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Viral advertising on social media: A study of Chinese and Korean users' behaviour

What makes users more likely to share advertisements on social media platforms? Research carried out by Yuri Seo, Xiaozhu Li, Yung Kyun Choi and Sukki Yoon in China and South Korea investigated this question. ** The researchers analysed the behaviour of users on Facebook in South Korea and on SinaWeibo in China (SinaWeibo is one of the most popular social media platforms in the country). China and South Korea are the first and fourth largest markets in Asia and are among the heaviest social media users in the world.

The first research finding is in line with what traditional advertising professionals would expect: advertisements using "narrative transportation" are more likely to be shared, specifically among users who have frequent interactions. This means that advertisements that tell entertaining stories and remove consumers from their everyday realities are more influential. Just as you are more likely to be affected by an advertisement if it helps you to imagine using the product as a way to fulfil a fantasy, so, too, you are more likely to share an advertisement on social media if that advertisement "transports" you with escapism.

This finding has practical implications for advertisers on social media. It suggests that advertisers will get more impact if they make their advertising escapist as such advertisements will be shared more frequently. Another takeaway is that depending on the social network in question advertisers may be able to access user data to better tailor "narrative transportation" to a particular user or group of users. In addition, since users tend to share with other users with whom they frequently interact advertisers may want to invest in strengthening inter-user ties on a social media platform. Regardless of how much "narrative transportation" is in any given advertisement users will in general be more likely to share it.

Researchers also delved more deeply into social media mechanisms to explain how they contribute to viral advertising.

On social media platforms some advertisements are disclosed as being advertisements while some

advertisements are concealed as posts that are already naturally occurring on the platform (such concealment is called "native advertising"). This duality does not exist in traditional media, when one sees an advertisement on television one typically knows it is an advertisement. On social media platforms, on the other hand, users can sometimes think they are seeing another user's post when in fact they are looking at an advertisement.

The researchers find that users are less likely to share advertisements that are explicitly disclosed as being advertisements. They are more likely to share native advertising. The implication is that if advertisers want to spread their advertisements, they should downplay the commercial motives of their advertisements and use native advertising. This is of course a sensitive matter as regulations about social media advertising are at an early stage but may develop.

The third finding offers a potential way to overcome the negative impacts of disclosure requirements. Advertisements with "likes" are more likely to be shared by users. This is because the more likes an advertisement has the more social pressure there will be for users to think an advertisement is worth sharing. There are many reasons users "like" posts. Some users for instance "like" everything they see compulsively. This means advertisers can, instead of focusing on using "narrative transportation" or "native advertising", focus on making users "like" rather than share an advertisement. In the end, this also achieves a desired effect since liking leads to sharing.

**The full study results are available in an article authored by Yuri Seo, Xiaozhu Li, Yung Kyun Choi & Sukki Yoon: "Narrative Transportation and Paratextual Features of Social Media in Viral Advertising", *Journal of Advertising* (2018)

