Not All Products Are Placed Equal: a Quasi-Experimental Approach to the Integration Effects of Conspicuous Product Placement on Affective Brand Attitude

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Using real movie scenes as stimuli, Study 1 demonstrates that consumer feelings toward the placed brand improve when the product is seamlessly integrated, but deteriorate when the product is intrusively integrated. Study 2 identifies the boundary condition under which such integration effects are altered: poor integration’s brand-damaging effect can be reversed to a brand-enhancing effect if viewers are cognitively preoccupied with another task. Study 2 further suggests that poor integration’s reactance-induced boomerang effect might not only decrease the affective evaluation of the placed brand, but might also increase the affective evaluation of the not-shown competitor.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Imagine two consumers, Jason and Sarah, watching movies on TV. Jason, viewing a scene from Runaway Bride, sees Julia Roberts jump on a truck that conspicuously displays the FedEx logo. Sarah, watching The Thomas Crown Affair, sees Rene Russo march to a vending machine, pull out a can of Pepsi, with its logo prominent, and guzzle it down. In both scenes the brands are noticeably displayed; the actors touch or consume the products. Jason and Sarah instantly recognize that the products have been placed with obvious, persuasive intent. Who will feel more positively toward the product featured? Jason or Sarah? Will they feel differently if they are cognitively busy while viewing these scenes, if they are, say, speaking on the phone or browsing the Internet? And will their feelings toward brands that are not shown—UPS and Coke—be influenced as well? How Jason and Sarah respond may vary, depending on, among other things, how well the product has been integrated into the storyline.

As the practice of product placement is becoming more overt and blatant, marketers and consumers alike are increasingly accepting this “in-your-face” practice. Because costs associated with the placement and the centrality (e.g., close-ups) of the placement are directly linked, marketing practitioners have a heightened need to understand how and when such conspicuously placed placements help or damage the brand. Previous research has compared prominent placement and subtle placement as a primary construct responsible for effects on cognitive variables. However, few studies have yet to focus on how conspicuous placements in themselves—arguably the most common form of product placements in today’s media—can differently affect consumers’ feelings toward the brand. The present research aims to fill this gap.

Today’s discerning consumers seem to see both gratifying and disturbing aspects of product placement. They acknowledge that a well-placed product enriches the plot, heightens realism, and adds enjoyment to their entertainment experience, but when the product placement is poorly done, they see it as an intrusive and unwelcome distraction. According to one survey, 80 percent of American consumers have positive views toward conspicuous product placements, but 46 percent agree that it “depends on how it’s done.” Academics share this view. Some researchers have argued that well-integrated placement increases persuasion, but poorly integrated placement has the opposite effect. Using real movie scenes as stimuli, this paper focuses therefore on the factor that makes the placement more or less effective: A well-integrated conspicuous product placement and poorly integrated product placement. These two scenes were further validated for conspicuousness, integratedeness, and relevancy. In addition, we quasi-experimentally controlled for program length, brand-exposure duration, and program liking.

Second, in Study 1, we tested a rather straightforward but yet-to-be-experimentally tested effect: A well-integrated conspicuous brand placement will evoke a higher affective evaluation than will a poorly integrated conspicuous placement (H1).

Third, in Study 2, we tested the following hypothesis: For a well-integrated conspicuous placement, cognitively busy participants will have lower affective evaluation of the placed brand than will cognitively non-busy participants, but for a poorly integrated conspicuous placement, cognitively busy participants will have higher affective evaluation of the placed brand than will cognitively non-busy participants (H2).

Fourth, in Study 2, we tested two additional hypotheses: 1) For the poorly integrated conspicuous placement, cognitively non-busy participants will have a lower affective evaluation of the placed brand than of the not-shown competing brand (boomerang effect), but cognitively busy participants will have a higher affective evaluation of the placed brand than of the not-shown competing brand (H3.1, 2) However, for the well-integrated product placement, the two-way interaction effect specified in H3.1 will be absent (H3.2).

In sum, using real movie scenes as stimuli, this paper demonstrates that consumer feelings toward the placed brand improve when the product is seamlessly integrated, but deteriorate when the product is intrusively integrated. We also identified the boundary condition under which such integration effects are altered: that is, poor integration’s brand-damaging effect can be reversed to a brand-enhancing effect if viewers are cognitively preoccupied with another task. In addition, the results suggest that poor integration’s reactance-induced boomerang effect might not only decrease the affective evaluation of the placed brand, but might also increase the affective evaluation of the not-shown competitor.