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Make it part of the story: The role of product placement prominence and integration in fashion and beauty blogs among young digital natives

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ABSTRACT

Product placement is one of the most widely used marketing and advertising strategies. Although previous research has examined the role of different key variables in traditional media, the effect of prominence and integration in product placement strategies that appear in digital media such as fashion and beauty blogs has not been fully investigated. A 2 (Prominence: “low” vs. “high”) X 2 (Integration: “low” vs. “high”) between-subjects experiment was conducted to examine the impact of these variables on young digital natives consumers’ recall and attitudes towards the product, the brand, the blogger and the post. The results show that integrated placements are effective at eliciting brand and product recall and improving attitudes towards the post and the blogger. Prominence, on the other hand, did not have the expected impact on brand or product recall. In addition, Prominent product placement did increase consumers’ suspicion of the persuasion attempt. Implications and recommendations for bloggers and marketers are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In a universe hyper-saturated with information, product placement is presented as a good alternative to get attention and has gained ground over traditional advertising (PQMedia, 2021). One of the main reasons why product placement is gaining ground over more traditional forms of advertising is related to its more subtle nature and its greater ability to go unnoticed (Chan, 2012). As the Persuasive Knowledge Model shows, when people recognize a persuasive attempt, they can use their knowledge about persuasion to process the attempt more critically and resist the persuasion (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Therefore, although there are many variables that can affect the effectiveness of product placement (Balasubramanian et al., 2006), previous research has focused especially on two of them due to their direct relationship with persuasion knowledge activation: prominence (the extent to which the product possesses characteristics designed to

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create a central focus of the audience's attention) and integration (the extent to which the brand has a role in relation to the story and contributes to the construction of the characters or the plot; Russell, 1998).

Although these variables have been examined before separately, only in a previous study (Yang & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007) have they been studied together. However, due to methodological issues, the effects of both variables could not be properly differentiated. Therefore, no previous research has been able to study their comparative effect as well as their possible interaction.

In addition, the recent emergence and growing importance of digital influencers has caused a significant increase (more than 20%) in this marketing strategy in digital media in 2019 (Russell, 2019). Thus, it is necessary to examine the role played by prominence and integration in this new digital context in which these variables should be operationalized in a different way. Furthermore, this social media content is especially consumed by digital natives and, as previous studies have shown, this segment of the population usually processes digital stimuli differently than older digital immigrants (Kincl & Štrach, 2021; Kirk et al., 2015; Munsch, 2021). In consequence, this study attempts to fill this gap by studying the separate effect of prominence and integration as well as their interaction on influencer marketing effectiveness in the context of beauty and fashion blogs among young digital natives.

2. Theoretical background

One of the biggest advantages of product placement compared to conventional advertising is that while the latter is usually very explicit, which can lead to the appearance of resistance mechanisms, in the case of product placement, this persuasive intention might be more subtle and can even go unnoticed by the receiver, becoming a more subtle and effective strategy (Chan, 2012). As persuasion and consumer skepticism literature has shown, people tend to be more resistant to any proposal when they are aware of themselves as the target of a persuasive attempt (Briñol et al., 2015; Friestad & Wright, 1994). In this sense, previous research has shown that when the receiver of a message identifies it as an advertising strategy, resistance towards such a persuasive attempt increases (Campbell & Kirmani, 2008). Consequently, in the digital context, disclosing the commercial nature of a post (i.e. sponsored posts) automatically triggers the knowledge of the persuasive attempt and decreases its effectiveness (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020). Therefore, research on product placement effectiveness should pay special attention to those variables that increase or decrease the activation of the persuasive knowledge.

2.1. Product placement in blogs and social media

The emergence of new online communication channels has led to the appearance of new social media influencers who have the ability to prescribe and affect the purchasing decisions of their followers (Bentley et al., 2021). Brands are aware of this influence and, especially within the fashion category, are including these new digital leaders as an increasingly relevant part of their marketing and communication strategies (Hughes et al., 2019; Noris et al., 2021).

Although some posts are created without any promotional purpose, many are sponsored by commercial brands that reward social media influencers with money or gifts for talking about and recommending their products (Mutum & Wang, 2010). Many of the authors of these blogs have become celebrities and personalities who are capable of influencing due to their perceived credibility, attractiveness, trust, and experience (Arora & Sahu, 2014). However, when social media influencers engage in product placement strategies, the recipients of their messages may identify the commercial nature of the message and suspect that the product recommendation is purely commercial and not genuine, diminishing the effectiveness of the message and, in turn, the credibility of the influencer (Russell & Rasolofoarison, 2017). Therefore, research on product placement effectiveness in influencer marketing should also pay special attention to those variables that increase or decrease the perceived credibility of the source and his/her own work (e.g. the post).

2.2. Prominence and integration

Different studies have analyzed the key factors involved in making product placement more effective (Chan, 2012; Guo et al., 2019). However, because of its central role regarding the activation of the awareness of the persuasion attempt, previous research has focused on how product placement effectiveness might vary depending on two especially relevant variables: prominence and integration (e.g. Cowley & Barron, 2008; Naderer et al., 2018; Russell, 2002; Wang & Chen, 2019).

Placement integration refers to the extent to which the brand has a role in relation to the story and contributes to the construction of the characters or the plot (Russell, 1998). According to previous research, higher levels of integration predict better placement recall and better product and brand evaluation (d'Astous & Seguin, 1999; Kamleitner & Khair Jyote, 2013; Kishiya, 2018; Russell, 2002). Therefore, more integrated placements (i.e. where the brand is related to and integrated into the structure of the plot) will be more remembered and better evaluated than those that simply appear in the story without an important implication for its development. For example, Yang and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2007) proved that high integration (i.e. when the product was used by the protagonist) influenced explicit brand recognition and elicited more positive brand evaluations.

This better evaluation can be explained due to classical conditioning learning since the positive evaluation of the character (generally appreciated by its audience) can be thus transferred to the product (Schemer et al., 2008; Stephen et al., 2021). More importantly, placement integration into the plot could also help to disguise the commercial's intent and reduce the perception of the persuasive attempt by the viewer, reducing this way the risk of persuasive knowledge activation and, consequently, reactance defensiveness (Bhatnagar et al., 2003). Thus, higher levels of placement integration in social media like blogs should increase product and brand recall as well as lead to more favourable attitudes and purchase intentions. Furthermore, higher integration should lead to greater credibility and more favourable attitudes towards the social media influencer.

Placement prominence or prominent presence of the brand or product refers to the extent to which the product possesses characteristics designed to create a central focus of the audience's attention. That is the size, visibility, duration (exposure time), and

frequency (number of times) with which the product or brand is exposed or mentioned (Cowley & Barron, 2008; Gupta & Lord, 1998). This is a variable of controversial effectiveness, as it could have opposite effects. On the one hand, Gupta and Lord (1998) showed that brand recall increased when product placement was visibly prominent and that prominent placements were even more remembered than advertisements. However, on the other hand, other research has suggested not-so-favorable effects since greater prominence reduces the subtlety of product placement and activates knowledge of the persuasive attempt in subjects, thus increasing reactance and resistance to the persuasive attempt, (Matthes & Naderer, 2016; van Reijmersdal, 2015). Thus, it could be hypothesized that higher levels of placement prominence in social media should also increase product and brand recall, but at the same time, should lead to less favorable attitudes and purchase intentions. Furthermore, more prominent placements should result in less favorable attitudes towards the influencer and lower levels of credibility.

Although these two variables have been studied separately before, no previous research has studied how they interact together. In this regard, it could be hypothesized that the most effective product placement strategy for social influencers could be one in which the product or brand is highly prominent, but only as long as it is also highly integrated into the narrative. Some previous research (e.g. Yang & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007) has shown how situations in which high prominence and high integration occur (e.g. the protagonist uses the product) have had positive effects (both better attitudes towards the brand and greater recall). Nevertheless, the experimental design employed (in which the two variables appeared inseparably linked since placements classified as central to the plot were also more prominent) did not allow us to know whether the effect was attributed exclusively to prominence, to integration, to the interaction between the two or even to third variables (e.g. a positive association effect with a well-known actor).

In addition, it is worth noting that most of the previous research has studied the effect of variables such as prominence or integration into traditional media such as TV shows, films, music, etc. (Naderer et al., 2018). However, it is not well known the impact that these variables could have on digital media, such as blogs, where these variables might adopt a different operationalization and therefore have a different impact.

Finally, as previous research has shown (Kincl & Štrach, 2021), digital natives, process digital stimuli differently than older digital immigrants (Kirk et al., 2015; Munsch, 2021). For example, Wai Lai and Liu (2020) found that young individuals evaluated and responded to product placement in mobile social networks differently from more adult audiences. For this reason, it seems logical to assume that the persuasive effects generated by placement prominence and integration could also be different for this population.

On account of the above, this research is intended to analyze the role of *integration* and *prominence* in product placement strategies carried out by bloggers and their effect on memory, attitude change, and influencer evaluation among young digital people. The following hypotheses were proposed:

H₁: *A prominent product placement will elicit greater (H1a) product and (H1b) brand recall compared to a less prominent placement.*

H₂: *A prominent product placement will elicit a greater suspicion of the persuasive attempt compared to a less prominent placement.*

- H₃:** *A prominent product placement will lead to less favorable attitudes towards (H3a) the product, (H3b) the brand, (H3c) the blogger, and (H3d) the post compared to a less prominent placement.*
- H₄:** *An integrated product placement will elicit greater (H4a) product and (H4b) brand recall compared to a less integrated placement.*
- H₅:** *An integrated product placement will elicit less suspicion of the persuasive attempt compared to a less integrated placement.*
- H₆:** *An integrated product placement will elicit more favorable attitudes towards (H6a) the product, (H6b) the brand, (H6c) the blogger, and (H6d) the post.*
- H₇:** *An interaction between prominence and integration is expected regarding suspicion of persuasive attempt. Specifically, a prominent product placement will elicit a greater suspicion of the persuasive attempt compared to a less prominent placement except for the experimental condition in which high prominence and high integration concur.*
- H₈:** *An interaction between prominence and integration is expected regarding attitudes towards (H8a) the product, (H8b) the brand, (H8c) the blogger, and (H8d) the post. Specifically, a prominent product placement will elicit less favorable attitudes towards (H8a) the product, (H8b) the brand, (H8c) the blogger, and (H8d) the post except for the experimental condition in which high prominence and high integration concur.*
- H₉:** *Regarding recall, an additive effect is expected between prominence and integration. Specifically, a prominent product placement will elicit a greater recall, especially for the experimental condition in which high prominence and high integration concur.*

3. Method and materials

A sample of 135 students (105 women and 30 men) from a Communication School participated voluntarily in this study. The average age was 21.4 years ($SD = 3.3$). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions, according to a 2 (Prominence: “low” vs. “high”) X 2 (Integration: “low” vs. “high”) between-subject factorial design.

Upon arrival, participants read a post from a real *blogger* (to increase the realism of the stimulus), but a relatively unknown one to avoid the influence of other variables such as familiarity. The post, describing the qualities of a cosmetic product of a new beauty brand, was altered to create four different conditions depending on the prominence and integration with which the brand and product appeared. To ensure the internal validity of the stimuli, all other features (name of the blog, author, logo, advertising banners, etc.) remained constant.

After being exposed to the stimulus, the degree to which participants remembered the brand and product discussed in the post was measured. Finally, the participants completed a questionnaire in which they stated their opinions about the product, brand, blogger, and post.

3.1. Independent variables

3.1.1. Prominence

The size, frequency, position, and brand's typography were modified. Specifically, half of the participants (i.e. high prominence condition) received a post where the brand name appeared on more occasions (five in total), in a larger size and in more striking typography. Finally, the post included a photo of the product in a large size (7.5 x 15 cm), in which the brand's name was visible. In contrast, participants who were assigned to the low prominence condition received a post in which the brand's name was absent in the post title, and it appeared in the content only once, no typographic differentiation was made in the brand's name, and the product's photo appeared in a smaller size (3.75 x 7.5 cm). (Figures 1 and 2).

To ensure that the stimuli used in the manipulation were associated with greater or lesser prominence, an additional study was conducted ($N = 55$, 76.4% females, $M_{age} = 23.33$, $SD = 2.20$). The participants expressed the extent (from 1 = "Not at all" to 9 = "Totally") to which they considered that the brand name was easily visible and appeared frequently in the post, the image of the product was clearly visible and occupied an important proportion of the post (Cronbach alpha = .79). The results showed that participants perceived the post designed for the high prominence condition was significantly more prominent ($M = 7.28$, $SD = 1.72$) compared to the post used for the low prominence condition ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.47$), $t(54) = 14.18$, $p < .001$.

3.1.2. Integration

For the manipulation of integration or connection with the plot, the degree to which the product or brand represented a leading role in the narrative was modified, as well as the degree to which interaction with the protagonist or author of the plot occurred. Specifically, the participants assigned to the high integration condition received a post in which the product played an essential role in the development of the story and the story was told in first person by the author of the post. However, the other half of the participants received a post in which the mention of the product was oblivious to the development of the plot and the story was told in third person. To check that the placements used in the study were perceived as more or less integrated into the post, we conducted another additional study with a different sample ($N = 61$, 78.3% females, $M_{age} = 24.16$, $SD = 2.93$). The participants expressed the extent (from 1 = "Not at all" to 9 = "Totally") to which they considered that the post was told in the form of a personal story and the extent to which de mention of the brand and the product was related, integrated, and justified within the personal story (Cronbach alpha = .74). The results showed that participants considered that the placement used for the high integration condition was significantly more integrated ($M = 7.02$, $SD = 1.96$) compared to the placement used for the low integrated condition ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.54$), $t(59) = 14.52$, $p < .001$.

The image is a screenshot of a web browser displaying the Bymyheels website. At the top, the browser's address bar shows the URL: <http://www.bymyheels.com/2013/02/ultimas-novedades-de-bel>. The website's main header features the brand name "Bymyheels" in a large, elegant serif font, with the tagline "by Lara Martín-Gilarranz" in a smaller, pink sans-serif font below it.

A horizontal navigation menu is located below the header, containing links for "BY MY HEELS", "ABOUT ME", "CONTACT", "FOLLOW BYMYHEELS", "FACEBOOK", "TWITTER", "BLOGLOVIN", and "PRESS".

The main content area is dated "14.2.13" and titled "Últimas novedades de belleza". The text describes a beauty product line called "Tahé", highlighting its convenience and price. A small image shows the product packaging. Below this, a full-body photograph of a woman in a black jacket and leggings is shown, with a list of clothing items and brands: Leggings: Marie Claire; Shirt: Primark; Jacket: Loka Store; Parka: Sheinside; Heels: Zara; Clutch: Accessorize; Rings: Aristocrazy; Sunnies: Ray Ban.

On the right side of the page, there is a sidebar advertisement for "contratación de publicidad en medios sociales" (social media advertising). It features a profile picture of Lara Martín-Gilarranz and a bio: "In love with fashion. I studied Business Management, a Master Degree in Fashion & Beauty Communication, a Digital Marketing and 2.0 Communication Master Degree and a Personal Shopper Course." Below the bio is a quote from Stuart Weitzman: "Nothing has been invented yet that will do a better job than high heels at making a good pair of legs look great, or great ones look fabulous." A red link "Ver todo mi perfil" is provided.

At the bottom of the page, there is a search bar with the text "BÚSQUEDAS" and a "BUSCAR" button.

Figure 1. Stimulus low prominence and low integration.

The image shows a screenshot of a web browser displaying the Bymyheels website. The browser's address bar shows the URL: <http://www.bymyheels.com/2013/02/ultimas-novedades-de-bel>. The page features a large header with the text "Bymyheels by Lara Martín-Gilarranz". Below the header is a navigation menu with links: BY MY HEELS, ABOUT ME, CONTACT, FOLLOW BYMYHEELS, FACEBOOK, TWITTER, BLOGLOVIN, and PRESS. The main content area is titled "Últimas novedades de belleza – Tahe" and includes a sub-header "Pack tres productos de keratina Tahe". The article text describes Tahe beauty products and mentions a price of 19,95 €. There are two images: one showing Tahe product bottles and another showing a woman in a black jacket and heels. A sidebar on the right contains a "contratación de publicidad en medios sociales" banner, a profile for "Lara" with a bio and a quote, and a "Participar en este sitio" section with a "Miembros (3046)" list. At the bottom, there are social media "Follow" buttons for Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram, a "PHOTOS BY JORGE R." section with a photo of a woman being photographed, and a search bar labeled "BÚSQUEDAS".

Figure 2. Stimulus high prominence and low integration.

3.2. Dependent variables

3.2.1. Brand/product recall

Participants were asked to write the brand's name, as well as the products that were advertised in the post. The answers were subsequently encoded as correct or incorrect (for a similar procedure see Gupta & Lord, 1998)

3.2.2. Attitudes towards the product

Ten semantic differential items of 9 points were used (useless vs useful; unattractive vs attractive, etc.). Due to their high internal correlation (Cronbach alpha = .88), these ten items were averaged to form a single index of attitudes towards the product.

3.2.3. Attitudes towards the brand

An index that consists of the same ten semantic differential 9-point items that were used to measure attitudes towards the product was used (Cronbach alpha = .91).

3.2.4. Attitudes towards the blogger

Ten Likert scale-type items of 9 points were used (from 1 = "Not at all" to 9 = "Totally Agree"). For instance, participants were asked if they thought that the blogger was an expert in beauty, in fashion, a good professional, their willingness to become a follower of her blog, etc. Since these ten items showed a high internal correlation (Cronbach alpha = .81), they were also averaged to form a single index of attitudes towards the blogger.

3.2.5. Attitudes towards the post

Attitudes towards the post were measured by an index (Cronbach alpha = .91) composed of 5 semantic differential items of 9 points, each asking how useful, attractive, recommendable, well-written and exhaustive they thought the post was.

3.2.6. Suspicion of the persuasive attempt

Participants answered 4 Likert scale-type items of 9 points (from 1 = "Not at all" to 9 = "Totally Agree") where they stated the extent to which they believed that the blogger was actually a buyer of the product and that she actually consumed it. The other two questions regarded whether they thought *the blogger* received payments from the brand and whether they thought she received gifts from the brand for talking about them. Due to its thematic unit and internal correlation, the first two items were merged to create an index on the blogger as a real user of the product (Cronbach alpha = .84) and the two last items were merged into another index on the blogger as a recipient of payments by the brand (Cronbach alpha = .77). Both indices were intended to identify whether participants saw the product's recommendation as genuine or as a mere commercial strategy.

4. Results

4.1. Brand recall

A chi-squared test was conducted to assess any relationship between the brand's recall level and any of the four experimental conditions. The results showed that brand recall was significantly greater depending on integration, but not on

Table 1. Cross table Condition*Product Recall.

| | | | Product recall | | Total |
|-----------|---------|--------------------|----------------|-------|--------|
| | | | no | yes | |
| Condition | BP y BI | Count | 19 | 18 | 37 |
| | | % within Condition | 51,4% | 48,6% | 100,0% |
| | BP y AI | Corrected residue | 1,0 | -1,0 | |
| | | Count | 13 | 18 | 31 |
| | AP y BI | % within Condition | 41,9% | 58,1% | 100,0% |
| | | Corrected residue | -4 | ,4 | |
| | AP y AI | Count | 19 | 10 | 29 |
| | | % within Condition | 65,5% | 34,5% | 100,0% |
| | AP y AI | Corrected residue | 2,6 | -2,6 | |
| | | Count | 8 | 27 | 35 |
| | Total | % within Condition | 22,9% | 77,1% | 100,0% |
| | | Corrected residue | -3,0 | 3,0 | |
| | Total | Count | 59 | 73 | 132 |
| | | % within Condition | 44,7% | 55,3% | 100,0% |

prominence: In the high integration condition, people were more able to remember the name of the brand (59.1% vs 40.9%), while in the low integration condition, the opposite pattern was found (39.7% vs 60.3%) $\chi^2(1) = 5.035, p = .025$. On the contrary, when comparing the high prominence condition with the low prominence condition, no significant differences were found.

Product Recall was also significantly greater depending on integration, but not on prominence: In the high integration condition participants were able to remember the advertised product in a higher proportion (68.2%), $\chi^2(1) = 8.832, p = .003$. On the contrary, when comparing the high prominence condition with the low prominence condition, no differences were found. At the same time, when the four conditions were compared with each other, data indicated a significant effect ($\chi^2(1) = 8.832, p < .01$): recall was significantly stronger in the high prominence and high integration condition ($p = .002$) (Table 1).

4.2. Attitudes

The factorial variance analyses 2×2 (ANOVA) revealed that neither the prominence *nor the integration of the product placement* showed significant effects on product or brand valuations ($p > .1$).

However, integration did show effects on the attitude towards the blogger ($F(128) = 8.54, p = .004$): The attitude towards the blogger was more favorable for those participants who received the post in which the product was more integrated into the story ($M = 6.6, SD = .13$) than for those who were assigned to the low integration condition ($M = 6.04, SD = .14$) (Figure 3).

As presented in Figure 4, the ANOVA also revealed a main effect of integration on the attitudes towards the post ($F(132) = 4.520, p = .035$): High integration condition showed more favorable attitudes towards the post ($M = 5.3, SD = 2.15$) than low-integration condition ($M = 4.7, SD = 2.1$).

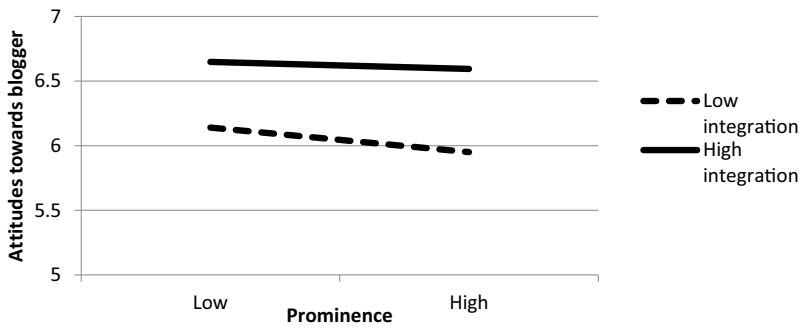


Figure 3. Effects of prominence and integration on attitude towards the blogger.

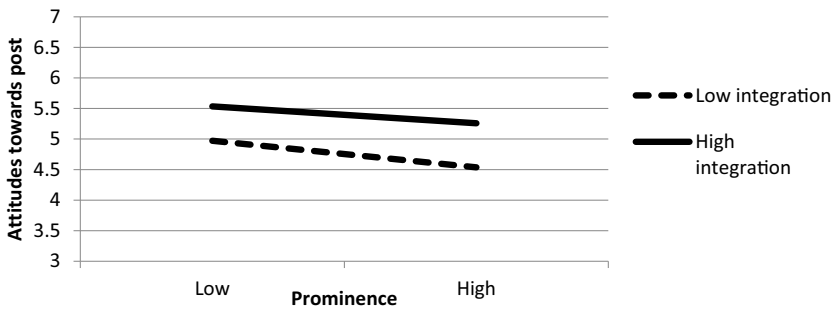


Figure 4. Effects of prominence and integration on attitude towards the post.

4.3. Suspicion of the persuasive attempt

The analysis showed a significant effect of prominence ($F(133) = 3.94$ $p = .04$) on the suspicion of a persuasive attempt. Participants who received the post in which the product was more prominent thought that the blogger had bought and consumed the product to a lesser extent ($M = 5.35$ $SD = .24$) than those under the condition of low prominence ($M = 6.04$ $SD = .24$). However, there was no effect of integration ($p > .1$) or interaction ($p > .1$). (Figure 5).

In the same vein, participants who received the post in which the product was more prominent showed greater inclination to believe that the blogger had received payments and gifts to speak favorably about it ($M = 6.6$ $SD = .269$), compared to low prominence condition¹ ($M = 5.8$ $SD = .266$) $F(133) = 4.09$ $p = .045$ (Figure 6).

5. Conclusions and discussion

The first main conclusion is that contrary to our prediction for H1a and H1b, prominence by itself might not be a particularly relevant factor in eliciting higher recall. Although previous research has consistently found that prominent stimuli usually elicit greater recall (e.g. Gupta & Lord, 1998), no research had yet examined this variable in the context of digital social media. However, these results align with previous findings that show that young digital natives are especially skillful at

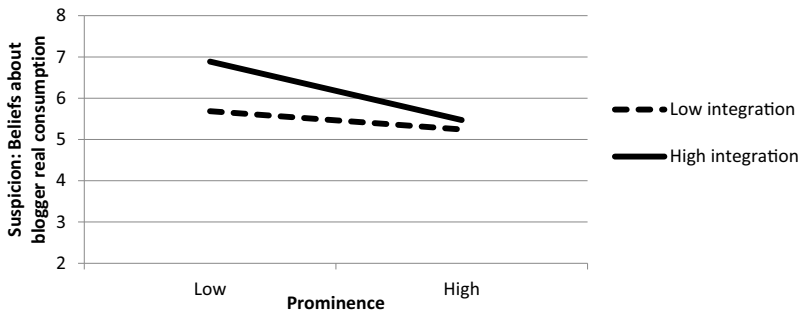


Figure 5. Prominence and integration effects on beliefs about blogger real consumption of the product.

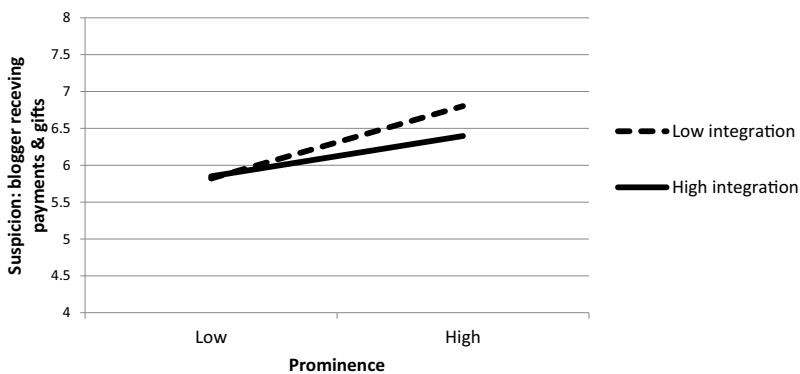


Figure 6. Prominence and integration effects on beliefs about the blogger receiving payments and gifts.

detecting and ignoring redundant or irrelevant advertising stimuli such as banners, therefore reducing both its impact in memory and its effectiveness (Cuesta-Cambra et al., 2017; Lee & Ahn, 2012). Thus, in this context, this result constitutes the first evidence showing that, among digital natives, the prominence of the product is not effective in eliciting recall.

On the contrary, and confirming H4a and H4b, integration seems to be a key factor in increasing recall. If this hypothesis is confirmed in future works, it would be logical to think that to elicit the greatest possible recall of brand and product, it is highly recommended for the product to be as much integrated as possible with the storytelling. Also, in line with H9, the greatest recall occurs when high prominence coincides with high integration. Thus, even though integration is the variable that affects the recall of the brand and the product the most, its effect is even greater when combined with high prominence.

Moreover, higher integration had no effect on the awareness of the persuasion attempt (H5). Still, it was a decisive factor in attitudes towards the post (H6d) and the blogger (H6c), although it showed no effect on attitudes towards the brand

(H6b) or product (H6a). This finding has highly relevant implications for bloggers: attitudes towards the blogger will be more favorable if the recommendations are well integrated.

Future research should investigate why integration, among digital natives, might affect attitudes towards the blogger and the post but not towards the brand and the product. A possible explanation might be related to the fact that, while in traditional advertising the brand and the source of the persuasive attempt coincide, in product placement strategies used in blogs, the brand and the message source are perceived as two clearly different agents and, therefore, are susceptible to different evaluations, at least among young digital natives, with greater skills in advertising strategies.

Equally relevant is the fact that, although greater prominence did not seem to have an impact on less favourable attitudes towards the brand (H3b), product (H3a), post (H3d) or blogger (H3c), results showed that suspicion of the persuasive intent (H2) did increase. Thus, in line with what was expected, the participants assigned to the high prominence condition largely considered the product's recommendation as a mere commercial strategy instead of a genuine one. Specifically, the more prominent the product placement was, the less confident participants were that the blogger actually bought and used the product and the greater their suspicion was about the blogger receiving payments and gifts from the brand to speak highly of it. This also has important practical consequences since, as with any persuasive source, honesty, independence, and perceived transparency can determine the blogger's credibility (Pornpitakpan, 2004).

It is interesting to note that, against what might be expected (Friestad & Wright, 1994), this awareness or suspicion of the persuasive attempt did not turn into unfavourable attitudes towards the brand or the product. Nevertheless, previous research analyzing bloggers' credibility has found similar results. Specifically, Colliander and Erlandsson (2015) showed that the credibility of the blog and blogger diminished when readers realised that it was sponsored by a brand but did not affect the attitudes or intent to buy that brand. A possible explanation for this phenomenon could be a "naturalization" of persuasive messages among digital natives. That is, this specific target accepts, and sees as normal, that brands use these influencers as selling tools and that bloggers receive compensation for promotional work without being perceived as something surprising or especially negative. Readers might assume that despite being a sponsored content, the blogger praises the brand because they sincerely like it.

Therefore, digital influencers should carefully consider how to develop effective product placement strategies without eroding their own credibility. In this sense, regarding the variables under examination, this research suggests that digital influencers should put special emphasis on integrating their recommendations as much as possible into the narrative. As this research has shown, this variable affects the effectiveness of the strategy directly as it helps to generate a greater recall about the brand and the product. Secondly, it improves the perception that the reader has about the author of the blog, as well as their work. Simultaneously, these influencers should design strategies in which prominence is moderate. Although high prominence might increase the recall of the brand or product when it is accompanied by high integration, that will arouse the suspicion of persuasive attempt in readers, thus reducing their credibility and, perhaps, harming their image or reputation.

Finally, since the author of the examined blog in this study was unknown to the participants, future research should investigate how prominence and integration into blogs are affected when the author is well known, and the readers already have specific expectations for them

Note

1. When gender was included into the ANOVA as an additional factor, no significant interactions were found qualifying the main effects ($ps > .05$), suggesting that gender was not a moderating factor. In addition, when gender was included into the ANOVA as a covariable (ANCOVA) all main effects remained significant ($ps < .05$).

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