

Influence of Branded Entertainment on Viewers Buying Attitude in the Pre- and Post COVID-19 Period

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Abstract

The Indian retail sector is flooded with multiple brands across product and service categories. The brands have been developing their business models around 7Ps of marketing mix. But with almost all the brands adopting these strategies in some way or other, retailers realize that in order to attract, acquire and retain customers they need to review and remodel their business strategies. Studies on consumer buying behavior have shown that customers are looking for emotional connect and brand experience. To this end, branded entertainment forges a relatable, emotional connection with consumers, which can keep a brand top of mind in a more natural way. While extensive studies have been conducted on the subject prior to 2020 that point to the use of branded entertainment as a strategic tool and its influence on customers buying attitude, there is a gap in research on influence of branded entertainment on viewers buying attitude in pre- and post COVID-19 period in India. This article discusses the influence of branded entertainment on viewers buying attitude based on interviews of 1397 Indian respondents in 2021. Based on data analysis outcomes, it was concluded that in the post pandemic period, the role of branded entertainment was not only limited to informing viewers about the brand, but it also helped in developing an emotional attachment between the brand and the viewers. Despite developing an emotional connect in post pandemic period, the branded entertainment has not been effective in influencing viewers' intent to purchase into actual purchase.

Keywords: Branded entertainment, product placement, buying attitude, cognitive attitude, conative attitude, emotive attitude, purchase intention

Introduction

Branded entertainment is the integration of advertising into entertainment content in such a manner that brands are embedded and thus become an integral part of a storyline

of a film, television programs or other entertainment mediums. It is a form of marketing where companies produce, fund, or license the creation of entertainment media, seeking to entertain or educate audiences using branded content and messaging. This convergence of advertising and entertainment is termed as branded entertainment. The Association of National Advertisers (2011) defines it as a fully integrated means of linking a product within an entertainment source. This form requires co-creation and collaboration between entertainment, media and brands. The rise in popularity of branded entertainment in recent years, corresponds with decline of engagement for traditional advertising methods. Traditional advertising involves one-way, persuasive and obtrusive marketing communication such as TV commercials, advertisements in print media, radio advertisements, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing, sponsoring, and web advertising including pop-ups. Competition between brands and their advertising messages that bombarded customers led to the need for unique promotional strategies by each brand (Koch and Anderson, 2009). Hudson, S. and Hudson, D. (2006) suggest that branded entertainment is a new term to describe a more contemporary, sophisticated use of product placement. Karrh (1995) describes product placement as the inclusion of branded products in cinema and television programs in return for payment in an audio and/or visual form. Branded entertainment is designed to entertain audiences using filmed entertainment products such as long-form cinematic films. This genre of marketing communication is considered as a 'hybrid form' of promotion that includes advertising (content and format controlled by the sponsor) and publicity (content and format controlled by the media) seen in cinema and television programs to influence audiences who do not explicitly identify with the sponsor (Balasubramanian, 1994). According to Patil and Bisoyi (2012), branded entertainment has been evidenced in Bollywood cinema as embedded advertising for financial remuneration that began in the late 1990s.

While there are some overlaps between branded entertainment and content marketing, the distinction emerges from their objectives. In content marketing, content takes precedence in terms of presentation as a marketing tool for a brand. The UK Branded Content Marketing Association (BCMA, 2011) defines branded entertainment as a company which pays a television channel or a program-maker to include its products or brands in their programs. Effective branded content should be authentic, have purpose and above all, it should be entertaining. A study by BCMA in 2008 to analyze the efficacy of branded content compared to traditional advertising concluded that in most cases consumers preferred a more innovative approach compared with traditional advertising

(Rakshit, 2018). To elucidate what branded content offers that a traditional channel does not, a working definition was articulated through the partnership of Ipsos with Oxford Brookes University and BCMA in 2017 as: 'Branded Content is content fully or partly funded by a brand which promotes the brand's values and provides something of value to audiences – often by entertaining, informing and/or educating'. Strazdina (2009) finds that when brand experience is communicated through an entertainment vehicle, the overall message is strengthened giving a competitive advantage to the brand. From a managerial perspective, branded content is 'any output/ partly funded or at least endorsed by the legal owner of the brand which promotes the owner's brand values, and makes audiences choose to engage with the brand based on a pull logic due to its entertainment information and/or education value' (ibid.). It was found that mostly websites featuring branded content were more successful than websites featuring typical advertisements, and were more effective at increasing the purchase intent of viewers, leading to the conclusion that in nearly every category measured, advertisement effectiveness scores on branded content sites were numerically higher than on the web in general, on portals or on advertisement networks. While content marketing focuses on a bigger mix of channels and strategies for the long term to appeal to a wider audience, product marketing banks on price and promotional variables to drive demand. In other words, product marketing is more sales-focused while content marketing is more brand-focused.

Branded content may not necessarily be a promotion for the brand, although it may still include product placement. Also known as embedded marketing, product brand placement, product integration, and in-program sponsoring, product placement is a marketing technique where references to specific brands or products being used or consumed in their natural settings are incorporated into the script with specific promotional intent of building brand awareness provides exposure to potential target consumers. It involves financial agreement between advertisers and creators of creative programs and is an effective promotional tool for brands wherein the name, product, package, signage, and other trademark merchandise are strategically positioned in exchange for cash, goods, or services (Gupta and Gould, 1997). While product placement is riskier than conventional advertising, it is becoming a common practice to place products and brands into mainstream media including films, broadcast and cable television programs, computer and video games, blogs, music videos/DVDs, magazines, books, comics, Broadway musicals and plays, radio, internet, and mobile phones (Stephen and Coote, 2005).

Review of Literature

Research on branded entertainment is only two decades old (Russell and Stern, 2006; DeLorme, et al., 1994). Though over 250 research articles on branded entertainment were published in 2005 alone, the impact of branded entertainment on generating business has not been empirically measured (Hudson, S. and Hudson, D., 2006). With the objective of studying the influence of branded entertainment on viewers' buying attitudes, a review of literature was undertaken.

An early example of product placement was seen in *The Garage* (1920), an American silent film which had several scenes featuring the logo of Red Crown gasoline. The placement of Sunlight soap—a household product introduced by the British company, Lever Brothers may have been the first documented example of paid product placement in films produced by Auguste and Louis Lumière in 1896 (Newell, et al., 2006). With the launch of television in the 1950s, brands realized the potential of this new platform, during which time, a total of 18 programs were sponsored by brands in their names (Hudson, S. and Hudson, D., 2006). The reach of brand placement was taken seriously when the sales of Reese's Pieces candy tripled within two weeks of the release of Steven Spielberg's *ET: the Extra-Terrestrial* in 1982 (Tsai, et al., 2007). The maturation of product placement in movies from being merely placed to branded entertainment progress on a continuum, forging a stronger emotional connect with the consumer.

Branded entertainment and consumer attitude

According to Kozary and Baxter (2010) attitude includes 3 stages—cognitive stage of exposure to information leading to mental processing (thinking), awareness and knowledge about the communicated brand, affective stage of association and emotional response to the brand; and the conative stage of behavioral engagement with the advertised brand through discussion or purchase. Branded entertainment influences on attitude have shown that viewers exhibit a positive attitude to branded entertainment, which leads to increase in sales by enhancing beliefs and strengthening the emotional connect with the brand (Schmoll, et al., 2006; Gupta and Gould, 1997). Branded entertainment is created by brands in entertainment medium in such a manner that it brings positive action, happiness or prestige in consumers' minds and ultimately converts to purchases (Morton and Friedman, 2002).

Branded entertainment and brand awareness

Findings of the study on the benefits of branded entertainment summarized by Hudson, S. and Hudson, D. (2006) reveal that it helps in generating authenticity for producers as it adds realism to film or television and other content; enhances brand awareness, recall value and converts viewers into prospective purchasers; and thus provides a solution to advertising avoidance and media fragmentation. Koch and Andersen (2009) highlight real-lived experiences as brand equity in experiential branding as a strategic choice of event based on its interrelations with brand value and content. Tsai, et al. (2007) researched to find that branded entertainment leads to higher brand awareness which results in high recall, positive attitudes and stronger purchase intentions. Chan (2012) identifies the components of branded entertainment into the study of the nature of brand appearances in movies or television programs, empirical studies of branded entertainment effectiveness, development and trends in branded entertainment, marketers' views on branded entertainment, and ethical acceptability of branded entertainment. However, Williams, et al. (2011) have pointed out the downside of product placement as the lack of control, lack of surety of successful media programing, possibility of negative character association, difficulty in pricing product placement and product placement ethics.

Branded entertainment in India

Guliani (2017) refers to the AdAge report claiming that branded entertainment content in India has been annually growing at a very rapid pace of 130-150 percent, while the study by the Content Marketing Institute (CMI) finds that more than 70 percent of brands are creating more engaging content. The size of the digital advertising market in India is INR 76.9 billion and is growing at a rate of 28 percent. According to Allied Market Research (2020), the online entertainment market size globally was valued at USD 183.1 billion in 2019, and is estimated to reach USD 652.5 billion by 2027, registering a CAGR of 20.8 percent from 2021 to 2027. These data indicate the lucrative opportunity for marketers to create content conveyed through storytelling to engage the audience. The study by Whisper Media (2021) focusses on determining the effectiveness of branded entertainment on TV viewership across general entertainment channel (GEC) genres in India. The findings indicate that branded entertainment has led to an increase in spontaneous brand recall. In the Hindi speaking and Tamil GEC genres, the increase in viewership was more than 15 percent as compared to GEC viewership in those belts which were shown content with brands figuring as advertisement in the content. It further noticed that such content also pushes the intention to purchase or to continue using the product.

Addressing the Research Gap in Branded Entertainment in India during COVID-19

The year 2020 saw the world face an unprecedented challenge due to COVID-19 that slowed down or even halted production, affected supply chains and also impacted consumer buying behavior. During this period, impulse buying was expressed in the form of panic buying mostly as stockpiling of food items, medicines and hygiene products (Islam, et al., 2020; Dammeyer, 2020) as opposed to impulse buying as an unplanned purchase of a new product without any prior experience. Home-bound during the pandemic, both work from home and attending classes have been in online mode, while television and OTT platforms have been the entertainment sources. Viewers were exposed to movies, television series, web series and shows which featured advertisements, product placements and branded entertainment, which were the same forms of entertainment in pre- COVID-19 period.

To address the research gap in Indian retail, there was a felt need to conduct a research study in the field of branded entertainment to study the change in the role of branded entertainment due to COVID-19 with reference to customers' buying attitude. With this need for research, the objective of the study was to study the influence of branded entertainment on customers buying attitudes in the pre- and post COVID-19 period. In order to get attain the objective, the following three hypotheses were formulated for the study:

H₀1: There is no significant difference in the viewer's perception on branded entertainment influencing their cognitive attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period.

H₀2: There is no significant difference in the viewer's perception on branded entertainment influencing their emotive attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period.

H₀3: There is no significant difference in the viewer's perception on branded entertainment influencing their conative attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period.

Methodology

The study was conceptualized in October 2020. Secondary data was gathered from review of related literature in books, research articles and online sources. As this

was exploratory research and also due to situational constraints of COVID-19, non-probability sampling method was determined to be the most suitable within which judgmental sampling and snowball sampling method was used. The sample size of 1556 respondents comprised viewers who understand, appreciate and evaluate branded entertainment in terms of the content. Their responses were checked for accuracy, consistency and completeness of information. A total of 159 responses were rejected, and finally 1397 responses were processed for analysis. The sampling frame comprised men and women in the age group of 18-50 years at the third and fourth level of Maslow hierarchy of needs with focus on social and self-esteem needs. Primary data was collected from respondents located in Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Bengaluru and Hyderabad (Table 1).

Table 1: Sample size and location of respondents for the survey

S.No.	City	Number of respondents
1	Delhi /NCR	450
2	Mumbai	399
3	Bengaluru	298
4	Chennai	125
5	Hyderabad	125
	Total	1397

Primary data was collected during March–May 2021 through a structured questionnaire using online personal interview of 339 respondents through Zoom and 1058 responses collected using Google survey forms. The researcher developed a structured questionnaire with close-ended dichotomous questions, multiple choice questions and 5-point Likert scale questions to measure opinions, perceptions, and behaviors of the respondents in the pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period. Data for testing the hypothesis was collected using Likert scale questions in the questionnaire that measured respondents' perception on branded entertainment influencing their cognitive, emotive and conative attitudes before COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period. Hypothesis testing was done using a paired t-test. Within t-test, two tailed t-test was performed for hypothesis testing.

Questions on the respondent's profile included details of geographic location, psychographic, demographic and behavioral characteristics. Prior to conducting the survey, a pilot test was conducted on a convenience sample of 35 viewers whose profile matched those in the sampling frame of the research study, with the intention of testing

the questionnaire to examine the validity of each question, clarity in terms of language and terms used in questionnaire. Based on identified lacuna in the questionnaire, changes were made and a final questionnaire was prepared for the survey. Frequency table, mean values and t-test using SPSS 18.0 version were decided to be used for data analysis.

Analysis

Viewers' perceptions were studied to determine influence of branded entertainment on their cognitive attitude, emotive attitude and conative attitude. The opinion of viewers was sought using five-point Likert scale. Analysis of their responses on these five attributes is presented through frequency data in Table 2 - Table 4.

Table 2: Influence of branded entertainment on viewers' cognitive attitude in pre-COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period

	Pre- COVID-19 period		Post COVID-19 period	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	277	20	152	11
Disagree	265	19	143	10
Neutral	222	16	185	13
Agree	332	24	413	30
Strongly Agree	301	21	504	36
Total	1397	100	1397	100

Table 2 indicates that in pre- COVID period, 45 percent of the viewers agreed or strongly agreed with the opinion that branded entertainment influenced their cognitive attitude, while in the post COVID period, 66 percent of the respondents were of the opinion that branded entertainment influenced their cognitive attitude.

Table 3: Influence of branded entertainment on viewers' emotive attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period

	Pre- COVID-19 period		Post COVID-19 period	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	455	32	346	25
Disagree	445	32	261	19
Neutral	177	13	110	8
Agree	165	12	394	28
Strongly Agree	155	11	286	20
Total	1397	100	1397	100

Table 3 shows that only 23 percent of the viewers agreed or strongly agreed that branded entertainment influenced their emotive attitude in pre- COVID era, but in post COVID era more than 45 percent felt that the branded entertainment influenced their emotive attitude.

Table 4: Influence of branded entertainment on viewers’ conative attitude in pre-COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period

	Pre- COVID-19		Post COVID-19	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	367	26	207	15
Disagree	365	26	310	22
Neutral	433	31	333	24
Agree	122	9	240	17
Strongly Agree	110	8	307	22
Total	1397	100	1397	100

Table 4 shows that only 17 percent of the respondents felt that their conative attitude was influenced by branded entertainment in the pre- COVID-19 period but in the post COVID-19 period the percentage of respondents grew to 39 percent.

The frequency tables clearly indicate that the branded entertainment has influenced viewers’ cognitive, emotive and conative attitude in post COVID-19 period as compared to pre- COVID-19 period.

Table 5: Customer perception: Mean value in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period

Statements related to Influence of Branded Entertainment on Viewers Buying Attitude	Pre- COVID-19 era			Post COVID-19 era		
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Branded entertainment influences customer cognitive attitude	1397	3.15	1.54	1397	4.10	1.47
Branded entertainment influences customer emotive attitude	1397	1.61	1.61	1397	3.59	1.29
Branded entertainment influences customer conative attitude	1397	1.41	1.02	1397	2.17	1.19

The above result was also tested using mean values of the opinions. The scales used were 1 to 5 (where 1 is Strongly Disagree, 2 is Disagree, 3 is Neutral, 4 is Agree and 5 is Strongly Agree). A mean value above 3 indicates agreement with the opinion in the statement whereas mean value below 3 indicates disagreement with the opinion in the statement. Mean values in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 era are indicated in Table 5.

As can be seen from the table above, in the pre- COVID-19 period, branded entertainment influencing customers' cognitive attitude has shown a mean value of slightly above 3, which indicates agreement of the respondents with the statement that branded entertainment influences customers' cognitive attitude. In the other two cases of branded entertainment influencing customer emotive attitude and branded entertainment influencing customer conative attitude, the mean value is below 3 which indicate disagreement of the respondents with the statements.

However, in the post COVID-19 period, the mean values for the statements, branded entertainment influences customer cognitive attitude and branded entertainment influences customer emotive attitude, are above 3 which indicates their agreement with these statements. However, in the case of the statement that branded entertainment influences customer conative attitude, the mean value is less than 3 which clearly indicates that the respondents are in disagreement with this statement.

The opinions were finally tested for significance, for which the following hypotheses were tested using paired t-test.

H₀1: There is no significant difference in the viewer's perception on branded entertainment influencing their cognitive attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period.

H₀2: There is no significant difference in the viewer's perception on branded entertainment influencing their emotive attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period.

H₀3: There is no significant difference in the viewer's perception on branded entertainment influencing their conative attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period.

A paired t-test was conducted to test the above mentioned hypothesis, the results of which are given in Table 6, Table 7 and Table 8 below.

Table 6: Paired t-test for difference in the viewer’s perception on branded entertainment influencing their cognitive attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period

	Mean	N	Standard Deviation
Score Pre- COVID-19	3.15	1397	1.54
Score Post COVID-19	4.10	1397	1.47

Paired sample test			
Paired difference			
	T	df	Sig (2 –tailed)
Score on perception in pre- COVID-19 period - Score on perception in post COVID-19 period	1.235	1396	.027

Since the p value is less than .05, the null hypothesis is rejected and alternate hypothesis is accepted (Table 6). Hence, it can be inferred that there is a significant difference in the viewer’s perception on branded entertainment influencing their cognitive attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period.

Table 7: Paired t-test for difference in the viewer’s perception on branded entertainment influencing their emotive attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period

	Mean	N	Standard Deviation
Score Pre- COVID-19	1.61	1397	1.61
Score Post COVID-19	3.59	1397	1.29

Paired sample test			
Paired difference			
	T	df	Sig (2–tailed)
Score on perception in pre- COVID-19 period - Score on perception in post COVID-19 period	2.635	1396	.023

Referring to Table 7, since the p value is less than .05, the null hypothesis is rejected and alternate hypothesis is accepted. Thus, it can be inferred that there is a significant difference in the viewer’s perception on branded entertainment influencing their emotive attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period.

Table 8: Paired t-test for difference in the viewer's perception on branded entertainment influencing their conative attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period

	Mean	N	Standard Deviation
Score Pre- COVID-19	1.412	1397	1.02
Score Post COVID-19	2.17	1397	1.19

Paired sample test			
Paired difference			
	T	df	Sig (2 –tailed)
Score on Perception in Pre- COVID-19 - Score on Perception in Post COVID-19 period	1.112	1396	.061

Since the p value is greater than .05, the null hypothesis is accepted (Table 8). It can be inferred that there is no significant difference in the viewer's perception on branded entertainment influencing their conative attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period.

Results

On the basis of the paired t-test results in Table 6, Table 7 and Table 8 above, the following interpretations were made regarding the hypotheses.

- There is a significant difference in the viewer's perception on branded entertainment influencing their cognitive attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period.
- There is a significant difference in the viewer's perception on branded entertainment influencing their emotive attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period.
- There is no significant difference in the viewer's perception on branded entertainment influencing their conative attitude in pre- COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period.

Discussion, Conclusions and Suggestions

While there has been a growing body of research focusing on branded entertainment, there are limited studies on branded entertainment on viewers buying attitude in the pre- and post COVID-19 era. In this study, the influence of branded entertainment on viewers' buying attitude was examined in the pre- and post COVID-19 period. The lack

of research on the influence of branded entertainment on viewers' buying attitude in context of the Indian retail industry necessitated this study. Review and compilation of research data in this area, led to identification of the gap in literature based on which the research objectives, hypothesis and research methods were articulated and determined. Primary data was collected through interviews and structured questionnaire to capture their perception about branded entertainment influence on buying attitude in pre- and post COVID-19 period.

The findings of the current study show that the branded entertainment in post COVID-19 period was more effective in influencing viewers' cognitive and emotive attitude as compared to the pre- COVID-19 period. The reason was that due to COVID-19, the brand started aggressively making use of branded entertainment content for the dissemination of information to enable viewers to understand its DNA in terms of its aesthetics and functionality. Also, the content creators were effective in creating an emotional connect between the viewer and the brand. This is attributed to the fact that during this period, brands started focusing on branded entertainment content with messages on health, safety, care and support. At a time when insecurity and vulnerability caused by COVID-19 were pervasive, such messages forged an emotional connect between brand and viewers.

But the dissemination of information, knowledge, awareness and emotional connect was not strong enough to develop brand recognition and recall. Due to this, branded entertainment content could not significantly drive the viewers' conative attitude of purchase intentions, and actual purchase and branded entertainment failed to convert the customers' intent to purchase to actual purchase. This may be attributed to the widespread fear of COVID-19 during the period of this study which saw consumers purchase basic essentials rather than brand-specific items.

With gradual dissipation of the fear of COVID-19, as customers are resuming their pre- COVID-19 purchasing behavior, retail brands need to re-envision their branded entertainment strategies with greater emphasis on strengthening the emotive connect between the brand and its viewers that can lead to high recall value, thus activating the conative attitude that could drive their purchase intention and actual purchase. The message from the brand to the branded entertainment developer would need to create content with strong emotive connect that will dominate the mind space of viewers, increasing the possibilities of converting purchase intentions to actual purchases.

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