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Effects of Brand Placement Disclosures: An Eye Tracking Study Into the Effects Of Disclosures and the Moderating Role of Brand Familiarity

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1 Introduction

Developments as advertising clutter and increased aversion towards commercials have led to an increased popularity of brand placements to unobtrusively reach the customer (Cain, 2011; Glass, 2007; Van Reijmersdal, Neijens, and Smit, 2007; Wei, Fischer, and Main, 2008). However, due to its unobtrusiveness, ethical concerns have been raised about the deceptive nature of brand placements (Kuhn, Hume, and Love, 2010). Therefore, regulations were implemented in the European Union to force inclusion of brand placement disclosures on television (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, and Neijens, 2012). Brand placement disclosures should make the viewer aware of the persuasive attempts of the brand placement (Van Reijmersdal, Tutaj, and Boerman, 2013) and enable them to distinguish this form of advertising from the editorial content (Cain, 2011). Yet, this raises the question whether a brand placement disclosure actually causes such an effect.

Previous research has shown that brand placement disclosures can increase persuasion knowledge and brand memory and can have negative effects on brand attitude under specific conditions (Bennett, Pecotich, and Putrevu, 1999; Boerman et al., 2012; Campbell, Mohr, and Verlegh, 2013). The current study extends previous research in three ways. First of all, instead of the more salient, prominent placements used in previous disclosure research, the current study examined whether disclosures are also effective in stimulating persuasion knowledge for more subtle, background placements.

Second, eye tracking is used to measure visual attention to both the disclosure and the brand placement. Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, and Neijens (2015) showed that visual attention to the disclosure and brand placement are important mediators in activating persuasion knowledge. This study extends previous research, by examining whether merely seeing the disclosure is sufficient to establish an effect, or that explicit recall of the disclosure is a precondition.

Third, this is the first study that explored the moderating role of brand familiarity in relation to brand placement disclosure effects. Objects that have high attitude accessibility (e.g., familiar brands) are believed to attract more visual

attention (Fazio, Powell, and Williams, 1998). Therefore, we expect disclosure effects to be stronger for familiar brands than unfamiliar brands.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 *Effects of Brand Placement Disclosures on Visual Attention and Persuasion Knowledge*

According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright, 1994), consumers build knowledge about persuasion to learn how to cope with commercial messages. When exposed to a brand placement disclosure, the viewer is made aware of a persuasive attempt, stimulating the viewer to think about the sponsored content more elaborately (Boerman et al., 2015). Thus, viewers that see a disclosure are more likely to follow *systematic persuasion processing* (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, and Owen, 2010), characterized by a high motivation and ability to process the persuasive content (Petty et al., 2005).

For prominent brand placements, studies have shown that a disclosure in a TV program indeed leads to heightened forms of persuasion knowledge (Boerman et al., 2015; Campbell et al., 2013). Based on prior research, we expect that the effect of a disclosure for a subtle brand placement to follow two phases. A brand placement disclosure will raise viewers' recognition of advertising in the TV program. This will consequently lead to a better understanding of the persuasive intent of brand placements (Boerman et al., 2015).

Moreover, research has shown that people's visual attention while watching a program plays an important role in the effect of disclosures (Boerman et al., 2015). Visual attention, as measured with an eye tracking device, is an implicit measure that corresponds to the fixations a person has on an object (Pieters and Warlop, 1999). According to Pieters and Warlop (1999), visual attention is a two-stage process. The first stage involves creating an abstract representation of an object. More visual attention to the object leads to the second stage, where more cognitive processing takes place and existing associations in memory are used to identify the object (Pieters and Warlop, 1999). As it is assumed that subtle brand placements are processed automatically (Buijzen et al., 2010), viewers are more likely to remain in the first stage of visual attention. However, as a brand placement disclosure makes the viewer aware that the program contains product placement, this can prime the viewer to pay more attention to the placement and as such motivate viewers to process the placement more extensively. Consequently, this can increase recognition of advertising and activate persuasion knowledge (Boerman et al., 2012). Hence, for subtle brand placements, it is also expected that the effect of the disclosure on recognition of ad-

vertising and perceived persuasive intent is mediated by visual attention to the brand placement.

H1: Exposure to a subtle brand placement with a disclosure will lead to a) more visual attention to the brand placement, and consequently b) higher recognition of advertising and c) higher perceived persuasive intent, than exposure to a brand placement without a disclosure.

2.2 *Effects of Brand Placement Disclosures on Brand Memory*

Because a brand placement disclosure emphasizes the presence of a brand within a TV program, brand memory is expected to improve as a result of seeing the disclosure. Following the same reasoning as for visual attention to the brand placement, the longer a person fixates on an object, the more cognitive processing takes place and the higher the chance that an object is memorized (Just and Carpenter, 1980; Petty et al., 2005). As a brand placement disclosure is expected to motivate viewers to attend to the subtle brand placement and elaborate on it more extensively than when no disclosure is shown, the increased visual attention and persuasion knowledge can consequently enhance brand memory, as shown by Boerman et al. (2015).

H2: Exposure to a subtle brand placement with a disclosure will lead to higher brand memory than exposure to a brand placement without a disclosure; this effect is mediated by visual attention to the brand placement, recognition of advertising and the perceived persuasive intent.

2.3 *Effects of Brand Placement Disclosures on Brand Attitude*

Since disclosures are believed to activate persuasion knowledge (Boerman et al., 2012; Campbell et al. 2013), critical processing of brand placements can negatively influence brand attitude. In several studies, exposure to a brand placement disclosure on TV or radio led to activation of persuasion knowledge, which resulted in a decreased brand attitude (Boerman et al., 2012; Matthes, Schemer, and Wirt, 2007; Wei et al., 2008). Following the previous findings, inclusion of a brand placement disclosure is assumed to activate persuasion knowledge, leading to critical processing. Consequently, a more negative brand attitude is expected.

H3: Exposure to a brand placement with a disclosure will lead to a more negative brand attitude than exposure to a brand placement without a disclosure; this effect is mediated by visual attention to the brand placement, recognition of advertising and the perceived persuasive intent.

2.4 *Moderating Effect of Brand Familiarity*

Brand familiarity is considered a possible moderator in the effects of brand placement disclosures, as explained by attitude accessibility (Fazio et al., 1998). For a familiar brand, consumers have different types of associations in memory based on previous experiences with the brand (Campbell and Keller, 2003), resulting in high attitude accessibility (Fazio et al., 1998). For an unfamiliar brand, consumers have no previous experience with the brand, thus there are no associations in memory on which to rely when exposed to the brand (Campbell and Keller, 2003). Due to their higher attitude accessibility, familiar brands are expected to strengthen effects of brand placement disclosures on visual attention for the brand placement and persuasion knowledge.

First of all, differences in attitude accessibility can affect the amount of visual attention a person has for the brand placement. Roskos-Ewoldsen and Fazio (1992) found that objects to which people hold an accessible attitude, attracted more visual attention than other objects. Likewise, a study from Fazio et al. (1998) shows that objects were chosen more often when attitude accessibility was high, than when attitude accessibility was low. Similarly, a brand placement from a familiar brand is expected to attract more visual attention than a brand placement from an unfamiliar brand, due to their higher attitude accessibility.

Second, because familiar brands are expected to attract more attention, they are more likely of being consciously processed, than unfamiliar brands (Nelson, Yaros, and Keum, 2006). The more visual attention for the brand placement, the higher the chance that the viewer will arrive at the second stage of visual attention, characterized by a more elaborate processing of the content (Pieters and Warlop, 1999). Consequently, the higher attention and deeper processing of the familiar brand placement can lead to a higher recognition of advertising and a higher perceived persuasive intent, compared to the unfamiliar brand.

Third, as a brand placement disclosure has been argued to enhance visual attention to the brand placement and activate persuasion knowledge, disclosures and brand familiarity are expected to interact with each other and subsequently lead to a strengthened effect on visual attention and persuasion knowledge. This moderating effect of brand familiarity is hypothesized to evoke a stronger effect on brand memory and brand attitude. Previous studies already found that brand placements from familiar brands are more easily memorized (Brennan and Babin, 2004; Nelson et al., 2006; Wei et al., 2008) and can yield a more negative brand attitude (Mau, Silberer, and Constien, 2008), compared to an unfamiliar brand placement. Therefore, it is expected that the mediated effect of a brand placement disclosure on brand memory and brand attitude is stronger for familiar brands, than for unfamiliar brands. The proposed conceptual model is depicted in Figure 1.

H4: The mediation effect of brand placement disclosures on brand memory and brand attitude via visual attention to the brand placement, recognition of advertising and perceived persuasive intent is moderated by brand familiarity; the mediation effect is stronger for familiar brands than for unfamiliar brands.

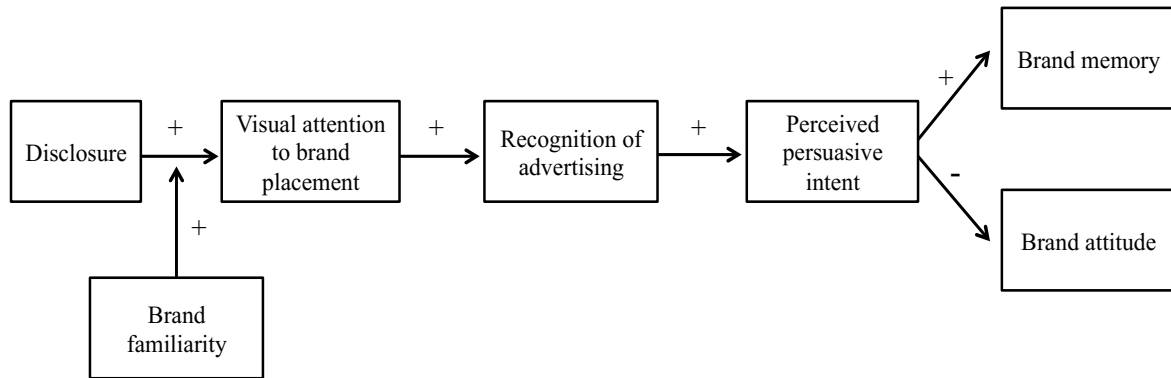


Figure 1: Conceptual model: Effect of brand placement disclosure on brand memory and brand attitude, via visual attention to the brand placement, recognition of advertising, and perceived persuasive intent, and moderated by brand familiarity.

3 Method

3.1 Participants and Procedure

The study employed a 2 (disclosure or no disclosure) by 2 (familiar versus unfamiliar brand) between-subjects factorial design among 171 participants (68% women, 93% students, $M_{age} = 22.49$) in the university laboratory. All participants were exposed to a shortened episode of a TV program, where they were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. While watching the TV program, eye movements were registered using a SMI RED eye tracker with a gaze sample rate of 120 Hz per second. After watching the episode, participants filled out a questionnaire that measured recall of the disclosures, brand recall, brand attitude, persuasion knowledge, and brand familiarity.

3.2 Stimulus Material

All participants were exposed to a shortened episode of a Dutch TV program that lasted 9 minutes and 3 seconds. The episode was manipulated in two ways. First of all, in two conditions, a brand placement disclosure was edited into the fragment. The disclosure stated “This program contains product placement” in combination with a PP-logo (Product Placement; see Figure 2), following the standard disclosure currently used in several countries in the EU. Conform cur-

rent practice on TV, the disclosure was shown at the beginning of the program, a few seconds after the opening leader ends and was visible for 6 seconds in the upper right corner of the screen.

Second, the episode was manipulated by replacing the brand placement with a familiar (Doritos), or an unfamiliar brand (Mexi-Snax) using Adobe Premiere Pro (see Figure 3). The brands were subtly placed in two different scenes during the episode in the background, for 30 seconds in total.



Figure 2: Stimulus material: Disclosure.



Figure 3: Stimulus material: Familiar vs. unfamiliar brand placement.

3.3 Measures

Visual attention to the disclosure and brand placement was measured by creating three Areas of Interest (AOIs), using SMI BeGaze software. One AOI was created for the disclosure and two for the brand placements. Visual attention was exported using the total fixation time in milliseconds inside the AOI. To adjust skewness of the attention measures, log functions were used to obtain a normal distribution. Two variables were created, *visual attention for the disclosure* ($M = .72$, $SD = .63$) and *visual attention to the brand placement* ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 3.18$). Furthermore, two dummy variables were created, measuring whether or not the participant fixated at least once on the disclosure or brand placement.

For the disclosure, 83% of the participants showed at least one fixation and 46% fixated at least once on the brand placement. *Recognition of advertising* was measured with a one item 7-point Likert scale adopted from Boerman et al. (2012) ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.91$). *Perceived persuasive intent* was measured by three 7-point Likert scale items ($M = 5.81$, $SD = .92$). *Brand memory* was measured by asking participants if they recalled seeing any brands in the episode (yes/no), with an open entry option when they answered “yes” to indicate which brand(s) they saw. All open answers were coded as 1 when they gave a correct answer, answering “no” or a wrong open ended answer was coded as 0 (no). In total, 30% recalled the right brand. *Brand attitude* was measured by five 7-point semantic differential scales from Campbell et al. (2013) ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.23$). *Disclosure recall* was measured in the conditions where a brand placement disclosure was shown. Participants were asked whether or not they saw a disclosure and a logo that informed about advertising (product placement) in the episode (1 = yes, 2 = no, 3 = don’t know). This variable was recoded into a dichotomous variable (1 = yes, 0 = no/don’t know) with 49% of the participants that recalled seeing a disclosure. As a manipulation check, *brand familiarity* was measured with a one item 7-point semantic differential scale from completely unfamiliar to completely familiar ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 2.67$). The manipulation check showed that the brand Doritos was indeed perceived as more familiar ($M = 6.45$, $SD = 0.09$) than the unfamiliar brand Mexi-Snax ($M = 1.22$, $SD = 0.10$; $t(112) = -38.19$, $p < 0.001$).

4 Results

Before analysing the data, it was checked whether all participants in the disclosure conditions indeed saw the disclosure. The eye tracking data revealed that 15 participants did not see the disclosure, therefore, these participants were assigned to the no disclosure condition. In all analyses, two comparisons were made to understand the conditions under which the disclosure was effective. First, a comparison was made between the group that was exposed to the disclosure ($n = 91$) and the group not exposed to the disclosure (including those who did not see the disclosure; $n = 80$). In the second analysis, the group that saw the disclosure is divided by explicit recall of the disclosure. This enables an additional comparison between the group that both saw and recalled the disclosure ($n = 47$), the group that saw the disclosure but did not recall it ($n = 44$), and those who have not seen a disclosure ($n = 80$).

To analyse the mediated and moderated effects of the disclosure and brand familiarity on persuasion knowledge, brand memory and brand attitude, serial multiple mediation models and mediated moderation models were tested for each of the dependent variables using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013).

It was expected that exposure to a subtle brand placement with a disclosure would lead to a higher recognition of advertising and perceived persuasive intent, via visual attention to the brand placement (H1), and consequently to a higher brand memory (H2) and a more negative brand attitude (H3), compared to exposure to a subtle brand placement without a disclosure.

With respect to disclosure effects, the results showed that merely seeing a brand placement disclosure was not effective. Explicit recall of the disclosure was a precondition for disclosure effectiveness: Only when the disclosure was seen and explicitly recalled, it increased visual attention to the brand placement ($b = 1.79, p < .05$) and recognition of advertising ($b = 1.15, p < .001$). The disclosure has an indirect effect via recognition of advertising on perceived persuasive intent (indirect effect = 0.13, boot SE = 0.13, 95% BCBCI [0.022, 0.308]) and a small indirect effect when visual attention to the brand placement was added as a second mediator (indirect effect = 0.03, boot SE = 0.02, 95% BCBCI [0.006, 0.104]). Thus, H1 is partly confirmed, namely, only for the group that has both seen and explicitly recalled the disclosure (compared to the group that has not seen or recalled the disclosure).

Furthermore, the disclosure has an indirect effect on brand memory, via visual attention to the brand placement and recognition of advertising (indirect effect = 0.46, boot SE = 0.28, 95% BCBCI [0.122, 1.154]), but only when the disclosure is seen and explicitly recalled. Thus, H2 is also partly confirmed. However, no indirect effects of the disclosure on brand attitude were found, rejecting H3.

Brand familiarity did not moderate the effects of disclosures on brand memory and brand attitude, rejecting H4. However, there was an interaction effect of brand familiarity: When explicitly recalled, the disclosure led to a higher perceived persuasive intent of the brand placement from the familiar brand, compared to the unfamiliar brand ($b = 0.63, p < 0.05$). Second, there was a main effect of brand familiarity: a brand placement from a familiar brand led to more visual attention ($b = 1.06, p < 0.05$), was easier recognized as advertising ($b = 1.11, p < 0.001$) and had a higher brand memory score ($b = 2.07, p < 0.001$), compared to a brand placement from an unfamiliar brand.

5 Discussion

This study examined whether disclosures are effective to inform viewers about the persuasive intent of subtle brand placement disclosures. Specifically, it was tested whether exposure to a disclosure led to increased attention to the subtle brand placement, and consequently increased recognition of advertising and the perceived persuasive intent, compared to exposure to a brand placement without a disclosure. The results demonstrate that merely seeing the disclosure is not enough to establish an effect. Only when the brand placement disclosure is

both seen and explicitly recalled, the brand placement disclosure enables the viewer to recognize the brand placement as advertising and consequently make them aware of the persuasive intent of the brand placement. Similar to more prominent placements (Boerman et al., 2015), the disclosure also functioned as a prime and increased visual attention to the subtle brand placement. The enhanced visual attention was partly mediating the effects found on recognition of advertising and the perceived persuasive intent.

Second, it was examined whether a disclosure increased brand memory, while at the same time decreased brand attitude, via the increased visual attention for the brand placement and persuasion knowledge. Again, when explicitly recalled, the disclosure increased brand memory of the subtle brand placement, via recognition of advertising. These results are in accordance with previous studies on prominent placements (Boerman et al., 2012; Boerman et al., 2015, Van Reijmersdal et al., 2013). However, contrary to previous research (Boerman et al., 2012; Matthes et al., 2007; Wei et al., 2008), the disclosure had no negative effect on brand attitude. In the current study, a subtle brand placement was used, which could have caused the lack of an effect on brand attitude. As has been found in previous research, subtle brand placements are generally perceived as less obtrusive and more acceptable than prominent placements (d'Astous and Chartier, 1998; Kuhn et al., 2010), which could have prevented participants from being critical towards the brand placement and diminish brand attitude.

Third, it was tested whether brand familiarity moderated brand placement disclosure effects. A disclosure (when explicitly recalled) was more effective in making the participant aware of the perceived persuasive intent of the brand placement from the familiar brand, compared to the unfamiliar brand. However, brand familiarity did not further strengthen disclosure effects on brand memory or brand attitude.

The findings of this study have three important theoretical implications. First of all, results from the study show an important precondition for brand placement disclosure effectiveness. Eye tracking data revealed that merely seeing the disclosure is not enough to establish an effect. Only when the disclosure was explicitly recalled, it increased visual attention to the brand placement, persuasion knowledge, and eventually brand memory. This means a certain amount of attention for the disclosure is necessary in order to explicitly recall the disclosure and activate persuasion knowledge.

Second, the current study demonstrates that disclosure effects are different for subtle brand placements compared to prominent placements. The results revealed that showing a disclosure prior to exposure to a subtle brand placement, did not diminish brand attitude, as has been found for prominent placements.

Third, this study was the first to show that for subtle brand placements, brand familiarity does not moderate the relation between disclosures and brand memory and brand attitude. However, the study did show that disclosures are more effective in making the viewer aware of the persuasive intent of the brand placement for familiar brands, than for unfamiliar brands.

In addition to its theoretical implications, the current study can offer interesting insights for legislators and advertisers. This study showed that the primary aim of a brand placement disclosure (to enable the viewer to distinguish the brand placement as a form of advertising and making them aware of the persuasive intent) also works with regard to subtle brand placements. However, legislators should take into account that disclosures are more effective in activating persuasion knowledge for familiar brands than for unfamiliar brands. Moreover, a sufficient amount of attention is needed for the disclosure in order to be effective, as disclosures were only effective when they were explicitly recalled.

Furthermore, the study shows advertisers that including a subtle brand placement following a disclosure can be an effective strategy to enhance brand memory, whereas brand evaluations do not diminish, as has been found for prominent placements. With regard to brand familiarity, brand placements from familiar brands have the advantage of attracting more attention and improving brand memory. Even though familiar brands are also more easily recognized as advertising compared to unfamiliar brands, this does not negatively influence brand attitude.

As this was the first study to focus on the moderating role of brand familiarity in brand placement disclosure effects, additional research can give more insights into the role of brand familiarity and examine whether effects found in this study are comparable when using real brand placements. Moreover, future studies could look into the moderating role of brand familiarity in disclosure effects by comparing subtle and prominent placements. Whereas subtle placements are more likely to be processed unconsciously, prominent placements are processed more elaborately (Law & Braun, 2000). Therefore, it would be of interest to see whether the effects found in this study also hold for prominent placements, and can be extended to other brand placement formats, such as games, sponsored blog posts, or vlogs.

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