Mini-film advertising has grown in popularity through viral internet videos.

Despite its prevalence, little is known about how combining brand information with storylines might impact on the advert’s effectiveness.

Research by Dr Lydia Qianqian Li from Shanghai University, China, highlights the importance of brand cue placement and audience characteristics such as loneliness when developing mini-film adverts.

The internet has revolutionised the medium of advertising, creating a platform that allows marketers to reach millions of people around the world. This has led to a growth in mini-film advertising, also known as MA, which is fast becoming an attractive option for brands wishing to promote their products. MA videos usually comprise of a three-to-ten-minute immersive story which contains little reference to the product or brand. This differs from more traditional forms of advertising, where the brand takes centre stage and the sole purpose is to share product information with the audience. MA has a more hedonic quality, often acting as a type of branded entertainment. It tends to be more cost effective than traditional advertising because viewers share the online videos virally, meaning that marketers can avoid using paid-for media channels.

A key feature of MA is its storyline, which has the power to take viewers on an emotional journey, influencing their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. Immersing the audience within the storyline helps to elicit a positive emotional response from consumers. It has been found that including factual information can make viewers less engaged; therefore, product information is kept to a minimum in MA advertisements. Typically, brand cues such as product names or information to help explain the content of the advert are shown at either the beginning or end.

**Storyline and brand cues**

Previous research relating to MA has often focused on the benefits of including a storyline. However, few studies have investigated the impact of combining storytelling with brand information. Dr Lydia Qianqian Li at Shanghai University in China has undertaken research that will help marketers to optimise their advertising for specific target audiences. The research explores the impact of brand cues, which are pieces of information included within an advert’s storyline that give hints about the brand. Another key area of her investigation was to further understand the role and influence of ‘transportation’ upon the impact of MA advertising. Transportation occurs when the viewer is completely hooked or transfixed with a storyline to the extent that it becomes the entire focus of their mental capacity.

A further research aim was to investigate the influence of individual differences – such as knowledge, life experiences, or even emotions – on the impact of MA. Lydia Q Li focused her research on loneliness, using it to investigate how personal characteristics may impact upon advertising effect. Loneliness was chosen because individuals experiencing social isolation tend to use internet communications more than real-world interactions, increasing their access and attention to online advertising.

**Testing four mini-film variations**

Lydia Q Li selected university students to take part in this research as they are a major user of social media and often the target of MA campaigns. Young adults are also more likely to be affected by loneliness. The research used a real advert called ‘When Red Balloons Fly’ which had over one million views on YouTube and won several advertising awards. It has a narrative structure with minimal brand information presented at the end. The 168 participants were split into four distinct groups; each were shown a different version of the advert. These variations included having interpretative brand information or just the brand name at the beginning or the end of the advert. A questionnaire measured the effect of brand cues, transportation, advertising effect, and loneliness.
Impact of brand cue placement
The results demonstrated a difference in advertising effect. Lydia Q. Li noted that when brand cues appeared at the end of the advert, it enhanced positive emotions and trust towards the brand, as well as intention to purchase. This indicates that placing brand cues at the end of an MA advert makes the information source seem more reliable.

The research also found that those who watched a version of the MA that contained interpretative words (ie, brand cues) experienced stronger brand emotions. Lydia Q Li believes this is because brand cues help consumers to understand the narrative information and explain the positive emotions. The study also focused on the impact of transportation, which had a positive influence on the relationship between brand cues and consumers’ attitudes towards the advert. This was especially prevalent when interpretative words were included within the MA, as they strengthened the connection between the brand and storyline content. Particularly, brand cues that appeared at the end of the advert helped consumers to experience transportation, which enhanced their trust, emotional connection, and intention to purchase.

Loneliness enhances emotions
However, MA with brand cues at the beginning of the advert enhanced emotions and purchase intentions for consumers with elevated levels of loneliness. Lydia Q Li believes that having these cues upfront may have helped to reduce negative thoughts connected to the advert and align these consumers’ emotions with the storyline. Interestingly, the research found that loneliness only had an influence on emotions and intention to purchase but did not influence trust. Brand trust is often related to understanding functional information which might be difficult to achieve through the format of MA.

This research highlights the importance of including interpretative information within MAs to help enhance the viewers’ understanding of the content. The study also emphasises the influence of consumer characteristics and the need to adjust the placement of brand cues accordingly. Lydia Q Li hopes that her research will serve as a reference to help organisations develop effective MA marketing strategies.

Lydia Qianqian Li's research highlights the importance of including interpretative information within MAs to help enhance the viewers’ understanding of the content.

Li used a real advert in her research, called “When Good Balloons Fly”. The mini movie had over one million views on YouTube and two versions of advertising records.

Personal response
What inspired you to conduct this research?
Transformative consumer research (TCR) is a trend that prioritises consumer wellbeing. Marketing campaigns in line with this promote long-lasting benefits for the consumer. Among various advertisements, MA becomes increasingly popular when more people use social media and online shopping channels. At the same time, when people spend more time online, loneliness becomes an unavoidable issue. Stories in MA may help increase the happiness of lonely consumers, but references to the brand may evoke negative emotions. Thus, whether consumers’ well-being as well as the effectiveness of MA, my collaborators and I conducted this research by taking loneliness of consumers into account.

How do you think your research can help marketers develop MA marketing strategies?
When making decisions, we usually have two information processing paths: the emotional or intuitive path and the rational or analysis path. To make an effective marketing strategy, marketers can begin by taking this principle as a basis: ‘touch with heart, and reason by truth’. This means that marketers can attract the potential consumers with ‘stories’ that attract them by creating an emotional connection; at the same time, MA should also be informative. More specifically, marketers can use the following points to develop a specific MA marketing strategy.

First, when designing an MA, marketers should maintain the temporal and spatial coherence of the narrative structure. This can help consumers understand and be more easily involved in the story. Second, our research indicates a better effectiveness when the MA has interpretative words at the end of it. So, marketers can place brand cues at the end of the MA, supplying more information to connect the narrative content with the brand. Thirdly, when making an MA, marketers should consider the characteristics of consumers and adjust brand cues for relevant consumer groups to improve the MA effect. Specifically, when targeting ‘highly lonely’ consumers, marketers need to use brand cues with both brand name and interpretative words at the beginning of the advertisement. When targeting ‘lowly lonely’ consumers, they need to put the brand name and interpretative words at the end of the advertisement.

Are there any other personal characteristics that would be interesting to research?
There are several characteristics which are potentially related to MA, I classified these factors into two correlated categories. The first relates to emotions or effects. For example, self-construal, which refers to how a person defines oneself in relation to others, may influence people’s reaction to stories in MA. Those with high interdependent self-construal view the relationship with others as very important while people with high independent self-construal view the independence and autonomy of oneself as the most important thing. Thus, MA can have different content and brand cues design for those consumers groups – eg, having a family or friends context for one consumer base and individual activities content for the other.

In addition, the other type of personal characteristics is related to people’s cognition or rationality. According to construal level theory, people’s thinking can be abstract or concrete. People with a high construal level can interpret information at an abstract and high cognition level, meaning that they focus more on details. Marketers can design an MA with different narratives and brand cues for these two groups. The first group may prefer abstract stories while the second group would welcome concrete information.

Research shows that self-construal has an impact on information processing and decision making. When we take a deeper look at these personal characteristics and their impact on consumers’ reaction to MA, we may propose interesting questions, for example, whether these two types of personal characteristics will interact with each other and have a more dynamic effect on MA effectiveness.

Where do you feel the main gaps in knowledge remain related to MA?
First, there are many types of MA that need investigating – including comedies and romances. Second, whether MA display branded products may influence the advertising effect. Further, it remains unknown whether an optimal combination of temporal and spatial dimensions of narrative structure exists. Future research can focus on those issues to reveal the underlying influencing factors and the mechanism of MA effectiveness.