

Misinformation salience reduces advertising effectiveness

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Abstract

Consumers increasingly navigate digital environments where brand communications coexist alongside concerns about misinformation. We propose that when informational content highlights the prevalence of misinformation, creating a misinformation-salient environment, it activates a distrust mindset that heightens vigilance toward proximal information. Across five studies ($N = 5,493$) and multiple supplementary studies, we show that this form of indirect misinformation undermines the effectiveness of proximal advertising. Misinformation salience reduces trust in brand communication (Studies 1 and 5), lowers the likelihood that consumers include the advertised brand in their consideration sets (Studies 2–3), and diminishes purchase intentions (Study 4). These effects arise because misinformation salience selectively decreases the perceived diagnosticity of advertising claims (Study 3). This spillover effect is strongest when the ad appears immediately within a misinformation-salient context (Study 4). We provide initial evidence that trust-enhancing signals (i.e. third-party certifications) can restore perceived diagnosticity and buffer these negative effects (Study 5). This research identifies a novel, context-based pathway through which misinformation impairs persuasion, revealing how today's crowded media environment can inadvertently weaken consumer responses to legitimate brand communications.

Track: Digital Marketing & Social Media