FULL PAPER

Product placements and credibility
An experiment on the relations between product placements, judgmental expert statements, and viewer ratings of an advisory broadcast

Nikolaus Jackob, Thomas Roessing & Karl N. Renner

Introduction and hypotheses

Product depictions in the media are commonly discussed in connection with so-called “product placements”. Product placement is considered to be a hybrid form of advertising in which the advertising message is integrated into the content of films or television programmes.

In March 2009, Wirth et al. published the results of an experiment on the effect of product placement on the credibility of journalistic television programmes. The study investigated whether the credibility of brands and products is affected when they are visibly embedded in an informational TV broadcast. The results were as follows (cf. Wirth et al., 2009, p. 77): The audience is usually aware that product depictions are intended to have a persuasive effect. Nevertheless, recipients are not bothered by the attempt to influence them. Only few involved individuals became less tolerant of brand and product placements as they began to increase. The authors concluded that increasing frequency of placements had no effect on the credibility or assessment of the programme (Wirth et al., 2009, p. 64).

The present study’s objective is to examine whether the findings of the Swiss experiment can be reproduced. In addition, it broadens the perspective of the prior studies by incorporating a semiotic-pragmatic argumentational context and expands the experimental design of Wirth et al. by adding a further factor: the tenor of the programme. Moreover, the surveying of the dependent variables is accompanied by real-time response (RTR) measurement.

The research design aims at testing two hypotheses:

H1: No or little product placements have no or little effects on the perceived credibility of a journalistic programme. Highly distinctive product placements have a strong effect on perceived credibility.

In addition, the effect discernible brands or products have on the assessment of a programme is assumed to be dependent on the tenor of the programme encompassing the placement. The second hypothesis thus is:

H2: Perceived credibility is more strongly affected by product placement in the case of consonant use of product placements (products or brands in a positive
programming context) than in the case of product placements in a dissonant context (product or brands in a negative programming context).

Method

The first hypothesis implies that the number of product placements influences the perception of journalistic programmes as being credible or not credible. The second hypothesis implies that there is an interaction between visible brands or products and the positive or negative tenor of the programme encompassing them. An experimental test of the hypotheses thus requires a two-factorial design. The tenor factor has two varieties: positive and negative. The number of product placements varies in three ways: (1) no product placements, (2) few product placements, and (3) numerous product placements. This study uses as a stimulus a consumer-advice programme on the topic ‘buying and preparing fish’. The stimulus material was produced by the media centre of the Johannes Gutenberg-University of Mainz, Germany. In accordance with the study’s design, a four-minute consumer-advice programme typical of those found on German television was created in six versions. In the versions with product placements, packaging of the well-known German food company “Iglo” appeared.

The positive or negative tenor of the programme was provided by an expert on “fish research”. In the positive version, he praised the health and environmental benefits of eating fish and recommended that people eat fish. In the negative version, the expert warned about the health and environmental detriments associated with fish and recommended that people not eat fish.

The experiments took place on six weekdays between 2 and 10 November 2011 with student subjects (n = 128). The six groups were parallelized in terms of gender and academic concentration. Questionnaires containing 13 questions (mostly on a scale of 1 to 5) were distributed after the stimulus film was shown. While the stimulus film was being shown, the test subjects used a control dial to indicate how credible they found the depicted consumer-advice programme (RTR-Measurement). The dial had a scale of 1 to 7, and the test subjects were instructed to turn it to the left, when they found the depiction to be less credible and to the right, when the programme appeared to them to be credible.

Results

The questionnaire data were analysed with a two-factorial ANOVA. The analysis yielded significant single-factorial differences between the groups for only three of the 16 items measured for the stimulus film. Overall, the programme with numerous product placements came across as more vivid than the one without any. Moreover, the viewers felt that the versions with a moderate or high number of placements were livelier than the version without any visible brand-name products. With respect to the perception of the programme as biased or unbiased, there was a difference between the programmes that were given a positive spin by the expert and those with a negative spin: The programmes with a positive spin were perceived as “more biased” than those with a negative one.
Multi-factorial variance analysis reveals three interaction effects: In the view of the test subjects, the stimulus versions with numerous product placements and simultaneous negative programme tenor seemed more unbiased, more objective, and more trustworthy. Where the tenor is negative, a consumer-advice programme comes across as all the more unbiased, objective, and trustworthy the more product placements it contains. Accordingly, trust in the journalistic quality of the consumer-advice programme depends on the contradiction between the number of discernible product placements and the tenor of the programme. The positive effect of a negative expert tenor on journalistic credibility in the programme versions in which numerous products were shown is confirmed by RTR measurements.

The first hypothesis – modest product placement barely affects the credibility attributed to a journalistic programme, whereas intensive placement by all means does – must be called into question in light of the findings. Analogous to the results obtained by Wirth et al. (2009), this study as well finds no significant connection between the number of visible brands or products and the assessment of credibility. The second hypothesis – the credibility of a journalistic programme is less strongly affected by a dissonant use of product placements (brands or products in a programme tenor that is negative) than by a consonant use (brands or products in a positive programme context) – is confirmed, at least for three items. A programme that is furnished with a massive number of brand or product embeddings and simultaneously adopts a warning tenor towards the products is perceived by the test subjects as journalistically more convincing than the other programmes. Against the background of semiotic considerations on the interplay of meaning and purpose, the explanation is that the test subjects concluded from the contrast between the statement’s tenor and perceived product depictions that the purpose of such a statement was not to exert influence on them in the sense of the perceived advertising.

References