



TV advertising engagement as a state of immersion and presence



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ABSTRACT

Despite widespread theoretical and practical interest in advertising engagement, scholars and practitioners share little consensus as to what it is and how it can be measured. Guided by the theories of immersion and presence, this research investigates the experiential nature of advertising engagement in the television advertising context. Using survey data ($N = 1,115$ cases) on thirteen TV advertisements aired during two Super Bowl broadcasts, a definition of the construct is developed and a parsimonious, reliable and valid four-item scale for measuring experiential TV advertising engagement is produced. As conceptualized, TV advertising engagement is an experience independent of its antecedents and consequences, in which the viewer is psychologically immersed in and present with a TV advertisement. These conceptual dimensions are reflected in the four items of the produced scale.

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1. Introduction

Engagement is one of the most widely used concepts in modern advertising. ComScore ARS, for example, conducted a decade-long study of audience diagnostics and reports that persuasiveness is highest in high advertising engagement conditions and that early and sustained advertising engagement is the best predictor of video advertisement effectiveness (Ziliak, 2011). The company concludes that advertising engagement is a necessary component of persuasion and is as important to the determination of advertising effectiveness as other metrics (e.g., brand relevance, linkage, and differentiation). Yet, despite its popularity and documented link to effectiveness, the concept remains ambiguous and unclear (Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009) and “perhaps the least understood while simultaneously one of the most overused” constructs of advertising research (Gluck, 2012, p. 2). This conceptual underdevelopment results in a lack of clarity regarding the construct and its effectiveness, leading practitioners and theorists to often miscast the consequences of engagement as advertising engagement itself (Calder et al., 2009) or to conflate it with similar concepts, such as involvement or interactivity (Mollen & Wilson, 2010).

The Advertising Research Foundation (2006) defines advertising engagement as “turning on a prospect to a brand message enhanced by the surrounding context” (Wang, 2006, p. 355). This definition is widely cited and embraced, at least in terms of conceptual direction, because

it covers a wide range of internal (i.e., psychological engagement) and external (i.e., behavioral engagement such as clicking) reactions to advertisements, and reflects the essence of what ad engagement is thought to be – the consumer experience of being *turned on*. However, as noted above, though broadly inclusive and directionally sound, the ARF definition is criticized as being too broad for practical applications in the measurement of advertising engagement (Calder et al., 2009). According to Calder and Malthouse (2008), the industry needs “not only to pin it down but also to determine how to measure it [engagement]” (p. 2).

Guided by the theories of immersion and presence, which are germane to the state of being *turned on* by mediated experiences, the current study builds on conceptual thinking and research to help fill theoretical and methodological gaps in the literature. Using the context of TV advertising, the study seeks to first, add theoretical clarity to the conceptual boundary of advertising engagement and second, advance research on the construct by producing a validated scale for measuring TV ad engagement.

Past research on advertising engagement has been mostly conceptual (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011), rather than empirical. In the few empirical studies, measures of advertising engagement are largely ad hoc (e.g., How engaging was it for you to process the advertisement? [Wang, 2006]) or comprised of proxy surrogates (e.g., click and viewing time for interactive ads) (Calder et al., 2009). The fuzziness of the construct’s conceptualization results from the blanket use of the term engagement to indicate any committed reaction to marketing communications, such as advertising. However, because consumers exhibit many types of engagement-like or engagement-related reactions

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(psychological or behavioral) to attended marketing communications (e.g., ad, brand, and medium), making the claim that a universal measure of advertising engagement applies to all reactions and communication forms is misleading. Consequently, the theoretical validity of the construct and its past measurements in the extant literature are conceptually questionable and of limited applicability.

Because advertisements are delivered by specific media, and because different media offer different engagement experiences, the media context of advertising engagement should be specified in research to parse out engagement processes from general media effects. Therefore, this study focuses on TV advertising because, among all multisensory media, TV receives the largest share of advertising expenditures (39%, followed by digital [28.3%], [Statistica, 2015](#)) and is considered the most effective and efficient advertising medium ([Lynch, 2015](#)).

Focusing on the TV context, TV advertising engagement, or the act of being engaged, is conceptualized as an event, separate and independent of the act's antecedents and consequences, in which the viewer is mentally and concurrently immersed in and present with an encountered advertisement. As noted later, studies show that the experience of being connected to a message is linked to the feelings of immersion (i.e., perception of being in interaction with, included in, or enveloped by the mediated environment) and presence (i.e., perception of *being there*) in a mediated environment ([Witmer & Singer, 1998](#)). The expectation is that being psychologically engaged with a TV advertisement is a mental event of being connected to, related to, immersed in, and present with the advertisement.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

2.1. Defining advertising engagement

[Spielmann and Richard \(2013\)](#) note that engagement, a construct developed to understand how communication works upon contact ([Calder & Malthouse, 2005](#)), is often confounded with a similar construct, *involvement*. The situation raises the question: Is engagement a different label for involvement, or are the two constructs conceptually different? In advertising, involvement is viewed as a state variable indicating ad-elicited arousal, interest, or drive levels ([Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 1997](#)), or as a moderator (composed of attention and relevance) that influences attitude formation during ad-exposure ([Laczniak & Muehling, 1993](#)). Multi-dimensional views of involvement also exist. For example, [Celuch and Slama \(1998\)](#) state that ad involvement consists of affective (e.g., intimacy of ad) and cognitive (e.g., informativeness) dimensions. [Spielmann and Richard's \(2013\)](#) recent study introduces the second-order concept of *overall ad involvement*, composed of message, media, and creative involvement as first-order constructs. Thus, a relevant question for the present research is: Are any of the involvement constructs similar to what practitioners and academics refer to as *advertising engagement*?

As noted earlier, the emerging literature shows that the conceptual definition of advertising engagement is as varied as that of involvement. Consequently, when it is said, "a viewer is engaged with an advertisement," it is unclear what *being engaged* means. Is it represented by focal attention and felt relevance ([Wang, 2006](#))? Is it the physical interactions with the advertisement, such as clicking ([Gluck, 2012](#))? Or, is it reflective of the various elements of the advertisement itself (i.e., message and/or executional characteristics) or the medium of message delivery ([Spielmann & Richard, 2013](#))? Though all of these perspectives are conceptually relevant, this research takes the position that none adequately represents the advertising engagement construct. For example, contextual relevance ([Wang, 2006](#)) might be related to *being engaged*; however, relevance and engagement are not equal. [Table 1](#) presents some of the notable concepts and measures related to ad involvement and engagement.

Amidst the diverse views, [Calder and Malthouse \(2008\)](#) offer an especially interesting perspective on the character of advertising engagement. They argue that the antecedents (e.g., contextual relevance) and consequences (e.g., time spent on viewing) are separate and distinct from *being engaged* with an advertisement, and as such, should not be confused with the construct itself. They base their argument on the belief that if an advertisement is relevant and interesting (i.e., antecedents of engagement), the viewer is expected to feel engaged with that advertisement in the viewing environment ([Calder & Malthouse, 2008](#)).

In psychology, engagement is considered an approach (vs. avoidance) response to a stimulus, comprised of two experiences – hedonic and motivational ([Higgins, 2006](#)). The first is called *liking* (i.e., like → approach vs. dislike → avoid) and the latter *engagement* (i.e., engaging → approach vs. unengaging → avoid). Using this framework, [Calder and Malthouse \(2008\)](#) conceptualize media engagement as "the sum of motivational experiences consumers have with the media product" (p. 6) and suggest that it consists of intrinsic (i.e., the goal is media experience itself) and extrinsic (i.e., media experience as the means to achieve external goals) motivations. Though viewers might have both motivations, it is known that they do not actively seek out ads to satisfy extrinsic goals. Instead, if engagement with a TV ad occurs, it is more likely associated with intrinsic goals (i.e., experiencing mediated content). Studies of narrative elements in message processing describe this type of intrinsic experience as a convergent psychological process focusing on events occurring in the narrative story ([Green & Brock, 2000](#)).

Dictionary definitions of the word *engage* include descriptions such as "entangle," "entrap," "attract," "interlock," "bind," "involve," and "give/hold attention" ([Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1991](#)). Even though these and other words may be applicable, herein *interlock* is adopted as the best verbal descriptor of the overall nature of *being engaged*: the word implies a two-way interaction wherein the TV viewer and the TV advertisement become locked together. Moreover, a key distinction between *involve* and *interlock* warrants attention: involvement is a trait condition (i.e., you are not involved if you lack prior topic interest) whereas interlock is a state condition (i.e., you can be engaged even if you lack prior topic interest). Though involvement is often viewed to represent some motivational factor, such as an a priori state or cognitive structure, *interlock* clearly and sufficiently describes advertising engagement – it powerfully conveys the organic integration of the TV viewer and the advertisement. From the perspective of communication theory, the interlocking experience between viewer and advertisement is reflected by two concepts, immersion and presence. *Immersion* is defined as the physical state of being enveloped by sensory information created by media ([Slater & Wilbur, 1997](#)). Metaphorically, immersion is described as the experience of being completely surrounded by another reality, similar to the feeling of being submerged in water ([Murray, 1997](#)). Highly immersive media environments are thought to lead to perceptions of *presence*, defined as the subjective feeling of *being there* ([Biocca, 1997](#)).

Research indicates that the concepts of immersion and presence operate across multiple mediated platforms, including print ([Green & Brock, 2000](#)), television ([Reeves, 1978](#)), video games, and virtual environments ([Lee, 2004; Ahn et al., 2016](#)). As such, these concepts are especially relevant to advertising engagement because they involve a depth continuum rather than a dichotomous state of existence or absence. Accordingly, the present study posits that immersion and presence are two necessary conditions for *being engaged*, wherein the TV viewer feels mentally *there* within an advertisement. Transportation is a similar construct involving narrative-based experiences that result in heightened enjoyment of entertainment ([Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004](#)), attitude change ([Escalas, 2004](#)), and favorable ad responses ([Wang & Calder, 2009](#)).

When developing a construct, consideration must also be given to whether the underlying dimensions are reflective or formative indicators of the latent construct ([Diamantopoulos & Winklhofer, 2001](#)). A

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