Aet Tu, Brutus?@: a Case For Consumer Skepticism and Backlash Against Product Placements

Namita Bhatnagar, University of Manitoba
Lerzan Aksoy, Koc University, Turkey

EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Marketers find themselves faced with the challenging task of creatively capturing and maintaining consumer attention. Two trends contribute to the search for unconventional methods for message delivery: (1) the gradual adaptation of consumers to existing modes of marketing communications; and (2) the increasing abundance of marketing messages that compete for limited consumer attention. Placing brands within media content (e.g., movies, T.V. programs, music) is one such method. This practice is termed as 'product placement'--while brand sponsors pay for embedded commercial messages, this sponsorship frequently remains hidden (Balasubramanian 1994; Solomon and Englis 1996).

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“Et Tu, Brutus?”: A Case for Consumer Skepticism and Backlash against Product Placements

Namita Bhatnagar , University of Manitoba
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Marketers find themselves faced with the challenging task of creatively capturing and maintaining consumer attention. Two trends contribute to the search for unconventional methods for message delivery: (1) the gradual adaptation of consumers to existing modes of marketing communications; and (2) the increasing abundance of marketing messages that compete for limited consumer attention. Placing brands within media content (e.g., movies, T.V. programs, music) is one such method. This practice is termed as ‘product placement’—while brand sponsors pay for embedded commercial messages, this sponsorship frequently remains hidden (Balasubramanian 1994; Solomon and Englis 1996).

Placements are considered as cost-effective alternatives to advertising based on widely held assumptions (i.e., consumers are naïve and unwittingly consume marketing messages in the guise of entertainment due to the naturalistic and covert manner of brand inclusion) that may not necessarily bear out given the sophistication of audiences today. This assumed lack of persuasion knowledge is questioned based on contradicting anecdotal and pretest evidence: consumer speculations about the commercial intent of embedded messages and consequent skepticism are found to be high. Scant academic attention has been paid to the impact of variations in consumer awareness, except in the case of ethically controversial products (e.g., alcohol, tobacco) where public policy legislation is called for. The role of persuasion knowledge in generating a consumer backlash against placements (e.g., lowered trust in media and placed claims) remains unexplored. Important insights into the need for regulating placement activities may be gained from this research. If consumers are indeed more sophisticated than they are given credit for and possess adequate awareness and consequent mechanisms to cope with persuasive attempts, the call for government intervention may be unwarranted.

Further, investigations into placement efficacy have been limited to brand memory and evaluation (Babin and Carder 1996), and evidence available is ambiguous at best. Drawing upon tenets of the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad and Wright 1994) adds complexity to the placement efficacy construct (by also including trust in brand sponsors, the claims they make and trust placed in participating media). This suggests that the effectiveness of placements can be gauged from the point of view of all participants involved: for consumers (from a welfare perspective), for brand sponsors (from a brand and claim memory, attitudinal and trust perspective), and for participating media (from a trust and reputational perspective). Several issues thus warrant investigation: (a) Whether product placements are indeed as attractive as have been portrayed in past literature?; (b) Whether there are extenuating circumstances that might make advertisements more attractive?; (c) Whether product placement effects can prove to be a double edged sword for brand sponsors (by increasing memory on one hand, and hurting trust on the other) and for media (by generating additional revenue, yet potentially hurting its credibility); and (d) Whether government legislation of placement practices is needed in order to protect consumers that lack the ability to do so themselves?

The investigation focuses on consumer awareness of the covert commercial aspect of product placements and the consequent impact on placement efficacy. The 2 key hypotheses tested are: (1) memory for placed brands and claims is higher than the memory for advertised brands (in line with past research); and (2) awareness of commercial intent moderates the effect of the trust in brands, claims made and media used, such that high awareness leads to lowered trust for claims and lowered perceptions of motive purity for media used, when brands are placed versus when they are advertised. In other words, placed claims are expected to enhance memory. At the same time, a potential backlash can occur if consumers become aware of the hidden commercial intent of sponsors. This backlash would not occur when awareness is low and no commercial intent is perceived. Consumers are already aware of the commercial nature of advertisements, and the question of feeling manipulated and consequent backlash does not arise here. Results support the proposition that though people appear to remember placed claims better, it may sometimes be better to advertise brands. Media managers in addition need to understand that repercussions to covertly embedding brands within the programming or editorial content are possible.

Three laboratory experiments (two conducted, one planned) test these hypotheses. Study 1 uses a paper-based scenario about brand placements for a fictional vitamin brand within a hypothetical magazine article. Awareness of commercial intent is manipulated, and the trust in brands, perceived motive purity of the medium involved, and feelings of betrayal in the medium are measured. Study 2 uses more realistic stimuli (presented as excerpts from a hypothetical magazine), measures awareness of commercial intent, and compares persuasion outcomes when claims about an unfamiliar brand of instant soup are placed versus advertised. Memory as well as trust measures for the brand and the medium are measured. Results bear out the proposition that placements can lead to better memory outcomes, yet they also have the potential to create a backlash if consumers feel they are being manipulated via covert marketing attempts. This dual nature of placements is under-investigated in existing placement literature and the implications for media tend to be ignored. In Study 3 we propose to investigate whether this backlash gets exacerbated when placements are discerned in highly credible media. Since consumers tend to hold credible media up to a higher standard of conduct, they may feel even more betrayed since such conduct would not be within the realm of their expectations.

References