Social Network Connectedness to Soap Operas, Celebrity Product Endorsement, and Consumer Behavior

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Abstract

One factor that has not received attention in the literature but that affects the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement and product placement is consumers’ perceptions of their social networks. We propose and demonstrate that perceptions about attitudes and behavior of consumers’ social networks toward a given medium (network connectedness) directly affect consumers’ purchase intentions of brands advertised through soap opera celebrities. Data from a field study of Brazilian consumers show that this network connectedness effect exists independently from that of self connectedness (the extent to which viewers develop parasocial relationships with characters that resemble real close relationships.)

Introduction

Entertainment content such as TV soap operas and movies are highly desirable media for placing products and brands because the characters naturally receive direct attention from viewers, and because the characters often become celebrities in their own right. In particular, product placement and celebrity endorsement are popular means of promoting fashion products. Although the relationship between viewers and the medium itself (e.g., soap operas and movies) has been identified as a determinant of the effectiveness of these marketing practices, consumer perceptions of their social networks’ attitudes and behavior toward the medium have not been directly linked to such effectiveness.

Consumers’ social networks are especially important because most people are moderately connected to others and willing to share marketing information with others (Smith et al. 2007). Given that the entertainment industry naturally provides popular topics for discussion in social networks, we expect marketing actions in this domain to generate social interactive effects that significantly increase the effectiveness of firms’ efforts beyond their direct effects on consumers. We propose that social interactions driven by product placement and celebrity endorsement take the form of social network connectedness, which we define as consumers’ perceptions of how others are affected by marketing communications from a particular source (in this case a medium).

We argue these perceptions play a significant role in the fashion context where social utility is a prime determinant of behavior (McIntyre and Miller 1992). We propose and demonstrate that network connectedness directly affects one’s purchase intentions of an advertised brand, beyond previously documented effects of self connectedness to a medium—the extent to which viewers develop parasocial relationships with characters that resemble real close relationships (Russell, Norman, and Heckler 2004). We focus on the use of soap opera celebrities in advertising campaigns for fashion products, as well as product placement in soap operas—more specifically, novelas, which are highly popular, prime-time, serial fiction (La Pastina 2001).

Novelas owe their popularity to the presentation of types of people whom viewers recognize and with whom they become familiar over time (Russell and Stern 2006). The prominence of consumption in the genre is reflected in the importance of products such as clothing, makeup, home furnishings, and food to the characters (Cornwell and Keillor 1996). In the clothing domain, fashion trends tend to be associated with wealthy urban characters (La Pastina 2001) who serve as aspirational referents. La Pastina (2001) argues that the desire to learn about fashion, lifestyle trends, and behavior is intrinsically associated with soap operas, fuelling knowledge of consumer goods and lifestyles. Therefore, a better understanding of the effects of product placement in soap operas is of high relevance for marketing.

Empirical Evidence

Research Context and Procedures

A field study was conducted in Brazil in collaboration with a high-end fashion retailer whose brands have been featured in several novelas and been endorsed by soap opera celebrities. The data were collected by intercepting Brazilian women as they exited one of five selected stores. The stores were selected to span different geographic areas within a large city as to maximize variance in socio-economic status. All participants who completed the brief survey were entered in a lottery for a free pair of shoes at that store.

The questionnaire assessed their attitudes toward the brand, number of products of this brand they had previously bought, and how much they intended to buy in the future (purchase intention). It also captured network connectedness and self connectedness to soap operas using measures adapted from (Russell et al. 2004), the amount of time they spent per week watching soap operas, and whether they had seen the brand in a soap opera (attention to placement). Finally, susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989), age, and highest education level were measured.

Descriptive Results

One hundred and thirty one women aged 12 to 77 (M=39.8) participated. On average, participants reported spending six hours per week watching soap operas (SD=5.45). Levels of connectedness to soap operas spanned the scale, from 1 to 5, with means of 3.15 (SD=1.07) for self connectedness and 3.52 (SD=1.02) for network connectedness. Evidence of discriminant validity between self and network connectedness is evident in the relatively low correlation between the two constructs (r=.41).

Self (α=.84) and network (α=.85) connectedness were regressed on level of education, age, and susceptibility to interpersonal influence (α=.77). Self connectedness was related to both susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Std B=.19, t(123)=2.20, p<.05) and level of education (Std B=.22, t(123)=2.54, p<.05). Network connectedness was only related to susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Std B=.25, t(113)=2.76, p<.05). Surprisingly, age did not affect either type of connectedness.

Analyses

We compared the effects of self and network connectedness on attention to brand placement in soap operas, attitudes toward the brand, and brand purchase intentions. Regressions were conducted for each DV on self and network connectedness, as well as susceptibility to