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## User generated content presenting brands on social media increases young adults' purchase intention

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### ABSTRACT

On Facebook, companies not only actively spread branded content themselves, they also encourage users to do so. Hence, persuasive messages blend into the stream of content, making it increasingly difficult for users to identify and cope with this covert advertising content. In an experimental study, we confronted users to disclosed advertisements; brand; and user-generated posts allowing us to discern effects on persuasion knowledge, affective reaction and, in turn, purchase intention. Furthermore, we manipulated viewer's attention to the posts. In line with the Persuasion Knowledge Model, we found that user-generated content did not trigger persuasion knowledge and a subsequent negative affect. Thus, user-generated content led to higher purchase intention compared to disclosed advertisement and brand posts. Surprisingly, participants' heightened attention decreased their negative affective reaction towards the advertisement post compared to the brand post. We conclude that policy makers should consider employing advertising disclosures for user-generated content.

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Social media; covert advertising; persuasion knowledge; disclosure

In 2017, Facebook had 2 billion daily users worldwide (Socialbakers 2017). Given its massive number of users, Facebook leads a pack of social media sites in marketing spending, which from 2009 to 2016 increased by a staggering 234%. Today, a whopping 72.5% of companies in the U.S. use Facebook for advertising purposes (Moorman 2016). With a vast majority of social media marketers being convinced that Facebook 'delivers the best ROI among the social networks' (Newberry 2018), it is an important and established marketing channel (Choi 2011).

On Facebook's newsfeed, users are confronted with branded content in three different ways. First, paid advertisement posts can be placed by companies in the target group's news feed, in which case brands appear as the sources of the posts. Such posts are comparable to traditional advertising insofar as companies invest financial resources into exposing a broad target base of consumers to their persuasive

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messages. To comply with Facebook's policy for advertisers, such posts have to be marked as advertisements by a disclosure. In 2018, five million businesses actively placed paid advertisement campaigns on Facebook (Newberry 2018). Second, brands can create a brand page to solicit a brand community, i.e. users who 'like' the brand page. Over 70 million businesses operate their own Facebook page, thus taking advantage of this promotion opportunity (Newberry 2018). In those instances, however, only users who have already 'liked' the brand on Facebook are exposed to the companies' posted content. Third, users can post content that contains brand references to their Facebook pages and, appearing as its sole source, thereby exposing their entire Facebook network to the branded content (Facebook 2017).

The latter option, user-generated brand content, is a highly discussed marketing tool. Especially business media, such as *Forbes* (Olenski 2017) or *Adweek* (Merckel 2017) praise user-generated content as highly advantageous covert marketing tool for companies, as it blends into the editorial social media content. Regulators might be, however, rightfully concerned that users are no longer able to identify persuasive content on social media. This is crucial though, as we know based on the *Persuasion Knowledge Model* (PKM) by Friestad and Wright (1994) that in the case of traditional media, only if viewers identify a certain content as commercial, coping mechanisms are triggered, which may lead to more critical processing of the message. Prior research in the online realm found similar results for blog posts (e.g. van Reijmersdal et al. 2016), vlog posts (De Jans, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2018), native advertising in articles (Campbell and Evans 2018), or Instagram posts (e.g. Evans et al. 2017). The U.S Federal Trade Commission advises social media users to employ media literacy techniques to identify branded content. Thus, users should reflect on questions like 'who created or paid for the ad, and why?' (FTC 2013). However, answering those questions might not be so easy anymore in times of social media marketing, when the explicitly stated source of a posting can be a user and FTC guidelines of disclosing advertised content are bluntly ignored by businesses (Fletcher 2017). Hence, it is crucial to generate insights on how the processes proclaimed by the PKM manifest for the different forms of branded posts on social media.

Furthermore, even if branded posts are disclosed as advertisement, studies on source and disclosure effects suggest that viewers have a hard time identifying persuasive content because they do not pay enough attention to corresponding indicators (Wojdyski and Evans 2016). In fact, the European Commission (2018) stated that increasing viewers' visual attention to advertising disclosures can serve as a remedy against disguised advertising practices. This could be the case, because heightened attention can enhance persuasion knowledge (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, and Neijens 2015). Two highly related constructs in this regard are visual attention and cognitive involvement (Pieters and Wedel 2007). That is, when humans concentrate on a content (i.e. are highly cognitive involved), their visual attention to the different aspects of this content is also high. In light of this, one would theorize that higher attention helps users to understand that they are confronted with persuasive messages.

Yet from literature on information processing, we know that humans only have limited cognitive processing capacities (Lang 2000). Studies indicate that social media use has led to an extensive increase in the amount of information a user is exposed to,

greatly increasing the cognitive load (Gomez-Rodriguez, Gummadi, and Schoelkopf 2014). Consequently, highly attentive users might not have enough capacity to experience an affective reaction towards a content (Matthes, Schemer, and Wirth 2007; Janssen et al. 2016). Thus, attention may foster persuasion knowledge, but not necessarily negative affect.

With this study, we are the first to investigate the effects of attention on persuasion knowledge and affective reaction in the social media environment. In addition, this is also the first comprehensive experimental study testing the effects of three different types of branded Facebook posts, i.e. *disclosed advertisement posts*, *brand posts*, and *user-generated posts*. This allows us to assess viewers' persuasion knowledge and affective reaction towards these three different types of posts and subsequent brand outcomes.

### The power of user-generated content

Media outlets have often highlighted the value of user-generated branded content. *Forbes* has recommended that companies 'take proactive steps to stimulate the creation of user-generated content' (Olenski 2017), and the subtitle of an article in the advertising online journal *Adweek* has argued that 'Not only is UGC [user-generated content] much cheaper to implement, but it is also much more effective' (Merckel 2017). Citing metrics such as hashtag usage and retweets, the latter publication especially underscored the power of user-generated brand images (Merckel 2017). In the MIT Sloan Management Review, businesses even get advised to redefine their social media marketing goals in a way that includes brand engagement, i.e. customers posting branded content, as an ROI indicator (Hoffman and Fodor 2010). Consequently, numerous studies have explored under which circumstances users are willing to post branded content. Researchers who have investigated the reasons why users contribute and create brand-related content have identified personal identity, integration, and social interaction as major motivations. Many users upload pictures displaying brands in order to express their connection to a brand's image and popularity as well as their inclusion in the social group that uses the brand (Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit 2011). Common among such posts are so-called 'brand-selfies', which Sung, Kim, and Choi (2018, 10) have dubbed an 'effective means of self-expression'. In a content analysis of posts connected to two apparel brands, Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian (2012) found that personal identity, integration, and social interaction motivated a third of user-generated Facebook posts.

More importantly, user-generated brand posts result from marketing efforts such as real-world tie-ins or contests. In their content analysis of several social media networks, Ashley and Tuten (2015, 22) found that '26/28 brands invited users to share content'. One industry that often uses covert marketing techniques is the alcohol industry. Real-world tie-ins are the most important content generators on alcohol brand community pages. Alcohol brands for instance launch branded event series (Nicholls 2012), sponsor sport events (Pinsky et al. 2017), and corresponding hashtags. Another technique of the alcohol industry, described by Lobstein et al. (2016), are photo- or video-competitions. People are therefore encouraged through these events and competitions to take pictures and post them on their own social media channels: 'The personal brand

experience of the fan leads to the circulation of branded information within the broader mediation of their everyday life within their circle of friends' (Brodmerkel and Carah 2013, 279). Carah and Shaul (2016) analyzed two highly successful Smirnoff campaigns that mobilized user-generated branded content on Instagram to promote the Smirnoff brand. Regarding how user-generated content connected the brand to the users, they wrote that users' 'use of hashtags places the brand within a wider flow of images related to their own bodies and identities' (Carah and Shaul 2016, 74). However, even with the reasons for users to create and share brand-related content established, it remains unclear whether users exposed to such content will react similarly to how they react to brand-related content posted by commercial sources. In the area of effect studies, research on the increasingly recognized value of user-generated brand content is scarce. Hence, we sought to assess how the source of a branded message affects viewers' evaluations of the brand.

Several scholars have investigated the effects of having users as the source of persuasive messages. Central to their studies was, however, the likeability, credibility, and perceived quality of user-generated advertisements (Ertimur and Gilly 2012; Steyn et al. 2011; Thompson and Malaviya 2013). For instance, Ertimur and Gilly (2012, 126) found that when viewers were aware that a user-generated post was commercial content, they did not cope with the persuasive intent of the post. Instead, they took the role of an ad critic and, for example, gave suggestions about the lighting or editing of the presented pictures.

Other authors have examined the role of users as the source of advertisements, when testing advertisement disclosures (e.g. De Jans, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2018; Hwang and Jeong 2016; Kim and Song 2017). Their results do not tackle, however how different sources affect the activation of persuasion knowledge, because they depend on the effectiveness of the disclosure manipulation itself – that is, whether the disclosure made participants realize that the source of the content was a company and not the user (Kim and Song 2017) and whether that realization triggered negative affect (Matthes and Naderer 2016). For example, Kim and Song (2017) compared user generated brand posts with and without disclosure. This however cannot clearly establish the effect of a user as the source of branded content in comparison to brand messages by the company itself.

At the same time, although other scholars have focused on the effects of reviews or product-related stories shared by users, such forms of advertising are hardly comparable to user-generated brand posts on Facebook, which do not always have a persuasive or informative intent (Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian 2012). This brings us to the possibly biggest advantage for companies in employing user-generated brand posts as marketing effort and an area strongly lacking research: the alleged incapability of social media users to identify it as persuasive content and in turn to cope with it.

## **Coping with brand messages**

A model analyzing the different factors influencing consumers' understanding of persuasion tactics and their knowledge of how to cope with persuasive attempts is the PKM (Friestad and Wright 1994, 1995). Persuasion knowledge develops gradually, due

to consumers' regular exposure to persuasive content. Persuasion knowledge is based on knowledge about the topic, understanding the persuasive process, and knowing the agents respectively communicators. In this study, we specifically focus on the latter, i.e. agent knowledge. This aspect consists of the consumer being aware that the source of a message has a commercial background and, hence, a persuasive intent. This knowledge should lead users to identify a message as a persuasive attempt and in turn trigger coping mechanisms. The agent 'represents whomever a target identifies as being responsible for designing and constructing a persuasion attempt' (Friestad and Wright 1994, 2). In the case of Facebook posts, the source of the posting is always stated above the content, i.e. the picture or statement. In other words, the PKM suggests that knowing that a brand or company is behind a communication effort will trigger coping mechanisms aimed at potentially blocking a persuasive intent (Friestad and Wright 1995).

On Facebook, however, there are two types of posts that present a brand as the source. Brands can pay to appear in users' newsfeeds that fit their target group. In this case, a short disclosure alerts the user to the fact that they are confronted with paid content. If a user or one of his or her 'friends' however, follows a brand page on Facebook, they agree to be confronted with branded posts and as such no ad-disclosure is presented. Embedded in a stream of miscellaneous content, both types have, at first glance, only one main difference: The disclosure of the advertising message. Consequently, it is questionable if users correctly identify persuasive content presented on social media at all or only in the case of paid posts that contain an ad-disclosure (Evans et al. 2017).

Past research indicates that the appearance of a disclosure can alert users' attention to the fact that they are confronted with a persuasive message, thus trigger users' persuasion knowledge. This has been indicated for product placement disclosures on TV (e.g. Boerman, van Reijmersdal, and Neijens 2012, 2015; Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2016; Matthes and Naderer 2016; Tessitore and Geuens 2013), disclosures in advergames (Evans and Hoy 2016; van Reijmersdal et al. 2015), and social media outlets such as blogs (van Reijmersdal et al. 2016) or Instagram (Evans et al. 2017). Results hitherto remain inconclusive, however, mainly due to the differences in disclosure manipulations (see Evans et al. 2017). In other words, whether the disclosure factually made participants understand that the underlying source of the content is a company and not a user is of key importance. Some studies, however, have put the effectiveness of certain ad disclosures in covert marketing into doubt (e.g. Wojdyski and Evans 2016). Following the logic of the PKM, we therefore hypothesize:

**H1:** Persuasion knowledge is activated **a)** the least when participants are exposed to user-generated posts and **b)** the most when exposed to disclosed advertising posts. Hence, we expect brand posts to evoke more persuasion knowledge than user-generated posts and less than disclosed advertising posts.

Activated persuasion knowledge may in turn encourage users to critically contest the content itself, the source of the content, and the persuasive tactics of the content (Fransen, Smit, and Verlegh 2015). In a qualitative study, Zuwerink and Cameron (2003) assessed the variety of coping mechanisms that can be triggered by persuasion knowledge. Cognitive resistance, such as attitude bolstering, which is the reassurance

of one's belief, and affective resistance, such as negative affect against the persuasive attempt, were among the most frequent resistance strategies. In the context of sponsored content, extant research (van Reijmersdal et al. 2016) suggests that affective resistance co-occurs with cognitive resistance for two reasons. First, research showed that content which is perceived as advertising often directly triggers negative attitudes, annoyance, and avoidance behaviour (e.g. Mittal 1994; Moriarty and Everett 1994). Second, Friestad and Wright (1994) pointed out that identifying a communication as persuasive intent is a change of meaning. Thus, the persuasive attempt is considered an intruder into the communication context. In other words, if a post is identified as a persuasive intent while someone is browsing through entertaining and informative content on their Facebook wall, it might intrude in the Facebook browsing experience and thereby trigger resistance. The meaning of the persuasive message is scrutinized, which in turn leads to negative effects on brand evaluations (Evans et al. 2017; Hwang and Jeong 2016; Liljander, Gummerus, and Söderlund 2015). This was supported by research on advertisement intrusiveness which has linked the intrusiveness to viewers being annoyed by advertisements (e.g. Ha 1996; Truong and Simmons 2010). Consequently, we pose the hypothesis:

**H2:** The higher a participant's level of persuasion knowledge regarding a Facebook post the stronger is his/her negative affective reaction against the Facebook post.

Last but not least, the goal of a marketing communication is to influence marketing outcomes, such as, for example, purchase intent. Extant research has demonstrated in diverse channels how increased persuasion knowledge diminished marketing outcomes (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, and Neijens 2012; Matthes, Schemer, and Wirth 2007). Interestingly, Wei, Fischer, and Main (2008) have found the effect to especially hold for unfamiliar brands. We predict that this appears on account of the explained triggered coping mechanism of negative affect (Zuwerink and Cameron 2003). Therefore, we suggest that:

**H3:** The stronger participants' negative affect against a Facebook post, the stronger the decrease in their purchase intention of the brand presented within the post.

## The role of attention in the persuasive process

In extant research, different aspects of attention have been studied (Park and McClung 1986; Wojdyski and Evans 2016). Two concepts that researchers have connected are visual attention and cognitive involvement (Pieters and Wedel 2007). For instance, involvement scales measure aspects as 'I concentrated on the story' (Matthes, Schemer, and Wirth 2007, 499) and cognitive involvement manipulations demand participants to 'pay specific attention' to the depicted content (Park and McClung 1986, 546). This is highly connected with participants looking more attentively at all aspects of a content (i.e. visual attention, Pieters and Wedel 2007).

Why is the degree of attention important? Especially in the social media environment, attention to posts may be crucial for the persuasion process, as commercial and non-commercial content are strongly interconnected. In fact, several studies on the topic of source and disclosure effects have demonstrated that viewers are unaware

that a content has a commercial source, even if the source itself is disclosed or an advertising disclosure is included in the content (e.g. Boerman, van Reijmersdal, and Neijens 2012, 2015; Nelson and Park 2015; Kim, Pasadeos, and Barban 2001; Wojdyski and Evans 2016). Eye-tracking studies have established that one issue is a lack in visual attention of the viewers. If users don't pay attention to the posts, they may not process the information provided in, for instance, disclosures. As a consequence, the intended effect of disclosures on persuasion knowledge can hardly be achieved (see Wogalter and Laughery 1996 for results on warning signs and labels in general, see Boerman, van Reijmersdal, and Neijens 2012 for a study on product placement disclosures). For instance, Wojdyski and Evans (2016) found that in the case of a news story, viewers did not visually engage with an advertising disclosure positioned above the story. This position of the disclosure, however, matters for Facebook posts, as the source of a message is positioned above the content. Hence, when viewers are confronted with advertising or brand posts, a lack of attention to the posts makes it unlikely that sources and disclosures are processed. This, in turn, may impede the generation of persuasion knowledge. Therefore we hypothesize:

**H4:** In the disclosed advertising and brand post conditions, opposed to the user-generated content condition, users in the high-attention condition will have a higher persuasion knowledge, compared to users in the normal-attention condition.

Regarding negative affect, the role of attention, however, is less clear. As already mentioned, cognitive resources of viewers are typically limited (Nairn and Fine 2008). That is, an information overload could occur when the amount of input to a system exceeds its processing capacity (Janssen et al. 2016). Yet negative affect towards an advertising attempt requires a substantial amount of cognitive resources. Following this assumption, users that process posts with high attention have only limited resources left to experience an affective reaction towards messages (Nairn and Fine 2008). In fact, this mechanism was found for traditional television programming (e.g. Park and McClung 1986), as well as for integrated content, such as product placements (e.g. Janssen et al. 2016; Matthes, Schemer, and Wirth 2007). For instance, Matthes, Schemer, and Wirth (2007) observed that levels of involvement exerted an effect on negative affective outcomes: Highly involved viewers with low levels of persuasion knowledge were least critical towards the embedded brands. Along the same lines, Janssen et al.'s (2016) results indicate that depletion can impact the critical processing of information. The authors did find that depleted participants were less critical towards the embedded brands. Again, these findings can be explained on the theoretical basis of the limited capacity model which suggests that humans have only a limited capacity of critically processing the abundance of information provided (Lang 2000). Especially in the social media environment, heightened attention to posts might lead to a cognitive overload for users, as they are confronted with a variety of contents in those posts. This cognitive overload could impede their experience of a negative affect towards content. In other words, in the case of processing social media content, attention to the posts as a whole may require substantial cognitive resources. These resources, however, are necessary to raise negative affect in response to advertising or brand posts. That is, even though viewers may realize the persuasive attempt, they may lack the necessary cognitive resources to generate negative affect. However,

to our knowledge, there is no research yet on the effects of attention on negative affect in regard to social media content. We therefore refrain from formulating an hypothesis, and ask:

**RQ1:** How will attention influence participant's affective reaction regarding the (a) disclosed advertising post, (b) brand post and (c) user-generated post?

To conclude, there is no research yet comparing the effects of user-generated posts, brand post, and disclosed advertising posts as sources of branded Facebook posts. We expect that users as sources of branded Facebook posts will trigger less persuasion knowledge regarding the post compared to brand posts as well as disclosed advertising posts, therefore impeding negative affect. Hence, user-generated brand posts should more positively affect purchase intention than disclosed advertising posts or brand posts. Furthermore, we test the role that attention could play in the persuasion process. For the full effect model see [Figure 1](#).

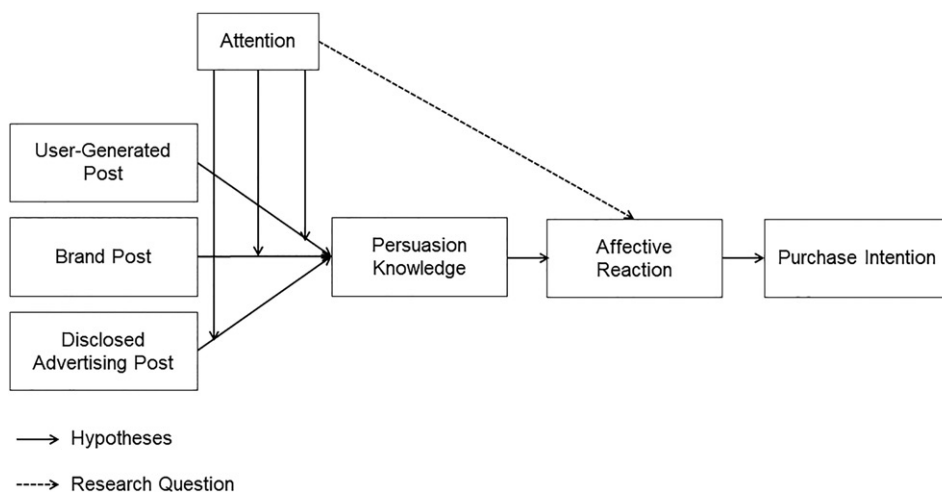
## Method

### *Procedure*

The experiment had a 3 (source: disclosed advertisement versus brand post versus user-generated post)  $\times$  2 (attention: high versus normal) between-subject design. Analyses were conducted with a total of  $N=293$  college students above the legal drinking age ( $M_{\text{age}}=22.57$ ;  $SD=3.58$ ; 78.2% female) in the university laboratory of the Department of Communication at the University of Vienna in May 2017. We followed the APA ethical guidelines; hence all participants signed an informed consent form before entering our university laboratory, where the study was conducted. Then, we randomly assigned them to an attention condition consisting of a textual instruction. We operationalized attention via two aspects, cognitive involvement adapted from Park and McClung (1986) and visual attention. In the high-attention condition, we asked the participants to concentrate on all aspects of the posts, to memorize them and to look carefully at all aspects of them. In the normal-attention condition, we encouraged their usual browsing behaviour (see Appendix). In a second step, we randomly assigned participants to one of the source conditions. Participants went through the 20 Facebook posts in randomized order, fifteen identical nonrelated posts and five source manipulated alcohol posts. After the study, they were debriefed about the topic of the study and the risks of excessive alcohol consumption.

### *Stimulus*

All participants saw fifteen identical, nonrelated posts aimed at embedding the five manipulated posts in a realistic setting. Furthermore, participants saw five posts featuring the 'Ciroc' brand. Each post presented a different photo related to the 'Ciroc' brand. The 'Ciroc' posts were identical, except for the source being a disclosed advertising by the brand 'Ciroc', a brand post by the same brand, or a user-generated brand post featuring the brand 'Ciroc'. In other words, the remaining five posts were identical except for the source of the posts and, respectively, the included ad disclosure



**Figure 1.** Model of all hypothesized paths and research questions.

(Evans et al. 2017). Hence, each participants either saw all five different ‘Ciroc’ posts by a disclosed advertising, a brand post or a user-generated post, the source being treated as between-subject factor (Stimulus material is available upon request).

We chose an alcohol brand as the target brand because we deemed it important that the user-generated content seems realistic to the participants. Regarding the post engagement rate – which involves response rates to fan posts, counted likes, comments and shares – the alcohol industry is the clear forerunner (Socialbakers 2012). Brand pages post content up to twice a day (Carah 2014), strongly encouraging users’ engagement with real-world tie-ins; interactive games; sponsored online events and invitations to drink’ (Nicholls 2012, 487). Hence we assumed that users are used to this kind of content posted by brand as well as user sources.

### Pre-test

We pre-tested the stimulus pictures to assure that their content did not appear more realistic for either a post placed by a company or a user-generated post. This was of high importance, in order to exclude effects from the content itself. Student participants ( $N=73$ ) saw twenty Facebook posts, among them the manipulated posts. They were randomly assigned to a condition with the user being the post source ( $n=25$ ) or the brand being the source ( $n=48$ ). We showed participants only the content of the manipulated posts, i.e. a statement and a picture but without any source. We did this for all manipulated posts one by one. Subsequently, we asked participants, if they felt that a user or brand would be equally probable to post such content ( $1 = \text{not at all}$ ,  $5 = \text{very much}$ ). Participants evaluated the probability for picture one ( $M=3.74$ ,  $SD=1.11$ ), picture two ( $M=3.53$ ,  $SD=1.27$ ), picture three ( $M=3.44$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ), picture four ( $M=3.22$ ,  $SD=1.29$ ), and picture five ( $M=3.74$ ,  $SD=1.33$ ). All content was deemed to be as probable to be posted by a user as by a brand. Additionally, participants were asked, if they could imagine seeing such a post on Facebook ( $1 = \text{not at all}$ ,  $5 = \text{very much}$ ). All pictures were deemed expectable as a Facebook post: picture

one ( $M=4.33$ ,  $SD=0.77$ ), picture two ( $M=3.89$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ), picture three ( $M=3.78$ ,  $SD=1.24$ ), picture four ( $M=4.0$ ,  $SD=1.08$ ), and picture five ( $M=4.38$ ,  $SD=0.72$ ). As such, the content of the post was deemed appropriate for the study.

## Measures

We assessed participants' *attention* using two statements on a 5-point scale adapted from Park and McClung' cognitive involvement manipulation (1986) ('I tried to memorize the posts', 'I concentrated on the posts') and three statements focusing on participants' visual attention ('I looked at all the aspects of the post', 'I looked at the posts attentively', 'I took time to look at the posts'). Following Carpenter (2018), we conducted an explorative factor analysis with oblique rotation with the five items, which indicates that both elements are part of the same concept, which we employed as a measure of attention. The analyses yielded one factor, explaining 71.71% of the variance. Hence, the statements formed a reliable index ( $\alpha=0.90$ ;  $M=3.87$ ,  $SD=0.95$ ). Furthermore, we measured *source recall* as an open question. Comparable to van Reijmersdal et al. (2016), we measured the participants' *persuasion knowledge* using three items ('These posts were advertising', 'These posts were posted without commercial interest' (recoded), 'These posts were posted to advertise a product') on a 5-point scale ( $\alpha=0.90$ ;  $M=4.18$ ,  $SD=1.15$ ). Negative *affective reaction* (van Reijmersdal et al. 2016) to the post was also measured using three items on a 5-point scale ('I was irritated/annoyed/enraged by those posts'). The formed index was reliable ( $\alpha=0.78$ ;  $M=2.30$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ). In addition, we assessed participants' *purchase intention* for the embedded brand, Ciroc, using three items ('I would buy Ciroc Vodka', 'I would buy other alcoholic products of the Ciroc brand', 'I am interested in where to buy Ciroc Vodka') on a 5-point scale ( $\alpha=0.78$ ;  $M=1.92$ ,  $SD=0.93$ ). As a control variable, we included participants' *alcohol consumption*, stated on a single 5-point scale item (1 = *never*, 2 = *less than once a month*, 3 = *two to four times a month*, 4 = *two to three times a week*, 5 = *four times a week or more*;  $M=2.94$ ,  $SD=0.85$ ). It was to be expected that participants' current level of alcohol consumption might predict their interest in buying alcohol (e.g. Alhabash et al. 2015). Further, we included age (mean-centred) as a control variable, as extant studies have shown that age can affect viewers' perception of alcohol related content (Mayrhofer and Naderer 2019).

## Randomization and manipulation checks

A randomization check for gender ( $\chi^2=5.75$ ,  $df=5$ ,  $N=293$ ,  $p=.33$ ) was successful. Furthermore, the manipulation check of attention in the main study was successful. Hence, in the normal attention condition, users indicated a significantly lower level of attention ( $M=3.50$ ,  $SD=0.91$ ) compared to the high attention condition ( $M=4.27$ ,  $SD=0.83$ ) ( $t(291)=-7.55$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Additionally, we dummy coded the open *source recall* question with a margin of one letter. Participants in the high attention condition remembered the correct source of the brand posts significantly more than those in the normal attention condition. Namely, 67.1% ( $n=94$ ) of high attentive participants remembered the source, against only 42.5% ( $n=65$ ) ( $\chi^2=17.91$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

A manipulation check on a separate sample with similar demographics as the main sample was conducted to assure that participants understood the difference between disclosed advertisement and brand posts ( $N = 36$ ). They saw both types of posts (Post 1 = brand post; Post 2 = advertisement post) and had to agree or disagree with eight statements that were correct or incorrect (e.g. 'I would only see post 1 if I had already liked the brand', 'Every user could be exposed to post 2 in their newsfeed', 'Post 2 is disseminated by a brand, without paying Facebook for it'. see Appendix). All statements were judged correctly by at least 80.6% ( $n = 29$ ).

### **Data analysis**

We calculated a moderated mediation model to test our hypotheses with 5000 bootstrapping samples. We used model 85 with SPSS Process (Hayes 2018). The experimental conditions were dummy coded. First, the user-generated brand post condition was used as the reference group. Second, we used the disclosed advertising post condition as reference group to assess the relevance of the advertising disclosure. Attention had two codes (0 = normal and 1 = high attention). We computed interaction terms between source and attention. To assure the robustness of the results, we tested all possible direct effects (see Table 1).

## **Results**

### **Persuasion knowledge**

In a first step, we investigated the effects on participants' persuasion knowledge. We found a main effect of the disclosed advertising post condition ( $b = 1.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $LLCI = .740$ ;  $ULCI = 1.516$ ) and the brand post condition ( $b = .92$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $LLCI = .495$ ;  $ULCI = 1.354$ ) compared to the user-generated post. Thus, if a brand is the source of a message, the user's persuasion knowledge is increased. In other words, the user as the source induces the least persuasion knowledge. Therefore, Hypotheses 1a was supported. There was, however, no main effect of the attention condition ( $b = .33$ ,  $p = .11$ ,  $LLCI = -.071$ ;  $ULCI = .737$ ). Also, we could not support H4, as attention did not moderate the effect of the post source on persuasion knowledge (disclosed advertising post \* attention:  $b = -.09$ ,  $p = .75$ ,  $LLCI = -.647$ ;  $ULCI = .468$ , brand post \* attention:  $b = .15$ ,  $p = .63$ ,  $LLCI = -.459$ ;  $ULCI = .761$ ). For all results see Table 1.

To establish the effect of the advertising disclosure, we ran the model using the advertising condition as a reference group. Again, focusing on the level of persuasion knowledge, we found a negative main effect of the user-generated brand post condition ( $b = -1.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $LLCI = -1.516$ ;  $ULCI = -.740$ ) in comparison to the advertising condition but no effect of the brand post condition ( $b = -.20$ ,  $p = .33$ ,  $LLCI = -.610$ ;  $ULCI = -.740$ ). Thus, the disclosure did not increase the users' awareness for the persuasive intent. Consequently, Hypothesis 1b was not supported, as the disclosed advertising did not induce significantly more persuasion knowledge than the brand post (for the descriptive results on persuasion knowledge see Table 2). As can be seen in Table 3, no additional main or interaction effects occurred.

**Table 1.** Path analysis: user-generated post inserted as reference group.

Variables	Persuasion knowledge		Affective reaction		Purchase intention	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Disclosed advertising post	1.13***	.20	.23	.21	-.11	.18
Brand post	.92***	.22	-.02	.22	.04	.20
Attention	.33	.21	.14	.21	-.10	.18
Age	-.01	.02	-.01	.02	-.02	.01
Alcohol consumption	.08	.07	-.06	.07	.17**	.06
Disclosed advertising post* attention	-.09	.28	-.45	.28	.15	.25
Brand post* attention	.15	.31	.21	.31	-.05	.27
Persuasion knowledge			.13*	.06	-.04	.05
Affective reaction					-.22***	.05
Explained variance	.22		.05		.11	

Note: *N* = 293.

\**p* < .05.

\*\**p* < .01.

\*\*\**p* < .001.

**Table 2.** Descriptive results: persuasion knowledge by source and attention.

Persuasion knowledge	Attention	
	High	Normal
User-generated post	3.65 (1.26)	3.32 (1.17)
Brand post	4.74 (0.76)	4.26 (1.27)
Disclosed advertising post	4.71 (0.68)	4.47 (0.88)

Note: *N* = 293.

**Table 3.** Path analysis: disclosed advertising post inserted as reference group.

Variables	Persuasion knowledge		Affective reaction		Purchase intention	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
User-generated post	-1.13***	.20	-.23	.21	.11	.18
Brand post	-.20	.21	-.25	.21	.14	.18
Attention	.24	.20	-.31	.19	.05	.17
Age	-.01	.02	-.01	.02	-.02	.02
Alcohol consumption	.08	.07	-.06	.07	.17**	.06
User-generated post* attention	.09	.28	.45	.28	-.15	.25
Brand post* attention	.24	.30	.66*	.30	-.20	.27
Persuasion knowledge			.13*	.06	-.04	.05
Affective reaction					-.22***	.05
Explained variance	.22		.05		.11	

\**p* < .05.

\*\**p* < .01.

\*\*\**p* < .001.

### Affective reaction

In a second step, we investigated participants' affective reaction. We found no main effects of the disclosed advertising post condition ( $b = .23$ ,  $p = .26$ ,  $LLCI = -.175$ ;  $ULCI = .642$ ) and the brand post condition ( $b = -.02$ ,  $p = .94$ ,  $LLCI = -.458$ ;  $ULCI = .425$ ). No additional main or interaction effects occurred. However, persuasion knowledge significantly influenced affective reaction ( $b = .13$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $LLCI = .011$ ;  $ULCI = .243$ ). Hence, Hypothesis 2 was supported. Attention had no main effect ( $b = .14$ ,  $p = .51$ ,  $LLCI = -.268$ ;  $ULCI = .542$ ) or interaction effects of the disclosed

advertising post ( $b = -.45$ ,  $p = .11$ ,  $LLCI = -1.005$ ;  $ULCI = .108$ ) and brand post condition ( $b = .21$ ,  $p = .49$ ,  $LLCI = -.395$ ;  $ULCI = .823$ ) compared to the user-generated post (Table 1).

We then ran the analysis with the disclosed advertising post as reference group and uncovered that the interaction effect of the brand post condition compared to the advertising condition and attention ( $b = .66$ ,  $p < .03$ ,  $LLCI = .067$ ;  $ULCI = 1.257$ ) was significant. This indicates that highly attentive participants showed lower levels of negative affect reactions in the disclosed advertising post, compared to the brand post condition (Table 3).

### **Purchase intention**

In a last step, we assessed purchase intention as our main outcome measure. We found no main effect of the disclosed advertising post condition ( $b = -.11$ ,  $p = .56$ ,  $LLCI = -.463$ ;  $ULCI = .250$ ) and the brand post condition ( $b = .04$ ,  $p = .85$ ,  $LLCI = -.348$ ;  $ULCI = .421$ ). There was no main effect of attention ( $b = -.10$ ,  $p = .56$ ,  $LLCI = -.457$ ;  $ULCI = .249$ ). Also, the interaction effect of the disclosed advertising post condition and attention ( $b = .15$ ,  $p = .54$ ,  $LLCI = -.334$ ;  $ULCI = .639$ ) and the interaction effect of the brand post condition and attention ( $b = -.05$ ,  $p = .86$ ,  $LLCI = -.578$ ;  $ULCI = .483$ ) were not significant. Age ( $b = -.02$ ,  $p = .10$ ,  $LLCI = -.054$ ;  $ULCI = .005$ ) had no main effect. Persuasion knowledge had no direct effect ( $b = -.04$ ,  $p = .50$ ,  $LLCI = -.137$ ;  $ULCI = .067$ ). Yet we found alcohol consumption to have a main effect ( $b = .17$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $LLCI = .044$ ;  $ULCI = .287$ ) on participants intention to purchase the embedded brand. Thus, the level of users' alcohol consumption positively increased users' intention to buy the advertised brand, independent from condition. More importantly, we also found a negative effect of affective reaction towards the posts ( $b = -.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $LLCI = -.323$ ;  $ULCI = -.120$ ). Consequently, Hypothesis 3 was supported (Table 1). The results for purchase intention stayed constant when putting the disclosed advertising post as reference group (Table 3).

We then further examined the mediation path of source on purchase intention via level of persuasion knowledge and via negative affective reaction. The indirect effect of the disclosed advertising post on purchase intention via persuasion knowledge and via negative affective reactions compared to the user generated post was significant ( $b = -.03$ ;  $LLCI = -.076$ ;  $ULCI = -.001$ ). Furthermore, compared to the user-generated content, the brand post lead to a negative indirect effect via persuasion knowledge and via negative affective reaction on purchase intention ( $b = -.03$ ;  $LLCI = -.070$ ;  $ULCI = -.001$ ).

### **Discussion**

This study is the first to experimentally manipulate and, thus, comprehensively assess the effects of different types of brand posts on users. While keeping the content of the posts constant, we tested how different sources affected the viewers' perceptions of the posts and their purchase intention for the branded product. Furthermore, we tested the role of attention, based on visual attention, as well as cognitive

involvement, on persuasion knowledge and affective reaction for the three different posts. Lastly, we controlled for age and alcohol consumption, which were shown in prior studies to affect viewers' perception of alcohol-related content (Alhabash et al. 2015; Mayrhofer and Naderer 2017).

A crucial insight is that user-generated branded content, which might be considered covert advertisement, significantly decreased persuasion knowledge of the viewers. As such, coping mechanisms were not triggered, thus dampening the negative affect towards the post, which in turn led to a higher purchase intention as compared to both posts by the brand itself (disclosed advertising post and brand posts). In other words, the coping mechanisms that users employ to resist persuasive intent are not triggered if the displayed source of the persuasive content is a fellow user. As expected, this is in line with Friestad and Wright's (1994) PKM, which posits agent knowledge as a crucial information to trigger persuasion knowledge. Furthermore, it supports van Reijmersdal et al.'s (2016) assumption that users employ negative affect to cope with persuasive messages, which decreases marketing outcomes, such as purchase intention.

This finding has important implications for further research as well as for policy makers and consumers. To start with, user-generated brand content is a marketing tool used by a wide array of industries and praised by professionals. In contrast to this tremendous relevance, research on the effects of user-generated content on viewers is scarce. For instance, the idea of the exorbitant profitability of user-generated content as described in *Forbes* (Fromm 2016) or *Adweek* (Boachie 2018) is based on individual companies and opinions, instead of research studies. Furthermore, assuming that user-generated content indeed has benefits compared to traditional advertising, the processes behind this fact remain unclear. We tried to address this topic focusing on the PKM (Friestad and Wright 1994), however, other mechanisms such as a mere-exposure effect (Strick, van Baaren, Holland, and van Knippenberg 2009) should be investigated.

While it has to be stated in general that consumers have the right to be informed if they confront a persuasive intent, the lack of such information is especially worrisome when it comes to health damaging or risky products, such as alcohol. While we acknowledge that alcohol related posts are often not directly connected to a brand and posted by users for different reasons (Ridout, Campbell, and Ellis 2012; Westgate and Holliday 2016), it has to be underlined that alcohol companies are actively encouraging users to post such pictures (Carah 2014; Nicholls 2012). As a matter of fact, user-generated content is especially attractive for the alcohol industry, since with this technique pictures and messages presenting the brand can circumvent advertising regulations, such as depicting drinkers below the age of 25, showing excessive drinking and presenting sexual advantages due to alcohol (Lobstein et al. 2016).

One option often brought up in the context of making viewers more vigilant is the use of advertising disclosures. This directly leads to the second finding of this study: the ineffectiveness of the advertising disclosure to enhance users' level of persuasion knowledge.

While several studies found that advertising disclosures can trigger persuasion knowledge in blogs (van Reijmersdal et al. 2016) or on Instagram (Evans et al. 2017), this study falls in line with Kim, Pasadeos, and Barban's (2001) study on advertorials

finding no additional effect of a disclosure. As Kim, Pasadeos, and Barban (2001) explained, this might be due to a ceiling effect. In fact, persuasion knowledge regarding the brand post condition was high ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 1.08$  measured on a 5-point scale). In other words, the fact that the source of the post was a brand already triggered a considerable level of persuasion knowledge. Interestingly, we did not find any effect of heightened attention on persuasion knowledge, but again this might be due to the mentioned ceiling effect (see Table 2).

This points towards the fact that Facebook's policy on putting disclosures on paid advertisement posts does not tackle the issue of covert marketing. As such, user-generated brand content would also have to be marked as commercial in certain cases, which is, however, challenging to implement since consumers post branded content mostly without commercial intent. Still especially when it comes to alcohol messages, following Brodmerkel and Carah (2013), we suggest policy makers should 'hold alcohol brands responsible not just for what they say but also for the kinds of audience participation and mediation they invite and encourage' (2013, 278). For instance, a new definition of what is considered a commercial alcohol brand picture on Facebook should be considered to encompass user-generated material that is created in a direct response to a brand. Pictures using hashtags or tags created for real-world tie-in events, such as the highly successful Smirnoff campaigns (Carah and Shaul 2016; Nicholls 2012) could be marked with a disclosure as well, independently of the pictures' sources. For instance, if a user publishes a branded post in response to the promise of a free product, this could be understood as a commercial act following recent European jurisdiction. This is the case, as recent court rulings have seen free products as a form of compensation. In other words, if a user attending an event gets a free drink for a branded picture containing a corresponding hashtag, regulations could hold the user accountable (Kiel and Solf 2017). To our knowledge, no judicial rules have been implemented in the regard of user-generated content in the United States, the FTC has, however, adapted the 'Guides concerning Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising' (FTC 2015). Overall, a further examination of the topic would be necessary not only for further research but also policymakers.

Furthermore, positioning and formulation of the disclosures should be kept in mind, as studies point to the fact that the existing Facebook disclosures might not attract the attention they need (Wojdyski and Evans 2016).

Interestingly, however, in line with Janssen et al. (2016), we found highly attentive participants to react less negatively to the post that included a disclosure. Consequently, we support Janssen and colleagues' suggestion that a disclosure may backfire as it increases awareness for the brand, in our case the source of the post. Research on disclosures combined with a user source would again be of high interest. On the one side, the disclosure could inform the viewer of the persuasive intent. On the other side, viewers whose cognitive capacities are already depleted by the processing of the surrounding information might even remember more strongly that the source was a user. Another possible explanation lies in findings of the FTC regarding search engine advertisements and advertorials. The FTC found that participants spent significantly less time looking at native advertisements with a disclosure. However, this was not due to an increase in ad recognition (FTC 2017). Possibly, highly attentive

viewers' identify advertisements regardless of the disclosure but in the case of a paid ad with disclosure, they just move on more quickly, and do not invest further resources on it.

### ***Limitations and future research***

This study investigated the interplay between two complex factors: the source of branded content on Facebook and viewers' attention to it. Regarding the source manipulation, we have to mention several limitations. First, we exposed participants to posts of an unknown user. Yet, Facebook users are usually exposed to user-generated posts by their friends. As such, the effect of the user-generated alcohol posts could be even stronger. Future research should intend to include manipulation of weak versus strong ties with a user posting alcohol related brand content. Second, we excluded the branch of influencer marketing in this study, since it would have to be known by the participants that a specific source is not a regular user but an 'influencer'. In this case, further aspects could confound the results, for instance effects triggered by the perception of the expert or celebrity status of the 'influencer' (e.g. Knoll and Matthes 2017). It could be of interest, however, to conduct follow-up studies on the characteristics of a user source, such as his or her popularity or expert status on a product. Third, we used alcohol as product category, as alcohol-related user-generated posts are very common in real-life (Nicholls 2012). It would definitely be worthwhile testing effects for other product categories. For instance, users often use Facebook as source for information on fashion trends (Newberry 2018).

Concerning the manipulation of viewers' attention, there are limitations as well. As much as we attempted to create a realistic browsing scenario, this experiment was still a laboratory study limited in external validity. Future studies should expose users to alcohol Facebook posts in a more naturalistic setting, such as on their own smartphone. Also, we worked with self-report data regarding the manipulation check of attention. Consequently, we cannot achieve the level of certainty regarding participants' visual attention that an eye-tracking study would offer. Regarding cognitive involvement, we also relied on self-report data. In order to assess cognitive overload, however, further examinations are necessary that shed deeper insights into the role of attention on the processing of embedded advertising messages.

Finally, we investigated this topic with a student sample. Even though student samples are often criticized for their lack of generalizability to the broad public (Kam, Wilking, and Zechmeister 2007), in our case a student sample is adequate and even necessary as they are the main target group of the examined advertising practice.

### **Conclusion**

Our study suggests that persuasive messages on social media trigger users' persuasion knowledge, if a brand is marked as their source. If, however, a user posts brand-related content, this can have persuasive effects without creating awareness for the persuasive potential. As it is only fair to the consumer to disclose covert advertising practices, we

would argue for a stricter regulation of campaigns aiming at a broad user-participation. For instance, by also including ad disclosures on user-generated posts created in this context. As such, posts containing a hashtag or caption promoted by a brand could be marked as commercial content.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Appendix

*Attention Manipulation:*

*Low:*

You will now see 20 Facebook Posts. Please browse through the posts, as you would do in your daily Facebook-Usage. Thank you!

*High:*

You will now see 20 Facebook Posts.

Your task is to:

Take as much time as you need to observe everything carefully

Memorize all aspects attentively

Look at all details in a very concentrated way

This is very important, since you will be asked questions regarding your memory of the posts later on.

Thank you for your effort!

*Manipulation check brand post (=1) vs. paid advertisement post (=2)*

Companies pay Facebook, so that I see post 2 (*correct*).

I would only see post 1, if I had already liked the brand (*correct*).

Every user could be exposed to post 2 in their newsfeed (*correct*).

Post 1 and 2 were posted by a brand (*correct*).

Post 2 is disseminated by a brand, without paying Facebook for it (*false*).

There is no difference between post 1 and 2 (*false*).

I would only see post 2, if I already know the brand (*false*).

To reach new customers, a brand would use post 2 (*correct*).