

Liking of Movie Genre Alters the Effectiveness of Background Product Placements

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Product placement has been likened to evaluative conditioning (EC) in which a viewer's liking of an actor using a brand transfers to the brand. Less research has evaluated how more subtle background placements work. Further, most published studies report explicit brand attitudes as outcome measures. We show that background placements of a familiar brand can alter implicit brand attitudes. Furthermore, viewers who liked the movie genre showed positive implicit attitudes, and viewers who disliked the movie genre showed negative implicit attitudes, suggesting that genre generated affect transferred to implicit attitudes. Advertising implications are discussed.

Product placement in various forms of media has increased dramatically in recent years (Russell & Belch, 2005; Wiles & Danielova, 2009). This trend has been seen as a reflection of marketers' growing attempts to affect the brand attitudes of consumers in more subtle ways (Balasubramanian, Karrh, & Patwardhan, 2006; Russell, 2002). A variety of studies have shown that product placement can lead viewers to recall the brands placed in the program (Babin & Carder, 1996; Brennan, Dubas, & Babin, 1999; Bressoud, Lehu, & Russell, 2010; Gupta & Lord, 1998; Law & Braun, 2004; Matthes, Wirth, Schemer, & Kissling, 2011; Schneider & Cornwell, 2005) and alter their attitude about those brands (Law & Braun, 2000; Russell, 2002; Russell & Stern, 2006; Schemer, Matthes, Wirth, & Textor, 2008; Yang & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007; Yoon, Choi, & Song, 2011). As this research grows, a greater consideration of the mechanisms underlying placement effects is necessary. Our goal is to test hypotheses regarding the role of associative mechanisms in product placement that can lead to attitude change.

The Associative-Propositional Evaluation (APE) model (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006) suggests that attitudes can be changed or formed through either the

mere association of a valenced stimulus with an attitude object or through more extensive propositional reasoning. Applied to product placement, this suggests two potential avenues to attitude change. Placements that are more central (e.g., a brand is used consistently by a main character, or the brand is discussed within the dialogue of the movie or TV show) may prompt propositional thought on the part of the viewer (Gibson, Redker, & Zimmerman, in press). Seeing such centrally placed brands would likely lead viewers to consciously consider their evaluation of those brands, even if only briefly. Whether positive or negative attributes of the brands are more prominently considered may depend on the context of the placement, their liking of the character using the brand, and so on. Because of this, such placements are more likely to directly alter the viewer's consciously held explicit attitudes. Placements for brands appearing in the background of a scene, however, would be less likely to generate propositional thought. These background placements occur with no connection to the plot and do not show any characters using the products directly. Such placements may still benefit the brand, however, if the brand becomes associated with positive aspects of the viewing experience. In this sense, it becomes useful to consider product placement to be a variant of Evaluative Conditioning (EC).

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EC is a basic strategy for altering attitudes in which a stimulus that already possesses a positive or negative valence (an unconditioned stimulus [US]) is paired with another stimulus (a conditioned stimulus [CS]). Eventually, the evaluation of the CS shifts toward the evaluation of the US (De Houwer, Thomas, & Baeyens 2001). A number of studies have demonstrated the applicability of EC concepts to marketing situations (e.g., Allen & Madden, 1985; Allen & Shimp, 1990; Gibson, 2008; Redker & Gibson, 2009; Shimp, Stuart, & Engle, 1991; Stuart, Shimp, & Engle, 1987). We propose that product placement can be understood as a form of EC. De Houwer (2007) suggested that EC is best thought of as an effect (i.e., the shift in attitude that follows the pairing of the CS and US) that can occur via multiple processes. One such process is propositional in nature (Mitchell, De Houwer, & Lovibond, 2009). Thus, seeing an actor use a brand in a movie or TV show might lead the viewer to conclude that the character made a reasoned choice, suggesting that the brand has high quality. The viewer has evaluated an implied proposition regarding the brand based on the association they observed. Product placement could, however, alter implicit attitudes via more automatic associative processes. This view of EC suggests that tagging the affect associated with the US to the CS will lead to the altered evaluation of the CS (Bliss-Moreau & Feldman-Barrett, 2009). We propose that something like this will occur with background placements in movies.

Research on EC has shown that evaluative conditioning produces stronger effects for novel as opposed to familiar stimuli (Cacioppo, Marshall-Goodell, Tassinari, & Petty 1992; Shimp et al., 1991). This might suggest that product placement would have limited effects on well-known brands. Alternatively, it may be that familiar brands will show a shift in *implicit* attitudes following product placement. Implicit attitudes are automatic affective associations that are triggered when one encounters the relevant attitude object (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). Recent work has documented the importance of implicit attitudes in consumer behavior (Florack, Friese, & Scarabis, 2010; Friese, Wanke, & Plessner, 2006; Gibson, 2008). Furthermore, research suggests that even if EC does not affect self-reported explicit attitudes for familiar stimuli, implicit attitudes can still be affected (Gibson, 2008). Further, some have suggested that product placement may have its strongest effects on implicit measures (Law & Braun, 2000; van Reijmersdal, 2009). One purpose of the current study was to explore effects of product placement on implicit brand attitudes.

H1: Implicit, but not explicit attitudes will be altered by background product placement of a familiar brand.

There are other potentially beneficial effects of product placement beyond brand recall and changing brand

attitudes. For example, companies may benefit if consumers develop a strong attachment to their brands (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). These authors suggest that self-brand connection could be more important than attitude strength in determining brand choice. Others have also documented the importance of self-brand connections (Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Recent research has shown that product placements in which a liked lead character uses a brand can increase implicit self-brand connection (Gibson et al., in press; see also Dal Cin, Gibson, Zanna, Shumate, & Fong, 2007). They suggested that identifying with a character leads the viewer to integrate brands used by the character into the self-concept. If so, then we would expect that background placements should not change implicit brand self-identification because no character is identified with the brand.

H2: Background placements will not affect implicit brand self-identification.

A final consideration is, within the framework of EC, what serves as the US for placements that appear in the background of a scene? Schemer et al. (2008) showed that a rapper using a particular brand could serve as a positive or negative US depending on the viewer's existing evaluation of the rapper. With background placements, however, there is no salient stimulus directly connected with the brand being placed. We propose that the viewer's general evaluation of the movie could become associated with the brand appearing in the movie's background. Thus, if a viewer likes the movie, that positive evaluation could become associated with the brand. In contrast, if the viewer dislikes the movie, then that negative evaluation could become associated with the brand. To test this hypothesis, we selected individuals who differed in their preference for science fiction movies. They then watched a clip from a science fiction movie that either did or did not include a background placement for Coca-Cola. We predicted that their different response to the movie would lead one group to have more positive implicit brand attitudes and the other to have more negative implicit brand attitudes.

H3: Background placement of a neutral brand will lead viewers who like the genre to show more positive implicit brand attitudes than viewers who dislike the movie genre.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 105 undergraduate psychology students (49 female, 56 male) who participated to get extra course credit.

Procedure

Potential participants completed an online pretest that included three questions measuring their attitudes toward Coke and three questions measuring their attitudes toward Pepsi. In addition, imbedded among other items regarding different film genres (e.g., romantic comedy, drama) were three items measuring their attitudes toward science fiction (sci-fi) films. People expressing equivalent attitudes toward Coke and Pepsi (i.e., within 2 scale points in summed items for Coke and Pepsi), and who strongly liked or strongly disliked sci-fi films (i.e., were in the top or bottom third of respondents based on their attitudes toward sci-fi films) were then offered the opportunity to participate in the main study. Participants went through the procedure individually or in pairs. On arrival to the lab, the experimenter communicated the cover story that researchers sometimes combined two studies to save time. The first study, they were told, focused on people's ability to predict plot twists when watching movies. They were told that they would watch a portion of the movie *Blade Runner* and then try to predict what would happen next. The experimental group saw a 43-min segment of the movie (from 3 min 10 s into the movie to 46 min 32 s into the movie) in which a large Coke billboard appeared in the background of a scene four times. The billboard appeared briefly in each instance (between 2 s and 12 s). The control group saw a segment of similar length (from 1 hr 12 min 36 s into the movie to 1 hr 52 min 11 s into the movie) in which Coke did not appear. To fulfill the cover story, participants typed a description of what they believed would happen next once the clip ended. Couched as a measure of attention and memory, they then listed any brands that they recalled from the clip they just watched. In addition, they used 7-point Likert type scales to rate their familiarity with the movie, their liking for the movie, the quality of the dialogue, and interest in seeing more movies like this. The remaining portion of the study was presented as a pilot study to help the researchers select products to use in future studies. They evaluated four brands (McDonalds, Burger King, Coke, and Pepsi) on three 7-point Likert-type scales measuring their agreement with a statement that they liked the brand (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*), how much they liked the brand (from *dislike very much* to *like very much*), and their overall brand attitude (from *very unfavorable* to *very favorable*).

Next, participants completed two Implicit Association Tests (IATs): The Coke–Pepsi attitude IAT and a Coke–Pepsi self-identification IAT (Gibson, 2008). The basic logic of the IAT is that when two constructs are closely associated in memory, response to those constructs will be fast when responding with the same keystroke. In contrast, when two constructs are not closely associated

in memory, then response to those constructs will be slow when responding with the same keystroke. Initial presentation of Coke or Pepsi on the right or left of the screen, and initial pairing of Coke or Pepsi with positive, negative, self, or other attributes, was counterbalanced across participants. We did not counterbalance the order of collection of implicit and explicit measures, as past research has demonstrated that order effects are rare (Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2005). After completing the IATs, participants were given a funnel interview to probe for suspicion, debriefed, and excused.

RESULTS

Suspicion

In all, 19 participants mentioned product placement or a related concept during the funnel interview. Including or excluding these 19 participants does not alter the reported results; so all participants are retained in these analyses.

Manipulation Check

To evaluate whether we successfully selected sci-fi lovers and sci-fi haters, we created a scale combining the four items evaluating the movie clip. The scale proved reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$) and was evaluated with a 2 (sci-fi pretest: love/hate) \times 2 (movie clip) analysis of variance. Participant sex was also included as an IV in this analysis. In this, and all subsequent analyses, sex had no effect on the outcome measures and is not mentioned further. The main effect for the sci-fi pretest was the only significant effect, $F(1, 97) = 22.34, p < .001$. Sci-fi lovers liked the movie more ($M = 17.08$) than sci-fi haters ($M = 12.60$). Thus, our pretest successfully identified sci-fi lovers and haters. It is important to note that the clip itself led to no main or interactive effects, suggesting that the two clips used were equally likeable.

Movie Familiarity

To assess whether the groups differed in terms of their familiarity with the movie, a 2 (sci-fi pretest) \times 2 (movie clip) analysis of variance was carried out on the familiarity measure. As might be expected, sci-fi lovers were more familiar with the movie ($M = 1.87$) than sci-fi haters ($M = 1.20$), $F(1, 102) = 7.92, p < .01$. The main effect for movie clip and the Movie Clip \times Sci-Fi Pretest interaction were not significant (both $F_s < 1$). Despite the significant difference, most sci-fi lovers were unfamiliar with the movie. A full 35 of 55 sci-fi lovers selected 1 (*completely unfamiliar*) on the 7-point scale. Therefore, it seems unlikely that past experience with the movie had a

great effect on the analyses reported next. We do include familiarity as a covariate in these analyses, however, to ensure that past experience with the movie is not biasing the results.

Brand Recall

Overall, 41 participants stated that they recalled seeing Coke in the movie segment they watched. Of these, 39 were in the experimental condition, with two participants incorrectly recalling having seen Coke in the control condition, $\chi^2(1) = 52.22, p < .001$. Within the experimental condition, we carried out a chi-square test to evaluate whether sci-fi lovers or sci-fi haters were more likely to recall seeing the Coke billboard. Sci-fi lovers were more likely to recall seeing the billboard (86%) than were sci-fi haters (56%), $\chi^2(1) = 6.11, p < .05$. This may be the result of greater involvement in the movie on the part of the sci-fi lovers. It is important to note, however, when including brand recall as a grouping variable in the analyses reported next we did not find that it had any main or interactive effects on implicit brand attitudes, explicit brand attitudes, or implicit brand self-identification.

Implicit Brand Attitudes

A 2 (sci-fi pretest) \times 2 (movie clip) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was carried out, using implicit brand attitudes as the dependent variable (DV) and the pretest brand attitude measure and movie familiarity as covariates. Implicit attitudes were calculated using the *D* method (Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003). Neither main effect was significant (both *F*s < 1.2). The interaction between movie clip and science fiction pretest, however, was significant, $F(1, 99) = 4.92, p < .05$. Tests for simple effects demonstrated that implicit brand attitudes were significantly different among those who watched the experimental condition movie clip, $t(49) = 2.31, p < .05$. As hypothesized, those who loved sci-fi had more positive evaluative associations with Coke than did those who hated sci-fi (see Table 1). For those in the control condition, however, sci-fi lovers and haters showed no differences in their evaluative associations with Coke and Pepsi, $t(48) < 1$. Test for simple effects within the sci-fi lover and sci-fi hater groups found no reliable differences in implicit attitudes based on the movie clip that was seen, both *t*s < 1.5, both *p*s > .14. Finally, to determine if exposure to the background placement caused implicit Coke attitudes to move away from a neutral point, single sample *t* tests were carried out in which the mean implicit attitude for sci-fi lovers in the placement condition were compared to zero, and in which the mean implicit attitude for sci-fi haters in the placement condition were compared to zero. For

TABLE 1
The Effects of Movie Version and Sci-Fi Preference on Implicit Brand Attitude

Sci-Fi Preference	Movie Version		Total
	Experimental	Control	
Loves sci-fi	.172 _a (.09)	-.016 (.09)	.078 (.06)
Hates sci-fi	-.131 _b (.09)	.084 (.09)	-.023 (.07)
Total	.021 (.06)	.034 (.06)	.027 (.05)

Note. Values represent the Implicit Association Test attitude score with standard deviations in parentheses. Positive scores indicate an implicit preference for Coca-Cola. Sample sizes ranged from 25 to 28 across the four conditions. Different subscripts represent means different at the .05 level by tests for simple effects.

sci-fi lovers, this test was marginally significant, $t(27) = 1.98, p = .058$. For sci-fi haters, though as expected the implicit attitude was negative, it did not differ significantly from zero, $t(24) = 1.27, p = .22$.

Implicit Brand Self-Identification

A 2 (sci-fi pretest) \times 2 (movie clip) ANCOVA was carried out, using implicit brand self-identification as the DV and the pretest brand attitude measure and movie familiarity as covariates. Neither of the main effects or the interaction were significant (all *F*s < 1).

Explicit Brand Attitude

A 2 (sci-fi pretest) \times 2 (movie clip) ANCOVA was carried out, using explicit brand attitudes as the DV and the pretest brand attitude measure and movie familiarity as covariates. Neither of the main effects or the interaction were significant (all *F*s < 2.5, all *p*s > .11). To make the explicit measure correspond to the comparative nature of the IAT (i.e., the IAT is based on associations of both Coke and Pepsi with positive and negative attributes), we subtracted the explicit Pepsi attitude from the explicit Coke attitude to create a difference score in which positive values would represent an explicit preference for Coke. A 2 (sci-fi pretest) \times 2 (movie clip) ANCOVA on this variable showed no difference in the comparative explicit attitude across conditions (all *F*s < 1.4, all *p*s > .22). We also looked at any change in explicit Coke attitudes from pretest to posttest. This ANCOVA also showed no significant effects (all *F*s < 1.7, all *p*s > .2).

Implicit–Explicit Attitude Correlations

Examining various aspects of the relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes within our sample should also prove informative. Overall, we would expect that

implicit and explicit attitudes toward Coke should be relatively strongly related, as past research has shown that the implicit–explicit correlation is relatively strong for consumer products (Hofmann, Gawronski, Gschwendner, Le, & Schmitt, 2005). Given that finding, we might expect a strong relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes across our sample. However, other research has shown that when one type of attitude is changed through an experimental manipulation, but the other is not, then the relationship between the measures drops (Gawronski & Strack, 2004). This suggests that the implicit–explicit correlation in our experimental condition in which implicit attitudes shifted should be nonsignificant. Overall, implicit and explicit attitudes were significantly related in our sample, $r(104) = .22$, $p < .05$. In our control condition, this relationship was also significant, $r(51) = .33$, $p < .05$. In the condition that included the placement, however, this relationship was nonsignificant, $r(52) = .10$, $p = .46$. Thus, as would be expected given past research, implicit attitudes being altered while explicit attitudes were not led to a nonsignificant relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes.

DISCUSSION

Product placements in TV and movies has increased dramatically in recent years. Most research exploring the efficacy of product placement has emphasized viewers' brand recall and their explicit brand attitudes as outcome measures. Much of this research would suggest that more central placement (i.e., having a brand directly connected to the plot, discussed by characters, or used directly by characters) is necessary to lead to any effects of product placement on the viewer. This research, however, has ignored the possibility that implicit attitudes could be affected by less central placements. Our research is the first to demonstrate that background placements can lead viewers with different movie genre preferences to show shifts in opposite directions in their implicit brand attitudes. Furthermore, our method provided a realistic and powerful test of our hypothesis. We used a popular theatrically released movie in which brand exposure was relatively brief. This shows that background placements need not be overwhelming to have an effect on attitudes. This is similar to other research demonstrating EC effects with as little as one pairing of CS and US (Stuart et al., 1987). Finally, by viewing background placement as a form of EC, we were able to predict how implicit brand attitudes would change based on the APE model.

As predicted, seeing the brand in a genre of movie that one liked led to positive implicit brand attitudes, and seeing the brand in a genre of movie that one disliked led to negative implicit brand attitudes. Brand recall had no

impact on this effect. As expected for a familiar brand, explicit brand attitudes were unaffected by the placement. As expected for background placements, implicit brand self-identification was also unaffected. This result for placements occurring in the background of scenes differs from results for placements in which central characters are using a brand. Seeing a liked, central character using a brand led viewers to show greater implicit self-identification with the brand and led to changes in both implicit and explicit attitudes for those who recalled seeing the brand (see Gibson et al., in press). The effects of background placements in the current study, however, are what one would expect in an EC procedure that prompts little propositional reasoning. Given that the pairing of CS (brand) and US (movie) was simultaneous, and that the effect on implicit attitudes was not contingent upon brand recall, this is likely an example of what Sweldens, van Osselaer, and Janiszewski (2010) have termed *direct evaluative conditioning*. This form of conditioning occurs when the affect of the US is directly transferred to the CS. This leads to more stable effects because it does not rely on memory of the connection between the CS and US.

A further contribution of the current research is that it is the first to demonstrate that differences in movie genre preference can impact the effectiveness of the placement. This shows that individual differences can lead to different audience responses to the same placement. The implications of this are important for advertisers. First, the results are encouraging for companies placing brands in movies in that people who dislike a film genre are unlikely to attend such a film. Thus, most viewers in theaters would show a positive shift in implicit attitudes toward the brand in the background placement. In addition, knowing the demographics of viewers who tend to favor a given genre will help companies select appropriate movies in which to place their products.

An important question for future research is how background placements could affect brand choice. Background placements for familiar brands may influence quick, impulsive purchases but not influence considered, deliberate purchases. This follows from the finding that quick purchase decisions are more likely to be based on implicit attitudes and more carefully considered decisions are based on explicit attitudes (Frieze, Hofmann, & Wanke, 2008; Frieze et al., 2006; Gibson, 2008). Thus, even though the background placements studied here were subtle, the effects on brand choice may be powerful. Future research could also benefit from the inclusion of both central and background placement conditions in one study. Direct comparison of central and background placements could further delineate the processes underlying placement effects.

A few other important questions that could be addressed in future research pertain to explicit attitudes.

First, would the effects we identified for implicit attitudes in the current research carry over to explicit attitudes if the placement was for an unfamiliar brand? The APE model would predict that the answer is yes. In this scenario, the placement will directly affect the implicit attitude (as it did in the current study). However, because there would be little propositional information about the novel brand to guide the formation of the explicit attitude, the viewer would be likely to use the implicit attitude to inform the formation of the explicit attitude (see Zimmerman, Redker, & Gibson, 2011). Another question regarding explicit attitudes relates to how results might differ if a background placement could stimulate propositional reasoning. If propositional reasoning were engaged, explicit attitudes would likely shift as a result.

The current research shows how the APE model can be useful in helping to understand how product placement affects brand attitudes. Furthermore, our research highlights the complexity of product placement effects on viewers. Brand placements can sometimes have broad and striking effects, such as the huge increase in sales following the appearance of Reese's Pieces in the movie *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Balasubramanian et al., 2006). Other effects may be more nuanced and subtle, such as those identified in the current study. We were able to show that background placements led to shifts in implicit attitudes. These shifts may be subtler but could potentially impact brand choice in important ways.

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