



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research



Can negative characters in soap operas be positive for product placement?☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 February 2016

Received in revised form 16 October 2016

Accepted 18 October 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Product placement

Brand placement

Parasocial relationship

Positive-negative asymmetry

Soap opera characters

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to test how the consumer's attitude toward product placements in a television soap opera is affected by the use of different types of character: positive versus negative; and (2) to determine the circumstance in which a negative character can be appropriated in product placement. The conceptual model proposes that the attitude toward product placement in general has a direct and indirect impact on the attitude toward the placed product, while the (negative or positive) nature of the television characters interacting with the placed product works as a moderator. Experimental data test the model. The stimuli were original product placements in a soap opera broadcast. Results from a structural equation model show that negative characters can be effective vehicles for product placement as long as viewers meet two conditions: they manifest general acceptance of product placement and have a parasocial relationship with the character.

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1. Introduction

Product placement – also known as brand placement, brand integration or in-program sponsoring (Marchand et al., 2015) – is a communication technique characterized by the subtle integration of brands, products or concepts within audio visual content as paid messages (Balasubramanian, 1994; Karrh, 1998). It has emerged as a viable alternative to traditional advertising (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) and is an increasingly important tool in the communication strategy of brands (Karniouchina et al., 2011; Wiles & Danielova, 2009). A reason for the growth of product placement is the skepticism about traditional television advertising (Fransen et al., 2015; Paço & Reis, 2012). Audiences are more likely to counter-argue in response to advertising than to product placement as they perceive the explicit persuasive intention of advertising (Balasubramanian et al., 2014). Therefore, informed consumers look at advertising as a partial and less credible source of information and tend to resist strong advertising pressure (Ries & Ries, 2002). Additionally, marketers express concern about advertising clutter, the proliferation of television channels, and the availability of zapping mechanisms to avoid advertising viewing (Kotler, 2005; Uribe, 2016). For these reasons, investment in product placement has steadily increased and the subject has received greater attention from the academic community (van Reijmersdal et al., 2009). This interest is likely to continue as

product placement is currently considered a hot topic in the field of communication research (Taylor, 2013).

Product placement is also beneficial from the point of view of audio-visual production because the inclusion of brands adds realism to fictional action, helps identify the time period in which the action takes place, and contributes to defining the character's role (Balasubramanian et al., 2006). It also shows the viewers something (e.g. brands) that they use in their daily lives (DeLorme & Reid, 1999) thereby enhancing viewer involvement with the program (Balasubramanian et al., 2014). Finally, the interaction between characters and brands in fictional television programs or movies provides the audience with clues about the character's personality and lifestyle (Russell & Stern, 2006).

The relationship between brands and characters is seen in a range of television programs. The regularity, duration and narrative features of soap operas make them particularly suitable for creating this connection between character and viewer; the story and characters are designed to appeal to viewers' fantasies about an exciting life full of emotions so as to boost the link with the viewer. This link benefits from the soap opera structure as it encompasses an array of plots with intertwining stories (Stern et al., 2007) and the viewer experiences a strong emotional release, personal gratuity, companionship, and escape from reality (Stern et al., 2005). Similarly, viewers discover the characters' interrelationships (La Pastina, 2001) and develop strong and lasting bonds with their favorite characters (Stern et al., 2007).

Different types of character are commonly portrayed in soap operas, and they are frequently stereotyped and polarized: either positive or negative, heroes or villains (Stern et al., 2007). One can expect asymmetry in the way viewers relate to them since positive and negative events evoke different patterns of psychological, affective, cognitive, and

☆ We would like to thank both reviewers for their insightful comments as they allowed us to make significant improvements to the paper.

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behavioral activity in consumers (Fazio et al., 2015). The lack of studies on the impact of using different types of characters in product placement situations may explain the fact that, in most cases, marketers still prefer their brands to appear in positive storylines with positive characters linked to them (Knoll et al., 2015; Redondo, 2012). This gap in the literature is the main motivation for the current study, which asks the following research questions: can negative characters be used for successful product placement? In what circumstances can a negative character be an appropriate product placement vehicle?

To respond to these questions, the paper presents an experimental study that tests the use of product placement linked with different types of soap opera characters. All characters use the same brand in product placement situations with similar valence and prominence. In order to investigate this topic, we define six hypotheses in the study using the parasocial relationship as the mediator and type of character as moderator.

The article makes the following contributions to the literature. First, we further extend the use of the concept of the parasocial relationship – a unilateral psychological connection between viewer and character or media celebrity (Yuan et al., 2016) – by connecting it with the attitude toward product placement in general, namely by analyzing the direct and indirect effect on the attitude toward the placed product. Second, we highlight the moderator effect of the type of character in the conceptual model. Third, we find that negative characters can also be used in product placement as long as viewers meet two conditions: they manifest general product placement acceptance and have a parasocial attachment to the character.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section introduces the main concepts, constructs, hypotheses, and proposed model. Section 3 describes the methodology, measures, and variables. Section 4 presents the results. Section 5 provides the discussion and main conclusions.

2. Viewers, characters, and product placement

2.1. The effect of attitude toward product placement in general

Consumers generally accept product placement; this has been shown in cross-cultural comparative studies (Gould et al., 2000) in the USA and Germany (DeLorme et al., 2000), Austria and France (Gould et al., 2000), Australia (Brennan et al., 2004), Singapore (Karrh et al., 2001), and the USA, Finland and Italy (Sabour et al., 2016). Overall, consumers seem to understand that product placement is part of brand communication strategy; they do not consider it either unethical or misleading and accept its incorporation in the fictional world (Sung et al., 2009). Even more skeptical segments of the population in relation to advertising such as adolescents tend to perceive product placement as a natural part of their daily lives (Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998).

Despite this general acceptance, some researchers question the ethics of product placement because no explicit reference is made to the presence of brands in the audiovisual content. Some viewers may consider that product placement invades their privacy and denies them the ability to choose and the right to be informed (Nebenzahl & Jaffe, 1998). These ethical and deontological concerns are particularly relevant in the case of sensitive products like tobacco that cannot legally use traditional advertising (Gould et al., 2000). These concerns are also important to brands because consumers' attitudes and beliefs about product placement are linked to subsequent intentions of product usage (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Morton & Friedman, 2002). In fact, it is recognized that the attitude toward product placement in general is an important antecedent to consumer attitudes toward brands used in product placement (Balasubramanian et al., 2006); and positive attitudes toward product placement are usually connected with a positive attitude toward the placed products (Eisend, 2009; Gupta & Gould, 1997).

For these reasons, our first hypothesis is:

H1. The attitude toward product placement in general positively influences the consumer's attitude toward the placed product.

2.2. Parasocial relationship – fictional character as a close friend

People are fascinated by the world of fictional characters and of celebrities portrayed in the mass media. According to transportation theory, they can be transported into a fictional narrative world which impacts their beliefs (Green & Brock, 2000). As a result and regardless of the media used, viewers often care about the characters and their involvement in the story; this is an example of the so-called paradox of fiction (Livingston & Mele, 1997); they become absorbed by the fictional story and interact virtually with fictional characters as if they were real people (Russell & Stern, 2005). In particular, televised fictional programs like soap operas give the audience the feeling they are closely following everything that happens in the daily life of the fictional characters. Soap opera audiences often immerse themselves in exciting narrative worlds; they tend to perceive fictional stories and characters as realistic situations and persons and fill in eventual perceptual gaps with reliable assumptions based on their real-world experience (Levin & Simons, 2000).

In some cases, viewers want to be like the character (identification) and tend to experience what happens to the character as if it had happened to them (Cohen et al., 2006); in other situations viewers keep their self-identity and relate to fictional characters as though they were acquaintances or even friends, in a parasocial way (Cohen, 2001). A parasocial attachment is one-sided, mediated by media, and not a reciprocal relationship. It happens when the viewer has the illusion of a face-to-face relationship with a fictional character or a celebrity (real person) and therefore feels part of a close, intimate relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Stephens et al., 1996).

The repetition of parasocial interactions allows the viewer to accumulate knowledge about the characters and make a mental representation of their parasocial relationship (Klimmt et al., 2006). While parasocial connections can undoubtedly occur in isolated situations (e.g. a movie), this kind of relationship is more likely to develop when the viewer sees a character over a long period of time (Balasubramanian et al., 2014).

The parasocial relationship applies both to fictional characters and real celebrities. People can connect strongly to a celebrity (real person), follow her/his career closely and join fan clubs; but may also react strongly against negative celebrity behaviors by making no parasocial link or rapidly withdrawing from it, distinguishing between reality and fiction (Schemer et al., 2008; Zhou & Whitla, 2013). In contrast, it is easier for the audience to accept fictional characters with dubious moral principles, because there are no real-life consequences attached (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). For instance, in the TV show 'Dexter' the protagonist depicts a character who is loyal to his beloved and friends but at the same time is a serial killer. Viewer's parasocial relationship may be plausible, because his vicious behavior belongs to the world of fiction. However, the same behavior by a celebrity would be totally unacceptable and would not result in any parasocial relationship (Knoll et al., 2015).

According to the balance theory, people tend to seek balance, order and harmony in their lives; in the absence of equilibrium, they change their attitudes and/or behavior in order to restore balance (Dalakas & Levin, 2005). Hence, if a viewer has a parasocial connection with a fictional character, and realizes that this character uses or likes a product that he dislikes, it creates a state of imbalance and produces tension for change (Woodside & Chebat, 2001); and they will tend to adjust their attitude toward the placed product in order to achieve psychological balance (Russell & Stern, 2006).

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