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Online game characters' influence on brand trust: Self-disclosure, group membership, and product type

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ABSTRACT

Advergaming has become a marketers' essential exercise in branding. This paper examines how an animated character appearing in an advergame affects consumers' trust toward the promoted brand. Two studies demonstrate that a highly (vs. minimally) self-disclosing game character increases the game player's trust toward the promoted brand if the game character claims to be an outgroup member, but the opposite is true if the game character claims to be an ingroup member. These effects emerge only when promoted brands are publicly consumed products, but disappear when promoted brands are privately consumed products. The findings are robust across two countries—the United States and South Korea—which vary in the degree of consumer familiarity with advergaming practices.

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1. Introduction

Advergaming—the practice of using online video games that are embedded with advertising messages—has become an essential part of branding. Marketers seem to believe that advergaming is more effective than traditional advertising because it captures consumers' attention (Edwards, 2003), entertains (Nelson, 2002), can be customized (Moore, 2006), and educates (Lee, Choi, Quilliam, & Cole, 2009). This confidence in advergaming's effectiveness is reflected in practitioners' increased spending on advergaming, which was projected to exceed half a billion dollars by 2009 (Johannes & Odell, 2007). Academics are not silent on the topic: a growing number of researchers investigate various aspects of advergaming such as brand prominence and game repetition (Caughergh & De Pelsmacker, 2010), the locality of the brand (Nelson, 2002), the size of the product (Grigorovici & Constantin, 2004), and product involvement (Caughergh & De Pelsmacker, 2010). However, no prior study has examined how behaviors and characteristics of an animated game character affect consumer's trust toward the promoted brand. This research aims to fill this gap.

Research suggests that online gaming can help consumers meet their social needs (Lo, Wang, & Fang, 2005a,b). Consumers may

treat on-screen characters as if they are independent social entities, and may desire to establish personal relationships with them (Lo, 2008; Moon, 2000, 2003). Such social needs in the virtual world are found to influence consumers' perception of brands. For example, Holzwarth, Zaniszewski, and Neumann (2006) find that the active use of an avatar can help the online retailer overcome the impersonal nature of the Internet environment and, as a result, enhance consumers' attitudes toward the brand. Holzwarth et al. (2006) further report that the character's attractiveness and expertise moderate its persuasiveness. Thus advergaming provides consumers with another venue for social interactions where the interpersonal norms of the human-to-human relationship in the physical world may apply to the human-to-character relationship in the virtual world.

Accordingly, this article examines whether three important variables that are identified in social judgment and consumer behavior—self-disclosure, group membership, and product type—play roles in shaping consumers' trust toward the sponsoring brand in advergaming. Persuasive messages are generally less effective when they come from outgroup members (Mackie & Cooper, 1984), arguably because of greater uncertainty and less basis for trust. However, self-disclosure serves to reduce uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), particularly for outgroup members about whom less is known (Gudykunst, 2005). Thus, this paper proposes that when game characters indicate they are members of an outgroup and then disclose personal information about themselves, they enhance the game players' trust toward the brand. But when the game characters claim to be members of an ingroup, the effect is reversed; that is,

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their self-disclosure *weakens* the players' trust toward the brand. Furthermore, because social influence affects public behaviors more than private behaviors (e.g., Asch, 1956) this research identifies the *product category* as a second moderator, and proposes that the above-specified interactions occur if the endorsed product is publicly consumed, but such interactions are absent if the endorsed product is privately consumed.

Study 1 first tests this idea with a U.S. population. Study 2 then adds another product and generalizes the findings using a population from South Korea, where people are more accustomed to the practice of *advergaming*. The literature review that follows begins by looking at the key variables of the current research: online trust, self-disclosure, group membership, and product category.

2. Literature review

2.1. Online trust

Trust is based on expectations (e.g., for social order, for competent role performance, for placing others' interests first) that people have for others or themselves (Barber, 1983). Carter and Weber (1992) conceptualize trust as an interactional orientation between self and others; the relationship is the objective. This relationship, according to Carter and Weber (1992), is typified by individuals' beliefs that others will respect their perspectives and will not act in ways that will violate the moral standards of the relationship. The individual experiences risk as a result of the emotional investment and the uncertainty of interpersonal interactions (Weber & Carter, 1998). For this reason, reciprocity (or role-taking) is a core part of building trustful relationships (Weber & Carter, 1998).

In the current context, the more trusting consumers are, the more willing they may be to risk engagement with the brand. Trust is one of the most important concepts in online transactions (Taylor & Strutton, 2010). Online trust is defined as an "attitude of confident expectation in an online situation or risk that one's vulnerabilities will not be exploited" (Corritore, Kracher, & Wiedenbeck, 2003, p. 740). Prior research documents that online trust has three subcomponents: integrity, ability, and benevolence (e.g., Gefen, 2002). Integrity is the belief that the online merchant adheres to stated rules or keeps promises. Ability is the belief that the online merchant has the skills and competence to provide good quality products and services. Benevolence is the belief that the online merchant wants to do good to the customer without regard to making a sale (Wang & Emurian, 2005). Trust is considered to be harder to develop online than offline because two important elements are missing: the physical (e.g., physical facilities are nonexistent) and the human/social interaction (e.g., online interactions are impersonal, anonymous, and automated; Gefen & Straub, 2003).

2.2. Self-disclosure and group membership

Self-disclosure, defined as any personal information that a person communicates to another (Collins & Miller, 1994), plays a beneficial role in interpersonal relationships; that is, close relationships develop as a result of escalating breadth and intimacy of information that two individuals disclose to one another (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Self-disclosure is reciprocal; that is, when a conversing partner discloses to an individual, the individual not only feels greater attraction toward the partner but also discloses more in return, leading to mutual interpersonal attraction (Berg & Wright-Buckley, 1988). Why do people self-disclose? One reason is that self-disclosure serves a long-known psychological need—a need to belong (e.g., Maslow, 1943)—by facilitating relationships, resulting in positive affect (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008; Rosa, Qualls, & Fuentes, 2008; Vittengl & Holt, 2000).

However, self-disclosure has its costs because the practice of disclosing personal information can counter-serve another long-known psychological need—a need for privacy (e.g., Marshall, 1972)—and potentially endanger individuals or bring them harm (Ben-Ze'ev, 2003; Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington, 2006; Langenderfer & Cook, 2004). Because disclosures necessarily involve risk-taking and the self becomes vulnerable to rejection and betrayal (Weber & Carter, 1998), people sometimes avoid disclosures that reflect poorly on the self for fear of social rejection, embarrassment, and disapproval (DePaulo, Kahsy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Lane & Wegner, 1995). Arising from the need for belonging and the need for privacy, this conflict presents individuals with a dilemma: to disclose or not to disclose? This question becomes even more pressing to online consumers who frequently deal with a stranger (character) in the virtual world, because of the impersonal, anonymous, and automated nature of Internet communications, as noted earlier (Gefen & Straub, 2003). One way for online consumers to cope with this conflict is to run a mental cost-benefit analysis to weigh potential gains and losses that are likely to accompany self-disclosure, a process that can be conscious and deliberate, or non-conscious and automatic (Fletcher, Rosanowski, & Fitness, 1994). Perceptions of whether the benefits outweigh the costs, or vice versa, may depend on individual differences and/or situational factors.

In terms of individual differences, Cameron, Holmes, and Vorauer (2009) find that individuals with high self-esteem benefit from disclosing their personal failure to their dating partner, ultimately improving the intimacy and closeness of the relationship, whereas individuals with low self-esteem suffer from disclosing their personal failures to their partner, ultimately deteriorating the intimacy and closeness. Cameron et al. (2009) explain that individuals with low self-esteem equate conveying their flaws with providing reasons for rejection, consequently concluding that they are devalued and unloved.

Although some people are more or less prone to self-disclosure, situational variables also play a role. One situational variable that may be relevant to online interactions is the group membership of the partner. Several studies report that, for example, self-disclosure reduces bias toward outgroup members (Ensari & Miller, 2002; Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007) and improves negotiations with outgroup members (Moore, Kurtzberg, & Thompson, 1999). Surprisingly, however, a review of the literature did not turn up a single study that examines the joint influence of self-disclosure and group membership on trust. Thus, the present work questions whether the group membership of the partner systematically biases the perceived cost-benefit trade-off of self-disclosure.

Specifically, the authors argue that individuals will perceive the benefits of self-disclosure to be greater than the costs if they are interacting with partners who are members of an outgroup (e.g., the individual might be pleased that "they seem very open to me"). Self-disclosers will perceive the costs to be greater than the benefits if they are interacting with partners who are members of the ingroup (e.g., they may be inhibited by fearing "that's too much information"). Such reactions occur because when individuals encounter total strangers (e.g., someone from a different country), they have no baseline common ground for reference (e.g., cultural norms). Their need for belonging is likely to be activated, and they may focus their interaction on establishing a nonhostile relationship. Under such circumstances, they are likely to be assured of anonymity and may use self-disclosure as a functional strategy for effectively communicating friendly intentions (e.g., they may think "I will tell you about myself to signal that I don't mean to harm you"). In addition, their risk of failed disclosure—embarrassment or losing face—will be minimal, because they may somewhat easily justify a failure to connect (e.g., "the failure was not because of me") and attribute this failure to the lack of cultural, normative knowledge.

By contrast, when an individual learns that the stranger belongs to one's ingroup (e.g., someone who goes to the same school), the need

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