

Evaluation of Digital Outreach and Media Engagement in Sacramento County's Child Support Program

Research Brief

Road Test 3 | July 2021

Jordan Engel and Kate Stepleton



Sacramento's Department of Child Support Services (DCSS) received a digital marketing grant from the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The purpose of the grant, which was awarded to 14 child support programs around the country, is to research how digital marketing strategies may help child support programs more effectively reach and serve families.

DCSS proposed four sequential tests, each examining the effects of a different digital marketing approach on enrollment in the child support program. The aim of the digital marketing approaches is to increase applications and voluntary case openings among custodial parents who are eligible for child support but who are not participating in the program.¹ This report details methods and descriptive findings from the third test of a digital marketing approach. More information about the project and the previous tests can be found in the project's [first evaluation report](#)² and [second evaluation report](#).³

Each of the tests involve deploying a video advertisement via different communication channels. The video highlights how DCSS can help busy parents apply for child support services from the comfort of their homes.

Key Findings

1. Agencies should consider the capabilities of an advertising platform to influence their desired outcome.
2. The context of an advertisement's run may have implications for its success.
3. More robust data over a larger time period is needed to describe TurboCourt's usage since DCSS's adoption of the service in July 2020.
4. A self-service ad manager can offer a low-cost way to reach thousands of potential customers, but it may have limited functionality and available data.

¹ Parents receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families are mandated to enroll in child support services. DCSS has focused their interventions on voluntary participants who are not required to participate in the child support program as a condition of their public benefit receipt.

² Stepleton, Kate, Jordan Engel, and Asaph Glosser. "Evaluation of Digital Outreach and Media Engagement in Sacramento County's Child Support Program," February 2020.

³ Engel, Jordan, and Kate Stepleton. "Evaluation of Digital Outreach and Media Engagement in Sacramento County's Child Support Program," March 2021.

For the third intervention, DCSS placed advertisements on Hulu, a streaming service that offers live and on-demand television shows and movies. DCSS launched the third intervention on Hulu to reach the growing audience of streaming service users.

Despite many other industries slowing during the COVID-19 pandemic, streaming services have experienced growth. Data shows that time spent streaming grew 44% between Q4 2019 and Q4 2020, and streaming advertisers have also seen an increase in advertising impressions.⁴ Hulu offers both an ad-free and a cheaper ad-supported plan. With over 39 million subscribers in 2020, about 70%, or 29 million, of those subscribers are expected to have ad-supported plans.⁵ DCSS posted the third video advertisement using Hulu's lower-cost self-service ad manager, and the video campaign ran from December 15, 2020 to January 15, 2021. DCSS launched the advertisement in December 2020 to leverage higher television consumption in winter months.⁶

In the third test, the video introduced TurboCourt, a step-by-step online service that guides people through the child support application process.

Test 1: Paid Social Media Advertising

DCSS conducted its first digital marketing test in July 2019. DCSS placed the video as a paid advertisement on Facebook and YouTube, targeting parents with low incomes in Sacramento County. Key findings include:

- DCSS's advertisement was widely viewed in Sacramento County.
- The advertisement performed differently on the two platforms, with YouTube garnering far more views than Facebook; the Facebook advertisement had a higher click rate.
- We do not know conclusively whether the placement of the advertisement drove viewers to submit child support applications and voluntarily open child support cases.

Test 2: Targeted Email Campaign

DCSS conducted its second digital marketing test in February 2020. DCSS partnered with the Sacramento County Department of Human Assistance to email parents with children under 18 who were receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits and Medicaid with the email containing links to the second test's video advertisement, to DCSS's website, and to the online child support application. Key findings include:

- A targeted email campaign can successfully reach potential child support clients.
- Impressions from an email campaign are largely observed in the first few days following delivery.
- Of the people who opened the message from DCSS, a small percent went on to click any of the three links in the email related to the child support program.
- The email campaign was a low-cost method of marketing child support services.

⁴ Conviva. "Conviva's State of Streaming Q4 2020." Accessed September 3, 2021. <https://www.conviva.com/state-of-streaming/convivas-state-of-streaming-q4-2020/>.

⁵ Business of Apps. "Hulu Revenue and Usage Statistics (2021)," January 5, 2021. <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/hulu-statistics/>; Spangler, Todd. "Hulu Says 70% of Its 82 Million Viewers Are on Ad-Supported Plan." *Variety* (blog), May 29, 2019. <https://variety.com/2019/digital/news/hulu-ad-supported-subscribers-70-percent-1203227954/>.

⁶ Dixon, Colin. "Do the Seasons Affect SVOD as Much as Traditional Television?" *NScreenMedia* (blog), October 19, 2015. <https://nscreenmedia.com/do-the-seasons-affect-svod-as-much-as-traditional-television/>.

Approach

Below we describe DCSS's approach to designing the third digital marketing intervention. We discuss audience targeting, the Hulu platform, the message contained in the video, and TurboCourt.

Audience Targeting

DCSS's target audience for the third intervention was both custodial and noncustodial parents who were potentially eligible for child support services without active cases in Sacramento County. The advertisement was targeted at people of all genders between the ages of 25 and 49 who were likely to be parents in Sacramento County. DCSS targeted the video advertisement toward parents in the following areas of Sacramento County: Antelope, Citrus Heights, Elk Grove, Folsom, Rancho Cordova, and the City of Sacramento. DCSS set target content genres that would relate to families, including Comedy, Family, Health and Wellness, and Lifestyle. They also targeted Latinx content as a genre to aim to reach their largely Latinx customers and potential customers.

Hulu

DCSS launched the third intervention on the streaming service Hulu. DCSS participated in Hulu's beta-testing of a new self-service ad manager for small businesses. DCSS set the campaign to run from December 15, 2020 to January 15, 2021 with a budget of \$3,000. The same budget has been allocated to all road tests belonging to this project. With this budget, Hulu projected the advertisement would reach 79,575 total views.

Hulu's self-service ad manager provides users with simple analytics, including delivered impressions and the cost of each million impressions, daily and total (see Indicators box on this page). Hulu also provides advertisers with data on the total impressions delivered over the course of the campaign, broken out by the genre of the show during which the advertisement appeared and by viewing platform. Hulu lists mobile, computer, and living room viewing platforms. Living room devices count consumer devices most commonly found in viewer's living rooms, including Amazon Fire TV, Xbox 360, and Roku.

The self-service ad manager does not allow for businesses to include clickable links in advertisements and does not allow for more detailed analysis of viewers. Hulu's ad-supported users may not skip videos, so the total watch time for all views would be the full thirty-second advertisement. However, studies

Indicators

Hulu Analytics

Delivered Impressions: The total and daily number of viewings of the advertisement.

Reach: The number of unique viewers who were shown the advertisement.

Cost Per Mille (CPM): Cost per thousand impressions of the advertisement.

Total Cost: The total cost and daily cost of the impressions.

Show Genre: The percent of total impressions, over the course of the month-long campaign, delivered during different show genres.

Platform: The total percent, over the course of the month-long campaign, of views by viewing platform (living room, mobile, or computer).

DCSS Administrative Data

Case Openings: New voluntary DCSS enrollments. Includes online, paper, and TurboCourt applications.

Demographics: Descriptive information about DCSS enrollees. Includes gender, age, and race of the custodial parent; and the number of unemancipated children on the case. This also includes information about the custodial parent at the time of enrollment, including whether the parent has had a child support case before, whether there is a court order prior to opening the case, and whether the custodial parent has an existing Medi-Cal or CalFresh case.

indicate that many advertisement viewers leave the room, turn down the volume, or otherwise ignore displayed advertisements.⁷

Video Advertisement

The video advertisement from the second test portrays a mother and her child moving through their morning routine. For this test, DCSS updated the advertisement to include information about TurboCourt. The final twelve seconds of the [thirty-second advertisement](#) showed the mother signing into her TurboCourt account and applying for child support services, while the tagline notes that applying for child support services is “easier than ever with TurboCourt.” The final frame of the video displayed the URL of TurboCourt’s Child Support page. There was no clickable link in the video and Hulu users could not directly navigate from the advertisement to TurboCourt or to DCSS’s website.

TurboCourt

TurboCourt is a web-based interface that guides applicants through the child support application process by posing “simple, easy-to-understand” questions and subsequently filling in application forms based on applicants’ responses to those questions.⁸ DCSS contracted with TurboCourt in July 2020 to provide a user-friendly way for potentially eligible parents to submit new child support applications online. They wanted to highlight TurboCourt in the advertisement to give parents an easier to use alternative to the traditional Online Application (OLA). As there was no clickable link to TurboCourt in the Hulu advertisement, we do not know whether TurboCourt applicants were shown the advertisement or chose to apply for DCSS services after viewing the advertisement.

Research Questions

In this brief we focus on the following four research questions:

Research Question 1: How did the video perform on Hulu?

We describe the advertisement’s reach and its cost, including the number of users shown the advertisement and information about the shows watched and devices used when impressions were delivered.

Research Question 2: Compared to the year before, did engagement with DCSS differ during the intervention period?

The aim of the Hulu campaign was to encourage eligible custodial and noncustodial parents to apply for and open a child support case. Software and data limitations do not allow us to answer such causal questions with certainty.

Research Question 3: Did TurboCourt use among DCSS applicants during the intervention period change compared to before the intervention?

DCSS hoped to understand how parents’ use of TurboCourt has changed since its launch in July 2020. Our analysis of TurboCourt use among DCSS applicants includes the overall trend in applications, a comparison of all new digital applicants by source (i.e., TurboCourt and OLA), and information about TurboCourt applications before and after the intervention period.

⁷ Logan, Kelty. “Hulu.Com or NBC? Streaming Video versus Traditional TV | the Journal of Advertising Research.” Accessed June 7, 2021. <http://www.journalofadvertisingresearch.com/content/51/1/276>.

⁸ TurboCourt. “File Child Support Application Online.” *TurboCourt* (blog). Accessed May 14, 2021. <https://info.turbocourt.com/childsupport/>.

Research Question 4: Who applied for child support services in Sacramento County during the study period?

DCSS was also interested in learning more about the characteristics of their new customers. We looked at applicant characteristics and demographic information of custodial parents who enrolled voluntarily. DCSS also wanted to understand who their TurboCourt applicants were during the intervention period and if those applicants differed from paper or online applicants.

Findings

How did the Hulu campaign perform?

We describe the advertisement’s reach and impressions, variations in views over time, and the cost of each impression.

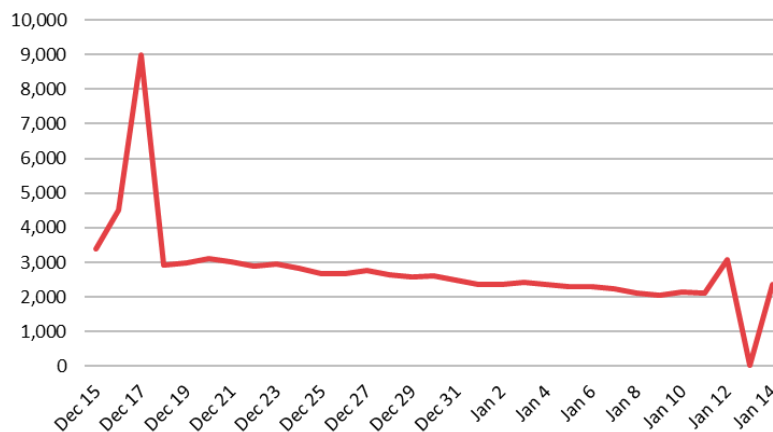
Hulu’s online ad manager reported 81,704 impressions from 33,581 unique viewers over the 31 days between December 15, 2020 to January 15, 2021. The distribution of impressions delivered each day varied over the campaign (see Figure 1).⁹

Hulu set the cost per thousand impressions at \$37.70. The total cost of the advertisement campaign rose steadily over the course of the campaign, despite daily impressions varying by thousands. Across the 31-day campaign, the Hulu advertisement averaged 2,782 impressions and a cost of \$105 per day. The total cost of the advertisement was \$2,999.98.

Users primarily viewed the advertisement on their living room device, such as a Roku or Nintendo Switch (70% of impressions), and 30% saw the advertisement on their mobile device. Less than 1% of users encountered the advertisement on a computer.

The advertisement was delivered during video content from over 16 genres. The primary show genres that the advertisement was aired during include Animation and Cartoons (24%), Comedy (23%), and Drama (21%). Other genres garnered less than 10% of impressions.

Figure 1: Impressions Delivered Per Day December 15, 2020 – January 15, 2021



⁹ There are some ambiguities in the data provided by Hulu about impressions and overall campaign cost. Hulu reported 81,704 total impressions and a \$3,000 cost over the course of the 30-day campaign. However, adding up the daily reported costs and impressions from the 30-day campaign, we saw 86,257 delivered impressions and a \$3,252 total cost. A Hulu representative confirmed that the total reported cost and impressions was the more accurate number. DCSS did not pay more than their \$3,000 budget, and Hulu considered additional delivered impressions as “bonus” impressions.

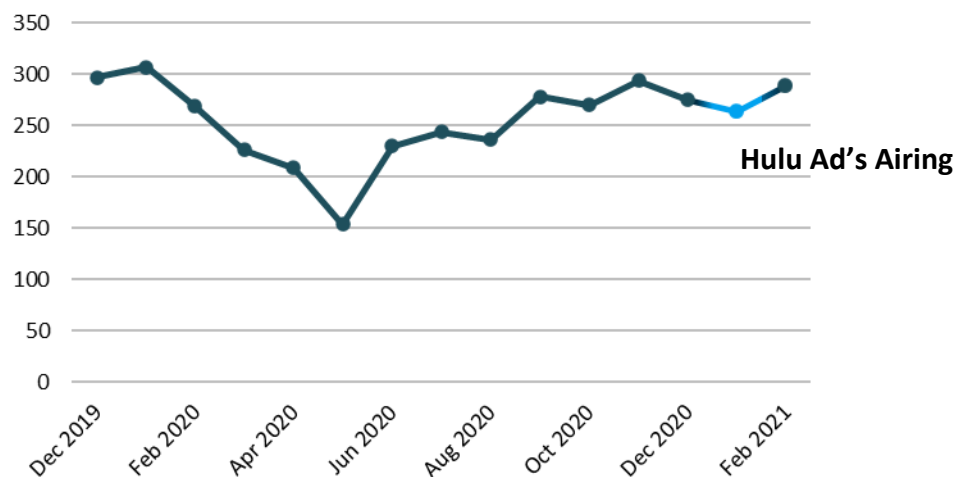
Compared to the same time period the year before, did engagement with DCSS differ during the intervention period?

We compared case openings throughout the advertisement’s campaign with same time period during the previous year. We were not able to track who viewed the Hulu advertisement and if those viewers then went on to open child support applications. Several external factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, economic changes, and other DCSS outreach efforts, may have influenced whether parents enrolled in child support services during the intervention period. We cannot know if any changes in voluntary case openings between December 15, 2020 and January 15, 2021 compared to the year before would have happened in the absence of the Hulu intervention.

DCSS is closed to new applicants on weekends and holidays. DCSS accepted applications for 22 days between December 15, 2020 and January 15, 2021 and 21 days between December 15, 2019 and January 15, 2020. We did not see an increase in case openings during the intervention period compared to the year before. There were 139 voluntary case openings between December 15, 2020 and January 15, 2021, a 24% decrease in voluntary case openings compared to 182 voluntary case openings between December 15, 2019 and January 15, 2020.

Compared to December 2019 and January 2020, average enrollment throughout December 2020 and January 2021 was 11% lower (269 voluntary enrollments compared to 302). However, total monthly new voluntary cases fluctuate by as many as 153 case openings throughout the year (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Voluntary Child Support Openings December 2019 – February 2021

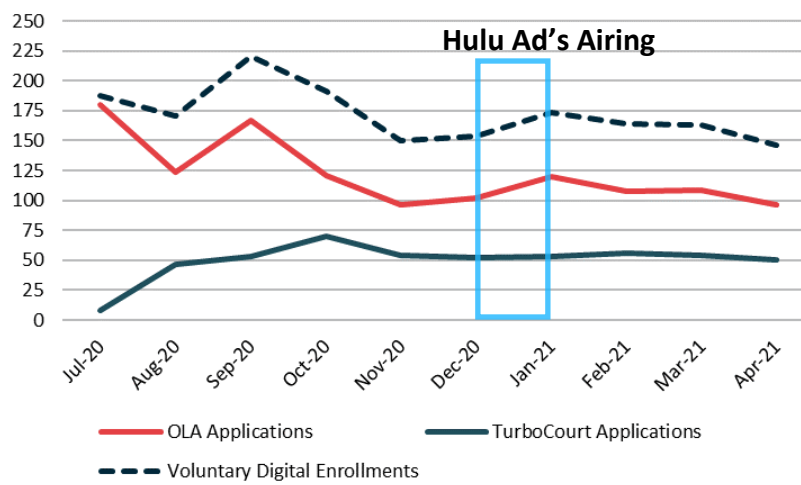


Did TurboCourt use among DCSS applicants during the intervention period change compared to before the intervention?

DCSS designed the Hulu advertisement to highlight the ease of applying for child support services using TurboCourt. DCSS hoped that more potential customers would apply for DCSS services after viewing the advertisement and learning about TurboCourt as an alternative to the traditional online application, which can be complex and difficult to navigate without assistance.

DCSS wanted to understand applicants’ use of TurboCourt in the months following its launch. Since TurboCourt’s deployment in July 2020, new voluntary enrollments from TurboCourt and OLA have converged (see Figure 3). It appears that some of the traffic to OLA has shifted to TurboCourt applicants.

Figure 3: New Voluntary Digital Enrollments by Source - TurboCourt and Online (OLA) Applications July 2020 – January 2021



DCSS wanted to know if more customers had applied by TurboCourt during the intervention period than in previous months. New voluntary monthly enrollments from TurboCourt applications in the month before and after the intervention (November 2020 to February 2021) differ only slightly – by as many as four applications. It is not likely that the Hulu advertisement affected TurboCourt applications.

Who is applying for child support services in Sacramento County?

To understand the context of the intervention, we compared demographic and descriptive information about voluntary enrollees during the month of the intervention period and the same time period in the previous year (Table 1). In Table 1, the same customer could be counted in multiple rows. There were slight, but not notable, differences between DCSS customers during the intervention period and the previous year.¹⁰

New DCSS customers during the intervention period were not demographically different than customers during the same time period the year before. Approximately 87% of new DCSS customers identified as female between December 15, 2019 and January 15, 2020 (88%), and between December 15, 2020 and January 15, 2021 (86%).¹¹ New customers in both years reported similar racial breakdowns, with the highest portion of customers identifying as White, Black, and Hispanic.¹² Custodial parent applicants in both years averaged 35 years old (35.5 in 2020 and 34.7 in 2019) and customers in both years averaged 1.45 unemancipated children.

¹⁰ Parents’ participation in public benefits program was lower during the intervention period than during the previous year.

¹¹ DCSS now provides the option for users to identify as male, female, or non-binary. During the intervention period, custodial parents could only identify as male or female.

¹² Individuals may identify as more than one race and may report this as an additional race to their primary race. In this report, we only analyze primary race. DCSS indicates few parents provide an additional race.

**Table 1: Descriptive Information about Voluntary Applicants to DCSS
December 15, 2019 – January 15, 2020 and December 15, 2020 – January 15, 2021¹³**

	2020	2021
	<i>N</i> = 182	<i>N</i> = 139
	%	
Medi-Cal/CalFresh Receipt ¹⁴	20	13
Prior Cash Aid Recipient	44	25
Custodial Parent Had Existing Court Order	44	40
Previously Received Child Support	43	35

DCSS was also interested in understanding whether TurboCourt applicants differed from their typical OLA and Paper applicants. We compared the demographics of TurboCourt applicants and traditional (OLA and Paper) applicants during the intervention period. There were minor differences between TurboCourt applicants and traditional applicants, including, for example, a slightly higher (3%) proportion of male applicants and a narrower age range (25-52 for TurboCourt applicants and 18-69 for traditional applicants). However, these differences were small in all cases.

Impact of COVID-19 on the Intervention and Evaluation

DCSS deployed the Hulu advertisement during the COVID-19 pandemic. The global pandemic has had enormous economic and health impacts on the lives of people around the world, including Californians. A December 2020 report indicates that the COVID-driven recession in California has disproportionately affected low-income workers, African Americans, Latinos, and women, who are experiencing higher increases in unemployment.¹⁵ DCSS’s target population of low-income parents in Sacramento County has likely been affected by the pandemic. However, it is not possible to know the effects of COVID on DCSS enrollments during the intervention period. Likewise, we do not know whether the pandemic influenced parents’ watching habits or their potential interaction with the Hulu advertisement.

Lessons Learned

DCSS’s email campaign yields several insights to inform efforts to digitally market child support services via advertisement placement on a streaming platform:

- **Agencies should consider the capabilities of an advertising platform to influence their desired outcome.** The goal with DCSS’s campaign was to increase voluntary child support enrollments in Sacramento County. Additionally, DCSS hoped to convey to a broad audience of potential customers that TurboCourt is a user-friendly application service and applying for child support

¹³ Descriptive and demographic data in Table 1 describe new DCSS enrollees between December 15, 2019 – January 15, 2020 and December 15, 2020 – January 15, 2021.

¹⁴ Throughout the grant period, DCSS’s target audience has been potentially eligible parents with low-incomes without active child support cases. One proxy that DCSS uses to identify parents with low-incomes is to look at customers’ participation in food assistance or Medicaid. DCSS’s application system tracks whether new customers participate in Medi-Cal, California’s Medicaid program, or CalFresh, California’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

¹⁵ Bohn, Sarah, Dean Bonner, Julien Lafortune, and Tess Thorman. “Income Inequality and Economic Opportunity in California,” n.d., 45.

services is now “easier than ever.” Hulu allowed DCSS to broadcast its message widely across Sacramento County. However, relying on data from proprietary platforms such as Hulu imposes constraints on the agency’s ability to analyze the effectiveness of the advertising campaign. Hulu’s self-service ad manager does not allow self-service advertisers to include links in their advertisement. The lack of a web link in the advertisement may have deterred potential customers who were interested in applying but did not navigate to TurboCourt on their own.¹⁶ Without a link in the advertisement, we could not measure how many people who saw DCSS’s advertisement went on to open up TurboCourt or to view DCSS’ website. Hulu analytics through the self-service ad manager were also limited. Hulu did not provide demographics of the advertisement’s viewers, limiting our ability to compare the population of Hulu ad viewers with the population of new customers.

- **The context of an advertisement’s run may have implications for its success.** DCSS chose to run this advertisement on Hulu during the winter months to leverage higher streaming viewership during winter holidays. DCSS also was mindful of COVID-19’s effects on household habits and decided to launch the third intervention through a streaming service because of increased viewership during the pandemic. These situational factors might have increased the salience of the Hulu advertisement for DCSS’s intended audience. DCSS also revised the advertisement by filming the scenes of the mother and her child interacting in an outdoor setting to match what parents might have safely been able to do with their child at the height of the pandemic.
- **More robust data over a larger time period would be needed to describe TurboCourt’s usage since DCSS’s adoption of the service in July 2020.** DCSS deployed TurboCourt to customers in July 2020. The number of parents using TurboCourt to apply for child support has increased since DCSS adopted the platform. However, the numbers are still small, and there is limited data available to help explain what may be driving this increase.
- **A self-service ad manager can offer a low-cost way to reach thousands of potential customers, but it may limit functionality and available data.** DCSS used Hulu’s new self-service ad manager to broadcast their advertisement to Hulu’s audience in Sacramento County. Previously, any Hulu advertising required a larger budget, which DCSS would not have been able to replicate after the grant’s end. With the self-service ad manager, DCSS could launch their advertisement on Hulu within their desired budget. This is a good option for agencies working with a smaller budget. However, the downside of this smaller scale option is more limited functionality. Specifically, use of the self-service ad manager meant that DCSS could not include a clickable link to TurboCourt on the advertisement and did not receive demographic information on the advertisement’s viewers. This tradeoff between cost and functionality meant that DCSS could convey its message to potential clients via the ad manager, albeit without some of the beneficial features of a higher-cost tool.

This is the third in a series of briefs describing DCSS’s digital marketing efforts. Other briefs have described advertising efforts on other platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, along with targeted email campaigns. Collectively, they document new approaches to increasing applications for child support services and the potential role digital communication and advertising can play.

¹⁶ 70% of the Hulu advertisement’s viewers saw the video advertisement on their living room device. Even if it there were a clickable link in the advertisement, DCSS would not expect many of the living room users to be able to click on the link. Any link clicks would likely be concentrated in the 30% of viewers who saw the ad on their mobile device.