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Rewarding In-Game Banner Ad Clicks with Tangible Incentives

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Abstract. Mobile games in the past years have become a new, growing channel for advertisers to reach their customers. The wide spread use of mobile devices, such as smart phones, tablets and PDAs, facilitates the delivery of a variety of highly targeted interactive advertising messages including the use of mobile games as a media. As the phenomenon is new, the literature on mobile in-game advertising is very scarce. The objective of this research is to bridge this gap by studying the consumers' general attitudes towards mobile in-game banner advertising (IGBA) as an advertising format and how effective is reward incentives affects the game players' attitude towards banner advertisements and consequent actions in the mobile game context. A survey research was completed in October 2012, with 426 responses from Finland. The results show that tangible and flexible reward scheme with a link to location based rewards where mobile gamers can redeem physically by converting the points achieved from their game plays, are effective to positively affect their attitudes and intention to take actions.

Keywords: Mobile Advertising, Game Advertising, Ad Clicks, Rewards, Tangible Incentives

1 Introduction

Mobile technology has increased the possibilities to reach and serve consumers in multiple ways anytime, anywhere relatively easily and cheaply in a highly targeted, interactive way [34], [37]. The increasing popularity of mobile gaming [28] has enhanced the appeal of using mobile games as a marketing medium which requires more attention from researchers as well as practitioners. Growth in mobile gamers was 35%

year-on-year in US totaling 100 million, whilst in EU the growth was 15% year on year totaling 70 million calculated based on five countries including Finland in 2012 [28]. Engaging nature of games, and long exposure to the advertisements are seen as major benefits of advertising through games compared to traditional media [8],[27],[36],[41]. According to [28], gaming took 13% of all time spent on games worldwide, totaling more than 130 million hours a day and 9% total money spent on games, grossing USD 5.8 billion. According to [29], the usage of mobile web has been growing massively in the past years. Almost half of under 45-year-olds use internet weekly on their mobile phones outside their homes [32]. In short, mobile games offer a pertinent way to reach and engage with consumers, especially young adults [31].

The research in mobile marketing itself is still in its early stages [34], and there is even less research on mobile games as an advertising medium. The literature on mobile in-game advertising is at embryonic stage. Hence, the literature on mobile in-game advertising effectiveness is very scarce although there are researches on mobile advertising effectiveness in other formats such as text messages [39], [2]. As such, this research aims to close part of this observed gap by studying the consumers' attitudes towards mobile in-game banner advertising as an advertising format and how effective is location-based reward incentives affects the game players' attitude towards banner advertisements and what are their intentions to take action in the mobile game context.

This research reviews existing literature which is used to build the theoretical framework. Afterwards, methodology and the empirical analysis are presented. Finally, the results are discussed, including the limitations of the existing research along with discussion and conclusion

2 Literature Review

In-games advertising (IGA) refers to the incorporation of brands into existing games [43]. Mobile advertising itself, is not a new innovation but the formats of doing mobile advertising keep evolving at a fast pace. Before the wide adoption of smart phones, PDAs and tablets, SMS and MMS messaging were the primary advertising formats in the mobile medium [2], [34], [42]. Much of the research on acceptance and attitudes towards mobile marketing is made based on the basic mobile phone [34]. Previous studies look at acceptance of different messaging formats, when the advertiser sends either a solicited or unsolicited message to a consumer [2], [11], [16], [39], [42]. However, today high-tech mobile devices along with new mobile technologies provide increasingly multisided medium with various m-commerce, marketing and advertising possibilities [19], [34]. There is now a wide range of formats that are unique to the mobile medium such as location-based advertising, display advertising inside different mobile applications and mobile coupons [34]. This is why further research is needed on how consumers perceive them.

2.1 Attitudes towards advertising in different media

As banner advertisements are widely used in internet advertising, there is quite significant amount of research looking at the effectiveness and consumers' attitudes towards them. [4] states that consumers perceived banner advertisements more favorably than other online ad formats because they perceived banners as less intrusive ad formats. On the contrary, [10] identifies past negative experience with banners causes people to avoid the source in the future. The phenomenon is sometimes referred as "banner blindness" [10]. Also, [35] states that consumers are often engaged in selective perception resulting in limited information exposure. However, in mobile games context, the screen size is relatively small and the game players are engaged in gaming activities, thusly, the attitude towards banner format is unclear.

Due to the advanced technology and wide adoption of mobile devices, mobile medium provides new possibilities for delivering up-to-date, relevant, customized data easily and inexpensively. However, this does not mean that consumers want to receive it. Mobile devices are seen as highly personal and intimate devices, and advertisements sent without permission are easily seen intrusive and annoying, [12], [17], [34], [39]. When permission is given, the consumer attitudes are more positive than with advertising without permission [1], [3], [39]. In this research, the permission is acquired when the gamer plays the game. However, a gamer's primary concern is to 'play a game', not to receive advertisements. Similarly, consumers involuntarily face banner advertisements when they go on a website to perform other tasks [9].

Moreover, in-game advertisements are seen as positive, but these positive attitudes are generated only when some relatively strict conditions are filled/ satisfied. According to earlier studies, the in-game advertisements usually have to be congruent with the game theme to be seen positively [18], [23], [38]. [23] states that incongruent advertisements have been perceived as "odd", "surprising", "inappropriate" and "confusing". Even if these conditions are met, the advertisements are not been perceived positively by everyone. Also, game players' comments noted that the world is already filled with commercials and hoped that their game-world would be left alone [27]. Due to banner advertisements rather disconnected nature, they thus might be seen negatively. As such, we hypothesized that:

H1: *Attitudes of game players towards banner advertisements in mobile games are negative.*

2.2 Incentives

For the purpose of this research, mobile coupons refer to digital coupons on a mobile device such as a mobile phone, smart phone, or personal digital assistant. People carry their mobile phones almost always with them, along with the mobile coupons [12]. This medium also reduces costs to businesses related to database creation and maintenance, printing, physical distribution, measurement and tracking. Digital coupons have amplified outreach allowing businesses to obtain immediate quantitative information, thus enable to adapt target their consumers' preferences quickly [20]. Promotional offers, such as discount coupons, free samples or lucky draws, have been used

to enhance consumer attitudes towards mobile marketing, and to increase the effectiveness and acceptance of mobile marketing [1], [3], [11], [39]. Thus, they could be used to enhance the effectiveness of mobile in-game banner advertising as well.

Interactive properties of games can also be applied to game playing such that gamers can make choices or get rewarded through involvement with the brand [22]. [17] studies rewards based on gamer's participation in the game play as well as achievements in the game. They found that when consumers are voluntarily connected to the campaign via the offered prizes, it will lead to more responses and more affective attitude toward the brand and the company. Similarly, the positive feeling of challenge and accomplishing a goal may be transferrable to a real life brand. Rewarding consumers for their achievements is not only beneficial in terms of increased redeeming of company's offers, but it might translate into increased amount of playing. The overall high interest in mobile coupons, the even higher interest in mobile coupons as rewards in the game and the extending exposure time to advertisements; all are advantages of this new promotion format [7], [21], [24], [33], [41].

2.3 Factors affecting effectiveness of incentives

2.3.1 Location based incentives

Location-based mobile services are services in which the location of a person or an object is used to determine the application or service [3]. Location-based mobile services include mobile marketing based on consumer's location [40]. Commercial and promotional messages are not the only thing that can be tied to the location of the mobile device but also the game playing. Integrating player's location into the game experience is one factor that makes mobile games special compared to traditional video games [6]. Similarly, integrating player's location into the in-game advertising could make mobile IGA special compared to traditional IGA as well.

However, the very idea that game players can be tracked creates sense of loss of privacy [40]. In Finland, the consumers seem to somewhat perceive the benefits greater than the possible negative effects. According to a study reported by [19], in the EU area, 48% of smart phone users are interested in location-based vouchers. And the same number for Finland is 57%. This shows that there is an interest in new marketing innovations such as location-based promotions which has been enabled by advanced technology.

2.3.2 Redemption options for mobile coupons

There are few options for companies to organize the actual redemption of the incentives offered within mobile games. The first one presented here is when consumers store the coupon on their mobile device and show it at the cashier to the store clerk [26]. The other ways could be through e-commerce or m-commerce. It is important to know how consumers perceive these different options, so that marketers can plan their mobile incentive redemption taking consumer preferences into account.

[12] study shows that redemption effort is the main determinant of attitude towards mobile coupons where consumers are concerned about the complication and

cost to redeem such coupons. When looking at mobile games, the players are familiar with the technology. Thus the fear of technological difficulty might not be as severe in this context.

Redemption can also be done via online computer or mobile webstore. According to a report issued in November 2012 by [32] – already two thirds of the Finnish people had purchased something online during the past year and the number has been steadily rising. Consumers are thus already relatively comfortable buying online. Again, young adults are the main age group who has adopted this behavior [15]. However, there are no conclusive answers from earlier studies in mobile context, thus our next set of hypotheses are:

H2a: *Tangible rewards in physical world affect mobile gamers' attitude towards mobile IGAs.*

H2b: *Flexible reward schemes affect mobile gamers' attitude towards mobile IGAs.*

H2c: *Location based rewards affect mobile gamers' attitude towards mobile IGAs.*

3 Research Framework

Based on the existing literature about attitudes toward advertising and consumer behavior models, a research framework is constructed using the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) proposed by Fishbein and Ajzen in early 1970s. There are three major constructs – Attitude, intention and behavior. The model describes the relations between attitude and behavior by linking individual beliefs, attitudes, intentions and behavior. Attitude toward the behavior is defined as the individual's positive or negative feelings about performing a behavior. It is an assessment of one's beliefs regarding the consequences arising from a behavior [14]. This model has been used quite widely in previous studies to explain the advertising effectiveness for other formats [39], [13], [1], [11].

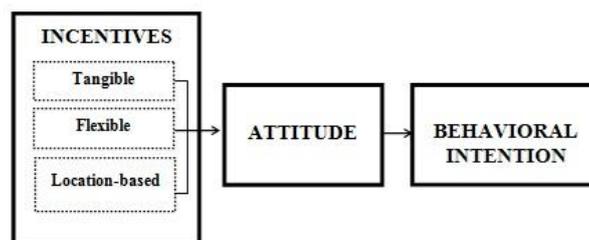


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework: Adapted from [14] and [39]

4 Methodology

This research is conducted with quantitative methods, which is typical for a deductive approach [5] employed here. The data gathering in quantitative social studies

is done from a group of people who represent a certain population via a questionnaire designed for the purpose [5]. Questionnaires are used to ensure an orderly and structured approach to data gathering [25]. Thus, in this research the data were collected using an online questionnaire and analyzed with SPSS programs.

Attitudes and intentions towards advertisements have already been widely researched, the survey questions in this area were formulated based on the earlier research. There are valid measures for attitudes and intentions in both online and mobile advertising [39], [13], [1], [11]. The questions regarding mobile game specific – factors and features of incentive systems were self-formulated based on the earlier research [39], [38] and [12] as well as the interview data.

The survey consisted of a total of 18 questions for those who play mobile games and who had noticed banner advertising in them. A screenshot of a banner ad in a mobile game was displayed when asked if the respondents notice similar type of ad when they play mobile games to ensure the respondents' full apprehension of research topic. The questions were mainly closed multiple choice questions but also multiple choice questions with an optional open-ended space were provided to gain more explicit information on how consumers view this new advertising medium [5]. The questions were measured on a Likert scale from 1 to 7 where 1 as 'Strongly Disagree' and 7 as 'Strongly Agree'

Of the different sampling techniques, convenience sampling was incorporated to gather the data for this study. This method is very common in the field of business and management and more prominent than samples gathered based on probability sampling [5]. Although convenience sampling was employed in this research, some procedures were done to ensure the representativeness of the sample and thus reliability of the results. Firstly, the questionnaire was sent mainly to university students, who are mainly of the right age group considering mobile game playing. They also have relatively high skills in English in consideration that the electronic survey is written in English. Secondly, the questionnaire was run by thesis supervisors, co-researchers and piloted with few university students to ensure that respondents understood the questions correctly. This resulted in revision of some parts of the language used. Thirdly, the questionnaire included watershed questions regarding game playing and noticing of the advertisements, to get the opinions of those who play mobile games as well as see the advertisements. In a similar manner, those who had never seen advertisements in mobile games were directed to the questions regarding attitude and intentions if they were to see one. Therefore the responses used in the analysis are from people who play mobile games and have encountered advertisements in this medium.

The survey was conducted in October 2012 through researchers' Facebook pages, Master's thesis group on the internet, via e-mails to all student members of Finanssi, the history, geography and language students in the University of Oulu, students in Oulun Lyseo high school; students from Finnish degree programs and staff in the Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences. An incentive was used to increase the response rate: lucky draw of gift cards to S-group stores (one of the biggest retailers in Finland). The survey generated 497 responses in total. After removing incomplete

responses and excluding responses from non-Finnish origins, the final sample consists of 426 unique responses.

5 Data Analysis and Findings

5.1 Reliability Analysis

Before reporting findings, we present here the evidence that the data collected are of acceptable quality. Table 1 displays the reliability statistics of each construct. These statistics reveal that Cronbach's alpha of all the variables is over 60%. There are total 26 items and alpha for overall scale is 0.700. This value meets the threshold of 0.700, indicating the acceptable reliability of these scales [30].

Table 1. Reliability of Instruments

Variable	Items	Cronbach Alpha
Tangible Rewards	2	0.749
Flexible Rewards	3	0.832
Location Based Rewards	2	0.741
Attitude towards IGBAs	17	0.609
Intention	2	0.618
Total	26	

5.2 Demographics of Finnish Mobile Gamers

In this survey, there are 63% male respondents and 37% female respondents. 58.4% of the male respondents and 72% of the female respondents play mobile games. This suggests that there may be more females than males playing mobile games. 75.8% of the respondents are 20 to 29 years of age, which is the right age group for our research context. 61.5% of our respondents are earning between 201 to 1000 euros. Unlike earlier research [38] where the gamers spend 2-9 hours a day playing video games, our respondents in mobile games play short sessions. Majority of them (76.7%) plays between 1-15 minutes per session and the main reason for playing mobile game is to kill time while waiting for something to happen.

Table 2. Impact of Incentives on Attitude

Variables	Regression Coefficients	T – Statistics	Standard Errors	P Values
(Constant)	2.777	19.743	.141	.000
Incentives	.262	3.456	.030	.001
R – Square	.069			
F – Statistics	11.941			
Overall P Value	.001			

Table 2 provides the summary of regression analysis of the rewards affecting the attitude of the respondents to mobile IGBA's. The results exhibit the substantial contribution of independent variable to the dependent variable (R – Square = .069 and F – value = 11.941). In addition to this the model is also significant ($P < 0.05$). Individually, the impact of each variable, on dependent variable, is significant ($P < 0.05$). Hypothesis 2, 3 and 4 states the positive influence of rewards on the attitude. It is also evident from the overall impact of rewards/ incentives (including Tangible, Flexible and Location Based Rewards) results as it is having positive influence (0.262) on the dependent variable (Attitude). This means, individuals who are more interested in rewards tend to show a positive attitude towards the IGBAs.

Table 3. Impact of Flexible, Location and tangible incentive on Attitude

Independent variable	R ²	SE of the estimate	Beta	T	Sig.
Tangible	0.079	0.026	0.280	3.716	0.00
Flexible	0.033	0.027	0.181	2.360	0.019
Location	0.062	0.026	0.250	3.302	0.010

As seen from Table 3, the individual variables tangible rewards, flexible rewards, and location-based rewards show that their impact tends to be positive on the attitude of the mobile gamers to receive IGBA's having regression coefficient 0.079, 0.033 and 0.062 respectively.

Table 4. Impact of Attitude on Intentions

Variables	Regression Coefficients	T – Statistics	Standard Errors	P Values
(Constant)	.412	.917	.449	.360
Attitude	.290	4.290	.137	.000
R – Square	.084			
F – Statistics	18.403			
Overall P Value	.000			

In table 4 our hypothesis in present study hypothesized the impact of attitude on the intentions of the gamers as consumers. It is also evident from the regression analysis of the present study that attitude affects the intention positively (0.290) and significantly.

Table 5. Items of Attitude

Items of Attitude	Mean	Std. Deviation
I feel that seeing IGBAs is entertaining	1.92	1.219
I feel that IGBAs are pleasant	1.88	1.130
I feel that IGBAs are a good source for timely information	2.40	1.396
I feel IGBAs are irritating*	5.42	1.625
Contents in IGBAs are annoying*	5.00	1.571
I use IGBAs as a reference for purchasing	1.95	1.335
I trust IGBAs	2.26	1.376
IGBAs provide information need	1.99	1.220
IGBAs have no effect on how games are played	3.83	1.820
IGBAs don't interrupt the excitement	3.17	1.789
Overall, I like IGBAs	2.04	1.350
It is acceptable to have IGBAs in free games*	5.22	1.429
It is acceptable to have IGBAs in games that cost 3 euros or less	2.79	1.625
It is acceptable to have IGBAs in games that cost 3 euros or more	1.98	1.344
IGBAs are irritating in games that require deep concentration*	5.54	1.630
IGBAs are irritating in simple games	4.54	1.722
I would be interested in to receive IGBAs based on my location	2.94	1.766

* most influencing factors of the gamer's attitude towards in-game banner advertising

Table 5 portrays the descriptive statistic of the seventeen dimensions of Attitude towards In-Game Advertising in terms of mean and standard deviation with a view to answer Hypothesis 1 which states that game players attitude toward banner advertisements in mobile games are generally negative. The findings show that most influencing factor of the negative attitude towards in-game banner advertising (IGBAs) tends to be with the mean of 5.54 "IGBAs are irritating in games that require deep concentration" followed by "I feel IGBAs are irritating". Specifically the results in the Table 5 demonstrate that our hypothesis that suggests that the mean values of majority of the questions asked for the attitude reveal that, the attitude is generally negative towards IGBAs. The IGBA doesn't seem to be quite entreating for the respondents with the mean value of 1.92. Almost, all the means signify a value less than 5 except the reverse coded questions; which reveal that the attitude towards the ad is generally negative. Overall results suggest that mainstream of respondents are irritated with the IGBA.

6 Conclusion and Discussion

The main aim of this research is to study the consumers' attitudes towards mobile in-game banner advertising as an advertising format, and whether reward incentives affects the game players' attitude towards banner advertisements (IGBAs) and consequent action in the mobile game context. Our research questions are answered via four-folded ways:

1. The attitude of game players to IGBAs in mobile game is observed to be generally negative
2. The most influencing negative factors being irritations and annoyances caused by IGBAs on mobile games that require deep concentration.
3. Incentives in form of tangible, flexible and location based rewards have positive and significant impact on gamers' attitude towards IGBAs
4. Positive attitude towards IGBAs increase their behavioral intention to click or redeem the rewards.

The research also confirms that there is positive influence of rewards on the attitude as evident from the results showing a positive influence (0.262) on the dependent variable (Attitude). This means, individuals who are more interested in rewards tend to show a positive attitude towards the IGBAs. The research results also show that attitude affects the intention positively (0.290) and significantly. Also, the results show that tangible and flexible reward scheme with a link to location based rewards where mobile gamers can redeem physically by converting the points achieved from their game play, is effective to positively affect their attitudes and intention to take actions.

Theoretically, this study deepens and enriches our understanding of Finnish mobile game players' attitude towards IGBAs and the consequent actions. Practically, our research provides valuable suggestions to marketers and business managers to help them reduce uncertainty when building a marketing plan targeting Finnish mobile gamers. This research helps them gain more knowledge about their demographic profiles as a consumer - young adults earning some amount of income and they play mobile games to kill time. It is evident from our analysis that the mobile gamers' attitude towards IGBAs is negative. However, there is positive impact of incentives to their behavioral intention that ultimately increase the likelihood to click on IGBAs. The individual variables - tangible, flexible and location-based rewards have shown positive influence to the gamers' attitude towards IGBAs thus increasing their behavioral intention positively and significantly. In other words, they are motivated by mobile coupons with a flexible scheme where they can use in stores nearby. The results from this study are in accordance to previous researches regarding attitudes of consumers to advertising [39], [10], [16] and the factors affecting effectiveness of incentives [40], [3], [12].

While the results have contributed to the body of knowledge about mobile gamers in Finland, we are unable to discuss similar implications to non-Finnish mobile gamers. Consequently, we propose that other researchers should undertake similar study in other countries. Secondly, the research results point to the positive impact of flexible, tangible and location-based rewards to mobile gamers' attitude towards IGBAs, thus it is important that future research follow through deeper understanding of the type of consumer products and services that are most suited for such reward schemes.

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