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Persuasion Knowledge in an Evolving Media Landscape: Future Research Directions

Mathew S. Isaac and Bobby Calder

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**Persuasion Knowledge in an Evolving Media Landscape:
Future Research Directions**

MATHEW S. ISAAC*

BOBBY J. CALDER

*Mathew S. Isaac (isaacm@seattleu.edu) is the Thomas F. Gleed Chair of Business Administration and Professor of Marketing at the Albers School of Business and Economics, Seattle University, Seattle, WA 98122. Bobby J. Calder (calder@northwestern.edu) is the Professor Emeritus of Marketing at the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60208. Date of Submission: 12-21-2022.

ABSTRACT

Persuasion knowledge, which encapsulates consumers' literacy of common marketing tactics and their assumptions about what marketers hope to accomplish by using these tactics, is one of the original research areas pioneered by the *Journal of Consumer Research*. In their seminal work on the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), Friestad and Wright (1994, 1995) provided an overarching framework to understand consumers' coping behaviors when interacting with a marketer that they recognize to be engaging in a deliberate persuasion attempt. While the PKM has greatly influenced consumer research over the past 30 years, we contend that the value of the PKM can be further increased if the model is extended to accommodate the global \$400 billion content marketing industry that has emerged during the past decade. Because content marketing has largely abandoned traditional advertising techniques of media interruption and one-sided communications in favor of more insidious and covert forms of persuasion, it requires a deep understanding of not only *marketing persuasion knowledge* but also *media persuasion knowledge*. This paper outlines future directions for extending the PKM so as to more fully capture how consumers will respond to content marketing, in which media delivering information or entertainment is often inextricably intertwined with branded content.

Keywords: persuasion, persuasion knowledge, advertising, content marketing, branded content, media, native advertising

Of significant interest to consumer researchers is the concept of *persuasion knowledge*, which is a set of related knowledge structures that consumers develop from repeated exposure to persuasion attempts. It includes familiarity with common marketing tactics and assumptions about what marketers hope to accomplish by using these tactics (Boush, Friestad, and Rose 1994). In their seminal article introducing the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), Friestad and Wright (1994, 3) explain that persuasion knowledge performs the function of “guiding consumers’ attention to aspects of an advertising campaign or sales presentation, providing inferences about possible background conditions that caused the agent to construct the attempt in that way, [and] generating predictions about the attempt’s likely effects.”

The influence and enduring impact of the PKM to consumer researchers is indisputable. The original PKM article (Friestad and Wright 1994) has continued to grow in importance in the 30 years since its publication and has now amassed over 4,300 citations, according to Google Scholar (accessed May 31, 2022). Yet, we contend that the value of the PKM can be further increased if the model is extended to accommodate a major shift that has taken place in marketing practice over the past decade. Specifically, a global \$400 billion content marketing industry has emerged (Glenday 2017) in which traditional advertising techniques relying on media interruption and one-sided communications have been supplanted by far more insidious and covert forms of persuasion. In this paper, we offer suggestions on future research directions that will result in a more expansive PKM and ensure its relevance in the years to come.

PERSUASION IN TRADITIONAL ADVERTISING CONTEXTS

The topics of advertising and persuasion have received substantial attention in the *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR) over the past 50 years. In fact, a historical analysis conducted to commemorate JCR’s 40th anniversary identified advertising and persuasion as two of the 16 most prevalent topics in JCR during the journal’s first 40 years of existence (Wang et

al. 2015). The two topics are clearly interconnected in that persuasion—which has been defined as “an intentional effort through communication to influence a receiver who has some degree of freedom of choice” (Eisend and Tarrahi 2022, 4)—is ultimately the objective of advertising. Indeed, irrespective of whether an advertising campaign aims to encourage immediate purchase or shift long-term brand preference, its purpose is fundamentally persuasive in nature—to influence consumer attitudes and/or behaviors.

Much past research has focused on how aspects of an advertising message, frequently in conjunction with consumers’ own attributes, affect the persuasiveness of an appeal (e.g., Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983). However, researchers have also recognized that consumer responses to marketing tactics are often determined by consumers’ knowledge of the persuasion process itself—both in general and with respect to the specific tactic(s) being deployed by the marketer (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Friestad and Wright 1994, 1995, 1999; Kirmani and Zhu 2007). That is, consumers are active participants in marketing interactions rather than passive targets of persuasion. For example, consumers who are aware (vs. unaware) that celebrities are typically paid to endorse products may respond very differently to a celebrity endorsement in an advertisement if they attend to and rely on this knowledge. The extent to which consumers recognize and understand persuasion attempts has important consequences for attitude formation and consumer decision making. This insight was initially proposed by Friestad and Wright (1994) in what became the 15th most-cited article in JCR’s catalog at the time of the aforementioned historical analysis.¹

Friestad and Wright (1994) defined persuasion knowledge as personal or “folk” knowledge that people have about persuasion agents’ goals and tactics. Even though persuasion knowledge can sometimes result in favorable evaluations of marketers (Isaac and Grayson 2017,

¹ The article by Friestad and Wright (1994) also received the 2020 Association of Consumer Research (ACR)-Sheth Foundation award for long-term contribution to consumer research.

2020), it has generally been characterized as a “schemer schema” (Wright 1986) that plays an adaptive role by safeguarding consumers from the malevolent ulterior motives of marketers. It comprises a set of interconnected beliefs about the persuasion process, including beliefs about marketers’ tactics, the effectiveness of these tactics, and the goals marketers hope to achieve by using these tactics (Friestad and Wright 1994). Although related to fundamental psychological processes such as attribution (e.g., Calder and Burnkrant 1977; Sparkman and Locander 1980), the PKM provided a novel overarching framework that has facilitated the generation of testable hypotheses about how consumers might respond to persuasion attempts (e.g., Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Kirmani and Zhu 2007; Morales 2005). Since the PKM was first introduced, consumer researchers have devoted considerable attention to fleshing out the nomological network surrounding persuasion knowledge. A recent meta-analysis (Eisend and Tarrahi 2022) identified many consequences of consumer persuasion knowledge, some of which are marketer-intended (e.g., learning and memory, intentions and behaviors, and evaluations) and others which are unintended (e.g., negative coping responses). The same meta-analysis also identified a number of persuasion elements—including the source, message, channel, and receiver—that may act to moderate downstream effects.

A necessary condition outlined by the PKM for responding to—or “coping with a persuasion attempt” (Friestad and Wright 1994, 5)—is that one first recognizes it as persuasion and perceives the communicator as a marketer. This condition may explain why consumer researchers have predominantly focused on how persuasion knowledge influences consumer evaluations (typically in an adverse manner) across a variety of clear-cut marketing contexts, from traditional advertising (Aguirre-Rodriguez 2013; Ahluwalia and Burnkrant 2004) to salesperson interactions (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Friestad and Wright 1995). Even if persuasion knowledge is not always used or even accessed, most extant research has examined situations where consumers recognize that they are interacting with a persuasive agent (but for

exceptions, see Campbell, Mohr, and Verlegh 2013; Wei, Fischer, and Main 2008). Indeed, a fundamental property of persuasion knowledge is that its activation is predicated on consumers realizing that they are interacting with a marketer who is engaging in a *deliberate* persuasion attempt.

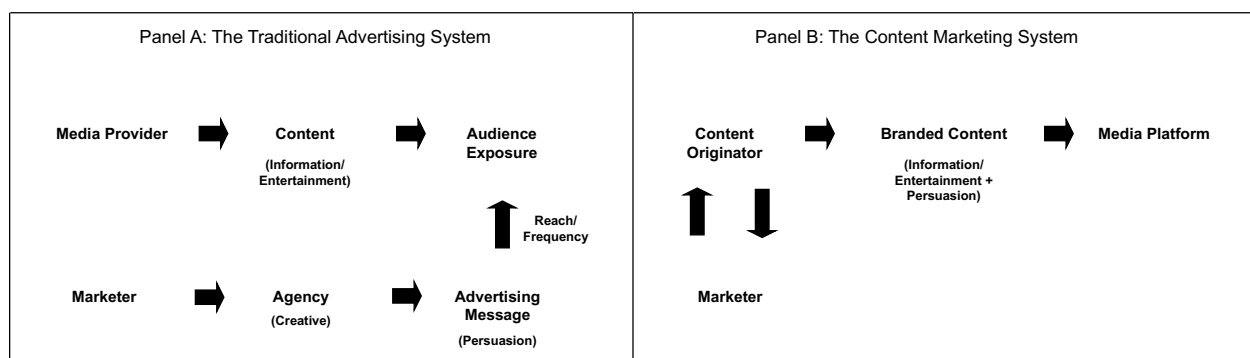
This precondition is quite limiting in view of the seismic changes to marketing practice that have taken place over the past decade and dramatically blurred the line between marketing content and the media content in which it is encased. Our belief is that the scale of these changes necessitates an expansion of the scope of the PKM to include the many situations in which consumers do not necessarily recognize that they are interacting with a marketer at all. That is, persuasion knowledge should no longer be solely defined as consumers' efforts to cope with the persuasion tactics of known marketers. In this article, we explore how the PKM might be expanded to accommodate the new world of content marketing in which a marketer's identity and intention are often obfuscated.

THE EMERGENCE OF CONTENT MARKETING

The study of persuasion in consumer research parallels and reflects the dominance of advertising in marketing communications. As previously noted, advertising in all its traditional forms is predicated on persuasion. Consumers are exposed to advertising messages that may utilize a number of execution devices to hold their attention (such as slice-of-life, testimonials, humor, etc.), but the essential purpose is to convince consumers of product or brand benefits. In fact, advertising has been defined as “a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future” (Richards and Curran 2002). Even as traditional advertising has evolved to become programmatic in that it is more precisely targeted and personalized, its reliance on overt persuasion has not fundamentally changed in the last 150 years.

Although it is so obvious as to seem unremarkable, advertising is a *mediated* form of communication. From its beginnings, advertising has mainly used media that provide entertainment and informational content to audiences (i.e., viewers, readers, listeners, users) in order to create advertising exposures. As depicted in panel A of figure 1, firms interested in marketing their products or services (labeled “Marketer”) employ outside or in-house creative agencies (“Agency”) to craft persuasive messages and typically buy time or space from media companies or brokers (“Media Provider”) for the opportunity to place their ads adjacent to unrelated media content that either provides information or entertainment. The key currency in this transaction is the number of targeted consumers reached and the frequency of impressions. Marketers essentially pay for the forced exposure of consumers to their advertising, thereby potentially subsidizing the cost that consumers must bear to access the media content that they actually want (Wu 2016). Notably, a critical aspect of this system has been that the mediation of advertising is purely transactional in that, exceptions aside, the media provider does not allow its content to be influenced by the advertising.

Figure 1: A Comparison of the Traditional Advertising System to the Content Marketing System



The world of traditional advertising represented in panel A of figure 1 has experienced considerable disruption in recent years. One does not have to foresee the demise of advertising, as some have (e.g., Essex 2017), to appreciate the rapid adoption and expansion of *content*

marketing, which represents a new form of marketing communication altogether. In essence, content marketing is the “creation and distribution of relevant, valuable brand-related content to current or prospective customers...via digital platforms or print media to drive strategic business objectives” (Koob 2021). Variouslly called “native advertising” (Wojdyski and Evans 2016) by those who wish to minimize its difference from traditional advertising, or “branded content” (Hardy 2021) by those wishing to emphasize it, content marketing seeks to achieve covert persuasion by integrating with media content rather than interrupting it.² This new ecosystem of content marketing is depicted in panel B of figure 1. In this world, individuals or companies that create original content (labeled “Content Originator”)—including but not limited to traditional news and media companies, bloggers, and even social media influencers—coordinate their efforts with firms marketing their products or services (“Marketer”) to create branded content that informs/entertains and persuades, often seamlessly and even simultaneously. This packaged content is then distributed by any number of media vehicles (“Media Platform”), which are owned by a media provider (e.g., a news site, blog) or even by the marketer itself (e.g., a discussion board linked to the brand’s website). A traditionalist might argue that advertising has always consisted of content, but this would miss the point that the key shift is in the strategic use and integration of informative or entertaining media content for persuasive purposes.

Many intriguing issues (e.g., regulation, consumer protection, etc.) arise from this changing media landscape, but one that immediately stands out concerns the beliefs that consumers have about branded content and how their persuasion knowledge might evolve based on the proliferation of content marketing. Given the 16% compounded annual growth rate of content marketing (Glenday 2017), it would be wise for persuasion knowledge researchers to account for this new form of persuasion that eschews traditional advertising in favor of branded

² The term “branded content” is used in this paper to distinguish content marketing communications from traditional mediated advertising messages.

content. In what follows, we discuss the interplay between the more established *marketing persuasion knowledge* and a new form of persuasion knowledge—*media persuasion knowledge*—that must be considered in order to accurately forecast consumers’ “persuasion coping behavior” (Friestad and Wright 1994, 3) when responding to content marketing practices.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

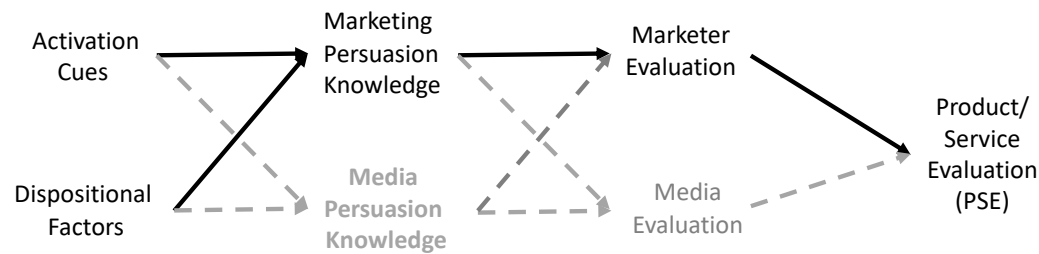
In the world of content marketing, it can no longer be assumed that branded content is identifiable as being a marketer’s own creation. For example, if a native advertisement on a lifestyle website references a brand name, many consumers may nevertheless perceive the content as purely informational (or entertainment) rather than persuasive. Even if they infer a persuasion motive, consumers might reason that the inclusion of branded content primarily serves the ulterior purpose of the media provider (e.g., “this website keeps mentioning a popular brand to maintain my attention and interest”). They may even misidentify paid media as earned media.

Relatedly, the advent of content marketing requires a more nuanced understanding of the persuasion knowledge that consumers possess about media entities themselves, including beliefs about the role that media providers and platforms play in content creation, endorsement, and dissemination. In addition to a general media schema, persuasion knowledge may vary for different types of media (e.g., news programs, movies, podcasts) or for specific providers. Furthermore, these expectations may depend on consumer traits or personal beliefs that are unrelated to marketing persuasion knowledge. For instance, consumers may make different inferences about the propensity of Fox News versus CNN to accept sponsored marketing content, and these motivated inferences may be heavily influenced by consumers’ own political affiliations. Based on these and other unique characteristics of the content marketing

environment, we advocate for an expanded conception of the PKM that builds upon the many strengths of the original model.

Development of an extended PKM requires research along new lines. Figure 2 characterizes the original model (in black) along with directions for future research (in gray).

Figure 2: Future Research Directions for an Extended Persuasion Knowledge Model



Note: Original Persuasion Knowledge Model in Black; Extended Persuasion Knowledge Mode in Gray

As shown, the original model focused on how *activation cues* and *dispositional factors* lead people to access marketing persuasion knowledge beliefs that affect their evaluations of the marketer and in turn their product/service evaluations (PSEs) and associated consumption behaviors. In the original PKM, activation cues tended to be situational factors that often related to specific message content. For example, Aguirre-Rodriguez (2013) demonstrated that advertising that emphasizes demand-related scarcity (e.g., “in popular demand”) activates persuasion knowledge more than supply-related scarcity messages (e.g., “supplies are limited”). Even though both appeals are correctly recognized by consumers as marketing communication, a demand-related message acts as a stronger activation cue and is therefore more likely to trigger consumer suspicion of an advertiser's motives (e.g., to sell more products). Dispositional factors refer to individual differences among consumers with respect to the persuasion knowledge that is available to be accessed. A number of quantitative scales have been developed to assess dispositional persuasion knowledge, either about marketing tactics in general (Bearden,

Hardesty, and Rose 2001; Friestad and Wright 1995) or about specific tactics, such as those used in advertising (Boush, Friestad, and Rose 1994; Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998) or pricing (Hardesty, Bearden, and Carlson 2007). Historically, persuasion knowledge researchers have studied how variation in these dispositional factors affects consumer response to an identical advertisement or marketing tactic that is universally recognized as marketing communication.

An extended model requires conception of a new form of persuasion knowledge—media persuasion knowledge. When seamlessly embedded into media, branded content may or may not be perceived by consumers as persuasion at all. A good example of this might be subtle product placement in a film or television program, which often goes unnoticed and does not activate persuasion knowledge unless independently primed (e.g., Cowley and Barron 2008). Even when branded content is recognized as persuasion (as opposed to information or entertainment), the process that leads consumers to attribute it to a marketer and/or to a media entity (either marketer-paid or marketer-owned) requires much more specification. Figure 2 suggests that marketing persuasion knowledge is likely to interact with persuasion knowledge associated with the media to influence subsequent evaluations. Next, we provide suggestions on how media persuasion knowledge should be conceptualized.

Media Persuasion Knowledge

Just as marketing persuasion knowledge reflects consumer beliefs about marketers' goals and tactics, media persuasion knowledge reflects consumer beliefs about media providers' goals and tactics when disseminating branded content. Any model that purports to include media persuasion knowledge must first account for how consumers respond to different types of media content in general, even when branded content is absent.

Fortunately, previous research on consumer engagement with media content provides helpful direction. This work has focused on the many uses and gratifications consumers derive from media (McQuail 2010) and how consumers' personal goals and values shape their

engagement with and attitudes toward media (e.g., Calder, Hollebeck, and Malthouse 2018; Ruggiero 2000). For instance, prior research (examining television programming) has shown that media consumption experiences linked to *interaction* (i.e., connecting with others), *transportation* (i.e., escaping or becoming diverted), and *discovery* (i.e., gaining insight, knowledge, or skills) are especially powerful at fostering consumer engagement and favorable media evaluations (Calder, Isaac, and Malthouse 2016). Of particular relevance to the present work, media experiences associated with specific consumer goals—such as affirming identity, increasing civic orientation, or inspiring achievement—have been shown to evoke persuasion-related cognitions (e.g., “why is this blog trying to make me feel better about my gender identity?”) and judgments (e.g., Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel 2009; Malthouse, Calder, and Tamhane 2007; Wang and Calder 2006), even in the absence of branded content. Given these findings, it seems likely that when branded content is embedded in media, media persuasion knowledge will be accessed to a greater or lesser extent depending on the specific confluence of activation cues (e.g., characteristics of the media itself) and dispositional factors (e.g., consumer goals and values).

Take the hypothetical example of a beer brand that is included in a feature story about why certain types of people tend to be the “life of the party.” In this example, product persuasion has been embedded in content crafted to engage consumers who have an interaction goal (i.e., connecting with others). Irrespective of whether marketing persuasion knowledge (e.g., beliefs about the goals of the beer brand) is accessed, media persuasion knowledge (e.g., beliefs about the goals of the media outlet that mentioned the beer brand in its feature story) may be activated by the branded content. The ensuing effect on media evaluation may well be positive if people infer that the branded content was helpful and supportive of their goal to connect with others. Of course, media evaluation could also be negative—consumers may conclude that the media

provider created the feature story entirely to distract them from a marketer's persuasion attempt, or they might evaluate the story (along with the branded content) as being unhelpful with respect to their goal. This media persuasion knowledge would exist alongside any marketing persuasion knowledge that is also accessed, with both potentially affecting evaluations of the marketer, the media, and ultimately the product or service. Of course, the most extreme positive effect on product/service evaluations would occur when both types of persuasion knowledge are positive, and the most extreme negative effect when both are negative.

Media persuasion knowledge can also arise from characteristics of the media environment itself. Perceptions of media bias, attitudes about misinformation and fake news disinformation, and attitudes towards different types of media (e.g., news programs, movies, podcasts) or specific providers are all sources of media persuasion knowledge beliefs that might be accessed by consumers who encounter branded content. To the extent that the practice of content marketing is itself part of a public discourse that spurs contentious legal and ethical debates, this too could create new media persuasion knowledge. Even if branded content is distributed via the marketer's own platform, product information may nevertheless be embedded in more traditional news-like content. For example, the energy drink Red Bull has published a popular lifestyle magazine called *The Red Bulletin* since 2005.³ Readers of this magazine may be inclined to access their marketing persuasion knowledge, their media persuasion knowledge, or both.

Activation Cues and Dispositional Factors

As depicted in figure 2, an extended persuasion knowledge model requires research on new types of activation cues and dispositional factors. To motivate future research based on the extended PKM, we have identified a non-exhaustive set of five activation cues that are especially

³ <https://www.redbull.com/us-en/theredbulletin>

relevant to the content marketing ecosystem. The first is *disclosure*. Whereas the original PKM was largely predicated on the identification of marketer-driven persuasion being obvious, branded content most often makes identification much more ambiguous. Labels such as "Sponsored by" and "Sponsored post" may have once referred to paid content that was more informational (and less persuasive) but that is no longer the case, both in practice and in terms of regulatory matters (Campbell and Grimm 2019). Interestingly, research on native advertising has focused heavily on how the presence or placement of disclosure labels, or even more subtle disclosure cues in the branded content itself, affects consumers' ability to recognize branded content as covert advertising (Wojdyski and Evans 2020). Although a meta-analysis found that on balance disclosure tends to activate marketing persuasion knowledge and increase resistance to persuasion attempts (Eisend et al. 2020), the results were somewhat mixed and conflicting findings were observed in the literature. From the point of view of future research, we argue that it is important not to view disclosure in isolation solely through the lens of marketing persuasion knowledge. As indicated in figure 2, questions such as whether disclosure affects media persuasion knowledge must also be considered.

We propose future research on four other activation cues related to content marketing that have received far less attention than disclosure. One is the *balance* of marketing persuasion versus the more typical media content that collectively comprises branded content. In some branded content, informational or entertainment media content is used very lightly to introduce or otherwise temper what is mostly marketing persuasion. At the other extreme, in longer form content (e.g., magazine-style articles), informational or entertainment content often created by media staff tends to comprise a larger proportion of branded content. How does this relative balance affect marketing and media persuasion knowledge, as well as subsequent product/service evaluations? A second cue worth investigating is *integration*. How closely is the marketer persuasion fitted into the overall branded content? Is it a seamless part of the story in which it is

embedded or more incidental? A third cue is *cohesion* between the marketing persuasion and the informational or entertainment content. Does the product/service and brand align with the theme of the story? A fourth cue is platform *context*. Does the branded content match the substance and style of surrounding non-branded content? We contend that if future researchers explore how these five activation cues—disclosure, balance, integration, cohesion, and context—affect both marketing persuasion knowledge and media persuasion knowledge, this research would collectively make significant strides in allowing us to forecast how consumers will respond to content marketing practices.

In addition to investigating these five activation cues separately, researchers ought to examine the important interactions that likely exist between each of them. For example, different disclosure labels may affect perceptions of balance, just as differences in integration might influence consumers' sensitivity to various disclosure cues in branded content. Relatedly, we also want to reinforce the point that these five activation cues represent only a starting list, and there are likely to be many other activation cues waiting to be identified that can inform and enrich the extended PKM.

Finally, the role of dispositional factors can conceivably play an even more important role in future persuasion knowledge research. Considering the degree to which media audiences are segmented, it is entirely possible that different segments may react very differently to branded content. The ability of media to increasingly customize and target content is likely to magnify individual differences in how consumers react to branded content. We also see opportunities for marrying established scales that have been used to measure marketing persuasion knowledge (e.g., Bearden, Hardesty, and Rose 2001; Friestad and Wright 1995) with tools that have been developed to assess consumer goals and values as they relate to media consumption (e.g., Calder, Isaac, and Malthouse 2016; Ruggiero 2000). The development of a unified scale that simultaneously captures both marketing persuasion knowledge and media

persuasion knowledge (as two separate factors, with discriminant validity) would be methodologically useful for researchers conducting persuasion knowledge research in the evolving media landscape.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we make the case that the already impressive influence of the PKM can be further increased if the model is extended to accommodate the burgeoning \$400 billion content marketing industry. We offer suggestions on future research directions that will result in a more expansive PKM and ensure its relevance in the years to come. Specifically, we contrast the traditional advertising system with the emerging content marketing system and explain how both *marketing persuasion knowledge* and *media persuasion knowledge* must be jointly considered in order to understand how consumers will respond to content marketing, in which branded content is often intertwined with information or entertainment. A key contribution of this paper is the identification of a non-exhaustive set of activation cues that are uniquely relevant to content marketing—disclosure, balance, cohesion, integration, and context—and deserve to be systematically investigated by persuasion knowledge researchers in the future.

We close with an example that highlights the necessity of extending the PKM. For a number of years, the financial services company Charles Schwab has invested in and developed a number of podcasts, including *Choiceology* (a show about behavioral decision making), *Financial Decoder* (a show about financial decision making), and *WashingtonWise Investor* (a show about legislative and regulatory affairs geared towards high-worth investors). Even though each host discloses upfront that the podcast is “from Charles Schwab,” the balance, cohesion, integration, and context of each of the shows differs greatly. In fact, Schwab’s portfolio of

podcasts has been described as a type of “audio funnel,”⁴ with each podcast playing a distinct role in the company’s marketing funnel and serving a different audience segment. It is intriguing to consider how marketing persuasion knowledge and media persuasion knowledge might be differentially activated among different types of listeners who consume each of these podcasts. The extended PKM that we have advocated for in this paper can help researchers disentangle these unique forms of persuasion knowledge and better predict how consumers will evaluate the marketer (e.g., Charles Schwab), the media (e.g., the podcasts themselves), and the company’s products and services (e.g., Schwab’s financial offerings).

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⁴ <https://blog.pacific-content.com/inside-charles-schwabs-audio-funnel-1d427541624f>

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