

The Effect of Advertorial Format and Copy Length on Attitudes of Female (Target) and Male (Non-Target) Audiences

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Introduction

The use of promotional messages that resemble editorial content is a long-standing practice in advertising, occurring in all major media, from advertorials in newspapers and magazines, to infomercials on television, to, most recently, digital “native” advertising on the internet. However, we have arguably never experienced as much growth in these advertising-editorial “hybrid” messages, as they are sometimes called (Balasubramanian 1994) as we have in recent years, as their use in existing media has grown while new forms have emerged with new media.

One of the older forms of hybrid message, the magazine advertorial presents an interesting hybrid message format for study due to its prevalence and growth: one recent study reported a 37% growth in advertorials in fashion and beauty magazines over a four year period (Hanson 2014). When asked about the increase in advertorials, most sources cite the need to “break through the advertising clutter” (Cameron & Haley 1992, Dahlen & Edenius 2007, Robinson, Ozanne, & Cohen 2002). The assumption underlying this reason is that advertorials garner more attention from consumers, an assumption that has received some empirical support (Kim, Pasadeos & Barban 2001). What is less clear is why consumers would attend more to advertorials. Probably the most common reason is that consumers mistake hybrid ads for editorial content; that is, they are “fooled” into attending to them (Kim et al. 2001).

An alternative explanation for increased attention to advertorials is their content. Because they are designed to mimic publication content, advertorials may be perceived as more informative or entertaining, and may evoke an editorial content schema instead of an advertising schema, even if consumers recognize that the source is the advertiser and not the publication (Dahlen & Edenius 2007).

Because advertorials are designed to be more informational, in line with feature material, they typically have longer copy (Cameron & Ju-Pak

2000), a characteristic that is often not viewed favorably by consumers (Huhmann & Albinsson 2012, Lu & Lu 2009). Therefore, the growth of hybrid messages raises a question about the possible interaction between copy length and format; specifically, is it possible that hybrid messages can tolerate longer copy, and thus and more selling points? This study attempts to shed light on that question, and, more generally, the question of attitudes toward advertorials in the absence of deception, that is, clearly presented as advertisements.

Literature Review

According to Cameron, Ju-Pak & Kim (1996, p. 722), an advertorial is a “paid-for, commercial message, featuring any object or objects (such as products services, organization, individuals, ideas, issues etc.) that simulates the editorial content of a publication in terms of design/structure, visual/verbal content, and/or context in which it appears.” Advertorials may be best understood as print equivalents to the more familiar infomercials, although advertorials may vary more according to their media vehicle; e.g., an advertorial in a news magazine may look like a news article while an advertorial in a fashion and beauty magazine may look like a how-to article. Like infomercials, advertorials can, momentarily or completely, mislead consumers with respect to the source (advertiser or publisher) and nature (advertisement or feature content) of the message. Research shows that advertorials have increased over the years in numbers and as a percent of magazine advertisements (Donaton 1992, Ju-Pak et al. 1995, Stout et al. 1989). A recent study found that the number of advertorials in fashion and beauty magazines increased even as total ad pages declined, and had reached over 12% of total ads, and as high as 16% of all ad pages in teen fashion magazines, by 2011 (Hanson 2014).

The growth in advertorials suggests that advertisers believe that they are effective; however, relatively few studies have directly addressed the issue of advertorial effectiveness, which, combined with differing measures of effectiveness, makes conclusions about advertorial effectiveness difficult. Kim et al. (2001) found that an ad designed as an advertorial garnered greater attention, message elaboration, and recall, compared to a similar ad in a standard format; Robinson, Ozanne, & Cohen (2002) and Hausknecht, Wilkinson, & Prough (1991) both found partial evidence of increased credibility for advertorials; and Van Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit (2005) found that advertorials were evaluated more favorably than conventional advertisements.

Regardless of the outcome measure, implicit or explicit in discussions of advertorial effectiveness is the issue of deception: it is often assumed that advertorials gain attention or credibility because readers believe they are

feature content. However, some of the potential gains in effectiveness from advertorials are more dependent on deception than others. Kim et al. (2001) concluded that advertorials fooled the reader into greater attention even though none mistook the advertorials for editorial material. A boost in attention could occur even if readers are only momentarily fooled—an occurrence that would not be detected by asking subjects if they thought the communication item was an advertisement. Even the most ad savvy consumers can be momentarily fooled by an advertorial.

Unlike attention, credibility gains from an advertorial format presumably require more than momentary deception. For example, Robinson et al. (2002) found that source credibility for various communication items, including advertorials, was affected by whether the page was perceived as being paid for and who the source was perceived as being. And, although Hausknecht et al. (1991) found that no subjects mistook the advertorials for editorial matter when asked to rate them on a scale measuring resemblance to advertising (which, illustrating the difficulty of measuring deception without confounding the results, could prompt ad recognition), they found that subjects with poor product knowledge rated unlabeled, and only unlabeled, advertorials more believable.

One way in which advertorials may be more effective in the absence of any deception is by generating more favorable evaluations from consumers. Van Reijmersdal et al. (2005) found that advertorials scored significantly higher on amusement and information, and significantly lower on irritation, than other advertisements, and Hausknecht et al. (1991) found that the advertorial version of an ad was rated more informative. Hausknecht et al. also found that for subjects who had used the product, brand attitude was higher for the advertorials than the ad. Given that advertorials, designed to mimic editorial content, typically have more ad copy than other types of ads (Cameron & Ju-Pak 2000), it is not surprising that they are seen as more informative. However, longer copy has usually been associated with less favorable brand and ad attitudes (Huhmann & Albinsson 2012, Lu & Lu 2009), while the above studies suggest that advertorials generate more favorable attitudes among some consumers. One explanation for the effectiveness of advertorials in generating favorable evaluations can be found in schema theory. A typical ad will evoke an “advertising schema,” which is likely to carry with it at least some skepticism and negative attitudes (Dahlen & Edenius 2007, Friestad & Wright 1994, Wright 1985). However, if the ad evokes a more positive schema, it is possible that there will be a transfer of that positive affect to the ad and brand (Myers-Levy & Tybout 1989). Dahlen & Edenius (2007) supported a schema activation argument in a study that found that placing ads in a non-traditional context—on an egg and in an elevator—resulted in a more favorable attitude toward the message. If advertorials, which resemble feature content, evoke the schema of

the medium, e.g., the magazine, or the content, e.g., beauty and fashion news, then the associated affect could be transferred to the ad and brand. Presumably, this could occur even if the individual, either immediately or eventually, realizes that the advertorial is an ad, in much the same way as private label products benefit from resemblance to leading brands, or novel products benefit from resemblance to established categories (Myers-Levy & Tybout 1989, Till and Priluck 2000).

Hypotheses

Schema theory suggests that, even in the absence of deception, if the advertorial format evokes the schema for magazine content, rather than advertisements, then this should be associated with more favorable attitudes for those with favorable attitudes toward the magazine content. Additional empirical evidence also supports more favorable attitudes, but, again, only for the target audience. Van Reijmersdal et al. (2005) found more favorable evaluations of advertorials in the magazines where *subscribers* were surveyed, and Hausknecht found more favorable attitudes only among *users* of the featured product. Therefore, it is expected that

H1: For female (target) subjects, ad attitude (a) and brand attitude (b) will be higher for the advertorial format ad.

H2: For male (non-target) subjects, ad attitude (a) and brand attitude (b) will not be higher for the advertorial format ad.

The second variable that the study investigated is copy length. The limited evidence available suggests that ads with shorter copy are evaluated more favorably than those with longer copy (Huhmann & Albinsson 2012, Lu & Lu 2009). There is no evidence to suggest that this differs by gender or target status. However, it follows from schema theory that for subjects invoking a positive magazine content schema for the advertorial, in our case, females, the negative effect of longer copy length might be mitigated—the advertorial format may be able to “tolerate” longer copy. Therefore, we expect that

H3: Ad attitude (a) and brand attitude (b) will be higher for the light copy ad.

H4: For female (target) subjects, the effect of copy length on attitude toward the ad (a) and brand attitude (b) will be moderated by ad format (advertorial vs. non-advertorial).

Methodology

Design and Materials

The study utilized four mock advertisements to create a two (advertorial/non-advertorial) by two (moderate/light copy length) experimental design. The mock ads were created by editing an advertisement for Sally Hansen nail polish strips found in Cosmopolitan magazine. The original ad was a two-page spread comprised of an advertorial format page facing a page with a more typical advertising format. (As an indication of the intended format, the first page of the spread was labeled “advertisement,” as recommended by ASME (2011) guidelines for advertorials, and the second page, which was unlikely to be mistaken for editorial content, was not.) Copy was edited to create moderate and light copy versions. The two moderate copy ads contained 69-72 words for the advertorial and non-advertorial versions, respectively. The two light copy ads contained no body copy and eight to nine words in headlines and subheads for the advertorial and non-advertorial versions, respectively. To control for the effect of the picture, the same picture was used for all four ads. The resulting mock ads are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Ad Stimuli

<p>Heavy Copy Ad</p>	<p>Light Copy Ad</p>
<p>Heavy Copy Advertorial</p>	<p>Light Copy Advertorial</p>

Subjects and Procedure

One hundred seventy-six undergraduate student subjects from six sophomore and upper-level business classes participated in the study. Each student received a packet that included a mock ad and questionnaire. The questionnaires stated the purpose of the study as, “to get your reactions to the enclosed advertisement.” After reviewing the advertisement, the subjects responded to questions regarding their ad attitude and brand attitude. Next, subjects responded to questions regarding ad, brand, and magazine credibility and familiarity, purchase intention, and product purchase and usage frequency. Lastly, subjects were asked to indicate age and gender. Two subjects were eliminated from the analysis due to multiple missing values, resulting in responses from 83 males and 91 females for analysis.

Measures and Manipulation Checks

All measures except for purchase and usage frequency and demographics utilized seven-point semantic differential scales. Following MacKenzie & Lutz (1989), the anchors for ad attitude and brand attitude were good/bad, dislike/like, and unfavorable/favorable. The three scales were averaged for analysis (coefficient alpha = .90 for ad attitude and .95 for brand attitude). Purchase and usage frequency were measured in five increments: 0, 1-2, 3-6, 7-12, >12 (times per year). Females reported significantly higher purchase ($\chi^2 = 144.29$, $p < .001$) and usage ($\chi^2 = 153.91$, $p < .001$) frequency than males for the product category, “nail products,” supporting the designation of females as the presumed target for the ads. As expected and intended by presenting the stimuli, in the statement of purpose and the instructions, as advertisements, ad credibility did not differ significantly by condition; specifically, there was no significant difference in perceived credibility between the advertorials and the traditional ads (4.43 vs. 4.29, $F = .54$, $p = .46$).

Results

Tables 1 and 2 show ad and brand attitude for the female target subjects in each condition. As predicted, brand attitude was significantly higher for the advertorial format ad (5.38 vs. 4.76, $p < .05$). Ad attitude was also greater for the advertorial format ad, although the effect was not as strong (4.76 vs. 4.37, $p < .10$). Ad and brand attitude for the male subjects are shown in Tables 3 and 4. Not surprisingly, means for both ad attitude and brand attitude overall were significantly lower in the male sample (ad attitude, 3.89 vs. 4.58, $F = 19.68$, $p < .001$; brand attitude, 3.94 vs. 5.10, $F = 39.71$, $p < .001$). Consistent with the second hypothesis, unlike the female sample, ad and brand attitudes in the male sample were not higher for the advertorials. For the males, brand attitude did not differ significantly for advertorial versus non-advertorial (3.84 vs. 4.02, $p > .10$), and ad attitude was significantly

higher for the *non-advertorial* for the males (4.11 vs. 3.63, $p < .05$). Analysis of variance for the combined male-female sample reveals significant gender by ad format interactions for both ad attitude ($F = 7.23$, $p < .01$) and brand attitude ($F = 4.14$, $p < .05$).

As expected, ad and brand attitudes were directionally higher for lighter copy ads for the female sample; however, the difference was not statistically significant, and attitudes were unexpectedly lower for the light copy ads for the male sample. Although the difference was not significant in either sample, a marginally significant gender by copy length interaction for ad attitude ($F = 2.80$, $p < .10$) and brand attitude ($F = 3.24$, $p < .10$) reflects the differential effect of copy length for the two samples. There was no evidence of an interaction between ad format and copy length. Therefore, hypotheses 3 and 4 were not supported.

Table 1: Ad Attitude (Females)

	Moderate Copy	Light Copy	Total
Advertorial Format	4.56 (.95)	4.97 (1.17)	4.76 (1.07)
	n = 25	n = 24	n = 49
Non-Advertorial Format	4.26 (1.08)	4.50 (1.08)	4.37 (1.08)
	n = 24	n = 18	n = 42
Total	4.41 (1.02)	4.77 (1.15)	4.58 (1.09)
	n = 49	n = 42	n = 91
Table reports means and, in parentheses, standard deviations. Statistics for main effect of ad format: $F(1, 90) = 2.87, p = .094$; for main effect of copy length: $F(1, 90) = 2.04, p = .157$; for interaction: $F(1, 90) = .15, p = .70$.			

Table 2: Brand Attitude (Females)

	Moderate Copy	Light Copy	Total
Advertorial Format	5.37 (.95)	5.40 (1.46)	5.39 (1.21)
	n = 25	n = 24	n = 49
Non-Advertorial Format	4.47 (1.32)	5.15 (1.18)	4.76 (1.29)
	n = 24	n = 18	n = 42
Total	4.93 (1.22)	5.29 (1.34)	5.10 (1.28)
	n = 49	n = 42	n = 91
Table reports means and, in parentheses, standard deviations. Statistics for main effect of ad format: $F(1, 90) = 4.84, p = .031$; for main effect of copy length: $F(1, 90) = 1.80, p = .18$; for interaction: $F(1, 90) = 1.51, p = .22$.			

Table 3: Ad Attitude (Males)

	Moderate Copy	Light Copy	Total
Advertorial Format	3.91 (1.26)	3.38 (.90)	3.63 (1.10)
	n = 18	n = 20	n = 38
Non-Advertorial Format	4.05 (.83)	4.17 (.92)	4.11 (.87)
	n = 21	n = 24	n = 45
Total	3.98 (1.04)	3.81 (.98)	3.89 (1.01)
	n = 39	n = 44	n = 83

Table reports means and, in parentheses, standard deviations. Statistics for main effect of ad format: $F(1, 82) = 4.38, p = .04$; for main effect of copy length: $F(1, 82) = .88, p = .35$; for interaction: $F(1, 82) = 2.22, p = .14$.

Table 4: Brand Attitude (Males)

	Moderate Copy	Light Copy	Total
Advertorial Format	4.11 (.91)	3.60 (.97)	3.84 (.96)
	n = 18	n = 20	n = 38
Non-Advertorial Format	4.08 (1.15)	3.97 (1.44)	4.02 (1.30)
	n = 21	n = 24	n = 45
Total	4.09 (1.03)	3.80 (1.25)	3.94 (1.15)
	n = 39	n = 44	n = 83

Table reports means and, in parentheses, standard deviations. Statistics for main effect of ad format: $F(1, 82) = .44, p = .51$; for main effect of copy length: $F(1, 82) = 1.46, p = .23$; for interaction: $F(1, 82) = .63, p = .43$.

Summary and Discussion

Most research on advertorials has focused on their prevalence and growth (Donaton 1992, Hanson 2014, Ju-Pak et al. 1995, Stout et al. 1989) or their ability to deceive consumers as to message source (Hausknecht et al. 1991, Kim et al. 2001, Sandler & Secunda 1993). Few studies have been concerned with attitudes toward advertorials, their impact on brand attitude, or, in particular, whether consumers might prefer advertorials without being fooled into thinking they are feature content. The present study contributes to our knowledge of advertorials by measuring both ad and brand attitude in a study designed to control for deception by clearly presenting the stimuli, in the statement of purpose and the instructions, as advertisements. The results, showing more favorable ad and brand attitudes toward the advertorials in the absence of “borrowed credibility,” imply alternative, or additional, explanations for the effectiveness of advertorials. One such explanation can be found in schema theory, which suggests that an ad resembling editorial content can evoke the schema of the latter, along with its associated affect, which can be transferred to the ad. By including subjects both in and out of the target market for the ad, the current study supports a schema theory explanation that may account for conflicting findings with respect to advertorial effectiveness. Specifically, the results of the study, showing higher ad and brand attitude for the advertorial version for the female target subjects and not for the male subjects, suggest that advertorials may “borrow,” not just credibility, but also affect, from the feature content they resemble. The results showing significantly *higher* ad attitude for the *non-advertorial* format in the male sample, while not predicted, could be taken as further corroboration of schema theory if we can assume that males like ads, in general, more than beauty-fashion news.

Because advertorials are usually copy-heavy, the interaction of copy length with the advertorial format is an intriguing question. Unfortunately, results from the present study were inconclusive with respect to a copy length-ad format interaction: although brand attitude (for the female target) was virtually identical for the heavy and light copy advertorials, and lower for the heavier copy traditional ad, the interaction was not significant, and ad attitude did not show the same expected pattern. It is possible that the copy length manipulation was too weak. At 69-72 words, the heavier copy ads were comparable to light copy ads in other studies, where the ads representing the heavy copy versions have had over 200 words (Huhmann & Albinsson 2012, Soley 1986). It was likewise not expected that males would respond more favorably to longer copy than females, for ads for which they were not the target, and the reason for this is unclear, as males are not known to prefer longer copy. It could be that, as readers unfamiliar with the product, they appreciated more information, or, absent ability or motivation to process the

ad, copy length served as a cue to ad quality (cf. Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann 1983). Although the focus of this article was on copy length only as it relates to advertorials, the research points to opportunities for further research on copy length and gender, knowledge, and other characteristics.

Conclusions and Future Research

As the use of paid messages resembling editorial content, such as advertorials, continues to grow, there is an increasing need to understand these messages, their effects and effectiveness. The results of the present study suggest that advertorials can have a positive effect on consumer attitudes in the absence of deception and offer one explanation in schema theory, but further research is necessary. Gender, combined with purchase and usage information, is a convenient and reliable target manipulation, but other manipulations of target status are needed to broaden the findings and rule out confounding effects, and, as discussed above, a stronger copy length manipulation might yield more information on ad liking and heavy copy advertorials. Finally, much more research is needed to understand the newer forms of digital hybrid messages, their various forms, prevalence, deceptiveness and effectiveness.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:

This paper is of relevance to those in advertising or media that design or utilize advertorials, and to marketing educators and researchers trying to better understand their effectiveness.

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TRACK: Advertising/Direct Marketing