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Native Advertising: Exploring Psychological Underpinnings

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Abstract: A proliferating realm of digital advertising, native advertising has attracted both admirers and critics worldwide. However, the current review paper attempts to integrate existing psychological literature to examine the nuances of native advertising. Persuasive knowledge and deception emerge as critical psychological variables that underscore native advertising. A comprehensive model that examines the interplay between the following psychological variables relevant to native advertising has been proposed: disclosure variables, persuasion knowledge (ad recognition), dealing with the sponsored content, attributions, message engagement, and psychological outcomes. Limitations and suggestions for future research and well as crucial implications have been discussed.

Keywords— ad recognition, disclosure, deception, native advertising, persuasion knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of digital technologies, disruptions have become the norm in every sphere of human functioning- and the field of advertising is no exception to the rule. Within the field of advertising, digital advertising is now more profitable than print advertising (Edmonds, Guskin, Mitchell, & Jurkowitz, 2013). And, within the realm of digital advertising, native advertising is bringing about sweeping transformations; however, consensus is yet to emerge on what constitutes “native advertising” (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2013). This is because the term ‘native’ lends itself to subjective interpretation and is contingent upon the strategic goals of the marketer (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2013; Wojdyski, 2016a).

Attempts have been made to provide a comprehensive definition of native advertising. For instance, native advertising concerns “presenting online content consumers with advertisements to that resemble, in format and content, the non-advertising content that is published on the same platform” (Wojdyski, 2016a; p. 203). Also known by other terms such as “sponsored content” or “advertorials” (Wojdyski, 2016a), native advertising comprises “paid ads that are so cohesive with the page content, assimilated into the design, and consistent with the platform behaviour that the viewer simply feels that they belong” (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2013; p. 3). According to Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) (2013), native

advertisements comprise six forms of ad units: in-feed units, paid search units, recommendation widgets, promoted listings, in-ad with native element units, and custom/ “can’t be contained” units. No matter what the advertisement form is, IAB (2013) recommends that native ads must offer clear and prominent disclosure to help consumers differentiate advertising from editorial content. While native advertising is becoming increasingly prominent, it has its own share of criticisms. Skeptics are of the view that success of native advertising hinges upon consumer.

deception (Berry, 2014; Colhoun, 2015; Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015; Wasserman, 2013). Audiences are nudged to form an impression that is completely different from the actual content of the advertisement (Wasserman, 2013). In addition, the audience may not be aware that the content they are exposed to, in fact, constitutes advertising (Hyman, Franklin, Yee & Rahmati, 2017; see Wojdyski & Evans, 2016).

The current review paper is neither an appreciation nor a criticism of the field of native digital advertising. Rather, it aims to objectively look at the dynamics of native advertising by bringing in psychological literature that examines the role of persuasion knowledge and deception.

Persuasion Knowledge in Native Advertising

Friestad and Wright (1994) proposed persuasion knowledge model (PKM), which suggests that people gather persuasion knowledge through workplace, family and peer socialization; vicarious exposure and experiences; and interactions about the ways of manipulating people’s actions, thoughts, and emotions. According to PKM, persuasion knowledge that people acquire determines how they make sense of and deal with a persuasion “attempt” (Friestad & Wright, 1994). According to Friestad and Wright (1994), three knowledge structures influence the consequences of persuasion attempts: persuasion knowledge, agent knowledge, and topic knowledge. First, persuasive knowledge provides “schemer schema” (Wright, 1985): it causes people to focus on specific aspects of advertising, understand the context in which the persuasion attempt was made, forecast the impact of the persuasion attempt, and gauge its overall effectiveness. Second, agent knowledge corresponds to the attributes and goals of the persuasion agent. Finally, topic knowledge comprises attitudes of the target audience towards the topic under consideration. According to Kirmani and Campbell (2004), persuasion knowledge causes the target consumer

to use the following strategies in response to persuasion attempts:

- Seeking strategies involve using the persuasion agent to accomplish personal goals. Typical seeking strategies involve eliciting information or support, fostering personal connections, offering rewards (e.g., praise), evaluating competence, accepting assistance, and directing the agent towards goal accomplishment.
- Sentry strategies, on the other hand, involve consumers protecting themselves from getting influenced by the persuasion agent. Typical sentry strategies are as follows: confronting, firmly refuting, deceiving, forestalling, and/or reprimanding the persuasion agent, and even conducting thorough research before interacting with the agent.

Broadly speaking, target consumers employ sentry strategies when they interpret the agent’s persuasive attempt as competitive/manipulative, whereas they employ seeker strategies when they interpret the agent’s persuasion attempt as cooperative (Kirmani & Campbell, 2004).

In the context of native advertising, Lee, Kim, Ham and Seok (2022) found that consumers who possessed persuasion knowledge were more likely to receive/cope with digital advertising skeptically (see also Nelson, Wood & Paek, 2009); however, persuasion

knowledge was not significantly related to perceived fairness of the advertising (Lee et al., 2022). Furthermore, skepticism towards the advertisement resulted in perceiving the native ads as manipulative (characterised by interruption or annoyance), which consequently encouraged the target consumers to use sentry strategies (Lee et al., 2022). Also, research has found that perceiving manipulative intent in the native ad caused consumers to reduce engagement with the content, which subsequently influenced purchase and sharing intentions (An, Kerr & Jin, 2019). Yet, research also indicates that consumers may be unaware that the content they are exposed to, in fact, is nothing but advertising (Hyman et al., 2017; see Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). To help consumers become aware of native advertising and thus enable persuasion

knowledge, disclosures become relevant (Boerman, 2020). Disclosures become meaningful only when a consumer notices them and comprehends their underlying message (Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). Factors such as disclosure position, disclosure

language, and visual prominence underscore the impact of disclosure (Wojdyski & Evans, 2016; Wojdyski, Bang, Keib, Jefferson, Choi & Malson, 2017). With respect to disclosure position, research suggests that disclosures at the centre or bottom of advertorial page facilitate better ad recognition than those at the top of the advertorial page (Krouwer, Poels, & Paulussen, 2017; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016; Wojdyski et al., 2017). When it comes to visual prominence, Federal Trade Commission (FTC, 2015) advises that:

Advertising disclosures should stand out. Disclosures should be large and visible enough for consumers to readily notice them...Text labels should be in a font size and colour that consumers can easily read on the screen. To

be readable, text colour should contrast strongly with the background. Using lighter font colours with a dark background makes it less likely consumers will read the text of a disclosure.

In line with FTC's recommendation, Wojdyski and colleagues (2017) found that using bold text and high-contrast colours in disclosures facilitated better ad recognition. The role of

visual prominence in recognition of native advertisement has been attested to in other

researches (e.g., Amazeen & Wojdyski, 2018; Wojdyski, 2016b). Finally, studies have indicated that highly explicit disclosure language (for example, terms such as "sponsored content" or "paid advertisement") led to enhanced recognition of native advertisement than less explicit disclosure language (for example, terms such as "partner content," "brand-

voice," or "presented by {XYZ}") (Amazeen & Wojdyski, 2018; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016;

Wojdyski et al., 2017). Additional factors that increase the likelihood of native ad

recognition include logo presence and familiarity with native advertising (Wojdyski, 2016b).

While disclosure plays a critical role in recognizing the sponsored content as advertising, it has consequences (see Boerman, 2020; Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun, 2017). First, consumers are more likely to perceive the sponsored content negatively (see Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017; Evans et al., 2017), which attenuates influencer's trustworthiness (e.g., De Veirman & Hudders, 2019). However, sponsored content negatively influenced influencer's trustworthiness and attitudes towards product/service brand when the advertorial message

was one-sided but not when it was two-sided (De

Veirman & Hudders, 2019). Surprisingly, Boerman (2020) found that ad recognition increased engagement with sponsored content.

Boerman (2020) attributed this finding to participants getting exposed to a novel brand and a likeable product as well as to the absence of a highly convincing caption in the study. Second, disclosures could also affect parasocial interaction (PSI), which refers to the target audience's imagination of close bonding/connectedness with the influencer (Horton & Wohl, 1956;

Russell & Stern, 2006; Tsai & Men, 2013); however, research in this domain is scant and has not yielded expected results (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019). Finally, brand recall

significantly enhanced with disclosures on account of better ad recognition (Boerman, 2020).

Deception in Native Advertising

As discussed earlier, native advertisements have often been criticized for inducing deception. Psychological literature provides invaluable insights into the nuances of deception in native advertising (for example, see Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015; Hastak & Mazis, 2011).

Hastak and Mazis (2011) provide a comprehensive understanding of five deceptive advertorial claims, viz., omission of material facts, misleadingness due to semantic confusion, intra-attribute misleadingness, interattribute misleadingness, and source-based misleadingness. Hastak and Mazis (2011) discuss the advertorial claims as follows:

- In case of *omission of material facts*, advertisers fail to provide or provide partial information related to the product/service under consideration, biasing consumer decisions. When dealing with incomplete information about a stimulus, individuals rely on pre-existing schemas (organized mental frameworks) to draw meaningful conclusions (Ableson, 1981). Applied to the context of advertising, consumers tend to be skeptical of advertisements (Friestad & Wright, 1995; Dahlén, 2005) when they have well-formed schemas or expectations about the attributes of the advertisement and product/service it endorses (Friestad & Wright, 1994, 1995). In native advertising, efforts are made to bypass activation of advertisement schema (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015), by ensuring that the typeface and layout of the advertisement matches that of the editorial content (van Reijmersdal, Neijens & Smit, 2005). Consequently, distinguishing between paid advertising and editorial content becomes challenging, and this causes consumers to perceive paid advertisements as objective

and trustworthy (van Reijmersdal et al., 2005).

- *Misleadingness due to semantic confusion* occurs when ambiguous visual (e.g., images) and verbal (e.g., words, phrases) representations are used in advertisements.
- *Intra-attribute misleadingness* arises when claims about a product's/service's attribute causes consumers to draw inaccurate judgments about the said attribute. The claims fall into two categories: (a) *attribute uniqueness claims* (advertisement inadvertently causing consumers to perceive a particular attribute as being exclusive to a brand), and (b) *attribute performance claims* (advertisement inadvertently causing consumers to inaccurately estimate a brand's performance on a particular attribute). Attribute uniqueness claim is evident in a situation where a marketer claims "Brand X sells sugar-free ice creams," which causes consumers to inaccurately interpret that "Only Brand X sells sugar-free ice creams." Attribute performance claim is evident when a marketer claims "Brand X of almond milk has Vitamin D," which causes consumers to interpret that "Brand X of almond milk is an excellent source of Vitamin D." The attribute performance claim would be inaccurate if the Brand X of almond milk has low levels of Vitamin D.
- *Interattribute misleadingness* arises when claims about a product's/service's attribute cause consumers to draw inaccurate judgments about another attribute. For example, when consumers are presented with the information that "Brand X is low on sugar," they may erroneously come to an understanding that "Brand X is also low on calories."
- Finally, *source-based misleadingness* arises after consumers receive misleading details about a product/service from the experts or its users. Source-based misleadingness is evident in the following scenarios: (a) an expert reviews a product/service that falls outside the purview of his/her professional expertise; (b) an expert or an organization that has a tie-up with specific brands, recommends their products/services; (c) marketer claiming that a product is endorsed by a majority of experts, causing consumers to erroneously believe that the

said claim is typical of relevant experts when, in fact, the marketer may have only included the reviews of experts who support the product/service; (d) marketer referring to a reputed organization when selling a product/service, causing consumers to mistakenly assume that the product/service is approved by the said organization; and (e) marketer presenting favourable consumer reviews of a product/service, causing potential consumers to believe that these reviews are typical of product/service consumers.

However, it is important to note that these deceptive claims are not only relevant to native advertising, but also apply to other forms of advertising. Native advertisers may address the issue of deception by enhancing the information value (contextualising information pertaining to the advertisement vis-à-vis the article) of the native ad and placing the ad alongside congruent editorial content (Wojdyski, 2016a). In fact, a study by Hervet, Guérard, Tremblay and Chtourou (2011) found that memory performance was better for ads that were aligned with the editorial content than those which were unrelated to the editorial content. Hervet et al.'s (2011) research, thus, highlighted the salience of *contextual advertising*.

Comprehensive Model: Psychological Underpinnings of Native Advertising Based on the surveyed literature, a comprehensive framework has been proposed (see Figure 1; see also conceptualization by An et al., 2019). First, disclosure properties, such as disclosure position, disclosure language, visual prominence, familiarity with native advertising will determine whether the sponsored content is recognized as an advertisement. Persuasion knowledge is expected to have a direct effect on outcome variables (consumer strategy, brand attitudes, brand recall). However, effect of persuasion knowledge on outcome variables could also be influenced by how consumers cope with the sponsored content (skepticism vs. perceived fairness), consumer attributions towards sponsored content and influencer/source, and message engagement. Finally, variables such as the nature of message (one-sided vs. two-sided), brand novelty, and extent of caption persuasiveness will operate as moderators in the proposed framework.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research Nonetheless, a lot remains unexplored with respect to the psychological dimensions of native advertising. Much of the empirical literature has been conducted in the Western cultures, such as the United States. In these cultures, individuals hold an

independent view of the self- where an individual's self-concept is grounded in personal qualities (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It would be interesting to explore how the relationships among the above variables would operate in collectivistic cultures, such as Japan where individuals hold an *interdependent view of the self*, rooted in social relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Indeed, literature suggests that self-construal impacts regulatory focus: individuals with an independent self-construal emphasize promotion-focus, whereas those with an interdependent self-construal emphasize prevention-focus (Lee, Aaker & Gardner, 2000). Second, elaboration likelihood model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1984, 1986) highlighted two distinct routes to persuasion: *central* and *peripheral*. An individual, when using central route to persuasion, engages in controlled, deliberate processing of the specific details of a given topic. However, an individual using peripheral route to persuasion, primarily focuses on superficial cues (e.g., physical attractiveness, source credibility) than specific details of a given topic. Factors such as prior information of a given topic, personal salience, and need for cognition determine the route to persuasion individuals that individuals adopt (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Understanding how ELM would operate in the context of native advertising would yield interesting insights. Finally, while psychological research on native advertising is largely quantitative in nature, qualitative data gathered through interviews may yield crucial insights about underlying processes and mechanisms.

Conclusion and Implications:

The current review paper brings to the forefront how consumer attitudes towards and recall of a native advertisement depends upon factors, such as disclosures, ad recognition, coping with the sponsored content, consumer attributions, and message engagement. Of particular interest are the implications of the review paper for advertisers and researchers. The review indicates that disclosures increase the likelihood of ad recognition and consequently reduce engagement with the sponsored content. However, studies that reported disclosure to negatively influence brand evaluation and consumer engagement used well-established brands (Boerman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017); however, this pattern was not observed when a novel brand was employed (Boerman, 2020). Thus, native advertisers must be aware of the nature of the brand when considering the use of disclosures in sponsored content.

Based on the literature reviewed, marketers are also recommended to be sensitive to the content of the message and extent of persuasiveness of caption when developing native ads. From a theoretical

standpoint, prospective researchers may consider examining the tenets of the proposed conceptual framework using empirical research.

In the 21st century, native advertising showcases a great potential in transforming consumers' attitudes and behaviours. Understanding psychological underpinnings of native advertising will help advertisers and consumers to make effective marketing and purchasing decisions, respectively.

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