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## HYBRIDIZATION AND CHANGE IN COMMERCIAL DISCOURSE: STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE BLURRING OF AIMS AND FUNCTIONS IN MEDIA HYBRID CONTENT

**Abstract.** The aim of the article is to identify the perception of hybrid commercial messages (HM) understood as a marketing technique. The study focuses on determining the level of recognition of various forms of HM in traditional and digital media by students from two different fields of study. Additionally, the goal is to examine their opinions on these marketing practices and the perceived credibility of the media in which HM are published.

Based on the Persuasion Knowledge Model and the Media Literacy Skills scale the following research questions were formulated: What do interviewees know about HMs? How does media literacy affect the recognition of HMs' persuasive intent? Can they identify the advertising nature of these messages? What strategies do they use to cope with HMs, and what are their opinions? The study involves qualitative interviews with 68 journalism and engineering students. Findings reveal that students often struggle to recognize the persuasive nature of HMs, indicating a need for better media literacy. Attitudes toward native advertising are categorized into three groups: opponents (critical of native ads), indifferent individuals (seeing them as necessary), and understanding participants (viewing them as legitimate).

**Keywords:** hybrid message; media literacy; Persuasion Knowledge Model; native advertising; advertorial

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout most of the 20th century, marketers primarily relied on traditional media, deploying campaigns with explicit sales goals. Early internet advertising, such as banners, was initially effective in capturing user attention. However, by 1997, Jan Panero Benway and David Lane identified “banner

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blindness” (2018), where oversaturation led users to ignore ads, often resorting to ad blockers.

The convergence of technology in a multimedia, multi-channel environment – termed mediamorphosis (Lister et al., 2009) – along with increasing market competition and media fragmentation, has rendered traditional advertising methods less effective. These phenomena contribute to information overload and a culture of distraction, as highlighted by the theory of the economics of attention. In response, new theories emphasizing the motivational role of emotions and semi-conscious processing have driven marketers to explore new strategies, shifting from conventional media spaces to active brand-consumer engagement within versatile media and entertainment platforms.

Branded integration with hybrid messages (HMs) has emerged as a viable communication strategy. According to McGinn and Nerissa Coyle Masters (2011), HMs offer “unique opportunities that traditional commercials cannot deliver” with brands often funding and controlling the entertainment content. This shift in marketing emphasizes creating engaging content that indirectly references the brand, blurring the line between editorial content and advertising and resulting in hybrid forms of content. The primary issue with these approaches is their lack of transparency, often leaving audiences unaware of the underlying commercial intentions (e.g. Tutaj and van Reijmersdal, 2012). While recipients easily recognize conventional advertisements, they often fail to discern the persuasive nature of hybrid content, which poses challenges to the credibility of traditional journalism (Amazeen and Muddiman, 2018).

The aim of this article is to determine the perception of hybrid commercial messages (HM). The study focuses on assessing the recognition of HM by students from two different fields of study. Additionally, the goal is to examine their opinions on these marketing practices and their views on the perceived credibility of the media in which such content is published. This research examines HM techniques as a marketing strategy that subtly influences consumer perception by embedding brand messages in contexts not typically recognized as advertising. Using the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) (Friestad and Wright, 1994) and the Media Literacy Skills Scale (Ashley, Maksl, and Craft, 2013; Duda, 2020), it explores consumers’ perceptions of various forms of commercial HMs across print and digital formats, offering a broad approach that contrasts with existing research focused on specific types of hybrid content (e.g., Amazeen and Muddiman, 2018; Kendrick and Fullerton, 2021; Park, Kim, and Lee, 2020; Duda, 2022). The following key research questions were posed: What do interviewees

know about HMs? How does media literacy affect the recognition of the persuasive intent of HMs? Can they identify the advertising nature of these messages? What strategies do they use to cope with HMs, and what are their opinions on them? The research, conducted through qualitative methods with 68 journalism and engineering students, explores their perceptions and reactions to different forms of commercial hybrid content. The results offer theoretical and practical implications, underscoring the importance of persuasion knowledge and media literacy in navigating media hybrid forms.

# 1. THE DYNAMICS OF HYBRID MESSAGES: DEFINITIONS, RECOGNITION CHALLENGES AND THE ROLE OF MEDIA LITERACY AND PERSUASION KNOWLEDGE

## 1.1 THE IDEA OF A HYBRID MESSAGE (HM)

Hybrid messages (HMs) are now integral to media programs and marketing, blending advertising and publicity to subtly influence audiences. Defined by Balasubramanian (1994), HMs often have greater persuasive power than traditional ads (Lou and Xie, 2021), necessitating regulation, especially for vulnerable groups. Rooted in public relations, HMs aim to bypass audience defenses, as described by industry leaders as “cheating the consumer’s radar” (Bond and Kirshenbaum, 2001). This approach embeds brand messages into entertainment or journalism, transitioning from overt persuasion to subtle suggestion without disrupting the media experience.

Jonathan Bond and Richard Kirshenbaum liken HMs to undetectable “bombers” dropping messages beyond consumer defenses. Similarly, Coca-Cola’s Steven J. Heyer emphasized using brands as cultural platforms, merging advertising with entertainment to foster “brand resonance” (Keller, 2013). The integration of digital technologies has further normalized ads within valued content, enhancing emotional connections with audiences.

Despite their prevalence, HMs remain underexplored in media studies (Duda, 2022). Techniques like branded content marketing focus on creating valuable, engaging content that builds trust and influences behavior without overt selling (Du Plessis, 2015; Rowley, 2008).

The study employed various hybrid messages as stimuli, such as sponsored media supplements – sections in media outlets paid for by advertisers that resemble editorial content while promoting products. Product recommendations by influencers blend personal content with marketing messages to endorse products.

Online native ads, integrated within news sites, match the format and style of the site, reducing intrusiveness. Sponsored Facebook posts appear like regular posts but promote products. Advertorials are articles that mimic editorial content but are funded by advertisers to promote brands subtly (for more details, see Duda, 2022). These techniques merge promotional material with non-advertising formats, making it harder for audiences to distinguish between content and advertising.

## 1.2 HYBRID MESSAGES RECOGNITION

Research on HMs encompasses theoretical and empirical approaches. Theoretical studies address the blurring of boundaries between editorial and commercial content and its normative implications. Empirical research focuses on HMs' effects on consumer attitudes, brand perception, and trust, often using experimental designs, online surveys, eye-tracking, think-aloud protocols, and interviews (e.g. Wojdyski et al., 2017; Jiang et al., 2017). Typical stimuli include native ads embedded in news websites, magazines, TV programs, and blogs.

Findings indicate that many consumers fail to recognize native ads as commercial, particularly when labeling is ambiguous, with recognition rates ranging from 9% to 37% (Amazeen and Wojdyski, 2020; Hyman et al., 2017). Effective labeling, which provides clear disclosures about sponsorship, significantly improves ad recognition (Wojdyski and Evans, 2016). While native ads are perceived as less intrusive and higher quality than traditional banners, their credibility diminishes once their persuasive intent is recognized. Transparency enhances sponsor credibility without necessarily reducing ad effectiveness, particularly when advertising's role in funding the publisher is emphasized (Becker-Olsen, 2003).

Publishers face challenges in maintaining credibility, as unclear labeling may erode trust and create perceptions of biased content selection. Clear labeling supports consumer consent and enhances platform credibility. Consumers generally accept native ads as necessary for platform sustainability, provided editorial integrity is preserved. However, native ads can negatively impact perceptions of publishers more than sponsors, as editorial offices are seen as decision-makers regarding content.

Although native ads achieve higher click-through rates than banner ads (Aribarg and Schwartz, 2019), this does not always translate to improved brand recognition, which remains more effective with traditional banners (Amazeen and Wojdyski, 2020). Publishers must balance click-through rates with the need to safeguard their reputation. Research underscores that transparent labeling,

including information about authorship and sponsorship, is crucial for maintaining trust while fostering consumer acceptance of native advertising as a necessary component of media sustainability.

### 1.3 MEDIA LITERACY AND PERSUASION KNOWLEDGE MODEL IN PERCEIVING HYBRID CONTENT

Media literacy, defined as the ability to critically and effectively use media and information technologies, is essential in navigating blurred boundaries between journalism, advertising, and public relations. It enables individuals to critically evaluate communication content, manage it effectively, and engage in its creation (Kahne, Lee, and Feezell, 2012; Maksl, Ashley, and Craft, 2015). Two key approaches underpin media literacy: the protectionist approach, emphasizing critical thinking and skepticism, and the pragmatic approach, focusing on active participation and creative expression using digital tools.

Critical media literacy also involves analyzing media ecosystems, understanding corporate power dynamics, and recognizing algorithmic information manipulation (Chu and Lee, 2014). It addresses the context, purpose, and audience responsibility in interpreting media messages, fostering reflective consumption and responsible digital content creation (Vraga and Tully, 2015). Advertising literacy, a subset of media literacy, is particularly relevant for understanding HMs, which blur the line between editorial and promotional content (Rozendaal et al., 2011).

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) provides a framework for understanding how consumers evaluate and respond to advertising attempts (Friestad and Wright, 1994). It distinguishes between “conceptual” persuasion knowledge, which identifies advertiser intent, and “attitudinal” persuasion knowledge (APK), which drives critical responses (Boerman et al., 2017). While conceptual knowledge is necessary, APK is vital for resisting persuasive efforts.

HMs, characterized by implicit promotional content resembling editorial material, often bypass critical consumer processing by inhibiting the activation of persuasion knowledge (Wojdyski, 2016). Research shows that individuals with higher media literacy are more likely to recognize persuasive intent in HMs and activate APK, fostering skepticism and reducing ad credibility (Weitzl, Seiffert-Brockmann, and Einwiller, 2020). Effective media literacy education enhances awareness of native advertising, enabling audiences to critically process and mitigate its influence (Chen et al., 2011).

This study builds on existing research to examine the role of media literacy in identifying and responding to HMs in editorial contexts, utilizing measures

from Ashley et al. (2013), Tully and Vraga (2015), and Duda (2020). It seeks to address gaps in understanding how media literacy skills moderate the impact of HMs and activate persuasion knowledge to promote informed decision-making and critical engagement.

The following research questions arise:

**RQ1:** Does media literacy skills influence the identification of the persuasive intent of HMs?

**RQ2:** What level of knowledge do interviewees possess regarding HMs? Are they able to recognize the advertising nature of such messages, and how do they process and identify the promotional intent of various forms of HMs?

**RQ3:** What strategies do respondents employ to cope with the persuasive nature of HMs?

**RQ4:** What are their opinions about HMs?

## 2. METHODOLOGY FOR EXAMINING PERCEPTIONS AND RECOGNITION OF HYBRID MESSAGES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MEDIA LITERACY AND PERSUASION KNOWLEDGE

The study employed the technique of individual interviews, conducting 68 qualitative interviews. Given that qualitative research is inherently open and permits individuality and flexibility in the research process, this method is particularly suited to examining diverse perspectives on hybrid forms of content. The interviews were conducted by the author, assisted by an experienced moderator. A semi-structured approach was utilized, guided by an interview protocol. Efforts were made to maintain the natural flow of conversation, with the facilitator steering the general direction and emphasizing key topics.

Interviews were conducted between April and June 2024, involving a sample of 68 media users with experience in online (news) media. The sample comprised 32 males and 36 females, between 18 and 25 years. The participants were university students, with 37 studying journalism and social communication, and 31 enrolled in polytechnic programs such as mechanical engineering, mechatronics, and biomedical engineering. Students of technical disciplines may have a more analytical approach to advertising content, placing greater emphasis on technological and functional aspects, while journalism students may be guided by more creative and emotional criteria, taking into account the narrative and ethical dimensions of the message. This distinction was the motive for choosing these two groups for the study.

The study utilized a variety of hybrid messages as stimuli, including: (1) a sponsored media supplement, (2) product recommendations on an influencer's channel, (3–5) three online native advertisements on a news site, tailored to both the device and the layout and style of the website, combining educational/informational content with image/sales activities (two unmarked), (6) a sponsored Facebook post, (7–9) three types of advertorials: (7) a full-page advertorial resembling editorial material, provided by an advertiser or prepared by a copywriter, published in a fixed layout as an article with a quote from a company representative, (8) an advertorial similar to the first type but in the form of an interview, (9) an unmarked advertorial without quotations, supported by an adjacent page advertisement, (10–12) three journalistic articles from an online news site to obscure the study's purpose.

The specific stimuli were selected based on a comprehensive analysis of various content marketing examples in national media, resulting in a final set of 12 stimuli to cover a broad range of techniques.

Respondents were informed that the interview would focus on their general media use, thereby concealing the study's true focus on perceptions of hybrid messages. Prior to commencing the interview, participants provided informed consent for their participation and the recording of the interview, with assurances of full anonymity.

At the outset of the interview, participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire titled "How the Ad Works," aimed at examining their media literacy (Ashley, Maksf, and Craft, 2013; Duda, 2020) and discussing their media usage habits. Subsequently, they were presented with various stimuli and asked to evaluate the content's interest, subject matter, perceived authorship and intent, credibility, and the reasoning behind their perceptions.

In a follow-up round, respondents who did not initially recognize the commercial nature of the messages and overlooked disclosure labels were prompted to consider the possibility of the content being an advertisement, with specific attention to the nature of disclosure.

To assess respondents' persuasion knowledge, questions were posed regarding their general awareness of advertisements and their methods for identifying them. Participants were also asked about their responses to such messages, including reasons for avoiding or blocking advertisements. New media skills and consumer skepticism were measured by asking participants to reflect on their critical media consumption habits. They were subtly encouraged to self-assess their media literacy skills, including their ability to differentiate between various media forms, evaluate message credibility, and their susceptibility to hybrid content.

The final segment of the interview explored participants' specific knowledge and awareness of content marketing, native advertising, and hybrid messages as marketing techniques. They were asked about their understanding, evaluation of the "secret" nature of such content, and its implications. Finally, respondents were debriefed about content marketing and informed in detail about the study's purpose.

Both the researcher and the moderator independently reviewed the transcripts to interpret the meanings of each participant's statements. This process involved organizing the data and developing a coding scheme to capture the relationships between responses within each category. The primary theses were thus identified in response to the research questions.

An inductive method was employed to add new, recurring topics, while a deductive method was used to formulate categories based on existing literature and the assumptions of the Persuasion Knowledge Model. After developing the categories, the coding schemes of both researchers were compared, and discrepancies were discussed to finalize the coding scheme (see Table 1).

Table 1. Categories in thematic qualitative analysis of interviews

Knowledge about Commercial Persuasion and HMs <i>Participants' familiarity with various marketing techniques and forms of hybrid messages, including native advertising, public relations, and content marketing.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ high</li> <li>▪ moderate</li> <li>▪ low</li> </ul>
Perception of HMs <i>How participants perceive the nature, intent, credibility and transparency of native advertising.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ content as advertising</li> <li>▪ neutral information</li> <li>▪ the content viewed as impartial and informative, without a clear promotional intent</li> <li>▪ blend of both advertising and informational elements</li> </ul>
Opinions about HMs <i>Participants' attitudes and viewpoints regarding the effectiveness and ethical implications of native advertising.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ positive/negative</li> <li>▪ effective/ineffective</li> </ul>
Experience <i>Participants' experiences and reactions when encountering different HMs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ positive</li> <li>▪ negative</li> <li>▪ ambivalent</li> </ul>
Strategies for Coping with HMs <i>The methods participants use to identify, interpret, and respond to HMs, including strategies for avoiding or engaging with such content.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ avoidance: passive/active</li> <li>▪ engagement: interaction</li> </ul>



Sub-categories were developed inductively for each type of stimulus, including familiarity with the communication type, perceived intent, transparency, and credibility, as well as the classification of content as advertising or non-advertising. Additionally, different types of hybrid messages were coded separately to capture variations in their perception.

The classification of persuasion knowledge and media literacy was based on a detailed analysis of participants' reactions and self-reflections. To assess media literacy, I compared participants' self-rated media skills with the accuracy of their answers to the questionnaire "How the Ad Works" (grouping the answers into three levels: high, moderate, low) and finally used a four-tier framework: (1) nearly all identified correctly (100–95% stimuli), (2) most identified correctly (94–51%), (3) a minority identified correctly (50–5%), and (4) none identified correctly (4–0%).

The classification results indicated significant differences between the journalism and polytechnic students. In Group 1, representing the highest level of persuasion knowledge and media literacy, only 2% of journalism students and 1% of polytechnic students were categorized. A larger proportion of journalism students (52%) were classified into Group 2, compared to 32% of polytechnic students. Group 3, representing low media literacy, included 38% of journalism students and 56% of polytechnic students. The remaining 8% of journalism students and 11% of polytechnic students were placed in Group 4, indicating the lowest levels of media literacy and persuasion knowledge.

### 3. RESULTS ON PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD HYBRID MESSAGES

#### 3.1 PERCEPTION OF HMs

Interviewees are able to identify the "hidden" format of commercial messages (native ads), especially when product references are both prominent and frequent within the text, when the content includes explicit disclosures or logos, or when the text is labeled as "promotional material." In the absence of such disclosures, only 7 participants discerned the promotional nature of the message, despite the presence of an adjacent advertisement from the same brand that reinforced the advertorial's content. Similarly, only 4 participants recognized the promotional intent of an advertorial presented as an interview with an actor promoting a series in which he played. For native advertisements, those labeled as "promotional material" were identified as advertising by 37 respondents.

The majority (39 participants) also recognized the advertising nature of an unmarked text that indicated product name in its lead. However, only 6 participants identified the native ad when it was not explicitly labeled: “It’s content that looks just like regular articles but isn’t actually one. They just mimic the style to make it seem authentic. I’m not sure if it’s effective, but I usually skip it because it feels misleading” (female, 22).

The findings indicate that top-down recognition – where prior knowledge and experience are used to identify a stimulus – is infrequent. Respondents generally do not pay attention to ad disclosures. Although numerous participants identified a Facebook post as “sponsored,” they often overlooked similar indicators in other formats, such as native advertisements, sponsored media supplements, or advertorials. The promotional nature of content on influencers’ channels was similarly under-recognized: “She shares useful stuff that’s good for me. It’s helpful, so I read it.” This was the most notable instance in which the recognition of the commercial nature of messages – specifically product recommendations on influencers’ channels – differed between students of journalism and communications and those from the university of technology. Polytechnic students are less likely to recognize commercial messages as such compared to the first group.

When respondents did discern the advertising intent of a message, they typically cited features such as purchase intent, sales goals, or content bias (one-sidedness), reflecting what is known as bottom-up recognition. An illustrative example of this reasoning is provided by a participant who stated: “It’s not about providing information, but about convincing me” (male, 23).

Generally, participants frequently overlooked the purpose and promotional nature of hybrid content initially, only identifying these aspects after being prompted by the interviewer to examine the stimulus more closely. Many respondents do not clearly distinguish between journalistic or informational content and advertising. Instead, they often describe the content as a blend of both advertising and informational elements: “Yes, it is a combination of entertainment and information, but of course, it is also advertising. So it’s a combination of everything” (female, 20).

Moreover, some participants, even after identifying the source or sender of the content as commercial, did not perceive the content as advertising but rather described it as neutral information. Several participants even denied the possibility that the content they had just seen could have been an advertisement when prompted by the interviewer. This indicates that their understanding of traditional advertising persuasion was inconsistent with their self-assessment

and ability to recognize hybrid forms of content, despite declaring a moderate level of media literacy: “I wouldn’t treat it as an advertisement, but rather as communicating about herself” (in reference to product recommendations on the influencer’s channel; female, 19).

Participants focused primarily on the topic rather than the potentially biased source. When the content was considered interesting, reactions were generally positive, even if the commercial source was noted. Some participants clarified that the nature of the content – whether it was an advertisement or not – was irrelevant as long as the topic was engaging. However, if the stimulus included a clear sales intention, responses were more negative. Negative reactions also emerged when participants identified an advertising source they had initially overlooked, leading to feelings of deception and betrayal. For example, one participant described advertising in a sponsored article as a “scam” (male, 19).

Sponsored Facebook posts evoked particularly negative reactions, while reactions to sponsored supplements, influencer’s recommendations, native ads and advertorials were less negative due to the detailed and diverse information provided, even though the commercial intent was noticed. Especially the low credibility was attributed to sponsored Facebook posts. However, in general, if participants perceived the content as well-crafted, they did not necessarily consider it less credible after identifying the commercial source: “Yes, I find it credible because the products fit the theme in some way. The whole thing looks very coherent” (male, 21). Participants also demonstrated that the medium influenced their perception of trustworthiness. Sponsored content in newspapers and websites was generally rated as more credible than paid content on social media platforms.

When asked about their familiarity with content marketing, the majority of polytechnic students and a third of journalism students reported that they had not heard of the term. Although they indicated awareness of the concept and recognized they had encountered it, they were unfamiliar with the specific terminology. Of the 68 interviewees, 16 were able to accurately describe the nature and objectives of content marketing.

Respondents expressed mixed views on the effectiveness of covert advertising. While they doubted its efficacy upon recognizing its true purpose, they also conceded that it might be more effective than traditional advertising methods. One participant remarked, “It’s hidden in the feed, so it looks like the other posts and you’re more likely to click and see what’s there. But we’ve also learned to ignore them and don’t even notice them anymore” (female, 24). “It looks

similar, but it catches your eye more. It's more colorful. The graphics and colors stand out and grab your attention" (male, 25).

The participants did not deny that there were situations in which they were influenced by native advertising. They admitted that this is more likely when ads are hidden, unmarked, and without the clear presence of a sponsor or brand. Twenty-four participants admitted to having difficulty assessing advertorial and native advertising as advertising and that they "mistakenly" clicked on these types of ads: "Honestly, it's hard to tell them apart" (female, 20). "At first, I had no idea it was an advertisement... others probably wouldn't have any idea either and would just perceive it as a post" (male, 24).

### 3.2 PERSUASION KNOWLEDGE AND MEDIA LITERACY: THEIR INFLUENCE ON RECOGNIZING COMMERCIAL CONTENT

The majority of respondents (44 individuals) self-assessed their media literacy as moderate, as reflected in statements such as: "I get by. I would say I'm fairly good with media. I can recognize most ads, but I don't usually pay them much attention. I just scroll through and focus on the content I'm interested in. If something catches my eye, I'll look into it further, but I don't dwell on the ads themselves" (male, 24). Eight participants rated their media literacy as low, exemplified by remarks like: "I don't really pay much attention to whether something is an ad or not. I just scroll through my feed on TikTok and if something looks interesting, I stop and watch it. I don't think about whether it's trying to sell me something" (female, 21).

These self-assessments were made following a discussion on the nature of hybrid messages. Consequently, several participants reassessed their ability to distinguish between different types of content, with one noting: "I thought there were quite clear differences, but after discussing it, it seems that it's not so obvious" (male, 25).

The results indicate that individuals who perceive their media literacy as high or moderate are generally more adept at identifying the promotional intentions inherent in content marketing. Participants with high self-rated media literacy were significantly more likely to recognize HMs stimuli as commercial compared to those with lower media literacy. The assessment of one's own advertising knowledge is crucial, as such self-perceptions influence the ability to recognize HM and the self-reported effectiveness in managing unwanted advertising. Additionally, a positive self-assessment of media skills often correlates with a heightened sense of control over advertising exposure, which can lead to more favorable evaluations of persuasive messages.

Consequently, higher self-rated media literacy appears to be positively associated with the ability to discern content marketing as commercial. This suggests a positive relationship between self-assessed media literacy and the recognition of the promotional nature of hybrid content.

Significant differences were found in the reception of HMs and recognition of promotional activities between students from different academic backgrounds, such as those studying in media fields versus those in polytechnic programs. Notably, there was especially one prominent discrepancy in recognizing the commercial nature of influencer recommendations, with 18 students from the first group and 9 from the second group identifying the content as commercial as a priority its feature.

### 3.3 ATTITUDES TOWARDS HYBRID CONTENT

Referring to Richard S. Lazarus's concept, the perception of a specific situation can be categorized into three types: stressful, irrelevant and benign-positive transaction. Respondents' attitudes toward native advertising can similarly be classified into three distinct types.

1. Opponents (stressful transaction): Thirteen respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the presence of native ads. Their concerns included perceived advertising chaos, irrelevance, intrusive personalization, invasion of privacy, and interference with reading interesting content. These advertisements were assessed as aggressive, intrusive, and irritating, disrupting users' cognitive processes and causing reluctance. Critics express negative reactions, perceiving native advertising as more disturbing than traditional forms of advertising. They call for greater transparency in advertising practices. For example, one participant expressed strong aversion to the commercial nature of sponsored content: "This is an even worse form of advertising. People don't like to be deceived. And if you click on a piece of news that turns out to be an advertisement, you feel like you've been scammed. This is contrary to my decision about what I wanted to read" (female, 25). Another participant noted the frustration caused by deceptive advertisements: "Such advertisements certainly deceive many people. You're reading something, clicking, and suddenly it takes you to a new page... It's just frustrating. So it's something negative. This is not what you want to see... it takes up your time, which you don't have much of anyway" (male, 23).

2. "Indifferent" (irrelevant significance): 12 respondents exhibited a neutral attitude towards hybrid content. They regarded it as a necessary financial source for media operations and an inseparable part of the modern mediasphere that

“needs to be dealt with somehow”. They recognized both its advantages and disadvantages: “Compared to the rest, they are not that bad. Especially since they look like the other texts. It looks like the rest, it’s easy to turn it off” [male, 19 years]. Indifferent participants were open to consuming the content if it appeared interesting, even though they were aware it was advertising. This reaction was rather passive, showing little interest in the author’s purpose or the type of advertising. For these respondents, the primary criterion was the content’s intrinsic interest: “If something is interesting, I watch it. No matter what it is” (female, 25).

3. “Understanding” attitude (benign-positive transaction): Five respondents, similar to the “indifferent” group, acknowledged that advertising revenue is a critical component of media budgets. They may view content marketing as a necessary and legitimate means for news media to generate revenue, as illustrated by the following perspective: “All media have to sustain themselves somehow. And they can only do that if they advertise and get money” (female, 21).

These participants perceived native advertising as less intrusive due to its seamless integration with journalistic content. They demonstrated that they do not always activate their persuasive knowledge to recognize sponsored content, which makes them potentially more susceptible to manipulation: “I think it’s okay because such advertising seems more natural and not so ubiquitous and irritating. It just blends in more with the content and doesn’t give the impression that you’re being attacked by it all the time” (male, 21). “They resemble the rest so well that I don’t really think about it at all” (female, 23).

Their responses to content marketing were marked by a proactive acceptance. Despite actively reflecting on the commercial intent behind the content, these respondents still found it compelling without immediately doubting its credibility. This group consisted of individuals who were either taken aback or impressed by the way the advertising was presented, and showed minimal reaction when they discovered that the content was indeed an advertisement, even if it was initially unnoticed: “Oh, it turns out to be advertising after all. Interesting, this is how advertising works. It’s cleverly concealed” (female, 25).

In general, the majority of participants (43 individuals) were categorized as “neutral,” displaying relatively little concern regarding hybrid forms of content.

## CONCLUSION

This study applied the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) (Friestad and Wright, 1994) and the media literacy skills scale (Ashley, Maksl, and Craft, 2013; Duda, 2020) to examine hybrid marketing recognition. Findings align with prior research, indicating that most participants struggle to identify branded content (Amazeen and Wojdyski, 2020; Hyman et al., 2017). Students often fail to recognize hybrid marketing as advertising, associating ads with overt, bold visuals rather than informational content. In a qualitative study of 68 participants, recognition of persuasive intent in hybrid marketing primarily emerged through bottom-up processing, with top-down recognition being rare.

Differences in recognition across media platforms were evident, corroborating previous studies (Hyman et al., 2017; Amazeen and Wojdyski, 2020). On social media, frequent users exhibited higher sensitivity to promotional disclosures, likely due to repeated exposure. In contrast, content from influencers was less often identified as advertising, as these sources are perceived as more credible.

Media literacy emerged as a critical factor in identifying promotional intent. Participants with moderate to high self-reported media literacy demonstrated greater competence in recognizing hybrid messages. This underscores the role of media literacy in mitigating the challenges posed by less transparent advertising forms.

Three distinct consumer attitudes toward hybrid marketing were identified: (i) acceptance – some participants viewed hybrid marketing as a necessary revenue source, appreciating its informational value and less intrusive nature; (ii) skepticism – critics raised concerns about manipulation and deception, especially when ads mimicked journalistic content; such experiences often led to defensive responses, including reactance and avoidance; (iii) advocacy for reform – calls for stricter regulation included demands for clearer labeling and enhanced transparency to distinguish ads from editorial content. Participants echoed findings by Jiang et al. (2017), favoring improved ad relevance and quality over volume.

Hybrid marketing, even when recognized as manipulative, undermines transparent media engagement, fosters cynicism, and diminishes trust. This erosion of trust risks weakening democratic principles by impairing informed decision-making and accountability.

The study's focus on students limits generalizability to broader demographics with varying media exposure and cultural contexts. Self-reported media literacy may introduce bias, as participants may overestimate their competence. Additionally, uneven media habits among students could affect their ability to recognize

hybrid marketing. Finally, psychological factors, such as individual values and anti-advertising attitudes, were not explored but could offer deeper insights into consumer responses. Future research should address these limitations to better understand the complexities of hybrid marketing recognition and its societal implications.

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HYBRYDYZACJA I TRANSFORMACJA KOMERCYJNEGO DYSKURSU.  
POSTAWY STUDENTÓW WOBEC ZACIERANIA GRANIC MIĘDZY CELAMI  
I FUNKCJAMI MEDIALNYCH PRZEKAZÓW HYBRYDOWYCH

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest identyfikacja percepcji hybrydowych tekstów komercyjnych (HT) rozumianych jako technika marketingowa. Badanie koncentruje się na określeniu poziomu rozpoznawalności różnych form HT w mediach tradycyjnych i cyfrowych przez studentów dwóch różnych kierunków. Dodatkowo, celem jest zbadanie ich opinii na temat tych praktyk marketingowych oraz postrzeganej wiarygodności mediów, w których HT są publikowane.

Bazując na założeniach Modelu Wiedzy o Perswazji i skali Kompetencji Medialnych, sformułowano następujące pytania badawcze: Jaką wiedzę o HT mają badani? Czy poziom kompetencji medialnych wpływa na rozpoznawanie perswazyjnego charakteru HT? Czy potrafią rozpoznać reklamowy charakter takich wiadomości? Jakie strategie stosują w odbiorze HT i jakie mają opinie na ich temat? Badanie, oparte na wywiadach z 68 studentami dziennikarstwa i kierunków technicznych, pokazuje, że studenci często nie dostrzegają perswazyjnego charakteru HT, co podkreśla potrzebę podnoszenia kompetencji medialnych. Postawy wobec HT można podzielić na trzy grupy: przeciwników, obojętnych i rozumiejących.

**Słowa kluczowe:** komercyjne teksty hybrydowe; kompetencje medialne; model wiedzy o perswazji; reklama natywna; advertorial