Video Games, Processing Fluency and Choice: Exploring Product Placement in New Media

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This study extends product placement research by testing whether or not there is any unique advantage of placing brands in video games over traditional media because of interactivity. Our three experiments showed that when a brand is just used as background in a video game, its effects are the same as other non-interactive media, namely only perceptual fluency occurs to bias children’s choice. However, when children have the opportunity to interact with the brand in the game, children’s subsequent choice of brand could be influenced by conceptual fluency. But this effect may be moderated by children’s regulatory fit/non fit when playing the game.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Only recently has the increasing use of product placements in video games attracted academic attention. Video games, unlike TV or films, increase interactivity and sensory immersion, which may increase players’ involvement with the placed product (Schneider and Cornwell, 2005). However, up to now no research has examined this advantage in detail, especially with regard to children who are believed to be more vulnerable to commercials (e.g. Auty and Lewis, 2004).

Furthermore, all previous research exploring product placement effectiveness was done without any consideration of contextual influences. But in reality consumers are not exposed to brands without contexts. For example, some consumers might indulge in video games (and be exposed to the brand) to demonstrate their game skills while others might only play the video game at their friends’ request. Recent research has found that advertising effectiveness could be moderated by its context, an area that is worthy of further exploration (e.g. Malaviya, 2007).

In order to fill the above gaps, three experiments were done to explore the underlying mechanism of product placement in video games in affecting children’s choice and to see whether its effectiveness would be moderated by one contextual factor—children’s regulatory fit/nonfit when playing the game. By doing so, this study extends previous product placement research on several fronts: it is the first research to explore with children whether there is a unique advantage in encouraging interactive engagement with brands in video games; secondly it tries to demonstrate that a contextual factor such as children’s regulatory fit/nonfit can moderate product placement effectiveness. Furthermore, while all previous research documented positive affect in participants after exposure to brands in the media, this research explores a possible boundary condition of this effect.

The main purpose of Study 1 was to explore the effect of product placement when brands were used as background in the game. The experimental design was a 2 (exposed to product placement vs. not exposed) x 2 (visual stimuli test vs. auditory stimuli test) between subjects factorial design. Children (n=131) were invited to either play a branded game (7 Up logo was used as background) or play a no-brand game for a similar length. The results show that product placement had a significant effect on children’s choice, although the effect disappeared when the modality of presentation was changed from a visual display to a verbal offer. Therefore, it appears that when there was no interaction with the brand, perceptual but not conceptual fluency led to the effectiveness of product placement.

Study 2 was conducted to see if there is a unique advantage of placing brands in interactive media. Children (n=97) were randomly placed into four conditions: 1) control group playing an unbranded tennis game; 2) perceptual group playing a football game where the teams displayed the Nike logo on their shirts; 3) a conceptual group where children listened to a tape asking them to guess the team sponsor (Nike, Coke or Toshiba) and then played the unbranded tennis game; 4) a conceptual-perceptual group where children listened to the tape, “guessed” the sponsor and then played the same branded game as Group 2. Half of each group was asked to make a stimulus-based choice for the brands while the other half was asked to write down the brand names without the stimuli being provided (Lee, 2002). In order to keep conscious recall separate from unconscious fluency, children in both test modes were asked to exclude brands they had encountered in the game. The findings suggest that elaboration at the time of exposure led to conceptual priming. Prior exposure to the verbal stimulus of possible sponsors made children more likely to choose the brand in a written test (without cues) even though no child could recall being exposed to the brand. But there appeared to be no synergistic effects when children experienced both perceptual and conceptual fluency. It may be that perceptual fluency or conceptual fluency alone is sufficient to enhance the liking of a brand, and there are no additive effects on preference.

While previous research always reported a positive effect after exposure to product placement, Study 3 was done to see whether children’s regulatory fit/nonfit when playing the game would moderate a placement’s effectiveness. Children (n=100) were randomly allocated to the following four conditions: 1) a control group (playing a video game without any brand), 2) a test control group (playing a branded game only), 3) a regulatory fit group (playing a branded game while experiencing regulatory fit) and 4) a regulatory nonfit group (playing a branded game while experiencing regulatory nonfit). Children in both regulatory fit and nonfit conditions were asked to watch a TV ad about a cream preventing athlete’s foot (a prevention focus) before playing the video game—FIFA 2002. Then when playing the video game, children who were allocated to the nonfit condition were told that the key strategy for playing the game was to score as many goals as possible (a promotion focus) while children who were allocated to the fit condition were told they needed to avoid letting the other team score (a prevention focus).

The results suggested that children in the regulatory fit condition were more likely to choose the brand in the game into their consideration set than children in the nonfit condition. Furthermore, children in the nonfit condition were also significantly less likely to choose the brand than children in the test control group (exposed to the brand only). Thus it appears that regulatory nonfit might block children from processing the stimulus even minimally.

In short, while previous research has attributed the effect of product placement to perceptual fluency, this study found that when the priming entailed a conceptual elaboration, such as being asked to choose a brand for players to wear—a common occurrence—children’s subsequent choice of brand could be influenced even without perceptual fluency. However, its effect may be moderated by children’s regulatory fit/nonfit when playing the game.

REFERENCES


