BRANDED CONTENT: UNDERSTANDING THE MECHANISMS OF STRATEGIC MESSAGING IN ENTERTAINMENT TELEVISION FORMATS

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Branded content as an advertising tactic is a growing phenomenon that is not widely researched and is generally ambiguous in nature. This study uses qualitative methods to explain how branded content is defined, how it functions, and how it can influence a brand. Case studies of IKEA and Chevrolet were compared alongside four interviews with branded content professionals. The data collected suggests that branded content in structure and substance is varied, however it comprises engagement, the brand, and financial transaction. The data collected also suggested that brands take a variety of stances when controlling content to support their brand, and that branded content generally supports the intangible aspects of a brand, as opposed to product features.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Corporate advertisers have largely funded broadcast television in the United States since its inception in the 1950s. Capitalizing on the mass audience television once accumulated, advertisers sought to put their products at the forefront of audience attention. Early television was often entirely sponsored by corporate advertisers. Sponsors would more or less own a television show, providing product placement, inserting their name into the title, and even showing characters using and benefiting from their products in the program (Thompson, 2009).

One of the earliest and most popular corporate-sponsored television shows was the *Texaco Star Theater*; the Texaco brand was present in every facet – from the theme song, to brand mentions by the host, even commercial breaks performed by the cast of the show (Thompson, 2009). Defined as having “title credits or presenting credits in programming which otherwise has little to do with the advertiser,” (Johnston, 2009, p. 170), sponsorship has evolved and diversified since the beginning of television. A further development of sponsorship, product placement, is the use or mention of a product on-screen (Elliott, 2011). An even further development of sponsorship and a primary focus of this study is brand integration, in which sponsorship or product placement may be utilized, however the brand is also integrated into the editorial content of a program. Brand integrations place the brand as a pivotal point of reference in the storyline Johnston, 2009), resulting in a combination of advertising and entertainment (Hudson &
Hudson, 2006). The defining lines of what is branded content and what is not are made even more ambiguous by the terms used to describe this content. Different regions refer to branded content using different terms. Many industry professionals in the U.S. use the term “branded entertainment.” The Branded Content Marketing Association (BCMA) uses the term “editorially led marketing” (www.bcma.info). For the purpose of this study, the term “branded content” is used to describe all advertiser-supported content discussed in the following pages, including product placement, sponsorship, and brand integration.

The hybrid message theory, any paid effort to impact an audience using tactics non-commercial in nature (Balasubramanian, 1994), best describes the rationale behind branded content. This combination of advertising and editorial content is neither new nor revolutionary; however, coupled with advances in technology and the resulting fragmented consumer market, hybrid messages represent one method that is being used to reach audiences. This method can be categorized as sponsorship, product placement, and brand integration (Johnston, 2009). Ranging in brand saturation into editorial content, sponsorship is typically restricted to a brand name in credits; product placement is the visual or verbal mention of a brand, while brand integration results in the most saturated content – brands are woven into a storyline so much so that the storyline is dependent upon the brand and thus fully integrated (Johnston, 2009).

Television programs, whether aired via broadcast television, cable or online, that utilize brand integration are increasing. The regulatory environment surrounding branded content is adapting to accommodate product placement and brand integration, whether through actual changes in law, such as in the United Kingdom, or through its diminished
priority status for governing bodies in the United States (Johnston, 2009). Branded
content is prevalent, and given its somewhat ambiguous measurement of success, it could
be argued that branded content will continue to be employed by advertisers in their media
mix. Also, media fragmentation and the prominence of social networks clearly influence
content creation. Although this study does not delve into these influences, this study
could be viewed as a precursor to such a study. This study explores branded content
within the television program format and strives answer preliminary questions regarding
the influence of branded content on the brand in question and its significance as an
advertising tactic.

Literature Review

Hudson and Hudson (2006) provide a short history and definition of branded
content. The authors chronicle the prevalence of branded content and the increasing
intensity by which brands have been integrated into entertainment content, beginning
with product placement and summarizing with full brand or content integration. Hudson
and Hudson (2006) trace the origins of product placement back to the beginning of
motion pictures in the 1890s, its continued use throughout the 1930s in film and radio,
and then through the 1950s in television (Barnouw, 1978). Some of the earliest
advertisers to utilize product placement included Lever Brothers, Buick, Warner
Brothers, and numerous tobacco companies. However, this early product placement was
not a typical function of advertising agencies as it is today. Hudson and Hudson (2006)
describe early product placement deals as “barter-style” arrangements.
The current form of branded content began to take shape in the early 1980s, when Reese’s Pieces were used in the movie *E.T.* Hershey recorded a significant increase in sales and, since then, advertising agencies and advertisers have returned to product placement and worked to improve seamless qualities. Hudson and Hudson (2006) also attribute the growth of branded content to the growth of the entertainment industry. Historically, advertisers have sought to capitalize on large, diverse entertainment audiences through traditional advertising. However, the growth in the entertainment industry and the diverse methods of media content delivery has created opportunities for advertisers to be more creative in placing their products. Although the entertainment industry has grown exponentially since its inception, entertainment projects still often struggle to obtain funding. Branded content allows advertisers to communicate their message, allows content creators to make creative content, and allows audiences to watch fewer commercial breaks in programming.

Hudson and Hudson (2006) introduce the branded entertainment continuum, a graphical representation of the levels of brand integration and key influences on the effectiveness of placements. Beginning with no brand integration and visual or verbal only product placement, typically characterized by celebrity endorsement or personal interview, and ending with a high level of brand integration where the brand is woven into the story line. The generally accepted definition of branded content is categorized in the latter side of the continuum. Hudson and Hudson (2006), also describe how the nature of some brands integrates the brand into the content better than other brands, such as BMW’s short films that allow the car to function as the lead role in the program. The
media used and supporting promotional activity must also coincide with brand characteristics.

Measurement is a significant factor in determining whether or not branded content is a viable option for content creators and advertisers (Hudson & Hudson, 2006). The authors note Nielsen’s product placement tracking system, and its continued efforts to quantify the effects of branded content. Aside from the steps Nielsen has taken, it can be relatively difficult to determine the success that branded content alone has rewarded a product. Hudson and Hudson (2006) also mention the control issues surrounding the success of branded content; many advertisers are building in-house creative teams to control their brands message. Finally, Hudson and Hudson (2005) relay some of the ethical issues debated by researchers and practitioners regarding branded content. “Subliminal” effects of brand placement and branded news content are of major concern to consumers.

Some research on branded content stems from the concept that individuals act and make many decisions based on emotion in addition to rational processes, and some researchers assert that the strongest brand relationships are formed when the brand appeals on an emotional level. It was once widely accepted by advertisers that advertisements must present clear messages to persuade its target market. The measurement research surrounding branded content proves the contrary – emotions trigger many consumer decisions and are the fabric of brand relationships. Therefore, advertisers must appeal to their target market on an emotional level, not necessarily via reason alone (Heath Brandt, & Nairn, 2006). High attention, a person’s level of conscious
thought devoted to a message, does not equate to increased bond or affinity for a brand, therefore traditional theory of connection between high attention resulting in effectiveness is not always true (Heath, Brandt, & Nairn, 2006). Advertising campaigns with strong emotional appeals account for some of the most successful campaigns in history (Heath, Brandt, & Nairn, 2006).

Heath, Brandt, and Nairn (2006) developed the Cognitive Emotive Power Test (CEP Test) to measure the emotional and the cognitive responses to advertising. The CEP measures cognitive power, the rational content, and emotive power: the strength of emotional and creative content (Heath, Brandt, & Nairn, 2006). Surveys in the CEP test measured three constructs: emotional content, rational content, and favorability. The study showed that there was a positive correlation between emotive power and favorability, but no significant relationship between cognitive power and favorability (Heath, Brandt, & Nairn, 2006), suggesting that creative content was compelling as opposed to the advertising message, i.e. rational messages. Heath, Brandt, and Nairn (2006) note that it is important to consider that emotion is defined as being any emotional response, such as anger, happiness, or boredom.

Establishing that emotion is one key in creating brand relationships, one of the most significant challenges of measuring branded content is devising a tool to measure the level of emotional engagement (Heath, 2009). Heath conducted a related study that measured emotional engagement in television by examining and defining levels of engagement versus levels of attention (Heath, 2009). Heath defines the level of engagement as “…the amount of sub-conscious “feeling” going-on when an
advertisement is being processed…” and level of attention as “…the amount of conscious “thinking” going on when an advertisement is being processed.” (Heath, 2006, p. 67)

Heath notes that these definitions can operate independently of one another and do not have to occur simultaneously for emotional engagement to occur. In Heath’s study, college students at the University of Bath volunteered to participate in a study through what they thought was the department of pharmacology. The students were purposefully misled to avoid priming. Eye cameras monitored participant’s eye movement while reading a newspaper, and again while participants watched a popular sitcom with traditional ad breaks. Fixations per second, recorded by the eye camera, were measured to interpret cognitive action. The results showed that twice the amount of purposeful eye movement was used to process newspaper content than television content, including advertisements (Heath, 2009). Heath notes that one of the primary differences in the way participants processed the information was that while reading the newspaper, participants had a goal and a purpose to read certain parts of the paper that interested them, resulting in high attention, while TV viewing was much more passive. TV viewing requires much lower levels of attention, suggesting that previous records of brand building via TV were not necessarily reliant upon whether or not viewers were paying significant amounts of attention. Heath’s study concludes that engagement and attention function separately. The author cited established strong brand relationships as products of engagement brought on by effective emotional communication. If Heath’s theory is correct, it is important to further dissect branded content to understand how it is able to communicate on an emotional level.
Branded Content as a Hybrid Message

Branded content is a “hybrid message” (Hudson & Hudson, 2006), defined by Balasubramanian as a form of communication that purports positive publicity (1994). Balasubramanian (1994) defines the hybrid message, discusses its history, and identifies opportunities for future research. The author begins by identifying two basic communication tactics, advertising and publicity, and defines hybrid messages as a combination of both tactics culminating in the optimum use of each to reach audiences. Balasubramanian’s definition of hybrid messages is “all paid attempts to influence audiences for commercial benefit using communications that project a non-commercial character; under these circumstances, audiences are likely to be unaware of the commercial influence attempt and/or to process the content of such communications differently than they process commercial messages” (Balasubramanian, 1994, p. 30).

Balasubramanian discusses types of hybrid messaging, including product placement, program tie-in, and program-length commercials. Balasubramanian identifies up and coming types of hybrid messages, including the “masked-art” hybrid message, where the advertiser’s message is embedded into the narrative, and the “masked-news” messages where advertiser’s messages are similarly embedded into news. “Masked-spokesperson” messages are similar to the masked art and news messages, except that an expert or otherwise celebrity carries the message.

Balasubramanian cites the earliest usage of product placement, and therefore the hybrid message, in the 1920s. Other forms of hybrid messages, such as program tie-ins and program-length commercials became more widely used in the 1950s and 1960s.
According to the author’s research, hybrid messaging increased in popularity in the 1980s when the concept more commonly required advertisers to pay for their message or products to be embedded into content. As Balasubramanian (1994) presented, hybrid messages, also branded content, obscure the defining points of advertising and pure editorial content. Considering that there is regulation in many markets designed to protect viewers and more vulnerable television audiences, children, for example, it is valuable to establish the current regulatory environment in which branded content is being produced.

Regulatory Environment

Johnston (2009) dissects branded content into three major categories: sponsorship, product placement, and brand integration. Ranging in intensity of brand saturation into editorial content, sponsorship is typically restricted to brand name in credits; product placement is the visual or verbal mention of a brand, while brand integrations result in the most saturated content – brands are woven into a storyline so that the storyline is dependent upon the brand and thus fully integrated (Johnston, 2009).

As advances in technology have fragmented the mass audience, advertisers are turning to more creative, yet not necessarily original, ways to reach their target market. This shift has led to calls for regulatory consideration. Johnston (2009) explains the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) influence on branded content through the Communications Act of 1934 requiring “broadcasters to disclose to their listeners or viewers if any content of the broadcast has been made in exchange for money, services or other valuable consideration” (Johnston, 2009, p. 171), and the “sponsorship
identification rule” (Johnston, 2009) requiring broadcasters to recall and communicate sponsors to the audience. Although neither of these laws has altered since 1934, two complaints were filed in the early 1990s regarding product placement in films. The Center for the Study of Commercialism (CSC) requested that the FCC require adult audiences to be warned of product placement in any particular film via “clear audio and visual notice” preceding any film; the CSC also wanted the prohibition of any product placement in children’s films (Johnston, 2009).

Product placement in children’s programming has sparked the most debate among regulatory groups, within and outside of the government. The majority of complaints filed with the FTC and FCC have called for complete prohibition of product placement in children’s programming. The National Advertising Review Council (NARC) called for closer examination of product placement in children’s programming and the analysis of its effects (Johnston, 2009).

In 2003, a consumer advocacy group called attention to the growing obscurity between advertising and editorial content. Commercial Alert contended that consumers were unable to discern advertising content in television programs, therefore consumers needed additional warning before watching television programs containing product placement. Commercial Alert filed complaints with both the FTC and the FCC, in the latter claiming that the FCC’s own sponsorship identification regulations were being violated (Johnston, 2009). Both complaints were challenged by advertising trade associations, including the Freedom to Advertise Coalition (FAC), resulting in the FTC ruling that Commercial Alert did not demonstrate sufficient harm caused by current
product placements. While FTC ruled against Commercial Alert, the commission acknowledged the precarious boundary between advertising and editorial content and stated that regulation should be stricter and will be closely monitored (Johnston, 2009).

Although branded content (or “embedded advertising” as referred to by the FCC and FTC) has motivated both consumer and advertising representative groups to confront current legislation, branded content is not a priority for either the FCC or the FTC. Changes in political office and the switch to digital television have further deprioritized branded content (Johnston, 2009). Increasingly fragmented audiences, multiple platforms, and the ability for consumers to access media whenever they want may shift the branded content debate – advertisers are challenged to target their audience in new and creative ways. Regulation has largely been focused on broadcast television and films, however changes in technology, access, and consumer expectations could minimize certain groups assertions that consumers need sufficient warning before being exposed to branded content. The concept of consumers being in control of their consumption delegitimizes certain consumer advocacy group’s intent on protecting their consumers. The consumer’s elevated voice could still pose a threat to sponsors unrelated to regulation. Ineffective or poorly constructed branded content could deter the new proactive consumer more efficiently than any action by the FCC or FTC.

Regulation in Europe

While the regulatory environment in the United States has largely excluded branded content and relied on the existing sponsorship identification laws, Europe has
refined regulation to accommodate product placement and various forms of sponsorship. In 1989, the European Union created the Television Without Frontiers Directive to regulate EU television and improve its facility across EU states, in hopes of creating a strong EU television sector (Besio, Hungerbuhler, Morici, & Prario, 2008). Although this directive laid the foundation for a network of television across EU states, it did not expound on branded content. In 2007, the EU released the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) that expanded upon the Television Without Frontiers Directive. Like the previous directive, AVMSD generally does not allow product placement, but does allow product placement under certain conditions (Besio, Hungerbuhler, Morici, & Prario, 2008).

According to the AVMSD, product placement is “any form of audiovisual commercial communication consisting of the inclusion of or a reference to a product, service or in the trademark thereof so that it is featured within a programme, in return for payment or similar consideration” (Angelopoulos, 2010). Paid product placement is allowed in film and television, except for children’s programming. Product placement is also allowed if the product is given under the impression that it will be used in the film or television piece. The AVMSD defines film and television as full-length, fictional films created for viewing in the theater; made for television movies; sports programs of any variety or duration; “entertainment programs without a fictional plot” (Angelopoulos, 2010, p. 16); and typical fictional television series (Angelopoulos, 2010). Television news and documentaries cannot contain product placement. Within the allowed formats, product placement cannot exhibit undue influence, undue promotional effects, or undue
prominence. Viewers must also be adequately informed of product placement via “warning logos” (Angelopoulos, 2010, p. 16) preceding the program. Undue influence refers to the restriction of product placement from having an effect on the media provider’s editorial autonomy. Undue promotional effects prohibit the product placement from somehow inspiring viewers to immediately purchase something, similar to direct-response marketing. Undue prominence refers to the product, trademark, or any mention of the product or its services not within reasonable confines of the editorial premise (Angelopoulos, 2010).

The AVMSD is not mandatory for every EU member state. Member states can opt-out of the directive, using their previous policy toward branded content. The United Kingdom chose to implement its own regulation regarding branded content in February 2011. OFCOM, the regulatory body responsible for broadcasting in the UK (with the exception of the BBC), outlined how product placement may be used in section 9 of its broadcasting code. Its rules are extensive compared to the AVMSD. OFCOM states that product placement is prohibited in television news and documentaries and it is also prohibited in religious programs, consumer advice programs, or current affairs programs. OFCOM strictly regulates the types of product that may be used are in comparison with the AVMSD. Products such as alcohol, baby formula, medicine, cigarettes of any kind, or foods and beverages that are high in fat, salt or sugar; or gambling of any kind may not be placed into programs (OFCOM Broadcasting Code 2011). The warning symbol as described in AVMSD must also be used within OFCOM’s realm of regulation – it is mandatory preceding any program containing product placement, at commercial breaks,
and at the conclusion of the program. Although OFCOM does not explain in detail how it segments its audience, it states that the logo would communicate best with its most “vulnerable” viewers. (OFCOM Broadcasting Code, 2011). It could be argued that OFCOM’s regulations are more limiting than the regulations set by the AVMSD, however close speculation concludes that OFCOM’s guide is in fact much more specific than what was set forward by the AVMSD. Even more specific than OFCOM, the BBC has released its own set of guidelines for using product placement.

As one of the key suppliers of British television, the government owned British Broadcasting Corporation, the BBC has adopted special rules regarding its adaptation of the UK government ruling. The Editorial Policy Guidance Note published by the BBC regarding BBC television and product placement states, “Under the terms of the BBC Agreement, the BBC must not commission, produce, or co-produce output for its licence fee funded services which contains product placement. All programmes made by the BBC, or an independent producer for broadcast on BBC licence fee funded services, must be free of product placement,” (BBC, 2012). The policy further clarifies the BBC’s role in acquired programs, “The broadcasting of any programme acquired from a third party, such as an American drama series, which contains product placement but does not require signaling, must be in accordance with the detailed BBC Guidance on Product Placement, the OFCOM Broadcasting Code and Government Regulations on Product Placement,” (BBC, 2012) however the BBC must not have any financial benefit from the program.
Branded Content Around the World

The recent change in UK regulation has sparked debate. According to a February 2011 BBC News article, institutions such as the Church of England and various medical associations have voiced opposition, claiming it could “damage trust in broadcasters and promote unhealthy lifestyles,” (BBC News, 2011). As of 2009, the UK broadcasting industry enjoyed a relatively moderate level of competition within the market (Broadcasting & Cable TV Industry Profile: United Kingdom, 2010). The recent change in regulation could increase rivalry in the industry and possibly raise the UK’s percentage of European market value, currently at 17.4% and second to Germany (Broadcasting & Cable TV Industry Profile: United Kingdom, 2010). Increased competition could generally be accepted as a positive influence of allowing branded content, but the discussion among skeptics about its fairness is likely to continue. Branded content is a global phenomenon in advertising. France, China, Latin America, Australia, New Zealand, and Greece are only some of the additional regions allowing their advertisers and content producers to use branded content. In China, traditional ad space is limited and closely censored; many advertisers are taking branded content to online platforms (Madden, 2010). BudLime’s That Love Comes (2009) and L’Oreal’s Buzz My Heart (2008) were both created to bypass Chinese regulation and place the brands among already sought after content (Madden, 2010). Reality show Mi Perro Ideal (2010) was launched by Pedigree in its Latin American markets. Sales and brand loyalty increased following the broadcast of the show, and adoptions dramatically increased in some of its target countries, particularly Mexico at an increase of 114%, according to Pedigree’s
advertising agency in charge of producing the content, Havas Sports and Entertainment (www.havas-se.com/ourwork.php).

Branded content industry practitioners, particularly those previously involved in film, cite the change in regulation as beneficial for advertisers, content providers, and audiences. Advertisers may participate in a more innovative way to reach target markets; content providers have additional funding for programs and audiences are receiving higher quality programs due to the additional funding (BBC News, 2011). Branded content’s worldwide appeal could however be credited conversely – more regulation means different platforms and revenue avenues will be sought outside traditional television. Such strict regulation as seen in China is motivating content producers to look outside traditional television simply so that their unique content may be seen. Advertisers are following suit, taking advantage of the freedom that online platforms offer by branding the content already turning toward the web.

Regardless of regulation, advertisers and content producers are turning to branded content for various reasons. And, although regulation varies from region to region, it will still affect the volume and manner in which branded content is created and if it is successful. For example, considering the British government’s history of product placement prohibition, the British broadcasting market could be preparing for drastic changes in funding and competition within the market among content providers (Smit, Van Reijmersdal & Neijens, 2009). Will the BBC’s third party stipulation place it at a disadvantage to its competitors British Sky Broadcasting Group and ITV? Will product placement be accepted or acknowledged by viewers? Numerous questions regarding the
success and perceptions of product placement could be addressed throughout the next few years, and it could be argued that practitioners within the broadcasting industry will have the empirical knowledge that will shape the future of product placement in the UK and possibly around the world.

Research Questions

As mentioned in Balasubramanian’s study, it can be difficult to gauge the effectiveness of hybrid messaging; the author identifies two tracks by which future research could follow, measuring message impact and public policy. Balasubramanian (1994) suggests that researchers should ask if hybrid messages create significant impact and define the factors that create impact. Also, audience reception of the message could clarify whether the audience recognizes the hybrid message as such and if that influences their opinion on the product in any given hybrid message. The immunization effect could describe the audience’s continued exposure to hybrid messaging: continued use of hybrid messages and public policy requiring advertisers to forewarn the audience of its techniques could allow the audience to resist the message. Although Balasubramanian’s goal was to identify how changes in the media marketplace can affect public policy and question whether these developments should effect consumer education, the author dissected the concept of hybrid messages in a way that paves a theoretical foundation for the modern form of hybrid messages used in advertising today, branded content. As Balasubramanian (1994) presented, hybrid messages obscure the defining points of advertising and pure editorial content.
Heath’s (2009) research is instructive when determining how branded content can be measured. The author concluded that emotion is always present when making decisions. Considering Heath’s study, branded content can be effective because its success is dependent upon how it emotionally appeals to its target. Positive emotional responses over time result in attitude change and decision-making – the building of a brand relationship. However, Heath’s study did not indicate the creative factors necessary for positive emotional response. This study endeavored to shed light on the creative and other yet to be defined factors that determine the success of branded content. Because there is no indication that advertisers will cease to promote their products or no longer need to sell their products, continued study of the ways in which successful branded content ticks is crucial to understanding the current state and future of media. Media users, also known as the target markets, have unprecedented control of what media they consume and when. Advertisers must respond to this change with meditated creative tactics that ultimately satisfy both the target market’s needs and the advertiser’s needs.

The following research questions examined branded content and clarified it as an advertising tactic:

RQ1: What defines branded content?

RQ2: How do companies control content to support their brand?

RQ3: How does the use of branded content influence brand significance?

Branded content as an advertising tactic, as previously mentioned, is a growing phenomenon that is not widely researched and is generally ambiguous in nature. This study used qualitative methods in an effort to define and understand the more imprecise
mechanisms that make branded content a useful way to communicate a brand. Case studies of IKEA and Chevrolet that include textual analysis of their most popular branded content were considered alongside interviews with professionals working in various aspects of the media industry. The qualitative methods explained in the following chapter gives insight into the mechanisms that make branded content function.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY: A CLOSER LOOK AT IKEA AND CHEVROLET

Branded content is a means for advertisers to communicate their brand by establishing a common ground with the viewer via creative content. The audience seeks out the content while the advertisers seek out the audience. Successful branded content is not a sales pitch or infomercial, but sought after entertainment that happens to contain a brand and brand message; the brand is woven into the storyline, participating in the narrative and in some ways positioning itself within a cultural norm. The brand is often seen within its natural element – for example, a Coke in a refrigerator or a middle-class teenager spending his summer working at a YMCA. Within this context, the brand placement is seen as reasonable and organic; meanwhile it seeps into the viewer’s total opinion of a program and, in turn, the viewer’s opinion of the brand.

This study is designed to examine branded content as a creative advertising tactic, provide a working definition, and to begin to determine its make up and influence on brands. Considering its ambiguous nature, this study utilizes qualitative methods to describe and understand branded content. Balasubramanian’s theoretical framework is applied to the research questions in an effort to clarify the meaning of branded content through a lens of editorial versus advertising content. By simplifying branded content elements into these categories the study will shed light on the mechanisms that can define it. This investigation includes two case studies that consider each company’s overall profile in their respective industries and then compare and analyze their usage of branded
content. The complex nature of branded content and the lack of scholarly literature about branded content suggested that the case study method would be most appropriate, allowing multiple sources to be compiled to create a more complete view of branded content. These findings are examined alongside scholarly literature, trade literature, interviews conducted with branded content professionals, and a brief study of less successful branded content.

Many companies are introducing branded content into their media mix. Two major companies, IKEA and Chevrolet, were selected for analysis in relation to their usage of branded content. IKEA and Chevrolet were chosen because they encompass global markets and participate in the public retail sphere. Both companies also generated profits in 2010. General Motors, Chevrolet’s parent company, generated $4.7 billion (Thompson, 2011) and IKEA generated $4.6 billion (McLaughlin, 2011). Although IKEA and Chevrolet generate similar revenue and create products for similar markets, the scopes of the companies vary due to their product offerings.

The scope of IKEA is far more extensive than that of Chevrolet. Beginning as a Swedish farmer’s side business selling fish, seeds, and magazines, and transforming into a multi-national furniture and housewares corporation, IKEA currently operates 242 stores in 24 different countries. IKEA’s products reach middle class consumers around the world and appeal to a variety of lifestyles within the middle class through their company’s use of clean, minimalist design in its products. Chevrolet is part of the larger American automobile manufacturer, General Motors, one of the largest automotive manufacturers in the world. Its products are produced primarily for middle class
consumers. Chevrolet distributes internationally, just as IKEA distributes, however Chevrolet is restricted to automobiles whereas IKEA sells an extensive line of products for the home. The differences between IKEA and Chevrolet could alone provide possible explanations for their chosen employment of branded content, and textual analysis of the actual content show how companies control content with regard to their brand.

The actual steps taken by advertisers to control content are often unknown. However, by careful textual analysis, dramatic techniques can be examined in relation to the brand; also, the use of genre can indicate brand significance. When considered in conjunction with the audience, the advertiser’s intent can be at least interpreted, if not revealed. Two pieces of branded content, *Easy to Assemble* (2011) produced for IKEA and *Men of a Certain Age* (2009) produced with Chevrolet were analyzed using 7 different criteria: for their use of characters, setting, themes, visual style, dialogue, narrative organization and brand mentions. The series is analyzed, exposing how the brand has positioned itself, possibly through attempting to become part of the cultural norm. This analysis shows the creative strategy used to create meaning, promote certain moods and opinions, and communicate social interest (McQueen, 1998). The programs were chosen for their timeliness and ingenuity; trade journal Advertising Age cited each program for its popularity and clever use of the brand within the plot (Steinberg, 2011). In addition to the textual analysis techniques previously mentioned, brand mentions in the program and the alignment of sponsor identity and brand image contribute to the overall analysis. The textual analysis primarily addresses the first and second research questions
regarding the definition of branded content and how companies control content to support their brand.

IKEA and Chevrolet’s use of branded content is viewed as relatively successful. IKEA’s series is still airing online at the time of this study, although Youtube has recorded low amounts of views. Chevrolet’s use of branded content was somewhat popular on TNT and two of its lead cast members were nominated for Emmy’s for their performance in the show, however it was canceled after two seasons for low viewership (Crider, 2011). A brief summary of another major brand’s less popular employment of branded content is presented alongside IKEA and Chevrolet to offer additional perspective. Cisco Systems, an international information technology and communications company, is similarly present around the world. Cisco does not produce the same type and breadth of consumer products as IKEA and Chevrolet, however Cisco chose to use branded content in the television format, similar to IKEA and Chevrolet. Cisco also briefly attempted to enter the consumer market (O’Leary, 2012). Cisco’s *Cisco Digital Cribs* (2009) launched during its foray into the consumer market. *Cisco Digital Cribs* (2009) is analyzed using the same techniques as *Easy to Assemble* (2011) and *Men of a Certain Age* (2009). *Cisco Digital Cribs* (2009) aired online and in similar time segments, similar to “Easy to Assemble” (2011), however it was not widely recognized. Although it could be argued that neither IKEA nor Chevrolet had massively successful series, each series received some recognition. Cisco’s program suffered low numbers of views on Youtube and was generally overlooked online. To better understand each program as a creative work, the creative techniques used in *Cisco Digital Cribs* (2009)
are compared to the creative techniques in IKEA and Chevrolet’s programs, exposing the differences between each piece of content.

As previously suggested by Heath (2009), measuring brand influence is problematic – there are few methods used to measure it. Brand recall can be measured and brand saturation into content can be recorded; however, its actual influence on consumer motivations is in the early stages of exploration. This study uses the opposite approach to understand influence by analyzing the creative tactics used to create branded content via the advertising professional actually opting to employ branded content.

Before beginning an advertising strategy, individuals in the industry must evaluate different tactics based on research, experience, and current work in the field. This study includes interviews with professionals involved in different aspects of the media and advertising industries. Four professionals were chosen based on a convenience sample from various veins of the media industry: government-funded editorial; advertising agency and media buying; broadcast media; and content production. Each personal was interviewed individually in person during a field research trip to London, United Kingdom. Because each professional had different expertise, each professional was asked three basic questions with regard to branded content and allowed to elaborate on their response to the best of their professional knowledge.

The first interview was conducted with Kevin Marsh. Kevin Marsh was referred through a University of North Texas broadcast professor who had asked Marsh to guest lecture his courses on broadcasting in the UK. Marsh is the former editor in chief of the BBC College of Journalism. Marsh currently writes, lectures, and teaches journalism, but
served as editor, producer, and writer of several television and radio programs on the BBC for over twenty years preceding his work at the BBC College of Journalism. Marsh was chosen to share his knowledge of branded content from the government-funded editorial perspective. Considering branded content is advertising within an editorial format, Marsh’s expertise represented the voice that decides how brand content can be dealt with within an editorial environment.

The second interview was conducted with Andrew Canter, the chief executive officer of the Branded Content Marketing Association (BCMA), and the CEO of contentworx, part of Experience Communications. Canter has worked in the advertising industry for several years, beginning in television advertisement sales. Canter has since worked extensively in media buying until he became head of client services for a company he was instrumental in creating, Media Planning Group (MPG), where he began to expand his work beyond traditional advertising to include sponsorship, interactive, and brand content. Canter created contentworx, a consulting agency specializing in developing branded content strategies for brands such as Sara Lee and Visa. He was asked to participate because of his extensive experience in different roles within advertising agencies and media buying. Canter was also asked to participate because of his extensive knowledge and interest in branded content.

The third interview was conducted with Pam Smithard, former managing director of the National Association of Television Executives (NATPE). Smithard was referred though the same University of North Texas professor who referred Kevin Marsh. Smithard began her work in television at iTV where she eventually helped to establish the
iTV Network Film Center. Smithard has worked in program planning, film acquisition, international sales, and production. Smithard was also awarded the Chevalier de l’Ordre de Arts et des Lettres by the French Minister of Culture and Communications for her extensive knowledge in the international audiovisual industry and her proficiency in enabling Anglo-French relations. Smithard was asked to participate in this study for her wide knowledge of the broadcast industry from the management perspective.

The final interview was conducted with the director of strategic content, international for CNBC, Roslyn Shaw. Shaw was previously the head of creative solutions for CNBC. Preceding CNBC, Shaw was the Executive Producer and head of branded content for FBC Media. Shaw is currently responsible for the strategic content for CNBC and CNBC.com. Shaw was asked to participate in this study for her unique perspective of content producer. One of Shaw’s responsibilities is to lead a team of producers who work to create branded content programs for numerous brands. Shaw works directly with the brands and producers, from pitching the idea to managing creative control.

The basic questions are as follows:

1. How do changes in technology influence branded content?
2. Who controls creative content?
3. Describe the risks of using branded content.

Considering the significant change in UK regulation regarding branded content and the smaller target audiences in the UK, the industry professionals primarily functioned in the UK and were chosen based on personal referrals.
This study used a qualitative approach and in-depth interview method to explain what has quickly become a popular advertising tactic for television and television-like formats. The following results comprise data gathered over the course of several months and present a timely yet detailed analysis of branded content. Results show how branded content functions in a realistic setting and eventually prompt future research questions beyond the basic groundwork presented in this study.
CHAPTER 3
DISCUSSION
Case Studies

This chapter contains the results of the case studies and the in-depth interviews. A background of IKEA and Chevrolet is presented, along with a summary of their advertising efforts, particularly in relation to branded content. A textual analysis of IKEA’s *Easy to Assemble* (2011) and Chevrolet’s *Men of a Certain Age* (2009) is presented in an effort to identify particular creative components to the content IKEA and Chevrolet chose to employ. A brief background of Cisco is also presented, along with a textual analysis of its *Cisco Digital Cribs* (2009) to provide perspective. Cisco briefly attempted to enter the international consumer market, a market familiar to IKEA and Chevrolet, however its use of branded content did not garner nearly as many views or spark as many conversations within advertising trade journals. A summary of the in-depth interviews is presented alongside the case studies to provide another point of view, in hopes of addressing the research questions.

*IKEA*

The success of branded entertainment is largely dependent upon how well the product and editorial content can cohabitate a plot, which is then dependent upon commonalities between advertiser and program. Home retailer IKEA was analyzed to
better understand why an advertiser may choose a branded entertainment and how IKEA integrated branded entertainment into a communication strategy.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, IKEA was founded in 1943 as a small business selling fish, seeds, and magazines. Since 1943, it has transformed into a high-earning furniture and housewares corporation, currently operating 242 stores in 24 different countries. Popularized with clean design characteristics and relatively low costs, IKEA stores are owned by the Netherlands-based holding company, INGKA Holding B.V. (IKEA Group Datamonitor, 2010). IKEA has positioned itself as a furniture and housewares store for all income groups around the world (IKEA Group Datamonitor, 2010) and has developed different marketing strategies per country (Bush, 2009). IKEA’s marketing has been lauded as particularly creative, even controversial (Clark, 2006), and showing traits of its word of mouth roots. According to IKEA’s student information pages (2010), IKEA’s marketing budget is still primarily devoted to its catalogue – 70% – which is produced in 17 different languages and distributed to 24 different countries. IKEA’s communication decisions are made through IKEA Communication (ICOM) (IKEA Catalogue, 2003) based in Almhult, Sweden. ICOM focuses on IKEA’s catalog and internal communication, however many international advertising strategies are conceived at ICOM.

Advertising Efforts

IKEA uses a mixed media approach to engage its international markets (“IKEA Student Info,” 2010). As part of its mixed media communication efforts, IKEA recently
invested in branded entertainment in its US and UK markets. Perhaps the most popular and critically successful (www.streamys.org) branded entertainment is “Easy to Assemble,” (2010) produced by and starring comedian Illeana Douglas (Hampp, 2010). “Easy to Assemble” (2010) premiered in 2009, and by its second season Advertising Age considered it the “most-watched sponsored web show in its second season, garnering 5.1 million views and counting” (Hampp, 2010). At the Streamy Awards, the most prominent organization that honors web series, “Easy to Assemble” (2010) was nominated alongside non-branded shows for Best Comedy Web Series, Best Female Actor in a Comedy Web series, and won the category Best Ensemble Cast in a Web Series in 2010. Although the show’s viewership is not necessarily directly related to increased sales, the success of *Easy to Assemble* (2010) has led IKEA to continue investment in the web series. The model by which actors are compensated may also contribute to its success; compensation was organized through the Screen Actors Guild, ensuring rates similar to those earned in television (Hampp, 2010) and therefore securing popular celebrity guest stars such as Jeff Goldblum, Keanu Reeves, Tim Meadows, and Jane Lynch. Illeana Douglas created *Easy to Assemble* (2010), however the executive producer is Magnus Gustafsson, head of digital media at IKEA US.

IKEA’s newest branded entertainment series expands reach into cable television on the A&E network. *Fix This Kitchen* is an ambush-style renovation show, remodeling kitchens entirely in IKEA furnishings and appliances. *Fix This Kitchen* is similar to a series of commercial spots placed in the IKEA UK market, *Kitchen Squad* (“Pure TV Brilliance,” 2010). *Kitchen Squad* (2010) also ambushed participants, however the soon
to be remodeled kitchen was removed and placed in a somewhat remote outdoor location for effect, as stunned participants discovered their kitchen while enjoying a walk or picnic. Less dramatically, *Fix This Kitchen* (2010) participants are observed as they arrive home, shocked to find his or her kitchen destroyed. Just as in *Kitchen Squad* (2010), entire kitchens are replaced within the duration of one show in *Fix This Kitchen* (2010).

*Fix This Kitchen* (2010) borrows HGTV’s host of *Red Hot and Green* (2009) Nicole Facciuto, as host and design expert. *Fix This Kitchen* (2010) also invites a famous chef to offer advice on the design of the kitchen. Participants are typically culinary enthusiasts who meet the chef and dine in the chef’s restaurant. The first season spanned six weeks and six episodes during fall 2010, and IKEA has not released if it will support a second season.

IKEA agreed to sponsor Oxygen’s original show, *Tori and Dean: Home Sweet Hollywood* (2011). Although initially designed to be a fully integrated sponsor – IKEA’s products would be fully integrated into the content – IKEA’s presence is less well known. IKEA branding is not present on the website where viewers can watch videos from the show, and the most notable mention of IKEA products is when Tori and Dean decide to remodel the home of their family friend (*Tori and Dean*, 2011). Although Oxygen’s original statement stated IKEA would be integrated into any story line (*Tori and Dean* is considered a reality television show), currently IKEA’s products are placed into the show (Crupi, 2010) as opposed to determining the course of events or influencing any of the character’s decisions.

IKEA’s international market and extensive reach into various income segments
could explain its dispersion of creative agency work. In 2010, New York advertising agency Ogilvy and Mather was granted IKEA’s integrated communications work (Zmuda, 2010) for much of its North American market, however IKEA’s advertising, including its branded entertainment, is produced across several different advertising, media, and digital agencies including SWX of Los Angeles and Omnicom Group companies. As indicated by IKEA’s planned future investment of branded entertainment programs such as Easy to Assemble (2011), branded entertainment is a new, effective tactic within IKEA’s marketing strategy.

Textual Analysis, IKEA’s Easy to Assemble (2011)

“Easy to Assemble” (2011) chronicles the experiences of former Hollywood actress Illeana Douglas, as she returns to a simpler life (www.easytoassembleseries.com) and begins working as a sales associate at IKEA Burbank. Illeana’s challenges at IKEA include battling with another former actress played by Justine Bateman, as well as competing for the coveted Co-worker of the Year award (Hampp, 2010). Notable guest stars include Jeff Goldblum, Keanu Reeves, Tim Meadows, and Jane Lynch. Few web series, let alone branded web series, have showcased such high paid, well-known actors (“Pure TV Brilliance,” 2010). The other comparable web series with regard to celebrity presence is Between Two Ferns with Zack Galifianakis, a non-branded web series (www.streamys.org). Illeana Douglas is billed as the creator of Easy to Assemble (2011), however it is supported by IKEA and produced by SXM, a California-based branded entertainment and digital production company (www.imdb.com). Gustav Magnusson,
head of digital media at IKEA US, is the executive producer.

According to an *Advertising Age* article by Andrew Hampp (2009) *Easy to Assemble* viewership increased dramatically in its second season. The first five episodes of season two were analyzed for the mention of branded products and story developments that support IKEA’s image (http://franchisor.ikea.com). Each episode is about ten minutes with no commercial interruption, however some episodes are only three to four minutes. The first 5 episodes of Season 2 totaled almost 39 minutes.

*Easy to Assemble* (2011) is styled similar to that of other current, popular (Griffin, 2008) comedies on broadcast television. Medium shots, references to pop culture, and quick changing camera views characterize witty dialogue. Camera angles follow character gaze and resulting expression in other characters, emphasizing irony or otherwise awkward moments in the showing, resulting in overall quirkingness. An unusual style choice in *Easy to Assemble* (2011) is some of its camera angles, particularly between scenes of dialogue. The frame cuts out the character’s eyes and focuses on their moving mouth (although speech is inaudible) and any movement in their upper body.

Episode 1, season 4 of *Easy to Assemble* (2011) recalls characters from the previous season, including lead Illeana Douglas and Justin Bateman, and sets groundwork for season two. Illeana decides to compete for Co-Worker of the Year at IKEA, competing primarily against her co-star, Justine Bateman. The Co-Worker of the Year is judged by his or her conduct while working on the IKEA showroom floor and any measure by which the co-worker seeks to improve relations among co-workers or the work environment in general. As the episode and the majority of the series takes place in
the Burbank, California IKEA store, Douglas and her “co-workers” wear the IKEA uniform (yellow polo shirt with the IKEA brand) and the scenes take place various at displays throughout IKEA’s extensive showroom and employee lounge. In episode 1, none of the IKEA items surrounding the characters are mentioned in dialogue. Also, there is no mention of IKEA’s brand promise (http://franchisor.ikea.com) or taglines. Episode 1 “Co-Worker of the Year” could take place in many retail outlets, as the show’s identification as a product of IKEA comes simply from logos and playful nods toward a kitschy Swedish culture.

Episode 2 contains the first mention of a specific product and services offered by IKEA; Douglas asks a co-worker if they’ve seen the new design of a cabinet (www.easytoassembleseries.com). In Episode 2, Douglas is encouraged to “think outside the box – the flat box,” (www.easytoassembleseries.com) when brainstorming ideas with her manager about how to win co-worker of the year. IKEA attributes its low prices to its flat box shipping methods; furniture is totally unassembled and shipped in a cheap, flat box (IKEA Group, 2010). One of Douglas’ “out of box” ideas to win co-worker of the year is to have a get to know your co-worker night at IKEA. Douglas’ motives are not simply to win points for co-worker of the year, but to also get to know another co-worker with whom she has a crush on.

In Episode 3, Douglas’ co-worker of the year rival Justine Bateman enters as another somewhat failed actress working at IKEA in hopes of utilizing her theatrical talents. Bateman stars in a talk show at IKEA, Forty and Bitter, where she hosts B-list celebrities and often condescends Douglas. When Douglas is found hoarding cookies in a
showroom desk that she snacks on throughout her shifts, Bateman calls her indiscretion to the attention of the manager in an attempt to put her out of the running for co-worker of the year.

Episode 4 and 5 are much shorter than the first three episodes; 5 minutes and 49 seconds and 3 minutes and 10 seconds respectively. In Episode 4, Douglas approaches the creators of *Ask a Ninja* web videos to create a viral video that will portray Douglas as funny yet having a good work ethic to help her move toward co-worker of the year and match Bateman’s Hollywood efforts. *Ask a Ninja* producers are not amused by Douglas offer. Douglas’ disappointment is compounded in Episode 5, where Bateman hosts Douglas on *Forty and Bitter* and attempts a snarky intervention for Douglas’ perceived kleptomaniacal tendencies, referring to the cookie incident.

These episodes distinctly reinforce the community of co-workers. When characters are not on the showroom floor talking with customers or, as Douglas’ character is often found, doing more menial tasks of stocking, employees are watching television together in the employee lounge, eating together, or visiting with each other in the showroom. The sense of community and family among co-workers could be viewed as an extension of IKEA’s intended family image (http://franchisor.ikea.com); although the show does not allow the viewer to see actual customers’ use of products, the viewer does garner the impression of family, a quirky Swedish culture, and overall novelty of IKEA products.
Chevrolet

Chevrolet is one of the eleven brands within General Motors (GM). Other major brands within the GM umbrella include Buick, Isuzu, GMC, Cadillac, and Opel (General Motors company, 2011). GM manufactures vehicles in 31 countries and distributes automobiles in over 120 countries around the world (General Motors company, 2011). GM’s headquarters are located in Detroit, Michigan. Beginning as simply General Motors Corporation in 1908, GM acquired several other American auto manufacturers from the year of its inception up until its most recent acquisition in the 2000s. Due to widespread economic trouble, GM’s business tactics have been primarily associated with selling off its various brands, such as the sale of Saab Automotive in 2011 (General Motors company, 2011). In recent years, GM has invested significantly in manufacturing more efficient automobiles. Although efficient automobiles have been a focus, GM also processes mid, large and luxury vehicles; sports utility vehicles; crossovers; small and medium trucks; passenger and cargo vans; classic cab; and various utility vehicles. GM also provides financial and communication services within its retail stores. GM’s revenue in 2010 was about $135 billion (General Motors Company, 2011).

GM is considered to have a strong position in the global automobile market, particularly in North America, which produced 59.7% of its total revenue in 2010 (General Motors Company, 2011) and where it holds 18.2% share of the automotive market. However, competition is still very strong. Decreased demand for vehicles and several domestic and foreign competitors have presented significant challenges for GM. Incentives and price-lowering marketing strategies have allowed GM to stay competitive,
but ultimately decrease its revenue (General Motors Company, 2011). In a statement by GM CEO Daniel Akerson first published in GM’s 2010 annual report, Akerson says one of its critical areas is “sharpening our focus on how we engage customers…” (General Motors Company, 2011). Akerson also mentioned that GM would accomplish this by “listening to customers, taking a wider view to predict emerging trends…and enhancing our advertising and marketing efforts to more effectively connect with our customers.” (GM Annual Report, 2010).

Advertising Efforts

As a leader in the auto industry, GM, and specifically its biggest brand Chevrolet, has invested a significant amount in advertising. Chevrolet has adopted various taglines and themes, for example “The Heartbeat of America” from 1986 to 1993, “Genuine Chevrolet” from 1994 to 1999, “Like a Rock” from 1992 through 2004, “An American Revolution” from 2005 to 2008, and most recently “Chevy Runs Deep” (Halpert, 2011). Chevrolet has a tradition of positioning itself as being particularly “American,” in a traditional and even stereotypical sense. It even used the slogan “baseball, hot dogs, apple pie” in the 1970s (Lico, 2008). Chevrolet positioned itself as America’s brand early on – from the early 1960s television show Route 66 (1960) to its product placement in The Apprentice (2006) (Taylor, 2006), to its role as robotic heroes in Transformers (2007) (Ransom, 2011). Chevy has also been the subject of almost 700 songs (Ransom, 2011). Chevrolet has used these American themes and taglines to propel ad campaigns utilizing traditional and new media, and it has shown particular interest in furthering its new media
tactics. Chevy reworked its relationship with its longstanding advertising agencies (McMains, 2010) and is continually shifting toward new media.

Textual Analysis: Chevrolet’s *Men of a Certain Age* (2009)

*Men of a Certain Age* (2009) is a drama series that aired on TNT. It stars Ray Romano, Scott Bakula, and Andre Braugher as middle-aged men and the problems they may encounter, such as aging parents, children leaving home, and divorce. Chevrolet sponsors *Men of a Certain Age* (2010) by taking product placement a step further and integrating a Chevrolet dealership into the storyline. One of the main characters, Owen Thoreau (played by Andre Braugher) works for his father at a Chevrolet dealership. The car dealership scenes are filmed at an actual Chevrolet dealership in Northridge, California (Steinberg, 2011), Ray Romano’s character drives a Chevrolet, and as Brian Steinberg recorded in *Advertising Age*, “viewers have seen signs for General Motors’ OnStar service; a pitch for the Chevy Volt; a pitch for the Chevrolet Cruze…” (Steinberg, 2011). Chevrolet offered its products and name brand for the show, in an effort to imitate life, however Chevrolet told *Advertising Age* that it has minimal influence over the script (Steinberg, 2011). Season 1, Episode 7 “Father’s Fraternity” (2009) (42:35) was analyzed for use of Chevrolet in the storyline.

In “Father’s Fraternity” (2009), Owen’s father (owner of the Chevrolet dealership) makes a commercial advertising the “family values” at Thoreau Chevrolet, using another employee, Marcus, in a way that hints Marcus is his son instead of Owen. Owen’s wife and mother insist that the commercial be remade, although Owen and his
father resist, mostly because Owen is less comfortable in front of cameras than Marcus. While Owen is uncomfortably confronting his father about the commercial, Ray Romano’s character, Joe Tranelli, is confronting his own father. Joe’s father is a retired hardware store owner who spends most of his time alone watching television. Joe encourages his father to get out more often and attempts to hire him as an employee in his party supply store, however Joe’s father is unsatisfied working with people he assumes are not as smart, capable, or experienced as he. Joe eventually proves to the local hardware store manager (where his father had applied several months before and was turned down) that his father is very knowledgeable and could serve as an asset to the store. The manager relents and hires Joe’s father.

The third main character played by Scott Bakula, Terry, is somewhat of a rogue character compared to the others; he has never been married, works temporary jobs when he cannot land acting roles, and frequently dates younger women. In an effort to make his life more fulfilling, Terry applies for the Big Brother program and is refused. Terry feels that his life is chaotic and meaningless, and his self-esteem is damaged by not being recognized for his honorable characteristics by the Big Brother program. Terry counters this by informally serving as a big brother to local kids, while stopping by the Big Brother program office to show how well he connects with children.

*Men of a Certain Age* (2009) chronicles problems that typical middle-aged American men face, including dealing with aging parents and determining meaning beyond day-to-day life. Although not expressly tied to mention of the Chevrolet brand, there are strong undertones of traditional social norms – the nuclear family is the
functional, acceptable family; characters are part of strictly American families; certain morals are considered right or correct, for example stealing and use of illegal drugs (particularly marijuana) is not just illegal but viewed as morally corrupt. It could be argued that this setting is ideal for Chevrolet’s American, nuclear family friendly brand (General Motors Annual Report, 2010). Chevrolet’s brand image in *Men of a Certain Age* (2009) is not simply a visual representation of the dealership and logo, but supports traditional American values and norms – key beliefs of its target market (General Motors Annual Report, 2010).

*Cisco Systems, Inc.*

Cisco Systems, Inc. began in California in 1984 when the growth of the Internet was creating demand for networking products. Cisco’s current product offerings fall within the routing and switching categories. Recently, Cisco has branched out into the digital video distribution systems, competing with Skype and Logitech (Galante, 2010). Cisco also creates collaborative technology, such as IP phones, mobile applications, web conferencing, and messaging (Cisco Systems, Inc. Annual Report, 2011). Cisco creates security technology as well, including firewall technology, intrusion prevention, virtual private networks, web and email security, and network security. Wireless networks, data centers for network storage and servers are key products created by Cisco, and Cisco has recently ventured into providing technology for physical security and video surveillance systems (Cisco Systems, Inc. Annual Report, 2011).

Cisco provides products and services primarily for the U.S. and Canada, but also
throughout Europe, Asia Pacific, Japan, and some emerging markets. Although Cisco has briefly targeted consumers, historically its target market is other businesses – “enterprise clients” (Cisco Systems, Inc. Annual Report, 2011). Cisco’s 2011 annual report claims that “enterprise, service provider, commercial, and consumer” (Cisco Systems, Inc. Annual Report, 2011, p. 7) comprise its market and that no one custom type accounts for more than 10% of net sales. Cisco has field sales offices in 95 countries and also sells products through partner companies. Cisco experienced reorganization toward the end of 2011, spearheaded by CEO John Chambers (Kucera, 2011). Some of the most significant cutbacks initiated in the reorganization included the elimination of their hand held camera product, Flip, and refocused its priorities on its router and network products (Kucera, 2011).

Advertising Efforts

Cisco has long engaged in traditional advertising and an assortment of digital advertising. Some of its consumer advertising efforts includes its mocking of the popular Old Spice campaign, which was viewed as relatively unsuccessful (Ehrlich, 2010). Cisco has also invested in product placement, having several unpaid placements in Transformers (2009) with significant estimated value (Hampp, 2009), and, in a less successful placement in 30 Rock in 2006 (Steinberg, 2010). However, the recently scaling back of its consumer product offerings (O’Learly, 2012) has been reflected in its advertising. Its newest advertising efforts are distinctly targeted at enterprise customers. The newest television spots, for example, feature stories from actual Cisco customers.
explaining how Cisco has helped their business (Bailey, 2012). Cisco’s upcoming campaigns are expected to include traditional media, digital, and social media (Riedman, 2011). The textual analysis of Digital Cribs (2008) will examine one of Cisco’s previous efforts to target its consumer audience. Considering the recent recalculation of target market, the textual analysis will indicate what was not considered successful for Cisco.

Textual analysis, Cisco’s Digital Cribs (2008)

Digital Cribs (2008) is an online series featuring notable individuals and their use of technology through Cisco products. The series is hosted through the Cisco website (http://www.cisco.com/web/consumer/digitalcribs/index.html) and through Cisco’s YouTube channel (http://www.YouTube.com/user/CiscoDigitalCribs?feature=watch). The Digital Cribs (2008) Cisco website also has links to Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Friend Feed, and an RSS feed link, although none of them are active. The YouTube channel was created on September 5, 2008 and the last activity occurred on September 23, 2010.

The episode analyzed for this study features basketball player Shane Battier who, at the time the video was filmed, played for NBA’s Houston Rockets. As of February 10, 2012, the video has been viewed 4,066 times. The 2:39 video is filmed in Battier’s home, as he takes the viewer (or the camera crew – Battier’s focus and eye contact throughout the video is on the crew shooting the video) throughout his upscale tech savvy home. It is filmed in a documentary style format, with an implied film crew following him around his home. Battier explains the different technology in his home, including his HD television, HD cable, satellite radio, satellite box, DVD player, CD player, receivers, HD
projection TV, karaoke machine, fax machine, and copy machine. Battier is not prompted by either an on- or off-camera host or interviewer. Instead, Battier lists the technology in his home and briefly explains how he uses it using somewhat shallow personal anecdotes, but without divulging in an actual story. While sitting behind his computer in his home office, Battier mentions his role as technology editor of Hoop magazine. Battier ends the video with a broad statement about technology, “when I think of technology, I think new, exciting; I think of possibilities, with email, with Internet with messaging with video conferencing…no longer are you confined to the spaces of just your community. And, you can really create a global business with a small idea, and I’m excited to use the technology to help grow that.” (http://youtu.be/GjynLtTWqQ8)

The brand Cisco is seen once during the video intro in the title frame that shows “Digital Cribs: Brought to You by Cisco” (http://youtu.be/GjynLtTWqQ8). The Cisco brand name and logo is also seen on Battier’s fax machine, and again on the final frame, reminding the viewer the Digital Cribs (2008) was produced by Cisco. Also, there is a shot of a basketball player at a press conference apparently sponsored by Cisco, as the Cisco logo is in the background of the player being interviewed. Other than these four instances, Cisco is not mentioned either visually or within the video dialogue. The Linksys Home Network is mentioned by Battier as being the most important piece of technology in his home. There is a close up shot of the Linksys box showing the Linksys name and logo.

Other brand names mentioned either visually or within dialogue are YouTube, the National Basketball Association (NBA), Hoop magazine and Blackberry. Battier visits
the YouTube site, mentions his karaoke video that was posted to YouTube, and explains that his YouTube video was possibly better known than his basketball career. Battier also mentions the “power of YouTube” (http://youtu.be/GjynLtTWqQ8) and technology generally. Battier explains how he spends significant time on the NBA website in an effort to improve his basketball skills. The video shows Battier scrolling through and attentively reading pages on the NBA website. Battier explains his role as technology editor of Hoop magazine, and there are occasional shots of Battier scrolling through his Blackberry phone.

IKEA, Chevrolet, and Cisco each used different genres of television programming. IKEA chose to create a short-episode comedy and release the program online, Chevrolet chose the prime-time drama format to air on a broadcast channel, and Cisco chose a short-episode reality television format released online. Also, each program experienced varying periods of success and popularity. IKEA’s *Easy to Assemble* (2011) won a web television show award, a Streamy, one of Chevrolet’s leading characters was twice nominated for an Emmy, and Cisco’s program received the least attention – a few thousand views on YouTube.

Each program did however have similarities in that each program served as a way to express brand characteristics other than explicitly mentioning or showing the brand through products or logos. Each program used genre and creative techniques, such as IKEA’s comedy, to communicate a personality corresponding with the image of the brand, also corresponding with the image each brand’s target market is most likely to engage with. Chevrolet’s target market could arguably appreciate and become engaged
with character-types they are familiar with in real life. IKEA consumers could also arguably appreciate the comedy and quirkiness of *Easy to Assemble* (2011), considering that as IKEA consumers they have already shown an appreciation for something different and slightly unconventional. Regardless of the genre or format, each textual analysis presented branded content’s ability to present characteristics unique to the brand, a personality, thereby communicating the brand at the emotional level.

**Interviews**

Four media industry professionals were chosen based on personal referrals and for their experience in the media industry and with branded content. Although each professional had extensive knowledge of the media industry, each professional chosen had a different background within media so as to provide a wide perspective of how branded content is regarded and utilized within media. As previously mentioned, each individual was interviewed in person and each interview was recorded using a digital audio recorder. Because each person had a different background, the first few minutes of the interview consisted of the subject explaining their current work and their background in the media industry. Each subject had a different expertise and was more confident answering some types of questions than others, however each subject did cover the three main questions. Their responses were recorded and are summarized in the following pages.
Kevin Marsh, Former Editor in Chief of BBC College of Journalism

Marsh was interviewed in person on June 9, 2011 in London, in front of the British Library. The interview was recorded and his responses to the three main questions are summarized below.

1. How might changes in technology influence branded content?

Marsh said that changes in technology have been a “major driver” (personal communication, June 9, 2011) in the general turn toward branded content. The decline of traditional display advertising, such as billboards, magazine and newspaper print ads, has resulted in a sharp decline of revenue and thus the turn toward less traditional forms of advertising. The audience has moved away from traditional media and is now found consuming media online, or through personal devices, all at the individual’s convenience. Marsh stated that the sharp decline has “blown away” (personal communication, June 9, 2011) traditional advertisements and UK companies, and most likely US as well, are spending much more on non-traditional marketing efforts. For example, a company may advertise through Google in an effort to speak directly to a specific target market. Companies are also turning to special product offers like rebates and coupons. In the sense that new technology has shifted the location of the target audience, technology is a major factor in the turn toward branded content.

2. Discuss creative control in the content creation process.

Marsh stated that not one entity – advertiser, producer, broadcaster, agency, etc. – holds all creative control in each branded content piece that he has seen. In some instances, particularly with the newspaper advertorial, it is obvious that the advertiser has
completely produced the piece. Marsh said that in the process of setting goals of branded content, the key players (advertiser, producer, broadcaster, agency) could disagree on who will take the lead in developing the content. It is most likely that advertisers would insist on having more creative control because they are largely funding the piece. For example, if the piece was a television show about boardroom executives at a major soft drink corporation, then the soft drink corporation funding the show would not want the executives to be portrayed as drunken, philandering, thieving, cheating, and otherwise unsavory characters.

3. Describe the risks of using branded content.

Marsh stated that most of the risks would be involved with product placement. Marsh said that there is not much risk for the general public viewing the branded content, and that the risk would be at most for the advertisers, particularly under the current product placement guidelines. For example, a beer company could pay for their beer to be used in a television show. In the course of the show, a drunk driver hits one of the characters, yet the advertiser had no way to influence the narrative of the show because of the OFCOM rules. In this instance, the major risk has been posed to the advertiser, not the audience viewing the show. Also, without engaging plots that often involve spontaneous events or unsavory characters, the value of the content declines and the product placement is not successful.

Andrew Canter, CEO of the UK BCMA and CEO of contentworx

Canter was interviewed in person on June 10, 2011, in his offices at contentworx
in London. The interview was recorded and his responses to the three main questions are below.

1. How might changes in technology influence branded content?

   Canter said that change in technology has pushed branded content forward. For example, the barrier to entry is much lower. If a company wants to test a television show, it can be released online for a fraction of the cost of releasing it on television. However, if the show is aired online and still appears a television show, it is still governed by OFCOM rules. Therefore, barrier to entry is lower with regard to cost, however regulation does not ease up simply due to distribution channel.

2. Discuss creative control in the content creation process.

   Canter stated that there are issues with creative control when creating branded content. One of the issues, particularly with releasing a television show, is that the process is lengthy and the averaging marketing director at a corporation serves roughly an 18-month tenure. Brands are often “risk avert” (personal communication, June 10, 2011) and think that their involvement will minimize risk. However, considering the required time to make and air a television show combined with the average tenure of a marketing director – there is not much opportunity to negotiate and also produce successful content.

   Canter also stated that content from consumers online can be more popular than the content from advertisers or producers, presenting competition that did not exist before technology allowed consumers to create their own content. Also, advertising agencies often want creative control, as they are charged with directions from the brand. This is
also problematic because most advertising agencies excel with creating traditional ads, for example commercials, and do not have the expertise to create engaging branded content.

Canter cited a successful working relationship when contentworx worked with Time Warner and Intercontinental Hotels to create a travel series for Intercontinental Hotels after reviewing the hotel’s lackluster request for a press campaign. Time Warner produced the show, contentworx initiated and guided the project, while Intercontinental Hotels supplied information about the brand and other valuable resources to make the content engaging, for example actual hotel concierges more or less starred in the program.

3. Describe the risks of using branded content.

Canter said that the risks of using branded content were closely related to control over creative content. Due to regulation, the brand cannot have editorial control over what is said in an editorial project. However, the brand can understand what is likely to be said about the brand, but there is technically no control allowed. Brands must have a thorough knowledge of the content to understand what the content will do for the brand and avoid unnecessary risks.

Pam Smithard, Former Managing Director of National Association of Television Program Executives.

Smithard was interviewed in person at a coffee shop in London on June 14, 2011. Her responses to the three main questions are as follows.
1. How might changes in technology influence branded content?

Smithard said that over time, there are phases to the economy. The economy may be strong, weak, somewhere in between, and advertisers must react to these changes in the economy and adjust their advertising to continue making profit. Technology has played a crucial role in advertiser’s decision making, particularly in the past ten years. For the first forty years of television, not very many things changed. There was the invention of color television, color improved, etc., but the changes in technology in the past ten years have been far more influential and far more extensive than most of television’s history.

2. Discuss creative control in the content creation process.

Smithard said that her role in the media industry was mostly within distribution and she did not have very much first hand experience with the creative process. However, Smithard said that simply the nature of branded content business deals would influence creative control. The business deal surrounding sponsorship has changed drastically. Previously, the broadcaster and the advertiser in a sponsorship deal would share revenue. However, now that the producer must be in the conversation early on in the process, revenue must be shared with the producer as well. Adding additional voices to the conversation early on presents opportunity for disagreement.

3. Describe the risks of using branded content.

Smithard said that the risks would occur mostly when brands think they deserve creative control. There is still a very strict line in British television separating the advertising and editorial content. There is so much separation, in fact, that there are a few
seconds of black screen between the advertisement and the program, particularly to emphasize the separation. The US does not have such separation between program and the advertisement. With product placement and sponsorship, advertisers will want to be sure they are involved at the beginning of the process.

Roslyn Shaw, Director of Strategic Content, International, CNBC

Shaw was interviewed in person on June 15, 2011 near the CNBC studios in London. Shaw leads a team responsible for creating strategic content programs for brands such as Shell. All strategic content for CNBC is made in-house. The content for the US is made in America, however the content for Europe and the rest of the CNBC markets is made in London. Her responses to the following three questions are as follows:

1. How might changes in technology influence branded content?

Shaw restricted her comments mostly to her work at CNBC rather than the media as a whole. Shaw is however responsible for content on CNBC and CNBC.com. Shaw said that the change in technology might change the way her division creates branded content. For example, CNBC currently does not use product placement, however that may change in the future. CNBC has instead continued to use “strategic content” rather than “branded content” – in its most stringent interpretation – because the issue of product placement is not present in strategic content. Strategic content includes sponsorship and the creation of programs that simply prompt viewers to think in a certain direction of a brand, hence why the advertiser would pay for that program. Shaw said that the changes in technology might push more branded content, in her situation “strategic
content,” to CNBC.com.

Shaw said that a challenge when having more digital content is that there are few measurement tools in place to measure “bespoke deals” (personal communication, June 15, 2011). Particularly when working with advertising agencies, the client wants to know the number of unique hits a website or advertisement has received. However, when creating more strategic, tailored content for a brand it is difficult to discern actual causes of success or failure that may result from choosing that particular content and method of delivery.

2. Discuss creative control in the content creation process.

Shaw stated that the issue of creative control is occurring more and more. When producing strategic content – branded content without the actual use of the brand name – it is a huge challenge. For example, her team pitched a sponsored show to an airline where individuals were profiled. The individuals were chosen based on the brand’s target market. The brand’s first question was “how will you integrate our brand” (personal communication, June 15, 2011). Due to regulation, CNBC will not fully integrate a brand, but the sponsors they work with often misunderstand the concept. Another example Shaw gave of creative control and sponsors not understanding the actual work that can be delivered to them under the UK regulation was a similar situation, except that due to the niche field of the particular brand, the program inevitably interviewed its competitors. The brand tried to intervene, but CNBC was not allowed to comply with their requests to remove their competitors from the program.
3. Describe the risks of using branded content.

Shaw said that in her role at CNBC, CNBC does is not exposed to many risks because they are very careful to provide an internal system of checks and balances. With a news channel, there are many potential risks when working with strategic content and the channel’s integrity must be protected. Another risk Shaw has encountered is through the budget. Often projects change course or otherwise can cost more than budgeted. In this situation, CNBC does not make as much profit as expected. Shaw also said that the most common risk is that brands do not like the content that is produced for them because they do not have as much control as they would prefer. However, through frequent, scheduled communication with the client this problem is often avoided.

Although each person interviewed highlighted different aspects how branded content operates within the media industry, each professional generally agreed on each topic. Marsh said that change in technology was a “major driver” and Canter said technology “pushed forward” branded content. Regarding creative control, each individual mentioned that the additional party during the production process presented numerous problems that were not present before branded content became an option for brands. And, each professional mentioned that branded content presented some risks for the advertiser, particularly if its chosen method of branded content was either not entertaining or not conducive to the brand characteristics the brand wants to communicate.

There were also some distinct differences in responses. Marsh argued that there simply was very little traditional media remaining for advertisers to work with, therefore the changes in technology were very significant for the onset of branded content. Canter
mentioned that the barrier to entry, the difficulty for a program to enter the television market, was considerably lower given the popularity of YouTube and the Internet in general. Shaw also made a unique point when discussing creative control; brands often do not understand the rules and regulations regarding product placement and branded content. Brands can ask for something specific within a program and be disappointed to learn that should the producer or broadcaster comply, they would be doing something illegal. Shaw made another unique point when discussing the risks involved when creating branded content. She mentioned that this type of program can often cost more than anticipated, leaving little profit for the producers.

The interviews and textual analysis have provided an alternate view of the environment in which branded content is created and how it is deployed. Although each of the research questions was addressed through the interviews and textual analysis, the results also point to areas for future research and improvement in this area.
CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

Conclusion

In an era when broadcast technology and consumer choice are rapidly evolving and increasing in prevalence unlike any time in history, a close examination of advertising tactics is required to understand how brands can continue to reach their audience. This study was based on three research questions mentioned in Chapter One that were designed to define and understand branded content, one of the many adaptations of advertising being utilized during this rapidly evolving period. This study defines branded content as a hybrid messaging tool, that employs entertainment content fueled by a brand’s message, ranging from subtle brand nuances to the most obvious visual placement. Although success is an inherently subjective term, this study compiled case studies, textual analysis, and interviews with successful brands and industry professionals to provide a wide response to the research questions.

The textual analysis of *Easy to Assemble* (2011) and *Men of a Certain Age* (2009) revealed key characteristics of each brand. In *Easy to Assemble* (2011), the episodes distinctly reinforce the community of co-workers. When characters are not on the showroom floor talking with customers or, as Douglas’ character is often found, doing more menial tasks like stocking, employees are watching television together in the employee lounge, eating together, or visiting with each other in the showroom. The sense of community and family among co-workers could be viewed as an extension of IKEA’s
intended family image (http://franchisor.ikea.com). Although the show does not allow the viewer to see actual customers use the products, the viewer does garner the impression of community, quirky Swedish culture, humor, and novelty.

In *Men of a Certain Age* (2009), the plot is consumed with problems that typical middle-aged American men face; including dealing with aging parents and the meaning beyond day-to-day life. Although not expressly tied to the Chevrolet brand, there are strong undertones of traditional social norms – the nuclear family is the functional, acceptable family. Characters are part of strictly American families, certain morals are considered right or correct, for example stealing and use of illegal drugs (particularly marijuana) is not just illegal but viewed as morally corrupt. It could be argued that this setting is prime for Chevrolet’s American, nuclear family friendly brand (General Motors Annual Report, 2010). Chevrolet’s brand image in *Men of a Certain Age* (2009) is not simply a visual representation of the dealership and logo, but supports traditional American values and norms – key beliefs of its target market (General Motors Annual Report, 2010).

The case studies and interviews addressed each of the research questions. With regard to the first research question, this study has shown that branded content can take many forms and directions and be fueled by any number of content creators and influencers. However, each form of branded content surveyed consists of the same key elements: engagement, to varying degrees; brand in visual, verbal, or ideological form; and financial transaction. From Balasubramanian’s definition of hybrid messaging (1994), to the textual analysis of *Men of a Certain Age* (2009), these three elements are
the pillars of branded content, present across genres and distribution channels. Given this common denominator, it is logical to understand why the term “branded content” is not the industry-standard term. These three key elements leave room for vastly different interpretation. Some interpretations might render the word “branded” useless in its description, such as the work done at CNBC that does not utilize product placement, but instead appeals on a more ideological level. It could be argued that Balasubramanian’s terms “hybrid messaging” are more appropriate than branded content, however the former does not suggest the third component, the necessary financial transaction.

The second research question was addressed through the case study and textual analysis. Companies control content through numerous ways and at varying stages of the content creation process. One method, as shown through the IKEA case study, is by the brand taking charge as the producer and the other creative personnel outside the company develop the more particular aspects of the content. Another tactic used by Chevrolet to control the environment in which its brand was used is to allow the brand to serve within an entertainment program designed specifically with the target market in mind. By allowing Chevrolet to be used as a major part of the plot of *Men of a Certain Age* (2009), a program about middle-income Americans with families and their day-to-day problems as they approach middle age, Chevrolet is minimizing risks of its brand falling upon audiences unlikely to buy Chevrolet. It is also minimizing the risk of its brand being positioned in an unsavory light. A Chevrolet dealership functions as the family business of one of the main characters, therefore it is unlikely that a narrow, negative interpretation of the brand will be generated through that type of program. Other less
engaging tactics, such as product placement, leave room for more negative impressions of the brand.

Through the Canter interview it can also be interpreted that when brands are not creating the content, they use advertising agencies or consultant-negotiators to mediate during the production process. These entities can speak on behalf of the brand to the producers. This extra party allows the brand’s interests to be communicated using the same creative and media-savvy language of the content producers.

The third research question regarding branded content’s influence on brand significance proved problematic. Brand significance, on par with brand engagement, is somewhat difficult to define. In the Chevrolet case study, the use of *Men of a Certain Age* (2009) was not directly linked to sales, however the actor who portrays the character working at the family owned Chevrolet dealership was twice nominated for an Emmy for that particular role (http://www.emmys.com/celebrities/andre-braugher). It is reasonable to conclude that Chevrolet was acknowledged as more than simply a logo if the character’s role received the attention required to win an Emmy, though to what extent Chevrolet’s acknowledgement influenced the brand overall is unknown.

This study has shown that branded content plays a part of brand significance by providing an engaging entity that serves as a face of the brand. Through knowledge of the engaging potential of branded content (Heath, 2009) and thorough knowledge of the background of IKEA, Chevrolet, and Cisco, the branded content analyzed in this study has personified each brand. According to the texts, IKEA is the quirky, funny, yet relatable brand. Chevrolet is the “real American” brand, and Cisco is the more aloof and
highly technical brand. This study shows branded content does not necessarily influence the brand itself, but brings out certain characteristics of the brand that result in the personification of the brand. This concept of personification is also evident in Shaw’s statements about strategic content. The “personality” characterized in the program is what could be admired or could seem interesting to the target market. The viewer, effectively intrigued by the program, seeks out what was intriguing to them and is ultimately led to the brand in other contexts.

Contributions of the Study

This study has allowed branded content to be analyzed as a tactic in an ongoing advertising strategy designed to help consumers form a long-lasting relationship with the brand. There are few studies approaching branded content from the case study and textual analysis perspectives. Many researchers have identified the existence of branded content and some researchers measure its effectiveness (Martin, 2011). However, the actual mechanisms required to create successful branded content have not been extensively explored. This study provided a glimpse of what actually makes branded content work – how brands, producers, and other entities in the branded content creation process come more or less together to create entertaining content.

The body of scholarly literature on branded content is relatively small. This study has added to the available literature on branded content, particularly the amount of literature analyzing branded content using qualitative methods. This study has also expanded upon the theory of hybrid messaging. Hybrid messaging served as a basic
outline of the way in which branded content functions, and the findings have applied this theory and provided a specific application. From a practical application standpoint, this study has identified mechanisms of branded content that could help brands decide what type of branded content would be appropriate for their brand.

Limitations

There were limitations when collecting data about the brands IKEA, Chevrolet, and Cisco. Attempts to contact the brands requesting information for the study were unanswered, leaving all research to be pulled from academic journals, trade publications, and company information released online. This problem could in part be due to the large scale of the companies. The organizational structure is extensive and complex, leaving personal communication difficult to initiate.

There was also lack of data on either company’s actual advertising strategies. It was concluded that each brand utilized other types of advertising in addition to branded content, however it was impossible to compile a complete list of each advertising tactic used according to fiscal year, or gain a clear outline of their strategy. Instead, available resources implied each brand’s strategy. The available resources could misinterpret the brand’s intended strategy, so a guide of the brand’s intent would have made the role of branded content in strategy much clearer. There also was not any specific financial data available on how much brands invested strictly into branded content during the time each analyzed piece was created. With this information, the amount invested could have been
compared to popularity, and the result of which would have shed more light on the success of the efforts.

The methodology included case studies and interviews. The nature of case studies is limiting because the findings cannot be used to describe an entire population. The low number of case studies and interviews exhibit these problems, as branded content is prevalent and there are many brands using branded content. Surveys and focus groups examining different types of brands and additional interviews could have provided more in depth data and made the study more complete. Testing branded content among audience members would also explain more about its creative mechanisms.

Future Research

Further studies into what exactly makes branded content successful could include in-depth interviews with each brand’s Chief Marketing Officer to understand whether or not their expectations or goals were met by using branded content. An outside researcher can determine the success of a company based on annual reports, but without access to specific company information about the actual results of any type of advertising it is difficult to draw conclusions. Further research in this direction would allow better branded content to be created in the future. Also, considering branded content’s ability to personify a brand, conversations with the brand wishing to use branded content could include a ‘personality test’ to help bring to mind the brand characteristics and appropriate genres and distribution channels. This type of conversation or test would greatly aid in determining what type of story to tell.
Future research could also test the target market’s engagement with *Easy to Assemble* (2011) and *Men of a Certain Age* (2009) using Heath’s (2006) system of measuring engagement. The IKEA and Chevrolet programs were considered relatively successful for their format due to popularity, however testing the same television shows on the target market and measuring the level of engagement would provide a more in depth analysis of the program’s success. The determining factor to utilize any form of advertising is whether or not that form of advertising will actually make a brand more successful. To accomplish this, there must be reliable measurement tools. This study approached branded content from a case study perspective, however future research could combine this type of study with quantitative efforts to provide a comprehensive measuring tool.

Considering the most successful advertising contains an element of entertainment (Lidstone, Moody, Edwards & Decool, 2012), the future of advertising will most likely include branded content. At its theoretical best, branded content is an opportunity for creative producers to create compelling content, brands to communicate an aspect of their brand not conducive to traditional advertising, and consumers watch desired content without the annoyance of traditional advertisements. However, the nature of branded content is complex. Brands must be well aligned with the genre, attributes, and method of delivery of the content. As this study has shown, unsuccessful branded content can be due to poor alignment. Therefore, continued study of branded content and the mechanisms of its success must be developed and tested to allow branded content to become situated as a useful advertising tool, a creative outlet, and sought after entertainment.
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