

Native advertising may create negative perceptions of media outlets

May 2 2016, by Jonathan F. Mcverry

Native advertising, often known as sponsored content or promoted posts, is showing up all over the Internet. Users may expect native advertising on sites like Facebook and BuzzFeed, but a discussion has emerged among those in the public relations field on whether the practice impacts the credibility of the companies who pay for it or the news outlets who run it. Are there consequences when companies and news outlets go native?

With funding from the Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication, a part of the College of Communications, Penn State researchers conducted a study to find out and presented the results at the International Public Relations Research Conference in March. The research team found that when content was identified as native advertising, readers held a lower opinion of the media outlet it was published in. However, the reputation of the company being promoted was not affected.

The idea for the project emerged while the team of graduate students was sitting in its weekly [public relations](#) group meeting. Adviser Denise Bortree, Page Center director and associate professor in the department of advertising and public relations, showed them a news article—or was it?

"We looked at it. It didn't look like an advertisement," PhD student and corresponding author Mu Wu said. "It looked like an everyday editorial, but we were wrong." It was a native advertisement.

News outlets from BuzzFeed to the *New York Times* participate in various forms of native advertising and claim to see no ethical issues with the practice. One previous study found that between 7 and 18 percent of readers can tell the difference between a real news story and a native advertisement. Wu said those numbers sparked the team's interest in identifying potential consequences.

To get an understanding of how perceptions may change, the research team conducted an experiment with 500 participants, which included one group of readers who were primed about native advertising, i.e., the concept was explained to them, and another group that was not. The team used identical content on "the best vacation spots" and placed it in both high credibility (New York Times) and low credibility (Buzzfeed) [news outlets](#). Lastly, they used a credible (Marriott) and non-credible (Super 8) corporation as the content sponsor. Pre-test data helped the research team decide the credibility of the organizations.

Readers who were primed about native advertising found the content to be less credible overall.

"We all have the idea that the news media should be objective and neutral—that's how it works," Wu said. "But people may see the media and companies working together to deceive us, so they change their perception toward the media more dramatically. On the other hand, people see that the company is just doing what it's supposed to, promoting itself."

Wu added that it is possible for readers to hold onto that distrust when reading real news stories, hurting the publication's overall credibility. A few other significant results emerged that caught the researchers' attention.

"What I found especially interesting was the effect the media source and

corporate source had on the content," Wu said. "It was completely changed by the process of priming, which essentially made users more aware of the persuasive nature of native advertising."

The study found that the readers who were not primed for native advertising evaluated the content and media outlet more positively when the article was sponsored by a high-credibility company and was also published in a high-credibility media outlet. However, for those who were primed, the results were the opposite. The combinations of a high-credibility company and a low-credibility media outlet or a low-credibility company and a high-credibility media outlet are more likely to elicit positive evaluations of both the content and the media outlet.

"It's a mismatch," Wu said. "When you are aware of that persuasive nature, you expect to see Marriott in media like the New York Times. However, when there is a mismatch like seeing the New York Times feature something from Super 8, it seems kind of counterintuitive to the reader."

"Unprimed readers may think, 'Super 8 sponsored content is in the New York Times? Well, it must be because the content is really good,' " Wu said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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