



Product Placement in Video Games: The Effect of Brand Familiarity and Repetition on Consumers' Memory

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Abstract

Product placement in video games is gaining momentum as a means to target audiences in an indirect and engaging way. This study uses a 2 (high repetition vs low repetition) × 2 (high brand familiarity vs low brand familiarity) factorial design to test the effects of repetition and brand familiarity on consumers' memory for brands placed in video games. Results suggest that consumers recall familiar brands placed in the video game better than unfamiliar ones. Familiar brands also performed better in a brand recognition measure than unfamiliar brands. As no interaction effect of repetition was found, both familiar and unfamiliar brands will benefit equally of the effect of repetition. Managerial implications, limitations, and future research are also addressed.

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Introduction

The use of video games for advertising purposes is not new and can be tracked back to the eighties when brands such as Budweiser or Marlboro placed their brands in video games like *Tapper* and *Pole Position*. Nowadays, just in America more than 150 million of people play video games (Entertainment Software Association [ESA] 2015). This growing number of video game players has also increased advertisers' interest to use video games as a way to approach consumers in an engaging and indirect way. More specifically video games are used to target marketing communications to young audiences (Peters and Leshner 2013; Terlutter and Capella 2013; Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, and Buijzen 2012).

Nevertheless, children and youngsters are not the only audience for video games as parents also play video games as a

way to both socialize with their children and to monitor the content of the video games they play (ESA 2009). Older video game players also play video games because they grew up as teenagers playing video games and now they continue playing video games during adulthood. Video game developers have also broadened their target audience with older population segments seeking for new market opportunities (for example, health-related video games in the shape of exercise mobile apps or serious games such as *Brain Training*).

As an increasing part of the population is playing video games worldwide, and more audiences can be reached through advertising in video games, advertising in video games is gaining momentum as a marketing communications tool. In fact, advertising in video games will reach \$7.2 billion by 2016 (Tassi 2011) and the expectation is for a continued expansion of these efforts going forward (Yeu et al. 2013).

By placing brands and products in video games, marketers expect to influence cognitive, affective, and conative consumer outcomes including brand salience, brand recall, brand recognition, brand attitude, brand choice or purchase intention (Balasubramanian, Karth, and Patwardhan 2006). One main

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advantage when using product placement in video games is that video game players can spend hours, months, and even years playing their favorite video games. Therefore, marketers may expect a higher brand exposure time, if compared to other media like television or magazines. The interactive and engaging nature of video games may also affect positively brand interactions. For example, in *Worms 3D*, the player can jump higher if he drinks Red Bull cans placed in the video game. In online video games marketers can also track consumer interactions (Herrewijn and Poels 2013) gaining a better knowledge in consumer behavior.

An increasing effort has been made over the last years to achieve a better knowledge on how product placement works in video games. However, more effort is needed to understand better how consumers process information of products and brands placed in video games. Previous research has analyzed different drivers of product placement effects on consumers' memory. These drivers include brand congruence (Nelson 2002; Peters and Leshner 2013), type of placement (Grigorovici and Constantin 2004), video game genre (Yang et al. 2006), proximity (Lee and Faber 2007; Peters and Leshner 2013), arousal (Yoon and Vargas 2013), and game difficulty level (Herrewijn and Poels 2013). However, extant literature on the effects of repetition in product placement in video games is scarce if not completely inexistent.

Message repetition is considered a key factor in media planning with implications for advertising effectiveness not only in traditional media like radio and television (Singh and Cole 1993) but also in new media like the Internet (Huang and Lin 2006). While literature on repetition in traditional media can be tracked back to the 70s and 80s (Berlyne 1970; Calder and Sternthal 1980) more research is needed in order to better understand the effects of repetition on consumers' memory in product placement in video games.

Regarding brand familiarity, previous research has analyzed the effect of brand familiarity on consumers' recall (Mau, Silberer, and Constien 2008; Nelson 2002; Nelson, Keum, and Yaros 2004). However, to the best of our knowledge, no previous research has analyzed the effect of repetition and the interaction effect of brand familiarity and repetition on consumers' memory in product placement in video games. The present study aims at filling up this research gap.

Product Placement in Video Games

Product placement refers to the “practice of including a brand name product, package, signage or another trademark merchandise within a motion picture, television or other media vehicles for increasing the memorability of the brand and for instant recognition at the point of purchase” (Panda 2004, p. 1). Traditionally, product placement has been used as a marketing communications tool in media like cinema (Brennan, Dubas, and Babin 1999; D’Astous and Chartier 2000; Law and Braun-La Tour 2000) and television (Gould and Gupta 2006; Russell 2002; Russell and Stern 2006; Van Reijmersdal, Smit, and Neijens 2010). Recently, there is an increasing use of product placement in books (Petrecca 2006), music (Burkhalter

and Thornton 2014; Delattre and Colovic 2009; De Gregorio and Sung 2009; Ferguson and Burkhalter 2014), and video games (Chang et al. 2010; Choi, Lee, and Li 2013; Lewis and Porter 2010; Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, and Buijzen 2012).

Some examples of product placement in video games include Pizza Hut and KFC in *Crazy Taxi* and AXE and Nokia in *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*. While product placement in cinema and television is usually both visual – *screen placements* – and auditory — *script placements*, product placement in video games is mostly visual, this is, in the shape of banners and billboards placed in the arena or nearby. Visual screen placements can be manipulated to increase brand recall and brand recognition. Therefore, they can potentially affect consumers' brand awareness and brand familiarity. This is possible because screen placements can be at the foreground – *on-set placements* – or at the background – *creative placements* – (Russell 2002) and marketers can manipulate design elements such as size, animation, or colors to attract consumers' attention. Finally, tridimensional branded objects such as kiosks or the product itself can also be placed to draw consumer's attention. A pioneering example of this kind of product placement was Budweiser's blimp in *Tapper*. Nikon also placed branded aerostatic balloons in *Sky Challenge 2009*.

Previous research on product placement has found some superiority of on-set placements over creative placements on consumers' brand recognition (Brennan, Dubas, and Babin 1999). Research on product placement in video games has also found some superiority of bigger on-set placements and smaller creative placements on consumers' brand recall (Grigorovici and Constantin 2004). Because players are usually focused on gameplay, information-processing models have been used to better understand how players process brand stimuli in video games. One such model is the Limited Capacity Model of Mediated Message Processing (Lang 2000), which has been previously applied to analyze how people process product placement in video games (Lee and Faber 2007; Peters and Leshner 2013). Another model, The Processing of Commercial Media Content (PCMC) has been developed to provide a suitable framework to investigate how young people process commercial attempts in marketing communications formats, like product placement, which blur editorial and advertising content (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010).

The Limited Capacity Model of Mediated Message Processing

The Limited Capacity Model of Mediated Message Processing (Lang 2000) is an information-processing model that was originally developed to investigate how people process television messages. The model has two major assumptions: a) people are information processors, and b) a person's ability to process information is limited, this is, once a person has been exposed to a message this message should automatically make it into the sensory store but this sensory store can hold more information than a person can be aware of or attend to. Only selected bits of information will be transformed into activated mental representations in working memory – or short-term memory – for further processing. The information that is not selected for further

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