

# WHEN PRODUCT PLACEMENT GOES WRONG

## The Effects of Program Liking and Placement Prominence

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**ABSTRACT:** Previous research has found a positive shift in brand attitude after exposure to product placements. The study presented here investigates conditions under which product placements may cause a negative shift in brand attitude. The results reveal that prominent placements can negatively impact brand attitudes of viewers who report high levels of program liking. Conversely, viewers reporting lower levels of program liking shift brand attitude in a positive direction after exposure to a prominent placement. However, the positive shift in brand attitude for participants with lower program liking disappears when a persuasive-intent prime precedes exposure to the placement. Subtle placements are less likely to result in negative shifts in brand attitude. The Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright 1994) is used to explain the results.

Product placement has a number of advantages over traditional television advertising. One of the most important is that viewers cannot avoid exposure to the placements. Research studies investigating product placements reveal effects that are positive for memory (Gupta and Lord 1998; Law and Braun 2000; Roehm, Roehm, and Boone 2004; Russell 2002), and choice (Law and Braun 2000); they also find effects that are positive, or at the very least, neutral, for brand attitude (Russell 2002). It is not surprising that exposure to a product placement increases accessibility of the brand in memory, as it is difficult to imagine a situation where the accessibility of a brand decreases after exposure to the brand name or brand logo. However, there is potential for a negative shift in brand attitude after forcing a consumer to view brand information.

The objective of this research is to investigate whether the presence of prominent product placements in programs will cause a negative shift in brand attitude for viewers who anticipate and enjoy the program. A prominent placement may activate persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994, 1995) such that viewers realize the persuasive intention of product placements. When people with high levels of program liking see a prominent product placement, they may interpret the placement to be an attempt to influence the viewer, which could interrupt the viewing experience. The outcome of the interruption could be a negative shift in brand attitude. This paper begins with a review of the placement literature, with a focus on placement prominence. A discussion

of the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) follows, as it is relevant to the reactions to the persuasive intent of product placements by viewers with high program liking as well as those with low program liking. An experiment is conducted with an advertising prime to test for the effects of placement prominence on brand attitude and the activation of persuasion knowledge. Finally, the results are used to comment on the future of product placement.

### PRODUCT PLACEMENT

Product placement is a combination of advertising and publicity designed to influence the audience by unobtrusively inserting branded products in entertainment programs such that the viewer is unlikely to be aware of the persuasive intent (Balasubramanian 1994). The practice has continued to spread in recent years, as marketers turn to a variety of communication channels to reach the consumer (McCarty 2004). In general terms, the objective of product placement is to generate positive associations toward the placed brand, resulting in a positive shift in brand attitude.

#### Effects on Brand Memory and Brand Attitude

Two approaches have been used to explain a shift in brand attitude after exposure to a product placement. In the first approach, exposure to a product placement increases implicit memory (accessibility) for a brand without necessarily improving explicit memory. In this case, the consumer misattributes the increase in accessibility for a brand as liking of

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This research was funded by a University of Sydney Bridging Grant.

the brand: hence, a mere exposure effect (Zajonc 1968). Thus, the consumer will not explicitly remember seeing the brand as a placement, but will report a more positive brand attitude as a result of the exposure. The mere exposure effect has been used to explain the increase in brand choice after exposure to product placements found by Law and Braun (2000), and could also be used to explain the positive attitude shift for visual placements that were low in plot connection in Russell's (2002) study.

In the second approach, exposure to a placement increases explicit memory for a brand. Russell (2002) found both an increase in explicit recognition memory and a positive shift in brand attitudes after exposure to audio placements that were high in plot connection. Presumably, exposure to the placements resulted in the creation and/or reinforcement of positive associations with the brands.

Does placement always affect brand attitude? Russell (2002) found brand attitude to be unchanged after exposure to audio placements that were low in plot connection. She used a congruency–incongruency explanation to account for the difference in brand attitude results between audio placements that were more or less connected to the plot. She suggested that the audio/low plot connection placements were incongruent with viewers' expectations because audio placements are usually connected to the plot. She reasoned that the incongruency was "likely to raise viewers' suspicion and counterargumentation" (Russell 2002, p. 309).

### Characteristics of the Placement

Much of the research on placement has focused on explanatory variables describing the characteristics of the placement itself, such as modality (Law and Braun 2000; Russell 2002), congruity with the plot (Russell 2002), type of program (d'Astous and Seguin 1999; Roehm, Roehm, and Boone 2004), and placement prominence. Prominence has been discussed and/or operationalized as the size of the product or logo, centrality in the screen, integration into the plot, centrality to the plot, number of mentions, duration on screen, strength of the placement and/or modality (Auty and Lewis 2004; Babin and Carder 1996; Bhatnagar, Aksoy, and Malkoc 2004; Gupta and Lord 1998; Law and Braun 2000; Russell 2002). These are also the variables that determine the amount a marketer is willing to pay for the placement (Bhatnagar, Aksoy, and Malkoc 2004).

Regardless of the operationalization, prominence has consistently been found to determine memory performance, with more prominent brands better remembered than less prominent brands (Babin and Carder 1996; Gupta and Lord 1998; Law and Braun 2000). An improvement in memory does not guarantee an improvement in brand attitude, however. In fact, the consumer's lack of awareness that the brand inclusion

is an attempt to influence brand attitude is central to the effectiveness of the placement (Bhatnagar, Aksoy, and Malkoc 2004). The increased processing accompanying prominence may have a down side (Campbell 1995) because it can cause an increase in counterarguing (Friestad and Wright 1994; Wright 1974) and irritation (Aaker and Bruzzone 1985; Ha 1996). Specifically, if the placement is pulled from the background where it merely creates a context from which drama or humor emerges, to the foreground where the humor is created as a vehicle to highlight the product, then prominent placements may interrupt the viewers' "suspension of disbelief." At this point, the persuasive intent interrupts the editorial content, which may cause irritation (Ha 1996).

### PERSUASION KNOWLEDGE

According to the PKM (Friestad and Wright 1994), people develop knowledge about how, why, and when a message is intended to influence them, to help them "cope" with persuasive episodes. Previous research using the PKM investigates situations where consumers must contend with a sales agent (Campbell 1995; Campbell and Kirmani 2000) or an advertising message (Ahluwalia and Burnkrant 2004). The very presence of a sales agent or an advertisement is cause for the activation of persuasion knowledge. Exposure to product placements is different because the consumer is viewing a movie or a television show as a form of entertainment. Since product placements are present in a limited number of television shows, there is no reason for the activation of persuasion knowledge on every television-viewing occasion. In fact, one of the perceived advantages of product placement is that when consumers are presented with a stimulus and a context that is construed to be an entertaining experience, they will not activate "their marketplace-related social intelligence, however deeply developed . . . leaving their performance unguided by that domain-specific knowledge" (Wright 2002, p. 680). That is, the advantage that product placements have over traditional television advertising is ascribed to the placement's hidden motive of persuasion (Bhatnagar, Aksoy, and Malkoc 2004). Marketing practitioners perceive product placements as vehicles by which brand promotion occurs under consumers' radar. When will a product placement be caught by the radar?

Persuasion knowledge is not chronically activated after its acquisition; instead, it is available for activation when the consumer believes a message is intended to persuade. When a tactic is perceived to have persuasive intent, the message will be affected by the *change of meaning principle*, which has implications for how consumers interpret the actions of persuasive agents. When a change of meaning occurs, viewers may "disengage somewhat from the ongoing interaction, draw inferences of some sort, get distracted from the message . . . or discount what the spokesperson says" (Friestad and Wright

1994, p. 13). If a viewer notices that a placement is pushed from the background to the foreground, it may cause a change in meaning for that viewer.

### Program Liking and Persuasion Knowledge

Viewers who are affectively focused on the program are more sensitive to interruption (Edwards, Li, and Lee 2002). A viewer who is more involved in the show may notice placements more, particularly if the placement is perceived as more than a prop used to create a convincing setting. Viewers who are higher in program liking (HPL) are more attentive because they look forward to watching a program to satisfy their entertainment goals. Increased attention will be evidenced by better explicit memory for a placement. Increased attention may also be accompanied by a realization that a brand has been “placed” in the program, which may disengage the viewer from the “reality” created by the program. It “makes one conscious, or more conscious than otherwise, that the other party sees you as someone on whom they think persuasion tactics can be or need to be used” (Friestad and Wright 1994, p. 13). This realization may be particularly off-putting for HPL viewers, as they have very positive feelings toward the program.

Viewers who are lower in program liking (LPL) are less likely to be attentive while watching a television program because they are less reliant on the program to satisfy their entertainment goals. The lower level of attention will be evidenced by low levels of explicit memory for a placement. Lower levels of attention are unlikely to be accompanied by perceptions that a placement is intrusive. Why would people watch a program they feel less liking for, or may even be neutral about? According to Eurodata TV, Americans watched a daily average of 4 hours and 25 minutes of television in 2003. The global average is not much lower, at 3 hours and 39 minutes per day. Given this incredible volume of viewing, it is difficult to believe that only highly liked programs are watched. There are other reasons people watch television programs: Viewers may watch the program to pass time, because they feel like watching television, perhaps the program is the best program on at the moment, and/or because the viewer in question is watching television with an HPL viewer. In any case, the viewing experience is not as absorbing for the LPL viewers. We expect that they will be less likely to explicitly remember the placements or to react negatively toward them.

### Prominence, Persuasion Knowledge, and Program Liking

Recent reviews of product placement have hypothesized that negative attitude effects after exposure to prominent product placements are plausible (Bhatnagar, Aksoy, and Malkoc 2004; McCarty 2004). We propose that there are conditions under

which prominent placements will negatively affect brand attitude. Specifically, an increase in explicit memory for a placement may be accompanied not only by the retrieval of strategies to defend against persuasion, but also by a more negative brand attitude. During exposure to prominent placements, HPL viewers may realize that a brand is placed in the program to influence their brand attitude. At this point, the PKM model predicts that viewers would experience the change in meaning principle, just as they do during traditional advertising messages (Friestad and Wright 1995). We propose that the placement may be interpreted by HPL viewers as intrusive, irritating, and/or distracting, because they are most sensitive to intrusions of the viewing experience (Edwards, Li, and Lee 2002).

*H1: HPL viewers will be more likely than LPL viewers to remember prominent placements.*

*H2: HPL viewers who have been exposed to prominent product placements will report lower brand attitudes for the placed brands than HPL viewers who were not exposed to the placements.*

*H3: The negative effect of exposure to prominent product placements will be greater for HPL viewers than for LPL viewers.*

### Priming and Persuasion Knowledge

When will persuasion knowledge be activated by LPL viewers? The PKM predicts that as soon as an ulterior motive is perceived, persuasion knowledge will be activated (Friestad and Wright 1994, 1995). Campbell and Kirmani (2000) investigate the accessibility of an ulterior motive as an antecedent to the activation of persuasion knowledge. They use a contextual prime, an ulterior motive, and find that when an ulterior motive is highly accessible, activation of persuasion knowledge is more likely. LPL viewers may activate persuasion knowledge if exposure to a prominent placement is preceded with a prime of the persuasive intent of the placement. Given that the persuasion knowledge of the HPL viewers is hypothesized to be activated by the placement alone, the inclusion of a prime is not expected to result in further damage to brand attitude.

*H4: LPL viewers exposed to a persuasive-intent prime before viewing a prominent placement will have lower brand attitudes than LPL viewers not exposed to a prime.*

## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

The study includes three manipulated independent variables and one measured independent variable. To test the first three hypotheses, exposure to a placement (placement, no placement) and placement prominence (prominent, subtle) are manipulated,

and program liking is measured (high, low). To test the fourth hypothesis, exposure to a persuasive-intent prime is included (prime, no prime). Participants were told that they would be providing data for two independent studies. The main study was called the Segmentation Study, and included viewing an episode of *Seinfeld*. Participants were told that the second study should occur near the end of the research session, whenever the second administrator knocked on the door. The second study occurred at exactly the same time in each session. The casual nature of the timing was intended to reduce any connection between the two studies.

### Participants and Design

Two hundred and fifteen undergraduate students received partial credit in a marketing course in exchange for their participation in the studies. A  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  design was used for the study. The factors were product placement (present, absent), prime (present, absent), and placement prominence (prominent, subtle). Participants were also divided into program liking (high, low) on the basis of a program liking scale.

Two different episodes of the sitcom *Seinfeld* were used as the stimulus. The episodes were selected from a content analysis of 180 episodes. The episodes were chosen because the branded products were relevant to the sample of university students.

Participants assigned to view the first episode served as the control group for participants assigned to the second episode, and vice versa. Therefore, each participant supplied two observations. For example, if a participant was assigned to view Video #1, an observation for the placement-only condition for Brand #1 and Brand #2 was supplied. The same participant also provided an observation for the control condition for Brand #3 and Brand #4. The inclusion of a control group was critical, as pretesting cannot guarantee that the brand attitudes are equivalent across the brands included in the placements. Instead, we compared brand attitude in the control condition to brand attitude after seeing a placement.

Two tapes were made for each episode. One tape included the placements for two brands only. The other tape included commercials for the placed brands and the placements. The commercials were used as persuasive-intent primes in the prime conditions.

### Placements

There were two target placements in each episode. On each tape, one placement occurred in the first half of the program, and the other appeared in the second half of the program. The placements were chosen to investigate the effects of different levels of prominence. As mentioned earlier, placement prominence has been operationalized with a variety of variables. We have categorized these variables as falling into three categories.

Prominent placements are connected to the plot (Russell 2002), are either audio or audiovisual (Gupta and Lord 1998; Law and Braun 2000; Roehm, Roehm, and Boone 2004; Russell 2002), and are mentioned more than once or seen on the screen for a number of seconds (Gupta and Lord 1998; Roehm, Roehm, and Boone 2004). We sought to find very prominent placements and extremely subtle placements. The prominent placements were chosen because they (1) were connected to the plot, (2) were mentioned more than once or were on the screen for more than five seconds, and (3) were either audio or audiovisual. The subtle placements were props only. They were (1) visual, (2) not related to the plot, and (3) seen only briefly.

The prominent placements were for Pantene shampoo and M&M's candy. Pantene becomes part of the plot (audio; three mentions) as Kramer was enamored with a woman who uses the product. M&M's candy is introduced as an audiovisual placement of the candy characters from the television commercial that George used to explain a situation to Jerry (audio; one mention), visual (approximately 41 seconds). The subtle placements were for Ruffles potato chips and Diet Coke. Ruffles (visual; less than 5 seconds) were consumed by George in Jerry's apartment. Diet Coke was consumed by Jerry (visual; less than 5 seconds). Only a portion of the Diet Coke logo is visible.

The prominent and subtle categories were corroborated by comments of three advertising industry experts. Each judge had more than 10 years experience as an advertising director. The judges viewed the videos and responded to the following questions:

1. If a 30-second commercial cost 100 units of currency, how much would a client pay for each of the placements?
2. Please rate the likelihood that a client would believe the placement would be noticed by consumers (use 100 points to indicate likelihood, i.e., 0 = no chance, 100 = guaranteed).
3. What communication objective(s) would each of the placements satisfy? For instance, remind consumers of the brand, change consumers' impressions of the brand, create new associations to the brand, convince consumers to use the brand (or use it more frequently), and/or others (please specify).
4. Please select three words to describe each of the placements.
5. What are the risks associated with each of the placements?

The judges reported that the Pantene (100, 90, 95) and M&M's (90, 85, 90) placements would be worth substantially more to the client than the Diet Coke (5, 0, 0) and Ruffles (10, 0, 0) placements. In fact, two of the judges believed that the subtle placements might not be billable items, but instead, used as a bonus in a larger deal. All of the judges stated that

the Pantene (100, 90, 90) and M&Ms (90, 90, 85) placements would be much more likely to be noticed. The judges also indicated that they thought the prominent placements might be used for any or all of the last three objectives, but that the subtle placements would, at most, remind the consumer about the brand. Words such as prominent, obvious, and obtrusive were used to describe the Pantene and M&Ms placements, whereas words such as subtle, inconspicuous, and barely noticeable were used to describe the Diet Coke and Ruffles placements. Finally, the only risk mentioned by the judges was the possibility of “going undetected by the consumer” for the brands in the subtle placements.

### Prime Manipulation

Participants viewed advertisements for the placed brands at the beginning of the program, before viewing either of the placements. The advertisement was intended to remind the viewer of the ulterior motive for a placement: persuasion by association. The PKM predicts that if the advertisements activate persuasion knowledge in viewers, then they should be able to defend themselves against the persuasive effects of exposure to product placements.

### Program Liking

Program liking was measured with Murry, Lastovicka, and Singh's (1992) six-item program liking scale. Participants read statements such as “If I knew this program was going to be on television, I would look forward to watching it,” and responded on a seven-point scale anchored from “disagree strongly” (−3) to “agree strongly” (+3). Two of the items were reversed scored. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was high ( $\alpha = .87$ ), and all of the correlations were highly significant.

The sum of the program liking score was used in a median split to divide the group into those participants who really enjoyed the program (high liking group [HPL],  $n = 109$ ) and those who were less enthusiastic about the program (low liking group [LPL],  $n = 106$ ). The scale scores could potentially range from +18 to −18. The actual range in scores was +18 to +9 for the high-liking group and +8 to −12 for the low-liking group.

### Procedure

Participants signed up to take part in two separate and independent studies. The first of these was referred to as “The *Seinfeld* Study,” and was purportedly designed to investigate how viewers rated various aspects of the program and the relationship of their ratings to other opinions and attitudes they held. The cover story for the brand attitude measures was that there was a second, independent study titled “The

Brand Comparison Study.” The second study was alleged to be a pretest for an honors student. Participants were told that the pretest was required to measure undergraduate's attitudes toward certain brands, which would be a critical part of the Honors student's work. The importance of collecting the data in two supposedly unrelated studies was essential to the investigation of brand attitudes. Without the separation of studies, participants may have figured out the true objective of the study when rating the brands. Thus, to reinforce the closure of the first study, and the commencement of the second, the participants were handed over to a different facilitator. The new facilitator handed out the Brand Comparison study, which was printed on different colored paper and set up in a different format. Finally, the original administrator returned, claiming to finish up the *Seinfeld* Study.

The *Seinfeld* Study was administered first within each group. Participants viewed an episode of *Seinfeld* with 4 to 6 other students. Immediately after the program, participants completed the program-liking measure. Participants were then asked to fill in another questionnaire by a different researcher claiming to be interested in the preferences of participants for brands in certain product categories. Participants placed an X on a 100-mm continuous scale to rate each brand. The scales were anchored by the labels “dislike” (0) and “like” (100). The survey included 20 brands; the 4 target brands were incorporated into the list.

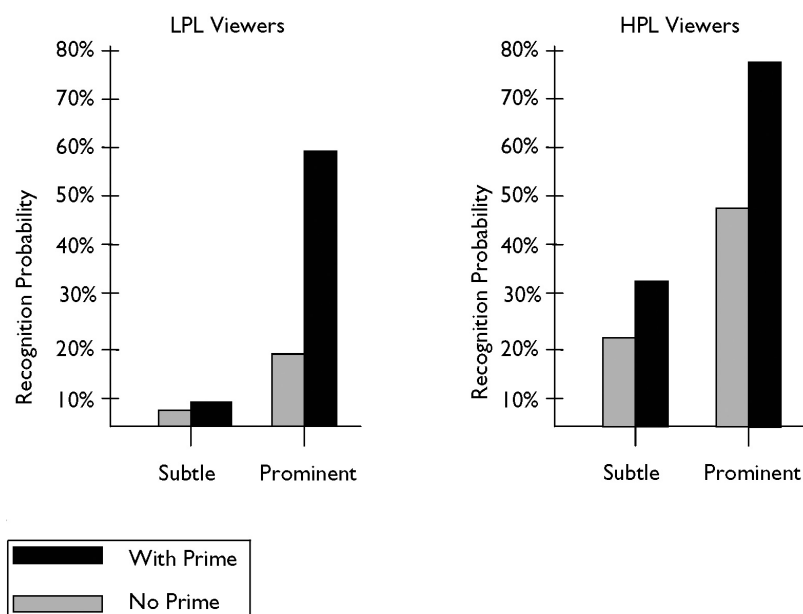
Finally, the original facilitator returned, stating that a final component of his study required completion. At this time, the explicit memory measures (recall and recognition tests) were administered. Participants were asked to list the brands and products they could remember hearing or seeing in the *Seinfeld* episode (placements). To further support the cover story, participants were asked for their preferences for television shows and other leisure activities. Participants were asked to report what they believed was the purpose of the study before the debriefing. None of the students believed that the study was testing the effect of placements on brand attitude, liking for the brands, or thoughts about the brands for the products placed in the program. Many gathered that the main objective was to measure memory for the placements, which would be expected, given that they provided memory reports as part of the *Seinfeld* Study.

## Results

### *Prominence Manipulation Check*

As expected, more prominent placements were more likely to be remembered than less prominent placements in both the no prime,  $M_{\text{subtle}} = .18$  versus  $M_{\text{prominent}} = .41$ ,  $t(116) = 3.28$ ,  $p < .01$ , and the prime condition,  $M_{\text{subtle}} = .22$  versus  $M_{\text{prominent}} = .69$ ,  $t(94) = 6.00$ ,  $p < .0001$ .

FIGURE 1  
Memory for Placements



Notes: LPL = lower program liking; HPL = higher program liking.

### Hypothesis Testing

HPL viewers were more likely than LPL viewers to remember seeing the prominent placement in the no prime condition,  $M_{\text{HPL}} = .48$  versus  $M_{\text{LPL}} = .20$ ,  $t(57) = 2.17$ ,  $p < .001$ , but not in the prime condition,  $M_{\text{HPL}} = .77$  versus  $M_{\text{LPL}} = .59$ ,  $t(46) = 1.53$ , *n.s.* This was expected, as the purpose of the prime manipulation was to make the placement and the persuasive intent more noticeable to LPL viewers. HPL viewers had better memory for prominent placements than for subtle placements in the no prime condition,  $M_{\text{subtle}} = .22$  versus  $M_{\text{prominent}} = .48$ ,  $t(86) = 3.13$ ,  $p < .01$ , and the prime condition,  $M_{\text{subtle}} = .33$  versus  $M_{\text{prominent}} = .77$ ,  $t(50) = 4.24$ ,  $p < .0001$ . Although the prime improved memory for the subtle placements, it did not eliminate the memory performance advantage of the prominent placement. The prominent placements were more remembered, particularly by the HPL viewers. Hypothesis 1 is therefore supported (see Figure 1).

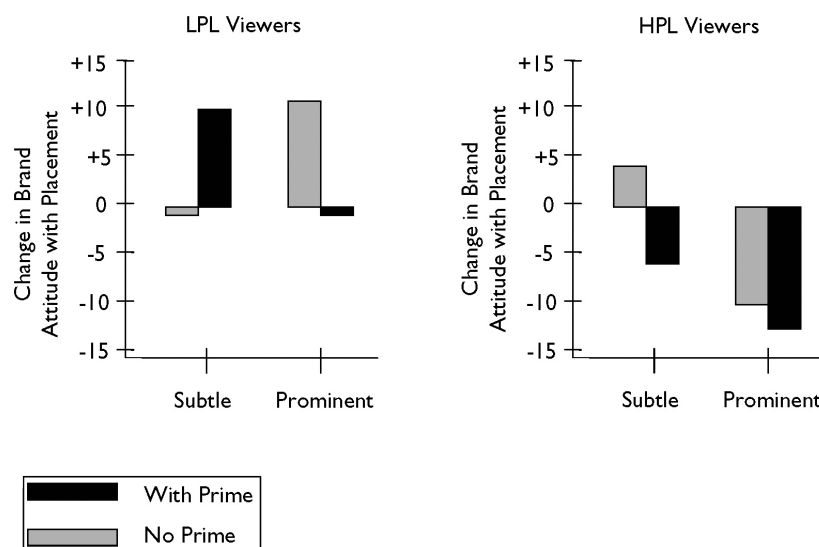
Better memory for the prominent placements is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for the claim that HPL viewers activated persuasion knowledge when viewing a prominent placement because activating persuasion knowledge results in elaboration on the message and the agent's intent. If viewers are not as involved in the program—as would be the case for LPL viewers, for instance—they are less likely to think about the placements or the intent of their inclusion. Better memory for the placements overall indicates that the HPL viewers were paying more attention to the details of the program. The

data support the assumption,  $M_{\text{HPL}} = .45$  versus  $M_{\text{LPL}} = .24$ ,  $t(212) = 2.73$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Hypothesis 2 states that in the no priming condition, HPL viewers who have been exposed to prominent placements will report lower brand attitudes for the placed brands than HPL viewers who have not been exposed to the placement (the control group). Hypothesis 3 states that the negative shift will be greater for HPL viewers than LPL viewers. An ANOVA (analysis of variance) run on brand attitude including independent factors of placement (placement, no placement) and program liking (high, low) for the no priming, prominent placement condition revealed the predicted two-way interaction,  $F(1, 103) = 6.75$ ,  $p < .01$ . For HPL viewers, there was a significant negative shift in brand attitude after exposure to prominent placements,  $M_{\text{no place}} = 68.95$ ,  $M_{\text{place}} = 58.60$ ,  $t(57) = 2.24$ ,  $p < .05$ . For LPL viewers, there was a significant positive shift in brand attitude after exposure to prominent placements,  $M_{\text{no place}} = 68.85$ ,  $M_{\text{place}} = 79.70$ ,  $t(46) = 1.96$ ,  $p < .05$ . Hypotheses 2 and 3 are therefore supported. The positive effects of a prominent placement on brand attitude for LPL viewers replicate Russell's (2002) findings, where brand attitude improved after exposure to a placement in an unfamiliar "program."

What about more subtle placements—is it possible they are under the radar of the HPL viewers? An ANOVA run on brand attitude including independent factors of placement (placement, no placement) and program liking (high, low) for the no priming, subtle placement condition did not reveal

FIGURE 2  
Effects of Placement on Brand Attitude (Between-Subject Effects)



Notes: LPL = lower program liking; HPL = higher program liking.

significant results. The brand attitude of both HPL viewers and LPL viewers was unchanged after exposure to a subtle placement. LPL viewers did not notice the placements ( $M_{\text{subtle}} = 7\%$ ), but more than one-fifth of the HPL viewers noticed them ( $M_{\text{subtle}} = 22\%$ ). There do not appear to be any mere exposure effects for LPL viewers, and there do not appear to be positive associative transfer effects for the HPL viewers. Although the subtle placements were noticed by some of the HPL viewers, exposure did not result in a systematic shift in brand attitude; the correlation between memory for subtle placements and brand attitude is not significant ( $r = -.07, n.s.$ ) in the placement condition. See Figure 2 for an illustration of the differences in the placement and no placement conditions.

#### Prime Results

The purpose of the inclusion of the prime was to investigate whether priming the LPL viewers of the persuasive intent of the prominent placements might activate persuasion knowledge. With persuasion knowledge activated, LPL viewers could be less susceptible to the brand attitude effects noted in the no priming condition for prominent placements. An ANOVA run on brand attitude for LPL viewers with priming, placement, and prominence as the independent factors revealed a significant three-way interaction,  $F(1, 210) = 3.91, p < .05$ . The positive shift found in the no priming condition was not found in the priming condition; brand attitude for LPL viewers did not shift significantly for prominent placements,  $M_{\text{no place}} = 67.67, M_{\text{place}} = 65.20, t(59) = .38, n.s.$  The results suggest that

persuasion knowledge was activated by the advertisement for LPL viewers. Memory for the prominent placement for LPL viewers increased to 59%, but was not significantly related to brand attitude ( $r = -.12, n.s.$ ). It may be that the exposure to the advertisement caused them to notice the placement, but it is also possible that the reported recognition of the prominent placement was a misattribution of increased brand accessibility following exposure to additional brand information in the advertisement. However, if the latter explanation caused the increase in memory, then misattributions should also be present in the *no placement* condition, but they were not (2% reported a placement when none existed).

Brand attitude for LPL viewers did shift significantly for subtle placements,  $M_{\text{no place}} = 66.98, M_{\text{place}} = 77.28, t(59) = 2.01, p < .05$ . The shift was in a positive direction. This is likely to be the result of a mere exposure effect, as memory for the placement did not increase in this condition. Therefore, very few viewers explicitly remembered the placement, but brand attitude was more positive.

As expected, the prime has no effect on HPL viewers' brand attitudes for prominent placements; the negative shift in brand attitude found without a prime is also found here,  $M_{\text{no place}} = 72.51, M_{\text{place}} = 59.53, t(45) = 2.54, p < .05$ . This was expected because persuasion knowledge was activated in the placement-only condition; the addition of a prime was redundant. The prime also has no effect on HPL viewers' brand attitudes for subtle placements; the absence of shift found without a prime is also found here,  $M_{\text{no place}} = 68.43, M_{\text{place}} = 62.88, t(45) = 1.15, n.s.$  See Table 1 for the cell means.

**TABLE I**  
**Brand Attitude and Recognition Results**

	No prime condition			
	Subtle placements		Prominent placements	
	No placement	Placement	No Placement	Placement
<i>LPL viewers</i>				
Brand attitude	67.67	65.20	68.85	79.70*
Memory		.07		.20
<i>HPL viewers</i>				
Brand attitude	63.84	67.66	68.95	58.59*
Memory		.22		.48
	Prime condition			
	Subtle placements		Prominent placements	
	No placement	Placement	No placement	Placement
<i>LPL viewers</i>				
Brand attitude	66.99	77.28*	67.91	66.05
Memory		.09		.59
<i>HPL viewers</i>				
Brand attitude	68.43	62.88	72.51	59.53*
Memory		.33		.77

*Notes:* LPL = lower program liking; HPL = higher program liking.  
 \* Indicates significant difference for the placement manipulation.

## Discussion of the Results

### *The No Priming Condition*

HPL viewers not only reported lower brand attitudes after exposure to prominent placements; they were also likely to recognize the placement. Some of the HPL viewers expressed irritation in the recall protocols, with statements such as “the Pantene placement—they mentioned the brand about 100 times,” “there was a placement for Pantene that was really annoying and obvious—does Seinfeld really need this money?” and “we saw an M&Ms character, which had nothing to do with the show and wasn’t funny at all.” On the other hand, brand attitudes for LPL viewers were positively influenced after exposure to prominent placements. Memory for the prominent placements was relatively low, at 20%. The positive shift in brand attitude for LPL viewers may be the result of mere exposure effects given the low memory performance, inflated brand attitude, and the significant negative correlation between memory and brand attitude after exposure to prominent placements ( $r = -.56, p < .05$ ). In any case, persuasion knowledge did not appear to be activated by LPL viewers while viewing the program.

### *The Priming Condition*

The pattern of results in the priming condition is consistent with H4. The hypothesis predicted that the activation of persuasion knowledge by LPL viewers after exposure to the persuasive-intent prime would eliminate any positive effects of exposure to prominent placements. These are the same prominent placements that caused a positive shift in the brand attitude of LPL viewers in the no priming condition.

As expected, the pattern of results for HPL viewers did not change with the addition of a priming manipulation. The prominent placements alone were enough to activate the persuasion knowledge of the HPL viewers; the addition of a persuasive prime was not expected to have an effect, and it did not.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Does exposure to product placements always result in more positive brand attitudes? The results presented here provide evidence that prominent placements viewed by HPL consumers can result in lower reported brand attitudes compared with the brand attitudes reported by a similar group in a control



condition. We use the PKM to explain the results. The HPL viewers notice the prominent placements; this is evidenced by their ability to explicitly remember seeing the placements. The HPL viewers appear to experience a change in meaning principle. Activating their persuasion knowledge to consider the intent of the placements interrupts their viewing experience. Ironically, these are the placements that are most expensive for the marketer. Some consolation may be found in the fact that prominent placements positively affect the brand attitudes of consumers with moderate to low levels of program liking.

Why would less-interested viewers be positively affected by prominent placements when viewers who really like the program are not? This may seem counterintuitive if the mechanism for placements is that consumers actively make associations between well-liked characters and brands. The findings for LPL consumers are consistent with mere exposure effects. For instance, it is only in conditions where explicit memory for the placement is very low that brand attitude after the placement is higher. In other words, when LPL viewers don't remember seeing the placement, exposure affects brand accessibility, and ultimately, reported brand attitude. Conversely, consumers who like the show are quite negative toward the prominent placements. They also remember seeing the placements. This suggests that they generate negative thoughts during exposure that damage brand attitude. This explanation is supported further by the fact that priming the placement with a persuasive-intent prime in the guise of an advertisement did not affect already damaged attitudes. Given that they enjoy the program, the negative thoughts may be associated with the interruption or distraction a prominent placement may engender.

How does the combination of placement and advertising affect brand attitudes? An advertisement seen before a prominent placement never helps, and sometimes hurts, the effects of product placement. The significantly positive effects of prominent placements on the attitudes of viewers lower in program liking were eliminated when seen with an advertisement. The explanation provided here is that the advertisement primed the viewer of the persuasive intent of the placement. Because there was no condition where the ad was seen after a prominent placement, however, it is impossible to rule out an alternative explanation of overexposure. An advertisement seen before a subtle placement never hurts, and sometimes helps, the effects of product placement. The null effects of subtle placements on the attitudes of viewers lower in program liking were replaced by significant positive effects on brand attitude when seen with an advertisement.

There are other important limitations to this work. In order for program liking to be more than a measure of viewers' one-shot impressions of a program, we had to use a television program that participants would hold fairly strong feelings about. Using a real program, real placements, and current television commercials meant that variables other than subtlety

could have varied between the subtle and prominent conditions. We also wanted to ensure that the commercials would not be novel, because that might draw unusual attention to the ads. Again, the advertisements varied on a number of different dimensions, not just the brand they were advertising. This limitation is minimized by the fact that the advertisements were simply used as a prime, and not considered to be representative of all ads. Another important limitation is that it is impossible to ascertain from the results reported here whether it is the eradication of mere exposure effects or the activation of persuasion knowledge that caused the reduction of prominent placement effects for the LPL viewers because there were no measures of persuasion knowledge collected in this study. Finally, we measured brand attitude directly after exposure to the program and the ads. We do not provide evidence of the longevity of these effects. Limitations aside, this research uncovers some limits to the positive effects of product placements previously reported in the literature and reveals important considerations in the use of this popular marketing tool. It is important to note that the damage to brand attitudes reported here were not predicted by the industry experts we recruited to comment on the placements.

Future research might consider whether there are conditions under which the prominence or the frequency of placements affects the attitude toward the program instead of, or in addition to, the attitude toward the brand. To date, the focus has been on attitude toward the brand only; the connectedness constructs recently developed by Russell, Norman, and Heckler (2004) would be useful in investigating the potential changes in the viewers' attitudes toward the program.

As placements become an increasingly important part of the media landscape, it is critical to understand how and when they are effective. Friestad and Wright (1994) argue that persuasion knowledge evolves over time; as consumers become more familiar with a tactic, their interpretations and evaluations change. They note that as comparative advertising increased in the 1970s and 1980s, the increased savvy of consumers toward the comparative strategy altered their reactions to the advertisements. In the same manner, as the consumer develops more sophisticated persuasion knowledge about less intrusive tactics, such as product placement, the effects reported in the priming condition may become increasingly common.

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