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“Fool’s Gold”: Linking Materialism to Persuasion Knowledge Activation and Susceptibility to Embedded Advertising

Robert Freeman Cartwright, Suzanna J. Oprea, and Eva A. van Reijmersdal

1 Introduction

Within the first two seconds of the music video for “Focus” (2015), the artist Ariana Grande debuts a Samsung phone—clearly showing the brand logo and using the product to write the title of the track. The usage and incorporation of a brand into a storyline is an advertising technique known as embedded advertising, as the brand is embedded into the content (Bhatnagar et al., 2003). Although this practice is used in other forms of media such as television, movies, vlogs, and video games, embedded advertising usage in music videos grew by 15.9% in 2015 with over 1,100 brands working with artists (PQ Media, 2015; Smith, 2017). An explanation for embedded advertising’s growth in the music video medium involves its relevance in reaching a young demographic. Youngsters (i.e., adolescents and young adults between the ages of 12 and 24) frequently watch music videos, and often do so via YouTube. As many as 84% of adolescents and young adults watch music videos on YouTube at least once a month (Smith, 2017).

Both adolescents and young adults are frequently exposed to embedded advertising in music videos, yet the former are believed to be particularly susceptible to its effects because of their insecurities and susceptibility to peer influence (Caspi and Roberts, 2001). The more insecure adolescents are, the more their personalities are subjective to change, and the more likely it is that they use brands for constructing their identity (Rhee and Johnson, 2012). Furthermore, the more insecure adolescents are more susceptible to peer influence, and tend to look up to celebrities and copy their behavior (Giles and Maltby, 2004): If their favorite celebrity owns a Samsung phone, they might be more likely to (want to) own one too. Though no such research has been conducted among adolescents, research with young adults showed that women want to buy the products owned by their favorite TV-characters (Voorveld et al., 2017).

Compared to older generations, adolescents show heightened levels of materialism (Jaspers and Pieters, 2016) and this is yet another reason why adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of embedded advertising. Past research has not only shown that brand conscious individuals think of themselves as being more susceptible to embedded advertising (Nelson and McLeod, 2005), but also suggests that they are. Materialists tend to be highly brand con-

scious as they typically believe it is important to own and acquire products and brands, for the reason that they lead to enhanced happiness and success (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Materialistic individuals display higher levels of brand alertness, implying that they can recognize embedded advertising faster (i.e., show higher levels of so-called conceptual persuasion knowledge). Yet, at the same time, materialistic individuals may use embedded advertising as a source of information / inspiration, be less critical about its content (i.e., show lower levels of so-called attitudinal persuasion knowledge) and – therefore – be more susceptible to its effects (e.g., as found by Voorveld et al., 2017).

Despite the role that materialism *could* play in predicting advertising effectiveness, to our knowledge there has not been a previous study looking into (1) the effect of materialism on adolescents' persuasion knowledge activation while watching a music video containing embedded advertising, (2) the effect of materialism on adolescents' brand responses after watching a music video containing embedded advertising, and (3) adolescents' attitudes towards embedded advertising in music videos. This study's aim is to provide insights into the role of materialism in the processing, effects, and acceptance of attitudes towards embedded advertising in music videos among adolescents.

The results of this study are both scientifically and socially relevant because they help improve our understanding of factors determining adolescents' susceptibility to the effects of embedded advertising. These insights are not only important for academics and companies, but also for policy makers who are set out to implement interventions to reduce advertising effects on youth.

2 Theoretical Framework

As said, materialism deals with individuals' views on products and brands: the extent to which their ownership is deemed central to one's life, and considered crucial for achieving happiness and success (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Materialism can be perceived as a state (i.e., meaning it is subject to gradual change, see for instance Oprea et al., 2014) or as a trait (i.e., meaning it is stable, or at least within generations and/or life phases, see Jaspers and Pieters, 2016). As previous research has indicated that a one-time exposure to an advertisement does not induce materialism (Cartwright and Oprea, 2016), we will treat it as a state within this study. Over the decades, advertising has shifted its focus from promoting the utilitarian features of a product to promoting materialistic themes (Belk and Pollay, 1985). Advertisers use materialistic cues and themes as they serve to enhance the tone and persuasive intent of the advertised message (Phillips and McQuarrie, 2004; Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002). Though accumulative exposure to these cues and themes in advertising was found to positively predict materialism in longitudinal research (e.g., Oprea et al., 2014), we test the

assumption that in a single-exposure scenario, materialism *predicts* adolescents’ vulnerability to the materialistic cues and themes in embedded advertising.

2.1 *Materialism and Persuasion Knowledge Activation*

Persuasion knowledge is a multi-faceted construct, and includes both conceptual and attitudinal components. According to Robertson and Rossiter (1974), persuasion knowledge evolves and grows in three stages during the developmental stages in childhood. During the first stage, children learn to recognize simple forms of advertising (in traditional media that is; at the age of 11 still struggle to recognize even simple Internet banners, see Vanwesenbeeck, Oprea and Smits, 2017). During the second stage, children gradually learn to also understand that advertising is made to sell products. Roberts (1983) discovered that by approximately the age of 8, most children have a basic understanding of the selling intent within traditional television commercials. These two first stages pertain to the development of conceptual advertising literacy, yet the third relates to attitudinal persuasion knowledge. Recognizing advertising and its selling intent is prerequisite to children’s / adolescents’ ability to scrutinize its content. In the third and last stage, so do Robertson and Rossiter (1974) argue, young adolescents may be able to understand the truthfulness and validity about advertising. Rozendaal et al., (2011) refined the concepts of attitudinal persuasion knowledge by introducing new elements such as trust and credibility.

This sequence was developed using explicit television advertising as its stimuli. However, embedded advertising presents a unique challenge to our abilities of activating psychological defense mechanisms to cope with being advertised to. This type of advertising obscures the lines between programming content and advertising. Such that, advertised messages can be hidden—often without individuals consciously recognizing the brand (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2007). If an individual cannot recognize the content as advertising, they cannot process the selling intent within it, thus are not able to determine whether the advertising is trustworthy.

The relationship between conceptual and attitudinal persuasion knowledge has been examined for television, (Boerman et al., 2012, 2014; Cain, 2011), advergames (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2015; An et al., 2014), and music videos (Matthes and Naderer, 2015). However, materialism has not been included in these studies. The complexity of materialism and its role within the psychological processes of persuasion remain unexamined; save for one study by Koller et al., (2013), which found an exploratory negative correlation between materialism and adults’ persuasion knowledge. Their measure for persuasion knowledge (derived from Bearden et al., 2001), however, only includes items on attitudinal persuasion knowledge and not conceptual persuasion knowledge. Hence, more materialistic individuals seem to be less likely to possess or activate attitudinal

persuasion knowledge, but we don't know whether this is also true in the context of embedded advertising, for conceptual persuasion knowledge, for the adolescent demographic. In order to identify the role of materialism within the spectrum of psychological processing of embedded advertising, the following exploratory research question has been posed:

RQ1: How is adolescents' materialism related to their activation of conceptual and of attitudinal persuasion knowledge regarding embedded advertising in music videos?

2.2 *Materialism and Brand Responses*

The effectiveness of traditional advertising is determined by examining whether an advertisement or commercial results in higher brand recall, improved brand attitude, and higher behavioral intention (for a review see, Van Reijmersdal et al., 2009). The difference between traditional and embedded advertising is that traditional advertising is explicit, whereas embedded advertising is covert. Often the brand may consciously go unnoticed (Gupta and Lord, 1998). Still, given that materialistic adolescents have a higher general brand awareness, they might be more likely to spot and recognize embedded brands. Previous research has shown that materialistic adult women are susceptible to product placement in ordinary TV content (Voorveld et al., 2017). In this study we investigate whether the same holds for adolescents in a music video context:

RQ2: How is adolescents' materialism related to their responses to the brand (i.e. brand recall, brand attitude, and behavioral intention)?

2.3 *Materialism and Attitude Towards Embedded Advertising*

As explained before, materialism and brand consciousness are closely linked. Still, although research has found that brand conscious individuals were more favorable of embedded advertised as opposed to their peers (Nelson and McLeod, 2005), the relation between materialism and attitude towards embedded advertising is yet to be examined. To narrow this gap, the final research question has been posed:

RQ3: How is adolescents' materialism related to their attitude toward embedded advertising?

3 **Methods and Results**

To answer the before mentioned research questions, we conducted a secondary analysis on a dataset from a study that was originally designed to investigate whether disclosures types mitigate embedded advertising's effects (cf. Cartwright et al., 2017). The study included four experimental conditions, each using a different type of sponsorship disclosure. The dataset contained information on

279 Canadian adolescents (age range 14-17, $M = 15.74$; 52.3% boys, 44.1% girls, 3.5% ‘other’), who were first exposed an Ariana Grande music video containing product placement for the Samsung Note 5, and then asked to complete measures on materialism, persuasion knowledge activation, brand responses, and their attitudes about embedded advertising. The data collection was granted IRB-approval from the University of Amsterdam.

Adolescents’ materialism was measured with the Material Values Scale by Richins and Dawson (1992) (score range 1 (low) to 7 (high); $M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.25$). Because there was no difference in materialism between the four disclosure conditions ($\chi^2(3, 275) = 1.68$, with $p = .172$), they could safely be combined into one sample to determine materialism’s effect on advertising processing and advertising responses. Still, in each of the subsequent analyses, experimental condition, was controlled for. So were the students’ grade level and socio-economic statuses, because the conditions *did* differ in composition on these accounts (test results respectively, $\chi^2(9, 279) = 17.69$, with $p = .039$, and $\chi^2(6, 279) = 12.63$, with $p = .049$). Due to space constraints, however, the effects of these control variables will not be discussed.

3.1 *Materialism and Persuasion Knowledge Activation (RQ1)*

We conducted a series of linear regression analyses to determine whether materialism predicted adolescents’ *persuasion knowledge activation*. We used three scales to measure adolescents’ recognition of advertising, understanding of selling intent, and attitudinal persuasion knowledge. The scale of each measure ranged from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). The ability to recognize that the music video contained advertising was measured with four items stating being: “The music video contained advertising,” “This music video was advertising from Samsung,” “This music video was sponsored by Samsung,” and “This music video contained commercial elements/content” (measure based on Boerman et al., 2014, as well as Tutaj and Van Reijmersdal, 2012). Understanding of the video’s selling intent was measured with three items derived from Rozendaal and colleagues (2013), asking adolescents to indicate whether advertising is meant to “Make you want to buy the phone/product,” “Make you like the phone/product,” and “To sell the phone/product.” Attitudinal persuasion knowledge was measured with four items, asking adolescents to specify whether they found the use of the Samsung Note 5 in the music video to be “Honest,” “Trustworthy,” “Convincing,” and “Credible” (measure based on Boerman et al., 2012). Table 1 below presents the number of items, reliability, mean, and standard deviation for each scale.

Table 1: Scale descriptives

	No. of items	Reliability (α)	Mean	SD
Recognition of advertising	4	.84	5.01	1.12
Understanding of selling intent	3	.80	4.84	1.31
Attitudinal persuasion knowledge	4	.90	4.34	1.15

A separate OLS regression analysis for each aspect of persuasion knowledge. The first of our subsequent analysis did not result in a significant regression model ($F(9, 269) = 1.09$ with $p = .369$), meaning materialism did not predict recognition of advertising ($\beta = .10$ with $p = .112$). The second and third model, however, were significant. Materialism positively predicted understanding of selling intent ($F(9, 269) = 2.22$ with $p = .021$; $\beta = .14$ with $p = .019$) and negatively predicted the activation of attitudinal persuasion knowledge ($F(9, 269) = 3.05$ with $p = .002$; $\beta = -.22$ with $p = .000$). Hence, to answer RQ1, higher levels of materialism were associated with higher understanding of selling intent, and lower attitudinal persuasion knowledge activation (i.e., indicating that materialistic adolescents are *less* skeptical towards the embedded advertising).

3.2 Materialism and Brand Responses (RQ2)

To answer RQ2, three brand responses (i.e., brand recall, brand attitude, and behavioral intention) were measured. First, we measured brand recall with a single item asking respondents to write down the brand that was featured in the music video. The respondents' answer to this open-ended question were coded into a dichotomous variable. In total, 171 adolescents listed no or the wrong brand (coded as 0) and 108 adolescents listed the correct brand (coded as 1). Second, we measured brand attitude using the four item seven-point semantic differential scale of Bezjian-Averay, et al., (1998) (i.e., with the items being "Bad/Good", "Awful/Nice", "Negative/Positive", and "Boring/Interesting"). Third, we measured behavioral intention on a scale from 1 (low) to 7 (high), asking adolescents to indicate whether they would consider buying the product themselves or to ask their parents to buy it for them. Table 2 below presents the number of items, reliability, mean, and standard deviation for each scale.

Table 2: Scale descriptives

	No. of items	Reliability (α)	Mean	SD
Brand recall	1	N/A	0.39	0.49
Brand attitude	4	.95	4.87	1.45
Behavioral intention	2	.93	3.32	1.66

To determine materialism’s effect on brand recall, we conducted a logistic regression analysis. Though the overall model was significant, materialism had no effect on brand recall ($\chi^2(9, n = 279) = 19.51$ with $p = .021$; $Exp(B) = 1.16$ with $p = .152$). The subsequent OLS regression analyses indicated that materialism positively predicted brand attitude ($F(9, 269) = 2.54$ with $p = .008$; $beta = .15$ with $p = .016$), and behavioral intention ($F(9, 269) = 2.68$ with $p = .005$; $beta = .22$ with $p = .000$). Hence, higher levels of materialism were associated with a more favorable brand attitude and higher behavioral intention.

3.3 Materialism and Attitude Towards Embedded Advertising (RQ3)

Adolescents’ attitude towards embedded advertising in general was measured using the same four item seven-point semantic differential scale of Bezjian-Avey et al., (1998) ($\alpha = .90, M = 4.24, SD = 1.42$). To determine materialism’s effect on the attitude towards embedded advertising we conducted an OLS regression analysis. The model was significant and materialism positively predicted attitude towards embedded advertising ($F(9, 269) = 2.32$ with $p = .016$; $beta = .16$ with $p = .007$). Hence, to answer RQ3, higher levels of materialism were associated with more favorable attitudes towards embedded advertising in general.

4 Conclusion and Discussion

This study was the first to investigate the effects of adolescents’ materialistic orientations on their responses to advertising that is embedded in music videos. More specifically, we examined the consequences of materialism for adolescents’ activation of persuasion knowledge in response to a brand that was integrated in to a music video, their responses to the brand, and their acceptance of embedded advertising.

First, this study shows that materialism determines the activation of conceptual and attitudinal persuasion knowledge among adolescents in response to advertising embedded in music videos. Materialism did not predict recognition of advertising, but this finding may perhaps be attributed to a ceiling effect: 82.4 percent of the respondents had a score above the midpoint of the scale, indicating that, regardless their predisposition, most adolescents recognized that the

music video was sponsored and contained advertising. Importantly, materialism predicted the activation of the selling intent component of conceptual persuasion knowledge positively, and the activation of attitudinal persuasion knowledge negatively. The latter findings are in line of those of Koller and colleagues (2013), who found that that materialists are less inclined to possess or activate attitudinal persuasion knowledge.

Second, this study shows that adolescents with higher levels of materialism are more susceptible to persuasion by embedded advertising in music videos. Materialism did not predict brand recall, but it positively predicted brand attitude and behavioral intention. In line with the previous work of Nelson and McLeod on brand conscious individuals, we found that higher materialism was associated with higher brand attitude and purchase intention.

Finally, materialism was also found to positively influence one's attitude towards embedded advertising. These findings are in line with the mere exposure theory (Zajonc, 1968) and, in a way, to those of Koller and colleagues (2013). Materialistic adolescents are not only less likely to activate their attitudinal persuasion knowledge when being exposed to a single embedded advertisement, they are also less likely to scrutinize embedded advertising in general.

4.1 *Limitations, Future Research, and Implications*

This study has a few limitations, the first being that materialism was measured *after* the exposure to the music video, rather than *before*. Though unlikely (see Cartwright and Oprea, 2016), it could have been possible for the music video to prime materialistic thoughts. Second, given that only one music video was tested, it is must be recognized that some of the affective attitudes may have been unconscious spill-over from the reactions to artist and the music itself. Future research should address these limitations, and could explore other theoretical avenues such as whether materialism also influences reactions towards other types of embedded advertising (e.g., influencer marketing through Instagram), whether long-term exposure to embedded advertising can – just like traditional advertising – foster materialism, and whether materialism can also function as a moderator in the relation between (embedded) advertising exposure and advertising processing and effects.

Though more research is needed to fully comprehend materialism's role in embedded advertising effects, this study has several theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, our study shows that materialism is an important factor in adolescents' responses to embedded advertising in music videos. Past research did not account for materialism, but now we know it is an important factor in predicting persuasion knowledge activation, brand responses, and attitude towards embedded advertising. Hence, materialism deserves a central role in theory as well as research practice.

Practically, this study has implications for the protection and empowerment of adolescents. On the one hand, adolescents that score higher on materialism seem to be more advertising savvy as they show a better understanding of the selling intentions of embedded advertising than adolescent who are less materialistic. On the other hand, these adolescents are also more susceptible to persuasion by embedded advertising: They show more positive brand attitudes and higher intentions to purchase the product that was embedded in the music video. In addition, they were less likely to activate their attitudinal persuasion knowledge and had a more favorable attitude to embedded advertising in general. It seems that materialistic adolescents use their persuasion knowledge to be persuaded by the embedded advertising rather than to resist it. For advertisers these findings imply that embedded advertising in music videos is effective in persuading materialistic adolescents. For policy makers it means that materialistic adolescents should be given special attention in interventions. The fact that materialistic adolescents are more vulnerable to the effects of advertising and subsequent conspicuous consumption, also puts them at increased risk for excessive spending and debt (Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, and Sheldon, 2004).

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