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ScienceDirect

Journal of Interactive Marketing 41 (2018) 94 – 103

JOURNAL OF INTERACTIVE MARKETING

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Viral Promotional Advergames: How Intrinsic Playfulness and the Extrinsic Value of Prizes Elicit Behavioral Responses

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Abstract

When designing a viral promotional advergame (VPA) (which combines a promotional game and an advergame in a viral marketing campaign), marketers focus on game schemes and prizes to trigger players' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and elicit certain behavioral responses, such as sharing personal data and forwarding the game. A field study examines factors that lead to behavioral responses in VPAs. The results show that players who perceive more playfulness tend to increase their game forwarding and personal data sharing behaviors. The perceived value of prizes also relates positively to game forwarding but not to personal data sharing. Finally, the results show that prior brand attitudes moderate the effect of the perceived value of prizes on game forwarding behavior.

Keywords: Advergame; Contest; Flow; Prize; Promotional game; Viral marketing

Introduction

Games are an important part of promotional and advertising campaigns (Kalra and Shi 2010) and attract substantial attention from academics and practitioners. Previous research distinguishes among in-game advertising, advergames, and promotional games. In this article, we highlight *viral promotional advergames* (VPA), which combine a promotional game with an advergame in a viral marketing campaign, with the goal of encouraging customer word of mouth (WOM), such that customers become willing promoters of the related brand. As a promotional game, a VPA provides rewards (e.g., sales promotions) to trigger players' immediate behavioral responses (e.g., provide their user data, share the game with friends). As an advergame, a VPA also aims to increase consumers' brand knowledge and improve their attitudes toward the brand.

This study therefore explores two behavioral outcomes of VPAs: consumers' personal data sharing and game forwarding. We investigate which factors lead to these behavioral outcomes, using as our foundation Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) flow theory, which defines flow as a holistic sensation that people feel when they are completely absorbed and involved in an activity. Previous research demonstrates the importance of flow for predicting learning, control, exploratory behaviors, positive subjective experiences, and other behavioral intentions (Hoffman and Novak 2009; Hsu and Lu 2004; Korzaan 2003; Sanchez-Franco 2006; Skadberg and Kimmel 2004). To the best of our knowledge though, no prior studies address the flow experience in the context of VPAs or investigate personal data sharing and game forwarding behaviors.

With a field study of a real VPA campaign, we gather actual behavioral data from players. We measure how intrinsic flow and the extrinsic value of prizes relate to players' behaviors. To measure intrinsic flow, we assess players' perceptions of the game's playfulness (Mathwick, Malhotra, and Rigdon 2001; Mathwick and Rigdon 2004). The results show that perceived playfulness relates positively to game forwarding and personal data sharing behaviors. The extrinsic measure related to the perceived value of prizes instead relates positively to game forwarding but not to personal data sharing. Furthermore, prior

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2017.09.004

1094-9968/

brand attitudes (i.e., before playing the VPA) moderate the effect of the perceived value of prizes on game forwarding behavior.

In the next section, we begin by developing our conceptual background and presenting our hypotheses. We then introduce our methodology and present the results of the field study. Finally, we detail our contributions to literature and offer some managerial implications for designing better viral promotional games.

Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

VPA: Concept Evolution

Games have evolved over time and with technological progress. An emerging form of the advergame is designed as part of viral marketing campaigns, such that consumers play the advergame to win sales promotions (e.g., Fly Further game launched by Air France; U-shop, U-win game designed by Uniqlo; Sparkles of Joy game developed by Furla). The target consumers of such games tend to be adults rather than children. During the game, players can increase their odds of winning if they share their personal information or send invitations to friends to play the game too. To distinguish this type of game, which combines a promotional game with an advergame in a viral marketing campaign, we use the term *viral promotional advergame*, or *VPA*. Because they include elements of advergames, VPAs are embedded in brand advertising messages (Mallinckrodt and Mizerski 2007) and try to achieve positive consumer outcomes, such as improved brand perceptions. Because they also represent promotional games, VPAs often are designed as contests that allow consumers to win a prize, whether due to luck or skill (Ward and Hill 1991), and are intended to generate immediate behavioral responses, by promising a better chance of winning if they perform those behaviors. Previous literature describes consumers' cognitive and affective perceptions about various types of games, though it mainly focuses on children as participants (An, Hyun, and Eun 2014; An and Stern 2011; Mallinckrodt and Mizerski 2007; Panic, Cauberghe, and De Pelsmacker 2013; Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, and Buijzen 2012). The current research explores adult players' conative behavioral responses to VPAs—namely, their personal data sharing and game forwarding behaviors. Furthermore, we explore how adult players' intrinsic and extrinsic values motivate these behaviors.

Flow Theory and Measures

Flow theory has been widely investigated in marketing and related fields. Extensive empirical research confirms that flow affects consumers' cognitive, affective, and conative responses, such as attitudes (Choi, Kim, and Kim 2007; Hsu and Lu 2004; Mathwick and Rigdon 2004; Sanchez-Franco 2006; Van Noort, Voorveld, and Van Reijmersdal 2012), behavioral intentions (Agarwal and Karahanna 2000; Hsu and Lu 2004; Koufaris 2002; Luna, Peracchio, and de Juan 2002, 2003; Richard and Chandra 2005; Sanchez-Franco 2006), and actual behaviors (Bridges and Florsheim 2008; Sanchez-Franco 2006; Skadberg and Kimmel 2004). A few researchers have applied flow theory to advergames (Steffen, Mau, and Schramm-Klein 2013; Vanwesenbeeck, Ponnet, and Walrave 2016), but to the best of our knowledge, no prior studies address flow experiences in the context of VPAs or investigate the specific consumer behavioral outcomes of personal data sharing and game forwarding.

To measure flow, existing approaches are either unidimensional or multidimensional (Hoffman and Novak 2009). Previous versions of multidimensional flow constructs tend to include characteristics such as challenge, skill, control, concentration, enjoyment, curiosity, arousal, involvement, playfulness, telepresence, and time distortion (Novak, Hoffman, and Yung 2000). One popular unidimensional measure relies on perceived playfulness, because with more immersive games, enjoyment and concentration exert stronger influences on players' perceptions and behaviors. Playfulness, as Mathwick, Malhotra, and Rigdon (2001) and Mathwick and Rigdon (2004) define it, exists to some degree in any activity in which a person freely engages. This construct is reflected in the two dimensions of enjoyment and escapism. Both dimensions imply a state of psychological immersion and appear extensively in quantitative studies, beyond just game-related studies.

Online Social Sharing

Both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits can motivate social sharing behaviors. With regard to intrinsic benefits, emotional broadcaster theory indicates that social sharing occurs when people need to share their aroused emotional experience with others (Harber and Cohen 2005; Harber and Pennebaker 1992). According to extant literature, intrinsic enjoyment leads to a stronger desire to participate in electronic WOM (Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Klein Pearo 2004; Schindler and Bickart 2005). As defined, perceived playfulness implies a sense of involvement that is intrinsically enjoyable (Bridges and Florsheim 2008), which triggers a positive emotional state. In a VPA context, players' enjoyment of the game should lead to more positive evaluations, which should make the game seem more worth sharing. Formally,

H1. During VPAs, perceived playfulness relates positively to consumers' game forwarding behaviors.

Extrinsic benefits, such as economic inducements (e.g., discounts, vouchers, free gifts), also might explain WOM, according to social exchange theory (Cheung and Lee 2012). Financial incentives are effective for increasing the likelihood of online recommendations (Ahrens, Coyle, and Strahilevitz 2013; Jeong and Moon 2014; Reimer and Berkenstein 2016). When companies use rewards, they aim to motivate players to forward the game, by offering them a better chance of winning a more attractive prize. It seems relatively straightforward that people are more willing to do something when they perceive the prize as being larger, except that (Fox, Crask and Kim 1988) found that increases in the size of the monetary incentives have decreasing marginal gains. Thus, we argue that the more attractive they