

The effectiveness of product placement on children: an experiment

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Abstract

In recent years, a noticeable increase in the use of non-conventional TV advertising has taken place. However, hardly any studies have been carried out to understand how these formats influence young viewers. This article presents the findings from an experimental study on the influence of product placement on children (aged 8, 10 and 12 years). The conclusions suggest that product placement has a very limited impact on children's memories and behaviour. On the other hand, they show high levels of recognition and awareness of product placement.

Key words

Advertising, children, product placement.

Resum

Durant els darrers anys, s'ha experimentat un creixement notable en l'ús de formats no convencionals de publicitat televisiva. Tanmateix, no s'han portat a terme gaires estudis per entendre la influència d'aquests formats entre els infants telespectadors. Aquest article presenta els resultats d'un estudi experimental sobre la influència de l'emplaçament de producte (product placement) entre els nens (de 8, 10 i 12 anys). Les conclusions suggereixen que el product placement té un impacte molt limitat en la memòria i el comportament dels infants. Per contra, mostren alts nivells de reconeixement i consciència de l'emplaçament de producte.

Paraules clau

Publicitat, infants, emplaçament de producte.

Introduction

Product placement is a non-conventional form of television advertising, which has become increasingly relevant in recent years, above all because of the success of drama series produced and broadcast by Spanish and Catalan television channels since the middle of the 1990s.

The term 'product placement' refers to a commercial communication technique which offers "different presentation strategies, in audiovisual production, of commercial products and corresponding brands" (Farré and Fernández Cavia 2005). This technique is defined as a format of brief duration, which establishes with the televised programme an 'insertion' relationship (in the sense that there is no clear separation between the two, meaning that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other), and which makes it difficult for the viewer to identify it as a commercial communication (Farré and Fernández Cavia 2005).

As explained earlier (Farré 2005), the term 'product placement' is not entirely satisfactory, because it is important not to

'place' the product into the programme but to place the brand, be it via the product or not. In this sense, we propose the use of a new term: 'brand placement', which, in fact, has been used in recent publications about this issue (Pino and Olivares 2006).

This, therefore, deals with a large number of concrete possibilities, from positioning a logo on the cinema or television screen (as, for example, when you see a sign in the background of a bar, or an advertisement that appears in the street where the action is happening) to the simple placement of a product in the props to the main character mentioning or using a brand or product, or, perhaps in a more interesting and complex case, the use of the product/brand as a key piece in an argument.

Product placement is probably the most studied non-conventional form of television advertising, but analysis of its efficacy is still lacking (Urbano 2005) and, above all, its effects on a particularly sensitive public, such as children. However, it has already been the object of some investigative research, above all in North-American academic papers. Recent articles

(Balasubramanian *et al.* 2006) and monographs (Pino and Olivares 2006) dedicate a good part of their attention to collecting a summary of the most noticeable up-to-date contributions, even though our understanding of consumer response to that kind of message is still very limited and superficial.

It is also worth pointing out that, concerning the increased use of product placement in programmes aimed at a young audience, many voices have joined the debate over the necessity of research focused on the effects of product placement on child consumers (Hudson and Hudson, 2006; Morton and Friedman, 2002; Tiwsakul *et al.*, 2005).

Additionally, it is necessary to point out other opposing voices to this technique, such as Hackley's (2008), who asserts that product placement brings ethical problems because of the difficulty of categorising it as a marketing practice. According to the author, the problem arises from the mixture of different techniques such as 'branding', promotions, the use of celebrities, sponsorship, public relations and publicity. However, this conflict in ethics is basically down to the fact that product placement is based on a type of communication that never reveals its source.

Objectives and methodology

This research's objective is to determine to what extent product placement passes unobserved as a commercial technique amongst children and to what extent it is capable, in spite of its lack of explicit identification and recognition, to influence the memory, the attitudes and the conduct of minors.

We can specify, therefore, that there are four effects of product placements that are worth analysing:

- a) First, whether placement is recognised by children as a vehicle for commercial communication or if, on the other hand, it tends to go unnoticed.
- b) Second, whether product placement succeeds in fixing the brand name and/or some of the product's characteristics in children's minds.
- c) Third, if placement generates a change of attitude towards the brands concerned.
- d) Fourth and finally, if placement has the capacity of changing children's behaviour in the buying or consumption of products.

In methodological terms, the usual techniques adopted by Spanish researchers in product placement studies have been, to date, solely based on the analysis of content and in-depth interviews with those involved in production processes (Méndiz Noguero 2001; Baños and Rodríguez 2003; Pino and Olivares 2006).

These techniques only provide a descriptive and external approach to this phenomenon, ignoring the most crucial aspect of this matter: how the viewer processes and interprets product placement and which influences this commercial technique exercises on their understanding, attitudes and behaviour.

The only way of approaching the placement study from this perspective is by designing an experiment that facilitates, under the most similar conditions possible to the real experience, the observation of perception mechanisms, interpretation and the assimilation of messages.

Experiments are more frequently found in Anglo-Saxon (and, above all, North American) research traditions than in Spanish or European ones, whether related to advertising in general or to product placement in particular (Astous and Séguin 1999; Russell 2002).

The specific test that has been carried out is based on the following parameters: in the first place, it is concerned with pre/post design. That is to say, there is a preliminary analysis according to a series of parameters of the individuals in the test group (knowledge of the brand, relevance of the brand or service, their consumer habits, and television consumption). Afterwards, an individual is exposed to the stimuli (a television programme where a placement clearly appears and which is addressed to a child or teenage audience). And, finally, a later analysis takes place to see if identification of the placement has occurred, as a commercial communication, memorisation of the brand and a change of opinion about the brand.

This research design included the selection, by the trial's participants and before exposure to audiovisual stimuli, of a series of tea-time products. After seeing the programme that included the product placements, the participants were asked to choose again to see if their choices had changed. If changes were noted, the participants were asked to explain why.

The trial was made up of nine groups of boys and girls. Each group comprised six individuals, mixing three boys with three girls but not mixing ages. Three groups were formed with 8-year-old children, three groups of children aged 10 years, and three groups of pre-adolescents, aged 12 years. One group from each of these acted as a control group, and was subjected to seeing a stimulus in which no product placement appeared.

The group's work was carried out in two primary schools. The first was the school Gran Capità, a subsidised private school that belongs to the Sant Joan Despí municipality (Baix Llobregat, Barcelona) and was founded in 1966. It now offers education to infants, primary school children and secondary school children. Six groups came from this centre, a group of 2nd, 4th and 6th year children, who had a fruit juice product placement, and a group of 2nd, 4th and 6th years who saw no product placement, acting as control groups.

The other centre was the Santa Teresa de Jesús college, a subsidised private school located in the Rambla Nova de Tarragona (Tarragonès) and which offers infant, primary and secondary education. Three groups came from this centre, one of 2nd, one of 4th and one of 6th year children, all three having a yoghurt product placement in their viewing.

A questionnaire was given to all the trial's participants, in which they were told that they would have to answer some questions about their consumer and television-viewing habits,

but without saying that they were taking part in research about product placement. They were also asked to choose breakfast products (in the morning groups) or tea-time products (in the afternoon groups) before the viewing took place.

Once the clip was shown, which either contained the product placement or not (as was the case with the control groups), the children were asked to complete a very similar questionnaire to the first one, to which a final question was added: "Have you made any changes with respect to your first selection? Why?".

As stimuli for the trial, the video clips were:

- An episode of the Spanish series *Los Serrano*, broadcast by Telecinco, where one of the main actors of the series, a teenage girl, appears drinking some fruit juice, in her bedroom, in the company of her siblings while they are doing their homework.
- An episode of the Spanish series *Ana y los siete*, where two adolescents appear – the girl was the protagonist of the series – in the kitchen of the house where the main action was happening, at night, where they opened the fridge and ate a natural yoghurt.
- The control group's trial contained another clip of an episode of *Los Serrano* where no product placement appeared.

The motive behind choosing these two series is that neither of them is a children's programme but they are instead aimed at a wider audience, counting amongst their target audience a large proportion of viewers in the same age brackets as those participating in the tests.

Moreover, in both cases, the programmes have a range of characters, amongst whom are children of similar ages to those in the trial, even though the two chosen scenes included older children, with the aim of profiting from the *aspirational* effect of imitating older children, which often happens amongst infants.

Two food product placements were chosen, with the aim of testing the children when selecting products for breakfast/tea and observing their behaviour.

The statistical analysis was carried out with the SPSS program.

The analyses, apart from the statistical frequencies, were based on McNemar's Test, which was especially suitable for measuring characteristics on more than one occasion for each of the trial's individuals. The usefulness of this test in our research is to compare whether the measurements taken in two different moments, before and after the intervention of or exposure to the stimulus (in this case product placement), are the same or whether a significant change has taken place.

In our research this measurement was applied to two variables. On the one hand, the participants' knowledge of yoghurt and juice brand names was measured before and after seeing the programme with the product placement; and, on the other, the change in selection of the food items was also measured before and after the viewing. The objective of these measure-

ments was to see if, after exposing participants to the stimuli, the individuals recognised more brands or if they made any changes based on the effect of product placement.

The analysis of the two groups on product placement, and of the juices and yoghurt, was made independently because the measurement was incomparable. It was a matter of different products and viewings and, therefore, its analysis had to be carried out separately.

Results

The first question analysed from the experiment centred on the respondents' recognition of the brands of juices and yoghurts before and after seeing the product placement, to compare and demonstrate its effect.

The results show changes in brand recognition or recall before and after seeing the clip, but not always in clear favour of the brand placed. For example, on one occasion a change was observed in the recollection of the Sunny brand after seeing the product's placement, which previously hadn't been mentioned. However, on the other hand, on three occasions the respondents remembered the Sunny brand only previously, and after viewing they mentioned other brands of juices, without remembering the placed product.

It was also observed that on 38 occasions prior to the product placement, respondents mentioned other juice brands and, after the viewing, there was only one change that mentioned the Sunny brand. Moreover, on three occasions there were no mentions of any juice brands, although Sunny was remembered after the product placement. But the most numerous changes were in the prior recall of other juice brands, recall of these changing after seeing the product placement.

As can be seen, there are changes in the recall of juice brands before and after product placement, not only concerning the effect of product placement but also among all the brands.

As Table 1 shows, the change in recognition or recall of the brands is significant. But as this is significant for all the brands,

Table 1. Statistical analysis (McNemar test)

	Sunny_pre Sunny_post	Other_pre Other_post	Sunny_pre Other_post	Other_pre Sunny_post
N	48	48	48	48
Sig.exact (bilateral)	0.125 ^(a)	0.125 ^(a)	0.000	0.000
Sig.exact (unilateral)	0.063	0.063	0.000	0.000

^(a) Binomial distribution has been used

Source: own.

Table 2. Statistical analysis (McNemar Test)

	Nestle_pre Nestle_post	Other_pre Other_post	Nestle_pre Other_post	Nestle_post Other_pre
N	33	33	33	33
Sig. exact (bilateral)	0.109 ^(a)	0.109 ^(a)	0.000 ^(a)	0.000 ^(a)
Sig. exact (unilateral)	0.055	0.055	0.000	0.000

^(a) Binomial distribution has been used

Source: own.

in all the comparisons, we cannot affirm that the significance is due to product placement.

Similar results are also seen in the placement of yoghurts. On eight occasions the respondents did not remember the Nestlé brand before the episode was shown and mentioned it just after seeing it. But, on the other hand, changes were also noted. On two occasions, Nestlé was remembered previously but it was not mentioned after the product placement.

As we have previously confirmed, there are changes in the recall of yoghurt brands before and after product placement occurred, but not only showing the effect of the product placed but also among all brands of yoghurts.

As Table 2 shows, the change in the recognition or recall of the yoghurt brands is significant. But as there is also significance in the changes in all of the brands, we cannot appreciate whether the significance is due to the placement of the Nestlé yoghurt.

Thus, with the placement of both juices and yoghurts, a significant or directional effect is not shown in the recall, recognition or mention of the placed products.

We now look at the results concerning the respondents' selection of placed products for their consumption during the test or experiment. Changes were also observed in the selection, even though this is not only along the lines of the product placement.

In the juice experiment, thirteen choices were made for Sunny before the product placement was shown which, after the viewing, varied and ended with no juice being chosen as a drink. In fifteen selections, no juice was selected before and Sunny was chosen afterwards. But also on three occasions juice was chosen before the viewing and afterwards Sunny was not. Finally, on three occasions, water was chosen before, while, afterwards, Sunny was chosen.

Table 3 shows that there are significant changes in the selection of products for consumption at the time of the test, and before and after seeing the product placement.

In the yoghurt experiment, the changes in choice were less significant. This is clearly shown in the results. On no occasion was Nestlé not chosen before viewing but chosen afterwards.

Table 3. Statistical analysis (McNemar Test)

	Sunny 1 Juice 2	Juice 1 Sunny 2	Water 1 Sunny 2	Sunny 1 Water 2
N	24	24	24	24
Sig. exacta (bilateral)	0.007 ^(a)	0.008 ^(a)	0.000 ^(a)	0.001 ^(a)
Sig. exacta (unilateral)	0.004	0.004	0.000	0.000

^(a) Binomial distribution has been used.

Note: Moment 1 pre, moment 2 post

Source: own.

On the other hand, in one case Nestlé was chosen earlier and in the second selection it was rejected. On eight occasions, Danone yoghurt was chosen beforehand and, later, none of the respondents changed their mind and chose Nestlé.

In this experiment the only significant matter to note in the respondents' selection changes is between the Danone and Nestlé brands, but not among the rest of the other products (see Table 4).

The changes have therefore generally been observed in the selection of products before and after the viewing the episodes in which the different product placements appeared. But it cannot be confirmed that these changes have taken place as the result of this placement, since changes occurred in all of the products shown and not just towards the products placed.

Results to date show that the placed products in the experiment are not an effect either in the mentioning or choice to consume the brands and products placed. However, when respondents were asked if they had seen advertising or some sign of the products in the episode, the majority replied he affirmative and were able to remember the name of the placed brands. In the following tables, the frequencies and percentages of the respondents who remembered the placed products are shown.

As can be seen, the Nestlé yoghurt placement's recollection percentage is significantly higher than Sunny juice's. Yet the recall of the two products placed is equally in the majority. This shows that this communicative tool does not go unnoticed even by children, who recognised the placed brands.

Conclusions

The results of the experiment reflect that the effectiveness of product placement among young girls and boys aged 8, 10 and 12 years is very limited. Significant changes were not observed either in the recall of the brands in the segment or in the selection of products for breakfast or tea time. That is to say, the children of our trial did not remember the juice or yoghurt brands more after seeing them placed in the programme.

Neither did the choice of these breakfast or tea-time products increase significantly.

These facts appear to reinforce the idea, which exists among some advertising professionals, that product placement only serves as a way of reinforcing a pre-existing product image; it is in fact very difficult to build a new brand image or to directly influence purchasing behaviour or consumption.

But it is important to remember that the two clips used as stimuli for this experiment only show moments when a product/brand was being consumed, with no verbal mention in either case of their qualities.

On the other hand, the majority of children in the trial are very much capable of recognising the presence of commercial brands in the midst of the programme.

It appears, therefore, that the children in our trial respond to an archetype that does not fit with the typical image attributed to them of being defenceless and unaware, easily influenced by conventional and non-conventional advertising. On the other hand, the variations observed in their consumer behaviour are minimal, insignificant, while the number of minors capable of recognising the presentation of commercial brands is significant in audiovisual programmes.

These results appear to demand certain reflection about the supposed defencelessness of children, at least of those individuals selected for the study. On the other hand, it would be interesting to replicate the research with boys and girls of different socio-economic and educational levels, with the aim of evaluating whether the results obtained could be extended to the entire child population.

Note

- 1 The analysis counted the number of choices, recalls or mentions, but not the number of subjects, since an individual can make more than one selection or can remember or recognise more than one brand.

Table 3. Statistical analysis (McNemar Test)

	Danone_pre Nestlé_post
N	18
Sig. exact (bilateral)	0.008 ^(a)
Sig. exact (unilateral)	0.004

^(a) Binomial distribution has been used.

Source: own.

Table 5. Statistics. Frequencies and percentages of the juice group (G1)

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Accumulated percentage
No	7	29.2	29.2
Yes	15	62.5	91.7
N/C	2	8.3	100.0
Total	24	100.0	

Source: own.

Table 6. Statistics. Frequencies and percentages of the yoghurt group (G2)

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Accumulated percentage
No	1	5.6	5.6
Yes	17	94.4	100.0
Total	18	100.0	

Source: own.

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