Playing with Consumers: Examining the Role of Play in Marketing Communications

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ABSTRACT

Play is an action that builds our culture, entertains us and acts as a communications tool forming connections. It is fun, opening players to engage with others. Advertisers have successfully used play in game formats, toys, contests, sweepstakes and entertainment to connect brands with consumers as a part of the marketing communications. Gradually, traditional push messaging via television, radio and print methods has been augmented by interaction marketing in both online and offline spaces.

In this thesis, I will focus on how play has been used in marketing communications. The bulk of the research has been grounded in games and gaming. A game is a structured system, and while play drives a game, play also can exist independently from a game and its structure. Many of the contemporary studies have centered on games, or in advertising terms, advergames. This provides for the study of a system, but interaction and advertising is much more than a system pushing messages, it is the action that creates content through play which means there is a connection to other forms of play such as with toys, sweepstakes, contests often held in communal places, a third place.

This thesis is focused on examining the use of play by advertisers. It was guided by a series of questions: how does play factor into marketing communications? What are play’s persuasive qualities? How are global brands using play to connect with consumers? What are the actions and places that fit the play paradigm best?

This work borrows from the theories of Johan Huizinga, Brian Sutton-Smith, Roger Caillois, and other scholars who provide the foundations for a new paradigm of play in marketing communications. Henry Jenkins’, James Carrey’s, Ray Oldenburg’s work in fandom, participatory culture, and third spaces provide insight to how brands’ playful strategies are welcomed by target audiences.
This study marks a point of departure from the dominant view of interactive advertising that has primarily focused on technological features and systems rather than human actions. I propose a shift in focus from interactive to interaction advertising, which I introduce as a concept of AdPlay.

Play is a function of rituals. A community is often built on shared ideas, thoughts, values & beliefs, beyond the constraint of religion or faith. In a public, there are the third places beyond work or home that provide a respite from routine. This pause from routine is where ritual can be found. People take children to playgrounds. People may go to the park. Shopping at stores or a mall provides a welcome break from routine. These third places provide brands with the opportunity to become a part of this fabric. Pieces of the branding can also be taken home through promotional items that could find a place in a person’s home or workspaces. Marketing communications should be more than transmission or promotion. It is a link. This link connects people with communities of shared beliefs and interests whose elements they deem important or vital. In the end, this not only fosters understanding, but also builds cultures, which potentially include powerful brand associations.

To engage is to join in. The brands examined in this thesis create proprietary branded content audiences willingly participate. They have branded third places by offering play filled entertaining interactions.

The methodology used includes interviews with leading industry advertising and marketing executives at Red Bull, McDonald’s, and Colgate-Palmolive as well as top media agencies DDB, Shadow Factory, Neutral Digital and The Marketing Store. Field work reviewing businesses using play were observed with various companies on site and at events including Cathay Pacific Airlines at Hong Kong Food & Wine Festival, McDonald’s on-site playgrounds and select events, The Honk Kong Monetary Authority app launch, HSBC Hong Kong Rugby Sevens, LEGO Chinese
New Year Celebration and Disney Parks. Finally, desk research included reviewing scholarly articles in top advertising, marketing and consumer journals.

What I have found is that much of the research is dedicated to gaming technological systems when industry experts focus on engagement through play. McDonald’s has built much of their play initiatives dedicated to playgrounds and toys. Red Bull uses play in special event marketing, contests and sports sponsorships.

By engaging in entertaining and fun ways, these and other brands have effectively used play to engage consumers. System study dominates the scholarly research in spite of the industry being centered on customer interactions beyond digital or other category considered interactive advertising. The Red Bull and McDonald’s case studies examine programs that utilize play in ritualistic designs that escape the confines of computer digital media systems. These communications activations via play filled marketed rituals occur in physical real-world spaces inside branded constructed stadia or travelling caravans around the world.

I conclude that it is the ritual of play, via a constructed system or free creativity, which brands use to build relationships and communities with willing participants.

Keywords: play, story, brand, branding, toys, third space / place, games, gaming, advergame, events, branded entertainment, engagement, participatory culture, qualitative method, spectacle, ritual, tribal, worship