



# Product placements in social settings: The impact of coviewing on the recall of placed brands

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## ABSTRACT

Product placements are often consumed in social settings. However, the product placement literature has yet to adequately incorporate social settings into its research agenda. This research adds to the product placement literature by examining the nature of the social setting based on the relationship between coviewers. Results from a multilevel modeling analysis of 254 dyads showed that coviewing settings with friends generated greater recall of placed brands than those with non-friends. This effect was especially strong in social settings that allowed for interaction between coviewers. In interactive coviewing settings, visually placed brands were better recalled among friends than non-friends; there was no significant difference in recall of audio and audio-visual brands between conditions. Additional analyses revealed that interactive coviewing settings with friends also resulted in greater recall of placed brands than solo viewing settings. Theoretical and managerial implications of findings on recall of placed brands in social settings are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

In today's world of media consumption, consumers have more control over exposure to branded content by using DVRs (Pantoja, Rossi, & Borges, 2016) and other ad-blocking tools (e.g., YouTube "Skip" button). The reality is ad-avoidance mechanisms introduce challenges for marketers. To overcome such challenges, marketers have turned to product placement as an alternative to traditional advertisements (Gillespie, Muehling, & Kareklas, 2018). Product placement may be the best option for promoting the brand in media environments designed specifically for ad-free entertainment, e.g., Dunkin Donuts and GM appear in Netflix's popular series, *House of Cards* (Castillo, 2017). In addition, product placement provides product tie-in advertising opportunities, such as for Pepsi in the successful television series, *Empire* (Gillette, 2015). In the US, product placement revenues were valued at \$6.01 billion in 2014 and are expected to grow to \$11.44 billion in 2019 (PQ Media, 2015).

Academic interest in product placement research continues to grow (e.g., Dens, De Pelsmacker, & Verhellen, 2018; Gillespie et al., 2018). However, most research has overlooked a common way that consumers often view programs, i.e., in a social setting. In fact, "many (if not most) real-world experiences are shared with others" (Bhargave & Montgomery, 2013, p. 501), such as "communal viewing" at live viewing parties, both in the home and in public viewing settings

(Harris, 2013). Product placements are embedded not only in programs but in the social setting in which they are often consumed (Coker, Altobello, & Balasubramanian, 2013; Noguti & Russell, 2014, 2015). Despite such natural viewing settings, the product placement literature has not adequately examined coviewing (Balasubramanian, Karrh, & Patwardhan, 2006) and social context factors (Noguti & Russell, 2014). Like the advertising (see Mora, 2016) and entertainment literature (see Cohen, Bowman, & Lancaster, 2016), the marketing literature has a paucity of studies on social settings surrounding product placements. The purpose of this research is to address this oversight by adding to the marketing literature on product placements within social contexts.

Though past research in advertising has examined joint versus solo contexts (see Pozharliev, Verbeke, & Bagozzi, 2017 for a review), no known research to date has examined the *nature* of the social setting on recall of placed brands. Social settings may include "... friends, family members, or acquaintances" (Fisher & Dubé, 2005, p. 851). Within the advertising literature are unanswered calls for understanding "audience member familiarity" or "level of acquaintance" (Puntoni & Tavassoli, 2007, p. 294) and "social audience" familiarity (Jayasinghe & Ritson, 2013, p. 118). Such calls suggest that research on social settings involving "close others" versus "distant others" is worth pursuing (Bhargave & Montgomery, 2013, p. 514). The present research answers these calls by examining the *nature* of social settings based on the relationship between coviewers and its impact on recall of placed brands.

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This research joins the growing body of research on product placement in social settings. It examines how memory of product placements is affected by *who* coviews based on the nature of the relationship between coviewers. Theoretical insights are gleaned from the extension of the social tuning hypothesis within the socially situated cognition framework to the product placement literature. Managerial insights provide guidance to practitioners on optimal coviewing settings for the recall of placed brands and the modality of placements within those settings. In doing so, this research provides a deeper understanding of how product placement works in naturalistic coviewing settings.

## 2. Background of the study

### 2.1. Factors affecting recall of placed brands

Product placement is “a paid product message aimed at influencing movie (or television) audiences via the planned and unobtrusive entry of a branded product into a movie (or television program)” (Balasubramanian, 1994, p. 31). Product placements may be through “audio and/or visual means” (Karrh, 1998, p. 33). Unlike ads, product placements are integrated into programs, with no blocks of time delineating such branded content from the rest of the program (Balasubramanian, Patwardhan, Pillai, & Coker, 2014). Like other hybrid messages, product placements combine advertising and publicity to make the message appear less commercial and more credible (Balasubramanian, 1994). Product placement is also a generally accepted practice among audiences (Gould, Gupta, & Grabner-Kräuter, 2000; Nebenzahl & Secunda, 1993). Marketers reap benefits from the practice since product placements increase recognition (Babin & Carder, 1996) and the economic worth of the firm (Wiles & Danielova, 2009), with this effect being sustainable over time (Karniouchina, Uslay, & Erenburg, 2011).

Since its inception more than 20 years ago, the product placement literature has primarily focused on two types of factors affecting recall of placed brands on television and in movies: (1) stimulus/execution factors (e.g., Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2015; Brennan & Babin, 2004; Brennan, Dubas, & Babin, 1999; d'Astous & Chartier, 2000; Dens, De Pelsmacker, Wouters, & Purnawirawan, 2012; Gupta & Lord, 1998; Law & Braun, 2000; Russell, 2002; Uribe, 2016; Yang & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007) and (2) individual-difference factors (e.g., Brennan & Babin, 2004; Cowley & Barron, 2008; Gillespie, Joireman, & Muehling, 2012; Lehu & Bressoud, 2008). Very little has been done to examine the role of social settings on recall of product placements, with one study to date examining perceived social group influence on memory of brands (see Nelson & McLeod 2005). Thus, product placement research has been slow to follow the reality of shared media consumption and, by extension, product placements in social settings.

### 2.2. Social settings and cognition

Social settings emerge naturally when individuals watch television with others (McDonald, 1986). Such shared viewing may be part of a ritualistic family practice, preserved through technology-mediation practices that reunite families separated over long distances (Epp, Schau, & Price, 2014, p. 97). Shared viewing is so important to certain groups (e.g., viewers within fraternities, housemates, and families) that when a television series is canceled or goes off the air, there is a loss of consumption sociality or shared consumption of the program (Russell & Schau, 2014).

Like sports viewing, coviewing a program may produce intra-audience effects, whereby spectator reactions to other spectators contribute to “the excitement, the arousal, and ultimately the entertainment value that result from sports spectatorship” (Hocking, 1982, p. 100–101). A significant body of research in social psychology supports intra-audience effects, acknowledging that “situations and communicative contexts pervasively influence social thought and action” (Smith & Semin,

2007, p. 135). This view is espoused in the socially situated cognition framework (Smith & Semin, 2004).

The socially situated cognition framework rests on four assumptions. It views cognition as: (1) adaptive to interpersonal interactions, (2) embodied within the physical being, (3) situated within a socially meaningful environment, and (4) distributed across individuals (Smith & Semin, 2004). Taken a step further, socially facilitated situated cognition occurs when the co-action and mere presence of others (i.e., Zajonc, 1965) produce context-specificity, resulting in enhanced memory in social compared to solitary conditions (Fonseca & Garcia-Marques, 2013). For purposes of the current research, the social tuning hypothesis of the socially situated cognition framework is examined.

The social tuning hypothesis posits that “people ‘tune into’ what they assume to be the stimuli experienced by their group, thereby achieving greater social coordination” (Shteynberg, 2010, p. 683). Social tuning research has focused on visual stimuli (e.g., paintings) with this effect expected for a variety of media. This hypothesis is consistent with the view that cognition in social contexts depends on the relationship between people (Smith & Conrey, 2009). Given this theoretical background, the nature of the social setting based on the relationship between coviewers (friends versus non-friends) is a central variable examined in this research.

### 2.3. Hypotheses development

Hypotheses are developed by drawing primarily on the psychology literature. Extending the social tuning hypothesis, friends are expected to show superiority in the recall of placed brands over people outside of the friendship group (called “non-friends”) who coview a program in a social setting. One possible explanation for this proposition is self-presentation, which is demanding on cognitive resources for people sharing an experience with non-friends, but not with friends. Normative self-presentation styles result in people “being modest to in-group members and self-enhancing to outgroup members” during a shared experience (He, Lever, & Humphreys, 2011, p. 435). Since more cognitive resources are required for self-enhancing presentation among non-friends, memory of content that are part of shared experiences suffers for non-friends. However, memory is expected to be enhanced in shared experiences with friends, who seem to have more available cognitive resources due to a lack of self-enhancing presentation.

Shared in-group attention also increases elaborative processing by adding functional relevance to the in-group's on-going relationship, with the attended material used in “future discussion, social coordination, or collective action with in-group members” (Shteynberg & Apfelbaum, 2013, p. 739). Expected future interaction with the in-group plays a fundamental role in social learning, which depends on both the individual and other people with whom the individual simultaneously shares experiences (Shteynberg & Apfelbaum, 2013). Further evidence on the role of identity in social contexts is provided by Shteynberg, Hirsh, Galinsky, and Knight (2014), who found that social contexts that allowed for shared in-group attention increased elaborative processing of attended objects.

Consistent with past research (i.e., He et al., 2011), friends are considered part of the in-group. It can be proposed that when a social setting involves friends, coviewers will tune into and pay more attention to the stimulus than when the social setting involves non-friends. In keeping with a self-presentation explanation per He et al. (2011), since friends are expected to be modest with each other, but not with non-friends, they are expected to benefit from freed cognitive resources to socially tune into the program and its accompanying product placements. Furthermore, to preserve the friendship (as per Shteynberg & Apfelbaum, 2013), friends may pay more attention to the program and remember more embedded placements in social settings with each other than with non-friends. Thus:

**H1.** Compared to coviewing with non-friends, friends who coview a

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