

Full Length Research Paper

Does branded product placement in film enhance realism and product recognition by consumers?

DLR van der Waldt, LS Du Toit and R Redelinghuys

Department of Marketing and Communication Management, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of Pretoria, Republic of South Africa.

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Product placement in films receives renewed focus in integrated marketing communication (IMC). One of the main concerns with regard to product placement as a marketing communication tool is that marketers have little knowledge if consumers are aware of product placements or recognise products that are deliberately placed in feature films by marketers and advertisers. The following specific research objectives were put forward to determine; if product placements in films increase realism of the film and respondents' recognition of brand name products placed in a film. These objectives were tested by questionnaire, distributed to 220 undergraduate respondents in the age bracket of 18 to 24 years. Respondents were exposed to film stimuli containing product placements and thereafter were required to complete the questionnaire at a university in Pretoria. A conclusion drawn from the findings was that product placements in films do have an effect on the realism of the film. Branded products placed in films are thought to inject a sense of realism into the film. It was further concluded that product placements in films prompted brand recognition among respondents. The main findings and conclusions of this research maintain that the prominence of a product placement in a film affects the consumers' ability to recognise the placed product. The more prominent a placement is in a film, the greater the likelihood that consumers will recognise it. It is recommended that marketing and advertising managers should strategically place their products prominently in films and television programmes in order to guarantee the desired impact thereof.

Key words: Product placement, prominently placed brand names, advertising, Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), product recognition, exposure to products.

INTRODUCTION

Moster et al. (2002) explains that films offer product exposure to millions of customers, making product placements a rapidly growing marketing communication medium. By cleverly weaving a product into a scene, marketers hope audiences will connect their brand with the stars or story they see on the screen. Product placements have received renewed attention within the developing context in Africa, (Van der Waldt, 2005; Du Toit and Redelinghuys, 2004; Du Preez and Williams, 2004; Nunes and Stroebel, 2004).

In order to counter television commercials zipping and zapping, audience fragmentation due to the rise in the number of cable channels, commercial clutter driven by increasing time allocated to advertisements and a simult-

aneous decrease in commercial length. Several factors caused marketers to develop innovative placement techniques (Gupta and Lord, 1998). These changes have led manufacturers and marketers to seek product placement as an alternative means to reach the consumer. Due to the proliferation of advertisements and the consequent difficulty in getting commercial messages to reach and influence potential customers, product placement appears to be an interesting alternative to traditional marketing communication tools (D'Astous and Chartier, 2000).

Product placement is considered an important marketing vehicle; it should be used to complement the other vehicles of advertising and marketing. The goal that marketers hope to achieve when using product placements is to establish a brand name or to reinforce it. Product placements can be subdivided into real placements and virtual placements. Real placements are those created as an integral part of film production, often requiring the par-

*Corresponding author. E-mail: delarey.vanderwaldt@up.ac.za.
Tel: (012) 4203415. Fax: (012) 362 5085

icipation of film actors or actresses. Virtual placements are those that are inserted via digital technology using a process independent from the production of the audio-visual segment (Balasubramanian, 1994). According to Berglund and Spets (2003) placing products and brands on both the screen and in the conversation, increases the probability that the viewer recognises the product or brand. It is therefore anticipated that potential customers absorb information about products and brands from many sources. Although product placements have grown into a popular form of advertising, deficiencies in the research of product placements commonly exist. As a result, a number of important issues remain unexplored and in need of further validation (Gupta et al., 2000). This study identified realism and brand recognition as variables that are less explored.

Realism and product placements in films

Film producers argue that the use of a brand name product in a film enhances the realism, due to the fact that it lends a natural "everyday" touch to its settings. To depict a film character entering a restaurant, a store or petrol station with no names attached to them would be meaningless (Gupta et al., 2000). According to Junction (2003), product placements strengthen a film's link to real life. Product placements therefore add realism and authenticity to scenes in films. It is further argued that the use of products that consumers are already familiar with, increases the credibility and power of the film as something the audience can identify with (Xroads, 2004).

It is argued that real life products placed in films have a higher credibility than that of paid advertisements due to their perceived realism. Placing a brand name product within a film gives products an intensified sense of realism (Junction, 2003). The use of generic products in a film can draw attention away from the film's message. It makes sense for films to use branded items.

Due to the fact that the audience eats, drinks, wears and drives brand name products, the use of these items can assist the film by invoking a certain time period or creating the feel of a specific location (Moster et al., 2002). Another reason product placements are useful is that they often reinforce a film character's personality or history. Unlike traditional advertising messages, product placement also provides a venue where products can be realistically portrayed, and possibly demonstrated in the context of a film scene (Morton and Friedman, 2000).

Consumer recognition of product placements in film

According to Dodd and Johnstone (2000) product recognition can be seen as a person's ability to identify a product name in a film. In order for a product to be effectively recognised in a film, it should have a reasonable length of exposure time as well as having a well-integrated placement such as audio, visual or audio-visual. Product recognition depends significantly on the objective and sub-

jective nature of product placements in media such as film as identified by D'Astous and Chartier (2000).

Berglund and Spets (2003) state that research has established product placements as an effective marketing communication tool that has the ability to enhance brand recognition by consumers. Recognition is an advertising effectiveness test that involves showing a respondent an advertisement to determine if he or she has seen it. Recognition tests measure consumer recognition of an individual advertisement. Lamb et al. (2004) explain that recognition tests are typically used to measure the effectiveness of the advertisement. If an advertisement is considered to have high recognition, it is assumed that the advertisement is effective.

Previous research by Gupta and Lord (1998) has shown that recognition will be higher when a product placement includes both an audio and a visual compared to that of only a subtle visual usage. A prominent visual product placement is where a product is easily identified by its position and size and when it is included in a major scene within a film. A subtle visual product placement has a limited time of exposure and is often used as a background prop without audio reinforcement. This research attempted to evaluate the recognition a film attendee had when viewing a product that is placed more prominently.

Problem statement and research objective

Advertising is often not believed because consumers know that the producer or manufacturer of a product or service paid for the advertisement. There is however, a perception with the general public that products in films or broadcast programmes are "for real". Branded product placements of well-known names contribute to this perception. The placed products represent a time frame in the sequence of events as it unfolds or develops on the screen or in their television programmes. As such it is assumed that these placed products are perceived as credible and true to real life experiences. The larger-than-life-experience in a cinema theatre makes the perceived impact of product placements more effective. New avenues opened for advertisers and marketers to place their products in other communication media as the traditional feature film and television programmes. New technology is available to disseminate films to the Internet, e-mail, and DVD, mobile phones and play stations. The result manifests in a new window of opportunities for marketers and communication specialists to deliberately place their products in such a manner that it has the strategic effect on the viewers.

Gupta et al. (2000) have identified four aspects of empirical work on product placements that continue to remain noteworthy, namely: First, a few studies exist on this field of interest. Second, some of the findings do not unite or agree, as a result, a number of important issues remain unexplored and in need of further validation and generalisation. Third, previous studies generally restrict

attention to a few measures of message effectiveness. Last, research emphasis has remained uneven across the message effectiveness variables studied thus far. A need exists for further research on product placements as product placements in films provide considerable benefits to the marketer.

Little published information exists in a South African context on product placements in film [EbscoHost, Emerald, Sabinet and Science Direct search engines (Accessed: 6 September, 2006)]. It is therefore necessary that marketers and advertisers alike should take cognisance of the strategic placements and effects of prominently as well as subtle placed products. The problem marketers and advertisers encounter in South Africa is that little research evidence exists where consumer's reactions to product placements were tested. Little is known about the consumers' recognition of products that were placed in films. Do consumers view brand name product placements as variables that increase the realism of the film or broadcast programmes? Do consumers recognise brand name products that were deliberately placed more prominently in feature films?

These statements culminate in the following research problem: Advertisers and marketers do not know for certain whether product placements in films contribute to the realism of the film and recognise of branded product names placed in film scenes.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

For the purpose of this article, the sampling method used was a non-probability sampling approach. Non-probability sampling is arbitrary and subjective, due to the fact that a participant does not have a known non-zero chance of being included (Cooper and Schindler, 2006). A sample was drawn from a university student population. The motivation for this selection was that respondents were thought to be an appropriate sample since young adults (18 to 24 years of age) are avid film attendees.

Respondents also possess the disposable income to attend films (Gough, 2003). Product placement in films is therefore an effective way to target young, affluent and well-educated consumers. The initial sample was drawn from the undergraduate students at a university in Pretoria. Initially, two hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed amongst prospective respondents. The researchers, however, were only able to use two hundred and twenty due to questionnaires that were incorrectly completed by the respondents (N=220).

Questionnaire

Taking into consideration that a large number of the respondents were second-language English speakers, the statements and statements were set only in English in a simplified style. The questionnaire was primarily adopted and based on the works by D'Astous and Chartier (2000) and Berglund and Spets (2003). A five point Likert-type scale was used, with 'strongly agree' at point one; 'agree' at point two; 'neither agree nor disagree' at point three; 'disagree' at point four; and 'strongly disagree' at point five.

In an attempt to determine the reliability and validity of the final questionnaire, a sample of twenty respondents were used in a pre-

test phase. During the pre-test phase, the respondents were exposed to film clips containing product placements. After exposure to the film clips, the respondents were required to fill in a questionnaire concerning product placements in films and the respondents' recognition thereof. Reliability assessment was conducted to determine the Cronbach alpha for the questionnaire. Cronbach alpha is above 0.7 and indicate acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.7249$).

Stimulus material

Scenes from film and broadcast programmes were selected where branded products were featured. A short DVD clips from the following films were made: S.W.A.T., Gone in 60 seconds, Swordfish and Bend it like Beckham. In total, the length of the selected stimulus material was three minutes. The respondents filled in the questionnaire after viewing the film clips, which were shown in a typical class situation projected on a big screen. The respondents were not aware, prior to the testing, that the questionnaire was concerned with product placements in films. The pre-test carried out by the researchers was found to be a success. In these film scenes included both prominently as well as subtle placed brand names.

Data analysis

This data was entered into Microsoft Excel and imported to SPSS, once the required computations had been completed in Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation), cross-tabulation and inferential statistics (t-tests for significant differences at a 95% confidence level) were executed. The reliability and validity of the measurement scales were determined by way of Cronbach's coefficient alpha (Cooper and Schindler, 2006).

RESULTS

To determine if product placements in films increase realism in the film

H₁; Product placements in films have an effect on the realism of the film

This hypothesis is a single variable (univariate) hypothesis, as it attempted to determine the effect that product placements have on a film's realism. This hypothesis is a two-tailed (non-directional) hypothesis, as it does not indicate whether product placements have a negative or positive effect on a film's realism. The following statements reflected in Tale 1 below tested this hypothesis:

On the statement: "I prefer to see real brands in films..." the mean is a positive yes, with an average of 1.84 out of the 5- point scale. The statement: "Films should use fictional brands rather than existing brands" the overwhelming answer was a disagree (3.75).

The one sample t-test was selected to test this hypothesis, due to the fact that it was a univariate hypothesis that that was interval in nature. The specific population characteristic involved was the mean. The test value against which to test this hypothesis was chosen at 3. The reason for this was that 3 were the midpoint of the 5-point Likert scale used. If the value of the test statistic is significantly less than 3, it will result in the rejection of the

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on realism.

Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
The presence of brand name products in a film makes it more realistic.	217	2.05	0.934
I prefer to see real brands in films rather than fake or fictional ones.	220	1.84	0.902
I do not mind seeing brand name products in films as long as they are not unrealistically shown.	220	2.07	0.782
Real products should be used extensively in films to make a scene more believable.	220	2.47	0.943
Films should only contain those brand name products that are essential to a film's realism.	219	2.30	0.982
Films should use fictional brands rather than existing brands.	220	3.75	0.933

Table 2. One sample T-test.

One-Sample Statistics						
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean		
Total Realism	217	2.0507	0.93403	0.06341		
One-Sample Test						
	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	P value	Difference In means	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Total Realism	-14.972	216	3.093 ⁻³ <0.001	-0.9493	-1.0743	-0.8243

null hypothesis and the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis. Table 2 below indicate the results of the One Sample T-test on the items that measure realism, as indicated in the above table.

A low significance value (typically below 0.05) indicates that there is a significant difference between the test value and the observed mean. As can be seen from the table below, the significance level's value is 3.093⁻³. This was significantly lower than the significance level specified at 0.05. It is therefore safe to assume that the null hypothesis should be rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis: Product placements in film and broadcast programmes do have an effect on the realism of the film.

To determine if the respondents' recognition of products placed in films

H₂: The more prominent a placement is in a film, the greater the likelihood that consumers will remember it. The above hypothesis tested the same group of individual across two different measures, namely subtle and prominent product placements. Ordinal data was used to test this directional (one-tailed) hypothesis. This hypothesis was tested by way of a Multiple-choice multiple response scale. Each question contained a combination of subtle and prominent product placements, which had been predetermined by the researchers on the basis of

placement that has been in the foreground as opposed to a placement that is in the background.

In Table 3 below, the number of respondents who recognised a particular product is displayed. As can be seen, a number of respondents identified the fake placements that did not appear in the shown film clips. The questions listed below were tested by way of a multiple-choice multiple response scale. Respondents were exposed to the same film clips with various scenes and it was required that these respondents indicated which of the below mentioned brand name products they identified in the clips;

- 1) A prominent visual product placement is where a product is easily identified by its position and size and when it is included in a major scene within a film.
- 2) A fake product placement did not appear in the film.
- 3) A subtle visual product placement has a limited time of exposure and is often used as a background prop without audio reinforcement.

From the above table it evident that the response rate was high for McDonalds. This was a prominent placement that was undoubtedly most often recognised by the respondents (82%). Porsche had the second highest of a prominent placement (69%), followed by another prominent placement, Reebok (66%). Smirnoff Vodka as a prominent placement had a recognition rate of 51%, whilst Heineken was recognised by 47% of the respondents.

Table 3. Brand recognition of placed products.

Film name	Brand name	Mean	Prominence	Sum	%
S.W.A.T.	McDonalds	1.00	* Prominent	181	82
S.W.A.T.	Gucci Sunglasses	1.03	** Fake	31	14
S.W.A.T.	Dr Pepper	1.00	Fake	29	13
S.W.A.T.	Black Label	1.00	Fake	10	4,5
Gone in sixty seconds	Johnny Walker Whisky	1.00	Fake	44	20
Gone in sixty seconds	Porsche	1.00	Prominent	151	69
Gone in sixty seconds	Jack Daniels	1.00	Prominent	90	41
Gone in sixty seconds	Marlboro Cigarettes	1.00	Fake	16	7,3
Swordfish	Ferrari	1.00	Fake	30	14
Swordfish	Heineken	1.00	Prominent	104	47
Swordfish	Smirnoff Vodka	1.00	Prominent	113	51
Swordfish	Nokia	1.00	Fake	65	29,5
Bend it like Beckham	Ford	1.00	Subtle	38	17
Bend it like Beckham	Amstel	1.00	Fake	74	34
Bend it like Beckham	Vodafone	1.00	*** Subtle	92	42
Bend it like Beckham	Reebok	1.00	Prominent	145	66

Table 4: Recognition of prominent versus subtle product placements.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Prominent placements recognised	220	55.1299	21.51281
Subtle placements recognised	220	24.2424	26.80674

42% and 17% of the respondents recognised the subtle placements, Vodafone and Ford respectively. On the contrary, Black Label was the placement that was recognised the least by the respondents (4.5%). The reason for this could have been that Black Label was not featured in the film clips and was merely placed as a 'fake' to distract respondents. Other fake placements include: Gucci Sunglasses (14%), Dr Pepper (13%), Johnny Walker Whisky (20%), Marlboro Cigarettes (7.3%), Ferrari (14%), Nokia (29.5%) and Amstel (34%). There is a definite discrepancy between prominent and subtle product placements and its recognition by respondents. Table 4 below indicates this distinction:

1) The mean as a measure of central tendency in the above stated objective indicates that an average of 55.13 % of respondents noticed the prominent product placements in the film clips shown.

2) In contrast, only 24.24 % of the respondents noticed the subtle product placements portrayed in the film clips. The parametric test selected to test the above hypothesis was the two-sample t-test. The reason as to why this test was selected was due to the fact that the hypothesis compared the same group. The two-sample t-test is based on the assumption of normality, and the researchers made a provision that if the data set did not fulfil this assumption, the non-parametric alternative would be used, namely the Wilcoxon rank sign test. The assumption for normality was tested by way of a Kolmogorov Smirnov test, due to the fact that the sample size tested was bigger than 50 respondents. See Table 5 for the result of the test for normality.

Therefore the data could not be tested according to the parametric test, and therefore the non-parametric, namely the Wilcoxon rank sign test was used. The following was the results received after the data was tested according to the non-parametric test. Table 6 below reflects the Wilcoxon ranks sign test and the test statistics for product recognition:

As can be seen, the one-tailed p-value for significance is 2.14485⁻²⁶ (the two-tailed p-value of 4.2897⁻²⁶ divided by two), and this is significantly less than the stated 0.05 significance level. Therefore, in conclusion the null hypothesis was rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis, namely "that the more prominent a placement is in a film, the greater the likelihood that consumers will reme-

Table 5. Normality test – recognise of placed products

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov(a)			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Diff	0.153	220	1.3124 ⁻¹³	0.944	220	0.000
a Lilliefors Significance Correction						

Table 6. Wilcoxon Ranks Sign Test – Hypothesis two.

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
SUBTLE_PER - PROMINENT_PER	Negative Ranks	180(a)	120.91	21763.00
	Positive Ranks	38(b)	55.47	2108.00
	Ties	2(c)		
	Total	220		
a SUBTLE_PER < PROMINENT_PER b SUBTLE_PER > PROMINENT_PER Test Statistics – recognition Test Statistics(b)				
Z		SUBTLE_PER - PROMINENT_PER		
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		-10.566(a)		
a Based on positive ranks		4.2897 ⁻²⁶		
b Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test				

number it”.

LIMITATIONS

The reason that only undergraduate students from a university in Pretoria were included in the article was due to the fact that the researchers followed a convenience sampling approach. Thereby student respondents were easily accessible. The weaknesses of convenience sampling are that it is difficult to generalise to other subjects, it is less representative of an identified population and there is a greater likelihood of error due to experimenter or subject bias. Another downside to this sampling approach is that it is the least reliable design (McMillan and Schumacher, 2001).

The respondents surveyed were not aware of the researchers’ intention of testing respondents’ perceptions of product placements in films. The motive behind this was to recreate a natural viewing environment. Unfortunately this may have resulted in many respondents regarding the viewing session as purely a form of entertainment and therefore failed to notice the placed products in the film clips.

A further limitation of this article concerns the fact that the product placement stimuli were presented outside of the movie context. Viewing several placements in isolation is quite an artificial situation and it is not clear that the effects observed in this research would be replicated in a real film-viewing context. The results presented in

this article are based on a limited number of product placements and films. In addition the films chosen to identify and select the product placements used in this article were judgementally sampled and were probably not representative of films in general.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the course of this article it has been found that the respondents in general had a positive perception of product placements in films even though the respondents considered product placements in films as commercials in disguise.

A conclusion drawn from the article was that products placed prominently in films were better recognised than those placements placed subtly within the context of the film. Another aspect closely considered in this article was the effect product placements have on the realism of the film.

A conclusion that was drawn from the entire article was that product placements in films are a viable alternative to traditional forms of advertising. The reason for this is that product placement (especially prominent product placements) is readily recognised by viewers. Product placements therefore offer numerous benefits to the marketer in terms of reach and diminishing cost per viewer. Product placement is an immense field of research within which much is yet to be discovered. This article has only investigated a small part of this area of research. Investi-

gating a large sample through a quantitative article could shed a better light on some of the points revealed through this article. With regards to strategic action that needs to be taken in the future, the following recommendations are put forward:

- 1) It is important that further in-depth studies are conducted into the nature of consumers' recognition of product placements.
- 2) It should also be determined in the future whether the cost associated with product placements should be determined prior to the implementation thereof to establish the feasibility with regard to the cost per viewer and the reach of the target market
- 3) Managers must actively assess product placement opportunities as they would other promotion tools to ensure that the product's appearance works in synergy with its image and competitive positioning in the market.
- 4) In the future it should also be attempted to recreate an authentic cinema experience in order to see whether consumers remember product placements to the same extent when they are in a normal cinema-viewing environment.
- 5) Research in future should examine audience attitudes towards, or interest, in brands and branded goods to gain a more thorough understanding of an individual's propensity to be influenced by branded images. Examples suggested by prior research in product placement include self-efficiency and prior familiarity with the brand or product category.
- 6) In order to avoid the bias introduced by individual recognition, future research should investigate utilising a research design where association between placement exposure and reported behaviour is framed more definitely (for example by the time period and event).
- 7) The placements on Mobile Communication Media (MCM), with its physical small size and clear images, reception of undistorted visuals, marketers and advertisers should ensure prominently placed brand names.

Finally, product placement's growing importance (Van der Waldt, 2005), as a component of integrated marketing communication requires that marketers strive to better understand its potential. This knowledge is expected to help marketers better define their strategies for marketing and brand integration in their IMC plans.

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