Conceptualisation, Consumer and Cognition: the 3 Cs That Will Advance Product Placement Research

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Before useful product placement research and effective practice can occur, several conceptual issues must be resolved. Specifically, product placement needs to be clearly distinguished from advertising message embeds, endorsement, sponsorship, advertainment and other liminal activities. Essentially this involves defining and establishing the parameters of product placement, identifying the factors that affect placement processing, developing an ontology of placement context, and identifying what effects are possible and effective ways for measuring these effects. This paper aims to address all of these issues, thus offering a framework for future product placement research.

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ABSTRACT

Before useful product placement research and effective practice can occur, several conceptual issues must be resolved. Specifically, product placement needs to be clearly distinguished from advertising message embedding, endorsement, sponsorship, advertainment and other liminal activities. Essentially this involves defining and establishing the parameters of product placement, identifying the factors that affect placement processing, developing an ontology of placement context, and identifying what effects are possible and effective ways for measuring these effects. This paper aims to address all of these issues, thus offering a framework for future product placement research.

INTRODUCTION

As traditional means of delivering advertising messages lose their ability to reach and effectively communicate with those target audiences judged most desirable by advertisers, the need for alternative vehicles for communication becomes more urgent (Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993). Product placement, and its variant, advertainment, has arisen as tools to penetrate the audiences’ awareness, catching the audience when they are relatively ‘captive’ during a program, when their ‘this is advertising’ evaluation is turned off. It is this unobtrusive entry of the commercial message that makes product placement different from most other forms of marketing communication (McCarty 2004).

Current estimates valued the net worth of the overall product placement market to be $3.5 billion in 2004, a rise of 30.5% from 2003 (Kaplan 2005). Yet considering its use in practice, there has been a disproportionate amount of product placement research and there remains a considerable paucity of research in a number of areas. A fundamental problem is the lack of a strong conceptual foundation, with no overriding theoretical framework to describe how product placement may work. A myriad of definitions of product placement exist, but it is argued that none of these really capture what product placement is about and what it hopes to achieve, or the different forms it can take in various media contexts. Moreover, product placement needs to be properly distinguished from related forms of communication such as sponsorship, endorsement and advertainment. Finally, we also need to understand what effects are possible and what factors impact on these effects. Most research into product placement effectiveness has focused on memory for the placement, with the complexity of this research varying from simply determining how many brands could be remembered and offering no explanation (e.g. Babin and Carder 1996), to trying to explain results by considering certain executional characteristics of the actual placement (e.g. modality, prominence). These effects have been measured via explicit memory tests, thus assuming conscious memory. Yet given that product placement is a form of embedding, we cannot ignore the possibility of unconscious processing and memory and thus the value of implicit memory measures.

Most empirical research to date has focused on examining the effects of one or more executional variables under the control of the sponsor and program creator (e.g. program-induced mood, placement modality) on placement memory. In doing so, these studies have ignored how the characteristics of the audience member themselves affect placement processing. Though the quality of the placement can influence the degree of attention paid to the placement, other factors will also have an impact. This paper argues that the success of a product placement could well lie with the audience, being a function of their level of engagement with the entertainment they are consuming, their familiarity with the product or brand that is placed, and their adopted information processing style, and presents a placement processing framework that incorporates these factors. Furthermore, it also offers a resolution to the aforementioned definition and construct problems.

DEFINING PRODUCT PLACEMENT

A necessary condition for adequately measuring a construct is to specify the domain of the construct, with the researcher delineating what is and is not included within the definition (Churchill 1979). With no such parameters yet established for product placement, it remains somewhat ill-defined and difficult to operationalise. A starting point is therefore to define the construct. Since research in this area began a number of definitions have been proffered and these are listed in Exhibit 1. These definitions differ considerably in their level of inclusivity, namely which media product placements can feature in, what forms of payment may be made, and how a product placement is executed within a specific medium. It would therefore seem that the most comprehensive definition of product placement has been offered by Karth (1998, 33) who defines it as “the paid inclusion of branded products or brand identifiers, through audio and/or visual means, within mass media programming”. He argues that his is the most inclusive definition because it describes the paid nature of product placement (c.f. Steortz 1987; c.f. Balasubramanian 1994), it explains that brands can appear both visually and / or aurally (c.f. Steortz 1987), and infers that product placement encompasses many more mediums than just television or movies (c.f. Balasubramanian 1994; Gupta and Lord 1998; d’Astous and Chartier 2000). Indeed, no other definition in current circulation has all of these characteristics. However, shortcomings can also be found with Karth’s definition. Firstly, “brand identifier” is a tautology, given that a brand is an identifier, so this phrase is redundant. Secondly, it reduces product placement to the placement of brands only. Thirdly, since placement can occur in a variety of entertainment mediums, the focus on audio/visual would also seem unnecessary. Finally, as with most other definitions, it (wrongly) limits product placement to activities that are paid for. This would be acceptable provided that all product placements were contingent on a reward factor, but often, this is not the case, with the purpose being to enhance the program or story. For these reasons, product
placement is better described by defining it in terms of the actual act, namely, “the inclusion of products - branded and/or unbranded – to support content in entertainment programs”.

FIGURE 1
DEFINITIONS OF PRODUCT PLACEMENT

- “the inclusion of a brand name, product, package, signage or other trademark merchandise within a motion picture, television show, or music video” (Steortz 1987)
- “the inclusion of consumer products and services in motion pictures distributed to theatres by major Hollywood studios in return for cash fees or reciprocal promotional exposure for the films in marketing advertising programs” (Clark 1991, in Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993).
- “the planned entries of products into movies or television shows that may influence viewers’ product beliefs and/or behaviors favourably” (Balasubramanian 1994)
- “the practice of placing brand name products in movies as props” (Gupta and Gould 1997)
- “incorporating brands in movies in return for money or for some promotional or other consideration” (Gupta and Lord 1998)
- “the paid inclusion of branded products or brand identifiers, through audio and/or visual means, within mass media programming” (Karrh 1998)
- “a paid product message aimed at influencing movie (or television) audiences via the planned and unobtrusive entry of a branded product into a movie (or television program)” (Gupta and Lord 1998)
- “the placement of a brand or a firm in a movie or in a television program by different means and for promotional purposes” (d’Astous and Seguin 1999)
- “the inclusion of a product, a brand name, or the name of a firm in a movie or in a television program for promotional purposes” (d’Astous and Chartier 2000)
- “commercial insertions within a particular media program intended to heighten the visibility of a brand, type of product, or service” (La Pastina 2001)

Note the term ‘paid’ has been removed. Karrh’s definition infers that product placement only refers to cash payments, and it is unclear whether he is also considering the notion that product placement extends to different forms of payment such as the lending of products, uses of sets, or marketing support for the entertainment program. The coverage of product placement in the press generally focuses on the more explicit monetary component, leading many to believe that cash payments are made for each and every placement, thus neglecting the rich history of product placement which saw it evolve from a simple barter system, which is now encompassed by many of these other indirect payment methods or no payment at all. Further justifying the decision to remove the concept of ‘paid’ from the definition is that the issue of whether or not the placement is paid for by any of these means may ultimately be irrelevant since it is the audiences’ perceptions which are most important (Englis 1998), and increasing coverage of product placement in the press, as well as increasing cynicism from audiences may signal that they believe all placements to be paid for. They may feel that no brand appears in an entertainment program by accident. But whilst they do not appear by accident, it is not because they are necessarily there to influence (c.f. Balasubramanian 1994; Law and Braun-LaTour 2004). To make such a statement would be to say that directors and writers have lost complete control of their creative processes and that it is advertisers who are making entertainment, not them.

As both consumers and researchers, we can not always know which products appear as a result of a deal and which ones appear purely for creative purposes. Therefore, the way that we process all the different props, costumes and settings in entertainment programs is the same, regardless of whether it was the result of a formal placement or not. So relative to processing, the paid nature of product placement is irrelevant, as it is the questions surrounding processing that lie at the heart of both social and ethical concerns and commercial accountability. The paid nature of the product placement is only relevant from a commercial perspective, for advertisers who need to know what they are buying, and who need some way of measuring whether they are getting value for money and gaining value from their advertising spend.

ESTABLISHING PARAMETERS

Establishing parameters necessitates the clarification of the relationship between product placement, sponsorship, endorsement and advertainment. Separating the sponsorship and endorsement elements is relatively straightforward. To sponsor means to be surety for, to favour or support strongly; to support (someone) in a fund-raising activity by pledging a certain sum for each unit completed; and in a marketing context to pay or contribute towards the expenses of a media program, performance or other event or work, in return for advertising space or rights. Conversely, to endorse is to confirm, sanction, countenance, or vouch for, through an endorsement. Underlying sponsorship is the notion that some tangible or material act must be given to enhance the well-being of the entity sponsored. Endorsement is merely approval and does not require such tangible or material acts. In this way, sponsorship could be viewed as
a form of endorsement, but endorsement is not a form of sponsorship. There are a number of ways in which endorsement and sponsorship can be manifested – for example, celebrities directly (or indirectly) endorsing a brand, or one brand endorsing another. Our definition of product placement now envelopes both endorsement and sponsorship. For example, the use or reference to, in a positive context, by a star or character in an entertainment vehicle can be seen as an endorsement, and depending on the story context, a brand can be associated with a sponsorship act within a storyline. So in essence, placement under certain conditions can be associated with endorsement and/or sponsorship, but it is not by itself either of these two activities.

The relationship between product placement and advertainment is somewhat more complex. The term advertainment (also known as branded entertainment, brandtainment, brandsploitation, and brand integration) emerged in the late 1990s and was originally associated with the use of a short film format, but other genres such as computer games and music video clips have also adopted this format. Advertisers are now focussing on not interrupting audiences and working on a multitude of ways in which to seamlessly incorporate the advertisement into the entertainment vehicle, thus making the advertisement all but invisible. The key element of advertainment is that the messages do not appear to be advertisements, but entertainment and hence capture attention whilst the brand takes either a central or incidental role.

Kretchmer (2004) associates advertainment with entertainment vehicles created solely to spotlight specific advertisers. She argues that two forms can be identified - one where the advertisement is the entertainment; the other where the entertainment is the advertisement. The former is exemplified by Anheuser-Busch’s Bud Bowls that originated in 1989, where the Bud and Bud-Light battled for gridiron glory. The advertisement migrated to the Internet and transformed in the real domain with people betting on the outcome. For the latter she gives the example of Heather Locklear endorsing Preference during ads in ‘Spin City’, Katie Holmes endorsing Lumia in ads during ‘Dawson’s Creek’ and Jessica Alba supporting Feria in ads during ‘Dark Angel’, arguing that when we watch the show, we are primed to think about the product when we see the stars from the ad sporting their beautifully coloured hair. Since she defines advertainment as vehicles created solely to spotlight advertisers, one then presumes, using Kretchmer’s logic, that ‘Spin City’, ‘Dawson’s Creek’ and ‘Dark Angel’ were programs initiated and paid for by the advertisers. She also argues that both are forms of product placement and that endorsement and sponsorship elements are also features of the activity. Her linking of advertainment to entertainment vehicles created solely to spotlight specific advertisers does not create a problem, but her description of the two forms is not totally clear. It seems reasonable that advertainment should describe a situation where the advertisement is the entertainment, and the Anheuser-Busch’s Bud Bowls advertisement seems a reasonable example. However the other form, that the entertainment is the advertisement in the ‘Spin City’, ‘Dawson’s Creek’ and ‘Dark Angel’ examples are confusing as it suggests that the purpose of these programs is to advertise products. In the traditional understanding of product placement, the program content is developed independently of the needs of the product or brand, and the product or brand takes advantage of the existing program content. Essentially, there is a difference in the degree of ownership and control that the advertiser has over the process.

It seems therefore that advertainment and product placement are different, but related, activities, and that an ‘umbrella’ label for this evolved practice needs to be considered. Product placement was coined at a time when the practice was geared towards products as props and the strategic value was not fully realised by brand managers. This realisation, coupled with the emergence of advertainment suggests that it may be useful to create a new term and a new definition. Hence, this research offers the term ‘brandcasting’ as an umbrella term for both concepts. It is a nice play on words – not only stemming from the word broadcasting, but it also denotes that the brand is deliberately cast in the story. Brandcasting relates then to “the inclusion of products – branded or unbranded – in an entertainment program”, and it can take two forms – advertainment or product placement. More specifically, advertainment relates to program content designed to support a brand. The inclusion of a brand in an advertainment is always purposeful (as this is its raison d’être) and hence paid for, and the advertiser has more creative control. Product placement on the other hand relates to a product or brand used to support content and may or may not be deliberate or paid for. Furthermore, while both are forms of brandcasting, the purpose, function and viewer’s processing of the brand is likely to be different. For this reason, it may be useful to view the relationship between advertainment and product placement as two opposite ends of a continuum.
DEVELOPING A BRANDCAST PROCESSING FRAMEWORK

The uses and gratifications research stream is an audience-centred perspective that looks at what people do with the media rather than what the media does to them (Wakefield et al. 1998). An essential assumption of this perspective is that mass media use is controlled by the individual audience member, thus taking a user-level view as opposed to a mass exposure perspective in understanding media use (Stafford et al. 2004).

Pavelchak, Antil and Munch (1988) found that program induced emotional reactions will influence ad recall, especially during the encoding stage when program-induced emotion is likely to have its effect. Because brandcasts do not interrupt the movies or programs in which they are embedded, the issue is to determine how factors related to the processing of a program affect the concurrent processing of a brandcast. The answer may depend on the relative balance of three potentially countervailing forces – the program context, the brandcast quality and the recipient’s level of engrossment with the story. The brandcast processing framework presented in this paper is based on the assumption that a desired outcome of a brandcast is a memory of the brand and/or product and that the placement quality in any program is a ‘given’ (i.e. determined by the program designers). For this reason, audience characteristics are deemed to have a moderating effect on the placement stimulus.

Brandcast Effects

A significant issue for brandcasting is determining what audience effects are possible. This debate is magnified as there is little consensus or knowledge as to what effects practitioners are hoping to gain from brandcasting, what effects could theoretically arise, and what effects have actually been demonstrated through empirical studies. With the goal of marketing effort being to build and sustain purchase, the ultimate goal of communication planning is also purchase. Purchase, in turn, is influenced by a range of factors - some controllable by marketers, others not - so the most that one can expect from advertising efforts, including brandcasts, is that preference for the brand is created and/or sustained. Furthermore, the entwined nature of joint promotional campaigns makes it difficult to tease apart the effects of brandcasts from other forms of marketing efforts.

Thus it can be presumed that the intention is to create brand awareness and to influence preference. Though brandcasts involve parallel processing, memory effects (conscious / unconscious) are still the desired outcome. Whereas explicit memory tests are viable in traditional advertising, because placement awareness must result from parallel processing, the liminal factor in placement needs to be recognised, thus validating an argument for implicit measures. The value of implicit memory testing is gaining acceptance (Shapiro et al. 1997; Hair et al. 1998; Law and Braun 2000; Shapiro and Krishnan 2001). The choice of implicit or explicit could vary depending on the brandcast platform (i.e. advertisement or product placement). It may be that explicit measures may be more beneficial for measuring advertisement as the program has been designed to support the brand effects, and implicit better in the case of product placement. It seems sensible to assume that the costs associated with the strategic use of product placement would require an impact on brand awareness and image associations. This being so, some form of memory measure (conscious or unconscious) would seem appropriate either alone or in conjunction with attitude and/or preference measures.

Brandcast Quality

With the goal of brandcast research to understand what audience do with the brandcast, research is understandably geared towards examining the relationship between the quality of the brandcast and memory of it. Gupta and Lord (1998) were the first researchers to extend the product placement literature, by considering the effects of the placement quality. They found, as did Brennan, Dubas and Babin (1999), d’Astous and Chartier (2000) and Russell (2002) that prominence, modality and plot connection affected recall. A scrutiny of the previous studies indicates that any measure of brandcast quality should include prominence, modality, frequency and exposure length, use by star and plot connection.

Prominence. Determined by assessing whether the placement is creative or on-set. Creative (subtle) placements occur when a brand appears as a prop in the background of a shot, is small in size, is lost in an array of multiple products or objects, or has a low time of exposure (Murdock 1992). In contrast, on-set placements are more central to the action in the scene and one would expect them to be more easily recalled.

Modality. There are three main ways this can occur. Visual-only brandcasts show a product, logo, or some other visual brand identifier without any relevant message or sounds. In contrast, audio-only placements exist when the brand name is mentioned or heard without showing the product. Audio-visual placements exist when the brand is both seen and its name spoken.

Temporal Quality. Frequency and length of exposure represent repetition and time, which both help slow down the process of forgetting or decay, thus increasing the ability to retrieve information from the memory store. The more screen time a product is given, the greater the chance it has of being noticed and subsequently recalled. Audiences should therefore be more aware of a brand that is shown frequently and has long exposure times.

Plot Connection. Relates to the degree that the placement is integrated with the plot of the story (Russell 1998). Whereas lower plot placements do not contribute much to the story, higher plot placements constitute a major thematic element (Holbrook and Grayson 1986).

Used by Star. Prominence may also result from the fact that the product (or other brand identifier) is consumed or mentioned by one of the leading actors (Babin and Carder 1996). Such a brandcast is termed ‘use by star’ (Removed during review process).

Our model (see Exhibit 3) considers the role that these five different factors of brandcast quality have on memory for the brandcast. Because it is the brandcast to which the audience member is exposed, the characteristics of this stimulus are depicted as having a direct effect on the audience’s stages of processing.
Audience Characteristics

Adopting the stance of the uses and gratifications research stream, it seems sensible to argue that the recall of a product placement will be moderated by an audience member’s characteristics. Simply because a person is counted as being in the audience for a particular program does not mean that an advertisement or program segment has been seen. The environment in which an ad appears may have a significant effect on the viewer, and this effect may be caused by viewer attitudes towards the vehicle, mood engendered by it, the degree of involvement of the audience member and how the message content is processed (Lloyd and Clancy 1991; Norris and Colman 1993). Understanding the impact of context and audience state on advertising effectiveness is therefore important and raises both a theoretical issue – the role of the viewer in the communication process – and a methodological problem – how we can investigate different interpretations and their influence on effects (Livingstone 1990).

Level of Audience Engrossment

The term engrossment was selected to identify the components of the audiences’ mental and emotional engagement with a program. Engrossment means to occupy exclusively; to absorb, to give complete attention, concentration and intense mental effort; it is the mental state of being preoccupied by something. Essentially it is the degree to which individuals are engaged, affectively, cognitively and behaviorally, with the media they are consuming, at the time of consumption. It is characterised by the degree of cognitive effort (the degree of mental engagement) and the level of emotional arousal and pleasure experienced.

Audience activity is multi-dimensional and is best conceptualised as an unfixed construct, with audiences exhibiting varying degrees of activity both within and between programs. Intensively focused viewing is only one way of watching. Most people have different intensity levels of viewing which vary with the content of what they are watching, what else they are doing, time of day, motivation for viewing, and who else is watching with them (Lee 2002). For this reason, it may be more accurate to think of watching not as a binary condition, but along a continuum (Kim and Rubin 1997; Lee 2002).

An individual’s unique interests, personality predispositions, need for entertainment, media selectivity, prior exposure to the content, empathy with and desirability of the character, level of distraction, arousal states, or mood may influence their affective reactions, willingness and ability to become engrossed with a program. In other words, this engrossment may be more strongly linked to individual-level variables than to content variables. Whist this concept of engrossment is yet to be properly clarified, based on a review of the literature, and extending the work of (reviewed during review process), it is anticipated that factors such as pleasure, arousal, cognitive effort, and program and star liking will emerge as components of audience engrossment.

Level of Product Knowledge and Involvement

There is empirical evidence for the role of product familiarity in relation to formal advertising messages (e.g. Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Rao and Monroe 1988; Coupey et al. 1998), but not in the context of product placement except for (removed during review process). Product familiarity provides consumers with a superior ability to accumulate, integrate and judge the relevance of product information, thereby creating a sophisticated memory schema (Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Rao and Monroe 1988). With familiarity affecting what, how and how much product category information is stored in the brain, audiences are more willing to process personally relevant messages and find it easier to process information about products that are familiar to them (Petty et al. 1983; Celsi and Olson 1988; Babin and Carder 1996; DeLorme and Reid 1999). In the context of brandcasting, the perceived personal relevance may allow faster recognition (either conscious or unconscious) and facilitate concurrent processing of the embedded placement, hence impacting on the direct relationship between the product placement characteristics and retention.

Information Processing Style

It is well established that consumers have different processing skills, relating to their acquisition of information, the strategies they employ during acquisition, and their utilisation of acquired information when forming judgements (Childers et al. 1985). Two information processing styles are an individual’s propensity to process visual information (pictures) as opposed to verbal information (words). Such predispositions for processing orientation (i.e. visual or verbal) may stem from differing abilities to process information (Capon and Davis 1984) or a preference for a particular style (Richardson 1978).

This audience characteristic is thought to have a moderating effect on brandcast characteristics and subsequent retention of that brandcast. In the case of visual versus verbal processing, an individual with a preference for visual information would process pictures and images, whilst a person with a preference for verbal information would process words, text and dialogue. So, when exposed to the same brandcast, individuals would respond differently to the visual and verbal brandcasts based on their predisposition for visual or verbal information (Sojka and Giese 2001).

THE BRANDCAST PROCESSING FRAMEWORK

Given the nature and character of these factors, the framework shown in exhibit 3 shows how these factors interact. The audience characteristics have a moderating effect on the stimulus - the brandcast quality. Additional audience characteristics such as age, culture and media usage and frequency will be controlled for and compared, and delivery context will be limited to film. Future research should test different contexts in order to develop generalisations.

CONCLUSION

Product placement research is in its infancy and if it is to develop into a viable and meaningful research area in marketing communications, definition, construct and framework issues need to be resolved. This paper has argued for the use of the term brandcasting (the inclusion of products - branded and / or unbranded - in mass media programs) as an umbrella term for the practices of advertisement and product placement. Whilst both make use of brands and products in entertainment programs, they are in essence different forms and their differences
need to be taken into account when examining effects. A brandcasting framework was proposed, based on the premise that the effects of a brandcast are determined by the quality of that brandcast and that the audience characteristics (i.e. brand familiarity, engrossment and processing styles) will moderate the effects of the brandcast quality. It is hoped that the framework developed in this paper will have a seminal affect on how placement effects are examined.

**FIGURE 3**
Brandcast Processing Framework

Figure 3.1 – Basic Theoretical Model of Brandcast Processing

**REFERENCES**


