Market Analysis of the Modern Flourish of Visual Easter Eggs from the Perspective of Branded Entertainment

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Abstract
The main purpose of the research is to analyze the modern flourish market of visual Easter eggs from the perspective of branded entertainment. It firstly dissects the raising marketing force of branded entertainment, secondly presents the current visual industries that are made of surprises, thirdly analyzes the successful sensation of movie Easter eggs and finally reveals the budding trend of TV series Easter eggs.

Keywords: Market, Visual Easter Eggs, Branded Entertainment

I. Introduction
On this June in the Zhejiang province of China, the consumer Mr. Wang went to see a movie that had the visual Easter eggs in the ending section. But, the staff cleared out the theater when the movie Easter eggs had not been presented. Therefore, Mr. Wang feels strongly disappointed and send the complaint to the Administration for Market Regulation, and in the end, he received the full refund. This consumption complaint has been broadcasted by the news and raised public discussion.

From the standpoint of law, the visual Easter eggs are the part of the movie, and the theater should promise to provide the complete movie. However, the majority of people in the discussion feels attached to another supporting perspective. That is, as the local Consumer Council in the interview (Ma, 2018) declares, nowadays people generate higher standards and needs for entertainment consumption, and it is highly possible to completely ruin the consumption experience of the consumers who are happy to see a movie but cannot see the movie Easter eggs in the end.

In other words, although the material value brought by the consumption complaint only involves a small amount of money, it is extremely meaningful for the consumers to enjoy the excitement of movie Easter eggs. However, the case of Mr. Wang is just one of the numerous events that demonstrate the importance of the visual Easter eggs for modern consumers.

While more and more people are searching the entertainment and enjoyment powered by the visual Easter eggs, it is essential to analyze the modern sensation of movie Easter eggs and reveal the upcoming trend in the visual market.

Therefore, the study is to analyze the modern flourish market of visual Easter eggs from the perspective of branded entertainment by firstly revealing the raising marketing force of branded entertainment, secondly addressing the current visual industries that are made of surprises, thirdly analyzing the successful sensation of movie Easter eggs and finally exposing the budding trend of TV series Easter eggs.
In addition, the main subjects of study are the virtual Easter eggs in the popular visual industries, and the study adopts the literature analysis, which includes the references from books, journal researches, magazines, news, movie works, TV series productions, official movie websites, company websites, and visual reviews column.

II. Raising Marketing Force of Branded Entertainment

As time goes, modern society has gradually developed its unique public culture. When modern habitats generate distinct consumption behaviors, the marketing environment is transformed in order to respond to the new change. Therefore, though the idea of placement marketing has been applied everywhere, the marketing formats and applications need to evolve for the modern society.

In responding to the new needs, values, purchases behaviors and lifestyle of modern consumers, Branded Entertainment has been evolving as a new formula of marketing. Branded Entertainment can be referred to the broader marketing concept of entertainment: Entertainment marketing. Entertainment marketing is the experiential consumption that persuades people through brand or product placements (Hackley & Tiwsakul, 2006).

To be specific, as Martí-Parreño et al. (2017) define, Branded Entertainment is any kind of the marketing contents that attempt to approach consumers by providing entertainment, fulfill the planned marketing goals to benefit their brands, and fuses the editorial content and advertising content as the set of hybrid messages.

In terms of Branded Entertainment, new technology development not only changes the lifestyles of the public, but it also brings challenges and opportunities for marketers. For marketers, mobile and social media development are the two major focuses out of the fact that they play influential roles in current marketing environment (Saadeghvaziri & Seyedijavadain, 2011; Lim & Palacio-Marques, 2011; Wang et al., 2010; Martí-Parreño et al., 2017).

Most importantly, as the appealing and strong marketing trend, social media helps the consumers to switch their old marketing positions from passive information receivers to the active ones who could participate in the process of marketing co-creation and message spreading, and then increases the effects and chances of viral marketing and referral communication brought by those consumers (Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Martí-Parreño et al., 2017).

With the advances of new technology, the territory in which the target consumers live and used to be in a heavy mist is getting clearer for marketers. Based on big data and well-established information system, marketers can save lots of money from getting rid of unnecessary marketing items, projects, and campaigns. However, on the contrary, people nowadays become gradually impatient toward marketing applications.

According to Valero (2014), the founder of Animus Entertainment Group and the leader in Branded Entertainment arena with rich deal experiences with over 20 companies, consumers nowadays are no longer willing to watch the advertisement between television programs owing to the advanced technology which enables them to download and record the preferred media contents easily.

Nevertheless, modern consumers are not going to wait for their favorite contents and attempt to ignore irrelevant information, and in the end, they want all preferred entertainment instantly whenever they have the ideas. In other words, when the marketers want to deliver the marketing messages, the messages need to have emotional and personal engaging with the consumers to achieve its delivery; therefore, Branded Entertainment emphasizes the importance of uniting content to brand at the beginning of design as a new soft sell formula (Valero, 2014).
Though nowadays people have more or less got involved in the world trend of Branded Entertainment without consciousness, the powerful possibilities and footprint of Branded Entertainment have been noticed by scholars for the past ten years. Observing that Branded Entertainment was gaining impetus in 2004, Shrum (2004) foresees Branded Entertainment would become a promising marketing trend in the future marketing environment that fuses editorial content and advertising content into one.

Furthermore, the power of Branded Entertainment was still developing in 2007, as Lehu (2007) predicts that there would be the dominant component of mature marketing communication tool on the stage of Branded Entertainment. Nevertheless, in 2014, when Valero (2014) realizes that this is a new page of consumerism and brand media campaigns are transforming their expressions, the scholar announces that the future is right now and it is the time of Branded Entertainment.

III. Intriguing Formula of Branded Entertainment Process

As the promising and growing trend that is happening right now, Branded Entertainment presents various interesting expressions in marketing forms and rewrites the traditional marketing and advertising process to fit in the contemporary public perspectives and current lifestyles of consumers. Therefore, the section analyzes the studies discussing the functioning of Branded Entertainment and thus categorizes the five major concepts of Branded Entertainment.

The first significant concept of Branded Entertainment is that the brand has a determinant influence on the construction for the branded content. In the content of product placement, the brand or products are put into the content passively by the owner of that content, such as a film studio. However, in Branded Entertainment, the brand has deciding power over the branded content and actively seeks for the best presentation to benefit the brand.

As Martí-Parreño et al. (2017) expose, the brand of the product placement provides little resources to the content owner and has limited influence on the content, but the Branded Entertainment is entirely brand-funded, and the brand has the crucial command in producing the marketing content.

Secondly, the branded content should be tightly connected to consumers. People are used to chasing after entertainment contents that are associated with the brands which people are interested in. Nevertheless, with the vigorous evolvement of marketing industries, people nowadays are easily getting bored especially when they receive the marketing messages that they are not interested in.

Therefore, now in the Branded Entertainment concept, the brands must be omnipresent for the consumers out of the fact that consumers are no longer willing to get closer to the branded contents, and thence the contents need to take the initiative to approach the consumers (Valero, 2014).
Fig. 1 Relationship Change between Brands and Consumers

However, the approaching methods toward the consumers through omnipresent communication channels are also essential. Hence, the third significant concept of Branded Entertainment is to integrate the brands into the contents omni-presently. Thus, the brands become the impartible and inalienable ingredients of the contents in the context of Branded Entertainment. As Simon Hudson and David Hudson (2006) analyze, the primary differentiation between Branded Entertainment and traditional product placement is that Branded Entertainment blends the brands into the storyline intrinsically. Martí-Parreño et al. (2017) also agree that it is the crucial concept of Branded Entertainment.

Next, the fourth significant concept is that Branded Entertainment entertains people. Perceiving the brand to be interesting, joyous and stimulating through the experience of Branded Entertainment, consumers are influenced and thrilled by the entertainment, and many cases prove that now consumers actively search for Branded Entertainment in order to partake its entertainment, enjoy the realism and understand the brand (Martí-Parreño et al., 2017). Due to this enjoyable marketing philosophy, Branded Entertainment blurs the traditional boundary between entertainment and advertising (Moore, 2006).

Lastly, the fifth significant concept of Branded Entertainment is that the relationship between the brand, the branded message, and the consumers are engaging and synergistic. On the one hand, when consumers feel that their wishes are sympathized and realized by the brands, they are willing to become the carrier of the message for the brands (Valero, 2014). At the same time, the consumers can enjoy the free entertainment from the branded contents, such as its advergames and the branded films (Martí-Parreño et al., 2017).

On the other hand, the advertisers provide consumers with entertainment value and approach the loyal consumers by delivering the branded messages in the context of the contents that would not be interruptive. Through the process, Branded Entertainment helps to generate the synergistic engaging relationship between brands, branded messages, and consumers for both the advertisers and their consumers (Martí-Parreño et al., 2017).

Fig. 2 Synergistic Working of Branded Entertainment

**IV. Visual Industries Made of Surprises**

As for the entertainment world, as the technology advances, there are much more choices offered for consumers, and then people can purchase their preferred lifestyle. However, while it seems that the modern market is celebrating and embracing the unlimited opportunities and choices brought by the divergence of media formats, the media and entertainment market are gradually influenced by the convergence as the upcoming marketing trend at the same time.

Perceiving that the trend of convergence is emerging in the sooner future, Jenkins (2006) considers that the upcoming convergence trend manifests three major features, including the phenomenon that there would be streams of messages and information across multiple media formats, the cooperation between different industries over multiple media formats, and the people would develop the migratory characteristic and passionately pursue their favorite experience in the aspect of entertainment. Similarly, Brown (2017) agrees and confirms that the convergence culture has become the rising paradigm in terms of entertainment.

In order to attract the audience and reinforce the relationship with the loyal consumers, as the marketing performances are getting multifarious, the modern trend of marketing and branding in the entertainment market are gradually bringing people into focus by the ingredients of surprises.

However, surprises as the core component of modern branding strategies are not randomly chosen by marketing personnel in visual industries. In fact, surprises are the influential bridge between the emotion and the cognition in the human brains (Mellers et al., 2013).

From the viewpoints of neuroscience, when people are surprised, the dopamine as the reward chemical will be released in the brain to respond to the pleasure (Garland-Thomson, 2006; Anderson, 2011). Therefore, when people are encountering something unexpected or surprises that simulate the brains, the dopamine rushes in brains and the people will experience the pleasure of novelty (Kurzweil & Grossman, 2004; Garland-Thomson, 2006). Even if the surprises are lasting for a short time, the surprises can still polish the normal experiences with favors for the people (Anderson, 2011).

Nowadays, for the industries related to vision, the role of surprises is undoubtedly important. The unexpected visual surprises can stimulate the audience (Landa & Gonnella, 2001). To optimize the revenue and marketing, more and more enterprises associated to entertainment begin to apply the intellectual property frameworks, and the adoption of visual Easter eggs is one of the examples symbolizing the acknowledgment (Tzanelli, 2013).

As the delighters with the features of creative interaction responses or unexpected rewards (Peters, 2014), the visual Easter eggs can surprise to the audience and bring them in a laugh. Therefore, the creativity of the visual Easter eggs to entertain the audience makes this special branding strategy worthy being kept in the minds of the audience.
Hence, the visual Easter eggs have been widely adopted in the visual industries as the special surprises to the audience. The broad range of the applications of visual Easter eggs in the modern market can be glimpsed through the categorization of the visual Easter eggs based on the fields that it is applied. From the well-established database for visual Easter eggs, The Easter Egg Archive (2017), there are six categories of visual Easter eggs in the market: software, movies, music, TV shows, books, and art.

Nevertheless, there are numerous exhibitions of visual Easter eggs from various scopes in visual industries with diverse forms. In the area of comic books, Todd McFarlane, the famous creator who is best known for the work *The Amazing Spider-Man*, inserts Felix the Cat into many of his works in order to attract the man whom McFarlane frequently encounters in the local comic book store and who claims that he is not a fan of superheroes but might have the urge to buy the books of McFarlane if Felix the Cat appears in his comic books (Cronin, 2012). Also, in some websites such as Google, the brand logo of the companies might be changed on special dates (Peters, 2014).

Moreover, in the field of mail websites, the leading marketing automation platform MailChimp (2017) not only benefits the consumers to send a billion emails every day, but it also delivers the innovative experiences to the customers. In the interview, the director of User Experience of MailChimp Aarron Walter reveals, he tries to engage the users emotionally through the visual Easter eggs, and in return, he has received countless feedbacks from the users about how great they found the hidden surprises enjoyable (Anderson, 2011).

For example, when the consumers log out from the websites, they can get the changing surprises, such as the link to the next episode of the comics that made by MailChimp and about the company mascots Freddie and Mannie; however, the users can also get the sign of high five from the mascot Freddie when they finished planning an activity through MailChimp (Peters, 2014).

Fig. 3 High five from MailChimp


Eventually, when the audience feels pleasure from those visual surprises, the visual industries have put more effort on the creation of the visual Easter eggs in terms of the products, systems, channels, branding and marketing strategies. As Mellers et al. (2013) conclude, the power of surprises is the sustained source for astonishment, marvel and secret for everyone in the world. Therefore, the next section will disclose the successful sensation of movie Easter eggs in the modern society.

V. Successful Sensation of Movie Easter Eggs
In the great range of visual industries, there are innumerable companies that provide the products or services which influence the public as the necessary for physical needs and spiritual desires. However, among the countless visual fields, the movie industry is one of the most influential fields for all people in the world as the presentation of entertainment, novelty, and dream fulfilling.

With the visual presentations, plots, characters, editing and post-production, the movies seem remarkably attractive and viable for its considerable channels. Thus, Santas (2002) indicates that the movies are much closer to the audiences compared to the literature and dramas.

However, though the movie genres transform and change continually, the three major movie genres of comics, epics and dramatics always possess the dominant statuses in the minds of people and in the market (Santas, 2002). Hence, the modern time is not the exception. It is not coincident that the creations of visual Easter eggs are vigorous and achieve its peak of media exposure in the charming field of movies.

Absorbing the strength of one of the three dominant movie genres, comics, the visual Easter eggs have attracted a great number of people in the world and become both interesting and mystery through the integrations in the modern popular genre of superhero movies.

Nevertheless, even though Marvel and DC are the two biggest comics publishers of superhero genre in the market (Bothmann, 2015) and both have stretched the business territory to the movies industry, Marvel is the one which have grasped the skills of applying numerous visual Easter eggs and realized its potentials owing to the management of the new company owner Disney.

Sharing the same parent company of Disney, Marvel and Pixar are the pioneers in adopting numerous visual Easter eggs as the marketing strategies in the superhero genre and in the animation movie genre respectively. The movie Easter eggs successfully arise the attention of the audience and even build up the new popular culture of movie consuming experiences now.

For instance, the ringtone of the phone belonged to the character Tony Stark in *Iron Man* is exactly the theme song of the classic animation *Iron Man* in 1966, and the shield of Captain America is shown on the workbench of Tony Stark when he is removing his armor in the movie scene (Cronin, 2012).

Moreover, as the famous directors Joe and Anthony Russo in the interview indicate that the modern audiences have the strong passion for details in the movies and thus the filmmakers will try to add more elements for the audiences to repeatedly review the movies, the visual Easter eggs have become the vital components and are so essential that they are considered as the DNA in the movies of Marvel (Eisenberg, 2016).

Recently, there is the teaser as the Easter egg in the Marvel movie *Logan* (2017), but this Easter egg is only released in America. Therefore, the actor Ryan Reynolds who is staring the Marvel superhero Deadpool uploaded the video to YouTube for all people to watch. In this Easter egg *No Good Deed*, there is a phrase “Nathan Summers coming soon” on the telephone booth, and Nathan Summers is the new character who had been revealed by an Easter egg in *Deadpool* that he will appear in the sequel movie as a villain (Reynolds, 2017; Allen, 2017).

Witnessing the multiple success brought by the Easter eggs in the Marvel movies, many filmmakers have attempted to follow up the trend. Hence, there is Walter White’s Breaking Bad Easter egg in *Godzilla* (2014). Before
the movie, the actor Bryan Cranston had played the well-known role of Walter White in the TV series *Breaking Bad*. Therefore, in the opening title of *Godzilla*, the title of Walter White in the small font size shows up on the screen when introducing Bryan Cranston (Sciretta, 2014).

![Breaking Bad Godzilla Easter egg of Walter White](image)

**Fig. 4** Breaking Bad Godzilla Easter egg of Walter White


From the perspective of Branded Entertainment, with the core plots under the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the Easter eggs in the Marvel movies have been greatly effective and powerful in stimulating the audiences to seek for the connections among the clues brought by the visual Easter eggs.

In other words, the movie Easter eggs as the converged medium are benefiting the marketers in fostering the engagement with the keen audiences and developing the consumption experience of the active audience (Brown, 2017).

Finally, even though the movie Easter eggs do not have the dominant influences over the storylines of the movies, the audience still cannot stop the urge to search for the visual Easter eggs passionately.

### VI. Budding Trend of TV Series Easter Eggs

While the movie Easter eggs have enamored innumerable people with its charm, another market battlefield is secretly in preparation – the field of television series. With similar characteristics of visual presentations, television series is the small version of the movies.

Even though the visual Easter eggs in the TV series are still in developing, the performance and effects on the consumption experience of the audience can be anticipating. That is to say, the visual Easter eggs in the television series might be the better appropriate, entertaining ways for the modern audience because the Easter eggs in the television series can easily fit in the current public popular culture that pursues the fast and instant entertainment.

However, as many movie production companies have also produced the TV series with the related plot backgrounds to their movie works, it is equally important to balance and maintain the consistency of the branded information revealed in both the movies and the TV series.

Being ones of the sensitive people to the market trend and opportunities, Marvel and DC have realized the potentials and essentials of TV series Easter eggs. By intertwining the TV series and the movies into the same comic
universe (Sepinwall & Seitz, 2016), both of Marvel and DC try to elaborate and highlight the details, stories, visual performances and the depth of the viewing experiences for the audience.

For instance, in the TV series *Iron Fist*, the fictional company Stark Industries established by the famous character Tony Stark of the movie *Iron Man* is embedded in the movie through the showing up on the headline of the fictional Forbes magazine. (Billcoolman, 2017).

![Stark Industries in the Television Series Iron Fist](Fig. 5)

Billcoolman, “The Movie Review and The Easter Eggs of *Iron Fist,*” pixnet, March 21, 2017. [Online Movie Column]. Available: http://movie1314.pixnet.net/coblog/post/340805904-%E3%80%90%E7%BE%8E%E5%8A%87%E3%80%91%E3%80%8A%E9%90%B5%E6%8B%B3%E4%BF%A0%E3%80%8B%E8%A7%80%E5%BE%8C%E6%84%9F%EF%BC%8B%E5%BD%A9%E8%9B%8B%E8%88%87%E5%8E%9F%E5%87%BA%E8%99%95%E6%95%B4

Moreover, some TV series even conceal a few references as the visual Easter eggs to active the eager audience to search and understand the mentioned branded allusions, such the TV series *Hannibal* and the Tomas Harris novels (Mittell, 2015). Furthermore, some TV series Easter eggs are simply in-jokes.

Take an episode called “Pimento” in *Better Call Saul* as the example, which is the prequel series to the TV series *Breaking Bad*, the character Mike uses the paper bag that he claims to contain a pimento cheese sandwich to start the fight against the villains, and later the mentioning about the pimento cheese has become the special Easter eggs as the in-joke in that TV series (Blount, 2016).

Last but not the least, no matter in the scopes of movies or television dramas, the fundamental purpose of Easter eggs is to enhance the participation of the audiences, such as the selection of themes, plots, actors and executives (Tang, 2016).

**VII. Conclusion**

In order to catch up with the current trend of marketing and the popular culture, Branded Entertainment has been applied by modern marketers and become the raising marketing force. To be specific, Branded Entertainment is the marketing contents that provide the entertainment, fulfill the marketing goals for the brands and deliver the hybrid messages which combine the editorial contents and the marketing contents so as to approach the consumers.

As the technology advances, the enhancement and development on the entrainment and media formats bring challenges and chances for the marketers, and nowadays the people become impatient toward the traditional marketing applications because they can take the preferred entrainment in hands whenever they want. Filling into the gap...
between the marketers and their potential consumers, the Branded Entertainment is considered as the new dominant culture of consumerism.

Hence, there are five essential concepts of the intriguing formula of Branded Entertainment process: (1) the brand has determinant influence on the construction for the branded content; (2) the branded content should be tightly connected to consumers; (3) the brands are integrated into the contents omni-presently; (4) Branded Entertainment entertains people; (5) the relationship between the brand, the branded message, and the consumers are engaging and synergistic.

However, in the entertainment world, the trend of convergence is emerging: the ingredient of surprises is the modern paradigm for entertainment industries. In fact, in the human brains, surprises are the crucial bridge to connect the human emotion with the cognition. From the perspective of neuroscience, when people are surprised, the dopamine would rush in brains as the reward chemical to response to the pleasure brought by the surprises.

And for the visual industries, the surprises play the important role to stimulate the audience, and thence the modern adoption of the visual Easter eggs is also performing the acknowledgment. Then, when the marketers find that the audience enjoys the pleasure from the hidden visual surprises, the visual industries have put more effort on the creation of the visual Easter eggs as the marketing strategies of Branded Entertainment.

Nevertheless, among the various visual industries that attempt to fulfill the public desires, the movie industry is one of the most outstanding fields as the presentation of entertainment, novelty, and dream for all people in the world. With the visual presentations, plots, characters, editing and post-production, the movies seemed remarkably attractive and attached to the audience better than the literature does.

From the perspective of Branded Entertainment, the modern flourish of movie Easter eggs demonstrates its invaluable role as the effective, powerful and converging medium for the marketers to foster the engagement with the passionate audience and create the special consumption experience for the potential consumers. In short, the movie Easter eggs successfully arise the attention of the audience and build up the new popular culture of movie consuming experiences.

Nevertheless, while the movie Easter eggs have performed its potential, generated the great public reputation and finally established the market flourish in the visual market, the industries of TV series are secretly borrowing the idea of visual Easter eggs into the production of contents.

With the advantage of being the small version of the movies, TV series provide effective, instant and convenient visual entertainment for the audience. Thus, the visual Easter eggs in the television series might be the better appropriate, entertaining ways for the modern audience because the Easter eggs in the television series can easily fit in the current popular culture and public taste.

As for the visual companies that manage both the movie production and TV series production, balancing and maintaining the consistency of the branded information revealed in both the movies and the TV series at the same time will be the main task if they attempt to maximize the effect of visual Easter eggs. Furthermore, the background details, storyline, plots, visual effects and the presentation depth of the TV series are the target aspects of elaboration in order to create pleasing viewing experiences for the audience. In conclusion, although the TV series Easter eggs are still
budding, and the TV series field is not ready to embrace the omnipresent of visual Easter eggs like that in the movies, it is promising that the TV series Easter eggs will be blooming with shiny and diversified performances in the sooner future according to its current growing speed.

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