Product Placement in Television Drama: Do Information Overload and Character Attribute Matter?

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Abstract—Including branded information within media contents is an emerging yet important area of marketing communication. This research investigates in two studies the effects of information-overload and television character attributes (involvement, favorableness) on placement recall and viewers' attitudes towards the placed product. Results of Study 1 show that though information-overloaded placement enhances placement recall, it generates negative attitudes towards the placed product; yet, involvement with the television character dampens such negative effects. In contrast, viewers in non-information-overloaded placement condition report lower recall but more positive attitudes towards the placed product. Study 2 further investigates the main effects of character attributes. Results reveal that product placement associated with a favorable character is more effective in generating placement recall and positive placement attitudes than placement associated with a less favorable character. Managerial and theoretical implications are discussed.

Index Terms—Advertising, marketing communication, marketing management, product placement.

I. 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 first appeared in Hollywood movies in the 1930s. It expanded to television dramas, music videos, video games and even novels in recent years. In the United States, the market value of product placement amounted to US$4.38 billion in 2007 and is predicted to reach US$7.6 billion by 2010 [2]. Nevertheless, product placement, especially placement in television dramas is a young area of research because this type of placement was prohibited in the past. However, the barriers have since been gradually removed. Television Without Frontiers Directive, a special taskforce of the European Commission, reached mutual agreement to allow product placement in television dramas in 2007 [3]. In Hong Kong, the current study context, product placement in television drama was allowed since 2005.

Currently, prime time television dramas attract many sponsors. According to a product placement content analysis of American's television dramas, there are 8.6 brands in a storied programming on the average [4]. Not only does the placed product need to compete for attention against a rich array of stimulus in the television drama, such as the plot,

characters and costume, but also other products placed in the same television drama. Some marketers are afraid that the placement may be overlooked and include a variety of information in the placement. They feature the product visually and discuss details of the product in the dialogue. These 'Information-overloaded' placements are very obvious and appear to be mini advertisements within the television drama.

In spite of the notability of this phenomenon, few studies have been conducted to understand the effects of product placement in television drama given its short history. Early placement studies focused mainly on placement in movies. As well, the majority of placement studies stressed brand recall as a measure of placement effectiveness. Relatively few studies have investigated the viewers' attitudes towards the placed product or the effects of individual-specific factors.

The objective of this research is to investigate the effects of information-overloaded placement on placement recall and viewers' attitudes towards the placed product. The effect of drama character attributes (involvement, favorableness) will also be explored. Results of the study will provide theoretical implications to researchers as well as managerial implications to television stations and marketers.

II. Conceptual Framework And Research Hypothese

A. 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 subtle placement [5]-[7]. As well, placement with longer exposure time improves the viewers' memory performance [8], [9]. 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.

B. Information Overload and Effects on Attitudes towards the Placed Product

The persuasion knowledge model suggests that people develop knowledge about when, why and how a message is designed to influence them [10]. Persuasion knowledge helps people to interpret, evaluate and respond to persuasive messages. It may be triggered when people encounter a message intended to persuade. According to [11], when people activate their persuasion knowledge, they engage in counter-arguing and therefore, develop more negative attitudes towards the subject. Product placement has an advantage over traditional advertising because placement has the potential to hide the persuasion attempt of marketers [12]. However, if the placed product is the highlight of the scene, viewers will recognize that the placed product is there to persuade them. They will activate their persuasion knowledge just as they do when they encounter traditional advertising [13].

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.

C. Involvement with Television Drama Character – The Moderator

Entertainment persuasion theory [14] documented that high involvement with television drama character has the potential to undermine selective avoidance. More specifically, the pleasant feeling associated with the character increases the chances for viewers to process persuasive messages they would otherwise ignore. Thus, when a placement message is carried by a television drama character viewers are highly involved in, they may pay closer attention to things associated with that character, including the persuasive message. In the context of television advertising, several published studies found that involvement enhances memory. There is a direct relationship between involvement and recall in which high involvement is associated with high advertisement recall rate [15], [16]. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H3: When exposed to a non-information-overloaded placement, viewers with higher character involvement would be more likely to recall the placed product than viewers with lower character involvement.

In addition, viewers' involvement with the program character associated with the placed product determines whether or not they activate their persuasion knowledge when exposed to an overloaded placement. Entertainment persuasion theory [14] contents that involvement with television drama 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 whereas 'liking' is the lowest. Wishful identification occurs when viewers experience a desire to emulate the character whereas similarity occurs when viewers regard themselves similar to the character [17]. When viewers wishfully identify with or perceive themselves similar to the characters, they become more willing to accept persuasive information in the television drama. As for parasocial interaction, the character is regarded as a "super peer" to whom viewers seek guidance [18]. This "super peer" is viewed as less controlling and authoritative and therefore less likely to arouse resistance towards persuasive message [19]. This argument can also be applied to liking but in a weaker form because liking is a preceding stage of parasocial interaction. According to the entertainment persuasion theory [14], the higher the level of involvement with the characters, the less likely viewers 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 dramas. They are thus more likely to accept the overloaded placement. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H4: Higher involvement with the character in the television drama dampens the negative effects of information -overloaded placement on attitudes towards the placed product.

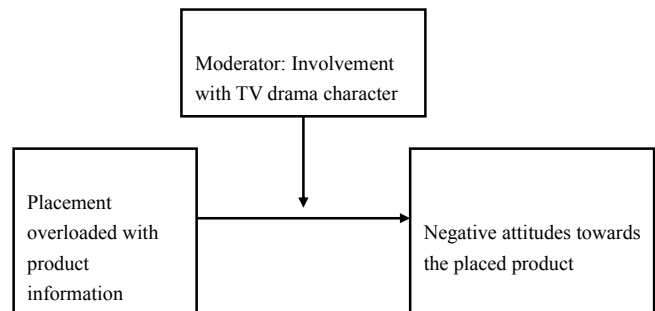Fig. 1 shows the conceptual framework for H1 to H4.

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework for H1 to H4.

D. Character Genre/Favorableness and Main Effects on Product Placement

The above conceptual framework suggests that the viewers' involvement with a television drama character may moderate the negative effects of an information-overloaded placement. Given the potential importance of character involvement, this research will build on the above works and examine the main effects of character involvement on placement effectiveness. Whereas involvement is a construct widely used in academic research, it is rarely used in the industry that tends to describe television drama characters using attributes such as genre and favorableness. It is therefore useful to operationalize involvement in these terms more familiar to the industry.

A television drama presents a few leading characters and a group of supporting characters. In most cases, the leading characters are regarded by viewers as better known and physically more attractive than supporting characters. Nevertheless, to increase exposure opportunity, not only is the placed product associated with the leading characters, but

also the supporting characters in many situations. Thus, an interesting issue arises: Would the associated character genre exert a main effect on placement effectiveness?

Previous research has shown that viewers are more likely to formulate character involvement with the more favorable leading characters than the less favorable supporting characters even if they appear in the same television drama [20]. Specifically, viewers scored higher in realness (i.e. He/she seems like a real person to me), liking (i.e. He/she is warm), similarity (I feel he/she and I are similar) and familiarity (I definitely know his/her attitudes and values) towards the favorable leading characters than the less favorable supporting characters. Thus, character genre/favorableness comprises the attribute that allows this research to operationalize viewers' involvement with television drama characters.

Earlier, the study proposed in H3 and H4 that character involvement affects the effectiveness of placement in television drama. Since the audience has different levels of involvement with character genre (leading or supporting character), the effects of placement would likely vary accordingly. As viewers generally are more likely to involve themselves with favorable leading characters than less favorable supporting characters, we hypothesize:

H5a: Viewers will more likely recall placement associated with more favorable leading character than they will recall placement associated with less favorable supporting characters.

H5b: Placement associated with more favorable leading characters will lead to better attitudes towards the placed product than placement associated with less favorable supporting characters.

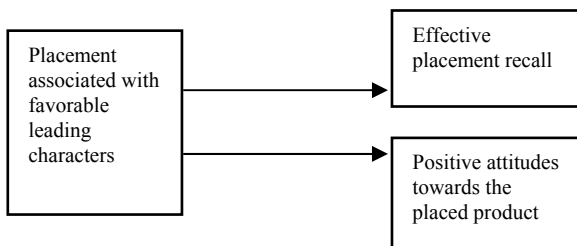Fig. 2 shows the conceptual framework for H5a and H5b.

Fig. 2. Conceptual framework for H5a and H5b.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & STUDY RESULTS

Two experimental studies were conducted. Experiment 1 was aimed at testing hypotheses one to four (H1 to H4) and experiment 2 was aimed at testing hypothesis five (H5).

A. Experiment One

Study Design—A 2 X 2 experiment was designed. The factors were placement characteristic (information-overloaded placement, non-information-overloaded placement) and character involvement (high, low). Placement characteristic was manipulated by editing existed television drama. Character involvement was not manipulated but measured via questionnaire on the basis of a 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 attitudes towards the placed product.

Experimental Instrument—Television dramas with product placement which were broadcasted during the recent two years (i.e. 2010-2011) in Hong Kong were reviewed. *Don Juan DeMercado* was chosen as the source of the experimental instrument. Broadcasted in February 2010, this five-episode television drama was produced by the *Television* Broadcasts *Limited*. The 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. Previous studies documented that prior brand knowledge affects people's information processing and message elaboration [21]. In this regard, either very familiar brand or very unfamiliar brand should be selected. Since there was no local placement of unfamiliar brands, a very familiar brand, namely *MTR* was selected for this study. It is believed that the participants have similar prior experience with *MTR*.

The selected product placement scene was information-overloaded in that the name of the product "*Wish Upon Your Star,*" a horoscope reader, was shown on the screen 10 times with close-up shots while the product was shown 6 times. In addition, a male leading character demonstrated in details how to obtain the product (using the pre-paid 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.

The 25-minute episode was trimmed down to a 10-minute video clip using a 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 use the product, the process and the outcome of using the product was deleted. The placement lasted 15 seconds.

Prestests—Three pretests were conducted. The first pretest was aimed at selecting the most overloaded placement among all the product placement scenes in the selected television drama. The second pretest was designed to validate the experimental instruments by judging if the two placements were information-overloaded and non-information -overloaded respectively. The third pretest was used to validate the questionnaire.

Subjects and Procedures—The experiment was conducted using a student sample. All subjects were limited to those enrolled in undergraduate communication courses to maintain a high level of homogeneity. A total of 100 students were recruited for the first experiment. One may argue that student sample may be problematic in terms of representativeness. However, according to [22], student sample creates a high level of homogeneity in terms of prior brand knowledge, education level and age. In addition, a

student sample would be appropriate if the dependent variables did not interact with the subjects' demographics. Product placement literature documented that gender, age, education and income level do not affect attitudes towards placement [12], [23]. Therefore, a student sample is appropriate for this experiment.

The experiment took place in classrooms. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the two exposure conditions and the number of subjects in each exposure condition was equal. As a cover story, the subjects were told that the study was about attitudes towards local television dramas. They were instructed to enjoy the television drama clip as they would at home. They then filled 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.

Measures— Questionnaire was used in the experiment as the measuring instrument. All the scales employed from previous research were translated into Chinese. Some statements within the scales were phrased positively while others were phrased negatively to lessen response tendency and boredom [24]. The questionnaire first asked for recall, followed by character involvement and attitudes 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. Attitudes 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 [25]. 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.

Results—78% of the 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 whereas 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 viewers with higher character involvement are more likely to recall the placed product than viewers with lower character involvement. Chi-square tests were conducted to study possible relationships between character involvement and placement recall. Significant result recorded in the non-overloaded placement condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 4.276, p < 0.05$. The result suggested that viewers with high character involvement are more likely to recall the placed product when viewing a non-overloaded placement. Therefore, hypothesis three is supported. In addition, there was no significant result recorded in the overloaded placement condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 5.274, p = 0.072$. Possible explanation is that, the overall recall rate was already very high (78%) in the overloaded placement condition. High character involvement was therefore not expected to have any further boost in placement recall. The placements were so obvious that viewers were expected to recall no matter whether they involve with the character or not.

Hypothesis four 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 four was therefore supported. High involvement with television drama character dampens the negative effects of information-overloaded placement on attitudes 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. 3). As reflected in Fig. 3, viewers already exhibited positive attitudes towards the placed product in the non-overload placement condition. Involvement with television drama character was therefore not expected to have any further attitudinal impacts.
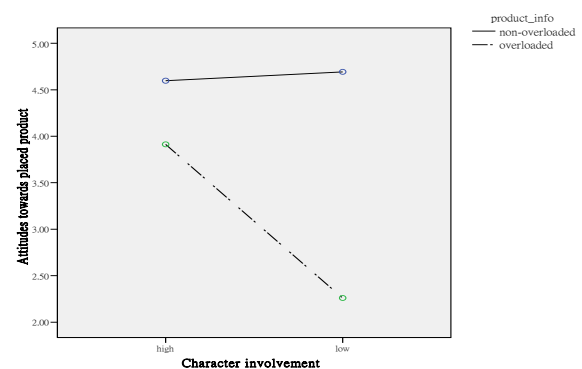

Fig. 3. Moderation effect of character involvement on attitudes towards the placed product.

B. Experiment Two

Objective—Experiment one suggested that character involvement has moderation effect on placement attitudes when the placement is regarded as information overloaded. To further confirm the importance of character involvement on placement attitudes, the second experiment was created to operationalize character involvement in terms of character genre/favorableness and to examine its main effects.

Study Design—This study included two exposure conditions. Subjects in the first condition watched a television drama clip in which the placements associated with a favorable leading character whereas the placements associated with a less favorable supporting character in the second condition. The two episodes were taken from the same television drama. The independent variable of this study is characteristic of placement (placement associated with favorable leading character and placement associated with less favorable supporting character). Same as experiment one, the dependent variables are placement recall and attitudes towards the placed product.

Experimental Instrument—The two placements were selected after reviewing a 24-episode local television drama, namely *The Mysteries of Love*. Both placements were promoting *Watsons Water*, a renowned local bottled water. The first set of placement was associated with a male leading character performed by a famous singer in the Asia-Pacific region. It was assumed that this favorable leading character could generate relatively high character involvement. The placement lasted for 35 seconds in total.

The second set of placement was associated with a male supporting character performed by an unfamiliar local actor. It was assumed that this less favorable supporting character would generate relatively low character involvement. The placement lasted for 37 seconds in total. The two experimental instruments were further edited to ensure other factors remained as similar as possible apart from the character genre (i.e. leading and supporting character). Product exposure duration, number of product close-up, amount of product information and integration to the plot were all put into consideration.

Subjects and Procedures—Pretest was conducted to validate the experimental instruments. A total of 60 undergraduate students were recruited for experiment two. The procedure of the second experiment is the same as the first one. Subjects were randomly assigned to two classrooms each showing different television drama clip. The number of subject in each exposure condition was equal. Subjects were then briefed, watched the television drama clip and finally filled out the questionnaire.

Results—A manipulation check was conducted prior to data analysis. An independent-samples t test was performed to examine the manipulation of the independent variable, that is, leading character and supporting character in the same television drama. Results showed that the leading character ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 0.89$) was perceived to be significantly more favorable than the supporting character ($M = 3.67$, SD = 1.52), $t(58) = 6.65$, $p < 0.001$. Results also reflected that viewers exhibit far higher character involvement towards the leading character ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 0.65$) than the supporting character ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.14$), $t(58) = 9.06$, $p < 0.001$. It confirmed that the selected experimental instruments were functioned as intended.

The placement recall rate was 73.3% when the placement was associated with more favorable leading character while it was 40.0% when the placement was associated with less favorable supporting character. Hypothesis 5a was supported. It was found that placement associated with more favorable leading character was more likely to be recalled by viewers than placement associated with less favorable supporting characters.

Independent-samples t tests showed significant effects of character genre on attitudes towards placed product. Attitudes towards the placed product was positive when the placement was associated with more favorable leading characters ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 0.73$) but turned to negative when the placement was associated with less favorable supporting characters, ($M= 3.86$, $SD = 0.79$), $t(58) = 6.69$, $p < 0.001$. Hypotheses 5b was thus supported. We can see that when same product was compared, placement associated with more favorable leading characters leads to better attitudes towards the placed product than placement associated with less favorable supporting characters.

In order to detect possible confounding variables, a series of one-way ANOVA tests was conducted for both experiment one and two. Results reflected that attitudes towards the placed product were not affected by individual's demographics, product experience and their experience with the selected television drama.

IV. DISCUSSION

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 an 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 in which the authors documented that increase in placement recall does not guarantee an increase in brand attitudes [13], [26].

Marketers should bear in mind that placement recall and attitudinal impacts of placement are independent effects that may not be 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, they 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 want to boost the awareness of a newly-launched product, they may choose overloaded placements instead. The rationale is similar to offensive advertising which aims at creating buzz among consumers and/or getting media attention at the first place and then to alter consumers' attitudes towards the product through other image building

campaigns in subsequent stage.

The present study also focuses on 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 [14], involvement with television drama characters helps overcome resistance to persuasion. When viewers are involved 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 dramas, 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.

The experiments in this study were conducted in an artificial television watching environment. Specifically, the subjects were asked to watch the television drama in the classroom together with their schoolmates. This is different from the naturalistic situation where viewers would usually watch television at home either alone or with family members. Also, even though the subjects were encouraged to watch the television drama as if they were in a naturalistic situation, they may nevertheless pay more attention given the experimental setting. Thus, further research could replicate this study using a more naturalistic setting. However, such a study may be difficult to operate because researchers have less control over the subjects.

Future research can also investigate a broader range of product categories. The majority of previous studies look at placed products as a whole without differentiating product-related characteristics. 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) categories. Differences found between advertising of high versus low involvement products in previous research [27] indicate the possibility of differences in the practice of product placement. It would be interesting to examine whether the placement of a high involvement product may require more product information than the placement of a low involvement product.

Lastly, studies in this area examine primarily the effects of placement on the placed product and the brand. Researchers may also consider investigating the impact of product placement on the broadcast media, such as the television drama and movie that carry the placement. This would be of particular interests to television stations and movie producers.

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