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Consumer responses to promoted tweets sent by brands and political parties

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand how consumers respond to social media advertising (SMA) by focusing on promoted tweets sent by brands and political parties, and examines persuasion knowledge as underlying mechanism of these responses. Two online experiments with between-subjects designs, comparing the effects of SMA (promoted vs. non-promoted tweet) and the source of the tweet (political party vs. brand), were conducted. Study 1 showed that consumers rarely notice it when a tweet is promoted. Study 2 demonstrated that when a promoted tweet was sent by a political party, the recipient's recognition that the tweet was a form of advertisement (i.e., activated persuasion knowledge) reduced online behavioral intention, increased skepticism, and negatively affected source trustworthiness and attitudes. This effect was not present for brands. Although research has shown that social media can be an important platform to engage audiences, this study is the first to study the mechanisms underlying the effects of SMA, and whether there are any boundary conditions to these effects. These findings suggest that political parties should be cautious in their use of social media advertising as it can evoke negative responses.

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1. Introduction

Social media are important in our daily lives, and have become an important platform to send across messages to specific audiences, such as consumers and voters. Research has shown that the usage of social media, such as Twitter, can be useful for political parties, organizations, and brands to engage audiences online (Kruikemeier, 2014; Okazaki, Díaz-Martín, Rozano, & Menéndez-Benito, 2015; Park, 2013; Van Norel et al., 2014). Therefore, Twitter has become an important medium for social media advertising (SMA; Van Dijck, 2011). Specifically, Twitter has allowed advertising since 2010, by including sponsored content, such as 'promoted tweets.' Promoted tweets are tweets purchased by advertisers that are visible to a specific target audience (Twitter, 2014). The deployment of promoted tweets can effectively evoke engagement (i.e., mentions of the brand in the tweet) and tweets with a positive sentiment about the advertiser (Dacres, Haddadi, & Purver, 2014).

However, the introduction of promoted tweets also involves some risks. Consumers may not appreciate this type of advertising

(Van Dijck, 2011). Research suggests that the use of promoted tweets could negatively affect consumers' attitudes towards the brand sending it and lowers consumers' intention to click on a URL in the tweet (Wood & Burkhalter, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial for both advertisers and Twitter itself to understand whether consumers accept advertising on Twitter (Taylor, Lewin, & Strutton, 2011). Moreover, little is known about the mechanisms underlying the effects of SMA, and whether there are any boundary conditions to these effects. Therefore, this study aims to test these, by gaining insights into how consumers process, recognize, and respond to promoted tweets, and whether this is contingent upon the source of the tweet (i.e., a political party or brand).

As SMA is fairly new, little is known about the extent to which consumers understand this type of advertising, and thus whether or not they have developed persuasion knowledge about SMA. Persuasion knowledge refers to personal knowledge and beliefs about advertising motives and tactics (Friestad & Wright, 1994). The activation of persuasion knowledge in response to advertising is often seen as an important underlying mechanism that may explain different consumer responses (Ham, Nelson, & Das, 2015; Lee & Hansen, 2013). This means that the use of persuasion knowledge in response to promoted tweets may be the underlying mechanism to the persuasive outcomes of promoted tweets (i.e., online behavioral intention) and consumers' responses towards the

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promoted tweet and its sender (i.e., source attitudes, source trustworthiness, and skepticism). Therefore, this study investigates consumers' use of persuasion knowledge, operationalized as the extent to which consumers recognize promoted tweets as advertising.

A possible boundary condition for the effects of promoted tweets could be the source that is sending out the tweet. Although promoted tweets are usually employed by brands, they are also used in political campaigns. Consumers may respond differently to SMA sent by political parties compared to SMA sent by brands. Recently, researchers have argued that voters and consumers cannot be treated in a similar manner and that marketing strategies for these two audiences should be implemented in different ways (Van Steenburg, 2015). As the decision to support a party is fundamentally different from the decision to buy a product, political advertising might affect voter attitudes differently than product advertising. Such insights might help to understand whether a 'voter as consumer' paradigm exists (Van Steenburg, 2015). Thus, tweets from different sources, and about different categories of goods and services, may have diverse effects. This study examines whether or not consumers appreciate the use of SMA in both contexts, and thus whether this is a beneficial strategy for both brands and political parties.

Altogether, by conducting two experiments, we try to provide insights into: (1) consumers' responses to promoted tweets (vs. non-promoted tweets) and the role of persuasion knowledge (i.e., the recognition of advertising) in the processing of this advertising format, and (2) whether these responses differ between promoted tweets sent by brands and political parties.

2. The use of persuasion knowledge in response to promoted tweets

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) explains how consumers respond to different advertising messages. The model suggests that the way consumers cope with advertising messages depends on the recognition of the persuasive nature of the message. The development of persuasion knowledge is influenced by how much experience a person has with particular persuasion attempts and continues developing throughout the life span but is presumed to be well-developed in adulthood (Friestad & Wright, 1994; John, 1999).

New advertising formats, such as SMA, challenge consumers' persuasion knowledge as they may not yet know and understand these formats. Because of the relative newness of SMA, consumers may not have experience with new advertising formats, such as promoted tweets. Consumers with less experience are less likely to have developed persuasion knowledge and to recognize its persuasive purpose. This is underscored by the idea that it is more difficult for consumers to evaluate information on the Internet than information in traditional, mass communications media, because the content on the Internet changes quickly, does not provide clear information about editorial policies, and contains many types of information (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). The development of persuasion knowledge can therefore be problematic (Tutaj & Van Reijmersdal, 2012).

However, there has been very little research on the use of persuasion knowledge in response to SMA. Therefore, this study tries to establish the extent to which consumers recognize promoted tweets as a form of advertising, and thus activate persuasion knowledge in response to promoted tweets. Although persuasion knowledge is a larger construct that exists of many levels (Friestad & Wright, 1994; John, 1999; Rozendaal, Lapierre, Van Reijmersdal, & Buijzen, 2011), in this study it is operationalized as the recognition of a tweet as advertising. This is based on the notion that the

recognition of advertising is seen as a first step that can induce the activation or usage of other dimensions of persuasion knowledge, such as an understanding of the persuasive intent of the message and the development of critical attitudes (Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2014; Rozendaal et al., 2011; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016).

Because consumers' persuasion knowledge about SMA may not be as developed as it is about other types of advertising, promoted tweets are clearly labeled with both an icon (i.e., a colored arrow) and a label that says 'Promoted by' followed by the advertisers' name, to help distinguish them from regular tweets. Prior research has shown that making the persuasive nature of a message more salient helps consumers to activate their persuasion knowledge (Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2012; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Ham et al., 2015; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). Moreover, the 'Promoted by' label may work as a heuristic cue that can (automatically) activate persuasion knowledge (Fransen & Fennis, 2014).

However, whether people do activate their persuasion knowledge in response to different types of tweets may depend upon the sender of that tweet. Promoted tweets are often deployed by brands, but political organizations also use promoted tweets in their campaigns. In recent years, Twitter has become an integral part of political campaigns (e.g., Lee, 2013; Vergeer & Hermans, 2013). Candidates and political parties increasingly use social media, to attempt to engage voters and win votes. They do so during political campaigns, but also in periods that do not involve specific elections: Continuous or permanent campaigning is an important part of the post-modern and professional campaign (Gibson & Römmele, 2001; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014) and seems to become more dominant in recent years.

Research repeatedly shows that (an interactive) use of Twitter by politicians is beneficial, as it leads to more votes and, in specific cases, positive evaluations (Kruikemeier, 2014; Lee & Shin, 2012; Spierings & Jacobs, 2014). Recently, and in addition to posting regular social media posts, politicians and parties have started using SMA. For instance, during the 2012 US presidential election campaign, both Romney and Obama used promoted tweets in Twitter users' timelines. These promoted tweets aimed to influence peoples' attitudes, to inform them, to reach new voters, and to inspire people to share messages (Twitter Business, n.d.). These aims resemble those of brands, which use promoted tweets to create awareness, promote sales, and generate web traffic (Twitter, 2014).

An important question is whether the activation of persuasion knowledge differs in response to SMA disseminated by brands and political parties. There is reason to believe that consumers will be more likely to recognize messages sent by brands as advertising, compared to messages by political parties. This is based on the goals of brands and political parties, and people's expectations of the messages sent by them.

Brands and political parties have different goals and different reasons for communicating with an audience (Van Steenburg, 2015). Brands aim to promote a certain product or service with the intention of increasing profits, whereas political parties try to promote themselves, publicize agendas, and mobilize citizens to take action with the ultimate aim of winning an election (Peng & Hackley, 2009; Rodgers & Thorson, 2000). Scholars have pointed out that few similarities exist between voters and consumers when considered as target audiences (Lock & Harris, 1996; Peng & Hackley, 2009). Persuading voters on moral issues is different than persuading consumers to buy a product (Lock & Harris, 1996), though political parties often borrow tactics from advertisers. Moreover, the decision to support a party is fundamentally different from the decision to buy a product. Therefore, voters and consumers cannot be treated in a similar manner, and marketing

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