Experiential Consumption of Video Game and In-Show Ads: Phenomenological Explanation through Thought Experimentation

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Video games provide a unique communicative playground in which advertisers should participate. In this milieu, advertisers are taking advantage of the experiential nature of video gaming by speaking to the product interests, via in-game advertising (IGA), of a captive and engaged audience. Additionally, within movies and television, brand and product placement (i.e., in-show advertising – ISA) simulate reality by marketing a given brand or product while providing the consumer with clues to actor preferences and personalities.

Although commonly practiced, IGA effects remain relatively arcane. Also, as ISA has not been exhaustively explored in the television and film industries, further technological advances toward interactive television and digital graphical interfaces offer exponentially expanding marketing opportunities for the ISA researcher. In partial closure of these research fissures, we propose multiple thought experiments grounded in the experiential consumption of video game and in-show ads.

Thought experimentation is a data-free (because the data are unattainable), theoretically-grounded approach to expand the boundaries of understanding and

explanation; through a 'what if' scenario, they are used as a means to answer (or propose) research questions (Sorensen 1992). For example, and specific to our investigation, *what if* marketers could gauge, in a video game setting, gamers' dopamine level response to in-game ads upon real-time exposure? If calculable, marketers' understanding of such consumption-related responses would enable efficacious brand strategy development; yet, such invaluable data are inaccessible under current technological conditions. In this sense, thought experiments are characteristically inquisitive; they beguile to our intuitions and curiosity by offering boundless theoretical insight (Brown and Fehige 2011).

Experiential Consumption

Phenomenological in nature, the experiential view of consumption comprises fantasies, feelings, and fun as part of the exchange process; this consumptive type is a subjective state where a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses, and aesthetic criteria are experienced and examined (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982); here, experiential consumption is grounded in escapism, aesthetic appreciation, and narrative connection (e.g., Hamilton and Wagner 2011). As evident in the video game playing and television viewing milieus, these experiential dimensions abound, making these settings appropriate for phenomenological inquiry into such consumptive aspects.

Dual-Process Theory

As cognitions and emotions work jointly to influence choice during the decision making process, focusing solely on cognitive acuities or emotional responses as choice antecedents leaves meaningful variance unexplained (van Gelder, de Vries, and van der Pligt 2009). In

this sense, dual-process frameworks provide a comprehensive view of decision-making processes by modeling both cognitive and emotive factors as choice precursors.

Proposed Method

Thought Experiment #1

The proposed thought experiment suggests measuring how gamers' dopamine levels vary based on promotional exposure. Using Kinect-type technology (i.e., wireless and hand held device-devoid), brain activity is monitored in real-time as gamers are exposed to and view such ads; subsequently, the chemical workings of the gamer's brain are discerned. In essence, this constructive thought experiment proffers how dual-process theory is at work when gamers are exposed to differing types of ads during play. When the time comes, if ever, advertisers would deliver, based on gamers' login and/or game registration data, and alter (if needed), based on dopamine responses, promotional stimuli during a game. So, a gamer who is Hispanic and a self-proclaimed avid golfer would be shown appropriate ads during his/her video game experience; such ads could be continued throughout the game experience if dopamine levels are triggered as expected; if dopamine levels are not as expected, ads could be altered to show pet products and resort offerings for example, based on gamers' demographic data and personal interests. In this respect, how advertisers influence dual-process responses based on IGA would be executed with a level of appropriateness that currently is not possible, while ameliorating the experiential value of the game.

Thought Experiment #2

Just as the marketer's ability to insert and examine responses to product and brand placement was enhanced by the advance from analogue to digital media, so too will the technological advent of interactive television. Technological advances affording unobtrusive data collection through dopamine level readings in real-time and two-way communication between viewers and advertisers would meaningfully alter the advertising and promotional landscape. We therefore envision a constructive thought experiment with regard to the promotion of complementary products wherein marketing theory may be finely dissected. The type of interactivity envisioned and, means of capturing real-time viewer dopamine response to ISA in our thought experiment goes well beyond current technology.

In our proposed thought experiment, given current household products captured in real-time, not only could negative brand attitude potentially be avoided, but data on the marketing of competitive and/or complementary products could be obtained. For example, in television shows or movie programming viewed by the consumer, known product preferences based on snapshots of household products and brands, such as soft drinks, snacks, and/or appliances, taken by Kinect-type technology, as captured during television viewing, could be inserted as appropriate into the behaviours of the protagonist or conversely, competitive products consumed by the antagonist. In this manner, viewers' dual-process responses could be explored, and preferential brand choice could be reinforced or angles of indifference between competing products could potentially be estimated.

Discussion

Although quantitative and qualitative methods used to examine IGA and ISA effects are useful and justified, the data used in such investigation contexts are not error-free and are subject to self-report and social desirability biases; as such, what researchers think they gleaned from samples may not accurately reflect respondents' true attitudes. In this situation, just because subjects' responses were obtained, it does not mean the answers provided were true indicators of how they felt or thought at the moment of brand exposure or data collection. Because the research administrator could not tap into the respondent's mind in real time, unobtrusively, there is no way to know if in fact the data collected are truly representative of the respondent's emotions and cognitions. Because of these methodological limitations, experiential consumption is very difficult if not impossible to accurately measure, yet its importance to marketing managers should not be ignored. To evade such imprecision, thought experimentation was used to explore how the experiential consumption of IGA and ISA could influence dual-process responses in gamers and viewers.

The proposed thought experiments yield insight to the dopamine workings of gamers' and viewers' minds when exposed to in-game and in-show promotional stimuli. As novel and distinct ads generate favourable advertising outcomes, we posit that dopamine levels and therefore emotive responses (toward such ads and brands) in gamers and viewers will increase when exposed to such ads during play and during show watching mode. Likewise, common and overused ads in similar settings will net lower levels of dopamine activation and therefore increase cognitive responses (toward such ads and brands) in gamers and viewers. As cognitions and emotions can be traced back to the chemical workings of the brain, the thought experiments here confirm the importance of gamers' and

viewers' dual-process responses to the experiential consumptive nature of in-game and in-show advertising.

References

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