

FACTORS INFLUENCING RURAL DIGITAL ADVERTISING ADOPTION

Factors Influencing Rural Digital Advertising Adoption in Alberta, Canada

By

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Abstract

Digital advertising's popularity in Canada is growing, according to digital revenue projections and market share data. While Google and Facebook are the major players in the Canadian digital advertising space, available data does not make geographic distinctions between urban and rural data. This makes it difficult to predict whether rural businesses are adopting digital advertising methods at the same rate as the national data shows. This qualitative study explores whether businesses in rural Alberta are adopting digital advertising methods, and if so, how they are navigating toward digital platforms. To ensure a sample that is reflective of rural advertising behaviours, Alberta communities located within 40 km of a major urban media market and with populations of more than 8,000 were excluded from the study. Findings drawn from interviews show that rural business owners are in the entry-level stages of integrating digital advertising strategies, but few are venturing past introductory engagement with digital advertising platforms. They appreciate digital advertising's potential for reach, cost, usability and learning opportunities, but are also aware of other 'traditional' advertising platforms, such as newspapers, that can better reach the specific demographics of the customers they are trying to reach, and who are worthy of continuing support. While it is evident that rural businesses have adopted digital advertising, findings show inconsistencies between the data collected in this study and the existing research literature on this topic. This points to the need for deeper exploration of digital advertising in rural-specific markets.

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

Purpose of the Study

As of 2019 Canadian digital ad spending, such as that spent on social media, websites and mobile applications, has surpassed traditional advertising methods by over \$1 billion (Briggs, 2019). As Internet advertising takes up more than half (53 per cent) of the total Canadian advertising market share (Think T.V., 2019), it is clear that business owners are making a conscious decision to invest in digital advertising. What is not clear is how unique populations within Canada, such as rural Alberta communities, are adapting to the new digital advertising opportunities. The unknown state of the adoption of digital advertising by businesses located in rural communities has prompted the following research question:

RQ1: What factors encourage the digital advertising purchase decisions of rural Alberta business owners?

My research on rural digital advertising adoption helps address a gap in the literature regarding an under-studied population. Most studies of Canadian digital advertising do not make geographic distinctions between urban and rural data, making it difficult to predict if rural digital advertising adoption mirrors national data. Are rural business owners spending 53 per cent of their advertising budgets on digital ads? Have their digital advertising activities surpassed traditional advertising methods, such as through newspapers, radio and television? Making inferences about rural advertising behaviours with reference to large-scale national digital advertising figures without considering specific data drawn from those regions creates big assumptions. These assumptions can be further problematized when regional factors such as the presence of early digital adopters, existing media loyalties, and the need to communicate with

older target audiences create unique factors that may expedite or slow digital adoption in rural communities.

The purpose of this research is to determine the current state of digital advertising in rural Alberta, explore how digital advertising innovation spreads in rural communities, determine the digital advertising attributes that rural business owners find appealing, and explore regional factors that affect digital advertising adoption. Along with contributing to the research literature on this topic, conducting a specific exploration of advertising behaviours in rural Alberta communities may provide insight for rural community business members and media professionals who are looking to take advantage of digital entrepreneurship opportunities.

Literature Preview

The literature begins with an exploration of the definition of “advertising” and a summary of rural digital advertising opportunities. Defining advertising as a “paid” activity was necessary to establish discussion context with research participants (Dahlen & Rosengren, 2016).

Next, a summary of different methods of digital advertising establishes a deeper understanding of methods including search engine marketing, Internet display advertising, and social media advertising, as well as how rural business owners are applying those tools in practice. Google and Facebook are used as case studies to describe the self-serve digital advertising purchasing process, and illustrate their benefits for advertisers. For example, search engine marketing (SEM) uses a cost-per-click bidding system to deliver ads to users when they search for certain keywords (Google, n.d.-g). Google display ads allow for more bid and display options (Google, n.d.-f). Social media advertising, such as Facebook ads, provide a variety of high-quality “plug and play” advertising formats (Figure 5).

Digital and mobile advertising is significantly growing in Canada (Winseck, 2019; Briggs, 2019; Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2020; Think T.V., 2019; Briggs, 2018a; Anthony, 2019). The Government of Canada brings a more realistic indication of advertising activities. Governments are required to communicate broadly to all Canadians, and so their advertising budget priorities may be more reflective of the diversity of people living in Canada and its varied rural communities. The federal government spends \$18.2 million on digital advertising, with 43 per cent going to social media platforms; 38 per cent going to digital display ads; 12 per cent going to search engine marketing and 6 per cent going to internet real time bidding (Government of Canada, 2019).

Urban centres can secure control over these emerging advertising processes (and associated revenues) due to increased competition over limited advertising dollars, more access to technology and technical expertise, and higher overall population density when compared to rural communities. While revenues from digital advertising are climbing nationwide, there is no indication they are climbing at the same rate in rural communities. For example, many weekly newspapers (a common advertising option for businesses in rural communities) provide digital advertising opportunities along with their printed product. However, available research demonstrates that this form of online advertising is not growing at a rate that will keep up with the decline of print advertising (Think T.V., 2019). These trends may imply overall slow adoption of digital advertising in rural communities – though they may also indicate that newspapers have not developed an effective digital platform to attract digital investment.

There are also generational and rural-specific indicators that may be causing some hesitation for rural business owners to adopt advertising. While older generations are showing evidence of increased usage of digital technologies, their usage of digital tools varies from that of

younger generations (Lee & Kim, 2014; News Media Canada, 2019; Tosca, 2019; Atkin, Hunt, & Lin, 2015). Regionally, studies indicate that users in rural communities have been found to be less engaged on digital platforms (Gilbert, Karahalios & Sandvig, 2010; Perrin, 2015). It is also possible that limited Internet access (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2019), lack of trust in digital platforms (Briggs, 2018b), and lack of experience using digital platforms (Prevatt, 2016; Motkoski, 2017) also contribute to the perceived lag of digital adoption in rural communities. These varied observations, however, cannot be confirmed without specifically conducting studies in rural contexts.

Methodology Preview

In this context, my research aims to discover factors that influence digital advertising in rural communities. In order to ensure that my rural sample communities were free from urban influences, I used the following inclusion criteria when choosing which communities to study: less than 8,000 population, located at least 40 km away from a major urban media market, and with a local advertising decision maker. Communities included in the sample were also required to have a weekly newspaper presence, to increase the likelihood of reaching businesses who have advertising purchase experience. Once research participants were acquired, I used an introductory questionnaire and one-on-one semi-structured interviews to understand their advertising activities. From there, I coded the text using grounded theory and diffusion of innovations (DOI) theory, and developed a theoretical narrative of rural digital advertising from the themes that emerged from the coding process.

Summary

This chapter has provided a brief overview of the significance of my research, the supporting literature, and the research methodology. It is evident that while digital advertising is

widely accepted in Canada, little is known about its acceptance by business owners in rural communities. To understand if, how, and why rural business owners use digital advertising, one must understand the digital advertising options that are available, the current state digital advertising, and the factors that influence its adoption. While rural business owners have adequate access to digital advertising opportunities, factors such as comfort-level with technology and the age of the business owner or customer may affect the rate of digital adoption. The research methodology was developed to ensure that specific rural perspectives were captured. Experiences reported by research participants will be communicated using a theoretical narrative.

This research report is organised as follows. First, I will first discuss key literature related to digital advertising concepts (Chapter 2). Next, I will outline the research methodology (Chapter 3), including a detailed explanation about the data coding process. From there, findings will be presented in the research participants' own words and will be summarized into a narrative that "tells the story" of the rural business owner and their experience with advertising (Chapter 4). Then, the findings will be further analyzed against the literature to explore validity and develop recommendations for future work in this area (Chapter 5).

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

Introduction

It is conceivable that advertising methods have been present since the dawn of human communication. Cave paintings and petroglyphs are said to have contained the earliest sales messages, which rapidly evolved as new communication platforms emerged (Tungate, 2007). The invention of the printing press in the 1440s, the rise of the newspaper in the 1850s, the introduction of radio advertising in the 1920s, and television commercials in the 1940s, all caused significant shifts in how businesses invest their advertising dollars (Tungate, 2007).

It should be no surprise that the widespread adoption of the Internet, and the devices used to access it, has caused another major advertising shift. In fact, Canadian digital ad spending surpassed traditional methods by more than \$1 billion in 2019 (Briggs, 2019). This implies that digital advertising, with Google and Facebook as the leading digital advertising platform providers, has “come of age” as a preferred advertising method for Canadian advertising decision-makers.

But digital advertising trends in specific rural markets can be difficult to track due to limited geographic-specific data available to researchers. Rural communities in Alberta are an example of niche geographic areas where our understanding about digital advertising activities remains somewhat uncertain due to the lack of publicly available data. Traditional advertising can be tracked with advertising revenues, because service areas are typically organized geographically. For example, monitoring weekly newspaper revenues, a common method of advertising in rural markets, may provide some insights on the popularity of newspaper advertising in rural communities. But that is the only part of the advertising picture. Particularly

in the context of a growing market, digital advertising in rural communities must also be accounted for.

The extent to which businesses in rural markets have adopted digital advertising is *not* clear. Published revenues of digital advertising providers do not make geographic distinctions between data from urban and rural markets (Briggs, 2018a, 2018b). This can muddy assumptions as to what is truly going on in the adoption of digital advertising in rural markets. One exception to this is weekly newspapers or rural radio stations, which offer online advertising to businesses through their local website or media chain, and so are easier to measure. However, in such cases available data indicates newspapers are not having success attracting digital advertisers. Newspapers that currently offer online advertising are seeing slow increases in their digital advertising revenues and they are not increasing as quickly as print advertising revenues are decreasing (Think T.V., 2018, 2019). At face value, this points to a trend of slow adoption of digital advertising in rural markets. However, there is more to this story. For example, if a local online advertising provider is not successfully attracting local business advertisers, it is easy to assume that advertising dollars are available, but are going to larger (urban-based) digital advertising providers, such as Google or Facebook.

A further consideration is the overall levels of digital advertising adoption in these communities. Available research indicates that low social media and web adoption in rural markets and small businesses is evident (Richmond, Rader, & Lanier, 2017). Small-to-medium businesses (which are typically the size of business in rural communities) also tend to have difficulties committing resources to invest in digital business practices (Prevatt, 2016; Motkoski, 2017).

Together, these observations warrant further study to see whether – and to what extent – businesses in rural communities are adopting and using digital advertising. Academic study of digital advertising in rural communities is somewhat limited. In fact, not all academic literature focusing on digital advertising adoption discloses whether their data are taken from an urban or rural environment. In other cases, urban and rural results are combined in aggregated data sets. While some general behavioural parallels may be drawn between digital advertising adoption in urban and rural communities, the urban population, their media consumption behaviours and increased competition between retailers can put more pressure on businesses in urban markets to adopt digital strategies more quickly. Therefore, it is possible that existing data on urban digital adoption will not be relevant to rural contexts.

The lack of fulsome data on this issue raises questions about whether a gap exists between the actual behaviours of rural Alberta digital advertisers, and the current information available through studies of Canadian advertising and revenue. It raises important questions as to the levels of adoption of digital advertising among business owners in rural communities, and what those adoption levels might tell us about such advertisers. For example, differing levels of adoption of digital advertising might reflect generational rather than geographic factors. Older business owners who are not immersed in, or comfortable with, using technology may not be aware of digital advertising's value, and therefore prefer familiar traditional advertising methods. Other non-geographic factors might also be present. For example, rural business owners may view their local digital audience as inactive and unworthy of investment in targeted advertising (when compared to their local 'offline' consumers). Finances may also be a factor: rural business owners may prefer to take advantage of free social media marketing opportunities on social networks that don't deplete their advertising budget. Levels of digital literacy may also be

considered. While many digital advertising opportunities are “self-serve” through hosting platforms, navigating new digital advertising purchase methods may create a large learning curve for business owners to confidently dive in. The nature of setting up advertising is also distinct in digital settings: business owners are no longer purchasing ad time or space that is distributed to a specific geographic region as they do with traditional advertising, but rather choosing keywords, target audiences and behaviours. In such methods, an ad is delivered if content “wins” the digital bidding process. Some business owners may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with these kinds of differences and changes.

At the same time, it is possible that digital advertising in rural Alberta communities is on the cusp of widespread adoption. As more “digital naturals” (Young & Akerstrom, 2015) take on business ownership, their high comfort with technology will likely lead to more adoption of digital advertising to promote their business. Put differently, as digital naturals become the “adult majority” within rural communities, digital advertising investment may become more viable. It is also possible that rural business owners are abandoning paid (local and regional) advertising altogether in favour of using free digital marketing tools.

In the absence of specific research into advertising practices in rural Alberta communities, the current state of adoption of digital advertising by rural business owners is largely unknown. An exploration of digital advertising adoption specific to rural communities will not only separate rural advertising buying behaviour from the available national data, it may identify adoption trends that can encourage digital entrepreneurship within these communities. Therefore, my research will explore how decisions about digital advertising are made by members of the rural Alberta business community.

Literature Review RQ1: What factors encourage the adoption of digital advertising by rural Alberta business owners?

This literature review will attempt to uncover the current state of digital advertising for rural business owners in Canada, with a focus on Alberta where possible. I anticipate that there is limited academic research available regarding some areas of digital advertising in Canada and Alberta. Therefore, I will seek academic and grey literature within comparable rural markets, such as those in the U.S., which follows acceptable professional practice when predicting digital advertising trends for Canada (Briggs, 2018c). I will also explore whether to consider (unpaid) social media in the definition of advertising. It is likely that many business owners, professionals, and academics equate unpaid social media to paid digital advertising, even if it does not fall under traditional definitions of “advertising”. Therefore, academic literature surrounding unpaid social media will also be queried.

A portion of my data will come from eMarketer and Paul Briggs, a Canadian senior analyst. To collect their data and develop projections, eMarketer refers to economic conditions; advertising, medium and consumption trends; reported and estimated revenues from advertising providers; as well as interviews with industry agencies, brands, and publishers. While these reports are not formal academic sources, eMarketer’s reputation as a data provider to corporations, academic institutions, and media organizations provides credibility to its data (eMarketer, n.d.).

Methodology

I developed three literature review questions to refine my search for literature:

LRQ1: What is the definition of advertising within the context of this study?

LRQ2: What digital advertising options are available for rural business owners in Alberta?

LRQ3: What is the current state of digital advertising in Alberta, Canada, and comparable rural markets?

LRQ4: What factors influence rural business owners to adopt digital advertising methods?

I started my research by accessing market data reports from several quantitative data sources including eMarketer, Statista, AdSpender, Forrester Research, and the Interactive Advertising Bureau. I did this to get a strong sense of the current state of digital advertising in Alberta, Canada and internationally, as reported by revenues. Then, I searched for Canadian industry reports from media organizations such as the Alberta Weekly Newspaper Association, News Media Canada, and Think TV, to provide insight into the state of digital advertising from traditional advertising providers. Advertising revenues and industry reports only tell the story of the state of advertising and consumption from the advertising provider's perspective; I will need to discover if there is academic research and grey literature on media consumption and advertising considerations of rural business owners. I used the University of Alberta EBSCO database and, more specifically, Sage Journals and Taylor and Francis, which publishes a variety of advertising, marketing, journalism, and communications journals. Finally, to fully understand digital advertising offerings, I conducted extensive research on Google and Facebook's customer advertising pages, to provide an adequate summary of digital advertising opportunities that are available in any community with Internet access.

Search parameters. Using Boolean logic, I input a variety of search terms listed below to discover articles that could be categorized under my three literature review questions (e.g., "Canada" and "advertising" and "rural"). As my research has a strong geographic focus, I want to discover as many Canadian and Albertan articles as possible. Therefore, *Canada* and *Alberta* are combined with the additional keywords listed below. As expected, there was limited

Canadian-specific academic literature. From there, I removed the geographic keywords to discover North American and international literature on my research topic. Topic keywords included: *advertising, rural, revenue, Facebook, Google, newspaper, newspaper advertising revenue, digital advertising revenue, advertising platforms, advertising budget, rural advertising opportunity, rural newspaper, weekly newspaper, local newspaper, rural advertising, digital divide, social media, social media adoption, small business, SME, SMB, Facebook, Google, YouTube, media, consumption, and readership.*

Narrowing results. My initial search revealed 84 sources, with an additional 10 discovered through a secondary search. I conducted a third search that expanded on a revised research question after consultation from my research supervisor. The searches were narrowed down using the following criteria:

Year of publication. My search criteria were limited to articles published between 2010 and 2019. The exception included articles that established context of the industry prior to integrated digital advertising practices. While it could be argued that the industry has significantly changed since 2010, making the data irrelevant, I would argue that older articles could corroborate or contradict data trends identified in other studies, to help detect potential bias, especially in grey literature.

Region of study. First preference was given to Albertan and Canadian data because that is the specific region in which I planned to conduct my own research. This allowed me to discover information gaps in our media and advertising market, which helped refine my research in a productive direction. If Albertan or Canadian data did not exist, I extended my regional considerations to North America, then internationally.

Cultural parallels. I felt it was important to consider the cultural and social status/organization of sample groups in international articles. For example, advertising preference and media consumption exploration in rural markets in Canada in 2015 would be different from a similar study conducted in India in 2015. Population density, geographic isolation, economic stability, etc. of each region can have significant impact on a region's media consumption options and behaviours. Where possible, I sought out international studies with cultures similar to Canada's, such as the United States and European regions.

Research origin. With my exploration focused on the current state of digital advertising, it was important to consider the sponsor or commissioner of the research and analyze the potential for bias. Industry advocates may use their data to portray their industry in a positive manner to maintain trust and viability within the communities they serve. If bias was detected, the article was not entirely discarded, as it confirms the presence of data deviations and justifies exploration into the intricate relationship between an industry and its community. At the same time, independent research through Statistics Canada or academic studies, could be triangulated to corroborate or disprove sponsored research.

Credibility. Advertising revenues are required to bring context to my research. Most data were found in grey literature from media, newspaper and marketing industry reports. Grey literature was critically evaluated for bias, and potential conflicts were considered as a part of the literature review discussion. Piecing together grey literature from multiple sources will help ensure data is objective and reveal any biases. Academic literature was evaluated for research topics, sample size, and the number of citations.

Organization and categorization of data. I adapted tools in RefWorks to organize and categorize my data to create a two-step approach to data collection. I added geographic and topic

tags (e.g., advertising revenue, Canada, newspaper) in RefWorks to help categorize articles into sub-themes under my original literature review questions. After reading each article more thoroughly, I added tags that provided details about the research outcomes and how it would be relevant to my topic (e.g., industry-sponsored, digital advertising preference).

Literature Discussion

Definition of advertising. It is important to consider the definition of advertising, to outline discussion parameters for this study. For many years, the accepted definition of advertising included identifiers that advertising is paid, nonpersonal, has an identified sponsor, is distributed via mass media, and has a persuasive or influential message (Richards & Curran, 2002). However, in today's digital landscape where businesses can advertise through their own social media, email, and website channels, traditional definitions of advertising appear too restrictive. A business owner posting details about an upcoming sale on their business's Facebook page would not be considered as advertising under the traditional definition because a basic Facebook post is not paid. However, a Facebook sale post *could* contain nonpersonal messaging, an identified sponsor, mass media distribution, and persuasion or influence attributes. In those contexts, it would be considered as advertising.

Dahlen and Rosengren's updated definition of advertising, "brand-initiated communication intent on impacting people" (2016, p. 334), is inclusive of new advertising and media formats. By this definition, digital marketing tools like Facebook business pages, preferred customer email newsletters, and business websites can be considered as advertising. According to the writers of the updated definition, the revision allows for advertising to stay relevant as the industry continues to change at a fast pace. Dahlen and Rosengren's academic and practical approach to developing this definition may also affect how advertising is viewed in research,

professional practice, and education (Eisend, 2016). Academics and professionals are not in full agreement on this issue: Dahlen and Rosengren's research showed that advertising academics preferred the old definition, specifically mentioning that the paid component is important to advertising, whereas advertising professionals preferred the broader definition, specifically mentioning the paid component is much less important, due to owned and earned media opportunities (Dahlen & Rosengren, 2016; Huh, 2016).

Before conducting research, it is important to set parameters of what constitutes advertising to ensure precise questioning techniques and targeted findings. Dahlen and Rosengren acknowledge that the new, broader definition can possibly integrate other marketing communication activities, which can blur boundaries between different marketing communications strategies (2016).

For the context of this literature review and research questioning, the traditional definition of advertising will be used and will include activities where the business owner paid money to an advertising provider to promote their business. When "advertising" is referenced, it will exclude unpaid media owned and earned by the business owner. However, unpaid methods will still be explored as part of the literature review and research findings. Unpaid advertising, such as social media posts and websites, are integrated into business strategy and will likely be thought of in conjunction with paid advertising. It will be natural for business owners to include unpaid activities as part of their experience during the interview. It is also important to include unpaid advertising as part of the narrative, to evolve beyond academic advertising research that solely explores traditional (paid) advertising methods (Kerr & Schultz, 2010). Therefore, I will not exclude unpaid methods mentioned by the interviewees in the findings if it comes up under the conversation of advertising.

Rural digital advertising opportunities. If a rural community has access to the Internet, then rural business owners have access to digital advertising. While the explanation of each digital advertising option in this section focuses on the dominating digital advertising providers in Canada, Facebook and Google (Winseck, 2019), it is important to note other digital advertising providers are also present, even in rural communities. For example, newspaper chains Postmedia and Great West Newspapers, which own weekly newspapers in Alberta rural communities, offer display and search advertising opportunities similar to Google (Postmedia Network Inc., n.d.; Great West Newspapers, n.d.). Rural radio stations also offer online and social media advertising opportunities (Stingray Radio Edmonton, n.d.; Golden West Broadcasting, n.d.).

The purpose of this section is to summarize digital advertising cost, targeting, format and purchasing processes to provide more clarity on how the digital advertising structure and process may influence digital advertising choices made by rural business owners. It also aims to discover how deeply rural business owners are using these tools.

Search engine marketing. Search engine marketing (SEM) allows business owners to bid on keywords through various search engine platforms and have their business listing appear at the top of the search results as an advertisement, or in other online formats, as defined by the SEM advertiser and provider. Google Search, one of the most popular SEM platforms in Canada (Winseck, 2019), will be used to explain the basic process used to purchase search engine advertising.

Google uses indicators such as bid amount, quality of advertisement, quality of landing page, bid thresholds, user search context, and ad extension use to determine a score, called an ad rank (Google, n.d.-g). An advertisement's ad rank determines which ads will be shown when

users who fit specific criteria search for the business's matching search terms. When an ad is delivered to a user, the business owner only pays when that user clicks on the ad to visit the website, calls a business, or reaches any other desired goal as defined by the campaign (Google, n.d.-a).

Google SEM is a self-serve platform, meaning business owners can create a Google account, create their own advertisement, choose their bid amount, and input search terms they wish the ad to be attached to. However, if a business owner does not bid high enough, chooses the wrong search terms, or drives a potential “clicker” to an ineffective web page, their ad ranking can be negatively impacted. Google provides automated bidding for those unfamiliar with this method of purchasing advertising, along with how-to articles to help educate business owners on effective digital advertising on their platform, if business owners are willing to commit the time to learn.

Set your budget

Select the option that works best for your business and the results you want. You can make updates any time.

CA\$11 daily average • CA\$334 monthly max

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU ⓘ

CA\$15 daily average • CA\$456 monthly max

CA\$20 daily average • CA\$608 monthly max

[ENTER YOUR OWN BUDGET](#)

Currency: Canadian Dollar (CA\$) ▼

BACK **NEXT**

How your budget works

What you pay for
You only pay for ad clicks or calls to your business.

Your daily average
Some days you might spend less than your daily average, and on others you might spend up to 4 times as much. But over the month you won't pay more than your monthly max.

If you change your mind
Try running your ad, but no need to commit. Change your budget or cancel your ad at anytime.

Figure 1 Google Ads. (n.d.). Automated cost-per-click budget example. Note the full disclosure budget statement and its clarity on how the ad purchasers will pay. Retrieved from <https://ads.google.com/aw/campaigns>. Screenshot by author August 1, 2020.

A business's bid amount is called a cost-per-click (CPC). The business owner can choose a maximum CPC they are willing to pay and set a daily spend amount to control their advertising budget (Figure 1). The ad rank and competing bids for the search terms determine the “cost” of each click, which may end up being less than the set maximum CPC (Google, n.d.-g). CPC advertising can be viewed as low-risk and low-investment, since you only pay when a user clicks. It is possible for each click to cost less than a dollar, depending on the popularity of the keyword. But it is also possible that each click will net Google the full amount, if the search terms aligned with the campaign are popular with other advertisers. Regardless of clicks, business owners will have their ad seen by users when it is delivered after a keyword search, increasing overall impressions (the number of times the ad is delivered to users).

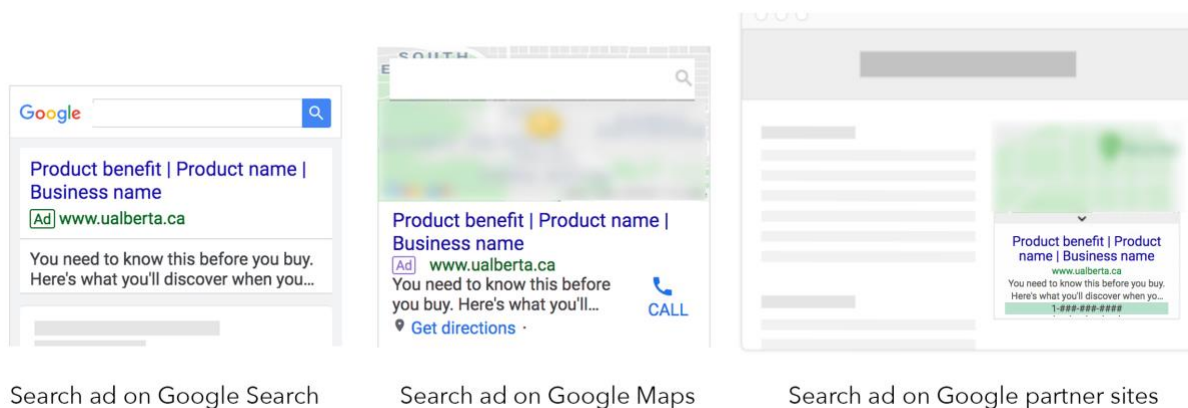


Figure 2 Google Ads. (n.d.). Google Search ad examples. Samples created and retrieved from <https://ads.google.com/aw/campaigns>. Screenshots by author on August 1, 2020.

Google SEM advertisements do not only show up on search engine results; the advertising network also gives business owners the opportunity to appear on Google partner websites, videos, and mobile applications (Figure 2). Despite SEM advertisements being delivered off a search engine platform, advertising delivery to users is still based on keywords. For example, a user may search for “cat toys” in Google Search and may get delivered a plain text SEM advertisement for “cat toys” on a pet website that is part of Google’s partner websites. In

addition, Google also offers image and video advertising as part of their SEM offerings (Google, n.d.-c). This distinction is significant to point out because it is easy for SEM advertising to be confused with Google's display advertising, which uses a different method of advertising payment, delivery, and format as outlined in the next section.

Internet display advertising. Internet display advertising can include plain text ads, similar to traditional newspaper classifieds; boxed ads, similar to bordered advertisements in a newspaper; and video ads, similar to those shown on television (Figure 3). Like SEM advertisements, Internet display ads also allow businesses to choose a set CPC bid. However, there are more payment and format options available with display advertising. Businesses may choose to pay by cost per thousand impressions (CPM), cost per action (CPA), or cost per view for video (CPV) if available. Google, for example, offers CPC, CPM, CPA and CPV within their display ad network and businesses can choose their desired pricing strategy, depending on their business goals (Google, n.d.-f). This allows potential advertisers to drive traffic to their website (CPC), focus on being seen (CPM), and only pay when a customer performs a specific action such as subscribing to a newsletter or making a purchase (CPA), or watching 30 seconds of a video (CPV).

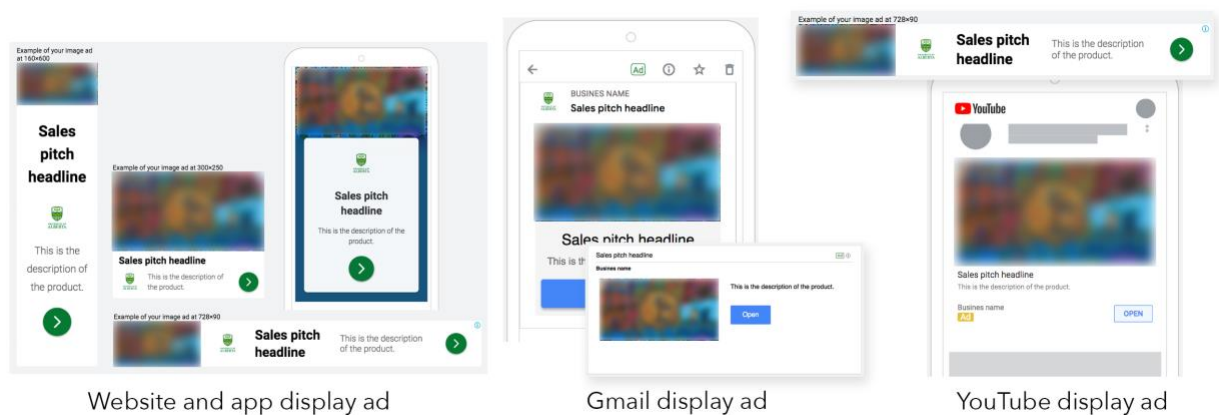


Figure 3 Google Ads. (n.d.). Google display ad examples. Retrieved from <https://ads.google.com/aw/campaigns>. Screenshots by author on August 1, 2020.

To help define advertising delivery, Google's Display Ad Network generates an ad rank for each submitted ad, similar to SEM. Businesses can target certain types of people, topics or websites instead of using search engine keywords to deliver ads to users (Google, n.d.-b). There are also more options for ad formats: text ads, boxed ads, video, and rich media can be used in a campaign (Figure 4) (Google, n.d.-e).

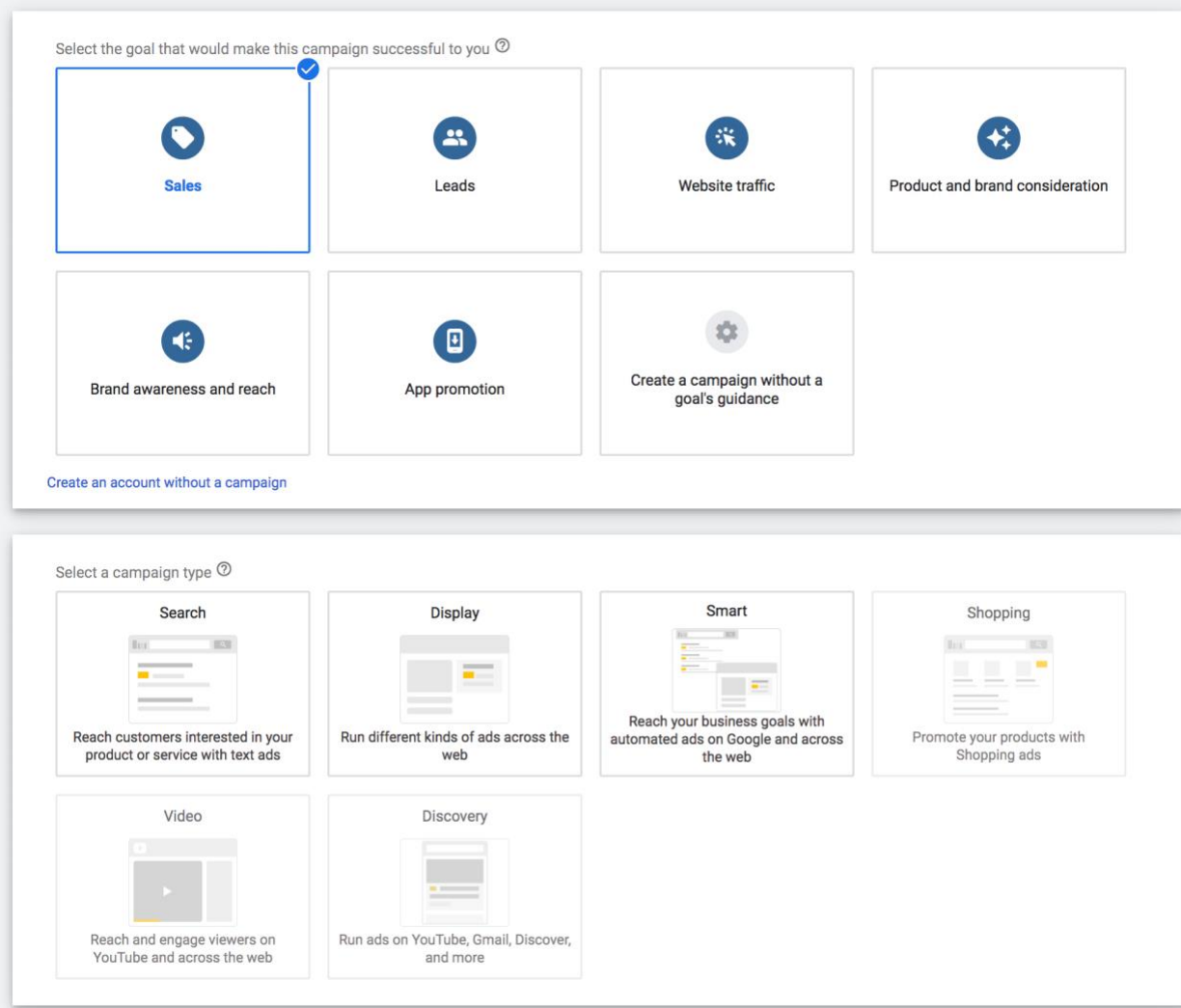


Figure 4 Google Ads. (n.d.). Google ad options. Retrieved from <https://ads.google.com/aw/campaigns>. Screenshot by author on August 1, 2020.

For both search engine and display advertising, performance may be measured using a variety of metrics. Google allows businesses to track clicks, impressions, website traffic, and

conversions across their search and display options which will allow businesses to analyze and optimize campaigns over time (Google, n.d.-d).

Social media advertising. Technology companies such as Facebook have strengthened API tools, audience networks, and integration which allow users to automate and manage their own ads, improving user experience (Helmond, Niebord, & van der Vlist, 2019). While there are other social media platforms that have similar digital advertising opportunities (LinkedIn, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.), Facebook's access to 22 million Canadians positions the social media giant behind Google for Canadian digital advertising revenue (Winseck, 2019), and is an appropriate platform to represent an overview of social media advertising.

Facebook provides digital advertising formats on Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, and their extended audience network (Figure 5) (Facebook, n.d.-a). A digital advertisement can be as simple as “boosting” existing content on a business Facebook page, however, a business owner can also develop unique campaigns separate from their page's news feed that deliver entertaining videos, images and product offers, or that encourage likes, event responses, and lead generation. Digital advertisements can be placed in a variety of positions throughout the supported platforms, from news feeds to stories, search results, and more (Figure 6).

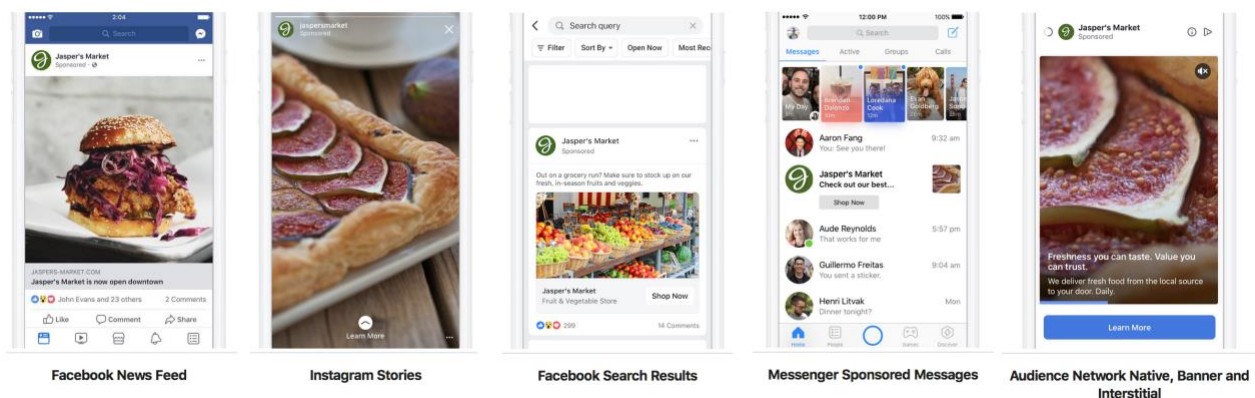


Figure 5 Facebook Business Manager. (n.d.). Facebook ad examples. Retrieved from <https://facebook.com/adsmanger>. Screenshots by author on August 1, 2020.

Businesses can bid, or have Facebook auto-bid, a cost-per-result until campaign spending limits are reached, similar to Google Display Ad Network (Facebook, n.d.-b). A “result” is defined by the goals of the original campaign. For example, if a business were to run an awareness campaign, it would be charged for every advertising view (impression). If a business were to run a conversion campaign, it would be charged for every website purchase originating from the Facebook ad. Conversion bid values tend to be more expensive than impression bids, due to the higher potential return of investment for the business’s earned click.

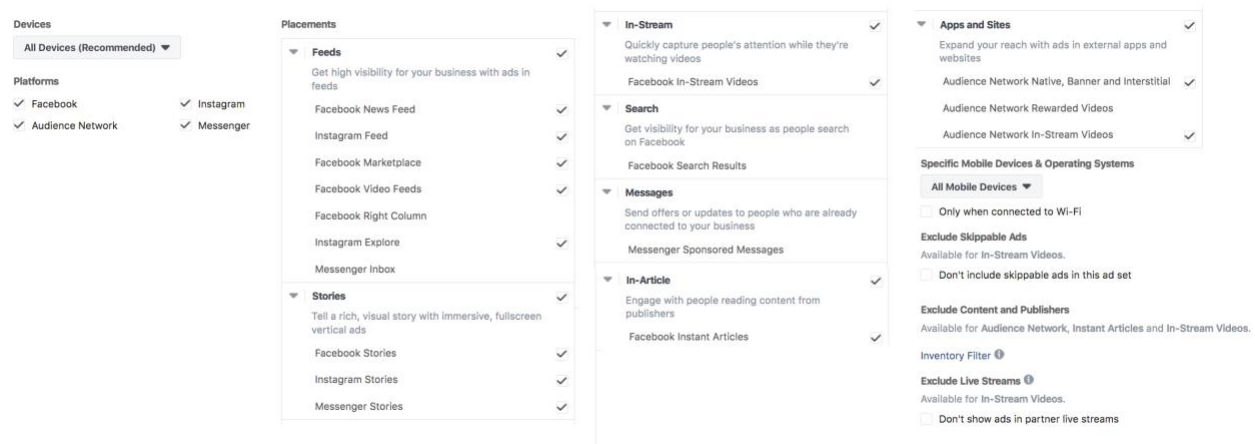


Figure 6 Facebook Business Manager. (n.d.). Facebook ad placement options. Retrieved from <https://facebook.com/adsmanager>. Screenshots by author on August 1, 2020.

Facebook also offers a fixed price to reach a specified amount of the chosen target audience. This option is similar to Google’s CPM in that it is only available to advertisers who wish to reach 200,000 or more people with their campaign. This advertising method would be unrealistic for most rural business owners, unless they have a provincial or national business presence that attracts a large target audience. Facebook digital ads are tracked across performance, demographic, and placement metrics. Like Google search and display advertising, results can be tracked in real time and campaigns can be immediately stopped or adjusted if results are not desirable (Facebook, n.d.-c).

The current State of digital advertising in Canada. Access to digital audiences and improved ad products have created a digital advertising business boom in Canada. This section provides an overview of current digital advertising trends and whether there is an indication that rural markets follow those trends. It contains a significant amount of grey literature, which is necessary when examining quantitative data such as industry revenues.

A variety of revenue data indicates digital advertising is on a significant climb. Google and Facebook captured 50 and 24 per cent (respectively) of the Canadian digital advertising market share in 2017 (Winseck, 2019). Canadian digital ad spending in 2018 surpassed traditional methods, taking up 50.2 per cent of the total ad market (Briggs, 2019). Other industry documents report the same digital revenue growth trends. A 2017 survey sponsored by the Interactive Advertising Bureau of Canada showed digital ad revenue growth, a continued increase in mobile advertising, and a decline in print advertising (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2020). Think T.V. also documented that Canadian Internet search, display, mobile, and video online advertising controlled 49.8 per cent market share of advertising activity in 2018, and 53.8 per cent in 2019 (Think T.V., 2018; 2019).

While this data is compiled using revenues of advertising providers, there is little indication as to how much of the available data represents rural markets. Urban centres in Canada can control data results due to population density and technology access. Is it feasible for a rural business that serves a town's population of under 8,000 (and its surrounding rural residents), to spend more than 50 per cent of its advertising budget on digital platforms?

The growth of mobile advertising in Canada is also significant to mention. One third of all advertising spending in Canada is moving toward mobile options, with Google Search and social media applications leading the way (Briggs, 2018a).

According to the data, Google's Canadian advertising revenue remains strong, increasing by almost \$5 billion from 2018 to 2019 (Anthony, 2019). In a 2020 report by Public First, commissioned by Google, Google's search and advertising tools created over \$16 billion in economic activity for 500,000 Canadian businesses, strengthening its value as an advertising provider in Canada.

While there is no data indicating how much Google and Facebook revenue is coming out of rural communities, weekly newspapers (a common rural advertising provider) are seeing slow gains in their digital advertising offerings. This may imply that digital advertising, in general, is not increasing in rural communities. Yet the margin between weekly newspaper online revenue and Internet advertising from digital advertising providers is significant. In 2018, Canadian weekly newspapers reported \$58 million in online revenue, whereas Internet advertising from digital providers accounted for \$7.5 billion and 53.8 per cent of the total advertising market share (Think T.V., 2019), much of which can be attributed to Google and Facebook (Public Policy Forum, 2017). While \$58 million of online revenue for weekly newspapers may seem significant, it pales in comparison to the \$363 million in local print advertising revenues still being generated by weekly newspapers (Think T.V., 2019). This may imply that print newspaper advertising is still preferred by rural business owners. However, the only category within weekly newspaper advertising that captures revenue growth from previous years is online, which grew by \$13 million from 2017 to 2018 (Think T.V. 2019). Local print revenue declined by \$77 million in that same year.

Weekly newspaper revenues in rural markets are an important puzzle piece when analyzing digital advertising in rural communities. While revenues are dropping in their printed products, newspaper appears to continue as the preferred format for advertising in rural communities,

showing a significant spread between print and digital revenues. For example, according to a 2018 Statistics Canada table, printed weekly newspapers captured \$461 million in print revenue, whereas their digital advertising options only captured \$53 million (Statistics Canada, 2019). This may imply that strong business-to-newspaper support still exists, and could be the cause of slow levels of digital advertising adoption in rural communities. However, there is no clear revenue data that shows whether rural digital dollars are going to other advertising providers to support this implication.

Influential factors for rural businesses in choosing digital advertising. It is necessary to turn to academic literature and additional grey data to determine whether digital advertising platform use and experience in rural communities may affect digital advertising purchase behaviours.

Rural advertising dollars. According to eMarketer projections, 60 per cent of Canadians will use social networks by 2020 (Briggs, 2018b). With more Canadians on social networks, advertising investment logically follows; an inference reflected in the levels of national digital advertising revenues previously discussed.

eMarketer has predicted that overall Canadian newspaper advertising spending, which is a common advertising avenue for rural business owners, will continue to decline through to 2023 (eMarketer, 2019). If rural businesses owners are also following suit and pulling their advertising budgets out of their weekly community newspapers, where are their budgets going?

One could look to government advertising spending as a case study. Governments are required to communicate broadly, given that every citizen within their province or country needs to be reached with information. Therefore, government advertising activities can be used as evidence of rural digital adoption since governments need to reach the most remote of their

constituents. As an example, the Government of Canada's 2019 annual report of advertising activities shows the federal government is dedicating more advertising resources to digital advertising because of the increased range and number of individuals who use digital platforms. One could argue that this broad data does not necessarily reflect rural digital acceptance, since the majority of Canadians live in urban centres. However, the federal government's reduction in newspaper advertising implies that they are choosing to reach rural communities through digital as well. From 2014-2015, 9 per cent of the government's advertising expenditures were dedicated to print, while 28 per cent went to digital (Government of Canada, 2019). By the 2017-2018 report, print advertising expenditures dropped to only 2 per cent and digital advertising was significantly boosted to 65 per cent, which accounted for \$18.2 million of their \$27.8 million advertising budget (Government of Canada, 2019). Making up the \$18.2 million sum were the following allocations: 43 per cent to social media platforms, with Facebook using 73 per cent of the social media budget; 38 per cent to digital display ads, 12 per cent to search engine marketing, and 6 per cent to real-time Internet bidding.

Perhaps the government's advertising preferences are driving newspapers to react. Postmedia owns 27 Alberta weekly newspapers, and is planning to invest time and resources into its digital properties (Postmedia Network Canada Corp, 2019). This investment can mean that rural communities are on the edge of a digital revolution; perhaps they have been waiting for the right expertise and tools to show them how to navigate digitally.

Generational digital adoption. The Government of Canada notably switched to digital advertising due to its citizens' adoption of digital platforms – in particular, social media applications such as Facebook. There is no denying that the utility of connecting family and friends has allowed social media use in Canada to grow across generations (Briggs, 2018c).

Often, younger generations are still viewed as having higher rates of social network usage (Atkin et al., 2015) and utilize online platforms to understand product features, or see what their friends are using (Briggs, 2018c). However, more studies are emerging that show older generations are not as intimidated by digital as first assumed. For example, the use of mobile (smart phone) devices is common across generations (Lee & Kim, 2014). Another study shows evidence of high digital acceptance for those aged 54-72, with more than 55 per cent of newspaper readers within that age range reading news on mobile devices (News Media Canada, 2019).

While older generations are getting more comfortable with technology use in general, their specific usage patterns are different from those of younger generations (Lee & Kim, 2014). Older digital users were more reluctant to use mobile devices for entertainment, business transactions and other non-talking purposes. Another study that included social media comparisons between rural-living senior citizens and urban university students also showed that the rural-living older group had different social media usage behaviours from the younger group (Tosca, 2019). Both groups used Facebook and a smartphone as their main device for social media, but usage patterns, frequency, and additional platform use was more varied between the older and younger groups.

The literature shows that age may not influence digital adoption as strongly as it did 10 years ago. It is likely that rural digital media preferences will continue to increase as more digital natives – individuals who are comfortable and have culturally accepted interacting in online environments (Young & Akerstrom, 2015) – enter business ownership and become contributing members to the local economy.

Rural digital adoption factors. While the Tosca study (2019) showed evidence of digital adoption in rural communities, previous studies have indicated that this not always the case. A

2010 study showed rural users of MySpace engaged at a lower rate compared to urban users (Gilbert et al., 2010). A 2015 Pew Research study also showed rural social media use consistently trailing behind urban and suburban behaviours (Perrin, 2015).

Another barrier for rural digital adoption is Internet access. A report on Canada's broadband connectivity reported that 18 per cent of Canadians (typically rural) do not have access to broadband Internet (Ruimy, 2018). Within Alberta, the CRTC's *Communications Monitoring Report* indicates that in 2017, less than 10 per cent of rural households in Alberta had access to faster broadband – 50 Mbps download and 10 Mbps upload (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2019). But while fast household Internet speeds are lacking in rural communities, mobile data is thriving. In Canada, 97 per cent of rural residents have access to LTE mobile data (Ruimy, 2018). Within Alberta over 95 per cent have access to LTE mobile data (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2019). High rates of data availability are likely connected to smart phone ownership. In 2017, 89 per cent of Albertans owned a smart phone (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2019). The LTE access and smart phone ownership in Alberta presents a unique opportunity for rural business owners who live in a community with slower or unstable Internet.

There is also evidence that despite climbing national digital advertising use, rural businesses are still wary of investing fully in digital advertising. A study of rural and urban North Carolina businesses showed that rural businesses had limited use of web and social media methods, compared to urban businesses (Richmond et al., 2017).

Trust of digital advertising providers. Perceived trust of digital advertisers is another factor related to rural digital adoption. A study by Advertising Standards Canada reported website ads were only trusted by 32 per cent of respondents, whereas newspaper ads had a 70 per

cent trust rate (Briggs, 2018b). Other digital advertising formats have also struggled with trust. Search ads had a 28 per cent trust rate, video pre-roll ads had 27 per cent, and social media ads had 24 per cent. However, self-regulatory governing bodies, like AdChoices, are implementing principles of transparency and consumer ad control (Technology Analysis Branch, 2015). This requires partnered companies, like Facebook and Google to clearly identify advertising content and allow users to control their advertising experience. It is possible current transparency policies and improved native delivery of advertising is elevating trust and awareness with Internet users.

However, data also shows users are generally accepting of online advertising, provided it kept the online services available for free (Knoll, 2016). Most Canadians who notice ads on social media and are willing to interact with them (Pollara Strategic Insights, 2019).

Experience on digital advertising platforms. Legacy newspaper organizations, who are typically a trusted advertising provider within rural business communities, have struggled to successfully adopt digital revenue models, further limiting digital advertising growth, while businesses turn to methods that reach more people online (Cosgrove & Gomaa, 2014). Digital media has disrupted newspapers, including in rural communities (Taras, 2015).

Lack of digital marketing experts in rural communities may also limit digital advertising exploration. Not all small and medium enterprises can take advantage of advertising tools on social media platforms such as Facebook due to the technical competencies required (Prevatt, 2016; Motkoski, 2017). In addition, business owners may not have access to appropriate training to grow their digital skills (Motkoski, 2017). Without training and awareness, it is possible many business owners are not aware of available digital advertising opportunities in their small market.

However, there are some newspaper chains, such as Postmedia, which are offering social media, search, and video advertising services, including Google Search and Facebook (Postmedia Network Inc., n.d.). With the chain's connection to 27 weekly newspapers in Alberta, there is an opportunity to be the "first" to provide full-service digital advertising and consulting within many rural communities. Postmedia's 2019 annual report illustrated a 9.8 per cent increase to \$109.7 million in digital advertising revenue from the previous year (Postmedia Network Canada Corp, 2019). To compare, local print advertising revenues were \$122.9 million, an 18.5 per cent decrease from the previous year. Although, in the same report, they acknowledge the risk of competition and the need to be able to adapt to new platforms and digital formats:

"The digital media industry experiences additional competitive challenges because barriers to entry are low and geographic location is less relevant. Participants in digital media platforms may improve their ability to target specific audiences and therefore become an even more attractive media for advertisers. These circumstances could result in our newspaper online media not being as competitive as they are currently in relation to these other forms of media" (Postmedia Network Canada Corp, 2019, p. 29-30).

It is important to acknowledge that social media is continuously evolving and audiences are drifting their attention between platforms, making it difficult for digital advertisers to choose an effective "one-size-fits-all" platform (Campbell & Bickle, 2017). Despite the challenge of distracted audiences, just over 79 per cent of Canadian marketing professionals believe social media marketing contributes to marketing success (Ignite Digital; Canadian Association of Marketing Professions, 2016).

Unpaid advertising. Dahlen and Rosengren's updated definition of advertising, "brand-initiated communication intent on impacting people" (2016, p. 334), includes "unpaid" tools such as social media and websites. Business pages and detailed sales pages can be a significant draw for small business owners to invest time into. A U.S. study of 27 small businesses in a mid-size city that explored how and why small businesses adopt social media discovered that social media adoption rates were high (He, Wang, Chen, & Zha, 2017). Many used the platform to post promotions, event announcements, achievements, and/or interesting stories. They also used it to communicate directly with customers through comments and developed strategies to get more "likes."

Business owners shared that they adopted social media because the platform is free, they were already familiar with the platform due to personal use, and they had enjoyment connecting with their customers. Most business owners managed their own social media presence either by themselves or designated staff to post and monitor. One respondent said they spend 2.5 hours per day maintaining their Facebook content. With the extra time invested, many adopters found benefits in using the platform.

A small group of business owners from the research sample said they resisted social media. Their reasons being that their target (older) customers did not use social media, social media methods did not have tangible benefits to the business and existing strong customer loyalty, and revenues made social media unnecessary (He et al., 2017).

It is worth noting the He et al. study found that social media adopters still relied heavily on traditional advertising methods, but if business owners wish to strategize and innovate, they may look to social media advertising to inform customers or raise brand recall (Durieux, Riscarolli, de Quadros, & Kock, 2017).

The findings of the He et al. study are interesting, as they make many strong recommendations for business owners to apply social media to their businesses. These include adopting a social media plan, investing in resources, taking care of it in house, analyzing metrics, creating customer-centric strategies, and starting off with small digital strategies to preserve resources. While social media adoption does not necessarily equate to digital advertising adoption, it demonstrates comfort and awareness of digital platforms, which may mean digital advertising investment in the future.

It also demonstrates that business owners see value investing in social media. Social media can bring a great competitive advantage for small business owners who choose to invest (Tanega & Toombs, 2014). Its benefits include visibility, and social media allows for strong competitor differentiation. However, efficient use of the platform requires training and resources, and it takes time to build an online presence that customers want to engage with. Another study shows that despite adoption of social media, small business owners find it difficult to profit from the presence and are often “forced” into using the platform because other businesses are taking part. (Cesaroni & Consoli, 2015).

Summary of the literature. The draw of digital advertising is significant for business owners, including those located in rural communities. Digital advertising’s ability to deliver content to users who are already searching for the information, its self-serve approach, and its low investment and risk are the main contributing factors to digital advertising’s growth in Canada (Éthier, 2019). Digital advertising is also widely available. Any rural business in Alberta that has Internet (or mobile data) access may make the investment.

It is currently unclear whether rural businesses are taking advantage of digital advertising to the extent that they could. Furthermore, there is limited data on adoption of Canadian digital

advertising revenues in rural areas. Digital advertising revenue data from providers is not itemized by geographic regions. There could also be a preference toward the adoption of free tools provided by social media and online platforms for small business owners. While most academic literature was urban-specific, it is possible that other influential factors could limit the opportunity to equate rural digital advertising behaviours to urban-based studies. For example, fast Internet speed, which is less available in rural Alberta is likely not a factor that an urban digital advertising study would need to consider.

Canadian advertising revenues show a clear preference toward digital advertising, however, digital advertising's success does not appear to be enjoyed by the newspaper industry, especially community newspapers, which historically, have been the main advertising provider in many rural communities. Overall, newspapers have experienced a decrease in advertising revenues and it is often blamed on business owners who have chosen to invest their advertising dollars in non-local digital advertising providers such as Facebook and Google (Public Policy Forum, 2017).

I was unable to discover any research that specifically studied digital advertising purchase preferences of rural business owners to confirm or deny this assumption. It is often assumed that older generations (e.g., Baby Boomers) are not digitally literate, and therefore do not use the digital tools to consume news or advertising. There is often a similar assumption for people living in rural communities. Their established and trusted non-digital communication networks (e.g., radio, newspapers, community newsletters, word of mouth) may limit the need for digital communication. While the literature confirms older generations and rural communities tend to have a slow rate of adoption of digital tools, the tools' ease of use allows for a low barrier-to-entry that can be easily overcome across generations. In the coming years, many of these

communities will also see more digital immigrants become seniors, which will dramatically shift advertising consumption behaviours in the aged 60 plus demographic.

Limitations and gaps. There appear to be gaps in studies related to digital advertising in rural communities. Based on literature reviewed, digital advertising in Canada is making significant gains, although it is not evident whether those gains extend to rural communities. While there is evidence of digital adoption in rural businesses and communities, there is also evidence of lack of adoption. The conflicting studies show there is a gap in research on digital advertising specific to rural markets.

The grey literature and documentation from Facebook and Google provided a strong basis of information and data, however, revenue reporting does not create a clear enough picture to fully understand digital advertising adoption factors. Qualitative research aligned with revenue reports may provide more clarity on my research topic.

Conclusion

This review of literature shows inconsistencies between Canadian digital advertising revenues and the potential for digital advertising to take place in rural Alberta communities. The strongest indicator of digital advertising is revenues, which are not calculated regionally. While the literature shows there is acceptance from business owners and users to adopt digital advertising and unpaid advertising tools such as social media, it is not certain how immersive digital adoption is in rural communities. In addition, technology adoption and acceptance across generations will continue to increase, which will likely have more business owners take more notice of digital advertising strategies sooner than later.

The literature reveals additional questions that can be illuminated with deeper research into factors influencing rural digital advertising adoption. Are rural business owners adopting digital

advertising? If so, what are the supports and barriers to such adoption? How does a business owner's perception of how much the community "uses" digital platforms affect their digital advertising decisions? How can digital advertising providers best serve rural business communities? The literature also showed that businesses who adopted social media as a strategy had to assign or take on new roles within the business and ensure time was scheduled to make the strategy profitable. Are rural businesses more hesitant to change the structure of their organization to integrate digital advertising adoption?

To explore these questions, I sought out rural business owners across Alberta to participate in my research. Each interviewee submitted preliminary demographic and business information, to determine whether data correlates with generational technology adoption research. Next, I used qualitative interviews to explore in more detail the motivational factors of digital advertising adoption. This strategy aims to provide a stronger understanding of what rural business owners consider when they adopt (or not adopt) digital advertising. With my research identifying emerging trends of digital advertising rural communities, my hope is it will reveal potential for digital entrepreneurship, inspire rural business owners to consider digital advertising more seriously, and identify rural community training and resource needs.

Chapter 3.

Methodology

Introduction

The review of the literature discussed in the previous chapter shows that the use of digital advertising by businesses in Canada is strong and continues to grow (Briggs, 2018a; Briggs, 2018b; Briggs, 2019; Winseck, 2019; Public Policy Forum, 2017). However, available information regarding this data is not granular on a geographic level: there is little indication whether (aggregated) national-level data mirrors actual digital advertising purchase behaviours in rural communities. It might be easy to brush off a rural community's use of digital advertising and simply lump their advertising purchase behaviours into broader national data. However, available studies show that small businesses and rural communities adopt digital and social media technologies, including marketing methods, at a slower rate than urban centres (Gilbert et al., 2010; Perrin, 2015; Richmond et al., 2017; Motkoski, 2017). This brings to question whether, and to what extent, rural business owners are adopting and using digital advertising.

Rural advertising markets are unique. For example, Alberta's rural populations, economic structures and business industries are distinct from those in urban centres; thus it follows that advertising data related to these regions could also be different than data compiled from urban centres. Rural Alberta contributes 26 per cent of Alberta's gross domestic product (GDP) (Nichols Applied Management Inc., 2018). This represents a significant economic impact, and provides justification for specific exploration in how rural owners promote and market their businesses.

As discussed in previous chapters, the purpose of this study is to explore how rural business owners, who typically operate small and medium-size enterprises (SME) in Alberta, are

adopting digital advertising. In this context, my study will examine the following research question:

RQ1: What factors encourage the adoption of digital advertising by rural Alberta business owners?

This chapter will discuss my research design, which consists of a series of one-on-one interviews with business owners drawn from three rural Alberta communities. The sections that follow provide details on my research design, participant selection, research setting, research instruments, research procedures, data collection, data analysis, and a summary of key concepts. I will also discuss how diffusion of innovations (DOI) theory will guide my research exploration.

Research Design

My research uses an exploratory design focused on one-on-one qualitative interviews with rural Alberta business owners in order to determine the factors that encourage or discourage their adoption of digital advertising. This method was chosen because I seek to “understand specific individuals, social groups, texts, or processes in the present day” (Merrigan, Huston & Johnston, 2012, p. 146). Exploratory research is a known method to gather data to determine whether a topic is worth further investigation (Yin, 2012). While data indicates wide adoption of digital advertising across Canada, available data does not separate between rural and urban communities. Therefore, my exploratory research provides a framework that might contribute to future research opportunities that focus on the specific contexts of rural advertising.

I chose one-on-one interviews over focus groups because of my desire to learn the actual behaviours of individual business owners and the decisions they make regarding their digital advertising methods. While focus groups provide the opportunity for business owners to share experiences and generate ideas in a group setting, it is possible that each participant's

contributions may be influenced by others in the focus group (Breen, 2006). This research will instead explore the current experiences and attitudes of individual business owners by providing them with an opportunity to reflect and self-report their digital advertising behaviours. One-on-one interviews allowed me probe into each business owner's digital advertising methods – and their reasons for adopting or not adopting those methods – without the participant being influenced or intimidated from hearing about the experiences of other participants.

I decided to use online tools in the form of video conferencing to conduct my research because it is a low-cost option that allows for broad geographic reach within Alberta, and allows for non-verbal communication (Denscombe, 2010). Conducting videoconference interviews allowed me to observe body language and other non-verbal communication of participants, similar to conducting an in-person interview. This helps to progress the semi-structured interviews to new topics. In one instance, a research participant preferred to only use the voice option of the video conferencing software, which I was happy to accommodate.

I anticipated challenges using the videoconference method. Participants may not have access to web cam technology, may not be comfortable interacting with a screen, or may have a lack of comfort with the technology. I sought to overcome these challenges by providing participants with detailed instructions on how to use the videoconference software and additional tutorial materials as necessary. The extra documentation was not needed as many were already familiar with video conferencing software, due to the COVID-19 epidemic happening in Alberta at the time of interviews.

The current COVID-19 social distancing regulations put in place by the Alberta Government on March 26, 2020 is also another reason that I chose to conduct one-on-one interviews using video conferencing software. Social distancing rules at the time of ethics

approval prevented me from holding in-person focus groups. While it is possible to conduct focus groups via online video conferencing, audio and video gaps can impact the quality of data collected due to factors such as: multiple participants speaking at the same time, participants having different comfort levels with video conferencing, and/or participants having different experiences using online conferencing technology. As the focus group moderator, it would have been my role to troubleshoot audio and video issues, which may detract from my primary goal of data collection. During the one-on-one videoconference interviews, I assisted individual participants on how to use the software, where necessary. I found using the video conferencing software did not impede in the interview process for myself or the research participant.

Participants

Using simple random sampling, I invited nine business owners from three randomly-selected rural Alberta communities (three business owners per community) to participate in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. I did this in two steps: first, I determined three communities; and second, I determined individual participants (rural business owners) to interview.

Step 1: Determining three eligible communities. To determine my sample communities, I divided the province into three geographic regions with the intention of choosing participants located in

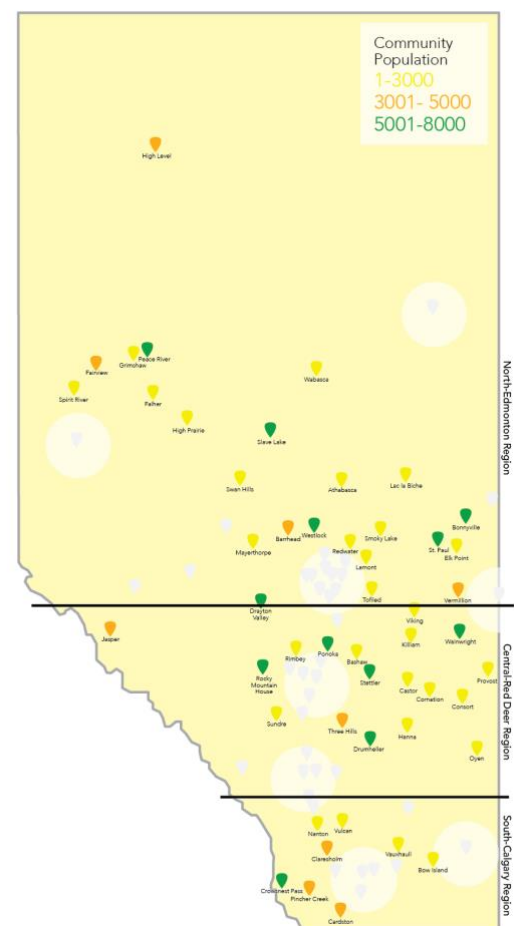


Figure 7. Communities who have a weekly community newspaper, are located 40 km away from an Alberta major urban media market and have a population of less than 8,000, according to most recent census data.

one community from each region: south-Calgary, central-Red Deer and north-Edmonton. This division allowed me to assess regional-specific digital advertising adoption preferences.

I included and excluded communities within each region that met specific rural criteria, to ensure the data gathered captured rural digital advertising adoption preferences. To be considered, each community had to have a weekly community newspaper presence. This was necessary to ensure I would be reaching businesses who have experience in purchasing advertising. Businesses that do not participate in planning and purchasing advertising were not be eligible for this research. Therefore, I presumed that a weekly newspaper presence created a greater probability that members of the business community would have an awareness and experience with advertising, which allowed for richer data, as opposed to a rural community with no traditional advertising providers. I also excluded communities located within 40 km of a major urban media market and had a population of more than 8,000. A community's distance from a major urban media market and its lower population also strengthened assurances that the data set was unique to rural markets. I defined a major urban media market as a community that has a daily newspaper and/or more than three local radio stations. Alberta major urban media markets identified were Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Calgary, Red Deer, Edmonton, Lloydminster, Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray. That left 61 eligible rural Alberta communities). Of the 88 Alberta communities that have a weekly community newspaper in 2020, I excluded 27 due to their proximity near a major urban media market. Next I further excluded communities with a population of more than 8,000 (based on 2016 census data). Finally, I randomly selected one eligible community from each of the regions identified in Figure 7 (south-Calgary, central-Red Deer and north-Edmonton) to draw participants for my study.

Step 2: Determining individual interview participants. Next, to prepare for interviews, I developed a selection process to recruit the rural business owners that I would approach to participate in the study in the eligible community in the three regions covered in this study. I determined that rural business owners who are actively operating a public storefront business within these three communities were eligible for the sample frame. This excluded national chain stores, since many franchises handle their advertising activities from a centralized office or have policies in place that may influence advertising adoption. Once I had determined the three targeted communities, I invited rural business owners who fit the sample criteria to participate in my study via phone using simple random sampling.

This step involved first collecting business information in each community through local Chamber of Commerce business directories. Two of the three communities provided directories that included the owner's name. Chamber directories proved to be a valuable resource to make an instant connection when I phoned to invite business owners to participate in the study. I eliminated national chain stores from the list and began calling businesses in each community, in no particular order.

My phone script was derived from an introductory email approved by the University of Alberta ethics review board (REMO) and my supervisor (see Appendix A). I used this opportunity to introduce the project and invite business owners to participate. I made sure to keep my introduction brief and communicated my research's value to quickly get their attention. As business owners accepted my invitation to participate in the research study, we agreed to an interview day and time. Within an hour of each interview booking, I followed up with the business owner via email to forward videoconference information and provide a link to a Google form that contained the introductory letter, consent form, and preliminary questionnaire (see

Appendix B). I instructed research participants to fill out the consent form prior to their interview. They were also sent an interview reminder approximately six hours prior to their scheduled videoconference.

I continued this recruitment process of “cold calling” business owners until I booked three interviews in each community. Simple random sampling from three sample frames allowed all rural business owners who owned a local service, retail, hospitality, or automotive public storefront an equal opportunity to participate in this study (Merrigan et al., 2012). In addition, using multiple frames in three Alberta geographic regions allowed for exploration of different rural economies, contributing essential information to broaden the scope of rural digital advertising adoption (Carfagna, 2001).

When I set out to invite business owners to participate, I did not anticipate how many negative responses “No’s” that I would receive. Participants explained that their reticence to participate in my study was related to the COVID-19 economic shutdown imposed by the Alberta government. Some business owners declined due to staff shortages or their need to direct all their time and resources towards reopening their business. Other businesses I contacted were not yet open or did not answer their phone. My initial plan was to attempt to find four business owners in each community, for a total of 12 people. But after slow progress and consulting with my research supervisor, we agreed to reduce the sample to three business owners in each community, for a total of nine (9) participants.

Interview Platform: Videoconferencing

Videoconferencing allowed research participants some flexibility to participate in the study. They could still be “present” at their place of business, interviews were easily rescheduled with little inconvenience to both parties, and they had the option to participate outside of

business hours. The videoconference software I used also allowed the participants and I to speak in a familiar environment, which likely added to their comfort level.

During interviews I made sure to have adequate light, a distraction-free background, and a quiet space to enhance the interview experience. I focused on keeping the tone conversational, as opposed to reading scripted questions, to allow for more detail in answers where necessary.

Interview Instrument

Before conducting interviews, I used a questionnaire during the consent process to collect basic demographic and geographic information from participants (see Appendix B). This was done to save time for qualitative questioning during the videoconference. Data collected included the age of the research participant, age of the business, and details about the service offering, all of which may provide additional context to the participant's narratives. For example, if the literature shows that older generations have a slower rate of digital technology adoption, I could potentially compare an older research participant's adoption with broader generational factors presented in the literature.

Interviews took place between July 20 and August 6, 2020. One-on-one interviews consisted of semi-structured interview questions which I developed to explore adoption factors of digital advertising (see Appendix C). I chose semi-structured interviews to allow for each participant to openly share their unique experiences in digital advertising adoption (Edwards & Holland, 2013). This included narratives around unpaid digital advertising because business owners often equated unpaid social media with advertising, similar to the updated definition of advertising as discussed in the literature review (Dahlen & Rosengren, 2016).

The development of my interview questions was guided by DOI theory and applied to contexts of digital advertising innovation spread, peer network influence and technology

adoption probability (Rogers, 2003). Because I used a random sample of participants, I expected to hear about a variety of experiences in using, or not using, digital advertising. A semi-structured interview allowed me to stay focused on specific topics while encouraging the research participant to disclose experiences and thought processes surrounding their promotional methods.

Interview Procedures

At the start of the videoconference interview, I provided a brief orientation to the videoconference software. I reminded the participant that the videoconference would be recorded and briefly reviewed the consent forms that were previously signed. If the participant had not yet filled out the consent and preliminary questionnaire (Appendix B), they had the option to fill it out during the videoconference, or give verbal consent to participate with the intent of filling it out afterwards. Consent was received from all nine participants.

After obtaining a final verbal agreement to proceed, I gave brief introduction that provided context to the research topic. To ensure clarity about advertising methods, I provided a simplified Richards and Curran definition of advertising (2002) which stated, “advertising will refer to an activity where you, the business owner, paid money to an advertising provider to promote your business” (Appendix C).

Using semi-structured interview questions (Appendix C), I started with broad topics and focused on more specific topics as the participant disclosed more information about advertising activities for their business. I drew from my communications background, actively listening and asking follow-up questions where necessary to clarify the context and meaning of their experiences. I used H. Russell Bernard’s probing techniques, as cited in Edwards and Holland (2013). This included allowing the interviewee some “silence” for brief reflection of their

answers, repeating key points back to the participant, and positive affirmation. This also allowed time for my own notetaking. I was careful to limit silent gaps to maintain interview flow.

I wished to be respectful of each participant's time. My goal was to keep interviews between 40 and 60 minutes, which I achieved. While it could be argued that this was a small window of time for engagement, I feel each interview achieved adequate topic exploration. My interview questions (Appendix C) were efficiently structured and essential demographic and geographic information was previously collected from participants, saving valuable time. If the participant was willing to extend their conversation, I was happy to accommodate additional time where necessary. I looked to previous social media adoption research studies, including MACT Capstone projects (Prevatt, 2016; Motkoski, 2017) and similar studies in an urban market to help direct my questioning (He et al., 2017).

I wrapped up each interview by asking if the participants had any final thoughts or comments about the interview topic, letting them know I will contact them when the final study is published and thanking them for their time. I reminded them of where to find my contact information if they had any questions or concerns.

Data Analysis Strategy

To answer my research question, I needed to discover patterns within interview transcripts to better create a narrative of how rural business owners are adopting digital advertising. To do this, I used Auerbach and Silverstein's qualitative coding method (2003). Using grounded theory, I conducted qualitative content analysis to help discover patterns in the data. I chose grounded theory because a hypothesis can be developed by listening to the research participants, (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) and be triangulated with existing Canadian data to confirm the theory (Golafshani, 2003). With the literature showing rural digital advertising adoption as

under-studied in Canada, I hope to create unique narrative surrounding digital advertising and rural communities (Tie, Birks & Francis, 2019).

Data analysis was also guided by diffusion of innovations (DOI) theory. DOI theory attempts to “explain the variables that influence how and why users adopt a new information medium” (University of Twente, 2004, p. 10). DOI theory and its assumptions surrounding innovation adoption helped me to discover repeating ideas and themes within the interview transcripts that can be applied to DOI-related constructs.

DOI theory is guided by four elements: the innovation, communication channels, time, and the social system (Rogers, 2003). Relating to this research, I first looked for narratives that talked about how long it took for rural business owners to fully adopt digital advertising. Then I examined how business owners who were experienced in digital advertising shared their experiences with other rural business owners. Then I looked for mentions of favourable and unfavourable attributes of advertising, based on their own experiences. Finally, I looked at whether there were unique criteria to each research region that affected how/why rural businesses adopt digital advertising.

The elements of DOI theory guided how I interpreted data, while I also applied steps of grounded theory coding as outlined by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003):

- 1) Explicitly state research concerns and theory.
- 2) Select relevant text.
- 3) Organize relevant text into repeating ideas.
- 4) Organize repeating ideas into logical themes.
- 5) Organize themes into theoretical constructs.
- 6) Create a theoretical narrative using diffusion of innovations and grounded theory.

With diffusion of innovations and grounded theory already established, I needed to state my research concerns to help isolate relevant text from the interview transcripts and complete step one of the coding technique (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). My desire was to frame the research concerns to capture research participants' lived experiences (grounded theory) while considering DOI elements (Rogers, 2003):

- What are the current preferred methods of advertising for rural business owners?
- How quickly are rural business owners integrating digital advertising?
- How are rural business owners learning about digital advertising?
- What attributes of digital advertising affect digital advertising adoption?
- What regional factors (e.g., advertising competition, Internet access) affect digital advertising adoption for rural business owners?

As I read through the interview transcripts, I kept the above research concerns at top of mind and highlighted passages related to digital advertising methods, attributes, training, implementation, and other factors that may affect their advertising decision-making process. Relevant text for each research participant was extracted and put into its own document for the next step of coding, which involved isolating repeating ideas (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). To isolate repeating ideas, I opened my first relevant text document from my first research participant. I copied the first passage of relevant text (known as starter text) into a new document. This starter text became my first repeating idea. I continued reading through the relevant text for each participant and copied additional passages that also fit into the same idea. For example, if one repeating idea passage from “participant A” read: “We use Facebook advertising every week” and “participant B” stated: “We sometimes use Facebook advertising, but maybe only a couple times a year”, these two passages contain the same idea of advertising

methods used. Therefore, I grouped them into a repeating idea that I named: “advertising strategies used by rural business owners.”

Once all the transcripts were reviewed for the first repeating idea, the process repeated; I pulled the next passage of relevant text from my first research participant and read through the remaining passage for topic connections. This continued until all relevant text was organized into repeating idea groups. Adjustments were made as new repeating ideas were discovered and I found I revisited how I organized passages several times to ensure repeating ideas were appropriately represented in relation to DOI theory and the literature. Repeating ideas that were unique were organized into an “orphan” document and re-visited once all repeating ideas were determined. Some “orphan” ideas were re-organized as new repeating ideas emerged. Other orphans were discarded due to lack of repeat mention.

The next step of the coding process was to organize the grouped repeating ideas into smaller logical themes, using a similar process. A theme represents an idea or topic within a group of repeating ideas (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Theme topics were inspired by the literature, grounded theory and DOI theory, but I also remained open to new themes if the categorization was called for. For example, within the “advertising strategies used by rural business owners” group of repeating ideas, I discovered specific narratives surrounding digital advertising currently being used (Theme: Digital advertising methods used by rural business owners), traditional advertising methods currently being used (Theme: Traditional print advertising methods used by rural business owners), and that business owners struggle with advertising (Theme: Business owners have uncertainties and challenges with advertising). Repeating ideas that did not fit any themes were also categorized as “orphans” and re-organized or discarded following a similar process as I described above.

Once all the repeating ideas were categorized into themes, the next step was categorizing themes into theoretical constructs as guided by DOI theory (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). To complete this step, I considered my themes and how they fit into the four elements of diffusion of innovations identified by Rogers (2003): the innovation; the communication channels; time; and the social system.

To categorize themes, I repeated the grounded theory coding process described above and categorized themes that shared a similar theoretical construct inspired by the four elements of diffusion of innovations. The theoretical construct was then compared to the original narratives that led to the development of each theme and the literature to ensure its validity. I went through this process twice, as I was limiting my constructs to a small portion of DOI theory in my first attempt. After I restructured the themes into the new constructs listed above, I was able to recognize parallels to the literature and noticed distinct narratives specific to digital advertising adoption.

The final themes and theoretical constructs that I identified will be presented in the findings chapter (Chapter 5). From there, the last step in my analytical process was to present my findings using theoretical narrative of the research participants' experiences and draw connections to the literature which will be presented in the discussion section.

Summary

My research aims to discover factors that influence digital advertising in rural communities. The literature showed there are inconsistencies between national digital advertising behaviours and levels of digital adoption in rural communities, due in part, to a lack of geographically granular data. Using a case study approach, my methodology design aims to help address this gap by carefully considering the sample frames (rural communities) and how the

populations within those frames will affect the data outcomes. To discover rural digital advertising adoption factors, the population needed to be deeply rooted in a rural environment. This was defined as a community of less than 8,000 residents and located at least 40 km away from a major urban media market. I specifically approached business owners who made advertising decisions locally to participate in the research. Using an introductory questionnaire and one-on-one semi-structured interviews, I gathered each business owner's unique perspectives and uses of digital advertising without influences from their business peer group, and explored regional behaviours where applicable. Then, I coded the data to develop a theoretical narrative surrounding rural digital advertising to discuss my findings in relation to the literature.

Chapter 4.

Findings and Discussion

Introduction

My research seeks to understand if, how, and why rural businesses are adopting digital advertising methods. At present, the extent to which businesses in rural communities have adopted digital advertising is unclear. As well, if they have adopted digital advertising, existing research does not illustrate how immersed they are in the practice. Available Canadian data shows that digital advertising revenues in Canada are increasing overall (Briggs, 2019; Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2020; Think T.V., 2019; Winseck, 2019), but there is still evidence of slow digital adoption in rural communities (Gilbert et al., 2010; He et al., 2017; Perrin, 2015; Richmond et al., 2017; Think T.V., 2019). For this study, I used semi-structured questions and interviewed nine business owners from three different geographic regions in Alberta regarding their experiences with advertising to answer the following research question:

RQ1: What factors encourage the adoption of digital advertising by rural Alberta business owners?

To answer this question, I analysed interview data using the coding technique explained in the previous chapter. I first created themes from repeating ideas and then organized those themes into four constructs inspired by the four elements of DOI Theory developed by Rogers (2003): 1) the **innovation**, which includes how relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability of the innovation affect adoption; 2) the **communication channels**, which includes how individuals share knowledge and seek peer feedback when considering the adoption of innovations; 3) **time**, which includes looking at how long it takes for an individual to adopt an innovation and the rate of adoption within a community; and 4) the **social system**,

which includes how regional factors affect innovation adoption. I used these four constructs, along with themes and repeating ideas identified through my analysis of the data, to develop a theoretical narrative that describes the rural business owners' experience with digital advertising in Alberta (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). In this chapter I will present a narrative of digital advertising in Alberta rural communities based on an analysis of my data in line with these theoretical constructs, and compare the narratives to the existing literature on my topic in order to test the narrative's validity.

To develop my narrative, I considered the literature, the research question, my research concerns, and how these elements connect to DOI theory. Where possible, I used the research participants' own words. Bracketed material within direct quotes indicates contextual information I use to provide clarity on the research participant's meaning. When research participants are specifically referenced, they will be identified as being from the south, central or north Alberta region (Figure 7) and will be assigned a number. For example, S1 indicates the participant quoted was from the south-Calgary region and was the first interviewee in that region. C1 indicates the first central-Red Deer region participant. N1 indicates the first north-Edmonton region participant. In some instances where the quote may risk the research participant to be identified, attribution was omitted.

The following chapter will present the research findings in a narrative format, followed by a discussion of the narrative's connection to the literature. While the first DOI element is exploring the innovation itself (in this case digital advertising), it was important to first establish the current activities of rural business owners. This meant determining whether digital advertising has already been adopted by rural business owners. That is where I will begin my narrative in the findings. Then, I will summarize my findings with an overview of how the

narrative fits in with digital advertising behaviours of rural Alberta businesses. Ultimately, my goal was to analyze what we now know about digital advertising in rural Alberta.

Data Presentation

The four theoretical constructs revealed through the grounded theory coding techniques discussed in the previous chapter are: 1) rate of digital advertising adoption by rural business owners; 2) how digital advertising users are sharing information with non-users; 3) attributes of digital advertising that favour adoption; and 4) regional factors that affect advertising adoption. These four constructs are presented in Table 1. Within each of these four broad theoretical constructs are the narrative themes I derived from repeating ideas found through analysing the interview transcripts.

Theoretical Construct (DOI theory)		Narrative Themes (Grounded analysis of interview data)
Rate of digital advertising adoption by rural business owners	Traditional Advertising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional print advertising methods are still being considered by business owners • Traditional and digital blended methods are being considered by business owners • Traditional broadcast advertising methods are still being considered by business owners
	Digital Paid and Unpaid Advertising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paid and unpaid promotional and communication strategies used by rural business owners • Digital advertising methods used by rural business owners • Web-based digital opportunities are being explored and used by business owners • Social media digital opportunities are being explored and used by business owners • Web advertising and app opportunities are being explored and used by business owners
	Advertising Expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business owners have an awareness of effective digital messaging • Business owners want to learn more about advertising
	Advertising Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of time distracts from trying new advertising strategies • Generational digital adoption factors affect promotional decisions
How digital advertising users are sharing information with non-users		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are promotional leaders in rural communities • Business owners trust advertising/marketing representatives • Rural business owners want more service from their newspaper • Advertising/marketing representatives are less common in digital advertising
Attributes of Digital	Relative Advantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business owners prefer to keep digital marketing in-house • There is more reach potential with digital

Advertising that Favour or Limit Adoption		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotional and advertising costs matter Digital advertising is perceived favourably by rural business owners
	Compatibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rural business owners make time for advertising Rural communities have adopted digital media Rural communities have not adopted digital media Business owners have uncertainties and challenges with advertising
	Complexity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New advertising implementation has challenges Platform usability and presentation is important Rural business owner's technology awareness affects advertising choices
	Trialability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is important to experiment with advertising and social media
	Observability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business owners expect results from their ad representatives Local newspapers are ineffective for advertising Rural business owners want proof of promotional success Business owners will eliminate platforms that are not working
Regional factors that affect advertising adoption		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rural business owners support their local newspaper Local newspapers are effective for advertising Internet access affects digital innovation <p>COVID-19 SPECIFIC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Businesses had to quickly pivot business strategies during COVID Customers were looking for relevant information on social media during COVID Newspaper advertising continued during COVID The COVID economic shutdown reinforced the power of digital advertising Overall advertising was reduced during the COVID economic shutdown

Table 1. Themes inspired by the elements of DOI theory, derived from repeating ideas.

Table 1 sets the stage by creating the ‘building blocks’ for a theoretical narrative of the research participants’ experiences. As I developed the narratives, I used my research concerns as a guide to help logically organize Alberta business owners’ experiences into themes and sub-themes (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003):

- What are the current preferred methods of advertising for rural business owners?
- How quickly are rural business owners integrating digital advertising?
- How are rural business owners learning about digital advertising?
- What attributes of digital advertising affect digital advertising adoption?

- What regional factors (e.g., advertising competition, Internet access) affect digital advertising adoption for rural business owners?

Promotional methods used by rural business owners. First, it was important to discover each business owner's current advertising activities, in order understand the current rate of digital adoption by rural business owners (Rogers, 2003). Specific mentions of all paid and unpaid promotional methods and specific digital advertising methods are summarized in Table 2 and Table 3.

	Print Advertising (Paid)	Radio Advertising (Paid)	Television Advertising (Paid)	Digital Advertising (Paid)	Unpaid Social Media	Website	Email Marketing	Search Engine Optimization	App
S1	x	x		x	x	x			
S2	x			x	x	x		x (paid)	
S3	x	x			x	x	x	x (unpaid)	x
C1	x			x	x	x			
C2	x				x	x			
C3	x	x		x	x	x		x (unpaid)	
N1	x			x	x	x			x
N2	x		x		x	x	x		
N3	x	x	x	x	x	x		x (unpaid)	

Table 2. Mentions of used paid and unpaid advertising methods by research participants. Participants were given a time from of January to March of 2020 to describe their activities, but some referenced methods outside of the suggested time frame.

	Facebook Advertising (Paid)	Google Advertising (Paid)	Online Newspaper Advertising (Paid)	Online Radio Advertising (Paid)	Other Website Advertising (Paid)
S1	x	x		x	
S2	x	x			x
S3					
C1	x				
C2					
C3	x				
N1	x				
N2					
N3	x			x	

Table 3. Of those participating in paid digital advertising, Facebook was a method used by all who participate in paid digital advertising. What is not known is how immersed they are in using that tool.

According to digital promotion mentions in Table 2 and Table 3, business owners are integrating paid and unpaid forms of digital advertising (unpaid such as social media, websites, and other digital techniques) with traditional advertising methods, such as newspaper, radio, and television. Six of nine interview participants reported already using digital advertising. As

illustrated in the breakdown of paid advertising (Table 3), other digital advertising methods were not as common as Facebook advertising.

Business owners want to take an active role in learning about new advertising but struggle with making time for training. According to one person interviewed: “I want to do it, but sometimes just maybe don't make the time” (S1). Another stated: “I try and tell people we have to learn and keep learning but it's also a time-consuming thing to do it properly” (C2). A third pointed out that: “Me personally. I just don't have the time to do that [to learn new digital advertising]” (C3).

Even if they do not have time to implement new advertising strategies, business owners are actively thinking about what they want to do next. One research participant wants to become more familiar with the digital platforms they are already using: “I want to spend some more time on Facebook and then Google” (S1). Another wanted to explore new strategies: “I would really like, if I could, [to] do more Facebook and Twitter, and if I didn't have such time constraints, I would love to do newsletters” (N2). Another participant reinforced how lack of time makes it difficult to try new strategies: “It's hard enough to manage the two [social media platforms] I've got going now. So, I guess if someone proposed another idea [for advertising] I might consider it, but right now I can't even” (N3).

Digital adoption can also be analyzed by how deeply business owners use the digital tools. One participant made a conscious decision regarding adoption: “My advertising is focused digitally from day one” (S2). However, others are comfortable posting content to their social media pages or just starting to explore paid digital advertising options: “We've also just recently, as of yesterday actually, started advertising on Facebook” (C1). “We started with the newspaper first. We added the radio, and now we're doing Facebook because now we're getting younger

people” (C3). “We might boost the odd post [on Facebook]... Other than our... \$5-a-week advertisement. We wouldn't put a lot of ads up” (N1). Others are just starting to explore digital advertising beyond Facebook: “We just finished a digital campaign [on a radio website] which just wrapped up the beginning of last week, actually. So that was a little bit different” (N3).

In addition, business owners who had not yet fully adopted digital advertising shared some valid reasons for their hesitation, which were specifically tied to the demographics of their community. Communities that had a large senior demographic or businesses whose target audience are seniors, had to approach their advertising in a more traditional way: “[We advertise in the newspaper] mainly because our demographic in [south-Calgary region] is a lot more seniors” (S3). While generational factors affect advertising strategy, one participant acknowledged that the digitally experienced seniors can be varied:

“I think it [advertising preferences] depends on the demographic. Like I said, a lot of...our population is over the age of 60 and some of them have Facebook; [but] some of them don't even have a computer” (C3).

However, my research indicates that the age of the business owner had limited impact on their digital adoption behaviours. Of all the research participants, two were over 60. While these two individuals had yet to explore digital advertising, they still showed evidence of using unpaid social media, websites and email to connect with their customers. Of the participants who were between the ages of 50-59, only one did not choose digital advertising, due to their need to reach an older demographic, but rigorously used other digital platforms. Therefore, age does not seem to be an important factor in the adoption of digital advertising within this sample.

Based on the research participants' reported usage, it shows there is an awareness of the opportunity of digital advertising, regardless if the business owner used it or not. Six of the nine

research participants have participated in digital advertising, which shows acceptance of the advertising method, specifically Facebook. Nevertheless, implementation of digital advertising is still in its early stages for many business owners, due to lack of time and concerns about demographic reach. In addition, before a rural business owner can begin to explore digital advertising, they need to be shown a pathway to using it effectively.

How peer groups influence digital advertising adoption. The strength of peer supports surrounding digital advertising show how digital adoption can be influenced in a community. Some rural business owners who appear to be digital early-adopters are creating opportunities to help others adopt digital strategies into their business. Two specific examples shared by research participants brought different outcomes. In one community [region withheld to maintain confidentiality], the business owner contacted a professional digital marketer and hosted digital marketing workshops for his staff and other businesses in the community. But this business owner did not see the trained staff effectively implement strategies after the training, stating: “It was a waste of money.” Another research participant in the same region shared a similar sentiment about social media training. “I’m thinking they [business owners] kind of just, took the [social media] training and thought it was interesting and didn’t really use it.” However, another community [region withheld] had great success with their digital marketing training with business owners continuing to use the skills after the training had ended. “Now some of them are doing fashion shows every Wednesday.” The main difference between both training programs was the additional support provided by the workshop hosts in the second example: “We assisted the businesses to do Facebook lives and advertise their businesses to the world.” The research participant said that when businesses participating in the training program demonstrated success with their digital methods, more businesses signed up for the program: “As we did the first

Wednesday, we had people sign up for the second Wednesday – and it [participation] just spiraled from there.”

Digital advertising consultants is another channel where knowledge can be shared with those who are considering adopting digital advertising. One research participant’s experience [region withheld] involving their radio advertising representative who offered the business digital advertising on the station’s website, reported a positive experience. “She [the radio sales rep] took the lead and we just kind of followed her suggestions.” The participant reported the sales rep was great at explaining everything and followed up the conclusion of the campaign with metrics to show proof of success. Another participant did not have as much luck with recommendations from their local digital sales representative. The research participant also used digital advertising through their regional radio station and did not get the return on investment they were hoping for. They stated that the sales rep likely oversold how effective the ad would be for their business. But despite this criticism, advertising representatives may be an effective way to spread digital advertising information in the community. One participant [region withheld] hoped for their local newspaper to take the lead and offer digital advertising options, or act as a consultant for Facebook and Google advertising: “I would pay for that service instead of paying \$200 for an ad that they post one time [in the newspaper].”

Facebook’s familiar interface and intuitive digital advertising tools can make it just as easy for rural business owners to use their own personal knowledge of the platform or seek additional paid or self-paced training to encourage adoption. Research participants reported they wanted to “get more into the learning” (S1) and “bring myself up to speed” (N3) in order to explore more advertising tools. “Now that I’m a familiar with it [social media]. It’s probably something I’ll, you know, learn a little bit about it a little bit more, which will educate me and [I’ll] probably still use

it on different aspects or continue using it in some shape or form” (N3). While others were influenced to learn more by others in their organization: “Our [employee title], he's been here for maybe three years or something, and he's young, and he's... pushing us to do it [go more digital]” (S3).

In summary, there is evidence that peer groups in rural communities influence the rate of digital adoption by business owners. Access to training can influence adoption but appears to be successful only when there are implementation supports in place for the business owner. Digital advertising representatives also appear to have an influence on adopting digital advertising, but only two participants reported using their local representative. One also cannot discount the level of service advertising representatives bring when digital advertising adoption barriers previously discussed included a lack of time. Still, Facebook’s intuitive advertising purchase platform appears to be an appropriate replacement for the in-person sales representative, and business owners are willing to commit basic resources (in the form of self or paid training) to using it.

Digital advertising attributes that affect adoption. Digital advertising tools used by the research participants allow them to be responsible for their own advertising. Business owners have taken an active role in developing their digital strategies, from building their own ads to training and assigning staff to manage their digital presences. “I kind of felt it was better to keep someone in house, like, someone that I could, kind of, coach and have them paid on the payroll” (S1).

Digital advertising’s reach was also a positive attribute for many business owners. The ability to reach potential customers outside of their geographic region was valued by many. One research participant had great success with reaching out-of-town customers through unpaid

Facebook posts: “Actually, would you believe I have more [customers] outside my community [due to Facebook posts reaching them]” (N2).

Facebook and Google were specifically mentioned as good value for dollars invested, including time spent using their free publishing tools. One participant compared digital’s value to newspaper: “There's an issue on how many ads you can place [in the newspaper] versus how much, I guess, leverage you'll get putting it on social media for free” (N1). In addition, digital advertising’s low cost makes it easy for business owners to try new strategies: “I'll be honest. I am... very conscious of the dollars. So, if something's [advertising] not going to cost a lot of money, I'm willing to give it a try and see if there is success in it” (N3).

There is strong evidence that digital advertising is becoming more accepted as it proves its effectiveness. They are noticing “a lot of Facebook hits, views” (C1) and have noticed advertising attitudes have “shifted a little more time to online” (N1). One research participant stated: “[Facebook is] probably one of the better methods for what I want to advertise now. I'm surprised, actually” (S1).

When you look at overall digital adoption in rural communities, research participants say social media, websites, online shopping and applications are embraced, in varying degrees, by their community, which encourages businesses to adopt them as a promotional platform. One research participant stated: “Our mentality is, like, let's get things as much online... and digital as we can. So, I wouldn't say that it's [comfort level with technology] because of anything within the organization. It's more about understanding who our residents are and what they need [for information]” (S3). However, implementing digital advertising is not without its challenges. There are still barriers such as not understanding the full value of digital platforms, and “getting

the structure set up” (C1) to implement use of digital tools like Facebook. “I don't think everybody takes it [social media] as seriously as they should” (S3).

With many rural business owners taking on their own digital advertising, choosing the right platform, reach, and getting discovered can be intimidating. Facebook algorithms on business pages “stop people from getting information” (S3) and it is easy to get lost on digital platforms. Ultimately, business owners are trying to find the best way to reach their customers. One participant stated there is no simple formula: “There still are people that don't get the newspaper, that don't listen to the radio... and they don't use Facebook. So, we're still trying to figure out how to get those people” (C3).

Business owners can overcome some of these challenges by making time for digital marketing training, but there is still hesitation due to timing, lack of desire to be online, and an unwillingness to accept help to learn. “Everybody's a little bit hesitant about moving towards like say paperless or that kind of stuff” (S3). “They [other business owners] didn't want our help and they never went on [online]” (N1).

Research participants acknowledge that they “have to get comfortable with” (S1) digital platforms. “A lot of business owners don't know how to do that [social media management]. And I think it would help increase their following if they stayed up to date with that” (N1). It is important for business owners to “reach out and ask for assistance” (N1). “I really don't even know like what the possibilities are [on Google]” (S1).

Research participants appreciated how they can easily test new digital platforms and observe results. Those who have purposely invested time in advertising understand that the process can be trial and error to find success. “You have to find the type of advertising that will work for you and that becomes a trial and error. You know, like I said, one may work for me but

isn't going to work for the next-door neighbour that's here" (N3). Some business owners said it was fun to experiment with different advertising methods, view the results, and try and do better the next time. One participant stated: "It becomes a bit of a challenge to see if you can outdo yourself on the next ad" (S1). Another business owner was quick to eliminate platforms that aren't working: "If we don't see any increased activity [after the Facebook ad runs], then I would suspect that would indicate to us that this is not probably been a positive avenue to advertise" (C1).

Whether using digital or traditional advertising methods, business owners want proof that their advertising is working. For those relying on traditional methods, they use customer feedback to know whether their ad is seen. This included increased phone calls, customers specifically mentioning the ad, or polling customers when they came into the store. For digital methods, advertising metrics provided a more tangible look into how many people were viewing and/or interacting with the ad, which added another layer of data that businesses can use to help plan future messaging, timing and ad format. "The most satisfying thing is when you can see that you're getting sales because of what you did [on Facebook]" (S1).

There are many positive attributes to integrating digital advertising into a rural business. It allows advertising operations to remain in house, provides access to a larger audience outside the geographic region, digital advertising is affordable and has shown effectiveness. A new platform also means new challenges. Rural business owners must endeavour to learn how to effectively use digital technology to have a successful advertising campaign, otherwise there is a risk of the tool being prematurely discarded. Fortunately, online tools allow business owners to instantly monitor campaigns and evaluate success over time.

Regional factors that affect advertising adoption. For the context of this narrative, I will consider “regional” as encompassing all communities participating in the study. I will also construct a brief narrative reflecting on advertising during the Alberta COVID-19 economic shutdown of non-essential businesses that lasted from approximately March 16, 2020 to May 14, 2020.

Business owners support their local newspaper with advertising dollars because they recognize it as an important contributor to the community: “The paper has really talented people” (S1). But some who support their paper were not certain if their advertising investment was benefiting their business: “Some of it [advertising] was just to support our local newspaper as well. But we really weren't finding that the dollars we were investing into paper was benefiting us” (N3).

Despite newspaper’s shortcomings described by the participants, they still view newspaper favourably because of access to their reading audience, that “there’s always local interest stories” (S3), and that it is a tangible, referenceable document. One participant stated: “We find that the newspaper [is most valuable] because of our demographic” (C1). While another said: “The newspaper was our only means of getting that [plus 60] group of people” (C3).

Internet access is still a barrier in some rural Alberta communities. Three participants from two separate communities used words such as “hit and miss” (C2) and “terrible” (N2) to describe their personal experiences with Internet access. A weak Internet infrastructure may limit digital innovation in the community, however it did not appear to limit their interest in continuing to explore digital advertising.

Rural business owners communicated strong loyalty to their local newspaper, but some questioned their return on investment for advertising. It is still an important tool to reach

audiences who have not adopted digital technology, which has been discussed in previous sections.

Regional factors related to the COVID-19 economic shutdown. During the COVID-19 economic shutdown, one community [region withheld] aggressively adopted digital strategies: “What we did is assisted any shops that we could that weren't already going on Shopify or something similar to Shopify.” In addition to the community hosting online initiatives during COVID-19, business owners received training, support, and cross promoted digital content with other business owners to help elevate reach.

Despite the economic shutdown, many rural business owners used digital tools to maintain communication with their customers. One research participant was surprised by the reach they achieved with “three or four really good posts” (S1) on Facebook during COVID. Other participants discovered they were still being searched for on Google, and that customers were seeking information on business’s social media and websites.

Of the businesses who used newspaper advertising prior to COVID-19, four of them continued. “I wanted to try to support them. We did ads in the paper, you know, three or four hundred dollars a month or something” (S1). “We still use the paper and we were still doing the same thing [during COVID]” (S3). “The newspaper [advertising during COVID] was consistent” However, two participants reported their community newspaper had distribution challenges. (C3). “So, it was a period in time [during COVID] there were perhaps, it was less people accessing that [the newspaper] because they're uncomfortable going out to get a paper” (C1)

Reliance on digital promotion during COVID-19 is making some rural business owners consider digital advertng more strongly. Many research participants shared they will likely continue a digital advertising focus post-COVID-19. “I think COVID has reinforced that going

almost completely digital with advertising is the way to go and I don't think that's going to change” (S2). “As of COVID we are now putting a lot more into Facebook” (C3). “I would say I've learned quite a bit [about advertising] in this time [during COVID] on options and what worked, and I think the momentum is good for all of us. We've all been really good at supporting one another as business owners. So, the goal would be to continue what progress we've made” (N3).

The COVID-19 economic shutdown affected digital advertising in multiple ways. Some were quick to support each other and adopt unique digital strategies to maintain business. Others relied on digital tools to maintain contact with their customers. Advertising activities were reduced, but each region's ability to quickly adapt in the COVID-19 environment has some business owners considering digital as a more dominant method for promoting their business.

Narrative Summary

The four theoretical constructs drawn from DOI theory provided a framework to answer the research question:

RQ1: What factors encourage the adoption of digital advertising by rural Alberta business owners?

So, what do we now know about digital advertising in Alberta? Considering business owners' rate of digital advertising adoption, how they share digital advertising knowledge, the positive and negative digital advertising attributes, and regional factors that affect advertising adoption allowed me to create a narrative of digital advertising activities in rural Alberta, where none previously existed.

Rural business owners have knowledge of digital advertising, even if they are not actively using it as a paid business tool, and more rural business owners have invested in some form of

paid digital advertising than those who have not. Those who have yet to adopt digital advertising state audience reach or advertising elsewhere are reasons why they have not tried digital advertising. Digital advertising appears to be in early phases of acceptance, but there are early adopters in rural communities who are attempting to speed the process through consulting or initiating training. If business owners had more time they would consider learning and implementing new kinds of digital advertising methods. Of the digital advertising platforms they have tried, business owners appreciate how the self-serve platforms provide affordable access to larger audiences outside their geographic region, which can then be monitored for success. Lack of experience with digital advertising may result in ad campaign failures, which could cause premature discarding of the digital advertising method. Despite digital advertising's growing popularity in rural business communities, there is still strong loyalty to their local newspaper, but it is unclear how long financial investment will continue. COVID-19 showed the resilience of rural Alberta businesses, with some taking advantage of digital strategies. While the COVID-19 economic shutdown may have brought a more positive view of digital advertising to rural Alberta business owners, it is unclear whether the positive attitudes toward digital advertising will continue.

Rural digital advertising is an under-studied concept, and the narrative method of my data analysis may bring into question my results. While it is often encouraged to let "subjectivity, interpretation, and context" (Auerbach & Silverstien, 2003, p. 77) be woven into qualitative evaluation, I feel that because this is an under-studied population (rural business owners), some triangulation is required. Triangulation involves comparing the themes – or in this case, the narrative – to existing data to achieve validity (Golafshani, 2003). In my discussion, I will explore the comparisons between my rural advertising narrative to the literature.

Discussion – Triangulation of Findings with Reference to Literature

The purpose of developing this new narrative of Alberta rural business owners' digital advertising behaviours was to determine whether rural business owners are adopting digital advertising, to measure their immersion in digital advertising, supports and attributes that positively affect digital advertising adoption, as well as how other advertising providers in the community affect digital advertising choices. I present this narrative with a caveat: my sample size of nine (9) participants is small, thus these findings should be tested and validated with reference to a larger group, possibly through follow-up surveys with more rural business owners.

While digital advertising revenues are climbing in Canada (Winseck, 2019, Briggs, 2019; Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2020; Think T.V., 2019), as of 2020 it appears that rural business owners are at the introductory stage of integrating digital advertising. Rural business owners' experience with digital advertising appears to be entry-level when you compare their activities to the search, display and social media opportunities discussed in the literature. Most rural business owners in Alberta who have tried digital advertising are currently using the basic advertising features on only one platform (Facebook), and it is inconclusive whether rural businesses are spending over 50 per cent of their advertising budget on digital options.

However, the COVID-19 economic shutdown may have begun to sway some rural business owners to look at digital options more seriously. Surprisingly, the Government of Canada's advertising focus seems somewhat reflective of advertising activities going on in rural communities. Of all the research participants who used digital advertising, their most frequently-used platforms were Facebook (6), web display (3), and Google Search (2). The government allocated their 2019 digital advertising budget with somewhat parallel figures that created the same order of preference. Their most-used platforms by budget were social media (43 per cent),

web display (38 per cent), and search engine marketing (12 per cent) (Government of Canada, 2019). While this parallel is not precise in measurement given the small sample size, comparing the order of preference of Government of Canada's digital advertising budget to the order of advertising preferences reported by rural businesses in this study can strengthen the validity of the rural advertising hypothesis.

Reported Canadian weekly newspaper digital advertising revenues do not reflect digital advertising behaviours for rural communities (Think T.V., 2019). None of the research participants reported using digital advertising options provided by their weekly newspaper. Only two reported working with their regional radio station for digital advertising. Regardless, rural communities support their printed publications through print advertising purchases, though it is uncertain how long that practice will continue for some rural advertisers. Strong print newspaper support does not mean that digital advertising is being slowly adopted. Newspapers could take advantage of the digital advertising attributes shown by the research participants, but they would first have to give community members a reason to reference their digital platform daily (similar to behaviours of a typical Facebook user), and improve how their digital advertising is purchased/delivered (with options of a self-serve platform).

The data also revealed there is opportunity for advertising providers focused on rural contexts – if they have a knowledgeable and trustworthy digital advertising representative. Existing literature showed that business owners may delay taking on new advertising due to lack of technical competency and time (Prevatt, 2016; Motkoski, 2017). Research participants in this study similarly communicated they were not sure of all the digital advertising opportunities that were available to them. A digital advertising representative may be able to help business owners bridge that gap; however, the representative must take time to thoroughly explain the digital

advertising tools they are selling and be prepared to show their effectiveness with advertising metrics for the rural business advertiser to confidently adopt. User-friendly platforms such as Facebook make the digital advertising representative obsolete for those who wish to keep digital advertising in-house. Therefore, digital advertising providers will need to create a process for a higher level of service in order to establish a higher perceived value for rural business owners. The rural businesses that participated in the digital training and received support during COVID-19 is one example of how peer support and demonstrated success can encourage new adoption within a (rural) region.

The literature showed how weekly newspaper chains like Postmedia are offering social media, search, and video advertising services (Postmedia Network Inc., n.d.). There does not seem to be interest from rural businesses to use digital services offered by Postmedia or similar chain newspapers. While Postmedia likely offers similar preferred services, such as personal consultation, recommendations, and metrics, their service offerings do not appear to be reaching rural business owners. Browsing Postmedia's advertising information, there is little indication whether a rural business owner will be connected with a local advertising representative, and the advertising offerings appear to be tailored toward larger advertisers who wish to reach a national audience, or businesses located in urban centres. Without direct inquiry about their digital services, it is unclear whether the offerings are the right size or focus for a rural market.

In terms of generational adoption factors, I also discovered that the age of the business owner had little to do with their digital advertising preferences. Six of the participants were aged 50-59 and two were over 60, but all demonstrated awareness of digital advertising and associated understanding of digital literacy. This is significant, as it indicates there is no longer a "cut off" of a certain age to use digital platforms. "Digital immigrants" who advertised during the rise of

mobile devices around 2010 are now in their 50s and 60s. It is natural for them to be open to future digital opportunities, considering they have been around various forms of digital technology for more than 10 years. This is also mirrored in the literature, showing a significant shift in rural digital adoption between 2010 and 2020 (Gilbert et al., 2010; Lee & Kim, 2014; Tosca, 2019).

However, rural business owners did consider the age of those they wish to reach when choosing platforms. Similar to the business social media adoption study by He et al. (2017), businesses who needed to reach an older demographic relied on traditional platforms, mostly newspapers, in order to reach them.

While some research participants complained about the limited access and speed of their local Internet connection (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2019), it appears to not have stopped them from using digital advertising. However, these Internet service limitations may limit those communities from exploring digital technologies on a deeper level.

In terms of the trust of digital advertising providers, the only challenge shared by one respondent was uncertainty regarding the provision of Facebook with their credit card number to implement a digital advertising campaign. Advertisement trustworthiness and acceptance was not a concern for the business owners who used digital advertising.

What is most interesting is that the literature, when compared to the narratives of the research participants, showed how urban data can under-represent rural activities in national studies. Existing research literature shows that Google is the dominant digital advertising provider in Canada (Public Policy Forum, 2017; Winseck, 2019). Yet this is not a reflection of what I learned is happening in rural communities. According to my study, Facebook was the

most popular digital platform in rural communities. I feel this result strengthens the importance of rural-specific advertising and media research, as well as points to new avenues of study, because rural populations bring unique characteristics that set them apart from generalized national data.

Summary

The method used to analyze data allowed me to develop a theoretical narrative of digital advertising behaviours of rural business owners in Alberta. Using grounded theory coding techniques, I pulled relevant text from the interview transcripts, categorized narratives and themes, and developed theoretical constructs inspired by the elements of DOI theory: the innovation, communication channels, time and the social system (Rogers, 2003). I looked for narratives that talked about adopting or rejecting digital advertising, how digital innovations were communicated and spread within a community, favourable and unfavourable attributes of digital advertising, and how regional factors can affect adoption. From there I developed a narrative that was validated through an examination of the literature. However, more study is required to elevate digital advertising's effect on rural economies because rural business advertising is under-represented in academic literature.

Chapter 5.

Conclusion

Introduction

My research provides an introductory narrative of how rural business owners in Alberta are adopting digital advertising strategies. Prior to this research, one would have to make assumptions about rural digital advertising activities by reviewing and interpreting reported revenues from Facebook, Google and other digital advertising providers. Urban data included in national studies and reports are not reflective of digital adoption rates in rural communities, requiring further study to explore the following research question:

RQ1: What factors encourage the adoption of digital advertising by rural Alberta business owners?

According to national data, Canadian digital advertising revenues are climbing and have surpassed traditional revenues by more than \$1 billion (Winseck, 2019; Briggs, 2019). Traditional advertising data can be tracked regionally, due to the geographic markets they serve, and can be tracked to rural markets for study and analysis. Unfortunately, there is limited data on the geographic breakdown of digital advertising and how earned revenues differ between urban and rural markets. This makes rural digital advertising activities somewhat unknown. This chapter will review the key findings of my research, explore its significance to the literature and field of study, disclose research limitations, and discuss future study recommendations.

Key Findings

In summary, my study indicates that rural businesses in Alberta have adopted digital advertising. Six of nine research participants use at least one digital advertising platform, but are still in the introductory stages of integrating digital advertising into their business. The data

shows Facebook is the most commonly used digital advertising platform, with all six using the basic advertising tools. Only three research participants reported additional digital advertising activity, adding Google and online radio, or website advertising to their strategy (Table 2).

While most research participants have used digital advertising, strong loyalty to newspapers remains. It is uncertain whether rural businesses are investing more of their budget to one advertising platform over the other. Tracking advertising preferences of rural businesses through budget allocation would reveal adoption behaviours over time, and would be an interesting area for further study to identify rural trends in digital advertising adoption.

It is important to note that rural business advertising preferences are similar to the federal government's advertising budget allocation. I discovered that rural businesses use Facebook (6), web display (3), and Google Search (2) as their digital methods. The federal government allocated their budget to social media (43 per cent), web display (38 per cent), and search engine marketing (12 per cent) (Government of Canada, 2019). As mentioned in the findings, this is not a precise measurement for comparison, but it does show how urban digital advertising data can under-represent rural activities in national studies.

It is important for a rural community to have early adopters to facilitate new advertising ideas to the community. Research participants reported hosting or attending community training sessions, attended peer-supported workshops, and used the expertise of their digital advertising representative to help guide adoption. Easy-to-use platforms such as Facebook can also make it simple for rural business owners to explore and develop their own strategies without help from others. This may net mixed results; if a business owner does not have enough training, their early attempts at digital advertising may be ineffective and cause them to prematurely abandon the advertising method.

The age of the business owner has little connection to their choice of digital advertising preferences. However, the age of the customer was a consideration when business owners choose their advertising. Business owners who needed to reach the aged 60 plus demographic typically relied on newspapers.

I previously hypothesized the possibility that digital advertising in rural communities is on the cusp of widespread adoption, but academic study of digital advertising in rural communities is limited and requires further exploration.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to my research. They include: a) sample size cannot be generalized to a larger group; b) semi-structured questions created the opportunity for unequal data collection around specific topics; c) different definitions of advertising may have created inaccurate data surrounding advertising activities; d) self-reported advertising activities may not be complete; e) COVID-19 affected participation and the current environment; and f) due to my previous experience with newspapers and digital advertising, there is potential for bias during the data collection and interpretation process. I encourage future researchers to consider these limitations if they are to continue academic study of these populations and this topic.

My research sample of nine rural business owners in Alberta may not be indicative of larger rural groups in the province, or to other Canadian provinces. Still, the smaller regional samples may provide some initial insights that could be explored with reference to regional digital activities.

Due to the nature of semi-structured questions, it was easy for some topics within the interview to be more relevant for an interview participant than others, which affected how much time I spent on each topic. This may lead to less detailed data from some participants. However,

I did my best to ensure their narratives were captured, even if the research question was not a priority for some of my participants. For example, I did not spend much time talking about specific digital advertising techniques when business owners shared that they did not use digital advertising. I did spend more time exploring how they used unpaid digital promotional methods to get a sense of their digital literacy.

Early in the interview process, I had to pay close attention to how I defined “advertising” for the research participants. While a definition of advertising was provided at the start of the interview, many research participants talked about both paid and unpaid advertising. Therefore, some of the aspects of the interview narratives may not accurately reflect advertising data collected in Table 1 and Table 2. Being conscious of this fact, I was careful to ask for confirmation when it was not clear whether reported digital activity as paid or unpaid. While I am confident that advertising activities are accurately reflected, there is some possibility for error.

While I specifically asked for research participants to disclose all advertising activities, there is potential for the self-reporting to be incomplete. Again, follow-up questions were able to pull additional activities not previously disclosed, but there was evidence of at least one inconsistency with promotional reporting: One participant shared that they did not use social media for their business, yet I found evidence of a business page and activity recorded on January of 2020. During our conversation, business page activity was not specific to the topic of study (paid digital advertising), so it is possible they did not mention it due to the original scope of the research topic.

The study also took place as businesses were recovering from the COVID-19 economic shutdown. Every effort was made to isolate pre-COVID data from post-COVID experiences, but narratives shared may not be generalizable to “normal” times.

While I feel I coded data and developed narratives in as unbiased a manner as possible, it is important to disclose that I have experience with both traditional and digital advertising that may affect my data interpretation. I am a media and advertising post-secondary educator in Alberta, and I have worked to evolve our program curriculum from traditional to digital advertising methods for the past five years. Prior to that I worked in advertising and production for newspapers, magazines, and other printed publications. For data collection and interpretation, I was conscious of, and questioned, my preferences toward social media and newspapers, to ensure lack of bias.

Implications for Professionals

Digital advertising preferences of rural business owners is currently under-studied in North America. After speaking with my participants and spending time with the data, there are several implications of this research that may benefit rural businesses and the advertising industry moving forward.

My research shows the rural business community is at the entry-level point of adopting digital advertising. While more research with larger samples is needed to confirm my narrative, it provides a starting point to observe continued adoption as more businesses adapt to digital strategies. We know that Facebook is a gateway platform for rural business owners to adopt digital advertising, while local digital advertising offerings are less explored. Analyzing the positive attributes and experiences of digital advertising, creating peer support for digital advertising adopters, and leveraging trust from local advertising providers may illuminate a

localized digital advertising option for rural businesses. The data also shows that regional radio stations have had some success in attracting rural businesses to advertising digitally, where there is no interest in digital offerings from weekly newspapers. Perhaps newspapers should look to radio and Facebook digital advertising models to critically evaluate the effectiveness and sale of their own digital advertising offerings to encourage success.

Finally, training and time to complete training, is a common narrative from the research participants as a challenge they are faced with. The case studies presented illustrate that the attributes of successful and unsuccessful training methods may encourage digital entrepreneurship in rural communities.

Recommendations for Future Researchers

Data analysis and the creation of the new narrative of Alberta rural business owners' digital advertising behaviours has illuminated additional areas of study moving forward. All participants showed evidence of using free tools like Facebook business pages as part of their (unpaid) advertising strategy. The comparison of unpaid digital to paid digital tools will bring more clarity to digital advertising's value for rural businesses.

The usage of digital advertising features would also be prudent, as it will show the depth of digital advertising literacy within each community. For example, business owners using Facebook in-stream video, in-article advertising options, or have expanded their digital strategy beyond Facebook likely have a deeper understanding of digital advertising opportunities compared to business owners who only use Facebook post boosting.

It would also be worthy to explore how advertising frequency and budget allocation has shifted as more rural businesses adopt digital advertising. While the data shows that rural businesses are adopting a blended strategy, using both traditional and digital techniques,

knowing how often and how much they spend on all advertising platforms will identify trends of digital advertising adoption.

Summary and Final Thoughts

My research data shows that rural businesses in Alberta have adopted digital advertising, even if they are in the early stages of adoption and implementation. This is evident due to their entry-level use of digital advertising tools and some of the research participants choosing to delay adoption. Despite this delay, there is still potential for them to explore digital advertising as an option, due to their use of unpaid digital promotional tools for their business. Reach, cost, platform usability, and a helping hand all encourage digital advertising adoption, yet business owners will not necessarily choose digital advertising if it won't reach their desired audience.

Despite the limitations of my research, I believe my narrative, discussion, and analysis demonstrates the importance of further exploration of advertising and media behaviour in rural populations. Evaluating rural digital advertising preferences and processes outlined in this research may reveal opportunities rural communities to provide digital advertising peer support or spark opportunities for digital advertising entrepreneurship.

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Appendix A

Introductory Email to Recruit Participants

Subject Line: Invitation to participate in a study on digital advertising by rural businesses in the era of Covid-19

Dear [Name]

The Internet and mobile devices have changed the landscape of advertising for rural business owners. Perhaps you have paid to have your business appear in search engine results, purchased a display ad on a website, or boosted a post from your social media page. Or maybe you have yet to explore digital advertising as an option for your business.

I have a keen interest in understanding your digital advertising preferences both prior to COVID-19 and during the pandemic. Have your methods of reaching customers changed since the pandemic started? If so, how?

I am contacting you, a rural business owner in [community], to seek how you've adopted (or not) digital advertising for your business over the last six months. We have limited understanding of how rural businesses use digital advertising – most studies focus on either urban settings or large national areas. Your input will provide clarity as to whether rural markets are adopting digital advertising at the same rate as shown by more general Canadian digital advertising data. I am conducting this research through the University of Alberta Masters of Communication and Technology program under the supervision of Dr. Rob McMahon, study number Pro00101182.

I would love to chat with you over videoconference to understand what you think about using digital advertising methods to promote your business. The interview will take approximately 40-60 minutes. I am very flexible to work around your schedule. Your input will potentially contribute to an information gap regarding digital advertising in rural communities, and identify trends, business training and resource needs for rural business owners. As well, it might raise broader awareness of the challenges and innovations that rural businesses are grappling with during the era of COVID-19 – and beyond.

To participate, please send me an email or contact me by phone to discuss the study and next steps.

Thank you for considering participation. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch via email or phone listed below.

Sincerely,
Martina Emard
University of Alberta
Masters of Arts in Communications and Technology

Appendix B

Consent Form and Preliminary Questionnaire

Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

Study Title: Factors Influencing the Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts
Study Number: Pro00101182

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study, "Factors Influencing the Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts." Please take a moment to fill out the following consent form and preliminary information via Google Forms.

Martina will contact you via phone within 24 hours of submission to arrange for a video conference interview time.

The following information will outline participation and confidentiality procedures, followed by providing consent and basic preliminary information about yourself and your business.

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Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

Study information and consent form

Please read through the following sections carefully. By submitting this form you agree to participate in the research study described in the following sections. If you do not consent, you may exit out of this form and your submission will not be recorded. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to email or phone Martina Emard using the below contact information.

Study Title: Factors Influencing the Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts
Study Number: Pro00101182

Research Investigator:
Martina Emard
emard@ualberta.ca
403-894-3663

Supervisor:
Dr. Rob McMahon
rob.mcmahon@ualberta.ca
780-248-1110

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Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

Background

- You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a business owner in a rural Alberta community.
- Your contact information was received via public directory or through voluntary participation via study promotion.
- The results of this study will be used to support my capstone project for COMM 900 in the Masters of Arts in Communications and Technology Program.
- Before you make a decision, one of the researchers will go over this form with you. You are encouraged to ask questions if you feel anything needs to be made clearer. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

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Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

Purpose

- The purpose of this study is to explore how rural business owners in Alberta are adopting (or not) digital advertising methods. It also looks at this question in the context of COVID-19.

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Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

Study Procedures

- You will fill out a preliminary questionnaire (included after this consent form).
- You will be interviewed via Zoom video conferencing software. Your interview should take about 40-60 minutes and will contain 14 semi-structured questions.
- Four participants from your rural community will be interviewed, along with eight other participants from two additional Alberta rural communities. Participants in this study will remain anonymous.
- The length of the study will be approximately one month, but your time commitment is limited to one interview.
- Your video conference interview will be video recorded, audio recorded, transcribed and securely stored on a personal hard drive on a locked computer for 5 years (following University of Alberta policy). After that the data will be destroyed (digital data deleted, all paper records shredded).
- To participate in the Zoom video conference, you will need access to a computer with webcam or a mobile device with a front-facing camera.
- With your consent, you will allow storage of study information in a secure data repository to facilitate future research.

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Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

Benefits

- An exploration of digital advertising adoption specific to rural communities will separate rural advertising buying behaviour from the available national data, identify trends that can encourage digital entrepreneurship within rural communities, inspire rural business owners to consider digital advertising methods and identify rural community training and resource needs. It may also raise public awareness of activities undertaken by rural business owners during COVID-19.

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Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

Risk

- There may be risks to being in this study that are not known. If we learn anything during the research that may affect your willingness to continue being in the study, we will tell you right away.

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Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

Cost of Participation

- There is no cost to participate in the study.

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Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

Reimbursement or Remuneration

- There is no reimbursement for participating in the study.

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Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

Voluntary Participation

- You are under no obligation to participate in this study. The participation is completely voluntary.
- You are not obliged to answer any specific questions even if participating in the study.
- You can choose to withdraw from the study at any time before August 15, 2020. To withdraw from a study, send an email to the researcher indicating your request (the email is available at the end of this form). The researcher will subsequently remove your data from the study and destroy it by deleting electronic files and/or shredding paper records). After August 15, 2020, data collected will remain in the study.
- If you withdraw prior to data being collected, the researcher will not use any data related to your initial acceptance to participate.
- If you withdraw after data is collected, you will be exempt from the study findings, provided you withdraw on August 15, 2020 or earlier.

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Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

Confidentiality & Anonymity

- Research will be published via the University of Alberta Education and Research Archive. Findings may also be showcased in presentations, teaching seminars and articles.
- Participant name and business name will not be personally identified in the research findings.
- Specific rural communities of the participants will not be identified in the study. Instead, they will be described by general geographic location (south Calgary, Calgary-Red Deer or Edmonton north).
- Interviews will be recorded using Zoom video conferencing software in video, audio and text format. Data will be moved to a secured hard drive and deleted from Zoom as soon as the recordings are processed on the cloud server. Field notes will be secured in a locked filing cabinet.
- Collected data (video conferencing, field notes) will be kept confidential. Only the student researcher and capstone supervisor will have access to the data.
- While efforts will be made to maintain anonymity of research participants, it cannot be fully guaranteed.
- Data will be secured on an external hard drive for five years following the completion of the research project. Following UAlberta policy, after five years, the data will be destroyed to ensure privacy and confidentiality.
- The participant may receive a copy of the report at their request. They may email the student researcher for a copy.
- We may use the data we get from this study in future research, but if we do this it will have to be approved by a Research Ethics Board.

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Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

Contact Information

- If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact Martina Emard, phone: 403-894-3663, email: Emard@ualberta.ca.
- The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

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Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

* Required

Consent Statement

Please accept the following statement. Martina will contact you within 24 hours of submission to arrange for a video conference interview time.

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will see summary charts and text of my responses when I submit this form. *

☐

Yes, I consent to participate in the study, Factors Influencing the Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts (Pro00101182)

Date *

MM DD YYYY

__ / __ / 2020

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Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

* Required

Introductory Questionnaire

Personal information (name, phone, business name and business community) is for the researcher's use only and will not be identified in the research findings.

First name *

Your answer

Last name *

Your answer

Phone *

Your answer

Age: *

☐ 18-29

☐ 30-39

☐ 40-49

☐ 50-59

☐ 60+

Business name *

Your answer

Business community (town) *

Your community will be identified as one of three Alberta regions: south Calgary, Calgary-Red Deer or Edmonton north

Your answer

Age of business *

Your answer

Total years as owner (if different from age of business) *

Your answer

Business category (e.g., hospitality, agriculture, food retail, clothing retail) *

Your answer

Are you or another local staff member the main decision maker for advertising your business? *

A decision maker is defined as someone who chooses when, where and how much to spend on advertising.

☐ Yes

☐ No

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If the respondent answers no to the last question,
they will be directed to this section

Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

Thank you for your response

I appreciate your time, but study participants must have a local advertising decision maker in their business to participate in the study. You may exit out of this form and your submission will not be recorded.

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[Submit](#)

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Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

Click submit to finish.

[Back](#) [Submit](#)

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Adoption of Digital Advertising in Rural Contexts Study

Thank you for your consent. Martina will contact you via your provided phone number within 24 hours of submission to arrange for a video conference interview time.

[See previous responses](#)

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Appendix C.

Interview Questions

NOTE: These are semi-structured questions and shifted in wording during the interview process. Questioning depth for each participant varied, depending on their answers.

Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I see you've filled out the Google form that outlines study procedures, confidentiality and gave your consent to participate. Do you have any questions or concerns about participating in the study?

This interview is being recorded and I will also be taking notes while we chat.

I'm going to be asking you questions about your purchasing behaviours and awareness of different forms of advertising. Please note that while my research topic is specific to **digital advertising**, I am still interested in hearing about other forms of advertising, like newspaper or radio.

For the context of this interview, **advertising** will refer to an activity where you, the business owner, paid money to an advertising provider to promote your business. This might include space or time in digital or traditional format including radio, television, newspaper, magazine, outdoor and all forms Internet advertising.

I am also interested in the role of COVID-19, if any, in influencing your approach to / opinion about **digital advertising**.

If you need to take a break or wish to skip a question, please let me know. Do you have any questions before we proceed?

Section One: Pre-COVID Advertising Preferences

To get started, I want to know more about how you advertised your business prior to COVID-19.

1. From January to March of 2020, what were your primary advertising methods?
2. Follow up: Clarify platforms/mediums.
3. How often did you use those methods?
 - a. Clarify frequency and amount of advertising.
4. How much time per week do you spend marketing your business?
 - a. Does your allotted time spent marketing your business affect your advertising preferences?
 - b. Do you rely on advertising professionals to help you to make advertising decisions?

Section Two: Pre-COVID Advertising Influences

1. Thank you. Now I want to know more about what influenced your advertising decisions.
2. How did you start advertising the way you do today?
 - a. What influenced your decision to advertise in that way?
 - b. What features do you like best about advertising in that way?
3. What barriers have you experienced in your choice of advertising?
4. Did your comfort level with technology affect your advertising preferences?
 - a. How?

Section Three: Pre-COVID Advertising Adoption Factors

Thank you. Now I'll be asking you to share a bit more detail about why you adopted your advertising methods.

1. In your opinion, which advertising method did do you find most valuable?
 - a. Why?

2. Why did you choose (digital over traditional) (traditional over digital)?
3. Which advertising options are you interested in, but have not yet tried?
4. What is holding you back from trying those advertising methods?

Section Four: Effects of COVID-19

On March 16, 2020, the Government of Alberta began releasing public health orders restricting business operations across various industries. This next section will inquire how your business and advertising has shifted since the government implemented the public health orders.

1. Did your business close during this time or did you remain open with modified service access or social distancing procedures?
 - a. Follow up: If you remained open, how did your business practices shift?
2. Did you continue advertising during the public health restrictions?
 - a. Follow up: If yes, did you use the same methods from the previous 3 months?
 - b. Follow up: If no, how did it shift?
3. What changes, if any, did you experience in your attitude towards digital advertising at this time?

Section Five: Final Thoughts

Thank you for sharing your experiences in advertising your business. Before we wrap up, do you have any advice for rural business owners regarding advertising their business?

Signoff Script

Thank you for your time and sharing your experiences. I will be compiling data over the coming months and will have my final study completed by the end of August. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.