Understanding the Mechanisms Behind Consumers’ Appreciation of Editorial Support

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We investigate how consumers’ appreciation of editorial support is contingent on perceived medium quality and on the activation of consumers’ persuasion knowledge. Echoing the call for more realistic designs, two experiments under incidental exposure conditions reveal undesirable effects of this common advertising technique if both contingency variables are controlled for.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Editorial support, i.e. the combination of advertisements with corresponding favorable news stories within one medium, is widely believed to increase advertising effectiveness (Kim et al. 2010). We wish to extend the findings in this stream of research by analyzing conditions and limitations of the reported positive coupling effect with specific respect to low-involvement situations. Given the importance of media qualities as contextual cues for the evaluation of messages, we expect 1) that perceived objectivity of the editorial content ad gauged from the medium will have an impact on consumers’ reactions towards coupling. 2) We hypothesize that accessibility of persuasion knowledge and defense goals may influence the mechanism by which editorial support as persuasion attempt influences consumers’ approach behavior toward the brand, e.g. in terms of purchase intention. We argue that less attentive processes might be equally important for the effect of editorial support on approach behavior. Consequently, we suggest investigating the effect under more incidental conditions, less prone to raising consumers’ task involvement than standard forced exposure. By “incidental,” we mean contacts with media and advertising stimuli that are modeled after natural contact situations: In such situations, advertising processing is generally not guided by external instructions, and thus consumers typically process the ads less actively than under forced exposure conditions.

A key feature of the effectiveness of publicity is its higher credibility compared to ads (Kim et al. 2010; Eisend and Küster 2011). Consumers often use their perception of media formats as a contextual cue for the validity of the information contained in the medium, particularly when their motivation to process is low (Hallahan, 1999). We expect that this contextual cue moderates the effect of editorial support. When consumers doubt the journalistic quality of a medium in terms of its objectivity, the repetition of the positive brand information may then trigger a defensive processing bias (Darke and Ritchie 2007), that works against the validity and the truth effect caused by the repetition (Arkes, Boehm, and Xu 1991; Roggeveen and Johar 2002), leading to reduced purchase intentions.

Hypothesis 1: Under incidental exposure conditions, the effect of editorial support on purchase intentions for a brand is more negative than if the ad appears alone, if consumers perceive the journalistic quality of the medium as low.

Editorial content is supposed to be more credible than ads since it stems from a “third party” that lacks ulterior motives and manipulative intent (Hallahan 1999). However, Friestad and Wright (1994; 1995) posit that consumers have heuristics about the persuasion strategies used in marketing communication. The heuristic “If a positive editorial report about a brand appears in the same medium as an advertisement for that brand, then beware!” could alert consumers to the manipulation that is presumably intended by coupling, without elaboration on the specific instance of this persuasive attempt at hand. The mere presence of the coupling might activate (unconsciously) defense goals (Liberman and Chaiken 1992; Darke and Ritchie 2007). Chartrand, Dalton, and Fitzsimons (2007) found strong evidence of automatic reactance that can arise without cognitive elaboration, and without conscious intention to behave reactant. We argue that with editorial support, i.e. the intentional coupling of an ad and editorial coverage, being heuristically identified as an overly strong and “authoritative” persuasion attempt, the coupling could spur an unconscious reactance reaction, which would lead to avoiding the brand altogether.

Hypothesis 2: Under incidental exposure conditions, editorial support will lead consumers to react to the brand with lower purchase intentions than if the advertisement were to stand alone.

We tested H1 and H2 in an experimental study (N = 68 non-Marketing undergrads) under incidental exposure conditions (radio as background medium, “living room” setting, cover story and distraction tasks). Using PROCESS model 1 (Hayes 2013) we found a significant and negative main effect of editorial support on purchase intentions for the advertised financial service (t = -2.79, p = .007) and a significant interaction of editorial support and perceived media quality (t = 2.39, p = .020, corroborating H1 and H2.

We propose that the activation or accessibility of persuasion knowledge as a contingency variable can further explain the undesirable effect found in study 1. As Skard and Thorbjørnsen (2014) found, consumers possess knowledge about why ads are purposefully placed next to news stories about a brand. Such specific knowledge could quickly be activated as heuristic even without intense elaboration on the material. Then coupling will be less effective because consumers might feel—consciously or unconsciously—skeptical toward the claims about the brand in the news story and the ad (Johar, Maheswaran und Peracchio 2006), and defense motivations might be activated, which lead to avoidance behavior. We test this mechanism by priming persuasion knowledge

Hypothesis 3: When persuasion knowledge is activated under incidental exposure, consumers show lower purchase intentions for a brand that uses editorial support compared to a situation in which they are only confronted with an ad for the brand.

In study 2, again under the same incidental exposure conditions as in study 1, a 2 (commercial only vs. commercial plus radio feature) x 2 (priming: neutral vs. persuasion knowledge activated) ANCOVA with the perceived medium format objectivity measure as covariate for the independent measure “purchase intention” (N = 125) revealed a significant interaction between editorial support and persuasion knowledge activation (F (1, 120) = 6.86, p = .010). Qualified by the significant interaction, a simple effect analysis showed that, consistent with hypothesis 3, the reduction in purchase intention between both levels of the prime was significant (F (1, 123) = 4.77, p = .028).

Contributing to the extant literature, our findings seem to suggest that the success of editorial support as an integrated marketing tool is contingent upon the perceived quality of the medium, and the accessibility of persuasion knowledge. Our two experiments consistently hint to mechanisms that are distinct from the process that produced the robust positive results in previous research. If consumers have reason to doubt the objectivity of the medium, they evaluate editorial support unfavorably. Thus, although some elaboration might be necessary to uncover the persuasion attempt, our findings suggest that “editorial support is an unduly persuasion attempt” kicks in as a
heuristic even when consumers are only incidentally confronted with the stimulus. From a methodological perspective, this finding sounds a note of caution against the use of forced exposure in experiments on editorial support.

REFERENCES


