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I hate ads but not the advertised brands: A qualitative study on Internet users' lived experiences with YouTube ads

Abstract:

Purpose: This paper explores Internet users' lived experiences with video ads, both skippable and non-skippable, while watching content on YouTube.

Design/Methodology/Approach: In-depth interviews were conducted with 22 participants.

Findings: The participants unanimously expressed dissatisfaction with YouTube ads. The dissatisfaction was directed to the platform but did not spill over to the advertised brand/product. Ethical concerns related to privacy also emerged. Specifically, with respect to non-skippable ads, the participants expressed dislike for forced viewing and explained how they would engage in extraneous activities during the ads. Nonetheless, they appreciated the flexibility offered by skippable ads. They also elaborated on how, why, and when they would skip/not skip skippable ads.

Originality: The findings are discussed in light of the literature on not only online advertising but also platform switching versus continuance intention, spillover effect, privacy-personalization paradox, and visual attention.

Keywords: ad skipping; online advertisement; online experience; privacy-personalization paradox; skippable ad; video advertising; YouTube; YouTube marketing.

Article classification: Research paper

Introduction

YouTube has now become the most popular online video-sharing platform (Chakraborty et al., 2021). Staggeringly, Internet users upload over 500 hours of video each minute. Moreover, YouTube videos of over a billion hours are watched daily by the online

community. Of late, people have reportedly been shifting their preference from subscribing to a pay-TV service to watching YouTube (Smith, 2020).

YouTube, however, is up against an intriguing challenge. For one, it has to meet the interests of marketers by allowing them to run video ads in order to reach their target audience (Tafesse, 2020). YouTube and the content creators also earn from ads that are approved for monetization (YouTube Creators, 2019). However, bombarding users with ads hampers their viewing experience (Belanche et al., 2017a, 2017b; Dehghani et al., 2016). Users who are dissatisfied with their YouTube experience may cut back on their viewing time. The lower the time users spend on YouTube, the lower the scope for ads to run, the lower the scope for marketers to have their interests served, and the lower the scope for the platform as well as the content creators to earn (Chakraborty et al., 2021).

As a way to tackle this challenge, two disparate video ad formats have become popular (YouTube, 2019). One includes ads up to three minutes long but skippable after five seconds. The other includes non-skippable short ads up to 20 seconds long (Belanche et al., 2017a, 2017b; Pashkevich et al., 2012). Marketers need to pay YouTube when users watch the full ad if it is short or at least 30 seconds if it is longer (Belanche et al., 2020; Chakraborty et al., 2021).

These two video ad formats meet stakeholders' interests in different ways. On the one hand, users are expected to have a penchant for skippable ads due to their flexibility (Logan, 2013; Pashkevich et al., 2012). Moreover, they are likely to prefer short ads. On the other hand, marketers' and content creators' interests are better served by non-skippable ads that compel users to watch. Compared with short ads, long ads offer marketers a wider scope to communicate with their customers (Belanche et al., 2017a, 2017b).

Nonetheless, YouTube often asks its users to rate their experience with ads (see Figure 1). This shows that an understanding of users' experiences with YouTube ads is

necessary. However, scholarly efforts in this area are currently limited. Among the few works, Dehghani et al. (2016) conducted a quantitative survey to study how YouTube ads predict brand awareness and purchase intentions. More recently, Belanche et al. (2017a, 2017b) conducted experiments to examine how YouTube users react to skippable ads. But users' reactions to non-skippable ads have hardly received any attention in the literature. Meanwhile, the YouTube environment has been changing rapidly, and the percentage of non-skippable ads has been on the rise.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

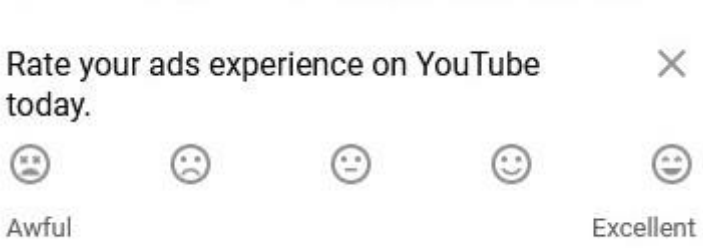

Figure 1. YouTube asking for feedback from users about their ads experience (Screenshot taken by one of the authors).

Therefore, to augment the handful of existing works (e.g., Belanche et al., 2017a, 2017b; Dehghani et al., 2016), this paper aims to offer a deeper understanding of Internet users' lived experiences with both skippable and non-skippable ads while watching videos on YouTube. Twenty-two in-depth interviews were conducted. Through this exploratory research, the paper makes two contributions. First, as one of the earliest qualitative studies in this area, it provides a rich description of how YouTube users feel about skippable as well as non-skippable ads while watching videos. Such a description is important for scholars and practitioners as it will help paint a clearer picture of the sentiment on the ground. Second, the

paper offers fresh insights into users' likes and dislikes with respect to ads on YouTube. These insights can not only inform marketers and YouTube but also lay the ground for further theoretical and empirical research in this area.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows: The next section is dedicated to a review of the literature. Given the exploratory nature of this paper, the literature was reviewed iteratively in a fragmented and purposive manner at several stages—first during the project planning stage, next during the period of data collection and coding, and finally during the writing process. As unconventional as it may seem, this is aligned with the guidelines for conducting exploratory qualitative research that cannot rely on an a priori framework for developing hypotheses (Martin and Turner, 1986; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Suddaby, 2006). The literature reviewed in the following section is therefore meant to give readers a background to the present research. It primarily stems from the authors' understanding of the literature before carrying out the empirical work.

The third and the fourth sections of the paper present the research methods employed and the findings gleaned respectively. Thereafter, the findings are presented in light of the literature that was reviewed not only during the planning stage of the research (included in the next section) but also during and after the empirical work (not cited in the next section). The implications of the research for theory and practice are also highlighted. The final section summarizes the key conclusions.

Literature review

Related works

Early research on online advertising predominantly focused on users' acceptance of the Internet as a medium for advertising (Ducoffe, 1996; Edwards et al., 2002; Yoon and Kim, 2001). Entertainment and informativeness of ads were positively related to the

perceived value of the ads in the online setting whereas perceived irritation had a negative association (Ducoffe, 1996). Traditional online ad formats include pop-ups, floating ads, and banner ads. It was found that pop-up ads, which open another window over the browser, along with floating ads, which appear by creating a layer over the web page, score highly in terms of the annoyance factor while banner ads score highly on the information front and are hence viewed relatively more favorably (Burns and Lutz, 2006). Online ads tend to be viewed more negatively than ads in mass communication avenues such as TV commercials (Logan, 2013).

Although early research confirmed that users find online advertising irritable (Ducoffe, 1996), subsequent works started to reveal a gradual shift in attitude (Edwards et al., 2002; Yoon and Kim, 2001). These works also found that a favorable attitude toward online ads tends to be positively associated with the effectiveness of advertising. For example, Cho et al. (2001) found that users did not necessarily have a negative attitude toward ads with forced exposure. Expectedly, advertising effectiveness in terms of click-through rates from forced exposure was higher than that from non-forced exposure. Moreover, Li et al. (2002) suggested that users' perceptions of interruption and intrusiveness could derive from advertisement length and frequency. According to Smith (2011), characteristics of online ads that cause a high level of annoyance with regard to intrusiveness include length, repetition, and the degree of forced exposure.

As social media continued to become popular, the advertising ecosystem has been undergoing a paradigm shift from persuasive mass communication to meeting individuals' specific needs (Belanche et al., 2020; Cho et al., 2001; Li et al., 2002; Sundar et al., 2017). Consequently, scholars have been looking into users' perceptions of online ads with a renewed sense of urgency (Belanche et al., 2017a, 2017b, 2020; Dehghani et al., 2016). Specifically, in the context of video-sharing social media, Dehghani et al. (2016) found that

users' perceptions of entertainment, customization and informativeness were positively related to advertising value while perceived irritation showed a negative association. According to Logan (2013), users rarely view ads as a means of subsidizing the cost of online content. Rather, they tend to dismiss ads as being intrusive.

Meanwhile, the level of users' control over advertising has evolved together with interactive social media. Most pertinently, YouTube introduced skippable video ads in 2010 as an interactive ad format that allows users to watch the ad to completion or skip it after five seconds (Pashkevich et al., 2012). Unlike non-skippable ads, the skippable format allows greater control and positively influences users' attitudes toward online ads. It empowers users by enabling them to choose what ad content to watch, when and where, thereby contributing to a perception of a more user-friendly platform (Belanche et al., 2017a, 2020; Chakraborty et al., 2021; Pashkevich et al., 2012).

Despite the growing popularity of the skippable ad format in online video advertising, the prevalence of ad-skipping tendency and users' inattentiveness toward ads are serious concerns for the advertising industry. With this format, users highly attend to their choice of media content and do not pay attention to ads (Campbell et al., 2017). When ads are not attentively viewed and processed, they essentially fail to serve their purposes (Storme et al., 2015). According to Belanche et al. (2017b), as users gain experience in watching online videos, they develop a habit of skipping ads almost subconsciously. In addition, every behavior of skipping increases the odds that the next ad will be skipped too—probably even sooner (Belanche et al., 2017b).

Clearly, this does not augur well for marketers when it comes to ad effectiveness, which is measured in terms of indicators that range from watching duration and skipping rate to attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the advertised brand (Belanche et al., 2017a, 2017b; Chakraborty et al., 2021). Watching duration refers to the time from the start of an ad

till it is either skipped or watched until completion. Skipping rate refers to the proportion of times the ad is skipped instead of being watched till the end. The point of skipping can also be informative. To foster a favorable attitude, marketers need users to have a longer watching duration and a lower skipping rate, which however would dampen users' online video watching experience. Hence, the literature suggests that there should be some congruency among the ads, the audience, and the video context in order to promote ad effectiveness (Belanche et al., 2017a, 2017b; Edwards et al., 2002). In addition, it has been shown that users are likely to report a high brand recall when the brand name is placed at the beginning of skippable ads—regardless of full or partial viewing—but at the end when it comes to non-skippable ads (Belanche et al., 2020).

Motivation for the current study

Even though previous works have investigated the extent to which exposure to video ads leads to users' ad acceptance and avoidance in the online setting, their methods have been mostly confined to quantitative surveys/experiments and statistical analyses of aggregated datasets. This is problematic for two reasons. First, it has given rise to a few inconclusive insights. For example, on the one hand, YouTube video ads are often preferred to TV commercials because the former is more relevant due to targeting and personalization (Logan, 2013). On the other hand, users leave no stone unturned in skipping YouTube ads, even when personalized (Belanche et al., 2020). Expectedly, scholars have been calling for a richer understanding of users' experiences with skippable and non-skippable video ad formats to deepen the literature (Arantes et al., 2018; Chakraborty et al., 2021). Hence, a qualitative, in-depth exploration is warranted to better understand users' lived experiences with YouTube ads, both skippable and non-skippable.

Second, the online ads literature has shed much light on ad perceptions including perceived annoyance (Burns and Lutz, 2006; Voigt et al., 2021), perceived entertainment (Dehghani et al., 2016; Ducoffe, 1996), perceived informativeness (Dehghani et al., 2016; Ducoffe, 1996), perceived intrusiveness (Belanche et al., 2017a; Hühn et al., 2017; Li et al., 2002; Smith, 2011), perceived irritation (Ducoffe, 1996; Jeon et al., 2019), and perceived value (Dehghani et al., 2016; Ducoffe, 1996; Kuo et al., 2021). Perception is a psychologically-oriented construct that lends itself readily to quantitative methods aiming to measure a phenomenon. Unsurprisingly, most of these works have used quantitative methods such as surveys and/or experiments. However, the literature is relatively less vocal on the interpretation, rather than the measurement, of the phenomenon of viewing ads on YouTube. This research gap motivates the current qualitative study, which focuses on interpreting Internet users' lived experiences with skippable and non-skippable YouTube ads.

Exploring such lived experiences is well poised to reveal the unique and diverse ways in which individuals engage with YouTube ads in their everyday lives. Findings will potentially go beyond online advertising and speak to the wider literature on technology use.

Research methods

Data collection

When users watch YouTube videos, they come across ads—some skippable, others not—at specific points in time unexpectedly. A study of the ways in which they would react to those ads does not readily fit into any a priori theoretical frameworks. This called for employing a qualitative, exploratory, and inductive methodology (Martin and Turner, 1986).

Interpretivism was adopted for this paper as it allows understanding of a phenomenon through the views and experiences of participants (Cohen and Manion, 1994; Creswell, 2003; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2011). It is rooted in the ontological assumption that the nature of

reality is socially constructed (Tadajewski, 2006). Hence, the interpretivist paradigm matches well with the study objective of interpreting Internet users' lived experiences with skippable and non-skippable ads while watching videos on YouTube (Charmaz, 2003; Lupton and Maslen, 2019; Smith and Osborn, 2003; Templeton et al., 2016). Within the interpretivist tradition, a grounded theory approach was followed. It is a flexible research paradigm that allows room for interpretation and adaptation in studying under-researched and under-theorized phenomena inductively (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Martin and Turner, 1986; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Suddaby, 2006). The intent was to come up with an empirically-grounded understanding of the lived experiences with YouTube ads.

Specifically, in-depth interviews were conducted. An in-depth interview method involves an unstructured, direct, personal interview where a participant is probed by an interviewer through open-ended questions to uncover motivations, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about a topic (Malhotra et al., 2017). It was deemed appropriate to obtain a rich understanding of participants' lived experiences with ads on YouTube.

In-depth interviews require information-rich cases. Therefore, through convenience sampling and snowballing, 22 participants (gender: 12 females, 10 males; age group: 21-30 years) were recruited. They were postgraduate students who were all heavy YouTube watchers and were also familiar with other video-on-demand services such as Netflix. Such a young demographic profile is particularly suited to studying online video ads (Belanche et al., 2020; Dehghani et al., 2016).

The sample size was not predetermined. Instead, data collection continued in tandem with data coding and analysis. The former was stopped when the latter started to reveal repetitive themes, denoting the possibility of theoretical saturation (Guest et al., 2006). The sample size of 22 is comparable to that used in in-depth interviews (e.g., Hazeri and Martin,

2009; Olaisen and Revang, 2017). In fact, 16 in-depth interviews are usually considered sufficient for saturation (Francis et al., 2010; Guest et al., 2006; Hagaman and Wutich, 2017).

A research assistant was trained to help with the interviews, each of which lasted about 30-45 minutes. There was a set of questions asking the participants how they usually felt when exposed to ads on YouTube, and what they liked/disliked about skippable as well as non-skippable ads. Nonetheless, the structure of the interview was kept flexible and conversational (see Appendix A). The participants were also asked to share their recent experiences while watching YouTube videos. The purpose was to stimulate in-depth accounts with minimal restrictions. During the interview, the participants were free to play any YouTube video of their choice on their mobile phones and explain their real-time ad experience (Kawaf, 2019). Unscripted probe questions such as "What else can you recall about that experience?" and "Can you give an example?" were asked regularly to encourage deeper insights as far as possible (Malhotra et al., 2017).

The interviews were conducted face-to-face and were audio-recorded. The research assistant also took handwritten observation notes during the interviews. At the end, permission was sought from the participants to exchange follow-up emails for clarification, if needed. The research assistant transcribed the audio recordings verbatim for coding and analysis.

Data coding and analysis

Consistent with the recommendations for conducting exploratory qualitative research using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), data coding and analysis continued in parallel with data collection. The analysis progressed through open coding and constant comparison (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Hall et al., 2012; Taylor and Bogdan, 1998).

The research assistant read the first interview transcript line-by-line to assign descriptive open codes. The next interview transcript was read with two-fold motivations: to constantly compare with the extant open codes and to find new open codes. In this way, patterns started to emerge. After completing the coding of the first three interview transcripts, the research assistant discussed these emerging patterns extensively with the first author. The data were read and reread to confirm the initial codes.

The remaining dataset was then trawled to collate the data relevant to each code. As the coding continued, codes with conceptual overlapping were merged into themes to achieve a higher-level synthesis. As codes were being consolidated into themes, the emergent themes were compared to one another with the aim of establishing logical connections among them.

To assess the reliability of the coding, the second author, who was not involved in the initial coding process, selected a random sample of five interviews to independently code the data. All disagreements were resolved through discussion to ensure inter-coder reliability (Chen et al., 2018; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Thereafter, the data relevant to each code were once again cross-checked.

To further assess the validity of the data analysis, a draft report of the findings was distributed to two interview participants as a form of member checking (Creswell and Miller, 2000; McCarthy et al., 2014). The feedback confirmed the authors' interpretation of the data; hence, no code was altered.

Findings

The findings can be broadly grouped into three themes: general experiences with YouTube ads, experiences with non-skippable ads, and experiences with skippable ads. The data corresponding to each of the themes is subsumed into several subthemes as described below.

General experiences with YouTube ads

Widespread negativity. All the participants indicated that they frequent YouTube to watch great content, not ads. Therefore, they generally dislike ads. Participant 2 commented, "Most of the time, I hate all types of ads on YouTube." Participant 10 elaborated, "I understand they [advertisers/marketers/YouTube] need to make money. But they should consider the quality of our experience. If I am looking to buy something, it is better for me to go and search online. Just google searching will be much more effective than coming across ads on YouTube. I can't remember ever being persuaded to buy anything as a consequence of YouTube ads." Participant 19 said, "I don't like ads on YouTube. At best skippable ads are fine as it takes only five seconds of my life…can't give more than that to YouTube ads…I feel like using ad blocker." "The viewing experience is very poor if the commercial appears repeatedly. I would feel annoyed," added Participant 22.

Participant 21, who abhorred ads too, was even more vehement, "I hate it when YouTube occasionally asks us to rate my ads experience. Why will I rate my ads experience? I did not come to YouTube to watch ads. It is like you come to watch video content, and you are being asked to rate the quality of something [ads] that is degrading your video watching experience. So I always rate my experience as awful…I know there is this thing called YouTube Premium to get videos without ads, but as a student I don't feel like paying for this. Not worth it!"

All the participants were not only resistant to ads on YouTube but also reluctant to subscribe to YouTube Premium. However, they were open to the free trial of the service for a month. Clearly, the student segment of the population does not appear too keen to pay for a YouTube Premium.

Lengthy ads seldom drew favorable responses. For example, participant 19 complained, “If it is too long, it makes me feel frustrated.” Echoed participant 22, “Short advertisements are easy to accept when they are attractive enough. Even two or three ad lines, a logo I think is enough. The focus has been highlighted, and interested people will search for themselves.” According to participant 13, “I’m sensitive to time. It's too much for me [to watch lengthy ads].” Participant 9 said, “Watching long ads is not possible in the busy life. However, if they are watched, I think long ads help me remember the product advertised very well…If it has story it will be more acceptable. But I still prefer a short one.”

Dislike for the platform but not the brand. Participants’ dislike for ads seemed to engender a negative attitude toward YouTube as a platform but not necessarily toward the brand or the product advertised. Only three participants indicated that they would transfer the annoyance caused by the ads to the brand. “If a platform, let's say, forces me to watch the commercial for two minutes before each video, I would feel a little bit repulsive of this kind of behavior of making money. Because it feels like that the platform and the brand sacrifice my time for own benefits,” said participant 22.

Among the rest, participant 8 opined, “Ads don't positively influence my attitude toward the [advertised] brand. But it may change my attitude to the platform. I will change the platform, open other tabs, or go to Twitch. I have more interesting things to do than watching boring YouTube ads.”

“It will not affect the brand. But it may affect the platform as I feel that the platform is annoying,” echoed participant 17. Agreed participant 3, “For the brand, I will not be disgusted…I think manufacturers are doing the right thing by advertising. But the way the platform is choosing them to display is not good…If they force to look at them, I will give up the use of the platform.”

Ethical dimensions. One participant pointed out an advantage of being annoyed by ads on YouTube—it helps curb binge-watching. Contemplated participant 15, "I sometimes find it hard to stop watching YouTube, and keep on watching multiple videos one after another. I find ads very irritating as they are very intrusive, but it is because of those ads that I think enough is enough and I stop. The intrusive ads strangely are helpful for me to check my video watching addiction." The unethical property of intrusiveness of ads, bizarrely, may have a positive influence in managing online addiction.

Another participant echoed concerns about privacy. "When I am signed in, I have noticed that I get a certain kind of ads. Those are different from the ads that I get when I am not signed in. It seems after I sign in, somebody is watching everything I am doing and giving me what I like…I don't like this feeling. To avoid it, I often deliberately sign out and then watch YouTube. It means I have to spend a little more time to find the videos that I like, but I don't mind spending that extra few seconds as at least there is more privacy," said participant 5.

A similar view was also expressed by participant 20, "I am someone who likes to guard my privacy. But as soon as I sign out, I often get this sort of a pop-up saying that I am signed out of YouTube, and I need to sign in to like, comment, subscribe, etc. Come on, YouTube should not tell me what I have to do, I know what I am doing, and I will not let you monitor what I watch so that you can irritate me with [personalized] ads."

Occasional positivity. A few participants echoed positive sentiments about YouTube ads. For example, participant 1 was willing to spend time watching ads that have an interesting storyline: "If an ad has a good story, it is equivalent to watching a drama. Sometimes the story can be really impressive." Participant 6 opined that "watching this kind

of [interesting] advertising is pure entertainment." Participant 17 was open to ads that are "beautifully made" in terms of visual aesthetics: "An ad that has a particularly good visual effect/content, I will watch for a while…They have to be relevant to me though [personalized]."

Experiences with non-skippable ads

Dislike for forced viewing. The resistance to non-skippable ads was unanimous. Several participants considered them to be overly "intrusive" and "a complete waste of time." Participant 12 indicated, "I don't like to watch non-skippable advertisements. I think it's a waste of time. Because of too many non-skippable ads, I reduce my use of the platform…I can choose other leisure activities such as playing online games." "I feel annoyed if it is not skippable…you can't force me to watch those ads," grumbled participant 21. Dittoed participant 8, "It forces me to watch it from the beginning to the end even though I'm not interested. Don't like the feeling of being forced at all. It is quite annoying, I thought I have freedom to choose online." The lack of autonomy that non-skippable ads engender was rarely appreciated.

Participant 2 likened the feeling of interruption caused by non-skippable ads to TV commercials: "The experience is similar to what we have been used to for a long time on television media…it can cause a very severe interruption to the viewer. Although it is only a short period, this feeling of being interrupted is annoying."

The only circumstance under which a few participants would not deem non-skippable ads annoying is when they are short. For example, participant 5 said, "[if] it is short and gets to the point quickly and ends quickly, I feel still ok."

Activities during non-skippable ads. During non-skippable ads, participants indicated being involved in a variety of activities other than viewing what they were 'forced' to watch. If the message at the bottom-right corner of the screen confirms that the video would play only after the end of the ad, participants would instantly consider if the ad was short or long.

About short non-skippable ads (closer to 5s), participant 16 stated, "When it is very short, I have no time to do other things...I would also not want to miss my video. So I would just watch this ad passively, focusing more on the message 'video will play after ad' [rather than the content of the non-skippable ad]." Participant 20 reported, "I would look at the counter. Sometimes YouTube tells me – your video will begin in 5-4-3-2-1. I am not watching the ad, but I have my eyes on the countdown timer." A similar view was echoed by several other participants.

To tackle relatively longer non-skippable ads (closer to 20s), several participants indicated looking at their phones for notifications. Participant 3 said, "I generally do not look at the ad, just turn off the sound and go to do something else. I will go to the kitchen to pour water, take snacks, eat fruit, play with my phone, use WhatsApp, or check emails." Participant 9 added, "I won't accept it, I will just evade. I just open a few other tabs, a few more pages to do other better things." Participant 16 would use non-skippable ads as "short breaks for stretching" and "to give some rest to the eyes from screen time." Multi-tasking in the digital realm seems to have become the norm.

As this pattern to evade started to emerge consistently from the first eight interviews, the remaining 14 participants were explicitly asked whether they could recall any non-skippable ads that they had come across in the last few weeks from the interview date. Nobody could recall any such ads. At best, a few of them would indicate the topic of the ad but with little confidence. Thus, despite being played in full, non-skippable ads do not appear to receive the attention that they are after.

Experiences with skippable ads

Flexibility. Participants unanimously expressed much higher acceptability for skippable ads vis-à-vis non-skippable ads. This was mainly vestige of the greater flexibility afforded by the former. All the participants thought that skippable ads save time. Participant 13 indicated, “In today’s fast paced world, even entertainment time [spent in watching YouTube videos] is short. I don’t like to spend that limited available time watching ads. It is good to know I can skip whenever I want…”

Moreover, the option to either skip after five seconds or watch to completion gave participants the impression that the platform cares about their rights. For instance, participant 18 commented, “With skippable ads, I feel respected. I think the platform and the advertising company respect our right to choose. Contrast to that, when I am not allowed to skip but forced to view, I feel deprived of my rights.” According to participant 22, “YouTube ads that allow me to choose to skip are the most tolerable.”

Duration of non-skippability. Opinion was divided in terms of the duration of non-skippability for skippable ads. About half of the participants were satisfied with five seconds. For example, participant 8 commented, “Five seconds are good enough. When I am impressed in the first 5 seconds, I can’t skip.” Participant 15 too indicated, “If I’m interested in the first five seconds, I watch it until it ends. If I'm not, that’s it!” Concurred participant 20, “I think [a duration of] five seconds is enough to judge whether you want to continue watching.”

Among the remaining half however, participants 1, 6 and 17 were happy to allow a longer non-skippability of 10 seconds. For example, participant 6 stated, “I don’t mind another 5 seconds on top of 5 seconds.” The rest advocated for either no non-skippability at

all or at most a non-skippability of three seconds. For instance, participant 5 commented, “I think it will be best if I can skip as soon as the ad starts playing.” According to participant 16, “The first three seconds are sufficient already, I can get it whether I want to watch or not.”

When skippable ads are skipped. All participants alluded to their habitual skipping behavior with respect to skippable ads. For example, participant 4 indicated, “I always want to skip. My patience for ads has become very low.” Participant 8 confirmed, “Repeated skipping creates a habit of skipping.” Participant 13 stated, “Study and work is too tight, almost no time for entertainment. Finally, when I have some time to watch video, I certainly wish not to waste time. Sometimes I skip some part in the video which is not very important. So how can I not skip ads that are skippable? I rarely don't skip, unless you do something else in the middle.” Participant 21 also confessed having developed a habit of skipping, “I click the button to skip straight away almost in an autopilot mode.”

During the first five seconds of non-skippability, participants seldom paid attention to the content of the ads. For instance, participant 12 said, “I skip as soon as […it can be skipped]…Before I am able to skip, I pay attention to the timer at the corner and watch that.” Participant 14 echoed a similar view, “As soon as I find a skippable ad, I will try to jump to the main video. I will jump and jump every time without paying any attention to the ad. If I am using my laptop, I place my cursor right at the position of the ‘Skip Ad’ option.”

The moment it is allowed, skipping skippable ads appears to be the default setting. To this end, participant 9 commented, “When I come across a lot of skippable ads, I skip them all subconsciously without much thinking. If there are less skippable ads, maybe we may be more accepting.” Subconscious skipping is occasionally regretted. For example, participant 19 recalled, “After I skipped, I was suddenly like - Oh no, I needed to watch that! I feel that I

missed out something exciting. This is a problem of uncontrolled skipping, but I still like skippable ads more than non-skippable ads."

When skippable ads are not skipped. Skippable ads are not skipped when they are congruent with expectations and can captivate the audience within the first five seconds. For example, participant 17 indicated, "Sometimes from the first few seconds, I know that the topic is interesting to me, so I would watch fully." Participant 1 said, "Some ads have a very interesting opening. So I can't skip." Skippable ads are watched beyond five seconds only when the content somehow resonates with viewers. Participant 22 indicated, "I would not skip after five seconds only if there is something really interesting." Participant 2 agreed, "I will watch till the end only if it [is] something really emotional and there is an interesting story right from the start. But it rarely happens. Only one I remember in my last few days!"

Occasionally, skippable ads are not skipped out of goodwill for the uploader. As participant 7 explained, "I generally don't like ads in YouTube. But then I watch videos posted by a travel vlogger. Since his travel videos give me entertainment, I feel I need to do something in exchange so that he can continue to travel and keep uploading more content for me. So I never skip ads while watching videos from his channel…I don't know if this is at all helpful for the vlogger…But that does not mean I pay attention to the ads. I use this time to wash my cups or prepare some snacks." Even though reciprocity and gratitude made the participant willing to watch the ads, the ads themselves did not serve their intended purpose.

Participant 15 indicated indolence as a barrier to skipping skippable ads: "I connect YouTube on TV when I am relaxing…At this time, I usually lie in bed, too lazy to move out of bed. So, even if there is an advertisement, I can watch it…as it is a matter of few seconds only. I am not in a hurry…But when I watch something specific, for example, I want to watch

this Ted talk my professor recommended in class on my laptop, usually I would always skip." All the findings are summarized in Table I.

[Insert Table I here]

Discussion

Theoretical contributions: findings in light of the literature

As indicated earlier, the authors continued to purposely review the literature during and after the empirical work. This section attempts to lift the findings to a higher level of abstraction in light of the literature reviewed prior to the empirical work as well as that consulted later (Martin and Turner, 1986; Suddaby, 2006). The purpose is to develop an empirically-grounded understanding of users' lived experiences with ads on YouTube.

Given that this paper adopted the interpretivist approach, the inductive reasoning and the flexible structures for the research process allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of watching ads from a variety of perspectives (Saunders et al., 2009; Tadajewski, 2006). Specifically, six streams of literature are brought to bear to illuminate the findings. The first has to do with users' dislike for online ads. Prior works have shown that individuals are more tolerant toward TV commercials than online ads (Ducoffe, 1996; Logan, 2013; Smith, 2011). Consistent with this stream, this paper finds almost unanimous dislike for YouTube ads, as reflected in comments such as "I hate all types of ads on YouTube" (participant 2) and "I don't like ads on YouTube" (participant 19). Advertising has long been accepted as essential in mass communication (Logan, 2013). However, when it comes to YouTube, users still seem reluctant to accept ads as a means of subsidizing the cost of online content. Instead of acknowledging the monetization of free online videos, they consider ads to be severely intrusive. Yet, the participants refused to pay for a YouTube premium. The

students in the sample did not appreciate YouTube's freemium business model, which offers free but constrained access to services with the option to remove the constraints through payment (Anderson, 2009).

The second stream of literature is the one that documents preference for skippable ads vis-à-vis non-skippable ads (Belanche et al., 2017a, 2017b, 2020; Pashkevich et al., 2012). Consistent with this stream, the interviews reveal that non-skippable ads, in particular, can have a damning effect on users' experiences with YouTube, even if they are short. This is evident from retorts such as "you can't force me to watch those ads" (participant 21). Skippable ads appear relatively better from the perspective of users' viewing experience.

This paper further shows that non-skippable ads rarely receive the attention that they are after. Worryingly for marketers, these ads failed to promote brand recall despite being played in full. This is akin to the zipping/zapping phenomenon (Olney et al., 1991), which explains how people refuse to pay attention to TV commercials, but in the contemporary media landscape. The paper further deepens the scholarly understanding of how, why and when users skip/not skip skippable ads. In terms of how, a tendency to skip "almost in autopilot mode" (e.g., participant 21) was evident. Participants could not wait to skip especially when they were in the middle of work- or education-related videos. They were, however, more forgiving of ads when they were watching videos for recreational purposes. According to participant 15, skipping was relatively more difficult when watching YouTube on mobile for relaxation than on laptop for studies: "I connect YouTube on TV when I am relaxing….too lazy to move out of bed. So, even if there is an advertisement, I can watch it…But when…I want to watch this Ted talk my professor recommended in class on my laptop, usually I would always skip." As Edwards et al. (2002) suggested, behavioral responses to ads differ when users surf the Internet mindlessly versus goal-directedly.

The third stream of literature focuses on users' intention to either continue using an online platform or switch to another related service. To this end, Wu et al. (2014) explained how poor service quality and inconvenience can translate into users' switching behavior in the context of social networking sites. Fatigue has been shown to be negatively related to continuance intention for platforms such as WeChat (Zong et al., 2019). Although no similar research has been conducted for YouTube, this paper finds evidence that ads on YouTube can promote platform switching tendencies—as expressed by participant 8, "I will change the platform"—due to their intrusiveness. Hence, it is important for YouTube to better manage the expectations of its users with respect to ads in the increasingly competitive audio-visual online marketplace.

The fourth stream of literature deals with the spillover effect, which refers to the phenomenon of how individuals' perception of an object has a bearing on their perception of another. The literature has highlighted spillover taking place within a product category (Balachander and Ghose, 2003), across product categories (Erdem, 1998), and from one product attribute to another (Ahluwalia et al., 2000). It has also been shown that individuals commonly associate the affect engendered by a given content (video ads on YouTube in this case) with the advertised brand or product (Gelb and Pickett, 1983). In this vein, this paper reveals that even though the participants disliked ads on YouTube, their dissatisfaction was mostly directed to the platform but did not spill over to the advertised brand or product. As participant 17 said, "It will not affect the brand. But it may affect the platform as I feel that the platform is annoying."

Compared with the platform, marketers seem to have greater leeway with video ads on YouTube. This finding almost lends support to the saying that any publicity is good publicity. Publicity, in the form of advertising, that impairs users' viewing experience on YouTube and promotes a negative attitude toward the platform does not necessarily spill over

to marketers. That said, the positive attitude engendered by skippable ads has the potential to spill over to both the platform and the advertised brand or product: “With skippable ads, … I think the platform and the advertising company respect our right to choose” (participant 8).

The fifth stream of literature relates to the privacy-personalization paradox. While social media monitoring has long been valuable for marketers to reach their target audience with personalized content, consumers may not appreciate the loss of privacy inherent in the personalization process (Akar and Topçu, 2011; Guo et al., 2016). This can be explained based on what is known as marketing (dis)comfort: individuals’ contentment with how marketers use data about their online presence for targeted advertising (Jacobson et al., 2020). Related to this stream of literature, the paper unravels a conundrum: On the one hand, privacy concerns made their presence felt: “It seems after I sign in, somebody is watching everything I am doing and giving me what I like…I don’t like this feeling” (participant 5). On the other hand, there was also a need for personalized content: “They [ads] have to be relevant to me” (participant 17). Evidently, participant 17 perhaps had greater marketing comfort with YouTube ads than participant 5. YouTube needs to educate its users about the platform’s data practices so that they will be confident enough to disclose their personal digital footprint in order to get personalized ads.

The final stream of literature is associated with the Gutenberg principle, which assumes a digital display to comprise four quadrants (Stupak et al., 2010; Wheildon, 1995). In general, the center of screens receives the majority of visual attention (Brasel and Gips, 2008), which however flows according to the Gutenberg principle. Western readers usually begin viewing the display from the top left, called the primary optical area. They would then shift their gaze rightward to the top right of the screen, called the strong fallow area. Eventually, they would end their gaze at the bottom right, called the terminal area. The bottom left part of the screen, known as the weak fallow area, usually receives the least

attention. In contrast, users pay substantial attention to the terminal area (Stupak et al., 2010; Wheildon, 1995).

This paper confirmed that the participants paid much attention to the terminal area while ads were being played on YouTube. The support for the Gutenberg principle on YouTube is evident from comments such as the following: “If I am using my laptop, I place my cursor right at the position of the ‘Skip Now’ option [at the terminal area of the screen]” (participant 14); and “I would look at the counter. Sometimes YouTube tells me – your video will begin in 5-4-3-2-1. I am not watching the ad, but I have my eyes on the countdown timer [at the terminal area of the screen]” (participant 20). Belanche et al. (2017b) demonstrated YouTube users’ ad skipping habit, which is detrimental for marketers. The development of this habit is possible to be slowed down by shifting the ‘Skip Ad’ button from the terminal area to the weak fallow area.

Overall, through this qualitative study, the paper gleans a number of new insights, as highlighted above. The research landscape on users’ perceptions of video ads on YouTube has hitherto been largely dominated by quantitative works (e.g., Belanche et al., 2017a, 2017b, 2020; Dehghani et al., 2016). These works are extended by this paper, which is the earliest attempt to use interpretivism and grounded theory for offering a rich description of how users feel about skippable and non-skippable YouTube ads. Their lived experiences were linked to not only the online advertising literature (Edwards et al., 2002; Ducoffe, 1996; Logan, 2013; Pashkevich et al., 2012; Smith 2011) but also to the wider academic discourse on platform switching versus continuance intention (Wu et al., 2014; Zong et al., 2019), spillover effect (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Balachander and Ghose, 2003; Gelb and Pickett, 1983), privacy-personalization paradox (Akar and Topçu, 2011; Guo et al., 2016; Jacobson et al., 2020), and the Gutenberg principle (Stupak et al., 2010; Wheildon, 1995).

Practical implications

The paper has a number of practical implications. For one, platforms such as YouTube are recommended to better manage users' expectations about ads. In general, the participants' dislike for ads was unequivocal. If users' expectations about ads on a given platform are not well managed, they may discontinue using the platform. Hence, users should be made aware of YouTube's business model, and the need for ads. To this end, it should be noted that YouTube recently updated its Terms of Service clarifying, "YouTube has the right to monetize all content on the platform and ads may appear on videos..." (Owsinski, 2020). This seems to be a step in the right direction.

Moreover, the paper reveals that skippable ads are received more favorably compared with non-skippable ads, even if the former is longer than the latter. Therefore, non-skippable ads should be used sparingly. To further enhance the flexibility offered by skippable ads, users may be allowed to customize the duration of non-skippability. As indicated earlier, a few participants were happy to allow a longer non-skippability of 10 seconds whereas a few others wanted it to be reduced to three seconds. Furthermore, to hinder habitual skipping, YouTube may want to experiment with the positioning of the 'Skip Ad' button.

Where possible, the ads should be made relevant to users through personalization. In light of the privacy-personalization paradox, users need to be made more data literate. They should have a clear understanding of how the platform uses their digital footprint. Being transparent about data practices may promote users' willingness to disclose personal information and preferences (Jacobson et al., 2020), which in turn will facilitate personalization without being perceived as intrusive. The platform, its viewers, its content creators as well as marketers need to come to an agreed ad exposure policy in the best interest of all the involved stakeholders.

The paper also highlights that marketers have their work cut out for them in measuring the effectiveness of video ads on YouTube. Marketers usually pay when users watch the full ad if it is short or at least 30 seconds if it is longer. However, users playing ads for such durations do not necessarily mean they are paying attention. Their gaze could be fixated on the terminal area of the screen. Alternatively, they could use the time to "go to the kitchen," "use WhatsApp," or "rest [their] eyes from screen time." To aggravate the problem, examples of effective advertising were rare: "I can't remember ever being persuaded to buy anything as a consequence of YouTube ads" (participant 10). Nonetheless, on an optimistic note for marketers, while the negative attitude generally engendered by ads does not spill over to the advertised brand or product, the positive attitude fostered by skippable ads does.

Finally, the paper finds the participants to be almost addicted to multi-screening. They could not wait to watch their intended content, and hence were unforgiving of ads. Even when the ads played, they would work on "other tabs" on their browsers, "check emails," or look through notifications on their phones to allay nomophobia—the fear of missing out caused by the lack of contact with mobile phones (Dhir et al., 2018). This multi-screen addiction among individuals aged between 21 and 30 years is certainly unhealthy (Lin et al., 2020). Hence, they are advised to make efforts to curb the tendency through greater self-regulation. It is far from ideal if the youth, like participant 15, has to rely on the annoyance created by ads—rather than one's sense of consciousness—to keep binge-watching at bay: "The intrusive ads strangely are helpful for me to check my video watching addiction."

Limitations and future research directions

This paper has two limitations. First, the sample included students, who were heavy YouTube watchers and belonged to the 21-30 years age bracket. Hence, the findings should not be generalized to the wider online populace. That said, this demographic profile is

suitable for studying online video ads (Belanche et al., 2020; Dehghani et al., 2016; Smith, 2020). Second, the scope of the study was specifically limited to skippable and non-skippable video ads on YouTube. In the interviews, participants were not required to elaborate on other ad formats such as overlay ads and bumper ads (YouTube Creators, 2019). However, comments such as "I hate all types of ads on YouTube" (participant 2) hint at possible negative attitudes toward such other ads too.

To investigate individuals' behaviors on YouTube in real-time, qualitative data collection approaches such as screencast videography could be employed in the future (Kawaf, 2019). Differences between various age groups, starting from adolescents to the elderly, need to be better understood. Scholars should also explore how users' experiences with video ads vary as a function of devices such as laptops, mobile phones, and tablets.

Going forward, the current qualitative study also paves the way for more quantitative and/or mixed methods studies. Large-scale surveys, comprising both close- and open-ended questions, could investigate the impact of video ads on not only experiential entertainment-related variables such as positive affect and arousal but also advertising effectiveness-related variables such as brand recall and brand attitude. In laboratory, online and/or field experiments, the nature of the ads could be manipulated in terms of factors such as ad skippability (skippable vs. non-skippable), ad placement (right at the beginning of the video vs. mid-way), affect conveyed through the ad (positive vs. negative), and position of the 'Skip Ad' button (terminal area vs. weak fallow area). Impulsiveness could be studied as a moderating variable as it may determine individuals' likelihood to engage in habitual skipping. For skippable ads, the influence of various durations of non-skippability (e.g., three seconds, five seconds, or 10 seconds) could also be teased out. Apart from self-reported questionnaires, eye-tracking might be employed to shed greater light on visual attention. How the effects of video ads vary when individuals watch YouTube mindlessly versus goal-

directedly and for work/study versus recreational purposes is also worth investigating. Such efforts will further enrich the scholarly understanding of ad effectiveness on YouTube.

Conclusions

The paper represents one of the earliest efforts to qualitatively study users' experiences with YouTube ads. It corroborates the literature, which is mostly dominated by quantitative studies, on two fronts: One, ads are seldom received favorably. Two, skippable ads are preferred to non-skippable ads.

Besides, the paper adds to the literature in terms of online advertising, platform switching versus continuance intention, spillover effect, privacy-personalization paradox, and visual attention. Overall, it shows that users do watch ads on YouTube, especially when the ad content is congruent with their preferences and expectations. However, non-skippable ads fail to promote brand recall. The dissatisfaction caused by ads is directed to the platform but usually does not spill over to the advertised brand or product.

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Appendix A: Interview guide.

Section	**Explanation of what the section involved**
Opening	General introductions and study background, explanation of what the interview involves and participants' rights, and obtaining informed consent.
Main discussion	Key areas of conversation: • How often do you use YouTube? And for what purposes? • How often do you come across ads on YouTube? • How do you usually feel about those YouTube ads? • Why do you think you feel that way? • What are the different types of ads that you come across? • How do you feel about skippable ads? • Why do you feel that way? • What do you like and dislike about such skippable ads? • How do you feel about non-skippable ads? • Why do you feel that way? • What do you like and dislike about such non-skippable ads? Regularly used probe questions: • Can you give an example? • Can you please share such a recent experience? • What else can you recall about that experience? • Can you please elaborate why?
Closing	Obtaining demographic information, seeking permission for follow-up email clarifications, confirming if the participant can be contacted again with a draft report of the findings for the purpose of member checking, and asking for prospective participants as part of the snowballing approach.

Table I. Summary of the findings.

Theme	Sub-theme	Sample Excerpt
General experiences with YouTube ads	Widespread negativity	"I hate all types of ads on YouTube" (participant 2)
	Dislike for the platform but not the brand	"I think manufacturers are doing the right thing by advertising. But the way the platform is choosing them to display is not good" (participant 3)
	Ethical dimensions	"It seems after I sign in, somebody is watching everything I am doing and giving me what I like…I don't like this feeling" (participant 5)
	Occasional positivity	"If an ad has a good story, it is equivalent to watching a drama" (participant 1)
Experiences with non-skippable ads	Dislike for forced viewing	"you can't force me to watch those ads" (participant 21)
	Activities during non-skippable ads	"I just open a few other tabs, a few more pages to do other better things" (participant 9)
Experiences with skippable ads	Flexibility	"With skippable ads, I feel respected" (participant 18)
	Duration of non-skippability	"Five seconds are good enough" (participant 8)
	When skippable ads are skipped	"I skip as soon as […it can be skipped]…" (participant 12)
	When skippable ads are not skipped	"I would not skip after five seconds only if there is something really interesting" (participant 22)

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