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## Towards a definition for branded entertainment: An exploratory study

Marthinus JC van Loggerenberg <sup>a</sup>, Carla Enslin <sup>b</sup> and Marelize Terblanche-Smit <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Faculty of Communication Studies: Advertising, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, USA;

<sup>b</sup>Faculty of Strategic Planning, Vega School, Cape Town, South Africa; <sup>c</sup>Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of Stellenbosch Business School, Bellville, South Africa

### ABSTRACT

Branded entertainment seemingly holds varied meanings. This is of concern as the discipline is growing in importance as a means to disrupt conventional brand communication practice. One can compare this problem to an industry that for argument's sake does not understand or agree on the fundamental principles of advertising or public relations, resulting in ineffective communication efforts. The lack of a cohesive understanding and application of branded entertainment erodes its core value, which is to breakthrough clutter and connect with audiences through authentic narrative; thus, the potential for branded entertainment to achieve resonance is depleted. Brand resonance builds brands strategically. This exploratory study engaged the perceptions of globally recognized brand communication decision makers across six continents on defining branded entertainment. We conducted interviews with planners and creators of award-winning branded entertainment campaigns that were recognized by multiple Grand Prix and Gold wins at the world's most respected advertising award shows. The research delivers a proposed definition: Branded entertainment is a communication effort that employs a compelling authentic narrative to achieve brand resonance. This definition can guide academics and practitioners on branded entertainment practice for strategic brand-building success.

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narrative; brand resonance;  
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communication planning

## Introduction

Branded entertainment's core value lies in its ability to breakthrough commercial clutter and arrest attention in a meaningful way (Meyers 2014; Ryan 2016). Traditional advertising may have lost its ability to arrest attention or to connect with target audiences in a unique and compelling way (Appleyard 2010; DeMers 2016). Branded entertainment, as disruption to conventional brand communication practice, holds potential to meaningfully connect with target audiences (Ryan 2016). Branded entertainment adds value to the brand experience (Martí-Parreño, Ruiz-Mafé, and Scribner 2015) in the form of entertainment, information or education (Morrison 2015).

**CONTACT** Marthinus JC van Loggerenberg  [mvanloggerenberg@usfca.edu](mailto:mvanloggerenberg@usfca.edu)  University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94117-1080, USA

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Branded entertainment has its origin with the 'soap opera'; first radio shows in the 1930s and later television shows in the 1950s were sponsored by a specific brand, typically soap manufacturers (Allen 1985, 96). However, these shows became less popular as advertisers started using short commercials between shows (Jefferson 2014). Branded entertainment regained popularity again in the mid-1980s, with advertisers 'trying to tie their brands to entertainment vehicles', according to Russell (2007, 4). It seemingly gained further momentum since 2012 (BeDel 2012), which was the year that branded entertainment was inaugurated as a category at the Cannes Festival of Creativity (Campaign 2012). In 2018, PQ Media reported in their Global Branded Entertainment Forecast that branded entertainment (including content marketing) is growing twice as fast as advertising spend (Haberman 2018).

The increase in branded entertainment's popularity in recent years could be attributed to a number of possible factors. The first is a rapidly evolving, highly fragmented digital mediascape where consumers bypass advertising to self-determine their interactions with brands (Teixeira 2014; Hittner 2016) with the opportunity for the shareability, spreadability and personalization of brand messages that digital allows (Lehu and Bressoud 2008; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013; Haberman 2018). Second, younger generation consumers in particular are skeptical of traditional advertising (Rohampton 2016) and expect brand communication to provide utility in the form of entertainment (Mathieu 2012; All 2013; Mescall 2013; Rayess 2015; Tyson 2016; Haberman 2018). Third, the opportunity to establish a deeper emotional connection with target audiences (Jaggi 2009; Duopoly 2014; Musson 2014) and to provide engaging content that is more personally relevant (Blanchard 2015) with the possibility of 'pushing the boundaries in terms of exceptional creative storytelling', according to Haberman (2018).

Branded entertainment holds potential to build brands strategically because it can constitute customer-based brand resonance (Keller 2009; Pereira 2017); the extent to which consumers are 'in synch' with the brand, characterized in terms of the intensity or the depth of the psychological bond with the brand (Keller 2001, 15).

Many branded entertainment campaigns on a global scale still fail to deliver on marketing and communication objectives (Mescall 2013; Pytlik 2014; Weiss 2014; Morrison 2015; Wiese 2015; Emhoff 2016; Pereira 2016; MacCuish 2017), which could be attributable to an industry not having a uniform definition of branded entertainment in context of its strategic potential (Asmussen in Canter 2018). The varied opinions on branded entertainment may as well erode branded entertainment's potential for resonance as the definition of branded entertainment is still vague (Ross 2013; Arhio and Raunio 2015; Pytlik 2014; Olenski 2016a).

Irish mathematical physicist and engineer, Lord Kelvin (1824–1907), stated: 'What is not defined cannot be measured. What is not measured cannot be improved. What is not improved always deteriorates' (Canêo and Neirotti 2017, 60). A definition exists as a statement of meaning, use and function, and aims to present the essence of a term or a concept; it is a valuable asset to assess situations by, to guide meaningful conversations and to make informed decisions (St. Rose 2012). Significant problems in industry practice and even project failure could be the manifestation of ill-defined concepts and disciplines (Veerasamy 2013).

Macrury (in Canter 2018, 98–99) is of opinion that branded content, the discipline within which branded entertainment exists (Rose 2013; Canter 2018), is just exiting its 'rapture'

phase where ‘lots of debate and jostling for position, lots of efforts to pin it down, define, contain and possess as a new identity’ commenced. Now moving towards a stage of ‘reflection’, according to Macrury, branded content is becoming more widely established and ‘settled’ with discussions around its development, application and practical-organizational considerations arising. It seems, however, that branded entertainment has not been defined properly in the ‘rapture’ phase and therefore it is experiencing orientation problems in the stage of ‘reflection’. Could it be that different interpretations for branded entertainment in the ‘rapture’ phase may have caused continued orientation concerns in the stage of ‘reflection’? A clear and shared definition can thus guide academics and practitioners on branded entertainment practice for strategic brand-building success.

The Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity, for instance, aimed to broadly define branded entertainment in 2012 and after not rewarding any Grand Prix in 2014 or 2015 due to a lack of ‘standout content’ and ‘category definition issues’ (Morrison 2015), branded entertainment was absorbed in 2016 in a broader ‘Entertainment’ category, without an official description or definition.

Branded entertainment seems to be facing two primary challenges at present:

- (1) Its intent is often experienced by target audiences as inauthentic due to a commercially led or overt sales approach (Swart 2007; Mescall 2013; Pytlik 2014), harming brand trust (Swart 2007; Rose 2016; Wander 2016).
- (2) Agency-side creatives and strategists with an advertising perspective often lack the skill to create engaging, strategically significant entertainment (Thielman 2014; Luhn 2016; Maconick 2016).

A lack of strategically significant, impactful content, as well as application problems in general are attributable to a lack of understanding of branded entertainment (Kiriakakis 2014; Olenski 2016b). A uniform definition to constitute a universally accepted ‘branded entertainment’ definition could assist academics and practitioners to understand what it is (and perhaps also what it is not). One can compare this problem to an industry that for argument’s sake does not understand or agree on the fundamental principles of advertising or public relations, resulting in ineffective communication efforts.

## Conceptual background

### *Branded entertainment definitions*

A uniform definition of branded entertainment does not exist and various attempts to define branded entertainment have been widely documented in literature (Dinkel 2010; Valero 2014; De Aguilera-Moyano, Baños-González, and Ramírez-Perdiguero 2015), even described as being ‘vague at best’ (Arhio and Raunio 2015). This section briefly investigates the various interpretations of branded entertainment as expressed in academic literature and the way in which the brand communication industry assigns meaning to it.

### *‘Branded entertainment’ and ‘branded content’*

The terms ‘branded entertainment’ and ‘branded content’ are used interchangeably by academics and industry alike (Asmussen et al. 2013; Pulizzi 2016). However, Martí-

Parreño, Ruiz-Mafé, and Scribner (2015) found that more academics refer to branded entertainment as content that is developed around the brand and often funded by the marketer, where industry refers to the latter as branded content. They also assert that branded content can be applied to a broader brand strategy framework and is 'not necessarily linked to entertainment', while branded entertainment can be restricted to brand marketing communications linked to entertainment content specifically.

### *Industry's take on what 'branded entertainment' means*

Brand communication industry practitioners seem to have a more all-encompassing view of branded entertainment; for instance, Pereira (2018, 22) writes that 'Branded entertainment is produced by brands; advertising you don't want to skip; marketing made to be sought; and not designed to interrupt entertainment'. The London International Awards (2019) describes branded entertainment as '... any piece of content (scripted or unscripted, comedy or drama, series or a single) that is made with a brand's personality, positioning and marketing objectives in mind. Its primary intention is delivering an entertaining and engaging experience to consumers'.

Attempts to define branded entertainment are often uncertain or deliver nebulous concepts, for instance, Woolfenden (2018) stating: '... there's no hard or fast definition for branded entertainment'; it's 'blurring lines between traditional entertainment (think television shows and movies) and advertising. Often considered an umbrella term; online films, video games, books, comics, music and podcasts can all be branded entertainment'. Some also refer to branded entertainment as a more advanced form of product placement, in which consumers receive branded messaging in an indirect or non-interruptive way. Others don't see it as product placement or integration at all, stating that it should be brand-generated (Woodrooffe 2014). Differences in opinion thus exist as some industry practitioners deem branded entertainment as an integration into a third party's intellectual property and others recon the brand should generate the entertainment and hence control a sense of full ownership.

### *Academics' take on what 'branded entertainment' means*

Before providing selected definitions, the terms 'product placement', 'product integration' and 'sponsorship' deserve brief attention because it is relevant in the interpretation of where the brand's level of ownership in a branded entertainment initiative lies. **Product placement** is the purposeful incorporation of commercial content into non-commercial settings, that is, a product plug generated via the fusion of advertising and entertainment' (Ginosar and Levi-Faur 2010, 467). **Product (or brand) integration** is explained by Vogt (2012) as being similar to product placement, except that brand or product integration involves the actual integration of the brand or product into the script of the entertainment property, i.e., to write the brand or product in as part of the entertainment property's story line. Sponsorship is the 'full or partial financing by an advertiser of a program, feature or event in exchange for brand or corporate awareness or association with or within that program or event' (Muller 1999, 414).

Some academics see branded entertainment as **product placement**, **product integration**, and even **sponsorship**, and by power of association, it could (hopefully) be seen as entertainment brought about by a brand (Russell and Belch 2005; Hudson and Hudson 2006; Van Reijmersdal, Neijens and Smit 2007; Lehu 2009; Bhargava 2011;

Cloonan 2011; Kunz, Elsässer and Santomier 2016). Hudson and Hudson's (2006, 492) definition, for instance, refers: 'The integration of advertising into entertainment content, whereby brands are embedded into storylines of a film, television program, or other entertainment medium'.

Some hold branded entertainment to be a **brand-generated communication initiative**. Other academics such as Caraccioli-Davis (2005); Czarnecki (2012); Chen and Lee (2014); Valero (2014) and Martí-Parreño, Ruiz-Mafé, and Scribner (2015) stipulate specifically that branded entertainment should not be deemed as product placement, or even a sophisticated form of product placement. Monaco (2009), Bhargava (2011) and Vogt (2012) feel similarly about product integration and Hudson (2010), Duopoly (2014), and Arhio and Raunio (2015) believe similarly for sponsorship. Monaco (2009, 3) developed the following definition: 'Branded entertainment is created, produced and funded specifically for a brand, by a brand, for the purposes of communicating the brand strategy using the entertainment medium and owned by the brand in most cases'.

Others academics are relatively vague on ownership although it seems that it could be **all-encompassing**, i.e., brand-generated and/or integration (O'Guinn, Allen, and Semenik 2009; Duopoly 2014; De Aguilera-Moyano, Baños-González, and Ramírez-Perdiguero 2015). O'Guinn, Allen, and Semenik (2009, 612) definition: 'The development and support of any entertainment property (e.g., TV shows, theme park, short film, movie, or video game) where a primary objective is to feature one's brand or brands in an effort to impress and connect with consumers in a unique and compelling way'.

### ***A question of branded entertainment ownership***

When a brand takes sufficient ownership of their branded entertainment, it allows the brand the ability to convey a brand-identity aligned message with potential to establish an **emotional connection** and **engagement** (Monaco 2009; Hudson 2010; Bhargava 2011; Vogt 2012; Arhio and Raunio 2015); both critical dimensions of resonance (Keller 2001).

Product placement holds some risks to the brand, for instance:

- (1) Misalignment of brand identity with the image or values of the property that may harm the brand's reputation (Nunlee, Smith, and Katz 2012).
- (2) A lack of control over how products are incorporated in a third party's property, especially when done insincerely, that may harm brand credibility (Daugherty and Gangadharbatla 2005).

Sincerity and credibility play pivotal roles to establish resonance (Keller 2013). From the study of literature, it seems that branded entertainment that is brand-generated and that communicates the brand's identity with a sense of sincerity via a more 'soft sell' approach (Graser 2014; Meyers 2016) seems to nurture potential towards resonance, branded entertainment's strategic potential (Keller 2009).

### ***Authentic branded entertainment narratives towards brand resonance***

The new 'touch point' for brand strategy is not about media, multi-platforms, or product-oriented stories. It is about creating compelling, human stories that connect

people with brands. 'We can never forget that at the end of the day it's all about that one thing: human connection', said Weiss (2014), a Cannes juror for the Branded Content and Entertainment category in 2014. Weiss specifically referred to branded entertainment in contextualizing this opinion. Narrative is 'to connote the threading together of a set of events or experiences in a temporal sequence in order to make sense of them' (Lai 2010, 72 citing Dean, 1998). This refers to a process in which stories are made – even referring to the cognitive structure of a story or the result of the process (stories, tales or histories) (Lai 2010, 72 citing Polkinghorne, 1998).

Narrative is a representation or manifestation of a specific story, rather than the story itself, i.e., more than just the story line; the way the story gets told (Mills 2015). A story is a structured narrative and if not connected to a broader narrative is mere entertainment (Jennings 2016). This means that the narrative ought to embody the brand, i.e., its reason for being. Branded entertainment is arguably one of the more compelling brand communication efforts that meaningfully contributes to brand narrative because its inherent narrative properties aim to establish a strong emotional connection with a target audience and therefore evoke such customer engagement (Dahlén, Lange, and Smith 2010).

Branded entertainment generated by a brand not only seems to benefit from employing a **narrative** in the entertainment effort, but it is seemingly a requisite to qualify as branded entertainment (Hitch and Worple 2010; Bhargava 2011; Okupniak 2012; Wiese 2013; Snyder 2013 in Dunaway 2013; Weiss 2014). A definition of 'authentic narrative' in branded entertainment could not be delivered by the study of literature. However, a literature study on branded entertainment that employs authenticity in its narrative was found to give form to branded entertainment that:

- (1) **Is brand-generated** (Monaco 2009; Gilbar 2010; Bhargava 2011; Vogt 2012; Czarnecki 2012; Pytlik 2014; Musson 2014; Martí-Parreño, Ruiz-Mafé, and Scribner 2015; Arhio and Raunio 2015)
- (2) **Communicates the brand's identity** (Gubrium and Holstein 1998; Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink 2008; Carroll and Wheaton 2009; Gilbar 2010; Wiese 2013; Pereira 2018)
- (3) **Is original work** (George 2013; Weiss 2014; Thielman 2014; Maconick 2016)
- (4) **Carries emotional meaning** (Gremler, Gwinner, and Brown 2001; Visconti 2010; Pace et al. 2011; Thompson, MacInnes, and Whan Park in; Malär et al. 2011; Czarnecki 2012; Cohen 2013; Pederson 2013; Marsden 2015) by aligning with the target audience's value system in a meaningful way (Tuomi in De Aguilera-Moyano, Baños-González, and Ramírez-Perdiguero 2015; ReedSmith 2010; Clift 2011; Mescall 2013; Tampon 2013; Clerck 2014)
- (5) **Is sincere**; adds value in the form of sincerely wanting to entertain (opposed to a 'hard sell') (Swart 2007; Wiese 2011; Roberts 2012; Mescall 2013; Pytlik 2014; Weiss 2014; Anderson 2015; Kirby 2015; Humlan 2015)
- (6) **Is believable** (Canter, Nicol, and Benneworth 2003; Yale 2012; Wall 2016)

### ***In conclusion***

Although narrative in branded entertainment can impress tactically, authentic narrative in a branded entertainment initiative enables a strong **emotional connection** with

a target audience and could therefore achieve brand resonance to strategically build a brand (Wolburg 2008; Jaggi 2009, 8; Czarnecki 2012; Rose 2013; Duopoly 2014; Musson 2014; Valero 2014; Brenner 2015). Furthermore, it is well documented in literature that branded entertainment can evoke **engagement** from its target audience (Ogilvy 2009; Dahlén, Lange, and Smith 2010; Siddiqi 2013; Duopoly 2014; Valero 2014). More than establishing an emotional connection or evoking engagement, the other dimensions of brand resonance, **community** and **loyalty** (Keller 2001), should be possible to achieve, as indicated by Keller (2009) and Candelino (2011). Branded entertainment employing authentic narrative that resonates has the ability to be more enduring (Wiese 2013), hence the potential for strategic brand communication over the long term.

Taking all of the above into consideration, a proposed working definition was delivered by the literature study: **Branded entertainment is a brand-generated contact point with the potential to achieve brand resonance through authentic narrative.**

## Methodology

Using a qualitative interpretivist approach an exploratory study was conducted to engage the perceptions of globally recognized brand communication decision makers, i.e., advertising agency-side strategists and creatives, and client-side marketers on branded entertainment. Interviews were conducted across six continents – Africa, North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and Australasia – with a total of 15 planners and creators who have received the highest international recognition of excellence in the form of multiple Grand Prix and Gold wins at the world's most respected advertising award shows in branded entertainment and content categories from 2012 to 2015.

Fourteen of the 15 participants were responsible for strategizing and/ or creating multi-award winning international branded entertainment campaigns between 2013 and 2015. Each has been directly responsible for planning and/ or creating the campaigns that qualified for the purposeful sample. The campaigns must have won multiple Grand Prix and Gold awards in the branded entertainment and/ or content category, that worked out to be mainly at Cannes, the CLIO's, the One Show awards, the WEBBY's, and in two isolated cases at Dubai Lynx and the Media Global Awards. Nine of the 14 participants were agency-side creatives, three were agency-side strategists, and two were clients. The participants all held senior positions and were thus involved in the strategic planning and/ or creating of the respective branded entertainment campaigns.

One participant, Aste Gutiérrez, was interviewed based on referral by participant James Mok, the Executive Creative Director for Asia-Pacific of the global advertising agency, Foote, Cone, and Belding (FCB). Gutiérrez is one of the world's most awarded creative directors for work created in branded content and entertainment (FWA 2017). So, 14 interviews were conducted using purposeful sampling and one interview was based on referral sampling. Refer to [Table 1](#) for sample selection.

The data obtained from the expert interviews delivered more than a hundred transcribed pages. The data were analyzed by means of content analysis in the hermeneutic tradition (Gadamer in Nieuwenhuis 2016) and was categorized and indexed the data (Hancock 1998) by employing open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Hancock, Ockleford, and Windridge 2009). A conceptual system was created in accordance with steps outlined by Elo and



**Table 1.** Research sample.

Awards (minimum requirement) <i>note: The vast majority have won at many more award festivals</i>	Campaign	Agency	Participants <i>note: Job titles are as per time of interview conducted</i>
<b>North America:</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Cannes Lions GRAND PRIX</li> <li>● CLIO GOLD</li> <li>● Cannes Lions GOLD</li> <li>● CLIO GOLD</li> </ul>	Intel & Toshiba's <i>The Beauty Inside</i>	Pereira & O'Dell <i>San Francisco</i>	Vice President & Executive Creative Director: <b>(1) Jaime Robinson</b> Founding Partner & Creative Director: <b>(2) Damien Eley</b> Managing Partner & Executive Creative Director: <b>(3) Kieran Antill</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Cannes Lions GOLD</li> <li>● CLIO GOLD</li> </ul>	Mattel Inc's <i>Hot Wheels for Real</i>	Mistress <i>Los Angeles</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Cannes Lions GOLD</li> <li>● CLIO GOLD</li> </ul>	Village Voice Newspaper's <i>New York Writes Itself</i>	Leo Burnett <i>New York</i>	
<b>South America:</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Cannes Lions GOLD</li> <li>● The Wave (Latin America's largest advertising festival) GRAND PRIX</li> </ul>	Coca Cola's <i>Coke Thirst Dolby Sound Experience</i>	J Walter Thompson <i>São Paulo</i>	Chief Creative Officer: <b>(4) Ricardo John</b>
<b>Europe:</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Cannes Lions GRAND PRIX</li> <li>● One Show BEST IN SHOW &amp; GOLD in Branded Entertainment category</li> <li>● Webby Awards GOLD</li> <li>● ADC Annual Awards (the oldest continuously running industry award show in the world; Part of the One Club for Creativity) GOLD</li> </ul>	Volvo Truck's <i>Live Test Series</i>	Forsman & Bodenfors <i>Gothenburg</i>	Creative Director & Senior Partner: <b>(5) Björn Engström</b> Director Strategic Brand & Marketing Communications at Volvo Trucks: <b>(6) Annika Viberud</b> Strategic Planning Director: <b>(7) Dr Gordon Euchler</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● ADC Annual Awards (the oldest continuously running industry award show in the world; Part of the One Club for Creativity) GOLD</li> </ul>	Deutsche Telekom's <i>Keep Moving</i>	DDB Tribal <i>Berlin</i>	
<b>Oceania:</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Cannes Lions GOLD</li> <li>● One Show GOLD</li> </ul>	SPCA & MINI's <i>Driving Dogs</i>	FCB <i>Auckland</i>	Asia Pacific Executive Creative Director: <b>(8) James Mok</b>
<b>Africa:</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Dubai Lynx GRAND PRIX</li> <li>● Mena Cristals (reward the best advertising creations of the North African and Middle Eastern countries) GOLD</li> <li>● Media Global Awards GOLD</li> <li>● IPRA (International Public Relations Association's communications awards) GOLD</li> </ul>	Mobinil's <i>Dayman Maabaad/ Always Together</i>	Leo Burnett <i>Cairo</i>	Managing Director: <b>(9) Amr Darwish</b>
Worth mentioning: GOLD at Africa's highly esteemed PRISM awards.	KFC's <i>Journey of Hope</i>	Ogilvy <i>Johannesburg</i>	Group Account Director: <b>(10) Lauren McInnes</b> Senior Copy Writer: <b>(11) Irene Styger</b> KFC Senior Brand Manager for Sponsorships and CSI: <b>(12) Lauren Turnbull</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Cannes Lions GOLD</li> <li>● Loerie Awards GOLD (Largest gathering of brand communication industry in Africa and the Middle East)</li> </ul>	Cape Town Tourism's <i>Send Your Facebook Profile to Cape Town</i>	Ogilvy <i>Cape Town</i>	Senior Art Director: <b>(13) Dean Paradise</b> & Senior Copywriter: <b>(14) Matthew Pullen</b>

(Continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued).

Awards (minimum requirement) <i>note: The vast majority have won at many more award festivals</i>	Campaign	Agency	Participants <i>note: Job titles are as per time of interview conducted</i>
<b>Asia:</b> Cannes, D&AD & Clio's, among others, in branded content and entertainment categories	Various	Fred & Farid <i>Shanghai</i>	Co-Head of Creative: <b>(15) Aste Gutiérrez</b>

At least a Grand Prix, meaning top honors, or Gold at one internationally acclaimed, i.e., highest rated award show specifically in the branded entertainment category: (1) Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity; (2) Design and Art Direction Awards (D&AD); (3) The One Show; (4) The CLIO Awards; (5) The London International Awards; (6) Dubai Lynx International Festival of Creativity; (7) The Webby Awards; (8) Festival of Media Global Awards; (9) The New York Festivals International Advertising Awards or (10) The ANDY Awards. As well as at least Gold at another award show that is preferably international but could be multi-continental with also an international judging panel (as requisite) that awarded the same piece of creative work.

Kyngäs (2007) that could interpret and communicate the research results, describe the implications and draw conclusions (Zikmund and Babin 2010).

## Results and discussion

### *Branded entertainment definitions*

Definitions for branded entertainment were delivered by the participants across six continents. The vast majority of participants felt that story or storytelling that delivers a sincere, engaging message (not advertising in the traditional sense) that expresses brand identity to establish emotional connection, should be qualifiers for branded entertainment. Participants from Africa, Europe, Asia and the majority of participants from North America were of opinion that branded entertainment should ideally be generated by the brand in order to initiate and take ownership of the communication. However, Oceania expressed branded entertainment to have a sponsored association with the entertainment (presented in context of placement, integration, promotion or activation). South America expressed a more all-encompassing approach: all entertainment that the brand provides or is associated with. A key component that was included in almost all the definitions across all continents was that branded entertainment is a communication effort that invites target audiences to watch, engage with or spend time with, out of their own free will or on their own terms.

### *A question of branded entertainment ownership*

#### *Product placement*

Most of the participants indicated that branded entertainment is **not** product placement. Gutiérrez furthermore denoted that product placement is a poor attempt at branded entertainment as it often lacks irony. This means irony in the sense that any good creative effort that is driven by a brand's creative message usually has a tension point that makes for good entertainment and with product placement, this tension point lacks in form, intent and creative output.

### *Product integration*

Very few of the participants indicated that they think that branded entertainment could include brand or product integration. Mok, for instance, felt that branded entertainment in this sense must be 'authentic' and 'respectful to the audience'. Antill stated that branded entertainment can include brand or product integration, but there are qualifiers. He alluded to the fact that it is only acceptable if the brand has a very strong reason for being based on the integral belief system of the characters and that the brand comes across as completely believable as part of the storyline based on sound judgment.

The findings suggest that authenticity plays a stronger role in integration compared to product placement, as it allows a brand the following: (1) a stronger sense of being in the entertainment, thus earning a more rightful place (compared to product placement) that carries a stronger sense of believability; (2) an alignment with the value system of the characters (which says something about the value system of the brand); and (3) more control over the narrative as the brand has a larger role to play (compared to product placement).

### *Sponsorships*

Also, very few of the participants indicated that sponsorship could be seen as branded entertainment given certain provisions. Mok and Antill asserted that mere logo-branding could never be deemed as branded entertainment. Antill seemed to agree with O'Guinn, Allen, and Semenik (2009, 612–613) take on branded entertainment in that it could include sponsorship of a real live event of some sort as it contributes to the target audience's experience of the brand. O'Guinn, Allen, and Semenik (2009, 613) referred to sponsorship at the NASCAR rally as an example. Antill took it a step further in saying that the half time show at the American Super Bowl could be seen as branded entertainment as it is a space within an entertainment property where the brand could be deemed as sponsor but not in the traditional sense of the word as it initiates and owns its entertainment content in that moment in time.

The participants all referred proactively to an actual real live event having the potential to qualify as branded entertainment. It seems that sponsorships can only be deemed as branded entertainment if the following aspects are true or present: (1) the brand connects with the target audience in a meaningful way, relaying its brand values, brand purpose, and brand message; (2) the brand provides content or entertainment of sort. Furthermore, the notion of ownership is challenged because sponsorship of a half time show, for instance, can be deemed as branded entertainment because the brand can take 'ownership' of an entertainment space during a particular time.

### *In summary*

The area of a brand taking ownership of the entertainment property is subject to different opinions. Marginally more participants agreed that brand or product integration could be branded entertainment based on certain qualifiers, compared to product placement or sponsorship. This is because the brand has a bigger chance to influence the narrative and some sense of ownership, even perceived, is better than none, given that it is done in a credible way. Nevertheless, none of the participants gave an absolute affirmative to sponsorship, product placement or brand/product integration. There were

always qualifiers that needed to be in place, otherwise branded entertainment's potential for resonance could be hindered or compromised.

### ***Branded entertainment's strategic potential: resonance***

#### ***Attachment***

A vast majority of the participants identified the potential of authentic branded entertainment narrative to constitute an emotional connection with a target audience, therefore initiating a sense of attitudinal attachment. This delivered a clear outcome, meaning that this resonance dimension can be reckoned to be one of the more possible resonance dimensions, if not the most possible resonance dimension to achieve.

#### ***Engagement***

The majority of the participants identified the potential of authentic branded entertainment narrative to evoke target audience engagement with a brand. 'Engagement' can therefore be considered to be one of the more possible resonance dimensions to be achieved by arguably most branded entertainment initiatives that employ authentic narrative.

#### ***Community***

The participants did not proactively and pertinently refer to 'community' as a stand-alone resonance requisite. However, most of the sample campaigns could instigate a sense of community or have been planned to bring about brand communities as a result of employing authentic narrative to maximize its chance of resonance.

#### ***Loyalty***

Intended loyalty or behavioral loyalty was only indicated by Darwish based on proof delivered from the results of the branded entertainment campaign that qualified him for the sample pool. No other participants proactively and pertinently referred to loyalty as a resonance dimension. However, it can be noted that several of the campaign results referenced by participants provided indication of action taken by target audiences or intended loyalty behavior.

### ***Authentic narrative***

#### ***Must have narrative***

The majority of the participants proactively indicated that **narrative is a requisite** or the backbone of branded entertainment which shows satisfactory support. Eley, for example, denoted that branded entertainment must have narrative and, in his opinion, it is more imperative to communicate via storytelling than ever before. He said that traditional advertising does not extend to branded entertainment merely by length despite digital allowing ads to be much longer. There needs to be a clear narrative, approached from a sincere way, to entertain more than to deliver a commercial message, he claimed.

Robinson similarly saw branded entertainment as 'entertainment that is truly entertaining, fantastic storytelling that happens to have a brand as a character'. Gutiérrez

stated with conviction that more than just having narrative, the idea behind the story ought to show insight and enticement to the extent that target audiences would be so intrigued that they would be ‘willing to watch’, more so than with brands merely delivering content as part of a marketing message.

It therefore seems that not only should branded entertainment engage an identity-based narrative, but it should also distinguish itself from other types of content delivery in order to satisfy demand for content that entertains more than just delivering the brand’s marketing message. The research findings indicate that branded entertainment is defined by employing narrative as a primary requisite in order to satisfy its main aim of entertaining a target audience.

**Must have authentic narrative**

Table 2 outlines branded entertainment **narrative characteristics that, according to participants, evoke brand resonance** (dimensions of attachment and engagement in particular). It is important to note that of all the characteristics mentioned, identity-alignment, emotional meaning and sincerity surfaced the most.

**Authentic narrative must be compelling to achieve resonance**

Most of the participants referred to the fact that branded entertainment should be compelling in order to provide utility through entertainment. This is because most felt that a compelling narrative stands integral to the concept of entertainment. It seems that entertainment value in branded entertainment lies in a simple, unique and provocative idea that is aligned with brand identity, i.e., the starting point, to create meaningful, compelling narrative. In addition, many participants also reasoned that narrative based on a universal concept, or interpretively a human truth, portrayed in a compelling way by means of intrigue or drama, increases potential for resonance.

**Table 2.** Authentic narrative characteristics to be prevalent in branded entertainment for resonance.

Characteristic	Participant support	Noteworthy
Brand-generated	Most	Ownership gives control over the narrative to such an extent that the brand can ‘... get an audience member to choose to spend time with your brand and to choose to engage with your brand in a way that they are letting your brand tell its story’, said Robinson.
<b>Brand identity aligned</b>	<b>Almost all</b>	Strategically sound branded entertainment narrative starts with the brand’s essence and then the aim is to dramatise that essence, said Euchler.
Original	Majority	An original idea must be the ‘genesis’ branded entertainment, said Paradise.
<b>Carries emotional meaning</b>	<b>Almost all</b>	A profound target audience insight dramatized in a provocative way can connect on an intensely emotional level, said Viberut.
<b>Sincere</b>	<b>Almost all</b>	There should be truth to the motivation why the brand is creating the entertainment; will only come across as being genuine if the motivation is experienced as honest and respectful, said John.
Believable	Many	Telling stories that come across as being ‘for real’ will lead to a sense of plausibility making for narrative coming across as being genuine, credible and trustworthy (for instance: Turnbull, Steyger and McInnes).
Craft	Many	Although craft did not surface sufficiently in literature participants felt it is essential to authentic narrative for resonance. Craft and consideration to narrative and the final creative output, for brand’s ‘devotion’ as ‘author’ to take ‘pride in its original work’ (for instance: Engström, Mok & Robinson)

## Conclusion and recommendations

This research has shown that various opinions exist on the definition of branded entertainment. This may include branded entertainment also including product placement, product/brand integration or sponsorship of an entertaining show or event. The findings suggest that these practices or promotional tools should stay promotional tools in their own right, as even the most sophisticated way of positioning product or brand in this way could still withhold the brand from its strategic potential. This is because branded entertainment's most impactful value lies in a brand-generated narrative that expresses a fuller nuanced brand identity aligned proposition. This is not to say that a brand cannot partner with another entity to deliver entertainment, as long as the perception of ownership translates.

Branded entertainment is therefore a particular offshoot of content marketing in a broader branded content sphere that exclusively aims to entertain by means of human or brand-centered narrative. This implies that branded entertainment should refrain from a primarily commercially led mindset or sales message-driven communication. This study has identified the creative nature of compelling authentic narrative as the central point of gravitas in creating strategically significant branded entertainment. Authentic narrative, in context of branded entertainment, refers to narrative that is original, communicates the brand's identity and purpose, and aligns with the target audience's value system in a meaningful way, with the potential to achieve customer-based brand resonance – therefore, its strategic value. This study hence proposes the following definition for branded entertainment: *Branded entertainment is a communication effort that employs a compelling authentic narrative to achieve brand resonance.*

### **Theoretical implications of research propositions**

The study delivered a proposed definition for branded entertainment. Various definitions of branded entertainment exist with very trying perplexities spanning extremes in explanations and interpretations. This directly affects practice, and not for the better because many campaigns on a global scale still fail to deliver on marketing and communication objectives.

This study contributed to the theoretical body of knowledge by specifying what branded entertainment is and what it is not. It defines the field and provides a purposeful benchmark for a discipline that is having difficulty orientating itself in contemporary brand-building practice. It could give guidance on how to achieve successful branded entertainment campaigns. It is ultimately pivotal to put a stake in the ground and offer the brand communication profession a proposed and convincing, well-argued and verifiable definition for this relatively new discipline.

The most valuable contribution is arguably this: the art of entertainment offers the ability to connect with a target audience through authentic narrative to achieve brand resonance.

### **Managerial implications**

The findings suggested that entertainment value in branded entertainment lies in a simple, unique and provocative idea that is aligned to brand identity, i.e., the starting

point, to create meaningful, compelling narrative. More than just creating a compelling narrative, an authentic narrative has potential to achieve brand resonance. This is done by generating brand-identity led narratives that carry emotional meaning by means of a deep, purposeful understanding of its target audience; their belief and value system, aligning the narrative with that of the brand's value system, towards resonance. The narrative ought to be sincere towards a target audience that expects utility value from content that entertains, be original with high consideration to craft, and be believable by means of narrative plausibility and genuineness. If advertising agency creatives and strategists can employ these principles in creating branded entertainment that can build brands strategically, clients may gain trust in the discipline.

### **Limitations and future research**

Limitations are inherent to any research study. Researcher subjectivity is ineradicably written into the qualitative research paradigm, but this subjectivity and individual biases of participants were avoided as much as possible. The participants in the study shared similar experiences in creating branded entertainment that delivered strategically significant brand-building results and therefore their individual opinions were welcomed in order to find similarities. These similarities resulted in instances of high data saturation that was shared in the primary research findings of this study. The present study provides leverage for continuing knowledge in the fast-evolving discipline of branded entertainment that is continuously proving to play a major part in the field of brand-building strategy of the future, as branded entertainment is growing twice as fast as advertising spend (PQ Media 2018).

The proposed definition can be tested with different future research methodologies against the opinion of advertising award show judges and brand communication decision makers globally.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### **Notes on contributors**

**Marthinus JC van Loggerenberg** is an Assistant Professor of Advertising at the University of San Francisco, USA. He has a PhD in Business Management and Administration (Brand Strategy) from the University of Stellenbosch Business School, South Africa and was Head of Department: Commerce, at The IIE Vega School, Cape Town, South Africa. His research is in the area of narratives in branded entertainment, word of mouth marketing and creative brand communication strategy. He has published in the International Journal of Digital Marketing.

**Carla Enslin** is Head of Strategy and New Business Development at The Independent Institute of Education, Vega School, South Africa. Her research and consulting focuses on the design and implementation of brand identity systems and contact strategies. She holds a PhD in Marketing Management, is a Research Associate at the University of Stellenbosch Business School and a Teaching Fellow at the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business.

**Marlize Terblanche-Smit** is an Associate Professor in Marketing Management at the University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB). She holds a PhD in Marketing Management and

Communication. She held the position of Head of the MBA program from 2014 to 2016 and lectured at the Department of Business Management at Stellenbosch University. She consults as a Strategic Marketing Practitioner and served in various senior marketing management positions in industry. Her research focus includes marketing communication, branding, consumer behavior and strategy.

## ORCID

Marthinus JC van Loggerenberg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3496-4775>

Carla Enslin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6874-2690>

Marlize Terblanche-Smit  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4877-9610>

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