and recognition, it fails to account for the effect that website/ad content congruency could have on the relationship between task orientation and ad recall.

Extant literature focused to some extent on program context - advertised product congruity (Bello, Pitts and Etzel 1983; De Pelsmacker, Geuens and Anckaert 2002; Furnham, Gunter, and Richardson 2002; Furnham, Gunter, and Walsh 1998; Horn and McEwen 1977). Nonetheless, advertisement - website congruity is believed to

trigger distinct effects on attention and attitude towards ads (Houston, Childers and Heckler 1987; Myers-Levy and Tybout 1989).

Studies on the effect of context/ad style (or content) congruity on advertising processing and recall are scarce and have generated contradictory findings. While some investigations support a positive effect of website/ad content congruity on ad recall and ad attitude (Aaker and Brown, 1972; Cannon, 1982), others support the negative effects of context/ad style congruity (Cantor and Venus, 1980; Derks and Arora, 1993). The explanation the latter studies provide emphasizes that an advertising message that contrasts with the context where it is embedded may lead to increased attention because the ad is perceived as innovative and interesting. (Juntunen, 1995).

Moore, Stammerjodan and Coulter (2005) define advertiser-website congruity as the extent to which the advertiser and the website focus on similar product categories. Based on Madler (1982), who suggests that consumers faced with information that is incongruent are likely to pay more attention to it and exhibit higher recall and recognition, Moore, Stammerjodan and Coulter hypothesize that web browsers will pay more attention to a banner ad for a product that is incongruent with the web site product category than to a banner ad for a product category that is congruent with the website product category. They also argue that web browsers who are consciously aware of the advertiser will have more positive attitudes toward the ad in a congruent context than in an incongruent context.

De Pelsmacker, Geuens and Anckaert (2002) have also studied the impact of ad style/context style congruency on attention and attitudes. Even though they do not look at online advertising but at television and print advertisements, their study is relevant to our discussion as it reveals how congruency between the advertising stimulus and the environment in which it is embedded can trigger higher or lower recall. In order to achieve a better understanding of this phenomenon, the authors make the distinction between low-involvement and high involvement consumers. Although they refer to product involvement, their analysis is somewhat similar to the user involvement with the viewing/usage activity analysis provided by Danaher and Mullarkey (2003).

Keeping in mind the influence that website/ad content congruity can exhibit over

attention and attitudes, it is interesting to assess how this factor could impact on the relationship between task orientation and ad recall. Building on Cho and Cheon (2004) article about avoidance of advertisements on the Internet, ad avoidance could play the role of a mediating factor between task orientation and ad recall. The underlying assumption is that different levels of task orientation will first trigger different degrees of ad avoidance, which is negatively related to ad recall.

Cho and Cheon (2004) hypothesize that users exhibit ad avoidance on the Internet because of perceived goal impediment, perceived ad clutter, and prior negative experience. For the purpose of our research, we'll focus mainly on the way Cho and Cheon have defined perceived goal impediment and what their findings were related to this variable. Cho and Cheon depart from the idea that the Internet is a more goal-, task-, interactivity-, and/or information-oriented medium (Chen and Wells, 1999, Eighmey, 1997; Korgaonkar and Wolin, 1999; Li, Edwards and Lee, 2002). Since users tend to be more goal-directed when using the Internet, banner ads may be considered more disturbing than other media ads. (Li, Edwards, and Lee, 2002). While Cho and Cheon identify three types of ad avoidance (cognitive, affective and behavioral) based on the different types of consumer advertising responses, we will look at ad avoidance as a single, unitary construct, in order to avoid unnecessary sophistication of our model.

2 Hypotheses

In this study, we want to build on Cho and Cheon's (2004) concept of ad avoidance, and investigate how task orientation impacts on ad avoidance, and implicitly on ad recall, while ad/site congruity works as a moderator factor on the relationship between task orientation and ad avoidance. In their study Cho and Cheon find out that the greater the goal impediment (search hindrance, disruption, and distraction), the greater the advertising avoidance on the Internet. In order to cope with this goal impediment, they suggest that context-congruent advertising messages could reduce the perceived goal impediment, and implicitly the ad avoidance. That's why we want to explore further this idea and see how ad/website congruity affects the relationship between task orientation and ad avoidance.

The variables that we look at are: task orientation, website/ad content congruency, ad avoidance and ad recall. We identify several relationships among these variables that we hypothesize in the following way:

H1: In situations of high Task Orientation, consumers will exhibit more Ad Avoidance than in situations of low Task Orientation.

This relationship has already been partly confirmed by Mullarkey and Danaher (2003). They argue that goal-directed web page viewing results in lower recall and recognition than exploratory web page viewing. Moreover, high goal orientation is also a determinant of ad avoidance, as the greater the perceived goal impediment, the greater the advertising avoidance on the Internet (Cho and Cheon, 2004).

H2: Ad Avoidance in negatively related to Ad Recall.

Given that Ad recall is a measure of attention towards the advertisement, it logically follows that whenever Internet users avoid banner ads, they do not pay enough attention that could enable them to recall the ad content.

H3: In situations of strong Website/Ad Content Congruency, the relationship between Task Orientation and Ad Avoidance behavior is weakened.

While several studies claim that website/ad content congruity leads to positive effects on advertisement recall (Aaker and Brown, 1972; Cannon, 1982), Moore, Stammerjodan and Coulter argue that website/ad content incongruence is likely to trigger more attention towards the banner ad, and higher ad recall. We argue that strong website/ad content congruency is likely to draw increased attention towards banners ads regardless of the level of task orientation exhibited by the consumer, thus triggering lower ad avoidance. (See Fig.1)

3 Methodology

While the previous section compiled the theoretical background necessary for achieving a better understanding of the subject of our study and it then presented the hypotheses we developed, the next section of this paper will illustrate the methodology we used to test the hypotheses.

For the data collection we decided to run an experiment in order to examine the effects of task orientation and website/ad content congruency on ad avoidance and ad recall.

For the purpose of this investigation we constructed a fictitious website, whose content and layout were quite similar to some popular websites. For the ad stimuli, several versions of a standard banner advertisement were created to manipulate website/ad content congruity. To ensure that website/ad congruency is manipulated effectively, we had to identify two sponsors for the banner ads that would be perceived as congruent or incongruent with the content of the website. Since both the website and the brands advertised were fictitious, no prior familiarity of the respondents with the site or the brands was expected to skew the results in any way.

Respondents were recruited on a convenience basis, using non-probability sampling and were directed to the experimental webpage and presented with an introductory screen that would provide them with detailed instructions to follow and thanking them for their participation. Since our main purpose was to assess how task orientation could impact ad recall, we tried to encourage our respondents to simulate online browsing activities together with goal-directed searches. To make our investigation easier, we divided it into two stages. At the first stage, respondents were instructed to look for a particular product on the website, while at the second stage they could leisurely browse the website. Two different banner ads were placed on the website at each stage of the experiment. One of them had content congruent with the content of the website, while the other was incongruent. After the time assigned for each task was over, the respondents were directed to fill in an onscreen questionnaire.

The questionnaire included questions asking for demographic data (age, gender, education level), other questions assessing their use of the website, for what purpose, what activities they undertook. Next, several measurement instruments were used in order to collect information pertaining to the variables we were interested in. The demographics were collected with the purpose of using them as covariates in order to account for some uncontrollable factors that might influence ad avoidance or ad recall.

In order to measure task orientation, we chose to use a series of eleven 7-point semantic

differential scales. These scales have demonstrated high validity while being used in similar investigations by Lichtenstein, Netemeyer and Burton (1990).

For assessing website/ad content congruency we will use the instrument developed by Miniard, Bhatla, Lord, Dickson (1991) asking respondents to evaluate how relevant the ad is to the content of the website, and then how appropriate the product advertised in the ad is to the content of the website.

To measure ad avoidance, we will use the scale developed by Cho and Cheon (2004), who use three variables to estimate ad avoidance on the Internet: cognitive, affective and behavioral ad avoidance. The scale comprises a total of 18 measurement items, 8 for cognitive ad avoidance, 6 for measuring affective ad avoidance and 4 for assessing behavioral ad avoidance.

Recall was measured at two distinct levels: unaided recall and aided recall. First, respondents were asked to write down all they could remember about any advertisements they've seen on the website. Then they were presented with a list of 10 brands, including the name of the brand advertised in the banner ad they saw on the website and asked to select the brand they remember having seen.

4 Results

Our first hypothesis states that the tendency to engage in ad avoidance behaviors is influenced by an individual's task orientation. As task orientation was manipulated in our design, a simple t-test reveals that, as expected when task orientation was high ad avoidance behavior was significantly higher (2.27 vs. 2.09; $t = 2.69$; $p = .007$). This was also supported by a significant correlation between the task orientation scale used as a manipulation and the same ad avoidance scale. These findings suggest that task orientation is a direct contributor to ad avoidance, supporting H1.

Our second hypothesis suggests that the prior relationship is stronger in situations where the ad and site are consistent in content and theme. Regression analysis using the interaction effect of congruency and task orientation suggests that this moderating effect does not operate, with a non-significant regression coefficient ($p = .79$) for the interaction term. Given the strength of the main effect suggested by H1, this is not surprising, as there will normally be some unexplained variation

that is accounted for by the hypothesized moderator. On this case, it appears that task orientation alone accounts for much of the ad avoidance behavior.

To ensure that ad avoidance is of managerial relevance, we also measured recall of the ads, to be certain that ad avoidance behavior was having the expected effect. Hypotheses 3 states that if ad avoidance behavior is high, recall will be low. This is confirmed by a t-test, showing that in cases where the brand advertised was recalled immediately after exposure to the site, ad avoidance was significantly lower (3.56 vs. 3.82; $t = 3.42$; $p < .001$) than in cases where the recall test was failed.

While the primary finding in this experiment was not as expected, it is useful to point out that the contextual expectation of ad processing suggested by previous studies is also operational in the context of web ads. Also, since there is no manipulation of the number of ad exposures in this context, we cannot tell if consistent ad avoidance over time would lead to memory in the long term, but in the short term, ad avoidance indeed does not encourage recall. The failure to support the moderating relationship of ad website congruency may actually be good news to advertisers as it provides additional flexibility in the ad placement process.

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