The Impact of Narrative Immersion and Perceived Self-Character Similarity on Evaluations of Product Placements

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Product placements, or paid brand inclusions within media content, where sponsor identities stay obscured, are extremely popular. We examine the impact of narrative immersion and perceived self-character similarity on persuasion knowledge, and the evaluation of placed brands and narratives in print (magazine) media. Results of four laboratory experiments suggest that immersion into experiences of dissimilar (versus similar) characters makes brand evaluations more favorable and similarity heightens persuasion knowledge. Brand and narrative evaluations, in the case of low self-character similarity, get enhanced when consumers are asked to take on the perspective of the story’s character.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Where the place for companies to make product-related claims traditionally resided in spaces clearly allocated for promotional purposes (e.g., between programs), today, unambiguous delineations between programming and promotions are harder to come by. The use of product placements—where brands pay to make seemingly innocuous cameo appearances within content and keep this sponsorship hidden (Balsubramanian 1994)—has gained in popularity over the past two decades. It is no longer unusual to encounter brands sharing space with characters within media narratives—e.g., General Motors vehicles that appear in the movie Transformers, the Bulgari jewelry brand embedded in author Fay Weldon’s book The Bulgari Connection, and Saab cars within the television sitcom Seinfeld.

This rise in incidence of product placements—fuelled by the need for revenues by production/publication houses and to break through the clutter of customary promotional practices by companies—has not gone hand-in-hand with an adequate understanding of their impact. Researchers have called for rigorous examinations beyond explicit brand memory and attitudinal effects of placements (Law and Braun-LaTour 2003). While contextual issues such as fit with the storyline, placement modality (e.g., visual/auditory, foreground/background) and audience-character attachments (Russell and Stern 2006) have been investigated, more needs to be done to understand how narratives that house placements are consumed as well as consequences for the narratives themselves. Further, academic scrutiny in the field of communications (e.g., Babin and Carder 1996) and marketing (e.g., Law and Braun 2002, Russell 2002) has primarily been limited to the context of TV and films. While these remain the biggest categories for placement expenditures, brand integrations frequently occur in media as diverse as music, radio shows, the Internet, videogames, books, magazines and newspapers. Outside of films and television, the highest proportion of brand integrations occur in magazines (PQ Media) that remain virtually unexamined within product placement research.

In this paper, we bring together research on narrative processing, persuasion, cognitive load and product placements to examine the role of narrative immersion and perceived self-character similarity on brand evaluations, narrative evaluations and persuasion knowledge in the context of brands embedded within magazine articles.

Though a long tradition of inquiry into audience-character relationships exists, this has only recently been applied to consumer processing of narratives within which placements occur. Further, persuasion research has primarily examined the persuasiveness of rhetorical product advocacy messages (e.g., ads). Consumers routinely encounter information in narrative form (by way of newspapers, magazines, TV and the like), yet the persuasive impact of narratives is not thoroughly understood (Green and Brock 2000). The idea of narrative transportation is the notion of losing oneself within a story (Gerrig, 1994). Research into narrative transportation has shown that mental immersion is persuasive (Green and Brock, 2000). Escalas (2004) found corroborating evidence within the context of advertisements that exhort audiences to “star” in positive hypothetical scenarios of product use. By bringing about mental transportation, the ads were able to lower consumers’ critical thinking and heighten affective responses. This in turn led to more favorable evaluations of ads and brands. In salesperson research, Campbell and Kimani (2000) find that cognitively busy consumers with less access to persuasion motives evaluate salespeople more positively. Along similar lines, we hypothesize that asking respondents to take the perspective of dissimilar characters should prove to be cognitively effortful. Thus, consumers should have fewer mental resources available to question the provenance of branded inclusions. Audiences that do not use their persuasion knowledge would therefore evaluate brands and the media content within which they appear more favorably. While putting ourselves into the shoes of people we consider as different may be a mental challenge, we have well-developed scripts and schemas related to our own lives and those of people we see as similar. Thus, identifying with experiences of similar characters should not be cognitively burdensome, and audiences should possess the cognitive capability for scrutinizing vicarious experiences and brand claims contained therein. Suspicions of ulterior persuasive motives should then temper brand as well as narrative evaluations.

We examined the joint effects of similarity and immersion on brand/story evaluations in a series of four laboratory experiments. Regardless of how similarity is manipulated across the first three studies, results consistently establish that the impact of perceived self-character similarity is moderated by the extent of immersion into the narrative. Participants, deeply immersed into the story, evaluated both the narrative and brand embedded within it more favorably when self-character similarity was low rather than high. A lack of immersion however led to stronger evaluations when experiences of a similar versus dissimilar character were described. In addition, persuasion knowledge was found to be greater when similar characters were used. In study 4 we employ implicit and explicit brand memory tasks to understand these results. As predicted, participants immersed into the story of a dissimilar protagonist performed better on (target and filler) brand memory tasks compared to a similar protagonist. We thus find initial support for a cognitive resource account of results obtained.

These results have important theoretical and practical implications. We contribute to literature on narrative processing and marketing communications by examining the impacts of character similarity and immersion on placement efficacy in print (magazine) media. Most prior research has been limited to understanding placement effects within television and film contexts and little research on been done on brand integrations within magazine media—a key venue with high placement expenditures. One limitation of this, and previous, research is that companies rarely use product placements in isolation and placements seldom appear within a single medium. For example, the portfolio of promotions used to launch BMW’s Z3 Roadster spanned appearances within the movie GoldenEye, cross-promotions of the car with the movie, and public relations appearances by actors. Further, brands integrated within Rachel Ray’s cookbooks also appear in her television show Day to Day with Rachel Ray and her magazine Every Day with Rachel Ray. We propose to examine the joint effects of different forms of marketing communications across media in future research.
References