

ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD AND READERS' PERCEPTIONS OF NATIVE
ADVERTISING ON NEWS WEBSITES

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ABSTRACT

This research examines native advertising on news websites through the lens of the Elaboration Likelihood Model. It seeks to determine factors that influence whether readers identify and trust native advertisements. These ads often appear and read similar to real news stories that have been written by journalists rather than sponsored content meant to persuade. Native advertisements have become prevalent on many news websites, with some outlets having in-house studios dedicated to creating them. They are designed to blend in with the rest of the website and not detract from it. There have been several recent studies on native advertisements, but there are still gaps, such as the effects of different types of design and the use of mobile phones, which the majority of mobile ads are targeted toward. For this study, an experiment was conducted that exposed four groups of participants to one of four articles, two of which were real stories and two of which were native advertisements. The results indicate that very few factors, relative to the readers or the native advertisements, bear any relation to readers' identification of the ads. No matter what, very few are able to tell the difference between news and native ads. But even after being made aware of the nature of native ads, people seem not to care.

DEDICATION

To my grandpa, who was my greatest influence. Of all the people I have ever known, he was the most good. I miss him dearly.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

ELM	Elaboration Likelihood Model
a	Cronbach's index of reliability
F	Fisher's F ratio: A ration of two variances
M	Mean: sum of a set of measurements divided by the number of measurements in the set
p	Probability associated with the occurrence under the null hypothesis of a value as extreme as or more extreme than the observed value
SD	Standard deviation: amount of variation of dispersion from the mean
N	Population size
r	Pearson product-moment correlation
χ^2	chi-squared
$<$	Less than
$=$	Equal to

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INTRODUCTION

Native advertisements are those that blend into true journalism content, selling products and experiences under the disguise of being news stories. They are designed to match the look and feel of the platform they are displayed on and the content they are surrounded by. On news websites, in addition to fitting in the design of the sites, they are presented as articles that employ journalistic-style writing and formatting. In fact, the writing in these advertisements is often excellent, meeting high journalistic standards in terms of writing style, sourcing, and other journalism norms. Indeed, journalists praised a 2014 native ad sponsored by Netflix and published on *The New York Times* website, “Women Inmates: Why the Male Model Doesn’t Work,” as a great example of journalism (Schauster, Ferrucci, & Neill, 2016). This ad was part of Netflix’s promotion campaign for its show, *Orange is the New Black*.

Native advertising has flourished in the digital era, when the competition for screen space is fierce and users demand seamless experiences for their content. Native ads made up \$4.7 billion of news website advertising revenue in 2013 and were expected to account for \$21 billion in 2018 (Wojdynski & Golan, 2016). More recent estimates place the number at \$32.9 billion for 2018, more than half of digital display spending (eMarketer, 2018).

Prominent news organizations such as *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* have started in-house brand studios that create native ads, which the news organizations call sponsored content. The visual appeal of the content frequently exceeds even that of the organizations’ typical news story. Because of the journalistic format and professional design of these ads, consumers can easily be fooled into believing that they are not ads at all, but legitimate news

stories (Wojdyski, 2016). They can be convinced that the ads were written by journalists rather than advertisers and PR practitioners (Krouwer & Poels, 2017). They can assume the information is unbiased and not intended to persuade. Native ads are typically distinguished from news stories mainly by a “disclosure label,” which is mostly ineffective (Wojdyski, 2016).

All of these issues surrounding native advertisements raise ethical questions for journalists. Native advertising can be a valuable revenue source for news organizations, but does it damage readers’ perceptions of the news organizations’ credibility? Are they misleading readers by allowing advertisements that are too similar to editorial content? Can news organizations seemingly endorse sponsored content, as long as there is an apparently inadequate disclosure statement included?

Some journalists believe that the differences between editorial content and sponsored content are obvious. A journalist in a study conducted by Schauster, Ferrucci, and Neill (2016) said, “The content is just not journalistic. It stands out so much on our site because anybody with half a brain could easily see that this content comes from a very different perspective” (p. 1,417). But research does not tend to agree with this view. While the differences might be apparent to a trained journalist, who is well-versed in the operation of newsrooms and the routines of working journalists, the average reader cannot identify them so easily. Indeed, other journalists are not so convinced that native ads are okay. Another journalist from the Schauster, Ferrucci, and Neill (2016) study said, “Some people will say the ad is labeled so it’s not bad. That’s crap. If it’s labeled well, it’s still trying to pass itself off as journalism. Why use those conventions otherwise?” (p. 1,415). In addition, the average reader might not be motivated enough to determine which stories are real and which are fake on news websites.

Along with an ethical dilemma, there is a more practical one. If readers are aware that news organizations are employing these native ads, the news organizations' credibility may be harmed. When journalists are already suffering from declining trust and legitimate news is often called fake, reporters and editors cannot afford to give readers more excuses to not trust them (Knight Foundation, 2018). Given this potential problem, the present thesis examines these questions: What determines whether readers recognize native ads, and how do native ads affect readers' attitudes toward the news organization and ad sponsor? The study seeks to answer these questions through an experiment based in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). It specifically examines readers' ability and motivation to process the information they read in native advertisements published by the *Washington Post*. Knowing what causes readers to distinguish sponsored from editorial content, news organizations can take steps to ensure that more readers will know when an ad is an ad. They may be able to avoid certain design elements that hinder identification or target ads to individuals who may be more motivated to examine them closely.

The next chapter reviews literature relevant to native advertising, credibility, and ELM. All three subjects are interconnected and important to the present study. ELM influences how much people pay attention to native advertising, and although the model is never explicitly connected, some of its elements are alluded to in native ad literature. The credibility of news organizations and advertisers influence perceptions of native ads, in the present study viewed through the lens of ELM, but perceptions of native ads in turn may influence the perceived credibility of those organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Native Advertising

Scholars have defined native advertising as a “means of presenting consumers with a commercial persuasive message that resembles the non-third-party content provided by the same publisher” (Wu et al., 2016, p. 1,494); “any paid advertising that takes the specific form and appearance of editorial content from the publisher itself” (Wojdynski & Evans, 2016, p. 157); and “branded content that is integrated in or similar to the format or design of the platform, including the social engagement features of the platform” (Lee, Kim, & Ham, 2016, p. 1,427).

All these definitions carry the same idea: unobtrusive advertisements designed to complement the style of the platform they inhabit. Unlike many advertisements, they do not scream their intentions to the viewer. Instead, they whisper their persuasive nature. Because native ads blend in so well with their surroundings, Wu et al. (2016) argued that consumers met with the ads typically do not engage in critical examination of them.

A typical example of a news site native advertisement will have a standard “newsy” headline with a kicker below. (For an example, see Appendix A). Some contain a byline as well. It will have a clean, simple design with the short paragraph format often seen in journalistic writing. It may make use of quotes from its supposed sources. It will often have photos or videos, and they may look natural or candid. The identifying mark of the ad is usually a banner that names the sponsor of the ad but also prominently features the name of the news organization. This type of native advertisement has the greatest potential for deception. Some native ads bear

less resemblance to a news article format and more to a typical advertisement while maintaining consistency with the overall website design.

Wojdyski (2016) found that viewers of native advertising do not engage in critical evaluation because they frequently miss or misinterpret the disclosures that identify the advertisements as sponsored content. But a critical examination is important if viewers are to avoid being misled, perhaps even more so than for traditional ads or other types of online content. As Wojdyski noted, “In native ads, the publisher has a financial incentive to portray a particular company or product in a light that is favorable or uncritical” (p. 1,476). Despite a 90% exposure rate to the disclosure in the Wojdyski study, only 40% of participants correctly identified the articles as paid ads. The author further demonstrated the appearance of native advertisements in a form that consumers dissociate from advertising and associate with non-sponsored news content causes them to be less apt to recognize the content as sponsored.

When viewers are not aware that the content is sponsored, they tend to perceive it as credible, particularly when their opinions of both the media outlet and sponsor are high. But they still find the content credible when their opinions of the sponsor are low, because they believe that the media source is endorsing the sponsor, lending its own credibility (Wu et al., 2016).

Even when viewers are aware that the content is sponsored, there is little to no negative effect on their perceptions of credibility or attitudes toward the brand or sponsoring organization (Sweetster, Ahn, Golan, & Hockman, 2016). In fact, as long as consumers do not believe the content to be manipulative, they often have positive reactions to native advertising because of its nonintrusiveness (Lee, Kim & Ham, 2016). And knowing that the content is sponsored is not itself enough to cause consumers to believe they are being manipulated. Recognition of a disclosure actually leads them to find the content less deceptive. Perhaps that is because knowing

an article is sponsored seems to lead to some confusion over what parties were involved in its creation. Indeed, despite identifying the disclosure, viewers still frequently believe that the article was written by a journalist (Krouwer & Poels, 2017).

Additionally, there could be a third-person effect at work. People tend to believe that they are less susceptible than others to be influenced by messages. This is especially true when the message and its persuasive effect are unwanted (Eisend, 2017). Therefore, people who encounter a native advertisement and are aware or informed of the nature of it may not believe it to be manipulative, because they think they are smart enough not to be tricked. Yet they may still believe that other people would be unwittingly persuaded by the same ad.

Also, somewhat surprisingly, Lee, Kim and Ham (2016) found that information-seeking individuals had more positive attitudes toward native advertisements. This is perhaps explained by Sweetster, Ahn, Golan, and Hochman (2016), who argued that native advertising is not bound by the tradition dichotomy of informational value and persuasive value. That is, a native advertisement does not have to be primarily informational or persuasive, and a persuasive intent does not preclude readers from accepting its information. Rather, the information in a native advertisement may facilitate persuasion even when readers are aware they are being persuaded.

This informational value is especially important for readers who are highly involved with the subject of the native ad, meaning they care deeply about the topic and may have a personal stake in it. Readers who are interested in the subject matter, whether they find some practical or entertainment value or merely want to satisfy some curiosity, have better attitudes toward not only the article itself, but also the news organization and native advertising as a whole. In fact, when highly involved individuals recognize the disclosure, they find the article even more credible. On the other hand, those who have low involvement with the subject have lower

perceptions of credibility (Krouwer & Poels, 2017). These results could be contrary to what would be expected from ELM, which will be explored later in this chapter.

Related to entertainment value, Lee, Kim, and Ham (2016) stated that “narrative realism” causes enjoyment, and when a product is placed into an enjoyable narrative, consumers should have more positive opinions of it (p. 1,430). A typical news outlet native advertisement should fit that description well. With its basis in journalistic form, it is a real, or realistic, narrative. Viewers should then have active engagement with these native ads and therefore hold more positive attitudes toward the brands they promote.

The majority of scholarly articles discussing native advertising have emerged within the past few years, as the practice of native advertising has become ubiquitous. Research shows conflicting data on both the effectiveness and effects of disclosures. Studies such as those done by Wojdyski (2016) have found that disclosures are largely ineffective. Lee, Kim, and Ham (2016) pointed to data that showed, when they do work, disclosures have negative effects on viewers’ attitudes toward the advertising brand, because the viewers see sponsored content as manipulative and misleading. But that study also showed that perceived manipulateness had little effect on attitudes toward the advertisement or brand. Further, Sweetster, Ahn, Golan, and Hockman (2016) found no effect from disclosures on perceived credibility, and a study by Krouwer and Poels (2017) found positive effects.

Additionally, there seems to be an important gap in native advertising literature: the mobile space. The vast majority, 90%, of money spent on native advertising goes to mobile placements (eMarketer, 2018). This shouldn’t be surprising, given the amount of time people now spend on smartphones and tablets, on average more than three hours per day combined (Nielson, 2018). The smaller screen sizes of smartphones make every piece of real estate in high demand, and

along with consumers' high standards for apps, this creates a greater need for unobtrusive advertisements in that space (Olenski, 2017). Mobile native ads also generate 20-60% more engagement than banner ads, meaning viewers are more likely to read or share them (Meola, 2016).

These statistics are for all native advertising, and it is unclear how much spending goes toward news websites and apps, and how much more engagement those ads generate. But people today are constantly overloaded with information, and the mere fact that native ads are better able to grab people's attention, if only for a moment, makes them a powerful tool for advertisers. As Lanham (2006) pointed out, it is not information but attention that is a scarce resource. In the Digital Age, there is so much information to be sorted through that the majority of it is ignored. Native advertisements appear as news that people want to see, rather than the ads they truly are, to break through people's information screens. And smartphones' form allows much less room for news outlets' native ads to disclose their true nature.

Given the prevalence of mobile native ads and of mobile news consumption, it is important to understand whether viewing native ads on a mobile device elicits different reader perceptions of the ads than other devices. When people more often than not share articles without reading them because the headline caught their attention, mobile devices and native ads could be a troublesome combination (Dewey, 2016).

This discussion of native advertising naturally leads to a discussion of ethics. Native ads are not straightforward about their persuasive nature and appear in a form that people associate with real news. Their primary means of identification, the disclosure, has largely been shown to be ineffective, and readers must pay close attention to understand the content is advertising. Additionally, news organizations' credibility may be extended to the ads. All these factors have

ethical implications. Much of the discussion on native advertising ethics appears to center around the disclosure statement and ethical issues that arise from using disclosure statements that, intentionally or not, do not fully convey the nature of the ads, along with the problem of readers not understanding disclosures (Sweetster, Ahn, Golan, & Hochman, 2016; Wojdyski & Golan, 2016). But the disclosure is clearly not native advertising's sole ethical problem. Ultimately, all the ethical issues surrounding native ads boil down to a lack of transparency. Readers are not easily able to see behind the curtain to understand exactly what native ads are, who is creating and paying for them, and what their purpose is. Transparency is a fundamental piece of Kantian ethics, which requires that people be treated as a means unto themselves rather than a means to an end. Deception can only take place where there is a lack of transparency, and as Plaisance (2007) said, "[Deception] is morally objectionable because, by its very nature, it assaults our capacity for rational thought and thwarts the exercise of our free will" (p. 202).

Still, while both journalists and advertisers recognize the ethical issues of native ads, neither seems to want to take responsibility for them. In the Schauster, Ferrucci, and Neill (2016) study, both journalists and advertisers blamed each other for the ethical problems of native ads. One advertising executive said, "I don't think there's an ethical issue on the advertising side. We're paid to push the envelope. I rely on publishers to take up that ethical torch. They have their charge to be ethical and good reporters and have the division between advertising and content" (p. 1,418). Likewise, another ad executive said, "I do think much of the responsibility for [confusion about the difference between editorial content, sponsored content, and advertising content] is actually not from the brand or the advertising agency. I think it's from the publishing platform" (pp. 1,418-1,419). On the other hand, journalists in the study placed the onus on publishers and advertisers. One journalist asked, "Is it ever ethical to trick people? If it is, then

what we're doing is ethical. Or what publishers are doing, I should say" (p. 1,419). Another journalist seemed to disapprove of native ads, but also seemed to imply that news organizations were merely allowing advertisers to fool their readers rather than news organizations being active participants. "Our business is meant to deliver important and factual information to people. But, oh yeah, we're paying the bills by allowing advertisers the ability to trick people" (p. 1,419).

Credibility

Generally, news should be more credible than advertising. But how credible are native advertisements that blur the line between news and advertising? To answer that question, this section will identify the factors that influence credibility. Credibility is a matter of perception. "Credibility is not a characteristic inherent in a source, but a judgment made by the users themselves" (Johnson & Kaye, 2009, p. 175). Therefore, a news article or a native advertisement that might seem deserving of high or low credibility to a journalist, for example, may not be perceived so by a general audience. To understand the effects of native advertising's place on news sites and audience's recognition of a native ad on its credibility, it seems valuable to discuss the credibility of native advertising in the broader context of the credibility of online news and information in general.

Websites from mainstream news organizations such as *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* generally rate much higher on credibility scales than other information sources (Chung, Kim, & Kim, 2010; Chung, Nam, & Stefanone, 2012; Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). They also receive the majority of news-related web traffic (Chung, Kim, & Kim, 2010). Much of the reason for this seems to be the reputation and recognition of the news organizations. Their online

news receives the same level of credibility as their offline versions (Chung, Nam & Stefanone, 2012). In a study by Chung, Kim, and Kim (2010), mainstream online news was rated most fair, accurate, objective, informative, professional, working for the public good, and written by professional journalists. The most important of these characteristics in predicting credibility were the perceptions of professionalism and that the news was written by professional journalists, which were combined into a factor deemed “expertise.”

Age also plays a factor, as major news sites are seen as more credible by younger people (Chung, Nam, & Stefanone, 2012). That could indicate that greater familiarity with and utilization of online news and the internet in general lead to a higher perceived credibility. Indeed, Flanagin and Metzger (2007) found that greater internet use predicted higher online news credibility perceptions. However, Johnson and Kaye (2009) did not find that such a relationship applied to mainstream online news. In addition to their expertise, mainstream news sites are expected to be fair and balanced in their reporting. Although major news organizations enjoy the highest level of credibility online, online news overall receives a relatively high level of credibility. News websites in general receive higher ratings for both sponsor and message credibility than other types of websites (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). Message credibility is especially higher on news websites (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007).

Still, news sites are not the only online sources that audiences find credible. In a study by Johnson and Kaye (2009), participants rated blogs and issue-oriented websites as moderately to strongly credible. They also rated mass emails and political candidate sites as moderately credible. This finding seems to suggest that information from online sources that have a clear bias or agenda to promote a particular point of view are still seen as moderately credible. However, it is important to note that all participants in the Johnson and Kaye (2009) study

indicated that they had a high level of political interest. In addition, the more frequently an individual used an alternative online source for news, the more credible they perceived it. These factors are relevant to the later discussion of ELM.

There are four parts of online message credibility identified by Flanagin and Metzger (2007): source credibility, message credibility, site credibility, and sponsor credibility. The first is source credibility, i.e. whom the recipient believes the message came from. A message may be identified by the recipient as having a number of different sources, including the author, the sponsor of the website, and the medium through which the message is received. The source attribution is important for making judgments about online information, but the source that the recipient perceives may not always be the true source. In native advertisements, it is important that viewers identify the source as the advertiser. If not, they may apply the source credibility of a journalist or the news organization.

Commercial information, on the other hand, often rates lower on credibility scales. Viewers typically give less credence to information from sources that have an apparent persuasive intent (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). However, in the Flanagin and Metzger (2007) study, an e-commerce site that sold baby products had a higher-than-expected perceived credibility. The authors explained this result as possibly because the site also offered news about pregnancy and infant care. The mere presence of the commercial content alongside news improved its credibility. This has implications for native advertisements, which on news websites are surrounded by legitimate news stories.

The second aspect of credibility is message credibility, which depends on characteristics of the message itself. These can include the message's quality, accuracy, and language (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). As discussed previously, native advertisements on prominent news sites,

particularly *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, are generally of high quality and make use of journalistic language. The third aspect is website credibility, which is influenced by elements such as the design of the web page and the amount of information displayed on the screen. Other scholars have also identified website design and format as important factors in determining credibility (Chung, Nam, & Stefanone, 2012; Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). Again, native advertisements, at least on major news websites, tend to be well designed. The fourth aspect is sponsor credibility, or the credibility of the organization or individual responsible for the website. The sponsor can be the same as the source, or the sponsor can be the medium for a message from a different source. Sponsor credibility can depend on reputation or the personal experience of the message recipient. Because sponsor credibility is a factor in overall credibility, even if viewers of native ads do properly identify the source, the ads may still benefit from the credibility of news organizations, as pointed out in some native advertising research (Wu et al., 2016).

Mahone (2014) found that, in the case of a conspiracy theory presented as news, the presence of attribution did not significantly affect perceived credibility. Personal agreement with the message, however, did elicit more favorable credibility evaluations. Contrary to studies of general online news, greater usage of online news did not improve credibility in this case. The author believed low issue salience and involvement may have reduced readers' willingness or desire to determine the article's credibility. This also has implications for ELM. Mahone further argued that, although the article was identified as news by the website, readers may not have considered it to be news.

It may seem that a conspiracy has little relation to native advertising, but both are persuasive messages that take the form of news, and therefore, mechanisms of credibility should

be similar. Both should also invoke at least a moderate level of skepticism. But even when readers are skeptical, they more often than not fail to verify information (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). In a Flanagin and Metzger (2000) study, participants reported only rarely or occasionally verifying online information. As such, other aspects of credibility and agreement with the message may be more important.

Elaboration Likelihood Model

The Elaboration Likelihood Model helps explain how people process persuasive messages. It predicts what factors may influence persuasion based on the characteristics of the message and the recipient. ELM's two major components are the likelihood of mental elaboration and the routes of persuasion.

The likelihood of mental elaboration is the probability that the recipient of a persuasive message will examine it closely, devoting a great deal of attention to interpreting and evaluating it (Petty, Brinol, & Priester, 2009). Motivation is essential for mental elaboration. SanJosé-Cabezudo, Gutiérrez-Arranz, and Gutiérrez-Cillán (2009) defined motivation as “the desire, urge, or will to engage in the sequence of events known as behavior” (p. 299). Personal relevance seems to be the greatest motivator. That is, when the subject of the message has some impact on the recipients or when they are highly interested in it, they will be motivated to elaborate.

ELM literature also suggests a number of other factors that might predict an individual's likelihood of identifying a native advertisement as an ad and his/her perception of the news source as credible. For example, trustworthiness is another indicator of elaboration. When a source is perceived as untrustworthy, its messages tend to receive more elaboration than when a

source is perceived as trustworthy. Other factors in determining mental elaboration are ability, i.e. whether the recipient has the knowledge and resources to closely evaluate the message, and need for cognition, i.e. whether the recipient has a natural desire for mental elaboration (Petty, Priester, & Brinol, 2002). Individuals who regularly read the news should have a relatively high need for cognition.

The routes of persuasion are the mental paths that messages must take for persuasion to occur. These routes are generally identified along a continuum of central and peripheral routes. The central route involves careful examination of the argument itself and forming opinions based on prior knowledge and experiences. The characteristics of a message that are most important for accepting a message vary from person to person. When the likelihood of elaboration is high, the central route is most likely to be taken. The peripheral route involves quick, passive judgments based on simple cues, or characteristics of the message that trigger automatic reactions. When the likelihood of elaboration is low, the peripheral route is most likely to be used (Petty, Priester, & Brinol, 2002).

Further research, particularly into the application of ELM to the internet, has shown that the two routes of persuasion are not mutually exclusive. Both can occur at the same time, combining the influence of central and peripheral cues. The likelihood of elaboration simply predicts the relative importance of central argument and peripheral cues. As the likelihood of elaboration increases, particularly with high levels of motivation, the central argument becomes more important, but peripheral elements will still have an effect. (Karson & Korgaonkar, 2001; SanJosé-Cabezudo, Gutiérrez-Arranz, & Gutiérrez-Cillán, 2009). Scholars who have discussed ELM's application to the internet seem to agree on this point. Karson and Korgaonkar (2001) did not believe their study supported the use of ELM relative to the internet because they found

involvement showed no effects on the persuasiveness of the message. There was little difference in the responses of “surfers” and “seekers,” i.e. those who were browsing the internet with no specific purpose and those who were looking for information, to information from internet promotions.

However, more recent research has applied ELM to the internet, albeit with the aforementioned adaptation of simultaneous central and peripheral persuasion. This could be a consequence of the significant increase in the capabilities and usage of the internet since the early 2000s. Some scholars have argued that the internet naturally induces high involvement in users. Individuals actively expose themselves to websites by clicking on links, using search engines, etc. This creates greater engagement for internet advertisements than other forms of advertising (SanJosé-Cabezudo, Gutiérrez-Arranz, & Gutiérrez-Cillán, 2009). Central and peripheral cues themselves can also induce a change in individuals’ issue involvement, which is strongly correlated to an advertisement’s effectiveness (Cyr, Head, Lim, & Stibe, 2018).

With relation to internet advertising and the present study, both design, a peripheral cue, and argument quality, a central cue, are significant factors in the persuasion process. Intuitive design and image appeal are among the peripheral cues that affect change in issue involvement (Cyr, Head, Lim, & Stibe, 2018). It is not necessary for individuals to pay close attention to those cues when processing them.

SanJosé-Cabezudo, Gutiérrez-Arranz, and Gutiérrez-Cillán (2009) further established that a serious, i.e. more informational, online advertising format is more effective overall than an amusing, i.e. more entertaining, one. It is more likely to improve viewers’ attitudes toward the website and the brand. But viewers’ motivation influences the effectiveness of each format. And it is not only the level of motivation, but the type of motivation that is important. Individuals

who have a high cognitive motivation, i.e. they are primarily motivated by a desire for information on the internet, appreciate a more serious design. People with a high affective motivation, i.e. they are primarily motivated by a desire for entertainment, appreciate a more amusing design.

Given that both news stories and native advertisements can also have different design approaches, it seems reasonable to determine what effect serious and amusing designs have on identification of native advertisements. Although both hard news and feature stories can use all types of design elements, the present study will use the following definitions: A serious design is defined as one that closely resembles the format of a primarily informational, basic news story, with few moving or interactive elements. An amusing design is defined as one that bears more resemblance to a feature story that has more entertaining features, including interactivity, moving elements, etc.

Prior knowledge also affects the influence of design and argument quality. The level of prior knowledge relevant to the subject of an internet advertisement is most important when persuasion is primarily through peripheral routes. In the presence of both peripheral and central cues, individuals with low prior knowledge will consider both types of cues in a search for information. Their involvement is enhanced by good design. Users with low prior knowledge are more influenced by peripheral design cues. For those with high prior knowledge, the design serves mostly as an aid to lead them to the central arguments. But somewhat surprisingly, argument quality is most important for those with low prior knowledge (Cyr, Head, Lim, Stibe, 2018).

Based on what we know and do not know about native advertising, credibility, and ELM, the present study advances the following hypotheses and research questions:

H1 is related to sponsor and message credibility, as defined in Flanagin and Metzger (2007). Given that persuasive messages are generally viewed as less credible than news, if readers who encounter a native ad believe the content they are reading is attempting to persuade them, they should describe the news organization and content itself as less credible than those who encounter an actual news article.

H1a: Participants who are exposed to a native advertisement will describe the news organization as less credible than participants who encounter a news article.

H1b: Participants who are exposed to a native advertisement will describe it as less credible than participants who encounter a news article.

H2 is related to the effects of native ad recognition. It is based on the research that shows, even when readers correctly identify a native ad, they typically do not change their attitudes toward the news organization or the ad sponsor and still tend to believe the ad was written by a journalist (Sweetster, Ahn, Golan, & Hockman, 2016; Krouwer & Poels, 2017).

H2a: When readers recognize content as a native advertisement, there will be no shift in attitude toward the news organization.

H2b: When readers recognize content as a native advertisement, there will be no shift in attitude toward the ad sponsor.

H2c: When readers recognize the advertisement, they will still identify journalists as the source of the message.

H3 is related to the design of native advertisements, specifically a serious, or more informational, design vs. an amusing design with more entertaining features, as defined in SanJosé-Cabezudo, Gutiérrez-Arranz, and Gutiérrez-Cillán (2009). Given that a serious design has been shown to be more effective than an amusing one, readers who encounter a news-style

advertisement should be less able to correctly determine the source than those who encounter a feature-style advertisement.

H3: When native advertisements have a serious, hard news design, readers will be more likely to identify the news organization as the source than when they have a more amusing, feature style, design.

H4 looks at the relationship between source and message credibility. Research has shown that having a professional journalist as the source is one of the most important factors in predicting the perceived credibility of news (Chung, Kim, & Kim, 2010). Therefore, when readers believe a native ad was written by a journalist, they should find the content of the ad more credible than when they believe it was written by an advertiser.

H4: Readers will find the message of a native advertisement more credible when they identify the news organization - rather than an advertiser - as the source.

H5 is related to ELM. Readers with a high elaboration likelihood should pay more attention to what they read than those with a low elaboration likelihood. Therefore, they should be more able to correctly identify the source of a native ad and less likely to be persuaded by it.

H5a: When elaboration likelihood is high (motivation, ability, and/or need for cognition is high), readers will be more likely to identify the advertiser as the source than when elaboration likelihood is low.

H5b: When elaboration likelihood is high (rather than low), readers will be less likely to have a positive attitude shift toward the subject of the native advertisement.

RQ1 is related readers' perceptions of native ads' manipulativenness. Given that identification of a native ad disclosure has been shown not to cause readers to believe they are

being manipulated, it asks whether readers who correctly recognize a native ad will describe it as manipulative (Krouwer & Poels, 2017).

RQ1: When readers recognize the content as an advertisement, will they subsequently describe it as manipulative?

Similarly, *RQ2* looks at the relationship between perceptions of manipulateness and attitude changes, which may point to a third-person effect.

RQ2: Will a third-person effect emerge, in that people who are told they were exposed to a native ad (a) consider the ad manipulative, (b) think it would affect other people, but (c) think it has no effect on them?

RQ3 is related to a potential link between news organization credibility and identification of native ads. Research has shown that, when news organizations host native ads, they effectively extend their own reputations to the ads (Wu et al., 2016). *RQ3* seeks to determine whether the credibility of the news organization can predict whether readers will correctly identify its hosted native ads. In other words, is it possible that readers decide whether content is an ad based mostly on how credible they find the hosting news organization?

RQ3: Does a relationship exist between participants' perceptions of the news organization's credibility and their identification of an article as ad or news?

Finally, *RQ4* is related to possible effects from reading native ads through different devices. Given that such a large portion of native ad spending goes to mobile devices and that native ads may be perceived differently from devices with different forms, does the device readers use matter? Will viewing device have any effect on ad recognition or attitude changes toward the news organization, ad sponsor, or ad itself?

RQ4a: Does a relationship exist between viewing device and ad recognition? In other words, are smartphone users less likely to correctly identify an ad, compared to computer users?

RQ4b: Does a relationship exist between viewing device and attitude shifts after reading a native ad?

METHODOLOGY

Sample

To examine the hypotheses and research questions, an experiment was performed on 210 college students from the University of Alabama's College of Communication and Information Sciences. College students should be more likely to receive their news from the internet. Therefore, they should represent a good sample of people who would be exposed to these native advertisements. Of the 210 who completed the study, 35 marked an incorrect response on attention checks within the questionnaire and were removed from the dataset. Next, another 32 respondents were removed from the dataset because they indicated they could not read the article (e.g., because of the *Washington Post* paywalls that permit non-subscribers 10 stories per month). The final sample included 140 participants. These participants were randomly divided into four groups, each exposed to one of the following: news story ($n=32$), news advertisement ($n=38$), feature story ($n=34$), feature advertisement ($n=35$).

Procedure

The experiment took place online. Participants were first asked to complete part of a questionnaire to assess independent variables. These variables included describing the device on which they were viewing the questionnaire and native advertisement stimulus material, need for cognition, motivation, prior knowledge of the subject matter represented in the stimulus content, and attitudes toward news sources such as the *Washington Post*. Operationalizations of these variables appear below. Following completion of these measures, participants were randomly

assigned to one of the four treatment conditions. Once participants indicated they had read the articles, they completed the post-test questionnaire that gauged the dependent variables.

Stimulus Material

Group A was exposed to the news story. Group B was exposed to the news advertisement. Group C was exposed to the feature story. Group D was exposed to the feature advertisement. For this study, the news story and news ad are considered to have a serious design, indicating that the articles were bare-bones, having only text and some photos. The feature story and feature ad are considered to have an amusing design, indicating that the articles had extra design elements, such as graphics. Both of the news articles and both of the feature articles had similar, though not identical, subjects in order to lessen the influence of the subjects on differing evaluations of the stories and ads by participants. The news articles were both related to Syrian refugees. The feature articles were related to farming. Participants were allowed to spend as much or as little time as they wanted reading their assigned articles, and the amount of time they spent was recorded. To view the articles, see Appendix A.

Measures

Independent Variables (Device, Need for Cognition, Motivation, Prior Knowledge, Attitude, Pre-test Credibility)

To determine *viewing device*, participants were asked to simply choose what type of device they were using to complete the experiment, e.g. phone, tablet, laptop, desktop.

Need for cognition was gauged using a measure developed by Cacioppo, Petty, and Kao (1984). Participants were asked to answer on a 7-point scale how well they fit each of 18

statements, with 1 representing "Does not describe me at all" and 7 representing "Describes me very well." Examples of statements are, "I would prefer complex to simple problems," "I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours," and "The notion of thinking abstractly is appealing to me." The 18-item scale (range: 18 to 126) demonstrated good reliability, ($\alpha=.87$; $M=77.35$, $SD=16.65$). All items appear in Appendix B.

Motivation was measured by asking participants to rate their agreement with two statements on a 7-point scale, with 1 representing "Strongly disagree" and 7 representing "Strongly agree." These statements gauged participants' perceived personal relevance of the subjects of the articles. Examples of statements are, "I believe the subject of Syrian refugees affects me personally," and "I am interested in the subject of Syrian refugees." For the farming story, the words "Syrian refugees" were replaced with "farming." The Syrian refugee scale (range= 2 to 14) demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha=.73$; $M=6.88$, $SD=8.92$). Meanwhile, the scale related to farming (range= 2 to 14) also demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha=.67$; $M=6.16$, $SD=3.07$).

Prior knowledge was measured by asking participants to rate, on a 7-point scale, their agreement with statements of familiarity for the subjects of the articles, with 1 representing "Strongly disagree" and 7 representing "Strongly agree." First, participants were asked to rate from 1 to 7 the statement, "I am familiar with the subject of Syrian refugees" ($M=3.99$, $SD=1.84$) or "I am familiar with the subject of farming/gardening" ($M=3.69$, $SD=1.79$). They were then asked to estimate how many times they had read or heard about each subject in the last three months on another 7-point scale, with 1 representing "0" and 7 representing "More than 10" (Syrian refugees: $M=3.17$, $SD=1.72$; farming/gardening: $M=2.53$, $SD=1.67$). Participants were further asked whether they had personal experience with the subjects. It should be noted that

these are not objective measures of prior knowledge but should give a reasonable idea of participants' relative knowledge.

Attitude was measured by asking participants to rate on a 7-point scale how much they like each in a list of news organizations, with 1 representing “Dislike a great deal” and 7 representing “Like a great deal.” Although only their attitudes toward the *Washington Post* are important for this study ($M=4.70$, $SD=1.41$), participants were given a list of 11 news organizations to gauge these attitudes relative to those for other prominent news organizations and so participants were not aware which organization the articles would be from before they were presented. For the full questionnaire, see Appendix B.

Manipulation Check

After viewing the stimulus materials, participants were asked to complete a manipulation check and were then presented with the second half of the questionnaire to assess dependent variables. The manipulation check included four questions about the content of the articles to ensure that participants were able to read and understand them. Examples of questions are “Were you able to read the article?” and “Which of the following was the subject of the article?” The manipulation check also included a dummy question that had three wrong choices and “None of the above” as answers to ensure participants were answering honestly.

Dependent Variables (Credibility, Attitude, Identification of Native Advertisement)

Credibility was measured using two 5-item scales from Roberts (2010). The first scale measured messenger credibility. It asked participants to indicate their agreement with 5 statements of credibility for the *Washington Post*, the news organization that published the stimulus content. Participants rated their agreement with each statement on a continuum from 1 to 7, with 1 representing “Strongly disagree” and 7 representing “Strongly agree.” Statements

included “The *Washington Post* can be trusted,” “The *Washington Post* is accurate,” and “The *Washington Post* tells the whole story.” The scale contained 5 items (range=5 to 35) and demonstrated strong reliability ($\alpha=.91$; $M=22.54$, $SD=5.79$)

The second credibility scale measured message credibility. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with 5 statements of credibility for the article they read on the same 1 to 7 continuum. Statements included “The article is believable,” “The article is trustworthy,” and “The article is not biased.” This scale (range=9 to 35) also demonstrated strong reliability ($\alpha=.90$; $M=24.56$, $SD=5.06$).

Attitude was measured by asking participants to indicate on a 7-point scale their attitudes toward the *Washington Post* and the articles they viewed, with 1 representing “Dislike a great deal” and 7 representing “Like a great deal” (WaPo: $M=4.60$, $SD=1.34$; Article: $M=4.80$, $SD=1.09$). They were asked to offer a reason if their attitude toward the *Washington Post* had changed after reading the article using an open-ended response. Participants were then asked to indicate on a 7-point scale, with 1 representing “Much less favorable” and 7 representing “Much more favorable,” ($M=3.36$, $SD=1.14$) whether their attitude toward the article had changed, and if so, asked to offer their reasoning. Participants who were exposed to one of the two advertisements were further asked to indicate whether their attitude toward the sponsor of the ad had changed on the same 7-point scale, and if so, asked to offer their reasoning (UC Davis: $M=4.33$, $SD=.79$; T. Rowe Price: 4, $SD=0$).

Identification was measured by asking participants to identify whether each article was news or advertising and how certain they were of their identification. Questions include “Was the article trying to persuade you?,” which participants answered using a 7-point scale of 1=definitely not to 7=definitely yes (range=1 to 5, $M=3.10$, $SD=.97$). It asked participants to

identify whether the article was news or an advertisement, with Yes or No. Finally, it asked participants to indicate "Who created the article?" by choosing among journalist, advertiser, or other.

Participants who were exposed to one of the ad conditions were given a final *Attitude* check after *Identification*. They were told that the article they read was an advertisement and not written by a journalist. Using a 7-point scale, with 1 representing "Much less favorable" and 7 representing "Much more favorable," participants were asked whether and to what degree this information changed their attitudes toward the articles ($M=3.36$, $SD=1.14$), the *Washington Post* ($M=3.46$, $SD=1.19$), and the advertisement sponsor (UC Davis: $M=3.38$, $SD=1.35$, T. Rowe Price: $M=3.61$, $SD=.77$).

They were also asked whether they would describe the article as manipulative using a yes/no response, and whether they believed others would be fooled by the article, also using a yes/no response. For the full questionnaire, see Appendix C.

RESULTS

A series of ANOVAs was conducted to test *H1*. *H1a* predicted that participants who read a native advertisement would find the *Washington Post* less credible than those who were exposed to a real news or feature story; *H1b* predicted that participants who read a native advertisement would describe the material as less credible than those who encountered a real story. There was no statistically significant difference at the $p < .05$ level in *Washington Post* credibility scores for the four treatment conditions, $F(3, 131) = 1.59, p = 1.9$. Similarly, there was no statistically significant difference at the $p < .05$ level in article credibility scores for the four treatment conditions, $F(3, 132) = .56, p = .64$. Therefore, *H1a* and *b* were not supported by the data.

In the next set of hypotheses, *H2a* predicted that readers who encountered and properly identified a native advertisement would not change their attitudes toward the *Washington Post*; *H2b* predicted that those same readers would similarly have no change in attitude toward the sponsor of the ad; *H2c* predicted that, despite knowing the article was an advertisement, those participants would still believe the article was created by a journalist. Of the 140 valid responses, 73 were exposed to the ad conditions. For *H2a*, a paired sample t-test was run using pretest and posttest attitudes toward the *Washington Post* for these respondents. Data supported the hypothesis. When participants recognized the article they read as an advertisement, they showed no attitude change toward the *Washington Post*.

Descriptive statistics were used to examine *H2b*. The resulting evidence supports the hypothesis, with the average shift being close to neutral (UC Davis, $M = 3.38, SD = 1.35$; T. Rowe Price, $M = 4, SD = 0$). A crosstab using ad recognition and source identification was run to examine

H2c. Of the 12 participants who correctly recognized an ad and responded to the source question, 4, or 33%, identified the ad as being created by a journalist, while 7 indicated that an advertiser created the content and one marked other.

The third hypothesis, *H3*, predicted that participants would be more likely to identify a journalist as the source of the news ad than the feature ad. To examine *H3*, a chi square analysis was conducted comparing the proportion of readers who identified a journalist as the source for the news ad and feature ad conditions, regardless of whether they correctly identified it as an ad. Of the 37 participants who encountered the news ad, 26 (70%) identified a journalist as the source. Meanwhile, of the 35 participants who encountered the feature ad, 21 (60%) identified a journalist as the source. However, this difference in proportions was not statistically significant. Overall, 47 of the 72 participants exposed to a native advertisement (65%) identified a journalist as the creator.

The fourth hypothesis, *H4*, predicted that participants who believed the article they read was created by a journalist would rate the message more credible than those who identified an advertiser as the source. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the means on the credibility scale between participants who identified a journalist as the source ($n=101$) and those who identified an advertiser as the source ($n=19$). A significant difference emerged, $F(1, 118)=1.73, p<.05$), such that participants perceived greater article credibility when they identified a journalist as the source ($M=25, SD=4.55$) compared to those who identified an advertiser as a source ($M=21.84, SD=6.21$). Therefore, data supported *H4*.

In the final set of hypotheses, *H5a* predicted that participants with high elaboration likelihood would be more likely to correctly identify an advertiser as the source of a native advertisement; *H5b* predicted that participants with high elaboration likelihood would be less

likely to be persuaded by a native advertisement and therefore less likely to have a positive attitude shift toward the subject of the ad. To examine *H5a*, participants who were exposed to the native advertisement regarding Syria were divided into either high elaboration likelihood or low elaboration likelihood based on a median split. A chi-square analysis showed no statistically significant difference between high and low elaboration likelihood participants when it came to their recognition of the article source. Of participants who were exposed to the Syrian refugee ad condition, 19 had low elaboration likelihood. Of those, 11 (58%) identified the source of the ad as a journalist and 4 (21%) identified an advertiser as the source, while 4 marked other. There were 18 participants who demonstrated high elaboration likelihood. Of those, 15 (83%) identified a journalist as the source of the advertisement and 1 identified an advertiser as the source, while 2 marked other. Similarly, elaboration likelihood did not elicit significant differences for participants exposed to the farming ad. Of the 12 low elaboration likelihood participants who encountered the farm ad, 7 (58%) identified a journalist as the source of the ad, while 3 (25%) identified an advertiser as the source and 2 marked other. Meanwhile, of the 22 participants high in elaboration likelihood, 13 (59%) identified a journalist as the source, while six (27%) identified an advertiser as the source, and 3 marked other. An additional analysis was conducted to see whether there were differences between high and low elaboration participants and the likelihood they would identify the advertisement as news or advertising. Again, no significant differences emerged, but all the low elaboration likelihood participants identified the farm ad as a news story, while 82% (18 of 22) of the high elaboration participants identified the farm ad as a news story. Regarding the Syrian refugee ad, 79% (15 of 19) of low elaboration participants identified the ad as news while 78% (14 of 18) of the high elaboration participants identified the ad as news. To examine *H5b*, a bivariate correlation analysis was run to see if there

was a relationship between elaboration likelihood and attitude shifts toward the subject of the native ad. Relationship between elaboration likelihood and attitude change toward Syrian refugees was not statistically significant, $r=-.16, p=.34$. The relationship between elaboration likelihood and attitude change toward farming was also not statistically significant, $r=.18, p=.28$.

A chi square analysis was used to examine the first research question, *RQ1*, which asked whether participants who correctly identified a native advertisement would describe the ad as manipulative after the true nature of the article was revealed. The results were not statistically significant. There were 14 participants exposed to an ad condition who recognized an advertiser as the source. Of those, 7 (50%) described the article as manipulative and 5 (36%) said it was not, and 2 were unsure. Meanwhile, 46 participants exposed to an ad identified a journalist as the source. Of those, 16 (35%) described the article as manipulative while 11 (24%) were unsure and 19 (41%) said it was not.

Table 1. Pearson Correlations Among Attitude Changes and Perceptions

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Article attitude change	-	.798**	.782**	.796**	.007	-.484**	-.568**
2. Washington Post attitude change	.798**	-	.823**	.474**	.118	-.527**	-.500**
3. UC Davis attitude change	.782**	.823**	-	-	-.049	-.575**	-.537**
4. T. Rowe Price attitude change	.796**	.474**	-	-	-.188	-.378*	-.414*
5. News or ad identification	.007	.118	-.049	-.188	-	-.133	-.125
6. Others would be fooled	-.484**	-.527**	-.575**	-.378*	-.133	-	.613**
7. Article is manipulative	-.568**	-.500**	-.537**	-.414*	-.125	.613**	-

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

RQ2 sought to determine whether a third-person effect would emerge among participants exposed to a native advertisement. To examine this RQ, a simple correlation analysis, shown in Table 1, was conducted. The analysis suggested that a third-person effect did indeed occur such that the more people considered the native ad manipulative and the more they thought others

would be fooled, the less they said it changed their own attitude toward the article, the *Washington Post*, and the ad sponsor.

The third research question, *RQ3*, sought to find a relationship between the perceived credibility of the *Washington Post* and participants' identification of content as news or advertising. To examine the question, a chi-square analysis was conducted, revealing a significant difference between participants who gave the *Washington Post* a high credibility rating and those who gave the *Washington Post* a low credibility rating. Participants who perceived the organization as highly credible were more likely to describe the article or ad they encountered as a news article, $\chi^2(1, n=135)=9.09, p<.01$. Of participants who rated the *Washington Post's* credibility highly, 94% (65 of 69) identified the content as a news article. Meanwhile, 75% (50 of 66) of participants who described the organization as less credible described the content as a news article. A subsequent analysis looked at participants who were only exposed to a native ad ($n=71$). While the difference was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, n=71)=3.41, p=.06$, the same trend was documented among these participants. Of participants who gave the *Washington Post* a high credibility rating, 32 (91%) thought the ad was news, compared to 27 (75%) of participants who considered the organization less credible.

In the final set of research questions, *RQ4a* sought to determine whether the device participants used to read the articles correlated with ad recognition; *RQ4b* sought to determine whether the device participants used correlated with any attitude shifts after reading a native ad. To examine *RQ4a*, a chi-square analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between viewing device used by participants and whether they correctly recognized an ad. There were 22 participants who used a phone to access the advertisements, 45 participants who used a laptop computer, and 5 participants who used a desktop computer. Regardless of device type,

participants stood greater likelihood of identifying the ad as news than an advertisement. Of participants who used phones, 77% (17) identified the advertisement as a news story, while 87% (39) of laptop computer users and 80% (4) of desktop computer users did so. To examine whether differences in attitude shifts toward the *Washington Post* emerged among viewing devices, a one-way ANOVA was conducted with device type entered as the factor and the pretest/posttest attitude change toward the *Washington Post* as the dependent variable. There was a statistically significant difference at the $p < .01$ level, $F(2, 70) = 5.6, p < .01$. Post-hoc comparisons using the LSD test indicated that the mean score for laptop computer users ($M = .09, SD = 1.02$) was significantly different from phone users ($M = -.69, SD = 1.10$) and desktop computer users ($M = -1.00, SD = 1.22$).

DISCUSSION

This thesis examined two questions: What determines whether readers recognize native ads, and how do native ads affect their attitudes toward the news organization and ad sponsor? In response to the first question, the results from the present study seem to indicate that very little affects whether people are able to identify native advertisements. Very few overall, only 17%, of participants exposed to advertisements were able to identify them. There was no difference in identification of the ads between participants with high and low elaboration likelihood or between participants in the different treatment groups, meaning that in this study, neither the factors relative to the readers nor factors relative to the ad had much influence on ad identification. People who like to think and should be highly motivated and able to process native ad messages still did not realize the true nature of what they read. The type of device also had no significant effect on ad identification, so the difference between the form of native ads on smaller and larger screens does not appear to be important.

Of the 59 participants who offered a reason why they thought the article was news or an ad, the most often cited reason was the article's informativeness. It seems that, despite the flashier design and more entertaining elements of the feature ad, native advertisements overall are still perceived as being more informational. This supports Sweetster, Ahn, Golan, and Hochman's (2016) point that native ads' persuasiveness is hidden behind their informativeness. Additionally, only one participant identified the disclosure statement as a reason, which seems to agree with other studies that show disclosures are ineffective.

There was, however, one factor that did predict whether participants identified an article as news or an ad: posttest *Washington Post* credibility. When participants rated the *Washington Post's* credibility highly, they almost always identified what they read as news (94% of the time). This trend was only slightly lower when isolating the ad treatment groups. This seems to indicate that native ads do benefit significantly from the credibility of the news organization that host them. As long as an article has the stamp of a news organization readers trust, they believe it is legitimate.

When it came to source identification, although participants who were exposed to the news ad did not identify a journalist as the source significantly more than participants in the feature ad group, the numbers did trend in that direction. A larger sample may prove *H3* to be true. Similarly, although less than half of participants who correctly recognized an ad still believed it to be created by a journalist, because there were so few who recognized an ad at all, a larger sample may prove otherwise. Nevertheless, there does seem to have been confusion over the source of the article regardless of whether readers identified it as an ad or not, with more than half identifying the ads as being created by a journalist. This could be the result of a fundamental lack of understanding of what journalists do. But participants who identified a journalist as the source did perceive significantly higher article credibility than those who identified an advertiser as the source. As it should be, the work of journalists seems to enjoy higher credibility than that of advertisers, but that credibility is unfortunately misplaced in native ads.

To answer how native ads affect reader attitudes, the data seems to indicate that they don't. There were no significant differences in attitude changes and credibility for the *Washington Post* or credibility for the article among the four test groups. Even for those who were exposed to and correctly recognized an ad, though they were few, there was no attitude change toward the *Post*

or the ad sponsor. Neither was there a significant difference in describing the ads as manipulative between those who had correctly and incorrectly identified the source. Elaboration likelihood also had no relationship with attitude changes toward the subjects of the ads. Despite the content of an article or knowledge that it is an ad, readers' attitudes are mostly unaffected. This could be because they largely have predetermined attitudes and they simply don't care if any new information is put before them. They still hold on to the same attitudes regardless of what they read or learn.

There is also the apparent third-person effect. Upon being told they had been exposed to a native ad, participants had no attitude changes but still often described the ad as manipulative and felt others would be fooled by it. It may be that people do not care about native ads despite identifying their manipulateness because people do not think they are personally affected and are therefore unconcerned by native ads' potential effects.

Curiously, there was a significant difference in attitude changes toward the *Washington Post* between laptop users on one side and phone and desktop users on the other. Laptop users' attitudes slightly improved while phone and desktop users' attitudes declined. It is difficult to guess why that might have been the case, but a possible explanation is that there was some mediating variable that caused participants reading on a laptop to have lower expectations of the *Washington Post* or news in general than those reading on a phone or desktop.

It is important to note some limitations to this study. Because an undergraduate population was used for the sample, the results may not apply to other demographics. And because there was such a small sample size for each test group, a larger sample may yield different results. These students also may not have cared as much to think about the stimuli or the questions

because they were participating in a research study for credit. Additionally, because there were many uncontrolled factors among the treatment groups, any results are only suggestive.

The takeaway from this research is that people overall, regardless of individual differences and motivations, seem unable to recognize when they are being exposed to a native ad, despite any characteristics of the ad that could make them aware of that fact. That being the case, and news organizations' credibility being possibly the most important factor in determining whether people trust these ads, it seems highly unethical for news organizations to continue to host and promote them. It is no accident that native ads are difficult to discern from real news. They are intended to fool the reader to get their attention. While advertisers should be ethical, news organizations and their journalists have a duty to be ethical. The buck stops with them. Although many news organizations may be desperate for revenue, if it is indeed journalists' job to be ethical, they should ensure that their credibility is not being used to do harm through native advertisements.

But it is unlikely that the practice of native advertising on news sites will end any time soon, and news consumers should guard themselves against native ads. They should be aware of native ads and be on the lookout for native ads' telltale, though often unclear, disclosure statement, which will usually say something like "BrandStudio" and state who created and/or sponsored the content. Although readers may not show any immediate attitude changes and may not believe they are affected by native ads, there is still a strong possibility they may be unwittingly influenced. Even if there are no direct effects, unaware readers may still freely accept and believe information that has been presented to them as journalism when it is not. From an ethical viewpoint, and an informed public being good and necessary, native ads and their deception should not be acceptable.

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APPENDIX A: STIMULUS

News Story

https://wapo.st/2ql2oVl?tid=ss_tw&utm_term=.b15e0a6308be



World

Turkey, once a haven for Syrian refugees, grows weary of their presence



People visit a neighborhood of shops to prepare for the Eid-al-Adha feast on Aug. 31, 2017, in Gaziantep, Turkey. (Chris McGrath/Getty Images)

By **Erin Cunningham** and **Zakaria Zakaria**

April 10

GAZIANTEP, Turkey — As a horrific war escalated next door, Turkey opened its doors to Syrian refugees, granting them access to free health care and promising

News Advertisement

https://www.washingtonpost.com/brand-studio/wp/2018/11/05/feature/refugees-reclaim-a-human-right-with-technology/?utm_term=.53041d53a36b



Content from **UC Davis**

Refugees reclaim a human right with technology

New tool securely stores and shares the educational documents needed to rebuild lives



By **Julia Ann Easley and Joe Proudman, UC Davis**

NOVEMBER 5, 2018

BEKAA VALLEY, Lebanon — Arabic

Feature Story

https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/lifestyle/led-growing/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.d4a81b44f6fc



Mike Zelkind, chief executive of 80 Acres Farms, grows tomatoes and other produce with artificial-light recipes made possible with new LED technology. (Maddie McGarvey for The Washington Post)

Growing the future

High-tech farmers are using LED lights in ways that seem to border on science fiction

By **Adrian Higgins** in Cincinnati

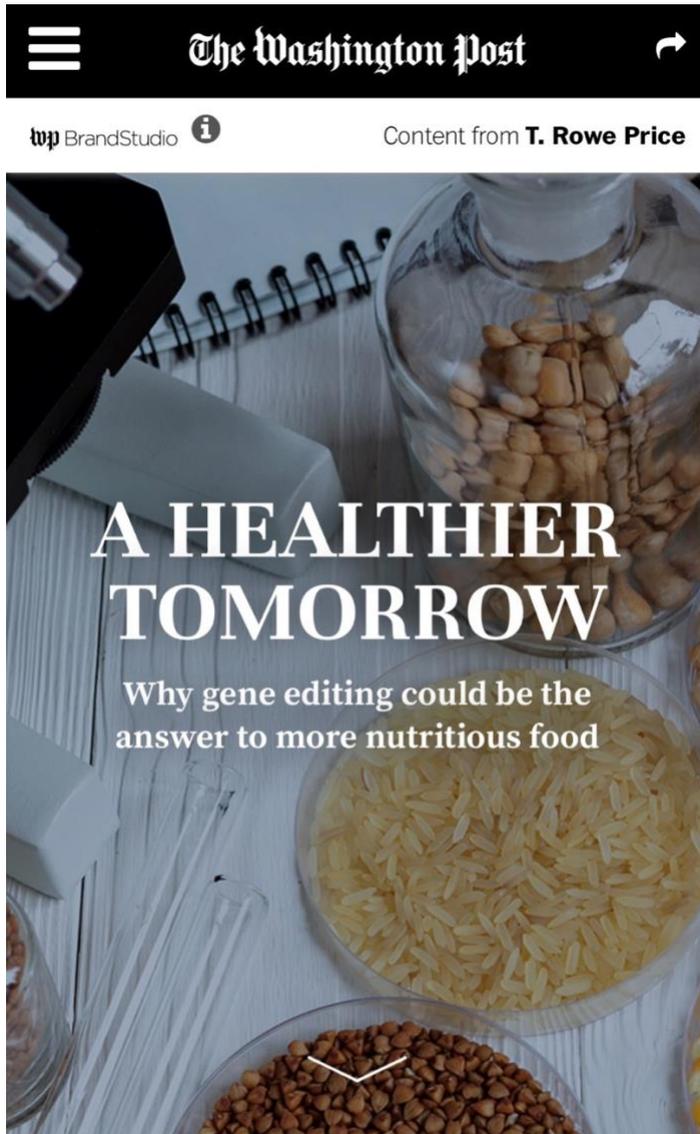
Nov. 6, 2018



ike Zelkind stands at one end of what was once a shipping container and opens the door to the future.

Feature Advertisement

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/brand-studio/trp/a-healthier-tomorrow/>



Many of today's most prevalent health issues, and subsequent health costs, trace back to a common cause: the food we eat.

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE (INDEPENDENT VARIABLES)

Viewing device

What type of device are you using right now? (Phone, tablet, laptop computer, desktop computer)

Need for Cognition (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984)

How well does each statement describe you? (Does not describe me at all...Describes me very well)

1. I would prefer complex to simple problems.
2. I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking.
3. Thinking is not my idea of fun.*
4. I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities.*
5. I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is a likely chance I will have to think in depth about something.*
6. I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours.
7. I only think as hard as I have to.*
8. I prefer to think about small, daily projects to long-term ones.*
9. I like tasks that require little thought once I've learned them.*
10. The idea of relying on thought to make my way to the top appeals to me.
11. I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems.
12. Learning new ways to think doesn't excite me very much.*
13. I prefer my life to be filled with puzzles that I must solve.
14. The notion of thinking abstractly is appealing to me.
15. I would prefer a task that is intellectual, difficult, and important to one that is somewhat important but does not require much thought.
16. I feel relief rather than satisfaction after completing a task that required a lot of mental effort.*
17. It's enough for me that something gets the job done; I don't care how or why it works.*
18. I usually end up deliberating about issues even when they do not affect me personally.

**Reverse scoring is used on this item.*

Motivation

Please rate your agreement with the following statements (Strongly disagree...Strongly agree):

1. I frequently read, watch, or listen to the news.
2. I generally use the internet more for information than entertainment.
3. I am interested in the subject of Syrian refugees.
4. I am interested in the subject of farming/gardening.
5. I believe the subject of Syrian refugees affects me personally.
6. I believe the subject of farming/gardening affects me personally.

Prior Knowledge

1. Please rate your agreement with the following statements (Strongly disagree...Strongly agree):
 - a. I am familiar with the subject of Syrian refugees.
 - b. I am familiar with the subject of farming/gardening.
2. How many times would you say you have read or heard about each of these subjects within the past three months? (0...More than 10)
 - a. Syrian refugees
 - b. Farming/gardening
3. Are you or do you personally know a Syrian refugee?
4. Do you have personal experience with farming/gardening?

Attitude

Please indicate your attitudes toward each of the following news organizations? (Dislike a great deal...Like a great deal)

1. ABC News
2. CBS News
3. CNN
4. Fox News Channel
5. Los Angeles Times
6. MSNBC
7. NBC News
8. New York Times
9. USA Today
10. Wall Street Journal
11. *Washington Post*

APPENDIX C: QUESTIONNAIRE (DEPENDENT VARIABLES)

Manipulation Check (News Story)

1. Were you able to read the article?
2. Which of the following was the subject of the article?
3. What country asked refugees to return home?
4. True or false: The majority of Syrians in Turkey do not desire citizenship there.
5. Which of the following statements is true? (Choice of three false answers and None of the above)

Manipulation Check (News Ad)

1. Were you able to read the article?
2. Which of the following was the subject of the article?
3. What tool is being used to securely store and share documents for refugees?
4. What does the mentioned section of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights outline?
5. Which of the following statements is true? (Choice of three false answers and None of the above)

Manipulation Check (Feature Story)

Please answer the following questions based on the two articles you just viewed.

1. Were you able to read the article?
2. Which of the following was the subject of the article?
3. What kind of lighting is being used for indoor farming?
4. What food was mentioned as having been tested with different amounts of light?
5. Which of the following statements is true? (Choice of three false answers and None of the above)

Manipulation Check (Feature Ad)

Please answer the following questions based on the two articles you just viewed.

1. Were you able to read the article?
2. Which of the following was the subject of the article?
3. True or false: Gene editing is the same as genetic modification.
4. Which of the following is a main benefit of gene editing?
5. Which of the following statements is true? (Choice of three false answers and None of the above)

Credibility (Roberts, 2010)

Please indicate your agreement with each of the following statements on the credibility of the *Washington Post*. (Strongly disagree...Strongly agree)

1. The *Washington Post* can be trusted.
2. The *Washington Post* is accurate.
3. The *Washington Post* is fair.
4. The *Washington Post* tells the whole story.
5. The *Washington Post* is not biased.

Please indicate your agreement with each of the following statements on the credibility of the article you read. (Strongly disagree...Strongly agree)

1. The article is believable.
2. The article is accurate.
3. The article is trustworthy.
4. The article is not biased.
5. The article is complete.

Attitude (News Story)

1. Please indicate your attitude toward the *Washington Post* and the article you viewed.
(Dislike a great deal...Like a great deal)
 - a. *Washington Post*
 - b. Article
2. If your attitude toward the *Washington Post* has changed after viewing the article, why?
3. Please indicate whether your attitude toward Syrian refugees has changed after viewing the article. (Much less favorable...Much more favorable)
4. If your attitude toward Syrian refugees has changed, why?

Attitude (News Ad)

1. Please indicate your attitude toward the *Washington Post* and the article you viewed.
(Dislike a great deal...Like a great deal)
 - a. *Washington Post*
 - b. Article
2. If your attitude toward the *Washington Post* has changed after viewing the article, why?
3. Please indicate whether your attitude toward Syrian refugees has changed after viewing the article. (Much less favorable...Much more favorable)
4. If your attitude toward Syrian refugees has changed, why?
5. Please indicate whether your attitude toward UC Davis has changed after viewing the article. (Much less favorable...Much more favorable)
6. If your attitude toward UC Davis has changed after viewing the article, why?

Attitude (Feature Story)

1. Please indicate your attitude toward the *Washington Post* and the article you viewed.
(Dislike a great deal...Like a great deal)
 - a. *Washington Post*
 - b. Article
2. If your attitude toward the *Washington Post* has changed after viewing the article, why?
3. Please indicate whether your attitude toward farming has changed after viewing the article. (Much less favorable...Much more favorable)
4. If your attitude toward farming has changed after viewing the article, why?

Attitude (Feature Ad)

1. Please indicate your attitude toward the *Washington Post* and the article you viewed.
(Dislike a great deal...Like a great deal)
 - a. *Washington Post*
 - b. Article
2. If your attitude toward the *Washington Post* has changed after viewing the article, why?
3. Please indicate whether your attitude toward farming has changed after viewing the article. (Much less favorable...Much more favorable)
4. If your attitude toward farming has changed after viewing the article, why?
5. Please indicate whether your attitude toward T. Rowe Price has changed after viewing the article. (Much less favorable...Much more favorable)
6. If your attitude toward T. Rowe Price has changed after viewing the article, why?

Identification

1. Was the article trying to persuade you? (Definitely not...Definitely yes)
2. Was the article news or an advertisement?
3. How certain are you of your previous answer? (Not certain at all...Completely certain)
4. Why do you believe this article was news or an advertisement?
5. Who created the article? (Journalist, Advertiser, Other)

Final Attitude Check (News Ad)

The article you read was an advertisement created by or submitted to the *Washington Post's* Brand Studio for UC Davis. It was not written by a journalist.

1. Does this change your attitude toward the article? (Much less favorable...Much more favorable)
2. Does this change your attitude toward the *Washington Post*? (Much less favorable...Much more favorable)
3. Does this change your attitude toward UC Davis? (Much less favorable...Much more favorable)
4. Would you describe the article you read as manipulative?
5. Do you think others would be fooled by the article?

Final Attitude Check (Feature Ad)

The article you read was an advertisement created by or submitted to the *Washington Post's* Brand Studio for T. Rowe Price. It was not written by a journalist.

1. Does this change your attitude toward the article? (Much less favorable...Much more favorable)
2. Does this change your attitude toward the *Washington Post*? (Much less favorable...Much more favorable)
3. Does this change your attitude toward T. Rowe Price? (Much less favorable...Much more favorable)
4. Would you describe the article you read as manipulative?
5. Do you think others would be fooled by the article?

APPENDIX D: IRB APPROVAL



February 4, 2019

Calvin Cockrell
Department of Journalism & Creative Media
College of Communication & Information Sciences
Box 870172

Re: IRB # 19-OR-037 "Elaboration Likelihood and Readers' Perceptions of News Content"

Dear Mr. Cockrell:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research. Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. You have also been granted the requested waiver of written documentation of informed consent and waiver of one element of informed consent. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

The approval for your application will lapse on February 3, 2020. If your research will continue beyond this date, please submit the continuing review to the IRB as required by University policy before the lapse. Please note, any modifications made in research design, methodology, or procedures must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before implementation. Please submit a final report form when the study is complete.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

A black rectangular box redacting the signature of the Director & Research Compliance Officer.

Carpanato T. Myles, MSM, CIM, CIP
Director & Research Compliance Officer