



Fitting product placements: Affective fit and cognitive fit as determinants of consumer evaluations of placed brands



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ABSTRACT

Due to increased clutter and consumers' active avoidance of traditional media, marketers have sought alternative means to effectively reach their audiences. One such technique is the use of media-based product placements in narrative. This strategy is often problematic, however, as extant research demonstrates that when consumers are aware of blatant placements, their attitudes toward the placed product may become *less*, rather than more, favorable. In a series of studies, we develop and test a theoretically-based *Product Placement Fit* model that recognizes the importance of congruency between consumers' narrative consumption goals and the manner in which products are placed. Results indicate that when product placements are congruent with both the narrative's story structure (cognitive fit) and the affective tones elicited by the narrative (affective fit), more favorable brand attitudes are produced. Further, narrative enjoyment resulting from a product placement mediates the impact of product placement fit on consumers' brand evaluations.

1. Introduction

"If you notice it, it's bad. If you don't notice it, it's worthless."
—The Product Placement Paradox (Ephron, 2003, p. 20).

In an effort to heighten brand awareness and positively impact sales, marketers frequently overtly integrate their products within narratives (e.g., television and film) so that some attention is drawn to the placed product (Balasubramanian, Karrh, & Patwardhan, 2006; Poniewozik, 2001; Yoon, Choi, & Song, 2011). These narratives (which now also include literature, music, video games, and some forms of native advertising) are comprised of events, character interactions, and settings that lead consumers to a state of cognitive and affective processing (Escalas, 2004; Pennington & Hastie, 1986; Shank & Abelson, 1995). The attention drawn from blatant placement of products in narrative may come at a price, however, as extant literature generally suggests that increased consumer awareness of placed products may result in *less* favorable brand evaluations, due to consumer irritation and/or reluctance to be influenced by marketers' overt attempts to persuade (Cowley & Barron, 2008; Homer, 2009). Higher persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994) is more likely to be evoked by prominent placements (as opposed to more subtle placements) because they attract greater attention and are often easier to recognize as commercially driven (Wei, Fischer, & Main, 2008). As such, it would appear that

marketers are faced with a dilemma often referred to as the “product placement paradox” (Ephron, 2003; Homer, 2009; Tiwusakul, Hackley, & Szmigin, 2005). If they place their products prominently (i.e., in more blatant ways), consumers will likely be aware of the placement, but may react negatively (Homer, 2009). If instead, they place their products in less overt (i.e., more subtle) ways, consumers may not even notice the placement, resulting in little if any measurable impact on consumers' awareness and subsequent evaluations of the placed product (Homer, 2009; Matthes, Schemer, & Wirth, 2007).

To address this marketplace conundrum, we introduce a theoretically-based conceptual model that recognizes and addresses the needs of both the consumer and the marketer from a product placement perspective. Our model (see Fig. 1) draws from a number of marketing and social psychological theories (to be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections of the paper), and is based upon the assumption that individuals often consume narratives (e.g., watch television programs or movies, read books, etc.) for self-satisfying, gratification-based reasons (i.e., for enjoyment purposes) (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). In considering this gratification-based goal of narrative consumption, we introduce and discuss two dimensions of product placements – “cognitive” fit and “affective” fit – which we believe to be key in driving the desired outcomes.

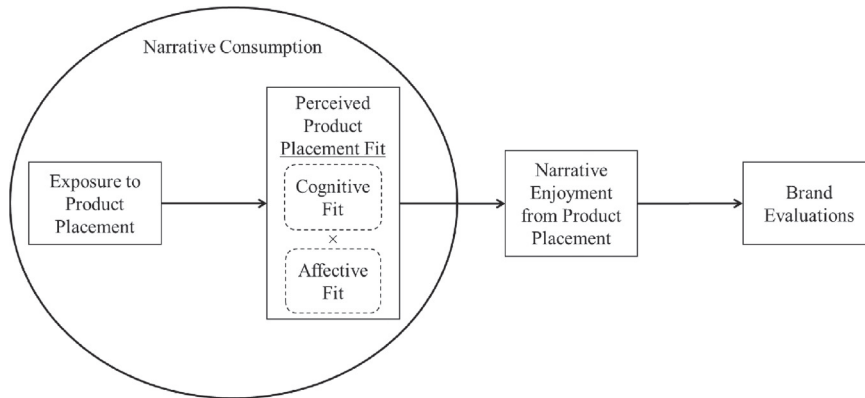
Importantly, the focus of our investigation is on blatant product

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“Product Placement Fit” Conceptual Model

Fig. 1. “Product placement fit” conceptual model.



placements (where brands are placed in narratives in an overt manner) – placements that heretofore have generally been associated with adverse consumer responses. Drawing from relevant theoretical perspectives, we propose that when a product placement is properly aligned with both the narrative structure of the story (i.e., under conditions of high cognitive fit) and with the emotions the narrative elicits at the time of the product placement (i.e., high affective fit), consumers' narrative consumption goals (i.e., narrative enjoyment) may be more fully realized, leading to more favorable evaluations of the blatantly placed product.

Before discussing the key components of our model further, we offer a brief review of relevant findings regarding product placement promotions, which are defined as the inclusion of branded products in entertainment media content with the intent to influence consumer attitudes and/or behavior (Russell, 2002). We then present and discuss three empirical studies that were undertaken to establish the viability of our proposed model relationships. Lastly, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our work, and offer suggestions for future research on this topic.

2. Conceptual development

2.1. Background

Product placement, also sometimes called brand placement, refers to the integration of a logo, a brand name, or the inclusion of a product, or its packaging in entertainment media (Lehu, 2007). Product placement in narrative includes multiple media formats, including television programs (Russell, 2002), film (Homer, 2009), novels (Brennan, 2008), music (Ferguson & Burkhalter, 2015) and music videos (Burkhalter & Thornton, 2012) among others, and has been demonstrated to impact individuals' cognitive, affective, and conative responses toward placed products. Extant product placement studies using novels as the medium, for example, recognize that brand recall is enhanced when cognitive processing of the brand is enhanced (Brennan, 2008). Similarly, using music as the medium, Ferguson and Burkhalter (2015) recognize higher prominence brands featured in the chorus of a song are more easily recalled than subtly placed brands featured in the verse of a song. Contrary to the findings of most product placement studies, Ferguson and Burkhalter (2015) also find partial support for a positive impact of increased prominence on brand attitudes under congruent conditions. Specifically, congruent brands that fit within the genre and culture of the song (in this case, the brand Phat Farm in a hip-hop song), elicit more favorable brand evaluations when the song is prominently placed than when it is subtly placed.

Lehu (2007) termed the commercial integration of brands within a variety of cultural vehicles (such as songs and novels), as “branded entertainment.” Indeed, product placements today play a vital role in

the brand communication strategy (Hackley & Tiwaskul, 2006). This role has increased in importance with the proliferation of digital video recorders, which allow consumers to skip through commercials (Sung & de Gregorio, 2008). Some reports suggest that consumers using such technologies skip between 50% and 90% of all commercials (McCarthy, 2001). In response, and in light of the favorable cost-benefit ratio (Wasko, Phillips, & Purdie, 1993), brand managers have been increasingly relying on product placements, integrating their brands within a variety of narratives. In fact, the increasing use of product placements to integrate brands within narratives has led to the creation of two specialized trade organizations, the Branded Content Marketing Association, and the Entertainment Resources and Marketing Association (Sung & de Gregorio, 2008).

As we present the relevant aspects of our conceptual model in the context of narrative consumption, it is perhaps important to note a meaningful difference in consumers' responses to blatant product placements as opposed to their responses to more traditional advertising formats. Whereas advertising content is physically and/or temporally separated (i.e., is distinct from) the narrative, product placements are embedded in (i.e., integrated with) the narrative (Balasubramanian, 1994). In addition, Russell (1998, p. 359) notes that “advertising plots are typically built around the brand,” whereas product placements typically involve “placing the brand inside an already existing plot.” Such a distinction is likely to differentially impact consumers' perceptions of intrusiveness and their perceptions of the marketer's primary objective/intent of including the placement. In the case of traditional advertising, consumers typically recognize that they are the target of a persuasive attempt, and react accordingly. In contrast, product placements (especially subtle placements) often add to the perceived realism of the narrative setting, with less attribution given to the persuasive intentions (commercial nature) of the placement (Balasubramanian et al., 2006). Moreover, we argue that when placements of branded products exhibit both cognitive and affective fit, the consumer's consumption of the narrative will be enhanced. This is not likely to be the case with the consumption of narrative before or after exposure to a typical advertisement. In fact, studies of mood congruence between programs and ads typically propose a causal model of effects, with program content affecting consumers' responses to ads (Goldberg & Gorn, 1987), rather than the reverse-order of effects.

2.2. Narrative consumption and product placement

As alluded to above, research focusing primarily on television and film media suggests that the presence of product placement may result in increased perceptions of realism (Campbell, Mohr, & Verlegh, 2013; Gupta & Gould, 1997). For example, Nebenzahl and Secunda (1993) demonstrated that individuals recognize the natural role products play in narrative structure, and as such, generally believe that real products

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