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The research as described in this document, was done by the first author as noted below. He/she was a student at the Munich University of Applied Sciences (MUAS) in 2014 - the topic was given as a student project. It has not been peer reviewed, but has been edited for basic grammar and accuracy. References have been standardized as far as possible according to the Harvard system. Consider this document as a working paper, to be used for basic referencing but not as seminal source for research work. It could be useful for research in the fields of Website Visibility, Information Retrieval and Search Engines.

An investigation of the use of minimal text to write effective paid advertisements on the search engine results page

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The search engine results page provides an important opportunity for numerous interest groups that would like to be found on the web. Paid text advertisements offer the chance to reach the users through compact text messages, in the hope of generating or increasing awareness which optimally should lead to a page visit. The limitations on these adverts are partly experienced due to the minimal text requirements set by the search engines.
The aim of the experiment conducted during this investigation is to study the impact of a correct text optimization on the aforementioned advertising links.
Method. A series of websites mimicking the links presented on a search engine result page were created and gathered in two sets for A/B testing: one with and one without optimized text on the displayed paid advertisements. These simulations were then presented to a group of forty-eight individuals, who ranked the likelihood of clicking on the pages' links, after having their simulated incentives for the search explained. After this, the ranking were transmuted into a score system and examined in conjunction with the feedback provided by the individuals after the culmination of the experiment session.
Results and Analysis. The results indicated that the users were more likely to click on an advertisement that contained an optimized text than on those that weren't optimized.
Conclusions. The analysis suggested a direct correlation between the optimization of the writing and the conversion rate for paid advertisements, regardless of the nature of the search. But then again, it also proposed that the effect caused by these optimizations varied considerably on intensity according to the type of search.

KEYWORDS

paid advertisement, text optimization, search engine, internet

1. INTRODUCTION

The search engine results page (SERP) is where users usually land when they are searching for something on the Internet. As such, it provides an important opportunity for numerous interest groups that would like to be found on the Web, a place where new websites are coming online constantly (Kuo, Christine et al., 2014). Paid text advertisements offer the chance to reach the users through compact text messages, in the hope of generating or increasing awareness which optimally should lead to a page visit. Nevertheless, the competition can be tough, as illustrated by the 28.2 billion Dollar that Google made 2010 on advertisement revenues only (Chen, He, 2011).

The limitations on these adverts are partly experienced due to the minimal text requirements set by the search engines (SEs). When taking into consideration that the typical attention span of a user on the SERP is not particularly lengthy, the precise optimization of the minimal text on these paid advertisement turns into a factor that often makes the difference between converting or not.

The aim of the experiment conducted during this investigation is to study the impact of a correct text optimization on the aforementioned advertising links. For this, a group of 48 people took part on a series of search simulations. Their results were measured and their feedback analyzed.

2. BACKGROUND AND OTHER RESEARCH

The current status of limitations from the big three SEs (Google, Yahoo! and Bing) is very similar for the standard paid advertisements on the SERP.

Google's limitations for the ads are (Google, 2014):

- Headline: 25 characters
- Description line 1: 35 characters
- Description line 2: 35 characters
- Display URL: 35 characters

In the same way, the limitations from the Yahoo Bing Network are (Microsoft, 2014):

- Headline: 25 characters
- Description: 71 characters
- Display URL: 35 characters

The dissimilarity amongst the restrictions enforced by these contextual paid advertisement providers consists basically of 1 character on the ad's description.

The challenges when writing these kind of ads relies perceptibly on the small space provided. The advertiser then has to try and reach the users attention while offering relevant information and not breaking the SEs' guidelines. For the Yahoo Bing Network for instance, the following examples, although eye-catching, are not allowed to be used on the ads (Microsoft, 2014):

- Summer Cruise Rates
  www.contoso.com
  >> Best Rates Here <<
  Book Today!
- Loans Here!!!!!
  www.contoso.com
  Get a loan today!!!!!!!
  All the best rates!!!!!!!!!!!!

3. METHODOLOGY

A temporary website with a total of twelve pages was created with HTML and CSS. There were two similar versions, each consisting of six pages. Three of these pages mimicked SERPs similar to the three biggest SEs. The other three pages had briefly introductions to the background of the search the user was simulating, as well as information about the search query used.

The SERPs contained real results found on the top SEs with changed brand names, as well as fake paid advertisements. One of the versions had unoptimized text on the paid advertisements. The other one tried to use the minimal text in the most effective way to convert. Moreover, the not paid results remained the same in both versions.

These two versions where used as a regular A/B randomized test. The user received always one version of each of the three SERPs. See Figure 1 for a screenshot of a not optimized text version, and Figure 2 for the optimized one.

There was paid special attention to the look and feel of the search results pages, which were intended to give the user a sense of familiarity that aimed to help reducing distractions and providing an overall more realistic simulation.

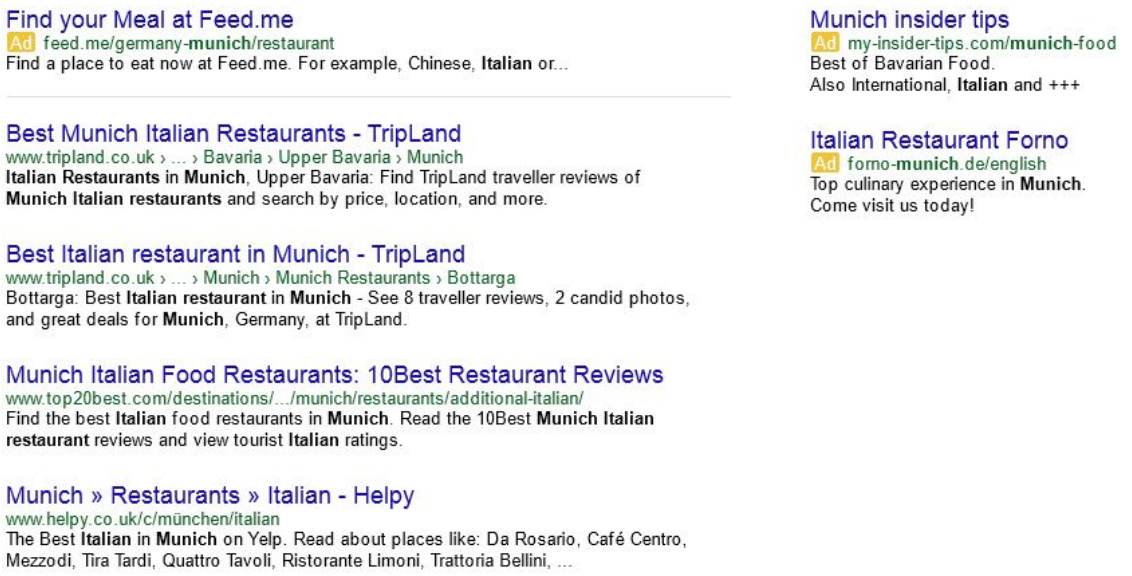

Figure 1: SERP for “Italian food”. Not optimized version.

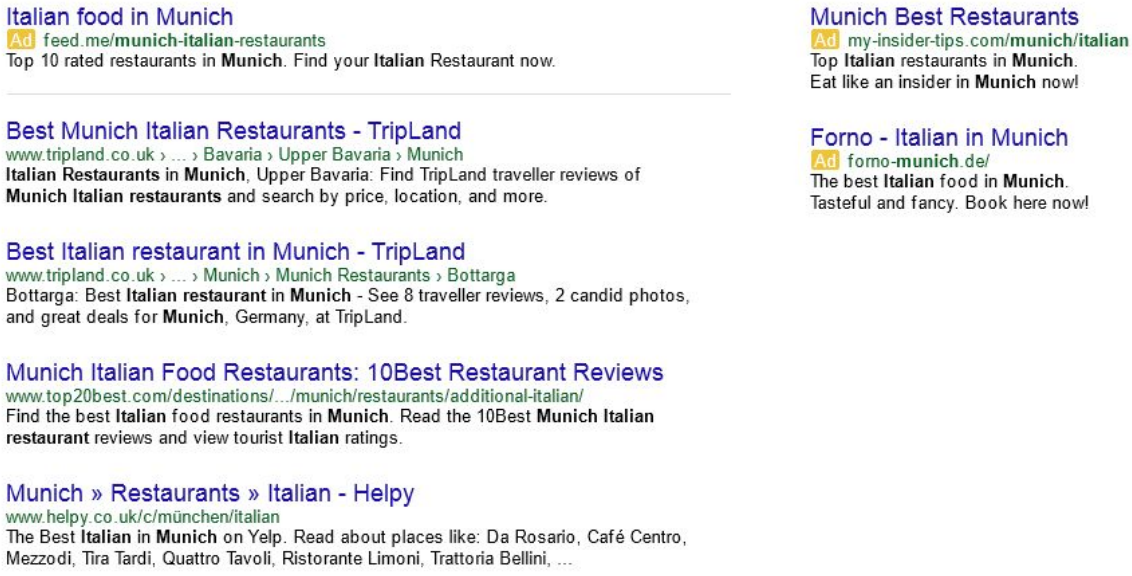

Figure 2: SERP for “Italian food”. Optimized for conversion.

As the experiment developed, the researcher was always available for the user, ready to help with any question about the virtual scenarios, and asking for general feedback at the end of the three simulations. Otherwise, the researcher did not purposely intervene during the experiment.

The user was presented with the six pages in the following order:

1. Introduction to Search 1

2. SERP 1
3. Introduction to Search 2
4. SERP 2
5. Introduction to Search 3
6. SERP 3

The searches, “Italian food”, “new printer” and “Napoleon’s birthday”, were presented randomly to the user.

Once the user read the introductions to the simulation, he was presented with the corresponding SERP for a maximum time of 30 seconds, during which he was asked to write a personal document ranking the search results by “likelihood of clicking”. The ranking was asked to be done in the following format, with the meanings besides each:

- **1st place:** The first link I would click and look at
- **2nd place:** The second link I would click and look at if I didn’t find the desired information already
- **3rd place:** The third link I would click and look at if I didn’t find the desired information already
- **4th place** and so on

The user could also opt to leave links out of the ranking, for those on which the user wouldn’t click even if he didn’t find the result, simulating a decision to change the search query.

The ranked results where then transposed to a simple scoring system as represented on the Table 1, starting at 1 point for the 7th place and incrementing by the factor $x + n$, where x is the score for the next smaller element and n is a number increasing by 1 and starting at 2 for the 6th place.

1st place	22
2nd place	16
3rd place	11
4th place	7
5th place	4
6th place	2
7th place	1
blank	0

Table 1: Score system for the user’s rankings.

At the end of the experiment, the user was asked for feedback about the rankings presented. This presented the opportunity to gain insides about the way of thinking of the user when reading or glancing at the paid advertisements.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Search for Italian food

The results of the simulation of the search for an Italian restaurant in Munich showed that regardless of the A/B test, the users tend to prefer the first not paid result. Even with well optimized text for the ad campaigns, the score of the first not paid result is still almost twice as valued as the next option.

After optimizing the minimal text on the paid ads for conversion, their scores got incremented by at least 51%. The scores decreased in this case where the last two not paid results. The first and second not paid results also suffered a small reduction on their score, but not as high.

The results for the Italian food simulation can be better observed on Figure 3.

From the feedback recollected from this simulation, the difference for a user in the overall perception of the results isn't that big in the A/B test. In general, the better written text for the paid advertisements on the optimized version was friendlier to the user and gave a slightly better sense of trust that those not optimized.

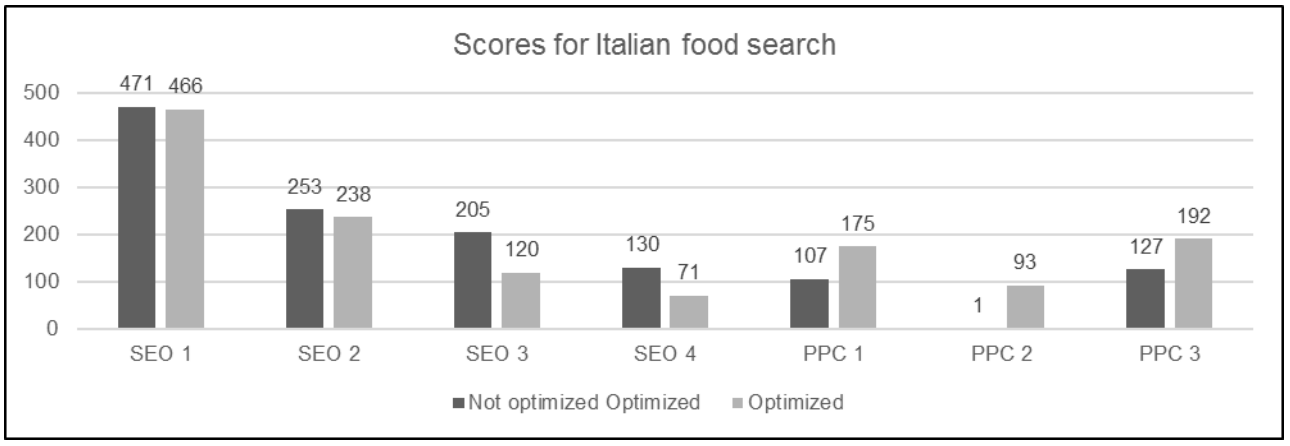

Figure 3: Scores for the links on the SERP for "Italian food". SEO 1, 2, 3 and 4 are the regular not paid results. PPC 1 is the paid advertisement on top of the SEO results. PPC 2 and 3 are the paid advertisements displayed on the right of the SERP, from top to bottom in that order.

4.2 Search for new printer

The simulation of the search for a new printer showed a general slightly bigger use of the paid advertisement's links when compared to the Italian food search. According to the feedback, this was due to the spirit of the search request. On this case, the user was already prepared to buy something and thus reacted better to the advertisements, as they may have contained something of their interest.

Again, after optimizing, the paid links performed 89% better in average. In addition to that, not only the last two, but the last three not paid results decrease considerably as a result of the users clicking more likely on a well optimized paid advertisement for this query.

The results can be better appreciated by looking at Figure 4.

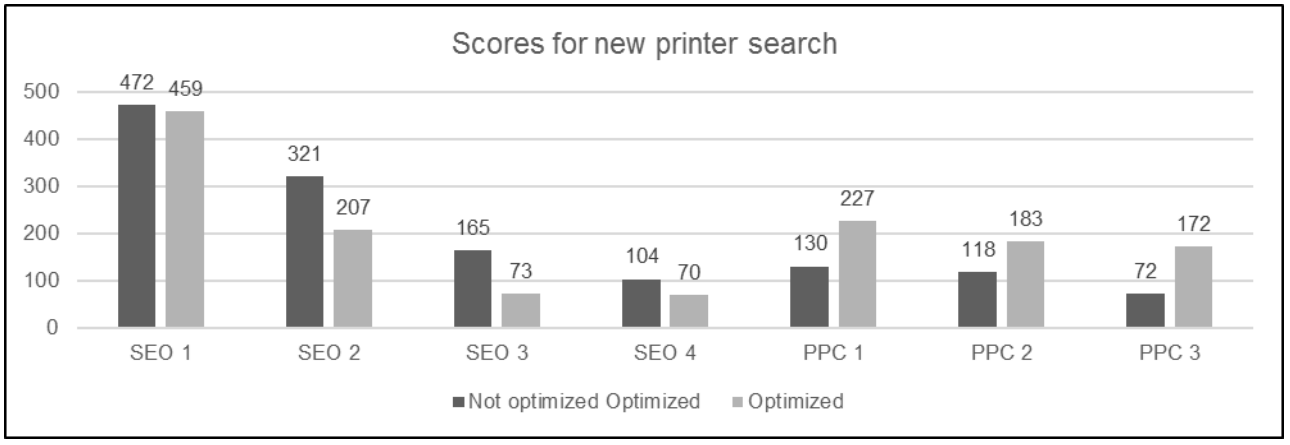

Figure 4: Scores for the links on the SERP for "new printer".

4.3 Search for Napoleon's birthday

The results from the Napoleon's birthday search show a very different pattern than the first two. As one can see in Figure 5, the not paid links where vastly more likely to be clicked by the users in both cases. Only the fourth not paid result went under the score of optimized paid advertisements.

The feedback season reveled that this was because paid content didn't offer any surplus. Furthermore, they were looked at as untrustworthy, since the user was searching for something of general knowledge, where no monetary transaction is usually involved. What's more, users weren't willing to visit as many links as on the other two searches, because they were expecting to get this kind of easy answer on a quick manner. They almost always preferred to change the search query than to click on a paid link.

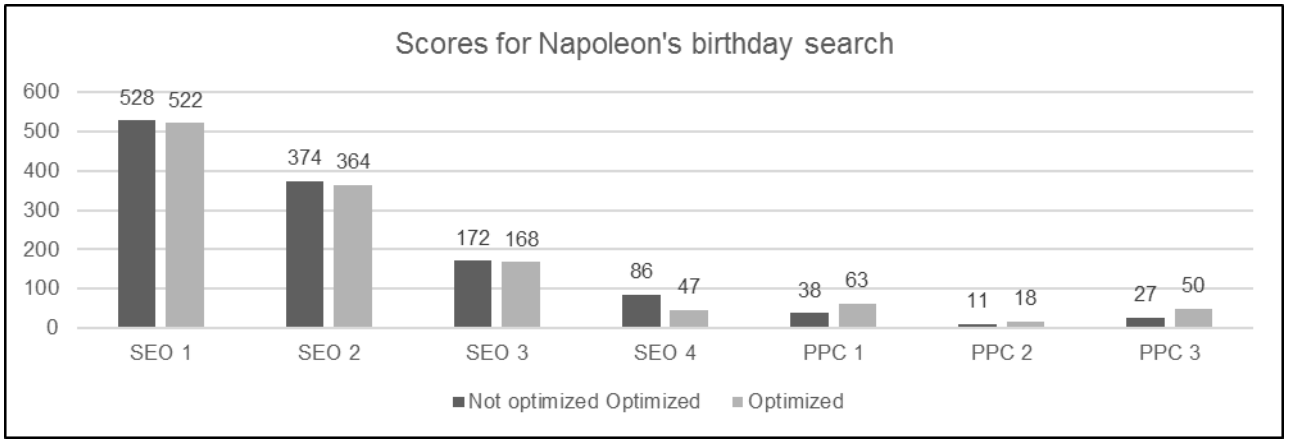

Figure 5: Scores for the links on the SERP for "Napoleon's birthday".

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion of the experiment

The experiments showed that the effective writing made a positive difference in the conversion rate for the paid advertisements. Furthermore, it suggested that these changes are, although always positive when compared to unoptimized ads, very diverse on their intensity depending on the type of search goal.

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5.2 Limitations of this research

The sample size for the simulations was not necessarily representative to a certain population or to the average internet interaction. It is to note that there were 48 people interviewed, that the average age of the participants who specified their age range was 23 years old, and that their cultural background was on most cases similar, with a high education level and access to the internet for a long period of time.

The scope of the experiment got reduced to three very simple and distinguishable search contexts, which, although may be plausible, are of course nothing but a minuscule part of the day to day use of search engines, and weren't even the most search terms at the time the research took place, but they were selected for simplification purposes.

5.3 Recommendations for further research on the topic

An expansion of this project research could include a bigger, as well as a more regionally focused sample size.

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