Abstract

Based upon a 3-year data set of Tweets linking to native advertising from leading U.S. news publications, this study provides human content analyses (n = 1,527) of the practice of native advertising disclosure in the field – both on publisher websites and when shared on Twitter – and explores whether disclosures serve the inoculating function of resistance to persuasion. Leveraging the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and inoculation theory (McGuire, 1964), results show a) regular use of disclosures on publisher landing pages, b) the absence of disclosures in over half of publisher Twitter Cards, and c) the presence of disclosures corresponded to an increased likelihood of negatively-valenced Twitter posts.

Keywords. Persuasion Knowledge Model, inoculation theory, native advertising, social media, journalism

Sharing Native Advertising on Twitter:

Content Analyses Examining Disclosure Practices and Their Inoculating Influence

As consumers increasingly ignore, skip, and block advertising, businesses that rely on it have turned to narrative and storytelling formats to get their message in front of an audience. At the same time, news publishers have had to contend with a precipitous drop in advertising revenue as advertisers transition away from the traditional display and classified advertising that supported news organizations for decades (Austin & Newman, 2015; Coddington, 2015; Ferrer Conill, 2016). In the evolving digital news environment, what is referred to as "native advertising" or "sponsored content" is becoming a bigger part of publishers' advertising revenue. An adaptation of the "advertorials" of the print era (Cameron & Curtain, 1995), native advertising adopts the look and feel of the news articles that surround it, right down to their storytelling and journalistic-like writing style (Carlson, 2015; Einstein, 2016; Ferrer Conill, 2016). Audiences read stories with narratives, not advertisements with selling propositions. In so doing, advertisers are more likely to have their messages seen by unsuspecting readers by leveraging the authority of news publishers to present their message (Ferrer Conill, 2016; Serazio, 2019; Sirrah, 2019) as news publishers are perceived by consumers as more trustworthy than advertisers (van Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2010).

To prevent readers from being deceived in this process, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has issued policy guidelines for advertising messages that are presented alongside non-commercial content (FTC, 2015). Consequently, a growing body of academic literature has examined the nature and effects of native advertising disclosures in digital news contexts. While most of these scholarly inquiries have focused on the ability of audiences to recognize native advertising as it resides on a publisher's website, Sirrah (2019) has revealed that

a news organization's contractual obligation to a native advertising client does not end with simply creating and publishing the content. Often, they are required to promote the native advertising on their social media properties to achieve specific engagement metrics. Thus, this study seeks to build on Sirrah's work by examining an area that has been largely overlooked by journalism studies: What are the nature and effects of native advertising once the content has left a publisher's website?

While publishers may claim that what happens to content once it leaves their website is not their responsibility, this argument becomes less convincing when we learn that it is their own social media properties – or those of organizations/individuals hired by the publishers – that are amplifying their native advertising content (Sirrah, 2019). If the native advertising shared on social media is not properly labeled as commercial in nature, publishers risk further eroding their already fragile legitimacy and autonomy (Ferrer Conill & Karlsson, 2019) in an era when many have been deriding mainstream media as "fake news" (Amazeen & Bucy, 2019). Moreover, if publishers are promoting the content of commercial sponsors on social media, they may be doing so at the expense of their own journalism. After all, consumers have a finite amount of attention to expend (Morse, 2019; Sirrah, 2019). Furthermore, as more people get news from social media, the ability to clearly decipher the original source of the content (from a journalist versus an advertiser) becomes even more critical, particularly given that many people do not read articles before sharing them on social media (Bright, 2016; Gabielkov et al., 2016). In these ways, questions persist whether the practice of native advertising serves the interests of advertisers rather than the public (Ferrer Conill & Karlsson, 2019).

Beyond the nature of disclosure practices by publishers, much of the research on disclosure effects has generally been limited to experimental/lab-based inquiries that preclude

actual field studies (c.f. Amazeen & Wojdynski, 2020; Krouwer, Poels, & Paulussen, 2020; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). The present study attempts to leverage both of these streams of research, that of the nature and effects, by combining data mining on the social media platform Twitter with content analyses to achieve two goals: 1) to describe the current native advertising disclosure practices of digital news publishers, both at the point of origin on their website and on Twitter and 2) to examine actual sharing practices of native advertising on Twitter, including whether sharers refer to this type of content as advertising rather than regular news content and the valence of their comments. This is important because if disclosures are lacking or ineffective, people may be deceived into sharing commercial content they thought was genuine journalism. Indeed, as the results in the following pages demonstrate, in over half the cases, the native advertising disclosures present on a publisher's news site did not transfer when shared on Twitter, rendering the commercial nature of the content virtually invisible once it left its point of origin.

The scant academic research that does exist on publisher disclosure practices mostly focuses on news *websites*, finding disclosures were frequently lacking, difficult to see, or used confusing language (An et al., 2019; Ferrer Conill, 2016; Keib & Tatge, 2016; Wang & Li, 2017). The sole study examining not only publisher websites but also the nature of disclosures when the content was shared on Facebook found them lacking in over half the cases (An, Kang, & Koo, 2019). In response to these authors' call for further research on the sharing of native advertising on other social media sites, the present study examines native advertisements that were posted on Twitter across a three-year period and whether the presence of a disclosure affected sharing behavior – a persuasive outcome measure and important engagement metric for publishers (Author, forthcoming). In so doing, this study aims to connect the native advertising

disclosure practices of news publishers to corresponding consumer behaviors while also answering the call of Compton and Pfau (2009) to "continue to flesh out potential differences in how inoculation WOMC [word-of-mouth communication] functions in the laboratory with how it functions in the field" (p. 20).

By exploring whether the current news publisher practices of disclosing native advertising in the field actually serve the inoculating function of resistance to persuasion that has been theorized and observed in laboratory experiments, we are able to show how people behave differently in referring to such content on Twitter depending upon whether it is disclosed as advertising or not. Leveraging the theoretical principles of the Persuasion Knowledge Model, or PKM, (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and inoculation theory (McGuire, 1964), the paper first reviews the relevant literature on persuasion, native advertising sponsorship disclosures, as well as word-of-mouth communication. The empirical analysis draws from a large data set of Tweets from Twitter and their links to native advertising from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Business Insider,* and *Politico* – prominent U.S. digital news publishers whose native advertising content is accessible via hyperlink search parameters. The study should be of interest to policy makers and journalists concerned with the future of journalism and protecting news consumers from deceptive marketing practices as well as communication and journalism scholars aiming to understand whether and how theories of persuasion and resistance manifest in digital news practices and consequent audience behavior.

Persuasion and resistance

Theoretically, the purpose of the FTC requiring a native advertising disclosure is to trigger persuasion knowledge in consumers (Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2016). According to the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994), when an individual recognizes the commercial nature of a

message, a change of meaning takes place whereby a mental shift in their cognitive schema occurs. For example, while a source cue from a news publisher might lead someone to anticipate that a message is journalistic in nature, a native advertising disclosure is supposed to reorient the reader to understand that the content, instead, should be schematically classified as commercial. This process is called "advertising recognition" (Wojdynski & Evans, 2020). In response to the now exposed persuasive attempt, an individual can employ an appropriate strategy to manage the episode. Frequently, recognition of persuasion leads to cognitive and behavioral resistance (Fransen, Verlegh, Kirmani, & Smit, 2015; Jacks & Cameron, 2003), although not always (Sweetser et al., 2016). For instance, in digital news contexts, recognition of and resistance to native advertising generally results in less favorable perceptions of the message (Amazeen & Muddiman, 2018; Wojdynski, 2016; Wu et al., 2016), brand (Wojdynski, 2016; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016), as well as the news publisher (Amazeen & Muddiman, 2018; Amazeen & Wojdynski, 2020; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016; Wu et al., 2016). In turn, this can lead to a decreased propensity to "like" and share this type of content on social media (Amazeen & Bucy, 2019; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016; Author, forthcoming). By fostering these types of resistant reactions, native advertising disclosures can be said to serve an inoculating function against forthcoming persuasive attempts (Amazeen & Wojdynski, 2019; Author, 2020).

According to inoculation theory (Compton & Pfau, 2005; McGuire, 1964), just as people can be protected against a biological virus by administering a medical vaccine, so too can people be protected from persuasion by disclosing forthcoming persuasive efforts. In both situations, exposure – to either a vaccine or a disclosure – leads to less susceptibility. While the traditional understanding of the inoculation process involves a message that both forewarns of a persuasive attempt as well as refutes arguments in the forthcoming content, studies have called into question

the requirement of preemptive refutations. That is, a disclosure, on its own, has been found to inoculate people against a *type* of message – such as native advertising disguised as a journalistic article – rather than the *content* of the message (Author, forthcoming; Banas & Miller, 2013). This is consistent with earlier work on warnings, more generally (Petty & Cacioppo, 1977). Native advertising disclosures, like warnings, motivate individuals to more fully consider what they expect to see from journalistic publishers: news rather than ads camouflaged as news.

Sponsorship disclosures

In the U.S., the FTC requires "clear and conspicuous" disclosure of commercial content (FTC, 2015). Guidelines suggest that 1) promotional messages must be transparent about their commercial nature, 2) the required nature of transparency is situation specific, and 3) disclosures must be clear and prominent. While the logic is to trigger persuasion knowledge, which elevates the likelihood of advertising recognition, critics indicate that the FTC's standards are ambiguous and have led to a plethora of "wiggle words" (Garfield, 2014) that are vague. For instance, while language such as "sponsored content" is often used, so are neologisms such as "from around the web" or "paid post." As a result, some consumers do not understand what these words mean, and the persuasion knowledge process fails to inoculate readers. Consequently, the boundaries that are supposed to divide the business (advertising) side of journalism from the editorial (news) side have blurred (Coddington, 2015; Ferrer Conill & Karlsson, 2019; Li, 2019). Without a clear distinction – in language people understand – of whether the source of information is commercial or journalistic, news consumers lose their ability to choose whether they want to engage with certain types of content and cannot accurately determine how much credibility they ascribe to it (FTC, 2015).

In addition to the inconsistent clarity of language employed in disclosures, their actual implementation is not absolute in the digital news industry either. Some research has found that sponsorship disclosure in native advertising was not common – at least in 2014 – as nearly half of sampled native advertisements from news websites lacked a disclosure (Wang & Li, 2017). Other research, however, found that although most of the sampled native ads on news sites did include a sponsor disclosure, the language clarity and prominence of the disclosures varied and were sometimes hard to understand or difficult to see (An et al., 2019; Ferrer Conill, 2016; Keib & Tatge, 2016). For instance, even if straightforward language was used – such as "advertisement" – some publishers minimized the visual prominence of disclosures by using small font sizes or font colors that blend in with the background (Einstein, 2016; Sirrah, 2019; van der Goot, Zandbergen, & van Reijmersdal, 2019). Taken together, these studies indicate disclosures continue to lack in clarity and standardization which may result in confusion among consumers and failure to protect them from persuasive attempts. Indeed, recent experimental studies have shown that most people are unable to distinguish native advertising from journalistic articles even when disclosures are present (Amazeen & Muddiman, 2018; Amazeen & Wojdynski, 2019, 2020; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016).[1]

Thus, consistent with the theoretical premises of the PKM and inoculation theory, the federally mandated disclosures on native advertising serve as a warning mechanism to trigger recognition or knowledge of a persuasive attempt. However, theory and practice do not always align. Because of the minimal empirical research in the *actual* use of disclosures on news websites and the evolving practices in the industry, a research question is posed:

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[1] One exception is Krouwer, Poels, and Paulussen (2020) who demonstrated higher levels of ad recognition. However, the goal of the study was to test the effects of more detailed disclosures that are not currently in use. Moreover, their operationalization and coding of this measure differed from other studies.

RQ1:   How common is the presence of native advertising disclosures on leading U.S.

digital news websites?

Not only is the presence of a disclosure in the native advertisement itself an FTC requirement, but with the growth of social networking sites the sponsored nature of the content must also be carried over when article sharing services are employed (FTC, 2015). For instance, consumers can now click on a single icon to share content from across the internet with their followers on Facebook, Twitter, or other social media. Research has shown that when shared on Facebook, more than half of native advertisements contain no disclosure (An et al., 2019). That is, even though a native ad that looks like a news article may contain an FTC-mandated disclosure on its host page, it does not always carry over if someone shares the content by posting it to social media. Beyond Facebook, Twitter is an influential and popular microblogging site that also offers individuals (and brands) the opportunity to discuss and share news, entertainment, sports, and politics as well as product information and advertising (Jin & Phua, 2014). Yet, no academic studies have assessed whether and how native advertising disclosures carry over from digital news articles to Twitter.

Just as we can leverage the theoretical frameworks of the PKM and inoculation theory from which to predict that native advertising disclosures serve to forewarn readers about a persuasive attempt on news websites in order to induce resistance, so too are they expected to trigger persuasion knowledge when present on social media. But the limited literature on native advertising disclosures in social media again prompts another research question:

RQ2:   How common is the presence of native advertising disclosures in Tweets that

share links to native advertising articles from leading US digital news sites?

Sharing practices, eWOM, and persuasion

Beyond the mere presence of disclosures on landing pages and in tweets, the commentary that often accompanies social media posts can offer important clues about how the content is perceived. Indeed, drawing from the principles of early studies of interpersonal communication and adoption of innovations (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Ryan & Gross, 1943), word-of-mouth is a key factor influencing decision making, an outcome of persuasion. With the evolution of digital technology, this concept has been extended online and renamed "electronic word-of-mouth" – or eWOM communication – and defined in the marketing literature as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39).

The conversations consumers have about brands and media messages can be considered a form of eWOM (Campbell, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2011; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Importantly, just as native advertising attempts to benefit from the perceived credibility of a presumably independent and objective news publisher (Ferrer Conill & Karlsson, 2019; Serazio, 2019), so too does eWOM benefit because it originates from consumers – who are perceived as more credible – rather than a self-interested brand (Foux, 2006; Hayes et al., 2019; O'Neil & Eisenmann, 2017). This is consistent with past research on traditional word-of-mouth communication demonstrating that source credibility affects persuasion (Hovland & Weiss, 1951).

In addition to the greater perceived credibility of consumers over brands, the influence of eWOM is also affected by the information direction – or valence – of an eWOM message configuration (Park & Lee, 2009). In the offline world, the negativity effect suggests that people place more importance on negative information than positive information when forming

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evaluations (Arndt, 1967; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). This effect carries over to the online context where negative eWOM was found to have a greater effect on brand credibility and purchase intent than did positive eWOM (Park & Lee, 2009). People are also more likely to share negative eWOM if they believe the same situation could happen to them (Bi, Zhang, & Ha, 2019), such as being deceived by commercial content disguised as an article.

Consistent with the framework of the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994), consumers often react negatively once they recognize a digital news article is advertising rather than news (Amazeen & Muddiman, 2018; Amazeen & Wojdynski, 2020; Wojdynski, 2016; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016; Wu et al., 2016). Furthermore, consistent with inoculation theory and resistance to persuasion (McGuire, 1964), native advertising recognition has also been shown to generate negative cognitive thoughts in laboratory experiments (Amazeen & Bucy, 2019; Amazeen & Wojdynski, 2019; Author, forthcoming). What has yet to be studied, however, is whether and the degree to which eWOM responses to *actual* native advertisements in the field also elicit this negativity. Moreover, emerging from the literature on inoculation theory (McGuire, 1964) is a concept referred to as "postinoculation talk" – or PIT – which suggests that following successful inoculation against a persuasive attempt, people are more likely to engage in PIT, a form of word-of-mouth communication (Ivanov et al., 2015). Inoculation researchers have theorized that inoculation-consistent information is spread via WOM communication (Compton & Pfau, 2009). Given that a native advertising disclosure serves to inoculate audiences from persuasive influence (Amazeen & Wojdynski, 2019; Author, 2020), it stands to reason that in this context, PIT would exist on social media as negative eWOM.

However, because it is known that intentions to share online content are negatively affected when people recognize a message has a persuasive intent (Hsieh, Hsieh, & Tang, 2012;

Wojdynski, 2016; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016), some marketing researchers have encouraged disguising persuasive intent to foster sharing behavior (Hsieh et al., 2012). To be sure, advertisers have pressured news publishers to minimize and even *exclude* disclosures (Einstein, 2016; Sirrah, 2019; van der Goot et al., 2019). Consequently, the lack of standardization in disclosure language and prominence as well as the inconsistent presence of disclosures at all (An et al., 2019; Ferrer Conill, 2016; Keib & Tatge, 2016; Wang & Li, 2017) suggest potential for a breakdown in the persuasion knowledge process whereby many people who encounter native advertising in the field may not recognize it as such.

Experimental lab findings provide evidence that this concern is warranted. Typically, fewer than one in four individuals are able to recognize native advertising in digital news contexts even with typical disclosures (Amazeen & Muddiman, 2018; Amazeen & Wojdynski, 2019, 2020; Wojdynski, 2016; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). At the same time, recent studies have shown that the majority of eWOM generated on Facebook and Twitter exhibits expressions of self-enhancement; that is, the desire to promote a positive self-image (Vargo, Gangadharbatla, & Hopp, 2019). The result is, across social media platforms, that eWOM content is personal and predominantly positive. Given the foregoing, it is predicted that the eWOM associated with native advertising content shared in social media is unlikely to be negatively valenced unless a disclosure is present.

H1:   Posts with original text on Twitter (e.g. organic or quoted retweets) that include a
        link to a native advertisement are more likely to be positively or neutrally
        valenced than negatively valenced.

H2:   The presence of a disclosure in a Tweet is a contributory moderator of the

relationship between post type (with original text ==vs. retweets==) and negatively

valenced text.

Methods

Data collection

We used Social Studio's Radian6 (Kim et al., 2013; Stavrakantonakis et al., 2012)

application programming interface (API) to identify publicly available Tweets that contained

hyperlinks to sponsored articles from *The Wall Street Journal* (59.4%), *Business Insider*

(24.4%), *The Washington Post* (10.5%), *The New York Times* (5.4%), and *Politico* (0.4%). The

Radian6 API has a historical archive of Twitter's Firehose that is searchable. These digital news

publishers were chosen because preliminary examination identified them as having robust

sponsored content offerings, because they are prominent news publications, and – most critically

– because their stories could be easily identified using hyperlink search parameters. For example,

a search for the domain and tree "nytimes.com/paidpost" in the expanded hyperlink metadata of

a Tweet on Twitter returns all sponsored content articles on the site that are in the Radian6

platform.

Social Studio has a 3-year archive of historical tweets. Tweets were downloaded for the

time period of January 17, 2016 to January 16, 2019. In all, 12,381 Tweets containing links to

native advertising were downloaded. For the analyses here, additional information about the

Tweets was required, including Tweet metadata and user profile information that is not available

via the Radian6 API. To address this, we used the ids of Tweets returned from the Radian6

search to "hydrate" the Tweets using the Python package Birdy (Xu & Zhang, 2018; Walsh,

2018). 9,480 Tweets were successfully hydrated. Tweets that were not hydrated were solely due

to the fact that the author had either: since deleted the tweet, deleted their account, or turned their account settings to private. In any of these cases, using such Tweets in the analysis would have been against Twitter's terms of service, and as such, these Tweets needed to be removed regardless of hydration (McCreadie et al., 2012). Thus, the full sampling frame is $N = 9,480$. A sample was extracted, as described below, for coding by humans.

Measures

Post type. Based upon the user profile information from the Twitter API, Tweet metadata were identified as being one of three types. Organic posts (60%) were created by the account holder. Retweets (40%) were posts that were publicly shared with an account's followers. Quoted Tweets (< 0.5%) were publicly shared Tweets to which original text was added. Posts with original text include both organic posts and quoted Tweets. Retweeted posts do not contain original text generated by the account holder.

Negative valence. Despite attempts to automate the coding of valence using IBM Watson tone analyzer and Google's Natural Language sentiment analysis, verification by humans found the results unreliable. The automated programs were unable to distinguish between negative sentiment that was part of the article itself versus that which was generated by the user. Thus, a random sample of $n = 1,539$ Tweets was evaluated by human coders to assess valence. Twelve Tweets were identified as linking to a genuine news article rather than native advertising and were thus omitted leaving $n = 1,527$ for analysis. Following Amazeen and Wojdynski (2019), Tweets were coded as negative if they challenged, opposed, or were skeptical of the linked native advertising article, or if they mentioned undesirable attributes/associations/affect toward the topic or contents in the article (1 = negative, 0 = not negative). Many Tweets repeated text from the article or headline. For example, while "Colombia's Cocaine Cartels Had a Cash Flow

Problem" was coded as negative by automated software, our human coders were able to understand that this was the title of the article and thus were instructed to code this as a neutral comment because it is merely repeating content from the native advertisement. After a period of training, two research assistants evaluated a random sample of 300 Tweets for polarity (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.75$). Although an alpha value on the low end of acceptability was achieved despite few disagreements between coders (6 in 300 cases), this often occurs with dichotomous variables where the presence of one of the values is rare – such as negative text about native advertising disguised as news. In such cases, percent agreement (98%) is an acceptable measure of reliability (de Swert, 2012; Li, 2019). Among all human-coded Tweets, 95% were positive or neutrally valenced and 5% were negatively valenced.

Disclosure presence. Research assistants reviewed the random sample of Tweets ($n = 1,527$) for the presence of disclosures. An item was coded as having a disclosure if it included any language identifying the content as advertising (such as #ad, ad, advertising, advertisement, advertorial, #sp, spon, sponsored content, partner content, paid program, paid post, content from [brand], propaganda, or similar). The landing pages of articles that were hyperlinked in Tweets were examined for disclosures (RQ1) as was content contained in each Tweet(RQ2): both the text entered by users as well as any "Twitter Card" information which may contain a title, summary, and/or preview image of the article accompanying a post as programmed by the publisher (Twitter, n.d.c.). Ambiguous cases were reviewed by the lead author. Within the sample of tweets, 26% had a disclosure in the text of the post and 47% of Twitter Cards contained a disclosure.

Results

The first research question (RQ1) examined the proportion of native advertising articles on digital news websites that contained a disclosure. A frequencies analysis[2] revealed that among all accessible articles, every one contained a disclosure when its hyperlink that was shared on Twitter was clicked through to the article landing page.[3]

Examining the presence or absence of disclosures in Tweets that shared links to native advertising content was the focus of RQ2. Among organic posts – those created by the account holder – only 27% of users included any type of disclosure language such as "ad," "paid post," or "sponsored content" in the text of their tweet. When an organic post was accompanied by a Twitter Card of an article, just under half (48%) contained a disclosure in the title or summary. Among the organic posts with no disclosures in the Twitter Card, 47% were from *Business Insider*, 24% were from the *Washington Post*, 14% were from the *New York Times*, 13% were from the *Wall Street Journal*, and 2% were from *Politico*. Many organic posts contained a disclosure in neither location (45%) while 36% contained one in either the text or the Twitter Card. In 18% of tweets, disclosures were contained in both the text and in the Twitter Card.

The first hypothesis (H1) proposed that the original text of Tweets (via organic posts or quoted retweets) that include a link to a native advertisement were more likely to be positive or neutral than negatively valenced. Cross tabulations between the type of post and presence of negative text revealed that 95% of Tweets were positive or neutral in valence. Only 4% of Tweets were negatively valenced. Thus, H1 is supported.

Although most Tweets were expected to be positive or neutral in valence, H2 anticipated that the presence of a disclosure would contribute to negative moderation of the valence of original text in Tweets. To examine this relationship, a binomial logistic regression was specified

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[2] All analyses were conducted using IBM's SPSS v.24.
[3] Eight percent (8%) of articles were no longer accessible at the time of data analysis.

with the presence or absence of a negative Tweet as the dependent variable. The independent variables were the type of post (presence/absence of original text), the presence/absence of a disclosure (anywhere in the Tweet including in the text or in the Twitter Card), and an interaction between the two. The model was significant [χ^2(3, 1093) = 40.25, $p < .001$; Cox & Snell = .04, Nagelkerke = .10]. As shown in Figure 1, the interaction was significant ($b = -2.37$, $SE = 1.10$, $\beta = 0.09$, $p < .05$). The presence of a disclosure contributed to an increase in the proportion of negatively-valenced Tweets with original text ($z = 2.56$, $p < .01$, one-tailed) as well as with no original text (i.e. retweets, $z = 5.01$, $p < .01$, one-tailed). In addition to the significant coefficient for the interaction, the coefficient for the presence of a disclosure was also significant ($b = 3.39$, $SE = 1.02$, $\beta = 29.60$, $p < .001$) suggesting that disclosures were the primary driver of negative text. Moreover, on its own, the type of post was not a significant predictor of negativity ($b = 1.82$, $SE = 1.07$, $\beta = 6.19$, $p > .05$). These results indicate support for H2.

-- Insert Figure 1 about here –

Discussion

This study sought to examine current native advertising disclosure practices of digital news publishers and the corresponding responses of Twitter users by leveraging the theoretical frameworks of the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and inoculation theory (McGuire, 1964). The results are consistent with prior experimental lab research showing the inoculating effects of disclosures (Amazeen & Wojdynski, 2019; Author, 2020). That is, the presence of a disclosure in a Tweet increased the odds that the accompanying text in a post was negative in nature. According to inoculation theory, this type of reaction is precisely what is expected when individuals resist an attempt at persuasion (Compton & Pfau, 2009; Fransen, et al., 2015; Jacks & Cameron, 2003). Although the present study cannot make causal attributions, it offers the

highest level of external validity in that it is a field study based upon *actual* behavior of both publishers and Twitter users. Thus, this finding is critical for policy makers in demonstrating whether disclosures are functioning as intended. Our study is the first – to our knowledge – to provide actual evidence from the field confirming that consumers behave in a way that is consistent with the premise of inoculation theory in the context of native advertising. By analyzing the tone of eWOM, we show that the original text of Tweets containing native advertising disclosures were more likely to be negatively valenced. In so doing, we extend theory as it relates to the concept of postinoculation talk (Ivanov et al., 2015) showing how inoculation functions not just within an individual, but when messages are shared between people on social media, as well.

Although previous research found that nearly half of publishers failed to disclose native ads on their news sites (Wang & Li, 2017), these findings were from 2014 – prior to the FTC's 2015 disclosure guidance. The present findings are consistent with research after 2015 (An et al., 2019; Ferrer Conill, 2016; Keib & Tatge, 2016): publisher landing pages of native advertising articles reliably contained native advertising disclosures. Nonetheless, recent reports indicate this is still not always the case. Publishers are pressured by brands to minimize and even omit disclosures (Einstein, 2016; Sirrah, 2019). A highly publicized case in point was when *Teen Vogue* ran an article in January 2020 entitled, "How Facebook is Helping Ensure the Integrity of the 2020 Election" without any disclosures indicating the article was sponsored by Facebook. A link to the article was shared on Facebook by its Chief Operating Officer, Sheryl Sandberg – without disclosure – so that it looked like genuine journalism to any of her followers. This is problematic not only because readers of the publication were deceived about the source of the content, but also because attention is a limited resource. By taking up readers' time and attention

with covert paid content that is favorable to Facebook, less time remains for readers to inform themselves with more objective journalistic accounts of the problems that were attributed to Facebook during the 2016 U.S. election and beyond (Morse, 2019; Sirrah, 2019).

Despite the encouraging findings from the present study regarding the consistent presence of native advertising disclosures on publisher website landing pages, these disclosures often disappeared on Twitter. A little over half of Tweets that organically shared links to native advertising contained no disclosures. For example, Figure 2 shows a native advertisement produced by the *Washington Post's* Brand Studio that was shared on Twitter. There are no disclosures in the original text of the Tweet or in the accompanying Twitter Card. To anyone scrolling past this post in their Twitter feed, it would appear this user is sharing a journalistic article from the *Washington Post*. This finding is consistent with the only other study known to assess native advertising content on social media wherein less than half of the native ads shared on Facebook contained a disclosure (An et al., 2019). Taken together, these studies are concerning because people who share news articles on social media – nearly 60% of people in one study – often do not read the article before sharing it (Bright, 2016; Gabielkov et al., 2016). That is, they may simply pass along shared content they see on social media without clicking through to the actual article and therefore may not realize they are sharing commercial content if a disclosure is lacking.

-- Insert Figure 2 about here --

Only a little more than one in four people who added original text to their post sharing a link to a native advertisement also included a disclosure identifying the content as commercial in nature. This finding suggests that it is unreasonable to expect lay public users to know when to insert these disclosures particularly if they, themselves, may be deceived by the origin of the

content. Nor should it be the responsibility of lay users to figure out when to attach disclosures to commercial content they find online; it is the responsibility of the advertisers and publishers to have the content clearly labeled at the point of origin. More importantly, the results indicate that over half (52%) of the Twitter Cards accompanying a Tweet, which are automated by the publisher, included no disclosure. Given that this sharing process is automated, the lack of disclosures seems to be a blatant breach by publishers of the FTC (2015) requirements, particularly *Business Insider* and the *Washington Post*, the two most frequent violators.

Indeed, an industry study by MediaRadar noted that it is the publishers, rather than the advertisers, that are not following the FTC rules (Sirrah, 2019). Moreover, while this study was premised upon U.S. publishers and guidelines established by the FTC, the European Union has similar guidelines in the Unfair Commercial Practice Directive (Boerman, 2018). Thus, a policy recommendation to combat this lack of compliance in both the U.S. and the E.U. should involve a digital watermark that must be embedded in any type of native advertising content such that it cannot be modified or removed when reposting elsewhere. By doing so, disclosures will no longer be able to "disappear" when shared on social media, preventing consumers from being able to properly identify the type of content they are encountering. Beyond requiring an embedded digital watermark, regulators should also consider standardizing disclosures (Campbell & Grimm, 2019) or offering more specific disclosure guidelines that require a calculated visibility ratio index based upon the percentage of contrast between the disclosure text and background color as well as the font size. Scales have been developed to measure perceived sponsorship transparency that can be used to assess the ideal visibility ratio (Wojdynski, Evans, & Hoy, 2018). This will further increase the likelihood that disclosures succeed in achieving their intended purpose of forewarning consumers about commercial content.

It is important to acknowledge that although recognition of native advertising frequently results in negative responses from audiences, this is not the only type of response that is elicited (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Some people are receptive to native advertising if it provides useful content (Hayes et al., 2019; Krouwer, Poels, & Paulussen, 2019; Sweetser et al., 2016). Furthermore, disclosures that are perceived as more transparent can minimize negativity (Amazeen & Wojdynski, 2019; Krouwer et al., 2020). Examples of opposing reactions to the recognition of a native advertisement from the present study are shown in Figure 3. In the Tweet on the left, the individual has a negative reaction to a native ad in the *New York Times*, lamenting its deceptiveness. In contrast, the Tweet on the right shows a positive response to a different *Times* native ad.

-- Insert Figure 3 about here –

A closer examination of the two images, however, reveals additional factors to consider beyond the mere presence of a disclosure. Different types of disclosure language may be more likely to elicit negative reactions from readers than others. Beyond the language of the disclosure, the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994) suggests that prior attitudes toward a sponsor and the topic or product may differentially influence attitudes. Furthermore, while prior attitudes toward a sponsor or product may influence responses, the valence of attitudes may also be influenced by the context in which the content is presented. People respond differently to native advertising depending upon the digital news context with greater negativity toward native ads presented as hard news (Amazeen, 2020). The two examples provided in the current study align with this prior research. In the first example, negative attitudes toward the China native ad may be because the content is presented in a hard-news context. In contrast, the second example portrays the practices of a female-owned dairy company as more of a human-interest soft-news

story. Nonetheless, while the present study confirms that people who share native advertising on Twitter are more likely to respond with negative comments when a disclosure is present, future research is needed to narrow down the specific factors that condition this likelihood.

Other limitations need acknowledgement, as well. While this sample included over 1,500 human-coded entries, the successful automation of such a process – using programs such as IBM Watson's tone analyzer or Google's Natural Language sentiment analysis – will open up the opportunity to review much larger quantities of native advertising content across a wider variety of publishers. It should also be recognized that to facilitate coding and minimize the challenges of discriminating between positive and neutral comments, these categories were grouped together. While this obscures whether the 95% of Tweets with original text were 1% positive and 94% neutral or vice versa (or some other combination), the primary concern here is that the majority were not negatively valenced. However, when disclosures were present – as predicted – they had a negative moderating effect on the polarity of the comments. Nonetheless, this is a limitation of interpreting the results.

Finally, we acknowledge that the original sampling frame of leading U.S. news organizations is not necessarily representative of all native advertising content from digital news publishers. However, news publishers who prevent identification of advertising from their hyperlinks could not be tracked and thus were excluded from this study. It is reasonable to believe that publishers who make it difficult to identify advertising content on their sites may be less, rather than more, likely to comply with federal guidelines as they pertain to disclosures suggesting the findings from this study may overstate the likelihood of compliance. Moreover, although the present study focused on U.S.-based publishers, native advertising is in use globally

(Ferrer Conill, 2016). Since media use behaviors likely vary across countries, future research warrants a global perspective.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature on native advertising and journalism in several ways. First, it suggests that the theoretical premise behind regulators' use of disclosures does, indeed, correspond with greater consumer resistance in practice. While this relationship has been previously demonstrated in laboratory experiments (Amazeen & Wojdynski, 2019; Author, 2020), this is the first study to reveal this relationship in the wild. Moreover, the present study extends our understanding of what happens to native advertising disclosures once they leave a publisher's website. When posted to Twitter, in half the cases the disclosures disappeared. This is, of course, alarming as without a disclosure, news consumers are unlikely to be able to distinguish genuine journalism from commercial content (Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2016; Wojdynski & Evans, 2020). It also demonstrates that publishers running afoul of federal disclosure mandates on social media is not isolated, but common.

Most of the debate surrounding native advertising within journalism studies has revolved around news organizations and publishers. For the most part, native advertising and its presentation has not been studied beyond news outlets. While publishers are generally complying with disclosure mandates on their websites (although the previously mentioned Facebook anecdote reminds us that this is not always so), these results suggest they are not taking responsibility for what happens to the commercial content when it leaves their websites despite being required to do so by the FTC. It is in this way that publisher practices may be undermining the journalism industry rather than supporting it (Amazeen, 2020; Amazeen & Muddiman, 2018; Einstein, 2016; Serazio, 2019; Sirrah, 2019). By blurring the line between the editorial and

business side of news they are risking the trust and legitimacy that audiences bestow upon them to define what is and is not news (Coddington, 2015; Ferrer Conill & Karlsson, 2018).

Prioritizing the sharing of commercial content over news content on social media by way of contractual obligations, while frequently omitting required disclosures (Sirrah, 2019), also raises questions about publishers' autonomy and their commitment to serving the public. Commercial interests are infiltrating and distorting journalistic independence, and on social media the lack of disclosures may have even broader influence, such as the disruption of news agendas. At a time when an accurately informed citizenry is more important than ever, publishers and policy makers must take a hard look at the implications of native advertising both within the newsroom as well as beyond it.

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Figure 1. Interaction Between Presence of Native Advertising Disclosure and Presence of

Original Text on Negativity
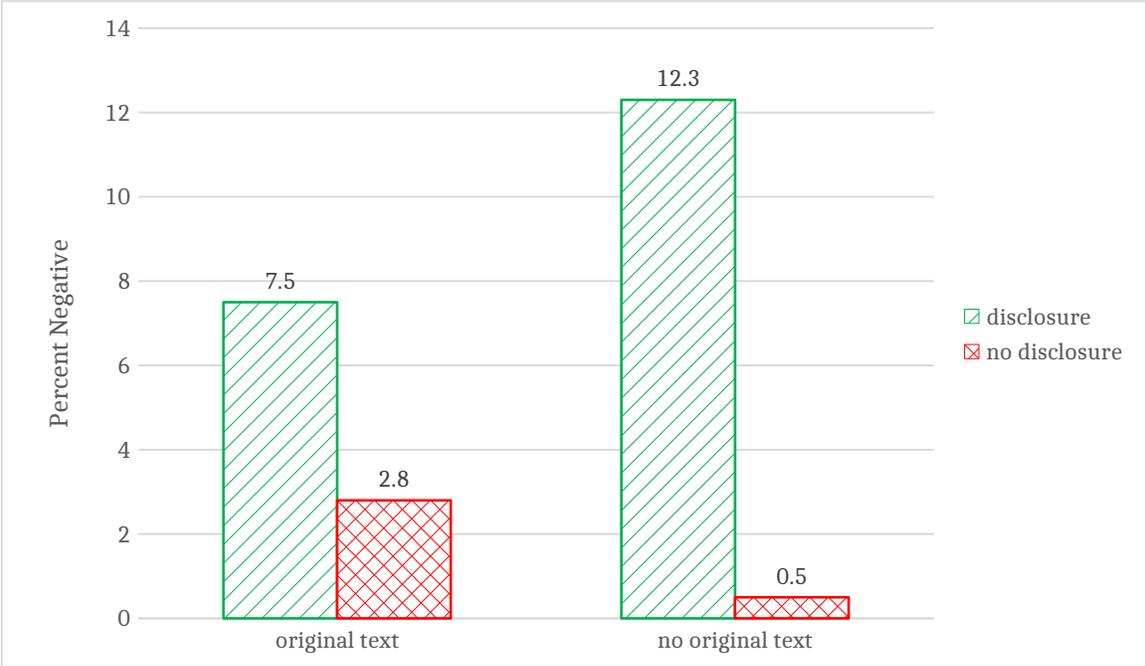
Note: $n = 1,096$. Differences are significant at $p < .01$.

Figure 2. *Washington Post* Native Advertisement Shared on Twitter

Figure 3. *New York Times* Native Advertisements Shared on Twitter