

Is Entertaining Content the Best Context for Online Ads?

A Collaborative Study by



Executive Summary. When users are entertained by online content do they really respond to display ads better than when they are informed, educated, or engaged by publishers in other ways? And does the entertainment value of the content always confer positive impressions to the brands that are advertised? Two studies were conducted to address these issues. In the first study, we confirmed that online ad buyers believe that the users of entertainment sites show better responses to ads, higher purchase intent, and better brand retention than do users of other sites. In the second study, we tested these beliefs by experimentally showing the ads of 3 different brands (for a bank, soft drink, and computer company) on 2 different types of sites, which had the same target audience (college students) but differed in their goal of providing entertainment versus educational resources. A summary of the findings is as follows:

- We found no experimental evidence for the hypothesis that brands are perceived more positively when their display ads appear on entertainment sites rather than on education sites.
- In fact, the bank that was displayed in the ads used in the study was perceived as **less classy, cool, modern, and honest** when its ads appeared on the entertainment sites compared to the education sites.
- The same pattern was found for intent to engage with the ads: there was no evidence for the superiority of the entertainment sites, and the bank ads were more likely to be clicked on when appearing on the education sites.
- Neither the entertainment nor education sites produced significantly better brand recall.

We interpret these findings in light of research on the multidimensional nature of brand relevance and users' forms of engagement.

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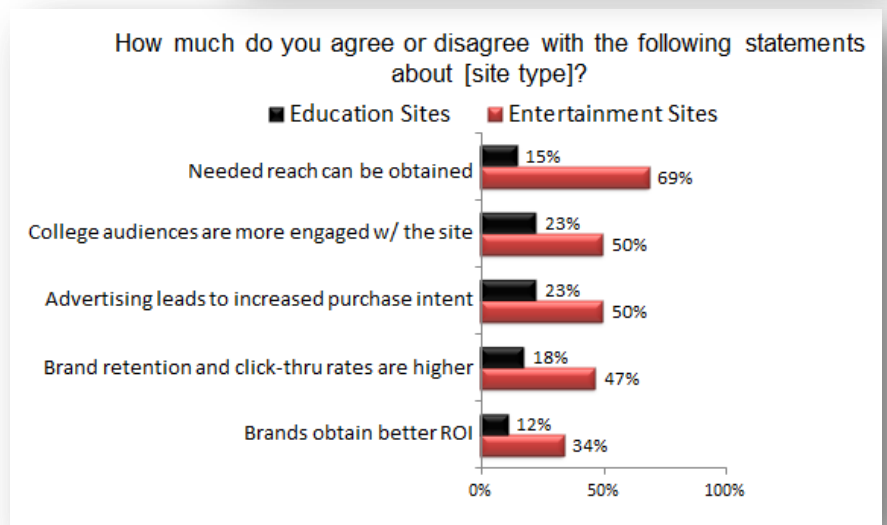
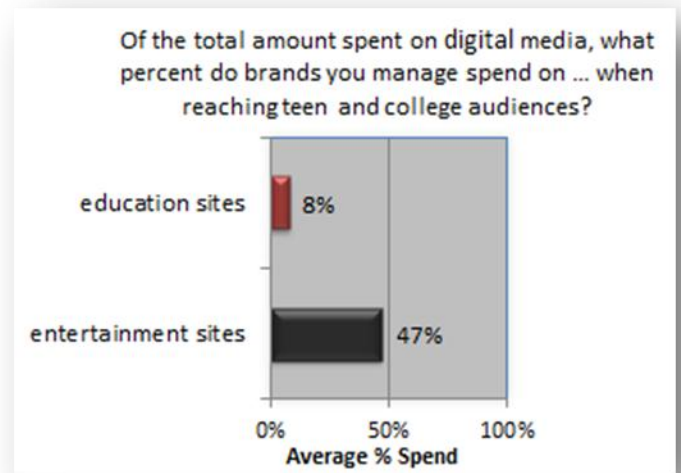
Background and Research Questions.

Clearly, users visit different online publishers to fulfill different needs. Quite often they seek to be entertained, and there is little question that the sites such as ICanHazCheezburger.com, Cracked.com, and FunnyOrDie.com are wildly successful in this way. But the web is nothing if not diverse, and many publishers are also devoted to informing, assisting, engaging, or finding solutions for users' needs in a great variety of ways. The question is, are sites that are not devoted to entertainment at any disadvantage as a place to advertise, or is perhaps the opposite true, that they are a better choice for certain brands or certain marketing objectives?

Psychster Inc. first became interested in this question while conducting a survey of ad buyers for our client Bookrags.com, an online resource of study guides, lesson plans, and book summaries for teachers and students. After drawing a distinction between such "education sites" and "entertainment sites," we asked the ad buyers about their attitudes toward both as shown in the figure below. (The bars represent the percentage of respondents who selected 5, 6, or 7 on a 7-pt scale where 7 = strongly agree.) Across a number of attributes, the ad buyers believed that entertainment sites were significantly superior, all $p < .05$.

Elsewhere, they reported to us that on average, when reaching teen and college audiences, their ad spend on entertainment sites was about 6 times greater than spend on education sites—in some cases the proportion of their ad spend devoted to entertainment sites was 100%.

There is some scientific foundation for the ad buyers' beliefs, but also unanswered questions. Media theorists believe that users' emotions are indeed intertwined with their information processing, as this mixture is the most effective way for them to judge the emotional significance of things like display ads and determine their appropriate response (Lang, 2009). Thus entertainment sites would appear to be at an advantage by arousing users' "hot" emotional needs in addition to their "cold" informational needs. However, theorists also argue that emotionally, users experience a constant mix of "appetite and aversion" while online, and the balance between these is what determines whether they perceive ads positively and show purchase intent or not



Key Question: Are brands advertised on entertainment sites perceived differently than when advertised on other sites?

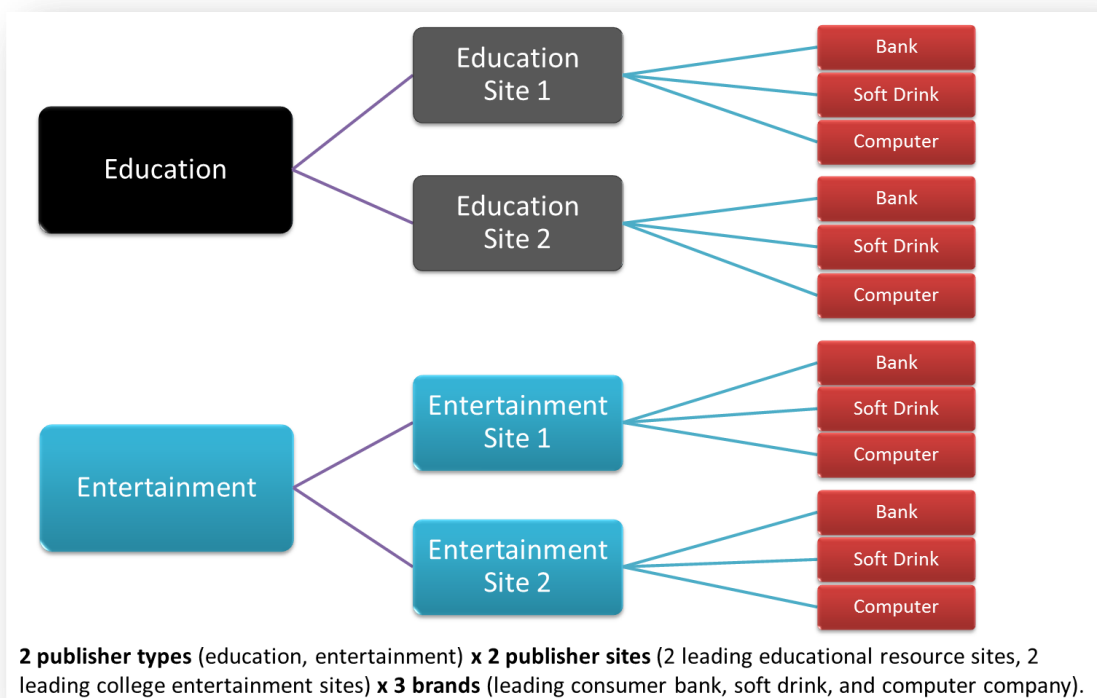
Secondary Question: Are brands advertised on entertainment sites more often recalled?

(Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997; Eckler & Bolls, 2011). For example, marketers [believe](#) that users are in more of this “appetitive” frame of mind when they search for baby products, health remedies, or computer reviews (meaning they are inclined to acquire or buy something) and less so when they are consuming entertaining content or connecting with others via social media.

Thus the pervasive belief of ad buyers in the superiority of entertainment sites is by no means a foregone conclusion. So we conducted a subsequent study to put these beliefs to the test.

Methodology.

We designed a multivariate online experiment by taking screenshots of two leading entertainment sites targeted at college-aged users, and two leading educational sites targeted at the same audience (the educational sites included Bookrags.com and one of its competitors). We digitally manipulated the screenshots to display one of three advertisements featuring either a leading bank company, a leading soft-drink company, or a leading computer company, for a total of 12 conditions (see below).



Respondents were randomly assigned to view one of these 12 images, after which they rated their attitudes toward the brand and the site. For analysis purposes, the 2 sites within each site type were aggregated in order to compare the 2 publisher types. Although the ads that were shown on the different sites were identical and thus a true experimental factor, we acknowledge that the publisher type is a quasi-experimental factor. That is, although every effort was made to choose sites with the same audience but different goals with regard to providing entertainment versus educational resources, they nonetheless differed in other ways which should be kept in mind in interpreting the results.

Respondents. The survey was fielded in September, 2011 to **662 respondents** recruited via a panel company who were college students ages 17-24 (63% women). In addition to being randomized into one of the groups discussed above, respondents were further randomized to answer one of 5 different types of ‘brand recall’ questions: 1) unassisted recall 2) assisted recall with 3 answer choices 3) assisted recall

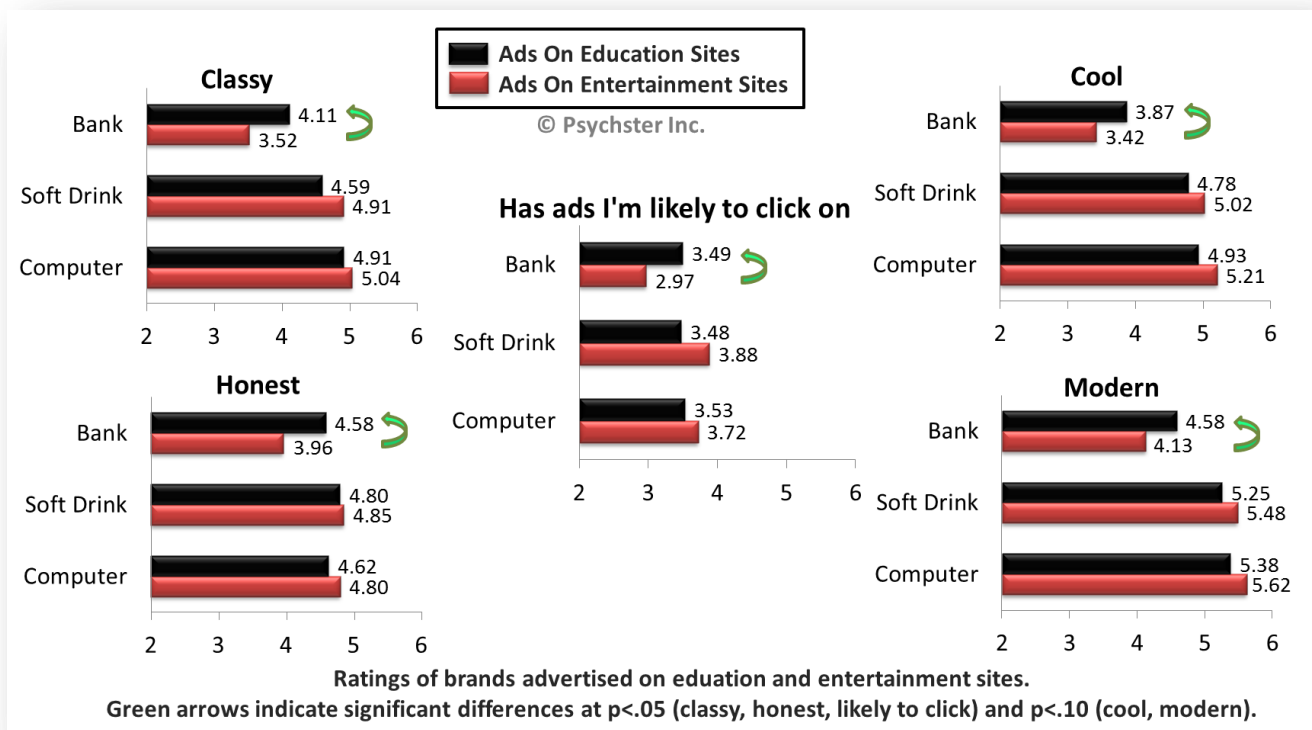
without alternatives-correct brand 4) assisted recall without alternatives-competitor brand 1 5) assisted recall without alternatives-competitor brand 2.

Metrics. After viewing the image, respondents rated a series of questions about brand recall, brand perceptions (i.e., how they felt about the brand featured in the image), specific site perceptions, and perceptions of education sites or entertainment sites as a whole. Within each group, there was a high degree of correlation between all the metrics, so only those showing significant difference are reported here.

Results.

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed **significant site type-by-brand interaction** across several attributes, multivariate $F(44,1216)=1.37, p=.05$. Specific findings are summarized below.

1. No support was found for the view that brands are perceived more positively or more engaging when they are advertised on entertainment sites rather than on education sites. The graphs below compare the ratings of the brands advertised on education and entertainment sites. Two key findings are revealed: first, there were no significant differences in brand perception for the soft drink and computer brand on the attributes **cool, classy, honest, modern, and has internet ads I’m likely to click on**. Furthermore, the bank ads performed significantly better on education sites than they did on entertainment sites on all of these attributes. As indicated, these findings run counter to the beliefs held by many ad buyers that ads fare better when they appear on entertainment sites, and it supports the notion that in some cases, advertising on entertainment sites may in fact confer more negative brand perception.



2. Brand recall was no greater on entertainment sites than on education sites. Across both assisted and unassisted recall metrics, rates of accurate brand recall were not significantly different across the two site types. In the tables below, respondents were asked “was [correct brand] the brand you saw previously?” As rates were about the same across the 2 sites types, these findings confirm the notion that brands are **not** necessarily more likely to be seen and remembered when they are advertised on entertainment sites versus education sites.

“Was [brand] the brand that you saw on the previous webpage?”

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Exposed To and Correctly Identified Bank

Education	4 out of 13, 31%
Entertainment	6 out of 17, 35%

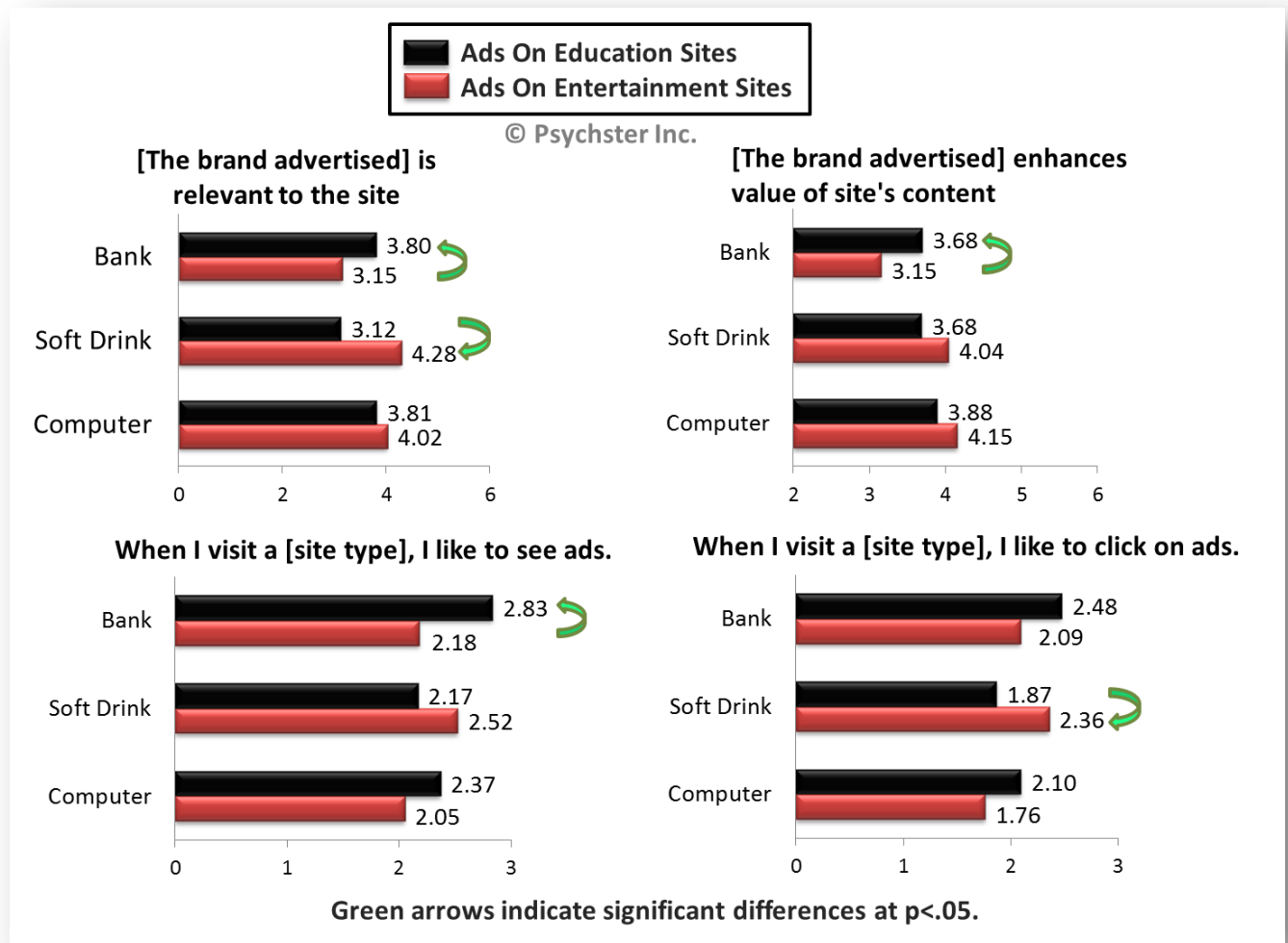
Exposed To and Correctly Identified Soft Drink

Education	11 out of 14, 79%
Entertainment	16 out of 19, 84%

Exposed To and Correctly Identified Computer Brand

Education	9 out of 23, 39%
Entertainment	7 out of 16, 44%

3. When relevant brands appeared on educational sites, users became more “appetitive” meaning they were more willing to engage with advertising during their visit. The figures below suggest that overall, users of educational sites are more willing to act as consumers and engage with ads than users of entertainment sites. Interestingly, however, this effect is further driven by the relevance of the ads to the site (bank ads were seen as more relevant to education sites, and soft-drink ads were seen as more relevant to entertainment sites). When this happened, the ads actually enhanced the sites’ content for users, and they were more likely to appreciate and engage with ads – all signs that they had shifted closer to a frame of mind in which they wanted to buy or acquire something for their needs.



Conclusions.

The results suggest that, contrary to widespread beliefs among ad buyers, sites whose goal is to entertain do not carry a universal advantage as an advertising platform over sites whose goal is to inform, educate, or meet users' needs in other ways. In fact, users of other sites may be more inclined toward acquiring goods or services by virtue of the site's content, and all the more so when relevant ads are displayed. For example, in this study when a bank ad was displayed on an education resource site, users were more likely to appreciate the ad, the brand, and even the publisher site itself, than when the same ad was displayed on an entertainment site.

Taken to its logical extreme, these results suggest that ad buyers may be unwittingly restricting their bottom line when they pay attention solely to the entertainment value of a publisher's content, and do not also consider the "appetitive versus aversive" frame of mind of its users. Theorists for some time (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997) have argued that, yes, consumers' emotional state affects their consumerism, but not in a one-size-fits-all way. Although being entertained is key to increasing the reach, frequency, and stickiness of the publisher site, other emotional and cognitive states may be a better match with the brands that are advertised and the calls to action they encourage.

These findings bear on the current debate over the differences between the internet and television as advertising platforms. As discussed here <http://tiny.cc/bgcae> some feel strongly that television is better at making an emotional connection with consumers and is thus better for brand-building campaigns,

whereas the internet is better at evoking action and is thus better for direct-marketing campaigns. This view is not inconsistent with the findings of our study, but again we would caution against a one-size fits all view of either medium. Clearly the success of ecommerce proves that sometimes users go to the web specifically to buy, just as the success of YouTube proves that sometimes users go to the web to be entertained. In the same way, this study indicates that users go to student resource sites to buy, and to humor sites for entertainment. We hope this study moves the discussion forward and encourages a multidimensional view of users' needs (e.g. entertainment, acquisition, information, connection) and an effort to match these with marketing objectives (brand building, purchase intent, awareness building, loyalty). Our results suggest that mismatches between the users' orientation and the ads may backfire: we observed that a bank was perceived as **less** classy, cool, honest, and modern when it tried to advertise on a college-humor site than on a study-guide site. Moreover, we would be fascinated by research that extends this discussion to the strengths and weaknesses of mobile platforms on similar metrics.

On a final note, we would like to see more research on how online publishers' content affects perceptions of ads and brands, and also the reverse, how ads and brands affect perceptions of the publishers. For example, recent work by Eckler & Bolls (2011) has revealed how the emotional tone of digital videos affect perceptions of the mid-roll ads, as well as users' likelihood to forward the videos. These "halo effects" are broadly assumed and little understood.

References.

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Cacioppo, J. T., Gardner, W.L., & Berntson, G.G. (1997). Beyond bipolar conceptualizations and measures: The case of attitudes and evaluative space. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 1, 3-25.

To view the actual images used in this survey, please contact the authors.