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Digital Media Soft Advertising: Shaping Consumer Trends and Transforming Platform Ecosystems

Chenyue Li

School of Marine Science, Guangxi University, Nanning, Guangxi, 530004, China

ABSTRACT
With the rapid development of digital media, the advertising dissemination model has gradually shifted from traditional hard sales promotion to content-integrated soft advertising, which has become the core means for advertisers to promote products and enhance brand value. However, the large-scale dissemination of soft advertising has also triggered new contradictions and risks, and conducting in-depth research on its development logic and impact is necessary. This study takes soft advertising on digital media platforms as the research object, using a combination of literature analysis and questionnaire surveys to systematically explore its causes of emergence, current dissemination status, audience perception, and potential risks. The research results show that the emergence of soft advertising is a strategic choice to address consumers' aversion to traditional hard advertising. The questionnaire survey conducted in this study also reveals a significant contradiction between the "large-scale dissemination" of soft advertising and the "negative audience perception", and further research has found that excessive placement of soft advertising has triggered multiple-dimensional risks. This study clarifies the current development status and core contradictions of digital media soft advertising, which can provide references for regulatory authorities to formulate regulatory policies, platforms to optimize content ecology, and advertisers to regulate dissemination behaviors. At the same time, it fills some gaps in academic research in this field.

KEYWORDS
Commercial information; Digital media; Doft advertising; Auidence

1 Introduction

Since the emergence of various media platforms, various groups or individuals have, for the purpose of commercial promotion, disseminated advertising content through different media communication channels, thereby achieving the goal of product promotion. Since the early 21st century, the rapid development of digital media has brought profound changes to the global economy. The core of digital media is reshaping the traditional media communication environment and methods [1]. This transformation has made it increasingly easier for advertisements to be exposed in the public eye. This phenomenon is not only reflected in the increase in the number of advertisements, but also in the increasingly diverse commercial information conveyed by advertisements. As the amount of commercial information increases, consumers are often forced to receive a large amount of advertising content that they do not need or are not interested in, thereby stimulating their aversion. To break through this barrier and continue to exert the advertising commercial value of digital media, advertisers integrate commercial content completely into media content to attract the public to actively contact or not oppose the commercial content, thereby increasing the number of commercial information that viewers are exposed to at the same time [2]. This transformation objectively changed the dissemination mode of advertisements, leading to a core content transformation from product priority to content dominance. Objectively, this form reduced the audience's aversion to commercial information and produced a lot of non-commercial content on digital media. This enabled viewers to no longer noticeably feel the disturbance caused by commercial information. However, many people believe that this change did not change the situation where audiences are "trapped" by commercial information. Audiences even interact on digital media platforms unknowingly and provide commercial value to advertisers. Regarding the controversy brought about by this phenomenon, this article focuses on discussing the causes of the current situation of soft advertisements on digital media platforms, and further analyzes the impact this phenomenon will have on consumer orientation and the ecosystem of digital media platforms, thereby further filling the research gap in this field of academia.

2 The Causes and Current Situation of the Phenomenon

2.1 Reasons Why Consumers Dislike Traditional Advertising

Today's digital media platforms act as a convergence of various media channels, that is to say, they are a combination of television, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards, direct mail advertisements, and many other media forms [3]. As the key channel for the public to obtain information nowadays, the rich and extensive commercial content offered by digital media has had varying degrees of impact on viewers. For instance, the appearance of advertising content can interrupt users' access to the content, which significantly disrupts the continuity and immersion of users' information acquisition and reduces their satisfaction with the platform. Frequent advertisements also increase users' aversion to the advertising content and lower their trust in the platform. Excessive advertising content can also greatly distract users' attention,

which undoubtedly greatly reduces their efficiency for work or study purposes. Moreover, excessive commercial content has also to some extent led to misleading and deceptive behaviors. Due to the negligence of content review on the platform, there are a large number of false or exaggerated advertising information on media platforms. Such information can mislead consumers in making decisions. As a result, consumers no longer trust advertising information and their trust in the media platform also significantly decreases.

2.2 Characteristics of Soft Advertising Itself

In response to the aforementioned issues and the current situation where consumers actively resist advertising information, advertisers have taken a series of measures to increase the exposure of commercial information. One of the important means is the emergence of soft advertisements. The design of soft advertisements focuses more on enhancing the interaction between the audience and the content. By incorporating more key factors that facilitate interaction, this goal is achieved [4]. The advertisement content is closely integrated with the user's experience, with user experience serving as an important entry point. By naturally integrating the advertising information into the media content, the user's viewing experience is significantly improved, and the advertising interaction is closely linked to the experience content. This, to a certain extent, reduces the user's perception of the advertisement and avoids viewers directly rejecting the information due to a stronger sense of advertisement in the content. It also reduces the impact of commercial information on the audience's immersion and coherence when using digital media platforms. Compared to traditional hard sales methods, some viewers even do not perceive that they have obtained a complete set of commercial information after watching the soft advertisement content.

2.3 Situation of Soft Advertisements on Mainstream Digital Media Platforms

Some studies have shown that compared to traditional hard sales tactics, soft advertisements are more attractive to consumers [5]. Given this characteristic, the dissemination volume of soft advertisements on digital media platforms is rapidly increasing and has reached a considerable scale. According to the QuestMobile 2025 Internet Advertising Market Semi-annual Report, in June 2025, the number of KOL partnerships in typical industries such as beauty care and household appliances alone in China exceeded 88,000. Within this month, the active user scale of typical industry KOL partnerships on the three mainstream platforms of Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Kuaishou alone exceeded 1.336 billion [6]. This data undoubtedly demonstrates the extremely high quantity of soft advertisements on digital media platforms and their extensive coverage scale. By starting from content traffic, brands have deeply integrated with content, and soft advertisements have become an important and powerful means for advertisers to increase brand value and promote brand products.

3 Investigation of the Dissemination Situation of Soft Advertisements and the Audience's Perception

3.1 Summary of the Situation

In order to investigate the current dissemination situation of soft advertisements and understand the true feelings of the audience towards them, this article conducts the research through a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire is mainly divided into two parts. The first part aims to investigate the current dissemination situation of soft advertisements, while the second part focuses on understanding the attitudes of the audience towards soft advertisements and how and to what extent soft advertisements will influence the public.

The survey results show that among all the respondents who have come into contact with soft advertisements, 89.66% believe that there are too many soft advertisements on current digital media platforms, and 96.55% of the respondents believe that the number of soft advertisements is on the rise. Therefore, on the premise of confirming that soft advertisements have been widely promoted, the questionnaire further explores the attitudes of the respondents towards soft advertisements. It is notable that 93.1% of the respondents believe that too many soft advertisements affect the user experience of digital media platforms. To further clarify the reasons and consequences of the above questionnaire results, this article conducts a more in-depth investigation.

3.2 Analysis of the Survey Results

Firstly, this article aims to ascertain which aspects of the digital media platform are affected by soft advertisements as perceived by 93.1% of the respondents. Among these, three factors stand out prominently. The first is that soft advertisements can affect the content perception experience, making viewers feel deceived, accounting for 81.48% of the cases; the second is that soft advertisements can reduce the trust of viewers in creators and media content, accounting for 62.96% of the cases; the third is that soft advertisements can force readers to distinguish whether the information they obtain is commercialized information, thereby reducing the efficiency of information acquisition, accounting for 50.26% of the cases. Thus, it is evident that the troubles brought by soft advertisements to the public have become a confirmed fact, and their impact also exhibits the characteristics of complex influencing factors and high impact degree.

More importantly, the survey results also reveal that the impact caused by excessive soft advertisement has evolved from a one-way influence from the platform to the audience to a mutual influence between the platform and the

audience. 93.1% of the respondents directly stated that excessive soft advertisements would reduce their favorability towards the digital media platform, and 88.96% of the respondents indicated that they might directly reduce their use of the digital media platform or replace it with other channels due to the increase in soft advertisements. Therefore, the mutual influence between the two and the potential future impacts also deserve public attention. How to further balance the placement of soft advertisements has become an issue that digital media platforms must confront in the present.

4 Risks and Challenges of Superfiuous Soft Advertisements

4.1 Infringement of the Rights of the Audience

The previous text has elaborated in detail on the potential impacts of excessive soft advertising on viewers and digital media platforms. These facts will inevitably have further effects on all those who are associated with digital media in their daily lives. The most direct and significant aspect is the damage to the rights of viewers, including the right to know, the right to choose, and the right to privacy, among others. When the public uses social media, they have the right to obtain disclosed information. Soft advertising, as a commercial means, is itself acceptable, but the lack of supervision and the absence of policy constraints will undoubtedly cause viewers to worry about commercial exploitation [7]. When viewers do not know that they are reading commercial information, soft advertising uses persuasive psychology to induce viewers to complete commercial conversions, which undoubtedly infringes upon the viewers' right to know. Therefore, the introduction of relevant policies is particularly necessary. It is necessary to clearly limit the degree and quantity of soft advertising during its dissemination to ensure that consumers' right to know is not infringed upon.

Different advertising forms have different attractiveness to viewers, and viewers also hold different attitudes towards the advertisements [5]. Traditional advertisements are usually required to display specific advertising labels, which ensures that viewers can selectively skip or ignore commercial information. However, for soft advertisements, this requirement is not mandatory, and viewers cannot immediately determine whether the information they obtain is commercial content. This form avoids viewers actively skipping the advertising content when obtaining information, essentially damaging viewers' right to choose the acquisition of information.

Most digital media platforms currently have the function of pushing personalized information to users based on analyzing user behavior. After the appearance of soft advertisements, this humanized function has brought public concerns about personal privacy protection. Some platforms will adjust their data collection activities by weighing the profitability and the legal consequences involved [8]. While soft advertisements themselves are commercial information, they are not subject to advertising law supervision. Therefore, platforms can easily take advantage of this loophole to provide more convenience for the dissemination of soft advertisements and further seek profits. In this process, users' privacy information is intentionally or unintentionally leaked, naturally resulting in the infringement of privacy rights.

4.2 Deterioration of the Media Platform Ecosystem Caused by Excessive Commercialization

The influence of sexual advertisements not only affects the users of digital media platforms, but also poses risks to the digital media platforms themselves due to the excessive dissemination of soft advertisements. Since soft advertisements can evade the special review of the platforms on commercial content, their dissemination costs are lower and their speed and scope of dissemination are greater compared to traditional hard advertisements. When a large amount of content on the platform is oriented towards the commercial value brought by the dissemination activities, the large amount of commercial information behind soft advertisements will enhance their influence by occupying the space for the dissemination of non-commercial information. This phenomenon not only affects the normal information distribution order on digital media platforms but also leads to a decline in the quality of the content disseminated by the platforms themselves, ultimately causing a vicious cycle and bringing a huge impact to the digital media platforms themselves.

The rapid development of digital media in the 21st century has profoundly transformed the global economy, and the core of the digital economy is reshaping traditional business and production models [9]. Digital media, including social media, online videos and digital advertisements, have become important components of the digital economy [10]. The deterioration of the dissemination ecology of platforms is destined to lead to the decline of their reputation and public trust, and further affect the commercial transformation ability of the platforms themselves, ultimately falling into a vicious cycle and bringing a huge impact to the digital media platforms themselves.

4.3 Risks Brought by the Change in the Relationship Between Digital Media Platforms and Audiences

The excessive dissemination of soft advertisements is also promoting the transformation of the relationship between digital media platforms and users. Since soft advertisements objectively do infringe upon the rights of audiences, and digital media platforms are the important carriers of soft advertisements. Audiences are likely to make the association that the advertisers and digital media platforms are "in the same group".

Digital media platforms initially developed rapidly as an Internet social channel, and after accumulating a large number of user groups, they were further valued as an easy-to-access channel for obtaining information. Unfortunately, in the past few years, we have witnessed a sharp increase in false information spread through social media channels [11]. This

has led to public distrust of digital media platforms, and the extensive dissemination of soft advertisements is exacerbating this problem. The distrust of digital media platforms by users is rapidly strengthening the collapse of the reciprocal relationship between the two, and undoubtedly has a long-term impact on both parties.

5 Conclusion

By analyzing the existing academic literature and data reports, and combining with the data from the questionnaire survey, this paper reaches the following conclusions. First, the research results reveal a significant contradiction between the "massive dissemination" of soft advertisements and the "negative perception" of the audience. In the context where 89.66% of the respondents believe that there are too many soft advertisements at present, most of the respondents believe that excessive soft advertisements have damaged the user experience of digital media platforms, and this contradiction has further escalated into a two-way influence between the platform and the audience. 88.96% of the users indicated that they might reduce their use of the platform or switch to other alternative channels.

This phenomenon fully demonstrates that the uncontrolled expansion of soft advertisements has begun to undermine the symbiotic relationship between digital media platforms and users. Second, the excessive placement of soft advertisements has triggered multiple dimensions of risks, threatening the rights of the audience and the long-term sustainability of the digital media ecosystem. For the audience, the lack of mandatory labeling and regulatory constraints in soft advertisements directly infringes upon three core rights: the right to know, the right to choose, and the right to privacy. For digital media platforms, soft advertisements, with lower review costs and wider dissemination ranges, have illegally occupied the survival space of non-commercialized content in a legitimate way, disrupting the normal information distribution order and causing a general decline in platform content quality; this excessive commercialization has further exacerbated the public trust crisis - compounded by the already existing problem of false information dissemination on social media, soft advertisements have continuously escalated users' distrust of the platform, and ultimately may cause the platform to fall into a vicious cycle of "reputation decline → user loss → commercial conversion ability weakening". In conclusion, soft advertisements, as an innovative commercial communication model, initially played a positive role in balancing the commercial value of digital media and user experience, but its lack of regulation and uncontrolled dissemination have deviated from its original development intention.

This phenomenon not only triggers conflicts among the audience, advertisers, and digital media platforms, but also poses a huge threat to the healthy development of the digital media ecosystem. To solve these problems, it is urgent for multiple parties to collaborate and take targeted measures. For example, regulatory authorities should quickly establish specific legal provisions for soft advertisements to prevent them from continuing to harm the rights of the audience in an implicit manner. Digital media platforms should strengthen content review and supervision, seek a balance between commercial interests and non-commercial content to promote long-term development. Advertisers should adhere to the bottom line and avoid excessive reliance on "implicit marketing", achieve reasonable dissemination of commercial information. Only through the collaborative efforts of all parties can soft advertisements return to a rational development track, thereby providing a guarantee for digital media to continue to play an active role in the global digital economy.

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