

Acceptability and Ethics of Product Placement in Sport Video Games

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As video games are becoming popular and widespread, young people spend a large amount of time playing video games (Eglesz, Fekete, Kiss, and Izso, 2005). Sport video games are very popular in North America because of their authenticity and similarity to televised sporting events and in-game advertising including product placement, athlete endorsements, and on-screen venue signage in sport video games (SVGs) is a commonplace in the sport industry (Cianfrone, Zhang, Trail, & Lutz, 2008). U.S. marketers spent 71\$ million on video game advertising in which products are placed in the gaming background or are used by game characters in 2005 and the advertising is expected to \$561 million by 2009 (Johannes, 2006). Thus, video game advertising is providing to be of real interests to marketers because gamers seem to recall advertising in games better than they do in any other medium (Devaney, 2005).

Product placement refers to “compensated inclusion of branded products or brand identifiers, through audio and/or visual means, within mass media programming”(Karrh, 1998, p.10). Product placement in SVGs is an important emerging area of marketing but it also raises controversial ethical issues. Product placement for some products has been more controversial and ethically-charged than others. For instance, the product placement of tobacco is extremely controversial (Rothenberg, 1991). Thus, the current study assumed that product placement acceptability and ethics have an impact on attitudes toward brands and intention to purchase and the purpose of the study is to examine attitudes and feelings toward product placements in SVGs.

Based on the review of literature, several hypotheses were generated: H1: More ethically-charged products will be perceived as less acceptable for being placed in sport video games than less ethically-charged products. H2: Individuals who more frequently play sport video games will be more likely to find product placement acceptable across products than those who play them less frequently. H3: There will be a product x gender interaction with respect to the acceptability of products placed in sport video games. H4: Given a product x gender interaction, males will be more likely to accept ethically-charged products than will females in product placements while not differing with regard to other products. H5: Individuals who have more positive attitudes toward brand placement in general will have more favorable attitudes toward the acceptability of actual products which could be placed in sport video games. H6: Sport video gamers who have favorable attitudes toward brand placement in general will be more likely to claim that they would purchase a brand they had seen in the sport video games.

An online survey was conducted using surveymonkey.com and data were gathered from 253 sport video gamers (Men =162, Women = 91). The vast majority of respondents were Caucasian (69.2%) and the mean age was 21.99 (SD = 3.69). The average number of hours they play SVGs a week was 4.54. To test first four hypotheses, a 2 (gender) x 2 (usage of SVG) x 13 (products) mixed between and repeated measure ANOVA was conducted and planned comparisons were conducted. Sport video gamers were divided into two groups (e.g., heavy and light gamer) based on their hours to play SVGs a week. To test H5 and H6, multiple regression analysis was performed to test the acceptability of product placement in SVGs.

There was a significant product effect $F(12, 238) = 44.07, p < .0001$. Pairwise t-test revealed that the three ethically-charged products of cigarettes, alcohol, and guns differed from other products at the .0001 significance level. Cigarettes were rated the least acceptable for product placement in SVGs followed by guns and alcohol. Soft drinks and healthy consumer products were rated the most acceptable. Thus, it supports that H1 - more ethically charged products will be perceived as less acceptable for being placed in SVGs than less ethically-charged products. The main effect of frequency of sport video gaming on the acceptability of product placements was significant, $F(1, 251) = 9.74, p < .002$. Heavy sport video gamers found product placement more acceptable. This was qualified by a significant interaction of product x usage, $F(12, 240) = 3.24, p < .0001$. Thus, H2 was supported. H3 predicting a product x gender interaction was supported, $F(12, 240) = 3.09, p < .0001$. Planned contrasts indicated that men found only alcohol acceptable than did women. Thus, H4 predicting that if there were a product x gender interaction, it would be a result of males' greater acceptability of ethically-charged product, is partially supported.

For INDEX (acceptability score of actual products), there were significant positive effects for attitude toward product placements in SVGs and for perceived realism (i.e., individuals who found that product placements contributed to realism) but a negative effect for restriction (i.e., people who had negative attitudes toward product placements). Thus, H5 predicting positive attitude toward product placement resulted in greater acceptance of products placed in SVGs. To test H6 regarding the effect of attitudes towards product placement on claimed purchase intention, a regression analysis was run and the results showed that

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there were significant effects for attitudes toward product placement in SVG and for perceived realism, indicating that positive attitudes toward product placement affect purchase intention. Thus, H6 was supported.

The results from this study showed that not only do differences in ethical concerns as reflected in attitudes toward product placements in general divide consumers, but also that specific products are regarded as more ethically disconcerting than others. In addition, individual consumer differences were found. Heavy gamers were more accepting of ethically charged product placements. Also, those who valued perceived realism and less restrictions had more positive general attitudes toward the acceptability of product placements in general than others. Male also tended to find the placing of ethically-charged products as more acceptable than did female, although the two genders did not differ with regard to the product, thus reflecting a product/gender interaction.

The results are valuable for sport marketers and sport video game manufacturers in regards to what products can be acceptable for product placement in SVGs. For most products, there appears to be an acceptance of product placement, at least in terms of general attitudes. Thus, product placement in SVGs can be seen as an acceptable communications tool. While attitude toward product placement in SVGs are generally favorable, its acceptance and possibly effectiveness may vary by product category, especially in terms of ethically-charged products. The study is limited in the products considered because it adopted from products shown in movies. Thus, some products may not actually be placed in SVGs. In addition, the determination of what were ethically-charged products, although supported by the results, was based on previous studies in movies. Future research might use this study as a starting point in developing and calibrating measures of this construct.