Does “Passing the Courvoisier” Always Pay Off? Positive and Negative Evaluative Conditioning Effects of Brand Placements in Rap Videos

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Abstract

The proliferation of brands in television programming has abounded in recent times. Especially in rap videos, actors frequently depict brands and products. One mechanism by which placements can affect consumers’ attitudes is evaluative conditioning. Given that in rap videos brands are paired with liked as well as disliked actors, there is a high potential for positive and negative conditioning effects. In an experiment with an authentic rap video, the appearance of placements and the image of the rap actors were varied. The results indicate that the pairing of a brand with positively evaluated artists produces positive attitudes toward the brand. In contrast, a negative conditioning procedure results in negative attitudes toward the brand. Further analyses demonstrate that conditioning effects are even stronger when preference for rap music is high and recognition of the brand rather low.
Does “Passing the Courvoisier” Always Pay Off? Positive and Negative Evaluative Conditioning Effects of Brand Placements in Music Videos

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of brands in television programming has abounded in recent times. Especially in rap videos, actors frequently depict brands and products. One mechanism by which placements can affect consumers' attitudes is evaluative conditioning. Given that in rap videos brands are paired with liked as well as disliked actors, there is a high potential for positive and negative conditioning effects. In an experiment with an authentic rap video, the appearance of placements and the image of the rap actors were varied. The results indicate that the pairing of a brand with positively evaluated artists produces positive attitudes toward the brand. In contrast, a negative conditioning procedure results in negative attitudes toward the brand. Further analyses demonstrate that conditioning effects are even stronger when preference for rap music is high and recognition of the brand rather low. © 2008 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
In 2002, the artists Busta Rhymes and Puff Daddy released a song and a music video with the title “Pass the Courvoisier Part Two.” Subsequently, the sales of the company distributing Courvoisier cognac jumped 20 percent. The company itself claimed that it had no agreement with the artists on the inclusion of the cognac brand in the music video. Voluntarily or not, the proliferation of brands and products has increased, especially in hip hop and rap music videos (Martin & Collins, 2002). Certainly, the case of Courvoisier may be a prime example of a successful advertising strategy; but one may ask why placements can produce favorable attitudes or behavior. More specifically, what kinds of processes operate when consumers see brands appearing in rap videos? Recently, both academic and marketing researchers have shown growing interest in the mechanisms of how placements influence recall, attitudes, and preferences (Law & Braun, 2000; Karrh, McKee, & Pardun, 2003; Roehm, Roehm, & Boone, 2004). Specifically, the hidden and subtle nature of placements makes them different from classical advertising in the sense that recipients process them quite differently (e.g., Auty & Lewis, 2004; McCarty, 2004; Russell, 2002).

Scholars from various disciplines such as learning psychology, emotion research, and mass communication, as well as consumer research, have long pointed to conditional learning as an important mechanism of preference acquisition (McSweeney & Bierley, 1984; De Houwer, Thomas, & Baeyens, 2001; Till & Priluck, 2000; Till, Stanley, & Priluck, 2008; Tom, 1995). More precisely, evaluative conditioning is a procedure by which an evaluative meaning (e.g., the positive valence of an unconditioned stimulus, henceforth US) can be transferred to a brand (i.e., a conditioned stimulus, henceforth CS). Conditioning effects have been exclusively studied in the realm of classical advertising. Although several scholars have argued that the effect of program-integrated advertising (e.g., placements) may work similarly (McCarty, 2004), there are hardly any studies investigating conditioning effects of brand placements (but see van Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2007). Moreover, little is known about how such effects work for rap videos—a genre in which brand placements occur quite prominently. Therefore, the present study addresses conditioning effects of brand placements in rap videos.

A major drawback of program-integrated advertising is the lack of control over the nature of the context in which the placement is included. In fact, empirical research indicates that brands and products in rap videos often appear in negative contexts, as, for example, when a brand is paired with delinquent actors (Englis, Solomon, & Olofsson, 1993, Martin & Collins, 2002). When a brand is paired with actors with a negative image, it may be questionable whether favorable brand attitudes can result (see also Balasubramanian, 1994; Karrh, McKee, & Pardun, 2003). However, previous research on negative conditioning effects has produced mixed results (Allen & Madden, 1985; Gorn, 1982; Tom, 1995). Given that brands in rap videos are likely to appear in contexts which can be perceived as negative, the aim of the present study is to investigate both positive and negative attitudinal conditioning effects of brands in a rap video.

**PLACEMENTS IN MUSIC VIDEOS**

According to Chang (2003), product placements in music videos are prospering: “The phenomenon of paid product placements in music videos is a recent trend
and it’s only getting bigger” (p. 18). Karrh (1998) offers several explanations for the growing interest of marketers in including placements in music videos: Placement deals can reduce production costs of video clips, placements have a longer “shelf life” compared to spot advertising, and placements are often distributed globally. In addition, placements in music videos pay off for marketers targeting an adolescent audience. Although recent studies on placement appearances have emphasized the need for further research, however, neither academic nor marketing research has kept pace with the skyrocketing practice of the placement industry (Karrh, 1998).

There are rare examples of content analyses investigating the occurrence of placements in music videos. One of the earliest content analyses found that while nearly 40% of U.S. music videos mentioned brands of any kind, the percentage of brands included in Swedish music television is much lower (15%) (Englis, Solomon, & Olofsson, 1993). It is worthwhile pointing to the outstanding genre of rap music: Rap videos contain the highest “proportion of consumption imagery overall, and the greatest use of a combination of verbal and visual consumption imagery” (Englis, Solomon, & Olofsson, 1993, p. 29). More recent studies substantiate this finding: A content analysis of music videos aired in the U.K. and New Zealand shows that nearly 50% of rap music videos contained specific brand references (Martin & Collins, 2002; Martin & McCracken, 2001).

Despite the proliferation of placements in music videos, little is known about the impact of placements. It is often assumed that music videos create strong ties to their audience. According to Avery and Ferraro (2000, p. 219), “brands appearing within these programs have the potential to create strong symbolic environments for consumers and . . . they hold at least the potential to persuade.” In particular, the pairing of brands with characters the viewers endorse may facilitate the transfer of evaluative meaning from artists to embedded brands (Avery & Ferraro, 2000). However, both anecdotal and empirical evidence suggest that placements in music videos may be a double-edged sword (Balasubramanian, 1994). On the one hand, embedding brands in rap music videos is an efficient way of targeting adolescent consumers. On the other hand, the context in which brands appear is to some extent characterized by delinquent behavior on the part of the rap performers (e.g., violence or murder). The content analysis by Englis, Solomon, and Olofsson (1993) demonstrated that rap videos contain more weapon and drug-related products than any other genre. This is confirmed by Baxter et al. (1985). They found that physical aggression, the use of weapons, and sexual violence are nearly ubiquitous in rap videos. Moreover, according to Martin and Collins (2002), 60% of the violence shown in music videos was against people. They also coded the products that were shown in violent scenes. The products that appeared most often in violent scenes were weapons, but also included sunglasses, telephones, tobacco, and cars (Martin & Collins, 2002).

As these studies illustrate, it is likely that brands or products embedded in rap videos appear in negatively reinforcing contexts. According to the content analyses, negatively reinforcing contexts refer to the pairing of a brand or a product with actors portrayed in violent scenes. Whether this causes viewers to more negatively perceive a brand that is paired with a delinquent rap performer depends on the subjective perception of the viewer and not on the normative valence coded in a content analysis. When, for example, the delinquent (i.e.,
normatively negative) behavior of a rap performer in a music video is perceived positively (i.e., subjectively positive), then the transferal of negative meaning from the actor to the embedded brand is unlikely. Instead, it can be expected that this pairing of a delinquent but positively evaluated actor with a brand shapes brand attitudes in a positive direction. In contrast, when a brand appears in the context of a subjectively negative character, then there is a high potential for the transferal of negative evaluative meaning to the brand. In sum, whether positive or negative transferal effects on brand attitudes occur depends on the subjectively perceived valence of the scenes from the rap video and not on the normative valence.

The assumptions regarding negative attitudinal affects of placements embedded in rap music videos should be alarming for marketing researchers and practitioners alike. However, if positively framed, rap videos offer an ideal environment in which to get brands and products embedded. Given that attitudes can be both positively and negatively shaped, it is vital to understand how the transferal of evaluative meaning from an artist to a brand works.

CONDITIONAL LEARNING EFFECTS IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

For decades researchers have demonstrated that the attitudinal effects of classical advertising (e.g., TV commercials) can be explained by conditional learning (e.g., Baker, 1999; McSweeney & Bierley, 1984). Conditional learning is based on a learning of relations of phenomena. For instance, classical conditioning suggests that a US (e.g., the provision of food) can be conditioned by the pairing with a CS (e.g., a ringing bell). Subsequently, after several pairing trials, the unconditioned response (UCR, i.e., salivation of the dog) is transferred to the CS. This means the ringing of the bell results in a salivation reaction, that is, a conditioned response (CR). Unlike classical conditioning, evaluative conditioning can be conceived as a transferal of evaluative or affective meaning: Evaluative conditioning can be considered as “changes in the liking of a stimulus that result from pairing that stimulus with other positive or negative stimuli” (De Houwer, Thomas, & Baeyens, 2001, p. 853). In consumer research the conditioning procedure is an integral paradigm for how marketers can influence consumer attitudes (McSweeney & Bierley, 1984; Shimp, Stuart, & Engle, 1991; Till, Stanley, & Priluck, 2008). For instance, Bierley, McSweeney, and Vannieuwkerk (1985) showed that preferences for various stimuli can be conditioned by pleasant music. The authors demonstrated that stimuli followed by pleasant music received higher liking ratings compared to stimuli presented without music. Furthermore, the results of Shimp, Stuart, and Engle (1991), based on a series of experiments, indicated that conditioning effects are more likely for unknown and moderately known brands as compared to well known brands. Taken together, conditioning effects on consumer evaluations are more likely when brands are novel (Allen & Janiszewski, 1989; Shimp, Stuart, & Engle, 1991) and when several trials of CS-US pairings occur (McSweeney & Bierley, 1984). Attitudinal conditioning effects can also be generalized to similar brands and products (Bierley, McSweeney, & Vannieuwkerk, 1985; Till & Priluck, 2000) and persist over time (Grossman & Till, 1998).
Positive and Negative Attitudinal Conditioning Effects of Placements

Thus far, researchers have relied heavily on classical spot advertising to demonstrate evaluative conditioning effects. However, the conditioning framework has not yet been applied to the effects of product placements (Balasubramanian, 1994; McCarty, 2004). Furthermore, in studying the effects of classical advertising, scholars have focused primarily on positive conditioning effects (van Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2007). There are rare exceptions of studies investigating negative attitudinal conditioning effects in the realm of advertising (Allen & Madden, 1985; Gorn, 1982; Tom, 1995; Walther & Grigoriadis, 2004). However, these studies have produced mixed results. Gorn (1982) demonstrated attitudinal conditioning by both liked and disliked music. During the presentation of a pen (blue or beige) projected on a screen participants listened to either liked or disliked music. Afterwards, subjects chose a pen (blue or beige) as a gift. Subjects exposed to music they liked chose more advertised pens than non-advertised ones. The pattern of results reversed when subjects listened to disliked music. Thus, the pairing of a consumer product with positively evaluated music resulted in a positive attitude toward the product, whereas the association of the product with disliked music resulted in a negative attitude. However, Allen and Madden (1985) failed to replicate Gorn’s (1982) findings: They had subjects listen to positive and negative humor (instead of music) during the pen presentation. As a result, the authors demonstrated a positive conditioning effect, but failed to demonstrate a negative conditioning effect. Therefore, they argue that Gorn’s findings may in part be due to a demand artifact (for a critical review of Gorn’s study, see also Bierley, McSweeney, & Vannieuwkerk, 1985; Kellaris & Cox, 1989). In another attempt to replicate Gorn’s (1982) results, Tom (1995) used a music manipulation as the US. He showed his participants a pen on a slide and subjects had to pay attention to the presentation (attended stimulus). During the presentation, a Chinese ideograph (unattended stimulus) was displayed 12 times with a tachistoscope on the same screen (0.02 second duration). After the presentation, participants chose a pen and a symbol that could be used as a logo for the pen. Tom (1995) expected the subjects to choose the Chinese ideograph as their favorite logo, along with the target pen depicted in the presentation. His findings indicated that the positive music produced higher choice rates for the pen and the Chinese ideograph. However, negative attitudinal effects were not obtained. No differences in choice emerged for the attended versus the unattended stimulus. In another study, Walther and Grigoriadis (2004) demonstrated negative attitudinal conditioning effects by pairing disliked faces with products. However, this effect was qualified by an interaction of the valence of the US with participants’ mood. Subjects in a sad mood were more susceptible to the negative conditioning procedure than subjects in a happy mood.

The problem of negative conditioning effects arises especially in the context of placements. In contrast to spot advertising and classical commercials, marketers cannot control the creative process of brand or product integration. The practice of placements is highly intuitive, and marketers can seldom determine the details and contexts of the placement (Karrh, McKee, & Pardun, 2003). As a consequence, unintentionally, brands and products are likely to appear in negative contexts or paired with actors with a negative image. Specifically,
placements in rap videos provide a prime example of producing negative conditioning effects: As stated above, brands in music videos are embedded in contexts that depict criminal acts or deviant behavior (Baxter et al., 1985; Englis, Solomon, & Olofsson, 1993; Martin & Collins, 2002). Therefore, the pairing of brands with artists with a negative image is likely to result in negative attitudinal conditioning.

However, in contrast to the conditioning studies discussed above (e.g., Gorn, 1982; Tom, 1995), it is not the music itself that works as the US but rather the valence of the actor appearing in the music video. Thus, the image of the actor represents a valenced US with which a brand can be paired. Conceptually, this manipulation is no different from music manipulations (Gorn, 1982; Groenland & Schoormans, 1994; Tom, 1995), comedy shows (Bierley, McSweeney, & Vannieuwkerk, 1985), attractive water scenes (Shimp, Stuart, & Engle, 1991), slides of beautiful landscapes (Grossman & Till, 1998), or liked or disliked faces (Walther & Grigoriadis, 2004) as valenced stimuli. These inductions create an affective reaction that can be transferred to the brand when repeatedly paired with a brand as a CS. The transferal of a negative affective reaction caused by a negative US is expected to produce unfavorable brand attitudes, whereas positive affective reactions should produce favorable brand attitudes.

As mentioned above, the occurrence of negative conditioning effects depends on the perception of the US by audience members. When brands occur in the context of the delinquent behavior of rap performers (a normatively negative US), but viewers consider this behavior as positive and consistent with the genre of rap (a subjectively positive US), then negative conditioning is unlikely to occur. Thus, whether a negative conditioning effect is obtained depends on the subjective perception of the US. The same holds true for evaluative conditioning procedures in the realm of classic advertising. In a conditioning study Blair and Shimp (1992) used a musical composition as a US to induce a more positive attitude toward an unknown brand. However, they failed to demonstrate an evaluative conditioning effect. The authors argue that the music was unexpectedly perceived as negative. As a consequence, the preference of the subjects in the experiment may have impeded the induction of positive affect, thus undermining the conditioning procedure. In other words, the pairing of a disliked US with a neutral CS is unlikely to produce a positive brand attitude. Taken together, when brands occur in the presence of rap actors who have a favorable image, positive attitudinal conditioning effects can be expected. Conversely, when brands are paired with rap actors who are disliked, then negative attitudinal conditioning effects may be the result.

**Music Preference as a Moderator in Attitudinal Conditioning**

From a marketing viewpoint, it is pivotal to know whether only target groups with a preference for rap music can be positively or negatively conditioned or whether people with a dislike of the genre are also affected by the conditioning procedure. Here the question arises whether a general liking of the music genre functions as a moderator of conditioning effects. Previous research suggests that conditioning procedures may work best when viewers are not prejudiced against the stimulus material applied in the experimental situation (Bierley, McSweeney, & Vannieuwkerk, 1985; Blair & Shimp, 1992). For instance, for their experiment Bierley and colleagues (1985) recruited only subjects with a preference
for that music. However, they did not examine conditioning effects in subjects disliking the music. Although they do not provide an explanation for their procedure, one can assume that liking the specific music genre enhances the susceptibility to conditioning effects. A study by Blair and Shimp (1992) lends further support to the notion that a general preference for a music genre works as a moderator in the conditioning process. However, their study did not explicitly address the effect of music preference. Thus, previous research is inconclusive on the moderating role of music genre preference on attitudinal conditioning.

In order to fill this gap it is important to point to the differences between the setting in the experiments reported in the previous section and the context in which music preference works as a moderator of placement conditioning effects. In the studies reported above it is the liking of the music that was applied as the US that moderated the conditioning effect. In contrast, with regard to placement conditioning effects, the US in the music video is not the music itself but the image of the band or the actors. Nevertheless, the music preference of audience members can moderate the conditioning effect. As in the previous research, it can be assumed that when individuals have a favorable attitude toward rap music, then the conditioning procedure should work as expected (Bierley, McSweeney, & Vannieuwkerk, 1985). However, for subjects who dislike the genre, either a conditioning procedure may not work at all or it may only work in a negative direction. The failure of the conditioning procedure is likely to be due to a negative attitude toward the whole experimental situation. Subjects may be indifferent or bored because they have to watch a music video that they would otherwise not have watched. It is equally possible that they do not pay attention to the music video. As a consequence, their subsequent brand attitude is based rather on the negative attitude toward the music than on any conditioning procedure. In other words, they may be not conditionable at all.

Another explanation might be that only a negative conditioning procedure works, but positive conditioning does not. In the negative conditioning procedure, a negative attitude toward the music genre can be confirmed by the negative image of the actors. Consequently, the negative attitude toward the music and the artists biases subsequent judgments in a negative direction. In contrast, the positive conditioning may fail, because a positive attitude toward the rap band induced experimentally is attenuated or overshadowed by an existing dislike of rap music in general. Thus, one could argue that subjects who dislike rap music are not conditionable in a positive way.

Attitudinal Conditioning Without Recognition

Another major question of previous research refers to the question of whether the effects of product placements on attitudes depend on the explicit recognition of the brand. Marketers often complain that placements do not work because viewers fail to recall them (Karrh, 1998). While much research asserts a weak recall of placements compared to classical advertising, this can also turn out to be a blessing in disguise: Unlike spot advertising, attitudinal placement effects can emerge even though viewers do not recognize commercial messages in media programming. A recent study by Russell (2002) suggests an advantage of subtle placements (see also Law & Braun, 2000; van Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2007). In this study, subtle placements were most effective in persuading viewers. Interestingly, these viewers were less able to recall placement information.
The author argues that the subtle nature of the brand placement does not raise consumers’ counterarguing strategies. Transferred to conditional learning, this implies that consumers process the pairing of the brand with the valenced image of an actor rather unconsciously and without any suspicion of persuasive intention. Although the US can thus be predictive of the brand evaluation, viewers do not necessarily have to recall the appearance of the brand explicitly. However, additional research is needed to examine the role of recognition in attitudinal conditioning.

To sum up, the present study addresses three major questions: The first refers to whether the conditioning paradigm also applies to brands (CS) appearing in the context of rap performers with either a positive or a negative image (US). In particular, the focus is on both positive and negative conditioning effects. On the one hand, this question is of practical concern: Given that placements may often unintentionally appear in negative contexts, the consequences of negative conditioning effects are crucial for marketers. On the other hand, investigating negative conditioning effects is of scientific interest because previous research has produced at best mixed results. The second aim is to examine the moderating effect of music preference in placement conditioning effects. Finally, the third aim of the present research is to address the question of whether attitudinal conditioning is contingent on the recognition of the brand embedded in a rap video.

EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

Hypotheses

As should be apparent from the sections above, it can be expected that brand placements in rap videos produce attitudinal conditioning effects. As a first hypothesis it can therefore be assumed that attitudes toward a brand improve as a function of the pairing of a brand with favorable rap actors, that is, a positive US. On the basis of previous research, it is reasonable to assume that attitudes can be equally conditioned in a negative direction, that is, producing negative conditioning effects. Therefore, as a second hypothesis, it can be predicted that the evaluation of a brand decreases when the brand co-occurs with negatively evaluated rap actors, that is, a negative US.

In the case of rap music videos, the postulated relationship between US valence and the presence of placements may be qualified by the general liking of the genre. Consistent with previous studies (Bierley, McSweeney, & Vannieuwkerk, 1985), it is postulated as a third hypothesis that attitudinal conditioning works as expected for subjects with a preference for rap music. However, for viewers with an unfavorable attitude toward rap music, either conditioning effects do not result at all or only a negative conditioning effect occurs. As previous research is inconclusive on the impact of music genre preference, it has been speculated that different processes might be at work. Based on this reasoning, two competing hypotheses can be formulated: Individuals disliking rap music are not conditionable at all, either in a positive or in a negative direction. Alternatively, subjects disliking rap music may be conditioned in a negative direction, but positive conditioning is attenuated or overshadowed by the unfavorable attitude toward the music genre.
Given that previous studies provided evidence for persuasive effects of commercials without recognition (e.g., Russell, 2002; but see Tom, 1995), one may wonder whether recognition is a necessary condition for the attitudinal influence of brand placements. Because research on placement effects without recognition has only recently begun to emerge, this idea is formulated as a research question: Is it possible to obtain attitudinal conditioning effects even if viewers do not recognize that a brand appeared in the music video? If attitudinal conditioning requires explicit recognition, then stronger conditioning effects should emerge for subjects high in recognition compared to their low-recognition counterparts. Conversely, if attitudinal conditioning works without recognition, then one should assume the strongest attitudinal effects for subjects low in recognition.

Participants
Seventy-eight undergraduate students in communication science (mean age = 23.03, 57% female) at a major European university participated in the study. The subjects were contacted by mail and invited to the researchers’ laboratory.

Experimental Design
An experiment with a $2 \times 2$ factorial design was conducted in which the affective image of rap actors in a music video (positive vs. negative image) and the occurrence of brand placements (placement present vs. absent) were treated as between-subjects factors. The rationale of the affective image induction is as follows: An actor in a music video has a certain image, varying from a positive to a negative valence. This image is activated when an audience member is confronted with the actor in the music video. Thus, the image of the actor represents a valenced US with which a brand (i.e., the CS) can be paired. Accordingly, the image induction creates an affective reaction that can be transferred to a brand when repeatedly paired with the brand. This also applies to the rationale of the present experiment: When the actor is repeatedly paired with a previously neutral and unknown brand, his image is repeatedly activated in the mind of the viewer and can be transferred to the brand. In terms of evaluative conditioning, the brand represents the CS, and the image of the actor is expected to function as the positively or negatively valenced US.

As the actors in the music video are not known to the broad public, either a positive or a negative image induction of their image should be easy to accomplish. This image manipulation of the artists was done by having subjects read an article from a regional newspaper. For the negative image, the rap performers are presented as rather greedy characters exploiting their fans and overpricing their CDs. Although it would be valuable to induce a negative image by showing rap actors in delinquent contexts, such a procedure would have been difficult to realize. Furthermore, criminal behavior may not necessarily produce a negative attitude toward the actors. Adolescent viewers adore rap artists even though the performers commit crimes. This could have caused positive attitudes in some of the subjects instead of negative attitudes. A positive image was established by portraying the artists as authentic, altruistic, and benevolent characters, giving donations for projects of public utility and being loyal to their fans.
The second factor in the experimental design, presence of placements, was realized by creating two versions of a rap video. One version was completely without any brand appearances. In the second version, the placement version, scenes from the original video were replaced by scenes in which one of the performers wore a shirt with an unknown brand (i.e., Nada clothing; see Appendix for screenshots). The reason for creating one version without any brand placements was to control for possible confounds. One such confound could be a mood influence on brand evaluations. As the US induces positive affect, the obtained results, particularly of single-trial conditioning, can also be explained in terms of affective priming (Allen & Madden, 1985; Groenland & Schoormans, 1994). When consumers are in a positive mood as a consequence of the music induction, their judgments are biased in a positive direction. The reverse pattern of judgmental bias can occur for consumers in a bad mood (Walther & Grigoriadis, 2004). According to the mood-congruency hypothesis (Bower, 1981), the mood of individuals biases their judgment in the direction of their mood. If the affective priming assumption is true, then the image induction (positive vs. negative image of the artists) will cause congruent brand attitudes even in the absence of brands. Thus, the zero-placement condition serves as a control for affective priming effects.

Simultaneous Conditioning

A classical conditioning procedure is realized when the conditioned stimulus precedes the unconditioned stimulus (McSweeney & Bierley, 1984). For instance, establishing a classical conditioning procedure in the placement context requires the marketer to influence the storyboards of media programming. In the case of a rap video, the positively or negatively evaluated artists (US) have to precede the brand (CS) in one or several trials. Obviously, this procedure is difficult to realize, especially when marketers lack control over the creative process of brand integration. In fact, in rap videos placements and artists most often appear simultaneously (Englis, Solomon, & Olofsson, 1993; Martin & Collins, 2002). In a study applying a simultaneous conditioning procedure, Gorn (1982) obtained comparably strong attitudinal conditioning effects (for a similar procedure see Allen & Madden, 1985; Baker, 1999; Rozin, Wrzesniewski, & Byrnes, 1998; Tom, 1995). Although research evidence suggests that the simultaneous presentation of CS and US “does not produce optimal conditioning” (McSweeney & Bierley, 1984, p. 622; see also Groenland & Schoormans, 1994; Kim, Allen, & Kardes, 1996), other researchers argue that it is not the temporal order of US-CS but the fact that the valence of the US is predictive of the evaluation of the CS (Walther & Grigoriadis, 2004). Even if the simultaneous presentation of CS and US results in smaller conditioning effects, a simultaneous conditioning procedure was chosen because this procedure is more realistic, thus enhancing the external validity of the present study (see for a related view Baker, 1999; Stuart, Shimp, & Engle, 1987).

Stimulus Material

Originally, the rap video was produced for a European music television broadcast. As we were able to cooperate with the artists during the production of the video, several scenes were shot twice in order to produce two completely identical
rap videos that differed only in the brand appearance on the shirt of one performer. Thus, the production of the rap video was guided by professional standards. After the experiment, the version without any placements was aired on a music television channel for several weeks. This procedure ensured, first, that the rap video did not raise viewers’ suspicion of lacking authenticity. Second, the professional production enhanced the external validity of the stimulus material. Previous studies had used slides displayed on a screen instead of real audio-visual material. Third, the two versions are completely identical except for the appearance of a brand placement. To check for participants’ suspicion, subjects answered questions about the authenticity and originality of the rap video. As expected, these answers did not show any concerns about the authenticity of the stimulus material. Instead, the data indicated that the rap video was perceived as an original clip aired on music television. Although the brand in the rap clip was exclusively created for the purpose of the study, a pretest ($N = 15$) was conducted to test for familiarity and evaluation of Nada Clothing. As expected, the target brand was evaluated as equally unfamiliar as other invented brands (all $ts < 1$). More precisely, the brands received low familiarity ratings ($M = 1.02$, $SD = 0.23$) on a 5-point familiarity rating scale (1 “not at all familiar” and 5 “very familiar”) and neutral evaluation scores ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 0.98$) on a 5-point semantic differential scale with five items (1 “negative” and 5 “positive”). The evaluation scores of the target brand, Nada Clothing, did not significantly differ from the other unknown or invented brands ($ts < 1$). In the placement version of the clip, the placement of the target brand occurred 29 times. The single appearance duration does not exceed two seconds (see screenshots in the Appendix).

**Procedure**

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. They were told that the study dealt with viewers’ evaluations of rap music videos. First, they received the newspaper article intended to manipulate the image of the rap actors. After reading the article, participants viewed the rap video on a personal computer for slightly more than four minutes. Subjects were run in groups of six to eight individuals in the advertising lab. They were equipped with headsets; no disturbance among subjects was observed. After watching the video clip, they filled out an online questionnaire, in which manipulation check measures, the dependent variables, and several questions pertaining to their music preferences and demographics were asked. Afterwards, they were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

**Measures**

To check for successful manipulation, subjects’ attitudes toward the artists were measured (5-item semantic differential scale, e.g., positive–negative, authentic–not authentic, likable–dislikeable; Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.81$). If not otherwise noted, all scales are 5-point scales. The central dependent variable was attitude toward the brand. Similar to measures in previous research, a semantic differential scale with five items was used (e.g., positive–negative, interesting–uninteresting, likable–dislikeable; $\alpha = 0.86$). Furthermore, the preference for rap music was assessed with a 1-item measure, as well as the participants’ demographics.
Recognition of the brand was gauged by a 1-item recognition measure. In the questionnaire, participants were exposed to several brands and had to check whether the brand occurred in the clip (1 “did not occur at all” and 5 “occurred very often”).

RESULTS

Manipulation Check

The first step checked whether the manipulation of the attitude toward the artists worked as expected. It was assumed that subjects who read the negative article about the rap performers would evaluate the artists more negatively compared to the subjects who read the positive article. Indeed, the manipulation was successful: Subjects reading about negative characteristics of the artists evaluated them more negatively (M = −0.55, SD = 0.84; standardized means) than their positively manipulated counterparts (M = 0.54, SD = 0.87). The difference between the two conditions was highly significant [t(76) = 5.59, p < 0.001]. The evaluation of the artists did not differ as a function of placement presence (t < 1).

Hypothesis Testing

The first two hypotheses pertain to the conditional learning of attitudes toward a previously unknown brand. It was assumed that attitudes can be positively conditioned by pairing a novel brand with favorably evaluated performers (hypothesis 1). Conversely, when negatively framed, the transferal from the artists to the brand should result in negative attitudes toward the brand (hypothesis 2). To check for possible confounds, demographics and preference for rap music were controlled for as covariates. As a result, a two-way interaction between conditioning valence and presence of placements was obtained [F(1, 70) = 6.02, p < 0.05, η² = 0.08]. No main effects of the experimental variables emerge, either for conditioning valence or for the presence of placements (Fs < 1, see Table 1).

As predicted, participants who saw the brand placement in a positive context were positively conditioned. In fact, subjects in the placement condition evaluated the

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<td>−0.19a (0.89)</td>
<td>0.18a (1.08)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rap video with 29 brand placements</td>
<td>0.39b (.81)</td>
<td>−0.47c (.92)</td>
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Notes: Entries are means, standard deviation in parentheses; different superscripts in a row or in a column indicate significant differences, p < 0.05.
brand more favorably ($M = 0.39, SD = 0.81$) compared to participants who saw the clip without placements ($M = -0.19, SD = 1.08$). Conversely, negatively conditioned subjects had a more negative attitude toward the brand in the placement condition ($M = -0.47, SD = 1.07$) compared to subjects who saw the rap video without placements ($M = 0.18, SD = 0.76$). The differences in brand evaluation in both the positive [$t(38) = 3.88, p < 0.05$] and the negative conditioning groups [$t(36) = 4.67, p < 0.05$] achieved statistical significance. Further single-comparison tests demonstrated that the brand attitudes of positively and negatively conditioned subjects in the placement condition were significantly different [$t(37) = 3.91, p < 0.05$]. In contrast, in the no-placement condition the attitude toward the brand did not differ as a function of conditioning valence [$t(41) = 1.25, ns$]. Thus, hypotheses one and two were confirmed.

In the foregoing analysis, preference for rap music was included as a covariate. In fact, preference for rap music turned out to be a significant predictor of viewers’ evaluation of the brand [$F(1,70) = 3.77, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.05$]. This result reveals evidence for the third hypothesis: It was predicted that the effect of positive and negative conditioning is contingent on the viewers’ music preference. More precisely, individuals with a preference for rap music should be more susceptible to both positive and negative conditioning effects compared to subjects disliking the genre. In an additional analysis, subjects were categorized as high and low in preference for rap music (median split, $Md = 3$). Then separate ANOVAs were run for the two groups. As hypothesized, attitudinal conditioning effects were more pronounced in individuals with a preference for rap music [$F(1,33) = 3.97, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.14$] compared to participants low in preference for rap music [$F(1,43) = 2.77, p = 0.10, \eta^2 = 0.06$]. In terms of explained variance, the conditioning manipulation proved to explain the variance in brand attitudes of subjects with a rap preference to a greater extent compared to subjects who dislike the genre. This result suggests that subjects with a preference for rap music can be conditioned both positively and negatively. Alternatively, it has been assumed that a dislike of a music genre reinforces negative conditioning but impedes or attenuates positive conditioning. However, the results do not indicate stronger negative conditioning effects. Positive and negative conditioning effects in subjects disliking the music are equally attenuated compared to conditioning effects in subjects with a preference for rap music. Thus, the experimental data suggest that a lack of preference for the music genre makes viewers less conditionable in general. This effect is independent of the valence of the US.

In order to examine the role of recognition in conditional learning, another two groups were distinguished by means of median split ($Md = 2$): first, subjects who recognized the placements in the clip and, second, those who did not. It is important to note that brand recognition does not vary as a function of the valence of the US ($F < 1$). Then separate analyses for the two groups were conducted. Interestingly, the attitudinal conditioning effect reported above is more pronounced for low-recognition subjects [$F(1,36) = 3.88, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.10$] compared to the high-recognition individuals [$F(1,31) = 2.63, p = 0.11, \eta^2 = 0.04$]. This result indicates that evaluative conditioning effects are more likely to occur when viewers do not recognize the brand embeds in the rap video. Conversely, higher recognition of the brand placement seems to attenuate attitudinal conditioning.
DISCUSSION

To date, consumer researchers have examined conditional learning only in the realm of classical advertising spots. The present study demonstrates that conditioning effects can also occur when a previously unknown brand placement appears in a rap video. These results are in line with research on evaluative conditioning in both consumer science and learning psychology (Hermans, Baeyens, & Eelen, 2003; McSweeney & Bierley, 1984). Extending the results of previous research on advertising, the study provided evidence for both positive and negative attitudinal conditioning. Specifically, positive conditioning effects occurred when brands were paired with artists with a positive image, thus producing favorable brand attitudes. Conversely, when subjects were exposed to the pairing of an unknown brand with disliked artists, they evaluated the brand more unfavorably. In a further step, it was demonstrated that a preference for rap music strengthens the attitudinal conditioning effect: When there are strong ties between the audience and the program, the conditioning procedure worked better than when preference for the genre was low. This confirms the results by Russell (2006): She found that viewers’ attachment to a performer produces positive attitudes toward a placed product. In addition, the results suggest that viewers who lack a preference for rap music cannot be conditioned at all.

So far, the results of the experiment conform to the hypotheses. The influence of program preference can be generalized to other media genres as well. Brand and product embeds have a higher persuasive potential when the audience is tied to the program (see also Russell, 2006): Foremost is the fact that a highly involved and distracted audience is more susceptible to attitudinal conditioning (Walther & Grigoriadis, 2004). This also pertains to the role of recognition of the brand in the music clip. Extending the research conducted by Tom (1995), the data indicate that conditional learning of attitudes can occur without explicit recognition (see also van Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2007). Attitudinal conditioning was most likely when participants failed to recognize the brand. In contrast, recognition of the brand in the video attenuated even the attitudinal conditioning effect. Similar to the results in studies by Russell (2002) and Law and Braun (2000), the “hidden impact” of placements may be due to the placements’ unobtrusiveness. Several authors acknowledge that, in particular, the somewhat subtle and inconspicuous nature of placements makes them an important “marketing weapon.” In fact, McCarty (2004) points to mere exposure as a mechanism of product placement effects. The mere presence of a placement frequently embedded in mass media programming can produce favorable brand attitudes (Matthes, Schemer, & Wirth, 2007).

One might object that the study has produced mere exposure effects and that the conditioning explanation is an artifact. If this had been the case, negative conditioning effects would not have been obtained (see Gorn, 1982, for a similar argument). According to Zajonc (1968), mere exposure effects are more likely to produce positive attitudes than negative ones: “Making attitudes more favorable should, therefore, be easier than making them less favorable” (Zajonc, 1968, p. 24). There are three other potential points to explain the results of the present study: an affective priming explanation, an elaboration likelihood effect, and a social learning effect. A priming effect seems unlikely as an alternative explanation: If the priming explanation were true, then there should be differences in attitudes of subjects who saw the rap video without the brand placements.
However, the experimental results contradict this explanation. A main effect of the context valence was not found.

An alternative explanation for the obtained results can be provided by the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). According to this model, the positive and negative image induction may have acted as a peripheral cue influencing brand attitudes. This explanation also conforms to the fact that those who were unaware of the brand in the video were most affected by the peripheral cue. As they processed the brand information in a rather shallow way they did not recall the brand. However, subjects who recognized the brand in the video may have been processing the brand information more centrally, producing stronger memory traces. Their brand attitudes are less affected by the image manipulation. This explanation may hold true for the condition in which placements occurred. But it cannot explain why the image induction is not used as a peripheral cue in the condition without any placement. The subjects in the condition without placements, who could not and consequently did not recognize any placements, may have been influenced by the image induction in just the same manner as subjects who saw the video with placements. But this was not the case: The brand attitude of subjects exposed to the video without placements did not differ as a function of conditioning valence. Therefore, an ELM account tells us only half of the story.

A third possibility—a social learning effect—can also be ruled out. Social learning requires the observer to internalize the actor and his behavior in a social learning situation (Bandura, 1994). As the data indicate, recognition of the brand was not a necessary condition for the occurrence of attitudinal effects. Taken together, this strengthens the interpretation of the present results, providing clear evidence of evaluative conditioning effects.

Nevertheless, as the present study was only a first step in demonstrating evaluative conditioning effects of brand placements, it is important to acknowledge some limitations. First, the data clearly indicate that viewers form attitudes spontaneously, without recognition. Although this result is in line with previous reasoning on placement effects, the underlying information processing conditions were not explicitly examined. Moreover, the conclusion that a brand placement may be more effective when recognition is low rests on a correlational analysis of the present data. Recognition or awareness of the brand was not systematically varied. However, recent research on evaluative conditioning in the field of classical spot advertising has also pointed to the role of viewer involvement (Tom, 1995; Walther & Grigoriadis, 2004). As Walther and Grigoriadis (2004, p. 758) argue, “evaluative learning is not dependent on conscious, deliberate attention, but turns out to be even stronger when participants are distracted.” Put differently, when the attention of viewers is distracted from placement information, viewers do not consider program-integrated brands as a persuasive attempt. Consequently, counterarguing is less likely to occur, thus producing positive attitudes toward the brand (McCarty, 2004). There are two possible avenues for further research to examine the causal role of recognition: On the one hand, researchers can vary the processing of the brand information in media programming by distracting them from an explicit perception. On the other hand, scholars can produce a stimulus with placements presented below conscious perception (see Krosnick et al., 1992). To corroborate these assumptions, the information processing antecedents deserve further attention in future studies.
The processing of placement information in music videos also depends on the obtrusiveness of the placement itself. This refers to the second shortcoming of the present study. Although great care was taken to create an authentic and externally valid rap video, it was not possible to vary the modality of the placement itself. Russell (1998) distinguishes several kinds of placements varying in visual and auditory appearance and in plot integration (e.g., foreground vs. background). Thus, besides the mere frequency of placements, other aspects of placement modality can be manipulated to examine an “optimal” degree of obtrusiveness.

Third, the present study concentrated on short-term effects of brands appearing in rap videos. To date, only a few studies have examined the stability of attitudinal conditioning effects. Grossman and Till (1998) demonstrated that even six pairings of US and CS result in conditioning effects enduring at least three weeks (see also Till & Priluck, 2000; Till, Stanley, & Priluck, 2008). Extending this line of research, De Houwer, Thomas, and Baeyens (2001) provided empirical evidence for the assumption that once-conditioned attitudes are resistant to extinction. In sum, once-conditioned attitudes seem to be enduring and less likely to be changed by counter-attitudinal persuasive appeals (Till, Stanley, & Priluck, 2008); however, it is important to note that conditioning procedures work best with novel brands. Similar to most conditioning experiments, only short-term attitudinal effects were examined, but not the impact of conditioning on purchase intentions or actual behavior. Although some studies have found conditioning effects on actual behavior or brand choice (Baker, 1999; Gorn, 1982), others have failed to provide such evidence (Allen & Madden, 1985; McSweeney & Bierley, 1984). Therefore, future studies should further examine positive and negative conditioning effects on purchase intentions or brand choice.

A fourth shortcoming of the present research concerns the participants of the experimental study. While the present study relied only on students as participants, it would be valuable to study the effect of placements in music videos with an adolescent sample, which is the main target group of the genre. Provided that adolescents with a high preference for rap music endorse the rap artists and performers, a much stronger influence of brand appearance can be expected. Conversely, a sample consisting of older subjects lacking the preference for rap music would probably be less susceptible to attitudinal conditioning procedures.

CONCLUSION

Marketers consider brand placements a less expensive strategy compared to classical spot advertising; but to return to the initial question, one may ask again whether the appearance of commercial messages in television programming (e.g., embedding a cognac brand like Courvoisier in a rap video) always pays off. Normally, one would suggest that practitioners should not look a gift horse in the mouth and try to integrate as many placements as possible. This strategy may turn out to be a double-edged sword: If placements appear in positively reinforcing contexts, attitudes can be conditioned as intended; however, it is possible that brands may unexpectedly appear in unfavorable contexts and thus produce negative consumer attitudes. In particular, the lack of control over the context in which the placement appears raises the probability that brands may
appear in negative scenes. Therefore, marketers would be ill-advised to get their brands embedded at any cost. Rap videos are a special environment for marketers because rap performers drop brand names in their lyrics or show products without any previous agreement with the brand manufacturer. Furthermore, brand embeds often occur in contexts that cannot be considered as ideal marketing environments—for example, scenes of delinquent or deviant behavior of the artists. Therefore, while marketers are dying to get their brands integrated into music videos, the potential loss for a brand manufacturer may exceed the potential gain of the placement integration strategy. However, an important boundary condition of negative conditioning effects is that the context of brand embeds is perceived negatively by viewers. When viewers adore the delinquent behavior of their favorite rap star, then positive rather than negative conditioning effects can be expected.

In considering the broader implications of the present findings, the experimental study points to the importance of advertising effects without viewers’ recognition. In line with previous research (Matthes, Schemer, & Wirth, 2007; van Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2007; Russell, 2002; Walther & Grigoriadis, 2004), it can be suggested that brand appearances in a media program can be more successful in influencing brand attitudes when the recognition of brand appearance is rather low. However, the experimental result, that placements can influence attitudes without recognition, also raises ethical concerns. Given the subtle nature of brand appearances, several researchers and practitioners express concern about persuasive placement effects, particularly when the viewers’ awareness is low. These authors suggest two ways to deal with “hidden” persuasion strategies of marketers. On the one hand, public awareness about subtle advertising effects should be raised by indicating that a program was sponsored and by mentioning the sponsors. Concerning this issue, it would be a valuable avenue of future research to examine the role of indicating sponsors or awareness thereof on the impact of attitudinal conditioning. On the other hand, a much harsher regulation would be the banning of all program-integrated commercial content, though, considering actual current marketing practices and the growing interest of marketers in program-integrated advertising, a ban on placements seems rather unlikely to occur.

REFERENCES


DOES “PASSING THE COURVOISIER” ALWAYS PAY OFF?


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APPENDIX

Screenshots of the Rap Video Clips

*Rap Video with Brand Placements (Nada Clothing)*
Rap Video without Brand Placements

Note: The present version of the video was produced exclusively for the purpose of the study. The fourth author was the producer of the video.