



The influence of audience characteristics on the effectiveness of brand placement memory



Thamaraiselvan Natarajan*, Senthil Arasu Balasubramaniam, Gladys Stephen, Daniel Inbaraj Jublee, Dharun Lingam Kasilingam

Department of Management Studies, National Institute of Technology, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of audience characteristics (who engage with the media content and characters) on brand placement memory. A theoretical framework was empirically tested to examine the influence of predictor variables that includes cognitive and affective reactions, star liking and identification with character on brand recall, from 420 responses gathered from a stimuli-based questionnaire administered to 18–34 age group audiences. To validate the hypotheses, PLS analysis (a variance-based structural equation modelling technique) was conducted using Smart-PLS. The results demonstrate that pleasure, arousal, cognitive effort and star liking do not have a direct influence on brand recall. However, it has indirect influence on brand recall through identification with a character that plays a significant role in memory of brand placement. Audiences who are highly involved in entertainment content and with characters hold the ability to recall brands placed in entertainment content. This engagement with the content and character ultimately results in brand recall and thereby marketers, production houses and brand placement agencies may target the Indian audiences' memory of brands movies through media characters.

1. Introduction

Brand placement and its practice have gained wide popularity among marketers as the persuasive intent of the method remains hidden (Srivastava, 2016) and serves as a lucrative option to traditional advertising (Davtyan and Cunningham, 2017; Russell and Stern, 2006). This innovative marketing communication strategy refers to “incorporating brands in movies in return for money or some promotional or other consideration” (Gupta and Gould, 1997). Brand placements in movies offer an effective marketing strategy in a global level with a broad audience reach. It's growth over the years is hugely contributed by the U.S market, followed by Brazil and Mexico that holds 80% of the global revenue of branded entertainment (PQMedia, 2015). Also, the practice has accelerated a robust expansion into the emerging markets (Chan et al., 2015), mainly Asian markets like India (Nelson and Deshpande, 2013; Nelson and Devanathan, 2006; Srivastava, 2016), where placements have witnessed audiences' acceptance and prefer the practice to traditional advertising. According to the FICCI (2015) report, revenues generated from in-cinema advertising are increasing at a steady pace in India, and have reported reaching \$4.9 billion at the end of 2014. Also, the opportunities for in-film branding in Indian film

industry is estimated around 51.45 million USD and expected to grow at a pace of 15–20% every year (Ambwani, 2014).

This growth is true in the case of emerging markets like India, as noticed to hold a diversified market with different groups of culture that encourages brand placement practices into these markets. This creates a need to explore the unseen and unveiled consumer reactions on brand placement. In terms of evaluating consumers reactions, few research studies (Chan et al., 2016a, 2016b; Davtyan and Cunningham, 2017; Meyer et al., 2016; Yang and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007) have exclusively focused on the effects of brand placements in terms of memory, attitude and purchase intention, with the current study, lies within the scope of evaluating audience activity with the media content and with identification with character on the effectiveness of brand placements through cognitive (Brand recall) outcomes.

Based on the earlier observations made by researchers (Codispoti et al., 2008; Escalas and Stern, 2003), it can be suggested that audience activity is measured through their emotionally aroused experiences that tend to create lasting memories. These emotions serve as the vital point for the marketers who tend to develop various strategies that would link the audiences' emotion with the brand. Most notably, *movies* are chosen as the prime medium that elicits emotional experiences of consumers.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: selvan@nitt.edu (T. Natarajan), arasu@nitt.edu (S.A. Balasubramaniam), gladys.stephen@outlook.com (G. Stephen), daniel.jublee@gmail.com (D.I. Jublee), dharrunnit@gmail.com (D.L. Kasilingam).

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Moreover, when an entertainment piece (The study uses a term “entertainment piece,” similar to the previous reviews to reflect movies as a medium) is consumed, viewers tend to activate their information processing related to the storyline and external information, such as brand placements. Thereby, usage of brands into the storyline increases the chances of audiences’ awareness towards the brand placement.

Academic research published on consumer’s reactions on brand placements have placed more of their emphasis on the stimuli related execution characteristics (Chan et al., 2016a, 2016b; Russell, 2002; Yang and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007) than on audience characteristics. As such, the importance of audiences until the date has been largely ignored and treated as passive processors, implying that the effect of brand placements remains the same on all people who view the media content and perceive similarly. Instead, specific audience characteristics might have an impact on the processing of brand placements such as age, gender, movie familiarity, program involvement/connectedness with character/star (Balasubramanian et al., 2006; Scott and Craig-Lees, 2010).

Also, these factors require audiences to process the brands placed on the media content simultaneously. Consequently, Scott and Craig-Lees (2010) suggested that the audience engagement with an entertainment piece influences brand placement effectiveness. Thus, our study attempts to extend the previous research by determining factors that influence audiences’ processing of an entertainment piece and identifying with characters that affects the simultaneous processing of brands placed within it. More specifically, the study focuses on Indian audiences who treat celebrities as idols and go to the extent of worshipping them. This adoration towards superstar/stars in the Indian Film Industry highlights the vital importance of liking a star. However, few research studies have explored the connectedness with the star but have not discussed on the differences between liking a star and its connection built with the character role portrayed. This is due to the audience connection with the star might have a significant impact on the processing capacity of brand placements. Thus, the study first makes an effort to address this gap by exploring the relationship between audiences’ elicited experience by an entertainment piece and its influence on brand recall using identification with the character as an additional construct (Balasubramanian et al., 2006; Godlewski and Perse, 2010). Second, to identify the influence of audience identification with the character on the effectiveness of brand placement. The effectiveness of brand placement in the study is measured by subsequent recall of brands in the stimuli. The literature about the effects of cognitive and affective reactions induced by media content on characters and its effects on brand recall is reviewed and leads to seven hypotheses in the study by using gender and prior movie-viewing experience as moderators. The results of the study validating these hypotheses are reported and discussed. Finally, the implications of the findings are provided, followed by the conclusion with the limitations and future research directions.

2. Theoretical framework and hypothesis

2.1. Individual characteristics

Brand placement studies had found that age and gender as individual-level variables are likely to influence audiences’ responses to brand placement (Bressoud et al., 2010; Gupta and Gould, 1997; Kureshi and Sood, 2012; Nelson and Deshpande, 2013). This characteristic of audiences seems to attract the marketer’s attention to the effectiveness of brand placements. As suggested by researchers, consumers across all countries under the age group of 16–34 years are most likely to spot brand placements and consider purchasing the brand (products/services) that they notice in films (Brennan et al., 2004; Nelli, 2009). In contrast, this result varies among people, as they get old. While age is found to influence the responses to brand placement, gender as an audience characteristic also makes a difference. As

individual differences vary across the processing capacity of the information available, that exists among male and female consumers. As male consumers tend to focus on overall aspects of processing information, while female consumers actively involved in processing the persuasion messages follow the central route in Elaboration Likelihood Model (Putrevu, 2001). A study conducted by McKechnie and Zhou (2003) suggested that American consumers are more likely to accept the practice of brand placements than Chinese. More specifically, U.S male consumers are more inclined to accept the placement of ethically charged products than their female counterparts and these results do not differ substantially among Chinese men and women.

Similarly, prior movie-viewing experience, i.e., the familiarity with the movie (Park and Berger, 2010) seems to affect viewers’ response to brand placements. It is reported in earlier studies that consumers get attracted to “the brands” when used by a movie character or displayed in the media content on repeated exposure. Thus, the effectiveness on brand placement can be strengthened by an association between prior viewing frequency and brand placement memory.

Based on these characteristics, researchers and practitioners are likely to focus on the other characteristics of audiences that influence the responses on brand placement. One such feature that has attracted the researchers’ attention is connectedness with the character and the program. Connectedness endures emotional feelings that viewer’s experience both before and after exposure to media content and the actors or characters involved. More specifically, throughout the literature, this connectedness is termed as identification with characters (Cohen, 2001). Identification with character is identified as “a mechanism through which audience members experience reaction and interpretation of the content from inside, that makes them experience the events happening to the character like their own (Cohen, 2001)”. This experience serves as a fundamental need of the people who involve themselves to form connections with others.

2.2. Measuring brand placement effects

According to the practitioners’ interviews and suggestions, brand awareness remains the primary objective of brand placements. Research evidence based on brand placements and its effectiveness most frequently has determined viewers’ cognitive responses that include brand placement recall and recognition (Balasubramanian et al., 2006; Bressoud et al., 2010; Devika, 2018; Karrh, 1998). The current study focuses on brand recall as a measure to evaluate the individual’s ability to trace the memory experienced. The literature supported related to brand placements effects on brand memory (recall) is discussed below.

2.2.1. Brand recall

Brand placement’s value lies in the brand awareness and the association that it generates. Given that brand awareness, is an essential element in developing brand equity and is considered as one of the primary goals for brand placement. Primarily, in the marketing communications, memory-based measurements appeared as a suitable form to test effectiveness, based on the evidence that these measures should coincide with the marketers’ goals that serves as a major criterion in the evaluation of consumer learning. Brand recall serves as a direct measure, depending on a persons’ ability to recognize the memory trace through conscious processing. Most of the research studies focus on recall as the direct measure due to its well-established linkage with the information processing capacity (Gupta and Lord, 1998). Based on the studies related to the effectiveness of brand placements (D’Astous and Chartier, 2000; Devika, 2018; Gupta and Lord, 1998; Kenneth and Pola, 2010; Nelson and Devanathan, 2006), the current study has used free and cued recall that is considered as the most common dependent measures. Thus, this study focuses on recall as measure of consciously processed memories that are retained for a shorter duration by audiences.

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