

Brand placement in novels

A test of the generation effect

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A key proposition of resource matching theory is that the cognitive challenge presented by a message execution should meet rather than exceed (or fall short of) the level of cognitive resources that the recipient is prepared to expend. A number of generation effect studies under incidental learning conditions indicate that the cognitive challenge presented by omitting letters from a word may enhance recall for the word. Within the context of brand placements in a novel, this study uses both the resource matching and generation effect frameworks to hypothesise the effects on brand recall of manipulating the cognitive challenge presented by the format of a brand placement – a fragment of a brand name versus a complete brand name. The results of two experiments indicate that mild fragmentation (the omission of a single letter in a brand name) induces higher levels of brand recall than either a severely fragmented or complete brand name. Study limitations as well as implications for the practice of brand placement in novels and other media are discussed.

Introduction

Popular culture is littered with references to branded products. In the movie *Runaway Bride*, Julia Roberts escapes from a marriage ceremony in a Federal Express van. Bruce Springsteen's music video for 'Born in the USA' contains visual images of Miller beer. Colin Dexter's (1983) novel, *The Riddle of the Third Mile*, features an Oxford University academic who displays a penchant for both *The Times* crossword and Glenfiddich whisky. Although brand appearances in popular culture may be motivated by creative considerations, such as the desire to lend verisimilitude to a drama or a novel, when such references result from commercial considerations (i.e. brand owners are charged for a brand's appearance) the practice is considered brand placement (Karrh 1998).

In 2004 – a year in which brand placements on television grew by 46% in the US – the value of the paid brand placements in all media in the US exceeded \$1 billion (Balasubramanian *et al.* 2006). Although the appearance of branded references in American novels was documented more than two decades ago (Friedman 1985), the extent to which such appearances are motivated by commercial considerations is difficult to ascertain. As is the case with paid brand placements in movies, authors and publishers are not required to disclose whether a fee has been received in exchange for a reference to a brand in a book. Nevertheless, there have been a number of recent acknowledgements that some authors are receiving commercial consideration for including brand references. Fay Weldon, a British novelist, acknowledged receiving a fee from Bulgari for including references to its eponymous jewellery products in her novel *The Bulgari Connection* (Nelson 2004). Similarly, Jordan Weisman and Sean Weisman – the authors of *Cathy's Book* – have acknowledged a placement deal with Procter & Gamble in which the authors included references to Cover Girl make-up products in exchange for Procter & Gamble promoting the book at its teen website (Petrecca 2006). Finally, Carole Mathews has acknowledged receiving a fee from Ford to include references to the Ford Fiesta in her 2004 novel *The Sweetest Taboo* (Petrecca 2006).

The extant literature on brand placement has considered the impact of a number of executional variables (such as placement prominence, the presence of an audible reference and placement screen-time) on audience memory for brands placed in audio-visual media such as films, television programmes and computer games (Babin & Carder 1996; Gupta & Lord 1998; Brennan *et al.* 1999; Law & Braun 2000; Schneider & Cornwell 2005); however, there are no empirical studies that consider factors that may influence recall for a brand that is promoted through the pages of a novel. Given the level of marketplace clutter, brand recall is difficult to achieve but prized by marketers since it is a critical predictor of purchase for low-involvement goods (Krugman 1965; Sengupta & Gorn 2002).

The present study considers whether recall for a brand name is influenced by manipulating the magnitude of the decoding challenge presented by inserting a brand in a novel. In particular, the study considers whether the effectiveness of a brand placement will be enhanced if a brand name presented within the pages of a novel is incomplete (fragmented). Our findings should be of interest not only to the practitioners

who negotiate contracts for brand placements in books (marketers, advertising agencies, publishers, authors and author agents) but also to academics and practitioners interested in the impact of self-generated marketing stimuli on consumer memory.

We begin with a review of the literature in both marketing and cognitive psychology on the memorability of stimuli presented in a fragmented rather than complete format. Next, in two laboratory experiments, we demonstrate that brand recall is influenced by the magnitude of the encoding challenge presented to an audience – with the mild fragmentation of a brand name inducing higher recall than either severe fragmentation or its complete presentation. We conclude with a discussion of the implications and limitations of our findings and offer directions for future research.

Incomplete brand placement and memory

A number of studies in marketing suggest that memory for an advertisement or brand can be enhanced when subjects are required to generate (rather than read) information. Heimbach and Jacoby (1972) report improved recall for incomplete versus complete versions of television and radio ads. Kardes (1988) reports significantly better recall for print ads that require individuals to draw a conclusion for themselves, over ads that provide an explicit conclusion. Similarly, Reardon and Moore (1996) find improved brand name recall for radio ads that conclude by prompting listeners to recall a (previously mentioned) brand name, over ads that simply reiterate the brand name in the conclusion. Finally, Sengupta and Gorn (2002) report that ads that draw attention to the omission of pictorial information (for example, a camera ad that replaces a picture of a camera with the outline of a camera shape on a suntanned body) induce greater levels of product recall than when the pictorial information is included. The authors also report that brand recall is enhanced when the omission is brand related. Thus, an illustration in an ad for Marlboro cigarettes that included a horse but omitted the cowboy synonymous with Marlboro improved recall for the brand over the condition in which the cowboy was present.

Although the marketing literature has not directly assessed the impact on recall of fragmented versus complete brand names processed within

the context of a novel, a substantial literature in cognitive psychology (see Steffens & Erdfelder 1998 for a review) provides guidance on the conditions under which recall of a word may be enhanced when, instead of reading, subjects are required to generate a word from a word fragment. A typical 'generation effect' (Slamecka & Graf 1978) study in cognitive psychology forewarns subjects of an impending memory test on a list of target words. In the generate condition subjects are provided with cue words for each target fragment (e.g. purr – c_ _) and instructed to generate the target in each cue–target pair. In the read condition the cues are paired with complete targets.

Subjects required to generate a target may employ one or more of three basic strategies (deWinstanley *et al.* 1996). First, the subject may attempt to generate the target based on information contained in the cue (cue–target relational processing). This processing is akin to a crossword solver who solves a question based on information provided in the clue. Second, the subject may generate the target based on the letters and blanks provided in the target fragment (target-specific processing). This is analogous to solving a crossword by considering possible words that match the combination of blanks and letters in the answer that have been gleaned from solving previous clues. Third, when a number of targets are from the same category (for example, all the targets are animals) an alert subject may use category membership as an additional clue (target–target or whole-list processing). To complete the crossword analogy, when solving a themed crossword (e.g. all answers have a connection with cricket) whole-list processing may help to reduce the pool of candidate answers. Clearly, as noted by McDaniel *et al.* (1990), when groups of targets come from several categories (e.g. some are animals, some are musical instruments, some are Shakespearean characters) one would expect whole-list processing to be a more helpful strategy in generating later targets from a category (i.e. as a subject becomes aware of target categories) than earlier targets.

Evidence for a positive generation effect on free recall is mixed when subjects process cue–target pairs having been forewarned of a memory test. In a review of 50 experiments under such intentional learning conditions, Steffens and Erdfelder (1998) report that 7 generate versus read comparisons produced a positive generation effect, 17 produced a negative generation effect, and in 26 no significant difference emerged between read and generate conditions. Steffens and Erdfelder (1998) attribute

these mixed results to the fact that ‘under intentional learning conditions participants in the read and generate conditions will presumably try equally hard to keep the [target] items in mind’ (p. 707).

In contrast, when subjects are not forewarned of an impending memory test (the incidental learning condition) every study has demonstrated either positive generation effects or no significant difference between conditions (Soloway 1986; McDaniel *et al.* 1988; McDaniel & Waddill 1990; McDaniel *et al.* 1990; Soraci *et al.* 1994). The results of studies under incidental learning conditions are clearly more relevant to the potential effects on recall of generating versus reading brand names placed in a novel because the processing of brand names in a novel is peripheral to a reader’s central purpose, namely comprehending the plot.

There are a number of differences, however, between the processing environment in which brand names might be generated from brand fragments in a book and the processing environment that is typical of an incidental learning test of the generation effect in the cognitive psychology literature. First, in the cognitive psychology literature, demonstrations of the generation effect have been obtained in environments where subjects study cue–target relationships in isolation; however, a brand placement in a novel is embedded in a sea of text. Second, in the cognitive psychology literature, even in the incidental learning condition, subjects receive a forced exposure (typically seven seconds in the McDaniel studies cited above) to a cue–target pair, and are instructed to generate a target and write or type the generated target. In contrast, subjects reading a novel who encounter a fragment of a brand name are not instructed to generate the name in its entirety and may elect not to engage in the cognitive effort required to comprehend the brand name. Accordingly, the generate condition is likely to lead to impoverished recall (in comparison to the read condition) if the cognitive challenge to comprehension posed by a word fragment exceeds the cognitive resources that the subject is prepared to devote to the task. This notion is consistent with a recent study by Brennan and Bahn (2006), which found that even among a high need-for-cognition audience (an audience that enjoys cognitive activity, Cacioppo & Petty 1982) an extremely challenging advertising message execution – one that provided only subtle clues to the product category advertised in a symbolic message – inhibited product category recall in comparison with an unchallenging literal execution. Accordingly, the magnitude of the

cognitive demands placed upon subjects in the generate condition is likely to be a critical determinant in realising the potential memory benefits that have been attributed to the process of generation. Such a framework is consistent with the key proposition of resource matching theory for persuasion (see Anand & Sternthal 1989; Peracchio & Meyers-Levy 1997), which maintains that persuasion can be enhanced by a message that presents a cognitive challenge; however, persuasion starts to diminish when the cognitive demands placed by a message exceed those supplied by the recipient.

An inverted U-shaped relationship is predicted to occur between the severity of brand name fragmentation and memory for the brand. Clearly a brand fragmentation metric must be sensitive to the number of letters in the complete brand name. Thus, the elimination of a single letter from the brand name 'I Can't Believe It's Not Butter' presents less of a comprehension challenge than the elimination of a single letter from the 'Gap' brand name. Accordingly, we propose a fragmentation metric that is based on the percentage of letters missing from a brand name: complete (0% letters missing), mild fragmentation (1–25% letters missing), severe fragmentation (26–50% letters missing), very severe fragmentation (51–75% letters missing) and extremely severe fragmentation (76–100% letters missing). Severe levels of fragmentation may exceed the reader's processing capacity and result in impoverished recall in comparison with mild fragmentation. The modest cognitive challenge presented by the latter should, however, produce the beneficial effects on memory that result from enhanced encoding without the failures of comprehension that occur when the cognitive burden on the reader overwhelms the processing effort that the reader is prepared to supply (Brennan & Bahn 2006). Consequently, mild fragmentation should result in improved recall over both the severe fragmentation and the complete condition (where the absence of a processing challenge should result in shallower levels of brand name encoding). Naturally, the hypothesised recall advantages associated with brand placement fragmentation are contingent upon readers being familiar with the brand name – subjects are unlikely to be able to generate unfamiliar brands (for example, new brand names) from a word fragment.

- H1:** When readers are familiar with a brand name, a mildly fragmented brand placement in a book will be better recalled than a severely fragmented brand name.
- H2:** When readers are familiar with a brand name, a mildly fragmented brand placement in a book will be better recalled than a complete brand name.

Experiment 1

Subjects and design

A total of 120 undergraduate students from a south-western US university participated in Experiment 1. The use of a student sample reflected the fact that the experimental stimulus (a chapter) was set in a college environment, and the plot addressed issues and concerns (tuition, grade inflation and online classes) relevant to a student population.

Subjects were randomly assigned to brand placement conditions (complete name, mildly fragmented name and severely fragmented name). Upon arrival at the experimental setting, subjects were informed that they would be evaluating the first chapter of a novel by an aspiring novelist for a potential publisher. As part of the cover story, subjects were told that some publishers of academic books also had a division that published fiction, and that because these academic publishers supplied various textbook supplements (videos, manuals, test-banks, etc.) to a university faculty free of charge, and that faculty typically assisted such publishers when the publishers needed to evaluate novels that were targeted at the college-age audience. Subjects were then given copies of a book cover and first chapter of a novel purportedly written by an aspiring author (actually written by the experimenter).

After reading the chapter, subjects completed a series of questions consistent with the cover story, and then completed a free recall test on the brand names that had appeared in the chapter. The rationale for the recall test was that the publisher wished to classify evaluations of the chapter and author according to how carefully subjects had paid attention to the chapter.

Independent variable

Six brand names were included in the chapter. The six names appeared on a shopping list of groceries. The list appeared in the context of the couple trying to decide whether they would eat out or make a meal at home. The husband read the list from the wife's recent shopping excursion 'to see if anything sounded better than delivered pizza'. In the severely fragmented condition, the last portion of each of the brand names was truncated and replaced with a dash. Within the severely fragmented condition the level of truncation ranged from 33% to 43%. In the mildly fragmented condition, the last letter of each brand name was replaced with a dash. The level of truncation in the mildly fragmented condition ranged from 11% to 17%. The explanation in the novel for the inclusion of brand fragments (in both the severely and mildly fragmented conditions) was that the wife usually jotted down only the beginning of the word to jog her memory for a brand at the store. The shopping list appeared on the second page of a six-page chapter. It was not centred or highlighted in any way, but appeared as part of a normal paragraph.

Results

The result of a one-way ANOVA (see Table 1) of placement type on recall was significant ($F(2,117) = 15.36, p < 0.01$). Consistent with hypothesis 1, the average number of brands recalled in the mildly fragmented condition was significantly greater than the average number of brands recalled in the severely fragmented condition ($\bar{X}_{\text{mild}} = 3.30, \bar{X}_{\text{severe}} = 2.15, p < 0.02$). Consistent with hypothesis 2, the average number of brands recalled in the mildly fragmented condition was significantly greater than the average number of brands recalled in the complete name condition ($\bar{X}_{\text{mild}} = 3.30, \bar{X}_{\text{complete}} = 2.32, p = 0.05$). There was no significant difference on brand recall between the severely fragmented condition and the complete name condition ($p > 0.9$).

Discussion

The results of Experiment 1 indicate that recall of brand names placed in the context of a novel is significantly affected by the extent to which a

Table 1: Cell means for brand recall and brand attitude

Measure	Complete brand placement	Mildly fragmented brand placement	Severely fragmented brand placement
Recall (Expt 1)	2.32 ^b	3.30 ^a	2.15 ^b
Recall (Expt 2)	2.35 ^b	3.59 ^a	2.13 ^b

^{a,b} Row means with different superscripts are significantly different ($p < 0.05$)

brand name is fragmented. Specifically, presenting a brand name in a manner that offers the reader a minor decoding challenge (eliminating the last letter of the name) improves recall over that which is obtained when the complete name is presented. Consistent with resource matching theory (Peracchio & Meyers-Levy 1997; Brennan & Bahn 2006), increasing the cognitive challenge (eliminating a syllable of the brand name) appears to overwhelm the processing resources supplied by the reader, and results in a deterioration of recall when compared to the recall obtained under the condition of mild fragmentation (i.e. when the subject has only to infer a single letter to complete the brand name), and recall equivalent to that obtained when the complete name is presented.

Experiment 2

To demonstrate the robustness of the results observed in Experiment 1, a second experiment was conducted. A total of 94 students from a southwestern US university who did not take part in Experiment 1 participated in Experiment 2. Experiment 2 differed from Experiment 1 in only two respects. First, although in Experiment 2 the complete and severe fragmentation conditions remained unchanged, the mild fragmentation condition was altered so that a portion (one letter) in the middle (rather than at the end) of each brand name was replaced with a dash. Second, since it was unlikely that a person would construct a shopping list that deliberately omitted a letter towards the middle of each brand name, the rationale for the missing letter(s) in the mild (severe) fragmentation condition was altered in Experiment 2. The rationale for the missing letter(s) in Experiment 2 was that ‘the grocery list was scarred by a coffee stain that made many of the items difficult to read’.

Results

The result of a one-way ANOVA (see Table 1) of placement type on recall was significant ($F(2,93) = 6.34, p < 0.003$). Consistent with hypothesis 1, the average number of brands recalled in the mildly fragmented condition was significantly greater than the average number of brands recalled in the severely fragmented condition ($\bar{X}_{\text{mild}} = 3.59, \bar{X}_{\text{severe}} = 2.13, p < 0.006$). Consistent with hypothesis 2, the average number of brands recalled in the mildly fragmented condition was significantly greater than the average number of brands recalled in the complete name condition ($\bar{X}_{\text{mild}} = 3.59, \bar{X}_{\text{complete}} = 2.35, p < 0.024$). There was no significant difference on brand recall between the severely fragmented condition and the complete name condition ($p > 0.88$).

Discussion

The results of Experiment 2 confirm the findings of Experiment 1. Specifically, the results of Experiment 2 indicate that the advantage enjoyed by the mildly fragmented brand placement over both its complete and severely fragmented counterpart are robust to a manipulation of mild truncation that omits a middle rather than final letter of the brand placement.

General discussion

This study indicates that an author who includes a reference to a well-known brand in a novel can enhance recall for the named brand by omitting a small portion of the brand name. The results of two experiments reveal that an inverted U-shaped relationship occurs between the cognitive challenge presented by a fragmented brand placement and memory for the brand. Specifically, in comparison with a complete brand reference, brand recall is enhanced when the reference is mildly fragmented (i.e. less than 25% of the letters are omitted from the middle or end of the brand name). The experiments also indicate that the mildly fragmented brand reference induces greater brand recall than is the case when the reference is severely fragmented (i.e. between 25 and 50% of the brand name is truncated).

Research in cognitive psychology (Steffens & Erdfelder 1998) has demonstrated that generation effects on recall (i.e. improved memory under conditions in which a target word has to be generated from a word fragment rather than read) can occur under incidental learning conditions in which each cue and target is presented in isolation to subjects during the exposure, and in which subjects are required to generate a word from a fragment at the time of exposure. The present study demonstrates that a generation effect may be obtained under the more demanding incidental learning condition that occurs when exposure to word fragments occurs in a clutter of surrounding text, and where subjects are not required to complete word fragments at the time of exposure.

The limitations of the present study result from the use of a laboratory environment that exposed subjects to a single chapter of a novel – reducing both the proactive and retroactive interference effects of the novel's text on brand that might be expected to occur from the reading of an entire novel. Clearly, an assessment of the external validity of the findings requires a replication in a natural setting (for example, with a sample who read novels as a result of their membership of a book club). Such a replication could also assess the longevity of the effects of brand placement fragmentation on brand recall.

Future research should consider whether exposure to a fragmented brand placement will induce a more favourable attitude towards the brand over that which occurs when readers are exposed to the complete brand name. Prior research on incomplete versus complete advertising pictures has yielded mixed results. In a print advertising study in which subjects were told that they were to judge new products that might be introduced to the marketplace, Peracchio and Meyers-Levy (1994) report that ads featuring incomplete pictures induced more favourable attitudes towards the new products among highly motivated subjects. Similarly, Sengupta and Gorn (2002) report that an incomplete print ad for an Olympus camera – in which a picture of a camera on a man's naked chest was replaced by the suntanned outline of shape consistent with a camera – induced more positive attitudes towards the Olympus brand than was the case when the camera was present. The authors attribute the greater persuasiveness of the ad with the explicit omission to the generation effect. In contrast, in a separate experiment in the same paper involving a complete versus incomplete illustration for Marlboro cigarettes, Sengupta and Gorn (2002)

found that the incomplete illustration did not induce significantly more favourable attitudes towards the Marlboro brand.

Future research should also consider the robustness of the present findings to brands placed in movies and computer games. In the present study, consistent with resource-matching theory (Peracchio & Meyers-Levy 1997; Brennan & Bahn 2006), the resource demands placed upon the reader exposed to a severely fragmented brand name were more likely to exceed the supply of cognitive resources required for the brand name to be generated than was the case when a mildly fragmented brand name was employed. The viewer of a brand placed in a movie or computer game has more cues to assist in brand name generation than is the case for the reader of a novel. When a brand name is to be partially occluded in audio-visual content (for example, when an actor's fingers partially obscure the name on a beer bottle), the viewer has other clues (for example, the shape of the beer bottle and the colour/font used on the label) to enable the brand name to be generated. As a result, a severely fragmented brand name in a movie or computer game may not overwhelm the processing resources supplied by the viewer – indeed it may produce the brand recall advantage over the completely visible brand name that was observed for the mildly fragmented placement in the present study.

Finally, since brand names are often repeated multiple times in a novel – in John Grisham's (2002) novel *The Summons* there are more than a dozen references to the Audi TT automobile – future research on brand placements in novels should also consider the effects of brand placement repetition. Novelists are unlikely to be able to incorporate dozens of situations in which a single brand name can be fragmented without such instances being perceived by the reader as artificial intrusions. Nevertheless, it may be possible to introduce a brand in a fragmented form and remove the fragmentation in a subsequent reference. This strategy affords the possibility of a generation effect in the first instance, and allows those who fail to generate the brand name when it first appears (or are uncertain if their generated name is correct) to become aware of the correct brand name after the subsequent reference. A situation that combines the potential for a positive effect of generation on recall with the removal of the potential negative consequence of severe fragmentation (that the brand name will not be comprehended) may afford a recall advantage for severely as well as mildly fragmented brand names over the repetition of their complete presentation.

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