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Whoo's laughing now?

A qualitative study of User Responses to Native Content Marketing

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Foreword

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to our supervisor, María Ruiz, whose expertise and support have been incredibly appreciated throughout this journey. We would also like to extend our thanks to the Department of Strategic Communication at Lund University and Östra Reals Gymnasium for bringing us together. We emphasise that our contribution to this thesis has been equally significant.

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Abstract

In the dynamic realm of social media marketing, maintaining a competitive edge is crucial; hence marketers are actively seeking strategies to stand out and increase levels of engagement. The study aimed to provide valuable insights into companies' utilisation of native content advertising on TikTok and users' attitudes towards this marketing strategy. By exploring the content types that influence users' attitudes toward native content advertising, the study discussed the potential positive and negative outcomes within different content categories. A qualitative content analysis was conducted to achieve the thesis goal, explicitly focusing on Duolingo's TikTok. The findings indicated that humour and trends in native content marketing reduced the factors contributing to persuasion coping mechanisms, making this type of content the most successful in generating positive consumer engagement. Furthermore, the findings revealed that content featuring trends perceived as entertaining could generate positive responses and mitigate negative associations with the brand. The findings also indicated that non-native content marketing, such as service-oriented content, was more likely to receive negative consumer responses and elicited comments regarding the company's service.

Keywords: Native advertising, Content Marketing, Tiktok, Duolingo, Persuasion knowledge model, Associative processing model of humour, consumer attitudes,

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1. Introduction

This section provides a background of the research topic, followed by the problematisation of the communicative phenomena of native content marketing as a new marketing strategy in modernising social media marketing. The introduction further explains TikTok and Duolingo's way of communicating on the platform. Lastly, the aim and research question of the study is introduced.

As social media has become an essential arena for marketing, marketers on platforms such as TikTok demand new strategies to maintain a competitive advantage and engagement. Yet, there was a significant gap in the research for marketing communication on this social media. The current gap presented an opportunity for this thesis to develop a new concept of native content marketing and uncover users' attitudes toward this strategy. With an analysis of Duolingo's TikTok content and marketing, this study gained a comprehensive understanding of consumer attitudes and what type of content influenced these attitudes. Drawing on the persuasion knowledge model and the associative processing model, this study offered a unique perspective on social media marketing. The study provided implications and understanding for marketers and researchers in leveraging native content marketing strategies across other social media platforms, paving the way for future advances in the field.

1.1 Problematisation

Over the past decade, social media marketing has evolved rapidly, prompting marketers to explore innovative methods of captivating their target audience. One notable emerging trend is the combination of native advertising and content marketing, which aims to emulate the type of information that individuals naturally consume. By seamlessly blending into the organic content on a platform, this form of advertising makes it challenging for consumers to differentiate between editorial and promotional content (Campbell & Grimm, 2018). This aligned with the fact that on TikTok and similar social media sites, brands had shifted their focus from traditional selling approaches to humanising their image and providing engaging content. Instead of directly promoting products or services, brands aimed to entertain their audience by capitalising on viral trends, engaging with other TikTokers and recreating popular memes (McCoy, 2021). This transition corresponded with the changing landscape of

new media, the increasing influence of social media marketing and word of mouth among younger Generation Z consumers who were averse to more traditional forms of advertising (Wijayaa et al., 2021). However, due to the novelty of TikTok, there was a lack of research focused on marketing tactics used on the platform and the implications of these marketing tactics on the consumers. Recent literature fell short of providing comprehensive insights into the nuanced interplay between social media marketing tactics and consumer attitudes, which highlighted the need for additional research in this area.

Furthermore, this phenomenon raised potential ethical concerns, particularly regarding transparency and the disclosure of sponsored content, as brands embraced a subtle advertising approach to engage users more effectively (Ford, 2022). However, users might not have always been aware they were consuming sponsored content. Users may have been unaware of their own perceptual shifts towards the brand, as they were consistently exposed to tailored branded content on their "For You" pages without an explicit invitation. To address these concerns, it was crucial to understand how TikTok users responded to native content advertising and the factors that influenced their attitudes towards such marketing. In terms of humorous advertising styles, the associative processing model suggested that humour could establish positive associations with a brand, even in covert advertising like native advertising (Strick, Holland, Van Baaren, Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 2013). Consequently, incorporating humour into native content marketing on social media had the potential to engage users more effectively. However, the persuasion knowledge model underscored the significance of transparency and the disclosure of sponsored content, particularly in fostering trust and maintaining ethical advertising practices.

This study addressed the knowledge gap concerning the emerging concept of native content marketing and user attitudes toward this marketing strategy. The research also sought to provide valuable insights that could inform advertisers in developing more impactful advertising practices on TikTok and similar platforms by investigating factors such as content categories, the utilisation of humour and trends and the perception of non-native content marketing.

1.2 Background

1.2.1 Tiktok

TikTok is a mobile application that enables users to create and share short videos. Initially named Musical.ly, the platform gained popularity among young girls, who recorded themselves mimicking and dancing to music. Bytedance, a Chinese company, acquired Musical.ly in 2018 and rebranded it as TikTok (Internetstiftelsen, 2020). In the initial six months of 2023, the platform had over one billion users worldwide, surpassing both Snapchat and Twitter (wallaroomedia, 2023). Notably, TikTok offers a platform for businesses to promote their products, develop a loyal customer base and showcase their brand narrative while cultivating a brand community. Furthermore, TikTok can be a valuable platform for attracting new customers and increasing online sales (wallaroomedia, 2023). Companies can also re-engage existing customers by presenting new products tailored to their interests. With TikTok available in over 150 markets and supporting 75 languages, it is a truly global platform enabling businesses to reach a diverse audience. Currently, nearly five million businesses leverage TikTok for marketing, creating an opportunity for expansion and growth (TikTok, 2023).

Critiques have been directed towards TikTok for promoting a culture of attractiveness and conformity among young users and moderators. Concerns have been raised about using user data and potential vulnerabilities in Internet security (Internetstiftelsen, 2020).

1.2.3 Duolingo on Tiktok

Duolingo is a language learning mobile application that seeks to provide high-quality education to users globally. The app was established in 2011 by Luis von Ahn and Severin Hacker and it was launched in 2012. Since then, it has gained popularity and has become the leading language-learning app worldwide. Duolingo's objective is to create a language learning platform that is both enjoyable and effective while being accessible to all learners (Duolingo, n.d).

In recent years, social media has become an integral part of businesses' communication strategies. With the rise of platforms like TikTok, companies aspired to find creative ways to

engage with their audiences and build their brand. This was particularly true for the language learning app Duolingo, which leveraged TikTok's unique features and achieved viral success. The following section focuses on exploring Duolingo's TikTok strategy and how it helped the brand build a strong social media presence. Duolingo's success on TikTok was attributed to its unique approach to content creation. Instead of using the platform solely for advertising purposes, Duolingo aimed to create content that was both educational and entertaining. By focusing on providing value to its audience, Duolingo built a community of followers who were genuinely interested in the brand (Techradar, 2022).

One of the key elements of Duolingo's TikTok strategy was its ability to stay relevant and up to date with the latest trends. By keeping up with viral trends on the platform, Duolingo was able to create timely and engaging content, increasing its chances of going viral. This helped the brand to remain relevant and top of mind among its target audience. Another important aspect of Duolingo's TikTok strategy was its focus on creating exclusive content specifically for the platform. By developing content that was unique to TikTok, Duolingo stood out and attracted a new audience to the brand. This also allowed Duolingo to differentiate itself from other language-learning apps that were also present on the platform. Moreover, Duolingo's TikTok strategy revolved around the use of humour and authenticity. By producing educational and humorous content, Duolingo made language learning enjoyable and captivating for its audience. This approach fostered a strong connection between Duolingo and its followers, establishing the brand as relatable (Techradar, 2022).

This study has highlighted how strategic communication in terms of creative social media campaigns can lead to significant growth for a business and serves as an inspiration for other brands looking to build their presence on TikTok.

1.3 Aim and research question

The aim of the research was to understand TikTok users' attitudes toward native content marketing and provide insights into the effects of native advertising on TikTok. The study also explored additional factors that might have influenced users' attitudes toward native advertising on TikTok, such as the design and style of the ads, as well as the social and cultural context of the platform.

To examine this phenomenon, Duolingo's TikTok content was used to gain further knowledge on this subject. To reach the aim, the authors categorised TikTok comments into different coding categories to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the users' attitudes.

RQ1: "How do TikTok users respond to native content marketing on the platform?"

RQ2: "How do different content types influence users' attitudes towards these ads?"

2. Literature review

In this section, an overall review of previous research related to persuasion, native advertising and content marketing is presented, as well as an overarching review of previous literature regarding customer engagement. The section's primary focus is on presenting research that illustrates the gaps in research regarding native advertising and persuasion.

2.1 Persuasion research in marketing

The concepts of persuasion and marketing have been extensively studied, with a focus on their interconnected relationship. Shrum (2004) emphasised the importance of an unrestricted flow of information as a cornerstone of free-market commerce, highlighting the need for audience awareness and consent to be persuaded. The topic of audience consent to persuasion became increasingly pertinent in recent studies, particularly with the evolution of marketing tactics on social media.

Ritter and Vaala (2022) discussed the rise of "stealth" marketing, which mainly targeted younger audiences and resulted from new media marketing tactics. They argued that children sometimes failed to identify native ads as advertisements due to their seamless integration with the content they were featured in. Rozendaal et al. (2009) discovered that adults were more adept at recognising the persuasive intent of advertising and had the capacity to counter-argue than children. Secondly, previous research has proposed that the effectiveness of advertising was determined not only by cognitive responses to a message but also by affective responses to a message (Brown and Stayman, 1992). This called attention to the lack of research on instances where more subversive forms of marketing were successful on an adult audience, as research only explored instances where adults were more likely to recognise persuasive attempts and likely to counter-argue these messages.

Persuasion knowledge was frequently used concerning the persuasion knowledge model (PKM) proposed by Friedstad and Wright (1994). Numerous studies employed the PKM as a theoretical framework to investigate the impact of advertising and marketing on consumer attitudes and behaviours. Myers et al. (2022) investigated how sponsored posts' textual and visual cues affected consumer engagement behaviours. The authors noted that sponsorship

disclosures, money references, brand logos and sponsored content reduced engagement. However, the study's limitation was that it focused only on one type of sponsored post and did not consider other factors that could affect consumer engagement. The findings may not be generalizable to other forms of advertising. There exists a lack of research on the persuasive effects of different content types and it is limited in comparative analyses. Some research shows that sponsored content increases persuasion knowledge and results in more negative brand attitudes compared to user-generated content (Muller & Christandl, 2019). Lou et al. (2020) also noted that advertising literacy interventions led to increased activation of conceptual persuasion knowledge, resulting in decreased electronic word-of-mouth and weakened purchase desires for the advertised product. However, their studies did not account for cases where brand logos were displayed, but electronic word-of-mouth still increased.

Research on covert persuasion attempts without visual or textual cues was lacking. Still, some research showed that consumer attitudes towards in-game advertising varied, with some perceiving it as intrusive and deceitful (Lorenzon & Russell, 2012). Similarly, Tutaj and van Reijmersdal (2012) argued that individuals with greater persuasion knowledge had more negative attitudes toward online advertising. This was worth noting for native forms of advertising as research on these instances was lacking. In relation to native forms of advertising, less obtrusive advertising was less likely to be identified and critically assessed as advertising (Dahlén & Edenius, 2007; Darke & Ritchie, 2007; Kuhn, Hume, & Love, 2010). However, these studies had limitations, as they emphasised the negative effects of intrusive advertising. Further research could explore the impact of more subtle and integrated advertising on changing consumer behaviour. Exploring components like source credibility, source attractiveness and the use of humour is crucial for advancing our understanding of marketing's persuasive effects (Strick et al., 2013).

2.2 Advertising Tactics

Einstein (2016) argued that while the relationship between advertising and communication technology remained unchanged, the blending of advertising and editorial content evolved. Further research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of brand names and characters in this type of advertising, as well as the impact of contextual factors. Wojdyski and Evans (2016) found that disclosure placement and language were important in promoting

recognition and influencing consumer attitudes toward native advertising. However, research has shown that disclosure statements may not always be sufficient in informing consumers and this was especially important to consider on platforms such as TikTok, where disclosure may not be immediately obvious. Other studies, such as "Effective native advertising isn't a secret" by Cambell and Marks (2015), showed that the initial aim of native advertising was to minimise the annoyance of brand content on social media to maintain followers. Consumers were often unaware that the content they were viewing was created by or at the behest of an advertiser. Moreover, research on covert persuasion attempts without visual or textual cues was lacking, but studies have shown that obtrusive advertising was perceived negatively by consumers (Lorenzon & Russell, 2012; Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012). Less obtrusive advertising was less likely to be identified and critically assessed as advertising (Dahlén & Edenius, 2007; Darke & Ritchie, 2007; Kuhn, Hume, & Love, 2010). Advertising effectiveness was influenced by authenticity and integration into the environment. However, these studies had limitations as they mainly focused on negative effects.

Further, content marketing is an emerging marketing strategy in the online space. Content marketing goes beyond native advertising by providing the audience with what is supposed to be engaging self-produced content in contrast to the mainly bought or sponsored content as in native advertising (Holliman & Rowley 2014). Du Plessis (2015) argued that creating a content marketing strategy that aligns with the organisation's overall marketing goals aligns with the interests and preferences of the target audience. Creating distinctive and attention-grabbing content is important to differentiate brands from competitors and attract customers.

However, there was a gap in studies that looked at content marketing's role in social media content communities. Du Plessis (2017) claimed that because content marketing was unobtrusive and established the brand as a thought leader, social media content communities enabled non-promotional information and engagement. A content community provided a platform for storytelling and businesses could humanise their brand and engage their audience. More recent research, such as Ansari et al. (2019), showed that social media content marketing had a moderately positive association with customer purchase decisions. In a similar vein, Baltes (2015) argued that content marketing engaged people and fostered brand loyalty.

2.3 Consumer Engagement on social media

Over the past few years, several studies have explored social media marketing strategies in relation to consumer engagement. Consumer engagement was expected to lead to better performance outcomes such as sales growth, referrals, enhanced co-creative experiences and more profitability (Bowden 2009, Bijmolt et al. 2010, Nambisan & Baron 2007, Prahalad 2004, Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli 2005). Additionally, Gambetti & Graffigna (2010) suggested that businesses had to adapt to the changing needs of their customers, including their desire to co-create brand content, engage in social interactions with other consumers and have emotional experiences in order to maintain a competitive advantage. Moreover, research by Lovett et al. (2016) showed that a brand's social media presence influenced more than 50% of decision-making and acquisition processes. Further, most studies see consumer engagement (CE) as a multidimensional concept with three components: cognitive, emotional and behavioural. (Vivek et al., 2012; Hollebeek, 2011; Liu et al., 2019) The behavioural and social elements of CE captured individuals' actions and interactions with the brand or product both within and outside of specific exchange situations (Vivek et al., 2012).

Previous research was primarily conducted on behavioural aspects of customer engagement, such as by Deng et al. (2021), who found that consumers' liking behaviour was influenced by the language used in brand posts. Further, Khan (2017) noted that comments were predicted by the social interaction motive. Other research on why people engaged with content on social media included Shao (2009), where it is shown that individuals consumed content to satisfy their information, entertainment and mood management needs. Secondly, they participated in the content by interacting with it and other users to enhance their social connections and be part of virtual communities. Community and subculture research is vital for understanding engagement. A subculture is individuals bound together by a common activity that's commonality is practised through specific language, commodity use and social organisation (de Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2007).

To advance the understanding of the connection between social media marketing and consumer engagement, future research should concentrate on identifying the specific factors that influence engagement behaviours on social media platforms. Understanding the factors that drive user engagement and what types of content are most likely to receive the most positive attitudes is an important area for further in-depth research.

3. Theoretical framework

To get a deeper understanding of why consumers resist or do not resist persuasion and what factors are behind consumers' attitudes, the persuasion knowledge model will be utilised in combination with the associative processing model of humour. Further, native advertising and content marketing will be used to understand Duolingo's marketing tactics on TikTok. The models and theories work together to answer the research question. The theoretical framework functions as a lens through which the results are understood.

3.1 Native Advertising

The concept of native advertising has existed for a significant time, but it has recently become more prevalent in discussions regarding online marketing. According to Campbell and Marks (2015), companies are using conversational and lighthearted marketing on social media to avoid upsetting customers to the point where they unfollow or unsubscribe. The authors suggest that this strategy, which attempts to minimise disturbance to consumers' online experience by appearing in-stream and blending in with the surrounding material, may be considered the earliest instance of online native advertising. This is achieved by designing them to blend in with the user's online environment, making them nearly indistinguishable from other online content and less disruptive to the user.

However, Wojdyski et al. (2018) emphasise that native advertising is editorial content paid for by a third party. The author argues that the format of the message should match or be "native" to the format of non-paid content presented by the same publisher and that the content of the messages is paid advertising. Wojdyski et al. (2018) noted that a multitude of scholars and practitioners have largely offered similar definitions, with Levi (2015, p.1) defining it as "a new marketing technique for unobtrusively integrating paid advertising into editorial content" and Brown (2016, p.206) as "taking that which is organic and flipping it around into advertising" The idea of relatively seamless integration of sponsored material with other non-bought content is central to each of these definitions.

Based on the definitions above and previous literature on native advertising, the following definition of native advertising will serve as a basis for the theoretical framework, "Native

advertising is paid advertising content that is designed to blend in with the platform's non-paid content, providing value to the consumer by being relevant, engaging and should blend seamlessly with the platform's non-paid content.”

3.2 Content Marketing

Because of the rise of digital channels and changing consumer behaviours, content marketing has emerged as a marketing strategy in recent years. There are several definitions of content marketing. One of the most cited ones originates from the Content Marketing Institute (2023),

“Content marketing is a marketing technique of creating and distributing valuable, relevant and consistent content to attract and acquire a clearly defined audience –with the objective of driving profitable customer action. It seeks to answer the queries, assisting the consumers in resolving their problems at hand and the decision-making process, rather than focusing on the brand or company”.

Content marketing is most successful when the audience's interests are considered. Further, understanding the target audience's demographics, behavioural characteristics and media consumption patterns is necessary for this, as is knowing the kinds of content that are most likely to be appealing to them. Rowley (2008) stresses the significance of consistency in content marketing. Consistently releasing good content can help a company become credible and authoritative in the eyes of its target market and maintain its interest over time.

In conclusion, As opposed to native advertising, content marketing is an owned form of marketing that focuses on giving value to the consumers and their needs in order to create profitable customer action and brand awareness over time, with the content usually being produced on the company's own social media platform.

3.3 Native Content Marketing

Based on the theoretical framework explained above regarding content marketing and native advertising, it is clear that these two concepts alone are insufficient to explain the marketing strategy used by Duolingo on TikTok. Through the observation made in this study, it was found that a combination of these two concepts is the most suitable way to encapsulate and

define Duolingo's strategy. There are several parts within native advertising that are useful for the analysis; nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge certain aspects of the material that present contradictions. Some of the core concepts of native advertising, such as that all content must be paid media, do not apply to Duolingo's TikTok marketing. Duolingo's content is owned media and, in that aspect, it is more aligned with definitions of content marketing. Content marketing focuses on entertaining and valuable content, which is not a primary focus in native advertising. On the other hand, content marketing does not have to blend into the nature of the platform seamlessly and appear like other non-promotional content, which is an important aspect of the analysis. The analysis covers important aspects of the strategies, but it also reveals that the two strategies do not cover the full extent of Duolingo's marketing. As a result of this investigation, a need for a new concept that incorporates the most important elements of both strategies was identified.

Therefore, the term "Native content marketing" was created to describe the combination of these two marketing theories. Based on the definitions of the marketing strategies shown above, native content marketing is best defined by the authors of this study as "an owned media strategic marketing approach that involves creating engaging, informative and relevant content that is seamlessly integrated into the form and function of a particular platform and does not appear to be promotional."

The aim of native content marketing is to provide a cohesive and natural user experience while effectively promoting a brand's products or services to a specific target audience. By combining these two approaches, native content marketing creates a marketing paradigm that leverages the strengths of both content marketing and native advertising. As such, it provides a suitable base for this study. By doing so, it further aims to add to the existing body of knowledge by shedding light on native content marketing as a unique marketing strategy and as a strategic approach in the digital marketing landscape.

3.4 Persuasion Knowledge Model

Friestad and Wright (1994) first introduce the persuasion knowledge model in "The persuasion knowledge model: How people cope with persuasion attempts." The authors argue that one of the consumers' primary tasks is to interpret and handle marketing attempts and

advertising. Consumers, over time, acquire a knowledge of various technologies and skills that help them identify how and when marketing techniques affect them. The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) is a model that explains how this persuasion knowledge affects people's responses to marketing and persuasion attempts. Thus, the PKM is an attempt to explain exemplifying persuasion processes between targets (the person to be persuaded) and agents (the person responsible for the persuasion attempt) and how the person's marketing knowledge affects their persuasion coping behaviours. Persuasion knowledge refers to the consumer's knowledge and understanding of advertisers' persuasive tactics. This knowledge includes understanding the various persuasive techniques used by advertisers, such as emotional appeals, celebrity endorsements and scarcity tactics, among others.

The persuasion knowledge model suggests that consumers with higher levels of persuasion knowledge are more likely to be sceptical of advertising messages, especially if they perceive that the advertiser is attempting to manipulate them. Once consumers detect a sign of persuasion attempts within a certain message, they try to understand why a marketer or provider sends out that particular information about a certain product or service (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000). If persuasion attempts are perceived as manipulative and unfair or plainly harsh or annoying, consumers tend to infer a persuasive or selling intent, which leads to negative consumer responses (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000). Subject knowledge and agent knowledge are also relevant to the persuasion knowledge model. Subject knowledge refers to the consumer's knowledge about the product or service being marketed, which can influence their attitudes and beliefs about the product. Agent knowledge refers to the consumer's knowledge of the advertiser or seller, which can also affect their reactions to advertising messages (Friestad and Wright, 1994).

Persuasion knowledge, which relates to the consumer's comprehension of the persuasion techniques utilised by advertising, is one of the key elements in the persuasion knowledge model. The persuasion knowledge model makes the claim that an explicit understanding of advertising or persuasive intent is necessary for persuasion knowledge activation. In other words, for the persuasion knowledge model to be effective, consumers must be aware that they are receiving a persuasive message. Without this recognition, the so-called coping mechanisms that are supposed to assist someone in protecting themselves against a persuasive message is not feasible. The persuasion knowledge model may not be as accurate in predicting a consumer's reaction to a message. For example, if they are unaware that they are receiving a persuasive message, the consumer might not use their coping mechanisms in that

situation and persuasion may occur accidentally (Friestad and Wright, 1994).

3.5 Associative processing model of humour

To establish a solid foundation for the theoretical framework, the associative processing model of humour will be combined with the persuasion knowledge model. The associative processing model of humour offers a comprehensive explanation of humour processing. According to this model, humour results from activating mental representations that are incongruous with our expectations, leading to a cognitive elaboration process that culminates in experiencing humour.

Regarding humour in advertising, Strick et al. (2013) contend that humour generates a positive effect and is typically associated with various brand-humour pairings in humorous ad campaigns. The authors suggest that this consistent pairing of humour with a brand creates favourable brand associations that influence impulsive brand selection. The associative processing model of humour suggests that using humour in ad campaigns encourages a specific brand choice. Repeatedly associating a brand with humour results in a direct implicit attitude change, indicating a change in the underlying associative structure of the brand attitude. This suggests that humour may have a longer-term impact on brand attitudes than previously thought.

The associative processing model posits that advertising information that is incongruent with prior expectations or schemas enhances attention and elaborative processing of ads. This is referred to as incongruity and humorous advertisements are more likely to have out-of-place elements, drawing more attention than non-comedic ones. However, humour draws most of the attention, making it challenging to process other information in the advertisement, such as brand names. This means that the humour may divert attention away from the brand information, making it less likely that consumers will remember the brand name or other product information. Despite this potential disadvantage, humour in advertising can positively impact brand perception (Strick et al., 2013).

According to the model, repeated exposure to humour can lead to new, positive brand associations that manifest in implicit and explicit measures of brand attitudes and behaviour. Even if consumers are not consciously aware of their positive feelings towards a brand, these

feelings can still influence their behaviour and choices. The model also suggests that using humour to prevent negative brand associations can be effective. Consumers who are resistant to brand messages may develop negative associations with the brand. Humour, on the other hand, can divert consumers' attention away from these negative associations and prevent them from forming. The more humour diverts consumers' attention away from negative associations, the more effective it is at preventing them from forming (Strick et al., 2013).

3.6 Summary

In summary, the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) is a theoretical framework that describes how consumers acquire knowledge about persuasive communication and how they apply it to deal with persuasive attempts. In accordance with the model, consumers actively participate in the persuasion process and have a set of beliefs and knowledge that they use to interpret and respond to persuasive messages. Consumers gain persuasion knowledge through prior experiences with advertising and other persuasive communication, as well as exposure to media literacy education and other sources of information. Consumers' recognition of persuasive intent is a critical factor in determining their level of engagement with and response to a persuasive message.

Furthermore, the associative processing model of humour shows that humour can prevent the formation of negative associations by diverting attention away from them. The effectiveness of humour in preventing negative associations depends on how much it diverts attention. Moreover, humour can prevent the formation of negative brand associations by diverting attention away from them. The model further shows that advertising information incongruent with prior expectations or schemas enhances attention and elaborative processing of ads.

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) and the associative processing model of humour can be used effectively together to improve our understanding of consumer responses to persuasive messages and the role of humour in advertising, especially in relation to native content marketing as it per defined in entertaining and does not appear promotional which are the two bases of the two theories.

4. Methodology

The methodology section begins with an explanation of the Ontological and epistemological stance adopted by the study. Subsequently, the chosen data selection and sampling method is presented, followed by the analysis method and a reflection of the chosen methodology. These elements are presented sequentially.

4.1 Ontological and epistemological stance

This study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of how TikTok users respond to native advertising on the platform and to identify the influential factors to consumers' attitudes towards these ads. A content analysis was conducted using a qualitative research method to answer the research questions. Qualitative studies provide detailed descriptions of a specific case, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the context. The purpose was to analyse the research questions based on an interpretive approach, which made a qualitative method suitable (Flick, 2014).

The study has adopted a hermeneutic epistemology, which entails interpreting texts and visual representations to comprehend the underlying meanings within the interpreted material. Hermeneutics is based on the social and cultural context surrounding the analysed material to interpret meaningfully, which applies to different levels of analysis, from individual words and expressions to more prominent themes and ideas (Prasad, 2017). This was suitable to this study as it sought to interpret perceptions through text in comments and the interpretation was based on a social context since TikTok is a social media platform built on a shared media culture within the platform.

The study also assumed a social constructivist ontology, recognising that their individual characteristics do not solely determine participants' attitudes and experiences with native advertising but are also influenced by broader social and cultural factors. This perspective acknowledges that participants' attitudes and experiences are constructed through social and cultural interactions and the influence of media messages and advertising practices. By adopting a social constructivist perspective, the study can explore how participants' attitudes and responses to native advertising on TikTok are shaped by their social and cultural contexts and interactions with the platform and its advertising practices (McNamee et al., 2020).

The study is based on abductive reasoning. K.T. Fann (1970) explains abduction as a process in which the researcher observes a phenomenon and hypothesises possible causes or explanations. The researcher then tests this hypothesis by seeking additional evidence or data that supports or refutes the hypothesis. Abduction starts with a set of observations or data and works backwards to develop a possible explanation for those observations. Abduction differs from other research methods, such as deduction and induction, because it does not focus on proving or verifying a hypothesis but on generating new ideas and theories. Therefore, it is useful when there is limited prior knowledge about the subject. As the goal of the study is to develop an existing theory, specifically Persuasion Theory concerning TikTok marketing, abduction is most appropriate to use because it allows researchers to generate new ideas and theories that enable the exploration of new and unexpected findings that may not have been considered with other forms of reasoning. As previously mentioned, there is also limited knowledge about TikTok users' perceptions, making abduction a suitable choice. The decision is also grounded on the flexibility to move back and forward between the conclusion and hypothesis, which is imperative due to the planned evaluation and modification of the various categories within content analysis throughout the research process (K.T. Fann, 1970).

4.2 Qualitative content analysis

When analysing the collected data, this study used qualitative content analysis. This method is used to systematically analyse and interpret the meaning of qualitative data, such as text, images, or videos. The purpose of content analysis is to identify patterns, themes and categories within the data and to draw conclusions about the content and context in which it is presented. Qualitative content analysis involves several steps, including determining the research question, selecting the material, constructing a coding framework, segmenting the data, creating codes, evaluating and modifying the coding framework, conducting the primary analysis, and presenting and interpreting the results. This method further involves a series of steps that must be iteratively reviewed to modify the coding framework. These factors contribute to the highly systematic nature of qualitative content analysis (Fingeld-Connett, 2013).

In this method, researchers develop a coding framework encompassing all aspects featured in the description and interpretation of the material. The goal is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the data collected. The coding framework comprises various categories or codes. The researchers create different codes to classify the data and reduce the material to concentrate on specific aspects of meaning. The coding frame is a crucial element in qualitative content analysis, consisting of main themes and subcategories focusing on specific aspects of the material. The categories should meet several requirements, such as being unidimensional, mutually exclusive and exhaustive. The number of hierarchical levels in a coding frame should be practical to handle and too many residual categories should be avoided to maintain the validity of the frame. The coding frame can be multidimensional; hence, the same unit can be coded under different subcategories but not the same main category (Flick, 2018). A coding manual should be developed to ensure consistency within the multiple codes involved. A coding manual typically consists of category names, code guidelines and examples of the codes. (Zhang, & Wildemuth, 2005).

When examining TikTok comments using qualitative content analysis, the collected data regarding comments were categorised into three categories. The first category was positive attitudes, which included four subcategories: Positive attitudes toward the entertainment value of the content, positive attitudes towards the company and service, tag and general positivity. The second category was negative attitudes, which included three subcategories: negative attitudes toward the entertainment value of the content, negative attitudes towards the company and service, and general negativity. The third category included subcategories such as community-oriented inside jokes, service-oriented humour and humorous insult. Similarly, the collected data in terms of videos were also categorised into different categories: Community-oriented, Trend, Service-Oriented and Mixed.

4.3 Collection Method and Sample

4.3.1 Multiple-step collection method

The study implemented a multiple-step collection method. In this method, objects are selected in several stages, each chosen based on the previous stage in the series.

Elements of randomisation of the selection were still desired but were done through multiple stages instead of just one (Denscombe, 2014).

The collection method was chosen since it provides an unbiased and representative sample of users' attitudes toward Duolingo's advertising on TikTok. This method ensures that the data collected are not influenced by a specific viewpoint or group of users, thus providing a more accurate representation of users' attitudes towards the advertising. This data collection method was deemed most appropriate for the study as the collection and analysis of the comments required a selection of TikTok videos first, followed by the selection of comments for each video.

From the 12th of April to the 28th of April, Duolingo's TikTok account underwent a review process where each of its published videos during that time frame (283) was individually evaluated, ranging from 1 (the most recently published) to 283 (the oldest video on the account). The first step was to filter out videos irrelevant to the study's purpose, further explained in 4.3.2 Inclusion, exclusion, and selection criteria. After this filtering process, all the remaining videos considered relevant to the study were renumbered from 1 to 241, as 42 videos had been eliminated. The next step involved categorising the 241 videos into four categories: Trend, Community-oriented, Service-Oriented and Mixed. Every category will be defined further in Figure 1.

After the initial categorisation, each video was assigned a new number within its respective category, from the most recent to the oldest video. After the completion of this phase, a randomised sampling method was implemented. One video from each category was randomly selected using Google's random number generator. For instance, to determine which video analyse within the Community-oriented category contained 42 videos, a number ranging from 1 to 42 was randomly generated. The number randomly generated was 24, thereby leading to the sample of the 24th video that would later be used in the analysis.

Subsequently, after completing these procedures for all video categories, all comments from each video were downloaded in separate Excel sheets corresponding to their respective categories. In order to ensure a representative sample, 100 comments were randomly chosen from each video using Google's random number generator. As this was done, all the comments were analysed and categorised.

Videos Categories:	
Categories:	Description:
Community-oriented:	Videos containing specific references, inside jokes, visuals, or textual references only understood by those inside the community.
Trend:	Videos that are recreations or remixes of popular trends on TikTok
Service-oriented:	Videos containing specific references, visuals, or text that refer to Duolingo's services or brand.
Mixed:	Videos containing a mix of two or more of the categories above.

Figure. 1. Video categories.

4.3.2 Inclusion, exclusion and selection criteria

Videos found to be irrelevant to the research topic were removed, including those where the audio had been removed due to copyright issues or where the video did not contain any form of native content marketing per relevant guidelines. For instance, videos that deviate from the typical content commonly associated with user-generated content on TikTok, thus lacking alignment with the nature of the platform.

To ensure the quality of our data, the study will apply specific criteria when selecting comments for our analysis. Firstly, it will only select comments that are in English, as this is the language in which our study will be conducted. Secondly, it will exclude spam comments, such as random lettering, obvious bots and advertisements from other companies, or comments that contain offensive language, as these comments may not provide valuable insights into users' attitudes towards the advertising. Finally, it will select comments that

express a clear opinion or reaction to the advertising rather than those that are purely descriptive or provide irrelevant information.

4.3.3. Sample

The selection of Duolingo's account as the sample was determined by its relevance to the research questions, thereby adopting a purposive-directed sampling approach (Bryman, 2018). The comments section of Duolingo's TikTok posts as the source of our data was chosen because it provides a rich source of data on users' attitudes and experiences with the app's advertising. The comments section allows users to express their opinions and reactions to the ads in real time, providing valuable insight into their immediate responses to the advertising. Furthermore, comments allow users to engage with each other, providing additional context for their attitudes toward the advertising. The decision to analyse 100 comments obtained from four distinct videos, resulting in a cumulative total of 400 comments, was made partly to reduce the material. This was to ensure the feasibility within the study's designated timeframe. However, the hypothesis suspected that no more than 100 comments would be required to reach a saturation point.

4.4 Analysis Method

After the sampling of the videos and the comments was made, all the comments were separately analysed and categorised one by one. As the ontological stance relies on abductive reasoning, it allowed for ongoing re-evaluation of the coding categories for the comments. Initially, the comments were classified into pre-existing categories as the videos. However, it quickly became apparent that these categories required re-evaluation since many of the comments did not fit into the description of the categories mentioned above. Because of this, a new set of categories was formulated through an analysis of the comments. These included three main categories: positive attitudes, negative attitudes and humour.

Further, these three categories were assigned subcategories. Positive attitudes got the subcategories: Service-oriented positive, Entertainment positive and General positive comments. Moreover, negatively got the subcategories: Service-oriented negative, Entertainment negative and General negative comment. The humour categories were split into the subcategories: Community inside jokes, Humorous insults and Service-oriented humour.

Once all the comments were classified, a separate table was created for each video to provide a more precise overview of the analysed empirical data. Then, each part of the result was analysed separately before being compared against each other. This approach aligns with Hermeneutics, which emphasises the need for an iterative and interpretive analysis to generate a comprehensive understanding of the data to extract meaning from the empirical material. This analytical process progresses from subjective comprehension towards new insights and ideas, which allows for a more profound comprehension. Because of the study's social constructivist ontological stance, the data analysis will reflect a reality influenced by broader social and cultural factors. The analysis will further demonstrate how the social context will influence the analysis and conclusion.

4.5 Reliability and Validity

Qualitative research necessitates the consideration of analytic reliability and validity to ensure the quality of the study. Reliability pertains to whether the results would be consistent if the study were repeated. Validity encompasses the logical coherence of conclusions and the extent to which measurements capture what is contextually relevant (Bryman, 2018).

The study's utilisation of a hermeneutic epistemology to interpret users' comments on TikTok introduced the potential for subjective interpretations of the data, which could have impacted the reliability and validity of the study. This was because hermeneutics relies on interpreting meaning and context, which the researcher's biases and assumptions could influence. Additionally, the study's adoption of a social constructivist ontology restricted the generalizability of the findings to other settings or contexts, as it acknowledged that users' attitudes and experiences with native content advertising were shaped by their social and cultural contexts. (Flick, 2014). Although, it is essential to note that qualitative studies allow for theoretical and conceptual generalisations (Bryman, 2018). The study's reliability and validity were considered high due to the careful selection of appropriate theory and research methods aligned with the study's objectives and research questions.

4.6 Methodological Reflections

While valuable for exploring new ideas and theories, abductive reasoning can lead to less reliable and generalisable results than other forms of reasoning. This is because it involves subjective interpretation and a higher level of subjectivity and interpretation (K.T. Fann, 1970). In the study on TikTok users' attitudes towards Duolingo's native content advertising, using a qualitative methodology limits the generalizability of the findings, as the sample size is usually smaller and the data collected are often context-specific. This means the results may not apply to a broader population beyond the TikTok users who participated in the study (Flick, 2014).

The qualitative content analysis method adopted further limits the scope of the investigation to Duolingo. This means that the study's findings may not reflect TikTok users' full range of attitudes and experiences towards native content advertising. In addition, it is essential to acknowledge that the use of data in this study may introduce potential bias or confounding factors. This is because the selection of participants only includes those who have commented on Duolingo's TikTok, which could lead to a more positive attitude towards the company and the ad. Those with negative attitudes may be less likely to comment, resulting in a biased dataset.

The researcher's knowledge may impact the credibility of the results, as coding textual data can be subjective (Zhang, & Wildemuth, 2005). To ensure consistency of the coding, a table of the codes has been developed, which clarifies the category names, guidelines and examples.

In summary, while the chosen methodology provides a detailed and nuanced understanding of TikTok users' attitudes and responses to native content advertising, the study's limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. These limitations include the potential for subjective interpretations, limited generalizability and biases introduced through sampling and self-reported data.

5. Analysis

This section presents the results of the study's empirical material. This analysis examines how TikTok users respond to native content marketing and commenters' attitudes towards Duolingo's content by examining the different types of videos.

The content analysis implemented a systematic approach to examine four videos of different categories. Each video was introduced and the category was explained and defined. The coding categories encompassed community-oriented, trend, service-oriented and mixed types. The analysis was presented according to video type because of the aim of this study. One of the key research questions revolved around understanding if different content types influenced consumer attitudes in the comment section. Hence, it was essential to examine each comment section individually under each video to gain insights into potential variations and distinctions. This approach enabled a thorough understanding of the impact of different content types on consumer attitudes.

Furthermore, the analysis will encompass the comments associated with each video, which will be presented under the video. The coding scheme used to analyse the comments are presented in the section below. The identified themes in our analysis include negative attitudes, positive attitudes and humour. These themes are further divided into subcategories: service-oriented, entertainment, tag and general comments, community inside jokes, humorous insults and service-oriented humour. Finally, the analysis will delve deeper into specific comments and themes, offering an in-depth exploration and understanding of the content.

5.1. Coding scheme

Theme: Positive attitudes		
Category: Positive attitudes	Description:	Example comments:

Subcategory: Service-oriented positive	The comment indicates interest in the product or service being advertised	“Thanks to you I am fluent in Spanish muchas gracias 🙏”
Subcategory: Entertainment	Comment praises the ad's creativity and entertainment value.	“@Lucas B the caption has me dead”
Subcategory: Tag	Comment tagging another person	“@samanthayve you need to see this”
Subcategory: General positive comment	Comment expressing praise or approval without a specific context.	“i should better follow duolingo bc it slays”

Figure 2. Coding scheme positive attitudes.

Theme: Negative attitudes		
Category: Negative attitudes	Description:	Comments:
Subcategory: Service-oriented negative	The comment indicates disinterest in the product or service being advertised	“REVERT THE UPDATE PLS WE'RE SO UNMOTIVATED TO KEEP LEARNING”
Subcategory: Entertainment negative	Comment criticises the ad's creativity and entertainment value	No comments found in this category
Subcategory: General negative comment	A general negative comment conveys criticism or disapproval without a specific context.	“Could i get an answer?”

Figure 3. Coding scheme negative attitudes.

Theme: Humour		
Category: Humour	Description:	Comments:
Subcategory: Community inside joke	Humorous comments, including information known to the Duolingo community	“i will ask her if you invite me to the afterparty 😊”
Subcategory: Humorous insult	Comments including jabs at the company, owl, Social media manager or any other light-hearted comment.	“I bet you don’t know what her name means in Arabic 😊”
Subcategory: Service-oriented humour	Humorous comment including information about Duolingo’s language learning services	“you better invite me or I’m deleting Duolingo”

Figure 4. Coding scheme humour.

5.2 Community-oriented

Defining the concept of online communities posed challenges due to its subjective nature and varying interpretations. However, for this study, it could be defined as a group of individuals who interacted around common norms and values within a shared interest, where the interaction took place over one or more online platforms.

TikTok serves as a platform encompassing diverse communities while fostering a larger collective community where trends and memes spread across subcommunities, creating a shared sense of belonging and sharing niche inside jokes with significance for that particular community. Duolingo fostered a TikTok community by creating inside jokes comprehended primarily by those following the company on the platform. This aligned with de Burgh-

Woodman and Brace-Govan's (2007) findings, which defined a subculture as individuals bound together by a common activity expressed through specific language, commodity use, and social organisation. Therefore, the inside jokes and discourses were understood mainly by those who have been included in the community for a while as the specific language and practices grew and evolved. The following sections used Duolingo's video ts as examples to explain their relevance to the community.

5.1.1 Selected video

The community-oriented video showcased Duolingo's cartoon bird mascot, placed next to the famous artist Dua Lipa. The video was accompanied by a text that read, "Dreaming of the day Dua Lipa finally agrees to being with me." The video's caption said, "It's cuffing szn let an owl dream 🙄😭 #dualipa #duolingo #idreamedadream."

The video was classified as community-oriented since it targeted Duolingo followers. It featured an inside joke, depicting the Duolingo birds' desire to marry Dua Lipa. The video underscored the community's sense of humour and achievement, resonating exclusively with Duolingo users. A user who had not been actively engaged in Duolingo's account for an extended period might not have understood the joke as it had been recurring and evolving throughout Duolingo's TikTok use.

5.1.2 Consumer Attitudes

The Community-oriented video garnered substantial viewership and many likes. The number of comments was insignificant compared to its widespread popularity. An interesting observation was the multitude of comments falling under the theme of humour, particularly within the subcategory of Community inside jokes. In comparison to the other videos, this category received the most such comments.

“ok ok we can make it happen 🙄”

“WHAT ABOUT DUOLINGO X SCRUB DADDY 💔💔”

“You should invite me”

This indicated that people tended to engage more positively and humorously when marketing content included topics and themes surrounding the community. Duolingo maintained and strengthened its community through this content as consumers wanted to show that they were part of it and commented on demonstrating this. The phrase "ok ok we can make it happen 😏" was an example of a recurrent way of communicating in the comment section, which reflected a humorous tone commonly used by users. A pattern seen in these types of comments was the choice of using the word "we," which indicated a sense of community and included followers humorously while also expressing enthusiasm and reciprocating the joke. The comment “WHAT ABOUT DUOLINGO X SCRUB DADDY ❤️❤️” referred to Duolingo's previous collab with the company Scrub Daddy's mascot and thus showed the commenter's long commitment to the company's content. This showcased how community-oriented content contributed to the company's community maintenance by creating a playful attitude among consumers, as demonstrated in the comments section. Comments displaying the commenters' wish to attend the wedding were a recurring theme observed, such as “you better invite me or I'm deleting Duolingo”. These comments alluded to an internal joke and served as a means for users to establish their affiliation with the community by playfully expressing their desire to attend the wedding. These comments also indicated active engagement within the app, further indicating their integration into the community.

Furthermore, a recurring theme in the comment section was negative feedback concerning Duolingo's recent update. Many commenters showed their displeasure with the update, urging the company to reverse it. The comments reflected a service-oriented negative sentiment, with users expressing a lack of motivation to continue using the platform due to the update.

“REVERT THE UPDATE YALL ARE JUST LOOSING US”

“REVERT THE UPDATE PLS WE'RE SO UNMOTIVATED TO KEEP
LEARNING”

Thus, due to its negative nature, those comments also indicated a sense of community, as the commenters used inclusive language such as "us" and "we," showing that they came together in the conversation to share a common complaint.

Duolingo's use of videos centred on community-building and inside jokes successfully enabled the audience and the company to share their stories. This was evident in the positive feedback received by the company on TikTok in the comment section. The videos focused on community humour and gave consumers a platform to engage in community-building behaviour where they could display their belonging and be part of the joke.

Of all the comments, the majority of them fell under the humour theme, suggesting that community-oriented content evoked positive reactions and elicited humorous responses from users. The prominence of service-oriented humour strengthened this finding as a frequently recurring attitude among consumers, further supporting the notion that community-oriented content engendered positive reactions and humour.

Notably, the community-oriented videos did not directly reference Duolingo's service or mention their specific product, further emphasising the focus on community engagement rather than explicit advertising. Therefore, the community-oriented video was a clear example of native content marketing since it was seamlessly integrated into the nature of TikTok and did not have an apparent promotional aspect. It could be stated that using native content marketing as an owned media strategic marketing approach was a successful way of creating content to influence consumer attitudes and responses positively and humorously. Positive attitudes generated by social media marketing were crucial for consumers' overall perception of the company and could be attributed to a direct linkage with the company's sales performance. Ansari et al. (2019) stated that social media content marketing significantly influenced consumer purchasing decisions more than brand awareness. Based on the positive response to successful native content marketing, it could be stated that native content marketing as a social media strategy would positively correlate to consumer purchasing decisions. This was further corroborated by The associative processing model of humour (Strick et al., 2013), implying that the consistent association of humour with a brand established favourable brand perceptions that impacted impulsive brand selection and encouraged a specific brand choice.

5.2 Trend

This research focused on an online phenomenon, particularly internet trends that competes for users' attention in a highly competitive online environment (Asur et al., 2011). For this study, trend refers to internet trends. The TikTok algorithm is essential in promoting and generating trends on the platform. By leveraging machine learning and artificial intelligence, the algorithm personalises users' "For You" pages, tailoring content recommendations to their preferences and interests. As a result, multiple trends emerged across the platform, spanning different communities and reaching a broad audience (TikTok, 2020).

However, to fully understand TikTok trends, it was crucial to consider the meme culture on the platform. Memes transformed from isolated events to widespread social phenomena through imitation, copying, remixing and repackaging. These transformations were essential aspects of TikTok trends, as creators repurposed and remixed the original trend into multiple iterations (Zulli & Zulli, 2020).

5.2.1 Selected video

The video began with a blanket that dropped and revealed the Duolingo owl standing in a white office space surrounded by people. Confetti was thrown at the owl, and phone flashlights were pointed at it while a popular song by Celine Dion, "It's All Coming Back to Me Now," played in the background. The owl then "lip-synced" and danced to the song. Furthermore, the video was captioned, "When @peterspasta came to the office, Celine Duon came out to play. #comedy #trend #Duolingo #itsallcomingbacktomenow #40yearsofcelinedion #DuaLipa." This video was a recreation of a trend that was widespread on the social media platform at the time. The trend involved people lip-syncing to the same song and using everyday household items, such as hair dryers, torn paper and matches. This was done to create makeshift stagecraft that mimicked real performances of musicians, emulating the dramatic nature of wind and smoke machines and other objects that are common practice in live performances.

5.2.2 Consumer attitudes

The TikTok community responded positively to the video, which was classified as a "trend," as evidenced by the many likes, comments and views it received. A content analysis of the comments revealed a consistent theme of humour and positive attitudes among the viewers. Most comments were humorous, indicating a shared understanding and inside jokes within the Duolingo community. This humour often stemmed from specific references and "lore" associated with Duolingo. Moreover, many viewers expressed admiration for the video's entertainment value and creative elements. The following comments serve as examples of entertainment positive comments:

“We will never do a trend as successfully as Duo I am convinced”

“we need a full concert, duo!!”

Even though the comments displayed above were categorised as entertainment positive, they also exhibited community aspects. The utilisation of "we" in the comments reflects a sense of belonging and community within the comment section. The phrase "we will never do a trend as successfully as Duo, I am convinced" suggests that the commenters share a collective identity. By employing the word "we," the commenters align themselves with other viewers who appreciate the mascot or the social media managers' ability to recreate TikTok trends. Similarly, the statement "we need a full concert, Duo!!" further underscores the community aspect in the comment section, representing a single commenter making a collective request. Both comments demonstrate an interesting trend in which the owl mascot is consistently called "Duo" rather than using the full name, Duolingo. This linguistic choice differentiates the mascot from the language learning app itself, establishing it as an independent entity separate from the corporate promotional aspects of the social media account. This is further supported by Du Plessis (2017), who emphasised the role of content communities in providing a platform for storytelling, humanising brands and effectively engaging the audience.

Furthermore, while a few comments had a negative tone, the overall sentiment remained positive. Some commenters provided constructive criticism regarding the video's

entertainment value, while others expressed general negativity. The following comments exemplify the general negative sentiment expressed by some viewers:

“Who’s going be cleaning that”

“Guys I think duolingo is on cr@ck”

The comment "Who’s going be cleaning that" conveyed a slightly negative tone, implying scepticism about the aftermath of the paper being thrown around in the video. However, it should be noted that this comment did not directly criticise Duolingo's services or products but rather expressed a practical concern about the office environment. Similarly, the remark "Guys, I think Duolingo is on cr@ck" could be interpreted negatively. However, the context and tone of such comments within the TikTok community had to be considered. TikTok comments often had a humorous or sarcastic tone and it appeared that this was a playful remark rather than severe criticism. The use of "guys" in the comment also fostered a sense of community. This aligned with the concept explained by Gambetti & Graffigna (2010), which suggested that customers wanted to co-create brand content and engage in social interactions with fellow commenters.

Moreover, it was somewhat surprising that there were not many negative comments on a viral video, considering that most of the video's viewers were likely not members of the Duolingo TikTok community. This was supported by the company having 6.6 million followers compared to 13.8 million views. The findings indicated that the video captured the attention of a broader audience beyond the Duolingo community. Additionally, the study revealed an intriguing pattern regarding the presence or absence of negative comments related to the service aspect of the video content. This highlighted the significant role of humour as a potential mechanism to divert attention away from negative brand associations. This observation aligned with previous research suggesting that humour can be a powerful tool in mitigating the impact of potentially unfavourable brand perceptions. This is supported by Strick et al. (2013), who contend that humour generates a positive effect and diverts consumers' attention away from negative associations.

Except for the Duolingo owl's appearance, the trend video directly repackaged other TikTok users' content, presenting marketing content in an unfamiliar or unexpected medium, as this

trend format is not often used in traditional marketing. According to previous research by Dahlén & Edenius (2007), Darke & Ritchie (2007) and Kuhn, Hume, & Love (2010), this resulted in the content being less easily recognised as advertising and, consequently, subjected to less critical evaluation. This could explain why the comments on the video did not explicitly refer to Duolingo's offerings.

Furthermore, the comments within the entertainment category offered further corroboration for the preceding findings regarding the presence of less critical attitudes. The findings aligned with the effects described by the persuasion knowledge model (PKM) outlined by Friestad and Wright (1994). According to the PKM, consumers who were more aware of the source of the content were more likely to develop negative attitudes towards it. In this case, the humorous nature of the videos took over, overshadowing any persuasion attempts and diminishing consumers' recognition of the brand as the driving force behind the content. As the video was a replica of a trend, some viewers may have been unaware that it was associated with a company account since there were no disclosures or mentions of the Duolingo name in the video. The PKM also suggested that subject knowledge, referring to consumers' familiarity with the advertised product or service, could shape their attitudes about it. Some comments in the entertainment category exemplified this. The following comments exemplify positive responses to the entertainment value of the content:

so... there is this contest called eurovision.. you should attend it u would win 😞

Omg the lip syncing was so perfect 🤩



Celine could never

And the Vegas residency starts...?

These comments did not explicitly mention Duolingo or its services but focused on the content's visual appeal and entertainment value. This aligns with the concept that a lack of subject and agent knowledge, as proposed by the persuasion knowledge model (PKM), can contribute to a reduced number of negative responses and attitudes. When viewers are unfamiliar with the brand or services behind the content, their evaluations tend to be less critical and more focused on the perceived entertainment value. In this case, the lack of direct mentions of Duolingo or its services suggests that viewers may not be strongly aware of the

brand's presence within the video. Thus, their comments primarily revolved around the entertainment aspects, such as lip-syncing or the association with Celine Dion or the concept of a Vegas residency.

Furthermore, the study uncovered various humorous comments within the community that participated in or referenced an inside joke involving the Duolingo owl kidnapping kids and people. The following comments serve as examples of community-oriented inside jokes:

“please give my sister back, I will never forget the Spanish lessons again I promise
  “

“please let me out please I'll do my Spanish”

“Duolingo already finished three courses, FREE MY FAMILY PLEASE”

This finding holds significance as it underscores the role of community culture in shaping the reception and interpretation of content on TikTok. The presence of inside jokes within the community-oriented humorous comments indicates that the Duolingo community has cultivated a distinct culture that influences how its members interact with one another and understand the content on the platform. This community aspect is supported by research conducted by De Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan (2007), who argues that subcultures are formed around shared activities and expressed through distinct language. The first comment contributes to the notion of the Duolingo owl taking a family member as a punishment for not consistently practising language lessons. Likewise, the second comment, "please let me out please I'll do my Spanish," adds to the comedic narrative that the Duolingo owl has captured the commenter. They are begging for their freedom by promising to study Spanish. The third comment, "Duolingo already finished three courses, FREE MY FAMILY PLEASE," further extends the ongoing meme by humorously suggesting that the commenter's completion of multiple Duolingo courses should secure the freedom of their family members, who are thought to be held hostage by the Duolingo owl.

The comments provided demonstrated the playful and humorous dynamics of an inside joke within the Duolingo community, where users engaged in joking about the personification of the Duolingo owl as a strict and intimidating language instructor known as "Evil Duo." This

meme originated on Tumblr and Twitter and has since become widely recognised within the TikTok community (knowyourmeme, 2022). Participating in this inside joke allows users to express their dedication to language learning, albeit ironically, while engaging in an exaggerated narrative centred around the owl's behaviour. The popularity of the Duolingo meme further underscores the significance of inside jokes and shared cultural references in fostering a sense of belonging and identity within online communities. Through their participation in the meme, users align themselves with a distinct subculture of Duolingo learners, fostering mutual understanding.

Furthermore, the study revealed that some community-coded comments revolved around an imaginary parasocial relationship between the Duolingo owl and the singer Dua Lipa. In contrast, others focused on topics such as the social media managers' strained relationship with Duolingo's legal team and higher-ups in the corporate hierarchy. The following comments serve as additional examples of the community-oriented inside joke:

“Be honest. Is this for Dua Lipa?”

“Y’all dragged legal Steve into it? He did not go to law school for this”

These findings shed light on the TikTok community's attitudes towards a Duolingo video categorised as a "trend." The overwhelming number of positive and humorous comments indicates that the video was perceived as entertainment rather than advertising. The lack of negative comments targeting Duolingo's services or products is worth noting, indicating once again that humour is a diversion from negative associations with the brand (Strick et al., 2013). The study's findings further highlight the significance of community culture in influencing the reception and interpretation of content on TikTok.

5.3 Service-oriented

The service-oriented category referred to the type of video content directly related to Duolingo's service. This included providing users with practical information or tools related to language learning, being more instructional, and aiming to motivate users to use Duolingo's service. One prominent characteristic of service-oriented videos was their recognition of their

corporate identity, thereby setting them apart from individual content creators. This was achieved by referencing the company's name, services, personnel, and other potential indicators. Overall, including service-oriented videos on Duolingo was likely intended to enhance the platform's educational value and increase users' awareness of Duolingo's service. The study's analysis of commenters' attitudes towards the content type provided valuable insights into how users perceived and engaged with Duolingo's instructional materials.

5.4.1 Selected video

The video showed the Duolingo owl walking to a small coffee kiosk on a big busy street. In the video, a text said, “Getting zooted before a long day of inspiring language learners for the New Year”. The caption to the video is !new year, same me #duolingo #Dulapeep #languagelearning”. The video had a sound which was an Original sound by Petsio where a man was yelling, “Wakey wakey, it's time for school, common wake up it's time for school. Common man are u ready for school”

5.4.2 Consumer attitudes

The Service-oriented video had a relatively lower number of views than videos in other categories. The lack of comments categorised within the Tag category may have explained its comparatively smaller reach. Furthermore, this suggested that videos with a service-oriented focus tended to have less viral appeal. Nevertheless, it was crucial to emphasise that this type of content generated higher levels of engagement through comments. Specifically, this video exhibited the highest level of engagement in terms of comments.

The comment section reflected significant engagement in the category of service-oriented comments, comprising both negative and positive feedback. This theme presented the highest representation in both positive and negative service-oriented comments. The prevalence of positive comments stood out, suggesting that followers were highly inclined to express positive sentiments regarding the service. It was worth noting that these positive comments may not necessarily have been directly related to the content of the service-oriented video itself. The following comments serve as examples of product and service positive:

“Thanks for freezing my days in my japanese lessons really nice. Now i will complete lesson a day 🍻”

“i only got 100% on every Italian test 😊”

Moreover, the significant negative responses from consumers were not necessarily directed at the advertisement itself but towards the service as a whole. There were few generally negative comments and no negative comments related to the video's entertainment aspect. This discrepancy suggested that service-oriented videos elicited more negative reactions from viewers. Friestad and Wright's (1994) persuasion knowledge model provided insight into understanding this phenomenon. According to the model, service-oriented videos could be perceived as more manipulative and driven by a clear intent to sell. This perception could increase viewers' scepticism or resistance, increasing the likelihood of negative feedback. The abundance of negative comments in the video's service-oriented subcategory supported the idea that viewers may react negatively to the content they perceived as primarily focused on promoting products or services. This was further supported by Muller & Christandl, (2019) who showed that sponsored content increases persuasion knowledge and results in more negative brand attitudes. The following comments serve as examples of product and service negative:

“@👤 and they want us to use this app for school work 🧠”

“Yo I deleted duolingo bc I got annoyed”

“My sister deleted duo and I use Google translate”

Acknowledging the prevailing consumer attitudes observed in this video, which revolved around humour, specifically community inside jokes, was essential. Out of these, the majority of the comments were jokes about Duolingo kidnapping their family. The following comments serve as examples of community-oriented inside jokes:

“Let my family go pls i have a 50 day streak of French 😭”

“Duo can I have my family back? I did my Spanish lessons”

The company could be said to have successfully fostered a sense of community among its users. This was consistent with Shao's (2009) findings, which stated that people consumed content to fulfil their information and entertainment needs and manage their moods. Individuals also actively participated in the content by interacting with it and other users, enhancing their social connections, and becoming members of virtual communities. The presence of inside jokes within the videos on Duolingo served as a mechanism for users to demonstrate their affiliation with the community, regardless of the specific topic of the videos. This sense of community and shared humour contributed to user engagement and connection, strengthening the brand's relationship with its audience.

Another finding of the result was that the three most liked comments were all service-oriented. The most popular comment was a positive service-oriented comment.

“Make a sign language learning app 🙏 “

Again, this indicated that consumer attitudes were more inclined towards the service aspect when the content was centred around it. The second and third most-liked comments were both negative.

“Duo, im sorry but I think google translate is better 😞”

“Is there a way to get the old Duolingo UI back? The new path option is terrible for learning Japanese.I'll even pay for super Duolingo again to get it”

This again stated that videos with a service-oriented theme tended to elicit more negative responses from viewers. Although the video incorporated some elements of native content marketing by subtly blending it into the format, it was not entirely saturated with this marketing approach since it used obvious attempts to sell its product. The relatively low number of views and the abundance of negative comments regarding this video could explain its perceived lack of success compared to others. This finding further supported the persuasion knowledge model, which suggested that consumers with higher levels of persuasion knowledge were more sceptical of advertising messages, particularly when they

perceived the advertiser's intent to manipulate them. This scepticism was amplified when the message was perceived as harsh or annoying in the context of the platform or situation (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000).

5.4 Mixed

The term "mixed" in this context referred to a video that incorporated two or more different styles of videos based on the coding scheme. These styles could include service-oriented content that provided information or assistance to viewers, trend content that featured popular trends or cultural phenomena, or community-oriented content that showcased user-generated content or highlighted the experiences of a particular group.

Illustratively, a mixed video could have included service-oriented content combined with a popular trending song, dance, or audio. It could have also incorporated ongoing inside jokes or topics that circulated in a particular sub-community on social media platforms like TikTok, such as the portrayal of the Duolingo bird as a kidnapper or the ongoing jokes in the Harry Styles community about him being bald. Mixed videos were an effective way to engage a diverse audience by offering a variety of content that appealed to different interests and preferences.

5.4.1 Selected video

The selected mixed video featured the Duolingo owl mascot standing in what appeared to be the company's office. The video was accompanied by the trending song "Captain" by Nutcase22, which was circulating on the platform at the time of posting. This song was being used in an ongoing trend where creators would put text on the screen expressing their dislike or disapproval towards a feature, topic, event, or thing. After a whistle was blown in the song, the subject in the video would "disappear," symbolising their decision not to engage with it.

The video posted by Duolingo displayed the text "Leadership wanted to talk about your latest video," with the text and the owl disappearing after mimicking the whistling along to the song, just like all the other creators participating in the trend. The video was captioned with "#Duolingo #comedy #trend #whistle #DuaLipa #stickyicky #DuoLingo." The video

contained elements of both service-oriented content, community oriented content and trend-oriented content. The community and service aspect of the video revolved around an ongoing joke in the Duolingo community, where the higher-ups at the company, such as legal and the board, expressed dissatisfaction with the social media managers and the mascot's "unhinged" behaviour and videos. The mention of company personnel and work life added service-oriented features as it reminded viewers of the business aspects of the account. Furthermore, the video recreated an ongoing trend on the platform. However, it was tailored specifically to the Duolingo TikTok community. It could be better understood by viewers aware of the ongoing storyline and lore surrounding the owl mascot and the struggles of the social media managers in the office posting the content.

5.4.2 Consumer attitudes

The video, categorised as "mixed," garnered 274.7 thousand likes, 1986 thousand comments, and over 2 million views at the time of the analysis. The video received significant engagement with millions of views and generated a diverse range of comments from the TikTok community. A content analysis of the comments section revealed several prominent themes, primarily revolving around positivity, humour, and appreciation for the video's entertainment value and creativity.

Interestingly, in contrast to the video categorised as trend, the mixed video received slightly more comments that displayed a negative sentiment, with some being classified as generally negative and some being product-oriented negative comments. The following comments were service-oriented negative comments:

“Sorry duo I’ve been ignoring you it’s cause I don’t feel like doing my lessons”

“it's been 6 years since I opened a duo lesson..”

This highlighted the importance of the specific characteristics of the video content in shaping the response of the audience. The presence of negative comments on the "mixed" video, albeit less critical than the comments under the service-oriented video, highlighted the impact of specific video content characteristics on the audience's response. Even when combined with

humorous themes, the inclusion of service-related aspects in the content appeared to have elicited some negative feedback in this case. It was worth noting, however, that the "mixed" video's humorous elements appeared to serve as a distraction or deflection from the service aspect, resulting in fewer and less critical negative comments. This finding was consistent with previous research suggesting that humour mitigate negative brand associations and act as a distraction from negative feedback (Strick et al., 2016). The humorous elements of the "mixed" video might have deflected some of the attention away from the service aspect, resulting in fewer and less critical negative comments.

In addition to the previously discussed findings, it was noteworthy that the "mixed" video generated a higher number of positive service-oriented comments compared to both the "trend" and "community" videos. This observation could be attributed to the inclusion of specific textual references within the video that pertained to corporate leadership or other aspects related to the service, opening up discussions in the comments that were both positive and negative or related to actual service and product-related questions. The most liked comment on the video was also classified as a service-oriented comment. The findings of Wojdyski and Evans (2016) supported the notion that the strategic placement and language used in disclosures within native advertising could impact consumer recognition and attitudes. In the context of the "mixed" video, the explicit textual references related to the service aspect may have functioned as subtle disclosures, effectively communicating to the audience that the content was part of a marketing effort. However, integrating these references within the video's narrative could have minimised any potential negative reactions typically associated with overt advertising. The following comments were service-oriented positive comments:

“Tell them that video was the reason I did my Spanish voice lessons”

“tell leadership that video is the only reason I downloaded the app”

One comment that received a lot of approval from the audience was about the video's service aspect. The comment expressed how the video had inspired the commenter to take Spanish voice lessons, implying that the content had been successful in its goal of encouraging language learning and that Duolingo should have been informed of this achievement. Similar comments in the same category demonstrated a similar sentiment of wanting Duolingo and/or the social media manager to receive praise for the impactful content.

Furthermore, several comments fell under the service-oriented humour category. These comments included an ironic tone and language, combined with references to Duolingo's services and offerings in their language learning app. The following comments were service-oriented humour comments:

“POV: you missed Russian lessons”

“duolingo is now gonna find the people who missed their lessons lucky i dont have duolingo”

“Don’t tell them but I haven’t practice my Spanish in over two years loool”

The comments under the Duolingo video, which included community-oriented elements, a humorous trend, and service-oriented elements, reflected the audience's engagement with the content as well as their recognition of the brand's service offerings. The audience's familiarity with Duolingo's language learning platform, as well as their ability to relate to the video's content, was demonstrated by the comment, "POV: you missed Russian lessons." The comment had a humorous tone, as the "POV" part was a recurring joke on TikTok and was commonly associated with trends. The second comment added a humorous tone while still acknowledging the video's service-oriented aspect. It emphasised the brand's reputation for sending reminders to users who had missed their lessons while highlighting user engagement and interaction with the Duolingo platform. The third comment, "Don’t tell them but I haven’t practice my Spanish in over two years loool" emphasised Duolingo's community-oriented humorous nature while still recognising the brand's offerings.

The comments under the mixed video highlighted an essential aspect of the attitudes towards the content. These findings aligned with the research conducted by Wojdyski and Evans (2016), who emphasised the significance of disclosure placement and language in promoting brand recognition. In the video, the mentions of corporate leadership could be considered a form of disclosure, providing transparency about the brand's association with the content. As a result of recognising the brand Duolingo and its advertising, commenters preferred making jokes and humorous remarks related to the products and services offered by Duolingo. This inclination towards service-oriented humour, as observed in the multitude of comments, could

further be attributed to the audience's awareness of the brand's offerings instead of more general humorous comments. The humorous tone of the comments was also explained by research conducted by Dahlén & Edenius (2007), who stated that less obtrusive forms of advertising were less likely to be identified and critically assessed as advertising. This could explain why the service-oriented comments were expressed in a more humorous manner instead of a critical one

6. Discussion

The persuasion knowledge model suggested that consumers must be conscious of being influenced in order to resist persuasion attempts effectively. In contrast, the associative processing model of humour proposed that humour diverts consumers' attention away from brand associations. Interestingly, the results of the study demonstrated the successful application of these theories together in a new marketing strategy. Duolingo's use of native content marketing, which incorporates subtle yet humorous content, exemplifies the combination of these two theories. The main findings in the results showed that the overall attitudes displayed were generally positive as well as humorous, which answered the first research question (How do TikTok users respond to native content marketing on the platform). However, the most significant effect on consumer attitudes was related to whether the content was native content marketing or a more obvious marketing attempt, for example, reminding viewers about the corporation and brand Duolingo instead of focusing on the fictional mascot Duo. This difference was evident in the Service-oriented video, which exhibited partial adherence to the definition of native content marketing and received a substantially higher number of negative consumer responses when compared to the videos entirely classified as native content marketing.

The community-oriented videos mainly got positive and community inside-joke comments where consumers displayed their belonging and “apartness” of the jokes. This is due to consumers actively participating in content to enhance their social connections by becoming part of virtual communities (Shao, 2009). These communities serve as a platform for users to connect and participate in inside jokes, all of which contribute to community engagement. The social connection among Duolingo users is strengthened by their shared knowledge and engagement with the app. In the context of TikTok, where virtual communities play a significant role, native content marketing becomes crucial, as seen by the results in the different responses to the service-oriented video and the community-oriented one. By understanding the norms, values and language of these communities, brands like Duolingo can create content that resonates with their target audience and fosters a sense of belonging. The inside knowledge gained from using the Duolingo app or engaging with the brand on social media becomes a valuable asset that strengthens the social connection among users.

It was clear that content type had effects on the comments. For instance, videos featuring trends garnered more positive and humorous comments from viewers. The findings further emphasised the importance of humour as a potential diversion from negative brand associations, as shown by the associative processing model of humour, which suggested that the inclusion of humour in the video contributed to positive responses from a broader audience and helped deflect negative brand associations. This answered the second research question (How do different content types influence users' attitudes towards these ads?).

Moreover, the absence of negative comments regarding service-oriented aspects in the trend video aligns with the model's suggestion that unexpected elements attract greater attention and processing, which clearly shows the importance of content type. This further aligned with the argument made by Strick et al. (2013) that humour could sometimes overshadow the brand, making it difficult for viewers to recall specific products or services. The trend video was a direct repackaging of other TikTok users' content, with the exception of the Duolingo owl's appearance, which made the marketing content presented in an unfamiliar or unexpected medium. According to researchers such as Dahlén & Edenius (2007), Darke & Ritchie (2007) and Kuhn, Hume, & Love (2010), this made the content less likely to be identified as advertising and, therefore, assessed less critically. This could explain why the comments on the video did not explicitly mention the offerings of Duolingo.

Additionally, it aligned with the effects described by the persuasion knowledge model, which suggested that consumers who were more aware of the content's source might exhibit negative attitudes towards it (Friestad and Wright, 1994). In this case, the humorous nature of the videos overshadowed the persuasion attempt and diminished the consumers' awareness of the brand as the agent behind the content. This necessitates expanding the persuasion knowledge model, which traditionally focuses on explicit cues and disclosures of persuasive intent. Humour is a powerful distraction, shifting attention away from the persuasive intent and fostering a more positive attitude toward the advertised brand or product. Recognising humour as an essential part of persuasion and exploring its impact on perception and attitude formation is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of consumer responses in native content marketing on TikTok, as the website is very humour heavy

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study show the significance of native content marketing in shaping overall positive and humorous attitudes among TikTok users. Using native content marketing strategies is effective in building a strong brand community and creating content that is relevant to the target audience. According to the study, content types have a significant effect on attitudes displayed in the comment section, with videos featuring humorous trends receiving more positive comments and videos containing non-native advertising service-oriented aspects receiving more critical comments. This emphasises the significance of incorporating humour and tailoring content to the platform's specific characteristics and preferences. The empirical insights derived from this study provide strategic communicators with a framework to navigate native content marketing on Social media and the tools to strategically communicate with the audience to foster brand-consumer interaction, positive associations and a brand community.

7.1 Recommendations for further research

Future research in marketing should focus on exploring the long-term effects of native content marketing on attitudes, brand perception, loyalty and purchase intentions, as this study only investigates attitudes on a specific platform and brand. Additionally, conducting comparative studies across different social media platforms can provide platform-specific insights and guide marketers in tailoring their strategies as native content marketing will be different across platforms. Further, exploring the impact of other content characteristics beyond humour, such as emotional appeal, storytelling and user-generated content will enhance understanding of consumer attitudes and engagement. Lastly, investigating the role of persuasion knowledge in TikTok native content marketing and its influence on consumer attitudes is essential for designing transparent and effective campaigns, which could be done by conducting interviews or surveys on consumers using TikTok. Addressing these research gaps will contribute to the development of more engaging and targeted marketing strategies.

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