

Advertising Your Product in Television Drama: Does Information Overload and Character Involvement Matter?

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Abstract. Including branded information within media contents is an emerging yet important area of marketing communication. The current study investigates the effects of information-overload on placement recall and viewers' attitude towards the placed product. The moderation effect of involvement with the television drama character is also explored. Results show that though information-overloaded placement enhances placement recall, it generates negative attitude towards the placed product; yet, involvement with the drama character dampens such negative effects. In contrast, viewers in non-information-overloaded placement condition report lower recall but more positive placement attitude. Managerial and theoretical implications are provided.

Keywords: product placement, advertising, marketing communication, marketing management

1. Introduction

Product placement refers to the "paid inclusion of branded products or brand identifiers through audio and/or visual means, within mass media programming" [1]. Product placement, especially placement in television programs is a young area of research because this type of placement was prohibited in the past. However, the barriers have since been gradually removed. In Hong Kong, the current study context, product placement in television program was allowed since 2005. Currently, prime time television programs attract many sponsors. According to a product placement content analysis of American's television programs, there are 8.6 brands in a storied programming on the average [2]. Some marketers are afraid that the placement may be overlooked and include much information in the placement. They feature the product visually and discuss details of the product in the dialogue. This makes 'Information overloaded' placements very obvious and they appear to be mini advertisements within the television drama.

The objective of this research is to investigate the effects of information-overloaded placement on placement recall and viewers' attitude towards the placed product. The moderation effect of drama character involvement will also be explored.

2. Conceptual Framework and Research Hypotheses

2.1. Information Overload and Effects on Placement Recall

An information-overloaded placement (overloaded placement) presents an excess of product information. Not only are the characters seeing, touching or using the placed products, they may also discuss the features and advantages of the products verbally. A non-information-overloaded placement (non-overloaded placement), on the other hand, shows the product only. No additional product information is provided or discussed in the placement. In most cases, the characters have only limited interaction with the placed product (e.g. the character turns on a laptop with a small Apple logo). Usually, no product information is released apart from the appearance of the product.

An overloaded placement draws viewers' attention from the story and increases their processing effort towards the placed product. Previous studies have shown that prominent placement is better recalled than

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subtle placement [3]. As well, placement with longer exposure time improves the viewers' memory performance [4]. Since an overloaded placement is more prominent and imposes a longer exposure time, it increases the cognitive outcome of the placement. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1: It will be significantly more likely for viewers to recall information-overloaded placement than non-information-overloaded placement.

2.2. Information Overload and Effects on Attitudes Towards the Placed Product

Persuasion knowledge [5] helps people to interpret, evaluate and respond to persuasive messages. It may be triggered when people encounter a message intended to persuade. When people activate their persuasion knowledge, they engage in counter-argument and therefore, develop more negative attitude towards the subject. Product placement has an advantage over traditional advertising because placement has the potential to hide the persuasion attempt of marketers [6]. However, if the placed product is the highlight of the scene, viewers will recognize that the placed product is there to persuade them. Placement overloaded with product information is more prominent and easier to be detected by viewers than non-overloaded placement. It is thus more likely to activate viewers' persuasion knowledge and result in counter-arguing. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2: Viewers exposed to information-overloaded placement will form significantly more negative attitudes towards the placed product than viewers exposed to non-information-overloaded placement.

2.3. Involvement with Television Drama Characters – The Moderator

Viewers' involvement with the drama character associated with the placed product determines whether or not they activate their persuasion knowledge when exposed to an overloaded placement. Entertainment persuasion theory [7] contends that involvement with television program character helps overcome resistance to persuasion. There are different levels of involvement with characters, including wishful identification, similarity, parasocial interaction and liking. 'Wishful identification' is the highest level while 'liking' is the lowest. Wishful identification occurs when viewers experience a desire to emulate the character while similarity occurs when viewers regard themselves similar to the character [8]. When viewers wishfully identify with or perceive themselves similar to the characters, they become more willing to accept persuasive information in the television program. As for parasocial interaction, the character is regarded as a "super peer" to whom viewers seek guidance. This "super peer" is viewed as less controlling and authoritative and therefore less likely to arouse resistance towards persuasive message. This argument can also be applied to liking but in a weaker form because liking is a preceding stage of parasocial interaction. The higher the level of involvement with the characters, the less likely viewers would activate their persuasion knowledge. When viewing an overloaded placement, if viewers are more cognitively involve with the characters, they become less critical and more engaged with the messages in the television programs. They are thus more likely to accept the overloaded placement. Therefore, it is hypothesize that:

H3: Higher involvement with the character in the television drama dampens the negative effects of information-overloaded placement on attitude towards the placed product.

Fig. 1 shows the research framework of this study.

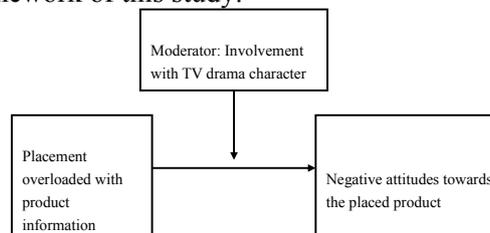


Fig. 1: Conceptual framework

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Design

A 2 X 2 experiment was designed. The factors were characteristic of placement (information-overloaded placement, non-information-overloaded placement) and character involvement (high, low). The

characteristic of placement was manipulated by editing existed television drama while character involvement was measured via questionnaire on the basis of character involvement scale. A split-half method was utilized to differentiate subjects into high involvement and low involvement groups. The dependent variables were placement recall and attitude towards the placed product.

3.2. Experimental Instrument

Hong Kong television dramas with product placement which broadcasted during the recent two years (i.e. 2010-2011) were reviewed. *Don Juan DeMercado* was chosen as the source of experimental instrument. Broadcasted in February 2010, this five-episode television drama was produced by the *Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB)*. This drama was sponsored by the *Mass Transit Railway Corporation (MTR)* that operates the local train/subway system. Product placement scenes which promote the MTR's "Wish Upon Your Star" campaign were featured extensively in this television drama.

The selected product placement scene was information-overloaded in a sense that the name of the product "Wish Upon Your Star", a horoscope reader, was shown on the screen 10 times with close-up shot frequently while the product was shown 6 times as well. In addition, a male leading character demonstrated in details how to obtain the product (using the pre-paid Octopus card to activate the system and then press a button on the screen), the process of using the product (some encouraging wishes were shown on the screen) and the outcome of using the product (a piece of paper with the wishes was printed for take-away). The placement lasted for 57 seconds in total.

The 25-minute episode was trimmed down into a 10-minute video clip using professional video editing software. This clip was then edited into another version entitled as non-information-overloaded placement. The storyline, setting and characters in the two video clips were the same. The only difference was the product placement scene. In the non-overloaded version, the name of the product "Wish Upon Your Star" was shown 4 times with only one close-up shot while the product was shown 3 times. The part in which the main character demonstrates how to obtain the product, the process and the outcome of using the product was deleted. The placement lasted 15 seconds.

3.3. Subjects and Procedures

The experiment was conducted using a total of 100 student samples. All subjects were limited to those enrolled in undergraduate communication course to maintain a high level of homogeneity. Three pretests were conducted before the experiment to validate the experimental instrument and the questionnaire. The experiment took place in classrooms. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the two exposure conditions and the number of subject in each exposure condition was equal. As a cover story, subjects were told that the study was about attitudes towards local television dramas. They were instructed to enjoy the television drama clip as if they do so at home. Subjects were asked to fill out a standardized paper-and-pen questionnaire after watching the video clip. Upon completing the questionnaire, they were debriefed and given a small gift as incentive.

3.4. Measures

Questionnaire was used in the experiment as the measuring instrument. The questionnaire first asked for recall, followed by character involvement and attitude towards the placed product in sequence. Covariates were collected in the last section. Unaided recall was used in this study. In the questionnaire, subjects were instructed to write down the brand name and the product name they can remember seeing in the television drama video clip. Attitude towards the placed product were measured using a three-item semantic differential scale (i.e. favorable/ not favorable, good/ bad, appealing/ not appealing). Character involvement was measured by utilizing the scale developed by [9]. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree. The experiment was designed to control as many potential confounding variables as possible. Furthermore, some additional information including prior brand and product experience, experience with the selected television drama and demographics were collected in the questionnaire.

4. Study Results

78% of subjects recalled the placement in the overloaded placement condition while 28% of subjects recalled the placement in the non-overloaded placement condition. Hypothesis one was supported. Information-overloaded placement was more likely to be recalled by viewers than non-information-overloaded placement.

Participants exposed to the overloaded placement ($M = 3.02, SD = 1.11$) exhibited quite negative attitude towards the placed product while participants exposed to the non-overloaded placement exhibited a more positive attitude ($M = 4.65, SD = 0.94$) $t(98) = 7.89, p < 0.001$. Hypothesis two was thus supported. Information-overloaded placement was more likely to generate negative attitudes towards the placed product than non-information-overloaded placement.

Involvement with television drama character was measured with a ten-item scale. The sum of the score was used in a mean split ($M = 4.06$) to differentiate the subjects with high character involvement and low character involvement. Altogether, there were 47 subjects with high character involvement (23 from the overloaded placement condition and 24 from the non-overloaded placement condition); and 53 subjects with low character involvement (27 from the overloaded placement condition and 26 from the non-overloaded placement condition). Hypothesis three predicted that high involvement with television drama character can dampen the negative effects of information-overloaded placement on attitudes towards the placed product. An ANOVA run on attitudes towards the placed product with amount of product information in placement and level of involvement with television drama character as the independent factors revealed a significant two-way interaction, $F(1, 96) = 26.04, p < 0.001$. In the overloaded placement condition, subjects who had high involvement with television drama character ($M = 3.91, SD = 0.70$) revealed more positive attitudes towards the placed product than those who had low involvement ($M = 2.26, SD = 0.78$). Nevertheless, such a positive shift was not found in the non-overloaded placement condition. Hypothesis three was therefore supported. High involvement with television drama character dampens the negative effects of information-overloaded placement on attitude towards the placed product. This moderation effect can only be found in the overloaded placement condition, but not in the non-overloaded one (see Fig. 2).

5. Discussions

When the same product is placed in the same television drama, why do some people exhibit more positive attitudes towards the placed product while others do not? This study found that the amount of product information in placement affect placement recall. Placement overloaded with product information is better recalled by the viewers than a non-overloaded one because it is more distractive and therefore more likely to draw viewers' attention from the television drama to the placed product.

Does increase in placement recall go together with increase in attitudes towards the placed product? This research recorded just the opposite. The results was indeed in line with some recent findings which documented that increase in placement recall does not guarantee an increase in brand attitudes [10] [11].

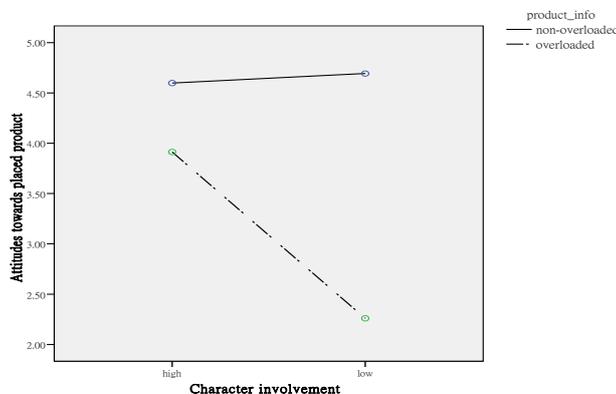


Fig. 2: Moderation effect of character involvement on attitudes towards the placed product

Marketers should bear in mind that placement recall and attitudinal impacts of placement are independent rather than positively related. Therefore, if marketers aim at enhancing product attitudes, they should avoid clogging up large amount of product information in the television drama. Rather, marketers

should make more subtle placements where viewers do not aware that the product inclusion is an attempt to influence their attitudes. On the other hand, if marketers aim at boosting awareness for a newly-lunched product, they may choose overloaded placements instead.

The present study also focuses character involvement as an internal factor of the viewers. Results showed that character involvement can dampen the negative effects of overloaded placement on attitudes towards the placed product. As mentioned in the entertainment persuasion theory [7], involvement with television program characters helps overcome resistance to persuasion. When viewers are cognitively involving with the television drama characters, they have less cognitive capacity to process the embedded persuasive messages. They become less critical and more likely to accept the persuasive messages in the television programs, including the overloaded placement.

This finding also suggests that certain kind of television drama may be a better vehicle for product placement. For instance, the so-call “idol drama” is more likely to generate positive impacts to the placed products because this kind of drama is acted by young and very popular celebrities who have lots of fans. Viewers are generally expected to have high character involvement and therefore less likely to counter argue the persuasive attempt of the placement.

Future research can investigate a broader range of product categories. Majority of previous studies look at placed product as a whole. Knowing which product category is more suitable for product placement will be of particular interest. One suggestion is to distinguish products into high involvement (e.g. computer) and low involvement (e.g. chocolate). Differences found between advertising of high involvement and low involvement products indicate the possibility of differences in the practice of product placement. It is interesting to look at whether placement of high involvement product needs to include more product information than the placement of low involvement product.

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