Investigating Product Placement in Video Games: the Effect of Mood on Children’s Choice

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Are children likely to be influenced by product placement in video games? In experiment 1, we found that placements in video games directly affected their choice of brand. Unexpectedly, we found that children who like to play game with others (extraverts) are more likely to be influenced by product placement than solo players (introverts). However, when mood is manipulated (experiment 2), children in a happy mood are more likely to choose the brands in the game into their consideration set than those who are sad or angry, regardless of their preferred style of play.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Although product placement in video games is expected to generate 800 million dollars every year (Case, 2005), and its unique advantage over brand placements in TV and film has been well documented (e.g. Nelson, 2002), little is known about its effectiveness or how to define and measure such effectiveness, especially with regard to children (Auty and Lewis, 2004). In order to fill in the above research gap, two experiments were done to explore the effectiveness of brand placements in video games on children’s choice and to see if any effect is moderated by mood.

Processing fluency (the ease with which a stimulus comes to mind) has been found to reliably bias consumer judgment and lead to positive evaluation (see Schwarz, 2004; Winkielman et al, 2003 for a review). Product placement in video games may lead to processing fluency as players often allocate limited attention to background details and the stimulus may be processed perceptually without any concomitant cognitive processing (Auty and Lewis, 2004). Without realizing the true source of fluency, game players may misattribute their subjective ease of processing the brand as preference for the brands shown in the game. Such effects are strongest when consumers lack cognitive capacity, such as the young children in this research, or lack the motivation to process the stimulus in sufficient detail to make a judgment (Winkielman et al, 2003).

Alongside work on fluency, psychologists have provided an extensive and growing body of literature about the effect of emotion and mood on information processing and judgment (see Clore, Schwarz and Conway, 1994; Forgas, 1995 for a review). Will a negative mood offset the hedonic marking of processing fluency by encouraging a more systematic processing of stimulus details and lead to a negative judgment?

Based on these theoretical accounts, the following hypotheses are made:

H1: Children exposed to product placement in a video game will be more likely to choose the placed brand when offered a choice of drink from a display than those who have not played the “branded” game.

H2a: When exposed to the same “branded” game, children in the positive mood condition will be more likely to choose the placed brand than children in other conditions.

H2b: When exposed to the same “branded” game, children in the positive mood condition will be less likely to recall the placed brands than children in other conditions.

H3a: When exposed to the same “branded” game, children in the negative mood condition will be less likely to choose the placed brand than children in other conditions.

H3b: When exposed to the same “branded” game, children in the negative mood condition are more likely to recall the placed brands in the game than children in other conditions.

To test these hypotheses, 165 Chinese children from Shanghai were recruited for two experiments to test product placement effectiveness in video games on children’s choice. Study 1 (n=71) replicated Auty and Lewis’s (2004) research on young children in a video game context. One group of children played a “branded” game and a control group played a game without brands. The children were offered a choice of the brand and the market leader in the same category. We found that product placement had a clear effect on children’s choice even though all but one played the games for the first time and for only a few minutes. In Study 2 (n=94), by manipulating children’s mood while playing a “branded” video game (positive/neutral/negative mood), we found that children in the positive mood were significantly more likely than children in other conditions to choose brands in the game in a written task asking which brand from the category a store manager should display. This difference in choice, however, could not be explained by more explicit attention to detail because, even though there was almost a significant difference (p=.06) in recall between children in the happy condition versus children in other conditions, there was very little explicit recall overall (only 6 in the negative condition out of 94 in all conditions recalled one or the other of the target brands).

Children in the negative mood condition were significantly less likely to choose the placed brands than the children in other conditions.

Across two experiments, we demonstrated that young children are incapable of using cognitive defence against the influence of product placement (Mallalieu, 2003) and appear to make choices based on immediately and readily observable perceptual features of the subjects (Roedder John, 1999). However, although previous research has documented that exposure to product placement leads to positive affect, Study 2 shows that children’s different moods when playing a video game can moderate product placement effectiveness and sometimes even lead to a negative judgment. This may be because the initially automatic positive reaction to the high fluency is overridden by the assimilation effect suggested by Srull (1983). Therefore, when asked to make a choice, although children in the negative mood might have an automatic positive affect towards the stimulus from prior exposure, they do not choose it because unhappy people are motivated to change their feelings (Isen, 1984) and do not have confidence in their judgment, so they are more likely to rely on external knowledge to make a judgment (Gasper, 2004; Adaval, 2001). The negative valence associated with the brand when they encoded the stimulus seems to override the positive reaction and lead to a negative judgment.

Because of its apparent influence, policy makers should consider the effects of product placement on children. This research moreover reports a boundary condition of the positive affect of product placement and processing fluency, such that managers should consider the context of the placement when brands are placed in games or films.

References


