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# Made to Impress: Examining the Influence of Tailored Advertising Disclosures on Persuasion Knowledge

Marco Mandolfo, Eva A. van Reijmersdal, Michele Di Dalmazi, Debora Bettiga and Lucio Lamberti

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The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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## 1 Introduction

With the proliferation of sponsored content across various media platforms, ensuring the transparency of such content has become paramount (Van Reijmersdal & Rozendaal, 2020). Disclosures, employed to inform audiences about the sponsored nature of the content, have demonstrated their effectiveness in enhancing consumers' persuasion knowledge (Eisend et al., 2020). However, the success of these disclosures is largely affected by the degree of attention they command from the audience (Boerman et al., 2017; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2023; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). In fact, attention profoundly influences cognitive processing and subsequent behavioral responses (Grimes, 2008). A cornerstone of this processing is the perceived relevance of information. When information is deemed relevant, it is more likely to be processed, remembered, and acted upon (Kreuter & Wray, 2003). Conversely, a disclosure that comes across as generic might be side-stepped, diminishing its intended effect (Rozendaal et al., 2021).

Past investigations indicate that tailoring messages to individual characteristics can heighten their relevance and hence attract more attention (Hawkins et al., 2008), but also might lead to unintended consequences such as negative evaluations (Boerman et al., 2017a, b). Based on this rationale, this study examines the effects of tailoring disclosures by means of cue-based personalization. Adopting a multi-method approach combining eye-tracking and self-reports, we investigate the influence of tailored disclosures on persuasion knowledge, behavioral responses, and evaluation of the disclosure in music videos.

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## 2 Theoretical Background

Message tailoring represents an established technique used to create individualized communications based on the receiver's characteristics (Rimer & Kreuter, 2006). The goal of message tailoring is to increase the relevance of the information presented and thus increase the effectiveness of the communication (Hawkins et al., 2008; Tam & Ho, 2006). Numerous studies have investigated strategies for tailoring messages to enhance message processing. These include approaches such as cue-based personalization, trait-based personalization, behavioral personalization, and contextual personalization (Kreuter et al., 1999). Among these, cue-based personalization represents a popular strategy in marketing communications (Hawkins et al., 2008). It involves the use of personally recognizable cues, such as the receiver's name or picture, which are typically incorporated in

logical and unobtrusive locations within the message, without changing the message's content. For instance, a message may begin with the salutation "Dear [First Name]," or the recipient's name may be placed appropriately within a sentence. Incorporating cue-based personalization in messages has been shown to trigger self-referencing processes and increase the message's relevance (De Keyzer et al., 2015). When a message is self-referential, it is more likely to be perceived as meaningful to the recipient, as it directly relates to their own identity. This can increase the likelihood that the recipient will cognitively process it (Burnkrant & Unnava, 1989, 1995).

Research has extensively investigated the perceptual mechanisms enhancing message tailoring's effectiveness, often explained by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Updegraff et al., 2007). The ELM outlines two persuasion paths: the central and peripheral routes. The central route demands a cognitive assessment of the issue-relevant information presented. Cue-based tailored messages often induce self-referencing associated with central route processing due to its pivotal role in individual motivation (Hawkins et al., 2008). When a message is personally relevant, individuals lean more towards a thoughtful evaluation, which typifies central route processing (Maslowska et al., 2016; Winter et al., 2021). We propose that the inclusion of self-referencing information in tailored disclosures will increase individuals' cognitive evaluation of the information, a key factor in central route processing (Hawkins et al., 2008). As a result, we expect that tailored disclosures will increase individuals' persuasion knowledge. Formally, we hypothesize:

**H1.** Tailored disclosures (vs non-tailored) have a positive direct effect on persuasion knowledge.

While tailored disclosures can heighten the perceived relevance of the disclosed information, they may also elicit concerns among recipients (Maslowska et al., 2016). Specifically, personalization cues used in tailored messages could suggest that the message was intentionally crafted to sway the recipient's behavior. As such, tailored disclosures can be associated with worse evaluations than non-tailored disclosures, especially if the recipient perceives a potential utilization of their personal data (Aguirre et al., 2015). Along these lines, we expect that a tailored disclosure decreases the overall evaluation of the tailored message in comparison to a non-tailored disclosure. Formally, we posit:

**H2.** Tailored disclosures (vs non-tailored) have a negative direct effect on disclosure evaluations.

In contrast to the central route, the peripheral route posited by the ELM affects responses that necessitate comparatively minimal cognitive processing (Petty &

Cacioppo, 1986). Along these lines, message tailoring is posited to modulate viewers' behavioral patterns, acting as an attention primer. This priming can influence the viewer's ocular behavior when subsequently exposed to the embedded advertising content. We expect that viewers, post-exposure to tailored messages, are more likely to immediately seek out the sponsored content, maintaining their focus on it for a more extended period. This altered search behavior and sustained attention pattern can ultimately bolster persuasion knowledge. Consequently, we posit that compared to non-tailored disclosures, tailored ones can indirectly influence persuasion knowledge, mediated by viewers' immediate search for and sustained attention to embedded product placements. Formally, we hypothesize:

**H3.** Tailored disclosures (vs non-tailored) have a positive indirect effect on persuasion knowledge. This effect is mediated by viewers' immediate visual search for the embedded product and the sustained attention to brand placement.

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## 3 Materials and Methods

### 3.1 Research Design and Stimulus Materials

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions: a tailored and a non-tailored disclosure. The tailored disclosure reported the name of the participant paired with "the following video contains product placements. This message has been created especially for you". This format is in line with the principle of identification and customization (Hawkins et al., 2008). The non-tailored disclosure, on the other hand, read "Dear user, the following video contains product placements. This message complies with Directive 2005/29/CE". All disclosures were in Italian, were displayed for 6 s (Boerman et al., 2015) and were displayed on a black background in line with previous studies (Chan, 2020; Mandolfo et al., 2022). The disclosure was displayed before the experimental stimulus, a 3:00 min music video featuring the song "The Alphabeat" by David Guetta, which embedded a Renault-branded car. This product was displayed in 7 scenes of the video for a total of 20 s, while no verbal placements (i.e., mentions of the brand in the lyrics) were employed. A further distractor music video ("Pink + White" by Frank Ocean) of comparable duration without disclosure was displayed before the main stimulus.

## 3.2 Participants

The experimental investigation involved 124 Italian participants (48% women,  $M_{\text{age}} = 41.1$ ,  $SD = 12.2$ , age range: 23–65). To ensure the quality of data, the recruitment phase was conducted by an external provider to exclude participants with acute visual problems and squint, as well as those with an educational background in communication or advertising. A total of 27% of the participants had university degrees; while the rest had achieved secondary education, which is in line with the general distribution of the Italian population (Istat, [2021](#)).

## 3.3 Procedure

Upon arrival at the experimental facility, participants gave informed consent. To avoid potential priming effects, names were collected during the application process, ensuring no subsequent mention at the experiment's onset. Subsequently, participants were allocated to one of two experimental conditions and positioned at a designated workstation where eye-tracking calibration was conducted. The distractor video and the main stimulus were then presented with a 3-s blank screen with a black cross displayed before each video. After watching each video, in accordance with Chan ([2020](#)), participants answered factual questions about the video's content to ensure effective viewing in full.

## 3.4 Instrumentation

During each session the eye-tracking signal was gathered through an eye-tracking bar (SMI REDn Scientific) attached to the 24" computer monitor, recording at a sampling rate of 30 Hz. We used a 13-point gaze calibration and a 4-point validation to achieve  $0.4^\circ$  gaze position accuracy. Each participant was seated in a range of 60–80 cm from the monitor to ensure the validity of the signal acquisition.

## 3.5 Measures

The eye-tracking signal was employed to extract ocular fixations using iMotions 9.3 software package for eye-tracking data. Specific areas of interest (AOIs) were created for disclosures and branded products displayed in the music video.

Quadrilateral shapes were used as static AOIs to frame the disclosures, and dynamic areas were designed to trail the moving object for each scene showing the product for embedded products. The dwell time (i.e., the sum of all fixations and saccades time, expressed in seconds) within the dedicated AOI was used to estimate sustained attention to the brand placement disclosure in line with previous studies (Guo et al., 2018; Smink et al., 2017; Boerman et al., 2015). Consistently to Boerman et al. (2015), the threshold for a fixation was set at a minimum of 80 ms. Also, the time to first fixation was computed as the time interval between the onset of a stimulus and the fixation within an AOI. The time to first fixation was employed as an indicator of the individual drive to immediately search for the embedded product.

Explicit self-reports were evaluated on 7-point Likert scales and were adapted from previous literature. These included a 3-item (e.g., “the message displayed before the video was personalized according to my profile”) construct investigating Perceived Disclosure Personalization (De Keyzer et al., 2022), a 3-item (e.g., “I liked watching this video”) construct assessing Video Liking (Chan, 2020), a 3-item (e.g., “I liked listening to this song”) construct assessing Music Liking (Cameron et al., 2003), a single-item (i.e., “I was already familiar with this video”) assessing Video Familiarity (Boerman et al., 2021), a single-item (i.e. “the video I just watched contained advertising”) assessing Persuasion Knowledge (Boerman et al., 2021), a 5-item (e.g., “including the message displayed before the video is useful”) construct assessing Disclosure Evaluation (De Keyzer et al., 2022), and a 4-item (e.g., “using product placement in music videos is OK with me”) construct measuring Product Placement Attitudes (Homer, 2009).

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## 4 Results

*Randomization.* Results showed no significant differences between the two experimental groups in terms of gender,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.129$ ,  $p = 0.719$ , age,  $t(122) = 0.594$ ,  $p = 0.544$ , product placement attitudes,  $t(122) = -1.421$ ,  $p = 0.158$ , and video familiarity,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.342$ ,  $p = 0.559$ , indicating that randomization was successful. No statistically significant difference was observed between the two disclosure conditions in terms of time to first fixation,  $U = 1702$ ,  $p = 0.607$ , and dwell time,  $U = 1766$ ,  $p = 0.858$ . Additionally, no significant differences were observed between the two groups in video liking,  $t(122) = -0.834$ ,  $p = 0.406$ , and music liking  $t(122) = -0.463$ ,  $p = 0.644$ , suggesting that the two typologies of disclosures did not affect the subsequent content appreciation.

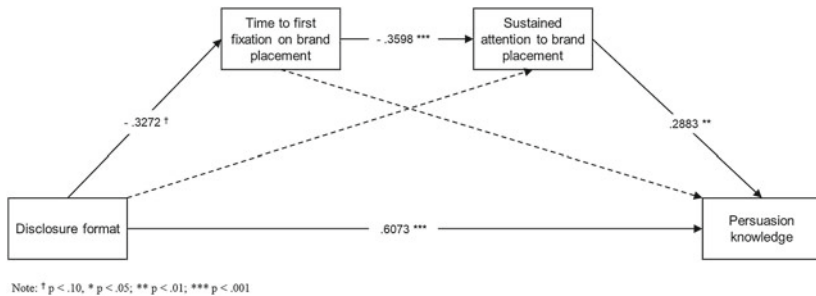
*Manipulation check.* A manipulation check revealed that, as intended, those in the tailored disclosure condition perceived the message to be significantly more personalized ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) than those in the non-tailored disclosure condition ( $M = 3.21$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

*Hypothesis testing.* To test H1, an ANOVA was conducted with the disclosure type as the independent variable and persuasion knowledge as the dependent variable. A positive relationship was found between disclosure typology and persuasion knowledge, showing that viewers who were exposed to a tailored disclosure ( $M = 6.13$ ;  $SD = 1.10$ ) were more likely to report positive advertising recognition than those exposed to a non-tailored disclosure ( $M = 4.87$ ;  $SD = 1.97$ ;  $F(1, 123) = 18.253$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), providing strong support for H1.

Similarly, we conducted an ANOVA to test H2 with the disclosure type as the independent variable and disclosure evaluation as the dependent variable. Our results revealed that participants who received a tailored disclosure ( $M = 4.84$ ;  $SD = 0.95$ ) did not exhibit a greater likelihood of reporting an unfavorable evaluation of the disclosure when compared to those who received a non-tailored disclosure ( $M = 5.23$ ;  $SD = 1.18$ ;  $F(1, 123) = 3.235$ ,  $p = 0.075$ ). Therefore, we reject H2.

To test H3, we utilized Hayes' PROCESS macro (v4.1, model 6, 5000 bootstrap samples) to examine the indirect effects of disclosure type on persuasion knowledge via time to first fixation and dwell time to the embedded brand as serial mediators. Our findings revealed a significant direct effect of disclosure format on persuasion knowledge, in line with H1 (direct effect = 0.607,  $SE = 0.166$ ,  $t = 3.650$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Additionally, we observed a positive indirect effect (indirect total effect = 0.034,  $BootSE = 0.020$ , 95% BCBCI [0.0072, 0.0857]) via the two mediators. Specifically, a tailored disclosure decreased the time to first fixation on the embedded product ( $b = -0.327$ ,  $SE = 0.179$ ,  $t = -1.832$ ,  $p = 0.069$ ), which in turn increased sustained attention towards the brand embedded in the video ( $b = -0.360$ ,  $SE = 0.085$ ,  $t = -4.238$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and subsequently increased persuasion knowledge ( $b = 0.288$ ,  $SE = 0.089$ ,  $t = 3.237$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). These findings support H3. A summary of the path model's results is presented in Fig. 1.





**Fig. 1** Path model testing the effects of disclosure format on persuasion knowledge

## 5 Discussion

The present study aimed to assess the impact of tailored disclosures on persuasion knowledge regarding embedded advertising in music videos. Firstly, our results indicate that tailored disclosures have a positive direct effect on persuasion knowledge. The incorporation of self-referencing information within tailored disclosures can conceivably heighten individuals' motivation to engage in a careful cognitive evaluation of the information presented, thereby facilitating central route processing (Hawkins et al., 2008). To the best of our knowledge, this study represents the first effort to examine the role of personalization within the disclosure literature, offering a seminal perspective on the interplay between message tailoring and persuasion knowledge.

Also, we show that tailored disclosures have a positive indirect effect on persuasion knowledge. We show that tailored disclosures may function as a primer, prompting viewers to alter their subsequent way of watching the video content. As a result, viewers show a tendency to attend to the sponsored content faster and longer which in turn reinforces persuasion knowledge. This is congruent with, and builds upon, extant research which emphasized the effects of sustained visual attention towards brand placements on persuasion knowledge (Boerman et al., 2015). Our contribution lies in expanding this framework by introducing a further behavioral antecedent, namely immediacy to attend to brand placement, which emphasizes that the priming effect of disclosures affects not only the length of the fixations but also the immediacy to seek the branded content. Taken together, these findings suggest that the use of tailored disclosures incorporating cue-based personalization can be an effective approach to enhancing persuasion knowledge.

Second, our findings showed that there was no significant difference in the evaluations of tailored and non-tailored disclosures. These findings suggest that the use of tailored disclosures may not necessarily have a negative impact on disclosure evaluations. This contributes to the extant advertising literature, as it challenges prevailing assumptions, emphasizing that personalized messaging strategies can be implemented without detriment to consumer perceptions.

## **5.1 Implications, Limitations, and Suggestions for Future Research**

As digital advertising flourishes, our findings have significant implications for advertising practitioners and regulators. First, for advertisers, this study highlights the substantial impact of tailored disclosures on enhancing advertising recognition. Through personalized disclosures, communication practitioners can not only amplify viewers' engagement but also influence the speed at which viewers seek branded content. This offers a strategic advantage in optimizing advertisement placements. Moreover, the lack of significant disparity in consumer evaluations between tailored and non-tailored disclosures mitigates concerns about potential negative evaluations. Second, regulators face the challenge of ensuring the ethical use of such disclosures. Policymakers are suggested to evaluate best practices to use tailored disclosures effectively and ethically. The use of personalization presents an opportunity for policymakers to foster consumer protection through innovative communication approaches.

Despite the contributions of this research, its limitations need to be acknowledged. First, our findings showed no variation in sustained attention paid to the disclosure, likely due to the eye-tracking setting in which participants were asked to keep their eyes on the screen. Future research in a more naturalistic setting is needed to examine whether tailored disclosures affect not only the attention paid to the placement but also to the disclosure itself. Second, this study investigated only cue-based personalization. Future research is needed to examine whether other forms of tailoring such as trait-based or contextual personalization have the same effects.

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