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Turbulent Tables: The Effect of Perception in Tabular Advertisements

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SUMMER RESEARCH AND CREATIVITY GRANTS



Faculty Mentor: Dr. Melody Carswell
Graduate Advisor: Will Seidelman

This summer, I received a research grant from the Office of Undergraduate Research (formerly known as eUreKa), and I must say that I am incredibly lucky to have had the opportunity to conduct a research project with this financial backing and the support and guidance of Dr. Melody Carswell and Will Seidelman. This summer has been an eye-opening experience to the research world and academia as a whole. The lessons learned will certainly help me in my future research endeavors and I hope that others have benefited from this experience as much as I have.

The main focus of the current study is to investigate how an advertisement's perceptual layout may influence consumer decision making. More specifically, we wanted to examine advertisements presented in a tabular format, which can demonstrate side-by-side comparisons of feature and can easily show a lot of information in a rather straight-forward and efficient manner. What is the most efficient way to design these tables and what allows for consumers to make informed decisions which cater to their wants and needs? For the study, the tables had vertical, horizontal, or no shading and we looked at how this affected individuals' selections of televisions based on the features present or absent therein. The features which could be present in each model included: Full HD 1080p, High Refresh Rate, Energy Star, Multiple HDMI inputs, Internet Capabilities, 3D Capabilities, and Free Delivery. Whether a particular model contained particular features was random, although no two models in the same table had the same features.

While our data failed to produce statistically significant results between the shading conditions, this study has proven to be a great pilot project for future research has confirmed some suspicions in regards to consumer behavior. Participants almost always seemed to use a hybrid strategy when deciding on what model had the best feature combination. Participants made their decision based on both the presence of their favorite features, as determined by a post-decision ranking task, and by which model had the most features overall. This supports our hypothesis from personal interviews regarding what method they used: First, find the models with the features they deem most important, then determine which one has the most features. Future research will measure and compare reaction times to see if this is affected by shading, in an attempt to investigate if orientation can cause increases in information access costs when retrieving the pertinent information. Additionally, we plan to utilize an eye tracking apparatus to follow individuals' gaze patterns and see how the shading affects them.

It is interesting to note that participants consistently rated 3D capabilities as the least important and actively chose models without 3D when two models had the same number of features present. Also, according to the models chosen and the following questionnaire about "green" products, energy efficiency was not a key point for participants. Energy star was rarely in the top two important features and participants would only buy "green" products if they knew that they would save money.

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An additional benefit to this study was our usage of the Amazon Mechanical Turk system to recruit participants. MTurk is becoming quite popular as a research tool, but has not really been used by anyone in our department. It proved to be a fantastic means of collecting data. It was incredibly quick and efficient. We were a little weary that participants would not take the study seriously and choose models at random, but the results showed that this was never the case, solidifying MTurk as a legitimate resource for online data collection which we will utilize in the future.

While learning how Mechanical Turk worked was a learning experience for all of us, my experience went so far beyond this. I learned about the importance of obtaining good participants and how a good sample is required to run an experiment. I learned about the process involved in gaining IRB approval. I learned how to utilize resources such as MTurk and Qualtrics to run an experiment online and gather data. I learned how to use SPSS to analyze the data and draw conclusions from the analysis (and the importance of entering and analyzing data correctly). Most importantly, I learned about how research is a continually growing process and, even though results may not be what was expected, they still contribute to the ever-growing pool of knowledge research has created across time and space.