



Full length article

An application of brand personality to advergames: The effect of company attributes on advergame personality



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 October 2016

Received in revised form

13 December 2016

Accepted 14 December 2016

Available online 18 December 2016

Keywords:

Advergame

Brand personality

Advergame personality

Digital game

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the advergame personality (AP) dimensions and to explicate the underlying relationships of the AP dimensions with company attributes, product categories, and consumers' behavioral intentions. A series of surveys with convenience samples indicates that consumers ascribe personality characteristics to advergames and that the perceived AP is five-dimensional, specifically: *vibrancy*, *competence*, *intelligence*, *activeness*, and *excitement*. A path model shows that company attributes (i.e., size, reputation, relevance) influenced each AP dimension in various ways, depending on product category (i.e., hedonic vs. utilitarian), which in turn affected consumers' intentions to play an advergame and to purchase a product. This study produces valuable insights into the effectiveness of advergames and into ways to strategically lead to behavioral intentions to play an advergame and purchase a product.

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1. Introduction

In today's advertising industry one advertising practice attracting growing interest is advertising in entertainment programming, and the emerging content area that is particularly receiving notice is digital games (Chambers, 2005; Waiguny, Nelson, & Terlutter, 2012). As a new and captivating mass medium, digital games have evolved into an audio-visually impressive marketing communication tool for advertisers. Although digital games are typically targeting younger players, a substantial number of gamers are found at all ages (Terlutter & Capella, 2013). According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA, 2015), the average game player in the U.S. is 35 years old and 42 percent of Americans play games regularly, with a dedicated gaming console present in 51 percent of all U.S. households. Also, playing digital games is no longer a male-dominated phenomenon as 44% of all game players are women (ESA, 2015). Based upon a representative survey by The NPD Group/Retail Tracking Services, the total sales of digital game related markets in the U.S. reached over 15.4 billion in 2014.

In recent years, a branding strategy known as “advergames” is

by no means novel to the field of marketing communication. Advergame, a cross between digital games and advertising, is a hybrid form of branded entertainment with insertions of a brand within an entertainment property (Adis & Kim, 2013a; Cauberghe & De Pelsmacker, 2010; Okazaki & Yagüe, 2012; Vashisht & Royné, 2016). The rapid growth of interest in advergames indicates that marketers acknowledge the potential benefits of advergames as a covert marketing tactic. In general, most advergames try to promote their characteristics such as ‘interesting,’ ‘adventurous,’ and/or ‘exciting.’ However, emphasizing such attributes no longer helps differentiate any advergame from its competitors. Although developing advergames based on such ordinary attributes may increase awareness of an advergame, it does not ensure that desired advertising outcomes can be achieved. The present study suggests instead that consumers' personality perceptions of advergames, which is termed *advergame personality* (AP) can be used to build a unique identity to which to target game advertising, implying that understanding users' perceptions of the advergames may potentially lead to improving the effectiveness of advergames.

Despite a growing number of studies on advergames, there has been no attempt, to our knowledge, to conduct research based on the perspective that the image or personality of an advergame can be linked with and transferred to the advertised brand embedded in the game. Admittedly, little is known about the dimensions underlying the personality of advergames or whether, indeed,

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advergaming have their own personality dimensions that reflect human personality dimensions. This postulates that advergaming might have their own personalities as brands and individual personality traits also can be attributed to games and/or advergaming. Based on this postulation, the current study is designed to explore advergaming's own personality dimensions and to develop a valid and generalizable personality measurement scale in the context of advergaming.

More specifically, in this study, first, the perceived AP and its underlying dimensions are investigated by adopting the concept of brand personality. Second, this study examines the effects of the advergaming personalities on game players' future behavioral intentions such as willingness to play the game and intention to purchase.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Advergame as branded entertainment

The use of branded entertainment in digital games is becoming more prevalent (Hudson & Hudson, 2006). From the advertisers' view point, branded entertainment refers to efforts to imbue brand messages in entertainment-oriented media content in order to increase consumers' willingness to process commercial contents. In the context of advergaming, the digital game is a specially designed entertainment property to promote the brand, product, service or idea (Adis & Kim, 2013a; Cauberghe & De Pelsmacker, 2010; Okazaki & Yagüe, 2012; Terlutter & Capella, 2013). Since the main purpose of advergaming is to convey a brand message clearly, advergaming are rather simple in their design (e.g., no complex rules, short playing time, etc.), generally free of charge, downloadable (Adis & Kim, 2013a; Bellman, Kemp, Haddad, & Varan, 2014; Terlutter & Capella, 2013), and easily distributed on various platforms such as on companies' Web sites, via e-mail, on mobile devices and on interactive digital television (Cauberghe & De Pelsmacker, 2010).

The general consensus of the studies in the advergaming area is that advergaming may affect an individual's brand related information processing through positive arousal associated with game play, in turn, increase brand awareness, brand knowledge, and positive brand attitudes (Hernandez & Chapa, 2010). However, although many academic approaches have been taken to theoretically describe advergaming's significant potential as a new form of advertising, research on advergame is still limited in number and scope (Kinard & Hartman, 2013; Rifon et al., 2014).

2.2. Brand personality and brand association

Brand personality can be described as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). On the basis of this notion, it is considered that consumers often view brands as having human characteristics (Aaker, 1997, 1999; Plummer, 2000). In a marketing context, people can build and maintain emotionally charged relationships with the brand as being a person with whom they may choose to have a relationship (Blackston, 2000; Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011). This is due to the fact that, for the purpose of advertising, marketers and advertisers seek to humanize and anthropomorphize their brands by promoting products' (and services') symbolic images; consumers may easily view a brand as having certain human traits (Lee & Cho, 2009). These characteristics could be traits such as friendly, youthful, sporty, dynamic or sophisticated. For example, one may use the following words to describe some popular brands: "cool" and "real" for Coca-Cola, whereas "young" and "exciting" for Pepsi (Aaker, 1997), "sophisticated" for a BMW (Phau & Lau, 2000),

and "unique" for Dr. Pepper (Aaker, 1997; Plummer, 2000). Along these lines, when brands are associated with specific user characteristics, consumers may obtain a favorable social classification by using these brands (Aaker, 1997). Moreover, being associated with a certain consumer's profile may contribute to the development of the ideal self-concept and the identity of the consumer (Sirgy, 1982; Supphellen & Gronhaug, 2003). As the idea of brand association is commonly considered a novel communication tool for increasing consumers' preferences for a brand by differentiating that brand within a product category (Aaker, 1997, 1999; Keller, 1993), many researchers have long suggested that the perceptions (or personality) associated with a brand go beyond mere functional product-related attributes and relate to demographic factors such as gender, age and social class (e.g., Keller, 1993; Levy, 1959; Lee & Cho, 2009, 2012).

As argued by Aaker (1997), brand personality that a consumer associates with a particular brand might have some traits congruent with human personalities. On the other hand, according to other studies, brand personalities differ from human personalities in that human personality traits are developed on the basis of individuals' behaviors, physical characteristics, attitudes and beliefs (Lee & Cho, 2012), whereas brand personality traits are formed through indirect or direct contact that the consumer has with the brand (Plummer, 2000). In sum, most of the research papers on brand personality have generally provided empirical support for the notion that favorable brand associations help create overall brand images (or personalities) and their evaluations are stored in consumers' memories.

2.3. Advergame personality defined

The concept of brand personality has become quite generally accepted in the marketing field. In fact, studies on the application and validation of Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale (or researchers' own) seem to have been continuously carried out. Research efforts have been extended into new areas such as service businesses, nonprofit organizations and sports activities. For example, TV stations, hotels, restaurants, airlines, tourism places, cities, countries, and sports activities are examples that have been applied to the brand personality concept (e.g., Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Karande, Zinkhan, & Lum, 1997; Lee & Cho, 2012; Lin, 2010; Meenaghan, 2001; Shim, Kim, & Hwang, 2008; Sigauw, Matilla, & Austin, 1999; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011; Venable, Rose, Bush, & Gilbert, 2005). These academic efforts have been made to examine whether any theoretical structure of a personality could exist in a specific product, services and organizations, and they explored perceptions of brand personality and developed a measuring scale for the personality by adopting human personality dimensions.

For example, Lin (2010) investigated whether consumers may perceive specific video game brands (i.e., Bandai) as having personalities in terms of excitement, competence, peacefulness, sincerity, and sophistication. The study found that a specific brand scored high on brand personality for "competence" and "sophistication", which means that consumers had developed certain levels of relationship with the game brand, which further influences their brand loyalty. In support of this perspective, Meenaghan (2001) reported that a sporting event may have its own particular personality traits. The study suggests that some personality traits which are associated with high-brow arts activities such as ballet (sophisticated, elite, discrimination, upmarket, serious, and pre-emptive) are differentiated from other events. In another example, Ekinci and Hosany (2006) examined the applicability and validity of Aaker's (1997) brand personality framework in the context of tourism destinations. Their findings showed that destination

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