



How Brand Disclosure Timing and Brand Prominence Influence Consumer's Intention to Share Branded Entertainment Content

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Abstract

The spread of branded entertainment video online relies on the consumer's referral decision, an initial decision to share the video. This study investigates how brand prominence and brand disclosure timing in a branded entertainment video interact with each other and affect viewers' persuasion knowledge, sharing intention, and visual attention. The study finds that when the branded nature of the video was disclosed prior to viewing the video content, prominent placement generated greater conceptual/attitudinal persuasion knowledge compared to subtle placement. Accordingly, greater persuasion knowledge resulted in less sharing intention and active avoidance in visual attention to the brand in the video content. On the other hand, when the brand was disclosed after the video content, there were no significant effects of brand prominence on conceptual or attitudinal persuasion knowledge, or on sharing intention. Further, the study shed light on the underlying mechanism of interaction effect by demonstrating the mediating role of attitudinal persuasion knowledge and enjoyment. Practical and theoretical implications are discussed.

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Keywords: Branded entertainment video; Brand disclosure timing; Brand prominence; Content sharing

Introduction

Although TV still remains one of the most powerful advertising platforms, digital media continuously pull dollars from traditional media; its expenditures surpassed TV for the first time in 2016, and the gap is anticipated to widen in 2017 (eMarketer 2017). Thus, marketers have attempted to employ many different marketing strategies within the digital landscape, including display ads, social endorsement, brand persona creation, and branded entertainment content (Tuten and Solomon 2014).

Among these different digital advertising strategies, branded entertainment content has attracted practitioners and scholars' attention as a way to successfully reach and engage consumers and to build a strong emotional relationship with them (Hudson and Hudson 2006). Branded entertainment content refers to

brand-generated entertainment content into which a branded message or product is integrated (Chen and Lee 2014). For instance, Red Bull is well known for publishing online extreme sports stunt videos. In 2016, Red Bull was recognized as the most shared video brand, generating over 27 million shares online (Unruly 2017). Branded entertainment content differs from traditional product placement, in which products or brand identifiers are embedded within existing media content, such as movies or television shows (Balasubramanian 1994). In branded entertainment content, the brand or products are integrated into entertainment content that is created and distributed by the brands themselves (Hudson and Hudson 2006), and thereby brands have more control over the content. Branded entertainment videos typically expose the products or brands in the videos in an attempt to transfer the positive emotions evoked by the entertainment video to the brand.

Although consumers' exposure to the brand in this type of entertainment content may benefit advertisers through increased brand awareness and attitude, many consumer advocacy groups have argued that some aspects of branded entertainment can be

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considered unethical and deceptive (Cain 2011; Hackley, Tiwusakul, and Preuss 2008; Kuhn, Hume, and Love 2010). Since branded entertainment tends to deliver the sender and the intention of messages in an implicit way, which blurs the distinction between advertising and entertainment (Bhatnagar, Aksoy, and Malkoc 2004), viewers often cannot recognize the persuasive intent (Balasubramanian 1994; Karrh 1998). That means consumers can be influenced by a brand without knowing (Kuhn, Hume, and Love 2010) and such practices may lead people to engage in a purchase behavior without understanding that they are being influenced by the branded message.

Due to this potentially deceptive aspect of branded communication, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requires broadcasters to disclose sponsorship (e.g., product placement) in the TV program. However, there have not been any explicit guidelines for branded entertainment content in an online environment. Only recently, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) expanded the guidelines for sponsorship disclosure to online platforms and made it clear that online video content which includes a product placement or brand identifiers should disclose its sponsorship in the video (FTC 2015).

This newly released guideline on sponsorship disclosure can protect consumers from potential deception. At the same time, however, previous research indicates that the presence of a brand disclosure may deter consumers' content sharing behavior by activating viewers' persuasion knowledge (Campbell, Mohr, and Verlegh 2013; Van Reijmersdal et al. 2015) and consequent resistance strategies. Knowing that the content has persuasive intent activates consumers' protective mechanism and, in turn, facilitates critical processing (Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, and Neijens 2015; Wojdyski and Evans 2016), which consequently lowers consumers' intention to pass along the content (Wojdyski and Evans 2016).

Since branded entertainment content is usually designed to spread through unpaid or earned media (e.g., social media) (Chiu et al. 2007), the presence of disclosure may threaten the success of the content marketing practice due to the consumers' activated defensive mechanism. Accordingly, the recent increased need for the sponsorship disclosure calls for research investigating the effect of sponsorship disclosure on sharing intention. Moreover, previous studies show that brand prominence is another critical factor that influences viewer's persuasion knowledge (Dens et al. 2012; Van Reijmersdal 2009). While high brand prominence in entertainment content increases brand memory, it can also lead to negative brand attitudes by activating persuasion knowledge (Van Reijmersdal 2009). Thus, this study aims to examine how branded entertainment videos can successfully provoke consumers' persuasion knowledge and referral decision with different disclosure timing (pre-disclosure vs. post-disclosure) and brand prominence (high vs. low) in the video. It also should be noted that the interest of this study is on audiences' initial decision to share the content (i.e., referral decision), which involves an active judgment of the value of the content and of the cost-benefit of the sharing behavior, rather than audiences' pass-along action of ads that is previously referred by others (i.e., co-referral decision; Hayes and King 2014).

The contribution of this study is threefold: First, while many product placement studies have focused on consumers' cognitive and attitudinal reactions toward the placements (Eckler and Bolls 2011; Hsieh, Hsieh, and Tang 2012), this study attempts to further investigate the effect of brand prominence on consumers' visual attention to the brand and on behavioral intention (i.e. referral decision). Second, while the presence of disclosure has been mostly understood to increase viewers' defensive mechanism, the current study suggests that the interplay between the timing of the disclosure and the brand prominence may influence consumers' response to the branded entertainment content. Third, by uncovering the mediating role of persuasion knowledge and enjoyment, this study deepens the theoretical understanding of the psychological mechanism in which consumers make referral decisions.

Literature Review

Brand Placement Effects on Persuasion

Since branded entertainment integrates brand placement into an entertainment content, it blurs the line between persuasion and entertainment (Hudson and Hudson 2006). Moreover, especially on the web, brand-generated content is often presented to consumers in a cluttered media environment alongside user-generated content and media-generated content. For example, if an individual searches for extreme sports videos on YouTube, search outcomes will not only include user-generated (e.g., individually uploaded) and media-generated videos (e.g., extreme sports magazines), but also brand-generated videos (e.g., Red Bull and Monster). In many cases, branded entertainment videos have no brand name included in their titles (e.g., Purina's Puppyhood) and fewer clues that users can use to detect the branded nature of the video prior to watching it. Although some video sharing websites display the source of the video before users click on it, they are not likely to recognize the source due to its small and light font. Therefore, it may not be easy for consumers to seamlessly recognize each source of the content before watching it. This blurring decreases the likelihood that seeing the brand will activate viewers' 'persuasion knowledge (PK),' or their awareness of intended influence from outside and their beliefs about their own coping ability (Friestad and Wright 1995).

According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model, when individuals encounter purposive intention to influence them and if they recognize the persuasive aspects of the message, they automatically retrieve their persuasion knowledge and activate their defense mechanism to cope with the attempt (Friestad and Wright 1994). In the context of advertising, Rozendaal et al. (2011) proposed two dimensions of persuasion knowledge: conceptual and attitudinal. As a cognitive dimension, Rozendaal et al. (2011) introduced the multiple aspects of conceptual persuasion knowledge; audiences' ability 1) to recognize advertising and differentiate it from other media content, 2) to understand advertising's selling intent, 3) to understand who pays for advertising, 4) to understand advertising's audience targeting, 5) to understand advertising's persuasive intent, 6) to understand advertising's persuasive tactic, and 7) to understand advertising's

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