

The Impact of Instagram Sponsored Ad Message Explicitness and Product Type on Consumers' Perception of Ad and Click "Shop Now" Intention

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Purpose/Background: Brands are increasingly advertising their products through Social Network Services (SNS), particularly Instagram stories, which have a daily user base of over 500 million users (Bagadiya, 2023). As a result, brands are utilizing sponsored content to reach consumers while engaged in SNS. Despite the popularity of Instagram stories and their cost-effective advertising format (Ayres, 2021), research on sponsored ads within this context is limited (Boerman, 2020; Kim, 2022). There is a lack of research on the impact of different levels of explicitness in advertising messages (Kumar et al., 2020), including explicit and implicit messaging. Explicit message claims, which are demonstrated with exaggeration (Brennan, 2018), and implicit message claims, which can be literally true but still mislead the audience more subtly (Harris, 1977; Hastak & Mazis, 2011).

While research has established that consumers generally prefer advertising that matches the product type (Drolet & Aaker, 2002), there is a need to investigate how this preference might affect their response to SNS advertising. It is possible that consumers might be more forgiving of explicit messages for hedonic products that are primarily purchased for their enjoyable nature, compared to utilitarian products that are purchased for their functional benefits. The study is guided by the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) which suggests that consumers are motivated to protect themselves from being unduly influenced and use their own knowledge to evaluate advertising messages, often being skeptical of exaggerated claims. The study aims to achieve three specific research objectives. Firstly, the study seeks to understand the impact of levels of explicitness in messaging (high: explicit vs. low: implicit) on Instagram users' advertising perceptions (persuasion knowledge, perceived deceptiveness, and ad credibility) and click "Shop Now" intentions. Secondly, the research aims to explore the influence of consumers' perception of ads on their click "Shop Now" intentions. Thirdly, the study investigates the role of product type (utilitarian vs. hedonic) on the relationship between the explicitness level in messaging and consumers' perception of ads and subsequent click "Shop Now" intentions.

Methods: The present study utilized a 2 (message explicitness level: high/explicit vs. low/implicit) x 2 (product type: utilitarian vs. hedonic) experimental design. Prior to the experiment, a series of pre-tests were conducted to select the product types that would represent utilitarian (i.e., soap) and hedonic (i.e., bath bomb) products. The current study involved 298 female participants between the ages of 18 and 34, as this age group is the primary demographic using Instagram (Statista, 2022). The participants were recruited from an online consumer panel called Prolific in the US, and the survey was randomly distributed evenly across four conditions, with an average of 75 participants per cell. Additionally, women have been found to be more

interested in personal care and hygiene products than men, making them a suitable target audience. In line with previous literature (Amyx & Lumpkin, 2016; Betts et al., 2021), the explicit message stimuli included the message “I want to persuade you to try this SOAP/BATH BOMB! You will absolutely fall in love with it! Get glowing and healthy skin just by using this perfect and revolutionary Soap/Bath Bomb!”; for the implicit message stimuli, the message included “Try this SOAP/BATH BOMB! You will like it! Get bright and healthy skin by using this Soap/Bath Bomb!” After exposure to the Instagram sponsored advertisements, each respondent completed measures assessing persuasion knowledge, perceived deceptiveness, ad credibility, click “Shop Now” intentions, and demographic information. All measures were adapted from previous research.

Analyses and Results: We conducted a series of Hayes’ Process (Model 7) to test for mediated moderation effects (Hayes, 2018). The results showed that the relationship between message explicitness levels and perceived deceptiveness was not significant ($B = -.1647$, $SE = .3019$, $p = .5490$, 95% CI $[-.7355, .3918]$). Also, there was no significant relationship between message explicitness levels and ad credibility ($B = .1013$, $SE = .2148$, $p = .6376$, 95% CI $[-.3215, .5240]$). Regarding the indirect effects of message explicitness levels on click “Shop Now” intention, the results showed that the indirect effect through perceived deception was not significant ($B = .0075$, $SE = .0375$, 95% CI $[-.0641, .0790]$). However, the indirect effect through persuasion knowledge was significant ($B = -.0354$, $SE = .0189$, 95% CI $[-.0730, -.0097]$), indicating that persuasion knowledge partially mediated the relationship between message explicitness levels and click “Shop Now” intention. The direct effects of message explicitness levels and the mediators on click “Shop Now” intention were also significant ($B = .2535$, $SE = .1261$, $p = .0454$, 95% CI $[-.0053, .5017]$ for message explicitness levels; $B = .0184$, $SE = .0558$, $p = .7418$, 95% CI $[-.0914, .1282]$ for perceived deceptiveness; $B = .1988$, $SE = .0529$, $p = .0002$, 95% CI $[-.0947, .3028]$ for persuasion knowledge; and $B = .6279$, $SE = .0547$, $p = .0000$, 95% CI $[-.5202, .7356]$ for ad credibility).

Discussion: The study provides important insights into the effects of message explicitness on consumer behavior in the context of social media advertising. The lack of significant relationship between message explicitness levels and ad credibility suggests that consumers may still find a sponsored ad credible even when they perceive it as exaggerated. Instagram users may be receptive to Story-type advertisements and perceive them as trustworthy, even if the ads employ exaggerated message. The finding that the indirect effect of message explicitness on click “Shop Now” intention was partially mediated by persuasion knowledge suggests that consumers’ awareness of persuasion intent can influence their response to deceptive advertising. The finding suggests that consumers’ awareness of the intent to persuade them through explicit advertising may affect their response to the advertising. If consumers are aware of the persuasive intent of an explicit advertisement, they are less likely to be influenced by it, partially explaining the effect of message explicitness on the intention to click “Shop Now.” The implication is that advertisers need to be transparent about their intent and provide clear, accurate, and trustful information in their Story-style Instagram advertising to maintain trust and avoid misleading consumers. Advertisers should communicate clearly and avoid using explicit messages to build long-term

relationships with their target audience. Lastly, there was no significant difference between utilitarian product (soap) and hedonic product (bath bomb) on the relationship between message deception level and consumer perception of ad. This result may not generalize to other contexts and products.

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