Going native on Facebook: a content analysis of sponsored messages on undergraduate student Facebook pages

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Abstract: This paper examines the prevalence and nature of sponsored messages on Facebook. Results of a content analysis of desktop and mobile Facebook pages from 52 undergraduate student subjects showed 53% of sponsored messages in the desktop sample and 100% of sponsored messages in the mobile sample would be categorised as native advertising, as they were located in the user’s news feed. Approximately 12% of all news feed posts were sponsored posts and almost 90% of sponsored news feed posts were based on the user’s or user’s friends’ actions. The majority of the sponsoring advertisers were from companies established after the year 2000, and only 11% were leading US advertisers.

Keywords: advertising; content analysis; Facebook; native advertising; social media; sponsored messages.

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1 Introduction

In 2008, when Facebook was emerging as social media powerhouse, the question on everyone’s mind was, can they make it pay? (Urstadt, 2008; Vara, 2008; Vascellaro, 2008). In 2016, that question seems quaint: ad revenue at Facebook reached over
Facebook dominates social media, with 65% of ad revenue in a category where the second largest, Twitter, has 8% (Marvin, 2015). It is second only to Google in total digital ad revenue, which is projected to surpass television advertising this year to become the largest category of ad spending. Facebook's ad revenue accelerated in 2012, when it introduced mobile advertising and began showing sponsored messages in a user's news feed, along with posts from friends (Darwell, 2012; Statistica, 2016). Sponsored messages in a user's news feed fall into the category of "native advertising" because they resemble the unpaid content, e.g., friends' posts, that surrounds them. Although the term native advertising is associated with digital media, paid advertising designed to resemble unpaid content is hardly new; in fact, while some authors reserve the term native for digital advertising (Bakshi, 2015), others have begun to use it to include older forms of advertising-editorial blends such as infomercials and advertorials (Hoofnagle and Meleshinsky, 2015). As with these older forms of ad-editorial blends, there are ethical concerns with native advertising, specifically, the potential for consumers to be deceived as to the source of the message. At a minimum, industry guidelines require labelling paid messages that might be mistaken for editorial content (ASME Guidelines, 2015; IAB Native Advertising Playbook, 2013). Facebook currently uses the term sponsored to indicate a paid message.

One of the advantages of digital advertising is its ability to target individuals, not just demographically, as with traditional print and broadcast media, but based on behaviour. For example, with Facebook's Social Graph and Social Exchange programs, advertisers can target based on user and friend activity on Facebook, as well as user activity outside of Facebook (Toner, 2013). The result is that ads are individualised – no two people are likely to see exactly the same ads. This type of highly targeted advertising can be beneficial to advertisers and perhaps even consumers, but poses an obstacle to certain types of advertising research: how do we know who is advertising what to whom? The purpose of this research, therefore, was to examine, from the perspective of a fairly narrow audience – college students – the prevalence and nature of sponsored messages on Facebook.

2 Literature review

Couldry and Turow (2014, p.1716) define native advertising as “textual, pictorial, and/or audio-visual material that supports the aims of an advertiser (and is paid for by the advertiser) while it mimics the format and editorial style of the publisher that carries it.” The Interactive Advertising Board (IAB) has identified six different types of native advertising: in-feed units, paid search units, recommendation widgets, promoted listings, in-ad with native element units, and a catch-all category for other, often platform-specific units, “custom/can’t be contained” (IAB Native Advertising Playbook, 2013). Using the IAB framework, Facebook sponsored messages within the news feed are best described by the third type of in-feed unit, defined as “an in-feed ad that is in a publisher’s normal content well; is in story form to match the surrounding stories and allows for an individual to play, read, view, or watch without leaving to a separate page” (IAB, p.9).

Because the term native to describe marketing efforts has its origins in the 2011 Online Marketing and Media conference, where it was used to describe developing efforts to monetise digital media, native advertising is associated with digital advertising, but a closer examination of its key features, paid by the advertiser and mimicking
Going native on Facebook

editorial content, makes it clear that native advertising is just another form of the advertising practices known in the past as hybrid messages or ad-editorial blends, and better known by specific forms such as advertorials and infomercials. Research on older forms of ad-editorial blends has documented growth in their usage for over 30 years (Stout et al., 1989; Donaton, 1992; Ju-Pak et al., 1995; Hanson, 2014). Although the history of digital native advertising is much shorter, Facebook’s growth in ad revenue after the implementation of sponsored stories provides some indication of its growth, as does a study by the Online Publishers Association, which found that 73% of its membership accepted native advertising (Marvin, 2013). Several sources cite the growth of native advertising as a driving factor in the growth of digital advertising (Lunden, 2014; eMarketer, 2016).

The prevalence and growth of ad-editorial blends suggests that advertisers believe they are effective, and research has offered some support for effectiveness. In earlier research on advertorials, for example, Kim et al. (2001) found that an ad designed as an advertorial garnered greater attention, message elaboration, and recall, compared to a similar ad in a standard format; Robinson et al. (2002) and Hausknecht et al. (1991) both found partial evidence of increased credibility for advertorials; and Van Reijmersdal et al. (2005) found that advertorials were evaluated more favourably than conventional advertisements, and Hanson (2016) found that an advertorial format generated more favourable ad and brand attitudes for target subjects. Recent research seems to indicate that the benefits of ad-editorial blends in terms of increased attention, elaboration, and attitudes extend to digital native advertising. A joint industry study by IPG Lab and Sharethrough found consumers looked at native ads 53% more frequently than display ads and 32% of respondents said the native ad “is an ad I would share with a member of family member” versus just 19% for display ads (IPG Lab, 2013). In academic research looking specifically at native advertising, Tutaj and van Reijmersdal (2012) reported that subjects found sponsored content more informative, amusing and less irritating than banner advertising, and Becker-Olsen (2003) found that sponsored content, when compared with banner advertising, led to more positive company attitudes and greater cognitive elaboration. Furthermore, while some have suggested that ad-editorial blends may lessen the credibility of the publications in which they appear (Sandler and Secunda, 1993; Kim et al., 2001), Howe and Teufel (2014) found that the presence of native advertising had no significant effect on perceptions of credibility.

The concern with ad-editorial blends is that they gain at least some of their effectiveness from deception; specifically, deceiving consumers – either completely or momentarily – as to the source of the message. Again, there is some evidence to support this. Howe and Teufel (2014) found that participants who were exposed to native advertising were less likely to report having seen advertising than those who were exposed to banner advertising, Hoofnagle and Meleshinsky (2015) found that 27% of 600 consumers tested thought an online advertorial in a blog was written by a reporter or editor, and Tutaj and Reijmersdal (2012) found that subjects exposed to native advertising in the form of sponsored content on a news web site scored lower on recognition of advertising format, understanding of persuasive intent, and scepticism than subjects exposed to banner advertising. In 2013, Facebook settled a class action lawsuit in California over the way it shared “likes” of advertisers in sponsored stories (Bachman, 2013), a practice that has raised concerns about both privacy and implied endorsement.

Because of the potential deception inherent in ad-editorial blends, government and industry regulations for ad-editorial blends have existed for decades, and recently efforts have been made to clarify and make explicit the extension of these rules to native
advertising. In 2013, the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) published its Native Advertising Playbook, which included principles for disclosure language and visibility along with common disclosure language for each of six categories of native advertising identified (IAB Native Advertising Handbook, 2013). In 2015, the American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME) modified its guidelines on advertorials to include digital practices, recommending “native advertising on websites and in social media should be clearly labelled as advertising by the use of terms such as “Sponsor Content” or “Paid Post” and visually distinguished from editorial content and that collections of sponsored links should be clearly labelled as advertising and visually separated from editorial content” (ASME Guidelines, 2015). In governmental action, in 2013, the FTC held a Native Advertising Workshop and published an updated guidance document on disclosures in digital advertising, and in December 2015 it issued a policy statement and online guide for businesses regarding native advertising. In the FTC’s Enforcement Policy Statement on Deceptively Formatted Advertisements, it reiterates the extension of deceptive formatting principles, such as clear and conspicuous disclosures, to digital native advertising and concludes by stating, “The Commission will find an advertisement deceptive if the ad misleads reasonable consumers as to its nature or source, including that a party other than the sponsoring advertiser is its source. Misleading representations of this kind are likely to affect consumers’ decisions or conduct regarding the advertised product or the advertisement, including by causing consumers to give greater credence to advertising claims or to interact with advertising content with which they otherwise would not have interacted” (FTC Enforcement Policy, 2015, p.16). Specifically referencing Facebook, Dan Greenberg of Sharethough emphasises the FTC’s position that practices that deceive a consumer into interacting with an ad or sales person are forbidden, even if the commercial nature of the communication is later revealed; therefore, “Before I decide to click on something, I need to realize this is an ad….” (Blurred Lines, 2013, p.195).

Most research on the use of Facebook as a marketing tool to date has focused on companies’ Facebook pages rather than their presence on individuals’ Facebook pages, probably due to the fact that the availability of paid messages in the news feed is relatively new, and the difficulty of collecting individual (private) versus brand (public) Facebook pages. Touchette et al. (2013) examined Facebook pages of leading apparel brands and found that photos and advertisements were the dominant content. Freeman et al. (2014) analysed 27 food and beverage brand Facebook pages in Australia and found that the most common marketing techniques included photos, user-generated content, and competitions, prizes, and giveaways, and that the age group most frequently liking the food and beverage brands was 18–24. Parsons (2013) analysed Facebook pages of 70 top global brands, representing a wide range of product categories found that marketing techniques varied, but that, on average, companies posted 24 times a month, and, again, pictures and promotions offering incentives, such as contests, were frequently used. Lipsman et al. (2012), through access to a consumer panel, were able to look at brand activity on users’ Facebook pages, along with brand Facebook pages. Among their findings were that Facebook users are 40 to 150 times more likely to be exposed to brand content in their news feeds than on brand pages, and that fan activity has a significant multiplier effect on reach through friends of fans. While Lipsman et al. were able, through their access to an internet panel, to expand research on Facebook marketing activity beyond brand pages, at the time of the research, Sponsored Stories were still appearing to the right of the news feed, and their study focused on unpaid impressions.
3 Research questions

Given the scarcity of research on native advertising on Facebook, specifically sponsored messages in the news feed, and the potential issues that native advertising entails, the following research questions were formulated:

R1: What is the prevalence of native (news feed) and non-native (side bar) sponsored messages on Facebook, and does it differ by gender or platform?

R2: What is the prevalence of the various types of sponsored messages in the news feed, and does it differ by gender or platform?

R3: What is the profile of advertisers on Facebook in terms of product category, age, and prominence?

4 Methodology

Sixty-three undergraduate student subjects from three upper-level business courses at a US university participated in the study. Subjects were given written instructions and then verbally led through the process of visiting the desktop and mobile versions of four different social media platforms, logging in where applicable, and capturing screenshots from each. Only the data collected for Facebook is utilised in the present study. In order to capture the entire page and not just the viewable screen, Google Chrome Full Page Screen Capture was used to capture the desktop web sites and Awesome Screen Shot was used to capture the mobile sites. Screenshots of mobile sites were sent via email to be saved on the students’ laptops, then all files were transferred to flash drives provided by the instructor.

Eight desktop and 14 mobile screenshots contained no sponsored messages and were eliminated from further analysis. (Twenty-two participants reported using ad blocking software; seven removed it for the study.) An additional 12 desktop and 20 mobile screenshots were eliminated due to file problems (e.g., images too small to read), failure to log in to one of the platforms, or problems downloading or using the screen capture software. In total, fifty-two subjects (29 male, 23 female) provided a useable screenshot from at least one of the two Facebook platforms, resulting in 72 screenshots and 168 sponsored messages for analysis.

Sponsored messages were defined as those labelled “sponsored,” clearly indicating a paid message. Posts from followed or liked brands that were not labelled “sponsored” were not included in this measure. Counts of total posts included both commercial (paid and unpaid) and friend posts but did not include posted comments or Facebook notifications (e.g., “What’s on your mind?” or “People You May Know”).

Product categories were determined by first coding the specific sponsor and product (e.g., Pandora, internet radio) and then grouping products into categories (e.g., leisure/entertainment), guided by categories used in content analyses of advertising to similar audiences (Mastin et al., 2004; Morris and Nichols, 2013; Hanson, 2014). In cases where a web retailer was promoting its site and a product, the category for the product being promoted was used. The resulting product typology captured 83% of the
products in seven categories: apparel/accessories, food/drink, auto, technology, financial, health/beauty, and leisure/entertainment (e.g., movies, entertainment streaming services, and sports and celebrity websites).

Screenshots were coded independently by two individuals. As most of the categories involved objective rather than subjective items (e.g., post counts, sponsor and product names), simple percent agreement was used as the reliability measure (cf. Ju Pak et al., 1996). Using a conservative unit of analysis (screenshot, not item), an initial inter-coder agreement of 93% was reached, with all discrepancies being clerical or oversight errors.

5 Results

Table 1 shows totals and percentages for sponsored messages by platform, gender, and location (news feed vs. side bar). For the desktop platform, the majority (61.43%) of the sponsored messages for males were in the news feed, while the majority (55.22%) of sponsored messages for the females occurred to the side ($\chi^2 = 3.17, p = .05$). All sponsored messages in the mobile application are in the news feed as there is no side bar. In total, 53.28% of the sponsored messages in the desktop platform occurred in the news feed and 46.72% occurred in the side bar.

Table 2 presents a closer look at messages appearing in the news feed. Approximately 12% of all posts in users’ news feeds were sponsored posts, with no significant difference across conditions ($\chi^2 = .46, p = .93$). Of the sponsored messages in the news feed, 58.65% mentioned users’ friends (friends had like the brand), 30.77% were Suggested Posts, and 10.56% carried no designation other than Sponsored. Among news feed ads with recommendation labels, there was a marginally significant gender difference ($\chi^2 = 2.55, p = .07$), with females more likely to see Friends Like (67.50% vs. 53.13%) and males more likely to see Suggested Post (37.50% vs. 20.00%), but there were no other significant differences in news feed ads by gender or platform.

Table 3 shows product categories for all sponsored messages. The largest categories for sponsored messages were apparel (30.95%), leisure/entertainment (23.21%), and technology (13.69%). Apparel represented a significantly larger percentage of the sponsored messages in the female sample (53.25% vs. 12.09%; $\chi^2 = 31.16, p = .00$) and leisure/entertainment represented a larger percentage of the sponsored messages in the male sample (30.77% vs. 14.29%; $\chi^2 = 5.47, p = .02$). The only other significant difference in product category by gender was for “other”: a larger percentage of the messages for males fell outside of the coding scheme (25.27% vs. 7.79%; $\chi^2 = 7.74, p = .01$). This included ads for hunting supplies, dog supplies, drink tumblers, and a veteran’s group. Apparel represented a significantly higher percentage of the sponsored messages in the desktop sample than the mobile sample (35.04% vs. 12.90%; $\chi^2 = 4.81, p = .02$). A marginally significant larger percentage of the mobile ads were for leisure/entertainment (25.89% vs. 11.69%; $z = 1.76, p = .08$), but there were no other significant differences between desktop and mobile in product categories advertised.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Desktop</th>
<th>Mobile</th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>Desktop</th>
<th>Mobile</th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>Facebook Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Sponsored Messages</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>51.09%</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>48.91%</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>81.55%</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side bar</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>38.57%</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>55.22%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News feed</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>61.43%</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>44.78%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desktop</td>
<td>Mobile</td>
<td>Totals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Desktop Total</td>
<td>Mobile Total</td>
<td>Male Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Feed Posts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#  %</td>
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<td>#  %</td>
<td>#  %</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Feed Posts</td>
<td>377 59.09%</td>
<td>261 40.91%</td>
<td>158 66.67%</td>
<td>638 72.91%</td>
<td>237 27.09%</td>
<td>27.09%</td>
<td>535 61.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsored</td>
<td>43 11.41%</td>
<td>30 11.49%</td>
<td>21 13.29%</td>
<td>73 11.44%</td>
<td>31 13.08%</td>
<td>11.96%</td>
<td>64 11.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends Like</td>
<td>25 58.14%</td>
<td>20 66.67%</td>
<td>9 42.86%</td>
<td>7 70.00%</td>
<td>45 61.64%</td>
<td>51.61%</td>
<td>34 53.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggested Post</td>
<td>18 41.86%</td>
<td>6 20.00%</td>
<td>6 28.57%</td>
<td>2 20.00%</td>
<td>24 32.88%</td>
<td>25.81%</td>
<td>24 37.50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3: Product categories by platform and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Desktop Male</th>
<th>Desktop Female</th>
<th>Mobile Male</th>
<th>Mobile Female</th>
<th>Desktop Total</th>
<th>Mobile Total</th>
<th>Male Total</th>
<th>Female Total</th>
<th>Facebook Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apparel</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>53.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auto</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/beauty</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tech</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13.19%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>13.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.65%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure/entertainment</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>20.44%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>23.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Product</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16.79%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17.26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:**
*Totals for male/female include duplicated subjects across web, mobile; n unique respondents = 29 M, 23 F; exceeds screenshot captures with no sponsored posts.*
Table 4 provides profile information for the advertising sponsors. There were a total of 117 different advertisers across the 168 sponsored posts, for an average of 1.44 posts per sponsor. The leading advertisers in the sample were Pandora, Romwe, Tobi, and Verizon, each with five ads. The first three of these brands only targeted females. Three other brands, Lululemon, Revolve Clothing, and She Insider, had four ads; all but one of the ads from these brands targeted females. Fifty-seven percent of the advertisers were founded in 2000 or later, and 11% were in the top 100 of US advertisers, as measured by Adbrands (Adbrands.net, 2015). There were no significant differences in sponsor age or ad spending category by platform.

Table 4  Sponsor profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Desktop</th>
<th>Mobile</th>
<th>Total*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unduplicated Sponsors</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts Per Sponsor</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Founded 2000+</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>56.12%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 100 Advertisers</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12.24%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *Desktop + Mobile sponsors exceeds total due to duplication of sponsors across platforms

6 Summary and discussion

Overall, 53% of sponsored messages in the desktop sample, and 100% of sponsored messages in the mobile sample, would be categorised as native, as they were located in the user’s news feed. By comparison, a recent study reported approximately 12% of all magazine ads in leading fashion and beauty magazines (a category heavy in advertorials) were advertorials (Hanson, 2014). The emergence of the mobile platform, designed for smaller screens and therefore limited in ad space, is likely a contributing factor to Facebook’s decision to accepted sponsored messages in the news feed, and the continued growth of mobile seems to predict continued growth in native advertising. On the desktop platform, side bars ads still represent almost half of all sponsored messages seen in a single page scroll. Although easier to ignore, the side bar ads have the advantage of remaining visible as users scroll down past other sponsored messages. The absence of side bar space on Facebook mobile did not result in significantly more news feed ads on mobile compared to desktop, reinforcing the challenge of generating advertising revenue on smaller screens.

Overall, about one in ten news feed posts were sponsored posts. By comparison, more than 14 minutes of every hour of television programming is commercial (Flint, 2014) and 54% of magazine pages are ad pages (MPA, n.d.). Almost 90% of sponsored news feed posts were based on the user’s or user’s friends’ actions (i.e., Suggested Post or Friends Like), illustrating how advertisers are using the unique advantages of Facebook’s social nature and tracking ability. The finding that women were significantly more likely to see a post from a brand friends had liked, and men a post based on their own behaviour, is consistent with research showing that women interact more with brands on social media (Vermeren, 2015).
The predominant product category for sponsored messages was apparel, representing over half of all ads for females in the study. While apparel is an obvious choice for female college students, so is health and beauty, which is very common in other media in this demographic, but only represented 6.5% of the ads for females in this study. Given that 38% of internet users report having purchased beauty and personal care products online (Nielsen, n.d.), the lack of advertising could represent a missed opportunity.

The second largest product category represented was leisure, which included entertainment streaming services and programming (e.g., Pandora, Netflix) and news and entertainment websites (e.g., CNN, PointAfter). Perhaps not surprisingly, given the shared digital nature of the products and the medium, the leisure categories combined represented over 23% of the ads. Advertisers in the male sample might be characterised as more idiosyncratic: no one product category dominated and there were significantly more products characterised as “other.”

The majority of the sponsoring advertisers were from companies established after the year 2000, and only 11% were leading US advertisers. This result may reflect advertisers’ perception of Facebook as still emerging as an advertising medium, and seen as risky or uncomfortable for established brands, but offering opportunities for less established brands. Given the relative homogeneity of the sample, there was surprisingly little repetition of advertisers across subjects. The most frequent advertisers had no more than five ads in the sample and each sponsor averaged only slightly more than one ad.

7 Conclusions and future research

Most of the sponsored messages on Facebook identified in this study would be classified as native advertising as they were found in the news feed and resembled, in content and format, posts from friends. Given the growth of mobile, where all Facebook advertising is in-feed, we could expect the trend towards more digital native advertising to continue. As native advertising can easily be mistaken for a non-commercial message, further study is needed to determine the level of deception and the adequacy of current labelling and disclosure; e.g., is the term “sponsored” clear and meaningful to typical users? Should there be other indications, in colour or format, of the nature of the message? In addition, studies of native advertising on web sites have shown that it is more effective than banner advertising, but further research is needed to determine which if any of the improvements in effectiveness extend to native advertising on Facebook, and if they are related to deception.

The results from the sample utilised in this study suggest that mainstream, established brands are not utilising Facebook as an advertising medium to the extent that less established brands are. Replication of the study with different demographic samples is needed to better understand the advertising dynamics on Facebook, and replication over time is needed to monitor growth in Facebook advertising and track changes in advertiser profile as it evolves as an advertising medium.

The highly individualised presentation of Facebook poses difficulties to anyone interested in knowing the prevalence and nature of its advertising. The present study provides a brief glimpse into the use of Facebook for advertising – paid messages – rather than as a public relations tool (i.e., the use of brand pages), as has been the focus of much of the research to date. Although limited by sample size and exploratory in
design, it provides a basis for future research on Facebook as it continues its growth and evolution as an advertising medium.

References


Going native on Facebook


