

Impact of Playful Ironic Branded Entertainment on Consumer Behavior

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to investigate the impact of playful ironic branded entertainment on consumer behavior (i.e., understanding, attitude toward the brand, attitude toward the branded entertainment, source characteristics, and purchase intention) on a low-involvement product, *Milo*, a chocolate malt beverage. Pre-experimental setting, with static group design, was employed to collect data from 120 undergraduate students. The result indicated that both playful ironic branded entertainment and non-playful ironic branded entertainment gave similar impacts on consumer behavior. Attitude toward the brand was the only sub-variable that the playful ironic branded entertainment produced significantly higher mean score than the non-playful ironic one.

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Introduction

Playful irony has long been used in various media as a rhetorical tool to entertain audiences. It refers to a contrary to what is meant (Lagerwerf, 2007) with an intention to communicate fellowship through humor (Myers-Roy, 1976). Playful irony, in fact, can take many forms and one of the popular forms is mock politeness or the use of impoliteness to express familiarity with group members (Leech, 1983, as cited in Culpeper, 1996). Nevertheless, playful irony is indeed a two-edged sword. On one hand, it can entertain audiences and encourage fellowship among group members. On the other hand, it can also backfire if it is misinterpreted or is used inappropriately in improper contexts.

In Thailand, playful irony has been one of the major rhetorical devices in entertainment industry, especially branded entertainment programs in online media. This is because there is hardly any regulation or oversight regarding online media production at present (NBTC, 2019). The popularity of these

humorous programs among the large amount of the audience has attracted many famous brands to associate themselves with programs or celebrities using playful irony. These brands, as advertising sponsors, generate a huge amount of money in Thai advertising industry. Thailand is the second largest country in terms of online advertising spending in Southeast Asia. The value tends to grow continuously in the next five years and will reach four hundred billion baht in 2020 (Positioning, 2016).

However, playful irony, as mentioned above, is a very risky rhetorical device. The risky nature of playful irony, as a result, has raised the concern about its impacts on every component of consumer behavior. Playful irony, if used appropriately, should produce a positive feeling, which lead to a positive action in the future. However, everything would be in the opposite scenario if playful irony is used inappropriately or misinterpreted. This, as

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a result, could harm the brand in various aspects, such as reputation, sales and stock price. Thus, it is necessary to investigate the reactions of consumers toward playful ironic stimuli.

Humor Appeal

Humor has been studied by many scholars since an ancient time until now. Theorists, such as Aristotle, Freud and Hobbes have intended to define humor over a hundred years (Kavanagh & O'Sullivan, 1999). But it seems the universally accredited definition does not exist (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). However, humor can be defined roughly as the quality in something that makes it funny or amusing; the ability to laugh at things that are amusing (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2019). Gulas and Weinberger (2006) also gave a similar view on humor as the stimuli eliciting an intended or unintended pleasurable effect in a form of subdued or exhilarated laughter. Sternthal and Craig (1974) also defined humor similarly to the previous scholars as heightened arousal, smile and laughter manifested by an audience as a response to a certain message. Importantly, they proposed that humor can be defined mainly based on the examinations of the responses elicited to perceptible stimuli. Elicitation, therefore, becomes a crucial element in defining and classifying humor. According to Speck (1991), humor elicitation can be understood from the mechanism of cognitive, affective, and interpersonal theories.

Because an all-encompassing, generally accepted definition of humor does not exist (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992), humor can be defined differently in various ways. However, the definition based on humor mechanism seems to be the most acceptable one. According to J. M. Suls (1972), incongruity-resolution working together with affective and social/interpersonal theories is the most crucial element in the process. The integration of the three theories can be used as a fundamental element for humorous message taxonomy including comic wit, sentimental humor, sentimental comedy, full comedy and satire (Speck, 1991).

Indeed, satire can be seen as a humorous genre, which frequently employs other rhetorical devices in its elicitation. And those rhetorical devices mainly include sarcasm and irony (Watson, 2011). However, these terms seem to be problematic for everyday usage. People are normally confused with the difference between sarcasm and irony because both of them share the same communication objective, to satirize. But they are, in fact, different from each other based on their linguistics tropes.

According to Lagerwerf (2007), sarcasm occurs when someone makes a negative comment by using positive words about a negative situation. On the other hand, irony basically means saying

something contrary to what is meant (Colebrook, 2004, as cited in Watson, 2011). A continuum ranging from understatement to sarcasm can provide a better understanding of the difference between the terms (Colston & O'Brien, 2000). At the one side stands understatement (making a compliment with less complimentary words) and at the other side stands sarcasm. Irony, further, is located in the middle of this continuum. Along the continuum, the intention to communicate varies from positive (compliment) to negative (insult) (Lagerwerf, 2007). Communicative intent, therefore, is a major element determining the difference between sarcasm and irony. While irony focuses largely on the contrary to what is meant, sarcasm gives an attention on the intention to wound (Watson, 2011).

Branded Entertainment

Branded entertainment refers to "the integration of advertising into entertainment content, whereby brands are embedded into storylines of a film, television program or other entertainment medium. This involves co-creation and collaboration between entertainment media and brands" (Hudson & Hudson, 2006, p. 492). This definition is also consistent with the one defined by Tuomi (2010) as the advanced form of product placement allowing brands to be a part of a storyline or plot. With this technique, it is hard to separate entertainment and advertising from each other because sponsors have a greater degree of control over entertainment production. Further, the study on a definition for branded entertainment by van Loggerenberg, Enslin, and Terblanche-Smit (2019) also gives a similar result. The scholars suggested that branded entertainment is a communication effort to employs a compelling authentic narrative to achieve brand resonance.

The impacts of branded entertainment on consumer behavior have been proved by many scholars. The effects have been found on every component of consumer behavior, including cognition, affection and conation.

In terms of cognition, Fill and Turnbull (2016) suggested that branded entertainment can be seen as an information source for consumers. Consumers develop a better understanding about products or brands through the presentations led by the environment or the celebrities depicted in media vehicles. Furthermore, branded entertainment, especially films and television, can attract higher levels of attention because of vivid presentations in the screens. Branded entertainment, additionally, also increases brand awareness through its high rate of exposure. This is because most of media vehicles can be categorized as mass media, which are released nationwide to a large number of audiences. In fact, branded entertainment does not increase only awareness but also the

levels of brand recall. Balasubramanian (1994) explained this phenomenon through the von Restorff effect, suggesting that any technique that enhances the novelty of specific products or makes them become unexpected tends to be able to increase brand recall. And importantly, one of these techniques include product placement and branded entertainment.

For affection, the sense of realism in branded entertainment seems to be the core element for various impacts on affective component. And the relationship between realism in branded entertainment and affective impacts can be seen in many aspects. Firstly, the positive relationship between consumers' attitude and branded entertainment has been affirmed by many scholars. A study on the placements on radio by van Reijmersdal (2011) found that audiences tended to perceive branded entertainment as more credible than normal advertising because of its realistic characteristic. Fill and Turnbull (2016) also further elaborated similarly that audiences tend to have positive attitude toward branded entertainment because the naturalistic representation of brands in the entertainment vehicles seamlessly strengthens the realism of fictional storylines. Besides attitude toward branded entertainment, scholars also found the positive dimension in consumers' attitude toward the sponsored brands.

According to Pervan and Martin (2002), brand placement in television soap operas is an effective promotional activity if used appropriately. The strong degree of realism from seamless placement in the soap operas positively influences consumers' attitude toward the brand. And in the same time, it provides the real-life experience about the brands through the entertainment media setting (T. Lee, Sung, & Choi, 2011). Branded entertainment, therefore, increases brand salience in the entertainment vehicles, which, consequently, increase consumer engagement (Johnstone & Dodd, 2000). Lastly, branded entertainment also has relationship with sources because the characters that use the products on screen can be seen as an indirect endorsement. In short, the image of the endorsers can be transferred to the products (Sheehan & Guo, 2005). Further, Fill and Turnbull (2016) pointed that the stronger the sense of realism in branded entertainment, the higher the levels of source credibility in the entertainment vehicles.

In relation to conation, Russell (1999) affirmed the existence of the relationship between branded entertainment and intention to purchase. Further, Santos (2009) also found the relationship between different kinds of placements and intention to purchase. The experiments on various famous brands, such as BMW, Puma, and Calvin Klein in her study show a positive relationship between audiovisual placement, plot placement, endorsers and intention to purchase. Furthermore, a study by Sinthamrong and Rompho (2015) on

Webisodes, a platform for branded entertainment, suggested that attitudes toward branded entertainment vary in line with intention to purchase. In other words, consumers tend to have higher levels of intention to purchase once they develop positive attitudes toward branded entertainment.

Consumer Behavior

Consumer behavior is the processes occurred when individuals or groups select, purchase, use or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to serve their needs and desires (Solomon, 2015). This explanation is in line with the definition by (Peter, Olson, & Grunert, 1999) saying that consumer behavior includes cognitive activities, feelings people learn from their experiences, and the actions they perform in the consumption processes. It also involves all the elements in the environment that influence these thoughts, feeling and actions.

In order to understand consumer behavior comprehensively, other concepts influencing consumer behavior will be reviewed together. These concepts include perception, attitude, and decision-making process.

In terms of definition, Assael (2005) defined perception as the process which a person selects, organizes and interprets stimuli interacting with his sensation in a meaningful way (Solomon, 2015). Perception, therefore, works as a worldview for each individual. In fact, individuals process stimuli differently through five senses including sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing together with other personal factors, such as, expectations, needs and experiences (Schiffman, Kanuk, & Wisenblit, 2010; Solomon, 2015). And perception is the first step in consumer behavior process. It occurs before consumers develop their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward products, services, ideas or experiences. Additionally, there are three main steps involved in perceptual process, including perceptual selection, perceptual organization and perceptual interpretation (Assael, 2005).

Attitude is a crucial affective element in consumer behavior. It works as a helping tool for consumers to evaluate stimuli efficiently. Attitude also induces final decision making in purchasing process. In terms of definitions, attitude has been defined differently by many researchers based on concepts and theories they used as a framework.

Fishbein and Ajzen (1975, as cited in, Lutz, 1991) defined attitude under consumer behavior context as a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object. Assael (2005) also defined attitude similarly as a learned propensity to response to objects in favorable or unfavorable ways. These definitions are consistent with the one defined by Lutz (1991) as a positive or negative emotional response toward objects, issues and

behaviors. Solomon (2015) also proposed that attitude is an overall evaluation toward people, objects, advertisements and issues, and attitude tends to be consistent. In conclusion, attitude is the association between objects (persons, issues or behaviors) and overall evaluation toward those objects with either positive or negative direction. And attitudes will be stored in consumers' memory permanently.

Each attitude function can be aroused or modified under different conditions. Katz (1960, as cited in Lutz, 1991) summarized that *utilitarian attitudes* tend to be aroused mostly by activation of needs and salience of cues related with need satisfaction. In terms of change conditions, need deprivation, new needs, shifting rewards and punishments and better paths for need satisfaction play an important role. For *ego-defensive attitudes*, arousal conditions include threats, appeals of hatred and repressed impulses, rise in frustrations and the use of authoritarian suggestion. In order to elicit change, removal of threats, catharsis and development of self-insight are crucial conditions. *Value-expressive attitudes*, on the other hand, will be aroused by salience of cues associated with values, appeals to individual to reassert self-image and ambiguities threatening self-concept. Furthermore, they can be changed under three important conditions, including dissatisfaction with self, greater preference of new attitude toward the self, control of all environmental supports to undermine old value. In terms of *knowledge attitudes*, they can be aroused by reinstatement of cues associated with old problem or of old problem itself. And will be changed under two conditions, which are ambiguity created by new information or change in environment and more meaning fun information about problems.

Besides conditions mentioned above, attitudes can also be influenced by information providers or sources. Sources consist of two main characteristics including source credibility and source attractiveness (Solomon, 2015). And both characteristics determine the effectiveness of sources.

Credibility refers to an expertise, objectivity, or trustworthiness of a communicator (Solomon, 2015). It is also defined as the extent to which a source or the addressor is believable (Adler, Rodman, & Du Pré, 2016). In other words, credibility stands for consumers' beliefs about an addressor's competency as an information provider involving in an evaluation process. Further, Hovland and Weiss (1951) suggested that credibility composes of two dimensions, which are source expertise and trustworthiness. Many researchers have found a significance influence of these two dimensions on advertising's effectiveness. For example, Cheung, Lee, and Rabjohn (2008) found a significant influence between source expertise and information adoption. This finding is

consistent with the results found by Braunsberger and Munch (1998) and Maddux and Rogers (1980) said that expert influencers are likely to be more persuasive and influential than non-expert influencers. In addition, consumer's attitude toward the source can be positively influenced by expert influencers (Maddux & Rogers, 1980). In terms of trustworthiness, Ohanian (1990) found that the message will become more persuasive, and the consumers tend to feel more involved if they perceive a strong degree of trustworthiness in influencers. Schiffman and Kanuk (2004) also suggested that trustworthiness is a crucial element contributing to the success of influencer marketing by brands.

Source attractiveness refers to the perceived social value of a communicator. This value involves the person's physical appearance, personality, social status or similarity to the receiver (Solomon, 2015). Source attractiveness consists of two main dimensions including similarity and likeability. Similarly to source credibility, many researchers have also proved a significance influence of these two dimensions on advertising's effectiveness. Erdogan (1999) and McGuire (1985) found that similarity between consumers and influencers is a key to enhance persuasion. Further, G. Belch and M. Belch (2003) also mentioned that similarity works as a connecting bridge for consumers, influencers and brands. Once consumers develop a bond with influencers, the established bond is likely to be transferred to the promoted brands as well. Kiecker and Cowles (2002) also suggested that similarity is a factor contributing to positive evaluation, information acceptance and information sharing. Moreover, consumers who share similar characteristics tend to interact with each other more because of "like me" principle (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). For likability, a positive relationship with attitude persuasion is found. According to Jain and Posavac (2001) likability positively results in the effectiveness of message because it intensifies consumers' attention, contributing to brand and message recall. Chaiken (1980) and O'hara, Netemeyer, and Burton (1991) also found similar conclusions saying that the stronger the likability is, the greater the persuasion chances are.

In fact, sources are not the only factor playing an important role in attitude change, but also messages. (Solomon, 2015) proposed that messages persuade consumers through their rationality and different appeals, including sex, humor and fear. According to the Elaboration likelihood model (ELM), the levels of involvement based on the degree of perceived risk are the factor determining whether the rationality or emotional appeals, will be selected as a major persuasion route (Assael, 2005). Consumers tend to take the central route of persuasion under high-involvement situations, where the degree of perceived risk is high. On the other hand, they tend to take the peripheral route

under low-involvement conditions, where the degree of perceived risk is low (Solomon, 2015).

Solomon (2015) also explained that the central route to persuasion focuses on the arguments developed by marketers and cognitive responses from consumers. The quality of arguments, therefore, is the center of attention. Furthermore, consumers tend to develop standard hierarchy of effects under central route indicating that consumers begin the process by carefully forming and evaluating beliefs and attitudes, which function as a guidance for future behaviors. On the other hand, the peripheral route to persuasion emphasizes the paradox of low involvement saying that consumers tend to focus more on the overall presentation of the products rather than the products themselves under low involvement conditions. Hence, it focuses on peripheral cues surrounding the actual messages, such as, package design, attractiveness and credibility of the sources. However, it is important to keep in mind that the same communications variable can be both a central and peripheral cue under different situations. For example, a physical attractive model could be considered as a peripheral cue in a cosmetic commercial. However, her beauty could become a central cue for a beauty product aiming to enhance attractiveness.

Method

This study was aimed to examine the impact of playful ironic branded entertainments on consumer behavior with a focus on a low-involvement product. In order to achieve the study goal, the research, therefore, was conducted using a pre-experimental approach, with static group design.

One hundred and twenty undergraduate students from Thammasat University, aged between 18 and 23 years old, were selected as the participants for the study. This was because students were major target audience for branded entertainment programs (Thairath Online, 2018). The study employed probability sampling method in the form of simple random, so that it could avoid bias in participant selection process. The names of the participants were put on a list and were randomized by Microsoft Excel in order to divide them into two separated group, consisting of 60 members each. And each group received different treatments during the experiment.

Treatments

This study offered two different treatments for respondents in two separated groups, experimental group and control group. Those who were in the experimental group watched the playful ironic branded entertainment while those who were in the control group watched the non-playful ironic branded entertainment. In order to maintain the reliability of the experiment, both treatments were selected from branded entertainment videos with the same low-involvement product from the same brand.

Stimulus development and selection

The selection process of branded entertainment videos used as stimuli in the study is as follows. As mentioned in the previous section, the stimuli included playful ironic branded entertainment and non-playful ironic branded entertainment. These stimuli were firstly selected from various branded entertainment videos in YouTube, but only eight of them were chosen as candidates and were later grouped in pairs of playful ironic and non-playful ironic branded entertainment videos representing the same products from the same brands.

After having been initially selected by the researcher, all selected videos were reviewed by two experts including an academican and a practitioner in the marketing communications field in order to ensure validity and credibility of the stimuli. In the selection process done by the experts, four videos of the two brands, including *Mille* (cosmetic) and *ROV* (MOBA game), were eliminated because they did not reach the imposed qualifications. Finally, the other four approved videos of *FoodPanda* (food delivery service) and *Milo* (chocolate malt beverage) were later edited accordingly with the recommendations from the experts so that the videos became valid, credible, and engaging.

Video and brand selection

The two approved playful ironic branded entertainment videos, *FoodPanda* (food delivery service) and *Milo* (chocolate malt beverage) were examined in a pre-test on twenty undergraduate students in order to find the pair used in the real study. The pairs were from *Imtips* (playful irony) and *Dhepleela* (non-playful irony) channels for *Food Panda*, and *Imtips* (playful irony) and *Softpomz* (non-playful irony) channels for *Milo*. Then, only the one with the highest mean was selected together with its pair, non-playful ironic branded entertainment video representing the same product from the same brand. To perform the pre-test, the twenty participants were asked to rate their perceptions on the degrees of playful irony and involvement in the product in the videos. The degree of playful irony in branded entertainment videos was asked through a set of questions

consisting of three five-point Likert scale items ranging from one, as totally disagree, to five, as totally agree. And the degree of involvement in the product in videos was measured through a question with four five-point semantic differential scale items ranging from one, as totally disagree, and five, as totally agree.

Although they were not significantly different from each other in terms of the degree of playful irony, *FoodPanda* must be eliminated because it failed to pass the involvement level. In order to perform the involvement level check, the four five-point semantic differential scale items were used to measure the perceived degree of product involvement together with one-sample *t*-test. The mean score of *Food Panda* was 2.80 ($SD = 0.87$) while the *Milo's* one was 2.10 ($SD = 0.67$). Although the mean of *Food Panda* seemed to be higher than *Milo's*, one-sample *t*-test suggested that it was not significantly lower than the test value of 3.00 ($t[9] = -4.19, p > .05$). Meanwhile, *Milo* showed the opposite result as the test confirmed that its mean score was significantly lower than the test value of 3.00 ($t[9] = -0.73, p < .05$). As a result, *Milo* (chocolate malt beverage) was selected as the brand to test in the real study.

Mean ratings were calculated for the two videos representing different brands. In terms of the degree of playful irony in the videos, both brands were mostly rated with high scores. The total mean score of *Food Panda* was 4.20 ($SD = 0.80$) while the one of *Milo* was 4.10 ($SD = 0.72$). Independent sample *t*-test, nevertheless, suggested that they were not significantly different ($t[18] = 0.29, p > .05$). This, hence, implied that the participants did not perceive the degree of playful irony in both videos of the two brands differently.

Questionnaire and variable measurement

For variable measurement, understanding was measured with three five-point Likert scale items developed by Lagerwerf (2007), with the reliability of .68. The participants were asked to rate their degree of agreement ranging from one, as strongly disagree, to five, as strongly agree. Further, attitude toward the branded entertainment was measured by the adapted version of four five-point bipolar semantic differential scale items by Mitchell and Olson (1981), with the reliability score of .88. The participants were asked to rate their degree of agreement, ranging from one, as strongly disagree, to five, as strongly agree. In terms of attitude toward the brand, the variable was measured by using five-point bipolar semantic differential scale developed by MacKenzie et al. (1986). The scale consisted of four items with reliability score of .85. The participants were asked to rate their degree of agreement ranging from one, as strongly disagree, to five, as strongly agree. Next, Source characteristics consist of two dimensions, source credibility and source attractiveness. In terms

of *source credibility*, the dimension can be divided further into two sub-dimensions, including expertise and trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990). Both of the characteristics were measured by five-point bipolar semantic differential scale. The scale was originally developed by Ohanian (1990), with the reliability score of .93 (Ballantine & Yeung, 2015). Lastly, purchase intention was measured by five-point Likert scale originally developed by Putrevu and Lord (1994), and Taylor and Baker (1994). And the reliability score of the scale has been proved by these previous studies at .91. The scale was slightly adjusted from the original version and included five items, asking the participants to rate their degree of agreement. The range on the scale started from one, as strongly disagree, to five, strongly agree.

Research procedures

About research procedures, the researchers chose a group of 120 undergraduate students from Thammasat University in Bangkok in order to perform the test. Then, the researchers created the name list of all participants and randomized them into two equal groups as A1, and A2 by using Microsoft Excel. After divided into groups, the participants were asked to join LINE groups accordingly with the group they belonged to as shown in Microsoft Excel. Next, the researchers and the research assistant concealed the true objective of the test in order to avoid bias. This was done by informing the students that the researchers and the research assistant were marketers, who were doing a research for a marketing company in order to gain consumer insight for a new product. Later, the researchers gave a brief introduction about irony and the structure of the questionnaire for the students in the experimental group (group A1), and later passed the questionnaires, created by Google Forms, to them. In the same time, the research assistant also gave a brief introduction about the structure of the questionnaire for the students in the control group (group A2), and later passed them the questionnaires, created by Google Forms, to them. After the participants finished answering, the researchers and the research assistant provided a debriefing and thanks them for collaboration.

In this study, Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows was used as a major tool to analyze the collected data. In order to compare the results from different groups, independent samples *t*-test was implemented, with the significance level of 95.0%.

Findings

There were total 120 participants in the experiment, which equally divided into two groups of 60 people each. Therefore, there were 60 participants who watched the ironic branded entertainment on a low-involvement product, *Milo*, and the other 60 participants, who watch non-playful ironic branded entertainment from the same brand. In terms of the gender, female was obviously the majority of the sample with 102 participants from the total number of 120, accounting for 85.0%. About the age, the oldest participant was 23 years old while the youngest ones were 18 years old. According to the data, the ages of the participants could be divided into two groups, which were 18-20, and 21-23. Most of the participants were in the range of 18-20 years old, accounted for 55.8 percent of the whole sample while the rest were between 21 and 23 years old, accounted for 44.2 percent.

Understanding

The mean scores of playful-ironic branded entertainment and non-playful ironic branded entertainment were compared with independent sample *t*-test to explore if there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups. After computed, the result suggested that the two groups were not significantly different ($t [118] = 1.54, p > .05$) although the control group ($M = 4.00, SD = 0.69$) showed a greater mean score than the other ($M = 3.78, SD = 0.87$). This, therefore, implied that the participants equally understand the product information regardless of the rhetorical device they experienced.

Attitude toward the branded entertainment

For attitude toward the branded entertainment, the mean score of the experimental group ($M = 3.99, SD = 0.63$) was slightly greater than the control group ($M = 3.82, SD = 0.79$). However, the mean scores of both the experimental and control groups were not significantly different from each other ($t [118] = -1.27, p > .05$). In other words, the participants in both groups held positive attitudes toward the branded entertainment at the same degree.

Attitude toward the brand

Although the mean scores of the two groups on attitude toward the brand seemed not to be different, they were statistically significantly different from one another ($t [120] = -2.33, p < .05$). The experimental group had a larger mean score ($M = 4.09, SD = 0.63$) than the one of the control group ($M = 3.79, SD = 0.76$). This suggested that the participants in the experimental group tended to slightly develop a stronger favorable attitude toward the brand than the other.

Source characteristics

The mean scores of the two groups were almost the same for this sub-variable even though the experimental group had a slightly greater mean score ($M = 3.36, SD = 0.58$) than the control group's score ($M = 3.33, SD = 0.64$). Plus, independent sample *t*-test revealed that there was no significant difference between those who watched playful ironic and non-playful ironic branded entertainments ($t [118] = -.24, p > .05$). This concluded that the participants equally appreciated the celebrities, *Ben Chalatit*, the playful ironic program host of *ImTips* channel and *Softpomz*, the non-playful ironic program host of *Softpomz* channel.

Purchase intention

The result revealed that the experimental group ($M = 3.90, SD = 0.81$) had a greater mean score than the control group ($M = 3.75, SD = 0.77$). However, an independent sample *t*-test did not suggest any significant difference between the two groups ($t [120] = -1.05, p > .05$). The result, therefore, indicated the equal impact of both playful ironic and non-playful ironic branded entertainments on the purchase intention of the participants.

To conclude, the study found that playful ironic branded entertainment had a slightly greater impact on consumer behavior than the non-playful ironic one did. This was because a significant difference was found in the attitude toward the brand as described in the previous section. Although the other sub-variables, including understanding, attitude toward the branded entertainment, source characteristics, and purchase intention, were not statistically significantly different, the hypothesis, thus, was partially supported

Table 1 Summary of Means, Standard Deviations, and *t*-tests

Sub-variables	Experimental Group		Control Group		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Understanding	3.78	0.87	4.00	0.69	1.54	.12
Attitude toward the branded entertainment	3.99	0.63	3.82	0.79	-1.27	.20
Attitude toward the brand	4.09	0.63	3.79	0.76	-2.33	.02
Source characteristics	3.36	0.58	3.33	0.64	-0.24	.80
Purchase intention	3.90	0.81	3.75	0.77	-1.05	.29

Discussions

Generally, playful ironic branded entertainment and its counterpart gave a very similar impact on consumer behavior. According to the result, attitude toward the brand was the only sub-variable, proved to have a statistically higher mean score when compared to the non-playful ironic one. Although understanding, attitude toward the branded entertainment, source characteristics, and purchase intention also recorded high mean scores, they were not statistically different. Playful ironic branded entertainment itself, therefore, seemed to partially impact consumer behavior at a certain degree.

Understanding

Playful ironic branded entertainment video received the high mean score on understanding at 3.78. The result seems to be consistent with previous studies about the impact of playful irony on the cognitive process of the audience. According to Donnelly (2002), incongruity elements in playful irony encourages the audience to process the message by linking the punchline with other playful cues. This, as a result, leads to higher degrees of attention, and the willingness to learn product information (Pehlivan et al., 2011).

However, when compared to the non-playful ironic branded entertainment, there was no statistically significant difference. This could be because non-playful ironic branded entertainment also received high mean score at a similar degree at 4.00. The result, therefore, does not only suggest the limited effect of playful irony on understanding but also put a focus on other possible factors, especially branded entertainment themselves.

In fact, the study by Lagerwerf (2007) also found the similar result about the impact of irony on understanding. In this study on irony and sarcasm in advertisement, he found that irony barely impacted the quality of understanding the participants had toward the treatments. In his opinion, the small impact was the consequence of the way he defined the term 'understanding' as individual perception on advertising. In this study and also this study, understanding can be divided into three dimensions as the clarity, informativeness, and appropriateness. These dimensions together with the overtly presented commercial intent in advertising or branded entertainment, as a result, can be seen as a possible factor forbidding an ironic effect.

In case of *Milo*, since both playful ironic branded entertainment and non-playful ironic one treated the brand as the main focus of the program, the commercial intention in the videos was also obvious. Therefore, the participants might not necessarily take much playful irony in their considerations when evaluating the understanding they had on the brand.

In addition, the resembling results of the two groups can be elaborately explained by the type of the product itself. According to Solomon (2015), *Milo* can be categorized as a low-involvement product, which is simple and can be learnt easily. Furthermore, *Milo* is a well-known brand that Thai consumers have known and have experienced for a very long time. In fact, *Milo* has been existing in Thai market for 63 years already (Marketing-Oops!, 2016). The brand has grown successfully until now as it was ranked as the second largest chocolate-malt-beverage brand in Thailand, accounting for one-third of the whole market share (Long-tun-man, 2017).

Indeed, the long history of *Milo* can be seen as a beneficial opportunity for the participants to continuously learn about *Milo*, and its product. And as explained in learning and memory theories, the higher the frequency of brand exposure, the better the qualities of memory and understanding people have on the brand, and its product. The repetition through frequent brand exposure strengthens the linkages of the brand-related nodes in their memory systems. These linkages are normally grouped together as brand schema, which are later stored firmly in long-term memory (Vidhshavudh, 2012). Hence, when asking how much they understand the product, it is common to expect high scores from the participants in both groups regardless of playful irony.

Attitude toward the branded entertainment

In terms of attitude toward the branded entertainment, the strongly positive attitude toward the playful ironic branded entertainment at 3.99 seems to suggest the consistent result with previous studies about the relationship between playful irony and advertising media. Some of the examples can be seen from Eisend (2009), Lagerwerf (2007), and Pehlivan et al. (2011), who similarly found that playful irony can truly induce a positive degree of appreciation toward the advertising media because of the enjoyment receiving from the incongruity, and humorous cues in advertising (Schilperoord & Maes, 2003).

In fact, the audience does not only enjoy the humor in playful irony, but also the sense of liberation from social restrictions. As explained by psychodynamic and freedom theories, many sensitive taboos, such as sex, religion and politics are not normally allowed in general conversations. The audience, therefore, needs to stabilize the repressed feelings through socially accepted approaches. And among them, playful irony as a kind of humor is an effective method (Mindess, 2017). The pleasure from the freedom, as a result, also leads to a better advertising appreciation (Donnelly, 2002).

In addition, when considering from the definition defined by Assael (2005) as unimportant,

simple, cheap, and low perceived risk, branded entertainments in general can also be considered as a low-involvement product. According to Elaboration Likelihood Model, playful irony, therefore, can be seen as a peripheral cue, influencing how the audience evaluates the branded entertainment through humor. Therefore, it is logical to expect the high mean score from the participants who watched playful ironic branded entertainment.

However, when considering from the high mean score of the non-playful ironic branded entertainment and the statistically insignificant difference between the two groups, playful irony might have just a slight impact on branded entertainment and was not the only factor majorly influencing the degrees of appreciation toward the branded entertainment. Again, this result is similar to the finding by Lagerwerf (2007), who admitted that irony was not the only factor although the relationship between the two variables was statistically affirmed in his study. Therefore, the limited effect of irony made room for another possible factor mentioned by the researcher as the quality of the advertising medium itself.

Branded entertainment in general seems to be an effective medium. This is because branded entertainment in social media platforms can be considered as a kind of new media developed from various traditional media, for example, films, and television programs (Hudson & Hudson, 2006). Branded entertainment, therefore, inherits all characteristics of its predecessors and breaks the traditional boundary in media landscape. In short, it can combine many characteristics of traditional media, as text, graphics, audio, and video into one information piece (Hinvimarn, 2017). This unique characteristic is what makes branded entertainment a vivid medium, attracting audience's interest effectively (Fill & Turnbull, 2016).

Further, the effectiveness of branded entertainment on audience's attitude has been proved by many studies. Although there might be some small differences among previous findings, all of them agreed on the same matter, which was the importance of realism as a unique characteristic of branded entertainment. The realistic representation of the brand as a result of the seamless placement does not only increase the credibility of the branded entertainment itself (van Reijmersdal, 2011) but also audience's engagement. And the strong engagement, as a result, will eventually lead to a greater enjoyment as explained by Song, Meyer, and Ha (2015).

In addition, according to Thavonsaksuttee and Napompech (2019), there are total four dimensions for a quality program. These dimensions were designed based on marketing mix or 4Cs principle, which names each mix as customer, cost, convenience, and communication. The researchers explained that for customer mix, the program should have a vivid representation that attracts

audience's interest and importantly should have the contents that truly satisfy the needs of the audience. In terms of the cost mix, the researchers focused on the costs the audience has on the devices needed for program viewing and other possible expenses. With regard to the convenience mix, the program should have flexible timetable and versatile watching channels, so the audience can watch it everywhere and anytime they prefer. Lastly, communication refers to any promotional activities executed by the program.

Logically, both playful ironic branded entertainment video, and non-playful ironic branded entertainment video, alternatively stated as *ImTips* and *Softpomz*, respectively, possess all qualities mentioned above. The high mean scores of attitudes toward the branded entertainment at 3.99 for *ImTips* by Ben Chalatit and 3.82 for *Softpomz* by *Softpomz* suggested the strong likability the audience has on the programs. Therefore, this implies that both branded entertainment programs have contents that truly meet the needs of the audience. Further, both *ImTips* and *Softpomz* are on YouTube and do not require any subscription fees. Thus, the audience can watch them anywhere and anytime for free. These characteristics, hence, indicate that both branded entertainment programs possess robust qualities on cost, and convenience mixes. Here comes the last mix, communication focusing largely on promotional activities. Both *ImTips* and *Softpomz* promote their channels very inclusively on every online touchpoint. They keep in touch with the audience through various social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. These properties, therefore, function as an indicator suggesting a high quality of both playful ironic and non-playful ironic branded entertainments.

As a result, this implies that the high mean scores on the attitude toward the branded entertainment might be influenced mainly by the medium used in the program. Playful irony alone, in other words, does not have enough persuasive power to be the only factor convincing the audience to positively evaluate the branded entertainment they watch.

Attitude toward the brand

For attitude toward the brand, the statistically significant difference was found in the study. Playful ironic branded entertainment ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.63$) was proved to have a higher mean score than the non-playful ironic one ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.76$) ($t [118] = -2.33$, $p < .05$). The result, therefore, affirms that playful irony truly has an impact on attitude toward the brand. This result strengthens the assumption of the Elaboration likelihood model, claiming that consumers tend to use peripheral cues, such as celebrities, and humor appeal, to process the information for a low-involvement product (Solomon, 2015). Categorized

as a low-involvement product, *Milo*, therefore, should be sensitive to playful irony.

Additionally, the significantly higher mean score of the playful ironic branded entertainment in this study also strengthens previous findings about the relationship between playful irony and attitude toward the brand. According to Griffiths (2018), playful irony, alternately called brand vulgarity, can positively affect brand image as it distracts the audience from the arguments they have against the product and, as a result, increases the likelihood of message acceptance. Furthermore, similarly to the finding found in attitude toward the branded entertainment, many scholars also affirmed the effectiveness of incongruity in playful irony on the advertised brands. Y. H. Lee and Mason (1999) suggested that incongruent elements do not only increase the pleasure from the advertising itself, but also from the brand. This effect is the consequence of the irrelevance and unexpected-ness elements brought by playful irony, functioning as a connecting bridge transferring pleasure from advertising media to the advertised brand (T. Kim & O. Kim, 2018).

Apart from the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the statistically significant difference might also be influenced by the relevance between the product and the branded entertainment. This is because the relevancy is one of the crucial dimensions in the components of the successful branded entertainment or the three Fs, consisting of fit, focus, and fame (Hollis, 2007). In fact, *ImTip* channel by *Ben Chalatit* is a cooking program while *Softpomz* channel by *Softpomz* is a variety program. Hence, theoretically there was a strong likelihood that the participants, who watched *ImTips*, might develop a more favorable attitude toward *Milo* than those in the control group.

Nevertheless, considered from received high mean score on this sub-variable at 3.79 and the significant difference at 0.30, playful irony might not have much impact on attitude toward the brand as firstly expected. The result, therefore, leaves room for other possible factors, contributing to the high mean score of non-playful ironic branded entertainment. And again, one of the possible factors could be the media or the branded entertainment itself because it is the mutually shared component in both treatments. The effectiveness of the branded entertainment on the brand is coherent with the review about the relationship between the branded entertainment and the brand as suggested by T. Lee et al. (2011), and Pervan and Martin (2002). The scholars explained that a strong favorable attitude toward the brand induced by the branded entertainment is the result of the seamless placement, providing product experiences in a realistic entertainment setting.

Source characteristics

Although understanding, attitude toward the branded entertainment, and attitude toward the brand received high mean scores from the participants, source characteristics, in contrast, acquired scores at moderate degrees of 3.36 for *Ben Chalatit*, representing playful irony, and 3.33 for *Softpomz*, representing non-playful irony. Further, Independent sample *t*-test did not affirm the statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups. The results, therefore, can be implied that the participants appreciated *Ben Chalatit*, and *Softpomz* at almost the same degree. Hence, the similar attitudes toward the two sources seem to contradict to the hypothesis claiming for a greater impact of playful irony on consumer behavior, which in this case is affection.

In order to explain the reasons why the result seems not to be consistent with the reviews, the profiles of the sources themselves could be the answer key. According to Cheyjunya (1998, as cited in Pumpayung, 2016), the effectiveness of an opinion leader depends largely on these three dimensions, including trustworthiness, influence, and media exposure. In her perspective, trustworthiness refers to face-to-face communication skill because communication is a fundamental factor contributing to personal competency, and trustworthiness. Next, influence can be seen as a dominant power over followers or members. It can also be interpreted as the confidence in expression over both negative and positive issues. Lastly, media exposure means a strong degree of media consumption an opinion leader holds. As explained in two-step flow, and gatekeeper theories, these characteristics are crucial elements for every opinion leader who functions as an information spreader. In case of *Ben Chalatit* and *Softpomz*, the high mean scores, therefore, signalize the great quality of the two influencers.

In terms of playful irony, the result from the mean score of *Ben Chalatit*'s source characteristic at 3.36 indicates the neutral attitude of the participants toward playful irony. And because the participants neither like nor hate humorous vulgarity, it can be concluded that playful irony does not possess enough power to significantly increase the degrees of overall appreciation toward the source characteristics of the speaker.

To conclude, playful irony barely impacts the characteristics of the speaker. Although it might slightly help increase the degree of attractiveness, it is not powerful enough to statistically significantly differentiate the mean scores of the speaker who use playful irony as a rhetorical device from the one who does not use it. Although playful irony itself does not completely impact how people evaluate the source, it only works as a mean to differentiate the image of the speaker from the others. However, the factors determining how much

the receiver appreciates the speaker using playful irony rely largely on personal characteristics as personality, and the aspirational groups they look up to.

Purchase intention

Finally yet importantly, purchase intention is another dimension, received high mean scores from the experimental group, *ImTips*, at 3.90. Thus, the high mean score seems to suggest the similar result with the previous studies about playful irony on purchase intention by many researchers, such as W. Chang and I. Chang (2014), and Lagerwerf (2007). The scholars found the stronger impact of ironic advertising on purchase intention as their results showed statistically significant differences between ironic advertising and the non-ironic ones.

Although playful ironic branded entertainment in this study also recorded high mean score, it was not statistically significantly different from the non-playful ironic one. This is because non-playful ironic branded entertainment also received high mean score at 3.75. The high mean scores together with the statistically indifference, therefore, indicate that playful irony seems to give just a small impact on purchase intention. Other factors, therefore, tended to play an important role in how the participants evaluate their intentions to buy *Milo*. And one of the most important factors could be branded entertainment as an advertising medium.

The high mean scores support the previous studies about the relationship between branded entertainment and purchase intention. The study by Sinthamrong and Rompho (2015) affirmed the relationship between branded entertainment and purchase intention as found in the Webisodes platform. Further, the result is also consistent with the finding found by Santos (2009) in her experiment on various leading brands, for example, Calvin Klein, Puma, and BMW. As mentioned earlier in the review, seamless placement, which increases the degree of realism in branded entertainment, is the key to drive purchase intention (Fill & Turnbull, 2016).

Without regard to the impact of the branded entertainments themselves, the product itself seems to be another factor influencing the way participants scored their purchase intentions. As described in the understanding dimension, *Milo* is a brand with high equity due to its long history, and the great sales volume in Thai market. In Thailand, the market value of chocolate-malt beverages is tremendous. According to Aranyik (2017), the total market value of this product category was 9,200 million Thai Baht. However, there are only two main players, which are *Milo*, and *Ovaltine*, for chocolate-malt beverages in Thailand. Thus, when asking how likely the participants were to buy *Milo* once they needed a chocolate-malt beverage, it is understandable to

see them scored their purchase intentions with high scores irrespective of playful irony.

All in all, the results from the experiment showed that playful irony gave just a little impact on consumer behavior. This is because the statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups were proved not to exist in various sub-variables, including understanding, attitude toward the branded entertainment, source characteristics, and purchase intention. As described above, the impact of playful irony on the attitude toward the brand was the only one, confirmed to possess statistically significant difference from the other group. Although the difference was statistically significant, it was too small to give the whole credit on playful irony as the major force, convincing the participants at the time they evaluated the brand.

Directions for Further Research and Practical Implications

There were two major limitations in this study. One was uncontrollable extraneous factors in the treatments, and the other was the global pandemic, obstructing data collection. In order to strengthen the quality of the experiment setting in the future, it is important to diminish possible effects of extraneous factors. Ironically, the more the researchers eliminate the extraneous factors, the less realism the branded entertainment videos are. Balancing the two factors properly, consequently, seems to be the true success key.

Last, for practical implications, if the brand has an intention to associate itself with the celebrities or the branded entertainment with playful irony for the purpose of stimulating consumer behavior, such as brand understanding, attitude toward the branded entertainment, attitude toward the brand, attitude toward the source, and purchase intention, it would be too risky. This is because playful irony provided just a small positive impact on consumer behavior as shown in the experiment. Associating the brand with playful ironic stimuli, as a result, will only increase the tendency that the brand will be backfired without immense benefits.

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