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# Telling the Brand Story: Including News Articles in Online Promotional Strategies

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**Abstract.** *Given the growing popularity of the Internet as a promotional medium, it is crucial for brand managers to examine the effects of combining the different brand communication sources online. According to social comprehension theory and knowledge from neuroscience, people exposed to a message spontaneously construct a mental simulation. People who are exposed to images or visuals are unlikely to assign verbal labels to their observations, whereas people who read a story may spontaneously form mental pictures of the narrative content. Mental processing of stories requires more extensive elaboration than processing of visuals. In a first study, survey results indicate online news articles about a brand are more likely to be acted upon by users than are advertisements. A second study considers integrating news articles and advertising when promoting new brands on the Internet in order to benefit from a synergistic effect. Previous studies examining a synergistic effect in marketing communications have looked at the increased effectiveness of combining multiple media or different tactics when promoting a brand. Experiment results from the second study indicate that when exposure to advertising combines with exposure to objective news about a new brand, effectiveness increases in terms of both ad and brand attitudes.*

**Keywords:** elaboration, Internet advertising, news, synergy.

## **TELLING THE BRAND STORY: INCLUDING NEWS ARTICLES IN ONLINE PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES**

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## 1. Introduction

Given the popularity of the Internet as a promotional medium, it is imperative to examine the effects of Internet marketing communications. Looking at how people process Internet marketing communications, Putrevu and Lord (2003) list three brand communication sources online: advertisements (including banner and pop-up ads), web sites, and viral messaging. The three tools differ in the level of marketer control over message content and placement.

According to an IAB/PriceWaterhouse Coopers report (2008), banner ads represent 21 percent of a 6 billion dollar advertising spending market. Banner ads are present online in various standardized sizes and are labeled *display* advertising by practitioners. Previous studies have found banner ads increase brand recognition and intention to purchase, even when the user does not click on the banner to access the brand's web site (Briggs and Hollis 1997; Manchanda et al. 2006). Unlike banner ads, pop-up ads occur less frequently online due to blocking software. So, banner ads are an effective brand communication tool under complete advertiser control in terms of both message and placement.

Websites feature narratives about brands in various formats: reviews, opinions, or publicity. Product reviews and opinions are social influences on target consumers (Bailey 2005). Neither independent product reviews nor word-of-mouth-type consumer opinions are under a brand manager's control. In turn, publicity in the form of news articles is the result of brand communications efforts. In the case of publicity, the marketer has some control over the message and its placement by generating news releases and sending them to the appropriate media outlets. Previous studies have found publicity to be an effective tool in generating positive brand attitudes and intentions to purchase the brand (Jin 2003, Micu and Thorson 2008).

Finally, viral messaging assumes outstanding creative development so that media buys are replaced with intentional passing along of the positive brand message. Viral messaging is considered word-of-mouth advertising (Phelps et al. 2004). While the initial message content is under the marketer's control, the placement of the message is not.

To sum up, the two tools that can be controlled by the brand manager in terms of message content and placement are banner ads and publicity in the form of news articles. Identifying ways to use effectively marketing communications tools is important as they help build a brand image as well as fix a brand image altered by the messages that are out of the marketer's control. Brand communications sources such as product reviews and opinions that cannot be controlled by the marketer do have an influence on target consumers. Several studies by both academics and practitioners have examined ways to assess the effects of such "uncontrolled" (by marketers) messages and to identify reaction strategies using communication tools that are controlled by marketers. In this study the concern is twofold, first, to compare effectiveness of banner ads and news articles individually, then, to compare

effectiveness of using advertising only as opposed to synergistic conditions (ad-article, article-ad) where the two tools are combined (most likely to happen in reality when we browse).

First, we present the theoretical background of our argument, followed by hypotheses and the two studies undertaken with findings and discussion for each and an overall discussion at the end.

Banner ads are highly visual and feature little text (copy), whereas news stories or publicity are largely verbal and often feature only or mostly text. When comparing the effects of online brand exposure to banner ads, news stories, or both, it is crucial to consider the difference between processing visual as opposed to verbal content.

## **2. Processing narrative information (as opposed to visual)**

Stories are crucial for people to acquire and memorize information (Shank and Abelson 1995). According to social comprehension theory, to understand information about a stimulus people spontaneously construct a mental simulation (Wyer and Radvansky 1999), called an event model (Wyer, Adaval, and Colcombe 2002). Event models represent subsets of what cognitive psychologists call mental or situational models (Johnson-Laird 1983; Kintsch 1998; Zwaan and Radvansky 1998). Mental models contain both verbal and nonverbal components. According to Wyer and Radvansky (1999), the image components of a mental model are obligatory, but verbal components are optional. They state that people who watch a movie are unlikely to assign verbal labels to their observations while people who read a book may spontaneously form mental pictures of the events described and the characters involved in them and, in doing so, may elaborate features of the events that were not specified in the text that was provided. Wyer and Radvansky conclude that people who see images or visuals are unlikely to assign verbal labels to their observations, whereas people who read a story may spontaneously form mental pictures of the narrative content and thereby elaborate features of the events that were not mentioned in the verbal depiction. Thus, mental processing of stories requires more extensive elaboration than processing of visual images because people have to “search for” and assign their own visuals to build the mental model of the story they are reading.

In a brand communications context, this means that exposing consumers to brands through news articles may generate a more extensive mental model than the one generated when observing banner ads. The mental model generated by the reader of the article includes both the information provided in the text and additional information inferred by the reader. So, the number of inferences is higher when processing text and the additional ones use familiar stored information. In a study of how consumers generate their own brand representations after being exposed to narrative promotional messages, Escalas (2004) concludes that mental models created in consumers' minds help them interpret brand meaning and generate positive brand attitudes through self-brand connections. Self-brand connections facilitate the

automatic retrieval of thoughts and feelings that relate to the brand. In turn, we expect exposure to news articles about the brand to generate more positive brand attitudes and behavioral intentions than would exposure to banner ads only. Hence, the first hypothesis in this study predicts a superior effectiveness of exposure to online news articles as opposed to banner ads.

*H1: News stories will be more effective as a brand communication source online than banner ads.*

Examining news stories and banner ads individually does not reflect the reality of a consumer's browsing experience. A user may encounter both a news story and a banner ad about the same brand in one browsing session. Therefore, in addition to examining the effectiveness of each individually, it is important to investigate possible synergistic effects between article and advertisement exposures.

### **3. Marketing communications synergies**

Synergy is the interaction of two or more agents or forces so that their combined effect is greater than the sum of their individual effects. The subject of the added marketing communications effects resulting from a successful combination of components is present in studies that looked at the effect of advertising in association with: the context in which it is presented, the media that carry it, the sales promotions it is connected to as well as publicity about it. Researchers focused on: (1) the effect of congruency between an ad and the context in which the ad appears (de Pelsmacker, Geuens, and Anckaert 2002; Moorman, Neijens, and Smit 2002); (2) the effect of using different media to convey the marketing communications message (Naik and Raman 2003; Chang and Thorson 2004; Stammerjohann et al. 2005); (3) the synergies between marketing communications tactics such as sales promotions and retail advertising (Lemon and Nowlis 2002), personal selling and advertising (Gopalakrishna and Chaterjee 1992), and publicity and advertising (Jin 2003; Micu and Thorson 2008). To sum up, synergies in marketing communications can be categorized into three types (similar to Moriarty 1996): (1) context-ad synergies; (2) cross-media synergies; and (3) cross-tactics synergies. On the basis that news articles generate more extensive mental models than banner ads, this study examines a cross-tactics synergistic effect between publicity and advertising in the online environment.

Research in the area of cross-tactics synergies is very scarce. While the integrated marketing communications framework encourages such research (Schultz, Tannenbaum and Lauterborn 1993), scholars focused more on integrating tools (media) of the same tactic (advertising). Establishing the existence of a synergistic effect among marketing communications tactics would pave the way for the strategic integration that IMC proponents support.

Most studies examining a cross-tactics synergistic effect surfaced in the sales marketing discipline and modeled synergistic effects at a macro level (Gopalakrishna

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and Chatterjee 1992, Lemon and Nowlis 2002). Previous studies to examine a cross-tactics synergistic effect using consumer data assessed the combined effect of publicity about Super Bowl ads and the ads themselves (Jin 2003) and the effects of combining publicity with advertising when promoting new brands on the Web (Micu and Thorson 2008). Findings from both studies support the idea of combining exposure to news articles with advertising because it generates increased ad recall (Jin 2003) and more positive brand attitudes (Micu and Thorson 2008).

So, previous literature supports the idea that exposure to two different messages about the same brand (as it would be with an article and an ad) should lead to more positive brand attitudes than exposure to two identical ad messages. The superior marketing communications effectiveness of varying as opposed to repeating brand messages is explained in previous studies by either encoding variability or deficient processing theory from consumer psychology. A summary of relevant literature is presented below. The addition of the current study is that by combining advertising specifically with news articles or narratives about the brand, there is an increase in effectiveness because of the narrative format in addition to the boost from varying the messages.

### **4. Effectiveness of varied as opposed to repetitive brand messages**

Unnava and Burnkrant (1991) compared repetitive versus varied advertising executions. They found that exposure to two different executions of an ad generated higher aided and unaided brand recall than exposure to the exact same ad twice. Unnava and Burnkrant explain that the superiority of the varied execution condition over the repetitive condition is due to the two different memory traces generated by the two executions or the varied encoding.

#### **4.1. Encoding variability**

According to encoding variability theory, variation in exposure leads to increased processing of the message by consumers (Stammerjohann et al. 2005). Hence, the network of memory traces that relate to a brand (Zaltman 2003) or the mental model of the brand (Wyer and Radvansky 1999) expands, increasing brand recall likelihood through the wealth of items in memory that might act as recall triggers. Not only do they have the brand message more accessible in their memory, but people exposed to varied brand messages (synergistic condition) are more motivated to attend to the varied (source or format) brand messages than they would be if exposed repetitively to the exact same brand message (Chang and Thorson 2004; Unnava and Burnkrant 1991).

## 4.2. Deficient processing

Related to encoding variability theory, deficient processing theory makes the same predictions regarding the superior effectiveness of exposure to varied rather than repetitive brand messages. This alternative explanation relies on the inferior effectiveness of repetitive exposure to a single message, because the strong mental representation from the first exposure creates the false belief that the person already has learned information about the brand (Appleton-Knapp, Bjork, and Wickens 2005). Additional (synergistic) effects result when people encounter a "new" brand message during each exposure and therefore attend to it more carefully than they would if they encountered the same message repetitively.

Hence, synergistic marketing communications exposure conditions featuring a news story in addition to advertising are expected to be more effective than those including repetitive advertising alone.

*H2: People exposed to the synergistic condition (ad-story or story-ad) will have a more positive attitude toward the ad than those exposed to a repetitive condition (ad-ad).*

*H3: People exposed to the synergistic condition (ad-story or story-ad) will have a more positive attitude toward the brand than those exposed to a repetitive condition (ad-ad).*

*H4: People exposed to the synergistic condition (ad-story or story-ad) will be more inclined to purchase the brand than those exposed to a repetitive condition (ad-ad).*

Two studies were conducted to test the hypotheses. The first study examined hypothesis one about the superior effectiveness of online news articles as opposed to banner ads as individual brand communications tools. The second study looked at the effectiveness of the synergistic exposure conditions (where news articles are included either before or after advertising) as opposed to advertising alone where there is repetitive exposure to banner ads only.

## 5. Study 1

In the first study, a survey was conducted online to assess the likelihood to act upon the two different message formats. Survey data was collected by a professional research company (Opinion Research Corporation) using a national sample of 1074 respondents. Demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. Respondents answered questions about how likely they were to act upon either news articles or banner ads when researching product information online.

Paired-samples t-test analysis was conducted to compare within subjects the likelihood to act upon exposure to either articles or banner ads. Results indicate articles are significantly more likely to be acted upon than banner ads. Means and t-test values are presented in Table 2.

Table 1

**Demographic description of the survey sample**

	Frequency	%	Cum. %
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	520	48.42	48.42
Female	554	51.58	100.00
Total	1074	100.00	
<b>Age</b>			
18-24	145	13.50	13.50
25-34	203	18.90	32.40
35-44	243	22.63	55.03
45-54	189	17.60	72.63
55-64	127	11.82	84.45
65 or older	167	15.55	100.00
Total	1074	100.00	
<b>Education</b>			
High school	239	22.25	22.25
Some college	343	31.94	54.19
College graduate	352	32.77	86.96
Post-graduate	140	13.04	100
Total	1074	100.00	
<b>Income</b>			
Less than \$25,000	256	23.84	23.84
\$25,000-\$39,999	218	20.30	44.13
\$40,000-\$49,999	124	11.55	55.68
\$50,000-\$74,999	220	20.48	76.16
\$75,000-\$99,999	130	12.10	88.27
Over \$100,000	126	11.73	100
Total	1074	100.00	

Table 2

**T-test results**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p
Articles	1074	2.34	1.01	19.529	1073	.000
Banners	1074	1.80	0.92			



The effects of demographic variables (age, gender, education and income) were examined in order to identify whether the superior performance of news articles as brand communications sources as opposed to banner ads is due to a demographic characteristic of the online consumer. Age was found to be significantly related to consumers being more likely to act upon news articles online ( $F=4.39$ ,  $p<.01$ ), the 18-24 year old group being the one most likely to upon any of the two brand message formats. None of the other three demographic characteristics significantly influenced the likelihood to act upon news articles as opposed to banner ads. Regardless of demographics, participants consistently scored higher on reacting to news articles rather than banner ads. Plots of reactions by demographic characteristic are presented in Figures 1 through 4.

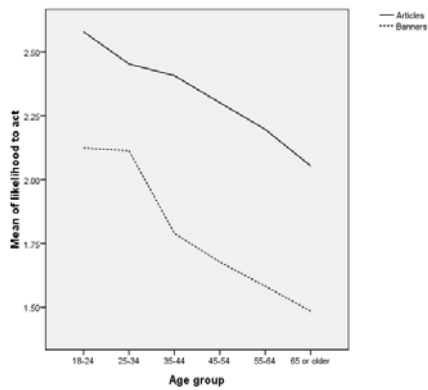


Figure 1. Age group

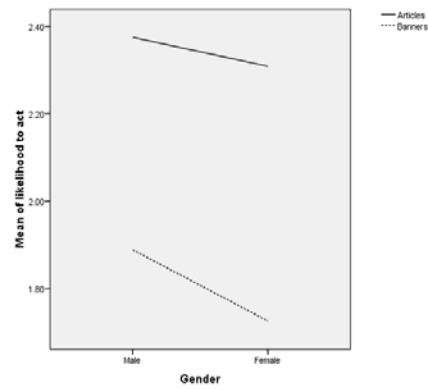


Figure 2. Gender

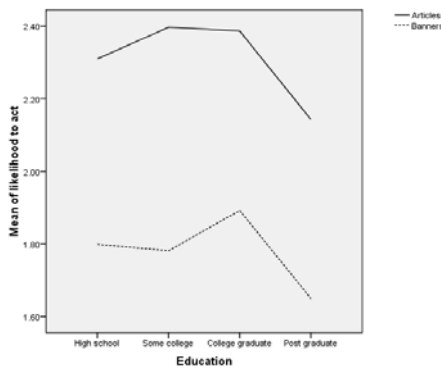


Figure 3. Education

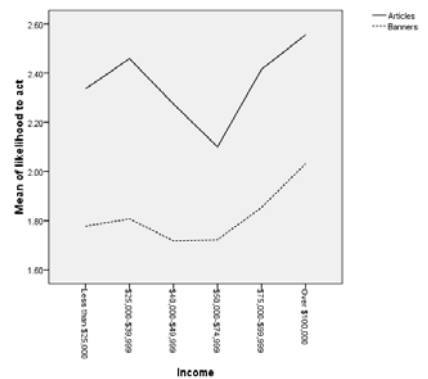


Figure 4. Income

Figures 1., 2., 3. and 4. Demographic characteristic (age, gender, education and income) effect on likelihood to act upon promotional message

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From study 1 we conclude that news articles are a more effective brand communications tool than banner ads. Thus, the first hypothesis is supported. A second finding from this first study is that age is a significant covariate of which the 18 to 24 year old group is the one most likely to react to any brand message format online. The results from study 1 apply to the Internet browsing population in general as the data come from a national sample with good representation across demographic characteristics. While external validity is high, internal validity suffers because of the cross-sectional survey design. To ensure higher internal validity, in study 2, the effectiveness of three exposure conditions (two synergistic and one repetitive) is compared using an experimental design.

### **6. Study 2**

A 3(experimental condition, between-subjects)  $\times$  4 (product, within-subjects) mixed-design experiment was designed to assess the differences among three exposure conditions to a new brand on the Internet, using either advertising alone or in combination with publicity as objective news. Specifically, to examine the synergistic effects that result from combining advertising with publicity, as opposed to repetitive exposure, and control for order effects, the following exposure conditions were employed: ad-ad, ad-then-article and article-then-ad. Four product categories were selected for this experiment (MP3 player, candy, DVD player, and sports shoes) because of their relevance for college students.

When designing the stimuli, fictitious brand names were developed for each product to control for any preexisting attitudes that might confound the results in case known brands were used. Ads and news articles were created for each of the four fictitious brands.

#### **6.1. Stimulus materials**

The banner ads feature simple visuals and minimal copy that mentions the product category and the brand name. The articles for the publicity treatment are similar in length and adopt an objective news tone. The articles start with the date, a headline, and a fictional reporter name and mention the product category and brand name in the main text. Manipulation checks in a pretest with 36 participants who viewed the stimulus items from a list of ads and stories verify that all stimulus materials represent typical banner ads ( $t(35) = .61, p = .572$ ) or news stories ( $t(35) = .78, p = .442$ ). Filler ads and articles with other fictional brands appear on the same pages with the target ads and articles. In addition, cartoons serve as fillers between the Web pages that contain ads or articles.

## **6.2. Experimental design**

A professional computer programmer created the experimental Web site, which underwent usability testing before being made accessible online. The participants accessed the experimental site from a computer terminal of their choice (i.e., where they would normally browse the Internet) and saw one of three versions (corresponding to the three exposure conditions), determined by random order. To ensure sufficient participants per condition, forced random assignment was used, such that each of the three groups included at least 32 participants, after which additional participants were randomly assigned to the four groups without restrictions. As counterbalances, the four ads and four articles within the treatments were programmed to appear in random order as participants accessed the site.

To ensure active participation, subjects were asked to vote for specific articles or ads according to predefined criteria (i.e., newsworthiness of the articles and design-brand name match for the ads). To detect participants who might skip reading the articles, the Web site and its corresponding database recorded the time each respondent spent on each page.

After viewing the ads and reading the articles, participants reached a page with a questionnaire that asked about their attitudes toward the ads and brands they saw, their intention to purchase those brands, and demographic information. Participants in the repetitive advertising condition answered a version of the questionnaire without questions about the articles.

## **6.3. Sample and data collection**

Subjects were 634 students from a large Midwestern U.S. university. This convenience sample comes from a homogenous population of students interested in the online environment. The student population represents the 18 to 24 year old group that was identified in Study 1 as the one most likely to react to any online brand communications efforts. Participants were recruited via e-mail from three large classes. According to a power analysis table, which indicates sample size as a function of power, effect size, and significance level (Keppel 1991), the minimum sample size needed for a power level of .90, an effect size of .06, and a significance level of .05 is 57 participants. More than 100 participants appear in each treatment group that corresponds to the three exposure conditions.

## **6.4. Dependent variables**

The dependent variables used to measure brand communication effectiveness are attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, and intention to purchase the brand. As we show in Tables 3 and 4 respectively, the attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand measures were gathered using a factor analysis for all four

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brands and obtained a Cronbach's alpha of greater than 8 for each. The three semantic differential scales that measure attitude were bad/good, pleasant/unpleasant, and favorable/unfavorable.

*Table 3*

**Factor analysis loadings and reliability for attitude toward the ad variables**

Item <sup>a</sup>	Loading	Alpha	Var. Expl. (%)
Attitude Toward Sonex MP3 Player Ad		.81	72.76
Sonex Ad Bad/Good	.869		
Sonex Ad Unfavorable/Favorable	.871		
Sonex Ad Unpleasant/Pleasant	.818		
Attitude Toward Sweeteez Candy Ad		.86	78.86
Sweeteez Ad Bad/Good	.898		
Sweeteez Ad Unfavorable/Favorable	.925		
Sweeteez Ad Unpleasant/Pleasant	.839		
Attitude Toward RoVision DVD Player Ad		.82	73.37
RoVision Ad Bad/Good	.911		
RoVision Ad Unfavorable/Favorable	.883		
RoVision Ad Unpleasant/Pleasant	.770		
Attitude Toward Talpa Sports Shoes Ad		.87	79.66
Talpa Ad Bad/Good	.896		
Talpa Ad Unfavorable/Favorable	.907		
Talpa Ad Unpleasant/Pleasant	.875		

<sup>a</sup>Extraction method: principal component analysis.

*Table 4*

**Factor analysis loadings and reliability for attitude toward the brand variables**

Product	Components	Loads	$\alpha$
MP3 Player	Sonex player bad/good	0.894	0.86
	Sonex player unfavorable/favorable	0.902	
	Sonex player unpleasant/pleasant	0.857	
Candy	Sweeteez candy bad/good	0.924	0.89
	Sweeteez candy unfavorable/favorable	0.924	
	Sweeteez candy unpleasant/pleasant	0.869	
DVD Player	RoVision player bad/good	0.924	0.85
	RoVision player unfavorable/favorable	0.900	
	RoVision player unpleasant/pleasant	0.806	
Sport Shoes	Talpa shoes bad/good	0.926	0.88
	Talpa shoes unfavorable/favorable	0.916	
	Talpa shoes unpleasant/pleasant	0.839	

## 6.5. Analysis and results

Multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used to test the hypotheses. Furthermore, a repeated measures MANCOVA was applied to compare the three exposure conditions for each of the three dependent variables.

Of the 634 participating students, only 583 remained for analysis after data screening. Of these, 43% are men and 57% are women. Participants were split evenly among conditions, with 142 (24.36%) seeing ads only, 143 (24.53%) viewing ads followed by articles, and 148 (25.39%) being exposed to articles then ads.

### 6.5.1. Attitude toward the ad across conditions

The second hypothesis predicts that participants who read news stories either before or after ads should have a more positive attitude toward the ad than those who view repetitive advertising only. The results indicate that participants differ significantly ( $F(2, 353) = 6.85, p < .00$ ) in their attitude toward the ad when exposed to advertising, whether in combination with publicity or not.

Pairwise comparisons among the three groups (i.e., see repetitive ads, read news stories and see ads, and see ads and then read news stories) reveal that participants in the repetitive advertising condition have a significantly less positive attitude toward the ad than do participants in the two synergistic conditions in which both an ad and a news article appear. Thus, the second hypothesis is supported. No significant difference emerges between the two integrated conditions in terms of participants' recorded attitude toward the advertisement.

### 6.5.2. Attitude toward the brand across conditions

The third hypothesis proposes that participants who read news stories and then see ads and those who see the ads first followed by news articles should have more positive attitudes toward the brand than participants who see repetitive advertising only. We find significant differences among the three conditions in terms of attitude toward the brand ( $F(3, 573) = 10.52, p < .000$ ). As Table 5 shows, participants exposed to news stories in addition to advertising score higher on attitude toward the brand than do the participants in the repetitive condition. Results of multiple analysis of variance show participants in the ad-then-article and article-then-ad synergistic conditions score significantly higher on attitude toward the brand than do participants in the repetitive advertising condition (see Table 6). Thus, the third hypothesis is supported.

Table 5

**Attitude toward the brand across the three groups**

Variable	Groups	Mean	SD	N
Attitude toward Sonex MP3 player	Ad-Ad	2.59	0.71	139
	Ad-Article	2.60	0.49	141
	Article-Ad	2.78	0.53	147
Attitude toward Sweeteez candy	Ad-Ad	2.76	0.79	139
	Ad-Article	2.96	0.70	141
	Article-Ad	2.91	0.71	147
Attitude toward RoVision DVD player	Ad-Ad	2.43	0.71	139
	Ad-Article	2.46	0.62	141
	Article-Ad	2.63	0.58	147
Attitude toward Talpa sports shoes	Ad-Ad	2.55	0.74	139
	Ad-Article	2.82	0.73	141
	Article-Ad	2.76	0.76	147

Table 6

**Multivariate tests of between-subject effects across participants for attitude toward the brand**

Source	Dependent Variable	SS	Df	MS	F	p
Groups	Attitude toward Sonex MP3 player	8.31	3.00	2.77	8.43	0.00
	Attitude toward Sweeteez candy	5.05	3.00	1.68	3.51	0.02
	Attitude toward RoVision DVD player	9.41	3.00	3.14	8.20	0.00
	Attitude toward Talpa sports shoes	9.94	3.00	3.31	6.14	0.00

As Table 7 reveals, pairwise comparisons do not indicate the significant superiority of either synergistic condition. As we show in Figure 5, the pattern across conditions is similar for the two more technical brands (Sonex MP3 player and RoVision DVD player) and for the two less technical brands (Sweeteez candy and Talpa sports shoes).

Table 7

**Group comparisons for attitude toward the brand**

Condition	Condition	M Diff.	(SE)	p
Ad-Ad	Ad-Article	-0.17	(.07)	.02*
	Article-Ad	-0.22	(.07)	.00*
Ad-Article	Ad-Ad	0.17	(.07)	.02*
	Article-Ad	-0.06	(.07)	.41
Article-Ad	Ad-Ad	0.22	(.07)	.00*
	Ad-Article	0.06	(.07)	.41

\*Mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

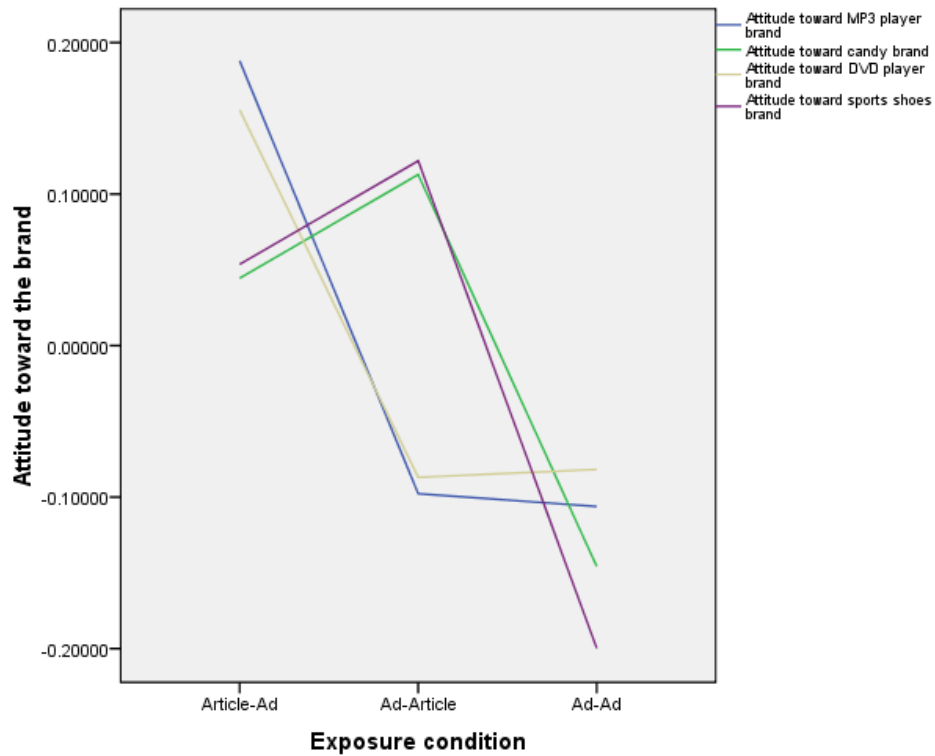


Figure 5. Group means for attitude toward the brand

### 6.5.3. Purchase intentions across conditions

The fourth and last hypothesis predicts that participants who read news stories first and then view banner ads and those who see banner ads first followed by news articles will record a higher intention to purchase the brands than those exposed to repetitive advertising. A third multiple analysis of variance indicates that participants in the three conditions differ in terms of their inclination to purchase the brands ( $F(3,575) = 4.33, p < .005$ ), such that those in the two synergistic conditions indicate higher purchase intention scores than those in the advertising alone condition. That is, the fourth hypothesis is supported and for this sample of participants, repetitive advertising is less effective in generating behavioral intentions than is a combination of objective news articles and advertising.

## **7. Discussion**

The findings of this study encourage managers to coordinate their Internet advertising with objective news about the brand for a more successful brand communications plan. Testing for a synergistic effect has been an ongoing endeavor for many scholars who have embraced the IMC framework (e.g., Chang and Thorson 2004; Naik and Raman 2004). Ultimately focusing on a cross-tactics synergistic effect, the current study looks at combining advertising exposure with exposure to objective news articles when promoting a new brand on the Internet.

In addition to a synergistic effect, this study offers a possible explanation for why the news article-banner ad synergy works best for generating higher brand attitudes, namely, combining a visual Internet advertisement format with a narrative about the brand. Exposing participants to a news story about the brand, in addition to a banner ad, may have generated the more positive brand attitudes, because the articles in the study feature only text that provides newsworthy information about the brand in a sequential fashion. In contrast, the banner ads are highly visual and feature little copy. In her study of how consumers generate narratives about brands after exposure to narrative ads, Escalas (2004) concludes that narrative structures help consumers interpret brand meanings and generate positive brand attitudes. Thus, the exposure conditions for the news story should have generated more positive brand attitudes and behavioral intentions than those without the narrative. Further study is warranted to distinguish between the effects of news articles as opposed to those of narrative advertisement formats. Luna (2004) found that an ad campaign that tells a story with its ads is more effective than a campaign using independent un-linked advertisements. In addition, in the print media environment, readers appear to have a hard time distinguishing advertorials from editorial content (Cameron and Ju-Pak 2000). Given the versatility of the Internet, news articles and narrative advertisements may be even harder to distinguish between for consumers. Hence, brand managers may include the online equivalent of advertorials (i.e., narrative advertisements) in their Internet brand communications plans. Practitioners are cautioned, however, that this research did not examine established brands, which carry the baggage associated with preexisting meanings, and therefore, this study's findings are most relevant for new brands. Cameron and Ju-Pak investigated advertorials as a means through which advertising attempts to "borrow" credibility by imitating the news format. Previous literature acknowledged the superior effectiveness of news-like advertising (Balasubramanian 1991). She introduced the concept of hybrid messages to the academic literature, a hybrid message being a paid-for publicity message that is not labeled as sponsored content. Hybrid messages are proof that no matter the dispute between the advertising and the public relations departments, there are communication professionals who write like public relations practitioners and place what they wrote wearing the advertising hat. Study 1 supports the idea of objective news articles about a brand being superior to advertising in terms of brand communication effectiveness in the online environment. An alternative explanation of this finding comes from the third-party



endorsement concept (Salmon, Reid, Pokrywczski, and Willett 1985; Cameron 1994; Cameron and Ju-Pak 2000) that news articles benefit from increased credibility as opposed to advertising messages.

### Limitations

Although this research found valuable information regarding the combined use of news articles and advertising online, it has at least a few limitations.

First, as data in study 1 come from a professional research company, the option of rewording or changing questions was not available. While the sample is a national one with good representation of the various demographic groups, the questions asked of the participants were general and focused on no particular brand.

Second, there are aspects relating to the sample of participants in study 2. While a homogenous population and experienced with the Internet, the student population is not representative of the general population. Also, the sample used was a convenience sample, not one statistically drawn. While participants were randomly assigned to conditions and counterbalancing was employed when coordinating exposure to the stimulus material, these measures do not make the results generalizable as they would have been if the sample of participants would have been statistically drawn. Also, some students received extra credit points from their instructors and some participated entirely voluntary. The thorough data screening excluded participants with inconsistent and incomplete answers however the difference in motivation to participate might have impacted the results beyond control. A future study on the topic of combining different tactics of marketing communication should employ a statistically-drawn sample of participants from the general population that is browsing the Internet nowadays.

The third limitation, also of study 2, comes the very nature of the study. Since the tests were done for four different brands, the ads and articles had to be different from one product to another. Due care was employed when designing the stimulus materials for all articles to look alike and have the same length and especially the same impartial tone. Also, when designing the banner ads, a similar format and layout was attempted with minimal differences. Still, the four target articles and four target ads could not have been exactly the same. Something in the text of the articles or in the design of the ads might have caused affective differences that could not be controlled. This limitation was unavoidable considering the high interest in testing the hypotheses for a variety of products. A future study may focus on separately investigating the affective and cognitive components of attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand and control for affect generated by the stimulus material.

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