Apparel brands' use of Facebook: An exploratory content analysis of branded entertainment

Ben Touchette, Morgan Schanski, and Seung-Eun Lee,
Central Michigan University, USA

Keywords: Branded entertainment, Facebook, play theory

Apparel companies create Facebook profile pages to directly communicate with consumers through the use of different forms of branded entertainment. The concept of branded entertainment involves a combination of entertainment and brand information that is part of a marketing strategy designed to reach consumers (Hudson & Hudson, 2006; Lehu, 2007). Various types of branded entertainment can be utilized on Facebook, including contests, sweepstakes, interactive games and word play, events, videos, audios, and downloads. Compared to traditional forms of marketing, branded entertainment can build a stronger relationship between the brand and consumers (Zhang, 2010). By creating a link between the brand and its consumers, branded entertainment serves as an effective marketing strategy that enhances short- and long-term awareness of a brand (Lehu, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to examine features of branded entertainment on apparel brands' Facebook pages based on the conceptual framework of play themes. Play theory posits that mass communication can be considered a form of play because it provides enjoyment and pleasure (Stephenson, 1967). Zhang (2010) adopted Stephenson's (1967) play theory and suggested four different play themes (play as power, play as identity, play as fantasy, and play as frivolity) that explain consumers' motivation to participate in play. Pleasure associated with the play as power theme stems from defeating others and from the chance to showcase certain skills used for such play. The play as identity theme require cooperation and bonding within a community. Play as fantasy activities include entertainment that offers surreal objects and goals. Play as frivolity refers to activities that are simple or trivial, and do not pose a complex challenge for users. According to Zhang (2010), brands should utilize certain play themes in branded entertainment on Facebook to motivate the users to participate. Specifically, it is important to present play themes that are congruent to the users' profiles, such as demographics and psychographics. Thus, the current study examines how apparel brands incorporate various types of play themes into branded entrainment on their Facebook pages to appeal to their targeted users.

Apparel magazine's list of the top 50 apparel brands was used to identify apparel brands and to select the study sample. According to the article, the brands were first ranked based on annual profits of $100 million or more and then by the number of Facebook fans. The Facebook profile pages of each of the 50 brands were analyzed for content between November 28, 2011 and December 25, 2011. The study occurred during this particular period because online retail sales have consistently peaked between November 28 and December 25 since 2007 (Comscore, 2012). The coding categories, which include eight branded entertainment types and four play themes, were developed based on Zhang's (2010) research. The unit of analysis was per post initiated by each brand. Collectively, 1,440 posts were analyzed during the time frame of the present study.

Two raters coded each post individually based on the elements of branded entertainment and play themes used within the post. Inter-rater reliability for the total number of coded items was 96.5%, exceeding the acceptable level suggested by Perreault and Leigh (1989).

The findings of the content analysis indicate that apparel brands use their Facebook pages in a limited capacity in terms of branded entertainment. Photos and advertisements were the predominant forms of branded entertainment. Photos and advertisements appeared an average of 16 times on each brand's Facebook page and constituted 55.4% of the total branded entertainment types used. The second most used branded entertainment was online interactive posts (19.2%), which were used an average of six times per Facebook page. Sweepstakes accounted for 11% of branded entertainment, or an average of three appearances per brand's page. The least frequently used branded entertainment types on theses Facebook pages included download and upload functions (1%), festivals and events (1%) and games and word play (0%). Surprisingly, most of the posts analyzed in this study failed to incorporate specific play themes into branded entertainments. Out of all of the posts analyzed, a total of 1,119 posts presented no specific play theme, accounting for 77.8% of all posts analyzed in this study. Among the play themes used, play as frivolity (7.9%) was most frequently present, followed by play as power (6.7%), play as fantasy (4.0%), and play as identity (3.6%). The play as frivolity theme was used an average of 2.26 times on each brand's Facebook page, while play as power appeared an average of 1.94 times; play as fantasy appeared an average of 1.16 times, and play as identity appeared an average of 1.04 times.

In conclusion, Facebook has great potential as a powerful social marketing and advertising platform for apparel brands; however, it became clear through this study that apparel brands fail to differentiate themselves beyond basic features of branded entertainment. The limited use of various types of branded entertainment and the lack of any specific utilization of theme will hinder users from engaging with a brand's Facebook content. The play themes explain specific consumer motivations for interacting with a brand and the *best* ways to encourage consumers to visit and to stay on a brand's page. To increase the effectiveness of Facebook marketing, apparel brands must tailor their branded entertainment based on play themes.

ComScore (2012). Consumer brand loyalty declines. Retrieved from http://www.marketingcharts.com/topics/behavioral-marketing/consumer-brand-loyalty-declines-12818/

Hudson, S., & Hudson, D. (2006). Branded entertainment: A new advertising technique or product placement in disguise? *Journal of Marketing Management, 22*(5-6), 489-504.

Lehu, J. (2007). *Branded Entertainment: Product Placement & Brand Strategy in the Entertainment Business*. Philadelphia, PA: Kogan Page Publishers.

Perreault, W. D., & Leigh, L. E. (1989). Reliability of nominal data based on qualitative judgments. *Journal of Marketing Research*, *26*, 135-148.

Stephenson, W. (1967). *The Play Theory of Mass Communication*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Inc.

Zhang, J. (2010). To play or not to play: An exploratory content analysis of branded entertainment in Facebook. *American Journal of Business*, *25*(1), 53-64.