Balancing impressiveness and favorability: A qualitative study on an emerging type of advertising in China

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Abstract
This study examined a new emerging advertising format (Creative Mid-Roll Advertising) in Chinese online video platforms through the eyes of consumers in order to give advertising scholars and practitioners a better understanding on how consumers perceive creative contents and formats of advertising in the era of new media. Creative Mid-Roll Advertising is a short video advertising embedded in the online TV series, and it is created in a way that makes it appear very similar to the drama in terms of the content and setting. In all, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data. Findings revealed that Creative Mid-Roll Advertising is characterized by mid-roll, native, explicit, and dramatic.

Keywords
Creative mid-roll advertising (CMA), short video advertising, qualitative research

If you are streaming a television series on QQ Video, one of the largest online streaming television service providers in China, you are likely to come across a creative type of commercial which looks like the television series you are watching, but you can still explicitly identify it as a mid-roll commercial. Creative mid-roll commercial, a new type of online advertising, which was first introduced by a television series called Darker II in 2015, has been pervasive among many popular television series ever since. The price has increased from around 500,000 Yuan for producing one...
commercial to approximately 10,000,000 yuan for three commercials (Peng, 2017). In addition to QQ video, viewers can now watch this kind of advertising on other popular Chinese online video streaming platforms such as YouKu and iQiyi.

Advertising campaigns are always seeking creative approaches. These days, by leveraging the power of new media, creative advertising has become more diversified not only in terms of content, but also regarding format. For example, Facebook launched a full-screen rich media in-app advertising campaign called Canvas, which provides brands with opportunities to blend into the timelines of social media users (Constine, 2016). In this era of digital marketing, consumers’ roles in marketing communication have shifted from simply being passive receivers, to becoming threefold participants—being a listener, an influencer for a potential market, and a co-creator providing feedback for a brand’s future development. While there is an increase in consumers’ power, their attitudes toward advertising are mercurial depending on the different elements related to advertising. For example, consumers are not only influenced by the contents of advertising, but the timing of video advertising which may interrupt consumers’ watching behavior and influence consumers’ attitude toward the brands (Li & Lo, 2015). The new environment of advertising asks for deeper understandings of advertising format that bring challenges to brand managers to optimize advertising’s impact.

This study aims to examine an emerging advertising format on Chinese online video platforms through the eyes of consumers in order to give researchers and practitioners a better understanding of how consumers perceive creative contents and formats of advertising in the era of new media.

**Literature review**

**Creative Mid-Roll Advertising (创意中插)**

Although there is no widely acceptable translation for the above-mentioned new advertising format in English, Chinese scholars and practitioners call it “创意中插” (The direct translation is Creative Mid-Roll Advertising [CMA]). Basically, it is a short video advertising embedded in online TV series, and it is created in a way that makes it appear very similar to the drama in terms of the content. In other words, the main characters of the short video advertising are the same as the characters in the TV drama, and the environmental settings are like those in the drama as well. The only difference is that the short video advertising includes a promoted product or brand into its independent storyline. For example, in a Chinese online drama called Darker II which tells a story of a group of police chasing after criminals, a short video advertising appears during the video, and uses the settings and the characters of the series to create an independent mini episode to promote Red Bull.

Given the nascent nature of this new type of advertising, no study has been conducted to explore this phenomenon. Therefore, the current study is designed to examine this phenomenon from the Chinese consumers’ perspective. Based on this purpose, the first research question is proposed:

RQ1: How do Chinese consumers perceive CMA?

**Mid-roll advertising**

Mid-roll advertising refers to a kind of advertising that appears during the video content (Interactive Advertising Bureau and PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2017). It directly interrupts consumers’ use of media, which could make consumers perceive the advertising to be intrusive. Li
Liu and Lo (2015) claimed that there are three factors affecting consumers’ perceptions on mid-roll advertising: advertising length, advertising position, and advertising context. The length of advertising facilitates advertising recall (Newell & Henderson, 1998) and brand recognition (Li & Lo, 2015). However, when consumers are in a goal-oriented state of expecting to watch video content, negative views about the advertising can be generated, and an even more severe behavior of advertising abandonment could occur when there is no skip button (Campbell, Mattison Thompson, Grimm, & Robson, 2017; Duff & Faber, 2011). Advertising position refers to the timing for playing commercials. When consumers are highly attentive to the content on the screen, it can help advertisers gain brand recognition. On the other hand, however, when consumers are engaged with the video content, an interruption caused by a commercial could make consumers be less willing to purchase the products (Acquisti & Spiekermann, 2011). Finally, previous studies indicate a congruity between a commercial and its context is a crucial factor for brand recognition (Feltham & Arnold, 1994). Some researchers claim that an incongruence between a commercial and its context can lead to a longer internal process to review the information, which indicates greater possibilities for consumers to remember the advertising (Feltham & Arnold, 1994; Mandler, 1982). Creative mid-roll advertising differs from traditional mid-roll advertising in that it is more naturally embedded in the media flow and might be less intrusive since the content and format are similar. However, how consumers perceive this type of advertising compared to their watching experience of traditional advertising is unknown. Therefore, the second research question is proposed:

RQ2: How do Chinese consumers perceive the difference between traditional mid-roll advertising and creative mid-roll advertising?

Native advertising

Previous research indicated that creative advertising is effective in facilitating unaided recall (Till & Baack, 2005) and the effect can persist over a relatively long period of time (Micael, Lars, & Erik, 2009). Consumers are more acceptable to creative advertising showing meaningfulness and connectedness (Ang, Leong, Lee, & Lou, 2014) and the rise of native advertising shows a new aspect of connectedness in the online environment (Wojdynski & Evans, 2016).

Native advertising is defined as “paid advertising that takes the specific form and appearance of editorial content from the publisher itself” (Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). Native Advertising Institute (Villanme, 2016) defined native advertising as “paid advertising where the ad matches the form, feel, function, and quality of the content of the media on which it appears.” The United States Federal Trade Commission defined it as a form of advertising with “content that bears a similarity to the news, feature articles, product reviews, entertainment, and other material that surrounds it online” (US Federal Trade Commission, 2015). All the definitions focus on a match of advertising contents with media platforms on which the advertisement appears. In particular, based on the above definitions, native advertising has two distinctive characteristics: the content of native advertising matches the content surrounding it; and, native advertising can appear on any kind of media platform, including social media, newspaper, radio, and so forth. Native advertising is especially suitable for social media environment in that (1) it helps brands deliver their message effectively; (2) it features newsfeeds so that it can maintain a natural content flow; and (3) it translates well to other media platforms (e.g. mobile) in terms of user experience (Fulgoni & Lipsman, 2014).
Wojdynski and Evan (2016) examined consumers’ perceptions of native advertising. They discovered that when an advertisement is recognized, it would negatively influence consumers’ trust in article quality, attitude toward the sponsor, and willingness to share the content. However, the study was conducted in the context of the contemporary newspaper industry, which claims to be fair and balanced (Gentzkow, Glaeser, & Goldin, 2006). With consumers having the expectation of unbiased and fair media content in a newspaper, the newspaper itself can be viewed as deceptive when consumers recognize that it delivers sponsored articles. However, the perception could be different when native advertising appears in a different context such as online streaming videos. Recently, Chinese advertising practitioners have applied the concept of native advertising to over-the-top media services. CMA is one type of native advertising in such a context (China Media Channel, 2017). Based on previous studies and practices, the third research question is proposed:

RQ3: How do Chinese consumers perceive the native characteristic of CMA?

**Narrative and informational advertising**

Narrative advertising, as opposed to argument advertising, is a kind of advertising which takes the form of a story (Boller & Olson, 1991; Chang, 2009; Deighton, Romer, & McQueen, 1989). By borrowing narrative theory from literature, Stern (1991) compared narrative advertising using a first-person point of view, a third-person point of view, and dramatic characters, in which audiences are considered as confidant, pupil/hearer, or participant, respectively. The researcher concluded that while a first-person point of view shows sincerity and a third person point of view demonstrates objectivity, using characters in advertising is the least intrusive way among the three.

This trichotomy not only divides narrative advertising by its style of presentation, but also suggests that consumers’ point of view as well as their roles in terms of the advertising could render different effects. Furthermore, Escalas (1998) divided narrative advertising into two categories: drama advertising and story advertising. For drama advertising, audiences observe the characters, whereas for story advertising, they listen to a narrator presenting the story. Narrative advertising can effectively engage consumers with the sponsored contents. It can hook consumers into the process of viewing the advertising (Chang, 2009; Escalas, Moore, & Britton, 2004) and entertain them by providing stories (Escalas, 1998). Escalas (2004) suggested that through the process of interpreting the narratives based on their own experience, consumers could establish self-brand connections, which in turn can influence their attitude and purchase intention toward the brand.

Since creative mid-roll advertising includes characters and plots, it should be defined as narrative advertising. For example, one of the creative mid-roll advertisements that appears during the drama Nothing Gold Can Stay uses two characters to endorse the product. The advertising begins with one of the characters, who is the housekeeper in the TV series, telling the other one about his pathetic background. Before the product is revealed, the advertising proceeds with narrative dialogue. However, when the housekeeper puts a large mobile phone on the table, the dialogue becomes informational. According to Puto and Wells (1984), informational advertising is characterized by (1) presenting factual information about the product, (2) presenting information in an obvious way, and (3) presenting verifiable data. In the example mentioned above, after the housekeeper opens the endorsed application, he uses a plain voice to introduce the basic function of the application. Although the introduction is still embedded in the dialogue, it appears to be obvious to consumers that the whole scene is an advertisement. In this sense, the CMA seems to be both narrative and informational. Therefore, the fourth research question is proposed:
RQ4: How do Chinese consumers perceive the narrative or/and the informational characteristics of CMA?

**Humor in advertising**

Humor is widely used in the advertising industry. Sternthal and Craig (1973) concluded that there are three approaches to define humor in advertising: (1) examine whether the content includes humorous stimulus properties (i.e. puns, jokes, understatements, etc.), (2) examine the responses generated by humor (i.e. laughter, smiles, etc.), and (3) examine audiences’ perceptions toward the content. According to Sternthal and Craig (1973), the first approach in defining humor is analyzing how to create humorous contents; the second is difficult to measure the extent, whereas the third is most suitable for analyzing the effectiveness of humor as the tone of a persuasive message.

As for the effects of humor, Weinberger and Gulas (1992) reached their conclusions based on these aspects: attention, comprehension, persuasion, source credibility, and liking. Humorous advertisements are more likely to grab consumers’ attention than non-humorous ones (Speck, 1987) in magazine ads (Madden & Weinberger, 1982), television ads (Chan, 2011), and radio ads (Weinberger & Campbell, 1991). Opinions vary as to the effects of humor on comprehension; while some researchers believe humorous content can facilitate the comprehension of an advertisement (Weinberger & Campbell, 1991), others find humor in advertising hinders consumers’ comprehension of the ad (Gelb & Zinkhan, 1985). Similarly, there is no universal agreement in academic and industrial research as to whether humorous content has greater persuasive power or source credibility than non-humorous content in advertisements (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). However, according to Weinberger and Gulas (1992), all researchers find that humorous content within advertisements contributes to the liking of the product or the brand. Although CMA includes humorous stimuli such as jokes and exaggerated performances, it remains unknown whether consumers will regard those contents as humorous and what the effect of the humorous tone is. Hence, the last research question is proposed:

RQ5: How do Chinese consumers perceive the humor characteristic of CMA?

**Methods**

Given the exploratory nature of the research, a qualitative study was conducted. In-depth interviews were used to collect data. The interview is suitable for the study because detailed information about consumers’ experiences and thoughts are needed (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Thus, conducting in-depth interviews can provide a more comprehensive picture of a consumer’s personal experience as well as his or her perception toward the new type of advertising.

**Sampling**

The study took a purposive sampling method. To be specific, snowball sampling and maximum variation sampling techniques were employed. Purposive sampling was used because it is a sampling method “designed to enhance researchers’ understandings of selected individuals or groups’ experiences or for developing theories and concepts.” (Devers & Frankel, 2000). Since this study values individual experience, and there is no previous literature discussed about this specific type of advertising, the purposive sampling is helpful for the researcher to explore various factors that
could influence consumers’ perceptions. Maximum variation sampling was used because “it can yield detailed descriptions of each case, in addition to identifying shared patterns that cut across cases” (Hoepfl, 1997). Participants included in the study had streamed online videos at least once a week in the past 2 years, yet they varied in age (early 20s to mid-50s) and industry (e.g. financial, medical, education). Due to the snowball sampling technique, female participants ended up outnumbering male participants. In total, 20 people were interviewed in the study (see Table 1).

### Procedure

The study took a qualitative approach. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face in China in February 2018, and audio-recorded. Since all participants were from China speaking Chinese, the researcher used Chinese to communicate with the interviewees, and the transcripts were translated into English for analysis. A data sheet was prepared for each participant, which was used to keep a record of his or her basic information as well as contents valuable to the study. Participants signed an informed consent form before the interview. Each interview lasted about 40 minutes covering two topics: the consumer’s general views on advertising and his or her views on CMA.

### Data analysis

A multi-staged thematic approach was used to analyze data. For exploratory studies, the thematic analysis is appropriate in that it focuses on a bottom-up process of deriving themes from raw data instead of using previous theories to guide the analytical process (Hampton, Rabagliati, Sorace, &

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**Table 1. Participant Information.**

| Number | Gender | Age | Industry       |
|--------|--------|-----|----------------|
| 01     | F      | 23  | Medical        |
| 02     | M      | 38  | Financial      |
| 03     | F      | 27  | Financial      |
| 04     | F      | 36  | Education      |
| 05     | F      | 46  | Financial      |
| 06     | F      | 41  | Public Services|
| 07     | F      | 40  | Financial      |
| 08     | F      | 51  | Financial      |
| 09     | M      | 52  | Financial      |
| 10     | F      | 24  | Media          |
| 11     | F      | 22  | Game           |
| 12     | M      | 27  | Game           |
| 13     | M      | 22  | Services       |
| 14     | F      | 23  | Student        |
| 15     | F      | 23  | Accounting     |
| 16     | F      | 24  | Accounting     |
| 17     | F      | 24  | Public Services|
| 18     | F      | 54  | Financial      |
| 19     | F      | 40  | Education      |
| 20     | F      | 50  | Education      |
Liu and Chen (2017). The analytical process includes five stages. First, transcripts are open-coded to synthesize common information. Second, the researcher combines similar codes, removes repetitious codes, and develops a new list of sub-headings. Next, sub-headings are categorized into themes for the final report. Last, the finished report is provided to participants to ensure that the results mirror their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Findings

Consumers’ perception on general advertising and short video advertising

Consumers’ attitude toward general advertising can influence their attitude toward any sub-category of advertising and their discussion of general advertising can demonstrate some basic opinions and behaviors that are helpful to understand their perception on CMA. Therefore, the first part of the interview focuses on the participants’ interpretation of general advertising.

Advertising: useful information, emotional resonance, and entertainment. According to the interviews, consumers appear to expect advertising to be meaningful. To consumers, meaningful advertising should fulfill at least one of the following functions: (1) providing solutions to their current concerns in their daily lives, (2) connecting with consumers emotionally, or (3) entertaining consumers with humorous or dramatic content:

This advertisement for RenRen Car is actually telling consumers that its reputation is good. To me, this advertising is solely for this purpose. (Participant 09, male, 52 years old, financial)

My work is related to media, so when I watch advertising I can know what other media platforms are doing, or if there is any new TV series or variety shows. (Participant 10, female, 24 years old, media)

Some advertising in the subway shows consumers’ negative attitude through the form of words. They don’t directly promote products. But because there are a lot of people in the subway, and most of them are white-collar workers, those advertisements can resonate with consumers’ emotion. (Participant 12, male, 27 years old, game)

There is some advertising in the shows that can make me laugh. For example when I see 58tongcheng in an ancient-based TV series, I will find it humorous and will not be annoyed by it. (Participant 11, female, 22 years old, game)

The first function is directly derived from product facts, which advertising alone cannot change. Connecting with consumers emotionally means that the brand demonstrates a compassionate attitude toward consumers, and that consumers feel that the brand “understands” their current worries or concerns. The entertainment function is largely associated with humor or other sensational contents. The second and the third functions are less dependent on product itself than the way of delivering messages; they are the “added value” provided by the advertising. Consumers’ understanding of general advertising provides a foundation for them to discuss short video advertising and CMA.

Short video advertising: seeking versus avoiding. During the research, it was found that consumers think watching mid-roll advertising is “acceptable.” Given that they are watching video contents at no charge on the website, they believe the free contents are provided in exchange for their attention.
Nevertheless, consumers are still seeking ways to avoid advertising by downloading video contents to watch offline. Other research also suggests consumers are using advertising blocking applications when watching online short videos (Vallade, 2008). While some consumers are seeking ways to avoid viewing advertising, other consumers are actively searching for video advertising on websites. The inconsistency between those two types of consumers indicates that consumers are not repelled by the sponsored content embedded within advertising or the video format of advertising but are avoiding contents that do not interest them:

Youku and iQiyi both have video advertising. I think advertising on the Internet is acceptable. Because they provide resources, you have to expect them to earn something. If there are no benefits, I mean advertising, the websites cannot run properly. (Participant 04, female, 36 years old, education)

If you are not a VIP, there is usually 60 to 75 minutes [note: it should be seconds instead of minutes] of advertising. In order to avoid those advertisements, I would choose to download the video. Recently, I would also consider paying or registering for VIP to avoid them. (Participant 07, female, 40 years old, financial)

I watch advertising based on my interests. Most of the advertising I watched recently are the ones for which I intentionally searched. Many paid video websites do not contain advertising. On Bilibili.com, there is an advertising section; I sometimes visit to watch advertising. (Participant 13, male, 22 years old, public services)

Consumers’ perceptions on characteristics of CMA

In the previous section of this paper, the researchers reviewed literature that could contribute to understand the characteristics of CMA, which are mid-roll, native, informational, and humorous. After interviewing the 20 participants, the researchers found that consumers’ perceptions about CMA’s characteristics could be summed up as mid-roll, native, explicit, and dramatic.

Mid-roll. When consumers are asked to compare CMA with traditional mid-roll advertising, timing is the factor that is most frequently mentioned. All the participants seem to presume that CMA plays in the middle of the show, an indication of characteristics of mid-roll advertising. In addition, consumers seem to have the opinion that traditional mid-roll advertising “interrupts” their watching experience by playing advertising suddenly during the show, while CMA appears at a specific time when a scene has ended:

This kind of advertising (creative mid-roll advertising) usually comes at moment when what is happening in the story is not too intense. Other advertising may play according to designated times when playing the video. So when you watch the video, you are continuously on edge that there will be advertising that interrupts you. (Participants 01, female, 23 years old, medical)

The difference is that the advertising we watched moments ago is not so all-of-a-sudden. And it plays after a plot has ended, instead of, like we watched earlier, playing the advertising when you are enjoying the video. In that case, it will repel me from the product and the advertiser. (Participant 12, male, 27 years old, game)

According to the interviews, when it comes to an intense scene when viewers are in a highly focused state of mind, traditional mid-roll advertising forcibly switches the content and plays the advertising. As it was reviewed in the previous section of this article, while traditional mid-roll advertising benefits
from consumers’ highly attentive state of mind, it suffers from consumers’ unfavorable attitude toward the brand or product because of the perceived disruption (Acquisti & Spiekermann, 2011). Based on consumers’ statements, CMA chooses the position that consumers are less attentive (i.e. between the scenes but still during the show), and it also gains a positive attitude from viewers for this choice. Therefore, it can be concluded that, in terms of advertising position, CMA exchanges the consumers’ attention for a favorable perception toward the advertisement.

**Native.** In addition to the timing of the advertising, consumers believe that CMA “looks like a part of the content.” By using the actors and settings in the scene, consumers are “deceived” into watching the content, and at first don’t realize it is advertising. The process of watching the native advertising content shortens the time for consumers to receive explicit promotional content and lessens the sense of interruption:

> It is more deceivable. It does not bring up the product at first, and (the scene) resembles the ancient times, just like it is in the TV series. Those two guys are in ancient costumes. So it (creative mid-roll advertising) is cleverer. It does not annoy people. The other two clips are apparently advertisements. When people are highly focused on the drama, it annoys me to watch any advertising. This one is clever; I thought it was another plot of the show. So maybe before you even realize it is an advertisement, and have some specific feelings, the advertisement is finished. (Participant 20, female, 50 years old, education)

> I don’t know if it is because the advertising is embedded in the story. But because this advertising used the same people, borrowed some of the plot from the show, and played at a relatively relaxing time, I don’t feel it forcibly interrupts me all of a sudden. So I think it is more acceptable. (Participants 01, female, 23 years old, medical)

Since native advertising emphasizes the match of advertising within the context, the CMA could be considered as a type of native advertising and consumers implicitly confirm its characteristic of being native. Like the timing of the advertising position, the native characteristic of CMA seems to contribute to consumers’ acceptance of advertising by lessening the sense of disruption. In addition, it shortens the time for consumers to view advertising, which could further contribute to consumers’ favorable attitude toward the advertising.

**Explicit.** In contrast with product placement in TV series or movies, the CMA is explicit by presenting the product and introducing it saliently. While people who have no previous knowledge of the product or the brand may not notice product placement in TV shows or movies, the CMA seems to ensure that consumers become aware of promotional messages:

> The difference (between creative mid-roll advertising and product placement) is that this kind of advertising is more purposive. It states clearly that you should borrow money from this application. As for product placement, some people may see it, and others may miss it. (Participant 11, female, 22 years old, game)

> I usually cannot recognize product placement. My friend would say: “look at that product placement!” then I can notice that. But I would care more about the story instead of looking at what kind of wine he is holding, or what bank he is visiting. (Participant 02, male, 38 years old, financial)

From the quotes above, consumers seem to think that CMA is more explicit than product placement. Although in the former section of this paper, the researcher proposed that CMA has the
characteristic of being informational, consumers did not directly associate CMA with this characteristic. Therefore, the proposed characteristic of being informational should be replaced by “explicit.” From this aspect, the CMA exchanges consumers’ favorability for conveying the message by effectively having their attention.

**Dramatic.** Although the researcher proposed that CMA is characterized by humor, not all participants from the interviews found it humorous. Instead, most of the participants emphasize the exaggeration technique in the advertising:

> It (CMA) uses some stickers (note: a type of picture embedded as a special effect in the video) and makes the video seem more like a meme. Actors perform in an exaggerated way. It tries to make itself humorous. I think it is creative. Maybe someone else will find it humorous. (Participant 09, male, 52 years old, financial)

> It makes it is easier for people to accept, I think. Because when people are watching TV dramas, their brains are tuned in to the plot. Advertising which is embedded in the plot of drama can let people accept the advertising without letting their minds make too much of a switch. And when it exaggeratedly shows the product in a sudden way, it stimulates consumers’ minds so that people are more impressed by the product. (Participants 02, male, 38 years old, financial)

Based on the interviews, it is more reasonable to substitute the word “humorous” with a more descriptive word “dramatic” to describe the CMA. Dramatic differs from explicit because dramatic focuses on impressing consumers, while the latter only judges whether the advertising delivers the selling information directly to the audiences. According to the interviews, exaggerated performances and narrative techniques make it easier for consumers to accept advertising, while the structure of CMA impresses consumers with the product or the brand. In this sense, the characteristic of being dramatic contributes to both consumers’ attention and their favorability.

**Consumers’ perception on possible effects of CMA**

**Consumers’ favorability toward the character in the show may carry over to their favorability toward the brand.** Since CMA uses characters in the TV series to advertise the product, it may intrigue consumers’ reflection on the character’s identity. During the interviews, consumers discuss how they associate the character in the advertisement with his or her identity in the TV series. When they realize it is an advertisement, it actually encourages them to ponder on the advertising again. In this way, the actor/actress in the CMA does not only represent himself/herself but represents the fictional character in the TV series. Especially when the character has some likable characteristics, the likability can be transferred to benefit brand equity:

> This advertising is interesting (CMA). It uses the character in the show to promote the mobile application (the product in the advertising). Comparing to the advertising in the past that will play all of a sudden, I prefer this kind of advertising because my affection to the character in the TV series may transfer to the product. (Participant 14, female, 23 years old, student)

**“Contrast” is a double-edged sword regarding the impact of CMA.** Based on the interviews, consumers state three types of “contrasts”: the contrast within the advertising, the contrast between advertising and context, and the one between advertising and the product category. In some narrative
advertising, a spokesman/spokeswoman may speak out or repeat the punchline to impress the audience. The punchline seems to stand out from the show according to some of the consumers. Instead of being naturally embedded in the dialogue, those punchlines appear to contrast with the logical flow of narrative advertising. CMA also uses a technique of letting actors/actress directly speak to the camera. While traditional mid-roll advertising creates impressions by highlighting the punchline, CMA relies on the sense of unsettledness by breaking “the fourth wall.” The impact of breaking the fourth wall is also proven in previous research, which suggests that it could attract viewers’ attention (Auter & Davis, 1991; Risko, Richardson, & Kingstone, 2016).

There is a disconnection when the character promotes the product. They seem to tell a story at first, but bring out the product in a dramatic way, which give a great visual impact. So I remember it no matter whether I like it. (Participant 06, female, 41 years old, public services)

The way of shooting this advertising is smart … although its settings, characters, and costumes are similar to the TV series based on ancient times, it promotes the product in a modern way with modern language. This kind of contrast is impressive. It makes people feel interested. (Participant 08, female, 51 years old, financial)

In addition, for some special TV series genre which bases its story on ancient China, using the character to promote a modern item can also create a contrast between the advertised product and the context (i.e. the TV series). For instance, one of the three clips used in this study selected from a TV series, which tells a story in China that takes place between 220 AD and 280 AD, but the promoted product, which is lactose free milk, is placed within a fine glass. Once the character dressed in ancient costume shows up with a glass of milk, consumers can feel the contrast between modern and ancient times. And according to the participants, this kind of contrast can also raise their interest in watching the advertising or impress them with the content:

It (the CMA embedded in the show) makes me remember it because it tells a story first, which intrigues my interest to finish watching it, and then the character in the story directly introduces this product to me, so it is interesting. (Participant 12, male, 27 years old, game)

The other type of contrast involves the product category and the tone of advertising. For products or brands that need to show trustworthiness, it seems improper to use CMA to advertise the product. Because CMA usually uses a humorous or dramatic tone, it contrasts with the brand image of a financial product, making the product or the brand seem less “professional.” I still think this (CMA) cannot be used to advertise financial products. It is too humorous and there is not much information about the credentials of the products, so I don’t think it is better than the former one (traditional mid-roll advertising). That kind of advertising looks more professional, and it feels more trust-worthy. (Participant 17, female, 24 years old, public services)

While traditional mid-roll advertising interrupts the watching experience, CMA may enhance it. While traditional mid-roll advertising is designed to attract attention by interrupting the watching experience (Li & Lo, 2015), CMA does not necessarily interrupt consumers. Although CMA still temporarily stops consumers from viewing the original video content, it plays at a specific time that eases the sense of interruption or even enhances the watching experience:

This kind of advertising (CMA) is less aggressive; it does not interrupt me from viewing the story. The other kind (traditional mid-roll advertising) is more aggressive. (Participant 08, female, 51 years old, financial)
This advertising does not greatly interfere with the atmosphere of the show. Also the plot of this clip is in a tense moment, and it’s not good for you to be tense through the entire story. It makes me relax a bit. And after it, I am excited again. (Participant 01, female, 23 years old, medical)

Since TV series are also made of countless shots and scenes, it seems that a video clip that contains similar visual elements like actors and background settings can make it seem like the advertising “belongs” to the TV series, which contributes to fewer interruptions. And when the “disconnection” of advertising and context let consumers switch their state of mind, it could allow consumers to jump out of the intense virtual world and relax:

This advertising has a sense of “belonging,” By “belonging” I mean you don’t feel it like an advertisement. At least in the first few seconds. That makes me feel that the advertising belongs to the TV series.  
(Participant 11, female, 22 years old, game)

Consumers get directly rewarded by watching the advertising. Consumers are tolerant of mid-roll advertising because they can watch video contents online without incurring any cost. Their attention acts as a currency for free video contents from video streaming websites (Teixeira, 2014). In fact, the exchange of attention and free content does not occur simultaneously. Consumers need to wait for the advertising to finish until they can access the next clips of free video content. As mentioned in the previous findings, consumers find CMA meaningful not only because it provides product information, but also because it entertains them with its content. When consumers are watching TV series, their needs might be the pursuit of entertainment, and by providing humorous or dramatic contents, CMA satisfies the consumers’ needs by itself. Since CMA provides meaning on its own, it seems that consumers get directly rewarded by paying attention, which indicates that CMA is not just advertising that consumers see as a part of gaining access to for free video contents, but that it provides value as its own.

I like this kind of advertising (CMA). It is interesting; I feel it reveals the other side of the characters in the show. (Participant 10, female, 24 years old, media)

Because when I watch TV series, I need a story, if the advertising can appear to be a story by that time, I would find it interesting. Because it satisfies my need for a story. (Participant 12, male, 27 years old, game)

Discussion

Previous literature suggests that consumers are no longer passive audiences (Wolin, Korgaonkar, & Lund, 2002). As mentioned earlier, native advertising, a type of advertising that may establish connectedness and meaningfulness among consumers, could have positive effects on consumers’ acceptance toward advertising and unaided recall (Ang et al., 2014; Till & Baack, 2005; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). As the creative mid-roll advertising has a connection with the context by using the character while being explicit of its promotional intent by breaking the fourth wall, CMA encourages consumers to establish a natural connection between advertising and their previous knowledge about the TV series. In this way, consumers may think more about the sponsored content, which could possibly facilitate their recognition or recall of the advertisement, which coincides with previous research on native advertising (Wojdynski & Evans, 2016).
In addition, unlike traditional media on which messages are delivered by the sender (Lister, 2009), new media is characterized by interactivity (Kiousis, 2002; McMillan & Hwang, 2002; Pavlik, 2001), which offers opportunities for consumers to interact with the content (Lister, 2009). In the context of CMA, when consumers are involved in searching for the connections between advertising and the context, they are interacting with the content. In other words, although CMA is produced to be a kind of video advertising, which only “pushes” the explicit selling information to consumers, it also presents consumers with a puzzle-like content that makes it possible for consumers to interact with the advertising. In this sense, CMA is more interactive than traditional mid-roll advertising and may seem more acceptable by consumers.

While the previous literature suggests that humorous content adds liking to the brand or product (Speck, 1987), consumers think that advertising with a humorous tone for some product categories (e.g. financial products) is not appropriate. This suggests that advertisers should think twice about the match between its product and the characteristics of CMA. In the meanwhile, since CMA is practically produced by the TV series production companies, these production companies could produce various kinds of CMA, as opposed to letting it be dramatic or humorous, to better deliver the messages for brands.

Theoretically, this study provides a new perspective for academia to view mid-roll advertising. Different from traditional mid-roll advertising, CMA can attract consumers’ attention and entertain them when they are watching advertising. The similarity of costumes and settings between TV series and advertising contributes to maintaining the flow of watching experience. Practically, the study also offers some managerial implications. In order to gain consumers’ favor and serve consumers’ needs when they are watching TV series, advertisers need to work on the story in the mid-roll advertising to ensure the quality of the advertising. In addition, practitioners need to find more connections between the advertising and the context so as to build an uninterrupted watching experience for consumers, which also contributes to gaining consumers’ favor. Furthermore, it is also worth noting that not all products are suitable for CMA; products or brands that need to keep a serious or professional image may not be appropriate to use CMA.

In summary, this research shows consumers’ reactions to CMA. Along with showing consumers’ perceptions about some of CMA’s salient characteristics, this research suggests that CMA may be a way for mid-roll advertising to gain consumers’ attention without annoying them.

**Limitation and future research**

Currently, there is no example of CMA appearing in a place other than during video content. So, in this research, participants are only shown CMA in the form of mid-roll advertising, which leads to the conclusion that “mid-roll” is one of CMA’s major characteristics. But as there are more brands using this advertising format, it is possible that CMA could consider creative “pre-roll” or “post-roll” advertising in the future. By that time, the four characteristics of CMA as discussed by the researcher should be updated. Therefore, a longitudinal study could be conducted to track the changes of CMA.

Although from the interviews, most consumers show a positive attitude toward CMA, it is worth noting that CMA is still a rather new advertising format. It is possible that the favorable feelings toward CMA may be lessened when consumers are familiar with this kind of advertising. Also, whether the constant appearance of CMA can still contribute to consumers’ positive impression remains unknown. Hence, future research may design to explore how familiarity and frequency of CMA influence people’s receptivity of CMA.
Since this research only examines consumer’ general perceptions toward the new type of advertising, the effects of CMA only rely on consumers’ self-reporting data. Whether CMA is effective in terms of some objective criteria are not discussed in this study. In addition, since CMA is a phenomenal and emerging type of advertising format in China, this research only interviews Chinese participants. In the future, quantitative research could be done to examine the power of CMA in changing consumers’ attitudes and purchasing behaviors, and cross-cultural research can be done to compare the effects of this advertising format in different cultural contexts.

Finally, this research only examined CMA from the consumers’ perspective, it does not touch on subjects like CMA production or advertisers’ or advertising practitioners’ understandings of CMA. Thus, future research could examine different aspects of CMA and different stakeholders’ perspectives on this new type of advertising. In addition, although China established its advertising standards in September 2015, which regulates the use of specific goods like baby milk and health foods, it does not include any definition or explanation of native advertising. Since China does not have many regulations on native advertising, if more practitioners start using CMA for promotional strategies in their advertising campaigns, new regulations on this format could be established, which may provide opportunities for future research.

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