Modern Product Placement: An Understanding of Consumers' Responses to Fashion Brand Advertisements Featuring a Destination

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Keywords: branding, advertising, equity, fit, experiment

Rationale and Purpose: Fashion apparel brand advertisements are increasingly utilizing images that place garments in scenarios that mirror everyday reality. That is, since fashion brands proliferate the real world, providing brand images that showcase the brand as integrated into everyday behavior more closely mirrors perceptions of everyday reality (Gould & Gupta, 2006; Balasubramanian et al., 2006). For instance, Michael Kors' recent advertisements featured a New York City backdrop. In this case, products are placed appropriately within the context of a fast-paced city lifestyle to more vividly envision product use or aspiration. The advent and growth of social media has further enabled and popularized the placement of branded products into personal spaces, thus, blurring the lines between commercial messages with personal communication (Eagle & Dahl, 2018). Given the proliferation in fashion brand advertisements, through an experimental manipulation, this study examines how featuring a destination as the products' background can impact the brand's equity and consumer brand purchase intentions. Given the importance of perceived fit within the context of product placement (Williams, Petrosky, Hernandex & Page, 2011), this study also tests the moderating role of perceived fit.

Hypotheses Development: According to social learning theory and the behavioral modeling paradigm, consumers learn through reinforcement of imitative behavior (Nord and Peter, 1980). That is, the mere observation of behavior that depicts positive consequences or use for a product (e.g., product strategically placed within a destination), can strengthen consumers' response. In line with this research, a successful product placement can transform consumers' perceived experience with the product (Russell, 1998), and is likely to enhance their brand perceptions (Mackay, Ewing, Newton, & Windisch, 2009). Thus, when consumers are exposed to a condition in which places a brand within a favorable destination, it is likely to produce greater positive brand responses. Based on this, exposure to an advertisement with the brand's products strategically placed within a destination will result in a higher level of brand equity (H1a) than exposure to an advertisement that lacks a destination. Considering that a brand's products placed within a destination helps consumers to envision its end-use, it is also likely that exposure to an advertisement with the brand's products within a destination will results in higher purchase intentions (H1b) when compared to advertisements without a destination. Additionally, drawing from research on product placement (e.g., Bhatnager, Aksoy, & Malkoc, 2004), the concept of perceived-fit is critical. Perceived fit, the fundamental idea that two partners are associated and are right for one another (Czellar, 2003) can determine the success of a partnership (Wang, Soesilo, & Zhang, 2015). Favorable perceived fit between the brand's products and the destination in which it is placed generates transfer of positive associations. Greater perceived fit is also expected to engender attention to the brand's products and believability of the brand's

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portrayal because the relevance of the message and the product's use within the destination context is high (Bhatnager et al., 2004). In this case, it is likely that when perceived fit is high, it will positively moderate the relationship between the experimental conditions and brand equity (H2a) and purchase intentions (H2b).

Methods: Using a research panel, respondents were assigned to one of the experimental conditions, a brand's products placed within a destination (n=148) and without a destination (n=135). A pre-test was used to select the brand's name and the destination background used in this study. In the main study, the experimental stimuli consisted of exposure to eleven brand images from the same collection that were either placed with a destination background, or without a destination background (i.e., blank background). Following exposure to the experimental stimuli, participants responded to measures of brand equity, purchase intentions and perceived fit between brand and destination. All measures were developed based on previous research and were measured on 7-point likert-type scales. A manipulation check confirmed that the stimuli was accurately perceived by respondents.

Findings: Controlling for consumers' global interest. ANCOVA results demonstrated that when consumers were exposed to the stimuli where a brand's products were placed within a destination, they had higher levels of brand equity (M=6.061) compared to when exposed to the stimuli without a destination background (M=6.039) (F=8.588, p=.004), supporting H1a. ANOVA results also confirm that consumers exposed to the stimuli with a brand's products placed within a destination had higher levels of purchase intentions (M=5.242) compared to when exposed to the stimuli without a destination background (M=4.718) (F=22.135, p=.000). Thus, H1b was supported. Lastly, PROCESS moderation (Model 1) (Hayes, 2013) was conducted to test H2a-b. Results revealed that the interaction between experimental stimuli and perceived fit on brand equity was not significant (Effect= .0715, SE=.099, t=.726, p=.469, 95% CI=-.122, .2653), thus H2a was not supported. However, H2b results revealed a significant interaction between experimental stimuli and perceived fit on purchase intentions (Effect=.290, SE=.117, t=2.48, p=.014, 95% CI=.519, .060). In fact, there was a significant R^2 change due to interaction (R^2 change=.015, F=6.169, p=.014). Thus, supporting H2b.

Discussion and Implications: Findings from this study highlight the importance of strategically placing a brand's products within an appropriate destination that closely mirrors everyday use or aspiration. When consumers are exposed to successful product placement, it can enhance the brand's level of equity and can encourage greater purchase intentions. This result demonstrates that by utilizing a destination as a background to highlight a brand's products, it can impact both the long term (i.e., brand equity) and short term (i.e., purchase intentions) health of the brand. Particularly, greater purchase intentions can be produced when the brand's products have high perceived fit between the brand and the destination background. Future research is encouraged to further explore the impact on a brand's destination background. Particularly, future research may test varying destination backgrounds (e.g., reality vs. aspirational) and its impact on the brand.

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