

Given recent interest in social media, many brands now create content that they hope consumers will view and share with peers. While some campaigns indeed go “viral,” their value to the brand is limited if they do not boost brand evaluation or increase purchase. Consequently, a key question is how to create valuable virality, or content that is not only shared but also beneficial to the brand. Share data from hundreds of real online ads, as well as controlled laboratory experiments, demonstrate that compared with informative appeals (which focus on product features), emotional appeals (which use drama, mood, music, and other emotion-eliciting strategies) are more likely to be shared. Informative appeals, in contrast, boost brand evaluations and purchase because the brand is an integral part of the ad content. By combining the benefits of both approaches, emotional brand-integral ads boost sharing while also bolstering brand-related outcomes. The authors’ framework sheds light on how companies can generate valuable virality and the mechanisms underlying these effects.

*Keywords:* viral marketing, social transmission, online content, advertising

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## Valuable Virality

Virality has become the holy grail of digital marketing. Rather than focusing on paid media, in which a brand pays to advertise, brands are devoting more and more attention to earned media, in which consumers are the communication channel (Corcoran 2009). The more consumers share a piece of content, the greater its reach. As a result, shares have become an increasingly important advertising metric.

Not surprisingly, companies now consider designing ads that are shareable or contagious. Not all ads are equally likely to be shared. Surprising, funny, or entertaining content is more likely to be passed on, and the more an ad seems like a blatant sell attempt, the less people will share it (Tucker 2015; for a review, see Berger 2014). Consequently, companies design ads with these aspects in mind. Research has recommended creating ads in which the story would still be intrinsically interesting even if the brand were removed (Teixeira 2012).

In the quest to increase shares, though, some companies may be sacrificing advertising effectiveness. One of the most highly shared ads of all time, Evian’s “Roller Babies,” received more

than 55 million views but had little impact on sales (O’Leary 2010). More generally, research has found that for every million views a video ad achieves, ad persuasiveness decreases by 10% (Tucker 2015). Content aspects that increase sharing seem to decrease effectiveness.

Are sharing and creating value for the brands at odds? Or might there be a way to create “valuable virality”—that is, ads consumers will share that also benefit the brand?

This article examines drivers of valuable virality. To do so, we distinguish between two types of outcomes: Advertising creative can influence an ad’s shareability as well as brand-related outcomes (i.e., brand evaluation and purchase). We examine whether certain types of advertising appeals can increase both outcomes simultaneously.

We make several contributions. First, we integrate research on word of mouth and advertising to shed light on what makes ads both viral *and* valuable. Some research has examined how word of mouth affects sales (for a review, see Babić et al. 2016), but less attention has been paid to why consumers share ads (or other company-generated content) in the first place. Further, little work has combined these two aspects. This research sheds light on both causes and consequences of social transmission. What drives consumers to share ads, and when does such social transmission actually lead to purchase intent?

Second, we deepen understanding around effective advertising in the new viral context. Contribution to the brand (e.g., brand

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evaluation, sales) used to be a key measure of advertising effectiveness (for a review, see Obermiller, Spangenberg, and MacLachlan 2005). But with viral marketing, attention has shifted to getting shares, and research has suggested that brand presence might reduce shares (Stephen, Sciandra, and Inman 2015; Teixeira 2012). In contrast, we show that companies need not trade off one or the other and that it is possible to create content that both boosts brand evaluation and gets highly shared. Further, while existing work has posited that emotional appeals should improve brand-related outcomes (Ang, Lee, and Leong 2007; Pieters, Warlop, and Wedel 2002), we show that this is not always the case. We demonstrate when emotional appeals boost purchase and when they do not.

Finally, this work has obvious practical implications for helping brands craft contagious content that will also boost evaluation and purchase. Overall, our work sheds light on valuable virality: what leads content to be both shared and valuable to the brand that created it.

### *WORD OF MOUTH AND ITS CONSEQUENCES*

Consumers often share their views, preferences, and experiences about products with others. Word of mouth diffuses information and influence and can boost product adoption and sales (Babić et al. 2016; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Iyengar, Van den Bulte, and Valente 2011). Given these positive consequences, many companies have embraced word-of-mouth marketing because it is often cheaper and more effective than traditional advertising (Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels 2009).

However, for word-of-mouth campaigns to be effective, two things must happen. First, consumers have to talk about the brand or share brand-related content. Not all content is passed on, and recent work has begun to examine why people share some things rather than others (for a review, see Berger 2014). This developing area has deepened understanding around why people share newspaper articles (Berger and Milkman 2012) or recommend products (Berger and Schwartz 2011; Moldovan, Goldenberg, and Chattopadhyay 2011), but there has been less attention to why people share branded video ads. Online video ad revenue increased approximately 35% in 2015 (Internet Advertising Bureau 2015), so this domain deserves more attention.

Second, campaigns need to create value for the brands being advertised. Millions of consumers might share an advertisement, but if watching it does not increase sales, then shares will not really benefit the brand. The word-of-mouth literature has focused on shares and referrals (for a review, see Babić et al. 2016) but little work has examined both shares and brand-related outcomes simultaneously (cf. Tucker 2015).<sup>1</sup>

The current research fills this gap by integrating sharing and creating value to the brand. What leads an ad both to be shared and to generate value for the company that created it?

### *DRIVERS OF VALUABLE VIRALITY*

To address this question, we distinguish between how advertising content influences shares and brand-related outcomes. In particular, we suggest that different types of advertising

appeals may have different effects on (1) shares and (2) brand evaluation and purchase.

One prominent distinction in advertising research is between emotional and informational appeals (Chandy et al. 2001; MacInnis, Rao, and Weiss 2002). Emotional appeals are designed to appeal to emotions by using mood, music, and other emotion-eliciting strategies. Informational appeals are designed to appeal to cognition by using objective information describing a brand's attributes or benefits (MacInnis, Rao, and Weiss 2002; Yoo and MacInnis 2005).

Compared with informational appeals, emotional appeals are more likely to be shared. More emotional news is more likely to make the most e-mailed list (Berger and Milkman 2012), and more emotional stories are more likely to be shared (Heath, Bell, and Sternberg 2001; Rimé 2009). Emotional arousal increases social transmission (Berger 2011), and people may share surprising or interesting content because it makes them look good (Berger and Schwartz 2011; De Angelis et al. 2012; Moldovan, Goldenberg, and Chattopadhyay 2011).

In contrast, informational appeals should often bolster brand-related outcomes such as evaluation and purchase. First, consumers should evaluate informative appeals' persuasion attempts as fairer and less manipulative. Consumers distrust advertising (Darke and Ritchie 2007; Rumbo 2002), and manipulative persuasion tactics can activate persuasion knowledge and generate reactance (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Fransen et al. 2015). In informative appeals, however, persuasion attempts are direct by nature (e.g., explicit presentation of product features), so inferences about persuasive attempts should be more positive, which should boost brand evaluations and purchase intent. Second, informative appeals provide more information about the product or brand. Because the main narrative is directly related to the product being advertised, informative appeals should lead consumers to feel like they have a better sense of the products/brands' relevant features. As long as consumers are positively disposed to the information presented, this increased brand or product knowledge should, in turn, bolster brand evaluation and purchase intent.

Overall then, different appeal types seem to generate different benefits. Whereas emotional appeals lead to higher shares, informative appeals often boost brand evaluation and purchase intent. But is there a way to generate both benefits simultaneously? Can certain advertising appeal types bolster both ad and brand-related outcomes at the same time?

### *THE CURRENT RESEARCH*

We suggest that emotional appeals that make the brand integral to the narrative (i.e., emotional brand-integral ads) may be able to blend the benefits of both types of appeals. Part of the reason that informative appeals boost brand outcomes is that the brand is, by default, an integral part of the plot. Informative appeals explicitly discuss product benefits, and the brand is directly relevant to the main ad narrative.

Consequently, making the brand an integral part of the content in emotional appeals may boost brand-related outcomes for the same reason informative appeals tend to benefit the brand. First, emotional brand-integral ads (hereinafter, emotional integral ads) should generate more favorable inferences about persuasion. In emotional brand-nonintegral ads (hereinafter, emotional nonintegral ads), consumers are more

<sup>1</sup>Even if they do not increase brand evaluation, by increasing exposure, shares can boost brand awareness and accessibility. The current research focuses more on the evaluative consequences of shares, but we return to the exposure aspect in the "General Discussion" section.

likely to think that the brand is just using emotional tactics to convince them and may infer manipulative intent (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Darke and Ritchie 2007). When the brand is more integral to the narrative, however, the emotion-eliciting strategies should seem less superfluous, and thus inferences about persuasion attempts should be more favorable. Second, emotional integral appeals should boost brand knowledge. Just as in informative ads, consumers should learn more about the brand when it is related to the narrative. Note that emotional integral ads increase brand knowledge not only by communicating product features but also by conveying brand image or personality. Taken together, compared with emotional nonintegral ads, the combination of positive inferences about persuasion attempts and increased knowledge should boost brand evaluations and purchase.

Further, making the brands integral part of the content should not reduce sharing. Because surprising, novel, and interesting content boosts shares, as long as consumers are positively disposed to the ad content, emotional appeals should still increase sharing, regardless of whether the brand is integral.

This suggests that companies do not have to trade off between shares and brand evaluations. Emotional integral ads should increase sharing (compared with informative appeals) while also boosting brand-related outcomes (compared with emotional nonintegral appeals).

Although one could argue that using emotional integral ads is intuitive, the fact that it is not common practice casts doubt on this notion. Analysis of hundreds of video ads ("Field Observation of Viral Ads," described next) shows that brands are only highly integral in 20% of emotional ads. Advertisers may avoid making the brand an integral part of the ad because they are worried that brand presence will make appeals seem more like ads, which could reduce sharing (Stephen, Sciandra, and Inman 2015). As we find in the field data, however, brand integralness and presence are different constructs. Further, we demonstrate that making the brand an integral part of emotional appeals does not, in fact, reduce shares.

Overall then, we compare how three ad types—(1) emotional integral, (2) emotional nonintegral, and (3) informative—influence both shares and brand evaluation and purchase. We test our predictions using a mix of field and laboratory investigations. We begin by examining actual sharing of hundreds of online video ads to document the actual distribution of ad types based on ad appeal and brand integralness and examine whether certain ad types generate more virality. Further, we investigate whether companies behave as if there is a trade-off between creating emotional ads and making the brands an integral part of the narrative. Next, Study 1 uses a controlled experiment to test how different ad types simultaneously influence shares and brand-related outcomes. Study 2 uses a richer design and real sharing to rule out alternative explanations and test external validity. Finally, Study 3 investigates the hypothesized mechanisms (i.e., brand knowledge and inferences about persuasive attempts) behind the effects.

#### FIELD OBSERVATION OF VIRAL ADS

We begin by examining the relationship between ad type and actual shares in the field. We analyze hundreds of ads from Unruly, the most prominent viral ad-tracking platform (unruly.co). The data include the number times each video is shared over various channels (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Twitter) and social media more generally.

Compared with ads that use more informational appeals, we predict that ads that use more emotional appeals will be shared more. More importantly for our theorizing, we predict that among ads which use more emotional appeals, higher brand integralness does not reduce sharing.

Further, although this is not a key theory test, we also examine the distribution of different types of ads based on appeal type and brand integralness. We show that emotional appeals tend not to make the brand an integral part of the narrative, consistent with our suggestion that creating emotional integral ads is not a common practice in the field. Finally, we measure a variety of control variables (e.g., product, brand, ad characteristics) to test whether alternative explanations drive any observed results.

#### Data

Data were provided by Unruly, a media company that tracks online video shares. Unruly provides the world's largest, most comprehensive database, having tracked 329 billion videos since 2006. To control for seasonality, we focused on ads released at the same time (i.e., June 2013). We randomly selected a set of ads, and two independent raters<sup>2</sup> ( $r = .88$ ) removed any movie trailers, music videos, television shows, news clips, and nonprofit content, leaving 240 ads.

We tracked the number of times each ad was shared in the six months following its launch. Ads receive most of their shares within the first six months. Shares are highly concave, with most shares occurring right away and dropping sharply afterward (Tucker 2015). Forty-two percent of online branded video shares occur in the first three days (Waterhouse 2014), and in our data, 65% occur in the first month.

Next, we coded ad appeal type. Using a scale developed in prior work (Yoo and MacInnis 2005), two independent raters coded whether ads were more emotional or informational in nature (1 = "informative," and 7 = "emotional";  $\alpha = .90$ ). More emotional appeals are defined as "designed to appeal to the receiver's emotions by using drama, mood, music and other emotion-eliciting strategies." More informative appeals are defined as "designed to appeal to the rationality of the receiver by using objective information describing a brand's attributes or benefits" (Yoo and MacInnis 2005, p. 1397).

Finally, two other independent coders rated how integral the brand was to the narrative (1 = "not integral at all," and 7 = "very integral";  $\alpha = .84$ ). Ads in which the brand is clearly part of the story were rated high on brand integralness, whereas ads in which the brand could be replaced with almost any other brand/product were rated low on brand integralness (for full coding instructions for appeal type and integralness, see Web Appendix A).

#### Control Variables

To test whether alternative explanations can explain the results, we include several control variables in the analysis. These are described in the following subsections.

*Ad characteristics.* One might wonder whether other ad characteristics such as length, language, use of celebrities, or humorous content might drive the results. To test for this possibility, we control for these factors. First, it may be that shorter videos are shared more (cf. Berger and Milkman 2012).

<sup>2</sup>All coders mentioned throughout the article were blind to the hypotheses of the studies.

There is decent variation in length ( $M = 90$  sec,  $SD = 88.66$ ), so we used the log in our analyses. Second, whether ads are in the local language versus English might affect willingness to share. To control for this, we included the language of each ad as a binary variable (English and local language); 66% of ads were in English. Third, humor might also play a role (Tucker 2015). To control for humor, four independent judges rated each ad on the extent to which they found it humorous (1 = “not humorous at all,” and 7 = “very humorous”;  $\alpha = .69$ ). Fourth, ads that feature celebrities might get shared more. To control for this, we coded whether each ad includes a celebrity (yes/no) and added this binary variable as a control; 11% of ads included a celebrity.

*Brand and product characteristics.* One might also wonder whether brand- or product-related characteristics such as search versus experience goods, brand presence, brand equity, or brand community size might drive the results, so we control for these characteristics. First, one could argue that ads for certain types of products (e.g., experience goods) might be shared more. To control for this possibility, two independent coders ( $\alpha = .74$ ) used definitions from Nelson (1974) and Laband (1986) to code whether the product in each ad is a search, experience, or credence good. Any disagreements were resolved by discussion.

Second, stronger brand presence (i.e., large size and long duration) might make appeals seem more like persuasive attempts, which might reduce sharing. Following Pieters and Wedel (2004), we measured brand presence by coding both size and duration each time the brand appears in any visual form in the ad videos (for full instructions, see Web Appendix A).

Third, product involvement might also play a role. Following Lovett, Peres, and Shachar (2013), we measured product involvement at the subcategory level (i.e., beauty products, beverages, cars, telecommunications) using Zaichkowsky’s (1985) five-item (e.g., “exciting,” “fascinating,” “means a lot to me”), seven-point personal involvement inventory based on Mittal (1995). Sixty participants each rated eight random product categories on product involvement.

Fourth, some brands have higher brand equity or larger brand communities, both of which might increase sharing. To control for this possibility, we did two things. First, we coded whether the brand appeared in Interbrand’s list of top 100 brands of 2013 (36% of the brands appeared on this list). Second, we controlled for the size of the brand community by counting the number of likes each brand’s Facebook page received.

Fifth, we controlled for whether the brand in each ad is global or local. Some brands have global reach (i.e., appear under the same name in multiple countries), while others are more local in scope (i.e., promoted and distributed in a more restricted area). One could argue that global brands might receive more shares because more people know them. To control for this possibility, a coder used the Internet to determine whether each brand was more global or local in scope; 86% of the brands were global.

## Results

First, we examined the distribution of different types of ads based on ad appeal and brand integralness. We found that 41.8% of the ads used an emotional appeal (receiving a score greater than 4 on ad appeal). More importantly, consistent with

our prior suggestion, appeal type and brand integralness were negatively correlated ( $r = -.45$ ); emotional appeals tended not to make the brand an integral part of the story (Figure 1). Spotlight analyses show that compared with brands in more informative ads ( $-1$  SD below the mean), brands in more emotional ads are less likely to be an integral part of the narrative ( $+1$  SD above the mean;  $M = 3.89$  vs.  $M = 5.47$ ;  $F = 40.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This finding indicates that companies tend to trade off between creating emotional ads and making the brand an integral part of the ad content. Further, it demonstrates that emotional appeals could make brands more integral to their content.

Next, we examined how ad appeal (i.e., more informative vs. more emotional) and brand integralness relate to how many times the ad is shared. To avoid potential multicollinearity (due to correlation between appeal type and brand integralness;  $r = -.45$ ), we separately examined the effect of each (continuous) predictor on shares. Given the nonnormal distribution of number of shares, with high overdispersion ( $M = 513$ ,  $SD = 2,602$ ) and a large number of zeros (31.7% of ads), we analyzed the data using a negative binomial regression.

*Appeal type.* As we predicted, appeal type is positively related to shares ( $\beta_{\text{ad appeal}} = .81$ ,  $SE = .03$ ;  $\chi^2 = 672.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Compared with informative ads, emotional ads are shared more.

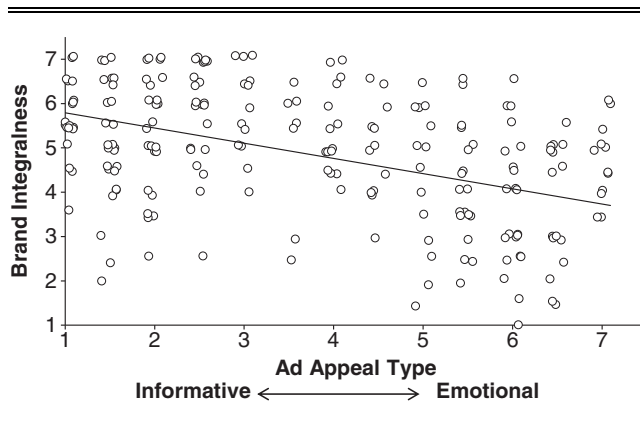
*Brand integralness.* Given that any relationship between brand integralness and shares could be driven by appeal type (i.e., brands tend to be more integral in informative ads, which might lead brand integralness to seem like it has a negative effect), we used floodlight analysis (Spiller et al. 2013) to examine the relationship between brand integralness and shares for different ad appeal types.<sup>3</sup> Among more informative ads (i.e., at ad appeal = 2.5), ads received more shares when the brand was more integral to the narrative ( $\beta_{\text{integral}} = .46$ ,  $SE = .17$ ;  $\chi^2 = 7.13$ ,  $p = .008$ ). Among more emotional ads (i.e., at ad appeal = 5.5), however, the relationship between brand integralness and shares disappeared ( $\beta_{\text{ad appeal}} = .29$ ,  $SE = .07$ ;  $\chi^2 = 2.13$ ,  $p = .14$ ) (for further details, see Web Appendix A, Table A1). This is consistent with our suggestion that even though companies tend not to make the brand an integral part of emotional appeals, doing so does not decrease shares.

*Ancillary analyses: appeal type.* These findings hold when we control for a host of other factors (i.e., ad length, language used, humor, presence of celebrity, brand presence, product type, product involvement, brand equity, global vs. local brand, and brand community size). Because our study includes several control variables, we check and correct for any potential for multicollinearity (Web Appendix A, Table A2). Even when these controls are included, emotional appeals still receive more shares than informative appeals ( $\beta_{\text{ad appeal}} = .25$ ,  $SE = .06$ ;  $\chi^2 = 16.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Web Appendix A, Table A3). Though not our focus, it is worth noting that some of our control variables are linked to shares. Ads that included celebrities, for example, received more shares, as did ads for brands that had large communities on Facebook.

*Ancillary analyses: brand integralness.* The relationship between brand integralness and shares also persists after including the controls. A floodlight analysis indicates that the relationship between brand integralness and shares is positive

<sup>3</sup>Floodlight analysis is not subject to multicollinearity concerns (Disatnik and Silvan 2014).

Figure 1  
AD APPEAL TYPE AND BRAND INTEGRALNESS ARE  
NEGATIVELY CORRELATED



for more informative ads (i.e., at ad appeal = 2.5;  $\beta_{\text{integral}} = .64$ ,  $SE = .26$ ;  $\chi^2 = 6.01$ ,  $p = .014$ ) but becomes weaker for more emotional ads (i.e., at ad appeal = 5.5;  $\beta_{\text{integral}} = .58$ ,  $SE = .24$ ;  $\chi^2 = 5.47$ ,  $p = .019$ ; for further details, see Web Appendix A, Table A4). This is consistent with our previous suggestion that making the brand an integral part of more emotional appeals does not decrease shares.

*Ancillary analyses: brand presence.* Although our focus is on brand integralness, not brand presence, we also examined when strong brand presence does and does not inhibit sharing. First, consistent with the notion that integralness and presence are distinct constructs, we find that they are uncorrelated ( $r = .04$ ,  $p > .6$ ). Brand presence is also uncorrelated with ad appeal (i.e., emotional vs. informative;  $r = -.01$ ,  $p > .8$ ).

Second, consistent with intuition, ads in which brands are more present are shared less ( $\beta = -8.34$ ,  $SE = 4.25$ ;  $\chi^2 = 3.85$ ,  $p = .05$ ). Importantly, however, this relationship varies with ad type. Floodlight analysis shows that among more informative ads (i.e., below the scale midpoint), ads received fewer shares when the brand was more present ( $ps < .02$ ). Among more emotional ads (i.e., above the midpoint), however, the relationship between brand presence and shares was not significant (all  $ps > .21$ ). It is difficult to infer too much from this exploratory analysis, but it provides some suggestion of when brand presence inhibits sharing and when it does not. While brand presence hurts the sharing of informative ads, it does not inhibit sharing among emotional ads (potentially because sharing is driven more by the content or narrative itself). Future work might examine this question more directly.

### Discussion

Actual share data from hundreds of ads supports our perspective and provides preliminary insight into what drives valuable virality. First, as we predicted, within emotional appeals, making the brand an integral part of the narrative did not decrease shares. This finding is important because it contradicts some current marketing practice. As Figure 1 shows, most of the ads that use emotional appeals tend not to make the brand an integral part of the narrative. Many advertisers prioritize

interesting and engaging content over whether the brand is actually part of the story. However, deeper analysis shows that while strong brand presence is linked to lower shares, making the brand integral to the narrative does not hurt, and may in fact increase, shares. Further, as we show in the next studies, it bolsters brand evaluation and purchase.

Second, compared with informative appeals, more emotional appeals are more likely to be shared. Importantly, we are not suggesting that informative appeals are worse on every dimension. Although they are shared less, as we show in the subsequent experiments, informative appeals often improve brand-related outcomes.

Third, these results persist even when we control for a host of other ad- and brand-related variables (e.g., presence of celebrity, product type, brand equity). Thus, while a number of other factors affect sharing, our key variables of interest also seem to play a role.

Although these initial results are supportive, there are certainly some limitations. We used a random set of ads released at the same time to control for seasonality, but they may not be representative of all ads. Further, as with many studies of observational data, we cannot infer causality. The fact that the results persist when we control for a host of other variables is heartening, however, and we conduct follow-up experiments to better test causality, rule out alternatives, and explore how ad type also affects brand-related outcomes.

### STUDY 1: MANIPULATING AD TYPE

In Study 1, we manipulate ad types and examine sharing and brand-related outcomes. We test whether, (1) within emotional ads, making the brand an integral part of the narrative hurts sharing, and (2) compared with informative ads, emotional ads increase sharing. For brand-related outcomes, we test whether, compared with emotional nonintegral ads, emotional integral and informative ads boost brand evaluation and purchase intent.

### Method

*Materials.* We created three video ads (see Figure 2) for a fictitious brand of hand soap ("Crown"). We edited existing ads, removed frames showing the brand name, and inserted the slogan "Crown Hand Soap, Feel Clean and Fresh!" at the end of all the clips.

We manipulated appeal type and brand integralness through ad content (informative vs. emotional integral vs. emotional nonintegral). In the informative ad ("Pure and Natural"), a woman and child use the soap, and product benefits are explicitly stated. The ad noted that the soap is gentle on the skin, moisturizes and refreshes, and is environmentally friendly. The emotional integral ad ("Foam City") showed how a downtown area turns into a giant bubble bath with whole streets filled with foam. The product (soap) was clearly relevant and integral to the narrative (i.e., soap makes foam). The emotional nonintegral ad ("Human Slingshot") used a situation in which the product (soap) was not very relevant to the narrative. In this ad, people are riding a raft down an enormous slide next to a lake. The raft is hooked to a bungee cord and catapults them through the air into the water.

Pretest results confirmed that the product was perceived as more relevant and integral to the narrative of the ad in the

Figure 2  
STIMULI USED IN STUDY 1



emotional integral ad than in the emotional nonintegral ad.<sup>4</sup> Further, we selected emotional appeals that did not differ in evaluation in the absence of branding.<sup>5</sup> This enabled us to ensure that it is the fit between the ad content and the product being advertised, rather than just the ad content itself, that is driving any observed effects.

**Procedure.** Undergraduate students ( $N = 131$ , 50% female, mean age = 20.5 years) at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania completed the study for monetary payment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three ad types (emotional integral, emotional nonintegral, or informative) and completed a variety of dependent measures. First, they were asked how willing they would be to share the video with others (1 = “not at all,” and 7 = “extremely”). Next, they evaluated the brand using four seven-point scales (brand evaluation index: “bad–good,” “negative–positive,” “unfavorable–favorable,” “not interesting–interesting,” and “undesirable–desirable”;  $\alpha = .92$ ). Finally, they indicated their purchase likelihood (1 = “not likely,” and 7 = “extremely likely”).

### Results

**Shares.** First, we examined how ad type influenced willingness to share (Figure 3). Consistent with our theorizing, compared with emotional nonintegral ads ( $M = 3.64$ ), emotional integral ads ( $M = 4.08$ ) did not decrease willingness to share

<sup>4</sup>Pretest participants ( $N = 95$ ) evaluated the relevance of the ads to hand soap (1 = “not relevant at all,” and 7 = “very relevant”). As we predicted, the emotional integral appeal (“Foam City”) was perceived as more related to hand soap ( $M = 5.58$ ) than the emotional nonintegral appeal (“Human Slingshot”);  $M = 2.21$ ;  $F(1, 93) = 107.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

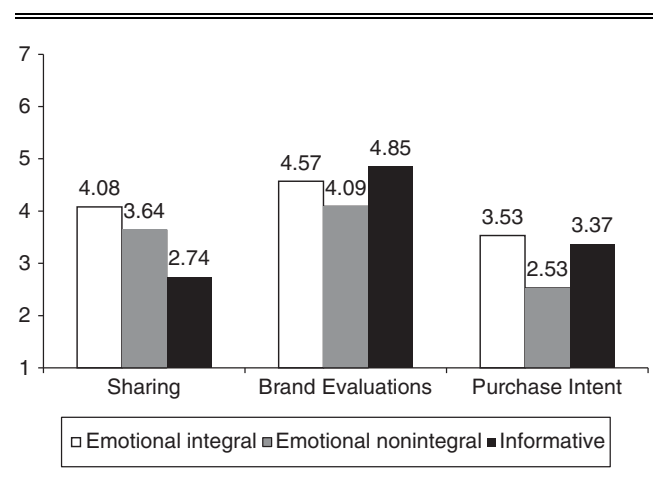
<sup>5</sup>Pretest participants ( $N = 95$ ) viewed just the ad content, without any brand mention, and evaluated the ads using five seven-point scales (ad evaluation index: “bad–good,” “not appealing–appealing,” “not attractive–attractive,” “not interesting–interesting,” and “not entertaining–entertaining”;  $\alpha = .90$ ). The selected appeals were evaluated equivalently in the absence of any brand mention ( $M = 5.69$  vs.  $M = 5.69$ ;  $F = 0$ ,  $p > .9$ ). This casts doubt on the possibility that any differences between the emotional appeals that emerge after branding can be attributed to the particular videos used.

( $F(1, 128) = 1.4$ ,  $p = .24$ ). However, as we expected, compared with informative ads ( $M = 2.74$ ), people were more willing to share both emotional integral ads ( $F(1, 128) = 14.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and emotional nonintegral ads ( $F(1, 128) = 5.58$ ,  $p = .02$ ).

**Brand-related outcomes.** Second, we examined how ad type influenced brand evaluations. As we predicted, compared with the emotional nonintegral ads ( $M = 4.09$ ), informative ads ( $M = 4.85$ ;  $F(1, 128) = 9.85$ ,  $p < .005$ ) and emotional integral ads ( $M = 4.57$ ;  $F(1, 128) = 4.11$ ,  $p < .05$ ) increased brand evaluations.

Ad type had similar effects on purchase intent (Figure 3). Compared with the emotional nonintegral ads ( $M = 2.53$ ), informative ads ( $M = 3.37$ ;  $F(1, 128) = 6.63$ ,  $p < .02$ ) and emotional integral ads ( $M = 3.53$ ;  $F(1, 128) = 9.68$ ,  $p < .005$ ) increased purchase likelihood.

Figure 3  
HOW AD TYPE INFLUENCES SHARING AND BRAND-RELATED OUTCOMES (STUDY 1)



### Discussion

Study 1 extends the field observation to a situation in which ad types were experimentally manipulated. Although people were more willing to share emotional ads, informative ads increased brand evaluation and purchase. Emotional integral ads, however, provided the best of both worlds. They had a similar effect in boosting shares as emotional nonintegral ads while also creating similar positive effects on brand evaluation and purchase as informative ads.

Note that these differences in willingness to share were not driven by emotional ads simply being “better” ads. Pretest results showed that the ads were evaluated similarly in the absence of branding. Further, the sharing results persist even controlling for ad evaluation.<sup>6</sup>

### STUDY 2: ACTUAL SHARING

Study 2 builds on Study 1 in two key ways. First, we measure actual sharing. This provides external validity of our results. Second, we use an even richer experimental design to further rule out potential alternative explanations. We use the same ad content but change the product the ad is supposedly for, making it more or less integral to the content. This enables us to more cleanly investigate the effect of ad type. We examine whether the *same* emotional appeals have different effects on brand-related outcomes depending on whether the product is integral to the ad’s narrative.

### Method

**Materials.** For each of two different product categories (hand soap and swimwear), we created three video ads for a fictitious brand (“Star”). We used a 2 (product category: hand soap vs. swimwear)  $\times$  3 (ad type: emotional integral vs. emotional nonintegral vs. informative) between-subjects design. As in Study 1, we edited existing ads, removed frames showing the brand name, and inserted the slogan “Star Hand Soap [Swimwear]!” at the end of all the clips.<sup>7</sup>

We manipulated ad type through the ad content and the product categories the ads were supposedly for (Figure 4; for stimuli details, see Web Appendix B). For hand soap, the ads were the same as those used in Study 1, except for the slogans.

To more effectively show the causal impact of brand integralness while controlling for nonfocal aspects of ad content, we then took the same ads but changed their product category. “Human Slingshot,” for example, was used as the nonintegral condition for hand soap (because it is not related to hand soap), but we made it integral for a different set of participants by saying that it was an ad for swimwear (which is much more related to the narrative of the ad). Thus, by changing the product the ad was supposedly for, we were able to manipulate brand integralness while keeping the rest of the ad the same. We did

<sup>6</sup>Participants evaluated the ads (with brand mentions) using four seven-point scales (“bad–good,” “negative–positive,” “unfavorable–favorable,” and “undesirable–desirable”). Compared with emotional nonintegral ads ( $M = 3.63$ ), emotional integral ads ( $M = 4.08$ ) did not decrease willingness to share ( $F(1, 128) = .35, p = .55$ ). Further, compared with the informative ads ( $M = 2.74$ ), both emotional integral ads and emotional nonintegral ads boosted willingness to share (respectively,  $F(1, 128) = 6.87, p = .01$ ;  $F(1, 128) = 3.54, p = .06$ ).

<sup>7</sup>One could argue that a slogan mentioning the product benefits is more suitable for informative ads, and such a slogan at the end of an emotional ad could confound our results. To address this concern, in Study 2 we included only the brand name (Star Hand Soap [Swimwear]) at the end of each video ad.

the same with “Foam City,” making it less integral by saying that it was for swimwear (a product that has less to do with the content of the ad). The informative swimwear ad showed people at the pool, displayed the brand’s product line, and noted the different styles and sizes that were available.

A series of pretests ensured that the materials manipulated ad type effectively. First, pretests confirmed that emotional ads were evaluated as being significantly more emotional than the informative ads, and that the informative ads were evaluated as being significantly more informative than the emotional ads. Second, pretests confirmed that the creative executions effectively manipulated brand integralness. Third, pretests confirmed that that brand-related outcomes are not due to the particular videos used. Fourth, pretests demonstrated that the ads did not differ on argument strength (for pretest details and results, see Web Appendix B).

**Main study.** Undergraduate students ( $N = 140$ , 49% female, mean age = 19.6 years) at MEF University participated in exchange for monetary payment. Participants were randomly assigned to condition in a 3 (ad type: emotional integral vs. emotional nonintegral vs. informative)  $\times$  2 (product category: hand soap vs. swimwear) between-subjects design. We did not expect (or find) any effects resulting from product category, but including this factor rules out alternatives based on ad content.

Participants were informed that they would be participating in a conversation study in which they would watch some videos and chat with a randomly chosen participant through instant messaging. In fact, each participant was matched with a confederate.

First, to test how appeal type changed brand evaluation, before being assigned to ad type condition, all participants evaluated the fictitious brand “Star” using the four seven-point scales from Study 1 (e.g., “bad–good”). Second, they were randomly assigned to watch one of the ads. Third, after watching their assigned ad, participants chatted using an instant messaging platform. To start the conversation, they were given a choice: either (1) just introduce themselves or (2) introduce themselves and share a link to the ad they watched. This decision to share the ad was our key dependent variable.

After chatting for a few minutes, participants evaluated the brand using the same scale as before (e.g., “bad–good”). Finally, participants were probed for suspicion and asked to indicate what they thought was the purpose of the study. None suspected the actual purpose of the study or articulated the hypotheses being tested.

### Results

A 3 (ad type: emotional integral vs. emotional nonintegral vs. informative)  $\times$  2 (product category: hand soap vs. swimwear) analysis of variance was conducted on the various dependent measures. As we expected, no main effect or interactions ( $\chi^2$ s  $< .4, ps > .5$ ;  $F$ s  $< .2, ps > .6$ ) resulting from product category were evident, so we collapsed across this factor for all further analyses.

**Sharing.** First, we examined the how ad type influenced sharing (Figure 5). Consistent with our theorizing as well as the results from the field study and Study 1, we observed no difference between emotional integral ads ( $M = 70\%$ ) and emotional nonintegral ads ( $M = 68\%$ ;  $\chi^2 < .1, p > .8$ ). However, as expected, compared with informative ads ( $M = 48\%$ ), both emotional integral ads ( $\chi^2(1, 137) = 4.72, p = .03$ ) and emotional nonintegral ads ( $\chi^2(1, 137) = 3.85, p = .05$ ) boosted actual sharing.

Figure 4  
STIMULI USED IN STUDY 2



*Brand evaluation.* Second, we examined how ad type influenced brand evaluations. There was no difference in brand evaluations before watching the ads ( $F(2, 137) = .30, p = .74; M_{\text{integral}} = 3.85$  vs.  $M_{\text{nonintegral}} = 3.63, M_{\text{informative}} = 3.68$ ). However, as we predicted, compared with the emotional nonintegral ads ( $M = 3.62$ ), informative ads ( $M = 4.34; F(1, 137) = 3.77, p = .05$ ) and emotional integral ads ( $M = 4.81; F(1, 137) = 10.60, p = .001$ ) increased brand evaluations after watching ads.

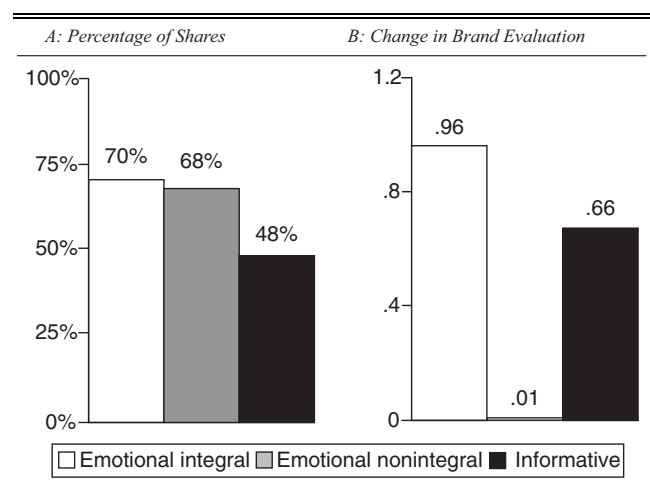
Further, comparing brand evaluation before and after ad exposure provides insight into the direction of the observed effects. One might wonder whether emotional integral ads boost evaluation or emotional nonintegral ads decrease evaluation. As we predicted, the emotional integral appeal boosted brand evaluation ( $M_{\text{eval\_change}} = .96; F(1, 46) = 21.79, p < .001$ ; Figure 5). The emotional nonintegral appeal, however, did not change evaluations ( $M_{\text{eval\_change}} = .01; F < .1, p > .9$ ).

*Discussion*

Using real sharing, the results of Study 2 underscore our theorizing. Whereas emotional appeals increased sharing, informative appeals increased brand evaluation. Emotional appeals in which the brand was integral to the narrative, however, combined the benefits of both approaches. Emotional integral ads had a similar effect in boosting shares as emotional nonintegral ads while also creating similar positive

effects on brand evaluation as informative ads. Emotional integral ads thus provide valuable virality, increasing shares

Figure 5  
HOW AD TYPE AFFECTS SHARES AND CHANGES BRAND EVALUATION (STUDY 2)





while also boosting brand evaluations. Further, although many ads use emotional nonintegral appeals in practice (as our field observation shows), Study 2 suggests that such appeals may not always boost brand evaluation.

### STUDY 3: MEDIATING ROLE OF INFERENCES ABOUT PERSUASIVE ATTEMPTS AND BRAND KNOWLEDGE

Study 3 tests the hypothesized process underlying ad types' influence on brand-related outcomes. We measure (1) inferences about persuasive attempts and (2) brand knowledge and examine whether they simultaneously mediate the effect of emotional integral and informative ads on brand-related outcomes (compared with emotional nonintegral ads).

In addition, we test several alternative explanations. We include thought listings to show that our effects on brand-related outcomes generalize to other measures. We measure ad evaluation to show that our results persist even controlling for this measure. We measure level of processing and argument strength to determine whether they can account for the results.

#### Method

Undergraduate students ( $N = 149$ , 64% female, mean age = 21.9 years) at Erasmus University completed the study as part of a set of experiments in exchange for partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to condition in a 3 (ad type: emotional integral vs. emotional nonintegral vs. informative)  $\times$  2 (product category: hand soap vs. swimwear) between-subjects design using the ads from Study 2. We did not expect (or find) any effects resulting from product category, but including this factor rules out alternatives based on ad content.

After watching their assigned ad, participants completed four willingness-to-share items (e.g., "If I were to share a video online, the probability of sharing this video is ..."; 1 = "not likely," and 7 = "very likely";  $\alpha = .95$ ). Next, they evaluated the brands using the same items as Study 2 (e.g., "bad-good"). To test the generalizability of the effect, we included a standard thought-listing task (adapted from Cacioppo and Petty 1981). Participants listed five thoughts they had about the brand while viewing the ad using a series of boxes (e.g., "Your first thought," "Your second thought"). They were told to enter one thought per box and ignore capitalization, grammar, or spelling. Two independent raters coded each thought on the basis of its valence for the brand ( $-1 =$  negative,  $0 =$  neutral,  $1 =$  positive;  $r_s > .72$ ).

Next, participants indicated their likelihood of purchasing the products using three items (e.g., "I would buy from this brand if I were to buy the product mentioned in the advertisement"; 1 = "not likely at all," and 7 = "very likely";  $\alpha = .97$ ). Finally, they completed the underlying process measures. They evaluated their knowledge about the brand using three items (e.g., "How much do you know about the brand and what it is like after watching this ad?"; 1 = "not at all," and 7 = "extremely";  $\alpha = .80$ ). They also completed a four-item scale (adapted from Campbell 1995) measuring inferences about persuasion attempts (e.g., "The way the ad tries to persuade seems acceptable to me," "The advertiser tried to be persuasive without being excessively manipulative";  $\alpha = .69$ ).

#### Results

A 3 (ad type: emotional integral vs. emotional nonintegral vs. informative)  $\times$  2 (product category: hand soap vs. swimwear)

analysis of variance was conducted on the various dependent measures. As we expected, we observed no main effects or interactions ( $F_s < .6$ ,  $p_s > .5$ ) resulting from product category, so we collapsed across this factor for all further analyses.

**Sharing.** As we predicted, compared with emotional nonintegral ads ( $M = 4.01$ ), emotional integral ads did not decrease willingness to share ( $M = 4.16$ ;  $F < .2$ ,  $p > .6$ ; Figure 6). Compared with informative ads ( $M = 2.97$ ), however, as we expected, both emotional integral ads ( $M = 4.16$ ;  $F(1, 146) = 10.40$ ,  $p = .002$ ) and emotional nonintegral ads ( $M = 4.01$ ;  $F(1, 146) = 7.32$ ,  $p = .008$ ) increased willingness to share.

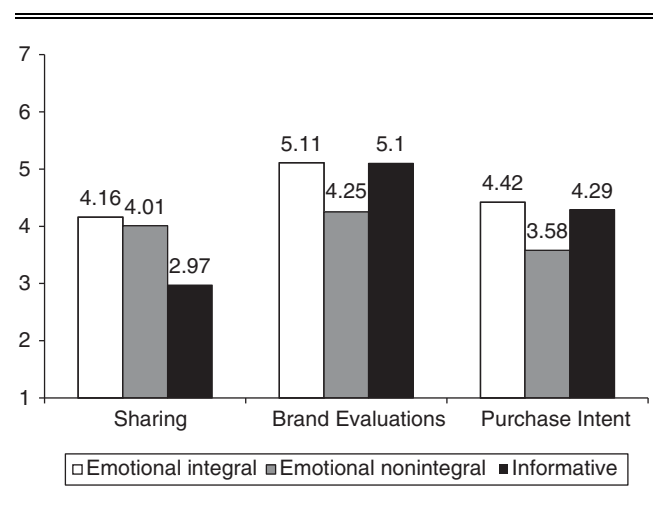
**Brand-related outcomes.** As we predicted, compared with emotional nonintegral ads ( $M = 4.25$ ), both informative ( $M = 5.10$ ;  $F(1, 146) = 8.46$ ,  $p = .004$ ) and emotional integral ads ( $M = 5.11$ ;  $F(1, 146) = 9.29$ ,  $p = .003$ ) increased brand evaluation. Emotional integral ads and informative ads did not differ ( $F < .1$ ,  $p > .9$ ; Figure 6).

Thought listings showed similar effects. Compared with emotional nonintegral ads ( $M = 28\%$ ), participants had more positive thoughts about the brand if they watched emotional integral ads ( $M = 51\%$ ;  $\chi^2 = 6.34$ ,  $p < .05$ ) or informative ads ( $M = 46\%$ ;  $\chi^2 = 3.42$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Further, participants who watched emotional integral ads ( $M = 72\%$ ) had fewer negative thoughts about the brand than people who watched emotional nonintegral ads ( $M = 13\%$ ;  $\chi^2 = 5.67$ ,  $p < .05$ ) or informative ads ( $M = 17\%$ ;  $\chi^2 = 3.64$ ,  $p = .053$ ). These findings provide further evidence that making brands an integral part of the story boosts brand evaluations.

Results were the same for purchase intent (Figure 6). Compared with emotional nonintegral ads ( $M = 3.58$ ), both informative ( $M = 4.29$ ;  $F(1, 146) = 4.68$ ,  $p = .032$ ) and emotional integral ads ( $M = 4.42$ ;  $F(1, 146) = 6.81$ ,  $p = .01$ ) increased purchase likelihood. Emotional integral ads and informative ads did not differ ( $F < .2$ ,  $p > .6$ ). Taken together, although informative and emotional ads had positive effects on different dependent measures, emotional integral ads combined both benefits, boosting both shares and brand-related outcomes.

**Testing the underlying processes.** We also tested whether the effect of appeal type on brand-related outcomes is driven

Figure 6  
HOW AD TYPE INFLUENCES SHARING AND BRAND-RELATED OUTCOMES (STUDY 3)



by inferences about persuasive attempts and brand knowledge. The results of two mediation analyses support our theorizing.

*Comparing emotional integral and emotional nonintegral ads.* Inferences about persuasion and brand knowledge simultaneously mediate the relationship between the ad type and brand evaluation (Figure 7, top). Compared with emotional nonintegral ads, emotional integral ads boost brand evaluation ( $\beta = .27, p < .001$ ). Emotional integral appeals generate more positive inferences about persuasive attempts ( $M_{\text{emotional integral}} = 4.16$  vs.  $M_{\text{emotional nonintegral}} = 3.68$ ;  $F(1, 99) = 3.84, p = .053$ ) and also increase brand knowledge ( $M_{\text{emotional integral}} = 4.10$  vs.  $M_{\text{emotional nonintegral}} = 3.35$ ;  $F(1, 99) = 3.69, p = .057$ ). Further, both inferences about persuasion ( $\beta = .45, p < .001$ ) and brand knowledge ( $\beta = .56, p < .001$ ) are linked to brand evaluation. Finally, simultaneous mediation analysis (Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007), including both inferences about persuasion and brand knowledge, shows that both mediators drive brand evaluation (95% confidence intervals [CIs] for the total indirect effect = (.11, .96)).

*Comparing informative and emotional nonintegral ads.* We find similar results comparing informative and emotional nonintegral ads (Figure 7, bottom). As we have shown, compared with emotional nonintegral ads, informative ads boost brand evaluation ( $\beta = .28, p < .001$ ). They also generate more positive inferences about persuasive attempts ( $M_{\text{informative}} = 4.45$  vs.  $M_{\text{emotional nonintegral}} = 3.68$ ;  $F(1, 93) = 12.33, p < .005$ ) and increase brand knowledge ( $M_{\text{informative}} = 4.01$  vs.  $M_{\text{emotional nonintegral}} = 3.35$ ;  $F(1, 92) = 2.82, p = .09$ ). Both inferences about persuasion ( $\beta = .48, p < .001$ ) and brand knowledge ( $\beta = .52, p < .001$ ) are linked to brand evaluation. Finally, simultaneous mediation analysis (Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007), including both inferences about persuasion and brand knowledge, shows that both mediators drive brand evaluation (95% CIs for the total indirect effect = (.40, 1.23)).

Note that the mediation results persist controlling for ad evaluations (emotional integral vs. emotional nonintegral:

95% CI = (.06, .75); emotional nonintegral vs. informative: 95% CI = (.46, 1.33)).<sup>8</sup> Thus, although ad evaluation is positively linked to brand evaluation (emotional integral vs. emotional nonintegral:  $\beta = .37, p < .001$ ; emotional nonintegral vs. informative:  $\beta = .28, p < .005$ ), our effects persist even when we control for this relationship.

### Discussion

Study 3 supports our theorizing and provides deeper insights into the processes behind the observed effects. First, extending the findings of the Studies 1 and 2, Study 3 demonstrates that emotional appeals boost sharing but do not always benefit the brands that create them. By making the brand more integral to the narrative, however, emotional appeals, like informative appeals, can boost brand evaluation and purchase (and lead to more positive thoughts about the brands). By controlling for ad content, we confirm that the effects were not due to the specific ads we created but to appeal type.

Second, the fact that our brand evaluation measures show the same effects as standard thought listings demonstrates the generalizability of our effects and suggests that brand evaluations are made under high cognitive elaboration. These findings have implications for advertising literature showing that the moderating role of elaboration (i.e., central and peripheral) is key in understanding advertising effectiveness (Cacioppo and Petty 1981).

Third, we demonstrate that inferences about persuasion and brand knowledge simultaneously mediate the effects of ad type on brand-related outcomes. Because the brand is an integral part of the narrative, compared with emotional nonintegral appeals, emotional integral and informative ads create more favorable inferences about persuasive attempts. They also increase brand knowledge. These two factors in turn boost brand evaluation and purchase intent.

Further evidence of the benefits of emotional integral ads comes from examining the link between ad evaluation and brand evaluation. Research has suggested that favorable ad evaluations lead to favorable brand evaluations (Bagozzi, Gürhan-Canli, and Priester 2002; Pham, Geuens, and De Pelsmacker 2013), but our results show that the degree of transfer depends on appeal type ( $F(3, 139) = 26.75, p < .005$ ). The link between ad evaluation and brand evaluation is stronger for emotional integral ads ( $\beta = .83$ ;  $F(1, 47) = 106.64, p < .001$ ) than for emotional nonintegral ads ( $\beta = .53$ ;  $F(1, 45) = 17.57, p < .001$ ), which further suggests the importance of making brands integral to emotional appeals.

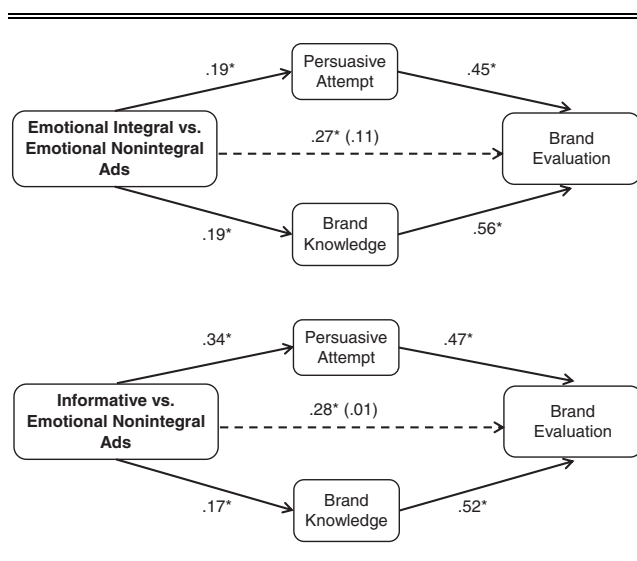
Note that we are not suggesting that emotional integral ads are always better. While the emotional integral and informative ads had similar effects on brand evaluation and purchase intent in this instance, in cases in which ads become even more informative, they may boost brand knowledge (and thus brand evaluations) even further. Thus, when brands do not care as much about ads being shared, informative ads can be a good way to bolster brand evaluations.

### Alternative Explanations

Ancillary analyses cast doubt on several alternative explanations for the effect, including level of processing and

Figure 7

PERSUASIVE ATTEMPT AND BRAND KNOWLEDGE  
SIMULTANEOUSLY MEDIATE BRAND EVALUATION (STUDY 3)



\* $p < .05$ .

<sup>8</sup>Participants ( $N = 149$ ) evaluated the ads using four seven-point scales (ad evaluation index: “bad–good,” “unfavorable–favorable,” “dislike–like,” and “negative–positive”;  $\alpha = .95$ ).

argument strength. One might wonder whether the processing level influenced our results. Research has shown that processing level (e.g., dual process framework; Chaiken and Trope 1999) can affect ad responses (Darke and Ritchie 2007). To test this possibility, participants ( $N = 101$ ) viewed one of the ads and rated three dimensions of processing level (adapted from Smith et al. 2007; amount of attention, motivation to process, and depth of processing). The different ad types, however, did not generate different levels of processing on any of the dimensions ( $F_s < 1$ ,  $p_s > .3$ ), which casts doubt on the possibility that different appeal types generated different levels of processing and that is what drove the results.

Alternatively, one could wonder whether certain ads conveyed stronger arguments, which could have boosted brand evaluations. To test this possibility, participants ( $N = 53$ ) were shown two of the six ads, and they rated the ads' argument strength (1 = "very weak," and 7 = "very strong"; adapted from Sanbonmatsu and Kardes 1988). It is important to note that some ads do not contain any explicit statements of product features but still provide arguments about the brand and/or features through its content. In Volkswagen's "Force" ad, for example, the remote locking feature is never explicitly mentioned but is implicitly shown as part of the story. To capture this, the instructions asked participants to consider arguments even if they were not stated explicitly; see Web Appendix B). The ads did not differ on argument strength ( $F < .8$ ,  $p > .4$ ), which casts doubt on the possibility that any differences between the ads can be attributed to the argument strength.

#### GENERAL DISCUSSION

Both academics and practitioners have become increasingly interested in virality. However, while it is clear that sharing can boost product adoption and sales, less is known about what makes content both viral and valuable to the brand that created it.

A combination of field data and laboratory experiments demonstrate how different advertising types (emotional vs. emotional nonintegral vs. informative) shape valuable virality. In particular, we show that different ad types affect shares and brand-related outcomes differently. Whereas emotional ads increase sharing compared with informative ads, informative ads bolster brand evaluation and purchase likelihood compared with emotional nonintegral ads. Emotional integral ads combine the benefits of both approaches: they encourage people to share while also boosting brand-related outcomes (by generating more positive inferences about persuasion attempts and increasing brand knowledge). Taken together, the findings demonstrate that emotional integral ads generate valuable virality. They increase sharing while also benefiting the brand.

The fact that we find consistent effects across a variety of methods underscores their generalizability. Whether examining aggregate data from hundreds of ads in the field (field observation), scale responses by in controlled laboratory experiments (Studies 1 and 3), or actual shares by individuals (Study 2), we find similar results. Combining tight laboratory experiments with field data enables us to rigorously test causality and underlying mechanisms while also demonstrating external validity and that these effects actually matter in the field.

#### CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

These findings make several contributions. First, we integrate work on both the causes and consequences of word of mouth, shedding light on what makes ads both viral and

valuable. Second, we deepen understanding around effective advertising. Although some work has suggested that emotional appeals should improve brand-related outcomes (Ang, Lee, and Leong 2007; Pieters, Warlop, and Wedel 2002), we demonstrate that this is only the case when the brand is integral to the plot. Further, while advertising research has studied brand-to-consumer relevance (e.g., how showing brands in familiar circumstances makes advertisements more personally relevant; Ang and Low 2000; Smith et al. 2007), brand integralness has received less attention, and making the brand integral to emotional appeals is not common practice (see the "Field Observation of Viral Ads" section). The little work on this topic that does exist has suggested that making brands more integral to television show plots reduces persuasion (Russell 2002) and may reduce shares (Teixeira 2012). In contrast, we demonstrate when and why integralness can actually be beneficial.

The results also have important marketing implications, providing a useful reminder about how to design effective ads in the new viral context. The interactive nature of the web has changed the way many marketers advertise. Rather than focusing on information, marketers have gravitated toward funny and more engaging appeals. Yet in the rush to make the brand a less prominent part of the narrative, something may be lost. Indeed, the brand was a highly integral part of the message in less than 20% of the ads we surveyed.

Emotional appeals that maintain the brand as an integral part of the message may be the best way to go. In the Blendtec's "Will It Blend" campaign, for example, it is impossible to tell the story of the ad in which the blender shreds an iPhone without talking about the blender. Making the product integral to the narrative not only encourages people to remember the ad is for a blender but also increases the chances that people talking about the ad will mention that fact as a key detail. More than 150 million people have shared the "Will It Blend" campaign, and most videos from this campaign have over 10 million views. However, while the videos almost never directly mention the product features, these features are key to the narrative (i.e., a blender must be really powerful to be able to shred an iPhone). In addition, in the year the campaign was released, sales increased 43% (Lorber 2007). While this is just one example, it suggests the potential benefits of emotional integral ads. Overall, our work deepens understanding around why people share content and sheds light on how managers can make their own campaigns both viral and valuable.

#### LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

As with most research, this work has limitations. Given the observational nature of the field data, it is difficult to demonstrate causality. Further, although we collected a reasonably large sample of ads, one could argue that they are not representative of all product categories, or that the sample is not large enough in each category to demonstrate category differences. That said, the fact that the results are consistent with our theorizing, even when we controlled for a variety of ad- and brand-related factors, provides some support for our conceptualization in the field.

Our experiments demonstrate causality and rule out alternative mechanisms, but they also have limitations. Following the standard procedure in literature (Tucker 2015) and practice (e.g., InsightExpress) to measure advertising outcomes, we used reported purchase intent and brand evaluation. Although

survey responses do not perfectly measure purchase, they are highly correlated (Morwitz, Steckel, and Gupta 2007) and widely used. We also use willingness-to-share measures, which, while not perfect, are commonly used in word-of-mouth research and correlated with actual shares.<sup>9</sup> The fact that we find similar results in both aggregate field data (field observation) and real sharing at an individual level (Study 2) provides further external validity.

Limitations aside, this work suggests several interesting questions for further research. Future studies might more deeply examine how brand presence affects both shares and brand-related outcomes. Our preliminary evidence suggests that presence may hurt shares. However, some ads show the brand only at the end, whereas others show the brand throughout the clip. One might imagine that the link between the brand and the creative content becomes weaker when the brand is shown during only one part of the commercial. That said, showing branding throughout may reduce consumer willingness to share. Similarly, although only showing the brand at the end may seem beneficial in some ways (e.g., by reducing overt branding), it may lead consumers to view advertisers as even more manipulative when the brand is not relevant to the ad content. Consequently, as our mediational evidence indicates, inference about persuasion is a key component to consider.

Research could also examine different ways to create emotional appeals and explore when one type versus another is more effective. The most common emotion used by video ads is happiness (Unruly 2016), but negative emotions (e.g., anger) can also boost sharing if they are high arousal (Berger 2011; Berger and Milkman 2012). Might certain characteristics of emotions (e.g., valence, arousal) facilitate brand integralness while also bolstering brand-related outcomes? Further research could examine how different types of emotional appeals could generate both shares and value for the brand.

It would also be worthwhile to more deeply examine the relationship between our findings and traditional advertising grids (e.g., the Rossiter–Percy [1997] grid). Such grids suggest that providing product information is key for low-involvement and utilitarian products and that emotional appeals are not as important. However, is that approach still the most effective when sharing is taken into account? The hand soap we examined in Study 1 is low involvement, yet the emotional integral ads had effects similar to the informative ad on brand-related outcomes while also boosting sharing, which should help the brand in the long run. Further, our field observation suggests that although ads for high-involvement products are shared less, brand integralness for those ads might boost shares. Future work might examine whether the recommendations of traditional advertising grids still hold when sharing is considered and how emotional appeals that integrate the brand into the narrative fit into these theories.

We focused on brand-related outcomes such as evaluations and purchase intent, but subsequent work might also consider earlier parts of the consumer decision journey. For some advertisers, the goal of shares may not be to bolster brand

evaluation but to increase exposure and thus raise awareness and accessibility. Even if they are less effective at boosting evaluations, for example, highly shared ads may still be beneficial because they expose a broader range of people to the brand. Future research could examine the effect of viral ads on different brand-related outcomes in a more integrated way.

Finally, it would also be useful to consider how word-of-mouth drivers may vary based on whether content is consumer or company generated. One reason word of mouth is more effective than advertising is that consumers trust their peers more because consumers know that brands are self-interested. Thus, word of mouth should be more credible and lead to less negative persuasion inferences. However, companies are beginning to encourage consumers to generate advertisements, blurring the line between consumer- and company-generated content. Although such ads are consumer created, they are solicited and curated by the brand, which should make consumers more likely to make negative persuasive inferences. That said, consumer-created ads might still be more effective than purely company-generated content. Further research could examine whether cocreation by consumers leads to less negative inferences and more valuable virality.

In conclusion, this research illustrates how content characteristics shape valuable virality. We shed light on content characteristics that not only drive people to share the ad but also benefit the brand.

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<sup>9</sup>A supplementary analysis also collected information on likelihood of sharing for videos for a randomly selected subset of 50 out of the original 240 videos from our field observation. The willingness-to-share measure is reasonably correlated with actual shares ( $r = .37, p < .005$ ), which suggests that willingness-to-share measures are a reasonable way to test our hypotheses.

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