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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Huan Chen entitled "The Lived Meanings of Product Placement in Social Network Sites (SNSs) among Urban Chinese White-Collar Professional Users: A Story of Happy Network." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Communication and Information.

Eric Haley, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Ron Taylor, Margaret Morrison, Dan Flint

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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**THE LIVED MEANINGS OF PRODUCT
PLACEMENT IN SOCIAL NETWORK SITES (SNSS)
AMONG CHINESE URBAN WHITE-COLLAR
PROFESSIONALS: A STORY OF HAPPY
NETWORK**

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Huan Chen
May 2011

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved mother. Wish she gain peace in heaven knowing that her daughter finally became Dr. Chen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In my life-world, the lived meanings of doctoral study are expressed in one word – CREATION. “C” refers to challenge. My academic journey of doctoral study is one of the biggest challenges in my life, and I am glad that I finally survived. “R” means research. During my doctoral study, a major part of my social experiences is doing research. “E” represents enjoyment. I truly enjoyed every minute of my doctoral study although the process was full of ups and downs. “A” stands for analysis. The doctoral study requires a strong analytical skill, and I am proud that I possess such an essential skill. “T” denotes transformation. After three and half years’ systematic training, I successfully transformed from a doctoral student into a scholar. “I” is the abbreviation of imagination. My doctoral study is composed of various imaginative activities inside and outside classrooms. “O” signifies originality. In the entire process of my doctoral study, I was constantly encouraged to view a variety of phenomena from fresh perspectives, generate creative and innovative ideas, and solve problems creatively. “N” indicates newness. One of the most important goals of my doctoral study is to add something new to the body of knowledge, and I believe that my dissertation fulfills this goal.

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ABSTRACT

A phenomenology study reveals the lived meanings of product placement in social network sites (SNSs) among Chinese urban, white-collar professional users through an investigation of a newly launched SNS, Happy Network. In total, 25 face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data. Findings indicated that participants' interpretations of product placement were interrelated with the socially constructed meanings of the SNS, participants' social role of white-collar professionals, and the consumer culture of contemporary Chinese society. In particular, the emerged themes with regard to the shared meanings of the SNS include five dialectic relations: in control/controlled by, dependent/independent, public/private, intimate/distant, and personal/social. Meanwhile, the socially constructed meanings of product placement in the context of SNS are justifying the existence, connecting to the real world, noticing the familiar, insinuating brand image, and linking to consumption.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Product Placement Emerging in Social Network Sites (SNSs)

During a lunch break, a Chinese young office worker logs onto a Chinese social network website – Happy Network. She goes to Happy Garden, buys a bag of “Lohas” orange seeds, and plants them in her virtual garden. She takes care of those plants every day and sometimes her friends visit her garden and help her with them. In a few days, oranges are ripe. She reaps fruits, mashes them, and makes “Lohas” juice out of these oranges. She sends “Lohas” juice to all her online friends as a special gift through the platform of Happy Network. At the same time, she gains an opportunity to win a box of the real product of “Lohas” juice in her offline world.

This young woman was one of the millions of users who played the Happy Garden game and knew the brand of “Lohas” through Happy Network, one of China’s most popular social network sites. In only two months from April to June 2009, 28 million people played this game. Each day, the virtual “Lohas” juice was sent by users of Happy Network about 120 million times. Two months later, brand awareness of “Lohas” increased from zero to 36%; people’s brand purchase intention toward “Lohas” rocketed to No. 2 next to the leading Chinese juice brand “Huiyuan”; and, sales of “Lohas” juice increased 30% (iResearchAd.com). The “Lohas” campaign was considered one of the most successful interactive marketing campaigns in 2009 (Zhan 2009). Some

researchers indicated that the key factor that contributed to the success of the “Lohas” campaign was the placement of the product within a social network site (SNS) (Zhao 2009).

Product placement, the intentional, paid inclusion of product, service, brand or/and brand identifier into media content, has gained popularity since the 1980s and is considered an effective marketing practice to influence consumers’ attitudes and behaviors (Eisen 2009; Lee and Faber 2007; Homer 2009). Compared with traditional advertising, product placement possesses several advantages: first of all, they are inescapable (Brennan and Babin 2004; Roehn, Roehn, and Boone 2004). With advances in technology, such as VCR, DVD, and TiVo, consumers can easily ignore television advertising by switching channels, zapping, or even blocking all commercials using TiVo. However, consumers can hardly avoid brand exposures embedded in media programs. Secondly, product placements are less likely to activate consumers’ defensive mechanism, thus making them more acceptable than traditional advertising (Karrh 1998; Schemer, Matthes, and Wirth 2008; Schmoll et al. 2006). In addition, placements have a relatively long shelf life and global reach with the worldwide circulations of VCRs and DVDs (Karrh 1998; Delorne and Reid 1999). Finally, product placements are less costly than traditional mass media advertising (Karrh, Firth, and Callison 2001; Hackley and Tiwsakul 2006).

Due to all these benefits, product placements have now reached ‘celebrity status’ (Homer 2009) and become a powerful marketing weapon in marketers’

arsenals. In 2006, firms spent approximate 7.5 billion dollars on product placements in mass media (Graser and Stanley 2006).

The development and evolution of product placements are in step with advances and innovations in media (Newell, Salmon and Chang 2006). Recently, more and more products and brands have been integrated into the newly emerging media platform of social network sites (Product Placement News 2009). Social network sites (SNSs) were “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd and Ellison 2007, p.211). As PPN (2009) indicated, because of their huge influence and interactivity, social network sites have become an attractive medium for marketers and advertisers.

In particular, with the growing worldwide popularity of social gaming such as Mafia Wars (played by more than 25 million social media users each month on Facebook (Leggatt 2010)), marketers have begun weaving brands into the social gaming environment. The Israeli chocolate brand Elite Taami Nutz and its digital agency developed a product placement campaign on Farmville, allowing users of the application the possibility to nurture their own field of branded peanuts (Chioveano 2010). Water.org, a non-profit organization raised \$13,000 in under a week by inviting FishVille players to purchase a specially designed fish. In addition, traffic to the website increased ten-fold during the campaign. Movie promoters also use this platform to promote new releases. A week-long, pre-

launch campaign was run on Mafia Wars for the gangster movie "Public Enemies" whereby players could undertake Public Enemies-themed "jobs" and unlock additional virtual items associated with the movie along with loot, clips and facts (Leggatt 2010). According to Nielsen Asian Pacific Social Media Report (Han 2010), virtual product placements within social network sites games is becoming one of the most profitable sources of revenue for social network sites, generating between US\$200,000 to US\$500,000 per month on product placement.

Previous research on product placements has covered a wide range of topics and explored this phenomenon in different media contexts (Balasubramanian, Karrh and Patwardhan 2006; Van Reijmersdal, Neijens and Smith 2009). However, only a few studies have examined product placements in new media environment, such as computer games (Mackay et al. 2009; Mau et al. 2008) and online games (Lee and Faber 2007; Lewis and Porter 2010). No study to date has been designed to explore product placements in the context of SNSs. However, as the opening case and the discussion above suggest, the appropriate use of product placements in SNSs could serve as a powerful marketing communication tool helping marketers to break through the clutter of messages bombarding consumers today, to effectively reach specific target audiences in an increasingly fragmented media environment, and, ultimately, to achieve marketing communication goals.

Although practical experiences are valuable references for marketers to develop and apply their marketing communications in the new media context of

SNSs, more systematic studies are needed to explore this specific phenomenon to advance the theoretical understanding of product placements as well as to offer implications and insights for marketers and advertisers.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the filling the following gaps in existing research. In the product placement research literature, the dominate research orientation has been quantitative, with a positivistic paradigm. Some researchers (DeLorme and Reid 1999; Gould and Gupta 2006) have suggested that more qualitative research with an emphasis on description and understanding from the perspective of users are needed to provide a more complete picture of product placement in different media contexts. Furthermore, some researchers (Karrh 1998; DeLorme and Reid 1999; Gould and Gupta 2006) have called for a meanings-based approach to examine product placements to better understand this particular phenomenon. Additionally, a great bulk of the previous research on product placements has been conducted in the context of the U.S. As a result, our knowledge of product placements in other countries and cultural areas is relatively limited. Finally, although extensive, much of the existing research on product placements has focused on college students (Schmoll et al. 2006). Consequently, other social groups' perceptions, understandings, and interpretations regarding product placements remain largely unknown.

From a practical perspective, the current study has several important implications for marketers and advertisers. Firstly, the findings of this study may offer a useful reference for marketers and advertisers to better evaluate the

effectiveness of current product placements in the context of Chinese SNSs. Secondly, using the findings of this study, marketers and advertisers may be able to design and develop more appropriate and innovative formats for product placement to better engage urban white-collar professional users in the context of SNSs. Thirdly, the findings of the study may benefit marketers and advertisers by offering important insights regarding the meanings of Chinese social network sites among urban white-collar professionals, thus helping them to communicate with this very active consumer group more accurately and effectively in the context of Chinese SNSs. Finally, the findings of the study also may provide useful information on the possible connections between consumers' receptivity toward virtual marketing communications and their potential consumption behaviors in the real world, thus offering valuable insights for marketers and advertisers to better plan marketing communication in the context of this new medium.

Hence, the purpose of the study is to fill the research gaps, advance theoretical knowledge about product placements, and generate marketing communication insights by exploring the lived meanings of product placements in SNSs among urban white-collar professional users in the context of China. Specifically, the study reveals how urban white-collar professional users of Chinese social network sites perceive, understand, and interpret the product placements woven in different modules of a social network site by investigating a particular newly launched and very popular Chinese SNS: Happy Network (www.kaxin001.com).

This dissertation is organized as follows: Chapter 1 discusses the definition of product placement; Chapter 2 offers a comprehensive literature review of product placement research in traditional and new media contexts; Chapter 3 describes the research context and research site; Chapter 4 discusses the research question; Chapter 5 presents the methodology of the study including its ontological and epistemological assumptions, theoretical framework, and research design; Chapter 6 describes the findings of the study; Chapter 7 provides discussion, limitation, and future research directions.

Definition of Product Placement

The first definition of product placements was proposed by Steertz (1987). According to Steertz (1987), product placement refers to “the inclusion of a brand name, product package, signage, or other trademark merchandise within a motion picture, television show, or music video” (Steertz 1987, p.22). The two most widely circulated definitions in the literature were offered by Balasubramanian (1994) and Karrh (1998). Based on the framework of hybrid message, Balasubramanian (1994) defined product placement as “a paid product message aimed at influencing movie (or television) audiences via the planned and unobtrusive entry of a branded product into a movie (television program)” (Balasubramanian 1994, p.31). Karrh (1998) offered a definition of product placements as “the paid inclusion of branded products or brand identifiers, through audio and/or visual means, within mass media programming.”(Karrh 1998, p.33). While each of the above definition touches upon important

dimensions of product placement, all of them confine product placement to the traditional mass media context.

As the practice and research on product placements has begun to shift towards new media, researchers have provided different definitions of product placements to better fit in the changing media context. For example, La Ferle and Edwards (2006) revised Karrh (1998)'s definition and defined product placements as "the intentional inclusion of brands through audio and/or visual means, within entertainment, educational, or informational content" (p.66). Russell and Belch (2005) defined product placements as "the purposeful incorporation of a brand into an entertainment vehicle" (p. 74). Lee and Faber (2007) contended that product placement is "the inclusion of brand identifier in entertainment media programming in return for commercial considerations" (p. 75). Van Reijmersdal, et al. (2009) offered a definition of product placements as "the purposeful incorporation of brands into editorial content" (p. 429).

In the interest of inclusiveness and distinctiveness, and with consideration for the ever changing media context, the present study defines product placements broadly, as the intentional, paid inclusion of products, services, brands or/and brand identifiers into media content. This definition captures two important characteristics of product placements. First of all, product placements are planned communication efforts. In other words, there is a distinction between brands "placed" into programming and those simply "included" in programming (Karrh 1998). Secondly, product placements are also paid communication efforts:

Advertisers pay a fee to have their products, services, and brands featured/integrated into media contents (Avery and Ferrera 2000).

Summary

In any systematic research endeavor, one of the first steps is to define and clarify the central phenomenon under study. In order to do so, this chapter has offered an overview of product placement practices in the new context of SNSs, a brief review of product placement research, a statement of the purpose of the study, and a discussion of definitions of product placement. The case of “Lohas” and other examples well demonstrated the potential impacts on target audiences of product placements in SNSs and the importance of product placements as a marketing communication strategy. Finally, a broadly constructed definition of product placement was provided in order to better define the central phenomenon and guide the whole study.

Given the various advantages of product placement and the popularity of social network sites, advertisers and marketers have begun to place brands in SNSs and are noting positive results. However, academic research seems to lag behind. This systematic study will make an important step toward filling the research gap: It is designed to advance our theoretical knowledge of product placements in the context of SNSs and to offer useful information for advertising and marketing practitioners. As we all know, doing research is a cumulative process: every single study is based on previous academic work. The next chapter examines previous research on product placements in both traditional

and new media contexts, compares studies in these two contexts, and identifies the theoretical foundation for the current investigation.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Product Placement Research in Traditional Mass Media

In the literature, traditional mass media refer to movies, television, music videos, and novels not including newspapers and magazines (Balasubramanian et al. 2006). Previous research of product placement in traditional media has investigated a variety of topics with both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In this review, firstly, quantitative research including context analysis and effects of product placement are examined, and secondly, qualitative research approaches including phenomenological research, ethnographic research, and critical studies of product placement are discussed.

Quantitative Research

Context Analysis. Since the first product placement appeared in a motion picture, this mass medium has consistently been seen as a desirable place for displaying products, brands, or services. Focusing on Hollywood movies, Galician and Bourdeau (2004) conducted a content analysis of 15 top-grossing motion pictures of 1977, 1987, and 1997. They uncovered 546 product placements in the 45 movies, which equaled to about a quarter (24%) of the total running time of the movies; the most frequently appearing product categories were automobiles (21%), beer (14%), and soda (11%), and the most frequently appearing brand was Coke-Cola.

Product placement was introduced into television in the 1950s and has evolved from a sporadic and informal practice into a regular and formalized operation during the last five decades (Turner 2004). In order to ascertain the prevalence of product placements on television screens, two studies (Avery and Ferraro 2000; La Ferle and Edwards 2006) were conducted to explore brand exposures appearing on the prime-time television programs. Avery and Ferraro (2000) conducted a content-analysis of 112 hours of prime-time television programming from four major networks. They found that brand appearances were prolific on prime-time television programs with approximately fifteen brand appearances per half-hour of programming; the majority of the brands (60.7%) were embedded in relatively serious TV shows such as news programs, featured magazine shows, and documentaries; regarding presentation mode, 42.6 percent of brand appearances were visual only, 38.6 percent were verbal only, and 18.8 percent were both visual and verbal; regarding visual salience, a sizable number of brands were saliently displayed, and their portrayals were reinforced by character interactions. While most of the brands were portrayed neutrally (82.3%), those involving both visual and verbal displays were portrayed more positively than those with only visual or only verbal displays; brand displays with character interactions were also more positively portrayed. When comparing movie reruns with scripted television programs, Avery and Ferraro (2000) found that a higher percentage of brands appearing in movies than in television were visually prominent, but a higher proportion of those in television programs were characterized as having persuasive intention.

In a similar study, La Ferle and Edwards (2006) conducted a content-analysis of 105 hours of prime-time television programming across five major networks in a one-week period. Their findings indicated that placements were quite prevalent, with one brand appearing in every three minutes of programming. Brands usually appeared either visually or verbally, but rarely demonstrated dual modality; most brands were portrayed neutrally and were seen for less than five seconds. Program category characteristics impacted the prominence of brands in shows: consumer products were displayed most frequently on television but service placements appeared more prominently; they also found that an ever-interesting number of brands on television occurred as plugs (The main characters in the show verbally mentioning or discussing the product). Based on their findings, they suggested that advertisers should take greater control over brand appearances to ensure their prominence. Specifically, they recommended that bimodality brand appearances, the embedding of brands into plots, and longer exposures may enhance the impact of brand placements.

In addition to content analysis, the examination of different effects of product placement in various contexts of traditional mass media is a dominant research tradition in the product placement literature. Previous research has examined a wide range of effects in cognitive, affective, and conative domains.

General Attitude toward Product Placement. Nebenzahl and Secunda (1993) surveyed 171 college students regarding their attitudes toward product placement in movies. The results indicated that generally they didn't object to product placement, but instead deemed it an effective marketing communication

technique; they also tended to have a more positive attitude toward product placement than other more obtrusive promotional forms. Those subjects who opposed product placement did so on the grounds of its deceptiveness.

Gupta and Gould (1997) examined consumers' perception of ethics and acceptability of product placements in movies. Their findings revealed that consumers generally considered product placement acceptable except for three ethically charged products: cigarettes, alcohol, and guns; consumers who more frequently watched movies were more likely to find product placement acceptable across products than consumers who watched them less frequently; consumers who valued the perceived realism and supported fewer restrictions on product placements and had more positive attitudes towards them than others. Additionally, males tended to find the placements of ethically charged products more acceptable than did females.

Three years later, Gould, Gupta, and Grabner-Krauter (2000) replicated Gould and Gupta (1997)'s study in a cross-cultural context. They assessed consumers' attitude toward product placement in France, Australia, and the United States. The study generated results similar to Gould and Gupta (1997)'s study. Specifically, the findings supported three hypotheses of differences regarding product placement: product differences, individual differences, and country differences. Regarding cross-cultural differences, U.S. consumers tended to be more accepting of and more likely to purchase products shown in movies. Regarding product differences, non-ethical products tended to be less acceptable across all three countries. Regarding individual differences, gender,

frequency of movie watching, and general attitudes toward product placement had significant effects on receptivity to and purchase behaviors for placed products across three countries.

In a similar study, Karrh, Firth, and Callison (2001) examined young consumers' attitudes towards product placements in the U. S. and Singapore. The results indicated that, compared to their American counterparts, Singaporean respondents were less likely to report self-monitoring activities, were less likely to perceive brand appearances as paid advertising, had greater concerns about the ethics of brand placements, and were more supportive of government restrictions on placements. In addition, respondents in both samples were equally likely to report paying attention to brands in films and television shows, and were equally likely to admit that their purchasing patterns were affected by the brands they saw in films and television shows.

McKechnie and Zhou (2003) compared American and Chinese consumers' attitudes towards product placements in movies and found that Chinese consumers were generally less accepting of product placements than American consumers. Among both groups, more ethically charged products generated more concerns than did less ethically charged products.

In order to ascertain differences in awareness of and attitudes toward product placements in movies and televisions, Ong (2004) conducted an online survey among 117 people. The survey results indicated that the respondents had a relatively higher awareness of product placements in both movies and TV programs, and did not appear to differ in their attitude toward product placements

in these two media platforms. In addition, the younger respondents in the sample were found to be more tolerable of product placements in general than the older respondents.

Focusing on a specific population, Schmoll et al. (2006) investigated Baby Boomers' attitudes towards product placements. They discovered that Baby Boomers had a relatively favorable attitude towards product placements as long as the products were not ethically problematic (such as cigarette and alcohol) types of products and not placed in children programs. They also found that respondents generally were indifferent toward whether or not product placements were included in the entertainment media. They further revealed that some respondents actually preferred product placements over traditional advertising because these placements don't interrupt the entertainment content.

Using an online panel of more than 3,000 consumers, Sung et al. (2009) examined non-student consumers' attitudes towards product placements. Their results indicated that, overall, respondents demonstrated a positive attitude toward product placements; they did not support general government regulation of placements or banning the practices; they valued the realism that placements bring to films; they did not perceive product placements as unethical or misleading; they were aware that brand appearances within a film were often a form of advertising; and they were not interested in disclosure of placements at the start of movies.

Brand Recall. Steertz (1987) used telephone interviews to assess "day-after" recall of feature films and found that approximately 38% of the respondents

correctly recalled brands shown in the films. Barker and Crawford (1995) exposed student respondents to *Wayne's World* and tested for brand recall. They found that respondents had high aided and unaided recall for brands that appeared in the movie.

Babin and Carder (1996a, 1996b) conducted simulated theater viewing experiments among college students to test brand recognition of product placement in full-length movies. Through the two experiments, they found that brand salience had a significant effect on brand recognition. Subjects who viewed salient brands in movies recognized more brands than those who viewed less salient brands. In addition, the recognition rate was relatively high among subjects in that 30% to 50% of brands were recognized by more than 30% of those movie viewers.

Examining the effects of prominence and mode on brand recall in movies among 274 undergraduate students, Gupta and Lord (1998) found that prominent placements had the highest recall followed by advertising and then subtle product placements. In the mean time, audio-only product messages enjoyed higher recall than subtle visual-only product messages.

Roehn, Roehn, and Borne (2004) tested the cueing effects of different modes of product placements in different types of programs. The results suggested that on-camera discussion of a brand (plug) in a segment-based program is more likely to be retrieved by subsequently encountering another episode of the show in which the play occurs rather than a particle rerun. By contrast, product placements (brand appearances with no mention by characters)

are more likely to be retrieved in a plot-based program when consumers encounter a partial rerun of the original episode.

Focusing on the influence of presentation mode and brand familiarity, Brennan and Babin (2004) revealed that for saliently placed brands (on-set), audio-visual product placements achieved higher recognition than visual placements; familiar brands achieve greater recognition rates than unfamiliar brands; and, familiar brands have a higher level of recognition scores than unfamiliar brands even after controlling for guessing and constructive recognition.

Gupta and Gound (2007) examined the effect of brand recall in the game show setting and compared product placement with commercial, the results indicated that in general commercials were better recalled, and location and price were better predictive of product placement recall. Specifically, primacy rather than recency and higher prices were associated with higher recall.

Brennan (2008) investigated product placement in novels and found out that mildly fragmented references induced greater brand recall than either complete or severely fragmented brand references. Delattre and Colovic (2009) examined brand recall and recognition of product placement in songs and found that the most memorial brands were those placed in the refrain and pronounced slowly. In addition, listeners who were familiar with the artist, appreciated the song and the artist, and have an interest in music remembered the most number of brands.

Brand Attitude. Russell and Stern (2006) investigated the influence of product placement in television serial comedies on consumer attitude toward the products. Their findings indicated that when a character's attitude towards a

placed product is negative, the consumers' attachment to the character significantly affects their attitude towards the product if the character-product association is strong; when the character's attitude towards the product is positive, consumers' attachment to the character affects consumers' attitude towards the product regardless of the strength of the character-product association. Consumers' attachment to the character is a stronger predictor of attitudes toward placed products than consumers' attitude toward the character.

Cowley and Barron (2008) investigated effects of program-liking and placement prominence on consumers' attitudes toward brands in TV programs. The results revealed that for those who reported a higher level of program-liking, prominent placements negatively impacted attitudes toward brand; for those who reported a lower level of program liking, prominent placements shifted their brand attitude toward a positive direction after exposure to a prominent placement. However, the positive shift in brand attitude for participants with lower program-liking disappeared when a persuasive-intent prime preceded exposure to the placement.

Homer (2009) conducted two experiments to examine the effect of placement type and repetition on attitudes toward brands. The results suggested that brand attitudes decreased when product placements were prominent, especially when such obvious product mentions were repeated. When product placements were presented in a more subtle way, consumers' attitudes were relatively positive, and repeated exposures had little incremental impact.

Using the evaluative conditioning as their theoretical framework, Scheme, Mattes and Wirth (2008) investigated positive and negative evaluative conditioning of brand placements in music videos. They observed that people developed a positive attitude toward a brand when they were exposed to a positive conditioning of artists with a favorable image. Conversely, people developed a negative attitude toward brand when they were exposed to a negative conditioning of artists with an unfavorable image. In addition, people's preferences for the music genre and their recognition of the brand moderated the conditioning effects. Specifically, the conditioning effects were strengthened when people favored the genre of music and attenuated when people recognized the brand in the music.

Brand Image. Van Reijmersdal (2007) conducted two experiments to test the effects of television brand placement on brand image, and found that brand placement affected brand image: Two or more exposures were necessary for brand image to change, and brand image changed in the direction of the program: image components that were not associated with the program were not affected and neither was brand attitude. Memory of brand was not related to brand image. Generally, these results suggest that brand image is influenced implicitly without explicit memory of the exposure.

Brand Choice. Morton and Meredith (2002) conducted an exploratory study of product placements among 132 college students and found that a subset of beliefs about products portrayed in movies and televisions may predict behavior following exposure to product placements.

Focusing on young children, Auty and Lewis (2004) found a clear effect of product placements on children's incidental choice of a drink. Specifically, they observed that previous exposure to the film was the precondition for a product placement to influence children's brand choice. Implicit memory of the brand in the film and current exposure to the brand in film functioned together to impact the children's brand choice regardless of age difference.

Effects of Brand Recall and Brand Attitude (Mere Exposure Effect). Russell (2002) examined the effects of modality and plot connection congruency of product placement on brand memory and attitude in television shows. The results suggested that while incongruence between modalities and plot connection improve memory, congruency enhances persuasion. Specifically, visual placements were only remembered when their plot connection was not in line with their modality. However, incongruent placements were found to affect brand attitude adversely. In the context of audio visual media, memory was greater when the stimulus was spoken than when it was only visually presented. Hence, the results suggested that the relationship between memory and attitude is not straightforward.

In a similar study, Matthes, Schemer, and Wirth (2008) examined the impact of product placements in television magazines and found that the frequent and unreinforced presentation of previously unknown brands can have an effect on viewers' attitudes, even if memory for the placement is low. They explained their results by the mere exposure effect. According to the mere exposure effect, repeated exposures to a stimulus can lead to favorable feelings towards that

stimulus, even though people do not remember that they have been exposed to it.

Effects of Brand Recall and Brand Choice. Ong and Meri (1994) conducted theater exit surveys of two full-length movies among 75 theatergoers to assess brand recall, purchase intention, and ethical judgments regarding brand props in movies. They found low unaided recall of brand props, with recall ability and patterns differing greatly among individual respondents. They found no positive relation between recall of product placement and purchase intentions. Generally, respondents had a relatively positive attitude toward the practice of product placement.

Examined the effectiveness of product placement in TV programs, Law and Braun (2000) observed an overall enhancement in product recall, recognition, and choice. However, while the centrality of placements influenced recall and recognition, it showed no influence on choice. Similarly, while audiovisual placements were best remembered, seen-only placements had the most influence on choice. The results suggested a negative relationship between brand recall and recognition on one hand, and brand choice on the other in terms of product placement in TV programs. It also suggested that the facilitative effects of placement might be most influential if they are not consciously processed.

Effects of Brand Attitude and Related Behavior. Using consumer socialization as theoretical framework, Gregorio and Sung (2010) explored consumers' attitude toward and behaviors in response to product placement.

They surveyed 3,340 subjects through an online consumer panel and found various effects of consumer socialization agents on product placement. Specifically, they revealed that peer communication about consumption and frequency of movie watching are positively related with attitudes toward product placement and with product placement related behaviors. Furthermore, they found that positive attitudes toward product placement are most common for the following groups, those who communicate more with peers about brands, those who have less education, those who watch more movies, and those who have higher incomes. Females and African Americans are more likely to have positive attitudes toward product placement than males and other ethnic groups. With regard to product-placement related behaviors, they discovered that engagement in product-placement related behaviors is most common among individuals who communicate with peers, or who held a positive attitude toward product placement, or who watch more movies, or who have lower incomes. Additionally, Anglo-American females are less likely to engage in product-placement related behaviors than are other ethnic groups and males.

Effects of Brand Recall, Brand Attitude, and Brand Choice. In order to test the effects of different types of product placement on audience's memories, attitudes, and brand choices, Young and Koskos-Ewoldsen (2007) conducted an experiment among 373 students. Findings of the study suggested that for explicit memory, main characters' usage of a product or the integration of brand and story had greater effects than did the mere presence of brand; for implicit memory, by contrast, mere presence of a brand showed greater effects than did

the other two conditions; for brand attitude, the audience expressed more positive attitudes toward the brand when the brand was used by the main character; when the brand was a part of the story, the audience showed a less positive attitude toward the brand; for brand choice, the mere presence of the brand achieved the greatest effect.

Qualitative Investigation

Phenomenological Research. Delorme and Reid (1999) conducted a phenomenological study to explore moviegoers' experiences and interpretations of brand props in films. In-depth interviews and focus groups were used to collect data. In total, 30 in-depth interviews and eight focus groups were conducted. Findings revealed that when interpreting brands props, moviegoers demonstrated their appreciation of realism induced by placements in the movie scenery; they noticed familiar branded products or services that they had previously purchased and consumed in their everyday lives; and, they also felt empathy and related to characters and further involved in the movies through these props. In addition, moviegoers also interpreted brand props in terms of their everyday consumer behavior. Specifically, brand props functioned as tools for purchasing decisions by providing useful information for moviegoers to make or reinforce purchased-related choices. Meanwhile, brand props were also perceived as tools for establishing characters' identity and aspirations, which enabled moviegoers to compare their consumption worlds with those depicted in movies. Moreover, for older moviegoers, brand props represented signs of cultural change, emotional discomfort, and feelings of concern, whereas for

younger moviegoers, brand props were associated with an invitation to cultural belongings and feelings of emotional security. In general, their findings suggested that audiences interpret significance and meanings of brand placements in films as part of their ongoing everyday experiences. Brand placements therefore should be conceived in relation to how props are placed within the context of movies, movie viewing experiences, and the experiences of the audience as citizens and consumers.

Gould and Gupta (2006) conducted two interpretive studies using essays and in-depth interviews to explore game show viewers' understanding and interpretations of product placements. Participants were 101 college students and 23 non-college students. Based on the emerged themes, they developed a model consisting of three interacting sites of constructed meanings: consumers, game shows, and product placements. Specifically, consumers related to both game shows and the products placed in them through multiple referencing processes including reflexivity, intertextuality, communal, and imaging. The constructed meanings of the game shows include the postmodern ambivalence toward the general meanings and the different interpretations for the individual game show. In the context of game shows, product placements were perceived and interpreted with regard to prize quality, effectiveness, target, cash vs. prize, ecology, and appropriateness. In summary, the findings suggested that product placement effectiveness is intertextually embedded in meaning, discourse, and reflexivity, and appropriateness is the most important aspect of product placement meaning.

Ethnographic Research. In a yearlong ethnographic study, La Pasina (2001) explored the engagement of viewers in Macambira, a small rural community in the interior of Northeast Brazil, with the telenovela *The Cattle King*. He found that with exception of a few younger and better-educated viewers, most viewers in Macambira perceived product placements to be an integral part of the narrative or did not see them at all. However, La Pasina (2001) argued that the viewers were oblivious to product placements not because they were unable to understand the nature of the advertisements, but because the viewers were isolated from the urban culture due to the economic, social, and cultural constraints of their lives. He also noticed that the viewers' interpretations of product placements were related to the stereotypes of gender: men were much more attuned to the narrative's rural elements, while women were interested in fashion trends that were associated with the characters in the dramas. Finally, he found that the telenovela created a sense of peripheral status among viewers, causing them to perceive themselves as foreign to the urban or even rural reality portrayed on screen. Overall, La Pasina (2001) indicated that culture capital that is available to viewers is the key element in their processing of media interpretation.

Critical Studies. In a case study, Friedman (2004) investigated a popular film *Cast Away* regarding the contradictions between relentless product placement of FedEx in the film and contemporary global capitalism. Friedman indicated that *Cast Away* reflected four components of global capitalism: the compression of

time, the compression of place, the rising influence of multinational corporations, and the dominance of consumer culture.

Summary of Product Placement Research in Traditional Mass Media

The review of literature above demonstrates that product placement has become a widespread practice in traditional media contexts, and prevalent in several different media platforms, such as motion pictures (Galician and Bourdeau 2004) and TV programs (Avery and Ferraro 2000; La Ferle and Edwards 2006). Generally, the practice of product placement in traditional mass media has received relatively high acceptance and favorable evaluations from consumers (Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993; Gupta and Gould 1997; Ong 2004) across many social groups (Schmoll et al. 2006; Sung et al. 2009) and cultural areas (Gould et al. 2000; Karrh et al. 2001; McKechnie and Zhou 2003).

In quantitative research on product placement in mass media contexts, product placement effectiveness is the dominant research tradition, covering a variety of topics and testing different effects of product placement with regard to three effect dimensions: cognition, affect, and conation. One major research domain is concerned with brand recall and recognition. Previous research has found contradictory results regarding the effectiveness of brand recall. Some studies have uncovered relatively high recall scores of product placement (Steortz 1987; Barker and Crawford 1995), while other studies have revealed rather low brand recall rates (Ong and meri 1994). Execution factors of salience (Babin and Carder 1996a, 1996b; Gupta and Lord 1998) and presentation mode (Gupta and Lord 1998; Roehn et al. 2004; Brennan and Babin 2004), media

factors of program genres (Gupta and Gound 2007; Brennan 2008) and types (Roehn et al. 2004; Delattre and Colovic 2009), as well as individual factors of brand familiarity (Brennan and Babin 2004) and personal preferences (Delattre and Colovic 2009) have all been found to moderate the effects of brand recall and recognition.

Another major issue addressed by quantitative research on product placement in mass media contexts is brand attitude. Previous research has indicated that consumers' attitudes toward placed brands largely depends on their affective evaluations of characters (Russell and Stern 2006; Scheme, Mattes and Wirth 2008) and programs (Cowley and Barron 2008). Execution factors of salience (Cowley and Barron 2008), type (Homer 2009; Scheme, Mattes and Wirth 2008), and repetition (Homer 2009) have also been found to influence consumers' attitudes toward embedded brands.

A couple of studies (Morton and Meredith 2002; Auty and Lewis 2004) have also been conducted to investigate the effect of brand choice. Generally, the results of these two studies suggested that product placement has an effect on brand choice among consumers in different age cohorts.

Finally, a variety of studies were conducted to examine the relationships between brand recall and brand attitude (Russell 2002; Matthes, Schemer and Wirth 2008), brand recall and brand choice (Ong and meri 1994; Law and Braun 2000), brand attitude and brand choice (Gregorio and Sung 2010), and brand recall, brand attitude, and brand choice (Young and Koskos-Ewoldsen 2007). Generally, the results of all these studies support Van Reijmersdal (2009)'s two

evaluative generalizations: first, prominent brand placement affects memory positively, but affects attitudes negatively when audiences are involved with the medium vehicle, or when they like the medium vehicle, or when they become aware of the deliberate brand placement (selling attempt); second, brand placement can affect audiences' attitudes and behavior, whether or not they memory of the placement.

In qualitative research on product placement in mass media contexts, although only a limited number of studies have been conducted, these studies have explored different social groups such as movie goers (Delorme and Reid 1999), game show viewers (Gould and Gupta 2006), and TV watchers (La Pasina 2001) with various qualitative research approaches including phenomenology (Delorme and Reid 1999; Gould and Gupta 2006), ethnography (La Pasina 2001), and critical study (Friedman 2004). The findings of these studies suggest that participants' interpretations of product placement in the context of mass media are interdependent with the meanings of media platforms that present the brands (Delorme and Reid 1999; Gould and Gupta 2006) and the cultural contexts of participants (La Pasina 2001).

Product Placement Research in New Media

The emerging research on product placement in new media mainly focuses on two media platforms: computer/video games (Mackay et al. 2009; Mau et al. 2008; Nelson 2002; Nelson, Keum and Yaros 2004; Nelson et al. 2006; Schneider and Cornwell 2005; Young et al. 2006) and online games (Chang et al. 2010; Lee and Faber 2007; Lewis and Porter 2010; Van Reijmersdal et al. 2010).

Product Placement in Computer/Video Games

Nelson (2002) is the first scholar to examine the use of product placement within a computer/video game context. In her study, Nelson (2002) found that players generally displayed a positive attitude toward product placement in computer/video games. With regard to brand recall, Nelson found that when the brand was a major part of game and the consumer was actively involved, short-term recall was enhanced; when the brand was relevant to game players, both short-term and long-term recall were demonstrated; and finally, recall superiority seemed to be related to the perceived novelty of brand placement.

A study by Nelson, Keum and Yaros (2004) also revealed that people are fairly positive toward product placements in games overall. Contradictory to the results found in traditional mass media research, they observed that product placements in the context of computer games was not always appreciated by players for their value as markers of realism. By contrast, fake brands offered an outlet for imagination (on the part of developers and players) and added to the humor or entertainment value of the games. Their findings also demonstrated gamers' active construction of persuasion knowledge about product placements in games. Finally, the results showed positive relationships between liking of advertising in general, evaluations of product placements, and perceptions of influence on one's own buying behaviors.

Schneider and Cornwell (2005) conducted a study to examine the brand recall and recognition of product placements in computer games. The results of their study indicated that prominent placements had higher recall and recognition

levels than subtle placements. Additionally, experienced players had higher recall and recognition of brand appearances than novices. In a similar study, Young et al. (2006) examined explicit and implicit memory of “In-game” advertising. Their results clearly demonstrated that “In-game” advertising has an impact on both explicit and implicit memory. However, the effect of “In-game” advertising on explicit memory is relatively small.

With consideration of both brand recall and brand attitude, Mau et al. (2008) examined the effects of in-game advertising for familiar and unfamiliar brands. Regarding brand recall, the results showed a significantly high recall rate among the participants for both familiar and unfamiliar brands. However, brand recall was moderated by consumers’ skepticism. Regarding brand attitude, while players assessed the unfamiliar brand positively after playing the game, their attitudes toward the familiar brand deteriorated. In a similar study, Mackay et al. (2009) conducted a pre-post test experiment and found that participants with pre-existing high positive attitudes towards the embedded brand displayed significantly higher levels of both spontaneous and prompted recall than participants with low pre-existing attitudes towards the brand. In addition, the participants with low pre-existing attitudes towards the embedded brand became more positively disposed towards the brand after exposure to the in-game product placement.

In a relatively complicated study, Nelson et al. (2006) investigated the influence of telepresence on spectators’ and players’ processing of real and fictitious brands in a computer game. The results suggested that gamers’

interactivity influenced the effectiveness of product placement. Specifically, game players recalled significantly fewer real and fictitious brands than did watchers. However, there was no difference between players and watchers regarding perceived persuasion for both real and fictitious brands. Generally, real brands were found to have a higher recall than fictitious brands among both players and watchers. But only players perceived significantly greater persuading effects for real brands than for fictitious brands. Telepresence was found to influence perceived persuasion but not recall. Finally, when telepresence and game liking were simultaneously measured for fictitious brands, the influence of each on perceived persuasion disappeared.

Product Placement in Online Games

Lee and Faber (2007) examined the effects of placement location, prior game-playing experience, and game-product congruity on brand recall. The results of their study demonstrated that focal product placement led to superior recall and recognition sensitivity of brands than did peripheral placement. This difference was greater among inexperienced players than among experienced players. Although experienced players in moderate involvement conditions recognized focal brands better than peripheral brands, this recognition superiority disappeared when experienced players' involvement was high. Inexperienced players, even in high involvement conditions, still recognized focal brands better than peripheral brands. Highly incongruent brands were better recalled than either highly congruent or moderately incongruent brands. For three-way

interaction effects, inexperienced players in high involvement conditions showed the greatest effects of game-product congruity on recall.

Lewis and Porter (2010) conducted a quasi-experimental survey among 100 participants ages 18 to 24 to examine players' perception of advertising in a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). They found out that moderately incongruent advertising in an MMORPG can trigger high awareness of embedded brands. However, extremely incongruent advertising can reduce a game's perceived sense of realism and annoy players especially if not integrated appropriately into the game environment.

In a similar study, Chang et al. (2010) examined the match between online games and advertising. In an 18-day experiment among 582 Chinese online game players, they found that all three matching dimensions of congruity, integration, and prominence affected both interest in and purchase intentions of players for the products advertised in the game. Additionally, players' interest in in-game advertising had a positive effect on their purchase intentions.

Van Reijersdal et al. (2010) conducted quasi-experiments among 2748 teenage girls to test how interactive brand placements in online games affect children's cognitive, affective, and conative responses. The results indicated that interactive brand placement has a positive effect on brand awareness, brand image, and behavior intentions; girls' attitudes toward games are positively influenced by brand placement; prior brand use moderates the effects of interactive brand placement in games on brand image and behavior intentions; and, the effect on behavioral intention is moderated by both brand use and age.

Summary of Product Placement Research in New Media

Given the nascent nature of research on product placement in new media, the number of the studies is relatively scarce and the studies are confined in two media platforms. As in the research on product placement in traditional mass media, a key research topic in the field of product placement in new media is product placement effectiveness. Brand recall and brand recognition, brand attitudes, and behavioral intentions are the major outcome variables in the literature.

Regarding product placement in computer games, the research indicates that generally, game players demonstrate a relatively positive attitude toward product placement in the context of computer/video games (Nelson 2002; Nelson et al. 2004). For brand recall and recognition, people tend to have a better ability to remember brands that are prominent (Nelson 2002; Schneider and Cornwell 2005), relevant (Nelson 2002), and real (Nelson et al. 2006). The effects of brand recall and recognition are moderated by players' game skills (Schneider and Cornwell 2005), the novelty of brand placement (Nelson 2002; Nelson et al. 2004), consumers' skepticism (Mau et al. 2008), existing brand attitudes (Mackay et al. 2009), and gamers' interactivity (Nelson et al. 2006). Regarding brand attitudes, people tend to evaluate unfamiliar (Mau et al. 2008) or less favorable brands (Mackay et al. 2009) more positively after exposure to those brands in computer/video games. Regarding brand purchase intentions, previous research reveals a positive relationship between evaluations of product placement and

perceptions of influence of product placements on buying behaviors (Nelson et al. 2004; Nelson et al. 2006).

Regarding product placement in online games, all studies except one (Van Reijersdal et al. 2010) focused on the congruity between games and products. Results of these studies have suggested that in general, incongruent brands are better recalled than congruent brands (Lee and Faber 2007; Lewis and Porter 2010). However, game players display a less favorable attitude toward highly incongruent brands because of its intrusiveness (Lewis and Porter 2010; Chang et al. 2010). Regarding brand purchase intentions, Change et al. (2010) reveal a positive relationship between congruity of in-game advertising and players' purchase intention toward the advertised product.

Product Placement Research in Different Media Contexts: A Comparison

Since the research on product placement in traditional mass media has a relatively longer history than research on product placement in new media, overall, the research demonstrates a broader scope covering a greater variety of topics (Karrh 1998; Balasubramanian et al. 2006; Van Reijersdal et al. 2009). Simultaneously, the research in this field also achieves a certain degree of depth by exploring various mass media platforms (i.e. Movie: Delorme and Reid 1999; TV: La Pasina 2001; Novel: Brenna 2008; Music Video: Shemer et al. 2008), examining different genres and types of TV programs (i.e. Game Show: Gupta and Gould 2007, Sitcom: Russell and Stern 2006), and investigating the effects

of various execution, individual, and situational factors (Balasubramanian et al. 2006). Additionally, the research also shows a methodological diversity: different types of research methods such as content analysis (i.e. La Ferla and Edwards 2006), surveys (i.e. Ong 2004), experiments (i.e. Russell 2002), in-depth interviews (La Pasina 2001), and focus groups (Delorme and Reid 1999) have been intensively used to explore related topics. Finally, the research displays cultural variation by investigating the phenomenon in different social and cultural settings (Schmoll et al. 2006; Sung et al. 2009) and countries (Gould et al. 2000; Karrh et al. 2001; McKechnie and Zhou 2003).

By contrast, studies on product placement in new media are limited in number, scope, and depth. Since the first study was conducted in 2002, only a small number of studies have been published in academic journals during the most recent eight-year period. Although a variety of emerging new media exist, the research predominantly focused on two media platforms, thus confining the scope of research. Likewise, the single concentration of all the studies has been product placement effectiveness, and, perhaps as a consequence, the preferred major research method used in this research tradition has been the controlled experiment. Finally, the majority of studies have been conducted within the context of the United States. As a result, our knowledge of geographical and cultural variations of product placement in new media environments remains limited.

Summary

From this review of product placement research in both traditional and new media, most studies of product placement with a few exceptions do not incorporate the contextual factors of media platforms into their investigations. Consequently, the results of the research of product placement in new media by and large have mirrored the findings of the research conducted in the context of traditional mass media.

However, a medium is not only a technological and passive platform for presenting product placements. Each medium may generate its own sets of meanings through which consumers react to and interpret the contents that it transmits (Gould and Gupta 2006; Hirschman and Thompson 1997). Consumers' relationships to the media themselves constitute an essential aspect of the perceived meaning they derive from commercial messages (Hirschman and Thompson 1997). Media contexts can influence individuals' subjective mental states and subsequent processing of embedded commercial messages (Moorman, Neijens, and Smit 2002; Nelson et al. 2006). From the "sites as meaning" perspective (Jansson 2002), consumers ascribe not only meanings to product placements, but also to the media that transmit the placements and react to them (Gould and Gupta 2006). In other words, media and product placements are the synergistic junction of two sites of meaning. Hence, to understand how consumers perceive and interpret product placements, it is necessary to clarify how consumers perceive and interpret the media platform in which these products or brands are placed.

CHAPTER 3

The CONTEXT OF RESEARCH

Media as a Source of Meaning

When interpreting the meanings of advertising, consumers use multiple frames of reference (Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Jansson 2002). In other words, the interpretative meanings of advertising emerge from “intertextuality” (Jansson 2002) - the internal co-existence and referentiality of various externally derived texts, genres, and discourses. These interpretative frameworks are essential to understand what advertising means to consumers and what they actually do with advertising. The frames can be very wide-ranging in scope and originate from consumers’ personal experiences and socially derived knowledge (Mick and Buhl 1992; McCracken 1986; Hirschman and Thompson 1997).

In the modern world, a large part of people’s cultural frameworks is derived from media consumption (Jansson 2002). As an important ideological force, mass media are consistently shaping these frameworks through sorting reality into meaningful categories (McCracken 1987). Simultaneously, as sites of meaning (Jansson 2002), different media signal different meanings to consumers and form various referential systems for consumers to interpret and construct meanings (Hirschman and Thompson 1997). In the course of everyday life, various kinds of non-commercial media texts provide consumers with images of goods and services, images that consumers perceive and incorporate as meaningful components of their interpretations of commercial messages. At the

same time, the technological characteristics of particular media platforms also establish different contexts, that influence how consumers decode the meanings of advertising (Nelson, Keum and Yaros 2004). In summary, consumers' relationships to the mass media platforms themselves constitute an essential aspect of the perceived meanings they derive from the advertising transmitted via these media.

As a special type of advertising, product placements well demonstrate the symbolic relationships between advertising and media (Hirschman and Thompson 1997), i.e. encoded "intertextuality" (Janssan 2002). For example, in their exploration of brand placements in movies, DeLorme and Reid (1999) explored and found that audiences used the meanings they derived from the movie-medium to construct meanings for the product placed there. In a similar study, Gupta and Gould (2006) revealed that consumers intertwined the meanings of the game shows and the meanings of product placements themselves to make sense of the product placements. This previous research, demonstrating a powerful symbolic relationship between product placements and media-type in traditional mass media, highlights an opportunity for future researchers: As product placements move into new media contexts that are radically different from traditional media, it is imperative to examine the symbolic meanings that new media platforms have for consumers and the intertextual effects of these meanings on consumers' interpretations of product placements.

Social Network Sites (SNSs): A Unique Media Context

Social network sites (SNSs) are also referred to as online social networks (Acar 2008, Cardon 2009; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007) and social networking websites (SNWs) (Walther et al. 2008; Agarwal and Mital 2009; DeKay 2009). Acar (2008) defined online social networks as “websites that encourage people to establish a ‘network of connections’ to others” (p. 63). The key feature of an online social network is that it connects people with common interests while empowering them to be independent communicators. Donnath and boyd (2004) described social networking sites as “online environments in which people create a self-descriptive profile and then make links to people they know on the sites, creating a network of personal connections” (p. 72). Donnath and boyd considered ‘profile’ and ‘network of links’ as the fundamental characteristics of these sites.

In an extensive review of SNSs research, boyd and Ellison (2007) suggested using ‘social network sites’ as the term to describe the particular phenomenon, and differentiate ‘social network sites’ from ‘social networking sites.’ While ‘social networking sites’ emphasize building new relationships with strangers, ‘social network sites’ are used for both initiating a new relationship and maintaining existing offline social relationships. In this sense, the term ‘social network sites’ has a broader scope than ‘social networking sites.’

Based on their understanding, boyd and Ellison (2007) define social network sites as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users

with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p.211). According to this definition, profiles, Friends, comments, and private messaging are identified as crucial features of social network sites. However, depending on their different target groups and technologies, particular social network sites may also offer other features such as photo-sharing, video-sharing, mobile interactions, instant messaging, and built-in blogging.

The Research Site: Happy Network

The Chinese government maintains relatively strict control over information flow on the Internet (Hu 2010). Some popular SNSs, such as Facebook, are not available in mainland China. This strict control has offered Chinese program developers an opportunity to design and build their own versions of Chinese SNS. Since 2007, various Chinese SNSs have copied Facebook's methods, including Xiaonei (changed name to Renren in 2009), Hainei, 51.com, and Happy Network. Accordingly, SNSs have become more popular among Chinese internet users; currently, more than 1,000 Chinese SNSs have been established. The most successful of these include Renren, Happy Network, and Shiji Jiayuan, which focus on social life, white-collar professionals, and dating, respectively (Zhao 2009).

Since launching in April 2008 (Cao 2008), Happy Network (www.kaixin001.com) reached a ranking of 1,300 among all global Web sites in July 2008, but by April 2009, had moved up to 118, surpassing "校内网

"(www.xiaonei.com), the largest SNS in China (Li 2008a) as the top Chinese SNS and the most popular social network site among Chinese white-collar professionals.

Some experts have claimed that the Happy Network is the best Chinese imitator of Facebook (Xie 2008b), though it differs in two ways: First, Happy Network focuses on a different user group. The foundational users of Facebook were college students while the first users of Happy Network were urban, white-collar professionals (Xie 2008b).

Second, Happy Network focuses on web games. During its early developmental stage, the most popular games were "Trading Friends" and "Parking War" (Cao 2008; Li 2008a). However, like Facebook, the site allows users to change their personal status, store and share photos and music, write and share blogs, exchange short messages, send gifts, test themselves, launch polls or reports, and so forth. These functions are activated through various modules embedded in the web site, which are updated and augmented regularly. As of January 2010, more than 30 modules covered diverse social and interactive functions. In addition, the site offers a platform for users to look for friends through its people search function (www.kaixin001.com).

Summary

Previous research demonstrates that every medium is itself a source of meaning and provides an important referential framework for consumers to construct meanings for the commercial content that it transmits. The SNS, an increasingly popular medium, has its own unique meanings for consumers, which

influence how they interpret advertising placed within it. As a newly launched Chinese SNS, Happy Network offers a prime context for us to explore the symbolic relations between product placement and SNS in the context of China. Following this survey of the research context, the next chapter discusses research gaps in the literature and describes the research question that captures the central phenomenon of interest for this study.

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH QUESTION

From the previous literature, it is clear that although previous research on product placements explored a variety of media contexts, no study to date has been designed to examine product placements in the SNS, an increasingly popular and unique media platform. Given the tremendous advances in the practice of product placements in SNSs, it is worthwhile to systematically explore this phenomenon to gain insights into practice as well as to enrich our theoretical understanding. Simultaneously, the dominant research orientation of previous product placement research has been quantitative; that is, all previous studies have been designed to test and confirm researchers' theoretical assumptions rather than to focus on users' experiences and interpretations. Some researchers (DeLorme and Reid 1999; Gould and Gupta 2006) have suggested that qualitative research with an emphasis on description and understanding from the perspective of users is needed to provide a more complete picture of product placements in different media contexts. Furthermore, the majority of the previous research has focused on the effects of product placements without taking into account factors related to media platforms. As a result, the existing studies of product placements in new media largely mirror the studies of product placement in traditional media. However, as discussed previously, media are an important source of meanings. Therefore, our understanding of product placements can be enhanced by understanding the meanings of specific media platforms which

present placements. Additionally, a great bulk of the previous research on product placements has been conducted in the context of the United States. Thus, our understanding of how product placements work in other countries and cultural areas is relatively limited. Finally, extensive research on product placements has focused on college students (Schmoll et al. 2006). Consequently, other social groups' perceptions, understandings, and interpretations regarding product placements remain largely unknown.

With all these considerations in mind, the current study was designed to fill the research gaps noted above and explore the lived meanings of product placements in Chinese SNSs among Chinese urban white-collar professional users by examining a newly launched Chinese SNS – Happy Network (www.kaixin001.com). The overarching issue motivating this study was how Chinese urban white-collar professional users make sense of product placements in the context of SNS medium. To address this issue specifically, the study explored users' motivations, activities, feelings, experiences, and attitudes toward product placements in the Happy Network SNS. Through this exploration, themes emerged concerning the personal realities and socially constructed meanings of product placements in the context of the SNS medium. Thus, the formal research question addressed in this study was as follows:

RQ: How do Chinese urban, white-collar professional users make sense of product placements in the Happy Network?

Summary

The multiple research gaps existing in the literature justify the necessity and importance of the current study. In order to answer the research question, an appropriate methodology is needed. This is discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5 METHODOLOGY

Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions

Methodology denotes the rationale and the philosophical assumptions that underlie a particular study providing a framework for choosing particular methods of investigation. Methodology provides a context for understanding a researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions when engaging in the research process (Graves 2006). Ontology is the study of the nature of existence (Gray 2004). It raises basic questions about the nature of reality and the nature of the human beings in the world (Denzin and Lincoln 2004). The ontological assumption of the current study is that multiple realities exist. Realities exist "in the form of multiple constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific, dependent for their form and content on the persons who hold them." (Guba 1990, p. 27) In other words, there are multiple truths that are "bound by the time, context, and the individual who believe them" (Morrison et al. 2002, p. 19). Therefore, the primary purpose of this investigation is to reveal the subjective, socially constructed, and context-bounded realities regarding product placements in the SNSs in the life-worlds of Chinese white-collar professional users.

Epistemology is the study of knowledge and justified belief (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Epistemology seeks to understand what it means to know. The current study takes the epistemological stance of constructivism.

Essentially, constructivism suggests that truth and meaning are created by subjects' interactions with the world (Gray 2004). Specifically, constructivists consider the notion of meaning to be central to human behavior: human interaction with the world is mediated through the process of meaning-making and interpretation; any attempt to understand social reality has to be grounded in people's experience of that social reality. Hence, the principal task of this investigation is to uncover the lived meanings of product placements embedded in SNSs in the context of Chinese white-collar professional users' everyday social experience.

Theoretical Perspective: Phenomenology

Grounding these ontological and epistemological assumptions, the theoretical perspective guiding the study is phenomenology. Phenomenology as a philosophical tradition was founded by Husserl at the beginning of the 20th century and further developed as existential philosophy by Heidegger, and in a dialectical direction by Merleau-Ponty and Sartre (Kvale 1983; Moran 2000; Sokolowski 2000). Literally, phenomenology means the study of phenomena, that is, the study of "the things themselves!" (Ihde 1986) Phenomenology is a radical way of doing philosophy. Phenomenologists seek to describe phenomena in the broadest sense, as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is, as it manifests itself to the consciousness of the experiencer (Moran 2000). In other words, phenomenology is the study of human experience and the structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view (Sokolowski 2000).

There are, according to Husserl (Gurwitsch 1974), four major ideas in phenomenology: first, the life-world is given in direct and immediate experience, especially perceptual experience; second, the life-world is also a cultural world – “a world made by men in the various forms of their mutual cooperation, and on whose objects sense and meaning are bestowed by virtue of intellectual and mental function” (p. 7); third, human beings have concrete existence and are involved in the cultural world; fourth, human beings gain access to “reality” through consciousness. In this sense, phenomenology is a correction of the Cartesian philosophy (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989) and a return to concrete, lived human experience in all its richness (Moran 2000).

The central structure of an experience is its intentionality. Simply speaking, intentionality is the directness of consciousness (Sokolowski 2000). Consciousness is always directed toward an object. Every act of consciousness we perform, every experience that we have, is essentially a consciousness or an experience of something or other. Whether or not the object of the act exists, it has meaning and a mode of being for consciousness; it is a meaning for correlate of the conscious act (Moran 2000). Thus, intentionality could also be seen as a correlational rule (Ihde 1986). What the correlational rule governs are the intentional structures of acts and their correlative objects, that is, the noetic-noematic structure of consciousness (Moran 2000; Moustakas 1994). Noesis refers to the act of perceiving, feeling, thinking, remembering, or judging while noema refers to the perceived as such, the remembered as such, and the judged as such (Moustakas 1994, p. 69). According to Ihde (1986), noema is what is

experienced, the object-correlate. Noesis is the experiencing or the act of experiencing, the subject-correlate. Noema corresponds with noesis at all points. In other words, “every experiencing has its reference or direction towards what is experienced, and, contrarily, every experienced phenomenon refers to or reflects a mode of experiencing to which it is presents” (Ihde 1986, p. 43). In the noema-noesis relationship, there is a shift to internal consciousness, where ideas and judgments are more fully the focus of our attention. As Moustakas (1994) indicated, the aim of phenomenological study is to obtain comprehensive descriptions that can provide the basis of reflective structural analysis, whereby the essence of the experience can be revealed. The reflective process that allows us to reveal the structure of lived experience is called phenomenological reduction.

Phenomenological reduction ideally would begin with the stance of rejecting all presuppositions, which Husserl called the “Epoche” (Ihde 1986; Moustakas 1994). In the Epoche, we set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things and suspend our scientific and natural attitude in order to isolate the central essential features of the phenomena under investigation (Moustakas 1994; Moran 2000). However, it is impossible to achieve completely abandon all presuppositions. Thus, in practice, the Epoche actually requires a consciousness of one’s own presuppositions (Kvale 1983). According to Moustakas (1994), the actual work of phenomenological reduction involves several steps, including 1) bracketing, in which the focus of the research is placed in the brackets; 2) horizontalizing, in which, initially, every statement is

treated as equally valuable, and so that only the horizons of the phenomenon – its textural meanings and invariant constituents are selected by the researcher; 4) clustering, in which the statements within the horizons are grouped into themes; and 4) organizing, in which the horizons and themes are organized into a coherent textural description of the phenomenon.

After these initial steps of phenomenological reduction are completed, what Husserl calls “imaginative variation” begins. The major task of imaginative variation is to describe the essential structures of a phenomenon. In other words, the researcher explores the possible variations in the experience of the phenomenon (Ihde 1986). Through imaginative variations, structural descriptions of an experience can be achieved. Ultimately, the phenomenological study aims at the establishment of a knowledge of essences by the intuitive integration of fundamental textual and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of experiences of the phenomenon as a whole.

To summarize, phenomenology is “an examination of experience that deals with and is limited by whatever falls within the correlation of experienced-experiencing. It proceeds in a prescribed order, starting from what appears as it appears, and questions retrogressively from the ‘what’ of appearance to the ‘how’ of experience and ultimately back to the ‘who’ of experience” (Ihde 1986, p.54). Under the framework of phenomenology, this investigation is designed to access participants’ consciousness, to describe their everyday experiences with product placement in the SNS from the first-person perspective, to learn their experiences naively and freshly, to develop an intersubjective knowing of their

experiences, and to reveal the essence of the phenomenon through phenomenological reduction.

Research Design

Target Population

The target population of the study is Chinese, urban, white-collar, professional users of Happy Network who have experiences of giving or/and receiving virtual gifts or/and playing web games. In the current study, the urban, white-collar, professionals are broadly defined as educated adults who work in professional and nonmanual occupations with a middle-level (3000 yuan or \$452 per month) or higher income. According to iResearch (2007), Chinese white-collar netizens (users of the Internet) are people between 23 and 40, who have AA/AS or higher degrees and stable occupations with an average income of 3000 (\$452) or higher Chinese yuan per month, whose offices are generally located within the central business district (CBD) in metropolitan areas (Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou) and big cities such as Tianjing, Qingdao, Chongqing, Shenzhen, and Guiyang. Geographically, Beijing (23.7%) and Shanghai (22.1%) have the highest concentration of Chinese white-collar netizens. As Sun (2009) indicated, most product placements of Happy Network are embedded in the module of gift and various web games. Hence, given the primary interest of the study, this study was concerned only with participants who had the experience of exchanging virtual gifts and/or playing one or more web games in Happy Network.

Sampling

Purposive sampling and snow-balling sampling were employed to guide the recruitment of participants. Purposive sampling is popular in qualitative research (Patton 1990). Briefly speaking, purposive sampling means sampling in a deliberate way with a particular purpose or focus in mind (Punch 2005). Usually, the investigator relies on his or her expert judgment to select individuals that are representative or typical of the population (Singleton and Straits 2005). In the current study, the criteria for selecting participants were, first, he/she has significant experiences of the phenomenon of interest; and second, he/she is accessible and willing to participate in this project. Snowball sampling is a referral technique which uses a process of chain referral (Singleton and Straits 2005). Specifically, when members of the target population are located, they are asked to provide names and contact information of other members of the target population, who are then contacted and asked to name others, and so on. Snowball sampling is appropriate when the members of the target population are hard to locate (Babbie 2001).

In particular, prior to her travel to China, the researcher contacted two white-collar professional users of Happy Network (one in Beijing and one in Shanghai) and asked them to recommend other white professional users who met the criteria to participate in this research. With their kind assistance, she identified six participants in Shanghai and five participants in Beijing in advance. During her visits in Shanghai and Beijing, based on the principle of redundancy (Taylor

1994) or theoretical saturation (Corbin and Strauss 2008), she further recruited seven participants in Shanghai and Beijing, respectively. In total, 25 white-collar professionals from Beijing and Shanghai participated in this research. Among these participants, 12 were men and 13 were women, whose ages ranged from 24 to 33 years. All participants had some college-level education and had a variety of job titles, including insurance broker, marketing manager, customer service staff, salesman, engineer, journalist, PR consultant, head-hunting consultant, and IT technician. Their annual incomes ranged from 40,000 yuan (\$6,021) to 500,000 yuan(\$75,258). All participants had the experience of exchanging virtual gifts and/or playing one or more web games in Happy Network (see Table 1).

Table 1. Profile of Participants.

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Location | Occupation | Education | Experience with Happy Network |
|-------------|-----|--------|----------|--------------------------|-----------|-------------------------------|
| Laura | 24 | Female | Shanghai | Data analyst | BS | 1 year 5 months |
| Frank | 28 | Male | Shanghai | Customer service staff | AA | 1 year 10 months |
| Sunny | 27 | Female | Shanghai | Group purchase staff | MS | 1 year |
| Tresor | 28 | Female | Shanghai | Manager of a Toy company | BA | 1 year 8 months |
| Jenny | 28 | Female | Shanghai | Marketing | BS | 1 year 10 months |
| Serendipity | 28 | Male | Shanghai | Engineer | MS | 1 year 2 months |
| Steven | 29 | Male | Shanghai | IT technician | AA | 2 year and 2 months |
| Candy | 31 | Female | Shanghai | HR staff | BA | 2 years |
| Nelson | 26 | Male | Shanghai | Head-hunting consultant | BA | 1 year 11 months |
| Tony | 33 | Male | Shanghai | Copy writer | BA | 2 years 1 month |
| Gemini | 28 | Female | Shanghai | Journalist | BA | 2 years 2 months |
| Louiett | 27 | Female | Shanghai | Teacher | MA | 1 year 5 months |
| Victor | 25 | Male | Shanghai | PR account executive | BA | 1 year 2 months |
| Nancy | 28 | Female | Shanghai | Graphic designer | BA | 1 year |
| Tom | 33 | Male | Beijing | Vice manager | BA | 2 years and 4 months |
| Wilson | 29 | Male | Beijing | Insurance broker | BS | 1 year 9 months |
| Yilian | 31 | Female | Beijing | Patent attorney | BS | 1 year and 8 months |
| Judy | 32 | Female | Beijing | PR consultant | BA | 2 years |
| Zara | 29 | Female | Beijing | Owner of an online Store | BA | 1 year 7 months |
| Slater | 29 | Male | Beijing | Communication technician | BS | 1 year 10 months |
| Samantha | 32 | Female | Beijing | Art editor | BA | 1 year 8 months |
| Maggie | 31 | Female | Beijing | Accountant | BA | 1 year 10 months |
| Sherry | 28 | Female | Beijing | Art editor | BA | 1 year 6 months |
| Phoenix | 30 | Male | Beijing | Tourism manager | AA | 1 year |
| Sofia | 26 | Female | Beijing | PR account executive | BA | 1 year 6 months |
| Gondi | 33 | Male | Beijing | Salesman | BA | 1 year 7 months |

Data Collection Method

In-depth interviews were used as the primary data collection method. The in-depth interview is the most commonly used method in phenomenological investigations (Moustakas 1994; Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989). It is a powerful qualitative method of phenomenological investigation because it “gives us the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves” (McCracken, 1988, p. 9). In other words, interviewing offers the opportunity for researchers to transcend themselves and to share the social and cultural contexts with the people being researched. The empathy of research participants thus helps researchers to enter the life-worlds of participants, to become conscious of participants’ experienced and experiencing, and to be able to fully describe their lived experiences of the phenomenon under study. Another strength of the long interview is that, generally, it only sets broad parameters for the discussion, leaving participants free to tell their own stories. From a phenomenological view, human beings gain access to realities through their consciousness. A loosely structured, discursive conversation is a good way to access participants’ conscious experiences and allow their realities to emerge.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face within the settings that were comfortable and natural for the participants. As advised by McCracken (1988) and Thompson et al. (1989), the interviews were conducted in a context in which the participants felt at ease discussing their experiences. Based on participants’

preferences, interview settings included office conference rooms, coffee shops, and restaurants. For participants' convenience, most of the interviews were conducted either during lunch breaks (12:00 pm – 2:00 pm) or in the evenings (6:00 pm – 10:00 pm). Each interview lasted about 30 to 75 minutes. To provide an accurate record of participants' comments, the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in Chinese, then translated into English.

Before interviewing with participants, a bracketing interview was conducted to make explicit the presuppositions and biases the investigator brings to the research situation. Specifically, a colleague trained in phenomenological interviewing techniques interviewed the investigator regarding her experiences of product placements in the Happy Network SSN. In the life-world of the researcher, her personal experiences indicate three assumptions regarding the usage of this SNS: first, Happy Network is a place for relaxation and entertainment; second, Happy Network is a place for reconnecting with previous or long-lost friends; and, third, Happy Network is an interesting phenomenon that is worthy of study. Regarding product placements in the context of SNS, her interpretations also reveal a couple of assumptions about this phenomenon: first, similar to product placements in other media platforms, the central effect of product placements in SNS is to enhance brand awareness; and, second, for a product placement to be effective in the context of an SNS, the embedded brand should be appropriate in terms of necessity, relevance, and prominence (for a more detailed description of this interview, see Appendix C). Through the bracketing interview, the investigator became conscious of her prejudgments,

biases, preconceived ideas, and attitudes toward product placements in the SSN. As a result, when she interviewed her participants, she was conscious of her prepositions and attempted to focus on her participants' experiences with a naive and fresh eye.

Data Analysis

Unlike quantitative research, in which data analysis usually starts after all data are collected, data analysis in qualitative research begins during the data collection process (Corbin and Strauss 2008). The researcher began analyzing her data immediately after the first interview. During the entire research process, she was continuously and repeatedly listening to audio recordings, checking transcripts, coding themes, making memos, drawing diagrams, and writing diaries.

Specifically, the data analysis followed the principle of phenomenological reduction. The first step of phenomenological reduction is horizontalization, which means putting the immediate phenomena on a level plane, without assuming an initial hierarchy of "reality" (Ihde 1986). In order to do this, the researcher took extensive notes when she was conducting the interviews, listened to each interview twice, and intensively read each transcript three times to catch every detail and variation. When she listened to the audio recordings for the first time, while trying to take as many notes as she could, she also attempted to refresh her memory of the interviews, including her conversations with the participants, every participant's facial and body expressions, the arrangements of the interview locations, the time of the day that the interviews happened, the

ambiance and dynamics of the environment, and other things that may have influenced participants' interpretations. When she listened to the audio recordings for the second time, she began the initial coding and writing memos for each interview. After listening to the audio tapes twice, she further immersed herself into the data by reading each written transcript three times in order to identify all the horizons existing in the data set. For example, she noticed that Frank, one of the participants, described Happy Restaurant – a web game in Happy Network as “*having relatively plenty of stuff, can be arranged and adjusted at any time, could express personal style, is close to daily lives, and facilitates communication.*” Each statement in horizontalizing holds equal value and contributes to an understanding of the nature and meaning of web games in Happy Network. The following is the excerpt of Frank's interview.

Frank: I felt that Happy Restaurant has relatively plenty of stuff. You can adjust and arrange these things at any time. Usually, you don't want them to be similar to others'. You have your own ideas. It is a way to show your personal style.... In addition, in the game, you could know how to cook an actual dish. It is close to daily lives. ...Another thing is that we can also communicate through Happy Restaurant. For example, you can purchase others' dishes, help them to serve dishes, and share your dishes with them. All these are ways for us to communicate.

The second step of phenomenological reduction is to delimit the invariant horizons or meaning units. In this stage, the primary job of the researcher was to identify and compare repeated or similar words, phrases, and sentences appearing in each transcript. Generally, 20 to 30 meaning units were generated in every transcript. For instance, in this stage, the meaning units that emerged as Frank to described web games in Happy Network included *personal style*,

closeness, sharing, communication, and control, while his descriptions of product placements in Happy Network were expressed in meaning units such as brand image of Happy Network, awareness of product placement, profits of the website, not impeding games, not interrupting games, frequency of appearances, not having an aversion toward product placement, proactive choice, too deliberate, and an appropriate proportion of product placement.

The next step that the researcher took was to cluster the invariant constituents into themes. During this phase, the researcher focused on the internal relationships and structures of the meaning units and grouped them into appropriate themes. In other words, the researcher, using phenomenological reflection and imaginative variation, constructed a thematic portrayal of the experience. A theme allows the investigator to demonstrate what the essence of an experience for the experiencer. The particular structure of themes present in an experience is what distinguishes that experience from other types of experience (Graves 2006). Interpretative themes reflect a fusion of horizons between the text and the researcher (Thompson et al. 1990). For example, in the life-world of Frank, the themes that emerged for the lived meanings of Happy Network were *social interaction, information, and fun.*

The three steps described above demonstrate the general procedure of coding of data used in this study. These steps were consistently applied at three levels of phenomenology reduction analysis, which were individual textural and individual structural descriptions, composite textural and composite structural descriptions, and synthesis of textual and structural meanings and essences

(Moustakas 1994). For phenomenological interpretations, one important principle is the hermeneutic interpretative circle (Thompson et al. 1990; Graves 2006), that is, a constant movement between understanding of a part of text and understanding its meaning within the emerging whole of the text (Graves 2006). Interpretations are constantly revised as more of the text is grasped by the interpreter (Thompson et al. 1990). In the current study, each interview was interpreted ideographically by exploring horizons, meaning units, and themes (individual textural and structural descriptions). Then the researcher broadened the interpretative context by reading across texts to identify common patterns among interview transcripts (composite textural and structural descriptions). Finally, the researcher achieved a comprehensive understanding of the essence of the phenomenon (synthesis of textual and structural meanings and essences) by revealing the thematic interconnections (looking at the interconnections among themes and describing salient relationships), and analyzing the ground (interpreting the various accounts to understand what the experiencers themselves defined to be the essential conditions of the experiences they were recounting).

Evaluative Criteria

Different research paradigms demand different evaluative criteria. Rather than validity and reliability for quantitative research, the criteria evaluation of qualitative research paradigms focuses on different aspects. Generally, “trustworthiness,” “authenticity,” and “credibility” are the common terms in qualitative literature for evaluating research (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Creswell

and Miller 2000; Creswell 2003). In the marketing literature, “credibility,” “transferability,” “dependability,” and “conformability” are the most important evaluative criteria for qualitative research (Hirschman 1986; Miles and Huberman 1984; Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Several measures were taken to ensure the quality of research. First, both Chinese and English versions of the data analysis reports were provided to some participants to ensure that the findings represented their perspectives and understanding. Second, during the entire study, the researcher constantly reflected on her own assumptions, beliefs, and biases, especially in comparison with participants' realities, to confirm that the interpretations reflected the participants' views, rather than her own. Third, peer debriefing and external auditors (Creswell and Miller 2000) also ensured the quality of the analysis. Finally, this researcher observed one of the most important criteria for evaluating the quality of a phenomenological study is to make sure that each theme is evidenced by the words of the participants themselves (Graves 2006). This is accomplished by presenting participants' own words and original expressions when reporting thematic findings. Such emic, inference-free descriptions render more information and provide readers a basis for “accepting, rejecting, or modifying an investigator’s conclusion” (Haley, 1996, p. 26).

Summary

Research methods are plans used in pursuit of knowledge (Polkinghorne 1989). They are outlines of investigative journeys, and supposed to lead to valid knowledge. In other words, the proper choice of research methods to a great

degree ensures the quality of research and validates the research findings. In the current chapter, detailed descriptions of the researcher's multiple assumptions and the research design have been offered. In the next chapter, research findings generated by the application of the outlined research methods are presented.

CHAPTER 6 FINDINGS

Generally, participants' interpretations of product placement in the context of SNS are interrelated with the socially constructed meanings of Happy Network, participants' social role of white-collar professionals, and consumer culture of contemporary Chinese society. In order to fully demonstrate participants' social experiences of the SNS and embedded brands, first of all, a detailed idiographic account of Candy was offered to show the individual textual and structural descriptions; then a gestalt portrayal of major themes across participants was provided to demonstrate the composite textual and structural descriptions; and finally, a synthesis of textual and structural meanings was discussed to reveal the essence of the phenomenon.

The Case of Candy

A single case-study description of Candy was offered to demonstrate the process of phenomenological reduction analysis and to provide a conceptual background for more encompassing thematic descriptions discussed later. At the time of the interview, Candy was 31 years old with a bachelor degree from law school. She was working as a HR professional in a large clothing company with an income of 10,000 yuan (\$1050) per month in Shanghai. She also had three-year work experiences in an international trading company and four-year work experiences in a head-hunting company. She was married with no child. She had

previous experiences of playing online games. The interview was conducted in a Pizza Hut restaurant in downtown Shanghai and lasted 43 minutes.

Interpretation of Happy Network.

After asking two screening questions and gathering information about the participant's background, the researcher posed the following question to elicit the participant's experiences of SNSs:

I: Could you please describe the website on which you spend the most time interacting with others?

C: Currently, Happy Network is a major platform for me because I consider that Happy Network has several strengths: first of all, it enables us to reconnect with our long-lost friends. You know, nowadays people's pace of work is fast and they would like to stay at home (in their leisure time). So many old friends and previous classmates are no longer in touch. However, Happy Network provides a platform for you to gradually rebuild your circles of social, life, or academic relationships. Therefore, on the one hand, we stay at home for a relatively long time; on the other hand, we can still keep in touch with many friends. In addition, it (Happy Network) is also an information platform. You can learn something that you couldn't know through other news media. Probably there is something that is false. Err...I mean that there were a lot of false news (on it). But it actually posted some things that other media would not be willing to report. Finally, it also has a lot of entertaining stuff.

Functions of Happy Network. As shown from the above quotes, in Candy's life-world settings, Happy Network performs multiple functions, such as maintaining social relations, providing information, and offering entertainment. From Candy's perspective, Happy Network enables her to regain and control social relationships in her current social contexts, which is characterized by a fast pace of work and relatively long stays at home. Happy Network also satisfies her information needs by supplying non-traditional types of news to meet her diverse information needs. As a professional with a higher education and rich work

experiences, Candy demonstrates a high level of information literacy by detecting false news among the plethora of information on the site.

Later in the interview, Candy indicated that social interaction is the foundation of all these functions, which differentiates this site from other social community websites.

C: Social community platforms are not lacking (in China), such as Tianya, Mop, and KDS. These are the leaders of social community websites. They also provide a lot of news information on the websites. But the only big difference between Happy Network and them is that Happy Network enables you to build social relations around you and facilitate social interactions between you and your friends. Other websites don't have this (function). If from the perspective of entertainment, I bet Tianya also has a lot of entertaining and funny stuff.

Based on her basic understanding of functions of Happy Network, she further illustrated the information functions of Happy Network. As she indicated, the social interaction characteristic of Happy Network to a large degree determines the mode and speed of information communication on this site.

C: Reposts in Happy Network including other stuff are the news that your friends have already read. (They disseminated this stuff), then you are able to read it. It is not that you actively search news but receive information from others. ... For example, I read some news and I would like to share with others, with all my friends. ... If you click on them, then you disseminate that information to all your friends. ... Everyone has his/her social circles. Especially those who like to play Happy Network generally have a relatively large social circle, which is usually larger than 100 persons. ... If you communicate some information, you can achieve communication effect in a very short period of time. For example, a piece of breaking news, perhaps entertaining news or politically sensitive news, within an half of hour, the number of click could surpass 20,000 even 100,000. ... So the communication speed is very fast.

According to Candy, thanks to its characteristics as a medium for communicating information, Happy Network also performs the function of ethical control, serving as a kind of watchdog.

C: Some news is disseminated very fast. For example, someone was killed by a drunk driver in a car accident. Such a kind of news will be continually circulated for several days. Actually, nowadays the Internet including SNSs perform such a role of social moral obligation control. If something is found to conflict with public ethical standards, it will be soon exposed in the public. Sometimes the government may not pay attention to such things or they just deal with them perfunctorily. Due to the public pressure, they have to treat them more seriously.

During the entire interview and data analysis, I kept thinking that probably because of her previous experiences studying law, she was paying a great attention to the information function of Happy Network, and demonstrating a large interest in the social and justice issues reflected on the site. As she indicates,

“We can feel a kind of public emotion on the website: a negative feeling toward government and public organizations. ...You will read about many injustices there, which reflects the public’s feelings and opinions. People need a channel to express their sentiments.”

Later, when she discussed web games in Happy Network, she also portrayed it from the perspective of fair or unfair competition. Even when talking about game fun, she mentioned that one source of fun is the lack of moral judgment in the virtual community. This interpretation of Happy Network is very unique from the perspective of this particular participant. Across the entire group of participants, only one participant, a journalist major, expressed similar ideas.

Commercialization of Happy Network. In addition to the three functions of Happy Network mentioned above, Candy also indicated that Happy Network “has

a relatively strong commercial atmosphere.” As a shrewd consumer, she noticed different types of advertising appearing in the website. She also displayed her understanding of the business operation of the site and acknowledged the placement of various marketing communications there.

C: I felt that those (three) are the functions of Happy Network. But now it has a relatively strong commercial atmosphere (laugh).

I: What do you mean that “it has a relatively strong commercial atmosphere”? Could you please explain in more details?

C: For example, it added something into the games. I don’t know if you have played its games before. There is always some advertising in those games. In addition, it also included celebrity blogs, celebrity groups or organizations, such as “Motorola Smash Gold Eggs.” Of course, for an organization to survive, it needs some sources of income. Therefore, it is understandable that it has such stuff. It is better than other online games, which charge fees from users. It is understandable that it adopts a certain kind of profit model.

Users of Happy Network. Candy defined users of Happy Network as people under 40 years old. Those aged between 15 and 35 are major players of web games because “older people may not focus on the games in the site because of their family responsibilities including taking care of children, family, and other chores.” In other words, from Candy’s perspective, the general users of Happy Network are relatively young. Later in the interview, she further illustrated the characteristics of this group of people.

C: The majority of the users of Happy Network should be under 40. I feel that people whose ages are between 15 and 35 are major players of web games. ... First of all, we have disposable income. ... Second, we would like to spend money on something that we are interested in or the whole group is interested in. For example, there is something popular among us. If I have the (consumption) ability and it will not influence my normal life, then I would like to try.

From the above quotes, it seems that Candy has a relatively strong sense of group identity. She is able to describe the characteristics of her social group; she pays attention to popular trends among her social group; and she consumes not only depending on her own interests, but also under the influence of the group that she perceives herself as belonging to.

Finally, Candy concluded her description of Happy Network. Echoing her previous accounts, she iterated the three functions of Happy Network with a special emphasis on the information function. She mentioned that in addition to offering news, the site also provides information about popular culture allowing her to closely follow trends. In summary, in Candy's life world, Happy Network is an online social community with "relatively complete functions" to satisfy her diverse needs:

I: What else? You mentioned entertainment, leisure, even public supervision. What else would you use to describe Happy Network?

C: I felt that Happy Network is a (platform), in which you can relatively quickly learn the news that are not covered in other media and what's happening now; you can also know hot issues in the society including some popular words in the Internet or what are the most popular things. In other words, you can quickly know popular trends and words in the contemporary society. In addition, I consider that it is a socialization and communication platform. ... Everyone has leisure time. It (Happy Network) provides a platform for you to follow closely, to express your feelings, and to kill time. As an online social community, it has relatively complete functions.

Interpretation of Product Placement

In the website of Happy Network, most product placements are embedded in web games and the gift module. Therefore, our conversation about product placement began with her experiences playing web games in Happy Network.

Meanings of web games. In Candy's life world, the lived meanings of web games in Happy Network are "simple," (easy to be tired of) but somehow "interesting" (still offering some fun), shaped by her previous game experiences, her background as a law student, and her need for competition.

I: You mentioned that there are many small games in Happy Network. Could you please tell me what games you have played before?

C: There is a cooking one, an X world, a Happy Garden, and Stealing Vegetables. However, basically I play these games no more than a month because its game mode is relatively simple. Later, I repeat the same job again and again. Therefore, I don't feel fresh anymore and don't want to play any longer (laugh).

As shown from the above quotes, in Candy's experiential world, the web games in Happy Network are simple and even become boring when she plays the games for a certain period of time. Therefore, she has a relatively short playing circle (one month) regarding each game in the site. Her interpretations of web games in Happy Network are shaped by her previous experiences of online games. Consciously or unconsciously, she uses her previous experience of online games as a referential framework to evaluate the web games in Happy Network.

I: You mentioned several times about online games. Do you play online games?

C: Yes, I've played before.

I: Then what do you think the differences between online games and the web games in Happy Network are?

C: Oh, huge differences (laugh). Web games (in Happy Network) are too simple, that is, what you need to do is to repeat clicks. Online games, however, have tasks with stories and continuity. You need to beat a boss and finish a task, which becomes the necessary condition for you to promote to a

higher level. In addition, when you finish a task, you can get some appliances, which will facilitate your future tasks.... Another (difference) is that online games have the requirement of ranking. If you want to achieve certain rank, you may have to play for several days, weeks or even months. Based on your different ranks, you will have different tasks. In addition, the tasks of online games have a longer circle. You may need to spend several days to finish one task. ... (For web games in Happy Network), basically, you can finish a task in 5 minutes except that you wait for crops to be ripe. However, it is only a process of waiting. During the time you don't have to take care of them.

It seems that, given the nature and characteristics of online games, Candy has a higher level of involvement in other online games than in the web games on Happy Network. From her descriptions, other online games seem more challenging, and need more input of time, efforts, experience, and skill. Compared to other online games, the web games in Happy Network are less challenging and engaging, thus she tires of them quickly. In other words, as an experienced game player, she feels restricted by the web games of Happy Network in the sense that she can't "achieve certain rank," to demonstrate her knowledge and skills.

Although generally Candy considers the web games in Happy Network to be simple, she can still gain entertainment through these games. According to her, the fun of the web games comes from her interactions with friends, the freedom from real world moral constraints, and the chance to compete with others. In particular, she mentioned the game of Stealing Vegetables, which is embedded in Happy Garden.

I: Could you please tell me which games you like best in Happy Network?

C: Games? Probably Stealing Vegetables. It is interesting.

I: What do you mean "interesting"?

C: It offers you a ... happy mood through stealing other people's stuff (laugh). But there are also lots of interactions in this game. You know, that you plant vegetables is not for yourself but for other people to steal. So I never reap my own vegetables but let my friends to steal them. ... In the real world, you couldn't steal other people's property. But you can do this through virtual platform. ... In the virtual world, you may not be judged by moral standards. In addition, you also compete with your friends (in the game). For those valuable vegetables, you need to count how much time left (for them to be ripe). Sometimes you even don't sleep during the night and wait for the vegetables to be ripe and steal them.

Candy also remarked on innovations and improvements of the web games in Happy Network, and expressed her appreciation of game designers. As mentioned previously, her interpretations seem to be influenced by her previous experiences with online games.

C: The other thing is that its development team has put a lot of efforts in designing games. They know that people are tired of games soon especially those simple games. Once a new game comes, people will be tired of it very soon. Therefore, they are continually developing new things and new functions. For example, recently they developed a function of group buy. I feel that it is pretty good and I would like to join such a kind of activities. ... For some old games, they also put some new elements into the games.

I: Could you please give me an example because you mentioned that they put some new elements into old games?

C: For example, the cooking game (Happy Restaurant). ... If you organize a wedding party, they will provide you some special adornments to decorate your restaurant, and such kind of things. How to say, it is like that they introduce the task function of online games into their web games.

Meanings of product placements embedded in the web games. Candy's interpretations of product placements in the context of Happy Network's web games seem to be closely related to her experiences with web games in general, her brand experiences, her law student background, and her consumption

experiences. First of all, she indicated her awareness of the product placements in the web games. Specifically, she mentioned “Lohas” juice.

I: When you play games, such as Happy Garden or Stealing Vegetables, have you noticed any brand or product or ...?

C: Yes, I have (noticed), like “Lohas” juice. If logos (of brands) appeared on plants, it is easy for us to notice them. In particular, the campaign of “Lohas” juice persisted a relatively long period. During the campaign, all the plants, that is, all your cultivated plants, were imprinted with their logos.

According to Candy’s accounts, her first reaction toward the embedded brands was “Oh, advertising finally comes,” indicating her familiarity with advertising and her realization of the unavoidability of advertising in the increasingly commercialized Chinese society. As a citizen of this commercialized society, she also showed her understanding of the existence of advertising in the website.

I: What do you think when you first saw this (Lohas juice)?

C: When I first saw it, I was thinking that “Oh, advertising finally comes.” ... We all like the web games. So we hope this platform can exist longer. Of course we know that they will not do business without profit, not to mention losing money. Servers and labors are all needed money to maintain. Therefore, we are very supportive if it makes profit through some appropriate ways.

Generally, Candy displayed a relatively positive attitude toward the product placements in the web games on Happy Network, given the conditions that, in her view, embedded products should not influence game playing, especially the fairness of the games, and should not charge users directly or indirectly. From Candy’s perspective, “fairness” is a key word to evaluate the appropriateness of product placements. According to Candy, embedded brands should not become

something that “creates gaps” among users and “destroys the fairness” of web games. These stipulations make Candy unique among the participants in this study, signifying and reinforcing her background as a law student. She also indicated that placements should be interesting and facilitate interactions:

C: ... I don't have a negative attitude toward them (product placements) because they didn't bring some negative things to the games. On the contrary, it is pretty interesting in that you can make juice and send it to your friends. I'd say that I don't have an opposition toward it. It is pretty interesting. It facilitates interactions. ... But for some games, they require virtual game money. If they change the fairness of the games, I may lose interest in those games. For example, they have a game cooperating with the Magnum company. If you eat Magnum ice-cream, you will find a serial of number on its sticks. When you enter the number in the game, you will get some benefits from the game. I consider that it actually creates unfair competitions. If you want to charge us, then just change the game to an online game. It is not appropriate to charge some people but not others on which creating gaps between those two groups. ... I want to emphasize that I don't like the Magnum game. It destroys the fairness of the game. It actually encourages you to buy Magnum ice cream frequently.

Regarding specific in-game brands, Candy expressed different degrees of sensitivity toward familiar and unfamiliar brands. She is more sensitive toward familiar brands than unfamiliar ones because those brands are connected to her brand-inundated daily life and reinforce other promotional techniques that the marketers are using in the real world.

I: When you saw Motorola (in game), did you realize it is advertising?

C: Absolutely. It is our familiar brand. When it comes out, you are sure ...em ... because it is not like an unfamiliar brand, unless it becomes a product with logo, you may not know it is advertising. For those that we are familiar in our daily life, once they appear in our eyes, it means that they need to promote some new stuff. I remember that in the game of Parking War, some new models of car, such as Kaiyue (Buick). When some new models came to the market, those new models soon became the promotional items of that month in the game.

When Candy discussed her consumption, she pointed out that product placements in web games may influence her consumption of fast moving consumer foods in the real world. However, for those high-end consumer goods, her purchases are not motivated by product placements in the context of web games.

I: Do you think that the embedded brands in Happy Network have any impact on your consumption in the real world?

C: I don't think so. Except with those fast moving consumer foods, such as juice, it will not influence my consumption. Even when I see advertisements (of juice in other places), I will probably try these products. For some high-end consumer goods, especially cars, it (product placement) only makes me aware of the new model of car. If I want to purchase a car, I must consider my budget, my requirements, and my needs including the model and style of the car. But I won't ... buy the car because you advertise to me every day. It is impossible, that is, for those high-end consumer goods, this (product placement) will not influence my consumption.

Meanings of the gift-model and embedded product placements. Compared to her interpretation of web games, Candy's description of the gift module in Happy Network was relatively concise. As in real world situations, sending or/and receiving gift generally happens on special occasions such as birthdays and holidays. The central meaning of receiving gifts is that "It's the thought that counts." In other words, Candy cares about who sends the gift, that is, she appreciates other people's caring, rather than what the gift is. Because the gifts are "too virtual" and "too many", she doesn't receive any impressive gifts; neither does she notice any product placements in the module of gift. Her interpretation again is shaped by her previous experiences with online games.

I: Could you please tell me generally on what occasions do you receive gifts?

C: Usually most gifts come to me on my birthday and holidays. On other days, I occasionally receive gifts from others and don't know why they send me the gifts.

I: Tell me about your most impressive gift?

C: I don't have any impressive gift because all these (gifts) are not real. So I don't have any very impressive gift (laugh).

I: Then when do you send gifts to your friends?

C: Probably on others' birthdays because it (Happy Network) has a function. It will remind you of your friends' birthdays three days in advance. If I see it, I would like to send a wish to my friends.

I: Have you noticed any product or brand in the gifts?

C: Probably there are some, but I didn't pay attention. There should be some out there. But if you want me to name one, I don't remember any of them. I know there are some. ... For gifts, there are too many, a variety of gifts. When you receive gifts, it's the thought that counts.

I: In other words, you care more about who sends you the gift.

C: Yes. You are happy when you receive gifts. However, the gifts are too... I'd say, are too virtual. For example, in online games, when you exchange gifts or appliances with each other, those gifts or appliances could to a certain degree help you with your games. However, for this gift (in Happy Network), you can only put it there. It is useless.

Other types of product placement. In addition to product placements in web games and the gift-model, Candy also notices other types of product placements in Happy Network, such as placements of celebrities and organizations. Specifically, she describes an organization called "group buy". According to Candy, she pays attention to the organization because of its "great benefits" and friends' participation. This kind of product placement could motivate her consumption if the product meets her needs.

C: Other advertising types ... as I mentioned previously, currently there are lots of celebrities and organizations appearing (in the Happy Network). Actually, if one of your friends joins an organization, you will see the news in the first page of the website. If you see it, probably you would be willing to join it as well. For example, I saw that one of my friends joined an organization of group buy. Every day, there is a new project (product and service) for group buy. The price of the project is much lower than the market price. For me, it brings great benefits and my friend has joined the organization. So I would be very willing to join such an organization. Although I may not buy every day, I pay attention to it every day. If some day I find something that I need, I probably will purchase.

Final thoughts of product placement. At the end of our conversation, Candy gave some final thoughts regarding product placements in the context of social media. Regarding awareness of product placements in such a context, Candy considers that she and her social group “certainly know it is advertising.” The major concern she raises is the fit between product placements and her social group in terms of age cohort, relevance, and consumption pattern. As she indicated, the website should actively discover and motivate consumption among this group of people. When a fit is found between a product placement and the social group she belongs to, it is possible that her consumption will be motivated.

C: For brands (in Happy Network), I felt that they should know our age group and don't offer something that does not match with us. ... It is that they should pay attention to the major consumers among our group. When they know our position (in the market), they could promote some products that we find acceptable. ... For this kind of advertising (product placement), first we certainly know it is advertising, and then we can judge pretty quickly whether or not it is possible for us to buy these things.

I: So you feel that ...

C: Yes, when these things come out, I know they are advertising, but they are not relevant to me. ... For example, if it places a juice, I would like to try it. But if it places a car, how can I try it?

I: (laugh) In addition to what you said before, that is, the products fit your age group and satisfy your relevant needs. What else do you want to say?

C: I felt that they should discover everybody's possible consumptions. Take me for instance; I just mentioned the organization of group buy. I consider it is appropriate. For example, we are eating here today. The average cost is about 50 yuan per person. If today they offer a group buy project, for example, before a certain date, you come here to consume and probably only need to pay half of the price. Of course, it is possible that it is only effective for a specific combo. But this is what we are willing to try. Suppose you have time, this place is not far from your home or company, and you have the need for eating or if you don't have one, you probably will be motivated, (you will choose to consume here) because it will not influence your income and your disposable money.

Descriptive Summary

A fairly detailed idiographic account of the interview with Candy has been offered. As the above descriptions demonstrate, Candy interpreted Happy Network mainly from its various functions including maintenance of social relationships, information, and entertainment. Specifically, she emphasized the information function of the SNS. In her life world, Happy Network offered her different types of information, such as nontraditional news, hot issues, and fashion trends. To some extent, Happy Network has become an important information source embedded in her everyday life. As a sophisticated consumer, Candy also noticed the commercialization of Happy Network. However, she didn't show a negative attitude toward it but displayed a sophisticated understanding of the business operations of SNSs. In summary, according to Candy, Happy Network is a comprehensive online social community that satisfies multiple needs in her daily life.

Candy's interpretation of product placements was grounded in her understanding of different modules in Happy Network as well as the general meanings of the SNS. Her interpretation was also shaped by her previous experiences of online games, her educational background as a law student, and her consumptive experiences in the real world. In keeping with her interpretation of Happy Network as a commercial enterprise, Candy acknowledged the existence of product placements in the context of the SNS. Product placements in this particular media platform were seen by her as a means to connect to the commercialized real world. Generally, Candy displayed a high awareness of and relatively positive attitude toward product placements in this environment. Although Candy's interpretations of product placements in different modules varied, she believed that, in the context of SNSs, product placements ought to be appropriate, useful, and facilitating social interactions.

At an idiographic level, the very phenomenological issue is how these experiences and interpretations are meaningfully organized within Candy's life world. At the nomothetic level, the question is whether similar patterns emerged for other participants. By searching for themes across all the interviews, a better sense of shared experiential meanings can be gained, which in turn can afford a more informed and nuanced understanding of each individual case (Thompson et al. 1990). Thompson et al. (1990) used the metaphor of melody to describe phenomenological themes: appreciation of a melody does not depend on any set of notes but on the organization of notes relative to each other. Therefore, it is the organization of participants' individual experiences within their life worlds that

is central to understand lived meanings. From this perspective, although specific aspects of each individual's experiences are different, similarities can be seen from particular circumstances that are meaningfully experienced by more than one individual in similar contexts.

A Gestalt Portrayal

As Thompson et al. (1989) indicated, existential-phenomenology seeks to describe experience as it emerges in some particular contexts. Therefore, the experiential gestalt is contextualized by the participants' life-world settings. Propelled by industrialization, informationization, and globalization, Chinese society has changed dramatically in the past 30 years. These changes can be summarized as a transformation from a social structure of unity to one of multiplicity, and from a centralized society to an open society with coexisting diversity (Li 2008b). One distinctive indicator of the societal changes in people's everyday life is the change in value systems, from a simplified, monotonous, unitary orientation to one that is more complicated, varied, and diverse. In addition, with the rise of consumerism, China has also been transformed from a production-oriented communist country into a consumption-oriented society (Zhao and Belk 2008). Consequently, a consumer culture that simultaneously incorporates contradictory experiences of emancipation and disempowerment has emerged in urban China (Davis 2005; Wang 2001).

As a newly emergent, middle-class social group, Chinese urban, white-collar professionals are adapting to the changes and transformations of their social structure (Tang 2004). Their distinctive characteristics indicate that these

professionals pursue high quality, high taste, and diversity in their life; they have high working mobility; they express a strong sense of reality and pragmatism; they pay more attention to their personal feelings and self-actualization; they generally feel nervous and anxious; and they are sympathetic and responsible (Pan 1999). In addition, they have earned relatively high education levels, incomes, and social status (Tang 2004). They are open-minded and tend to advocate and accept innovations in terms of knowledge and technology. Their value orientation is complex and ambivalent, full of conflicts and compromises between old and new values and Western and Eastern cultures. In addition to living through the transformation of social structure, Chinese white-collar professionals experience working conditions that define their distinctive characteristics and differentiate them from their counterparts in Western countries. Chinese white-collar professionals work longer hours, take fewer holidays and vacations, and suffer higher degrees of anxiety and pressure compared with white-collar professionals in Western countries (Xiao 2006; Xie 2008a). Research has indicated that 70% of Chinese, urban, white-collar professionals work 10 hours or more a day on average (Shi 2009). Consequently, they are eager to pursue entertainment in their daily lives (Shi 2009), and intentionally integrate their work and leisure activities (Zhang 2009).

As a group, Chinese urban, white-collar professionals are the vanguard and backbone of Chinese consumer culture (Davis 2005). They have huge consumption power with significant disposable income (21CBH 2007). Generally, they consider themselves to be rational consumers: they pay attention to quality

of products, are brand conscious, and know the right time to purchase products or services of their favorite brands. They also have a relatively mature concept of consumption and know how to enjoy their lives. Specifically, based on their distinctive consumptive ideas, Chinese urban, white-collar professional consumers can be categorized into five types: new fashion and try-on oriented consumers, rational consumers, impulsive consumers, luxury consumers, and consumers of overdraft (iResearch 2007).

As vividly demonstrated from the following descriptions, the participants' interpretations of SNSs and product placement in the context of SNS are interdependent with their social roles as white-collar professionals in the cultural context of contemporary China.

The Meanings of Happy Network: A Frame of Reference and Key Dialectics

Consistent with Chen and Haley's (2010) research findings, in the participants' life worlds, the shared meanings of Happy Network were interdependent with their interpretations of time, fun, need to belong, and social interaction. Additionally, as shown in Candy's case and demonstrated across the whole group, the information function also emerged as a critical dimension of participants' constructed meanings for the SNS. Specifically, the five interpretative themes that Chen and Haley (2010) uncovered in their research also emerged from the current set of interviews: in control/controlled by, dependent/independent, public/private, intimate/distant, and personal/social. This

finding suggesting that the concepts are related consistently to this social group's interpretations of Happy Network (see figure 1).

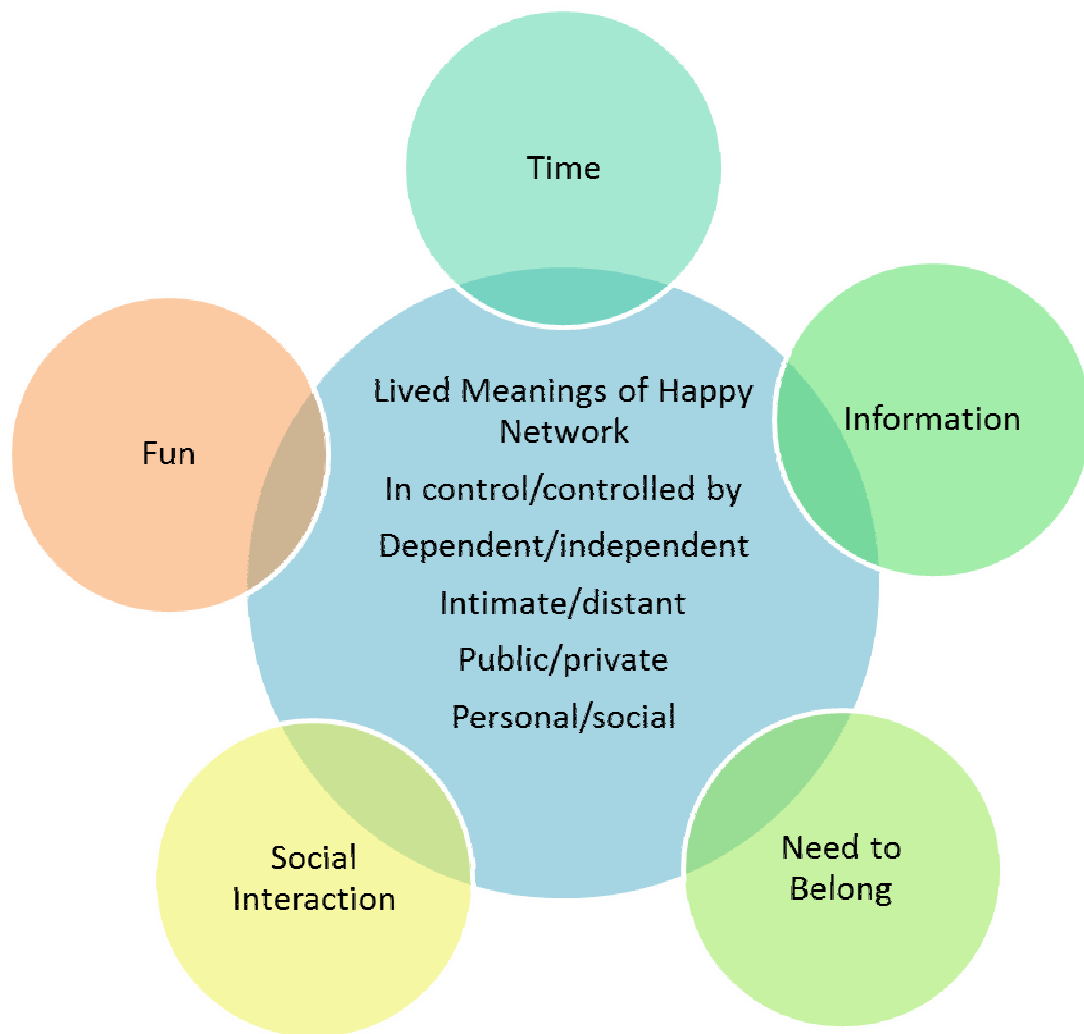


Figure 1. The General Meanings of Happy Network.

Frame of Reference: Five Dimensions

The Time Dimension

Participants in the current study consistently showed their consciousness of time. The time dimension is closely related to participants' social role as white-collar professionals. On the one hand, as busy white-collar workers living in the "fast-paced working environment", these participants reported that Happy Network saves them time by helping them find information quickly, manage their social relationships efficiently, and entertain themselves and their friends flexibly. On the other hand, however, to some participants, playing social games wastes too much time. As a result, they "stop playing games in Happy Network".

Happy Garden is relatively entertaining. It does not occupy too much of my time. As white-collar professionals, we are working at office. We couldn't play games all the time. ... If I am not busy, I will log onto Happy Network at 10:00 a.m. Even when I don't play games, I still open the website because there are a lot of reposts. ... If I am too busy, I will close the website. If I am not too busy, I am always hanging on the website (Jenny, female, 28, marketing, Shanghai).

Urban city life is busy. Everyone has his/her own living space. We don't have time to see each face to face in the real world. So we communicate with each other in Happy Network (Wilson, male, 29, insurance broker, Beijing).

I have played Parking War, Living Together, and Happy Garden. However, I was tired of them later and felt that it wasted too much of my time. Therefore, I stopped playing games in Happy Network (Zara, female, owner of an online store, Beijing).

This theme partially signals Chinese white-collar professionals' "time syndrome" (Xiao 2006). As noted above, Chinese white-collar professionals work longer hours, take fewer holidays and vacations, and suffer higher degrees of anxiety and pressure compared with white-collar professionals in Western

countries (Xiao 2006; Xie 2008a). Consequently, these SNS users are highly sensitive to time and are eager to manage their limited time. In their fast-paced transitional society, alienated from both agricultural and industrial civilizations (Shi 2009), they define time as a limited resource, which can either be squandered or saved by participating in Happy Network.

The Fun Dimension

Fun is another important element of the constructed meanings of Happy Network. Participants used different words to express this feeling, such as interesting, playful, happy, and entertaining. Seeking fun for themselves and entertaining their friends were two important motivations:

I have fun in Happy Network. ... I also make fun of others, such as I would like to issue tickets on my friends' cars. That's it (Laura, female, 24, data analyst, Shanghai).

Then, I felt that playing games with my friends makes me very happy. It is actually like its name – Happy Network (laugh) (Nancy, female, 28, graphic designer, Shanghai).

Happy Network is pretty good. It makes my life more colorful (Zara, female, owner of an online store, Beijing).

If I found something interesting in Happy Network, I would share with my friends through reposts (Sofia, 26, female, PR account executive, Beijing).

As Holt (2005) has indicated, play an important aspect of consuming. Similar to baseball spectators, the participants in this study engage in two types of play in the context of the SNS: communing, in which they share mutually felt experiences with others, and socializing, in which they use experiential practices to entertain each other. Participants' pursuit of fun in Happy Network also reflects the characteristics of communication in contemporary China. According to Zhang

(2009), industrialization and informationization have pushed China into an era of leisure communication, in which media help audiences improve the quality of their leisure activities. One indicator of this era is a blurred boundary between work and leisure, as represented by white-collar professionals who intentionally integrate their work and leisure activities in the SNS.

The Need to Belong Dimension

People need relationships characterized by both regular contact and ongoing bonding in their social lives (Baumeister and Leary 1995). The need to belong motivated participants to initiate, participate, develop, and sustain their activities in Happy Network. The SNS offered them a platform to connect with others regularly and build a sense of belongingness:

All my friends registered for Happy Network. So I also registered. Now everyday when I go back to my home, after I open QQ and MSN, I will open Happy Network to read reposts and check my friends' statuses (Sunny, 27, female, group purchase staff, Shanghai).

I felt that at that time Happy Network was popular among my friends. If I didn't use Happy Network, I would be out. For example, (before I registered Happy Network), many of my friends asked me "Hi, you haven't joined Happy Network? You are too outdated" (Laura, female, 24, data analyst, Shanghai).

Do you know? When we played crazily about Happy Network, we talked about the games even in the elevator. We would ask each other "Hi, what cars have you bought?" I also heard that other people were discussing parking issues and stealing vegetables. ... I felt that everyone around me was playing Happy Network. When I logged onto Happy Network, I found that everyone was online (Nancy, female, 28, graphic designer, Shanghai).

Chinese urban, white-collar professionals are a special social group in contemporary Chinese society. They are a newly emerging social class with relatively high education and income, and they greatly contribute to societal

development through their knowledge, skills, and taxes (Yu 2005). However, because they frequently change jobs and move to different places, it is hard for them to build belongingness through local communities. Thus, white-collar professionals often use the Internet to unite and build their collective social identity (Zhang and Lei 2009). The SNS offers an ideal place for white-collar professionals to address their need to belong and establish their social identity through multiple services (Gangadharbatla 2008). As the quotes indicate, Happy Network serves as a conversational resource and communicative platform that allows members to enact their sense of belonging to a group.

The Social Interaction Dimension

Participants discussed their Happy Network experiences in the context of social interactions. For participants, social interactions occurred at multiple levels, involving both online and offline communication and activities.

Another thing is social interaction. For example, em, some of my classmates or friends posted photos. I would like to make comments on those photos. Some of my classmates and friends like taking photos and they post their photos periodically. Sometimes I made comments on their photos. Sometimes I asked them their recent statuses, such as whether or not they buy new lens and things like that. Then we could start our conversation from a photo. It is like this (Serendipity, male, 28, engineer, Shanghai).

It (Happy Network) influences my offline life. For example, many of my online friends are living in my neighborhood. Someone cooked a good dish and posted the photo in Happy Network. We all praised him or her about the dish, which make our relationships become more harmonious. Or they may post their kids' photos and we commend on those photos. It is like that we care for each other through the Internet. How to say, sometimes it is hard to express those through face-to-face communication, telephone, or messaging because these things are related to your social community. For example, you couldn't send messages to everyone and tell them that you

cook a good dish. So it is useful to communicate such stuff through Happy Network (Yilian, female, 31, patent attorney, Beijing).

Just as Facebook is an important channel for college students in the United States to create and maintain social capital through bridging, bonding, and maintaining social relationships with multiple social interactions (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007), Happy Network performs a similar function for white-collar professional participants, to form and maintain their social capital through online social interactions that connect both online and offline social relationships.

The Information Dimension

According to the participants, Happy Network has become an important channel by which they assess a variety of information, such as recent news about friends and society, hot issues, public opinions, popular trends, tips of daily lives, and so forth. In this sense, Happy Network is a multifunctional information provider, which satisfies diverse information needs.

Yes, their statuses including whether or not they upload new photos or repost some funny posts. It is probably a channel for gathering information ... and to know their living environments. ... (I would like to read) on the one hand, funny reposts. On the other hand, because reposts are related to personal interests, there is lots of useful information, such as how to operate Excel or PPT or some useful data. I will save these data to use as resources. Most information is entertaining or the most popular stuff in the current society, for example, the world cup. There are many “world cup” related topics. In fact, in the contemporary environment of the Internet, everyone is the producer of content. You can assess a variety of weird thoughts or creative ideas. ... Yes, all (materials) are the original stuff created by the Internet users, through which you can know diverse social phenomena. In addition to propaganda of government, those national affairs and news, you can find real voices from grassroots (in Happy Network). Because they originated from grassroots, these contents are mostly jokes or funny stuffs. But behind the jokes and funny stuffs, you will

see social realities or popular trends, which are reflective of the Internet users' mentality and attitude. ... I feel that currently the Internet users who post messages are those who have some education but are relatively vulnerable in the society. They are not the people who control the mainstream discourse. Therefore, they want to express their emotions and dissatisfactions through Internet (Tom, male, 33, vice manager, Beijing).

Frame of Reference Themes to the Key Dialectics

These five dimensions described above intertwine and form the reference framework for participants to interpret their SNS experiences. Although the five dimensions demonstrate participants' basic understandings of SNS, these themes don't reflect all the tensions and contradictions existing in the data.

Throughout the interviews, participants displayed complicated and paradoxical feelings toward the Happy Network. In order to fully capture the lived meanings of the SNS, the researcher further uncovered five interpretative themes.

Specifically, the lived meanings of Happy Network are reflected in the five key dialectics: being in control/controlled by, dependent/independent, public/private, intimate/distant, and personal/social.

Being in Control/Controlled by

The participants' feelings of being in control of or controlled by the SNS were demonstrated in various dimensions of their experiences on Happy Network.

Specifically, they expressed the feeling of being in control in terms of their perception of self-control and control of social relationships. As white-collar professionals, self-discipline is important for them to survive in their fast-paced and highly competitive working environment. In an unstable and dynamic transforming society, individual Chinese people also consciously or

unconsciously seek self-control to secure their personal safety and development (Li 2008b). The participants derive a sense of self-control from controlling their time, information, and entertainment:

The most important thing is speed. You can quickly check changes of your friends' statuses, such as what he or she has done recently, what they have played, any progress on their work and studies? You can also read some funny reposts at the earliest time. Its communication speed is faster than traditional news websites and BBS websites. In addition, it saves your time for selecting news and information because news that many people repost and comment must be the hottest issues happened recently (Steven, male, 30, IT technician, Shanghai).

Each time I stay in Happy Network for about half an hour. I log onto it several times during my working hours. I mainly play games with my friends for entertainment and relaxation because the games can be stopped at any time (Sherry, female, 28, art editor, Beijing).

In addition, the participants said that they are able to control their social relations through Happy Network, with more ease than relationship management in the real world. Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes human ethics and relationships (Wang 1996). In traditional Chinese society, all relationships are built on family and generate from family members, which traditionally has made them relatively easy to maintain and manage. However, in modern China, industrialization, modernization, and informationization have induced a series of societal changes that have fundamentally changed Chinese people's relationships. The scope of relationships is much broader, the relationships are more heterogeneous, and there is a greater sense of alienation (Zhang and Pan 2009). Various real-world obstacles make managing and maintaining relationships harder for modern Chinese people. In particular, urban white-collar professionals' high mobility and fast-paced work rhythm make relationships

especially hard (Liao 2009). However, in the virtual world, Happy Network empowers white-collar professional participants to overcome these restrictions and manage their relationships through multiple communicative and social functions:

I felt that some functions of Happy Network helped me to reconnect with my previous classmates including those who are studying abroad. Em, for example, I reconnected with a high school classmate through Happy Network and met her in a small party several days ago. We haven't seen each other for 14 years. I felt very happy (Tresor, female, 28, manager of a toy company, Shanghai).

I felt that it (Happy Network) facilitates social interaction among people. For example, it is hard for friends or family members, especially in big cities in contemporary China to have a dinner together because everyone is busy. However, in Happy Network, we can maintain our relationships through virtual caring for each other (Victor, male, 25, PR account executive, Shanghai).

I consider Happy Network as a two-dimensional cell phone. ... Sometimes its communication is better than cell phone or instant message tools such as QQ and MSN. For example, if I want to talk to someone online but don't know what to say, I can send a gift to him or her as a signal. It is better than messaging "Hello" to him or her. If she or he sees the gift and thinks of something to say, she or he will send messages back to me and then we can start our conversation. If she or he doesn't know what to say or is too busy to communicate, he or she can just receive the gift or send a gift back to me. It can reduce some embarrassment between me and my friends (Wilson, male, 29, insurance broker, Beijing).

The feeling of being controlled mainly emerges from online game experiences.

Unlike online games, Happy Network's games require that participants devote some time every day to each game. Although the games are simple, they are oriented toward the long run, designed to keep users in Happy Network. The games control the participants by controlling their time. As previously discussed, these white-collar professionals are sensitive to time (Shi 2009), and when the

participants realize the manipulation, they often take actions to regain their freedom:

Em, I felt that to speak objectively, the games of Happy Network are all time consuming. ... When I first played Happy Restaurant, I was crazy about this game. I would make a dish in the morning and another in the afternoon. I counted how much time left for me to log onto Happy Network again (to cook). After a while, I felt it was not necessary. Em, I felt that I shouldn't waste too much time on games. So I quit playing the games (Sofia, 26, PR account executive, Beijing).

As demonstrated in Candy's case and the whole group, experienced game players felt that their preexisting gaming knowledge and skills were not useful when playing Happy Network games. They thus felt restricted by the games. In other words, the games alienated experienced players by limiting their ability to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, which violated their sense of personal achievement. Because most Chinese urban, white-collar professionals consider their personal feelings and self-actualization important with regard to evaluations of their experiences (Pan 1999), they feel that Happy Network should find a better balance between ease and difficulty in designing its games.

To tell you the truth, for people who play online games, all web games in Happy Network are not so interesting. Therefore, for me, I don't feel that they are very fun. ... The first difference between web games and online games is that the vision effect is different. Almost all online games have 3D version with different scenes. In addition, tasks of online games are much harder than those in web games. Moreover, each online game has a storyline. Web games in Happy Network are too easy. ... To me, Happy Network is a platform of socialization rather than a platform of playing games (Jenny, female, 28, marketing, Shanghai).

I don't consider any game in Happy Network interesting. According to me, I play these games only for freshness without persistency, that is, why I should continue to play these games. For some large MMORPG online games, I can gradually improve my rankings. With the highest ranking, I can ultimately beat everyone in the virtual world. However, for those small games in Happy

Network, such as Trading Friends, it is fun in that you can buy your friends either rewarding or punishing them. In the Parking War, you try to find a parking lot and buy good cars to compare to your friends'. ... I felt that they are too simple (Tom, male, 33, vice manager, Beijing).

Being Dependent/Independent

The participants indicated both feelings of dependence and independence with regard to Happy Network. Internet users depend on the Internet for information, entertainment, convenience, and social interaction, and similarly, Happy Network users depend on the site to gain information, entertain themselves and others, and communicate and socialize. Thus, Happy Network has become embedded in participants' everyday experiences as a "habitual behavior" and an "addiction."

If I turn on my computer, I will log onto Happy Network no matter whether I check it or not. It has become my habitual behavior (Sunny, 27, female, group purchase staff, Shanghai).

Every day, I spend half of my time on Happy Network. ... If it is counted by hour, I spend more than 12 hours on Happy Network each day. I have to admit that I am addicted to it (Wilson, male, 29, insurance broker, Beijing).

Even as participants expressed dependence on Happy Network, they demonstrated efforts to become independent of it. For example, they might log onto Happy Network less, stop playing online games altogether, or use other communicative channels. The participants mainly chose to seek more independence from Happy Network because they felt it waste of time or became fatigued to it:

Recently, I only stay in Happy Network about half of an hour every day to check my friends' statuses and read reposts. I don't play games anymore because first the games are lacking creative ideas, and the most importantly I don't have time to play those games (Nelson, male, 26, head-hunting consultant, Shanghai).

At beginning, I played several games in Happy Network but I currently don't play games because it wastes too much time and I am tired of those games (Samantha, female, 32, art editor, Beijing).

Being Public/Private

The participants' interpretations of Happy Network also intertwined with their sense of public and private space. According to the participants, Happy Network does not distinguish a clear boundary between public and private spaces. It could be described as a private-public or public-private platform. Unlike a general public webpage, the webpage of each user is not accessible to everyone; generally only the friends of users may browse their personal webpages. Thus, each personal webpage on Happy Network is constructed as a private area in a public space. This characteristic greatly shapes the participants' experiences with Happy Network:

I don't add strangers in my Happy Network because I often upload some photos in it. I don't want strangers to see my photos. I consider it as my private space. ... Communications in QQ and MSN are between two people. The content is only known by two of us. However, in Happy Network, if someone posts some photos of their vacations, we all can see and comment on them. So he or she doesn't need to tell people one by one. Once he or she posts something, he or she actually shares with all friends (Sunny, 27, female, group purchase staff, Shanghai).

I feel that if I don't want my friends to know something, I would not post it in Happy Network. Even I write diaries in Happy Network, generally I just want to convey some information or I'd like to write some trivia things, such as comments of soccer games. But for some more private things, like my mood, especially my work, I would not write that stuff in Happy Network.... It is after all a public space (Gemini, female, 28, journalist, Shanghai).

Being Intimate/Distant

Contradictory feelings of being intimate and distant arise from participants' perceptions of the closeness of their relationships on Happy Network. Happy Network allows participants to categorize their friends according to five types: most intimate friends, old friends (including previous classmates and colleagues), new friends (current social relations), friends' friends, and strangers. In traditional Chinese society, all relationships are extensions of relations within the family, and family-based relationships are simple, intimate, and stable (Zhang and Pan 2009). Because all relationships extend from the family, the degrees of closeness across the different relationships are fairly clear. However, in contemporary Chinese society, the constant differentiation in social structures, innovations of communication technology, and the mobility of social groups have expanded and complicated Chinese people's social relationships, so that they are more fluid. The degrees of intimacy in relationships also has become fuzzy and ambiguous (Wang 1996). The acceleration of the pace of life and sense that time is scarce give modern Chinese people less time to cultivate their relationships, further blurring the degrees of closeness and distance that traditionally distinguished different relationships.

Because the virtual communities tend to lack the complexity and restrictions of the real world, people's social relationships tend to be simple and differentiated. As in traditional Chinese society, the closeness and distance of social relationships becomes salient online. The clarification and distinction of relationships that Happy Network allows its participants to reconstruct a sense of

intimacy in this online space. Their feelings of intimacy and distance not only determine their communication and socialization strategies on Happy Network but also influence their offline social relations. Happy Network thus facilitates communications with old friends most, but has less impact on the offline social interactions that participants maintain with their most intimate or distant friends. In this sense, Happy Network transcends the online versus offline boundary and becomes a crucial medium that connects and integrates online with offline social relationships:

Regarding friends on other websites, you may know each other through the Internet but may not meet each other face to face. But in Happy Network, most online friends are your friends (in the real world), previous classmates, or friends' friends. Generally, you won't add someone who you totally don't know except some celebrities. ... Therefore, Happy Network is communicative platform for acquaintance (Frank, male, 28, customer service staff, Shanghai).

For my closest friends, I would like to make comments on their photos or statuses; for my general friends, usually I just browsed their photos and read their statuses without making comments unless those photos were really interesting or something really intrigued me. ... I send gifts to my friends depending on closeness and age. If she or he is close to me and similar to my age, I would send her a set of swimming suit and him a package of condom (Gemini, female, 28, journalist, Shanghai).

Happy Network creates a topic for us to communicate about in the real world. I reconnected with many previous classmates through Happy Network. When we hang out to eat dinner or drink coffee, Happy Network became our conversational topic because we haven't seen each other for many years. There is a gap between us. We have to find something that both of us are familiar with to talk. Then we talked about things like who posted something in Happy Network and what I wrote in Happy Network. ... I feel that Happy Network facilitates my communication and socialization with my old friends by making us know better about each others' current lives, but not the most intimate and unfamiliar friends (Tresor, female, 28, manager of a toy company, Shanghai).

Being Personal/Social

The participants' understanding of Happy Network is also expressed through their negotiation of personal and social identities on the site. According to Brewer (1991), personal identity is the individual self, denoting characteristics that differentiate one person from others within a given social context. Social identities are categorizations of the self into inclusive social units that depersonalize the self-concept, so that "I" becomes "we." As noted above, participants engage in multiple activities on Happy Network, such as updating their status, messaging, writing diaries, sharing music, commenting, and playing games. Through these activities, they express their personal characteristics and styles to signal and reinforce who they are as individuals. As some participants mention, their restaurants on Happy Network represent their "personal styles." Belk (1988) conceptualizes possessions as extended selves that reflect consumers' identities. In the current study, participants' personal pages on Happy Network could be considered representations of their extended selves, opportunities to construct and reinforce their senses of style, and thus, their personal selves. Meanwhile, the emphasis on personal identity among the participants also reflects the growing sense of individualism among contemporary Chinese (Lin 2001), especially among Chinese youth (Zhang and Shavitt 2003).

Generally, multiple identities coexist in a specific context (Brewer 1991). When participants express their personal identity on Happy Network, they also construct their social identities. Social identities on the Internet are changing, multiple, and fluid (Liu 2009). In a virtual community, people can constantly

construct and change social identities to satisfy their various needs and depict themselves from multiple perspectives. For example, the participants gained different life experiences through constructions of different social identities on Happy Network.

I felt that Happy Restaurant has many things in it. You can adjust and arrange these things by yourself at any time. You won't want them to be similar to others'. You have your own ideas. It is a way to show your personal style (Frank, male, 28, customer service staff, Shanghai).

You know, nowadays young people like to expose themselves, showing their personal stuff and displaying their uniqueness and personality. Happy Network is a platform for you to see others and be seen by others including both people you know and those you don't know. So I believe that everyone wants to post his/her coolest photos in Happy Network (Phoenix, male, 30, tourism manager, Beijing).

I feel that many users of Happy Network were born in 82 or 83. We are receptive to new things, like communicating gossip, are a little bit crazy, would like to complain, and are either critical youth or unconcerned citizens (Gemini, female, 28, journalist, Shanghai).

In Happy Network, we can have different life experiences from the real world. We can steal other people's vegetables, occupy other people's parking lots, buy large houses and luxury cars, and trade stocks. ... In other words, we can do whatever we want to do in the virtual world (Nancy, female, 28, graphic designer, Shanghai).

Interpretation of Product Placement in Happy Network

The socially constructed meanings of product placement in the context of the SNS are discussed below on two levels. Firstly, the specific meanings for brands embedded in four different modules in Happy Network are presented. These modules include web games, gifts, reposts, and webpages of celebrities and organizations. Secondly, five interpretative themes regarding the general meanings of product placement in Happy Network are provided: justifying the

existence, noticing the familiar, connecting to the real world, insinuating brand image, and linking to consumption.

Specific Meanings of Product Placements in Various Modules

In the context of Happy Network, products, brands, and services are placed in different modules such as web games, gifts, reposts, and webpages of celebrities and organizations. To the participants, product placements in different modules have their own distinctive meanings while sharing some similar interpretations.

Meanings of Product Placement in Web Games. Generally, participants in this study display a high awareness of product placements in web games. Every participant was able to recognize and remember some brands embedded in games. They expressed no “opposition” toward product placement in web games, and indicated that this kind of advertising is “acceptable.”

I saw different brands in a web game called Working. ... For example, I remembered that if you worked for a branded humidifier company, your salary was higher than that of other positions. ... (When I saw the brand), my feeling was that “Oh, someone is advertising here again” (Samantha, female, 32, art editor, Beijing).

I don't feel opposed toward its commercialization. For example, it embedded some brands in its web games. Actually I know they are advertising. But I am not opposed to them. It is not direct like “Pang” an advertisement appearing in front of me. It placed advertising into (games). So I felt it doesn't matter. To me, this kind of advertising is acceptable (Tresor, female, 28, manager of a toy company, Shanghai).

According to the participants, the key characteristics of product placement in web games are interpreted in terms of *users' proactive choice, interactivity, involvement, and naturalness*. First of all, the participants were free not only to choose whether or not to play web games, but also whether or not to pay

attention to the embedded brands. Therefore, one aspect of the meanings of the product placements in the web games is the users' proactive choice. Secondly, in the context of web games, the participants socially interact with each other through product placements. In other words, to a certain degree, product placements facilitate the interactivity of the web games. As a result, these product placements are deemed more acceptable by the participants than others on Happy Network. Thirdly, willing participation is required to play and experience the web games. This personal involvement made participants feel close to the placed brands. Fourthly, product placements in Happy Network are very natural and sometimes even not recognized by the participants.

It (product placement in web games) is better than pop-ups and flash ads in other websites. It is embedded in web games. You have proactive choices. You can choose to play the games or not (Steven, male, 30, IT technician, Shanghai).

(Product placement in web games) are more acceptable because they are embedded in games and you interact with your friends through those games (Sherry, female, 28, art editor, Beijing).

When I saw the Dicos fried chicken leg in Expo 2010, I felt very close to it because I have made this dish in games of Happy Network (Gemini, female, 28, journalist, Shanghai).

Em, it looks like that First Financial was placed in the game of Stock. The reason that why I didn't remember it before, it is that its placement is too natural. ... Therefore, I consider product placements in Happy Network are very natural. If you don't think hard, you probably can't remember them. However, you still have some impressions. It seems not like deliberate placement. I felt that this is its unique characteristic (Victor, male, 25, PR account executive, Shanghai).

To the participants, in the context of web games, product placement is considered to be appropriate when it does not “interrupt” or “impede” the games, is relevant to the games, and appears “not be too deliberate.”

For example, if I am playing a game, during the process, in order to achieve its effects of advertising, it constantly interrupts the game including some pop-ups which I need to close one by one. If there is too much of such kinds of advertising, I feel that it impedes me to play the game. What I mean is that if there is too much of such kind of advertising, I may lose the fun of playing games. As a result, I probably will never play this game again (Frank, male, 28, customer service staff, Shanghai).

Even if I feel that a placement is very clever, when I am playing a game, if it is not relevant to the game, I will absolutely not click it (Sofia, 26, PR account executive, Beijing).

I am ok with products placed in web games. But the embedded products should become a part of the game and not be too deliberate (Maggie, female, 31, accountant, Beijing).

From different perspectives, participants in this study offer various insightful suggestions for marketers to better place products in the context of web games. For example, some participants suggest adding more entertaining, funny, and interesting elements to product placements, enhancing the usability of product placements by integrating online promotions and offline products, and finding an appropriate timing to place the brands.

Games are for entertainment. ... So it doesn't matter if there are some ads in the games. If it can add some comedy effects, it will be better. ... For example, one of the characters in a game is called “Wahaha” (a famous brand of beverage). People may feel funny and close to the game (Yilian, female, 31, patent attorney, Beijing).

For product placement in games, I felt that the timing of the placement is very important. If a product is placed at a dull moment, the effect will much less than a product that is placed at a moment that people care about. For example, when I play Happy Garden, I felt that planting is plain but reaping time is exciting. ... Another thing is that it should connect product placement

in the virtual community with real products in the real world. For example, when I am playing a game, after several stages, I get a gift. Even when I finish playing the game, I will probably think about when the gift will arrive, and that particular brand (Gondi, make, 33, sales man, Beijing).

Meanings of product placement in the module of gifts. Unlike the high awareness of product placements in web games, awareness of product placements in the context of the module of gift is relatively low among the participants. Some participants indicated that they have noticed brands when sending and/or receiving gifts. However, other participants noted that they “didn’t pay attention,” or “didn’t remember,” because there are “too many gifts” and they care about “who send the gifts rather than what the gifts are.” Like product placements in web games, for those participants who have noticed the brands in the module of gifts, this type of advertising is deemed to be acceptable.

There was one of France Airline. The gift was the tower of Paris. It was the brand of France Airline. ...I felt it is ok because the gift itself was interesting. I didn’t have an opposition toward it. I found that it was fun (Jenny, female, 28, marketing, Shanghai).

Probably there are some, but I didn’t pay attention. There should be some out there. But if you want me to name one, I don’t have impression on any of them. I know there are some. ... For gifts, there are too many, a variety of gifts. When you receive gifts, it’s the through that counts (Candy, female, 31, HR staff, Shanghai).

In the participants’ life worlds, the essential meanings of product placements in the context of the gift module are grounded in the cultural meanings of gifts in the Chinese society. As one participant pointed out, “The gift is sent by my friend. This is the key. It is different from direct advertising. Your feelings are different because Chinese society is a relational society.” Like the product placement in

web games, the characteristics of product placement in the gift module include *naturalness, users' proactive choice, and interactivity.*

You are not interacting with machines or strangers. You are interacting with your friends, through which to improve your relationships. ... When your friends receive a gift from you, at least he or she will have a good mood. For me, when I receive a gift, I will feel that the person still cares about me. For the gift, at that moment, I will have a concept about what it is (Yilian, female, 31, patent attorney, Beijing).

For brands in the module of gift, I don't feel that they are advertising because the brands are from a relatively wide range. It is not like that, when you first see them, you will know they are advertising. They are like the things around you in your everyday life. So I don't pay special attention to them (Frank, male, 28, customer service staff, Shanghai).

For brands appearing in the module of gift, you become more proactive because gifts are listed there, you choose what you want to send out (Steven, male, 30, IT technician, Shanghai).

Regarding product placements embedded in the gift module, participants in this study also provided some enlightening ideas for marketers to better communicate with them through this type of marketing communication tool. For instance, they suggested that Happy Network could consider constantly updating information about new placed products on the first page. In addition, as with product placements in web games, Happy Network could also consider enhancing the usability of the embedded brands by integrating placements with products or consumption in the real world.

The frequency of sending and receiving gifts is not high because you have only one birthday every year. So Happy Network should actively update the information about gifts. For example, it could offer information about what new gifts are recently added to the module. Otherwise, people will not notice the change in the module. ... Another thing is that it could add some usefulness of gifts. For example, they can convert the virtual gifts into real products, such as when five people send you the same gift, you can get a real gift of product in the real world (Frank, male, 28, customer service staff, Shanghai).

Meanings of product placement in other modules. In addition to product placements in web games and the gift module, some participants also noticed brands in other modules, such as the reposting module and the webpages of celebrities and organizations. Reposting is a relatively new function of Happy Network, designed to facilitate the exchange of information among users. For example, if users find some interesting news on another website, they can repost that news in Happy Network and disseminate among their online friends. Because of the nature of social media, reposts are “disseminated very fast in Happy Network” and can reach “a relatively broad range of people.” Given the diversity of reposts, product placements appearing in reposts range across a variety of product categories. Even a celebrity can be placed in this context. For example, many grassroots stars such as Sister Feng are constantly exposed on Happy Network through reposts. To a certain degree, these grassroots stars may also be considered as placed brands in Happy Network. “Disguise” and “creativity” are the key words in the participants’ interpretations of product placements in reposts.

To a certain degree, Happy Network has become a platform for internet star-makers. For example, “Sister Feng,” you can see lots of her speeches, photos, and activities in reposts. ... Actually, it is also a product placement but the product is a person (Jenny, female, 28, marketing, Shanghai).

Another type is ads that are disguised as videos. Usually, the titles are scary and eye-catching. People repost them a lot. But actually these videos are commercials. People like this kind of videos. If you have ideas, people would be willing to read, watch, and repost those things (Tony, male, 33, copy writer, Shanghai).

However, some participants indicated that the “credibility of reposts is relatively low”. For participants to accept product placements in reposts, the placed product, brand, or service has to be supported by other sources, and especially confirmed by interpersonal communications. To a certain degree, product placements in reposts are similar to “virus communication” or “online WOM.” Therefore, those “products or services of high quality but without a strong brand, and with a focus on consumer experiences” are most suitable to be placed in reposts.

I saw a lot of advertising in reposts. ... I felt that the credibility is relatively low (Zara, female, owner of an online store, Beijing).
I felt that if I only saw this repost (of a product placement), I would not believe it. But my friend also told me about it. So I thought that sometimes reposts were believable (Gemini, female, 28, journalist, Shanghai).

Products or services of high quality but without a strong brand, and with a focus on consumer experiences are more suitable to be placed in reposts because people may not be highly susceptible if it is communicated from the perspective of consumers (Slater, male, 29, communication technician).

The webpages of celebrities and organizations are similar to users’ personal webpages. However, each celebrity and organization webpage appears on users’ first pages in turn for every user to add them as friends. Hence, each celebrity or organization webpage can be regarded as a product placement. According to the participants, “usefulness” and “interactivity” are the essential meanings of this kind of product placement.

In my view, for some celebrities and organizations, such as Niuer, I clicked it because it offered some samples of products and tips about skin care. Females care much about their skins. So I followed his blogs. I felt that this kind of product placement is good. It is useful for me. ... In addition, this kind of product placement has a better interactivity. It is more attractive than traditional advertising. I actively pay attention to it. ... For example, I will keep

an eye on his website to see if he has free samples to give out. I can also leave messages for him. Although he will not answer everyone's question, it is possible that he will pick my questions to answer (Jenny, female, 28, marketing, Shanghai).

General Meanings of Product Placement in the Context of Happy Network

Figure 2 presents the five major interpretative themes regarding the general meanings of product placement in the context of Happy Network, themes that emerged from the present set of interviews: (1) justifying the existence, (2) noticing the familiar, (3) connecting to the real world, (4) insinuating brand image, and (5) linking to consumption. Each participant in this study had a unique perspective on product placements in the context of Happy Network, but all of the 25 participants contextualized these themes as taking place against the ground of a highly commercialized contemporary Chinese society.

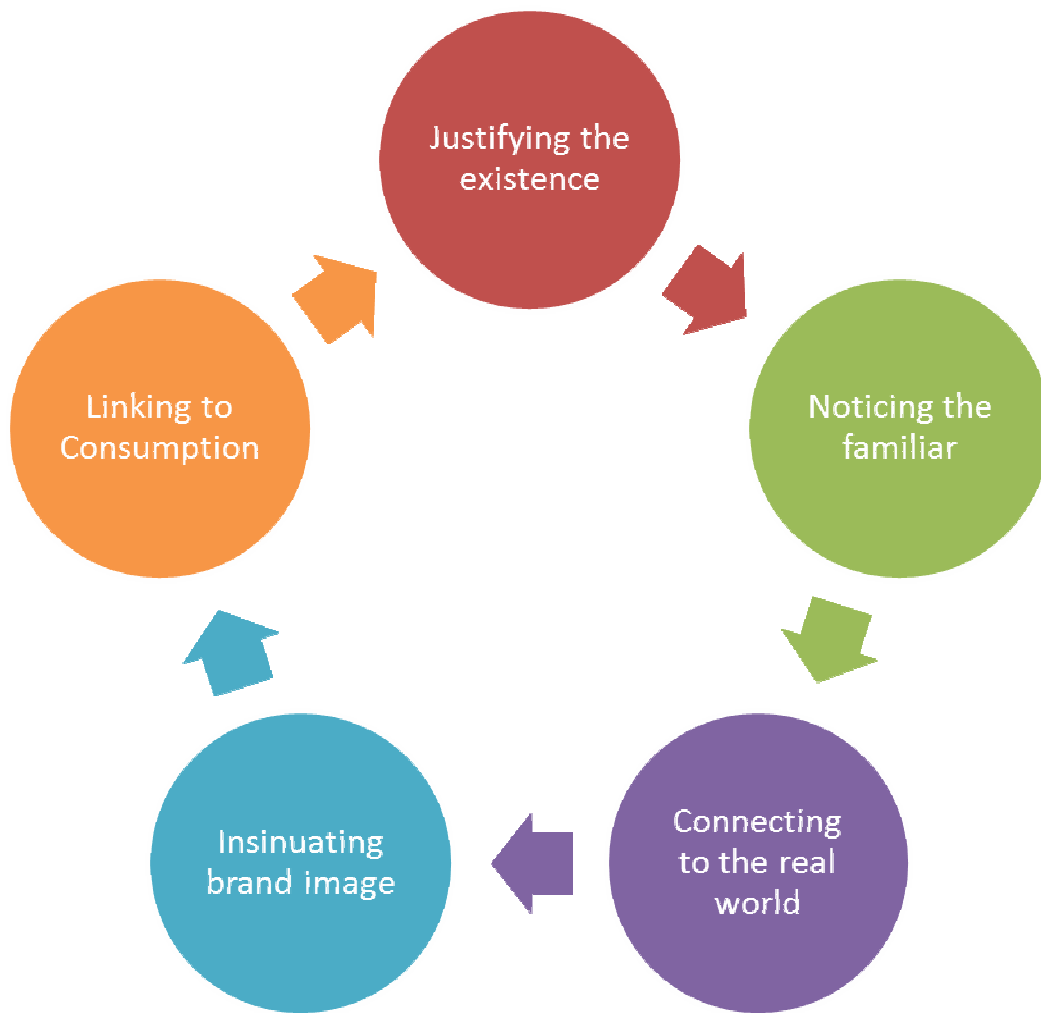


Figure 2. The General Meanings of Product Placement in the SNS

Justifying the existence of product placements. From their various unique perspectives, participants in this study displayed their acceptance of the existence of product placements in Happy Network, with such comments as “Every website has advertising,” “It needs sources of profit,” “The website needs to survive,” “It does not impede playing games,” “It makes web games more interesting,” “Placed products are prettier than other gifts,” and “It is a smart way to advertise.” Generally, the participants justified the existence of product placements from three viewpoints: as essential to the business operation of the website, as a smart marketing advertising strategy, and as a mode of communication attributed to their personal experience. Regardless of which perspective, these participants collectively justify and accept the existence and commerciality of product placement at least to a certain degree. The appearance of product placements in the website is regarded as “very normal” and “nothing new.” In other words, the participants are well accustomed to product placements in this media environment, suggesting that embedded brands have become a part of their everyday experience of Happy Network.

I don't know how other people think about this. I felt it is obvious to me. As a website, Happy Network certainly needs some sources of profit. If it doesn't charge you fee to maintain its website, it surely has to make money through advertising. Therefore, in every game, there should be some kind of advertising to support it. If it has no income, why does it provide you these things (games) and offer you such a platform? (Frank, male, 28, customer service staff, Shanghai)

Like I just mentioned, if you play Happy Restaurant, you need a refrigerator. If they add a Xifei refrigerator or a Midea refrigerator in it, it doesn't influence me (to play games). It only adds a brand there. In addition, I might think that ... this company is good at strategic thinking because it can earn great profits based on a very small cost. You know, many people are currently using

Happy Network. This kind of “soft” advertising is more acceptable than “hard” advertising. Nowadays, people use the Internet more and more. Instead of investing huge money on TV advertising, it is better to put money on the Internet advertising (Tresor, female, 28, manager of a toy company, Shanghai).

At least placed products are better than those gifts without brands. In addition, generally the gifts with brands are much more expensive than other gifts such as apple, birthday cake, and flowers. Usually placed products are worthy several thousand yuan (in the real world). ... Actually the advertising (product placement) is rather obvious, but the placed products are cute. For those models of car, they placed some colorful and pretty ones. I was willing to send one to my friends as a gift (Wilson, male, 29, insurance broker, Beijing).

While participants displayed their acceptance of product placements in Happy Network, they also indicated that they don't want Happy Network to become “too commercialized.” They also noted that it is important for Happy Network to work out an “appropriate proportion” between commercialized and non-commercialized contents.

I felt that Happy Network recently became too commercialized (Judy, female, 32, PR consultant, Beijing).

Yes, it is a proportion. ... It should control its advertising under a proportion, which people are acceptable. Em... once it passes that proportion, people may turn to be aversive (Yilian, female, 31, patent attorney, Beijing).

Noticing the familiar. Participants of this study are particularly attuned to familiar branded products and services that they have purchased and consumed in their everyday lives. For those participants, familiar brands are easily recognizable, signifying status and quality, and connected to their life worlds.

Yes, (I have noticed brands and products). For example, in the Parking War, there are different brands of cars. In the game of Real Estate, I remembered that some buildings were developed by my husband. You know, my husband is working in a company of real estate development. In the game, there were some buildings developed by his company (laugh). So I told him that I bought

this one and I was living in it now. ... Another is that ... that in the Happy Garden, you could make your own juice, such as tomato juice or orange juice. I remembered that its brand was perhaps Huiyuan because its package was what we could see in our daily life (Nancy, female, 28, graphic designer, Shanghai).

Em...another thing I just think of is that if it appears in other media or if I consider it is a good brand for a relatively long time, that is, the brand that I trust, or if I used that brand before then if it appears in Happy Network, it is more impressive and acceptable than other new brands that I don't hear before (Serendipity, male, 28, engineer, Shanghai).

For example, if I see some embedded products or brands that I previously thought not so good, I believe they could do better. For instance, some local brands of car, like QQ and Chery which I consider they are low-end products, if I see their brands here, I believe that they are gradually moving to mid-level cars (Gondi, male, 33, salesman, Beijing).

Based on their experiences, participants in this study suggested that it is better for well-known brands than for unknown brands to be advertised or placed in the context of Happy Network. According to some participants, new or unfamiliar brands need to be exposed frequently in other media platforms to build brand images.

(For new brands), I will say "Hey, what is this? I haven't heard of it before." I guess I would say so. I never heard about its advertising. I never heard about its brand. I will not remember it unless it appears in front of me every day or I also see it in my daily life. ... If it is only placed in Happy Network, I will not remember it (Laura, female, 24, data analyst, Shanghai).

Because I saw it on bus: its advertisements and its products on bus, suddenly I remembered that I saw this food in Happy Network. I can associate them together. So if I happen to pass this restaurant or if I have the opportunity, I probably will try it (Frank, male, 28, customer service staff, Shanghai).

Yes, I felt that like this kind of product placement, it is better to be used to reinforce familiar brands than to promote new products. For a new product, too many things need to be explained. Through product placement, you couldn't explain clearly about all these things (Nelson, male, 26, head-hunting consultant, Shanghai).

Yes, I think so. I consider that product placement in SNSs is the extension of real world brands. In other words, if it is already well-known in real world, I think it is a good extension to improve its brand image. However, if I haven't known the brand before, it is very hard for me to know the meanings of the brand only through games (in SNSs) (Gondi, male, 33, sales man, Beijing).

Connecting to the real world. According to the participants, product placements in Happy Network are "normal" and "natural", adding realism to the games, and reflective of the fact that their daily lives in the real world are inundated by brands. Therefore, they don't "have an opposition toward it," and sometimes learn something new from these product placements. If the products are relevant to them, they may pay more attention to them.

Em, in my view, I felt it (product placement) is very natural. ... I also noticed that ... em ... its real state is connecting to real world. For example, some communities are the same as those in Shanghai, em ... including the Parking War, there are many brand names in it that I felt that they are all placed brands. I think they are very natural. I felt that people will have a sense of belonging because we are living a world surrounded by brands. Therefore, it is quite natural that brands appear in a virtual community unless you go back to ancient times when there is no brand (Victor, male, 25, PR account executive, Shanghai).

Another good thing is that I can learn (something) in the Parking War because I am not very familiar with different brands of cars. If I see a car that I don't know, I will ask my husband whether it is good or not because my husband knows much about cars. How to say, I felt that I can learn something from it (Nancy, female, 28, graphic designer, Shanghai).

Currently, I feel it (product placement) is okay. ... I temporarily don't have an opposition toward it (Frank, male, 28, customer service staff, Shanghai).

I felt that I laughed it off is because I am not interested in that product or it is irrelevant to me. But if that the product is happen to be what I plan to buy, I feel that I will be very interested. ... For example, if I want to buy a car now, I like VW Golf very much. If I see Golf, I will feel that it is very interesting (Sofia, 26, PR account executive, Beijing).

In participants' life worlds, the product placements in Happy Network are "transferring things existing in real lives to the virtual environment," because "what they can use in real world could also be used in the virtual community." Therefore, the participants advise that placed brands be products that people can easily access in their daily lives, that is, the products that "you can buy at anytime and anywhere." In particular, some participants consider that fast moving consumer products (FMCP) are more appropriately placed in Happy Network than any others.

After all, Happy Network is a virtual community. It has many things that are similar to those in the real world. If it can place some brands cleverly, it is pretty much OK. ... It should place everyday brands cleverly not awkwardly. ... Everyday brands are those that you can see when you walk on street and use in your daily lives. ... I feel that FMCPs are easier to be placed (Nelson, male, 26, head-hunting consultant, Shanghai).

It is related to product categories. For high-end products and luxury products, it is not appropriate to advertise here. However, for those FMCPs, it is a good place to advertise or place their products (Slater, male, 29, communication technician).

Insinuating brand image. To some participants, product placements in this particular media context signify the particular brand images of the embedded brands. In their minds, Happy Network is a proper media platform for "second-tier brands," especially suitable for national brands. Prestigious international brands, they "do not need to advertise there," or if they do advertise there, "it is Happy Network that benefits from" those brands. For local brands, by contrast, advertising on Happy Network will "improve their brand image."

When I saw Motorola in Happy Network, I was thinking why it advertised there. ... I felt that only second-tier brands advertise there. ... For those really good brands, they don't need to advertise there. ... For example,

commercials of Nike and Adidas are always so interesting. During the whole process, they don't offer any information about Nike and Adidas but only show their logos at end. I really enjoyed watching their commercials. ...Both of them shouldn't advertise there. Even they don't advertise at all, people will still buy their products. .. I felt that Happy Network is more appropriate for national brands such as Semir and Xtep (Gemini, female, 28, journalist, Shanghai).

I felt that if BMW is placed in Happy Network, it is Happy Network that benefits from it (laugh). ... Happy Network should pay BMW. However, for those local brands, such as QQ and Chery, if they advertise in Happy Network, they will improve their brand image (Gondi, male, 33, salesman, Beijing).

Linking to consumption. Some participants, especially female participants, remarked that product placements in Happy Network may influence their consumption in the real world. However, the choice to consume products placed on Happy Network is influenced by multiple factors, including their personal needs, consumption ability, life stage, previous experiences with the products or brands, the relevance of the product, product information from other sources, and the availability of the product. Male participants in this study, by contrast, tend to believe that they are "rational" consumers whose purchase will not be influenced by advertising, including product placements.

(Through games in Happy Network), I got to know the brand of Lohas. Therefore, for example, when I went to supermarket to buy juice, such as tomato juice or carrot juice, previously I only chose the brand of ... Weichuan. Now I probably would also try Lohas. It is like this. Previously I only drank Weichuan juice. But now I knew this brand (Lohas). If it was not through Happy Network, I wouldn't pick Lohas juice when I went to supermarket. I actually have tried it to see whether it is tasty or not (Jenny, female, 28, marketing, Shanghai).

For example, one of my friends recommended a coffee shop to me. It is called Laomai Coffee, located at Hengshan road. ...Soon I saw it in Happy Network. ... If I only saw it online, I wouldn't go there; if I only depended on

my friend's recommendation, I wouldn't have a deep impression (Gemini, female, 28, journalist, Shanghai).

I noticed Dicos Fried Chicken, KFC, and Pizza Hut. I am personally interested in food. If I see some new products, such as new fried chicken leg, I would like to try it (Zara, female, owner of an online store, Beijing).

I guess...it is very hard (for product placement to influence my consumption). ... It (product placement) is helpful to define a brand. ... I may have an impression of a brand or it may motivate me to look for more information to know that brand better. ... For purchase to happen, I need to learn more about the brand and product, and when I actually have purchase needs (Serendipity, male, 28, engineer, Shanghai).

Summary

In a phenomenological study, a major purpose is to produce clear and accurate descriptions of a particular aspect of human experience (Polkinghorne 1989). In the current study, the central phenomenon under consideration was Chinese urban, white-collar professionals' experiences of product placement in the context of SNS. Methodologically, a phenomenological study generally starts its investigation from an individual case that may reflect the essence or the invariable structure of the phenomenon. Therefore, a single case of Candy was offered to show how this particular phenomenon intentionally reflects in her consciousness and the lived meanings of product placements in the context of SNS in her life-world setting. A phenomenological study also requires a careful working through and imaginatively testing of various descriptions of an essence, until the essential elements and their relationship are differentiated from the unessential and particular (Polkinghorne 1989). Thus, a thematic portrayal of participants' collective experiences was provided to demonstrate the essential elements and interconnection of these elements. In the next chapter, the

essence of the phenomenon is revealed and displayed in a theoretical model that integrates three sites of meanings.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION, LIMITATION, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Discussion

The current study has explored the lived meanings of product placements in the context of SNSs among Chinese urban, white-collar professionals. Findings of this study reveal the lived meanings of SNS, the specific meanings of product placements in different modules of Happy Network, as well as the general meanings of product placements in the context of the SNS. The emergent themes of this study reveal that participants' understandings and interpretations are multidimensional, dialectical, dynamic, and vivid. In participants' life-worlds, the lived meanings of product placements embedded in various modules are grounded in and referential to the cultural meanings of each module and the SNS as a whole. They are also shaped by and reflective of participants' social role as white-collar professionals and members of consumer culture of contemporary Chinese society. In other words, "intertextuality," the integration and interdependence of meanings from multiple sites (Janssan 2002), is the process by which participants understand and interpret product placements in the context of this SNS.

For a phenomenological investigation, one critical goal is to establish of the knowledge of essences by the intuitive integration of fundamental textual and structural descriptions into a unified description the phenomenon as a whole (Moustakas 1994). Based on the emerged themes, a theoretical model regarding

the socially constructed meanings of product placement in the unique context of the Happy Network SNS was developed. As shown in figure 3, three major sites of meaning – the consumer, the Happy Network SNS, and the product placement are linked in a network of bidirectional meaning transfers. Each site of meanings also has its own characteristics and subsites of meanings.

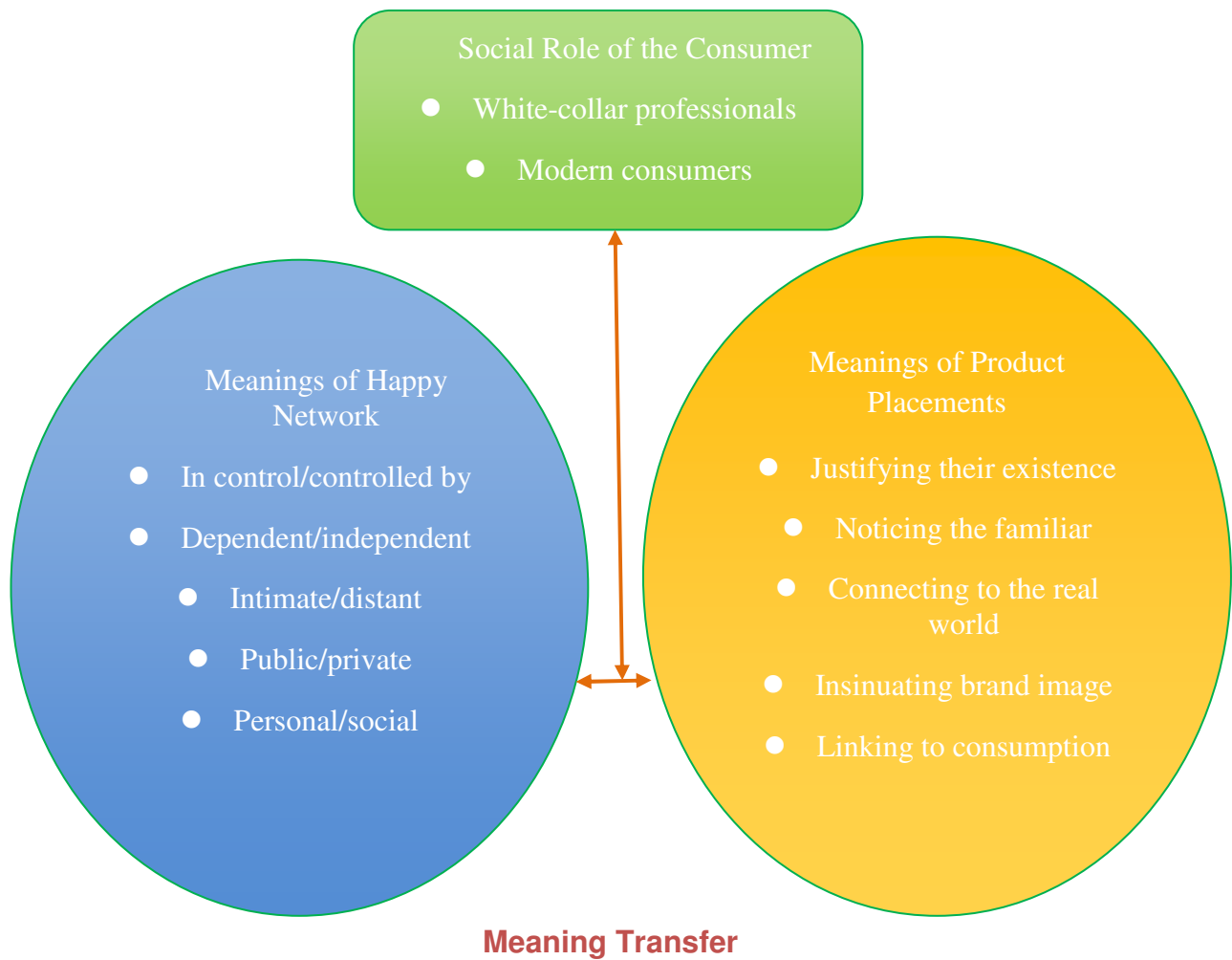


Figure 3. A Theoretical Model of the Lived Meaning of Product Placement in the SNS

Consumers perform multiple roles in their everyday lives (Biddle 1986). In this specific study, participants' two distinctive and interrelated social roles as white-collar professionals and modern consumers, functioned as the primary referential parameter for them to construct the meanings of the SNS and of product placements in the SNS. The socially established norms and expectations emerging from these two roles (Biddle 1986) formed different frameworks for them to interpret the SNS and of product placements. Living in a society transformed by the forces of industrialization, informationization, and globalization, Chinese white-collar professionals are facing multiple contradictions in their everyday lives: between old and new values, between Oriental and Western cultures, and between tradition and modernity. In the accelerated modern Chinese society, because of the compression of time (Friedman 2004), white-collar professionals became time conscious, tending to maintain social relationships in an efficient way, and preferring to seek fun and information through convenient channels. In the meanwhile, due to the compression of space (Friedman 2004), this privileged group of people have gradually alienated themselves from their family, community, and social relations. In the participants' life-worlds, the SNS counteracts the compressions thus buttressing them, helping them to gain liberation and to reconstruct their cultural values.

Specifically, at the individual level, the pursuit of freedom and individual liberation are the foundation for participants' experience of the SNS. In their everyday experiences, the participants actively value freedom and control over their time, communication, socialization, and entertainment, and constantly are

seeking to extricate themselves from the multiple restrictions they face in the real world – to obtain liberation. At the collective level, returning to Chinese traditional culture is an overarching theme that organizes participants' social experiences of SNSs. In their daily practices, the participants, consciously or unconsciously combat and seek to overcome the alienation and isolation caused by industrialization and modernization. Through communications and social interactions on the SNS, they show their appreciation of traditional virtues that are lacking in contemporary Chinese society and thereby collectively build quasi-family communities that resemble, form, and counterturn, if not in substance, traditional Chinese culture.

As mentioned previously, with the rise of modernity and materialism, China has transformed into a consumer society dominated by consumer culture. According to Slater (1999), consumer culture denotes to “a social arrangement in which the relation between the lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, is mediated through markets” (p. 8). Specifically, in the context of contemporary China, since January 1979, China has shifted its priorities from class struggle to economic development. As a result, the market has been given a larger role, and the planned economy has been gradually replaced by a combination of central planning and market mechanisms (Zhou and Belk 2008). In the past decades, with sustained economic growth and improved standards of material living, Chinese urban residents have dramatically increased their spending on discretionary purchases and enthusiastically consumed globally

branded products (Davis 2005). Consequently, consumerist values are gradually penetrating and becoming popular in Chinese society (Zhou and Belk 2008).

In the current study, participants' interpretations of product placement in the context of SNS clearly demonstrated their sophisticated knowledge of marketing communications and appreciation of consumerist values. At the macro level, the study reveals five interpretive themes regarding the general meanings of product placements in the context of the SNS: (1) justifying their existence, (2) noticing the familiar, (3) connecting to the real world, (4) insinuating brand image, and (5) linking to consumption. Essentially, these interpretations are grounded in and reflective of consumer culture in contemporary Chinese society. As sophisticated consumers in a highly commercialized society, participants in this study acknowledge the existence of product placements and appreciate their value in the context of the SNS. To the participants, product placements have become the crucial medium by which they link their virtual communities with their brand-inundated real worlds. Accustomed to an environment saturated by brands, the participants associate product placements in the SNS with an invitation to cultural belonging and feelings of normality. In other words, product placements have been naturalized in the context of the SNS and become woven into the participants' everyday experiences of the SNS, indivisible from other aspects of the site.

The participants' interpretations of product placements in the context of the SNS are also closely related to the characteristics of this specific new media platform. Gould and Gupta (2006) have indicated that "appropriateness" is the

most important aspect of product placements' meaning, stretching across media platforms and program genres. In the current study, "appropriateness" also emerged as an important dimension by which participants interpret product placements in the SNS. For example, in web games, judgments of the appropriateness of product placements are based on their unobtrusiveness and relevance, while in the gift module product placements are considered to be appropriate when they fit with the Chinese traditional culture of exchanging gifts. In addition to "appropriateness", "interactivity" and "usefulness" emerged as two other important components of the lived meanings of product placements in the context of the SNS. "Interactivity" denotes various types of interactions among users, between users and products, and between users and marketers – which are achieved or facilitated through product placements embedded in different modules. The "usefulness" of product placements has multiple dimensions, including useful information, bonuses in the virtual community, and benefits in the real world. Hence, at the micro level, "appropriateness", "interactivity", and "usefulness" seem to be the key aspects of the lived meanings of product placements in the context of the SNS among Chinese urban, white-collar professionals (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. The Lived Meanings of Product Placement in the SNS

Theoretical Implications

Consistent with previous research (Gupta and Gould 1997; Nelson 2002; Nelson et al. 2004), participants in this study displayed a relatively positive attitude toward product placement. However, unlike previous research, in this study, participants' receptivity to product placements in the context of the SNS seems to come from their recognition of the commercialization of society and acknowledge of the business model of SNSs: In other words, product placements in the SNS are justified in participants' minds as a normal part of their everyday experiences. Therefore, some promising directions for future research might be to explore how social groups interpret other promotional types in the context of SNSs or to compare interpretations of different promotional types across various media platforms and various cultural contexts.

Another important theoretical implication of the current study for product placement research, especially for product placement research in new media contexts, concerns the dynamics and complexity of consumers' own experiential viewpoints (Delorme and Reid 1999; Gould and Gupta 2006) in conjunctions with sociocultural and cross-cultural perspectives (La Pastina 2001). This phenomenon, in all its complexity, is likely to yield more useful insights than focusing simply on the effectiveness of product placements. Findings of this study are supportive of Gould and Gupta (2006)'s claim that product placement effectiveness is intertextually embedded in meaning, discourse, and reflexivity; only through these can attitudinal and behavioral change take place (p.78). In other words, different sites of meanings are intertwined to construct the ecology

of cultural codes that determine how product placements influence consumers' brand- and consumption-related behaviors. In the current study, the ecology of cultural codes involves the medium of the SNS, product placements in each module, the product placements in the SNS, and the consumer. Moreover, the production of these codes seems to draw on the participants' social roles as white-professionals and as members of contemporary China's consumer culture.

In addition to "appropriateness" (Delorme and Reid 1999; Gould and Gupta 2006), two other important concepts regarding the meanings of product placements in the SNS emerged from this study: "interactivity" and "usefulness." The current study reveals that each of these two concepts has multiple meanings with manifold dimensions. This study suggests that further exploration of every dimension in the same context or similar media platforms is merited to enrich our understanding. For example, interactions among users regarding product placements in the gift module differ from their interactions in web games. It would be interesting to examine how the different meanings that people attribute to gift exchange and game-playing shape the influence of SNSs' interactivity. Moreover, the specific meanings of product placements in the SNS are also grounded in the meanings that people attribute to the particular SNS. A distinct feature of the participants' behaviors in Happy Network is sharing (Belk 2010, p. 717), a fundamental consumer behavior that differs from commodity exchange and gift giving, because sharing transcends the concept of ownership to emphasize nonreciprocal activities and tends to be "a communal act that links us to others." The participants engaged in sharing in multiple ways in Happy Network.

Therefore, another possible theoretical venue for further investigation is the possible connection between sharing and usefulness regarding product placements in SNSs or other new media platforms.

Moreover, as revealed in the study, participants actively constructed meanings for the SNS. They regard this particular SNS as having its own “brand image”, which influences their perceptions of the brands imbedded in this context. This finding has an important theoretical implication for brand alliance (Park, Jun and Shocker 1996; Park and Ruekert 1994) and cobranding (Kumar 2005) research. Previous research on brand alliance and cobranding has mainly focused on the alliance or cobranding of products and services. The findings of the study suggest that products and services could also co-brand with a specific medium. Choosing appropriate cobranding strategies for products or services and media platforms may generate positive synergic effects for both products/services and media platforms.

Additionally, the current study revealed gender differences of the relationship between product placement and participants’ consumption behaviors. This finding augments previous literature on this issue and offers theoretical implications for future research. Previous research (Gupta and Gould 1997; Gould et al. 2000) indicated that male consumers tended to have a more positive attitude toward ethically charged product placements than female consumers did, while in general female consumers evaluated the practice of product placement more favorably than male counterparts (Gregorio and Sung 2010). The findings of the study complement previous research by revealing that female consumers’

consumption behaviors are more likely to be motivated by product placements than male consumers' in the context of SNSs. Therefore, future research is needed to examine this relationship in greater depth or explore other gender differences regarding this particular phenomenon.

The current study also offers theoretical implications for our understanding of involvement as one influence on consumers' interpretations of product placements. Throughout the interviews, participants cited that product placement in the SNS worked to increase their brand recognition for both familiar and unfamiliar brands. This finding is consistent with previous research on the potential effects of product placements. An important theoretical step would be to understand how brand recognition such as that generated by product placements in SNS works in relation to purchase intention. There has been a wealth of research on this relationship in the traditional advertising literature. For example, it has been posited that in low involvement purchase situations, mere brand recognition might be enough to get a consumer to consider purchasing a particular brand (Muehling, Laczniak and Andrews 1993). This reasoning would suggest that product placements in SNSs might benefit brands in low involvement product categories.

However, a key question with product placements is "what is the message?" Unlike traditional advertising, where the emphasis is almost always placed on delivering a strategic message about the brand, a product placement has no clear, marketer-created message. As such, could product placements be influential in higher involvement purchase situations? Such influence would be

questionable in light of how consumers in the present study discussed product placements' brand effects. The participants, especially the women, described such effects at the recognition and affective levels. Participants, especially males, suggested that mere inclusion of a brand in a SNS would not be enough to influence an important purchase decision. This insight is also supported by the previous involvement literature.

Managerial Implications

The current study offers several important managerial implications for marketers and advertisers. The findings of the study reveal that the practice of product placement is highly acceptable among participants in the context of the SNS. Therefore, the key question is how to integrate brands into this new media context in a smarter and more engaging way. In order to do so, first of all, the promotional brands should fit the environment of the SNS, facilitate the multiple functions of the SNS, and enhance users' experiences in this particular medium. For example, the placed brands should help users to launch, develop, maintain, and strengthen their social bonds, both in the virtual community and in the offline world. Meanwhile, marketers should also position promotional brands as a way for users to exercise control, obtain information, have fun, and gain a sense of belonging.

Specifically, participants' interpretations of product placements are closely related to the characteristics of each module and their experiences of the SNS. Hence, marketers should actively and constantly adapt the format of placements to better fit their brands into the particular modules of particular SNSs in order to

enhance participants' experiences. For example, as suggested by the participants, for product placement in the module of web games, adding more entertaining, funny, and interesting elements, integrating online promotions and offline products, and finding an appropriate timing to place brands are all possible ways to better engage users and thereby enhance the effectiveness of this promotional technique.

In addition, the promotional brands should also conform with users' social identities, especially in terms of their social roles as white-collar professionals, and adapt to their consumption concepts and behaviors. For instance, as uncovered in the study, participants tended to pay attention to and follow the consumptive trends among their social group. Therefore, marketers should consider positioning the placed brands as trendy products or services that are popular among Chinese white-collar professionals. Similarly, placed products and services should also match with the perceived brand image of the SNS among its users. The findings of this study reveal that in the participants' minds, national brands and FMCG are more appropriate than less established brands in the context of this specific SNS.

Finally, one participant indicated, "In the environment of the Internet, everyone is the producer of content." Thus, marketers could also consider how to better integrate product placement and user-generated content in the context of SNS. In fact, the findings of the current study indicate that in the context of SNS, some product placements are generated by users, such as reposts of local businesses' websites. However, this kind of product placement has relatively low

credibility among the users. Therefore, if marketers plan to use consumer-generated product placement as a communication tool, they have to increase the credibility of the message. One possible way to do this might be to combine online and offline word-of-mouth.

Limitation and Future Research

Similar to most studies, this research is a snapshot in time of a dynamic phenomenon. A chronological tracking of the shared meanings of product placement in SNSs among Chinese, urban, white-collar, professional users of SNSs would enhance the degree of cultural depth offered by the analysis. Participants' interpretations may shift as their experiences accumulate. In the current study, only experienced users were investigated. Future research may compare experienced users' understandings to inexperienced users' interpretations to see possible differences and variations. Similarly, although participants in the current study engaged in relatively diverse occupations, many of them were working in marketing and mass media related fields, which might influence their interpretations of SNSs and product placements. In the current set of data, no differences were found between participants who are working as marketing and media professionals and those who are working in other fields. Future research may recruit participants from a wider scope of occupations to compare their interpretations. In addition, participants' interpretations are culturally contextualized and bound to be dynamic, changing as cultural meanings shift. Longitudinal data could provide additional insights into the

interpersonal dynamics and micro-cultural characteristics of users' life worlds (Muniz and Schau 2007).

This study focused on urban, white-collar, professional users-one of the most important subcultures of users of Chinese SNSs. Although the findings reflect contextualized understandings of SNSs among these users, the complexity and dynamics of this subculture means that the collected data cannot reveal whether the similar meanings of product placements in the context of SNS will emerge for subgroups within this subculture or other subcultures. For example, white-collar professionals from small cities may have different interpretations and emphasize different aspects than those from the metropolitan areas. Furthermore, as Chinese SNSs gain popularity and penetrate different socioeconomic layers within Chinese society, their structure is becoming more diverse. Studies designed to explore the dynamics and variations among subcultures and subgroups of Chinese SNSs users should enrich our understanding of this particular phenomenon. To broaden the research context into a cross-cultural environment, future research may compare similarities and differences regarding this specific phenomenon in different countries and cultural areas. For example, it would be interesting to explore how American college-student users of Facebook interpret product placements in there in comparison to Chinese college-student users of Happy Network to reveal possible deep-rooted cultural differences.

Additionally, this study has investigated product placements in a specific social network site. In the life-worlds of the participants, various types of social network sites are just as salient. Another possible research direction would be to

examine socially-constructed meanings of product placements in other types of SNSs. Similarly, the current study was confined in one specific media platform; future research could explore the meanings of product placements in other new media contexts, such as twitter and iPhone, as well as compare the findings in different new media and/or cross-cultural contexts to offer more insights into this phenomenon.

Finally, in order to answer the question “What is the message?”, future research could examine the messages consumers take away from product placements in games or other SNS modules (as well as other media platforms). The present study suggests a level of active processing of product placements by some consumers, which might suggest that some consumers may create messages/meanings for the specific brands in relation to the specifics of a product placement. It would be interesting to study how such consumer-constructed messages relate to marketer-constructed messages for the same brands. It would also be useful to understand what types of consumer are likely to create messages from product placements and under what conditions.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. As we briefly discussed through SNS messages and emails, I am currently researching product placement in the social network sites. Specifically, I am interested in your experiences, feelings, ideas, and opinions of product/brand/service embedded in the virtual gifts or/and online games in Happy Network (www.kaixin001.com).

Discussion of process

- Data collection (obtain informed consent to record interview)
- Data analyses
- Data storage and destruction
- Confidentiality
- Right to end interview at any time

Introduction

I want you to feel comfortable. I would like our interview today be very open, informal, and conversational. This is not a structured question and answer session. There are not any right or wrong answers. You are expert and I am here to learn from you. I am simply interested in your experiences, feelings, ideas, and opinions. Specifically, I am interested in your experiences with product/brand/service embedded in the virtual gifts and online games in Happy Network.

Screening Questions

Before we start our interviews, I would like to ask you two questions:

- Have you ever sent or received virtual gifts in Happy Network?
- Have you ever play online games in Happy Network?

If the participants said “no” to both questions, then stop interviewing, thank the participant, and ask him/her to recommend other potential participants. If he/she says “yes” to one or two questions, then start the interview.

Background Question

Ask questions to gain context about the participant

- Let's begin by you telling me a little about yourself, such as your age,

education, occupation, and life stage.

Discussion Questions

The discussion will cover three major domains: participants' experiences with social network site (SSNs), the Happy Network (especially their experiences of giving and receiving gifts or/and playing online games), and product/brand/service embedded in the virtual gifts and online games on the Happy Network.

Uncover:

- What social network sites means to them and how it fits into their every day experiences.
- What the Happy Network means to them and how it fits into their every day experiences.
- What the gift module means to them and how it fits into their everyday experiences.
- What different online games in the Happy Network means to them and how it fits into their every day experiences.
- Their experiences, feelings, perceptions, and interpretations of product/brand/service embedded in the virtual gifts and online games on the Happy Network.
- The possible connections between their experiences of brands in the virtual world with their experiences of the brands in the real world and their actual consumer behaviors (let these emerge on their own).

Possible Questions

- Tell me about the websites on which you spend the most time interacting with other people.
- Tell me about how you interact with other people on those websites.
- Tell me about your experiences of Happy Network? (If the participant talks pretty well, then let him or her follow the discussion. If the conversation goes not well, then go to the website of Happy Network and ask the participant log in his/her account. Offering the context for the participant to better discuss his/her experiences.)
- Tell me about your experiences of giving and/or receiving gifts in the Happy Network. (Depending on specific situations, the participant could discuss this with or without browsing the module of gift in Happy Network).
 - Possible probe questions: Could you tell me about the most excited gift(s) you have received in Happy Network? What kinds of gifts did you receive in Happy Network? What kinds of gifts do you like best? When or on which occasions did you receive gifts from your friends? What kinds of gifts did you send to your friends? When or on which occasions did you send gifts to your friends? Do you like this gift (pointing to a placed product)? What are your feelings, ideas, and opinions toward it (the

- placed product)?
- Tell me about your experiences of playing games in the Happy Network (Depending on specific situations, the participant could discuss this with or without browsing multiple games in Happy Network.).
 - Possible probe questions: How long have you been playing online games in Happy Network? Which online games do you play? Which one or ones do you play most? Which one or ones do you like best? Show me the game you like best (Ask the participant to play the game and tell the lived experiences while playing the game).
 - Do you notice any product/brand/service in Happy Network? Could you tell me about your experiences, feelings, ideas, and opinions towards these products/brands/services? You can talk about one specific product/brand/service or you can discuss more than one. (If the participant cannot remember any product/brand/service in Happy Network, then go to the website and point one to him/her and ask him/her to talk about it.).

Probes

Remember to constantly probe for details using non-verbal active listening cues as well as words like “tell me more about that,” “what did that mean to you?” and “please go on.”

Wrap-up

Thank you very much for taking time with me and discuss your ideas and opinions. I know I learned a lot from our conversation.

Do you have anything else you wish to share with me at this time?
May I contact you in the future if I have other follow-up questions?

Appendix B

Sample of Transcripts

Date: 07/06/2010

Time: 10:30 am

Place: Pizza Hut in downtown Shanghai

Participant: Candy

I: This is an informal conversation. It focuses on you. Please feel freely to talk about your feelings and experiences.

C: Em.

I: Before we start, I would like to ask you two questions: First, have you played games in Happy Network?

C: Yes, I've played.

I: Ok, the second question is that whether or not you have sent or received gifts in Happy Network?

C: Of course, I have (sent and received gifts) (laugh).

I: Good. Now we can start. First, could you please briefly introduce yourself: your personal information including your age, occupation, education, or anything else you would like to tell me?

C: Personal information.

I: Yes.

C: First, my age, em, I don't know if you are at the similar age to her (another participant). I am at same age with her. We are classmates. I am 31.

I: I am a little bit older than you.

C: Oh, really. I heard from her that you are studying for your Ph. D.

I: Yes (laugh).

C: I graduated with a bachelor degree. After graduation, although I studies law, I didn't work on something that is related to my major. I worked for an international

trading company for three years. After that, I worked as a head-hunting staff. I worked in a head-hunting company for 4 years. Currently, I am working as a HR professional in a large clothing company. Basically, this is my personal information.

I: If you don't mind, what is the range of your income?

C: My income is between 8,000 and 12,000. If only considering income, probably the income of head-hunting company is higher because we have commissions. Accordingly, it also has relatively higher pressure. Especially later when the entry level became lower and lower, a variety of head-hunting companies were launched. At the same time, it has a relatively long term of payroll. We have to wait until candidate on board, and generally after he or she passes probation, to collect our money. Of course, we also have the quota pressure from our company. It is not like the position of HR. It is relatively free and has certain status in the company. If your boss pays enough attention to you, the job of HR is good in a company.

I: Could you please describe the website on which you spend the most time interacting with others?

C: Currently, Happy Network is a major platform for me because I consider that Happy Network has several strengths: first of all, it is able to reconnect our long-lost friends. You know, nowadays people's pace of work is fast and they would like to stay at home (in their leisure time). So many old friends and previous classmates are no longer in touch. However, Happy Network provides a platform for you to gradually rebuild your circles of social, life, or academic relationships. Therefore, on the one hand, we stay at home for a relatively long time; on the other hand, we can still keep in touch with many friends. In addition, it (Happy Network) is also an information platform. You can know something that you couldn't know through other news media. Probably there is something that is false. Err...I mean that there were a lot of false news (on it). But it actually posted something that other media would not be willing to report. Finally, it also has many entertaining stuffs.

I: You mentioned that Happy Network helped you to reconnect with your previous social relations and it is a platform of information. What else?

C: I felt that those (three) are the functions of Happy Network. But now it has a relatively strong commercial atmosphere (laugh).

I: What do you mean that "it has a relatively strong commercial atmosphere"? Could you please explain it in more details?

C: For example, it added something into the games. I don't know if you have played its games before. There is always some advertising in those games. In addition, it also included celebrity blogs, celebrity groups or organizations, such

as “Motorola Smash Gold Eggs.” Of course, for an organization to survive, it needs some source of income. Therefore, it is understandable that it has such kind of stuff. It is better than other online games, which charge fees from users. It is understandable that it adopts a certain kind of profit model.

I: You mentioned that there are many small games in Happy Network. Could you please tell me what games you have played before?

C: There are a cooking one, an X world, a Happy Garden, and Stealing Vegetables. However, basically I play these games no more than a month more so because its game mode is relatively simple. Later, I repeat the same job again and again. Therefore, I don’t feel fresh anymore and don’t want to play any longer (laugh).

I: Could you please tell me which games you like best in Happy Network?

C: Games? Probably Stealing Vegetables. It is interesting.

I: What do you mean “interesting”?

C: It offers you a ... happy mood through stealing other people’s stuff (laugh). But there are also lots of interactions in this game. You know, that you plant vegetables is not for yourself but for other people to steal. So I never reap my own vegetables but let my friends to steal them.

I: Anything else?

C: In the real world, you couldn’t steal other people’s property. But you can do this through virtual platform (laugh).

I: So you can do something that you couldn’t do in the real world, right?

C: Em, in the virtual world, you may not be judged by moral standards. In addition, you also compete with your friends (in the game). For those valuable vegetables, you need to count how much time left (for them to be ripe). Sometimes you even don’t sleep during the night and wait for the vegetables to be ripe and steal them.

I: Have done so before?

C: Yes (laugh).

I: Counting time?

C: Yes. Counting time to steal other people's vegetables. Later, there are too many applications of software to help people to collect vegetables. You couldn't beat others. Vegetables would be stolen in a minute.

I: When you play games, such as Happy Garden or Stealing Vegetables, have you noticed any brand or product or ...?

C: Yes, I have (noticed), like "Lohas" juice. If produce has some advertising, generally you will notice it. In particular, "Lohas" juice has a relatively long event cycle, and all your crops, that is, your cultivated crops, have their logo. In addition, their advertising media closely followed. It laid the groundwork through those stuffs (product placement in Happy Network). Later, when the products were available in the market, their advertising was everywhere. I felt that basically they did well on this. Its earlier promotions connected with later advertising, which as a whole fits with the time circle of the FMCG industry. So, I felt that this is what they did relatively well.

I: What do you think when you first saw this (Lohas juice)?

C: When I first saw it, I was thinking that "Oh, advertising finally comes." However, I don't have a negative attitude toward it (product placements) because it didn't bring some negative things to the games. On the contrary, it is pretty interesting in that you can make juice and send it to your friends. I'd say that I don't have an antipathy toward it. It is pretty interesting. It facilitates interactions. But for some games, they require virtual game money. If they change the fairness of the games, I may lose interest in those games. For example, they have a game cooperated with Magnum company. If you eat Magnum ice-cream, you will find a serial of number on its sticks. When you enter the number in the game, you will get some benefits from the game. I consider that it actually creates unfair competitions. If you want to charge us, then just change the game to online games. It is not appropriate to charge some people but not others through which creating gaps between those two groups.

I: So like "Lohas," you felt it didn't influence your game and change the fairness of the game.

C: Yes, I didn't feel antipathy toward it.

I: But for those like Magnum, you don't like.

C: Yes, because it destroyed the fairness of the game. Actually, we play this game just for killing our time. I felt that it is not appropriate to do so.

I: When you saw Magnum, did you realize it is advertizing?

C: Absolutely.

I: Is it more obvious than “Lohas?”

C: Yes, it is too obvious.

I: Comparing these two forms, you like the first better or ...

C: Yes, (I like the first one better). We all like the web games. So we hope this platform can exist longer. Of course we know that they will not do business without profit, not to mention losing money. Servers and labors are all needed money to maintain. Therefore, we are very supportive if it makes profit through some appropriate ways. But if it charges users, I feel that it is not appropriate because it is different from online games. Social community platforms are not lacking (in China), such as Tianya, Mop, and KDS. These are the leaders of social community websites. They also provide a lot of news information on the websites. But the only big difference between Happy Network and them is that Happy Network is able to build social relations around you and facilitate social interactions between you and your friends. Other websites don't have this (function). If from the perspective of entertainment, I bet Tianya also has many entertaining and funny stuffs.

I: So you feel that the difference between Happy Network and Tianya or Mop is that it has the function of interaction, especially interacting with people around you.

C: People in your social circle.

I: Anything else?

C: The other thing is that its development team has put a lot of efforts in designing games. They know that people are tired of games soon especially those simple games. Once a new game comes, people will be tired of it very soon. Therefore, they are continually developing new things and new functions. For example, recently they developed a function of group buy. I feel that it is pretty good and I would like to join such a kind of activities. You know that until now, the project that lasts longest is the function of reposts because news will never be outdated. Em, for other small games, they need to update regularly by introducing some new stuff. I think basically they did it. After a while, they will promote some new things. For some old games, they also put some new elements into them. Therefore, for some experienced players who don't have short tiring circle like me, may continually play its games.

I: Could you please give me an example because you mentioned that they put some new elements into old games?

C: For example, the cooking game (Happy Restaurant). They added some materials of decoration into games. If you organize a wedding party, they will provide you some special adornments to decorate your restaurant, and such kind of things. How to say, it is like that they introduce the task function of online games into their web games.

I: You mentioned several times about online games. Do you play online games?

C: Yes, I've played before.

I: Then what do you think the differences between online games and the web games of Happy Network are?

C: Oh, huge differences (laugh). Web games (in Happy Network) are too simple, that is, what you need to do is to repeat clicks. Online games, however, have tasks with stories and continuity. You need to beat a boss and finish a task, which becomes the necessary condition for you to promote to a higher level. In addition, when you finish a task, you can get some appliances, which will facilitate your future tasks. In addition, because of the tasks in online games, it needs a relatively long time for finish (those tasks). During the process, you may meet five or six bosses, and pass several places and locations. It is like that during our daily life, if we plan to finish a task, today I may finish the first and second steps, and tomorrow I need to communicate with a particular person, then I can finally finish my task.

I: You just mentioned "boss." What is a boss?

C: A boss is a boss.

I: Ok, I just want to make sure.

C: It is a relatively big monster.

I: So you need to beat a boss. Then you can...

C: Yes, when you beat the boss, you can get a lot of equipments to help you do finish you next task.

I: Ok. Because I never play online games, I don't understand (how you play those games). You felt that web games in Happy Network are easier than online games.

C: Yes, much easier.

I: You also mentioned that online games have long stories.

C: Yes. Another (difference) is that online games have the requirement of ranking. If you want to achieve certain rank, you may have to play for several days, weeks or even months. Based on your different ranks, you will have different tasks. In addition, the tasks of online games have a longer circle. You may need to spend several days to finish one task. For example, I played an online game before. In order to finish one task, if you don't rest during the task, you may spend more than 10 hours on it. Of course, generally you cannot spend such a long time on it. So the task is split into three stages, which means you have to spend at least three hours on each stage. You couldn't stop during the period. Otherwise, you have to start from the beginning again.

I: How about the games in Happy Network? How do these games differ from those online games?

C: (For web games on Happy Network), basically, you can finish a task in 5 minutes except that you wait for crops to be ripe. However, it is only a process of waiting. During the time you don't have to take care of them.

I: In addition to Lohas juice, have you noticed other brands in Happy Network?

C: I just mentioned Magnum. I also noticed Motorola.

I: Which game did Motorola to be placed?

C: I forgot in which game I saw Motorola. Probably it was in the Happy Restaurant. I remember that you smashed eggs and you could win gold coins and something like that.

I: When you saw Motorola (in game), did you realize it is advertising?

C: Absolutely. It is our familiar brand. When it comes out, you are sure ...em ... because it is not like unfamiliar brand, unless it becomes a product with logo, you may not know it is advertising. For those that we are familiar in our daily life, once they appear in our eyes, it means that they need to promote some new stuff. I remember that in the game of Parking War, some new models of car, such as Kaiyue (Buick). When some new models came to the market, that new model soon became the main promotion of that month.

I: In other words, if you see brands that you've heard before, you will realize that it is advertising. But if it is unknown one, you probably will not notice that it is advertising.

C: Lohas is a special case. I remembered it was the first advertising appearing in Happy Network.

I: Oh, it was the first ads appearing in Happy Network.

C: Therefore, you may not know it is advertising.

I: How about now? If an unknown brand appears in the web games of Happy Network, will you recognize it is advertising?

C: Probably I will.

I: As you mentioned previously, you don't feel antipathy toward this kind of advertising.

C: Until now, I don't feel an antipathy toward it.

I: Do you have any other feelings?

C: Not really. It just added a product in our games. We can cooperate. However, I want to emphasize that I don't like the Magnum game.

I: Because it is unfair.

C: It destroyed fairness of the game.

I: Destroy, ok.

C: If you buy products of Magnum, you will get a serial of number. When you play games, your score will be higher than others. It is meaningless because we are supposed to play games in a fair platform. It actually encourages you to buy Magnum ice cream frequently.

I: Do you think that the embedded brands in Happy Network have any impact on your consumption in the real world?

C: I don't think so. Unless those fast moving consumer foods, such as juice, it will not influence my consumption. Even when I see advertisements (of juice in other places), I will probably try the product. For some high-end consumer goods, especially cars, it (product placement) only makes me be aware of such a kind of new car model. If I want to purchase a car, I must consider my budget, my requirements, and my needs including the model and style of the car. But I won't ... buy the car because you advertise to me every day. It is impossible, that is, for those high-end consumer goods, this (product placement) will not influence my consumption.

I: But you mentioned juice.

C: For FMCG, like some new products, even if it does not advertise in Happy Network, but I know products from other channels and see it on the roadside, I probably will try.

I: Have you tried Lohas before?

C: Yes, I've drunk its juice.

I: Okay, we just mentioned that whether or not you've received or sent gifts in Happy Network.

C: Yes, I've received and sent gifts before.

I: Could you please tell me generally on what occasions do you receive gift?

C: Usually most gifts come to me on my birthday and holidays. On other days, I occasionally receive gifts from others and don't know why they send me the gifts.

I: Tell me about your most impressive gift?

C: I don't have any impressive gift because all these (gifts) are not real. So I don't have any very impressive gift (laugh).

I: Then when do you send gift to your friends?

C: Probably on others' birthdays because it (Happy Network) has a function. It will remind you your friends' birthdays three days in advance. If I see it, I would like to send a wish to my friends.

I: Have you noticed any product or brand in the gifts?

C: Probably there are some, but I didn't pay attention. There should be some out there. But if you want me to name one, I don't have impression on any of them. I know there are some. ... For gifts, there are too many, a variety of gifts. When you receive gifts, the meaning of behavior is more important than the meaning of gift.

I: In other words, you care more who sends you the gift.

C: Yes. You are happy when you receive gifts. However, the gifts are too... I'd say, are too virtual. For example, in online games, when you exchange gifts or appliances with each other, those gifts or appliances could to a certain degree help you with your games. However, for this gift (in Happy Network), you can only put it there. It is useless.

I: In other words, according to you, compared to gifts in online games, gifts in Happy Network are lacking usefulness.

C: Yes, it is even not useful for games.

I: Have you noticed any other types of advertising in Happy Network?

C: Other advertising types ... as I mentioned previously, currently there are lots of celebrities and organizations appearing (in the Happy Network). Actually, if one of your friends joins an organization, you will see the news in the first page of the website. If you see it, probably you would be willing to join it as well. For example, I saw that one of my friends joined an organization of group buy. Every day, there is a new project (product and service) for group buy. The price of the project is much lower than the market price. I don't care if it charges other people. For me, it brings great benefits and my friend has joined the organization. So I would be very willing to join such an organization. Although I may not buy every day, I pay attention to it every day. If some day I find something that I need, I probably will purchase.

I: You mentioned that you joined the group is because your friend joined the group.

C: If it was not because of my friend, I probably would not notice that stuff. Because the reposts on Happy Network including other stuffs are the news that your friends have already read, then you are able to read them. It is not that you actively search news but receive information from others. Therefore, it emphasized conveying and sharing. For example, I read some news and I would like to share with others, with all my friends. Whether or not my friends would like to read it depends on his or her choice. If you click on them, then you disseminate that information to all your friends. Actually, it is all about communication.

I: Therefore, it is through the social circle to...

C: Yes, to communicate. Everyone has his/her social circles. Especially those who like to play Happy Network generally have a relatively large social circle, which is usually larger than 100 persons. The social circle of 100 persons is big. So the information you received is from 100 persons. Sometimes, you would read some sensitive news or news that everyone cares about. If you communicate some information, you can achieve communication effect in a very short period of time. For example, a piece of breaking news, perhaps entertaining news or politically sensitive news, within an half of hour, the number of click could surpass 20,000 even 100,000. For those sensitive stuffs and things that catch people's eyes, the communication speed is very fast.

I: Could please give me an example about those sensitive stuffs that you just mentioned?

C: Currently, probably the first one is World Cup. Another one is entertaining news, such as some celebrities were divorced. This kind of news is disseminated very fast. The still other is possibly the politically sensitive news. Nowadays, we could see lots of angry youth in Happy Network. Probably we shouldn't call them as angry youth. We can feel a kind of public emotion on the website: a negative feeling toward government and public organizations. Some news, like speeding, is disseminated very fast. For example, someone was killed by a drunk driver in a car accident. Such a kind of news will be continually circulated for several days. Actually, nowadays the Internet including SNSs performed such a role of social moral obligation control. If something that is found out to be conflict with public ethical standards, it will be soon exposed in public. Sometimes, government may not pay attention to such things or they just deal with it perfunctorily. Due to the public pressure, they have to treat it more seriously. However, sometimes, it also has negative effects. For instance, it invaded someone's privacy, like the pornographic issue that was also disseminated very fast. Therefore, we have to say in certain circumstances, it has some negative effects. But most of the time, it performs the role of moral control.

I: In addition to entertainment and communication, Happy Network performs the function of public opinion.

C: Yes.

I: And moral control.

C: Exactly, I feel that public opinion is a... a good thing because here (in China) media have no freedom. Therefore, only by providing such a platform, could we have some free speeches. Of course, Happy Network is sensitive. Some things will be blocked and deleted, especially those negative things about the government. Although we feel antipathy toward this kind of behaviors, we couldn't blame Happy Network because it needs the ISP to operate. If it becomes an anti-government platform, it probably will be banned soon (laugh).

I: But at beginning, you could read some sensitive stuffs in it.

C: A lot of this kind of sensitive topics including some unfair issues. Some are not just directly against the government, but also some unfair things in the society. Everyone knows that it is because of the social system. It does not depend on an individual. Therefore, some people would like to express their sentiments in it. You can see these things every day.

I: Oh, you can read these things every day.

C: Yes, almost every day.

I: When you saw these things, you would pay attention to them.

C: Yes, sometimes I would read this kind of things.

I: What else? You mentioned entertainment, leisure, even public supervision. What else would you use to describe Happy Network?

C: I felt that Happy Network is a (platform), in which you can relatively quickly learn the news that are not covered in other media and what's happening now; you can also know hot issues in the society including some popular words in the Internet or what are the most popular things. In other words, you can quickly know popular trends and words in the contemporary society. In addition, I consider that it is a socialization and communication platform.

I: What platform?

C: It is a socialization and communication platform. These are its major functions. Everyone has leisure time. It (Happy Network) provides a platform for you to follow closely, to express your feelings, and to kill your time. As an online social community, it has relatively complete functions.

I: Do you think that it is related to its number of participants?

C: If it does not have a certain amount of people as its foundation, it...em...it couldn't represent the whole. It is biased not representative.

I: You said that it is biased. What does that mean?

C: It is incomplete.

I: Incomplete.

C: Therefore, from its polls, you could see that it to a certain degree represent most people' opinions toward a particular issue in the society. You could see the percentage of each option. As I see it, because it has a relatively large basis of people, its results to a certain degree are representative. Of course, it has one limitation, which is its limitation of age. Probably people over 40 would not play this.

I: In your mind, what is the age range of users of Happy Network?

C: The majority of the users of Happy Network should be under 40. I felt that people whose ages are between 15 and 35 are major players of web games.

Older people may not focus on the games in the site because of their family responsibility including taking care of children, family, and other chores.

I: For brands in Happy Network, do you have any other experiences or feelings that you want share with me?

C: For brands (in Happy Network), I felt that they should know our age group and don't offer something that does not match with us. You sell houses (in Happy Network). Who will see your houses? It is that they should pay attention to the major consumers among our group. When they know our position (in the market), they could promote some products that we are acceptable.

I: In other words, brands must meet your age group's needs.

C: It should know that most of us, em, I don't say that there are no people over 40 years old, but the number is relatively small. Therefore, most of us are within the age range. That our income is at what status and what our situation is, represent the majority. We will not pay attention to luxury consumption. Placed brands should be positioned to match our age group.

I: Have you noticed any brands that are not appropriate?

C: I felt that probably those brands of cars. I am not saying that there is no person who has excellent work ability (who can afford a car), but those a few. They are not representative of the mass. If you choose to advertise (in Happy Network), you have to have a very clear positioning.

I: What is your feeling about this kind of advertising (product placement)?

C: For this kind of advertising (product placement), first we certainly know it is advertising, and then we can judge pretty quickly whether or not it is possible for us to buy these things.

I: So you felt that...

C: Yes, when these things come out, I know they are advertising, but they are not relevant to me.

I: So relevance is also important to you.

C: For example, if it places a juice, I would like to try it. But if it places a car, how can I try it?

I: (laugh) In addition to what you said before, that is, the products fit your age group and satisfy your relevant needs. What else do you want to say?

C: I felt that they should discover everybody's possible consumptions. Take me for instance; I just mentioned the organization of group buy. I consider it is appropriate. For example, we are eating here today. The average cost is about 50 yuan per person. If today they offer a group buy project, for example, before a certain date, you come here to consume and probably only need to pay half of the price. Of course, it is possible that it is only effective for a specific combo. But this is what we are willing to try. Suppose you have time, this place is not far from your home or company, and you have the need for eating or if you don't have one, you probably will be motivated, (you will choose to consume here) because it will not influence your income and your disposable money. Additionally, it also posted some Yoga classes. For example, if we want take a Yoga class for three months or a half year, the cost is from 500 to 1000 yuan. However, if today it has a group-buy of 100 yuan, of course, it would have a relatively short period, two weeks or one month, if I see it, probably I would be willing to try. Probably I don't have such a need. However, when I see this advertisement, I would like to try. So it should pay more attention to this age group's needs and their possible consumptions. If it could achieve something in this aspect, it would be good.

I: You mentioned your age group. What do you think about your age group?

C: Actually, people in our age have some characteristics. For example, our income is not so little. In other words, our income is not just enough for food and clothing. Because we have disposable income, we would like to seek something of petty bourgeoisie, such as some upscale restaurants. Probably these restaurants are expensive. But if they have promotions, we would like to go. In addition, we would like to try some new stuffs or fashionable activities. If this kind of things is promoted at Happy Network, we would accept. Therefore, they should focus on the things that we like.

I: You mentioned that your age group has two characteristics. The one is that you income is not so constraint. What is the other one?

C: First of all, we have disposable income.

I: Yes.

C: Second, we would like to spend money on something that we are interested in or the whole group is interested in. For example, there is something popular among us. If I have the (consumption) ability and it will not influence my normal life, then I would like to try.

I: Could you please tell me an example of something that the whole group is interested in?

C: For example, currently board games are very popular. There are many new launched stores of board games. If everybody is playing board games, then you would like to play as well. However, since I have been there before, I don't know which store is good. If these stores advertise (in Happy Network) and let me know their facilities and price, probably tomorrow I will invite some friends go to one of these stores.

I: So it (Happy Network) also offers you some useful information.

C: Yes, I felt that it could add more useful information for our daily lives.

I: Anything else?

C: No.

I: Thank you so much for your time. What you said is very useful for my research. If I have any other questions or follow-up questions, probably I will contact you. Could you kind enough to write your email for me?

C: No problem. I write it for you.

Appendix C

The Researcher's Interpretations: A Sensitive Scholar's Perception

Originally from China, the primary researcher was a doctoral student of advertising, at a southern U.S. university, in her mid-30s. Prior to her doctoral study, she earned two master degrees in communication and advertising, respectively. She had two years of industry work experience as a marketing specialist, as well as a two-year teaching and research experience in a Chinese university. She became a registered user of Happy Network in January 2009 and occasionally used the website. As mentioned previously, a bracketing interview was conducted to elicit the investigator's own account of her life experiences with the phenomenon of interest and to make her aware of particular biases and assumptions she may bring to the research situation and how these biases and assumptions may potentially interfere with the open-ended interviewing process. In general, the investigator demonstrated a high degree of scholarly sensitivity toward the specific phenomenon. She interpreted Happy Network and product placement mainly from the perspective of an advertising researcher whose major concern was to discover the nature, characteristics, and theories behind the phenomenon. In other words, her interpretations displayed professional and academic comments, thoughts, evaluations, and theorizations rather than pure descriptions of first-person experiences. From the bracketing interview, she seemed highly conscious of her role as a researcher. As she stated clearly, one

of her own purposes for using Happy Network was to do research, to become a participant-observer.

Oh, yes, I would also like to tell you this. At that time, I chose to use the website was because I am a scholar who pays close attention to new things or new phenomena. So I felt that at that time another purpose for me to use the website is to do research. I went to the website is not merely for relaxation and entertainment, but also for my future research. Actually, I considered that it is probably a scholar's sensitivity. Because I felt that this (website) probably would become my future research topic, then I chose to use it. That is it.

Later on, she further explained her research purpose in more details through the following quotes:

Because...em ...this site is a new type of website in China, you know, it is a combination of games, communication, and socialization. So I am wondering what the characteristics of this site are; why it is attractive; and why so many people choose to use this website. In other words, as a new platform, what is its value? Why do people like to play on it? As a scholar, I consider that it is important to experience the site in person. If you are a pure observer or you don't have the first-hand experiences, at least a basic understanding of it, I felt that it would be hard for you to do some in-depth research.

It seems that the primary researcher has a very strong research objective when she uses the website. When discussing advertising on the website, she emphasized her sensitivity again. Due to her sensitivity, she was able to catch all advertising forms appearing on the website, detect changes in posted advertisements, and notice the design and copy of those advertisements. Because of her academic background, she tended to treat advertising as a research object, and displayed a neutral attitude toward it.

Because I am an advertising researcher, I am very sensitive (to advertising). If there was any advertising information (on the site), I would definitely notice it. ... When I saw it, I knew it was an advertisement. ... I didn't have any favorable feeling toward it; neither did I have a negative evaluation on it. Em...if the advertisement was good, for example, the color was distinctive, or the slogan was attractive, then I might categorize it as a good advertisement.

... Every time when I logged onto the website, I always checked the advertisement on the login page. So if the advertisement was changed that day, I would immediately catch it.

Her scholarly sensitivity was also embedded in her interpretations of product placements. For her, product placements are just “another advertisement”.

However, as a researcher, she was eager to know consumers’ perceptions and interpretations of product placement in this particular context. As was her professional habit, she raised several questions regarding consumers’ interpretations and attempted to answer them from a consumer’s perspective.

When I was playing (games), I kept thinking if it is a smart and wise way to do (product placement). You know that I am sensitive. So more than often I analyzed it from a professional perspective. It is hard for me to evaluate advertising from a pure consumer’s perspective because you always have a knowledge bag in your mind. It is hard to throw it away. Therefore, consciously or unconsciously, I am always asking questions such as: Is this advertising good? Is it attractive to consumers? What attitude a consumer would have toward this kind of advertising? Sometimes I even think about whether or not consumers will notice that it is an advertisement. In other words, I am wondering if they are sensitive enough to know it is an advertisement. So as you see, most of the time, I try to figure out how consumers think about it. If I see it, just like I told you before, I would say “Oh, it is another advertisement.”

As a sensitive advertising scholar, she also tried to reveal the nature and design of product placements in the context of SNSs and analyze the advertising strategies for those brands. According to her, the design of product placements in the games of SNSs is based on users’ psychological needs for competition and desires to excel above others, and its success comes from the incentives attached to brands to facilitate playing games. At the same time, she considered the advertising strategy for those brands to be appropriate in that the embedded brands conform with the media platform as well as the target consumers.

In order to encourage users to pay attention to advertised brands, the website introduced an incentive mechanism. For example, if you send “Mengniu” milk (the advertised brand), you will get 200 yuan, while you send other milk, you can only earn 100 yuan. ... You know, when playing games, people are always competing with each other. Because you play with your friends, you may check how much you earn and how much he or she earns; you may also check what other people’s levels are and compared those with yours. You surely have a desire of excelling others. I think the designs of product placements in the website caught this kind of psychological needs among users. ... The users of this website are relatively upscale, most of who are office workers. So why did KFC choose to advertise on this website? Because it wants to attract this group of people to eat its “spicy wings” ... Its advertising strategy is fashion and youth oriented. This strategy fit with its target consumers. This is why KFC chose to advertise on this website.

Based on her understanding, the main effect of product placement is brand awareness, that is, consumers can “at least remember that particular brand” in the context of SSN through placements. In her life world, the key word of the lived meanings of product placement is “appropriateness” (Gould and Gupta 2006), which refers to necessity, relevance, and prominence (Cowley and Barron 2008). Necessity means “in a specific context, whether or not it is necessary to use that brand.” Relevance refers to embedded brands’ “match” with a specific environment. Prominence suggests that placed brands are “easily to be noticed”.

I think they placed brands in games is to enhance brand impression. If you play the game every day, brand awareness will enhance a lot. ... At least, you can remember that particular brand. I guess you should remember it. ... I consider they (brands and games) match with each other. For example, Lohas juice was placed in Happy Garden; Mengniu milk was embedded in Happy Farm; and now they released Happy Restaurant and Pizza Hut was in it. In other words, they (brands and games) have a certain degree of relevance.... Because movies and TV dramas have plots, consumers may not be able to notice the placed brands. However, the embedded brands in games are easily to be noticed.

As Gurwitsch (1974) indicated, the basis for human beings to apprehend and interpret cultural world is the “stock of knowledge at hand.” The primary

researcher's interpretations of the SNS and product placements in this particular context strongly reflect her "stock of knowledge" and clearly signify her social role as an advertising researcher. In her life world, her personal experiences indicated three assumptions regarding the usage of SNS: first, Happy Network is a place for relaxation and entertainment; second, Happy Network is a place for reconnecting with previous or long-lost friends; and, third, Happy Network is an interesting phenomenon that is worthy of further study. Regarding product placements in the context of SNS, her interpretations also reveal a couple of assumptions: first, similar to product placement in other media platforms, the central effect of product placements in SNSs is to enhance brand awareness; and, second, for a product placement to be effective in the context of an SNS, the embedded brands should be appropriate in terms of necessity, relevance, and prominence. By acknowledging her own assumptions toward the phenomenon of interest, she was attempting to achieve the "Epoche" status when conducting interviews and analyzing data. In other words, during the whole process, she was constantly reflecting her assumptions, beliefs, and biases in order to compare those with the participants' realities and try to make sure the interpretations came mainly from the perspectives of her study-participants.

VITA

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