Native advertising as a content marketing strategy

Davor Trbusic[a,1,*], Drazen Males[b], Luka Sikic[a,2]

[a]*Croatian Catholic University, Ilica 242, Zagreb, 10000, Croatia*
[b]*Faculty of Croatian Studies, Borongajska cesta 83d, Zagreb, 10000, Croatia*

Abstract

This research focuses on analyzing the content elements of native advertisements on the most popular Croatian online portals, with the aim of identifying key characteristics of headlines and content, as well as their correlation with audience reach. The study was conducted on a sample of 543 native ads published on six leading Croatian online portals from December 2021 to May 2022. The content analysis method was used, focusing on two general categories: headline characteristics and content characteristics. The analysis found that nearly 80% of the headlines had at least one clickbait characteristic, with the most commonly used styles including uncertainty (44.38%), use of numbers (9.39%), and emphasis on emotions (5.89%). The headlines were predominantly declarative sentences, with one-fifth being interrogative sentences, while the connection between the ad headline and the advertiser's brand name was very rarely present. In terms of content, visual elements were present in all ads, with photographs being the dominant element, and visual identity elements of the advertiser, such as logos, were included in 34.44% of the ads. Regarding sources in native ads, 47.33% of the ads did not use statements, while the most common sources were individuals from the organization (19.71%). Statements from direct users of the products or services were present in 6.81% of the cases, while statements from brand ambassadors and influencers were present in smaller percentages (4.79% and 3.5%, respectively). These findings highlight the dominance of clickbait headlines and the importance of visual identity in native advertising, while direct brand association and the use of various sources, including direct users, appear less frequently. A comparison of different types of headlines and sources with ad reach indicates specific practices in native advertising across different industries.

Keywords: native advertising, content analysis, headline characteristics

1. Introduction

The concentration of so-called hybrid forms of media content in the contemporary online environment is becoming increasingly intense (Balasubramanian, 1994; Macnamara, 2014; Taiminen, Luoma-aho & Tolvanen, 2015). Among the most prominent forms are sponsored content (Tutaj & Reijmersdal, 2012), content marketing (Pulizzi, 2014; Pulizzi & Piper, 2023), brand journalism (Cole & Greer, 2013), and native advertising (Verčič & Tkalac Verčič, 2016). For most researchers, the latter term will serve as an umbrella term that attempts to simplify the classification of hybrid forms, as native advertising by definition implies a paid advertisement that resembles editorial content, aiming to attract the target audience with useful content while simultaneously promoting the brand, values, and products (Cole & Greer, 2013; Howe & Teufel, 2014; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). On the other hand, the research by Taiminen et al. (2015) showed that most public relations and marketing professionals preferred to use the term "content marketing" when discussing

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*Corresponding author

Email addresses: `davor.trbusic@unicath.hr` (Davor Trbusic), `dmales@fhs.hr` (Drazen Males), `luka.sikic@unicath.hr` (Luka Sikic)

[1]This is the corresponding author.
[2]Co-author of the study.

commercial hybrid forms of online content. In addition to the obvious terminological confusion, three other problematic areas of native advertising need to be highlighted:

Application area: Is native advertising a public relations technique, a marketing tool, or a tactic that does not differ from traditional advertising in any way?

Authorship of native ads: Who creatively signs them and who is responsible for their content? Legal and ethical framework: How is native advertising legally defined, and what is the practice of media houses in labeling such advertisements (Trbušić, Maleš & Šikić, 2024).

The theoretical basis of this paper is the thesis that native advertising is "an extension of content marketing and provides marketers with a platform to place content in front of a wider audience they wouldn't ordinarily reach" (Crook, 2022). Although there are authors who highlight certain criteria by which content marketing differs from native advertising, which will be described in more detail later in the paper, the ultimate goal is common: to drive profitable customer action. The profitability of such market communication for organizations and brands is demonstrated by recent metrics. Figures show that 47% of marketing professionals globally believe in the effectiveness of this type of advertising (Kloot, 2022), and that in 2023, spending on native advertising in the United States increased by 12% compared to the previous year (eMarketer, 2023). Thus, with more than 97 billion US dollars invested, native advertising holds the largest share (59.7%) of the total expenditure for all types of advertising (eMarketer, 2023).

```r
library(dplyr)
```

```
## Warning: package 'dplyr' was built under R version 4.3.3
```

```
##
## Attaching package: 'dplyr'
```

```
## The following objects are masked from 'package:stats':
##
##     filter, lag
```

```
## The following objects are masked from 'package:base':
##
##     intersect, setdiff, setequal, union
```

```r
library(readr)
library(ggplot2)
```

```
## Warning: package 'ggplot2' was built under R version 4.3.3
```

```r
library(ggthemes)
```

```
## Warning: package 'ggthemes' was built under R version 4.3.3
```

```r
library(tidyverse)
```

```
## -- Attaching core tidyverse packages ----------------------- tidyverse 2.0.0 --
## v forcats   1.0.0      v stringr   1.5.1
## v lubridate 1.9.3      v tibble    3.2.1
## v purrr     1.0.2      v tidyr     1.3.0

## -- Conflicts ------------------------------------------- tidyverse_conflicts() --
## x dplyr::filter() masks stats::filter()
## x dplyr::lag()    masks stats::lag()
## i Use the conflicted package (<http://conflicted.r-lib.org/>) to force all conflicts to become err
```

```
library(readxl)
library(xlsx)
library(here)
```

```
## Warning: package 'here' was built under R version 4.3.3
```

```
## here() starts at C:/Users/lukas/Dropbox/Članci/NativeAdvertising
```

2. Native advertising and content marketing – two faces of the same coin?

Charmaine Du Plessis (2015a) defines content marketing as sharing brand content via owned media to gain earned media, which clearly implies that it is not a type of media content that is paid for, as (native) advertising certainly is. In this context, Du Plessis employs the classic PESO model of media content in public relations (Dietrich, 2014), which distinguishes paid media (advertising or other sponsored content); earned media (publicity generated from media pitches or news releases); shared media (content shared and re-shared on social media); and owned media (such as company's website, newsletter, or email communications). The order in the PESO model has long reflected the priorities of organizations in media strategy planning. However, recent research (Macnamara, Lwin, Adi & Zerfass, 2016) indicates a shift in the order in practice, with the dominance shifting to the SOEP model instead of the classic PESO model. The reasons for this are manifold, but the most indicative is that owned and earned media content are trusted more than paid media, while shared media (i.e., "recommendations from people I know" and "consumer opinions posted online") are the most trusted information sources of all (Nielsen, 2015).

Like Du Plessis, other authors (Handley & Chapman, 2011; Halvorson & Rach, 2012) also differentiate content marketing from other forms of hybrid content exclusively based on the distribution channel (owned media). However, there are authors who leave much more room for interpretation, not strictly confining it to owned media that later generates earned media (publicity). Their definitions are more focused on the strategy, intent, and ultimate goal of content marketing, rather than on the tactics and type of media content within the PESO framework. For instance, they highlight that content marketing is "a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content" (Pulizzi & Piper, 2023; CMI, 2024), which is disseminated on various platforms such as newspapers, magazines, TV, or radio channels (Holliman & Rowley, 2014).

The distribution of valuable, relevant, and consistent content is also at the core of native advertising (Campbell & Marks, 2015; Kim, 2017), which is especially evident in so-called branded or native content. According to the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), there are three fundamental forms of native advertising: In-Feed/In-Content native advertising, Content Recommendation Ads, and Branded/native content. The latter refers to "paid content by a brand that is published in the same format as full-fledged editorial content on the publisher's website, usually in collaboration with the publisher's own teams" (IAB, 2019, p. 14). This form of native advertising will be the focus of the research part of this paper for two main reasons: it conceptually correlates with the forms and tactics of content marketing, and it is the only form among the mentioned types of native advertising that can be approached analytically.

Types and tactics of content marketing typically include blogs, infographics, video content, photos, webinars, podcasts and social media (Halligan & Shah, 2010; Handley & Chapman, 2011; Bloomstein, 2012; Wuebben, 2012; Vibrant Publishers, 2020), but also paid ads (Baker, 2024), such as sponsored advertising options on social media, affiliate marketing, remarketing, native ads etc. (Jefferson & Tanton, 2015). It is yet another proof of the inconsistent interpretation of content marketing as something that is disseminated exclusively via owned media. It is more appropriate to consider content marketing as a set of tactics that, among other things, can drive traffic back to the website of some company or product (owned media). It is also noticeable that some authors of definitions avoid identifying content marketing with product advertising which aims at the purchase of a product or service (Patrutiu Baltes, 2015), seeking to further differentiate it from other related marketing tactics. The fact is that content marketing is part of an inbound marketing strategy, which, unlike the outbound strategy, is focused on "attracting valuable consumers

(potential, existing, or aspirational) who choose to interact with a particular company that provides them with something useful" (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015, p. 29). However, it is misguided to claim that the ultimate goal of any marketing communication, including content marketing, is not sales or gaining profit (Rowley, 2008; Pulizzi & Piper, 2023). Furthermore, both academics and practitioners agree that content marketing relies on a consumer-centric strategy (Ho, Pang & Choy, 2020). In conclusion, regardless of the type of marketing communication, whether it is content marketing, native advertising, or brand journalism - although one can discuss nuanced tactics and approaches to attract consumers into the marketing funnel and later motivate them for retention and advocacy phases - profitable customer action remains the intrinsic motive of every organization or brand.

Previous research does not encompass the analysis of native advertising as part of content marketing; rather, these concepts have been the focus of separate studies. Thus, insights in the context of native advertising relate to the analysis of readers' cognitive perception of native ads and their persuasive elements (Wojdynski & Evans, 2016), analysis of communication strategies in native ads (Wang & Li, 2017), perception of the organization or the sponsor of native ads and its socially responsible activities (Jung & Heo, 2018; Krouwer, Poels & Paulussen, 2019; Beckert, Koch, Viererbl, Denner, & Peter, 2020; Wu & Overton, 2021), perception of the credibility of online portals that publish native ads (Howe & Teufel, 2014), and analysis of the basic features of native ads based on the most-read selected Croatian online portals (Trbušić et al., 2024). Research in the field of content marketing primarily reflects valuable theoretical contributions, such as conceptual definitions, classification of types and forms of content marketing, identification of strategies and tactics of content marketing in the digital environment (Koiso-Kanttila, 2004; Rowley, 2008; Handley & Chapman, 2011; Bloomstein, 2012; Wuebben, 2012; Pulizzi, 2014; Jefferson & Tanton, 2015; Vinerean, 2017; Pulizzi & Piper, 2023), and the definition of six fundamental elements of content marketing which should be considered by marketers (Du Plessis, 2015a; Du Plessis, 2015b). Empirically, content marketing has been analyzed as part of B2B strategies on digital channels (Holliman & Rowley, 2014) or in the context of content creation practices in successful companies (Du Plessis, 2015c; Ho et al., 2020). Additionally, studies have addressed the causal linkage between content marketing and online consumer behavior (Du Plessis, 2022) and content marketing as part of business strategy in the luxury industry (Rios, 2016).

3. Methodology and analytical design

Cilj istraživanja je utvrditi osnovne karakteristike sadržajnih elemenata nativnih oglasa (kao jedne od strategija sadržajnog marketinga) na promatranim najčitanijim hrvatskim internetskim portalima. Specifični ciljevi istraživanja usmjereni su na promatranje dviju širih cjelina. Riječ je o značajkama naslova (npr. vrste rečenica u naslovima, zastupljenost i vrste clickbait naslova, navođenje naziva brenda) te o analizi elemenata unutar samog sadržaja nativnih oglasa (npr. navođenje izvora tj. upotrebljavanje izjava sugovornika, korištenje opreme i vizualnog identiteta). Spomenute kategorije nisu izabrane proizvoljno, već su definirane sukladno vrstama i tipologiji sadržajnog marketinga (see p. 5). Osim toga, cilj je utvrditi postoji li značajna korelacija između karakteristikâ naslova i sadržaja nativnih oglasa s dosegom publike. Jednako tako, pozornost je u radu usmjerena i na specifičnosti koje se u ovom vidu oglašavanja primjećuju kod različitih industrija, tj. različitih praksi kojima pribjegavaju naručitelji nativnih oglasa.

```
original <- read.xlsx(here("analysis", "data", "raw_data", "native_articles.xlsx"), sheetIndex = 1) %>
variables <- read.xlsx(here("analysis", "data", "raw_data", "native_research.xlsx"), sheetIndex = 1)

dta <- merge(
  original %>% filter(V1 %in% variables$V1),
  variables %>% select(-c(23, 24, 25)),
  by = "V1",
  all.x = TRUE
)
```

```
# Convert the 'DATE' column to Date format
dta$DATE <- as.Date(dta$DATE)




stemmed <- readRDS("C:/Users/Lukas/Dropbox/Mediatoolkit/native_token_stemm.rds")
stemmed <- readRDS("C:/Users/lukas/Dropbox/Članci/Native rad/native_token_stemm.rds")

stemmed <- stemmed %>%
  rename("wordp" = "word") %>%
  rename("word" = "transformed_column")
```

Uzorak za istraživanje čine nativni oglasi objavljivani u šestomjesečnom razdoblju (prosinac 2021. – svibanj 2022.) na šest najčitanijih hrvatskih internetskih portala (index.hr, jutarnji.hr, vecernji.hr, 24sata.hr, telegram.hr, slobodnadalmacija.hr), koji su prema kriteriju posjećenosti izdvojeni kao najutjecajniji online mediji u hrvatskom digitalnom medijskom prostoru (Peruško, 2023), Nakon provedene strojne predanalize koja je uključivala sve objave na hrvatskim internetskim portalima kroz promatrano razdoblje, odnosno nešto više od 1,5 milijuna objava na 5104 internetske stranice, izdvojen je reprezentativan uzorak temeljen kriterija posjećenosti, tj. najveći hrvatski internetski portali na kojima je provedena strojna pretraga po ključnim riječima i frazama u sadržaju ili naslovu. Ključne riječi prema kojima je tako izdvojen nativni sadržaj odnosile su se na složenice kao što su: „plaćeni sadržaj", „sponzorirani sadržaj", „native", „sadržaj donosi", „sadržaj nastao", „prilog je napravljen", „powered by", „tnative", „24contenthaus", s obzirom na to kako nativni sadržaj treba biti istaknut kao takav u mediju. Nakon izdvajanja svih članaka kroz šestomjesečno razdoblje koji odgovaraju ovim ključnim riječima, njih ukupno 811, ljudskom analizom su odbačeni oni koji ne zadovoljavaju karakteristike nativnih članaka, što se primarno odnosilo na sponzorirane ili PR objave i druge sadržaje koji se ne odnose na nativne oglase, a kao konačan uzorak za provedbu istraživanja su identificirana i ukupno izdvojena 543 nativna oglasa na šest internetskih portala koji se ističu po svojoj utjecajnosti i čitanosti u Republici Hrvatskoj. Jednako tako, prethodno određivanju uzorka za istraživanje, utvrđeno je kako svi internetski portali čiji su članci predmetom analize sadržaja, uopće nude uslugu nativnog oglašavanja, kroz provjeru njihovih javno dostupnih cjenika marketinških, oglašivačkih i usluga odnosa s javnošću. Od ukupnog uzorka od 543 nativna oglasa, 177 objava ili 32,6 posto objava odnosi se na internetski portal jutarnji.hr, 103 objave ili 18.97 % na vecernji.hr, dok se 99 objava ili 18,23 % odnosi na telegram.hr. Na internetski portal 24sata.hr odnosi se 88 analiziranih članaka ili 16,21 %, na index.hr 62 ili 11,42 %, a na slobodnadalmacija.hr 14 nativnih članaka ili 2,58 posto.

Istraživanje na uzorku od 543 nativna oglasa objavljena od 1. prosinca 2021. do 30. svibnja 2022. godine na izdvojenih šest hrvatskih internetskih portala koji zadovoljavaju kriterij posjećenosti, provedeno je metodom analize sadržaja, pri čemu je primijenjena analitička matrica koja je sadržavala pet općih kategorija (opći identifikacijski elementi, sadržajno isticanje, karakteristike naslova, karakteristike sadržaja, angažman publike), unutar kojih je izdvojeno 19 varijabli po kojima je promatran svaki od 543 oglasa. Pri analizi su autori nazavisno čitali i analizirali sve identificirane oglase i potom usporedili rezultate uz potpuno poklapanje u svim varijablama među autorima.

Za potrebe ovoga istraživanja su promatrane dvije opće kategorije, sukladno vrstama i tipologiji sadržajnog marketinga: karakteristike naslova i karakteristike sadržaja nativnih oglasa. Varijable su se odnosile na kategoriziranje vrsta naslova, na povezanost naslova s brendom oglašivača te na određivanje tipa clickbait naslova, dok je analiza samog sadržaja nativnih članaka bila usmjerena na vrstu vizualne opreme članka (foto, video, infografika, grafika, kombinacije navedenih) i njenu povezanost s vizualnim identitetom oglaši-

vača, odnosno zastupljenost različitih vrsta izvora/izjava (izvor iz organizacije/tvrtke, brend ambasador, influencer - slavna/poznata osoba, izravni korisnik proizvoda ili usluge, više izvora) u nativnim oglasima.

Cilj istraživanja je i utvrditi postoji li značajna korelacija između vrsta naslova i dosegom publike, stoga su podaci o karakteristikama naslova dovedeni u vezu s podacima o dosegu svakog pojedinog oglasa, a istraživanje je usto i utvrdilo jesu li određene vrste naslova nativnih oglasa zastupljenije, odnosno karakterističnije za različite industrije. Na jednak su način uspoređene i promatrane vrste izjava koje se nalaze u analiziranim nativnim oglasima – s obzirom na vrstu industrije kojoj pripada oglašivač te s obzirom na doseg te objave.

4. Results and Discussion

Od ukupnog broja od 543 analizirana nativna oglasa koja su objavljena u šestomjesečnom razdoblju (prosinac 2021. – svibanj 2022.) na šest hrvatskih internetskih portala koji zadovoljavaju kriterij posjećenosti i relevantnosti (jutarnji.hr, index.hr, vecernji.hr, 24sata.hr, telegram.hr, slobodnadalmacija.hr), kod njih gotovo četiri petine (79,01 %) utvrđena je zastupljenost clickbait naslova. Pri određivanju obilježja clickbait poslužili smo se tipologijom koju su definirali Kanižaj. . . Istraživanje je pokazalo kako su najzastupljeniji oni clickbait naslovi koje karakterizira neizvjesnost (44,38 %). Više kombinacija stilova u naslovima je zamijećeno kod 13,81 % oglasa, dok je 20,99 % naslova bilo bez ijedne clickbait karakteristike. Naslovi u kojima prevladava stil koji podrazumijeva korištenje brojkama pojavljuje se u 9,39 % slučajeva, a 5,89 % naslova karakterizira naglašavanje emocija. Kod 4,97 % naslova primijećeno je korištenje nedefiniranim zamjenicama, dok je stil obrnutog narativa registriran kod 0,55 % oglasa.

Tablica 1. Zastupljenost obilježja clickbait naslova kod analiziranih nativnih oglasa (n=543)

Obilježja clickbait naslova kod nativnog oglasa Broj objava % Nedefinirane zamjenice 27 4,97 Neizvjesnost 241 44,38 Stil obrnutog narativa 3 0,55 Naglašavanje emocija 32 5,89 Korištenje brojkama 51 9,39 Više kombinacija 75 13,81 Nije clickbait naslov 114 20,99

Kod velike većine promatranih nativnih oglasa (94,48 %) nije zabilježeno navođenje naziva brenda oglašivača u njihovu naslovu, dok je kod 5,52 % ili trideset članaka od njih 543, naziv brenda bio dijelom naslova. TU ĆEMO DODATI TU RAZLIKU IZMEĐU SPONZORIRANOG ČLANKA KOJI U PRAKSI NAVODI OGLAŠIVAČA U NASLOVU I NATIVEA KOJI TO NE PRAKTICIRA JER JE RIJEČ O SUPTILNIJOJ OGLAŠIVAČKOJ TAKTICI BLA BLA

`Većina naslova, njih 71,09 %, po vrsti je bilo izjavna rečenica, dok se petina naslova (20,26 posto) `

Tablica 2. Vrsta vizualne opreme analiziranih nativnih oglasa (n=543)

Vrsta vizualne opreme kod nativnih oglasa Broj objava % Foto-sadržaj 400 73,67 Video-sadržaj 0 0 Grafika ili infografika 3 0,55 Foto i video sadržaj 60 11,05 Foto i grafički sadržaj 65 11,97 Video i grafički sadržaj 2 0,37 Foto, video i grafički sadržaj 13 2,39 Članak nema vizualnu opremu 0 0

`Logotip oglašivača, odnosno elementi vizualnog identiteta oglašivača, bili su prikazani u sklopu vizua`
`Od karakteristika sadržaja nativnih oglasa u ovome istraživanju, promatrane su i vrste izvora, odnosno`

Tablica 3. Zastupljenost različitih vrsta izvora u izjavama kod analiziranih nativnih oglasa (n=543)

Vrste izvora / izjava kod nativnih oglasa Broj objava % Nema izvora / izjave 257 47,33 Izvor iz organizacije / tvrtke 107 19,71 Brend ambasador 26 4,79 Influencer, slavna / poznata osoba 19 3,5 Izravni korisnik proizvoda ili usluge 37 6,81 Više izvora 41 7,55 Izvor nepovezan s proizvodom ili uslugom 56 10,31

5. Conclusion

Zaključak istraživanja može se sažeti kroz nekoliko ključnih točaka. Analiza 543 nativna oglasa objavljena na šest hrvatskih internetskih portala pokazala je značajnu prisutnost clickbait naslova, gdje je gotovo 80 % naslova imalo barem jednu clickbait karakteristiku, pri čemu se najčešće koristio stil neizvjesnosti. Iako je u manjem dijelu naslova (5,52 %) zabilježeno navođenje brenda, većina ih je bila neutralna po pitanju

izravnog reklamiranja. Naslovi su pretežito izjavne rečenice, dok su vizualni elementi, osobito fotografije, bili prisutni u svim oglasima, pri čemu je logo oglašivača bio uključen u 34,44 % slučajeva. Na području izvora izjava, gotovo polovica članaka nije koristila izjave, dok su u ostalim člancima najčešće izvori bile osobe iz organizacije, s relativno malom prisutnošću influencera i slavnih osoba. Ovi nalazi ukazuju na dominaciju clickbait naslova i značajnu ulogu vizualne opreme u nativnom oglašavanju, dok je izravno povezivanje s brendom i korištenje autoritativnih izvora rjeđe zastupljeno.