

# Multi-platforming engagement – an MTV case history

**Charles Young** and **Amy Shea Hall**, Ameritest, shows how audience engagement with programming affects engagement with the ads

**E**NGAGEMENT IS A complex subject and there are many ways to look at engagement with media. Advertisers learned long ago that it is a mistake to think of TV commercials as one-dimensional, describable by a single metric such as day-after-recall. All now understand the need to measure multiple dimensions of performance – for example, attention-getting power, branding, and motivation – to predict a commercial’s potential effectiveness. It would be equally simplistic to think of engagement with programming content one-dimensionally. Here are just some of the different ways or contexts in which we might think of a viewer as being ‘engaged’ with a TV programme.

1. Cognitive: to be focused and attentive to what is shown and said at a given moment in the programme.
2. Emotional: to be ‘hooked, and deeply involved with the unfolding storyline of the programme.
3. Social: to watch a show with other people.
4. Multi-platforming: to simultaneously interact with other platforms like the internet or cellphone while watching a programme.

For those who depend on advertising to fund the creation of content – namely TV networks – exploring exactly what it means to call an audience ‘engaged’, and exactly what happens when this happens, is vital. MTV’s desire to understand more deeply its viewers’ engagement with its programming, and how that engagement

affects embedded advertising, resulted in its joining with Ameritest to study one of its most highly viewed programmes: the annual Video Music Awards (VMA) – adding to the growing body of knowledge on engagement and advertising.

### Methodology

It was important to MTV to use the same tools to measure engagement with programming that its advertisers used to study its advertising – not only to contribute to work taking place on engagement, but to employ validated measurement tools that would be accepted and trusted by MTV’s advertisers. For this study, MTV chose one of a variety of approaches being used by major advertisers to measure emotional engagement with its commercials: the Ameritest Picture Sorts®.

Research was conducted among 640 respondents representing MTV’s core audience of 13–24 year olds, male and female, who regularly watch MTV. The study was divided into a test cell of n=480 of those regular MTV viewers who watched the VMA programme and a control cell of n=160 regular MTV viewers who did not. The test and control cells were matched demographically for age, gender and ethnicity.

The study was conducted on the internet, so that respondents could be exposed to visual stimuli from both the programme and embedded advertising, and questioned on programme reactions, viewing context, multi-platform behav-

our, brand preferences and awareness and attitudes to the advertising. The 30-minute survey was fielded three days after the VMA aired in September, 2005.

Recognition and response measures were obtained for 15 commercials embedded in the programme, using six key frames as a recognition stimulus – comparable to the standard approach used today by major advertisers doing online ad-tracking research.

Two picture sorts were conducted on the two-hour programme itself. The first visual sort, the Flow of Attention, is a cognitive measure of pre-conscious filtering – what the search engine of the eye allows into the conscious mind. The second sort, the Flow of Emotion, measures emotional response to those images that were remembered. Therefore, the Flow of Emotion can be viewed as the result of a two-step filtering process.

One interesting finding from a recent ARF study of different research techniques for measuring engagement is that no significant correlation has been found between dial-meter systems and our Picture Sorts. This is relevant to understanding this study, because dial meters are a traditional approach used to study movies and programming content as well as TV commercials – for example, as in Millward Brown’s Interest Trace.

The idea that still images can be used to capture the emotions of a film, is well established in Hollywood. As stated by Mary Corliss, Assistant Curator in the Department of Film and Media at the ▶

‘The ability of the media vehicle to emotionally engage cannot substitute for excellence in both the media and the message’

FIGURE 1

### Social engagement and audience ratings

Those who watched with someone else and those who participated in a multi-platform experience watched more of the show

	A Whole show (187) %	B More than half (201) %	C Less than half (92) %
Watched with someone	65 C*	61 C*	48
Watched both online and VOD	32 BC*	17 C*	9

Note: \*The relevant value is statistically significantly more than B or C.

Museum of Modern Art in New York: 'Francois Truffaut acknowledged the potency of the still image when he ended his first feature, *The 400 Blows*, with a freeze frame of his young hero. It captured Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Leaud) in a moment in time, his future uncertain, his face seemingly asking "Now what?" at the end of the first turbulent chapter of his experiences. That's what film stills do. They freeze the emotion and excitement of an actor, a scene, a film an era; they are the pin through the movie butterfly that somehow gives this lovely, ephemeral creature lasting life. Stills distil; stills preserve.'

For research purposes, picture-sorting builds on these ideas. Using a non-verbal or right-brain scanning and sorting process, respondents sort through still images to reconstruct their visual – and emotional – experience of a film, without having to resort to words.

One of the keys to the technique is how finely the film is 'thin-sliced' into still pictures. The idea of thin-slicing was

described by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Blink* to describe the ability of the mind to unconsciously or pre-consciously process experience very rapidly: 'Thin-slicing' refers to the ability of our unconscious to find patterns in situations and behavior based on very narrow slices of experience.'

The stills used in picture-sort are not chosen according to clock time or uniform increments (which is one of the main differences from dial-meter measurements), but are taken to represent perceivably different, meaningful slices of the film experience. That is why there is no fixed or pre-determined number of pictures used in the process. The number of pictures, the partitioning of the film experience, has to be tied to content. In a sense, we are taking a stratified, not a uniform, sample of the flow of visual information in the film.

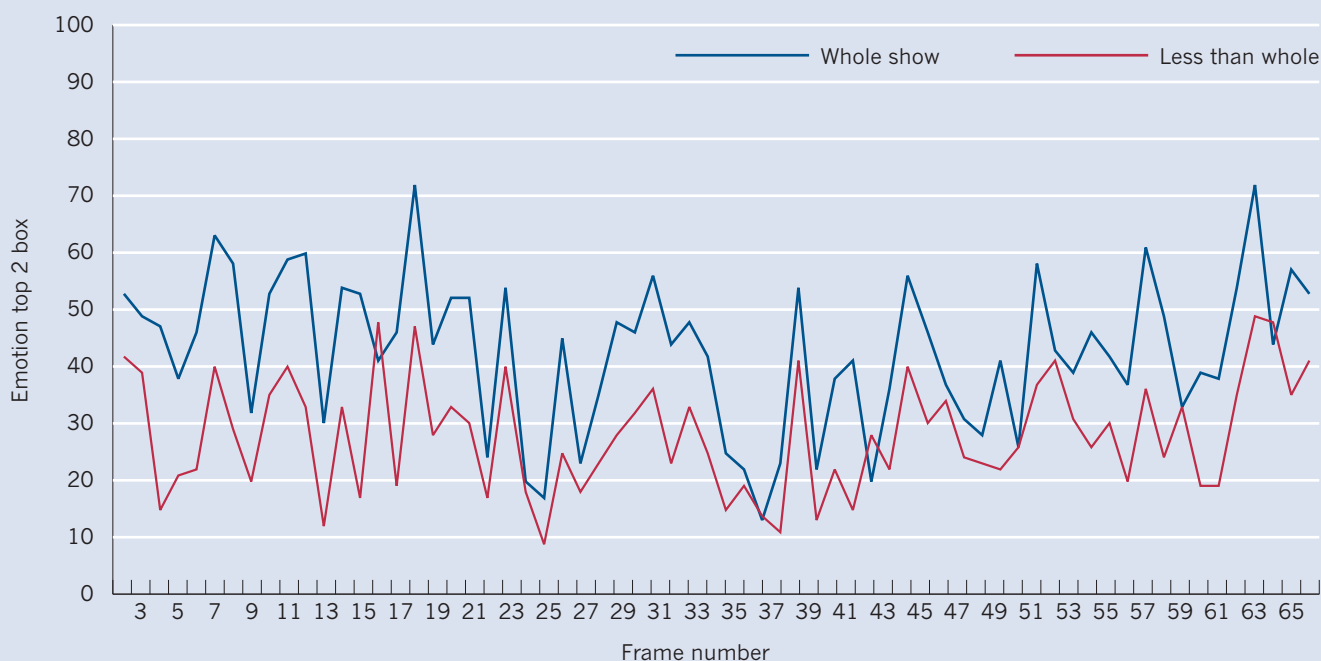
For 30-second TV commercials, the film is sliced very thinly, because it turns out empirically that that level of granularity is actionable for re-editing

film to improve commercial performance. For a two-hour movie or TV programme, the slices will be thicker. To capture the context effects of the VMA programme, 66 stills were sufficient.

One insightful observation about comparing the seismographic-looking flow graphs from film of different lengths is that within a certain range human perception – the search patterns of our conscious attention and the vibrations of our emotions – appears to scale fractally. Complexity scientists point out that if you zoom in on a picture of the coastline of England, changing scale by changing the length of your yardstick, the overall pattern looks the same. Similarly, if you look at unlabelled picture-sort graphs of a two-hour movie, a 7-minute online film, or a 30-second commercial, you might have trouble telling which is which. This suggests that, on the level of film syntax and dramatic structure, 30-second commercials and two-hour movies operate on the same principles of the human mind – the problem of

FIGURE 2

**Flow of Emotion by VMA viewing**



Note: The Flow of Emotion® is the intellectual property of CY Research, Inc. d/b/a Ameritest®. This technique may not be used without the written permission of or licence from CY Research, Inc. Picture Sorts® and Flow of Emotion® are federally registered with the US Patent and Trademark Office.

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FIGURE 3

**Better-liked ads get more lift**

Ad in programme	Recall			Liking			
	Most engaged half %	Least engaged half %	Difference *	Most engaged half %	Least engaged half %	Difference **	
Ad A	61	46	15	80	47	33	+35 average lift
Ad B	58	49	9	71	55	16	
Ad C	49	55	-6	71	33	38	
Ad D	44	28	16	70	23	47	
Ad E	41	34	7	63	54	9	
Ad F	40	40	0	60	16	44	
Ad G	36	23	13	60	17	43	
Ad H	34	29	5	59	12	47	
Ad I	26	13	13	57	30	27	
Ad J	24	25	-1	47	34	13	
Ad K	23	18	5	47	33	14	+13 average lift
Ad L	23	16	7	45	41	4	
Ad M	22	23	-1	42	15	27	
Ad N	18	17	1	23	14	9	
Ad O	14	8	6	14	16	-2	

\* Average difference 5.4%. Not significant.  
 \*\* Average difference 24.6%. Significant.

good throughout the programme. This reminds us that engagement is multi-dimensional, and measuring it, especially for today's audience, requires cognitive measures like the Flow of Attention as well as the emotional measures that are the main focus of this article.

**Emotional context**

Figure 2 demonstrates that those who watched the whole show were also more emotionally engaged, as measured by the picture-sorted Flow of Emotion. The most engaged curve is not simply the least engaged curve shifted upwards; these audiences are responding to different moments in the programme.

A look at the Flow of Emotion for the VMA offers highly specific insights on those moments in the programme that resonated emotionally for viewers of this programme, with its history of pushing the envelope. The results of the Flow of Emotion for the VMA tracked with MTV's expectations as well as industry press.

Footing with MTV's extensive knowledge of contemporary music culture, the strongest positive emotional peaks in the show affirmed the popularity of such stars as Kelly Clarkson, Alicia Keys and Destiny's Child. Polarizing moments that resulted in strongest negative emotion for many viewers were also no surprise: R. Kelly with his legal troubles, P. Diddy wearing a controversial T-shirt, Eva Longoria and her questionable humour regarding Hurricane Katrina, and Paris Hilton were all negative emotional peaks.

**The emotional magnifier**

The Flow of Emotion was also used to explore the interaction between emotional engagement with programme content and the embedded advertising. Using the picture-sorting data, two groups were created to view responses to the embedded advertising. The VMA audience was divided based on level of emotional response to the stills sorted from the VMA, averaged across all stills sorted. This resulted in two equal groups: the 'Most Engaged' and 'Least Engaged'. To test ▶

emotional engagement with advertising and of emotional engagement with content is the same research problem.

**The engaged viewer**

The cliché 'when you are holding a hammer every problem seems like a nail' serves as a caution to researchers who can forget to see questions beyond the tools they most use to answer them. In this study, we did not begin by first looking at the measurements we had in hand, but worked backwards from the desired behaviour of the audience. For a programmer, what would be the essential difference between an engaged and a non-engaged viewer?

In this age of TiVo, the hope and the expectation is that an engaged viewer would watch the entire programme, to the end. So we began by looking for contextual variables that correlate with full-programme viewing.

**Social context**

Viewing the award show as a social experience – that is, watching the programme with others – contributed to whole-pro-

gramme viewership, as shown in Figure 1. Those who watched with someone else were significantly more likely to watch the whole show. This suggests that social engagement might have a multiplier effect on the raw audience ratings for highly social programmes such as the VMA.

**Multi-platform context**

For many the VMA was a multi-platforming experience, as well. For a quarter of viewers, accessing alternative content online or through video on demand (VOD) was part of the event. As with the social component, multi-platforming – particularly likely among younger TV audiences today – again resulted in watching more of the programme. This form of engagement with technology certainly has implications for the new world of integrated, 360° ad-surround marketers.

In an old-world view, multi-platforming could be construed as not paying attention – the programming becoming mere background noise while viewers navigate the web. However, the Flow of Attention for the VMA demonstrates this was not so, as attention overall was

whether or not the difference between the groups was just a halo effect, we ran a correlation between the two time series. We found them to be only moderately correlated ( $r^2=37\%$ ). Hence, the Most Engaged group was not only responding at different levels, but responding to different elements in the programme.

Males and females, and younger and older, were equally engaged by the

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programme. This suggests that the differences described below that are correlated with this measure of programme engagement are not explained by differences in the demographics of the two groups.

A stronger level of emotional engagement with the programme was related to a stronger response to the embedded advertising – though the effects were not the same for all measures or all the advertising.

The most engaged did not recall ads any better than did the least engaged, but they reported higher levels of liking for the ads, particularly among the most likeable ads, as shown in Figure 3.

Ad liking, however, was significantly affected by emotional engagement with the programme, with an average 24.6% stronger response to the advertising among the most engaged compared to the least. However, not all ads benefit from the effect equally.

These differences in ad liking are not due to differences in the brand being advertised, since ads for the same brand appear in both the top and bottom halves of the list. In theory, the appropriateness of the advertising to the programme content could have contributed to the difference. The fit between brand and programme is certainly one of the major factors a marketer takes into account when buying media. You would not, for example, expect to see an IBM commercial on *South Park*, nor to see an Axe body-spray ad on *Sixty Minutes*. On judgement, however, all the brands and ads

included in the study were quite MTV-appropriate.

One possible explanation of the magnification of the likeability of an ad embedded in an engaging programme is the occurrence of some kind of emotional resonance – the effect of two ‘voices’ singing together in concert, or counterpoint, acting as an emotional amplification when the content, mood or tone of a commercial builds on what came before.

Perhaps the most important observation here is that those ads that are already most liked see more of a lift; weaker ads do not experience as strong a magnifying effect. This suggests that creative excellence matters on both ends and is an important variable in how the surrounding emotional context affects advertising. Good ads are strengthened by the emotional surround of the programme content, but good content can’t compensate for a weak ad.

Finally, for most brands advertised on the VMA, an impact on purchase intent and many brand ratings was also found. Importantly, the effect was significantly greater for those audience members most emotionally engaged with the programme. In terms of intended shopping or purchasing behaviour, those who watched the VMA were motivated to shop with the sponsors at higher levels than those in the control because of the embedded advertising. The same was true for sponsor brand ratings. The most engaged showed the highest levels against the control group. This is what we call the programme ‘magnifier effect’ (see Figure 4).

Thus we complete our logic that by starting with a behaviour that programmers care about – staying to the end of the programme – one arrives at a behaviour that sponsors care about – buying the brand.

This research suggests that a strong emotional engagement with programming can indeed magnify engagement with embedded advertising for some measures, such as liking, motivation, and perceptions of the brand – though it affects ad recall at insignificant levels.

Finally, the finding that not all embedded advertising benefits equally from a strong emotional engagement with surrounding context speaks to the importance of good creative in the ad executions themselves. The ability of the media vehicle to emotionally engage cannot substitute for excellence in both the media and the message. ■

FIGURE 4

**Intended behaviour**

	A Most engaged Half (203) %	B Least engaged Half (249) %	C Control (160) %
<b>FASHION RETAIL</b>			
<b>Intent to visit store in the next month</b>			
Definitely/probably will	61 BC*	52 BC*	36
Definitely will	28 BC*	19	13
Probably will	33 C*	33 C*	23
<b>MOBILE TECHNOLOGY</b>			
<b>Intent to visit store in the next month</b>			
Definitely/probably will	18 BC*	6 C*	2
Definitely will	8 BC*	1	1
Probably will	10 BC*	4	2
<b>AUTO</b>			
<b>Intent to visit dealer in the next month</b>			
Definitely/probably will	18 BC*	9 C*	3
Definitely will	7 BC*	1	1
Probably will	11 C*	8 C*	3

Note: \*The relevant value is statistically significantly more than B or C.



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