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Arming consumers against product placement: A comparison of factual and evaluative educational interventions^{☆,☆☆,☆☆☆}

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ABSTRACT

Several countries allow product placement on the condition that it is clearly identified to consumers. However, the currently used disclosures are not always effective. Therefore, we investigate the potential of two types of educational interventions (factual versus evaluative) to help consumers identify product placements, as well as the impact they have on the placed brands. Our results show that an evaluative (versus factual) intervention evokes more reactance (Study 1) and has a lower impact on persuasion knowledge but leads to similar correction effects on the purchase intention of the placed brand (Study 2). Study 3 extends these findings by investigating consumer characteristics as a potential moderator and shows that factual (evaluative) interventions lead to more correction effects on purchase intention for lower (higher) self-monitors.

1. Introduction

Product placement (PP), or the paid inclusion of a brand in a movie or television program, is on the rise. Global revenues increased by 13.6% and reached \$10.58 billion in 2014 (PQ Media, 2015). However, the increasing use of PP goes hand in hand with the concern of policymakers, consumer advocates, and academics that PP influences consumers without them recognizing it as a commercial message (Balasubramanian, 1994; Cain, 2011). In May 2011, almost every member state in the European Union adopted new guidelines for PP, legalizing PP as an advertising tactic, but only on condition that consumers be educated about its commercial intent. Additionally, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission issued a Native Advertising Guide to provide guidance to businesses on when and how to disclose deceptively formatted advertisements (Native Advertising, 2015). This highlights the ongoing concern of public policy worldwide to educate consumers about new and embedded advertising techniques such as PP.

Thus far, most studies have focused on the effectiveness of ad hoc disclosures that appear before, after, or during the program that contains PP (e.g., Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2015; Russell & Russell, 2008; Tessitore & Geuens, 2013). However, these studies show that currently used disclosures of PP are not always effective. For example, in several European countries (e.g., Belgium and the UK), a “PP”

or “P” symbol appears briefly on screen to disclose the presence of PP. However, a textual disclosure accompanying the symbol, or additional education on the commercial intent of PP, is needed to attract attention to the disclosure and the PP and to help consumers recognize the PP as advertising (Boerman et al., 2015; Tessitore & Geuens, 2013).

This suggests that consumers may benefit from more general education about PP as a hidden advertising tactic, for example via newspaper, magazine or social media articles, school programs, websites, or public information campaigns. First, general education about PP may overcome the issue of unattended disclosures because of program zipping, zapping, wear-out effects such as irritation or reduced attention (Gallopel-Morvan, Gabriel, Le Gall-Ely, Rieunier, & Urien, 2011; van Reijmersdal, Tutaj, & Boerman, 2013), or familiarity effects such as habituation (Wogalter, Conzola, & Smith-Jackson, 2002). Second, elevating consumers' advertising literacy for PP may facilitate the correction of PP influence in a distracting entertainment environment compared to mere disclosures. This study contributes to this line of research by investigating the effectiveness of different types of educational interventions that are not part of or specific to the program that contains PP.

The majority of the literature on advertising literacy interventions has focused on children as vulnerable consumers that do not recognize advertising as such (An, Jin, & Park, 2014; Buijzen, 2007; Livingstone &

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Helsper, 2006). However, adults can also be considered vulnerable consumers unaware of less traditional and more hidden advertising tactics such as PP (Cain, 2011). Hence, research is needed on whether, when and which educational interventions can help adults to identify the presence of PP, to activate their persuasion knowledge (i.e., knowledge that enables people to cope with persuasion attempts; Friestad & Wright, 1994) and to cope with PP influence. To help fill this gap, this manuscript focuses on the effectiveness of two often-used educational interventions: factual versus evaluative interventions – that is, a more objective intervention without a clear opinion on PP appropriateness versus a more subjective intervention with a clear opinion on PP appropriateness. Factual interventions are often used in official news broadcasts or governmental information sources, whereas evaluative interventions emphasizing the hidden and unethical influence of advertising that obscures our freedom to make choices based on our true beliefs are frequently encountered in classroom discussions, on social media, etc. Three specific questions shape this research.

First, a key question largely ignored by prior research on both advertising literacy interventions and PP disclosures is how consumers feel about the intervention or disclosure itself. In other words, could consumers possibly react against the intervention itself? Reactance is induced when consumers feel their freedom is constrained, for example, to form their own opinion (Brehm, 1966). In this respect, the distinction between factual and evaluative interventions is highly relevant, as evaluative interventions – because of their subjective and normative character – can be expected to evoke more reactance than factual interventions. A first research objective thus is to investigate potential reactance induced by factual versus evaluative interventions.

Second, both from a public policy perspective and a marketing perspective, the more downstream consequences of the different types of interventions are important. Are educational interventions able to lead consumers to identify PP and activate their persuasion knowledge, even in terms of reactance against the intervention? And will the interventions still lead consumers to correct for the influence of PP? Does reactance translate into a backlash effect or a positive effect for the brand, or is the effect of PP simply cancelled out? A second research objective, therefore, is to test the impact of factual versus evaluative interventions on consumers' responses to the placed brand.

A third and final question is whether the impact of different types of interventions depends on individual differences. From a practical point of view, it is highly relevant for policymakers to understand that a well-designed educational intervention might miss its purpose if it is not well-targeted. Most prior research on advertising literacy interventions and on PP disclosures has ignored individual difference variables. To help close this gap, our third research objective is to study self-monitoring as a potential moderator of the impact of intervention type. As self-monitoring is about individuals' motivation to rely on unbiased self-generated inferences versus on socially appropriate inferences generated by others (Snyder, 1974), this individual difference variable seems highly relevant to incorporate in research on the impact of factual versus evaluative interventions.

Our theorizing draws from the literature on PP disclosures, media literacy interventions, knowledge accessibility theory (Higgins, 1989), and persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Study 1 investigates to what extent factual versus evaluative interventions evoke reactance. Study 2 follows up on Study 1 by showing more downstream consequences (i.e., persuasion knowledge activation and purchase intention) of the two intervention types. Lastly, Study 3 takes in self-monitoring as a potential moderator of the impact of intervention type on purchase intention.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Reactance to factual versus evaluative interventions

Not all educational interventions are created equal. Some

interventions may be perceived as paternalistic and therefore induce psychological reactance (e.g., Furth-Matzkin & Sunstein, 2017; Goldberg & Gunasti, 2007). Reactance implies counterargumentation and negative affective reactions toward the intervention itself (Dillard & Shen, 2005). Psychological reactance occurs when freedom is perceived to be restricted, such as the freedom to generate one's own inferences (Brehm, 1966). Prior research suggests that people first want to form inferences about tactic appropriateness before they decide how to cope with a persuasion attempt (Wei, Fischer, & Main, 2008). If so, the distinction between factual and evaluative interventions seems highly relevant.

Factual interventions provide objective information about the media content, to enhance cognitive defenses and facilitate counterargumentation. Evaluative interventions provide (negative) inferences about the appropriateness of the message, to inhibit the production of favorable inferences about the message (Buijzen, 2007; Nathanson, 2004). Prior research has compared the effectiveness of both interventions on children's susceptibility to televised violence (Nathanson, 2004) and to television commercials (Buijzen, 2007). To reduce negative effects of televised violence on children, evaluative interventions prove more effective than factual interventions, because children are sensitive to social norms as provided in the evaluative intervention and may struggle to process the factual intervention (Nathanson, 2004). However, to reduce children's susceptibility to television commercials, both interventions prove to be effective albeit through different mechanisms: a factual intervention develops children's persuasion knowledge, whereas an evaluative intervention negatively influences children's attitudes toward commercials (Buijzen, 2007). As children are more likely to comply with than to react against an adult's intervention (Brehm & Brehm, 2013), the level of reactance these interventions evoke was not tested in the latter studies. For adult consumers, however, testing the level of reactance against different types of educational interventions is highly relevant but underinvestigated. Specifically, an evaluative intervention imposes inferences on the consumers and may lead consumers to feel threatened in their freedom to generate their own, independent inferences on PP appropriateness. A factual intervention leaves it up to the consumers to generate their own inferences regarding the appropriateness of the PP tactic. The foregoing suggests that consumer reactance is more likely for an evaluative intervention than for a factual intervention. We therefore hypothesize:

H1. The presence of inferences concerning the appropriateness of PP as a persuasion tactic in an intervention (i.e., evaluative intervention) induces more reactance and a more negative attitude toward the intervention than when such inferences are absent in an intervention (i.e., factual intervention).

2.2. Persuasion knowledge activation and factual versus evaluative interventions

To correct for a persuasion attempt, consumers must use their persuasion knowledge. The use of persuasion knowledge requires sufficient cognitive resources, as it involves effortful inferential thinking about ulterior motives (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Friestad & Wright, 1994). However, the distracting entertainment environment in the case of PP occupies cognitive resources, which can prevent correction for PP influence even after a disclosure (Wood & Quinn, 2003). Hence, it is important to make the use of persuasion knowledge in an already distracting environment less effortful.

According to knowledge accessibility theory (Higgins, 1989), the more accessible a construct, the less cognitive effort it takes to retrieve it and the more likely it will be used in later situations, even in a distracting environment. In line with this, Campbell and Kirmani (2000) showed that when an ulterior persuasion motive is made highly accessible, both distracted and less distracted people use their persuasion knowledge to correct for a persuasion attempt. Moreover, providing

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