Is Native Advertisement Hybrid of Literary Text?

Gordana Tkalec
University North, Koprivnica, Croatia

ABSTRACT
Native advertising is most often defined as a hybrid form that merges journalism and advertising, but this paper explores the thesis that it may also be considered a hybrid of literature. By examining the similarities between native content and literary texts — particularly their fictional basis, appellative function, objectivity or subjectivity, language and writing style, form, authorship, reader involvement, ethics and public interest — this study shows that native advertising shares several core elements with literature. While it lacks artistic intent, native advertising blurs boundaries between genres and uses literary writing and narrative techniques to enhance its persuasive effect. Through a review of recent literature and selected examples of native advertising in lifestyle media, this study demonstrates that native advertising is a hybrid of literature. It presents fictional events, uses literary descriptions and artistic style, occasionally adopts the structure of a short story, is subjective, conveys impressions and emotions, and employs narration. Unlike news articles, it does not report on real events nor answer fundamental journalistic questions, thus distancing itself significantly from journalistic form. As audiences shift from literary to digital media consumption, native advertising may be evolving into a modern, commercially driven replacement for fiction.

Keywords: native advertising, literature, fiction, appellative function, hybrid text, media audiences.

INTRODUCTION

At first glance, the answer to the question in the title seems clear: literature is art, native advertising is not; literature enriches, while native advertising manipulates and impoverishes. How can the status of a literary text be described? First, it must be stated that it differs from all those types of texts that represent or communicate a subject that exists independently of the text itself. If a text discusses a subject that exists outside it with the same determinacy, then it merely offers an exposition of that subject (Iser, 1978:95). Therefore, native advertising is not a literary text. Although the intertwining and hybridization of genres is not a new phenomenon—commercialization of content has simply shifted from traditional media to new media. (Zgrabljić Rotar, 2020)

What is native advertising? It is an increasingly prevalent tool of market communication used by organizations and brands. It is content designed to resemble editorial material, i.e., other journalistic forms (primarily news), with the goal of attracting readers through tailored editorial content, while simultaneously promoting the advertiser's brand, products, and values. This is especially prominent in the modern digital environment, where these so-called hybrid forms of media content are most visible. Among them are sponsored content, content marketing, brand journalism, and native advertising. (Trbušić et al., 2024:153)

Native advertising deliberately blurs the line between reality and advertisement in order to guide the consumer toward a particular action (in this case, purchasing a product) and convince them that this action is in their best interest and that they truly desire it. Native advertising resembles journalistic forms, but it is not one. All journalistic forms are based on facts and real events, while native advertising is based on fiction—on the imagination of the author who shapes the text. Very similar to literature, except the purpose is different and the ethical boundaries are ambiguous. In addition to the distinction between fiction on the one hand and factual reporting on the other, a fundamental difference between literature and contemporary informational media lies in the speed and volume of production, as well as the level and breadth of audience exposure.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that native advertising exhibits a greater number of features in common with literature than with news and may, therefore, be conceptualized as a hybrid form of literary rather than purely journalistic text, as has traditionally been assumed. Building on previous research into native advertising and news discourse, the study situates both within the framework of literary theory, thereby introducing an innovative perspective on the subject matter. Particular emphasis is placed on the following categories: the appellative function, reference to real or fictional events, objectivity versus subjectivity, language and style, form, authorship, ethics, and public interest. The methodological approach is grounded in content analysis, applied both to earlier scholarship and to contemporary media examples.

The study advances the following hypotheses:
- H1: Native advertising incorporates numerous literary elements.
- H2: News, by its defining characteristics, differs fundamentally from native advertising.
- H3: Native advertising may be regarded as a hybrid form of literary text.

In addition, the paper discusses several examples from lifestyle media that serve to illustrate the theoretical argument. The selection of cases was designed to ensure diversity and thus includes one global magazine with a local franchise, one regional magazine, and one small-reach local portal.

LITERARY AND MEDIA AUDIENCES

According to Eurostat data, nearly half of Europeans do not read a single book per year. The study did not specify how much of the books read belong to fiction or literature, or to some other category. Meanwhile, according to data published by DataReportal, Europeans spend on average more than two hours per day on social media, while the global average is 2 hours and 23 minutes. When we add time spent with print media, radio, and television, the disparity grows even larger. The literary audience is gradually becoming a smaller island in the sea of contemporary media consumers, and various attempts to digitize fiction fail to compete with the allure of new media, which offer everything—except deep reading and artistic experience.

Within the concept of the active media audience, audiences are understood as heterogeneous, and theoretical-research focus shifts toward defining various reception practices, developed through the audience's active participation in the processes of media production and reception (Hromadžić and Popović, 2010:98). Audiences shaped by digitized media are considered not

only as a transformation from passive to active audiences, but above all as a shift from active to interactive audiences. (Zgrabljić Rotar, 2011:33)

What happens to audiences in the context of new media? The modern user base chooses, participates, creates, edits, publishes, communicates, exchanges, criticizes, ad-vises, shops, is mobile and relentless, active and selective, digitally literate and demanding. Old media do not have many choices. (Mučalo and Šop, 2008:53–55) Information and communication technologies have permanently transformed the ways and models of human communication on all levels, and consequently, literature is expected to transform as well.

In fact, literature has always represented communication—that complex interpersonal relationship denoted by the Latin word communicatio. In oral literature, this was a direct relationship between the storyteller (rhapsode, singer, minstrel) and his listeners. In written literature, the relationship is realized indirectly and in a more complex manner, but still presupposes a "sender" (writer) and a "receiver" (reader). (Lešić, 2005:50) At this moment, literature remains written and has yet to find a path to digital transformation without ceasing to be literature in essence.

In the triangle formed by author, work, and audience, the audience is not merely a passive element, a chain of mere reactions, but a historically productive force in itself. The historical life of a literary work cannot be imagined without the active participation of its recipient. For the work enters the changing experiential horizon only through mediation, in which naive reception is continuously transformed into critical understanding, passive reception into active, and recognized aesthetic norms into new production that surpasses them. (Jauss in Beker, 1999: 282–283)

In contrast, contemporary informational media show a trend of trivialization, infotainment, tabloidization, and pseudo-journalism, accompanied by a pronounced erosion of ethics. Is this the path literature will take in order to satisfy the audience's ever-decreasing intellectual demands on one side and the desire for profit (or survival) on the other?

THE APPELLATIVE FUNCTION OF LITERATURE (AND ADVERTISING)

Advertising, at its core, has an appellative function: it encourages the consumer (reader, viewer, listener), i.e., the audience, to purchase a specific product of a certain brand. The advertising message, as a text type, aims to present a thing, being, or phenomenon in the best possible light and, in doing so, create a positive image in the reader's mind. More importantly, the goal of the advertising text is to perform its appellative function and motivate the reader to take a certain action—to integrate the advertised product into their everyday life. The sender of an advertising text, deliberately and strategically, by shaping speech acts, manipulates the reader's awareness, values, and interests, provoking the desired reaction and thereby fulfilling its persuasive goal. (Šegić, 2019:103)

Literature also possesses an appellative function, along with models and strategies through which it is realized. "Storytelling is pervasive through life. Much information is stored, indexed, and retrieved in the form of stories. Although lectures tend to put people to sleep, stories move them to action"(Woodside et al., 2008). The reality of a literary work does not correspond either to objective reality or to the reader's experience of it; instead, the literary text creates an

indeterminacy that allows the reader to adapt the text to their individual inclinations. (According to Wolfgang Iser, this function is made possible by the "blanks" in the structure of the text.) This is precisely what happens in native advertising content. Modern advertising hides behind an unrecognizable mask to use the element of surprise and increase its effectiveness. (Halonja and Kovačević, 1999:289)

"The popularity of native advertising formats in digital media has grown significantly in the past decade, as they can counter banner blindness and evade ad blockers. Native advertising ads can do this primarily due to the format's look and feel, which mimics the content it surrounds" (Kumar et al., 2025).

In Iser, we find compelling statements that further link literature and native advertising:
1. The less determined the texts are, the more the reader is involved in completing their potential intentions.
2. Blanks make the text adaptable and allow the reader to privatize the experience of others.
3. Indeterminacy functions as the point of reader inclusion by activating the reader's imagination to realize a purpose that is embedded in the text.
4. A literary text does not reflect objects, nor does it create them in the described sense; it is best described as presenting reactions to objects.
5. The reality of a literary text does not lie in its imitation of existing reality but in the insights it provides into that reality.
6. A literary text achieves its reality by provoking a reader response in the way it asks.
7. Life situations are always real, while literary texts are functional; hence, they must be based in the reading process, not in the real world. (Iser, 1978:95–113)

Native advertising is primarily functional and not based on the real world, encouraging the reader to privatize the experience of others, containing a hidden purpose within the text and seeking the realization of the reader's imagination. It depicts reactions to objects, with the most pronounced element being its persuasive purpose—that is, the reader responds to the text in precisely the way it asks. Based on this, native advertising is much closer to literature than to any journalistic genre.

NATIVE ADVERTISEMENT BETWEEN THE SHORT STORY AND NEWS

Various authors define native advertising as a form of advertising written to resemble news. The term "native advertising" in marketing is characterized as an "evolution of advertising" and is typically considered part of a new generation of marketing tools. However, due to its subtle method of presenting "editorial" content in media, PR practitioners increasingly describe native advertising as one of the most desirable PR tools. (Pakozdi et al., 2016) Raul Ferrer-Conill (2016) attributes to native advertising both the form and function of editorial content with the goal of recreating the user experience of reading news rather than consuming advertising content.

However, in its basic characteristics, native advertising differs more from news than it resembles it. News is an informative journalistic genre in which answers to key questions— what, who, where, when, and how—inform the audience in a fair, accurate, and concise way about the most important facts concerning an event, phenomenon, or person. (Vasilj et al.,

2004:10) The core trait of news is reporting on a real event. For journalism, truth and objectivity are essential. The path to truth generally consists of an honest effort to present facts as faithfully as possible while maintaining the most objective approach (Šuljić, 2006:75). It is never redundant to emphasize that news must be based on truth and not on anything else. Documentary reporting means that a journalist adheres strictly to facts that they have personally witnessed or obtained from verifiable sources, grounded in material evidence, thus avoiding the pitfalls of interpretation or speculation and sticking to what is unquestionably verified. (Malović, 2005:85) In native advertising, the event is not real but invented. "Thinking of fictionality as similarly flexible opens our eyes not only to its widespread presence outside of generic fictions but also to its multiple functions." (Nielsen et al., 2015)

When speaking about form, news is always written so that the most important facts appear at the beginning, and in the case of editorial shortening, cuts are made from the end. Native advertising often reveals its purpose—advertising—only at the end of the text. In case of shortening from the end, native advertising loses both its function and its form and ceases to be native advertising. What remains is a short, fictional story; a fictional event, a small number of characters, and a brief prose form. At the end, a commercial effect is simply added. In this sense, native advertising is much closer to a short story than to news.

Furthermore, the language of advertising is much closer to the literary-artistic functional style than to the journalistic one. In advertisements, one can find numerous stylistic devices—from repetition, metaphor, epithets, and personification to oxymoron, paradox, and paraphrase. Stylistic devices in advertising are inexhaustible sources and fundamental means of communication between the sender and the receiver of the advertising message. (Kovač & Seršić, 2024:19) This is not the case in news reporting, where stylistic devices are rarely allowed. In striving to attract the consumer's attention, the language of advertising must be creative, unusual, seductive, and even shocking. The author of a native advertising piece, although often a journalist, should not be one. The Croatian Journalists' Code of Honour, in Article 24, states that a journalist must not be the author of advertisements or other promotional content, as this casts doubt on their professional impartiality. The same applies to any other form of participation in advertising and promotional activities. (HND, 2009)

EXAMPLES OF NATIVE ADVERTISING AS A HYBRID LITERARY TEXT

In this chapter, we will highlight several examples from lifestyle magazines that illustrate typical ways in which literary elements are used in native advertising, while also outlining key differences compared to news reporting. We selected one regional lifestyle magazine for the area of Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia (Journal), one Croatian magazine of a global franchise (Elle) and one newer Croatian portal (Mixer) in order to have a diverse sample. The texts are selected according to authorship; we asked for differently signed posts; from signed with the author's name and surname, editorially signed to unsigned posts, so that we get a different sample again that would illustrate the previously stated claims.

Example 1

> *Summer has finally arrived. The days are longer, the sun invites us outside, and evenings are reserved for what we love most – gatherings with friends… The alarm rings, another sunny and hot summer day begins. As you leave the apartment, you*

might already feel how the space is soaking up the morning rays. You know there's a get-together planned for the evening, and you don't want your guests walking into a "sauna"... You come home, open the door, and enter a perfectly cooled room, ready to be transformed into a summer oasis. A few decorations, cheerful patterns, lemons and oranges, little umbrellas in the glasses – and everything is set... With a view of the sunset, funny stories, great music, delicious food, and a cozy atmosphere, you create lasting memories you'll cherish for years to come.

Title: Planning an evening with friends? Turn your home into a summer oasis in just a few steps
- Published: June 25, 2025
- Author: Editorial team

This article lacks all the characteristics of a news report—it does not answer any journalistic questions, presents a fully fictional scenario, is subjective, and is written in a literary-artistic style. The text is not visibly marked as promotional, even though it advertises an air conditioning unit, thereby misleading the reader. Through literary descriptions of a pleasant space created by the air conditioner and the emphasis on the imagined impression the space (and its owner) will leave on guests, the text subtly encourages purchase.

Example 2

Spring is finally here – at least according to the calendar. Nature awakens, the days grow longer, people suddenly have more energy, and everyone seems to be waiting for a chance to escape. Because, let's be honest, this year's spring in Zagreb has been anything but a highlight. More umbrellas than sunglasses. So, my girlfriends and I, in search of warmth and a bit more sunshine, decided to combine business with pleasure. A weekend in Rovinj? Sounds like a plan... The three of us, inseparable since primary school, like a true symbiosis – we can't even imagine a trip without all of us. When one says 'let's go somewhere', the other two are already packing. Outfits were quickly sorted (of course, we exchanged outfit photos), the skincare routine was packed as if for a mini-retreat, and makeup was arranged in shared pouches like we were filming a beauty tutorial.

Title: We found everything for the perfect girls' trip (first-hand tips!)
- Published: June 2, 2025
- Author: Sara Mustapić

This article is an example of a constructed pseudo-event for advertising purposes. A pseudo-event is designed solely to attract media attention, and its connection to reality is tenuous. It often testifies to itself in the way its creators intend, and its creation is funded. It is designed to be accessible, more interesting than reality, and tailored to a specific target audience (Boorstin, 2006). Hence, the example contains no elements of news, as the described event is not real but constructed. It is also written in a literary rather than journalistic style, is highly subjective, and the journalist is portrayed as a participant in the event, which violates journalistic standards (e.g., writing about private relationships and friends). There is a reversal typical of pseudo-journalism—what is insignificant becomes significant, while what is important is omitted (e.g.,

focus on what the journalist packed rather than disclosing it is a sponsored piece). The article is unnecessarily long to enhance its apparent authenticity and emotional resonance. Despite the title suggesting practical travel tips, the article ultimately promotes a car. It lacks even basic elements of a travelogue, which is otherwise common in native advertising. Positively, the article is signed with the author's full name, which is rare in native ads, although native advertising content is often presented as a personal, autobiographical experience. In this case, there is even an ad within an ad, referencing the very magazine in which the article appears:

Elle magazine is a must in our luggage – we know it'll come in handy for browsing between conference panels and during coffees on Rovinj terraces.

Example 3

> *During the Sarajevo Film Festival, the city never sleeps. The streets are awash in the colors of the Festival, shops and cafés stay open longer, and rivers of people stroll the streets—all smiling, all in good spirits. Twice a day, stars walk the red carpet, and official parties are held simultaneously at various venues. Of course, the best fun is always somewhere hidden—in private homes or at cafés known only to the true connoisseurs or faithful Sarajevo visitors… Beyond these spots, Sarajevo offers many hidden gems that won't disappoint. You might be surprised by a new taste or scent, taken aback by the number of foreigners, the new hotels and business buildings, but the feeling and charm of a good host, despite everything, still remain the same. Down by the Miljacka, it's as if we all soften a bit and become better people.*

Title: A City with Soul: We Discovered Why Meg Ryan Loves Sarajevo!
　– Published: August 28, 2024
　– Author: Not listed

This article disguises its promotional nature in several ways. It is written in the form of a travelogue and largely resembles a literary form: it is subjective, written in the first person, uses a literary-artistic style, references real locations in Sarajevo, and conveys impressions and emotions. It bears no resemblance to a news article—it is lengthy, descriptive, and prioritizes how it is written over what happened. It does not describe or comment on any actual event. To increase clickability, the author draws a connection with a celebrity (Meg Ryan), who has no actual relevance to the article, apart from some past quotes. The article is unexpectedly used to advertise a smartphone: at one point, the (anonymous) author mentions a phone that captures every detail and emotion, praising its features, only to return to the travelogue narrative. This is a common technique in native advertising.

Example 4

> *When you live in a 50-square-meter apartment, you quickly realize every centimeter must serve a purpose. For years, I searched for a way to separate my living room from my workspace – not with a wall or a partition, but with something that would create space rather than take it away.*

> *The solution appeared quite by accident, as I was choosing materials for kitchen fronts. At Elgrad's showroom, I noticed a display of black aluminum frames with various glass panels. And it looked stunning! Contemporary, elegant, both subtle and striking. I immediately knew: this isn't just a detail for cabinets or shelves. This is something that can give an entire space its own personality.*

Title: This Is the One Detail Interior Designers Love – It Transforms Both the Space and the Mood
- Published: June 30, 2025
- Author: Elle.hr

The article's introduction completely resembles a short story: a main (and sole) character, the protagonist, introduces us to a situation, their thoughts and dilemmas, leading to a turning point—the solution in the form of the advertised product. The piece is written in the first person and appears to be a genuine personal experience rather than a sponsored narrative. The journalist (allegedly) owns these particular glass partitions from the featured seller. The article in no way resembles news content; a journalist having a glass divider is not newsworthy. However, it does resemble a short story.

STORYTELLING AS A TOOL OF PERSUASION (AND DECEPTION)

"All societies and all developmentally normal individuals tell and respond to stories, both in serious modes (fact, legend, myth) and in play (fiction, jokes, pretend play). Fields as diverse as anthropology, business, film studies, law, linguistics, literature, media studies, medicine, and psychology investigate narrative from different angles." (Boyd, 2018) Storytelling is not new in advertising. Many authors cite it as an effective way to attract consumers:

"Storytelling has been a part of human civilization for thousands of years. It is used to send messages and share knowledge. Storytelling is a powerful communication tool that differentiates brands from others. It brings brands to life and gives them personality. As social media has become a vital part of individual's daily life, it provides companies with the ability to promote their products and services." (Mohamed et al., 2024)

Research by Kang et al. (2020) shows that: "Narrative transportation and narrative preference are positively associated with favorable responses toward ads. Stories elicited more favorable emotional responses and had some effect on participants' intention to share information about the product by word-of-mouth."

Grigsby and Mellema (2022) state that: "Native advertising and storytelling are both increasingly popular advertising strategies... even when advertising cues such as disclosure labels and brand presence are prominently located, consumers are less likely to recognize the advertising nature of narrative native ads."

At its core, native advertising blurs and masks the nature of paid promotional content, often crossing ethical and legal boundaries.

"In recent years, regulatory bodies like FTC (Federal Trade Commission), have coped with the challenge of enforcing guidelines to distinguish native ads from editorial content clearly, to

secure application of standardized advertising rules but also to protect all customers including vulnerable groups and children. Despite regulatory bodies' efforts to establish transparency standards, native advertising often blurs the line between paid promotional and editorial content, leading to instances of consumer deception and distrust." (Naumovska, 2024)

This brings us back to the argument that something ethically and legally questionable cannot be equated with something as elevated as literature. However, the very similarity to literary texts makes native advertising appealing to audiences—and thus valuable to advertisers.

CONCLUSION

As a text type, advertisements belong to the group of appellatives, defined as texts with the primary function of encouraging the recipient to act (Ivanetić, 2003:71). In contrast, literary texts typically do not express their intent directly but instead create meaning through the imagination of the reader (Iser, 1978:112–113). Contemporary marketing leverages this advantage in the form of native advertising—a hybrid of journalism, literature, and promotional content.

If advertising discourse—as a spectacular simulacrum promoting surrogate communication—has become the communicative center referenced by other discourses (journalistic, political, literary, scientific, etc.), then we must ask: is today's communication truly communication in the meaningful sense of the word? Is it not, as Bagić (2006:50) asks, filled with surrogates, spectacle, worn-out formulas, offhand quips, unnecessary digressions, and texts whose meaning can only be secured by their recipients? Let us also recall one of the great theorists of contemporary media who wrote: "One day historians and archaeologists will discover that the ads of our time are the richest and most faithful reflections any society ever made of its whole range of activities." (McLuhan, 2008)

Literature has an appellative function; prompting readers to act through various strategies. These are the very models used by native advertising to stimulate purchasing behavior while concealing its commercial intent.

Native advertising has been considered exclusively a journalistic-commercial hybrid form. However, through a review of recent literature and selected examples of native advertising in lifestyle media, this study demonstrates that it is also a hybrid of literature. It presents fictional events, uses literary descriptions and artistic style, occasionally adopts the structure of a short story, is subjective, conveys impressions and emotions, and employs narration. Unlike news articles, it does not report on real events nor answer fundamental journalistic questions, thus distancing itself significantly from journalistic form.

In this study, Hypotheses 1 and 2 were confirmed, while Hypothesis 3 was partially supported. Native advertising demonstrates numerous literary elements, including, among others, the appellative function, reliance on fictional events, subjectivity, and distinctive language and style. It differs from news in that it does not report on an actual event of public interest, which constitutes the fundamental defining feature of news. The third hypothesis was only partially confirmed (as was indicated by its tentative formulation, "may be regarded as"), since this paper has, we hope, opened a space for future research that may further substantiate or refute this claim.

Due to its questionable ethics, literary theory is unlikely to ever fully embrace native advertising—nor will journalism as a profession. Nevertheless, native advertising continues to attract a growing audience, perhaps because it offers a digitized alternative to literature, which is increasingly less read. Its commercial potential makes it an attractive investment, and thus ever more sophisticated, present, and seductive.

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