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Sponsored Messages in Facebook and Twitter News Feeds: An Examination of Prevalence, Brands, and Products

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Abstract – This paper compares the prevalence and nature of sponsored messages on Facebook and Twitter. Results of a content analysis of 180 sponsored messages from 65 screenshots provided by undergraduate student subjects showed significant differences in the product categories advertised on each platform, with sponsored messages for apparel and entertainment more prevalent on Facebook and financial products and services more prevalent on Twitter. The majority of the sponsoring advertisers on both platforms were from companies established after the year 2000; only seven percent were leading US advertisers; and only three advertisers—Amazon, Microsoft, and Toyota—appeared in both samples.

Keywords – advertising, content analysis, Facebook, Twitter, native advertising, social media, sponsored messages

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners – This paper is of relevance to educators teaching current practices in social media marketing, to researchers studying the prevalence and growth of ad-editorial blends, and to practitioners interested in utilizing Facebook or Twitter to promote products to college-aged students.

Introduction

Social network ad spending in the US is projected to reach 19.8 billion in 2018, almost double the level only three years prior (Ignite Social Media, 2016). Although Facebook is the leader by far, advertisers have also been attracted to Twitter, which is projected to generate 1.47 billion in US advertising in 2018 (eMarketer, 2016). All of the advertising on Twitter and the vast majority on Facebook takes the form of sponsored messages in the user's news feed. On Facebook these are "sponsored posts" and on Twitter they are "promoted tweets." Paid messages in a user's news feed fall into the category of "native advertising," because they resemble the unpaid content, e.g., posts from friends, or *unpaid* posts from liked or followed brands, that surrounds them. Native advertising has drawn concern because of the potential deception inherent in the format: consumers sometimes do not recognize it as advertising (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2016; Howe & Teufel, 2014; Tutaj & Reijmersdal, 2012).

The growth of social media has been so fast that academic research has struggled to keep up. Content analyses of social media as a promotion tool have focused on brands' posts on their own pages, rather than consumer news feeds. Brand posts on brand pages may show up in consumer news feeds as unpaid posts if they follow the brand, or could be placed as paid posts on consumer news feeds, but which or how much of either cannot be determined from this approach. Additionally, content analyses of brand pages have naturally focused on leading brands, but recent research suggests that sponsored messages—native advertising—as opposed to unpaid posts from liked or followed brands, may be dominated by smaller brands (Hanson, 2017). Facebook and Twitter have both been circumspect with respect to information on their advertisers (Doland, 2018; Edwards, 2014). Therefore, this study aims to augment and expand existing research by 1) examining the prevalence and nature of paid messages as they occur in user news feeds, and 2) comparing paid messaging on two sites that offer a similar format for native advertising, but have different uses and functions.

Literature Review

Native Advertising

Native advertising can be defined as “textual, pictorial, and/or audiovisual material that supports the aims of an advertiser (and is paid for by the advertiser) while it mimics the format and editorial style of the publisher that carries it” (Couldry & Turow, 2014: p. 1716). Based on this definition, native advertising could include older forms of ad-editorial blends, like advertorials and infomercials, but the term usually refers to digital forms of ad-editorial blends (Bakshi, 2015). Even within the digital category, there are many different types of native advertising. The Interactive Advertising Board (IAB) identifies six different types of native advertising: in-feed units, paid search units, recommendation widgets, promoted listings, in-ad with native element units, and a catch-all category for other, often platform-specific units, “custom/can't be contained” (IAB Native Advertising Playbook, 2013). Using the IAB framework, both Facebook and Twitter sponsored messages within the news feed fall into the third type of in-feed unit, defined as “an in-feed ad that is in a publisher's normal content well; is in story form to match the surrounding stories and allows for an individual to play, read, view, or watch without leaving to a separate page” (IAB: p. 9).

Researchers have long been interested in ad-editorial blends and have found evidence of both their effectiveness (Hanson, 2016; Hausknecht, Wilkinson, & Prough, 1991; Kim, Pasadeos & Barban, 2001; Robinson, Ozanne, & Cohen, 2002; Van Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2005), and deceptiveness (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015; Howe & Teufel, 2014; Kim, Pasadeos & Barban, 2001; Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012). The theoretical basis for understanding effectiveness and deception in ad-editorial blends can be found in schema theory and the related Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM). A typical ad will evoke an “advertising schema,” which is likely to carry with it at least some skepticism (Dahlen & Edenius, 2007; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Wright, 1985). If a sponsored message is not recognized as an ad, then “defenses are down,” and persuasion is likely to be increased. However, even if an individual recognizes the source of an ad-editorial blend as an advertiser, schema theory suggests it might still attain greater effectiveness if the affect associated with the “editorial” content that it resembles (e.g., the magazine or the news feed), rather than the more negative affect associated with advertising, is transferred to the advertising message (Myers-Levy & Tybout, 1989; Till & Priluck, 2000).

Studies examining native advertising in the form of sponsored content on websites have provided evidence that it can garner more positive attitudes than traditional banner advertising (Becker-Olsen, 2003; Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012), but have also provided evidence that consumers do not always recognize native advertising as advertising (Howe & Teufel, 2014; Tutaj & Reijmersdal, 2012). Fewer studies have been done on in-feed native advertising, but there is emerging evidence to suggest that earlier findings with respect to effectiveness and deceptiveness apply to in-feed native. Lee, Kim, and Ham (2016) found that the “nonintrusiveness” of in-feed native advertising was positively related to attitudes towards it, which suggests the potential for greater effectiveness through more positive ad attitudes, while Boerman et al. (2016) found that subjects had difficulty recognizing sponsored celebrity posts as native advertising and frequently did not remember seeing disclosures that identify the messages as advertising.

Content Analysis

Content analysis has often been used in academic research to identify the prevalence and nature of different types of advertising, including ad-editorial blends (Hanson, 2014; Ju-Pak, Kim, & Cameron, 1995; Stout, Wilcox, & Greer, 1989). Content analysis of promotion on Facebook and Twitter has focused on unpaid, “organic,” messaging, probably due to the fact that the availability of paid messages in the news feed is relatively new, as well as the difficulty of collecting individual (private) versus brand (public) pages and accounts. Research in this area has examined Facebook brand pages or Twitter brand accounts for the types of content and marketing techniques, e.g., photos, user-generated content, and sales promotions (Freeman, Kelly, Baur, Chapman, Chapman, Gill, & King, 2014; Parsons, 2013; Touchette, Schanski & Lee, 2013) and message strategies, e.g., emotional, functional, and experiential (Kim et al., 2015; Swani, Brown, & Milne, 2014). Tafesse and Wien (2017) provide a comprehensive list of studies done on categorizing social media posts and develop a comprehensive framework for categorizing social media posts.

A recent content analysis by Smith, Fischer and Yongjian (2012) is of particular relevance to the present study because, although it examines user-generated content and not native advertising, it presents a direct comparison of Facebook and Twitter that suggests differences that have implications for advertisers. Specifically, Twitter, with its focus on sharing news and information, was found to feature more brand-oriented user-generated content than Facebook, but also contained less positive and more neutral and negative content, while user-generated content on Facebook, with its focus on “personal information, interests, photos,...and keeping up with other people’s lives,” (p. 103), contained more self-promotion.

Research Questions

Following prior research tracking the prevalence of ad-editorial blends, the first research question is:

R1: What is the prevalence of native advertising in Facebook and Twitter feeds, and does it differ by platform or gender?

Second, given that prior research has selected, a priori, product categories to investigate promotion on social media, the present study investigates the prevalence of various product categories in Facebook and Twitter advertising; thus,

R2: What is the profile of native advertisers on Twitter and Facebook in terms of product category and does it differ by platform or gender?

Third, given that prior research has focused on Facebook and Twitter promotion of leading brands, the final research question is:

R3: What is the profile of native advertisers on Twitter and Facebook in terms of age and prominence, and does it differ by platform or gender?

Research Method

Sixty-three undergraduate student subjects from three upper-level business courses at a US university participated in the study. Subjects were given written instructions and then verbally led through the process of visiting the desktop and mobile versions of four different social media platforms, logging in where applicable, and capturing screenshots from each. Only the desktop data collected for Facebook and Twitter are utilized in the present study. In order to capture the entire page and not just the viewable screen, Google Chrome Full Page Screen Capture was used to capture the desktop web sites. Screenshots were saved using non-identifying file names, then all files were transferred to flash drives provided by the instructor.

Eight Facebook and five Twitter screenshots contained no sponsored messages and were eliminated from further analysis. An additional 12 Facebook and 23 Twitter screenshots were eliminated due to failure to log in/no account or file problems (e.g., images too small to read). In total, 44 subjects (23 male, 21 female) provided a useable screenshot from at least one of the two platforms—21 provided both, 18 provided Facebook only, and five provided Twitter only—resulting in 65 screenshots and 180 sponsored messages for analysis.

Sponsored messages were defined as messages occurring in the news feed that were labeled “sponsored” on Facebook and “promoted” on Twitter. Posts from followed or liked brands that were not labeled as sponsored or promoted were not included in the measure of sponsored messages. Counts of total posts included both commercial (paid and unpaid) and friend posts but did not include notifications (e.g., “What’s on your mind?” or “People You May Know”). Ads occurring to the side of the news feed on Facebook were not included in the present analysis.

Product categories were determined by first coding the specific sponsor and product (e.g., Pandora, internet radio) and then grouping products into categories (e.g., leisure/entertainment), guided by categories used in content analyses of advertising to similar audiences (Hanson, 2014; Mastin, Coe, Hamilton & Tarr, 2004; Morris & Nichols, 2013). In cases where a web retailer was promoting its site and a product, the category for the product being promoted was used. The resulting product typology captured 89% of the products in seven categories: apparel/accessories, food/drink, auto, technology, financial, health/beauty, and leisure/entertainment (e.g., movies, entertainment streaming services, and sports and celebrity websites).

Results

Table 1 shows the prevalence of paid messages in the Twitter and Facebook news feeds. In the Facebook sample, 11.44% of total messages in the news feed were sponsored messages, while in the Twitter sample, 8.57% of total tweets were promoted tweets ($\chi^2 = 4.02, p = .045$). The prevalence of paid messages in relation to total messages was virtually identical for males and females in the Facebook sample (11.41% vs. 11.44%), and slightly but not significantly greater for females in the Twitter sample (9.22% vs. 7.79%).

Table 1
News Feed Messages: Twitter vs. Facebook

	Twitter			Facebook		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Total Messages	565	683	1248	377	261	638
Paid Messages	44	63	107	43	30	73
Paid/Total	7.79%	9.22%	8.57%	11.41%	11.49%	11.44%

Table 2 shows paid messages by product category and by gender for the two platforms. The largest categories of paid messages in the Facebook sample were apparel/accessories (36.99%) and leisure (24.66%); both of these categories were significantly larger in the Facebook sample than the Twitter sample (36.99% vs. 13.08%, $\chi^2 = 14.10, p = .00$ and 24.66% vs. 11.21%, $\chi^2 = 4.72, p = .03$). The largest categories in the Twitter sample were financial (24.30%), technology (17.76%), and health and beauty (14.95%) products; the financial and health and beauty categories were significantly larger in the Twitter sample than the Facebook sample (24.30% vs. 5.48%, $\chi^2 = 11.07, p = .00$ and 14.95% vs. 1.37%, $\chi^2 = 9.36, p = .00$). In total, four of the product categories (apparel/accessories, health/beauty, financial, and leisure) differed significantly between social media platforms and four (food, auto, tech, and “other”) showed no significant differences with respect to frequency.

Health and beauty messages represented a significantly higher percentage of the messages for females than males (13.98% vs. 4.60%, $\chi^2 = 4.63, p = .03$), while the male sample had a significantly higher percentage of messages in the leisure-entertainment category (22.99% vs. 10.75%, $\chi^2 = 4.85, p = .03$). Males also had a greater percentage of messages in the “other” category (16.09% vs. 5.38%, $\chi^2 = 5.47, p = .02$). These included ads for dog supplies, drink tumblers, and a veteran’s group. The percentage of messages for apparel was significantly greater for females on Facebook (63.33% vs. 13.08%, $\chi^2 = 15.17, p = .00$), but slightly, though not significantly, higher for males in the Twitter sample (18.18% vs. 9.52%, $\chi^2 = 1.71, p = .19$). There were no significant gender differences in the percentage of paid messages for food, auto, technology, or financial products.

Table 2
Paid Message Product Categories by Platform and Gender

	Twitter				Facebook				Totals							
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Twitter Total		Facebook Total		Male Total		Female Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Apparel/accessories	8	18.18%	6	9.52%	8	18.60%	19	63.33%	14	13.08%	27	36.99%	16	18.39%	25	26.88%
Food	3	6.82%	4	6.35%	0	0.00%	1	3.33%	7	6.54%	1	1.37%	3	3.45%	5	5.38%
Auto	2	4.55%	2	3.17%	2	4.65%	0	0.00%	4	3.74%	2	2.74%	4	4.60%	2	2.15%
Health/beauty	4	9.09%	12	19.05%	0	0.00%	1	3.33%	16	14.95%	1	1.37%	4	4.60%	13	13.98%
Tech	7	15.91%	12	19.05%	7	16.28%	3	10.00%	19	17.76%	10	13.70%	14	16.09%	15	16.13%
Financial	9	20.45%	17	26.98%	3	6.98%	1	3.33%	26	24.30%	4	5.48%	12	13.79%	18	19.35%
Leisure/entertainment	6	13.64%	6	9.52%	14	32.56%	4	13.33%	12	11.21%	18	24.66%	20	22.99%	10	10.75%
Other Product	5	11.36%	4	6.35%	9	20.93%	1	3.33%	9	8.41%	10	13.70%	14	16.09%	5	5.38%
Product Totals	44	100.00%	63	100.00%	43	100.00%	30	100.00%	107	100.00%	73	100.00%	87	100.00%	93	100.00%

Table 3 provides profile information for the advertising sponsors. There were a total of 123 different advertisers across the 180 sponsored posts, for an average of 1.46 posts per sponsor. Fifty-eight percent of the advertisers were founded in 2000 or later, and 7% were in the top 100 of US advertisers, as measured by Adbrands (Adbrands.net, 2015). There were no significant differences in sponsor age by platform or gender.

Table 3
Advertiser Profile

	Twitter		Facebook		Total*	
Unduplicated Advertisers	64		62		123	
Ads Per Sponsor	1.67		1.18		1.46	
Founded 2000+	36	56.25%	36	58.06%	72	58.54%
Top 100 Advertisers	7	10.94%	5	8.06%	9	7.32%
*Twitter + Facebook sponsors may exceed total due to duplication of sponsors across platforms						

Only three advertisers, all established brands and leading US ad spenders, appeared in both samples: Amazon, Microsoft, and Toyota. Nine of the top 100 US advertisers (Amazon, American Express, Coke, Intel, Microsoft, Sprint, Toyota, Netflix, and AT&T) appeared in at least one of the two samples. The most frequent advertiser in the study was American Express, which had nine sponsored messages, all in Twitter feeds. The second most frequent advertiser was BetterHelp, an online counseling service, which advertised on eight female Twitter feeds. No single advertiser appeared more than three times across the (39 subjects and 73 ads in the) Facebook sample.

Summary and Discussion

Facebook clearly dominates social media advertising and the current study bears this out on a micro-level, with the ratio of paid advertising posts to total posts significantly greater on Facebook than on Twitter. However, when compared to traditional media, the ratio of advertising to content reflects a relatively low level of advertising clutter: while just over 11% of Facebook news feed posts were sponsored posts, more than 14 minutes of every hour of television programming is commercial (Flint, 2014) and 54% of magazine pages are ad pages (MPA, n.d.). Whether Facebook will hold sponsored posts at the current level for fear of alienating users, as some have suggested (Haile, 2017), or whether ad clutter will rise as it matures, as has been the case historically for advertising media, remains to be seen.

The results also suggest that advertisers are responding to the differing purposes and uses of the two social media platforms: Facebook, which is a more personal platform, had more ads for apparel and entertainment, while Twitter, which is more news-oriented, had more ads for financial products and services. In addition, none of the newer, smaller advertisers appeared on both platforms. Brands established after the year 2000, which formed the majority of advertisers, seemed to prefer to concentrate on one platform or the other. There were only three advertisers on both platforms: Amazon, Toyota, and Microsoft, all established brands and leading advertisers.

Facebook and Twitter have been reluctant to share information on individual advertisers, and, unlike traditional print and broadcast advertising, the advertisers and advertising messages on social media are highly individualized and not publicly visible. Expert “best guesses” suggest that the leading advertisers overall are large companies, such as Samsung, P&G, Microsoft, AT&T, and Amazon (Edwards, 2014). While three of these advertisers did appear in the study, over 90% of the advertisements were from companies that are not leading US advertisers. In this regard, the results support the suggestion of Pivotal Research analyst Brian Weiser, who, when asked about Procter and Gamble’s decision to reduce ad spending on Facebook, said “The bigger your brand, the more you need broad reach and less targeted media. Targeting is paramount for advertisers trying to get users to download a game app or a small business trying to appeal to local customers” (Terlep & Seetharaman, 2016). In addition to being smaller, the Facebook and Twitter advertisers were disproportionately “young” brands, with over half established after the year 2000, which may reflect a reluctance on the part of more established brands with established ad spending patterns to adopt the new media. The large number of different advertisers in the relatively small and homogeneous study sample may also reflect the relative youth of social media as advertising media and the fact that it is still somewhat experimental. It also indicates a significant strength for Facebook: As articulated by Procter and Gamble’s Marc Pritchard, “They...are insulated when any advertiser, even a big one, pulls spending, given how many they work with” (Vranica, 2018).

Future Research

The current study provides a snapshot of the prevalence and nature of advertising on Facebook and Twitter for a narrow demographic sample, undergraduate college students. Replication of the study with different demographic samples is needed to better understand the advertising dynamics on Facebook and Twitter, while replication over time is needed to monitor growth in social media advertising and track changes in advertiser profile as they evolve as advertising media.

Note

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