PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN MOVIES: A PRELIMINARY TEST OF AN ARGUMENT FOR INVOLVEMENT

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Abstract

A model is proposed to begin to explain the role that viewer involvement with a movie scene feature a product placement has on the impact of product placements. This study is a preliminary test of the differences in brand recognition and recall for products in either high or low involvement movie scenes. The experiment tests four existing motion pictures with product placements and shows a pattern (albeit statistically insignificant) of enhanced cognitive effects (recall and recognition) in more involving movie scenes. Implications are provided for future research to further test the proposed model.

Introduction

Marketers today are spending millions of dollars for product placements in motion pictures after the tremendous success linked to the dropping of Reese's Pieces candies to lead an alien out of the woods in the movie ET: The Extra-Terrestrial. More and more companies try to find more creative and uncluttered ways to expose consumers to products. Product placements range from subtle background appearances to the dominant role (10.5 minutes of total exposure time) of a Wilson volleyball washed ashore in a Federal Express package after a plane crash leaves actor Tom Hanks as the only survivor on a deserted island in the movie Cast Away (Maynard and Scala, 2002). Previous research has looked at moviegoers opinions about product placement (Gupta and Gould 1997; DeLorme and Reid 1999), the ethical nature of using movies for product pitches (Gupta, et al 2000), the frequency and type of brand exposure in movies (Karrh, 1994) and the effects on viewers of different types of exposures (e.g., background v. foreground, spoken v. visual only)(d'Astous and Chartier 2000; Gupta and Lord 1998; Brennan and Babin 2004; Sabherwal, Pokrywczynski and Griffin 1994). This latter research on placement effectiveness is the focus of the current research.

The primary objective of this research is to begin to examine the differential impact of product placements in movies depending on the context in which the placement is seen. Multiple movie product placements are tested, a distinction from earlier research. Since previous research has shown that product placements including both visual and verbal displays of the product have the most impact on recall and brand attitudes, followed by verbal only and finally visual only appearances, there's reason to believe other variables related to information processing may also affect impact. The variable of focus here is viewer involvement with the scene featuring the placement. A broader implication of the findings of this study may be to better understand the role context plays in all types of communication forms: letters, speeches, phone calls or face-to-face.

Literature Review

Although definitions of product placement differ slightly across the literature, a generally accepted one from Karrh (1994) says: "a paid inclusion of branded products or brand identifiers, through audio and/or visual means within mass media programming," is most comprehensive and is used for this study.

Research has generally found product placements to be acceptable to viewers. Placements are seen as adding realism to scene, are preferred to fictitious brands and are understood to be more and more a necessary component to cost containment in the making of programs and movies. (DeLorme and Reid 1999; Gupta and Gould 1997)

Product placement effects on viewers have been examined mostly with a focus on brand recall and recognition. Karrh (1994) found that viewers could correctly recognize and recall placed brands in movies, using aided recall measures, and d'Astous and Chartier (2000) found the same using free recall measures. Gupta and Lord (1998) showed brands placed prominently in a movie scene enjoyed higher brand recall than those that were not. Placements that combined verbal and visual brand references were better recalled than placements that enjoyed one or the other in movie scenes. (Sabherwal, et al, 1994) Although most of these studies establish a cognitive effect of movie product placements, brand recall is often no higher than 30 percent and most studies make no comparisons among movies, choosing to test just one movie and manipulating other variables related to the placement.
Few studies examine product placement influences on attitudes toward a product or brand. When they do, (e.g., Karrh 1994), no differences are found in viewers' attitudes toward the brand. Does this mean product placements are incapable of influencing brand attitudes? Or is the measurement of attitudinal effects to blame? Maybe it's the testing conditions used in these studies?

Some question if product placements are too subtle to have any effect on consumers (Andriasova and Wagner 2004). This study focused on product related strengths of association with the characters involved in using the product on screen. Rather than enhancing brand attitudes or brand awareness directly, a product placed in ways that viewers perceive fit with the character using them will gain an enhanced association every time consumers think of that character. In addition, Andriasova and Wagner (2004) found a link between viewer involvement in the program and product related associations. Unfortunately, only one product-character association was tested in this study, providing no comparison data as opposed to that provided by the present study.

Six variables of product placement have been identified as playing a role in the potential impact for sponsors (Fisher and Wagner 2004), and three of those are represented by the concept of involvement. Content characteristics, which include movie genre and mood of the scene are important in product placement decisions and contribute to viewers' involvement with the movie. Suspense thrillers and action adventures, which tend to engage viewers both cognitively and emotionally, have consistently been classified as high involvement content (e.g., Kennedy 1971; Park and McClung 1986) while comedies and musicals are identified as less involving (e.g., Bryant and Comisky 1978).

Characters are a second component important to product placement as well as viewer involvement. Association with popular actors, such as Tom Cruise wearing Ray Ban sunglasses in Risky Business, makes a product more attractive and movies more engaging for many viewers. Of course the role the character plays in the movie and the subsequent role the product gets also have an influence on product placement effectiveness and viewer involvement. For example, in Italian Job, the mini Cooper auto is a character itself as it shows up in numerous scenes throughout the movie and provides the nimble handling to allow the main characters to safely navigate through numerous dangers.

Finally processing opportunities, such as how prominent the product is depicted in the placement, whether shown visually or mentioned or both, along with the relevance of the product to the scene, impact placement outcomes. Russell (2002) called them "plot connections" and "modality," and in an experiment tested the main and interactive effects measuring both brand recognition and attitude change. She found greater brand recognition for visually dominant placements, but greater attitude change in background visual product placements. Involvement was not considered in this study.

Theory

This present study focuses on the variable of viewer involvement with different scenes in the movie and the accompanying effects it has on consumer reactions to product placements in high versus low involvement scenes. Although viewer involvement has not been widely applied to cinema, it has received attention when applied to television. The focus in this research has been how viewer involvement with programs affects the advertising placed during the airing of such programs. (Kennedy 1971; Bryant and Comisky 1978; Lloyd and Clancy 1991; Park and McClung 1986). Most of the studies that tested advertising recall in high and low involvement programs have generally found a contrasting effect between involvement and ad effectiveness. Kennedy (1971) tested the same ad in a suspense thriller (high involving) and a situation comedy (low involving) and concluded the poorer ad recall during the suspense thriller was caused by viewers' annoyance at the interruptions in their drive for story line closure. Lloyd and Clancy (1991) tested ad recall in a waiting room showing two different programs and also failed to find highly involving programs linked to better ad performance. Similar results were found by Bryant and Comisky (1978), although they suggest that the increased enjoyment experienced by highly involving programs may rub off on commercials and attitudes toward the brands featured in them.

Park and McClung (1986) measured commercial involvement rather than recall or brand attitudes and also distinguished between cognitive and affective program involvement. Their results mirrored the contrast effects found in the studies described above for cognitively involving programs, but enhanced ad involvement was found for affectively involving programming. This suggests that looking at multiple dimensions of viewer involvement is important.

Cho (2003) tested the effects of different levels of product involvement in the act of clicking Internet banner ads. Although Cho found banner ads were more likely to be accessed for more involving products, when peripheral cues, such as advertisement size and animation, were considered, the relationship between involvement and clicking became unclear. Another by-product of this study was an attempt to model the role of involvement and central/peripheral processing in mitigating Internet surfing behavior. This model was adapted to apply to movie product placement for the present study.

It is important to note that the contrast effect generally found between television program involvement and ad performance may not be applicable to product placement in movies. Television commercials are clearly a distinct message form compared to television programs, introducing the effects of interruptions, drive for closure and other effects not part of
the movie product placement experience. Given the generally accepted notion of limited capacity of the human information processing system (Petty and Cacioppo 1983), combining television program processing and commercials together may overload the system, providing a conceptual explanation for the empirical findings of most television viewing involvement research.

However, in most movie product placement situations, the products are seamlessly merged into the message being delivered by the movie. Processing product placements becomes part of processing the movie content. Hence, Petty and Cacioppo's well established Elaboration Likelihood Model (1983) on information processing would suggest that products placed in more highly involving scenes should produce more elaborate cognitive processing, increasing the chances that brand awareness and knowledge would be processed compared to products in less involving scenes. (See Appendix)

In turn, more highly involving scenes/placements are predicted to lead to different attitude outcomes, with more enduring brand attitudes occurring in high involvement conditions than in lower involvement ones. Although brands can still be enhanced in low involvement conditions because processing is still occurring, albeit a peripheral type, the effect is more likely to be short term. The length of this enhancement could be as short as the end of the movie, or as long as the next purchase decision. However, length of term is beyond the scope of this model.

Given this study is a preliminary step in the process of understanding movie viewing involvement and its effects on product placement impact, the following hypotheses were posited:

**H1:** Viewers experiencing high involvement movie scenes are more likely to recall a prominent, on-set product placed in a movie scene than viewers of less involving movie scenes.

**H2:** Viewers experiencing high involvement movie scenes are more likely to recall a greater number of product placements in a movie scene than viewers of less involving movie scenes. The number of brands exposed to the viewer must be accounted for in this assessment.

**Method**

The method for this research is a post-test experimental setting where viewers experience part of an existing movie that had product placements in different viewing involvement contexts. Face validity was used to develop a short-list of movies and scenes that had characteristics that would distinguish themselves as higher or lower on viewer involvement based on previous viewer involvement measures identified for television (Lord and Burnkrant 1993). Movies needed to be fairly current, feature at least one prominent, on-set product placement with existing brand familiarity (Fisher and Wagner 2004). Twenty minute segments of each movie were carefully selected and edited so that the prominent product placement occurred toward the middle of the 20 minute experience to avoid undue attention. Each segment was reviewed to be sure a clear plot for the overall movie could be established by any viewer, whether or not the movie was previously viewed.

The four movies selected for this study were: High involvement: Castaway and Italian Job; Low involvement: You've Got Mail and Catch Me If You Can.

**Castaway,** starring Tom Hanks as an executive stranded on a deserted island after a plane crash, attempting to survive long enough to be safely rescued. The prominent product placement was for Federal Express packages, which washed ashore with Hanks. The scene features Hanks opening the packages and finding a unique use for each, for example, tools to acquire and prepare food. The scene exudes the desperation of the character and his struggle for survival.

**Italian Job,** starring Mark Wahlberg and Charlize Theron as safe crackers chasing a greedy partner attempting to keep everyone's share of the loot. The prominent product placement was for the mini Cooper auto, which was driven by each star through a metro area at high speeds. Other products to get brief glimpses during the selected scene, including Napster, Dell and Pepsi Blue. The scene is a gripping chase through crowded downtown streets, with numerous close calls, but no gunfire.

**You've Got Mail,** starring Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan as competing bookstore owners who fall for each other over the Internet before realizing who the other represents. The prominent product placement was for Starbucks, where a scene shows both characters coming into the shop for coffee while a Hanks voiceover comments on the challenges of life presented by ordering a cup of coffee. The scene occurs before the two meet, and features several other product placements (Heineken beer, Olympic typewriter) in secondary roles.

**Catch Me If You Can,** starring Leonardo DiCaprio as a con man posing as an airline pilot to impress his father. The prominent product placement was for Pan Am Airways, the airline he works for. The scene also features another airline, TWA, which by the time of this study, was bankrupt and acquired by a competitor. The main character is seen creating fake pay checks, altering his appearance and having dinner with his father to boast of his success.

Established involvement measures from previous research (Zaichkowsky 1985; Lord and Burnkrant 1993; Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993) were used to confirm high and low viewer involvement scenes. Three dimensions of viewer involvement were assessed. Cognitive measures focused on counting the number of details about the movie scene viewers could accurately playback shortly after viewing. Petty and Cacioppo (1981) found those more highly involved in a situation
able to recall more details about the experience than others. Affective involvement was measured using nine items from Zaichkowsky's (1985) seven point semantic differential involvement inventory that loaded on a single factor and were reliable in a previous application by the author of program involvement measurement (Pokrywczynski 1986). These items also closely matched the "absorbing" factor of television program involvement used recently by Furnham, Gunter and Richardson (2002) Behavioral measures asked viewers to agree (five point scales) with statements regarding how they viewed the movie (e.g., I found my mind wandering, I looked away from screen, etc.) and what they were experiencing during viewing (e.g., I found myself sharing emotions of characters, I felt like I was participating in the scene, etc.) (Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993)

Free recall measures were used to gauge viewers' central processing of brand. Viewers were asked to write down the brands they recalled seeing during the segment and their roles in the scene, whether the product was featured prominently or as a background prop. This question was asked early in post questionnaire.

An aided recall question toward the end of the questionnaire asked viewers to check from a list of about 20 brands which ones they definitely recalled seeing during the viewing segment. Respondents were instructed not to guess about brand placements, only mark ones they were sure they saw.

The effects of prior viewing of the selected movie and attitudes toward product placements in general were measured and assessed for their impact on the results. The sample, which was randomly assigned in groups to the high or low viewing involvement conditions, was comprised of college students, who were appropriate for this study given their propensity to attend movies. (SMRB 2002) The movie segments were shown in group settings to approximate the typical movie viewing condition as much as possible. Groups ranged in size from 11 to 38.

Results

The sample consisted of 86 students from a Midwest university, spread across four test conditions, two predicted high involvement and two low involvement. (See Table 1) Females comprised 64 percent of the sample, with ages ranging from 18-31 (Mean=21). The scaled affective (n=9) and conative (n=6) involvement measures were found to be unidimensional and reliable (alphas=.92 --affective; .80--conative) Both lists of items were summed when used for further analysis. Comparisons among groups were done using one-way ANOVA.

Involvement

The three involvement measures (cognitive, affective and conative) were assessed to confirm the estimates of higher and lower involving movie scenes. For the cognitive measures, which used counts of the number of details about the movie recalled by viewers, the two predicted high involvement movies (Castaway and Italian Job) produced more details (Means=8.12 and 6.05 respectively) than the predicted less involving movies (Catch Me If You Can=5.64; You've Got Mail=4.74) Significant differences were found (F(3,82)=5.67, p=.001) with post hoc tests (Scheffe) showing Castaway different from the two predicted low involvement segments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie (predicted)</th>
<th>Cognitive Involve</th>
<th>Affective Involve</th>
<th>Conative Involve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Castaway (Hi I)</td>
<td>8.12*</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>20.2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian Job (Hi I)</td>
<td>6.05</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You've Got Mail (Lo I)</td>
<td>4.74*</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>17.1*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catch Me If Can(Lo I)</td>
<td>5.64</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No significant differences were found for the nine item affective involvement measures. Patterns were reversed from that predicted with the two low involvement films scoring higher. Statistical significance was approached but not achieved (F(3,81)=1.9, p=.13).

For the six item conative involvement measures, Castaway again generated the highest involvement score. Statistical significance was achieved (F(3,82)=6.45, p=.001) Post hoc (Scheffe) differences existed between Castaway and You've Got Mail. The Italian Job also was rated higher, but not statistically significant.

Although the findings were not clear cut in establishing the test film scenes as high or low involving on a consistent basis, both predicted high involvement films topped the list of measures for cognitive and conative involvement. This may suggest movie viewing involvement can vary depending on the dimension of involvement considered.
Brand recall

Brand recall for the prominent, on-set placement was outstanding using aided recall, with every brand topping 90 percent. (See Table 2) For the unaided recall measure, scores were still high across all four movie conditions. Although the mini Cooper produced the lowest recall among prominent brand placements, it was also the newest of the prominent brands and may not yet be recognizable to some. It also never received a verbal mention like the other prominent brand placements. Consequently, the lack of distinction between high and low involvement conditions for recall of the prominent brand leads to Rejection of H1.

Table 2. Recall of brand product placements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie</th>
<th>Percent (aided) recall of brands</th>
<th>Percent (unaided) recall of brands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Castaway</td>
<td>Fed Ex=100%</td>
<td>Fed Ex=100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wilson=100%</td>
<td>Wilson=100% Avg=2 brands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian Job</td>
<td>MiniCooper=90%</td>
<td>MiniCooper=80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Napster = 85%</td>
<td>Napster = 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pepsi Blue=20%</td>
<td>Pepsi Blue=20% Avg= 2.1 brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dell = 15%</td>
<td>Dell = 15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You've Got Mail</td>
<td>Starbucks=95%</td>
<td>Starbucks=87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heineken=45%</td>
<td>Heineken=8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Olympic =32%</td>
<td>Olympic =0% Avg.=1.7 brands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pepsi = 5%</td>
<td>Pepsi = 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catch Me If U Can</td>
<td>Pan Am=100%</td>
<td>Pan Am=91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TWA= 73%</td>
<td>TWA = 36% Avg.=1.9 brands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Checker=18%</td>
<td>Checker=0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Free (unaided) recall of all brand placements in each of the movie conditions showed a pattern (albeit insignificant) of superior performance in the more high involvement viewing conditions. Viewers of either Castaway or Italian Job averaged over two brands recalled (unaided), while viewers of Catch Me If You Can and You've Got Mail averaged 1.8 brands recalled. Although each movie segment had at least three brand placements in it, the maximum was seven, making the range of possible values condensed from a variation standpoint. A look at recall levels for less prominent brand placements shows at least one such brand in each high involvement segment (Wilson in Castaway; Napster in Italian Job) garnered superior brand recall to any secondary brands in the low involvement segments. Although the Wilson volleyball in Castaway plays a prominent role, even taking on the persona of a character (Maynard and Scala 2002), it has a minor role in the scene shown. So too for Napster, which appears only as a word on a digital board to alert a group that "you've been Napstered." Nonetheless, H2 is rejected.

Other variables

No significant differences were found among groups on the eight measures of attitudes toward product placements measures, which were summed to provide an overall attitude score. Individual items averaged in the "neutral" area on the scale, except for two measures (unethical, should be banned) that respondents somewhat disagreed with. Hence, no further analysis was performed using this variable. Prior viewing of the test segment did not vary much either, with 60 percent previously seeing either Castaway or Italian Job, 76 percent seeing You've Got Mail and 73 percent seeing Catch Me If You Can on previous occasions. Small sample sizes prohibited any further statistical examination of this variable.

CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

The results of this research show that viewers' involvement can vary with different movies and by type of involvement considered. On two of three involvement measures a movie (Castaway) predicted to be more involving and one less involving (You've Got Mail) to viewers indeed delivered. The Castaway segment depicted a character desperate to survive and had gripping scenes as the character experienced successes and failures in finding food and other necessities to survive. On the other extreme, You've Got Mail was a light-hearted, uneven and sprinkled with comedy that was setting the scene for later encounters that would prove challenging for the two leading characters. The two other films tested
showed tendencies to be classified as predicted. Coincidentally, both conditions had sample sizes of 20 or less, which may have contributed to the lack of variation necessary to sort these movies statistically.

The reverse prediction (albeit insignificant) for affective involvement viewing measures shows the importance of assessing multiple dimensions of the involvement construct. Involvement is a complex construct, one that research has yet to produce a clear understanding of. However, just because it is a complex construct doesn't mean researchers should shy away from its investigation. Its application to movie viewing and its impact on product placement effects is hinted at with the results of this study, although still not clear.

Overall brand recall for a variety of products featured in a film showed a slight edge in high involvement segments. It may be that high involvement viewing conditions offer the opportunity for more brands, particularly those that have a less prominent role as props or background material, to register among viewers. This is pleasant news for movie studios and producers who seek additional revenue streams while trying to draw the line before reaching a cluttered, distracting environment for viewers.

What is clear from the results of this study is the success a prominent, on-set brand placement can experience regardless of the viewer involvement with the segment. With 80 percent or better unaided recall and better than 90 percent aided recall for a prominent brand placement achieved in each test condition, it's no wonder marketers are making a mad rush to get their products injected into movie scripts. These preliminary results provide marketers and movie producers with the incentive to look more closely at how and when the products appear in the movie in determining cost/value. At present, studios are charging placement fees based on a fairly standard scale related to expected audience size for the movie. This assumes the exposure from placements is equal across movie scenes and equal to the exposure value marketers get from a 30 second commercial, since the dollar value given to a placement is based on price charged for a commercial exposed to a similar sized audience. (Maynard and Scala 2002). The results of this study suggest that both of these assumptions may be incorrect.

From a theoretical perspective, the results of this research suggest that more research should pursue the application of the Elaboration Likelihood Model to product placements. Viewers clearly attend to brand cues for prominently displayed products. Distinguishing between conditions that invoke central versus peripheral processing needs more work. This study didn't measure implications of involvement on attitude formation/shift. There may be greater differences in measures such as brand image duration and purchase intent, for example, than there are between brand recall and recognition in trying to identify whether central or peripheral processing is induced. Follow up research will require purchase diaries to track long term brand enhancement over a six month or more period to better assess enduring versus temporary brand enhancement.

Another limitation of this study was limited sample sizes within each condition that may have prohibited the level of variation necessary to statistically determine recall differences, especially for less prominently placed brands. These secondary brand placements may be more sensitive to the predicted differences promised by involvement and the Elaboration Likelihood Model.

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Attitude Formation/Shift

Central: Enduring brand image, purchase intent
Peripheral: Temporary brand image enhancement

Role of Involvement:
Central v. Peripheral processing

Involuntary exposure to product placement in movie

Hi I Scene  
Attending to cues of product placement
Central cues: Brand recall, product relevant info
Peripheral cues: Brand recognition

Lo I Scene

Attitude Formation/Shift