

“Et Tu, Brute?”: A Case for Consumer Backlash against Perceived Product Placements

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ABSTRACT

The practice of placing products within the content of various media is an increasingly popular marketing tool, mainly due to the covert manner of inclusion and naturalistic settings in which brands are portrayed. This research explores conditions under which the persuasive effects of placements get enhanced or mitigated. Several propositions with respect to consumer reactions to product placements versus advertisements are put forth, specifically in terms of the impact that awareness of commercial intent has on persuasive outcomes. Results of a series of experiments show that a product placement has the potential to be a double-edged sword that could generate consumer backlash. Compared to advertisements, placements increase memory for brand and claims, but result in lower trust in brand and in the medium, specifically when the consumer discerns sponsor’s commercial intent.

Key words: Product placements, advertising, consumer behavior, persuasion knowledge, brand trust, motive purity, non-traditional, promotion tools, blurred communications, hybrid messages, magazine media, commercial intent, memory, media credibility, experimental methodology.

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1. Introduction

The need to rise above the cacophony of marketing communications aimed constantly towards the consuming public has fueled interest in non-traditional methods that companies can use to get their messages across. The confluence of commercial persuasion and entertainment media, that frequently falls under the category of ‘blurred communications’ (Solomon and Englis, 1996), is one such solution. Brand sponsors pay for messages that are embedded within featured entertainment but their identity is kept hidden. Tremendous growth in popularity and industry organization over the past two decades make it critical for marketing researchers to gain deeper insights into this phenomenon. This research aims to provide insights into issues, largely pertinent to potential downsides of product placements, that the authors believe warrant further investigation. Specifically, potential backlash effects (especially in terms of lowered attitudes and trust) against brand sponsors and participating media, as consumers become increasingly aware of the covert commercial aspect of product placements, are explored.

Three laboratory experiments (two conducted, one planned) are intended towards this end. Paper based scenarios about brand placements of a hypothetical vitamin brand within a hypothetical magazine article are used in Study 1. Trust in brand, perceived motive purity of the medium involved, and feelings of betrayal in the medium are explored as subjects are made more versus less aware that the magazine has been paid by the vitamin manufacturer to include brand claims. Study 2 uses more realistic stimuli presented as excerpts from a hypothetical magazine, and compares persuasion outcomes when claims about an unfamiliar brand of instant soup are placed versus advertised. Memory as well as trust measures for the brand and the medium are measured. It is predicted that while placements may sometimes lead to better memory outcomes, they have the potential to create a consumer backlash if consumers feel they are being manipulated by covert marketing attempts. This backlash effect is under investigated in existing placement literature and the critical implications this can have for participating media is ignored. Proposed Study 3 will investigate whether this backlash is exacerbated when it occurs in more credible media. An overview of extant knowledge on product placements is presented below, followed by investigations into predictions, studies conducted and planned future studies.

2. Theoretical Background

Nature of Product Placements

Whereas blurred communications span all entertainment media, its most established form, product placements in movies, is not a new phenomenon. Long before an alien was eating Reese’s Pieces in the 1980s movie *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial* (Winski, 1982), tobacco companies had actors and actresses smoking cigarettes in movies of the 1920s (Schudson, 1984). In this multi-million dollar industry, once informal arrangements between Hollywood executives and

brand sponsors are now organized symbiotic relationships. Brands usually insinuate themselves into media content in return for commercial considerations (Gupta and Gould, 1997), allowing producers to generate revenues and corporations to promote their brands at the same time. More formally, blurred or hybrid messages are a category of communications where brand sponsors pay for a message but are not identified (Balasubramanian, 1994; Sandler and Secunda, 1993; Solomon and Englis, 1996). Of these, 'product placements' refer to instances where commercial motives exist for the inclusion of branded products in movies and T.V. programs (Balasubramanian, 1994). Just as several media are available for message dissemination, brand placements can occur in any of them. The term product placements is used loosely here to refer to branded inclusion in any medium, and not just in movies or T.V. programs. Some advantages of such non-traditional methods of communication that have been proposed in past literature are briefly touched upon below.

Advantages of Product Placements

Past research has argued for the superiority of blurred communications over more conventional forms of marketing practices on several grounds. Obvious amongst these are reasons such as the wide reach and longevity of featured entertainment. Consensus additionally appears to have formed around the idea that the hidden commercial intent of placed messages enhances persuasion outcomes (Balasubramanian, 1994). In other words, people do not know that companies pay to place their brands within popular media. Unless consumers realize that marketers are attempting to persuade them, the likelihood of setting up mental barriers, becoming skeptical, and carefully scrutinizing brand claims is low. The central assumption of the argument is that branded inclusions within entertainment are largely perceived as artistic expression and divorced from marketing efforts. This begs the question of whether consumers are really unaware that companies pay media to place their brands. If consumers are indeed aware of the commercial nature of placements, then serious implications arise for the level of credence that is put in the brand, the degree of trust that is placed in the medium and feelings of betrayal as well. Past research on the placement efficacy is summarized below in an attempt to better understand these issues.

Efficacy of Product Placements

Product placements have been of growing interest to researchers as well as practitioners of marketing in recent years (DeLorme and Reid, 1999; Gupta, Gould, and Lord, 1998; Karrh, 1994; Magiera, 1990). Actual efficacy of the practice, however, has not been well tested empirically. Evidence that is available is ambiguous and tends not to extend much beyond the findings regarding the positive effect product placements have on brand memory (Babin and Carder, 1996; Baker and Crawford, 1996; Gupta, Gould, and Lord, 1998; Ong and Meri, 1994; Steertz, 1987; Vollmers and Mizerski, 1994; Zimmer and DeLorme, 1997) and evaluation. Whereas quantitative measures such as box office ticket sales are sometimes used as proxies for the number of impressions created, such estimates are at best approximations of the true impact that placements have. Additional measures that this research identifies as significant are elaborated upon below.

Attitudes towards Placed Brands

Companies expect that consumers form attitudes towards brands based on the contexts in which they are presented. The seamless manner of brand inclusion within media content makes it easier for people to make paired associations between the context and the placed brand, thereby exploiting tenets of the theory of classical conditioning (Gorn, 1982). Sponsors have some degree of control over the manner in which their brands get portrayed and it is probably safe to assume that products generally get placed within positive contexts. These positive feelings engendered via storylines hopefully translate into the formation of positive attitudes towards placed brands (Balasubramanian, 1994).

Trust in Brand and Trust in Media

A proposed advantage of product placements over other forms of persuasion (e.g., advertisements) is the natural and covert method of message delivery. Placed information is usually embedded within a social context and can be assimilated into the storyline. Key arguments for the effectiveness of these embedded messages center on the hidden commercial intent of placements. Past research (Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994; Calfee & Ringold, 1988; Friestad & Wright, 1994) suggests that consumers react with skepticism in order to cope with persuasion attempts that are noticed (e.g., through advertisements and sales people that are clearly sponsored by companies). Proponents of the above view--that placements overcome skepticism and closer examination of product related claims (Balasubramanian, 1994)--base their arguments on the assumption that media productions successfully hide the commercial nature of placements by incorporating brands into the storyline in a natural way. If such intentions are not obvious to the consumer, trust in the brand and trust in the sponsoring media should not be affected negatively.

Consumer awareness of persuasive intent.

According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright 1994), individuals develop beliefs about how, why, and when marketers attempt to influence them. Individuals therefore develop 'persuasion knowledge' and devise strategies to cope with this knowledge. Kelly's work on attributions (1972) has implications for the influence of consumer awareness of persuasive intent on trust in brand and trust in media. It is suggested that message recipients evaluate the motives of message communicators and infer reporting biases (Eagly, Wood, and Chaiken (1978) in which communicators are seen as insincere in reporting accurate versions of events. Such attributions of communicator insincerity and manipulative-ness (Mills and Jellison, 1967) result in lower degrees of trust. In the case of placements, consumers may infer reporting bias on the part of the brand and sponsoring medium if commercial motivations underlying brand inclusions become known. More formally, we propose that:

- H1:** As awareness of the paid nature of placements increases, brand evaluations will decline.
- H2:** As awareness of the paid nature of placements increases, perceived motive purity of the participating media will decline.

H3: As awareness of the paid nature of placements increases, feelings of betrayal against the participating media will increase.

3. Study One

3.1. Method

Overview. A preliminary study was designed to test the hypotheses formulated. Subjects were asked to read a summary of an article recounting a day in the life of a typical student, recently featured in a magazine. The hypotheses were tested using a 2 (high awareness versus low awareness) cell between-subjects experimental design.

Subjects and Procedure. Two hundred and seventy two business students at a major university in Canada participated in the study. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Participants spent no more than 10 minutes on the entire task and received course credit upon completion of the study.

Stimuli. Participants were asked to read a summary of an article that featured a story about a day in the life of a college student. The feature was a narrative by a student about the daily rituals that a typical student goes through during the course of a day including going to classes, socializing with friends, exercising, studying, and the like. Included within the story was an explanation of how vitamins help boost energy and increase the student's productivity. The story ended by talking about the joys of student life. Before responding to the dependent variable measures, subjects in the high awareness condition were asked to assume that they found out that the manufacturer of the vitamins paid the magazine to include this vitamin brand within the story. Subjects on the low awareness condition were not told anything. Subjects were then asked to respond to several dependent variables and manipulation check items.

Dependent variables. The dependent variables measured were brand evaluations, motive purity of the medium and feelings of betrayal towards the medium. Please refer to Appendix A for a detailed description of the items used to measure the dependent variables and the manipulation check for awareness of sponsored placements.

3.2. Results

Manipulation check. The manipulation of subjects' awareness of the paid nature of the vitamin brand inclusion was successful and these perceptions were significantly greater when subjects were highly aware (mean=6.03; $F(1,270)=19.03$; $p<0.01$) versus less aware of the magazine's commercial intents (mean=5.34).

Dependent variables

Brand evaluation. Results indicate support for hypothesis 1 (i.e., that brand evaluations are adversely influenced by increased awareness of sponsored placements) and suggest that awareness of commercial intent leads to less favorable brand evaluations (see figure 1). Whereas subjects evaluated the brand more favorably when not aware of the sponsor's payment (mean=4.13), these evaluations dropped as awareness heightened (mean=3.61; $F(1,270)=12.90$, $p<0.01$).

Motive purity of medium. Results indicate support for hypothesis 2 and perceived motive purity of the magazine was significantly different in the low versus high awareness conditions (see figure 2). The subjects perceived the motives of the magazine to be purer and in the interests of the readers in the low awareness condition (mean = 4.07) and to less pure and more in the interests of the magazine itself in the high awareness condition (mean=3.15; $F(1,270)=22.23$, $p<0.01$).

Betrayal by medium. Results support hypothesis 3 (see figure 3) and indicate that subjects who were aware of the payment made by the sponsor tended to feel more betrayed (mean=4.05) as compared to the subjects who were not told anything (mean=3.36; $F(1,270)=14.82$, $p<0.01$).

3.3. Discussion

Results of study one indicate that awareness of payment by brand sponsor has a significant effect on consumer responses to product placements. High awareness results in lower brand evaluations, lower perceived purity of the magazine's motives and heightened feelings of betrayal. Several limitations of this study have been identified and will be addressed in further studies. The study does not account for subjects' prior beliefs about the general commercial nature of placements, uses single item measures for dependent variables, and uses scenarios that depict brand placement within magazines as opposed to a more realistic simulation of magazine media. Studies 2 and 3 have been designed to address some of these limitations (Study 2 conducted, Study 3 planned). An excerpt of a magazine containing brand placements was devised in Study 2. Further, multi-item scales to measure dependent variables were employed, and beliefs about brand sponsorship were measured rather than directly manipulated. Since product placements are advocated as a cost-effective and effective alternative to advertising within the majority of existing academic and managerial wisdom (Balasubramanian 1994), an additional goal is set for Study 2. Specifically, to investigate whether the efficacy of product placements (where commercial intent is supposed to be hidden) is indeed greater than the efficacy of advertisements (where commercial intent is blatant), especially when consumers become suspicious of the commercial intent of placements. If the persuasive intent underlying placements becomes apparent, consumers should be just as, if not more, skeptical of placed claims. Consumers that notice commercial intent, where they are not expected, might actually react more negatively to them (as in the case of product placements). This might well lead to a consumer backlash such that trust in the brand, and perceptions of the participating medium's motive purity might actually be adversely affected. In addition to replicating the findings of

study one in a different product category (instant soups), several additional effects are hypothesized:

H4: As awareness of the paid nature of brand inclusions increases, trust towards placed brands will decline to a greater extent when the brand is placed compared to when it is advertised.

H5: As awareness of the paid nature of brand inclusions increases, perceived motive purity of the participating media will decline to a greater extent when the brand is placed compared to when it is advertised.

The authors predict that it is sometimes better for firms to advertise claims versus placing them, given that a backlash at the grassroots level is possible when consumers become aware of placements in what appear to be covert attempts at manipulation. This intuition is reflected in the recent controversy over author Fay Weldon's latest work, 'The Bulgari Connection,' which is seen by many as a blatant marketing vehicle for the Bulgari jewellery brand versus being a novel (Bhatnagar, Aksoy and Malkoc 2002). The above hypotheses are tested in Study 2 described below.

4. Study Two

4.1. Method

Overview. Propositions of the research are tested in a 2 (communication vehicle: advertisements versus product placements) by 2 (awareness of commercial intent: high versus low) between subjects quasi-experimental design in which subjects were asked to go through the Living and Travel section of a hypothetical magazine. The magazine page contained a reporter's recount of a hiking trip as well as several advertisements. Health benefits of instant soup were presented either within the story of the article or were advertised.

Subjects and Procedure. One hundred and eleven undergraduate business students, juniors and seniors, at a major university in Turkey participated in the experiment. The language of instruction at the university is English and the results indicate that subjects did not have trouble following the article (mean ease of reading article = 5.7 out of 7). Subjects were asked to read a page belonging to a hypothetical magazine. They were told that this magazine was commonly found on an airline flying between Turkey and the United States of America. On reading the page, they were given the survey and hence subjects did not have a chance to see the article or the advertisements again. Next, subjects were asked to respond to the set of questions to which they could not go back to change. Participants spent no more than 15 minutes on the entire task and received course credit on completion of the study.

Stimuli. Subjects were asked to read a page of an airline's in-flight magazine. The 'Living and Travel' section of a hypothetical magazine called 'InFlight News' was depicted on the page. This page contained three advertisements as well as an article about camping in Turkey's Black

Sea Nature Parks with an illustrative photograph. The marketing message to be communicated was the ability of a particular brand of instant soup to fight coughs and colds. The communication method was manipulated by placing the message within one of the advertisements or within the article itself (i.e. the product placement). When the message was placed within an advertisement, the particular advertisement consisted of a headline: “Grandmothers Know...”; followed by a picture with the brand name and a person wearing a blanket and drinking soup; and the subheading: “As the wintry winds blow, the healing power of [soup brand] soothes your soul. Discover a Soup that Restores.” When the message was placed within the article, the health benefit was embedded within a story where the author and his friends travel to a nature park, remember their grandmother’s advice and drink chicken soup to fight coughs and colds in the cold weather. The picture of the person wearing a blanket and drinking soup is embedded within the article as the illustrative photograph. Prior brand attitude was controlled for by using an unfamiliar brand (Progresso) to Turkish subjects.

After reading the hypothetical magazine page, subjects responded to several dependent variable, and manipulation check items.

Dependent variables. The dependent variables measured were memory for the brand, brand trust, and perceived motive purity of the medium. Please see Appendix A for a detailed account of the multiple items used to measure each of the variables.

4.2. Results

Manipulation check. Subjects were asked to indicate *where* they encountered Progresso soup. Ninety one percent of the subjects in the ad condition correctly identified encountering Progresso soup in an advertisement and 86% of subjects in the product placement condition correctly identified encountering Progresso soup within the article.

Awareness of Product Placement Sponsorship. Subjects indicated their beliefs regarding payment of the soup manufacturer to be included in the magazine. The mean awareness was 5.32, and the median was 6. Hence a split was taken where subjects indicating awareness scores above 5 were classified into the high awareness group and those below or equal to 5 were classified into the low awareness group. The means for the dependent variables indicated no differences when subjects at the median (score=5) were included or excluded from the low awareness group and hence responses of these subjects were retained for analysis.

Memory for the Brand. Results replicate findings of the literature where placed brands ($\chi^2(1)=4.65$, $p<0.03$) and brand claims ($\chi^2(1)=11.41$, $p<0.01$) are recognized to a greater extent compared to when brands are advertised (see figure 4). The Progresso brand and the brand claim was recognized to a greater extent when subjects encountered the product within the article (mean for brand recognition=95%, mean for brand claim recognition=98%) as opposed to when they encountered it within the advertisement (mean for brand recognition=84%, mean for brand claim recognition=82%).

Brand trust. The instrument used for trust in the brand was adapted from the brand honesty dimension of the scale for perceived brand trust (Hess 1995). The difference between the high and low awareness groups within the product placement condition for evaluations of brand trust was marginally significant ($F(1,107)=3.80$, $p<0.07$). Results indicate a significant interaction effect (see figure 5) between awareness and location of the soup claim ($F(1,107)=8.40$, $p<0.01$). Whereas the mean brand trust for the high (low) awareness group in the advertisement condition is 4.20 (3.87), this mean drops drastically to 3.50 in the product placement condition when subjects are highly aware of the commercial intent of Progresso compared to when they are less aware (mean=3.90).

Motive purity of the medium. Perceived magazine motive purity was measured by averaging subjects' responses to five semantic differential scales on a 7-point scale. This scale was adapted from a motive purity scale used by Blazing (1998). A significant difference in perceived motive purity of magazine between subjects who were more or less aware of the commercial intent of the manufacturer ($F(1,107)=1.58$, ns) in the product placement condition did not materialize (although directional support was found). Results indicate a marginally significant interaction effect (see figure 6) between awareness and location of the soup claim ($F(1,107)=2.95$, $p<0.10$). Subjects infer the motives of the magazine to be much more impure (mean=3.70) when they strongly believed that Progresso paid to have its brand mentioned within the magazine article (high awareness) compared to when they believed Progresso's commercial involvement to be less (low awareness mean=4.0). This decrease in motive purity evaluations occurs in the product placement condition but not in the advertisement condition (mean for high awareness=4.20, mean for low awareness=4.10). This is because commercial intent is expected and more accepted when a brand is advertised and less accepted, and even shunned when placed within a natural setting such as within an article.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Results of study two corroborate findings of study one. Findings suggest that even though placements can lead to increased memory for the brand, they have the potential to be harmful not only for brand sponsors but for participating media as well (as instanced by declines in brand trust and perceived motive purity of the magazine) under conditions where consumers make negative inferences about the covert manipulative intent of placements. Such adverse implications, while of critical importance to media involved and evidenced within actual marketplace behavior, are overlooked by extant literature. This negative impact is not expected and indeed is not found for claims that are advertised and have an overt persuasive agenda.

Further studies are planned as some limitations placed on previous experimental designs are loosened. To this effect, Study 3 includes two filler pages that dilute the attention devoted to the central page of interest where brand claims are investigated.

A secondary objective of Study 3 is to manipulate credibility of the medium sponsoring the placement. Believability and persuasiveness of messages are influenced by the identity of the perceived source (Balasubramanian, 1994). Message sources (the media in this case) that are characterized as highly credible are more likely to be believed (Choo, 1964). Though perceptions

of both expertise as well as trustworthiness underlie the source credibility construct (Dholakia, Sternthal, and Leavitt, 1978), we constrain our arguments to the latter dimension (i.e., perceptions of trustworthiness) for the present. Eagly, Chaiken, and Wood (1978) suggest that people who believe a source to be biased or untrustworthy in some way are more likely to resist persuasion. In addition to resisting persuasion, we believe consumers may also feel betrayed on perceiving biases that contradict their initial expectations of ethical conduct. A backlash, fueled by consumer resentment, is therefore possible in reaction to placements noticed in media reputed to be credible and free of commercially motivated biases. Hence the reduction in brand trust and motive purity when consumers are highly aware of commercial motives should be further enhanced in conditions where highly credible media are used for the placement. This has important implications not only for marketing managers that need to make decisions about placing products but also for media that consider entering into such agreements with companies. Therefore, a 2 (advertisement versus product placement) by 2 (awareness of commercial intent: high versus low) by 2 (media credibility: high versus low) between subjects design is proposed for Study 3 to test these propositions.

6. Further Research

Most previous research has looked at the effects of placements in visual entertainment media like movies and television programs. Different media however are associated with different characteristics and other forms of media are extensively used in conveying embedded messages as well (e.g., print media). Generalizing wisdom garnered from research in visual media to understand placements in another medium might not be optimal, not least due to potential differences on relevant media characteristics. The additional examination of placements in media like books and magazines have worth, given that companies are increasingly looking to creatively cut through the clutter of traditional communications methods.

One of the limitations of this research is the fact that the study was conducted within a single context (i.e. an inflight magazine article). Therefore employing multiple contexts such as comparing it with other sources within print media (such as other magazines) or developing comparisons with other media (TV, movies) could improve the generalizations that can be made.

Further areas of intended exploration include the impact of varying strengths of product placements on awareness of commercial intent of placements and the impact that has on consumer responses. Various dimensions of product placement strength could be identified and manipulated. Potential dimensions include the number of times the product name appears in the placement, and the extent to which the product is used in a “natural setting” among other things.

A final direction for future research is a cross-cultural comparison of product placement efficacy. It is possible that consumers in different cultures possess differing levels of persuasion knowledge and therefore evaluate product placements in different ways. For example, consumers in Turkey could have lower levels of trust towards marketers and hence could perceive lower levels of motive purity of sponsors and communication media compared with US consumers and would be less vulnerable or amenable to more covert persuasion attempts. Therefore, trust levels

and cultural orientation could be segmentation variables to determine more or less amenable and/or vulnerable segments to covert persuasion attempts.

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Appendix A: Scale Items for Study One and Study Two

Study One Scale Items—Dependent Variables
<i>1. Brand Evaluations</i>
Please indicate your attitude towards the vitamin brand (1=Strongly unfavorable, 7=Strongly favorable)
<i>2. Motive Purity of Magazine</i>
How would you be most likely to describe the MAGAZINE’S motives for featuring claims about the vitamin product? (1=To further the interests of the Magazine itself, 7=To further the interests of its Readers)
<i>3. Feelings of Betrayal by Magazine</i>
Please indicate the extent to which you feel you have been betrayed by the Magazine (1=Extremely Betrayed, 7=Not Betrayed at all)
Study One—Manipulation Check
The magazine was paid by the vitamin manufacturer to include the vitamin brand within the story. (1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree)
Study Two Scale Items—Dependent Variables
<i>1. Brand Trust ($\alpha=0.70$)</i>
i. When I read about Progresso, I believe the information in it is accurate. ii. Most of what Progresso says about its soups is true iii. I think some of Progresso’s claims about its soups are puffed up to make them seem better than they really are (Reverse item). iv. If Progresso makes a claim or promise about its product, it’s probably true. (1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree)
<i>2. Motive Purity of Magazine ($\alpha=0.79$)</i>
Which words below would you be most likely to use to describe the magazines reasons for featuring the “health benefits of soup” message/claim? i. PURE/IMPURE (Reverse scaled) ii. SELFISH/SELFLESS iii. CARING/UNCARING (Reverse scaled) ix. SOCIETY-SERVING/SELF-SERVING (Reverse scaled) x. UNCONCERNED/CONCERNED
Study Two Items—Measurement of Awareness
I believe that Progresso paid to have its soup mentioned in the <u>magazine</u> . (1=Strongly disbelieve, 7=Strongly Believe)
Study Two Items—Manipulation Check
Where was the soup mentioned in the magazine? (please circle one) In an Advertisement Within the Article Other _____

Figure 1: Brand Evaluations

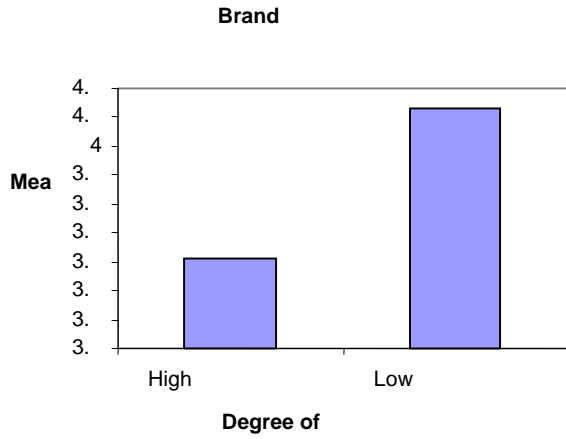


Figure 2: Motive Purity of Magazine

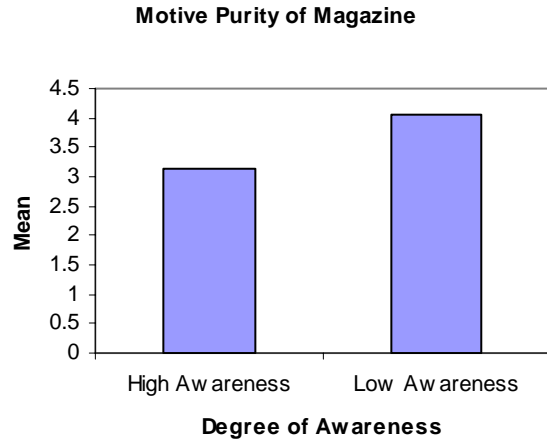


Figure 3: Betrayal by Magazine

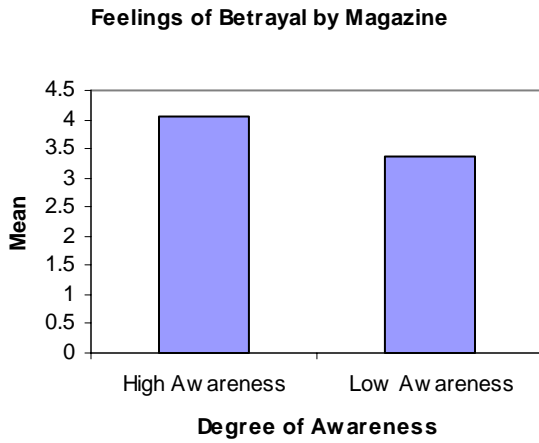


Figure 4: Memory

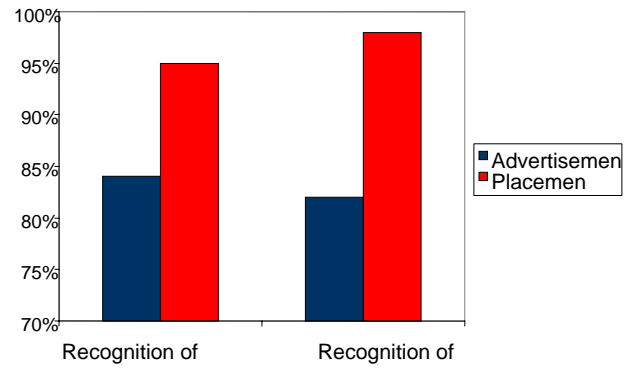


Figure 5: Brand Trust

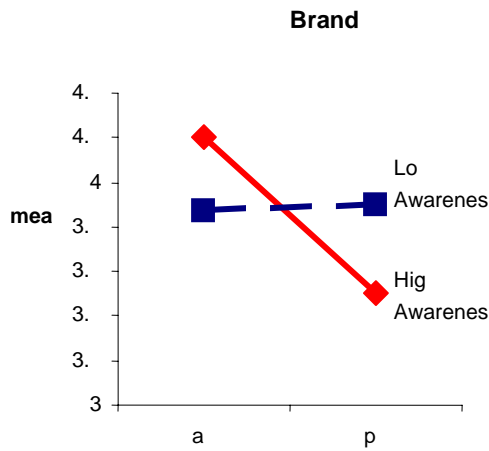


Figure 6: Motive Purity of Magazine

