Study finds health advertorials misleading but persuasive

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Sunny Jung Kim, an e-health communication researcher at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth College, led a study that finds health advertorials succeed in misleading people, in part, by tamping down their skepticism. Credit: Dartmouth College

Health advertorials, or advertisements camouflaged as credible news, succeed in misleading people, in part, by tamping down their skepticism and expectations for truth in advertising, a Dartmouth College-Stanford University study finds.

The study, which appears in the journal *Communication Research*, is the first to systemically examine whether specific communication tactics used in advertorials are persuasive and, if so, why they are more effective than traditional advertisements. A PDF is available on request.

Responding to consumer concern that native advertising can be intentionally misleading, the Federal Trade Commission last December issued guidelines on native advertising intended to prevent customers from being deceived. The guidelines suggest using a clear label of "advertisement" and placing disclosures in front of or above the headline. These two guidelines were also core elements empirically examined in the Dartmouth-Stanford study.

Advertorials, also known as native advertising, are not new. Infomercials and other "blurring practices" between editorials and advertising first appeared as early as the late 1940s in television and print media in the United States, and the volume and revenue of blurring practices of advertising are increasing. But it is not clear how advertorials create favorable marketing environments for advertisers, and how readers

process advertorials.

The Dartmouth-Stanford study asks two key questions regarding the information processing of advertorials. First, how are specific communication cues in health advertorials cognitively processed relative to those in typical advertisements? Second, why are these specific cues of the advertorial format more persuasive? The researchers examined the cognitive processes and persuasive effects of health product-related advertorials on more than 670 people. They found that advertorials were less likely to trigger consumer awareness of persuasive intent, especially when the "advertisement" label was not present.

"Unlabeled advertorials, compared to labeled advertorials and regular advertisements, were less likely to trigger consumer awareness of persuasive intent, and increased favorable attitudes toward advertising messages and purchase intention," says lead author Sunny Jung Kim, an e-health communication researcher in the Center for Technology and Behavioral Health at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth. "Because of their design and structure, advertorials tend to sway readers into believing that they are viewing credible information in the form of an editorial or news source."

The researchers also found that placing health information above an advertisement decreased consumer skepticism. Participants in their experiments exhibited more positive attitudes toward advertorials than they did toward traditional advertisements due to advertorials' unique structure, which, in turn, increased their willingness to purchase advertised products.

"This form of advertising appears to be on the rise as advertisers try to embed their ads in the stories we read and the photos we see in almost every platform of social media," said co-author Jeff Hancock, a professor of communication at Stanford University. "Understanding how

these advertorials operate cognitively can improve guidelines for the prevention of misleading or confusing consumers."

Kim adds: ""Until now, there has been no empirical evidence that has tested the core elements of persuasion tactics in advertorials, namely their unique structure and labeling and its impact on information processing. These advertising tactics are pervasive across various forms of media, from newspapers and magazines to social media. Our findings have broad implications for health researchers, advertisers and consumers."

More information: S. J. Kim et al, How Advertorials Deactivate Advertising Schema: MTurk-Based Experiments to Examine Persuasion Tactics and Outcomes in Health Advertisements, *Communication Research* (2016). DOI: 10.1177/0093650216644017

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