

Influencer Attachment and Consumer Response to Product Links in Native Video Ads: An Empirical Study on Bilibili's Platform

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Abstract

This study explores an innovative advertising technique on Bilibili, where product links are embedded as bullet comments visible only to mobile app users. The research involved 140 participants, divided equally between followers and non-followers of a popular influencer, 'Gourmet WanggangR.' These groups were further split, with half viewing a video containing the product link on the app and the other half via PC. The study revealed that influencer attachment significantly increased viewer immersion (transportation) and positively influenced attitudes towards the content, which in turn elevated purchase intentions. Importantly, the influencer's followers showed a stronger attachment and more favorable attitudes towards the content, alongside a heightened likelihood to purchase the advertised product. The presence of the product link further accentuated these effects among the influencer's followers. Conversely, in the absence of the link, the correlation between influencer attachment and content attitude was less pronounced. These findings highlight the effectiveness of embedding product links in video content as a marketing strategy, particularly when targeting an influencer's followers through mobile platforms.

Keywords : Native Advertisement, Link of Product, Transportation, Contents Attitude, Purchase Intention, Influencer Attachment

1. INTRODUCTION

With the widespread adoption of the internet and smartphones, the consumer advertising landscape has broadened significantly beyond traditional mass media to include social media platforms. On these digital platforms, users frequently encounter advertisements as an integral part of their content consumption experience. This constant exposure often leads to advertisement fatigue, progressively resulting in an aversion

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to these ads [1]. To counteract this growing consumer weariness, many companies are increasingly turning to native advertising [2, 3]. Native advertising, which seamlessly integrates promotional material within the content, has evolved into various forms across online platforms, becoming a significant aspect of modern digital marketing strategies [4, 5, 6, 7]. However, there is a considerable likelihood that with extensive exposure, users become adept at identifying native advertisements, discerning whether content is promotional [8]. Research indicates that consumers, upon realizing the content they are engaging with is an advertisement—particularly one lacking explicit disclosure—tend to respond more negatively [9, 10]. Consequently, there is a growing demand for transparent announcement of native advertisements.

In the United States and Korea, regulations require transparent disclosure of sponsored content and advertising to prevent deceptive practices [4, 11]. This trend towards transparency extends into the realm of personal media, where individual content creators are diversifying their revenue through sponsorships. Consequently, they must disclose any sponsorship or advertising within their content to comply with advertising regulations and maintain transparency [11]. In China, Bilibili has innovated in native advertisement announcements by embedding product links within video content. These links, akin to the platform's bullet comments, are visible only on the mobile app, contrasting with their invisibility on PC. Uniquely, these product links remain on-screen even when bullet comments are disabled, disappearing only after being displayed. This study aims to explore the impact of Bilibili's embedded product links on advertising effectiveness, delving into a new realm of digital marketing strategies.

2. THEORY

2.1. Bullet comments

Bullet comments, literally translated as “bullet curtains(弹幕, dàn mù)”, refer to real-time comments or remarks left by viewers scrolling across the screen while watching a video. With Bullet comments, viewers can see comments left by others at the same timeline point [12] so that they can exchange their various opinions about the video content they are consuming in real-time [13].

Prior research has established that bullet comments on videos significantly enhance viewer engagement, a concept referred to as ‘transportation.’ However, this effect varies depending on both the quantity and the relevance of the bullet comments. Intriguingly, the highest level of transportation was observed in the absence of bullet comments. When the volume of bullet comments was low, transportation rates were higher compared to scenarios with a high volume of comments. Moreover, transportation increased when the bullet comments were highly relevant to the content, as opposed to cases where the relevance was lower.

2.2. Native Advertisement

Native advertisement is a form of commercial message implemented in a format similar to the general content provided on online platforms. It naturally appears within the content and is used to minimize users’ tendency to avoid advertisement [14].

According to the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), native advertisement can be classified into four types, ‘SNS in-feed native ads’, ‘in-content native ads’, ‘content recommendation ads’ and ‘branded/native content ads. SNS in-feed native ads are advertisements resembling general content posted on social networking services (SNS), placed between text or content. In-content native ads are customized for platforms, primarily in text format on online news platforms, for promoting products or services similarly to news articles. Content

recommendation ads are presented alongside other content on online platforms. Branded/native content ads are brand advertisements created in a format similar to content offered by online platforms or sites, generally resembling other content on the platform. Native advertisement generally refers to SNS in-feed native ads and in-content native ads, which are provided in the same format as the content offered on the platform [15].

With the recent emergence of personal media, individual creators also have started receiving sponsorship to create content, generating additional revenue [11]. Unlike the direct advertising methods by which companies use their own YouTube channels to promote their brand or directly advertise their brand in various video advertisement formats, using influencers for advertising can convey information about their brand more acceptable to users [16]. It is because it aligns with their schemas [17], which are cognitive frameworks for reducing the effort to digest new information [18]. Information consistent with schemas is easier to accept, while information that doesn't align might be carefully judged or even be rejected.

2.3. Influencer Attachment

Attachment theory, originally delineated as an emotional linkage with significant others [19, 20], has been extended within the realm of marketing to elucidate the complex relationships between consumers and brands [21, 22]. This broadened perspective highlights the emotional connections that consumers develop with brands, consequent to their cumulative experiences, thereby assimilating brand identity into their personal self-concept [23, 24]. This paradigm is instrumental in determining brand success, significantly affecting the brand's perceived image and cultivating both immediate and long-term consumer allegiance [24, 25, 26, 27]. With the advent of social media, a novel form of attachment has emerged, namely, influencer fandom [28], which surpasses the conventional boundaries of brand relationships by amalgamating the characteristics of both brand and human brand attachments. Influencers, who are often viewed as more relatable figures compared to traditional celebrities [30, 31], establish profound connections with their audience, leading to a steadfast loyalty that remarkably withstands negative disclosures [24]. This evolving dynamic exerts a profound influence on consumer behavior, notably in promoting the acquisition and endorsement of products recommended by influencers.

2.4. Transportation

Transportation, a psychological phenomenon, entails deep immersion into a story's narrative, leading to a sense of self-loss and heightened engagement [32, 33]. It involves a unified focus on the story, momentarily eclipsing the real world [32]. This state, fostering a positive narrative attitude, is driven by attention, imagery, and emotions [33, 34, 35], and includes cognitive disengagement from reality, emotional alignment with characters, and mental projection into their experiences [36]. Transportation's power extends to altering readers' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, aligning them with a story's underlying messages, affecting perceptions on social issues, health, and consumer choices [32, 37]. It diminishes negative cognitive reactions [32, 38], and by reshaping cognitive and emotional dispositions, it amplifies advertising's persuasive capacity [39]. Research also indicates its positive impact on advertisement perception, product attitude, and purchase intention [40].

2.5. Contents Attitude

Attitude originates from the Latin word 'aptus', which means a physical pose or posture and by observing other people's physical posture, it can predict what actions they might take next. Although the explanation of attitudes varies among scholars, by concluding from the existing research, Attitude is demonstrated as a consistent emotional tendency between favor and disgust, positivity and negativity, or goodness and badness

and can be divided into cognitive, behavioral, and judgmental components.

Generally, consumers' attitudes are formed by information in advertisements and content about the companies, products, and services. Consumers' attitude is considered as a vital concept for marketers, as it ultimately has the most significant effect on purchase behavior [41]. and is a concept measuring the overall positive evaluation of a product or brand [42]. The perception of the advertisement affects the value and positive attitude, and the advertising attitude and brand attitude are affected by the characteristics of the advertisement, which ultimately result in purchase behavior. Therefore, content attitude can be defined as the tendency of consumers to react favorably or unfavorably to specific content stimuli.

2.6. Purchase Intention

Behavioral intention, varying in definition and measurement across studies, generally encapsulates a consumer's willingness and beliefs to undertake specific future actions [43]. It manifests in various forms such as recommendations, repurchases, revisits, reuse, and a readiness to pay premium prices, reflecting attitudes towards particular subjects. This concept is pivotal in assessing consumer attitudes [44] and understanding human decision-making processes [45]. A positive attitude towards a product [46] heightens the likelihood of favorable consumer behaviors like revisits and endorsements. Purchase intention, a significant facet of behavioral intentions [47], is shaped by consumer beliefs and attitudes, signifying the probability of engaging in planned purchases [48]. It represents the readiness to buy, serving as a precursor to actual purchasing actions [49, 50].

Elevated purchase intention is instrumental in steering consumer behavior towards purchases [51], with positive attitudes towards products or brands enhancing purchase intentions in decision-making [46]. Thus, heightened purchase intentions correlate with an increased chance of actual buying actions [52]. Therefore, purchase intention is a crucial link between consumer attitudes and real purchase behaviors, acting as a predictor of future consumer purchasing trends [53, 54].

3. Research Questions & Hypotheses

Based on literature review, this research proposes the following research questions and hypotheses:

H1: Influencer attachment will have a positive effect on transportation.

H2: Influencer attachment will have a positive effect on contents attitude.

H3: Transportation will have a positive effect on contents attitude.

H4: Contents attitude will have a positive effect on purchase intention.

H5: Followers of the influencer will demonstrate a higher level of attachment to the influencer compared to non-followers.

H6: Followers of the influencer will exhibit a more positive attitude towards the content compared to non-followers.

H7: Followers of the influencer will exhibit a greater willingness to purchase the product compared to non-followers.

RQ1: How does link of product affect the level of purchase intention?

Research questions and hypotheses can be visualized by the following model:

4. EXPERIMENTS

4.1. Procedure

To test the research model, 70 followers of an influencer named gourmet WanggangR on Bilibili and another 70 unfollowers were recruited to watch a video with link of product on his channel. 35 participants of each group watched the video by app without bullet comments and another 35 on PC also without bullet comments. After watching the video all participants were asked to finish an online survey. There were 42 male participants (30%) and 92 female participants (70%), with an average age of 25 years, most of whom were undergraduate and graduate students.

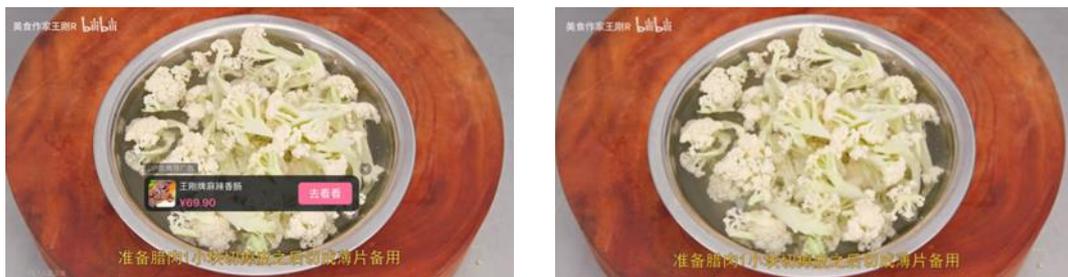


Figure 1. Experimental video (left: app; right: PC)

4.2. Measures

4.2.1. Influencer Attachment

The scale to measure influencer attachment was adapted and revised from previous studies using 5-point Likert-type scales (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The scale had five items, which were “I always want to watch videos on this influencer’s channel.”, “I long for watching the video on this influencer’s channel, when I don’t watch it.”, “I would be upset if I couldn’t watch videos of this influencer channel anymore.”, “I feel familiar with this influencer.”, and “I have affection for this influencer.”. The construct reliability was (Cronbach’s $\alpha=0.842$).

4.2.2. Transportation

The scale to measure transportation was adapted and revised from previous studies using 5-point Likert-type scales (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The scale had five items, which were “I focused on the story of this video”, “I was absorbed into the story of this video.”, “I think the story in this video feels like my own.”, “I didn’t have any other thoughts except this video while watching it.”, and “I lost track of time while watching this video.”. The construct reliability was (Cronbach’s $\alpha=0.834$).

4.2.3. Contents Attitude

The scale to measure contents attitude was adapted and revised from previous studies using 5-point Likert-type scales (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The scale had four items, which were “This video content is interesting.”, “This video content is attractive.”, “I can relate myself to this video content.”, and “I feel positive about this video.”. The construct reliability was (Cronbach’s $\alpha=0.837$).

4.2.4. Purchase Intention

The scale to measure purchase intention was adapted and revised from previous studies using 5-point Likert-

type scales (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The scale had three items, which were “I want to purchase the product of the advertising link in the video.”, “I am willing to purchase the product by clicking the advertising link in the video.”, and “When I want to purchase this kind of product, the products of the advertising link in the video would be my first choice.”. The construct reliability was (Cronbach’s $\alpha=0.689$).

5. RESULTS

5.1. Measurement Model Evaluation

The measurement model was assessed for discriminant validity, average variance extracted(AVE), Cronbach’s alpha (α), and composite reliability(CR) based on Hair et al.(2017) and Van Riel et al.(2017). The examination of cross-loadings and the Fornell–Larcker criterion are usually used for evaluating discriminant validity [57]. Therefore, the HTMT criterion was used as an alternative and superior way for assessing discriminant validity. Due to its robust performance and ease of use, the HTMT has been applied and disseminated extensively, making Henseler et al.’s (2015) work among the most referenced articles in social science research. As shown in Table 1, HTMT values between two reflective constructs were below 0.90 [58]; therefore, discriminant validity was confirmed. As shown in Table 2, all the constructs’ factor loadings had high values higher than or equal to 0.70, and AVE levels were significantly higher than the minimum required 0.50 [59], confirming convergent validity. Furthermore, all the constructs had high levels of internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach’s α coefficients surpassing the recommended level of 0.70 [60] and composite reliability (CR) values over the 0.70 level.

Table 1. Discriminant validity analysis with average variance results

Variable	IF	IA	T	CA	PI
Influencer Follower (IF)	(1)				
Influencer Attachment (IA)	0.58	(0.784)			
Transportation (T)	0.442	0.75	(0.775)		
Contents Attitude (CA)	0.431	0.773	0.813	(0.829)	
Purchase Intention (PI)	0.453	0.716	0.674	0.674	(0.787)

Notes: Diagonals contain AVE. Cells contain squared correlations. () : Square Root of AVE

Table 2. Construct reliability and validity

Constructs	Items	FL	CR	AVE	Cronbach’s alpha
Influencer Attachment (IA)	IA1	0.796			
	IA2	0.819			
	IA3	0.787	0.888	0.614	0.842
	IA4	0.70			
	IA5	0.815			

Transportation (T)	T1	0.79			
	T2	0.738			
	T3	0.759	0.883	0.601	0.834
	T4	0.824			
	T5	0.763			
Contents Attitude (CA)	CA1	0.78			
	CA2	0.774			
	CA3	0.79	0.891	0.671	0.837
	CA4	0.78			
Purchase Intention (PI)	PI1	0.793			
	PI2	0.817	0.829	0.619	0.700
	PI3	0.832			

Notes: FL = factor loadings, CR = Composite reliability, AVE = Average variance extracted

5.2. Structural model assessment

The hypothesized relationships in the research model were assessed using PLS algorithm bootstrapping method (5,000 subsamples). The results of the hypothesis testing, path coefficients, p-values, and t-values for each path are presented in Tables 3. As shown in Figure 2, the paths from influencer attachment to transportation and contents attitude were statistically and positively significant ($IA \rightarrow T$, $\beta=0.199$, $t=17.085$, $p < 0.05$; $IA \rightarrow CA$, $\beta=0.392$, $t=3.895$, $p < 0.05$), in support of H1 and H2. The path from transportation to contents attitude was positively significant ($T \rightarrow CA$, $\beta=0.533$, $t=5.527$, $p < 0.05$), and contents attitude in turn had a positive, significant influence on purchase intention ($CA \rightarrow PI$, $\beta=0.588$, $t=9.073$, $p < 0.05$), supporting H3 and H4. The paths from influencer follower to influencer attachment and purchase intention were statistically and positively significant ($IF \rightarrow IA$, $\beta=0.58$, $t=9.581$, $p < 0.05$; $IF \rightarrow PI$, $\beta=0.199$, $t=2.781$, $p < 0.05$), in support of H5 and H7. But the paths from influencer follower to contents attitude were not significant, therefore, H6 were not supported.

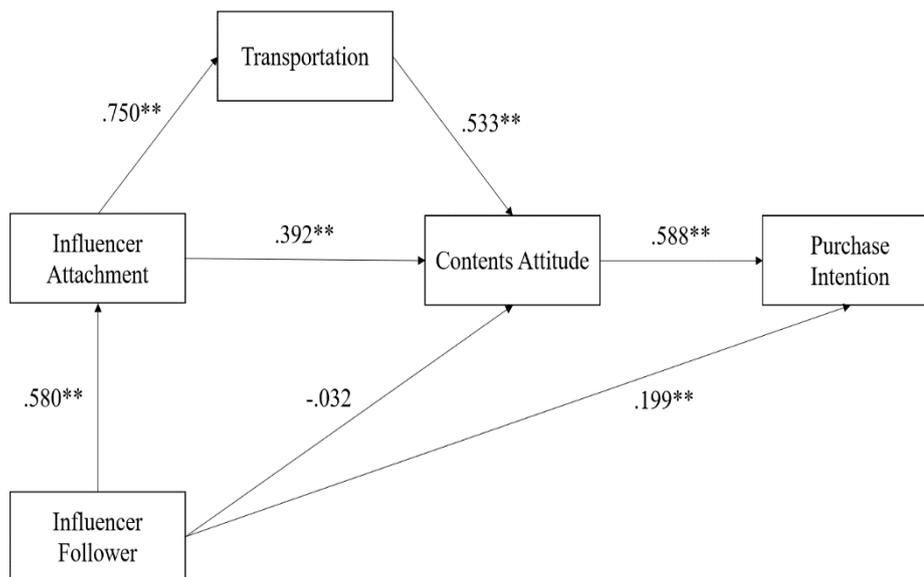


Figure 2. SEM for the entire sample

Table 3. Summary of hypothesis tests

Hypothesis	Sign	Standardized path coefficient	t-value	p-value	Result
H1. IA→T	(+)	0.75	17.085	0	Supported
H2. IA→CA	(+)	0.392	3.895	0	Supported
H3. T→CA	(+)	0.533	5.527	0	Supported
H4. CA→PI	(+)	0.588	9.073	0	Supported
H5. IF→IA	(+)	0.58	9.581	0	Supported
H6. IF→CA	(+)	-0.032	-0.703	0.242	Rejected
H7. IF→PI	(+)	0.199	2.781	0.003	Supported
IA R2: 0.336;		T R2: 0.562;		CA R2: 0.722;	
0.487				PI R2:	

Notes: IA=Influencer attachment, T=Transportation, CA=Contents attitude, PI=Purchase intention

5.3. Test of differences between groups with and without link of product

Independent t-tests were employed to investigate differences between participants who watched the video with link of product (n= 70) and without link of product (n= 70). Specifically, a PLS–MGA was used to compare each bootstrap estimate of one group with that of another group for the same parameter [61]. According to the guidelines of PLS–MGA [55, 62], percentages higher than 0.95 and lower than 0.05 indicate a significant difference of a specific PLS path coefficient between groups.

As reported in Table 4, there were significant differences between groups with and without link of product for the paths from influencer attachment to transportation (t=2.18, p<0.05) and contents attitude (t=-2.616, p<0.05) and the path from transportation to contents attitude (t=3.254, p<0.01). As for other paths, there were no significant differences between groups with and without link of product.

Table 4. Path coefficients and t-values for APP/PC groups

Paths	APP Group (without link of product)			PC Group (with link of product)			t-test	
	Path coefficient	t-value	p-value	Path coefficient	t-value	p-value	t-value	p-value
IA→T	0.812	15.559	0	0.737	14.433	0	2.18	0.031
IA→CA	0.081	0.348	0.365	0.474	5.193	0	-2.616	0.01
T→CA	0.868	4.18	0	0.43	4.764	0	3.254	0.0001
CA→PI	0.613	5.657	0	0.608	7.592	0	0.06	0.952
IF→IA	0.466	3.442	0.001	0.608	8.712	0	-1.622	0.107
IF→CA	-0.066	-0.675	0.252	-0.017	-0.3	0.382	-0.773	0.441
IF→PI	0.218	1.65	0.053	0.149	1.565	0.06	0.793	0.429

Notes: IA=Influencer attachment, T=Transportation, CA=Contents attitude, PI=Purchase intention

As shown in Figure 3, in group with link of product, influencer followers were more attached to the influencer (group with link of product: $\beta=0.608$, $t=8.712$, $p<0.05$; Group without link of product: $\beta=0.466$, $t=3.442$, $p<0.05$) and in turn had a positive significant influence on contents attitude ($\beta=0.474$, $t=5.193$, $p<0.05$) while in group without link of product the path from influencer attachment to contents attitude was not significant. And also, the path from influencer attachment to transportation ($\beta=0.812$, $t=15.559$, $p<0.05$) and in turn to contents attitude ($\beta=0.868$, $t=4.18$, $p<0.05$) in group without link of product were significantly more positive than in group with link of product (IA \rightarrow T: $\beta=0.737$, $t=14.433$, $p<0.05$; T \rightarrow CA: $\beta=0.43$, $t=4.764$, $p<0.05$).

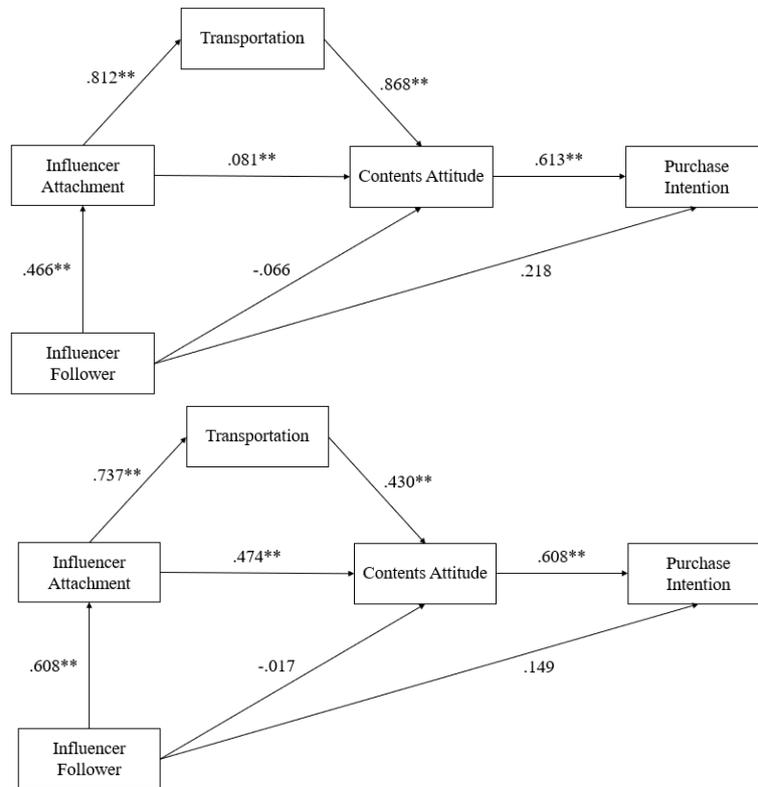


Figure 3. SEM for group without link of product(above) and with link of product(below)

6. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the impact of product links in native video ads on Bilibili, involving 140 participants equally divided between followers and non-followers of the influencer Gourmet WanggangR. Each subgroup, watching the video via app or PC, demonstrated varied responses. Key findings include influencer attachment significantly enhancing viewer transportation and positively affecting content attitude and purchase intention. Influencer followers showed stronger attachment, resulting in more favorable attitudes towards the content and higher purchase willingness. Notably, product link exposure in videos influenced follower attachment and content attitude, with a more pronounced effect absent the product link. The study highlights the importance of clear advertising and presents a strategic approach for leveraging native video ads, especially effective for influencer followers. This method benefits both viewers and influencers by aligning with digital preferences and enhancing content impact. However, limitations include using a pre-existing video, potentially biasing results, and unbalanced gender representation among participants. The study's focus on Bilibili users in China

also limits its generalizability. Future research should consider new, unseen videos, balanced gender representation, and a diverse international participant base to explore cultural differences and platform-specific impacts.

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