

**A Test of PR Students' Ability to Differentiate
Native Advertising from Editorial Content in Online Media**

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ABSTRACT

More than 700 U.S. Public Relations students participated in a study that included a test of their ability to differentiate between editorial and advertising content on a website. Almost all students (96.6%) correctly identified a banner advertisement correctly and 83 percent recognized a bylined article as non-advertising. Only 64 percent recognized a story with a “sponsored content” disclosure as advertising. Findings of this study are compared to a similar nationwide survey of advertising students. Implications for PR education are discussed.

A Test of PR Students' Ability to Differentiate Native Advertising from Editorial Content in Online Media

The current study is a test of media literacy among U.S. college public relations students and specifically examines their ability to recognize “native advertising” (also referred to as sponsored content) as advertising and not editorial matter that is publisher generated. Native advertising tactics on the part of news, information and entertainment publishers are central to the debate about whether advertisers are misleading the public by camouflaging advertising messages to appear as publisher content (Conill, 2016).

This study was designed to assess such recognition and differentiation capabilities among a population of PR students and also to explore how they made distinctions among message types, using an instrument developed for the Stanford History Education Group's (SHEG, 2016) Civic Online Reasoning program (McGrew, Ortega, Breakstone & Wineburg, 2017). It extends the SHEG measures to a population of students who, because of their academic studies, would be assumed to be adept at identifying news and editorial content as well as various forms of promotional messages.

Literature Review

Given the extent of online information, it is important for college students to be able to distinguish the validity of both the content and source. Without doubt, these “digital natives” are at ease online. Likely, they can simultaneously consume content on social networking sites, text their friends and take a selfie. However, it is unclear if students can accurately evaluate the information they consume. With traditional news, consumers typically trust that the information has been vetted. However, on the internet, both information and disinformation are easily spread. Without the same level of factual and editorial scrutiny, it is unclear whether the plethora of online information makes online users better-educated or more narrow-minded.

To gain better understanding of Civic Online Reasoning among students, the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG) with support of the Robert R. McCormick Foundation (2016), conducted an extensive study to determine students' ability to assess online information. The study analyzed 7,804 middle school, high school and college age students' responses to 56 assessment tasks. At all levels, they summed up young people's ability to assess information on the internet as “bleak” (p. 4). The “Home Page Analysis” task administered to 203 middle school students assessed their reactions to Native Advertising. This SHEG test asked students to examine three different sections of an online news page (traditional advertisement, news story, and native advertisement). Although most could distinguish the traditional ad and the news story, more than 80% of the respondents failed to recognize the article labeled “sponsored content” as native advertising, and instead identified it as a real news story (SHEG, 2016).

Kendrick and Fullerton (2019) replicated the SHEG test among a national sample of college advertising students, who were demographically similar to the sample of public relations students used in this study (predominantly white, female, 21-year olds). Almost all of the advertising students identified a standard banner promotion as an advertisement. However, more than one in five misidentified the bylined article as an

advertisement, and about one in four did not classify the story prominently labeled as “Sponsored Content” as an advertisement. The current study extends the SHEG measures to assess recognition and differentiation capabilities among a college-aged population of U.S. Public Relations students and to explore whether and how they distinguish among message types. Here, one aspect of media literacy – message evaluation -- is tested by examining the students’ ability to recognize native advertising labeled as “sponsored content” versus traditional banner advertising and editorial content. One might assume that public relations students, because of their academic studies, would be adept at identifying news and editorial content as well as various forms of promotional messages. Native advertising tactics on the part of news, information, and entertainment publishers are central to the debate about whether advertisers are misleading the public by disguising advertising messages as editorial content (Conill, 2016). The current study focused on PR students’ ability to identify and assess native advertising. The study contributes to the native advertising recognition literature about the ability of a sophisticated audience to recognize properly labeled sponsored content.

Native Advertising and Sponsored Content

In 2014, *Advertising Age’s* Michael Sebastian declared that media companies had “struck gold” with sponsored content revenues (Sebastian, 2014a, p. 1). Online advertising became the world’s biggest advertising medium in 2017, accounting for 37.6% of total advertising expenditures (Harmes, Bijmolt, & Hoekstra, 2019). Industry reports also indicate that the use of native advertising continues to rise. It has been estimated that native advertising revenue will surpass \$52.75 billion in 2020 (Johnson, 2021) and will drive 74% of all ad revenue by the end of 2021 (Boland, 2016).

Borrowing on the credibility of a content publisher, native advertising is paid content that mirrors the publisher’s original content in form and location. Native advertising includes paid posts, sponsored hyperlinks and content that is developed to mimic the hosting online media platform (Wojdyski & Golan, 2016). Advertising mimicking editorial content is not a new phenomenon, with formats such as the newspaper or magazine advertorial – a labeled article that took on the appearance of the publication’s editorial content -- beginning before the 1980s (Shaver & Lewis, 1987). Advertising studies prior to the public’s access to the internet examined the frequency of use of the original print advertorial formats (Cameron & Curtin, 1995), the executional components used (Kuen-Hee, Bong-Hyun & Cameron, 1995) and the difficulty readers had in determining if advertorials were news stories or ads (Cameron & Curtin, 1995). Researchers also called attention to the problematic nature of a range of native advertising tactics for public relations (Cameron, 1994; Kim, Pasadeos, & Barban, 2001) in addition to print advertorials, including host-sponsored advertising and broadcast news releases (Cameron & Curtin, 1995).

Ewing and Lambert (2019) point out that the increase in fake news has significantly impacted public relations, leaving public relations practitioners to assess the causes, symptoms, and consequences relative to their clients’ brands. Increased scrutiny of more recent online paid non-editorial messages – updated versions of advertorials, now known as native advertising – has been evident in recent years because of the frequent and varied use of paid content that could be confused with non-paid content, and lingering questions about the ethics of its deployment and its effects on consumers.

Campbell and Evans (2018) equate online, digital article-style native advertising to advertorials. Wojdyski and Golan (2016) note that the proliferation of online advertising, blurring the formats between organic content and paid ads, calls for broad examination of native advertising executions, effects, and ethics.

Native Advertising Definitions and Execution

The terms “sponsored content,” “native advertising,” and other labels for paid content remain a source of some confusion in marketing, academia and law, with some researchers calling for better definitions (Joel, 2013). From a marketing communications perspective, Wojdyski and Golan (2016) define native advertising as “the practice by which a marketer borrows from the credibility of a content publisher by presenting paid content with a format and location that matches the publisher’s original content” (p. 1403). Building on a foundation of journalism, Conill (2016) describes native advertising as “a form of paid media where the commercial content is delivered within the design and form of editorial content, as an attempt to recreate the user experience of reading news instead of advertising content” (p. 904). A U.S. content strategy consultancy situates sponsored content at the intersection of branded content and native advertising, and thus, as a subset of native advertising (Lazauskas, 2016). In addition, some authors use the terms sponsored content and native advertising interchangeably (Moore, 2014).

Hyman et al. (2017) asked respondents to classify which type of content they were viewing. They also asked about the main message conveyed by a list of potential native advertising labels and also which labels they preferred to see. More than 80% of respondents indicated that the terms “paid ad,” “paid content,” “this content was paid for by,” “paid post” and simply “ad” were most likely to be recognized as “ad/paid content.” Furthermore, the same labels also were favored by recipients for signaling that content was “paid/ad.” Hwang and Jeong (2021) examined how format similarity (closeness of advertisement to the editorial content) affects consumer responses to native advertising. Results indicated that format similarity increased perceived deceptiveness. Format novelty (familiarity with content) reduced ad recognition and perceived irritation and potential while generating greater click through intentions.

A few studies that investigate cognitive processing of native advertising have used the term ‘sponsored content,’ among others, to label native advertising messages to indicate their commercial nature. Wojdyski and Evans (2016) found that the term “sponsored content” is one of several appropriate labels to use when signaling that a particular piece of content is paid communication. In an online study, they further reported that terms that included the word “advertisement,” “advertising,” “paid,” and even “sponsored content” worked better than alternatives such as “brand voice,” which has been used by *Forbes* and others to label paid content (Moore, 2014). The form of native advertising examined in the current study is that of an article with the words “sponsored content” above the headline, which according to a content analysis of online publisher sites by Moore (2014), is one of the most common forms used in publishing.

Ferrer-Conill, Knudsen, Lauerer, and Barnoy (2020) examined visual boundaries with the convergence of editorial and commercial content. Findings revealed that news outlets are not consistent in the way they label sponsored content nor the level of transparency they provide the message recipient. Wang and Li (2017) conducted a content analysis of communication strategies found in 151 native advertisements and

three news websites. The researchers found that more than half of the sample cited sources and disclosed sponsorship. The authors caution that it is important to balance persuasive goals against the style and format of the publishing content.

Native Advertising Identification and Effects

Although researchers have investigated aspects of native advertising related to consumer attitudes toward brands that sponsor native ad messages (Wu et al., 2016; Brusse, Franssen & Smit, 2015; Ashley & Leonard, 2009) as well as attitudes toward media that use native advertising units (Wang & Huang, 2017; Wu et al., 2016; van Reijmersdal et al., 2015), it is largely unclear the degree to which media consumers are actually aware whether native content is paid, persuasive communication. Most of these studies involved surveys or experiments (Ham, Nelson & Das, 2015), with little in the way of participants' justification for how they categorize messages. Additionally, it also is difficult to generalize how audience members recognize and then deal with different types of content in different contexts because native advertising takes so many different forms and is consumed across many platforms.

Using scaled items to compare the degree of consumer understanding of the persuasive intent generated by both banner ads and sponsored content, Tutaj and Reijmersdal (2012) found that greater persuasion knowledge was experienced for the more overt banner ads. A similar measure of understanding of perception of persuasive intent was used by van Noort, Antheunis and van Reijmersdal (2012) to gauge consumer reaction to content on social networking sites. Amazeen (2020) conducted an online experiment (n = 931) to assess recognition and behavioral intent toward native advertising in digital news context. Findings suggested that persuasive attempts can be explained by both inoculation and reactance processes.

Measurement and context variations could well account for the sometimes vastly different estimates in studies of consumer recognition of native advertising. In an online study of adults viewing content across several different platforms, Hyman et al. (2017) gave respondents three choices by which they could identify various types of messages: paid content, unpaid content and not sure/don't know, and found that on average only 37% could correctly identify native advertising as "paid content." In two studies by Wodjynski and Evans (2016), consumer recognition of native advertising was at only 7% in the first study and 18.3% in the second study.

Zimand-Sheinec, et al. (2020) explored native advertising credibility perceptions and ethical attitudes among 18-24 year old, adolescents (n = 610) in the United States, Turkey, and Israel. They found that this group perceived native advertising as credible. However, after presented with objective persuasion knowledge, the subjects found they rated it as less credible, but still positive. The researchers posit that for adolescents, integration of native advertising into the digital media environment challenges three interconnected issues: credibility, digital media literacy, and ethics. Findings also revealed differences among cultures tied to trust-building. Only a few studies have investigated young adults' attitudes toward native ads. Howe and Teufel (2014) found that age did affect the credibility judgement toward both banner and native advertising. In this study, an older group (45-75 years) judged advertising as more credible than a young group (18-24 years). Thus, it may be important for marketers to educate youth on the

relationship between advertising and the media for greater understanding and acceptance of native advertising.

Sweetzer, Ahn, and Golan (2016) conducted an experiment to study the impact of native advertising disclosure on organization-public relationships (OPR). They found that credibility and brand attitude were predictors. However, OPR was not affected by the participants' cognizance of sponsorship/disclosure. Thus, presence or absence of sponsorship did not significantly impact credibility or attitudes toward the ad itself. However, other research indicates that the recognition of paid content as native advertising does have an effect on receiver perceptions. Han, Drumwright, and Goo (2017) examined whether native advertising's ability to deceive is an asset or liability. The researchers found that perceptions of native advertising deceptiveness increased advertising skepticism, irritation and avoidance. They concluded that responsible and transparent sponsorship is beneficial to both advertisers and online publishers. Wu and Overton (2020) asked if native advertising can be effective for corporate social event marketing. They concluded that participants expressed more favorable attitudes toward and greater intent to share the native advertising when messages had a proactive versus a reactive appeal.

Wojdynski and Evans (2019) created the Covert Advertising Recognition and Effects (CARE) model to provide a framework for potential antecedents and processes underlying covert advertising. They argue that effects may be related to the information received by an individual and the perceived presentation of the ad itself. Three key findings emerged. First, large portions of practitioners and consumers agree that native advertising can be deceptive either by its nature or execution. Next, when consumers recognize a covert ad, they feel more negatively toward the message, its content, and those who are exposed to the message. When they do not recognize that the content is sponsored, they interpret the native advertising as organic content. Finally, whether disclosures are implemented and disclosure characteristics both have an impact on the activation of persuasion knowledge and advertising recognition.

Ethical Considerations for Native Advertising

In response to ethical concerns, the Federal Trade Commission outlined native advertising rules for print and digital publishers (Kelly, 2015). While full disclosure is not required, the FTC called for some version of the word "advertising" to appear near native advertising to lessen confusion. The guidelines caution against the use of "promoted by" and "sponsored by" to describe native advertising. The FTC's primary concern was that native advertising avoid deceiving consumers. Based on previous research and case study analysis, Campbell and Marks (2015) found that less secretive advertising generates greater success.

In 2014, executives from the *New York Times* admitted that the downsizing of their native advertising labels was not in line with FTC guidance (Sebastian, 2014b). Even if government and industry guidelines are followed, some studies in other areas have found that advertising messages still have the ability to mislead. A study among young children by Liebert, Sprafkin, Liebert and Rubenstein (1977) found that while young consumers did not understand television commercial disclosure information such as "batteries not included" (which was in line with government and industry guidelines),

they demonstrated much greater understanding of words like *you have to put things together*.

Persuasion research holds that people who recognize advertising messages treat those messages with more skepticism than those that they consider to be something other than advertising and therefore more objective or neutral (Friestadt & Wright, 1994). Media literacy is concerned with the understanding of encountered media content. Likewise, advertising literacy (Nelson, 2016) is concentrated in the literacy of messages with persuasive intent. Zimand-Scheiner, Ryan, Kip, and Lahav (2020) suggest that the relationship between media literacy and online persuasive information, such as native ads, is an important field of research for brand managers, media channels, and policy makers. Austin and colleagues (2007) found that media literacy training can influence the way individuals think about media. They suggested that awareness may influence decision-making and intended behaviors.

Based on the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), a lack of awareness of being in a persuasive episode renders a person somewhat defenseless. The model indicates that consumers need to understand the reasoning behind persuasive appeals. Expectations regarding persuasive tactics are derived from what consumers think they know. Thus, it is crucial for consumers to identify a persuasive attempt in order to evaluate it (Zimand-Scheiner et al., 2020). In the PKM model, the potential lack of persuasive awareness raises many ethical questions. A major ethical consideration associated with native advertising is whether deception is intentional on the part of the publisher and/or advertiser. Cameron and Ju-Pak (2000) used the term “information pollution” (p. 12) to refer to print magazine and newspaper advertorial use and alleged that it “steals editorial credibility” (p. 23) in an effort to gain reader attention. Kim, Pasadeos and Barban (2001) found both labeled and unlabeled advertorials to be “deceptively effective” (p. 265).

Indeed, native advertising’s effectiveness lies in its ability to mirror editorial content. Schauster, Ferrucci, and Neill (2016) explored how the potential of native advertising to deceive impacts social responsibility through interviews with journalism advertising, and public relations professionals. All three groups of practitioners agreed that native advertising has potential for deception. However, the professionals were quick to shift blame to others over where the ethical responsibility lies. The researchers found that more than half of the tenets of social responsibility are threatened by native advertising.

There has been little research into the perceived ethical impact of native advertising on the sponsoring news source or brand. Beckert, Koch, Vierarbi, Denner, and Peter (2020) tested advertising disclosures in native ads on news websites. Results indicated that disclosures increased the perception of persuasive intent, but the disclosures did not necessarily decrease brand attitudes. Additionally, disclosure effects did not hold up over time.

Research Questions

This study builds on previous research on native advertising recognition. The current study considers the ability of a sophisticated audience to recognize properly

labeled native advertising. Specifically, it extends the original SHEG *Home Page Analysis* research to a national sample of public relations students by asking the following research questions:

- RQ1: Do PR students correctly identify a website banner ad as an advertisement?
RQ2: Do PR students recognize that a bylined website article is not an advertisement?
RQ3: Do PR students consider a story with a “sponsored content” disclosure an advertisement?
RQ4: How do advertising and PR students compare in their ability to recognize online advertising?

Method

This study employed a national online survey via the SurveyMonkey platform in April, 2018. Using an email list obtained from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), researchers invited 3,360 members of Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapters to participate in the survey. Invitations included an incentive for a \$5 Starbucks gift card for completing the survey. While 955 students responded, only 727 students from 115 schools completed the survey and received the Starbucks electronic gift card. The 727 completed responses make up the sample for this study.

The questionnaire included the Home Page Analysis section of SHEG’s *Evaluating Information* 2016 report, which included a replica of a news media website (Slate.com) with three items on the page flagged for the students to consider (See Figure 1.) For each flagged item, the student was asked to indicate yes or no to the question: Is this an ad? Space was provided under the yes/no response where the student was asked to explain why the item is/is not an ad.

Two coders studied the rubric provided in the Stanford Media Literacy (2016, pg. 10, see Figure 2.) report to code the students’ rationale as “beginning” (student incorrectly identified the item), “emerging” (student correctly identify the item but provides limited or incoherent reasoning) or “mastery” (student correctly identifies the item and provides coherent reasoning). Ten percent of the total sample was coded by both coders and intercoder reliability was calculated at 87% agreement using the Holsti (1969) method. Holsti was chosen because of the simplicity of the data set and the straight-forward nature of the method (Wang, 2011). After discussing the disagreements, one coder analyzed the remainder of the sample.

Results

Respondent Profile

The national sample of PRSSA members was predominantly female (90.6%), which is in line with estimates of gender representation in specific U.S. public relations programs (Morgan, 2013). Most of the students in the study (87.8%) identified as public relations/strategic communication majors. Their age ranged from 18-52 with median age at 21 years. The average self-reported overall GPA was 3.50 on a 4.0 scale. In terms of

year in school, 34.9% were seniors, 34.3% juniors, 21.9% sophomores and 8.9% first-years.

Students were asked with which race they most identified and were allowed to choose more than one. In response, 80.2% of the students indicated that they were White non-Hispanic, 11.0% Hispanic, 6.3% African American, 5.9% Asian American, .6% Pacific Islander and .4% Native American. About 1% indicated that they were International students (non-U.S. citizens). Six percent of the students had worked on the annual PRSSA Bateman national case study competition.

RQ1: Do PR students correctly identify a website banner ad as an advertisement?

The first item flagged on the homepage of the news website was a horizontal banner ad at the top of the page for Gotham Writers. It included a “Save \$20” message with a code for claiming the discount (See Figure 1). Almost all (96.6%) of the PR students accurately identified the banner ad as an advertisement. Using the rubric provided by the Stanford Media Literacy Study (2016), 3.3% were coded as “beginner,” 6.6% provided “emerging” rationale, while 90.1% demonstrated “mastery.”

RQ2: Do PR students recognize that a bylined website article is not an advertisement?

More than four out of five (83.1%) PR students indicated that a news story about almond growing was not advertising. Almost one-fifth (17%) were assigned beginner level understanding, 68% of the students provided rationale considered “emerging” and the remaining 15% achieved “mastery.”

RQ3: Do PR students consider a story with a “sponsored content” disclosure an advertisement?

Only about two-thirds (64.4%) of the students properly identified the item labeled “sponsored content” as an advertisement – 10.7% with emerging rationale and 53.7% with mastery of the concept, while the remaining students (35.6%) said it was not an ad and were coded as beginners.

RQ4: How do advertising and PR students compare in their ability to recognize online advertising?

The differences between advertising and PR student responses were compared using summary data t-tests (See Table 1). No statistically significant difference was found between the two groups of students on identifying the banner ad as an advertisement. However, PR students were significantly more likely to correctly indicate that the news article was not an ad ($t=2.78$; $p = .006$), while the advertising students were more likely to recognize “sponsored content” as an advertisement ($t=-3892$; $p = .0001$).

Discussion

The current study is one of several that examine aspects of native advertising executions, effects, and ethics, after such inquiry was called for by Wojdyski and Golan in 2016. Because it uses a large national sample of public relations students, it complements previous studies of advertising students and other groups about the extent of their ability to discern advertising from editorial content.

Presented with material from a news website, U.S. college students studying public relations were almost unanimous in their identification of a banner ad as advertising. More than four out of five said a bylined news story was not advertising,

far better at that task than their advertising student counterparts who were measured in an earlier study. However, PR students lagged significantly behind their advertising peers in discerning native advertising from editorial content, with more than one-third failing to categorize a piece labeled ‘sponsored content’ as an ad, compared with one-fourth of ad students failing to do so (Fullerton & Kendrick, 2019). Since the use of native advertising has proliferated since the fielding of the study among advertising students in 2017, one might have expected PR students to fare *better*, not worse, in terms of advertising v. editorial discernment in 2018, if for no other reason that they would have been exposed to more of it over time. The good news is that a large majority of PR students demonstrated the ability to separate native advertising from editorially generated content. The not-so-good news is that a substantial number of them did not.

Those who teach PR, no doubt, have their own methods of instructing students about aspects of media literacy and media consumption, including definitions and parameters for what constitutes sponsored content -- where space or time is paid for specifically. Might it be that advertising educators or educational materials they use, such as textbooks, either apply more varied language, or synonymize more often, in their references to content that is paid for but that does not appear in traditional ad spaces or places? Indeed, it can be challenging in today’s world of myriad media and channels to settle on basic definitions of just about any discipline or segment of industry, including, notably, the often-debated meaning of the terms “advertising” and “public relations.” One possible avenue a professor could employ for discussing definitions and implications of native advertising in class could be to administer the portion of the SHEG test that is the focus of this study. If, for example, students could submit their responses anonymously and without concern about receiving a particular grade for their performance, a rough initial read of sponsored content literacy among the class could be obtained fairly quickly and easily. The professor could use the data on class results across the three items to initiate discussion of the different content formats, names, and could listen closely to how students refer to editorial versus sponsored material. Having students first understand their own personal ‘consumer’ reaction to these types of content, and then have exposure to their own classmates’ knowledge and reactions, could provide an experiential foundation for robust discussion of communication formats, strategies, risks, and outcomes, including both communication effectiveness and ethics.

One of the ethical implications associated with the use of native advertising is that if the audience does not identify it as paid content, it will likely fail to activate their persuasion knowledge, a phenomenon that is widely viewed as necessary for effective consumer information-gathering, evaluation, and decision-making. As mentioned in the review of literature, even early forms of sponsored content, such as newspaper advertorials, were considered problematic for the field of public relations (Cameron & Curtin 1995). It is beyond the scope of this study to know whether or how PR educators discuss the phenomenon of consumer persuasion recognition and the subsequent activation of persuasion knowledge. Future research could examine the approaches that PR or strategic communication textbooks and course materials ‘teach’ students how and when to use native advertising, what they call it, how they recommend it be labeled for consumption, and importantly, theoretical foundations and ethical issues involved in each of those decisions.

Literature also suggests that incorporating media and advertising literacy instruction in the classroom may help students to identify advertising versus advertorial content. Austin et al. (2007) found that media literacy training can influence the way individuals think about media. It has also been found to increase awareness of advertising persuasive efforts. Awareness may influence decision-making and intended behaviors (Austin et al., 2007). Media literacy training may impact the way PR students consider transparency in strategic communication messaging and may help to make public relations students more savvy media consumers. It is important that future practitioners understand the voice they provide their clients as content creators. It is equally important that they be able to identify and to understand the potential impact of native advertising, including the possibility of negative consequences, such as the reactance phenomenon observed by Amazeen (2020). Ultimately, pedagogy must rest with public relations educators. Both project-based learning and case studies may help educators to highlight real-world uses of native advertising. For example, the Arthur W. Page Center (<https://pagecentertraining.psu.edu/>) offers free online training modules that address ethical issues within the public relations industry. Faculty can choose aspects to incorporate into class. Content is split into two lessons with a lesson overview, definitions, case studies, and quiz questions. The “Ethical Implications of Fake News” training module includes a lesson and resources devoted to “Native Advertising” (McKinnon, Haslett, Thomison, 2020). Upon completion of the module, students can print a certificate acknowledging their mastery of the material.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although the 700 respondents to the current survey far exceed respondent pools of other studies in this area, the primary limitation to the research and analysis offered here is that it is limited to university students who are studying public relations. Additionally, respondents were members of the pre-professional organization, PRSSA. Membership in PRSSA focuses on ethical leadership (www.prssa.org). Thus, members may have more familiarity with native advertising than non-members. Students in the study indicated their overall GPA to average 3.5 on a 4.0 scale. PRSSA students’ academic knowledge may skew higher than PR students who have not elected to join the organization. Thus, the ability of all public relations majors to properly identify native advertising may be lower than reported. Furthermore, results are not necessarily indicative of information source discernment of any other groups, whether other groups of students or even PR professionals. These limitations notwithstanding, the information provided by submitting such many students to parts of the SHEG test provides ample fodder for analysis of the group as a whole, as well as subgroups within, as discussed above.

Another limitation of the study is its reliance on only three stimuli – a single news article, website banner ad and sponsored editorial content. Arguably, the labeling of the native piece as ‘sponsored content’ falls below the FTC recommended threshold for signaling its paid nature (Federal Trade Commission 2015). It is possible that had other stimuli been used, in larger formats, on different topics or subjects, and with different terminology employed to label the ‘sponsored content,’ results may have been different.

Furthermore, in an effort to preserve the comparability of the test to the original SHEG studies, the original stimulus from 2015 was used, with no updating of content or design elements. Future studies could include content on additional topics as well as style elements more in line with current website design. In addition to the age of the stimuli, the time that has passed since the students were surveyed may also be a limitation, as teaching methods, textbooks and other research on native advertising may or may not have changed over time.

Again, the limitation in terms of how to label native advertising is related to the issue of the diversity of terminology used to describe content that is ‘paid for’ directly, and the large number of ‘novice’ responses to the native advertising categorization rationale among PR students appears to indicate that type of labeling confusion. For instance, it would seem likely that if the label on the sponsored content piece had included the word ‘paid’ or ‘advertising,’ it would have elicited a greater number of correct identifications of its origins, as previous studies have suggested.

As mentioned earlier, an analysis of PR textbook and teaching material content would be helpful in examining how authors, and therefore professors, frame, discuss and possibly employ the practice of native advertising in their pedagogy. Such a content analysis could shed light on definitions, labels and terms used, as this is one of the troubling aspects of an audience’s understanding and reacting to native advertising. Additionally, it would be useful to ascertain whether or how textbooks treat the subject of sponsored content in terms of professional ethics, including whether the subject of native advertising itself appears in conjunction with textbook material about professional ethics.

Another useful avenue of research would be to interview those who teach classes in PR to determine how, and also whether, they address the subject of native advertising, any exercises or examples they use, and the types of questions students pose on the subject. Again, the research could measure to what extent ethical considerations are part of pedagogical practices that involve the study of strategic planning, creation and deployment of sponsored communication content, and the ramifications of those decisions among publics, managers, and organizations.

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Figure 1. Home Page Analysis

1. This is / is not (circle one) an advertisement because _____

2. This is / is not (circle one) an advertisement because _____

3. This is / is not (circle one) an advertisement because _____

Here is the home page of Slate.com. Some of the things that appear on Slate.com are news stories, and others are advertisements.

STANFORD HISTORY EDUCATION GROUP

We know you've got a story. GOTHAM WRITERS

SAVE \$20 USE CODE: SAVE20 LIMITED TIME ONLY

Should California Stop Growing Almonds? The nut has been vilified for drinking up the state's water supply. It doesn't deserve such a bad rap. By Eric Holthaus

Slate MOST RECENT SEE ALL >

24M AGO - JORDAN WEISSMAN - 1M TO READ
 Forget Steak and Seafood: Here's How Welfare Recipients Actually Spend Their Money

30M AGO - BEN MATHIS-LILLEY
 Buckingham Palace Guard Falls Over (Video)

45M AGO - L. BRADLEY & A.M. LINDEMANN - 2M TO READ
 When Is Cheryl's Birthday? Solving a Logic Problem That Quickly Spread Around the World.

SPONSORED CONTENT
 The Real Reasons Women Don't Go Into Tech
 When Is Cheryl's Birthday? A simple chart that explains the logic problem that spread around the world. By Laura Bradley and Marie Lindemann

right here slow slow-watches.com

Figure 2. Rubric for assessing student responses from the Stanford History Education Group's (SHEG) Civic Online Reasoning program.

RUBRIC

MASTERY	Student correctly identifies the item as an ad or non-ad and provides coherent reasoning.
EMERGING	Student correctly identifies the item as an ad or non-ad but provides limited or incoherent reasoning.
BEGINNING	Student incorrectly identifies the item as an ad or non-ad.

Table 1. Differences between PR and advertising students.

	PR (n=727)	Ad (n=508)
Banner Ad	96.6% correct	98.0% correct
News Story*	83.1% correct	77.5% correct
Sponsored Content*	64.4% correct	74.2% correct

* significant at the .01 level