Others Matter: the Effect of Peer Connectedness to Television Series on Product Placement Effectiveness

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This research introduces the concept of peer connectedness to television series – the perceived referential influence of a television program on others. This includes the effects of consumption portrayals within the medium or program, in particular placed products. The results of a field study where peer connectedness is measured and a laboratory experiment where it is manipulated show that peer connectedness affects purchase intentions for products and brands placed in the content of television series. They also show the moderating role of susceptibility to normative interpersonal influence.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15068/volumes/v37/NA-37

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

There is a growing body of research focusing on the impact on consumers of products and brands placed in the content of entertainment media such as movies, television series, and talk shows, a practice referred to as product placement (Auty and Lewis 2004; Babin and Carder 1996; d’Astous and Seguin 1999; Russell 2002; Russell and Stern 2006). Yet, surprisingly little research has addressed how the social environment affects product placement effectiveness. Drawing a parallel with research on self-connectedness, defined as the referential relationships that people develop with television series (Russell, Norman and Heckler, 2004), we introduce the construct of peer connectedness. We define peer connectedness to television series as the perceived referential influence of television series on others. In other words, peer connectedness reflects the degree to which others are perceived as having developed referential relationships with the series and its characters, and therefore as being influenced by its content, including the products placed in the series.

Consistent with the extant literature on interpersonal influences in many realms of behavior, we theoretically propose and demonstrate that peer connectedness contributes significant explanatory power to predictions of purchase intentions for placed products. As peer connectedness involves one’s perceptions of what others think and do themselves, the construct of peer connectedness is akin to Cialdini and colleagues’ notion of descriptive social norms, defined as individuals’ perceptions of others’ behaviors (Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno 1991).

As peer connectedness effects on behavior inherently depend on the degree to which people care about others’ opinions, we further propose that the effect of peer connectedness on behavior should be greater when the consumer is more concerned about the social environment. As such, we demonstrate that the effect of peer connectedness on purchase intentions is moderated by susceptibility to normative interpersonal influence.

One field study was conducted with consumers of a leather goods brand often placed in Brazilian soap operas. Participants responded to a two-page questionnaire involving brand attitudes, purchase intentions, perceived peer connectedness and self-connectedness to the series, susceptibility to normative influences, and demographics. We proposed that peer connectedness affects purchase intentions by moderating consumers’ willingness to act upon their attitudes through their concerns with group norms. Indeed, the regression of consumers’ purchase intentions (PI) on brand attitude, peer connectedness, susceptibility to normative influence (SNI), and the two-way and three-way interaction terms reveal the predicted three-way interaction. On the one hand, consumers who held strongly positive brand attitudes but were low in SNI still report considerably high PI, regardless of perceived peer connectedness. On the other hand, for consumers who had positive brand attitudes but were high in SNI, PI is affected by peer connectedness (i.e., higher when peer connectedness is high).

A follow-up experiment conducted with US college students investigated how the perception of peer connectedness is affected by self-connectedness, and ultimately, how the resulting perceived peer connectedness affects consumers’ intentions to purchase brands placed in television series. Viewers of a popular television series participated in an experiment presented as a set of four separate studies. Attitudes toward a series of brands, including brands placed in the series, were collected in the first section. After an unrelated study presented in the second section, the third section focused on participants’ viewing history with the selected TV series and included a measure of self-connectedness. Participants were then randomly assigned to a minority or majority peer connectedness condition: explicit information was provided by stating that either a minority or a majority of other viewers are connected to that series. The participants’ resulting perception of peer connectedness was then measured. In the final section, intentions to purchase a series of brands were collected, and SNI was measured. Regression results showed that, as predicted, the peer connectedness manipulation affected perceived peer connectedness. In turn, perceived peer connectedness mediated the effect of the peer connectedness manipulation on purchase intentions when SNI is low. When SNI is high, consumers have stronger pre-existing perceptions of peer connectedness and are less influenced by external peer connectedness information.

These two studies provide support for the proposition that peer connectedness to television series is an important factor in predicting consumers’ intentions to purchase products placed in these series. The field study demonstrates that high perceived peer connectedness relates to higher purchase intentions for consumers who are more susceptible to normative influences. The laboratory experiment, in which peer connectedness was manipulated, demonstrates its causal effects on purchase intentions. Explicit information about peer connectedness creates a perception of peer connectedness that significantly predicts consumers’ intentions to buy brands placed in the series. The resulting perceived peer connectedness mediates the effect when susceptibility to normative influences is low but not when high. Taken together, our results demonstrate the importance of incorporating peer connectedness when testing the effects on audiences of product placements in television series.

REFERENCES


