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Examining search as opposed to experience goods when investigating synergies of internet news articles and banner ads

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the applicability of the economics of information-driven product categorization – search vs experience products – when investigating online brand advertising and news synergies.

Design/methodology/approach – Randomized controlled post-test experiment with over 400 participants in three treatment groups involving exposures to paid advertising (banner ad-plus-banner ad) and publicity (news article-plus-banner ad and banner ad-plus-news article) for four products. Questionnaire upon web site exit tested differences in brand attitudes among treatment groups and product categories.

Findings – Findings indicate that including news about the brand in the online brand communication mix – either before or after ads – generates higher brand attitude scores for experience products. For search products sequence matters and brand attitudes are more positive when consumers are exposed to news articles first followed by advertisements.

Research limitations/implications – Findings limited to the four product categories and student participants.

Practical implications – When promoting search goods online, brand managers should include publicity only before display advertising efforts. For experience goods, publicity generates higher brand attitude scores when included either before or while running display advertising.

Originality/value – First study examining online publicity and advertising synergies from an economics of information theory perspective separating search from experience goods when promoting new/unknown brands online. In the online environment, the line between journalistic/news and promotional/advertising text-based content has become increasingly blurred. Compared to paid online advertising, using third-party attributed communications sources like publicity increases message credibility. Adding product-related news and blog articles to banner advertisements may benefit from synergistic effects and have consumers process the brand message more extensively. The order of exposure to the different brand messages matters when promoting search as opposed to experience products online.

Keywords Internet marketing, Advertising, Marketing communications, Information processing, Economics of information, News and advertising synergy

Paper type Research paper

Proposing the economics of information theory when investigating internet brand advertising and news synergies

In the online environment, the line between journalistic/news and promotional/advertising text-based content has become increasingly blurred (Williams, 1998). Compared to paid online advertising (display, text, and search), using third-party attributed communications sources (publicity, blogs, social networks, or other content-rich online media) increases

message credibility and provides narrow targeting opportunities along with product relevance (Johnson *et al.*, 2007). Multi-channel shopping is the prevailing purchasing pattern today (Hsiao *et al.*, 2012). This means consumers are influenced by product information they encounter on the Internet even when purchasing the product offline. Adding product-related news and blog articles to banner advertisements within a product's marketing communications plan may benefit from synergistic effects and have consumers process the brand message more extensively. However, the news-ad combination may not be optimal for all products or all audiences due to inherent differences in product characteristics.

This study proposes a product classification rooted in the economics of information theory (Stigler, 1961; Nelson, 1974) to test the mechanism through which different electronic communications modes influence consumers' attitudes toward a new brand. According to the economics of information theory, the study compares search goods, those we can make up our minds about before experiencing them (e.g. books, camera, software, calculator), with experience goods, those that – as the name implies – have to be experienced in order to draw a conclusion on whether we like them or not (e.g. shoes, clothing, travel). Sparsely employed in the marketing literature (Zeithaml, 1981; Iacobucci, 1992), this product classification rooted in the economics of information theory has surfaced as a viable theoretical pillar for examining how consumers collect information about products in the online environment (Klein, 1998).

A meta-analysis of publicity and advertising effectiveness moderators indicates product type has to be considered when looking at comparing effectiveness between publicity and advertising (Eisend and Kuster, 2011). However, in this meta-analysis, product type refers to whether the consumers in the included studies had prior knowledge about the brands for which they saw either ads or publicity messages. Publicity is perceived to be more credible than advertising when the brands are new/unknown to the consumers (Celebi, 2007). In reality, brand managers seldom expose target audiences to either publicity or advertising alone. Most brands are promoted using a multitude of media and messages. The current study tests the increased effects on brand attitudes of adding publicity to advertising and examines whether sequence and product type (search or experience) make a difference in the results. The study addresses Eisend and Kuster's (2011) note on the lack of studies examining the sequencing or combination of publicity and advertising. Specifically, we compare the effects of paid advertising (banner ad plus banner ad) to the influence of an integrated online communications mix (news article plus banner ad) on attitude toward a new brand for search and experience products. Eisend and Kuster (2011) labeled news articles that mention or even promote brands as marketing-oriented publicity. These are legitimate news articles that most often than not are the result of public relations efforts. We will use the terms publicity, news articles, and news stories about brands to refer to such marketing-oriented publicity. On the advertising end, we chose banner ads as they still represent a large percentage of online advertising in terms of budgets allocated. As reported by e-Marketer in 2012, search and display ad categories make up most of the digital advertising marketplace. While search ads are still the leading digital advertising format in terms of spending (with 47.1 percent share), display advertising is close at 40.2 percent, with 23.3 percent share belonging to banner ads (Fredricksen, 2012). With experiment treatments combining banner ads (display advertising) and news articles (publicity), the study falls within the integrated marketing communications framework (Schultz *et al.*, 1993). We describe the integrated marketing communications tenets below, followed by a review of the advertising and

marketing articles that employ the economics of information theory. Then, we present our proposed hypotheses, a description of our experiment, results, a discussion of findings as well as implications and a conclusion.

Theory

The integrated marketing communications theoretical framework

Academics and practitioners alike have long advocated for the synergistic effects of integrating marketing communications tools (Bhargava and Donthu, 1999; Schultz, 1993). Synergy, when multiple messages have greater effect than the sum of individual ones, enables marketers to reach target audiences at multiple touch points and reinforce the brand message. Such simultaneous use of different communications media or tactics by brand managers determines better resource allocation (Naik and Peters, 2009), improved consumer brand attitudes (Micu and Thorson, 2008), and consequently increased persuasion (Schultz, 1996). The integration of brand message tools and formats is especially relevant in today's digitized and increasingly cluttered communications space when we are witnessing a paradigm shift toward interactive, narrowly targeted approaches and synergistic use of all company electronic communications.

While a number of studies have evaluated the combined effects of traditional and electronic media (e.g. Stammerjohan *et al.*, 2005; Chang and Thorson, 2004), it is not clear whether marketing communications within electronic media should emphasize one particular venue, or should be balanced among the increasingly diverse types. Extensively researched in the public opinion/political communications literature, the combined effect of news and advertising is considered a more persuasive combination than advertising alone (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994, Micu and Thorson, 2008). Brand managers have been using news-like promotional content in traditional print media. Previous research documented consumers having a hard time distinguishing between editorial and sponsored content in print (Cameron and Ju-Pak, 2000; Salmon *et al.*, 1985). The third-party endorsement theoretical framework from the public relations literature proposes that advertising in the format of news benefits from the credibility associated with the news content. Bucy (2003) found news to be perceived as more credible when communicated both on-air as well as online and concluded that the online-offline synergy works for news messages. Online, increased credibility can be determined by the news-like format or by argument quality (Shen *et al.*, 2011). Rather than testing the integration of multiple media, the current study examines the combination of tactics (advertising and publicity) within one medium (online).

According to the encoding variability theory, variation in exposure leads to increased processing of a message by consumers, because each message generates a separate memory trace (Stammerjohan *et al.*, 2005; Unnava and Burnkrant, 1991) thus increasing recall likelihood through the wealth of items in memory that might act as recall triggers. So, given the diverse sources and formats, adding news about the brand to advertising should generate more extensive processing of the brand message.

Studies that examined the integration of tactics as opposed to media are fewer historically and looked at advertising combined with sales promotions (Bemmaor and Mouchoux, 1991; Lemon and Nowlis, 2002) or personal selling (Gopalakrishna and Chatterjee, 1992). More recent and related to the current study, a synergistic effect from using both publicity – in the format of news – and advertising has been found for Super Bowl ads (Jin, 2003), tourism destinations (Loda and Carrick Coleman, 2005), tennis racquets (Wang, 2006), vacuum cleaners (Stammerjohan *et al.*, 2005), and shampoo (Rosengren, 2008).

Stammerjohan *et al.* (2005) exposed experiment participants to news stories and print ads or news stories and radio ads for two existing brands: Amex credit cards and Oreck vacuum cleaners. The participants read both positive and negative news stories for both brands. For Oreck, which was considered less familiar to college students, the researchers recorded significantly more positive attitudes toward both the ad and the brand among the group exposed to a positive news story. These authors concluded that for unfamiliar brands, a synergistic condition-positive publicity followed by advertising-results in improved attitude toward the ad and brand. The same was not found for the more familiar brand, Amex. These results are consistent with Rosengren's (2008) who looked at publicity and advertising messages embedded in newspaper clutter and found that advertising stands out for familiar brands and thus has a better chance of being processed. The current study examines publicity-and-advertising integration for unfamiliar fictitious brands and, in addition, differentiates among search and experience product categories.

Following the integrated marketing communications framework and the findings from the studies mentioned above, we first hypothesize that for all products in our study, whether search or experience, exposure to both news articles and banner ads will determine higher scores on our attitude toward the brand measure than exposure to repetitive banner ads alone. We attribute this to encoding variability as well as to the third-party endorsement theoretical framework from public relations. Given the latter credibility-related theoretical pillar, we also hypothesize that the news articles about our fictitious brands will benefit from higher message credibility than the banner ads for the same brands respectively:

H1. For both search and experience products, participants exposed to a combination of banner ads and news articles will have a more favorable attitude toward the brand than participants exposed to repetitive banner ads alone.

H2. For both search and experience products, the credibility associated with news articles about the brands will exceed the credibility associated with the banner ads for the same brands respectively.

Next, we present the review of relevant literature exposing the differences between advertising search as opposed to experience products and the ensuing hypotheses.

Product classification rooted in the economics of information theory

Traditionally in the advertising literature, products have been categorized by the level of involvement with the product category (Krugman, 1965; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981). Specifically for the online environment, Shamdasani *et al.* (2001) found banner advertising effectiveness to be web site relevance driven for high-involvement products and web site reputation driven for low-involvement products.

We propose an alternative product categorization, rooted in the economics of information theory, which classifies products as search vs experience ones, reflecting whether consumers make up their minds about a product either before or after the purchase (Nelson, 1974). Search goods are those about which consumers seek out information and make a judgment before purchasing. Experience goods have to be experienced first and then a judgment can be made. Unlike Krugman's (1965) low-involvement/high-involvement categorization, Nelson's scheme relies primarily on the product's fundamental attributes rather than on consumers' perceptions of it (Klein, 1998). So, this less-examined product categorization is based on attributes intrinsic to

the product rather than on the level of involvement of the potential consumer. Using this alternative classification, advertisers may decide on promotion-related aspects once thoroughly familiar with the product while waiting to know better the potential consumer.

It is worth noting that this alternative product classification is not present in previous studies examining integrated marketing communications effects. In this sense, the study is opening the door to research streams that would examine synergies among online brand messages from an economics of information perspective. In Table I, we present a summary of our literature review of advertising-related studies employing the economics of information theory.

Products can be classified as either search or experience particularly when examining advertising information content (Ekelund *et al.*, 1995; Franke *et al.*, 2004). Search goods are defined as those dominated by product attributes for which full information can be acquired prior to purchase. Experience goods are considered so because their dominant attributes are either too difficult or too costly to sample prior to purchase. When assessing the effectiveness and appropriateness of advertising content for print ads, Franke *et al.* (2004) found that advertisements for search goods have significantly higher information content than advertisements for experience goods even though consumer information demand is lower for search than experience goods (Ekelund *et al.*, 1995). This makes sense within the economics of information theory (Stigler, 1961), which postulates that consumers will search for information until the cost of doing so exceeds the benefits. In this instance, cost is time and effort, while benefits are lower price and higher product quality. Specifically for the internet, Liang and Huang (1998) examine which products are better suited to be marketed electronically and find experience goods (shoes) to have a significantly higher perceived acquisition cost online than search goods (books) due to not knowing when and more importantly what exactly one would be receiving after ordering online. More recently, Hsieh *et al.* (2005) find financial characteristics (e.g. points programs or price incentives) to weigh more in the purchase of search goods while find social characteristics are equally important to both search and experience goods. Other recent studies find that advertisers of search goods value more a premium placement within an online paid-placement auction than advertisers of experience goods (Animesh *et al.*, 2005) while online recommendations are more influential for search products than for experience ones (Senecal and Nantel, 2004) as word-of-mouth influences the search attributes of goods (Lim and Chung, 2011).

So, both offline and online advertising studies employing the search-experience distinction found more information to be available about search products while information demand is higher for experience ones.

We did not find a study that specifically examined news and advertising synergies for the two product categories. Based on our review of relevant literature, for search products, we feel consumers quickly scan the facts and form an opinion based on whichever brand message combination they are exposed to. With less to worry about how to "experience" the product online (cost), for search goods it is all about quick processing. The first brand message encountered will be the one determining opinion. Hence, if we take into consideration the encoding variability theory – stating that a more complex format will leave a more prominent memory trace – the news article plus banner ad combination will be more convincing as reading the article first will generate a broader memory trace and a more lasting impression. Showing the ad first or just ads will not yield the same level of brand attitudes as the article-first condition.

Studies adapting the search-experience classification from the economics to the marketing and advertising literatures

Zeithaml (1981)	Presents a continuum of evaluation for different types of products from easy to evaluate goods that are high in search qualities (clothing) to more difficult to evaluate goods with experience qualities (vacation) to even more difficult to evaluate services (medical diagnosis)
Iacobucci (1992)	Presents a goods to services continuum (from blue jeans to psychotherapy) and then finds a search-experience-credence score for each
	Finds goods spread from search (socks, clothing) to experience (laundry detergent, CD player)
	This is a first of a series of articles examining attributes of services; highly cited in the services literature however the current article focuses on goods rather than services
King and Balasubramanian	Empirically find that preference-formation for a search good (35 mm camera) is own-based as opposed to other-based while for an experience good (film processing service) is hybrid
Ekelund *et al.* (1995)	Argue for the value of economics of information theory when examining advertising information content
	Find that consumer information demand is lower for search (lumber, bicycles and books) than for experience (clothing and travel) goods
Franke *et al.* (2004)	Empirically examine the information content and consumer readership of print advertisements differentiating between search and experience products
	Find that print ads for search products (clothing, fragrance, furniture, toys, housewares, greeting cards) have a significantly higher information content than those for experience ones (car parts, tires, computer hardware and software, data storage devices, appliances, home electronics)

Studies applying the search-experience classification when examining the effectiveness of marketing and advertising on the internet

Liang and Huang (1998)	Examine which products are better suited to be marketed electronically
	Find that books and flowers are more likely to be ordered by consumers than shoes, toothpaste or a microwave oven due mainly to perceived transaction costs
	Specifically find experience goods (shoes) to have a significantly higher perceived acquisition cost online than search goods (books)
Klein (1998)	Argues that interactive media such as the Internet can transform all goods into search goods
	Featuring software as the search good example and wine as the experience good that can be transformed into a search one, this is likely the most cited and debated article in the literature relating to the search-experience distinction for online marketing
Shim *et al.*	Propose an online pre-purchase intention model for search goods only (books, software and videos)
	Find that consumer intention to search for product information online significantly influences the intention to purchase the products online
Senecal and Nantel (2004)	Find that online recommendations are more influential for search products (calculator) than for experience ones (wine)
Hsieh *et al.* (2005)	Examine what are the determinants of a committed online customer for different product categories
	Find that financial bonds (e.g. points programs or price incentives) weigh more in the purchase of search (books, ticket services) than of experience goods (hotels, information services), structural bonds (e.g. customized service or professional knowledge) are more important for experience goods, and social bonds are equally important in the purchase of both goods categories

(*continued*)

Table I.
Economics of information theory in the marketing and advertising literatures

384

Table I.

Animesh *et al.* (2005)	Based on data about advertisers' bids collected from online paid-placement auctions, they find that there are significant differences in the bidding strategies of sellers of search goods (books, CDs, cell phones) as compared to sellers of experience goods (cruising, moving and storage, auto insurance)
	Also find that the relative valuation for premium placement is much higher among advertisers of search goods as compared to advertisers of experience goods
	Suggest the findings could be explained by fundamental differences in consumer search behavior as well as the "quality signaling" (or lack thereof) potential of paid placements across the different product categories
Nakayama *et al.* (2010)	Bring four counterarguments to Klein's (1998) assertions that the Internet causes all goods to be search goods
	Empirically test whether the web has transformed all goods (PC, books, cell phone, car, auto insurance) into search goods and find that it hasn't
Lim and Chung (2011)	Find WOM influences search attributes of goods (Belize as a travel destination and Royal Bank of Canada banking services)

For experience goods, any brand information will be processed with interest. Consumers will see benefit in reading as much as they can about the product so as to substitute the lack of actually experiencing the product. Therefore, consumers will attend to a news article encountered either before or after a banner ad in their quest for information about experience products. For these products, the repetitive display ad condition will generate significantly less positive brand attitudes than any of the two integrated conditions. We sum up our predictions in the following hypotheses:

H3a. For search products, showing a news article followed by a banner ad will generate more positive brand attitudes than showing a banner ad followed by an article or repetitive banner ads.

H3b. For experience products, showing a news article either before or after a banner ad will generate more positive brand attitudes than showing repetitive banner ads only.

Following the same reasoning, where first impressions count for search products and "all impressions" contribute to brand attitude formation for experience products, we were also interested in format sequencing effects on article credibility. We have already hypothesized based on the third-party endorsement framework that news articles will be more credible than banner ads. We further hypothesize that, for search products only, reading the article first will make the publicity message more credible than when seeing the ad first, while for experience products the order of exposure will make no difference. For experience products, while the news article will be more credible than the banner ad, there will be no difference in news article credibility between conditions – the article presented either before or after the banner:

H4a. For search products, consumers exposed to the news article before (rather than after) a banner ad will find the article more credible.

H4b. For experience products, the sequence of news articles and banner ads will make no difference in terms of article credibility.

Method

A three (experimental condition, between-subjects) by four (product category, within-subjects) mixed design experiment was designed to assess the differences among exposure conditions to a new brand on the internet, using either banner advertising alone or in combination with publicity as objective news. Specifically, to examine the synergistic effects that result from combining advertising with publicity, as opposed to advertising only, the following exposure conditions were employed: "banner ad plus banner ad" repetitive condition and "news article plus banner ad" or "banner ad plus news article" combination conditions, so that each condition included the same number of exposures to the brand message and sequencing was taken into account for the combination condition. The participants in the repetitive ad condition saw two identical ads. These participants effectively saw: instructions, first ad, filler content, then the second ad, and then answered questions. The two ads were identical so as for this condition to be a truly repetitive condition (as when seeing the same ad twice while browsing online). Participants in the combination condition read instructions first, then browsed and saw a news article (or banner ad), then filler content, then a banner ad (or news article), and then answered experiment questions at the end. The four product categories selected for this experiment were: candy and sports shoes (experience goods) as well as MP3 player and DVD player (search goods). These products were selected out of 20 products rated by another class of 56 marketing students in a pre-test, based on their interest, relevance, degree of usefulness (Zaichkowsky, 1985) and search vs experience qualities (i.e. inspired from Srinivasan and Till (2002), we asked whether products were "easy to evaluate prior to purchase," "can be evaluated only after using the product," or "difficult to evaluate even after using the product"). When designing the stimuli, fictitious brand names were developed for each product to control for any preexisting attitudes that might confound the results in case known brands were used. Ads and news articles were created for each of the four fictitious brands and they are shown in the Appendix.

Stimulus materials

Banner ads and news stories were designed for each product category. Great care was given so that the four banner ads and the four news stories had similar format, length, and general look-and-feel, respectively. The banner ads were creatively alike and featured simple visuals and minimal copy that mentioned the product category and the brand name. All news articles for the publicity treatment were similar in length and adopted an objective and factual news tone. All articles had the look and feel of real news articles that would result from a brand's public relations efforts. They each started with the date, a headline, and a fictional reporter name and mentioned the product category and brand name in the text (see the Appendix). Manipulation checks in a pretest with 36 participants who viewed the stimulus items from a list of ads and stories verify that all stimulus materials represent typical banner ads ($t(35) = 0.61$, $p = 0.572$) or news stories ($t(35) = 0.78$, $p = 0.442$). Filler ads and articles with other fictitious brands appeared on the same pages with the target ads and articles. In addition, cartoons served as fillers between the web pages that contained ads or articles. The fact that our news stories and ads were similar respectively across the four product categories helps tease out the effect of product category within subjects.

Experimental design

A professional computer programmer created the experimental web sites, which underwent usability testing before being made accessible online. The participants accessed the experimental site from a computer terminal of their choice (i.e. where they would normally browse the internet) and saw one of two versions (corresponding to the two exposure conditions), determined by random order. To ensure sufficient participants per condition, forced random assignment was used, such that each of the two groups included at least 32 participants, after which additional participants were randomly assigned to the two groups without restrictions. For counterbalancing purposes, the four ads and four articles within the treatments were programmed to appear in random order as participants accessed the site. To ensure active participation, subjects were asked to vote for specific articles or ads according to predefined criteria (i.e. newsworthiness of the articles and design-brand name match for the ads). To detect participants who might skip reading the articles, the web site and its corresponding database recorded the time each respondent spent on each page. After viewing the ads and reading the articles, participants reached a page with a questionnaire that asked about their attitudes toward brands they saw, their intention to purchase those brands, and demographic information. Participants in the advertising only condition answered a version of the questionnaire without questions about the articles.

Sample and data collection

Subjects were 478 students from a large Midwestern US university. This convenience sample comes from a homogenous population of students interested both in the online environment and the product categories chosen for the experiment. Of the participants, 43 percent were males and 57 percent were females. After data clean-up, the number of participants was evenly split among conditions, with 142 cases in the ad-ad condition, 143 in the ad-article condition, and 148 in the article-ad condition. Participants were recruited via e-mail from three large marketing and advertising classes. The e-mail with the link to the experiment site was sent to students during class and students had to enter their university ID upon accessing the site. According to a power analysis table, which indicates sample size as a function of power, effect size, and significance level, the minimum sample size needed for a power level of 0.90, an effect size of 0.06, and a significance level of 0.05 is 57 participants. Participants were told they have to browse a few pages online and answer questions about them at the end. To ensure active browsing, they were asked to assess the design-brand name match for the ads and the newsworthiness of the articles.

Measured variables

The dependent variable used to measure brand communication effectiveness was attitude toward the brand. The three-item semantic differential scale contained bad/good, unfavorable/favorable, and unpleasant/pleasant choices. (Cronbach's α's for each product's "attitude toward the brand" is higher than 0.85). Respondents were also asked how credible they found each news story by rating its believability (Meyer, 1988).

Results

The important dependent variable in this study is attitude toward the brand. We present descriptive statistics first for this main dependent variable, followed by

results of multivariate analyses of variance and *t*-tests results from testing the proposed hypotheses.

As mentioned in our method section, each of our exposure condition treatment groups (i.e. ad-ad, ad-article, and article-ad) included a little over 140 randomly assigned participants. Means and standard deviations for the three conditions and all four products is presented in Table II.

We plotted the mean attitude toward the brand for the four products and Figure 1 shows how the two search products are different from the two experience products in

		Article-Ad			Ad-Article			Ad-Ad	
	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD
Search products									
Attitude toward the MP3 player brand	148	2.94	0.56	143	2.75	0.51	142	2.74	0.75
Attitude toward the DVD player brand	147	2.80	0.61	143	2.62	0.65	142	2.60	0.77
Experience products									
Attitude toward the candy brand	148	3.02	0.74	142	3.06	0.75	140	2.87	0.81
Attitude toward the sports shoes brand	148	2.93	0.80	142	2.99	0.77	141	2.70	0.78

Table II.
Number of participants, raw means and standard deviations of brand attitudes per treatment group
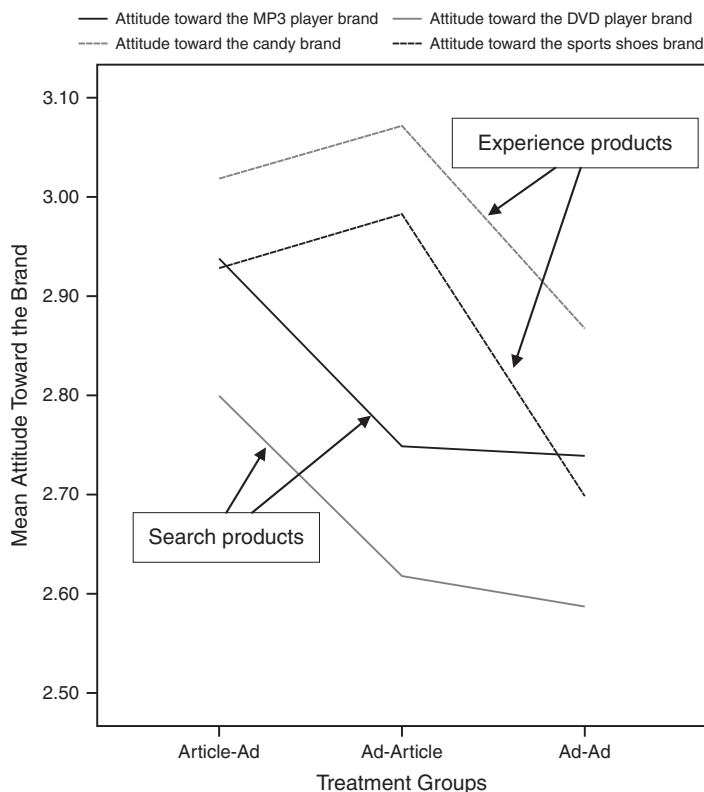

Figure 1.
Mean attitude toward the brand per treatment groups

terms of which exposure condition generates more positive brand attitudes: article-ad for search products and ad-article for experience products.

After examining the mean scores for attitude toward the brand, we conducted multivariate analysis of variance to test our first hypothesis which stated that a combination exposure condition (no matter the sequence) will generate more positive attitudes toward the brand than a repetitive advertising condition. From Figure 1 we could already see that the hypothesis was supported for our specific set of answers. After running the analysis however, the combination condition turned out to be significantly better in generating more positive brand attitudes in the case of experience products only ($F = 5.09$, $p < 0.05$ and $F = 10.09$, $p < 0.05$). For search products, the hypothesis was supported only at the 0.10 level. In addition to the type of product, our particular results may be due to execution details of our ads and news stories. We present this as a limitation in our discussion section (Table III).

Next, we focused on the credibility associated with both banner ads and news articles. We compared the credibility of banner ads as opposed to that of news stories for each product in our study. As hypothesized based on the third-party endorsement theory, news articles were found to be significantly more credible than banner ads ($t = 13.46$, $p < 0.001$ for MP3player, $t = 5.10$, $p < 0.001$ for DVD player, $t = 3.54$, $p < 0.001$ for candy, and $t = 3.08$, $p < 0.01$ for sports shoes). Means and standard deviations as well as specific t-test results are presented in Table IV.

	Exposure condition	n	Mean	SD	F	p
Search products						
Attitude toward the MP3 player brand	Ad-Ad	142	2.74	0.75	2.74	0.099
	Combination[a]	291	2.85	0.54		
Attitude toward the DVD player brand	Ad-Ad	142	2.60	0.77	3.10	0.079
	Combination	290	2.71	0.64		
Experience products						
Attitude toward the candy brand	Ad-Ad	140	2.87	0.81	5.09	0.025
	Combination	290	3.04	0.74		
Attitude toward the sports shoes brand	Ad-Ad	141	2.70	0.78	10.09	0.002
	Combination	290	2.96	0.78		

Note: [a]The combination exposure condition includes both Ad-Article and Article-Ad treatments

Table III.
Brand attitude differences between exposure conditions

	Mean	SD	T	p
Search products				
MP3 player story credibility	3.07	0.95	13.46	0.000
MP3 player ad credibility	2.31	0.51		
DVD player story credibility	2.85	1.03	5.10	0.000
DVD player ad credibility	2.56	0.63		
Experience products				
Candy story credibility	3.00	0.98	3.54	0.000
Candy ad credibility	2.78	0.70		
Sports shoes story credibility	2.94	1.15	3.08	0.002
Sports shoes ad credibility	2.74	0.73		

Table IV.
Means, SDs and T-test results comparing ad and news article credibility

As Figure 1 confirms, search products are different from experience products in that news articles followed by banner ads generate more positive attitudes toward the search brands while banner ads followed by news articles work better for experience products. Our third hypothesis proposes that: news articles followed by banner ads generate more positive brand attitudes than either banner ads followed by news articles or repetitive banner ads alone; and for experience products the sequence does not matter, basically including a news article with banner ads either before or after the ads works better than the banner ads alone, however no exposure condition that includes news articles is superior to the other. As presented in Table V, our data support this hypothesis with significant pairwise comparisons at the 0.05 level for both search and experience products with the exception of one comparison (article-ad compared to ad-ad for candy).

We discuss the different role of news articles in more depth in our next section. We set out to apply to marketing communications the distinction between search and experience products proposed by the economics of information theory. We have then added three additional theoretical pillars from marketing communications: integrated marketing communications, encoding variability, and third-party endorsement. Our last hypothesis stresses the importance of third-party endorsement and emphasizes the importance of credibility and its different role when search products as opposed to experience ones are promoted online using both ads and articles. We hypothesized that the audience will find news articles about new search brand more credible when exposed first to the news and then to a banner ads rather than the other way around ($H4a$) and that the sequence of news article and banner ads makes no difference in terms of article credibility for experience products ($H4b$). t-Tests results partially support $H4a$, participants who read an article first and then a banner ad found the article significantly more credible than those who saw the ad followed by the news article ($t = 2.04$, $p < 0.05$ for MP3 player and $t = 1.88$, $p < 0.10$ for DVD player). We found full support for $H4b$. Participants who saw different sequences of ads and news articles did not differ significantly in their assessment of the news articles credibility. Full results are presented in Table VI.

A summary of our hypotheses testing results is below. Next, we discuss the findings and implications of our study as well as its limitations.

Dependent variable	Treatment Group 1	Treatment Group 2	Mean Diff.	SE	p
Search products					
Attitude toward the MP3 player brand	Article-Ad	Ad-Article	0.189	0.073	0.010
	Article-Ad	Ad-Ad	0.199	0.073	0.007
Attitude toward the DVD player brand	Article-Ad	Ad-Article	0.182	0.080	0.023
	Article-Ad	Ad-Ad	0.212	0.080	0.008
Experience products					
Attitude toward the candy brand	Ad-Ad	Article-Ad[a]	−0.151	0.090	0.094
	Ad-Ad	Ad-Article	−0.204	0.091	0.025
Attitude toward the sports shoes brand	Ad-Ad	Article-Ad	−0.230	0.093	0.013
	Ad-Ad	Ad-Article	−0.284	0.094	0.003

Note: [a]This comparison is not significant however it is included as it is mentioned in the text

Table V.
Significant pairwise comparisons among treatment groups

Hypotheses summary

H1. For both search and experience products, participants exposed to a combination of banner ads and news articles will have a more favorable attitude toward the brand than participants exposed to repetitive banner ads alone (partially supported).

H2. For both search and experience products, the credibility associated with news articles about the brands will exceed the credibility associated with the banner ads for the same brands respectively (supported).

H3a. For search products, showing a news article followed by a banner ad will generate more positive brand attitudes than showing a banner ad followed by an article or repetitive banner ads (supported).

H3b. For experience products, showing a news article either before or after a banner ad will generate more positive brand attitudes than showing repetitive banner ads only (supported).

H4a. For search products, consumers exposed to the news article before (rather than after) a banner ad will find the article more credible (partially supported).

H4b. For experience products, the sequence of news articles and banner ads will make no difference in terms of article credibility (supported).

Discussion, implications, limitations

This study proposes the use of economics of information theory as a product categorization approach when examining online advertising-publicity synergistic effects on attitude toward the brand. Two search goods – those about which consumers can make up their minds without experiencing them – and two experience goods – those that need to be experienced before drawing conclusions – were presented to experiment participants in three treatment groups involving exposures to paid advertising (banner ad-plus-banner ad) and publicity (news article – plus-banner ad and banner ad – plus-news article). Findings indicate that including news about the brand in the online brand communication mix generates higher brand attitude scores for both search and experience products. The sequencing of news and advertisements

	Exposure sequence	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Search products							
MP3 player story credibility	Article-Ad	148	3.18	0.97	2.04	289	0.043
	Ad-Article	143	2.95	0.91			
DVD player story credibility	Article-Ad	148	2.96	1.06	1.88	289	0.062
	Ad-Article	143	2.73	0.99			
Experience products							
Candy story credibility	Article-Ad	148	3.04	1.04	0.66	289	0.512
	Ad-Article	143	2.97	0.91			
Sports shoes story credibility	Article-Ad	148	3.00	1.17	0.88	289	0.378
	Ad-Article	143	2.88	1.13			

Table VI.
Differences in story credibility among treatment groups depending on exposure sequence

matters for search products while for experience products it does not make a difference. For experience products including news articles – either before or after ads – increases brand attitude scores.

Combining news articles with advertisements
In the internet space, consumers rely on verbal messages that confirm or deny advertising claims. Sources of such messages are varied, from the company's web site where products are described to third-party product review sites, to news about brands and personal opinion expressed on blogs and forums. All product learning conveyed via these channels seamlessly blends with the brand information contained in advertising messages, also present online. The quality of the information consumers can find online about brands along with trust in those brands and perceived benefits are drivers of customer satisfaction and repurchase intentions (Fang *et al.*, 2011). The findings of this study confirm previous results from studies employing the integrated marketing communications framework as well as third-party endorsement-based studies in that adding news articles to banner ads or in other words combining publicity with advertising generates higher brand attitude scores than exposing consumers to advertising alone. The results show news articles are more credible than banner ads. The difference in credibility between articles and ads may be due to the difference in credibility of the sources of the two messages: news outlets as opposed to the companies that own the brands promoted. Communication source credibility has been identified as having an influence on communication outcomes by Carl Hovland *et al.* (1953). Source credibility has grown as a theory and has been applied more recently in various studies that looked at the effects of exposure to online communication such as the effect of the source of online health information on knowledge of the read content (Eastin, 2001) or the effect on interest in a product topic when product information is presented in online fora as opposed to a company web page (Bickart and Schindler, 2001). A review of the theoretical advancements in the area of sources of information and new media has been published by Metzger and her colleagues in 2008. The current study adds to the body of literature confirming what the source credibility theory proposes: that the more credible the source the more credible the message. Future studies should examine this hypothesis with a variety of internet message formats where credibility can be manipulated by either mentioning or omitting the source or by simply placing the message in a more credible (e.g. news feed) as opposed to a less credible (e.g. sponsored links) area of a web site.

Promoting search as opposed to experience products – superiority of text-based messages for search products
The findings also support the economics-of-information-driven product classification as a new starting point for developing an online marketing communications mix. Consumers differ in their motivation to attend to information about search products as opposed to experience products. Sequencing of publicity and advertising messages makes a difference online for search goods. Text-based messages should be first for this product group as consumers attending to information about search products are more motivated to read the verbal information. Banner ads are highly visual and feature little text (copy), whereas news stories or publicity are largely verbal and often feature only or mostly text. When comparing the effects of online brand exposure to banner ads, news stories, or both, we must consider the differences between visual and verbal content. Shank and Abelson (1995) stress that stories are crucial for people to

acquire and memorize information. According to social comprehension theory, people spontaneously construct a mental simulation to comprehend information about a stimulus (Wyer and Radvansky, 1999). This mental simulation is called an event model (Wyer *et al.*, 2002), which represent a subset of what cognitive psychologists call mental or situational models (Johnson-Laird, 1983; Kintsch, 1998; Zwaan and Radvansky, 1998). Mental models contain both verbal and nonverbal components. According to Wyer and Radvansky (1999), the image components of a mental model are obligatory, but verbal components are optional. They further state that people who see images or visuals are unlikely to assign verbal labels to their observations, whereas people who read a story may spontaneously form mental pictures of the events described and thereby elaborate features of the events that were not specified in the verbal description. Therefore, exposing consumers to brands through news articles or other text-based formats (e.g. blog posts, social media updates) may generate a more extensive mental model that includes both the information provided in the text and additional information inferred by the reader. Future studies should examine whether presenting information in a verbal as opposed to a visual format makes a difference in subsequent brand attitudes toward search products brands.

While findings are limited to this particular sample of students and to the four product categories examined the study adds a valuable direction in online marketing communications research. We conclude that there needs to be a variety of information rather than just more/quantity (repetitive) information about a brand in the marketplace. Encoding variability theory states that a larger memory trace will be imprinted on account of varied rather than repetitive information (we stress again variety not only quantity of information). One or both of the combination conditions generate more positive brand attitudes than the ad-ad condition. Hence, we find: superior credibility of news articles over ads; and superiority of exposure to varied (not only to an increased amount of) information. Sequencing of the different types of messages matters as well, especially for search-type products, for which text-based messages should come first.

Future research can examine brand attitude scores after exposure to specific online tools (e.g. social media posts, blog posts) and advertising for products in the two categories: search and experience. From an applied perspective, any findings along these lines would help with planning the sequencing of brand messages.

Lastly, another limitation of this study lies in the actual ads and news articles that were used. Even though during pre-testing these messages were deemed believable news articles and banner ads some differences in the scores came from the inherent differences among ads and news stories, respectively.

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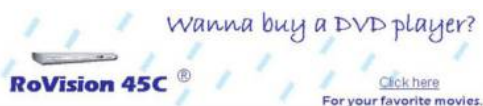
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Appendix 1. Stimulus materials

Ads

News articles

Sonex MP3 player

March 5, 2005 – Technology Section

First Look: Sonex Scores with New MP3 Player

Eric Dahlen, Tech News

Everyones seems to be gunning for MP3 players. Joining competitors like the Rio Carbon and the Creative Zen Micro is Sonex's $230 P20. I tested a shipping model of the 6 GB, color-screen player. The highlight of the P20 is a 1.5-inch display combined with a hardware-and-software interface. Navigating your music library is easy with the touch-sensitive slider control. You can browse by artist, album, genre, or song title. The player lets you add individual songs to an on-the-go playlist.

More Features: The P20 does more than play music: You can also listen to and record FM radio, record audio with a built-in microphone, display text files, and view JPG photos. The P20's battery is replaceable and rechargeable. The company rates the battery's run time between charges at about 12 hours.

RoVision DVD player

February 17, 2005 – Technology Section

RoVision Announces New DVD Player Line

Mike Stern, Tech News

The new RoVision DVD player lineup is available in a choice of silver or black and designed with a new ultra-slim profile. A broad range of features highlight the players' ease of use. These include Variable Speed Playback with sound and subtitles that allows the viewer to watch a DVD one-and-a-half times faster while audio and subtitles play at normal speed, 11 visual effects during still image (JPEG) playback, and the option to save any desired image to the player to use as a custom start-up screen. Two step-up models feature a dimmable illuminated disc tray, a RoVision original design solution.

Other available features include 10-disc memory and one-touch replay that instantly recalls the last seven seconds of video viewed. In addition, RoVision DVD players offer playback compatibility with a full range of formats.

Sweeteez candy

February 23, 2005 – Social Section

Candy of the week: Sweeteez Caramilk Maple

Joe Mochrie, Toronto News

With Caramilk Maple, Sweeteez adds a hint of maple to its popular chocolate bar. As with other "fusion" bars, the company is hoping that the combination of two sweet ingredients will spell success. In terms of packaging, instead of employing the swirls of color the competition has resorted to in this chocolate bar war, Sweeteez continue to rely on their trademark deep green wrapper, accented, in this variation, with a gentle streak of maple brown. The highlight of this wrapper is the candied maple leaf.

They say "Sweeteez Caramilk Maple brings together two Canadian icons – Caramilk and the flavor of maple syrup. With creamy, melt-in-your mouth chocolate pockets and the natural flavor of sweet maple syrup, it's one hundred percent Sweeteez quality," says John Killip, VP of Marketing at Sweeteez. "By bringing maple to its centre, you might just say that the Sweeteez Caramilk secret just got a little sweeter […]"

Talpa sports shoes

March 20, 2005 – Sports Section

Talpa launches MyShoe

Mike Perkovski, Fashion News

Launched at the Romanian Tennis Championships, and firmly placing their footprint in sports shoe history, local brand Talpa introduces MyShoe. Using a revolutionary computer-aided system to measure your feet, MyShoe will not only ensure you get the perfect fit from your sports shoe, but allows you to choose your own design as well. The three step process to MyShoe, carried out by a Talpa fitting expert, ensures customized shoes fit specific needs, regardless of individual foot make-up.

Talpa utilizes a dynamic foot scan system to measure your feet's weight distribution and pressure when running, and what technological features will provide the best support. For MyShoe, Talpa determines the exact size of each foot and the support required for the perfect fit. MyShoe ensures the best possible fit for your running shoe, football boot or tennis shoe.

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