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THAI GAMERS' ATTITUDE TOWARD PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN ONLINE GAMES

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Abstract

Marketers have been more attentive to advertisement in online games. Product placement via movies or news reports have been recognized; however, little is known about the placement in Thai online games. This study thus attempts to (1) report the profile of Thai online gamers, (2) explore their attitude toward in-game placement, and (3) analyze their awareness and product recall.

Based on the 253 number of usable questionnaires, Thai online gamers are mainly young, male students, spending 2-9 hours a day playing the games. They perceived congruence between game content and in-game placement and did not object to have commercials in the games. Although 86% of the samples were aware of in-game placement, their product recall is fairly low.

In addition to extending insight into online advertisement in the context of Thai gamers, marketers could arrange a more proper marketing plan based on these results.

Keywords: Thai gamers, online games, product placement, attitude

Problem statement

One of advertising tools, product placement is a marketing technique through which firms tangentially display their marketing messages through different channels. Television viewers may have noticed a can of soda on an anchor's desk during a news broadcast or an instruction on how to brew coffee using a new coffee maker one soap opera. Indeed, the placement in entertainment media is an important alternative to attract one's attention since advances in communication technologies have made it far difficult for marketers to deliver message via traditional media [10, 12]. While the Internet may have been the marketers' choices, the decline in general online advertising efficiency, such as the numbers of click on banners, urges them to consider new areas on this virtual word. Consequently, product placement has expanded to cover the realm of online games [9, 12, 16].

The product placement in online games could be classified into two major categories: advergaming and in-game placement [1, 2, 5, 6].

Advergame is the practice where firms develop a game associated heavily to products or services. For example, Cheetos snacks had created two advergaming in 1992 in order to draw the target's attention [26]. In-game placement is the practice where firms present their product campaign as decoration in a computer game. For example, players of SWAT5 may encounter a display of a poster of Tripping the Rift hanging on the game's wall [19] or Ford and Nike agreed in 2007 to display their commercials in four most popular video games including Nintendo's Wii or Sony's playstation [13]. These two product placement techniques are much similar in terms of applying computer games for marketing purposes. However, the main difference is that advergame is the specific game intended to draw target's attention to the product while in-game engages players in online games that have product message appearing in a few scenes of the games. Considering the general concept of product placement in which marketing messages are delivered as part of television programs, news reports, movies, or soccer match, the in-game placement idea is theoretically similar to the concept of product placement than advergame [1, 3]. As such, in-game advertisement is the study's focal interest.

Previous research has contended the reason that in-game placement contributes to success in advertisement [9, 12, 15, 16]. First, the presentation of the product message is not the main interest. Gamers still attend to the game consciously. They are then likely to perceive the message with no serious objection [12]. They are even able to have moderately high product recall [7]. Second, since the message display is rather peripheral, gamers will not develop negative reaction toward it. Based on Lee and Faber's [12, p. 75] arguments, should gamers easily recognize the message content, "[it could] activates [their] skepticism ..., which can [then] serve to counteract and limit persuasive effects". Third, interactivity between players and game they play and that among players present a unique opportunity to in-game placement, as compared to traditional placement. Games are thus more lively and more persuasive [9, 16]. This interactivity also lead gamers to feel or even to control the placement, consequently enhancing gamers' positive attitude not only toward the games but also toward the product placed in them [15, 16]. According to Kureshi and Sood [9, p. 256], gamers

often perceive “realism to the game” and this could lead to their favorable attitude toward the placement. Finally, gamers will always have different experience every time they play games. This difference include a player’s choices of how to play games or an array of their responses to these game activities. It would lead to various exciting reactions once the same game is played, even alone or in groups. This variation is so inviting that players may come back and then much often expose to the commercial placed in the games.

Gaming industry has proliferated worldwide. Yang and colleagues [24] had estimated that the number of gamers have increased nearly 50% a year since 2004. eMarketer [25] contends that the spending on the US in-game advertising in 2013 will be US\$ 681 millions, as compared to US\$ 443 millions in 2009. The increase is about 75%. In addition, the online games are expanding to cover a mobile platform. Wood [26] estimates high increase in the mobile gaming end user revenue worldwide from US\$ 4.7 billions in 2009 to 11.4 billions in 2014.

In Thailand, gaming and animation industry has directly received a considerable support from the government [21]. The software industry promotion agency (SIPA) has predicted that the gaming industry will nearly double in size from 9,086 million baht (or about US\$ 309,000) in 2008 to 15,687 million baht (or about US\$ 533,400) in 2013. Although this magnitude is relatively small, the growth is exceeding that in neighboring countries including Philippines or Indonesia.

Given the large proliferation, there have been research attempts to examine this online games and their implications to advertisement. Based on a survey in a Midwestern US city, Nelson and coworkers [15, 16] discovered a profile of online gamers: 3 in 4 being men in between 18 to 30 years of age. Recruited from residents in Edinburgh, UK, 71% of the gamers in Winkler and Buckner [22] are men and 87% are 20-29 years old. Kureshi and Sood [9] recently reported that male high school and college students between 22-25 years of age accounted for nearly 90% of Indian gamers. Yet, such statistics or these profiles on Thai gamers could not be located.

Research Objectives

Currently, online gaming industry in Thailand has been on the rise in terms of the number of developers and players. Also, the government has recognized this industry and made their effort to provide continuing support [21]. Empirical evidence from previous studies has ascertained (1) in-game placement has a promising future and (2) new business opportunities are waiting for both practitioners and researchers. Despite all these, there

is no public work examining, in the specific context of Thailand, who Thai gamers are, or what would be Thai’s reaction toward in-game placement. This study intends to fill this gap through the following objectives.

1. Describe the profile of Thai online gamers,
2. Examine their attitude, including awareness, toward in-game placement,
3. Analyze their recall of products in in-game placement

Methodology

This section discusses five methodological issues: population and samples; instrument; data collection execution; validity and reliability issues; and data analysis framework.

Population and Samples

Given this research’s main concern, the population must be Thai online gamers. Yet, there is no complete frame from which samples could be systematically drawn. Lack of this frame prevents us from using probability sampling. As such, we adopted purposive non-probability sampling technique. Following Sudman’s (1976) recommendation together with this research’s descriptive approach, the number of samples should be in the range of 200-500 units. Consequently, we strived to get at most 500 samples. Initially, we opted for an online channel since most of the gamers must often be online. According to survey experts’ concern on a response rate [4, 11]; however, we ultimately adopted both online and traditional (paper-based) channels. To reach only Thai gamers, the language in the survey instrument is Thai.

Instrument

To keep pace with current Thai gaming situation, we invited 15 Thai online gamers for an interview. It was casual, and open-ended and the details were recorded. Main results from the interview were (1) names of online games popular among Thai players, (2) few statements of attitudes toward the placement and those of purposes for which games are played, and (3) gamers’ hangout places or webboards. The first two results are for questionnaire development and the third is for its distribution.

Because of our intent to employ both online and offline questionnaires, these two versions must be identical. The questionnaire has four parts. The first part consists of screening questions (1) to ensure ones are eligible samples and (2) to ask them how often they play games for four previously elicited purposes. The second part measures their ability to recall products placed in six most popular

online games: Ragnarok online, Lineage II, Zhu Xian, Pangya, FIFA online 2 and Special Force. Aware that samples may enjoy other games, one open-ended item was provided. The third section collected a sample's attitude toward the game he or she had enjoyed most often. The final part gathered samples' demographics.

Data Collection Execution

We approached samples via two main channels. First, we posted a call for participation in various webboards. Should they agree to take part in this study, they would simply click on a link embedded in the call announcement. Second, we distributed the questionnaires at the locations, identified by the interviewees. Such locations include Internet game shops and coffee places. After five weeks of data collection, we were able to receive 562 questionnaires, 435 of which are usable. 182 out of the 435 reported they know nothing about online games or they play no games, leaving us 253 for further analysis.

Reliability and Validity Issues

To respond to this research's objectives, we have made an effort to ensure the finding's reliability and validity. Such effort includes the followings.

We gave high priority to questionnaire development. Based on the interview that helped us to gain current insight into gaming industry in Thailand and previous work [6, 12, 15, 22], all questionnaire items were carefully crafted. Two rounds of pretest were used to ensure understandability. We evaluated the system that facilitated the online data collection to guarantee robustness and proper conversion to the data set with SPSS readability. Through the traditional channel, we paid close attention to the coding process. So, the questionnaire responses are recorded in the same format of those from the online channel.

We are aware of many popular online games toward which samples may have different attitude. As a result, prior to asking for their attitude, we asked the samples to frame their responses based upon the online game they play most often.

Data Analysis Framework

We used descriptive statistics to report the profile of Thai online gamers, their attitude toward in-game placement and their ability to recall advertised products. Also, we adopted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with principal component extraction and varimax rotation to

examine broader constructs underlying their attitude toward in-game placement.

Results

Quality of Collected Data

Before reporting findings, we would like to present evidence that guarantees acceptable quality of the collected data. The Cronbach's alpha on eight items measuring attitude toward in-game placement is 0.782. This value exceeds the threshold of 0.70, indicating the acceptable reliability of these scales [17].

Demographics of Thai Online Gamers

Table 1 and 2 present important characteristics of Thai online gamers, the highlights of which are as follows:

- Most of them (64%) are men, less than 20 years of age (81%) and about 9 in 10 are still students. While 28% (the largest portion) spend 3-7 hours per week on the Internet, the same portion (27%) spend longer than 21 hours.

- It should not be a surprise that the largest percentage (35%) admitted playing online games as the most frequently-engaged online activity. The second to largest percentage were engaged in entertainment activities. Regarding the length of playing games, 2-9 hours are confirmed by the highest 4 out of 10 samples.

- The most often-cited purpose for which samples enjoy online games is to take a break while to gain higher levels in the games is least cited.

Awareness of, and Attitude toward, In-Game Placement

In Table 1, 86% of the samples were aware of in-game placement. In addition, Table 3 presents descriptive statistics of eight attitude items on which the samples indicated the amount of their agreement. They would rate one if they found the attitude least favorable or five if most favorable. The first two most favorable attitude scales are (1) congruence between game content and in-game advertisement is critical and (2) in-game advertisement does not interrupt game excitement. Their averages are 3.66 and 3.59, respectively. Also, the two least favorable attitude scales are that (1) in-game advertisement adds realism to the games and (2) products placed in games are interesting. Their averages are 2.95 and 3.14, respectively. Based on their skewness and kurtosis statistics reported in Table 3, it is still reasonable to assume that these variables are normally distributed [14].

The interpretation of these two most and two least favorable attitude scales would be that the samples perceive connection between the content in games and that in the advertisement; and the in-game advertisement does not take away the fun of playing games while they believe whether the game is real or interesting is independent from the in-game placement.

Table 1 Profile of Thai online gamers (N=253)

Variables	Overall N(%)
Gender	
Male	162 (64)
Female	91 (36)
Age	
< 20 yrs	205 (81)
21-30	41 (16)
31-40	5 (2)
40+	2 (1)
Highest education	
Less than college	197 (78)
College degree	33 (13)
Master degree or higher	23 (9)
Professions	
Students	216 (85)
Working people	37 (15)
Hours per weeks on Internet	
< 2	34 (13)
3-7	70 (28)
8-14	42 (17)
15-21	39 (15)
>21	68 (27)
Frequently-engaged Internet activities	
Play games	89 (35)
Be entertained	45 (17)
Check email	44 (17)
Search for data	31 (13)
Enjoy messaging	29 (12)
Do online shopping	3 (1)
Others	12 (5)
Hours per weeks playing games	
About 1 hour	48 (19)
2-9	109 (43)
10-19	44 (17)
20-50	30 (12)
>50	22 (9)
Aware of in-game placement	
Yes	218 (86)
No	35 (14)

Such interpretation, however, was made based on the two most and the two least favorable attitude items. Although useful to some extent, the insight may present only small fraction of their common attitude. Consequently, we performed an exploratory factor analysis on these eight attitude items in order to observe broader constructs

underlying the attitude. Table 4 presents results of the analysis that include loadings of the attitude items on the two emerging factors. Both two factors explained about 56% of the total variance among the attitude items. Also, in Table 4, Factor I accounted for 41.3% of the variance. Highest loadings of the five items on this factor reflect characteristics of in-game advertisement. Factor II accounted for 15.0% . Three items loaded highest on this factor indicating the samples' acceptance of in-game placement. One attitude item was not assigned to any of these two factors since its loadings on those factors are ambiguous.

We also inspected the quality of these factor analysis results using Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index and Bartlette's test of sphericity. The KMO index is 0.828, the value of which Kaiser [8, p. 35] considered "meritorious." Also, the statistics of Barlette's (515.069, df=28, p<.000) contends that the two factors parsimoniously and properly underscore Thai's gamers' attitude toward in-game placement.

Recall of Products Placed in Games

Based on 86% of the samples who are aware of in-game placement, we asked (1) in which popular online games they had seen the in-game advertisement and (2) whether they could recall the products in that placement. Among five popular online games, results in Table 5 indicate that 61% of the samples (the largest portion) aware of the placement claimed they had seen it in Ragnarok online, followed by 55% claimed they saw it in Pangya. Only 18% of those aware of the placement had observed products in Zhu Xian.

We further asked these samples to recall what they had seen in the top five popular online games. Results are in Table 6. Only 24%, yet the largest portion, of those aware of products placed on Ragnarok were able to recall the products in this game. About the same proportion (19%) were able to recall those in Special Force. The smallest part (5%) recall products placed in the Zhu Xian game.

Table 2 Frequency of purposes for which samples play online games (1: least frequency and 5: most frequency, N=253)

Purposes	Mean	Standard deviation
Take a break	3.89	0.986
Kill time	3.15	1.168
Meet friends via games	3.12	1.290
Gain games' higher levels	2.78	1.370

Table 3: Attitude toward in-game placement: Descriptive statistics

Attitude Items	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Congruence between game content and in-game advertisement is critical	3.66	0.998	-.557	-.087
In-game advertisement does not interrupt excitement	3.59	1.089	-.398	-.488
Players could recognize in-game advertisement	3.40	1.052	-.371	-.251
In-game advertisement has no effect on how games are played	3.38	1.065	-.258	-.328
In-game advertisement enhance product's image	3.28	0.995	-.255	-.040
It is acceptable to have commercial in games	3.19	0.910	-.289	.004
Products in in-game advertisement are interesting	3.14	1.012	-.188	-.541
In-game advertisement adds realism to games	2.95	0.989	-.145	-.298
Total	3.32	0.639	-.319	-.050

Table 4 Factor analysis results for attitude toward in-game placement

Attitude	Factors	
	I	II
Factor I: Characteristics of in-game advertisement		
In-game advertisement is interesting	.85	.01
In-game placement adds realism to the game	.75	.01
In-game placement enhances product's image	.72	.29
It is acceptable to have commercial in games	.68	.24
Factor II: Acceptance of in-game advertisement		
In-game placement does not interrupt the excitement	.11	.69
In-game placement has no effect on how the game is played	.00	.69
Congruency between game content and in-game advertisement is critical	.29	.68
Percent of Variance Explained	41.3%	15.0% = 56.3%
Not assigned		
Gamers could recognize in-game advertisement	.59	.48

Table 5 Online games on which samples claimed having seen in-game placement (a sample could provide multiple responses and a percentage is based on 218 of those aware of the placement)

Online games	N (%)
Ragnarok online	132 (61)
Pangya	120 (55)
Special force	90 (41)
FIFA online 2	74 (34)
Zhu Xian	40 (18)

Table 6 Proportion of those who could recall products placed in online games

Online games	Number of those aware of product placement in a game	Number of those able to recall products placed in a game (%)*
Ragnarok online	132	32 (24)
Pangya	120	23 (19)
Special force	90	21 (23)
FIFA online 2	74	8 (11)
Zhu Xian	40	2 (5)

* This percentage is based on those aware of product placement in the given game (the number in the proceeding column)

Conclusion and Discussion

Profile of Thai Online Gamers

Based on 253 submitted usable online questionnaires, the profile of Thai online gamers are young male mostly students, spending 2-9 hours a day playing games. About half of the samples spend at most seven hours and the other half spend at least 15 hours on the Internet. To take a break or to kill time are the top two purposes for which they play online games. We wish that there had been previous work examining the profile of Thai online gamers so we could have checked our findings against those. As such, we want to challenge research fellows to have results checked against ours in order to shed complete light on this profile.

Because of no studies exclusively examining Thai gamers profile, we had to juxtapose our results with those in other contexts [7, 9, 15, 16, 22]. Our findings could be another proper empirical evidence to confirm that men at 18-25 years of age are primal online gamers and this statement is also valid in Thai environment.

Thai Online Gamers' Attitude toward In-Game Placement

Results of Thai online gamers' assessment of eight attitude items indicated they are in most favor of (1) congruence between in-game advertisement and game content; and (2) continuing excitement even with the commercial's presence. They are in least favor of (1) realism that in-game advertisement may have added to the games; and (2) attention it may have drawn from gamers. It thus seems that Thai online gamers prefer to observe alignment between content of in-game commercials and that of the games. They seem also to accept that the in-game advertisement is not much interesting and adds no realism to the game but it does not interrupt the fun of playing the games. Least favorable attitude may suggest a certain level of disagreement. Consequently, Thai gamers may see no realism augmented to game content but the placement could be noticeable. These findings are in line with previous work that discovered the gamers' attitude toward in-game placement [6, 7, 27]. Indeed, Nutley [27] recommended that the effective in-game advertising must not be too outstanding. It should rather blend well with the background and should not interrupt the play. Faber and colleagues [6] also remarked that gamers' favorable attitude often lead to their positive attitude toward the brand placed in the game as well as a game sponsor. This further helps firms to properly manage customer relationship.

The factor analysis on these eight attitude items embark on two broader constructs underlying Thai online gamers' perception toward in-game placement. In fact, these results confirmed that they (1) notice characteristics of the commercial placed in games and (2) accept this in-game placement. This study's discovery is also evident in Lee and Faber [12]. They suggested that online media planners, since gamers notice and accept in-game product placement, must be attentive where they place a product in an online game and whether the product is low or high involvement.

Awareness and Recall of In-Game Product Placement

86% of the samples have noticed in-game placement. Ragnarok online is the game in which most of the samples are aware of the placement while Zhu Xian is at the other end. Other than these two are Pangya, Special force, and FIFA online 2, in the descending order of being noticed.

Among those aware of the placement, their recall is fairly low. Among 100 times ones claim to notice in-game placement, only 18 times ones could recall what is noticed. This "low recall" finding came at no surprise, although contrasting a little to what was reported in Glass [7]. Nelson and colleagues [15] discovered those who play online games were not able to recall so well as those who just observe the games being played. Subjects in Yang [24] had low recall if they encountered the entire placement but high recall if they saw just its fraction. Accordingly, firms must come up with the strategy though which only a small fraction of the placed product are visually present. One of the instances is the case that products are placed at the edge of a soccer field but often blocked by soccer players so viewers could see only just part of it. Kureshi and Sood [9] also confirmed that the recall will be high only when the game speed is low. Considering this study's five online games, their speed is fairly fast. This would explain why the recall in this study is somewhat low.

Contribution and Limitation

The study's conclusion leads to its contribution. Theoretically, the findings have extended our insight into in-game product placement in the context of Thai gamers. Such unique conceptual contribution to the Asian context is increasingly manifest [9]. Practically, marketers may reduce uncertainty of their marketing plans through knowledge of Thai online gamers' profile and their fairly positive attitude toward in-game placement. Although Thai gamers' recall is somewhat low, this would prompt practitioners to

stay alert on how to carefully place products in online games.

This study's findings would have had much wider value, should there not have been two major limitations. First, while the results have added to a body of knowledge about online gamers. We are unable to discuss similar implications to other contexts, beside that of Thai players. Consequently, there is a serious call for research on other environments. Second, a large amount of literature has confirmed that product placement in movies or new broadcasting reports has contributed to high product recall [10, 24]. This study's finding of low recall may trigger new effort to investigate a condition under which in-game placement could result in high product recall.

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