

Product placements in games

The effects of game liking and placement prominence



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Abstract

This research studies new challenges and opportunities with reference to product placements in games, a specific form of In-Game Advertising (IGA). As games and Movie or Television Programs (MTP's) resemble each other in a variety of ways, it is essential to translate the research conducted in the latter, to study the rather unexplored field of games and initiate a greater understanding in this area. This can be achieved by answering the problem statement, centered in this thesis:

To what extent do the attitude towards a game and the placement prominence, influence the attitude towards the product placement and subsequently the brand attitude of gamers?

The placement prominence influences the attitude towards the product placement, while the attitude towards a game, the interactivity of the game, the ability to skip cut scenes and gamey players' emotions moderate this relationship.

Subsequently, the attitude towards the product placement influences the attitude towards the brand, while previous experiences with the brand moderate this relationship as well. However, this relationship is ineffectual for stimulating a brand attitude when one's attitude towards product placements in general is negative. The outcomes of product placements are most effective, if one has not purchased a product or service of the brand and he or she does not have a negative attitude towards product placements in general. The product placement then demonstrates its use in a game, so consumers form an attitude towards the product placement. In that case, a positive (negative) attitude towards the product placement may yield both stronger and more (less) favorable brand attitudes.

Nowadays, consumers are exposed to many digital advertisements, therefore it is necessary to constantly conduct research concerning product placements in games, as consumers develop more sophisticated persuasion knowledge about less intrusive tactics such as product placements.

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Opening

The theme of this Bachelor Thesis is: Product Placements in games. For reason of personal interest in gaming, I intended to create an extra dimension to existing theories in the world of In-Game Advertising, in specific: product placements. After having read a study conducted by Cowley and Barron (2008), *When product placement goes wrong – the effects of program liking and placement prominence*, I decided to apply the knowledge covered in this study, to the world of gaming. Additionally, I added an extra mediating variable to the existing theoretical framework to perfect this translation to the field of gaming. Research concerning product placements in games is scarce; research concerning product placements in movies or television programs is abundant. An extension of the knowledge gained in the field of games could be achieved by relating the study of Cowley and Barron (2008) to this field and thereby extending the knowledge for advertisers interested in IGA .

This thesis encompasses five chapters and is structured as follows:

The first chapter unfolds the introduction to this thesis stressing the problem statement, the relevance and it offers a short description of the demarcation and an initial conceptual framework. The second chapter emphasizes the existing theories with reference to the attitude towards a Movie or Television Program and the attitude towards the product placement. The third chapter underlines the relation between the prominence of the product and the attitude towards the product placement. Chapter four discusses the attitude towards product placements and subsequently the attitude towards the brand. Conclusively, chapter five covers the conclusions that will be drawn upon the former research conducted in the area of movies and television programs, which will now be implemented in the world of games along with the necessary customization, to place and identify these elements in this field. An elaborated conceptual framework is discussed and a number of managerial recommendations along with the limitations of this study and suggested further research in this field conclude this chapter.

Foremost, I would like to thank my coach -dr. Cedric Stalpers-, my parents, my friends and my fellow students for their feedback and suggestions that accompanied me while writing this Bachelor Thesis.

Jan de Leeuw

1: Introduction

This introductory chapter clarifies the topic by an introduction and a problem indication, which leads to the problem statement, the research questions and with the academic and managerial relevance; both given additional attention in the concluding chapter. This chapter ends with the demarcation of this study and an initial conceptual framework.

1.1 Background

Product placement is a very common marketing strategy, used in all levels of media. Consumers cannot avoid the exposure to the placements, and this form of advertising frequently infiltrates and influences consumers' subconsciousness and behavior (Law, 2004; Cowley and Barron, 2008). Academic studies in product placements reveal outcomes that are supportive for choice (Law and Brown, 2000; Nelson, Keum and Yaros, 2004) and memory (Gupta and Lord, 1998; Law and Brown, 2000). Moreover, research came across outcomes that product placements significantly help in forming brand attitudes (Russel, 2002). In 2009 the retail sales of videogames exceeded the retail sales of movies and are expected to rise to an amount of 73,5 billion dollars in 2013, according to Price Waterhouse and Coopers' *Annual Global Entertainment and Media Outlook Report* (2009). The increasing amount spent on videogames has not remained unnoticed for marketers; in fact it has become a Mecca for them. Advertisements and product placements in games have increased in visibility and repetition over the past few years in videogames. Expenses made by advertisers for In-Game Advertising (IGA), range from \$25,000 to \$700,000, depending on the interactivity, the visibility and repetition of their product placement or advertisement (Moran, 2004).

Research concerning IGA has received little attention thus far, even though it reaches consumers in a distinctive way, as it has the element of interactivity to differentiate itself from traditional media (Nelson, Keum & Yaros 2004) and it has positive effects on gamers' brand awareness, according to Nelson (2002). Additionally, as statistical results reveal, successful computer games are fitting stimulators for brand recognition, since 87% of gamers in an experiment could recall the displayed product including its brand name. When given hints, this percentage climbed to 97% of the participants (Wang and Yang, 2008).

1.2 Problem indication

There is, however, a potential for a negative shift in brand attitude after forcing consumers to view highly visible brand information in Movie or Television Programs (MTP's), especially when viewers are highly entertained by it (Cowley and Barron, 2008). This can be derived from the relation between consumers who like a MTP and the prominence of product placements, influencing eventually consumers' brand attitude. Consumers of a MTP who enjoy watching it, can be troubled by an overwhelming product placement. Consequently, they can create a negative attitude towards the product placement, which subsequently influences one's attitude towards the brand. The question remains to what extent these results from the field of movies and television programs can be translated to the world of games, since the latter distinguishes itself from traditional media, as they are interactive (Nelson, 2002). This makes the conversion of the theory both challenging and relevant, since movies do resemble games in a variety of ways. Most significant is that both media offer viewers digital entertainment and offer product placements a wide variety of insertion in scripted scenarios (Nelson, Keum and Yaros, 2004). Surprisingly little research has been conducted concerning product placements in games, therefore research in MTP's can help study this rather unexplored field and initiate a greater understanding in this area.

The objective of this research is to discuss whether the presence of prominent product placement in games could cause a negative or a positive shift in the attitude towards the placement and subsequently towards the brand for players of the game who like or dislike a game.

1.3 Problem statement

To what extent do the attitude towards a game and the placement prominence, influence the attitude towards the product placement and subsequently the brand attitude of gamers?

1.4 Research questions

1. What theories exist concerning the attitude towards a MTP and attitude towards the product placement (*chapter 2*)?
2. What theories exist concerning the placement prominence and the attitude towards a product placement in a MTP (*chapter 3*)?
3. To what extent can the research of movies and television programs be translated to the world of games (*chapter 2.3, 3.3*)?
4. To what extent can an attitude towards the product placement alter the attitude towards the brand, in the field of gaming (*chapter 4*)?

Research question 1: What theories exist concerning the attitude towards a MTP and attitude towards the product placement?

This research question intends to provide us with a greater understanding of the effects concerning the attitude towards a MTP. Liking or disliking a MTP may have a significant effect on the attitude towards the product placement, which is supportive in forming an attitude towards a brand. These theories create an enhanced understanding concerning the direction and magnitude of these effects while translating it to the world of games.

Research question 2: What theories exist concerning the placement prominence in a MTP and the attitude towards the product placement?

This research question intends to analyze to what extent the prominence of the placement could influence consumers' attitude towards the brand, and what factors could impede the translation to the field of gaming. An in-depth view will focus on these effects which could alter consumers' brand attitude of the placement, thereby clarifying the relations illustrated in the conceptual framework.

Research question 3: To what extent can the research of movies and television programs be translated to the world of games?

The effects that influence the attitude of consumers of a MTP concerning product placements cannot be directly applied in the world of gaming. Nevertheless, consumers of a movie and players of a game match in certain ways. A precise translation, with the necessary customization, can make the theory beneficial in the area of games and can be of assistance when exploring this rather unexplored field.

Research question 4: To what extent can an attitude towards the product placement alter the attitude towards the brand, in the field of gaming?

A brand's product placement can be viewed as rather negative or rather positive, though the product placement attitude and brand attitude relation is unlikely to be a simple one, since other factors influence the latter as well. Brand attitude is specifically influenced by brand performance, which is evaluated during the consumption or use of the brand, which does not occur while being exposed to product placements (Gupta and Lord, 1998). By answering this research question, the relation between the mediating variable "attitude towards the product placement", and the dependent variable "attitude towards the brand," will be enlightened.

1.5 Academic relevance

As product placements are, and continue to be, an important part of the media landscape, and since recently of the game industry, where little research has been conducted concerning this matter, it is critical to gain proof of theories in this field. This rather unexplored area can be explored by converting the knowledge gained in traditional media - though with adjustments - to help comprehend the relation between these variables in the world of gaming. This topic applies the theory of Cowley and Barron (2008) of program and movie liking and prominent product placement, in a field where it has not been applied before. This theory has been quoted in many research and it can be helpful in explaining why product placements are not to be observed as “a purely positive experience for gamers,” as stated by Glass (2007, page 31). By reviewing research conducted by others, this topic creates a new dimension for product placement in games. Academic theories concerning product placements in games are scarce and tend to neglect the element of interactivity when copying theories of traditional media to this area (Wang and Yang, 2008; Nelson, 2002). Negative reactions from gamers towards product placement are mostly linked to the product type which does not blend in the setting of different types of games (Wang and Yang, 2008; Nelson, 2002). This is emphasized, while not taking the relation between game liking and placement prominence into account. Hence, an important aspect of the cause of a negative shift towards product placements in games has been overlooked.

The assumption that product placements have a potential to negatively influence the brand attitude of consumers (Cowley and Barron, 2008) is in contrast to research conducted by Wiles and Danielova (2009). Latter research mentions a positive effect on consumers’ brand attitude while not mentioning the potential occurrence of any negative effects. In the world of gaming this research has never been conducted, though evidence from Yang and Wang (2008) has been collected that product placements have multiple placement strategies. They discovered that the type of game is determinant for using different types of placement strategies, so positive brand attitudes can be stimulated. According to their study, shooting and sporting games should be approached differently than all other types of games, since they are tightly paced.

It is, however, critical to define the determinants of negative attitude effects as well. As games and MTP’s resemble in the use of product placements, existing theories of product placements in MTP’s may be applied in this field. Nevertheless, the element of interactivity makes this conversion slightly different. Therefore, this study extends the knowledge by reviewing these differences to help enlarge the knowledge covered in the area of product placements in games. Applying these theories should give a new insight in game liking and prominent product placement in games.

1.6 Managerial relevance

Applying the theory regarding liking or disliking a MTP and placement prominence in the area of games should give advertisers the ability to cut down a negative shift in brand attitudes, when promoting their product or service through product placement. Research concerning product placement in games is scarce, while effects on brand attitudes in movies and television series are significant. Therefore, applying this theory in the world of games could lead to new strategies for advertisers in the prominent placing of their product in games. Additionally, managers can benefit from the conclusions drawn in this report, concerning the effects of game liking or disliking on gamers' brand attitude. By doing so, the advertising effectiveness could be increased, by providing arguments that speed up the decision making process for advertisers and eventually it supports in reducing advertising investment issues.

1.7 Demarcation

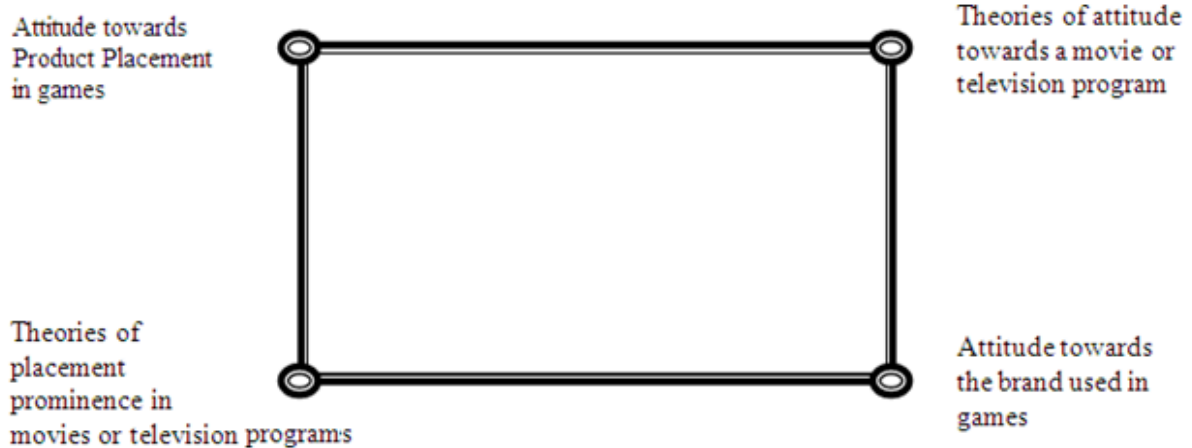


Figure1: Demarcation

Attitude towards product placement in games: By examining which factors influence this attitude, advertisers are able to comprehend and enhance their advertisement materials in games.

Theories of attitude towards a movie or television program: Theories in this field may help in understanding the effects of game liking and the attitude towards the product placement in games.

Attitude towards the brand used in games: This research aims to clarify the effects products placements in games have upon the attitude towards the brand used in the game.

Theories of placement prominence in movies or television programs: Theories in this field may help in understanding the effects of placement prominence in the field of games.

1.8 Initial conceptual framework

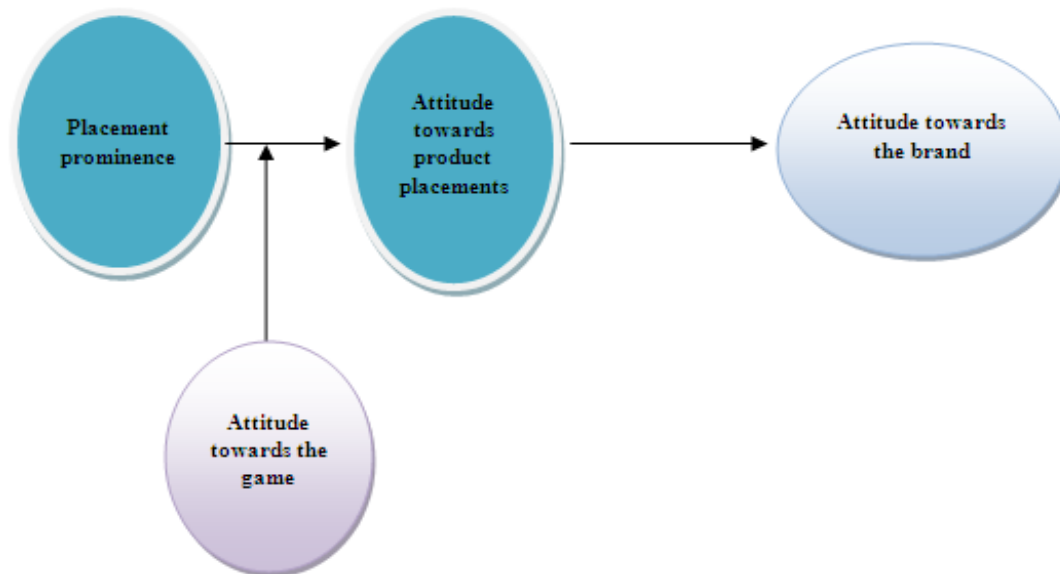


Figure 2: Initial conceptual framework

Placement prominence: Placement prominence is an independent (heterogeneous) variable and has a direct effect upon the attitude towards the product placement.

Attitude towards the game: The attitude towards moderates the relationship of the placement prominence with the attitude towards the product placement.

Attitude towards the product placement: This mediating variable helps in forming an attitude towards the brand used in a MTP or a game.

Attitude towards the brand: The dependent variable is the attitude towards the brand, which supports in brand choice and is therefore chosen to be clarified.

2: Literature review with reference to the attitude towards a MTP

This chapter mainly reviews existing theories concerning the attitude towards a MTP and consumers' attitude towards the placement. Paragraph 2.1 encompasses the main characteristics of a product placement and is followed by paragraph 2.2, which reviews existing literature concerning the attitude towards a MTP and 2.3 applies it in the world of games. The chapter ends with a conclusion.

2.1 Product placements

Product placement (sometimes referred to as “brand integration”) is a blend of publicity and advertising designed to influence the audience by (modestly) inserting branded products in media that offer entertainment for its audience, such that the consumer is unlikely to be aware of the persuasive intent (Balasubramanian, 1994). The practice has continued to spread in recent years and has eventually found its way to all levels of media. Consumers' response to product placements in MTP's can be derived from the fact that celebrities are empowered with symbolic meaning that is passed on to the product through its association with the celebrity. In much the same way, popular entertainment has rich symbolic meaning that can be transferred to the placed product (Russel, 2002). Consumers link the television world to their own, mapping their aspirations onto the products placed in the film or television program, which in turn could influence consumption norms and one's attitude, according to Pechmann and Shih (1999). For example, a Martini drink ordered by James Bond while seducing the Bond girl, gives him sex appeal. Adult males could derive this sex appeal from drinking a Martini, thereby linking it to their own world and ordering it when standing at a bar. This shifts their consumption norm and attitude towards the drink. A definition of one's attitude can be derived from a study concerning consumer behavior towards advertisements and is stated as follow: “a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner to a certain idea, object or situation (Friestad and Wright, 1994).”

2.2 Existing literature concerning the attitude towards a MTP

Although frequent research has been conducted concerning product placements, there still remain gaps in the understanding of product placements in MTP's. To what extent the attitude towards a MTP actually influences one's attitude towards the product placement, is difficult to define. Effects of other factors that influence one's attitude towards the product placement such as the plot connection (which defines the relationship between the plot and the product placement), the film characteristics and the brand performance have received thus far less attention (e.g. Russel 2002, Law and Brown, 2000). This definitely hides the effects with respect to product placements.

Though, the large amount of research that has been conducted with respect to the attitude towards a MTP in relation to the attitude towards the product placement (e.g. Gupta and Lord, 1998; Cowley and Barron, 2008), indicates that the attitude towards the MTP is considered a relevant factor in determining one's attitude towards the placement, as it determines one's attention paid towards a MTP (Gupta and Lord, 1998).

Consumers of a MTP who are affectively focused on a MTP are more sensitive to any kind of interruptions (Edwards, Li and Lee, 2002). These viewers, who are High in Program Liking (HPL) are more attentive since they look forward to watching a certain MTP. Cowley and Barron (2008) conducted an experiment concerning the effects of placements on brand attitudes. 215 Undergraduate students were asked to submit their program liking before watching the MTP on a six-item program liking scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$ and all correlations highly significant), with statements such as "If I knew this program was going to be on television, I would watch it". They were able to respond on a 7-point Likert scale and a median split was used to divide the group into two: HPL and LPL (Low in Program Liking). Prominent product placement were manipulated as follows: they were easy visible and central on the screen (foreground), they had a high number of repetitions (> 5 times in a television program), their duration on the screen was large (approximately 32 seconds) and they were low in relation with the plot. Subtle placement were represented similarly but conversely. More specific: they were not easy visible and not central on the screen (background). They had a low number of repetition (< 3 times in a television program) and a low duration on the screen (approximately 5 seconds) and their relation with the plot was high. Students typified a subtle placement as one which adds entertainment value and realism to a setting.

Effects of Placement on Brand Attitude (Between-Subject Effects)

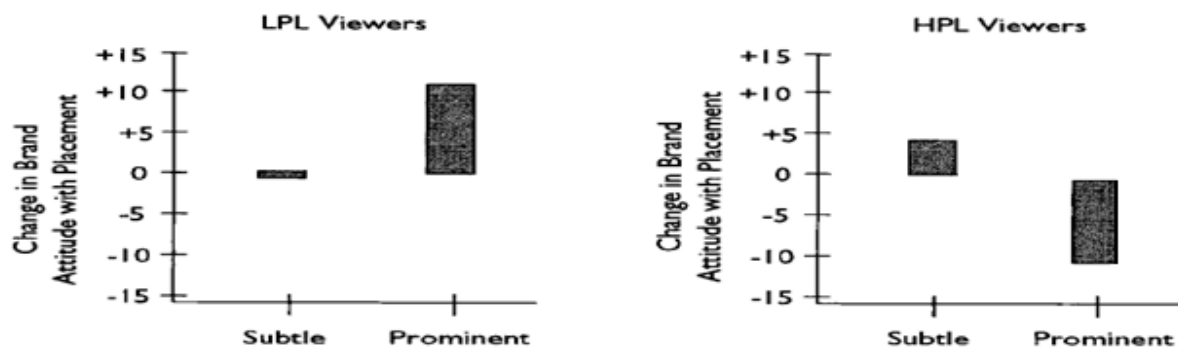


Figure 3, concerning 215 undergraduate students (Cowley and Barron, 2008)

The increased attention of HPL viewers is accompanied by the recognition of the persuasive tactics from advertisers and therefore advertisers should keep in mind to avoid overwhelming and repetitive exposures, which may lead to an increased realization of the persuasive intentions from advertisers.

If this interrupts HPL viewers' positive feeling towards a MTP and the placement does not add realism or entertainment value in a setting, it is plausible that they feel disturbed by the product placement, thereby creating a negative attitude towards the product placement, which subsequently influences one's attitude towards the brand. This can be derived from figure 3.

HPL viewers tend to remember the brand information better, even when exposed to subtle placements, than viewers who are LPL. For latter, the exposure to the placement is not as absorbing as for viewers with HPL. LPL viewers are far less attentive than HPL viewers as they do not necessarily rely on the MTP to fulfill their entertainment goals.

The lower level of explicit memory is evident, since they are watching a MTP that they do not necessarily feel entertained by and therefore LPL viewers are more likely to be distracted by factors other than the MTP. The lower level of attention is unlikely to be accompanied by the intrusive perception of a product placement, by reason of the less absorbing viewing experience. LPL viewers are less likely to be negatively influenced by the prominent product placement, since they are less likely to contemplate about the intention of the product placement they are (over)exposed to (Cowley and Barron, 2008).

As to be found in figure 3, for LPL viewers, prominent placements are accompanied by a more positive brand attitude. This does not implicate that LPL viewers could not be negatively influenced by an overwhelming and repetitive exposure. They are merely less likely to feel disturbed by the product placement which did not contribute in adding realism or entertainment value in a setting. LPL viewers had a relatively less negative attitude towards the product placement and subsequently towards the brand. This combination makes it difficult to implement a product placement in a MTP that will cause both parties to remember the brand information and even so, to cut down the feeling of being disturbed by the product placement. This is due to the fact that both parties of viewers are dissimilar in the perception of the persuasive intention of the advertisers and next to this, they differ in remembering the product placement. Therefore, advertisers of product placements should keep in mind that they have to obtain a suitable balance between the liking variable and the placement prominence variable when applying product placements.

2.3 From MTP to game

By translating this knowledge to the world of games, certain assumptions must be taken into account, thereby revising the impact of the attitude towards a game. Videogames offer a longer shelf life and a higher exposure level to brands than other media would, signifying a greater familiarity and liking. A player of a game encounters the product placement more frequently, since games have more replay value than a MTP in general (Wang and Yang, 2008) and games offer a greater variety in product classifications, which stimulates brand recognition.

This stems from the fact that games tend to offer a greater variety in scenarios, in which level designer are able to exercise their creativity to blend in product placements better, than in MTP's.

Far more frequently the player is likely to encounter a placement through a variety of scenes played again, when failing to comply a mission (adventure and action games) or replaying a match (sport games).

Statistical data indicate that, even when a viewing-experience is absorbent, product placements are easy to be recalled for gamers who are high in game liking (Yang, Roskos, Dinu and Arpan, 2006). They concluded this for implicit (unconsciousness) memory (with a word fragment completion test) and explicit (conscious) memory (with a recognition test) among 153 students who were affectively focused while playing a game.

On the other hand, wear out effects for games and the brand exposures within them are likely to occur, especially for games played on an average of 25+ (Grodal, 2000). Consumers of a game experience various emotions during gameplay, which is referred to as excitation transfer, which relies on measures of consumer arousal levels and could offer unpredictable results. Whereas in movies products are placed in scenes that remain the same for every viewing, games are typically structured to be a different experience every time the game is played. In addition, game players' emotions and stimulation change throughout the game because of learning, curiosity and suspense molded by gameplay (Grodal, 2000). Advertisers should be very cautious when gamers are affectively focused on a game, since they are very sensitive for interruptions and especially because emotions, e.g. anger and frustration, occur during gameplay.

Players who are low in game liking, are likely to feel less disrupted by the product placement since their viewing-experience is less absorbent. Players can however, remember brand information better than viewers of MTP's, since the exposure level to brands is, on average, higher. Thus, the effects of emotions and arousal on brand recall and persuasion in a gaming context offer a challenge that differs from product placement in MTP's.

2.4 Conclusion

As the attitude towards a MTP is vital for determining the attitude towards the product placement and subsequently the attitude towards the brand, advertisers using IGA should recognize the relation between this variable and the placement prominence. When translating the knowledge gained in the field of MTP's to the field of games, one should be even more cautious for the overexposure of a placement, since wear out effects for the brand exposure are likely to occur. More than ever, when a player is enjoying a game, the placement should be placed in a very subtle way, excluding interference of a product placement; thereby avoiding a negative attitude towards the product placement, which subsequently influences one's attitude towards the brand.

3: Literature review with reference to the prominence of the placement

This chapter illustrates the effect of the placement prominence on the attitude towards the product placement. Paragraph 3.1 briefly defines placement prominence, whereas paragraph 3.2 evaluates existing views on the relation between the prominence of the placement and the attitude towards the product placement. 3.3, the translation to the world of gaming, is followed by a conclusion.

3.1 Placement prominence

Product placements can vary from a simple logo on a cup of tea to a mammoth billboard seen in a MTP. Even so, it can be used by the James Bond, during a number of scenes, as being useful in defeating his opponents. These varieties in a placement are jointly identified in the definition of placement prominence. Placement prominence is a heterogeneous construct and is defined as the size of the product, the number of repetitions, the duration on the screen, the centrality on the screen, the strength of the placement in relation with the plot and the modality of the placement (Gupta and Lord, 1998; Russel, 2002; Law and Braun, 2000) .

These factors determine the amount of money spent on the placement by advertisers, additional to the popularity of the MTP. Although research has been collected regarding placement prominence, (e.g. Aaker and Bruzzone, 1985; Russel, 2002) the relation between the attitude towards a MTP and the placement prominence has remained underexposed.

3.2 Existing literature concerning placement prominence

A variety of research (e.g. Gupta and Lord, 1998; Law and Braun, 2000) has proven that the relationship between the placement prominence and the brand memory is positively significant. “More prominent brands appear to be better remembered than less prominent brands” (Lee and Faber, 2007, page 82). Needless to say that this does not necessarily mean an enhancement in brand attitude. When the placement appears to be repetitive, excessive or inappropriate, one could feel disturbed by the product placement and create a negative attitude towards the placement and subsequently towards the brand. A review of product placement by Law and Braun (2000), notes that negative attitude effects are plausible, after the exposure to highly prominent product placements. An improvement in brand memory can be accompanied not only by the retrieval of strategies to defend against persuasion of the advertiser. It is accompanied by a more negative attitude as well (Cowley and Barron, 2008). The outcome of a two group, after only design by Gupta and Lord (1998), reveals that product placements containing a high number of repetitions and a low relation to the plot, in combination with a high duration and centrality on the screen, makes viewers most receptive for intrusions of their viewing experience.

Respondents experienced the placement (in combination with these factors of the prominence) to attempt to influence their brand attitude, which resulted in a higher brand memory, but a lower attitude towards the brand (2.65 on a 7-point Likert scales). These results were significantly different than the results for the control group (4.71 on a 7-point Likert scales).

HPL viewers notice placements more, particularly if the placement is perceived more than as one blended into a convincing setting. When pulling a placement from the background to the foreground, the prominent placement may interrupt the viewers “suspension of disbelief.” Then, the persuasive intent disrupts the editorial content and may cause irritation to the viewer (Cowley and Barron, 2008). The lack of consumers’ awareness of the brand inclusion is vital for the effectiveness of the placement: the disguised placement can help the promotional message to melt down into a non-promotional dialogue or plotline enabling advertisers to build brand equity without interruption of the narrative flow of a MTP. The key to this approach is that consumers should not experience the brand inclusion as an attempt to influence their brand attitude; therefore, the placement should be placed in a subtle way. When encountering a subtle placement, one that fits or enhances the realism of a MTP, the attentive viewer who is exposed to the product placement, does respond fairly positively, as recorded in an event study of Wiles and Danielova (2009). The brand attitude of these viewers shifted in this study from 62.98 (prominent) to 82.57 (subtle) with $t(57) = 2.01$, $p < 0.05$. A subtle placement assists the presence of the placement implicitly and this supports the contextual contribution of the placement, which is similar to the experience in a game (Nelson, 2002).

3.3 From MTP to game

Nevertheless, games differ from MTP’s in a number of ways, thereby revising the impact of placement prominence. First of all, games allow interactivity, which stimulates the player to think in a creative way, since players can control the game by commanding the character with a joystick. MTP’s do not allow this active control dimension of interactivity, which enables the player to control actions and also perceptions, by an ability to control the point of view and thus his or her time of exposure to a product placement in a game. The prominence will be either more visible or less visible, determined by the point of view that is controlled by gamers. User control in a game allows the player to literally feel and/ or control a brand, which is unique compared to a MTP (Nelson, 2002). While it may be exciting to see James Bond drive his car through a diversity of obstacles in a city, games offer more interactivity since the player can actively take control of the car and adjust its speed and handling. This can be linked to a greater sense of being transported inside a mediated environment (Nelson, Keum and Yaros, 2004) and as a result a player is often more attentive to the game, and therefore the product placement, than viewers of a MTP.

Again, the effects in a gaming context offers both challenges and benefits that differs from product placement in MTP's. The element of interactivity can be beneficial for advertisers placing product placements in games. Even when gamers are high in game liking, they are offered the alternative of not being (over) exposed to a product placement, by controlling actions and also perceptions, as they have the ability to control the point of view. Next to that, most recent games offer gamers the ability to skip certain cut scenes where product placements are (over) exposed (Grodal, 2000). Nowadays, more and more games offer this ability to reduce the anger and frustration it causes to some gamers, since it breaks up the action. Game developers are continuously developing methods to have their gamers customize the game to their own specific needs: some prefer to view the cut scenes in between levels, while others may enjoy skipping it and dive directly into the action. This could help terminate the overexposure to the placement as players have the ability to control the actions in the game. It should not be overlooked that the element of interactivity makes it easier for players not to be exposed to the placement, however, this implies a lower brand memory (Nelson, Keum and Yaros, 2004).

The effects of the unique experience every time a game is played should be taken into account for advertisers when gamers are affectively focused on a game. They are very sensitive to interruptions, especially when the placement is excessively prominent when emotions, e.g. anger and frustration, occur during game play. Players of a game, in general, play a game for entertainment, in a way to escape reality for a while. As Nelson (2002) concluded in her study, the presence of an explicit placement hinders the latter. From this conclusion it is apparent that the virtual world for these gamers is both an escape and an exaggerated mirror of real life.

3.4 Conclusion

The prominence of a product placement is, next to the attitude towards the game, vital in determining the attitude towards the product placement and subsequently the attitude towards the brand. Negative attitude effects are plausible, after the exposure to highly prominent product placements in MTP's. Especially, a high number of repetitions in combination with a high duration and centrality on the screen makes viewers most receptive for intrusions of their viewing experience. When translating the knowledge gained in the field of MTP's to the field of games, the element of interactivity reduces the negative attitude effects towards the product placement, since the placement will either be more visible or less visible, determined by the point of view which is controlled by players of a game, or the ability to skip cut scenes where product placements are exposed. Gamers should encounter subtle placements, those that fit or enhance the realism of a game; thereby avoiding a negative attitude towards the product placement, which subsequently influences one's attitude towards the brand.

4: Attitude towards the placement and attitude towards the brand

This chapter mainly emphasizes the relation between the mediating variable “attitude towards the product placement” and the dependent variable “attitude towards the brand.” Paragraph 4.1 briefly defines the attitude towards the placement; paragraph 4.2 evaluates the relation between this mediating variable and the attitude towards the brand. In paragraph 4.3, a conclusion will be drawn for both variables in the world of games.

4.1 Attitude towards the product placement

As stated in the former chapters, the attitude towards the product placement is influenced by the independent variable “placement prominence” but also by the moderating variable “attitude towards the game” and three other moderating factors: interactivity, the ability to skip cut scenes and emotions. Additional to this fact, the attitude towards the product placement has one important fact enclosed within itself, which may not be disregarded. If one’s attitude towards product placements in general is regarded as being negative, it is hard to alter this perception in becoming positive (Biehal, Stevens and Curlo, 1992). In other words, already damaged attitudes towards product placements in general cannot be altered, even when fitting or enhancing the realism of a MTP or a game. Consumers’ rejection of commercialism in general arouses their aversion when confronted with a product placement. In this case, the effects of the independent variables are invalid and one’s attitude towards the dependent variable is condemned to be negative. Illustrated by an example posted on a gamer community site, Slashdot.org (March 30, 2004):

“We pay around \$50 for a game (which is an escape from reality to me) only to have to watch them rake in more from peppering everything with a Coke logo? I seriously don’t get it, are we to have advertisements on everything we encounter? I have had enough of it, F--- me, they would tattoo ads on our eyelids if they had the chance.”

All aspects considered, feelings and attitudes about product placements pertain to the same topics as research into attitudes toward advertising in general. That is to say, they are related to communal and economic facets, and ideas about the entertaining or informative values of advertising. However, the nature of each marketing communication device suggests differences with respect to consumers’ reception. In general, product placements are considered less annoying or intrusive than all other forms of advertising in digital media (although more concealed) and product placements can add the benefits of realism to an entertainment media context (Wiles and Danielova, 2009).

Though, as the use of commercial material in entertaining media grows, advertisers have to be careful not to trigger the awareness of the viewer's feelings regarding the brand inclusion as an attempt to influence his brand attitude. Consumers will call for their persuasion knowledge when interpreting a particular persuasion attempt, then they will select appropriate coping tactics and behavior (e.g. disregard the persuasion attempt, purchase the product), according to Friestad and Wright (1994). In spite of this, the latter effect remains ineffectual when one's attitude towards product placements in general is regarded as being negative.

4.2 Attitude towards the brand

The relation between the mediating variable "attitude towards the product placement" and the dependent variable "attitude towards the brand" is yet to be enlightened. This is unlikely to be a simple one, as brand attitude is specifically influenced by brand performance when one has purchased the product or service. In that case, the brand attitude is evaluated during the evaluation of the brand performance, which does not occur while being exposed to product placements (Biehal, Stevens and Curlo, 1992). Therefore, this is outside the scope of this study.

However, both attitudes are still connected and as earlier mentioned, the assessment of brand placements in a MTP or a game is related to consumers' feelings about commercialism and advertising in general. The study of Biehal, Stevens and Curlo (1992), suggests that the attitude towards the product placement has two potential impacts on brand attitude.

First of all, when a consumer is unfamiliar with the brand, it may affect the encoding of brand attribute information contained in placements and brand inference formed during advertising processing. This is documented by many (Biehal, Stevens and Curlo, 1992; Gupta and Lord, 1998).

For example: while examining a product placement, a consumer might form an attitude towards it, prior to a more detailed examination of brand attribute information and the attitude is formed during the exposure to the placement. Then, the product placement demonstrates its use in an MTP or a game, so consumers might form an attitude towards the product placement.

Consequently, the attitude towards the placement may affect the encoding of brand attribute information, either to be found on the product placement or gathered from other advertising content, e.g., texts or pictures (Muehling and Laczniak, 1988). Thus, a positive (negative) attitude towards the placement may yield both stronger and more (less) favorable brand attitudes (Muehling and Laczniak, 1988). This attitude would be used in brand choice, if one is able to bring the product placement to mind.

Second, after the encoding of brand attribute information through other advertisement material, the brand's attitude is assumed to be available and stored in the consumer's memory (Muehling and Laczniak, 1988). When familiar with the brand attribute information, one 's brand memory recalls the positive (negative) attribute information when encountering a product placement. So when a consumer first encounters the brand attribute information from other advertising material, the consumer will recall the positive (negative) brand attribute information and this previous experience with the brand influences his evaluation of the product placement. This inflicts a greater brand memory and it supports in favoring (declining) one's brand (Biehal, Stevens and Curlo, 1992).

4.3 Conclusion

The relation between the attitude towards the product placement and the attitude towards the brand is complicated and depends on the fact whether one has previously purchased a product or service of the brand. If this is the case, the brand attitude is mostly formed through brand performance; this does not occur while being exposed to product placements.

In addition to this complexity, already damaged attitudes towards product placements in general can hardly be altered, even when fitting or enhancing the realism of a MTP or a game. Although, product placements are considered less annoying or intrusive than all other forms of advertising in digital media, the brand attitude is condemned to be negative.

When both complications do not occur, if one has not purchased a product or service of the brand and he or she does not have a negative attitude towards product placements in general, a positive (negative) attitude towards the placement may yield both stronger and more (less) favorable brand attitudes. When familiar with brand attribute information, one 's brand memory recalls the positive (negative) attribute information when encountering a product placement. Then, the brand is easier to recall for consumers and this supports in favoring (declining) one's brand.

5: Concluding chapter

This final chapter discusses the general conclusion drawn upon this research, it presents a conceptual framework and it formulates the managerial implications, by providing arguments that speed up the decision making process for advertisers. Next to this it formulates the limitations this study has encountered and how suggested further research could contribute in comprehending this rather unexplored topic.

5.1 General conclusion

This literature review has assessed the central aspects of product placements in games. Although opposing views hold concerning the effects of product placements in MTP's, a majority of research concerning product placements in games tend to neglect the negative effects in this area; product placements are not to be observed as "a purely positive experience for gamers," as stated by Glass (2007, page 31). Existing research did not include the occurrence of any effects of the variables attitude towards the game and the placement prominence. Therefore, the knowledge gained in the area of MTP's can help in answering the problem statement:

To what extent do the attitude towards a game and the placement prominence, influence the attitude towards the product placement and subsequently the brand attitude of gamers?

Advertisers can include product placements in games, although they should be aware of the occurrence of negative effects towards the product placement, which subsequently influences the brand attitude of a gamer. In particular, overexposure of product placement in games causes negative attitude effects towards the product placement. This is more likely to occur in games than in MTP's, as games have a far higher replay value. More than ever, when a player is enjoying a game, the placement should be placed in a very subtle way, excluding interference of a product placement; thereby avoiding a negative attitude towards the product placement. Various emotions occur during gameplay, which manipulate the effects that product placements have on gamers, as well. Especially product placements containing a high number of repetitions in combination with a high duration and centrality on the screen, make viewers most receptive for intrusions of their viewing experience.

The element of interactivity can, however, be beneficial for advertisers placing product placements in games. Even when gamers are high in game liking, they are offered the alternative of not being (over) exposed to a product placement, by controlling actions and also perceptions, as they have the ability to control the point of view. In most cases, they are able to skip cut scenes where product placements might be brought to light.

The complexity of the relationship between the attitude towards the product placement and the attitude towards the brand, stems from the phenomenon whether one has previously purchased a product or service of the brand.

If already purchased, brand attitude is mostly formed by the performance of the product or service and the product placement merely serves in recalling consumer's experience with the brand. If not, and a consumer does not have a negative attitude towards product placements in general, a positive attitude towards the placement could yield both stronger and more favorable brand attitudes. When familiar with brand attribute information, one's brand memory recalls the positive (negative) attribute information when encountering a product placement. The brand is easier to recall for those consumers and it supports in forming one's brand attitude as well.

5.2 Conceptual framework

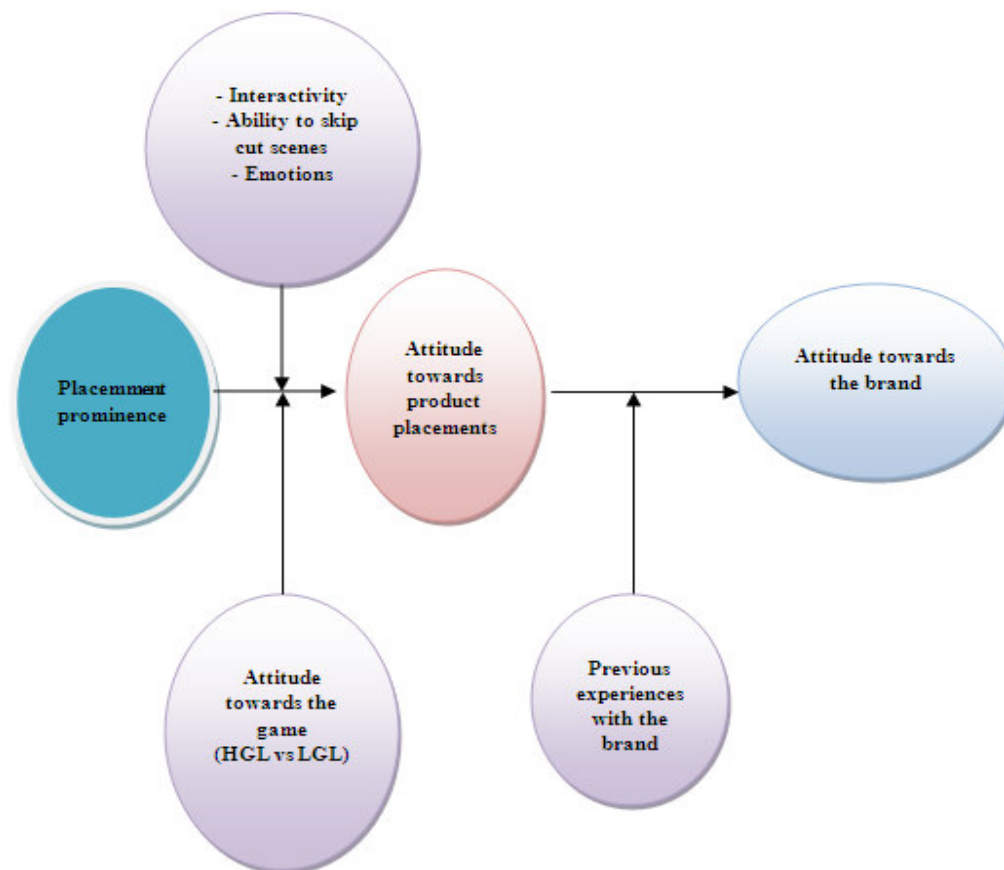


Figure 4: Elaborated conceptual framework

HGL= High in Game Liking

LGL = Low in Game Liking

Placement prominence: Placement prominence is an independent (heterogeneous) variable and has a direct effect upon the attitude towards the product placement. The combination of a high number of repetitions and a low relation to the plot, in combination with a high duration and centrality on the screen, makes viewers most receptive for intrusions of their viewing experience.

Interactivity: Interactivity lets players control the game by commanding the character. Players are able to control actions and also perceptions, by an ability to control the point of view and thus his or her time of exposure to a product placement in a game. Players are free to explore the virtual scenario, where the product placements are exposed in the surrounding.

Ability to skip cut scenes: Cut scenes are used by game developers to making the story flow naturally, although it breaks up the action. They use it to advance the plot and to present character development, therefore it offers opportunities to blend in product placements. Most games released nowadays, offer the ability to skip cut scenes. This can reduce the anger and frustration it causes to some gamers and the risk of getting (over)exposed to the product placement.

Emotions: game players' emotions and stimulation change throughout the game because of learning, curiosity and suspense molded by gameplay. Emotions as anger and frustration can trigger an aversion towards the product placement used in the game, especially when it is overexposed.

Attitude towards the game: The attitude towards the game moderates the relationship of the placement prominence with the attitude towards the product placement. HGL and LGL players' react dissimilar to placement prominence manipulations.

Attitude towards the product placement: This mediating variable helps in forming an attitude towards the brand used in a MTP or a game. Already damaged attitudes towards product placements in general can hardly be altered. Though, when a consumer does not have a negative attitude towards placements in general, a positive (negative) attitude towards the placement may yield both stronger and more (less) favorable brand attitudes.

Previous experiences with the brand: A previous experience with the brand modifies the relation between the attitude towards the product placement and the attitude towards the brand. If a consumer already purchased or uses the exposed brand, brand attitude is mostly formed by brand performance. Furthermore, when a consumer has encountered other advertisement materials of the brand, they will recall the positive (negative) brand attribute information and this previous experience with the brand influences his evaluation of the product placement.

Attitude towards the brand: The dependent variable is the attitude towards the brand, since brand choice is made by forming brand attitudes and thus, brand attitudes can directly affect choice outcomes. This is a relevant concept for researchers and advertisers alike. When the attitude towards the product placement is manipulated, it affects the attitude towards the brand as well.

5.3 Managerial implications

The limited amount of empirical research concerning product placements in games offers limited clear-cut advice for advertisers. This research extends the knowledge for advertisers by clarifying the imperative relationships concerning gamers' attitude towards the product placement and their brand attitude, which will aid in reducing investment issues for advertisers in the world of gaming concerning this popular marketing tool.

Under the circumstance that a gamer likes a game, it is vital not to place the product placement highly visible and not to present it in a high repeat patronage, as these gamers are most sensitive to interruptions. Gamers who are low in game liking, are less likely to feel disrupted by an overwhelming or repetitive placement. They do have however a lower brand memory, given that they are not necessarily entertained by a game. Advertisers of product placements should request that game companies offer scenarios which are carefully designed to fuse placements into games and in connection with that, to stimulate attention for the placement, add the benefits of realism or entertainment value to the particular entertainment media context so that gamers still feel that they escape reality for a while.

Next to this it is most recommendable that advertisers use the element of interactivity to their advantage. Games offer a great variety in scenarios, in which level designers should put their creativity into effect to blend in product placements, where they should add realism to the games' setting. When avoiding the most dangerous mixture of a high number of repetitions in combination with a high duration and centrality on the screen, advertisers can form positive attitude effects concerning their placement, which will subsequently form a more positive attitude towards the brand.

5.4 Limitations of this study

A delicate matter in this study is the fact that the effects of different types of games have not been included in this study. Some games may lend their selves superior for product placements (sport games) than other (fantasy games) to add realism to the game and to blend in with the surrounding of a digital area. Moreover, different categories of games can have a different impact on game player's emotions, while these emotions can have a significant effect on the players' attitude towards the placement (Wang & Yang, 2008). These emotions could yield a different impact of the negative effects the attitude towards the game and placement prominence include when opposed to the negative emotions of a player.

Furthermore, product placements can be visual or verbal. The involvement of both could yield different results for the attitude towards a product placement (Yang, Roskos, Dinu and Arpan, 2006).

Additionally, this research is not limited to a specific geographic location. Although, prior research on product placement in games and MTP's is restricted to Western countries and is therefore somewhat limited, different cultures and attitudes towards advertising can have a significant impact on the attitude towards product placements in games. This bias is present in this research and in other inter-related fields.

5.5 Suggested future research

This thesis makes certain assumptions concerning product placements in games more tenable, nevertheless the effects of different game types on emotions and eventually the attitude towards product placements and persuasion in a gaming context offer a challenge area for future exploration. How the attitude towards the brand affects brand choice in these circumstances is beyond the scope of this paper, but it constitutes an interesting topic for future research. This could help comprehend the effectiveness of an inclusion of a product placement in a game, regarding one's brand choice. A positive attitude towards the brand does not necessarily mean a preferred choice over the other brands. The relationship between stimulation of brand recall and attitude towards a brand is another attention-grabbing topic for future research, which has remained underexposed in this topic. Nowadays, consumers are exposed to a huge amount of digital advertisement material, therefore it is necessary to constantly conduct research concerning product placements in games, as consumers develop more sophisticated persuasion knowledge about less intrusive tactics such as product placements.

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