When Brand Representatives Act as Sales Associates: Mechanisms and Effects of Native Selling and its Disclosure

By Johanna Held, Maximilian Stieler, Claas Christian Germelmann and Laurence Ashworth

This research paper investigates consumer reactions when retailers and brands jointly employ a potentially deceptive sales tactic we term native selling. Native selling describes the use of brand representatives who act as sales personnel in retail stores. We investigate whether consumers are aware of this tactic, how they respond when they discover it has been employed, and whether disclosing the tactic improves consumer reactions. Drawing from research on persuasion knowledge, we predict that consumers will generally view the tactic as deceptive and thus respond negatively both to the store and brand when they believe the tactic is being used. However, we also find that consumers almost never suspect the tactic when it is not disclosed. Finally, we find that when consumers are informed of the tactic, they feel more rather than less deceived. Implications for retailers and brands are discussed.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of “Native Selling”

Imagine the following example: a friend of yours is interested in buying a new dishwasher. She goes to a consumer electronics store and wants to get advice on different models from various brands. She encounters a very helpful salesperson and buys a dishwasher accordingly. When you see your friend, you tell her about a newspaper report you read a few days ago about how some consumer electronics stores use brand representatives instead of their own sales personnel to give their customers advice. You ask her if she was aware of this tactic. She was not, and is now uncertain about the salesperson’s motives and the choice she made based on the sales advice she received. This paper investigates the consequences of this potentially misleading sales tactic.

A good deal of research has noted that consumers come to learn about and develop opinions of the persuasive tactics that marketers use. This has been labelled consumers’ “persuasion knowledge” (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Friestad and Wright 1994). One of the central findings of this stream of work is that consumers frequently respond negatively to tactics that they identify as persuas-
sion attempts because this highlights the firm’s or salesperson’s ulterior motives (e.g., Campbell and Kirmani 2000; DeCarlo 2005; Main et al. 2007). We build on these ideas to investigate consumer reactions to “native selling”, the term we use to describe the use of brand representatives on the sales floor. We use this terminology because of the similarity to “native advertising”, which refers to attempts to make advertising content look like the medium in which it is placed (Akdoğan and Altuntaş 2015; Wojdynski and Evans 2016). Our central suggestion is that consumers react to native selling for reasons that go beyond just perceiving an ulterior motive. Specifically, we suggest that consumers perceive native selling as an attempt to hide an ulterior motive. As such, we predict that native selling, when consumers are aware of the tactic, is likely to be perceived as a deceptive persuasion tactic. Like native advertising and other hidden or disguised tactics, however, we also suspect that native selling is often hard to detect in typical retail settings, and that it is likely subject to different degrees of disclosure. Consequently, we investigate the extent to which customers seem to be aware of native selling and their reactions to it when they find out the tactic has been used. We also examine their reactions to disclosure by the brand, and, in particular, whether this can help alleviate consumers’ predicted negative reactions to the tactic.

This paper contributes to the literature in a number of ways. First, existing work on brand representatives is relatively sparse. To our knowledge, the only study that investigates the role of manufacturer-hired sales agents focuses on information asymmetries and how they affect the entire supply chain (Khanjari et al. 2014). The current work contributes to the understanding of this topic by examining consumers’ reactions to this tactic. Second, although the potential negative effects of native advertising have been acknowledged in consumer research (Schauster et al. 2016), neither the specific retail context, nor disclosure as a potential means of lessening these negative effects has been considered in retailing and consumer research. Third, we contribute to the development of disclosure strategies for marketers, as these are often the target of public policy measures that address potentially misleading tactics. From a managerial point of view, we investigate strategies to reduce the negative impact of native selling by examining how upfront disclosure by the marketer compares to situations in which consumers learn about native selling independently. In a real-world setting, consumers may not have heard about native selling before they encounter this tactic. However, they may be informed about the existence of native selling during the sales episode, or later (e.g., by reading media reports). From a practical viewpoint, then, understanding what happens when consumers learn about deceptive sales tactics is crucial. In our paper, we address the following research questions:

- Are consumers aware of native selling tactics in a sales encounter?
- How do consumers respond when they discover that native selling has been employed?
- Does disclosing native selling lessen consumers’ predicted negative reactions?

We develop a framework for predicting consumers’ responses to native selling based on the literature on selling tactics, persuasion knowledge, and the effects of disclosing information to consumers. We then test our hypotheses with two experiments. Overall, we find that native selling can seriously reduce persuasion in sales encounters and that it harms attitudes toward both the retailer and brand. We also find that disclosure of native selling does little to lessen these negative effects. Finally, we offer strategic advice for retailers and brand manufacturers.

1.2. The Managerial Basis of “Native Selling”

Manufacturing firms are constantly looking for strategies to increase brand advocacy by retail sales personnel (Gillespie et al. 2016; Hughes and Ahearne 2010). One strategy manufacturers have started exploring is that of bypassing retail sales personnel completely by offering their own brand representatives to provide advice in stores (Fuchs und Gohlke 2014). These representatives are employed alongside the store’s regular sales personnel, making recommendations and giving advice directly to customers. The benefits to brand manufacturers are clear – they can place a brand advocate in direct contact with customers, bypassing the difficult and costly task of training store salespeople to become knowledgeable about the brand or otherwise encouraging brand advocacy (Gillespie et al. 2016; Hughes and Ahearne 2010). In contrast, regular salespeople – those employed by the store – must represent, and provide information about all of the brands in the store, and they may already identify with or promote certain brands (Badrinarayana and Laverie 2011, 2013; Hughes and Ahearne 2010). Thus, placing brand representatives in retail gives manufacturers a new opportunity to influence customers directly at the point of sale.

This practice, however, is not always made clear to customers. Brand representatives often look very similar to their store-employed counterparts and do not always explicitly reveal their affiliation. As such, this tactic resembles native advertising in print and online media, where advertisements are designed to have the same format as their surrounding content, masquerading as content and hiding their ulterior motive (Wojdynski 2016). Consequently, we employ the term “native selling” to refer to this sales tactic. We define native selling as the use of in-store personnel that resemble the retailer’s sales personnel, but who are paid or sponsored by a manufacturer. Typically, native selling strategies are designed to promote only the manufacturer’s brand, and not competing brands. Moreover, the level of disclosure can vary in terms of format and detectability (ARD 2016).
2. Theoretical background

Since not all consumers are aware of native selling, we are interested in what happens when they learn that their salesperson is not employed by the store, but by the brand. We draw on persuasion knowledge theory (Friestad and Wright 1994) to explain consumer knowledge about and handling of misleading sales strategies, and reactions when these strategies are disclosed. We predict that brand representatives may prove problematic because consumers are likely to view this tactic, not only as a deliberate attempt to influence their decision in favour of a particular brand, but, when it is not disclosed, as a deceptive tactic. The heightened persuasion knowledge then explains consumers’ subsequent negative responses to native selling. In contrast, honest disclosure of the salespeople’s affiliation may undo the predicted negative effects of the deception, but not of the ulterior motive.

2.1. Disclosure of persuasive marketing tactics

In order to identify a persuasive attempt, cope with it and use the agent knowledge a person possesses, persuasion knowledge must be activated. “Persuasion knowledge consists of various beliefs, such as determining which persuasion tactics marketers use; (...) which tactics are effective or appropriate in different situations; and what the firms’ goals and motives are.” (Kirmani and Zhu 2007, p. 689). Persuasion knowledge is activated when a change of meaning occurs (Williams et al. 2004). Change of meaning takes place when consumers’ persuasion knowledge helps them to understand that a marketer’s action was used as a persuasive tactic (Campbell and Kirmani 2008). Key to the activation of persuasion knowledge is consumers’ perception that a persuasive tactic has been employed, and not whether the marketer actually intended to persuade. Persuasion knowledge can be internally or externally activated. Internal activation can occur due to changes in consumers’ persuasion knowledge based on previous experiences (Friestad and Wright 1994). External activation is based on third party information that helps consumers think about actions as persuasive tactics (Campbell and Kirmani 2008).

From this perspective, there are two possibilities in terms of how consumers react to persuasion attempts. When consumers do not identify a persuasion tactic as such, they react to the tactic and to the marketer without being influenced by their persuasion knowledge (Koslow 2000). In contrast, when a tactic activates their persuasion knowledge, consumers will take into account the perceived appropriateness (e.g., fairness and respectfulness) of the tactic, as well as their beliefs about the effectiveness of the persuasion attempt, when assessing both the persuasive claims and the marketer (Friestad and Wright 1994). The literature on corrective advertising of deceptive marketing tactics explains what happens when consumers are made aware of a marketer’s persuasive attempt. Johar (1996) looked at the effect of corrective advertising on evaluations of the advertiser. The corrective ad in Johar’s experiments explained to participants how consumers were misled by a false implication claim in the original advertisement. That is, the corrective ad made consumers aware of the marketing tactic employed. Consumers then regarded the ad as persuasive or even deceptive. This resulted in a worse impression for consumers who had previously held the advertiser in high regard. For those who already had a negative opinion of the advertiser, there was no effect (Johar 1996). Darke et al. (2008) also found that corrective advertising had a negative effect on attitudes toward the brand. In contrast to Johar’s (1996) findings, these results were independent of prior advertiser evaluation. Both studies used fictitious brands.

Xie (2016) introduced participants to a prime with disclosing information about the persuasiveness of an ad and the tactics used to influence consumers. Participants who did not see the disclosure prime rated the ad’s influence on their purchase intention higher than those who saw the prime (Xie 2016). In line with these findings, Xie et al. (2014) also found that disclosing information about an ad’s persuasive tactics led to lower purchase intentions. In sum, the findings indicated that, in the presence of any type of disclosing information, the original message is seen as a persuasion tactic, and consumers saw the persuasive advertiser in a more negative light than before.

2.2. Persuasion knowledge and inappropriate selling tactics

Marketplace interactions between marketers and consumers have always been characterized by being obscure for the consumer. Marketers try to take advantage of information asymmetry as customers are usually uninformed, and they potentially influence the customer’s well-being and welfare negatively (Boush et al. 2009). Some influence techniques are more sales-oriented (e.g., purchase prompting), whereas others are more customer-oriented (e.g., helpful behaviours) (Mallalieu 2006). Selling-oriented salespeople are likely to use more persuasive communication in order to complete a deal and achieve their own goals (Saxe and Weitz 1982). Although this approach is associated with dissatisfaction with the salesperson (Goff et al. 1997), persuasive communication of some kind is likely to be used in sales encounters.

Consumers are likely to perceive sales-oriented communication and behaviours such as ‘social validation’, ‘limited supply’ and ‘buy now’ (Mallalieu 2006) as an underlying persuasive attempt, and they devalue these tactics accordingly. Research has shown that persuasive strategies such as flattery (Campbell and Kirmani 2000), the use of rhetorical questions (Ahlwalia and Burnkrant 2004), and expensive default options (Brown and Krishna 2004) can also activate persuasion knowledge and scepticism toward the persuasive attempt. Salience of ulterior motives is higher; consumers are thus more suspi-
cious of the sales tactic and have a negative response to the salesperson’s persuasive attempts (DeCarlo 2005). For example, customer knowledge about a salesperson’s pay (commission vs. straight salary) has an impact on their perception of salespeople’s honesty, as customers consider commissions an incentive for salespersons to employ more persuasive tactics in the sales encounter (Straughan and Lynn 2002).

Drawing on the literature above, it becomes evident that customers access persuasion knowledge in retail situations to protect themselves from being fooled. Campell and Kirmani (2000), for example, showed that salesperson flattery could make consumers suspicious. This, in turn, led to more negative attitudes towards the salesperson. They also showed that use of persuasion knowledge depended on the accessibility of the motive and consumer’s cognitive capacity. Awareness of persuasive attempts in sales encounters is specifically high when salespeople use sales-oriented strategies, specifically those that promote taking action or making a choice (Mallalieu 2006). Then, consumers may become sceptical about the persuasive sales tactic. If consumers respond to sales strategies with scepticism because they assume that the salesperson has ulterior motives, they are likely to respond to advice in a negative manner (Campbell and Kirmani 2008). Beyond that, consumers can automatically react to persuasive attempts even if ulterior motives are not salient (Main et al. 2007).

For native selling, we assume that most consumers will affiliate the salesperson with the store, and that making consumers aware of native selling (either with a truthful name tag, or by disclosing information) will lead to a less positive attitude towards the store and the brand and reduced purchase intention. As the literature review suggests, the type of information that makes consumers aware of the tactic does not seem to result in different consumer reactions, as long as the information is perceived.

**H1: Awareness of native selling reduces purchase intentions and leads to less positive attitudes toward the store and brand.**

When consumers learn that the salesperson is not employed by the retailer, but by a brand, we suppose that persuasion knowledge will be activated and they will find the tactic deceptive. Native selling is a sales strategy that potentially evokes persuasion knowledge as customers might assume there are ulterior motives behind the strategy if they are aware of it. In this case, the ulterior motive would be an attempt on the salesperson’s part to sell more products of one particular brand and thus take advantage of the customer’s lack of awareness. The use of regular store sales personnel is a norm, and based on this norm persuasive attempts can be judged by customers. To the extent that consumers believe that information about the actual salesperson’s background has been concealed, they may also see the tactic as deceptive. Since an activation of persuasion knowledge leads to negative judgment about the sales advice and the brands in question, we propose a mediating role of persuasion knowledge. We suppose that the feeling of being deceived, which is caused by the use of this misleading tactic, is the mechanism underlying consumers’ subsequent responses. We detail this in the following sections.

**H2: The negative effect of native selling on purchase intentions and attitudes is mediated by perceptions of the persuasion tactic and, specifically, the extent to which it is considered deceptive in nature (i.e., a persuasion knowledge effect).**

### 2.3. Disclosure and Honesty about native selling

Trust has been found to be an important feature of sales force effectiveness (Swan et al. 1999; Swan and Nolan 1985). Customers consider honesty – or the salesperson’s genuine interest in their concerns – as a component of trust and core moral value (Schwepker 2003).

Honest communication can be achieved by disclosing the salesperson’s background (e.g., by putting the brand’s name on the name tag and informing customers of the salesperson’s background). By openly communicating the use of native selling, the agent’s motives are no longer hidden and the tactic is perceived as less deceptive. Upfront disclosure is only perceived as less deceptive when comparing responses among all customers who are aware about native selling. Without information about native selling, consumers perceive a dishonest name tag (e.g., the retailer’s logo on the nametag of a brand sales person) as less deceptive, because they assume a normal sales situation, where the salesperson is employed by the retailer. With a brand name tag, consumers become aware of native selling and lower their positive response toward the companies. After all consumers are made aware of native selling, the retailer’s logo or ‘name only’ name tag backfires and these two name tags elicit more negative responses.

Taking this together, we assume:

**H3: Once consumers are aware of the use of native selling, an honest name tag (i.e., full disclosure) leads to a better evaluation of the brand than a dishonest and neutral name tag.**

### 2.4. Theoretical summary

Our integrative framework, shown in **Fig. 1**, is based on theoretical considerations from the various streams of literature explained in the previous sections. Awareness of native selling as the main independent variable is placed at the beginning of the model. In the current paper, we investigate consumers’ responses to native selling as a novel tactic. We further analyse this strategy in the presence/absence of disclosure. We thus compare the responses of consumers who are aware of the tactic of native selling with those who are not. Consumers can be made aware of native selling through open disclosure, which includes honest and upfront communication by the
marketer, or with any other information about the tactic. Additionally, this paper compares the responses to different levels of disclosure about native selling. Our study adds to the existing literature by showing the underlying mechanisms of native selling. We integrate native selling as a sales strategy into the persuasion knowledge model and analyse the tactic’s consequences for both the brand and the retailer. Based on studies about inappropriate marketing techniques, we assume that awareness about native selling leads to more negative responses towards the brands. We assume that an activation of persuasion knowledge, by making consumers aware of the tactic, leads consumers to feel deceived, which is then the underlying mechanism for the more negative responses towards the marketers. Consumers who are made aware of the tactic feel more deceived than consumers who are unaware of it. This effect can be compensated by an upfront disclosure about native selling.

3. Empirical studies

Two experiments address our hypotheses and test our theoretical framework. In both experiments, we manipulated disclosure of native selling by using name tags with different information about the salesperson’s background. Experiment 1 focuses on the reactions towards the different types of disclosure and analyses whether name tags alone can make consumers aware of native selling. Awareness of native selling as our main independent variable was then manipulated in the second experiment. Experiment 2 compares consumers’ who were made aware of native selling with those who were not. Consequently, explanations for the underlying process of consumers’ reactions will be given.

3.1. Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, we looked at the characteristics of native selling from a customer perspective. Since there is not yet any research on this specific sales strategy, we manipulated different name tags and investigated how consumers perceived them and the native selling tactic in general. The name tags varied in the degree of honesty about the salesperson’s background. This procedure gave us the opportunity to learn more about the tactic before analysing its consequences.

3.1.1. Method Experiment 1

One-hundred and seventeen participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions: 4 (Disclosure: Name Only, Name and Store, Name and Brand, Control) x 1 study. The manipulations can be found in Tab. A1 in the appendix. The study was conducted in May 2014 in Germany. Twenty-seven cases were deleted because those participants did not finish the survey and one participant answered inconsistently on the reverse coded items. Of the remaining 89 cases, 56 % were female, 29 % were students, and the mean age was 33. We confronted participants with a sales encounter scenario at a consumer electronics store (in the following, the terms consumer electronics store and retailer are used interchangeably). We used coffee makers as product category, because face-to-face advice was deemed particularly important for this category (a pre-test indicated 4.63 on a seven-point scale). Furthermore, products in this category are relatively high priced. We used a high-priced product to increase monetary relevance for participants. An unknown brand was used to avoid prior associations with the brand and the firm’s reputation (Darke et al. 2008).

Participants completed an online survey in which they were asked to imagine being interested in buying a new coffee maker for 800 €. They imagined going to a consumer electronics retail store and receiving face-to-face advice from a salesperson. Participants were shown a picture of a female salesperson with a name tag that showed the salesperson’s name only (Name Only, N = 19), the salesperson’s name, and the coffee brand’s name and logo (Name and Brand, N = 25), or the salesperson’s name and the consumer electronics store’s name and logo (Name and Store, N = 26). In the Control condition (N = 19), respondents did not see any picture, but just written information that the salesperson was employed by the brand and not the store (disclosure of native selling). After the initial manipulation, participants indicated whether they thought the salesperson worked for (disclosure check), to what extent they felt tricked and fooled (Darke and Ritchie 2007, p. 118) by the brand (two items, $\alpha = .97$) and the retailer (two items, $\alpha = .92$), and the degree to which they felt deceived by the advice situation (four items, $\alpha = .90$) (adapted from Darke and Ritchie 2007). After this section, all participants read a newspaper article that explained native selling.

![Fig. 1: Theoretical framework](https://doi.org/10.15358/0344-1369-2017-1-44)
In this experiment, we opted for a newspaper article that did not convey the information in a neutral way, since consumers are likely to get informed about native selling as a sales tactic through media content such as TV shows about consumer protection (ARD 2016) or newspaper articles (Fuchs und Gohlke 2014). More precisely, the newspaper article in our study disclosed that consumers get the feeling they received neutral advice, but the salesperson was actually employed by the brand. The last sentence of the article described the type of label the salesperson wore and was matched to each condition. The label described in the newspaper text varied across conditions to fit the label participants had actually seen on the picture of the salesperson. Before this point, the Name and Store condition was not deceptive at all for participants and looked like a usual sales advice situation. Participants were then asked again to describe the extent to which they felt deceived by the advice situation (four items, \( \alpha = .80 \)) (Darke and Ritchie 2007). All items were measured on a seven-point scale and are listed in Tab. A2 in the appendix.

### 3.1.2. Results of Experiment 1

The manipulation check showed that consumers expected the salesperson to work for the store. In the Name and Store and Name Only conditions, no one thought the salesperson worked for the coffee brand. In contrast, 56% of participants in the Name and Brand condition thought the salesperson worked for the coffee brand. Thirty-two per cent supposed the salesperson worked for the consumer electronics store. The remaining 12% did not remember it. The low recognition rates for the salesperson’s affiliation indicate that a brand name tag alone is not sufficient to disclose the use of native selling. Since consumers do not pay much attention to the name tag, we can conclude that consumers in general do not question the salesperson’s affiliation. Also, a brand name tag is not sufficient for honest and upfront communication. What is more, the use of a brand name tag resulted in consumers feeling they were being fooled to the same degree as with a media report upfront about native selling. It seems that an honest (Name and Brand) name tag does not lead to a more positive evaluation than a dishonest (Name and Store) or misleading (Name Only) name tag. Rather, an honest name tag even leads to worse evaluations. This finding only holds true if consumers are not exposed to further information about native selling.

### 3.1.3. Discussion of Experiment 1

The results indicate that native selling is not yet a well-known sales tactic among consumers. No one in the Name Only name tag condition thought the salesperson worked for the brand. Thus, no participant was sceptical of the salesperson’s affiliation. In our study, we used a regular sized name tag, which made the situation more realistic. Therefore, only 56% of participants detected the salesperson’s background correctly. One third of participants thought the salesperson worked for the electronics store, as they either did not see the name tag or did not remember it. The low recognition rates for the salesperson’s affiliation indicate that a brand name tag alone is not sufficient to disclose the use of native selling.

### Table 1: Results Experiment 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Full Disclosure (Brand Name)</th>
<th>No Disclosure (Name Only)</th>
<th>No Disclosure (Store Name)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed by the electronics store</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed by the brand</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name Only and Name and Store condition</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fooled and tricked by the electronics store</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fooled and tricked by the coffee brand</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceived by the advice situation (four items)</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>5.66</td>
<td>13.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 1: Results Experiment 1

\( \chi^2 (4) = 33.5, p < .001 \). In the Name Only and Name and Store conditions, people supposed that the salesperson worked for the consumer electronics store equally often (name only 89.5%, name and retail store brand logo 92.3%). The remaining participants did not remember at all who the salesperson worked for, or opted for brands other than the coffee brand or the electronics store. All means can be found in Tab. 1. Due to their similarities, we combined the Name Only and Name and Store conditions in subsequent analyses. An independent \( t \)-test revealed that, prior to reading the newspaper article, participants in the combined Name Only and Name and Store condition felt less tricked and fooled by the consumer electronics store (M = 1.93) than people in the Name and Brand condition (M = 3.68) (\( t(41) = -3.32, p = .001, r = .47 \)). The same was true for feeling fooled and tricked by the brand. Participants in the control group felt fooled and tricked by the brand (\( M_{st} = 3.12 \)) and the electronics store (\( M_{el} = 3.68 \)) to the same extent as participants in the Name and Brand condition (\( M_{nb} = 3.26 \); \( t(34) = -.23, p = .82; M_{ss} = 3.44; t(36) = -.38, p = .71 \)). No difference was found between groups regarding consumers’ feelings of deception relating to the advice situation (ANOVA results: \( F(1, 62) = 57.96, p = .43 \)).
We expect that when native selling is reported by the media, consumers will appreciate an honest name tag. Experiment 2 should thus clarify the differences between consumers who learn about native selling by an external source and those who do not.

Contrary to our expectations in this experiment, participants in all groups felt equally deceived by the advice situation before disclosure. The difference between groups is only non-significant when taking all participants in the Name and Brand condition together. When only analysing those who correctly remembered the salesperson to be employed by the brand and comparing them to the other two groups, they felt more deceived. This goes in line with the findings on being fooled and tricked by the brand and the retailer, and leads to worse evaluations of the honest (Name and Brand) name tag. In contrast to our predictions, we did not find an effect between groups on feelings of being deceived by the advice situation after the media report. Even when only analysing participants who correctly remembered the brand salesperson, an honest name tag still left participants feeling deceived as much as participants who saw a dishonest or misleading name tag. With Study 2, we had a more detailed look at this effect. Consumers felt equally fooled by the brand and the retailer, suggesting consumers do not differentiate between the brand and retailer. When analysing the consequences of native selling, it is thus important to keep in mind that the tactic affects both parties equally.

In sum, for companies that use brand sales personnel, it appeared not to matter how these employees were labelled. Even when the retailer truthfully disclosed the salesperson’s affiliation (with a brand name tag), consumers felt as deceived as when they read about native selling. All types of native selling appeared to lead to a high level of feeling deceived. Even if the retailer and the brand acted correctly from a legal perspective by printing the brand’s logo on the name tag, consumers perceived this procedure as morally incorrect.

3.2. Experiment 2

Surprisingly, Study 1 showed that disclosure by a brand representative caused consumers to feel fooled relative to conditions in which they assumed the salesperson worked for the store and that native selling appeared to cause consumers to feel deceived regardless of whether the representative’s affiliation had been disclosed. However, there were two important limitations associated with these findings. First, only a subset of participants correctly recognized the representative worked for the brand in the full disclosure condition (56%). Thus, it is possible that the finding that even full disclosure was considered deceptive when participants were explicitly informed about native selling was distorted by those who had not noticed the disclosure. Second, Study 1 did not compare consumers who were aware of native selling with those who were not (all participants in Study 1 were informed about the use of native selling), which meant we had no direct evidence that native selling was considered deceptive, only the indirect evidence that full disclosure of the brand affiliation seemed to make participants feel more fooled than when they assumed the representative worked for the store. The purpose of Study 2 was to address both of these limitations.

We achieved this in a number of ways: first, to increase the chances that participants would notice disclosure, the image we showed focused on the representative’s name tag. As in Study 1, we manipulated this to include the representative’s name, their name and the store name, or their name and the brand name (Disclosure manipulation). When the name tag included the store name, it also indicated, “Sales Associate”. When the name tag included the brand name, it also indicated, “Brand Representative”. Together, these changes were designed to increase the likelihood that participants would notice exactly what was being disclosed on the name tag.

In addition, Study 2 independently manipulated whether participants were told that the representative in the scenario worked for the brand. Half of the participants in each of the different name tag conditions were told about native selling in general terms (i.e., that some stores do this) and, more specifically, that the representative in the scenario worked for the brand. The remaining participants were given no such information. Overall, this led to a 3 (Disclosure of Native Selling: Name Only, Name and Store, Name and Brand) x 2 (Awareness of Native Selling: Yes, No) between-subjects experimental design that allowed us to directly test the effects of native selling, as well as the impact of disclosure on consumers’ reactions to native selling.

3.2.1. Method Experiment 2

The experiment was conducted at a large university in Canada in November 2016. Two-hundred and ten undergraduate students participated in return for credit toward their course (61% female, average age 20.3 years old). Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 3 (Disclosure: Name Only, Name and Store, Name and Brand) x 2 (Awareness of Native Selling: Yes, No) between-subjects experimental design. As in Study 1, participants read a scenario in which they imagined that they were looking to purchase a coffee maker. They were told that they visited a large kitchen store and that, while they were browsing, a representative asked if they needed any help. Participants explained what they were looking for, at which point the representative recommended a particular brand and model.

Below the scenario, participants saw a picture of the name tag that the representative was wearing (see Tab. A2 in the appendix). As in Study 1, name tags included only the representative’s name; their name, the store name, and the words, “Sales Associate”; or their name, the brand name, and “Brand Representative” (Disclosure manipulation). In order to keep the name tags as similar as possible across conditions, the store/brand name dis-
played on the name tag was always the same – “Kitchen-Tech” – regardless of whether it referred to the store or the brand. When it referred to the store, the brand was labelled “Home Innovations”; when it referred to the brand, the store was labelled “Home Innovations”. In the Name Only condition, the brand was always, “Kitchen-Tech”. Both names were fictitious.

The scenario was immediately followed by the Awareness manipulation, in which half the participants were told that the representative worked for the brand (see Tab. A2). Participants who were not made aware did not receive this information. All participants then completed measures of the dependent variables, which included (in the following order): purchase intentions (two items, \( r = .59, p < .001 \)), attitude toward the brand and the store (each with three items), and perceptions of deception as measure of persuasion knowledge activation (same four items from Study 1, \( \alpha = .91 \)). A factor analysis in which we analysed all attitude items for the brand and the retailer together indicated all six items loaded on a single factor. Therefore, the attitude measures were combined into a single attitudinal index (\( \alpha = .92 \)). All measures were along seven-point scales.

### 3.2.2. Results of Experiment 2

All measures were analysed using 3 (Disclosure) x 2 (Awareness) ANOVAs. In order to test \( H1 \), we looked at the main effect of Awareness on the dependent variables. There were significant main effects of Awareness on purchase intentions and attitudes (\( F(1, 204) = 24.00 \) and \( 27.52, p < .001 \)). No other effects on these measures were significant. The main effect of Awareness indicated that being made aware of the native selling (vs. receiving no information) reduced purchase intentions (\( M_S = 4.49 \) vs. 5.20) and led to more negative attitudes towards the store/brand (\( M_S = 4.32 \) vs. 5.12). Consistent with \( H1 \), native selling had a negative effect on both purchase intentions and attitudes. Moreover, there was no evidence that disclosing being a brand representative affected consumers’ responses to the tactic (Awareness did not interact with Disclosure for either measure; \( F(2, 204) = .09 \) and \( .23, p > .10 \)).

In order to test \( H2 \), we analysed participants’ perceptions of the extent to which they felt deceived. As with the other measures, there was a significant main effect of Awareness (\( F(1, 204) = 64.38, p < .001 \)) that indicated participants felt more deceived when they were aware of the native selling tactic (vs. received no information about it) (\( M_S = 4.63 \) vs. 3.29), confirming the first mediation path. There was also a main effect of Disclosure (\( F(2, 204) = 4.65, p < .05 \)). This effect, however, was qualified by the significant Awareness by Disclosure interaction (\( F(2, 204) = 7.69, p < .001 \)). Follow-up analyses were conducted to test \( H3 \). They indicated significant effects of Awareness when the name tag displayed only the representative’s name (\( M_S = 4.56 \) vs. 2.80; \( F(1, 204) = 32.13, p < .001 \)) or when it displayed their name and the name of the store (\( M_S = 4.80 \) vs. 2.93; \( F(1, 204) = 59.66, p < .001 \)). In both of these cases, awareness of the tactic made consumers feel substantially more deceived.

In contrast, there was no effect of Awareness when the name tag displayed the representative’s name and the brand name (\( M_S = 4.52 \) vs. 4.13; \( F(1, 204) = 1.63, p > .20 \); see Fig. 2). Participants felt deceived by native selling whether they learned about the tactic independently (i.e., because they were explicitly told about the tactic) or because it was disclosed on the representative’s name tag. Interestingly, there appeared to be no positive effect associated with honesty, not supporting \( H3 \) (i.e., when the brand representative fully disclosed their relationship with the brand). All it achieved was to alert consumers to a tactic they perceived as deceptive.

Finally, to fully test \( H2 \), we conducted several mediation analyses to determine if consumers’ perceptions of the extent to which they felt deceived could explain their broad negative reactions to the store (i.e., purchase intentions and attitudes). We opted against the proposed moderated mediation from Fig. 1 since we did not find an improvement of deception for Disclosure in the first place (not supporting \( H3 \)). For this additional analysis, we combined the “name only” and “name and store name” conditions, as they showed identical effects across all of the dependent variables. This meant that the Disclosure manipulation contrasted the full disclosure condition (i.e., where the name tag included the brand name) to the two non-disclosure conditions (i.e., where the name tag displayed only the person’s name or their name and the store name). The first mediation analysis to test \( H2 \) investigated whether the effects of Awareness on purchase intentions were mediated by perceived deception. Because there were no effects of Awareness in the full disclosure condition (i.e., when the brand affiliation was revealed in the name tag), we conducted this analysis within the non-disclosure conditions (i.e., the combined name only and name and store name condition). The confidence interval surrounding the mediated path was calculated using 10,000 bootstrap resamples (Preacher and Hayes 2008). As expected, perceived deception mediated the effect of Awareness on purchase in-

---

**Note:** *** \( p < .001 \); ** \( p < .01 \); * \( p < .05 \); ns = not significant.

**Fig. 2:** Perceived deception as a function of whether consumers were made aware of the native selling and the information disclosed on the salesperson’s name tag
tentions (CI95 %s = -.58 to -.30) when the tactic was not disclosed by the brand representative. A second analysis showed the same mediated effect on attitudes (CI95 %s = -.59 to -.29), consistent with H2 for the non-disclosure conditions. In short, when the brand representative did not disclose their affiliation, consumers who were made aware of the tactic reacted negatively to the store and brand because they perceived the tactic to be deceptive.

We conducted a second set of mediation analyses to examine the effect of disclosing the brand affiliation. To this end, we tested H2 for the remaining group. Contrary to H3, we already found that disclosure did not reduce deception. Instead, it simply appeared to alert consumers to the tactic, which consumers still appeared to consider deceptive. Consequently, our mediation analysis examined the question of whether the negative effects of disclosure on purchase intentions and attitudes were also mediated by perceived deception. To test this, we examined the mediated effect of Disclosure on purchase intentions and attitudes within the conditions where consumers were not explicitly made aware of the tactic (because disclosure made no difference when they were already aware). We found that perceived deception mediated the effect of Disclosure on both purchase intentions (CI95 %s = -.44 to -.14) and attitudes (CI95 %s = -.45 to -.14) when consumers were not otherwise aware of the tactic. The findings again support H2. In short, when consumers were not aware of native selling, being honest with them (i.e., disclosing the brand affiliation) seemed primarily to serve to alert consumers to the tactic, making them feel deceived, in turn, reducing purchase intentions and creating more negative attitudes.

3.2.3. Discussion Experiment 2

Experiment 2 showed that native selling led to more negative attitudes towards the store and brand and reduced purchase intentions (consistent with H1). Moreover, this effect was largely attributable to consumers’ knowledge and perception of the persuasion tactic (H2). Specifically, they regarded the tactic as deceptive. Perhaps most interestingly, this experiment also confirmed the indications in the first experiment that disclosure of the tactic (i.e., being honest with customers) did not appear to assuage consumers’ concerns (contrary to H3). In fact, disclosing the tactic simply alerted consumers to the native selling tactic, which caused them to feel deceived. It is, of course, possible that consumers could feel both deceived by the use of the tactic and also give some credit to the firm and/or brand for being honest. However, our results showed no evidence of a positive effect of honesty in this case. Consumers only appeared to react negatively as a consequence of perceiving the tactic to be a deceptive one. There was one other finding of note: consumers appeared to react to dishonest disclosure (i.e., when the representative used a name tag that indicated they were affiliated with the store) in the same way they reacted to the other two name tags. In other words, consumers appeared not to penalize the store/brand for dishonesty, just as they did not credit the store/brand for honesty. In all cases, the only element of the situation that appeared to matter to consumers was their perceptions of the deceptiveness of the tactic. One explanation for this finding is simply that consumers did not place much weight on the information revealed in the name tag. That is, they may not have considered a name tag an especially reliable source of information. Similar to consumers’ tolerance for puffery in slogans, name tags may not be held to an especially high standard when it comes to the veracity of the information they should contain. That does not mean consumers do not respond to any of the information contained, as their reactions to the brand disclosure revealed, but it does suggest that name tags are, by themselves, unlikely to be considered an especially important source of information.

4. General Discussion

4.1. Theoretical contribution

Our research adds to the findings on native communication strategies that appear in contexts where consumers do not expect such persuasive attempts (Akdoğan and Altuntaş 2015; Wojdynski and Golan 2016) by employing a native communication at the point of sale. In regard to our second research question about how consumers respond to native selling, we found that unidentified native selling led to better consequences for marketers than when consumers were aware of the tactic, as the salesperson’s background was hidden and consumers’ persuasion knowledge was not activated. The findings of this study also contribute to the literature on the disclosure of inappropriate marketing techniques. We found that any hint of disclosing information, whether coming from the marketer or from an external source, activated persuasion knowledge and diminished subsequent responses toward the marketer. It did not appear to matter how a consumer learned about the tactic, only that she knew about it. Since we did not explicitly manipulate the extent of the disclosure (it was revealed in a minimal way, on what appeared to be an unimportant source of information), it would be interesting to see if more extensive disclosure (e.g., a marketer-issued disclosure statement) could potentially compensate for the negative effects of native selling.

Our findings offer additional insights for the sales force literature when analysing the consequences of a joint sales tactic. Besides Khanjari et al. (2014), our work is one of the first to look theoretically at the role of manufacturer-hired sales agents in retail stores. We find that consumers do not differentiate between the retailer and the brand in their responses. Joint selling strategies equally affect both parties. Many other marketing tactics also involve two partners who jointly engage in behaviours that could be misleading or even deceptive for consumers. For instance, online advertisements that are disguised to look like the website in which they are embed-
dependent could, once discovered, be viewed as a moral transgression which might affect reactions toward the website in which the advertisement was embedded as well as the firm responsible for the advertisement. This is a particularly interesting case, as the website owner may have little control over the specific content of the advertisements displayed. Similar effects could exist in native advertising in print contexts, and perhaps more generally in contexts where marketers attempt to disguise themselves as the content in which they appear.

4.2. Practical implications

The first research question was whether consumers were aware of native selling or not. The results of our studies overwhelmingly show that consumers expect sales personnel to be employed by the retailer. Consequently, using native selling without making it clear to the consumer can result in negative consequences for the consumer. Firms should be aware, however, that consumers, at least in our research, give firms little credit for being up-front, and that consumers’ primary response is a strong dislike of the tactic. Firms need to account for such reactions when assessing the viability of such tactics.

We also found that consumers do not appear to be suspicious of native selling (whether or not it is potentially detectable) until they are informed of it directly. This does not mean, however, that retailers and brands have a carte blanche to use native selling. Although consumers might not be able to detect this tactic themselves, they do react in a negative manner when they find out about it. Learning about such tactics is likely to be commonplace in practice, as consumers are exposed to news media or word-of-mouth about such sales practices.

Findings from study 2 answer our third research question about the potential alleviating effect of firm disclosure. Although there may be ways for firms to disclose the tactic in a manner that alleviates consumers’ negative responses (e.g., a marketer-issued disclosure statement, prominent signs about the use of native selling, different colored clothing), we found no evidence that an honest name tag resulted in better consumer perceptions than a dishonest one. Either way, any benefits of not disclosing the salesperson’s background will backfire as soon as consumers learn about native selling from an external source (e.g. a newspaper report). Then, consumers will feel the marketer has fooled them, and this is likely to translate into distrust, not only for the store and brand in question, but also for the industry as a whole (Darke and Ritchie 2007). Darke and Ritchie (2007) showed that feeling fooled by an advertisement leads to defensive processing, which can reduce the effectiveness of advertisements both for the offending firm and second-party firms. When translating these findings to the context of native selling, it is possible that consumers who feel fooled by native selling will not only feel less positive toward salespeople in that specific store, but also towards salespeople in general.

Questions of morality arise with many business decisions and practices, specifically when consumers are involved. Businesses and consumers have moral standards they cling to when interacting with other actors. In business practices, moral standards could be openness and honesty.
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4.3. Limitations

Our study also has some limitations that suggest possible directions for future research. Using samples from two countries (Canada and Germany) could potentially lead to different answering patterns. Since our results were consistent across studies, sampling in different countries even gives us conclusions about the generalizability of our results. By using fictitious brands, we made sure that our results were not influenced by prior brand usage or individual differences in trust in the retailer or the brand. However, the use of fictitious brands might explain why consumers did not differentiate between the brand and the retailer, and why they were equally likely to attribute the deceptive tactic to both entities. Without prior brand knowledge, the deceptive sales tactic is the only brand information consumers have. This may be why they use the tactic to judge both brands. Consequently, further studies might use existing brands, and could investigate the influence of prior trust levels, in particular, to see if this can protect firms from the negative effects of persuasion knowledge. Future research might investigate native selling in a real store context to see how consumers cope with this persuasive selling technique.

Firms should communicate honestly and should avoid strategies that consumers may consider morally unacceptable. In a retail environment, consumers seemed to expect openness and honesty as a fundamental moral standard, regardless of whether the retailer or the manufacturer was responsible for potential moral violations. Consumers are very often confronted with persuasive marketing strategies that can be interpreted as misleading or deceptive. The investigation of consumers’ moral standards and perceived moral transgressions in sales situations is an avenue for future research. At the same time, consumers cope with persuasive attempts in different ways (Kirmani and Campbell 2004). It might be interesting to see how various consumers cope with native selling in the retail environment.
### Experiment 1: Honesty about Native Selling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full Disclosure</th>
<th>No Disclosure (Name Only)</th>
<th>No Disclosure (Store Name)</th>
<th>Control condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Besides having their own personnel, electronic stores employ special sales personnel from coffee maker brands. Your sales advisor, Mrs. Bastian, who you encountered in the coffee maker department, is not employed by the electronic store Electro Buy, but by the brand Hamilton Coffee. Hamilton Coffee is a US-based coffee maker brand.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Experiment 1: Awareness about Native Selling

In consumer electronic stores, one can find sales personnel that is employed and paid by brands. Their background is not always disclosed to the consumer. This sales tactic is called hidden promotion. Different to an ordinary promotion, consumers are feigned a neutral salesperson and independent sales advice. But the promoter's actual goal is to sell as many products for the brand she works for as possible. For customers this is not transparent most of the time.

Very often the false salesperson wears a name tag with her name and a small brand logo and the brand's name.

### Control Group's Questionnaire Ended Before the Awareness Manipulation

### Experiment 2: Honesty about Native Selling

**Awareness about Native Selling**

A number of retail stores in Canada and the US now have agreements with certain brands to allow brand representatives on the sales floor. Brand representatives are employed by the brand manufacturer and not the store. They work alongside regular store employees, but only provide information about their brand and not the other brands that the store carries. We would now like you to imagine that the assistant described in this scenario was a *brand representative, employed by [brand name]*. They do not work for the store.

### Experiment 2: Awareness about Native Selling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Awareness about Native Selling</th>
<th>No awareness about native selling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;A number of retail stores in Canada and the US now have agreements with certain brands to allow brand representatives on the sales floor. Brand representatives are employed by the brand manufacturer and not the store. They work alongside regular store employees, but only provide information about their brand and not the other brands that the store carries. We would now like you to imagine that the assistant described in this scenario was a <em>brand representative, employed by [brand name]</em>. They do not work for the store.&quot;</td>
<td>No awareness about native selling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tab. A1: Manipulation

Also the logo between both name tags is the same, consumers in the disclosure condition were told that the brand is called "Kitchen Tech" and in the no disclosure condition, the retailer was called "Kitchen Tech". 

"..."
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Nature of the variable*</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>No. of items</th>
<th>Poles of the 7-point scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experiment 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment of the salesperson</td>
<td>MC</td>
<td>Aided recall</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>For whom was the salesperson you received advice from employed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fooled and tricked</td>
<td>AM</td>
<td>Darke and Ritchie (2007)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Fooled/Tricked by the consumer electronics store (1 = do not agree at all/7 = totally agree)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived deception</td>
<td>DV</td>
<td>Darke and Ritchie (2007)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Please indicate how you retrospectively rate the use of the salesperson:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Truthful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Honest</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Misleading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Deceptive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Awareness Manipulation**     |                         |                                  |              |                                                                                          |
| Perceived deception            | DV                      | Darke and Ritchie (2007)         | 4            | Please indicate how you retrospectively rate the use of the salesperson:                   |
|                                |                          |                                  |              | - Truthful                                                                               |
|                                |                          |                                  |              | - Honest                                                                                 |
|                                |                          |                                  |              | - Misleading                                                                             |
|                                |                          |                                  |              | - Deceptive                                                                              |

| **Experiment 2**               |                         |                                  |              |                                                                                          |
| Employment of the salesperson  | MC                      | Aided recall                     | 1            | Who did James work for?                                                                   |
| Purchase intention             | DV                      |                                  | 2            | How likely would you be to purchase from this store?                                      |
| Attitude towards the store and | DV                      | Dens et al. (2012)               | 6            | How would you feel about the store (coffee maker manufacturer), Home Innovations/          |
| the brand                      |                          |                                  |              | the coffee maker manufacturer (store), KitchenTech?                                       |
|                                |                          |                                  |              | - Negative-Positive                                                                      |
|                                |                          |                                  |              | - Don’t like-Like                                                                       |
|                                |                          |                                  |              | - Unpleasant-Pleasant                                                                   |

1 Depending on the assigned condition, either the store or the coffee maker manufacturer was called Home Innovations.

* MC = Manipulation check, AM = additional measurement, DV = dependent variable.

Tab. 2: Survey questions

References


Gillespie, E. A., Noble, S. M., & Lam, S. K. (2016). Extrinsic ver-


Keywords

Brand Representatives, Disclosure, Native Selling, Persuasion Knowledge, Sales Tactics.
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