

Mobile Users May Not Buy Into Instant Gratification Cues

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Gimmicky contest ads and flashy free-prize messages may be an instant turnoff for mobile users, according to Penn State researchers.

In a study, a tempting offer of a free prize drawing for registering on a [mobile](#) website led users to distrust the site, said S. Shyam Sundar, Distinguished Professor of Communications and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory.

Sundar said that in an increasingly [information](#)-loaded world, people tend to lean on cues, such as icons and messages, for decision-making shortcuts, called heuristics. However, some cues may elicit user reaction in the opposite direction of what most marketers would anticipate.

"Even though we turn to our mobile devices for instantly gratifying our need for information, we may not be persuaded by advertising appeals for [instant gratification](#)," said Sundar. "It's a boomerang effect—marketers may think that they are activating the instant gratification heuristic when they display time-sensitive offers, but what they're actually doing is cuing red flags about the site."

Mobile users tend to be more knowledgeable about technology than regular users.

"It could be that an instant gratification message makes [mobile users](#), who tend to be more tech savvy, leery about the site," said Sundar.

Even though free-prize ads are ubiquitous on the internet, marketers may want to seek other ways to reach mobile customers, according to the researchers.

The researchers, who presented their findings today (Apr. 28) at the Association for Computing Machinery's Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, also tested a warning cue that seemed to prompt more conflicting reactions from users, said Sundar. When a security alert—a caution icon with a warning message—appeared, users became more worried about security, as expected. However, users were willing to reveal more information about their social media accounts after viewing the security prompt.

One possible explanation for this behavior is that the security cue makes the users distinguish more carefully between public and private information.

"People may feel that the social media information is already public information, not necessarily private information, and they are not as concerned about revealing social media information," said Sundar, who worked with Bo Zhang, Mu Wu, Hyunjin Kang and Eun Go, all doctoral students in mass communications. "The 'privacy paradox' of giving away information when we are most concerned about its safety may not be all that paradoxical if you consider that the information we give away is not quite private."

The researchers recruited 220 participants to test four different mobile sites. The participants were first asked to navigate to a mobile site. One site included a caution symbol and a security warning that the site was insecure and another site contained a gift box icon with a message that the user could win a free prize for registering. A third site showed both a warning and an instant gratification message and a fourth [site](#), which featured neither alerts, served as the control in the study. Except for

these cues, all other content in the four sites was identical.

Participants could choose how much or how little personal, professional, financial or [social media](#) information they provided in the registration form, which served as a measure of their information disclosure behaviors. After registering, they filled out an online questionnaire about their impressions of the mobile website.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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