Is Product Placement More Persuasive Under Conditions of Ego-Depletion?
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Introduction

Product Placement and Ego-Depletion in the Real World
The majority of people who watch television, watch during evening “primetime” hours. While they watch, they are frequently exposed to product placements stemming from a $3.36 billion dollar industry (PQ Media 2007).

Importantly, before people sit down to watch primetime television, most spend their day regulating their behavior (e.g. being at work when they would rather be golfing, politely responding to unruly customers when they would rather retaliate, or working to put their kids to bed when it would be easier to just let them stay up). Past research suggests that engaging in such tasks is likely to lead to a state of “ego-depletion” (Baumeister 2002).

Ego-Depletion’s Relevance to Product Placement
Past research shows that ego-depletion enhances the effectiveness of weak persuasive messages (Wheeler, Britz and Hermann 2007). This suggests that when viewers are in a state of ego-depletion, they may be more influenced by subtle product placements (e.g., products which are simply placed in the show, but not mentioned by actors or connected to the plot in any meaningful manner).

Previous research also shows, however, that ego-depletion interferes with cognitive functioning on challenging intellectual tasks (Schmeichel, Vohs and Baumeister 2003). This further suggests the somewhat counterintuitive prediction that while ego-depletion will enhance the persuasiveness of subtle product placements, it will simultaneously interfere with viewers’ ability to recognize those same placements.

Method

Ego-depletion Manipulation
Participants (50 undergraduate students) were exposed to a five-minute video of a woman being interviewed with random words (e.g. “watermelon”) appearing at the bottom of the screen.

Participants in the ego-depletion condition were asked to ignore the words. Participants in the control condition were given no such instructions. This is a standard ego-depletion manipulation (Schmeichel et al. 2003).

Product Placement Exposure
Participants then watched an episode of a popular 30 minute primetime comedy television show from a major television network.

Participants then reported their attitudes toward brands that were and were not placed in the show using a 7-point Likert-like scale (1 = strongly dislike to 7 = strongly like).

After participants evaluated the brands, they completed a recognition task in which they indicated the brands they recognized seeing in the show.

Hypotheses

H1: Ego-depleted individuals will be more persuaded (i.e. have more favorable brand attitudes) by subtle product placements than non ego-depleted individuals.

H2: Ego-depleted individuals will have less brand recognition of subtle product placements than non ego-depleted individuals.

To date, most product placement research has focused on either the nature of the placement, such as its connection to the plot (Russell 2002), or pre-existing differences between viewers such as viewers’ connection to the show (Cowley and Barron 2008) or its characters (Russell and Stern 2006). The current paper expands product placement research by exploring whether the effectiveness of product placements depends on temporary variations in viewers’ self-regulatory strength.

Viewing subtle product placements as a weak persuasive message, we hypothesized (and found) that ego-depletion increased brand attitudes toward products subtly placed in a program while at the same time decreasing recognition of those same brands.

These effects suggest that while ego-depleted individuals are less aware of subtle placements than non ego-depleted individuals, they are more positively persuaded by those placements. The present results underscore the importance of ego-depletion for research on product placement.

Study Method

Design 2 (condition: control vs. ego-depletion) x 2 (placement: not placed vs. subtle) mixed-model ANOVA.

The two-way interaction was marginally significant at p = .11. The simple effect of condition within the subtly placed products was also marginally significant (p = .11).

As expected, the simple effect of condition within the non-placed products was not significant (p = .82).

Manipulation check

Manipulation check results suggest a successful ego-depletion manipulation that is not confounded by mood.

Difficulties

Those in the ego-depletion condition rated the task as more difficult (M = 4.43, SD = 1.74) than those in the control condition (M = 2.58, SD = 1.84); (p = .001).

Mood

No difference between conditions for negative nor positive moods (p > .58).

Brand Attitudes

Design 2 (condition: ego-depletion vs. control) x 2 (placement: subtle vs. not placed) mixed-model ANOVA.

The two-way interaction was significant (p < .001). The simple effect of condition within the subtly placed products was significant (p < .05), but as expected, the simple effect of condition within the non-placed products was not significant (p = .74).

Brand Recognition

References


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