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Attitudes and related perceptions about product placement: a comparison of Finland, Italy and the United States

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The primary goal of our study is to explore cross-national differences in attitudes and perceptions about product placements, after investigating measurement invariance. Our cross-national focus includes three countries that have not been compared previously: Finland, Italy and the USA, which differ significantly in terms of the evolution/maturity of product placement markets, regulatory structures and cultural contexts. Motivated by earlier studies, we investigate the cross-national measurement invariance of scales to measure four research constructs related to the product placement domain (attitude toward credibility of advertising, attitude toward advertising-in-general, attitude toward placement-in-general and attitude toward regulation of placements). Our research also extends earlier work focused on similar constructs from a cross-national perspective. Results from multi-group analyses using a structural equation modeling approach indicate important and statistically significant differences in latent means between the three countries for all four constructs of research interest. Substantive explanations of these differences and their implications for future practice and research are discussed.

Keywords: product placement; brand placement; advertising; attitudes; cross-cultural research; measurement invariance

Introduction

Whether it is James Bond driving an Aston Martin in the movie *Skyfall* or Phil Dunphy craving an iPad in an episode of the popular television sitcom *Modern Family*, the presence of brands in popular culture has become commonplace. Marketers increasingly perceive these brand cameos or product placements as more attractive than other media options. This interest is reflected, on the one hand, in the growing size of the product placement market, with global product placement expenditure reaching \$7.39 billion in 2011 (PQ Media 2012) and on the other, in product placement's status as a hot research topic (Taylor 2009, 2013).

Product or brand placement can be defined as 'the paid inclusion of branded products or brand identifiers, through audio and/or visual means, within mass media programming' (Karrh 1998, 33). By means of placements, marketers aim to positively influence consumers' brand awareness, preferences and purchase intentions (d'Astous and Chartier 2000). While discussions about the origins of product placements often evoke cinema at the

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beginning of the last century, documented instances of placements pre-date the movies, for example, in cabaret (Lehu 2007). This is a testament to the long and symbiotic history between marketing and entertainment. A more recent practice is labeled ‘reverse product placement’, where fictional brands from entertainment media become real brands (Muzellec, Kanitz, and Lynn 2013). Placements are now present not only in movies and television programs, but also in plays (Wilson and Till 2011), radio programs (van Reijmersdal 2011), novels (Olsen and Lanseng 2012), song lyrics (Delattre and Colovic 2009), music videos (Schemer et al. 2008) and video/computer games (Hang and Auty 2011).

Product placement and its effects on audiences have attracted substantial research attention in the past two decades (Bressoud, Lehu, and Russell 2010; for literature reviews, see Balasubramanian, Karrh, and Patwardhan 2006; van Reijmersdal, Neijens, and Smit 2009). Although this literature explores consumers’ attitudes toward product placement as a practice, most studies address the cognitive and persuasive effects of placements in terms of memory and brand attitude (Bressoud, Lehu, and Russell 2010).

Early research in product placement was mostly of US origin and little attention was paid to the global nature of placements (Gould, Gupta, and Grabner-Kräuter 2000). Even though the number of international contributions has grown in product placement literature (e.g., Nelson and Devanathan 2006; Hang and Auty 2011; van Reijmersdal 2011; Olsen and Lanseng 2012), the US perspective still dominates. Understanding how consumers from other national and cultural backgrounds view placements has become increasingly important as entertainment products, such as movies and television shows, are now commonly available to and produced for global, multinational audiences (Gould, Gupta, and Grabner-Kräuter 2000). With market shares often exceeding 65% in the last 20 years, US movies have had a significant presence in most European countries (MEDIA Salles 2011). In addition, the evolution of on-demand services such as Netflix and Amazon Instant Video means that a vast and diverse international audience now has easy access to the same entertainment content and is consequently also exposed to the same placements. In this context, there is a clear need for more comparative research about the influence of different national and cultural backgrounds on placement outcomes.

The primary goal of our study is to explore differences in attitudes and perceptions about product placements across nations with different cultural and regulatory contexts. Research has shown that findings from cross-national studies are open to question if measurement invariance is not established, yet only 28% of cross-national studies seem to have assessed measurement invariance (He, Merz, and Alden 2008). A major contribution of our study is that, unlike previous studies, cross-national comparisons are made only after investigating measurement invariance. Our analysis focuses on three countries whose product placement markets differ in terms of evolution/maturity, regulatory structures and cultural contexts; namely, Finland, Italy and the USA.

We focus our attention on two well-researched constructs from the advertising domain that are likely to inform audience behaviors toward product placements: credibility of advertising (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998) and attitude toward advertising-in-general (Alwitt and Prabhaker 1992; MacKenzie and Lutz 1989; Muehling 1987). We also address two additional constructs that provide a contextually rich and nuanced understanding of how individuals respond to product placements: attitude toward placement-in-general (Gupta and Gould 1997) and attitude toward regulation of placements (Sung, de Gregorio, and Jung 2009; Hudson, Hudson, and Peloza 2008). These four constructs (see Table 1) have not been investigated or compared for cross-national measurement invariance in the context of product placement thus far.

Table 1. Model constructs and indicator items.

Latent model constructs	Indicators	Item description
F1 Attitude toward credibility of advertising (Source: Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998)	F1A	Advertising is a reliable source of information about the quality and performance of products
	F1B	Advertising is generally truthful
	F1C	We can depend on getting the truth in most advertising
	F1D	In general, advertising presents a true picture of the product being advertised
F2 Attitude toward advertising-in-general (Sources: Alwitt and Prabhaker 1992; MacKenzie and Lutz 1989; Muehling 1987)	F2A	I find advertising in general to be...unpleasant : pleasant
	F2B	Overall, my attitude toward advertising is...unfavorable : favorable
	F2C	I find advertising in general to be...boring : interesting
	F2D	Overall, my attitude toward advertising is...negative : positive
F3 Attitude toward placement-in-general (Sources: Gupta and Gould 1997 and items developed for this study)	F3A (R)	Product placement in television programs should be completely banned
	F3B (R)	Product placement is cheating consumers
	F3C (R)	I will not watch a movie or television program if I know beforehand that brands are placed prominently in it for commercial purposes
	F3D (R)	Product placement in movies should be completely banned
F4 Attitude toward regulation of placements (Sources: Gupta and Gould 1997 and items developed for this study)	F4A (R)	There is no need to regulate product placement in television programs in any way
	F4B (R)	There is no need to regulate product placement in movies in any way
	F4C	The government should regulate product placement in television programs
	F4D	Brands placed in a movie or television program for which the producers receive compensation from companies should be mentioned in the opening credits
	F4E	The government should regulate product placement in movies

Note: Items marked (R) were reverse coded prior to analysis.

Our research extends the work of Gould, Gupta, and Grabner-Kräuter (2000) who investigate similar constructs from a cross-national perspective, albeit for a different set of countries, using different research methods. In terms of methodology, our research reflects the spirit of Ewing, Caruana, and Zinkhan (2002) who explored the cross-national measurement invariance, generalizability and equivalence of response scales in advertising.

We first present the motivations behind our study, discuss the national contexts of the three countries in detail and propose hypotheses in the following sections. We then describe the research method, data collection and analysis. Finally, we present our results and discuss their implications for marketers and advertisers.

Need for cross-national research with measurement invariance

Several considerations motivated the design of our cross-national study, including the choice of countries (Finland, Italy and the USA) and the research method (multiple group analyses using structural equation modeling).

First, the bulk of the placement literature reflects the US context, showcasing its leadership position in the global placement market. However, placements reach a global audience via syndicated television programs and movie exports. This audience is far from homogenous, underscoring the importance of local knowledge in international placement campaigns. Steenkamp's (2005, 6) exhortation to 'move out of the US silo' and to evaluate how well existing theories and models apply internationally is especially relevant for placement research. Well over a decade ago, Karrh (1998) called for cross-cultural research to better understand the outcomes from product placements in different contexts. In a similar vein, Balasubramanian, Karrh, and Patwardhan (2006) called for studies on placements that include new contexts, cultures and nations. Globally integrated marketing communications campaigns encourage cross-cultural sensitivity, which applies to campaigns that include product placements (Tiwsakul, Hackley, and Szmigin 2005). This issue is also relevant to the 'standardization versus adaptation' debate (Gould, Gupta, and Grabner-Kräuter 2000; Tiwsakul, Hackley, and Szmigin 2005) because of the editorially embedded characteristic of product placement. A cross-national and comparative research approach may enhance our understanding of how product placements work.

Second, it is critical to assess measurement invariance in cross-cultural research in both advertising and product placement domains. As Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998) caution, it is possible that observed mean differences in cross-national research might not reflect true differences between countries on the construct measured, unless rigorous tests of cross-national measurement invariance are conducted. For example, such tests may help to rule out systematic biases in the way participants in different countries respond to certain items in the measurement scale used. Moreover, as Byrne and Stewart (2006) assert, if a measure does not operate equivalently across groups, the interpretation of between-group differences on that measure become questionable. Therefore, following Ewing, Caruana, and Zinkhan (2002), we employ the multiple group analysis approach using structural equation modeling to explicitly test for cross-national measurement invariance before making cross-national comparisons.

Third, the choice of countries was informed by prior work on product placements in cross-cultural contexts and the need for additional research. The US represents the main share of product placement expenditure, generating \$4.26 billion in 2011 and contributing to 57.6% share of the global market (PQ Media 2012). The US has thus been the setting for a large proportion of research activity on product placement, with several cross-national studies comparing perceptions or attitudes toward placements in the USA with

those from other nations (e.g., DeLorme, Mennicken, and Aleff 2000; Gould, Gupta, and Grabner-Kräuter 2000; Karrh, Frith, and Callison 2001; McKechnie and Zhou 2003; Lee, Sung, and de Gregorio 2011). However, these nations do not include Finland and Italy, which along with the USA, were the countries chosen for this study. The three countries represent interesting national cultures and contexts that are significantly different from each other. Their historical, cultural and regulatory differences are discussed next.

Cross-national contexts for product placements

Cultural differences

Previous research has affirmed cultural differences among the countries under consideration. For instance, Hofstede's (2001) work documents cultural differences across nations on five key dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, masculinity and long-term orientation. Finland, Italy and the USA occupy different positions on all five dimensions. Additional research evidence suggests that these three nations belong to different country/cultural clusters, which is a way to illustrate the similarities and differences between cultures (Gupta, Hanges, and Dorfman 2002). Specifically, Gupta, Hanges, and Dorfman (2002) place Finland in the Nordic European, Italy in the Latin European and the USA in the Anglo cultures cluster. Extending this pattern of differences, Steenkamp (2001) analyzed four national-cultural dimensions (after merging the frameworks advanced by Hofstede and Schwartz; for an overview of these frameworks, see Okazaki and Mueller 2007) and assigned Finland, Italy and the USA to the Nordic, Latin and Anglo cluster, respectively. These cultural differences, when evaluated in the broad persuasion context, raise the question whether advertising and placement messages are perceived differently across these three nations.

Legal and regulatory differences

In contrast to regulations related to advertising, the legal/regulatory implications for product placements in the USA range from weak to non-existent (Balasubramanian 1994; Lee 2008). Mirroring this relatively lax US regulatory climate, several nations in Europe have changed their policy toward placements following the introduction of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD). Despite these developments, important differences persist between the USA and other nations on the nature and scope of regulatory predisposition toward product placements. More details about country-wise differences in regulatory and historical contexts follow.

Finland

As early as the 1930s, Finnish movies intentionally featured car and tobacco brands (Kortti 2005). Similarly, Finnish television programs worked with corporate partners during the 1950s and 1960s. However, product placement did not evolve into an industry in Finland as it did in the USA. Although Finnish television and film media appeared receptive to brand sponsors, Finnish marketers did not embrace product placements aggressively (Sabour 2008).

The European Union (whose members include both Finland and Italy) has updated its regulations in this area (European Communities 2009). The implementation phase of the AVMSD was under way when this study was conducted (Ministry of Transport and

Communications 2009). Finnish regulations prior to this — specifically, the Act on Television and Radio Operations — did not explicitly discuss or forbid product placement (Grönqvist 2004). Nevertheless, this Act (1) required commercials to be identified as such and to be separate from editorial content, (2) prohibited surreptitious advertising and (3) mandated that the sponsor be clearly identified in sponsored program content. Although appearances of alcohol and cigarette products in movies were monitored, the regulations directed at placements in the television medium did not apply to movies (Grönqvist 2004).

The introduction of the AVMSD toward the end of 2007 was followed by a two-year implementation period for member states within the European Union. The AVMSD allows placements (1) in movies, serials, sports and light entertainment programs (excluding those directed at children) and (2) where goods or services are provided gratis for inclusion in the content (see AVMSD 2007). However, programs may not emphasize the placed product(s) excessively. Additionally, the disclosure of placements to viewers is mandatory. For instance — while the effectiveness of this approach is subject to debate — Belgium and the UK require the ‘PP’ or ‘P’ symbol to be displayed in the corner of the screen at the beginning and end of the program and after commercial breaks (Tessitore and Geuens 2013), whereas in Finland and Italy these notifications read ‘program contains product placement’. Finally, placements involving cigarettes and prescription drugs are not allowed.

The amended Act on Television and Radio Operations is still not applied to movies, except when they are broadcast on television. Furthermore, the law does not overtly treat domestic and foreign productions differently. Although Finland regulates placements in the television medium, it lacks similar legislation for the film medium. While the Consumer Ombudsman can take action in cases where marketing activities run afoul of the Consumer Protection Act, the act itself only outlines a few general rules (e.g., identifiability of marketing, marketing targeted at underage persons) that apply to all monitoring activities. It appears that there is no established practice for how these rules are implemented. In practice, the regulation of movie product placements, both domestic and foreign, is almost non-existent.

Italy

Branded products have appeared in Italian movies since the 1930s–1940s, as Dalli and Gistri (2005) note in their historical review, but the same cannot be said about product placement deals. Note that placements were not explicitly regulated in Italy prior to 1992. During this period, placements involved tacit deals between producers/directors/actors and private firms, rather than formal or legal agreements. Revenues from movie placements did not necessarily fund movie production, but often benefited actors and/or directors. As a result, placements proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in comedies, the most popular movie genre.

Between 1992 and 2004, Law number 74 (which focused on deceptive advertising practices) was applied to product placements. This law required all ads to be recognizable. In other words, the recipient should be able to identify the promotional features of the message, and distinguish between promotional (less credible) and non-promotional (more credible) sources. However, given the hybrid characteristic of product placement messages, that often conceals persuasive intent, enforcing this law posed significant challenges. Moreover, the Italian Constitution guarantees freedom of expression; thus movie placements were allowed if justified by the needs of directors or screenwriters.

Law number 28 took effect in 2004, and formally allowed placement deals in Italian movies. This law required *clear, truthful and fair* representation of brands to avoid

consumer deception. This law mandated disclosure in the closing credits of sponsors that provided any type of financial support for a movie. Additionally, brands had to be integrated into the movie's plot without interrupting the narrative. Finally, any promotion of prescription medication, tobacco and alcohol products within movies was prohibited. Note that this law failed to address placements in television programs, although they are subject to the rules on deceptive advertising. At the time this study was conducted, discussions were ongoing in Italy to incorporate the AVMSD into its national regulatory structure. However, product placement regulations only applied to domestic films, not to foreign movies. In the case of foreign movies, a commission reviews and decides whether or not to allow their release in Italy. This evaluation does not explicitly consider movie product placements, and focuses on whether the movie includes scenes that are considered indecent or improper.

United States

US product placements can be traced back to the 1930s (McKechnie and Zhou 2003; Wenner 2004). This area developed from a casual activity (DeLorme and Reid 1999) into a sophisticated practice in the 1980s (Balasubramanian 1994). Aided by specialized promotional agencies in the mid-1980s (McKechnie and Zhou 2003), placements eventually evolved into 'standard operating procedure' during the 1990s (Wenner 2004, 105). Currently, the US placement industry is organized and institutionalized, and even boasts a trade body called the Entertainment Resources and Marketing Association (Karrh, McKee, and Pardun 2003; Russell and Belch 2005; erma.org).

As stated earlier, US regulation of placements in film and television media ranges from weak to non-existent. Television placements face relatively more restrictions than movie placements. Placements emanating from broadcast/cablecast media (e.g., those in syndicated films produced for TV broadcast) are required to comply with the Communications Act (Federal Communications Commission 2008). While this Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulation mandates explicit identification of any paid sponsor through sponsorship announcements in programs, it lacks enforceability because of policy waivers and specific provisos. In cases where products or services are provided for free or at a nominal cost, sponsorship identification is not obligatory, 'as long as the product is not featured any more than necessary in the program in which it is contained' (Oxenford, Braverman, and Tomlinson 2008). Movie product placements are not regulated (Ong 2004).

Table 2 summarizes some of the relevant characteristics of each national context (Finland, Italy and the USA) for product placement. In the next section we focus our attention on the four constructs addressed in this study (see Table 1) and propose related hypotheses.

Theoretical and practical perspectives

Much of the research on product placements draws heavily on insights and perspectives from advertising. For example, three well-known metric categories drawn from the Hierarchy of Effects model in the advertising domain (cognitive, affective and conative) represent popular outcomes for assessing placement effectiveness (Balasubramanian, Karrh, and Patwardhan 2006).

From a theoretical perspective, Balasubramanian (1994) conceptualizes product placement as a 'hybrid' message that combines key advantages that sponsors derive from advertising and publicity. The paid-for property of advertising allows sponsors to control

Table 2. Summary of national contexts for product placement.

		Finland		Italy		United States
Cultural Regulatory	Country cluster ^a	Nordic/Nordic European Audiovisual Media Services Directive		Latin/Latin European Audiovisual Media Services Directive		Anglo FCC Communications Act
	Relevant regulations	Act on Television and Radio Operations		Law number 28		
Media literacy efforts Industry	Level of regulation	Consumer Protection Act				Weak Weak 563 ^d
		Moderate	Moderate			
	Number of domestic film releases (2010)	Substantial 23 ^b		Moderate 131 ^c		
	Number of US film releases (2010)	109 ^b		161 ^c		-

^a Gupta, Hanges, and Dorfman (2002); Steenkamp (2001); ^b Finnish Film Foundation (2011); ^c ANICA (2011); ^d Motion Picture Association of America (2014). USA/Canada

the content and format of the message (compared to messages generated through publicity that are not paid for) and the lack of sponsor identification in publicity enhances message credibility (compared to ad messages that identify the sponsor). Therefore, audiences may perceive placements as non-commercial content, which is typically processed without the scrutiny accorded to commercial content (Balasubramanian 1994). In theory, the combination of greater message control and enhanced message credibility may explain why sponsors find placements especially appealing compared to say, advertising or publicity.

Similar to Gould, Gupta, and Grabner-Kräuter (2000), we acknowledge the differences between product placement and advertising; at the same time, insights about placements may emerge from the investigation of relevant constructs in the advertising domain. Balasubramanian, Karrh, and Patwardhan (2006) note significant similarities and differences between advertising and placement messages. A related insight is that individuals are likely to frame or anchor their understanding of product placements around their perceptions about advertising. For example, there is research evidence that consumers accept movie placements more readily than traditional advertising, especially if they help subsidize and consequently improve movie quality (Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993; Gould, Gupta, and Grabner-Kräuter 2000; Gupta, Balasubramanian, and Klassen 2000; Karrh, Frith, and Callison 2001). Similarly, much of the discussion about legal ramifications of placements is anchored to rules that apply to advertising (Balasubramanian 1994). Therefore, we look at two well-researched constructs from the advertising domain that are likely to play a role in audience behaviors toward product placements: credibility of advertising (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998) and attitude toward advertising-in-general (Alwitt and Prabhaker 1992; MacKenzie and Lutz 1989; Muehling 1987).

A report from the Finnish Society on Media Education (2009) indicates that media education is considered an important part of the education system in Finland. While media education is not a specific subject, it is often integrated into the curriculum in order to develop individuals' abilities to understand how media is produced and to evaluate media critically. Such skills and competencies are also taught in Italy, but not to the same extent as in Finland. Media education takes various forms depending on the school level, from a focus on non-verbal communication in primary school to an interest in education technology at the high school level (Rivoltella 2007). European consumers are thus exposed to significantly more media literacy education as part of their upbringing, when compared to their US counterparts.

Advertising is recognized in all three countries as a form of persuasion, defined as 'symbol manipulation designed to produce action in others' (Brown 1958, 299). According to Obermiller, Spangenberg, and MacLachlan (2005), skeptical consumers may have a more negative relationship with advertising. That is, they are less likely to like advertising or believe in its claims. Clearly, the three countries under consideration are likely to differ with respect to this critical consumer characteristic.

A distinctive feature of Italy is its historically strong connection with the USA. As a result, Italians may be more open to commercial influence than Finns. Since World War II, US products (including cultural products such as movies, music, novels and TV shows) have remained popular in Italy, with most Italians considering the US outlook/lifestyle as an aspirational model (Dalli and Gistri 2005).

Based on the preceding discussion, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a: Consumers in the USA will consider advertising to be more credible than consumers in Finland and Italy.

H1b: Consumers in Finland will consider advertising to be less credible than consumers in Italy.

H2a: Consumers in the USA will have a more positive attitude toward advertising-in-general than consumers in Finland and Italy.

H2b: Consumers in Finland will have a less positive attitude toward advertising-in-general than consumers in Italy.

We also considered two other constructs that shed light on how individuals respond to product placements: attitude toward placement-in-general (Gupta and Gould 1997) and attitude toward regulation of placements (Sung, de Gregorio, and Jung 2009; Hudson, Hudson, and Peloza 2008). As the name suggests, attitude toward placement-in-general is conceptually similar to the attitude toward advertising-in-general construct. These constructs are anchored to the placement and advertising domains, respectively.

Consider audience attitudes toward product placement in general in the context of audience perceptions of movies in Italy, where movies are considered an art form rather than a commercial product. Italy has an extensive history of movies by the 'masters'. Of particular importance is the period between 1945 and 1950 when Italian moviemakers created a new genre labeled 'Neorealism' that showcased ordinary people on the screen to convey the story in a natural manner. More significantly, this approach elevated ordinary life to a level befitting artistic discourse (Brunetta 2003). Neorealism has influenced Italian plays and movies for a long time, including those that were not directly inspired by neorealist goals. Given this cultural context, audiences may consider the insertion of products/brands in movies for commercial purposes as something that compromises the integrity and value of the art form.

According to Hall (1976), it is useful to understand high context and low context cultures.¹ A key difference between the two lies in the nature of communication; high context cultures place greater emphasis on the non-verbal aspects of a message. In contrast, in low context cultures the information in a message is usually direct and explicit. Considering high versus low context countries/cultures as an extended continuum to rank countries, Hall and Hall (1990) placed Italy and the USA toward the high context and low context ends, respectively. Although Finland is not included in their listing, Nishimura, Nevgi, and Tella (2008) suggest that Finland shares elements from both high and low contexts. It is also instructive to consider cross-cultural differences in attitudes from the communication perspective. When this perspective is extended to include marketing messages, it is likely that indirect forms of persuasive communication such as product placements function effectively in low context cultures, whereas high context countries may be more predisposed to counteract or discount placements. A corollary is that high context cultures (such as Italy) may consider the regulation of placements more favorably. The opposite may be true for a low context culture such as the USA.

H3a: Consumers in the USA will have a more positive attitude toward placement-in-general than consumers in Finland and Italy.

H3b: Consumers in Italy will have a less positive attitude toward placement-in-general than consumers in Finland.

The large number of US product placements that Finnish and Italian audiences are exposed to may encourage thoughts about placement regulation to a greater degree than their US counterparts. On the other hand, attitudes toward the regulation of placements are likely to be lax in the USA. Kubey (2003) discusses a similar issue in the context of differences in media literacy. Audiences in Finland and Italy may perceive 'foreign' US placements as threats that potentially undermine their own cultural identities, and therefore subject to extra scrutiny. In contrast, the bulk of movies and television programs in the USA is of domestic origin, so US viewers are unlikely to seek a 'self-examination' of domestic media products.

The three countries studied also differ on Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance dimension (Hofstede 2001)². Italy scores highest on the uncertainty avoidance index, followed by Finland and the USA, in that order. A culture predicated on high uncertainty avoidance is more likely to impose strict regulations, safety and security measures.

H4a: Consumers in the USA will be more predisposed against regulation of placements than consumers in Finland and Italy.

H4b: Consumers in Italy will be more predisposed toward regulation of placements than consumers in Finland.

The following sections present our research method and data collection procedure as well as the details of our analysis and results.

Research method and data collection

Research method

Prior studies on cross-national differences in the product placement context have employed research methods such as ANOVA, regression analysis and t-tests (Gould, Gupta, and Grabner-Kräuter 2000; McKechnie and Zhou 2003; Rössler and Bacher 2002). In the spirit of the Ewing, Caruana, and Zinkhan (2002) study on advertising measurement scales, our research makes two key methodological contributions. First, we use the structural equation modeling (SEM) method that explicitly models measurement error. This approach examines latent constructs (rather than observed constructs that include measurement error), thereby avoiding problems with research findings that are attributable to poor measurement.

Second, we rely on multi-group analysis to explore whether the measurement models are similar across the three nations. Before comparing the means of latent constructs, it is important to investigate the cross-national measurement invariance of those constructs (Cheung and Rensvold 2002). This is critical because 'cross-national differences in relationships between scale scores could indicate real differences in structural relations between constructs or scaling artifacts, differences in scale reliability, or even nonequivalence of the constructs involved' (Steenkamp and Baumgartner 1998, 78). That is, cross-national differences in means or relationships between latent model constructs cannot be conclusively determined without tests for cross-national invariance of measurement instruments for the corresponding constructs.

Survey questionnaire

A survey questionnaire was initially developed in Finnish and later translated into English by one of the authors. Using a backward-translation approach, the veracity of the latter version was verified with a colleague fluent in both languages. The English version was used to collect data in the USA. For use in Italy, the English version was translated into Italian by one of the authors and then assessed for veracity by a colleague fluent in both languages. The questionnaire's development was guided by prior research (Gupta and Gould 1997; DeLorme, Mennicken, and Aleff 2000; Karrh, Frith, and Callison 2001). Some items were appropriately modified, and a few were developed specifically for this study.

The early part of the questionnaire formally defined the term *product placement* and provided examples. The survey focused on product placement in movies and television programs, and included: (1) belief items (e.g., perceptions of benefits and threats of product placement, its potential for regulation and its future), (2) semantic differential items (general attitudes toward advertising and product placement), (3) items to measure the

acceptability of placements in specific product categories, (4) items to assess the suitability of placements in movies and television programs of different genres, (5) demographics and (6) space for open-ended comments. Although the survey contained a larger pool of items, we restrict attention to the measurement items of research interest in this study (see Table 1 for the list of items and their sources).

Sample characteristics

Surveys were administered to convenience samples of university students in each country. Student samples were considered appropriate for this study since they overlap the two age groups (18–24 and 25–39 years) that watch movies frequently (Motion Picture Association of America 2014).

The Finland sample consisted of 479 students drawn from two major universities located in Eastern and Central Finland. The students participated voluntarily and represented several disciplines (e.g., business, social science, pedagogy, information technology). Sixty percent of this sample ($n = 286$) comprised female participants; seventy-six percent ($n = 360$) were less than 25 years old.

The Italian sample included 500 students enrolled at a major university in central Italy, representing various disciplines (e.g., business, social science, humanities). About one-half of this sample ($n = 248$) comprised female participants; sixty-five percent ($n = 325$) were less than 25 years old.

The US sample included 438 students drawn from a major Midwestern university, representing several disciplines (e.g., business, agriculture, communication). Forty-three percent of this sample ($n = 187$) comprised female participants; eighty-eight percent ($n = 384$) were less than 25 years old.

Participants from Finland completed the survey in a paper-and-pencil format, while those in Italy and the USA responded to an online survey to earn extra academic credit. Online surveys have gained popularity in research because they offer significant advantages, but fundamentally, they are comparable to paper-and-pencil surveys (see Balasubramanian and Kamakura 1989; Beebe et al. 1997; Lefever, Dal, and Matthíasdóttir 2007).

Analysis

The broad goals of our analysis are two-fold: (1) to estimate a baseline measurement model across the three nations for the four constructs of research interest and (2) to test this baseline model for significant cross-national differences in the latent means for each construct. We sought to assess whether the measurement instrument accurately measured the same construct, and whether the factor structures were similar across the three nations, before analyzing cross-national differences in the latent means.

We used the structural equation modeling method, and incorporated the multi-group analysis approach to test for cross-national differences. Multi-group analysis is appropriate because the data are segmented *a priori* by nations, and because it is theoretically justified (Ping 1995). This procedure also helps to analyze the data at aggregated as well as disaggregated levels, given the multi-group structure of the data. EQS 6.1 was used for all analyses, and estimation was based on the maximum likelihood method. To assess cross-national measurement invariance, we followed Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998) by testing for configural, metric and scalar invariance, followed by analysis of cross-national differences in latent means for each of the four constructs of research interest. In line with Byrne (1994), this required the following steps: (1) specification of a baseline

measurement model (separately for each nation, for each construct), (2) estimation of this model on data for all nations, and (3) conducting multi-group analysis on each construct using the sequential testing approach. We explain these in greater depth next.

Model specification

The first step in measurement invariance analysis is to establish a baseline measurement model for each construct that is both parsimonious and enjoys a high level of model fit for all groups (or nations). Changes were made — where necessary — to arrive at the baseline models, but these changes were retained for the remainder of the analysis. Next, a series of confirmatory factor analyses were conducted on models with more restrictions (constraints) and compared with a model with no restrictions (constraints). If no difference was found between the constrained and unconstrained models, these measurement models were considered invariant across the three countries. Following Byrne, Shavelson, and Muthén (1989), we tested for measurement invariance even when the model lacked ‘full’ invariance. Procedurally, we considered chi-squared values from the Lagrange Multiplier Test to check for the constraint that contributed the most to the invariance (i.e., the highest chi-square value that was significant). The path constraint that corresponded to this highest chi-square value was then released. The specific invariance tests and the approach to compare latent means are described next.

Invariance testing

In cross-national research, testing for configural invariance — the most basic type of invariance — indicates whether the pattern of factor loadings (and hence the structure of the measurement model) is similar across nations (Steenkamp and Baumgartner 1998). Configural invariance is affirmed by acceptable model fit indices when the whole multi-group model (aggregate level for all three nations rather than individual nation models) is estimated. During this model estimation process, no constraints are imposed on any of the parameters. The second level of measurement invariance testing involves the more rigorous metric invariance that considers whether participants from all three nations responded to the measurement items similarly (Steenkamp and Baumgartner 1998). In other words, we evaluate the equality of scaling units across nations by constraining factor loadings to be equal across the three nations analyzed (Vandenberg and Lance 2000). Although it is considered a ‘weak’ form of factorial invariance (Meredith 1993), it is a necessary criterion to further compare groups/nations (Vandenberg and Lance 2000).

Finally, scalar invariance assesses whether respondents with the same latent construct value have the same indicator values. Full scalar invariance provides evidence of ‘strong’ factorial invariance (Meredith 1993). However, Byrne and Stewart (2006) as well as Cooke, Kosson, and Michie (2001) consider partial invariance of intercepts to be acceptable in order to proceed to the next step which is the comparison of latent means of research constructs across groups (or nations). To determine scalar invariance, in addition to the constraints from previous steps, indicator intercepts were also constrained to be equal before model estimation.

Comparison of latent means

The MACS (means and covariance structure) approach of Byrne and Stewart (2006) was used to compare latent means across countries. MACS is superior to approaches such as

ANOVA since the latter cannot determine whether the measurement instrument is invariant across countries, and whether the indicators actually measure the constructs under consideration. Another advantage is that MACS takes measurement error into account. For each construct, latent means for one group/nation were constrained to zero while the means for the other two groups/nations were freely estimated. This enabled comparison between groups/nations for significant latent mean differences using *z*-statistics and effect sizes.

Model evaluation criteria

The normalized estimate of the Mardia's coefficient, which tests for multivariate normality of the data (Mardia 1970), was greater than the acceptable value of 1.96 for all constructs for all three countries. As a result, robust statistics that accommodate the lack of multivariate normality were used to assess the fit of each model. These included the robust comparative fit index (CFI) and the robust root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA). Index values greater than .90 (for CFI) and lower than .05 (for RMSEA) indicate a good fit (Hu and Bentler 1999; Browne and Cudeck 1992).

Our sequential testing procedure initially compared results from the unconstrained model for each construct with those from the corresponding fully constrained model, followed by comparisons of sequentially unconstrained nested models. The most commonly accepted criterion for model comparisons is the chi-square difference test (Byrne 1994). However, complete reliance on the chi-square difference test is not recommended because of problems associated with the chi-square statistic (Steenkamp and Baumgartner 1998; Yuan and Bentler 2004; Chen 2007). We therefore also focused on the difference in CFI that has received much attention in the literature (e.g., Cheung and Rensvold 2002). However, the definition of what is considered a 'significant' difference in CFI appears somewhat arbitrary. Little (1997) considers a Δ CFI value of .05 as significant; Cheung and Rensvold (2002) argue for a more stringent value of .01; other researchers advocate a 'minimal' difference requirement without specifying an exact cut-off value (Byrne 1994). To perform tests for invariance in a conservative manner, we elected to use the corrected Satorra-Bentler chi-square difference statistic ($SB\chi^2$) and a stringent definition of significant difference at .010 for Δ CFI when comparing constrained and less-constrained models (Chen 2007).

Results

Descriptive statistics for all the measurement items (indicators) are provided in Table 3. Table 4a summarizes our analyses with the baseline model and the related tests for measurement invariance. Baseline sets of measures for each construct were estimated separately for each country to determine the best fitting model for each construct for that country. We found that the goodness of fit statistics for 'Attitude toward credibility of advertising' and 'Attitude toward placement-in-general' were acceptable for all three countries and all factor loadings were significant in both cases. However, in the case of 'Attitude toward advertising-in-general', the inclusion of an error covariance between two indicators improved the fit of the model substantially (the indicators were F2B and F2D in the case of Finland and the USA, and F2A and F2D in the case of Italy) and this change in the measurement model was maintained for subsequent analyses. Similarly, the measurement model for 'Attitude toward regulation of placements' includes error covariances between F4A(R) and F4B(R) for the USA and Finland, and F4C and F4E for Italy.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of indicators.

Factor/indicator			Mean			Standard deviation		
			Finland	Italy	USA	Finland	Italy	USA
F1 Attitude toward credibility of advertising	F1A		1.89	2.28	2.70	0.76	1.14	1.02
	F1B		2.23	2.23	2.82	0.75	1.08	0.85
	F1C		2.00	2.20	2.55	0.84	1.15	0.96
	F1D		1.95	2.36	2.68	0.74	1.18	0.92
F2 Attitude toward advertising-in-general	F2A		3.08	2.77	3.53	0.91	1.10	1.03
	F2B		3.28	2.79	3.53	1.05	1.16	1.04
	F2C		3.22	2.41	3.77	1.09	1.15	1.05
	F2D		3.15	2.63	3.51	0.99	1.23	1.05
F3 Attitude toward placement-in-general	F3A (R)		4.10	3.38	3.95	0.90	1.19	0.98
	F3B (R)		3.45	2.87	3.61	0.99	1.16	0.90
	F3C (R)		4.41	4.07	4.15	0.93	1.05	1.07
	F3D (R)		4.24	3.33	4.06	0.89	1.21	0.97
F4 Attitude toward regulation of placements	F4A (R)		3.50	3.94	3.07	1.03	1.02	1.08
	F4B (R)		3.52	3.74	3.01	1.07	1.12	1.06
	F4C		2.58	3.73	2.47	1.06	1.13	1.14
	F4D		2.99	3.41	2.59	1.26	1.21	1.10
	F4E		2.72	3.68	2.50	1.10	1.10	1.02

Notes: items marked (R) were reverse coded prior to analysis; all measured on 5-point scales.

Following Byrne (1994), the rationales for these error covariances stem from similarities in the wording of these pairs of measurement items.

The results of the multi-group estimation (as presented in Table 4a) showed excellent values for the fit indices (CFI and RMSEA, evaluated as per the criteria established earlier) for all four constructs. We therefore concluded that the results support configural invariance across the three nations for these constructs. To establish metric invariance, the factor loadings for each construct were constrained to be equal across the three nations, and the multi-group model was again estimated as a whole. There was no significant difference in the $SB\chi^2$ value for 'Attitude toward credibility of advertising', which demonstrates metric invariance between countries for this construct. We completed similar analyses for the other constructs and a few paths were found to be non-invariant, establishing only partial metric invariance. The results are summarized in Table 4b.

In order to establish scalar invariance, the four individual models were re-estimated with all previous constraints as well as new constraints on item intercepts. The results from the fully constrained model (equality restrictions on all intercepts) showed a lack of model fit in the case of all four constructs. The results were examined to determine the paths responsible for the lack of invariance and the models were re-estimated after dropping the paths with highest chi-square values according to the Lagrange Multiplier test. The revised models showed acceptable fit indices and allowed us to formally move forward to comparisons of latent means of the four constructs of research interest.

Given the empirical support for partial measurement invariance, it is possible to compare latent means of individual constructs across countries. Since one group must be treated as the reference group, the latent means for Italy were set to zero for all constructs, and were freely estimated for the other groups. The latent mean differences between pairs

Table 4a. Summary of fit indices for invariance testing.

Models		SB χ^2	df	Δ SB χ^2 *	Δ df	CFI	Δ CFI	RMSEA	RMSEA 90% CI
Attitude toward credibility of advertising	Configural invariance	7.14	6	—	—	0.999	—	0.012	(.000, .038)
	Metric invariance	17.10	12	10.825	6	0.996	0.003	0.017	(.000, .035)
	Scalar invariance	175.63	16	123.56	4	0.989	−0.010	0.084	(.073, .096)
Attitude toward advertising- in-general	Configural invariance	3.27	3	—	—	1.000	—	0.008	(.000, .046)
	Metric invariance	50.65	9	52.44	6	0.984	0.016	0.057	(.043, .073)
	Scalar invariance	118.26	10	251.31	6	0.99	0.008	0.088	(.074, .102)
Attitude toward placement- in-general	Configural invariance	5.84	6	—	—	1.000	—	0.000	(.000, .034)
	Metric invariance	44.27	12	38.98	6	0.970	0.030	0.044	(.030, .058)
	Scalar invariance	128.15	14	142.93	3	0.99	0.007	0.076	(.064, .088)
Attitude toward regulation of placements	Configural invariance	35.173	12	—	—	0.98	—	0.037	(.023, .052)
	Metric invariance	68.92	20	33.244	8	0.96	0.019	0.042	(.031, .053)
	Scalar invariance	227.18	22	336.34	5	0.97	0.016	0.082	(.072, .091)

*Corrected values
Notes: configural invariance for unconstrained model, metric invariance for fully constrained model, scalar invariances are partial; all intermediate steps are not displayed but are available upon request.

of countries, corresponding *z*-values and effect sizes (Cohen’s *d*) are shown in Table 5. With respect to the Cohen’s *d* values, we consider .2 to denote a ‘small’ effect, .5 a ‘medium’ effect and .8 a ‘large’ effect (Cohen 1988). We found significant latent mean differences between the countries for all four constructs. Figure 1 visually depicts these differences.

We discuss these results in more detail next followed by their implications for marketers and advertisers.

Discussion

The results clearly show that, as expected, US respondents displayed a more positive attitude toward advertising-in-general, and they were also more inclined to think that advertising is credible. This pattern of results is further reinforced in the consistently more negative attitudes in the US sample toward regulation of placements in television programs and movies. However, it is worth noting that respondents from Finland were more positively inclined toward placements than their counterparts in Italy and the USA. We discuss individual constructs next.

Table 4b. Non-invariant factor loadings.

Construct	Indicator	Unstandardized estimates
Attitude toward credibility of advertising	No significant differences between countries with respect to this construct	
Attitude toward advertising-in-general	F2D: Overall, my attitude toward advertising is. . .negative : positive	Finland and USA: .976 (SE = .023), Italy: 1.279 (SE = .056)
Attitude toward placement-in-general	F3D(R): Product placement in movies should be completely banned	Finland: 1.654 (SE = .128), USA: 1.308 (SE = .116), Italy: 2.159 (SE = .203)
	F3A(R): Product placement in television programs should be completely banned	Finland and USA: 1.493 (SE = .101), Italy: 2.314 (SE = .223)
Attitude toward regulation of placements	F4D: Brands placed in a movie or television program for which the producers receive compensation from companies should be mentioned in the opening credits	Finland and Italy: .643 (SE = .059), USA: .384 (SE = .080)
	F4B(R): There is no need to regulate product placement in movies in any way	Finland and Italy: .823 (SE = .048), USA: .551 (SE = .073)
	F4A(R): There is no need to regulate product placement in television programs in any way	Finland and USA: .728 (SE = .044), Italy: 1.155 (SE = .163)

Attitudes toward credibility of advertising and advertising-in-general

Standardized values of latent mean differences for pairs of countries reveal that respondents from the USA had the most positive attitudes regarding advertising credibility, supporting H1a, and demonstrating that the European respondents tended to view commercials with greater skepticism than US respondents. Respondents from Finland had less positive attitudes toward the credibility of advertising than respondents from both Italy and the USA (with the latter having a larger effect size), supporting H1b. US

Table 5. Latent mean differences.

Construct	Finland vs. Italy			USA vs. Italy		
	Diff.	z-value	d	Diff.	z-value	d
Attitude toward credibility of advertising	-0.27	-5.39	-0.55	0.29	5.40	0.50
Attitude toward advertising-in-general	0.50	7.17	0.62	0.74	10.22	0.83
Attitude toward placement-in-general	0.40	9.12	0.88	0.30	6.86	0.63
Attitude toward regulation of placements	-0.55	-7.34	-0.62	-0.85	-10.89	-1.18

Notes: latent means for Italy set to zero; all differences are significant at $p < .05$.

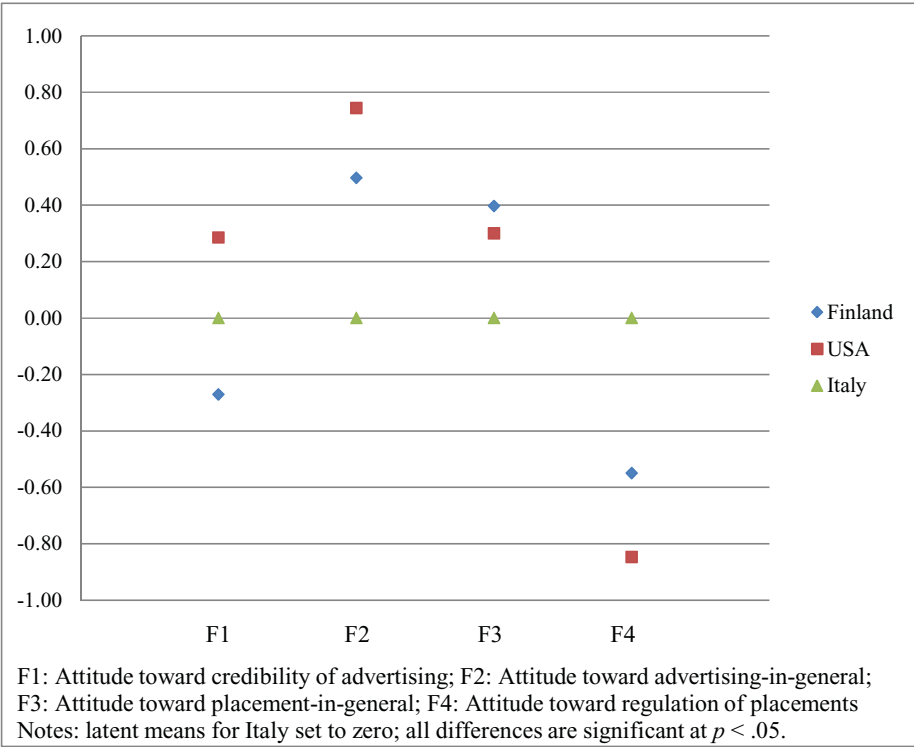


Figure 1. Comparison of relative latent means across countries.

respondents also displayed the most positive attitudes toward advertising-in-general, supporting H2a. However, respondents from Italy had the least positive attitudes toward advertising-in-general contrary to what was hypothesized in H2b. Notably, there was a large difference in latent means between Italy and the USA while the difference between Finland and US latent means had a medium effect size.

As discussed earlier, evidence suggests that media literacy enjoys a more exalted status in Europe – especially in Finland – as part of general education, when compared to the USA. At the same time, the influence of US culture has been much stronger in Italy than in Finland for well-known historical reasons. However, we discovered that Finland has the least positive attitude toward credibility of advertising as hypothesized, yet not the least positive attitude toward advertising-in-general, contrary to what was hypothesized. Research in this area has suggested that several belief factors potentially contribute to consumers’ attitudes toward advertising-in-general (Pollay and Mittal 1993); however, only some of these beliefs appear to be related to advertising skepticism. Notably, belief factors unrelated to skepticism include advertising’s entertainment value, usefulness in providing lifestyle information and contribution to the economy. Therefore, it is possible that the more negative beliefs regarding the credibility of advertising were offset by other, more positive beliefs, making this an avenue for future research.

Attitude toward placement-in-general

While we found a statistically significant difference in latent means for this construct between Finland and the USA – with the former being more positive and hence partially

contradicting H3a — the effect size was small. On the other hand, results indicate a wider margin between these two countries and Italy, which has the least positive attitude toward placement-in-general (supporting H3b). As discussed earlier, this may stem from how movies are generally perceived in Italy. Our finding that Finnish respondents have the most positive attitude toward placement-in-general may have two contributing factors: (1) the novelty value of placements compared to traditional advertising (which may create positive interest in the practice), and (2) the conservative number of placements in media content (which lowers the risk of saturation and consequent hostility toward the practice). Product placement surfaced as a topic of discussion around 2005 in Finland, coinciding with the reform of EU's Television without Frontiers directive (Sabour 2008). To the extent that product placement was not widely used in Finland, this practice was still considered rather new.

To gain additional insight, we examined the indicators of this construct. An ANOVA revealed a significant difference between Finland and the other countries with respect to the variable 'I will not watch a movie or television program if I know beforehand that brands are placed prominently in it for commercial purposes' (reverse-coded). This indicates that Finnish consumers are not likely to boycott movies or television programs just because brands appear in them. As mentioned earlier, this could be a reflection of the nascent product placement field in Finland. In addition, a contributing factor could be that a boycott of entertainment media that contain placements may diminish choices for both movies and television programs. Other factors at play may include cross-national differences in perceptions that placements contribute to realism, which also represents an avenue for future research.

With respect to attitude toward placement-in-general, prior studies have noted a positive correlation between this construct and attitude toward advertising-in-general (Gupta, Balasubramanian, and Klassen 2000; Nelson, Keum, and Yaros 2004; Sung and de Gregorio 2005). Our finding that Italy has the least positive attitude toward both advertising-in-general and placement-in-general mirrors this.

Attitude toward regulation of placements

Of the three countries, the US sample was most predisposed against regulation of placements, supporting H4a. Our findings are similar to Sung, de Gregorio, and Jung (2009) who investigate this construct in the US context. It is worth noting that this also supports Proposition 11d in Balasubramanian, Karrh, and Patwardhan (2006), that American consumers are more accepting of placements than their counterparts in other countries. In contrast, as the country with the least positive attitude toward placement-in-general, respondents from Italy were most predisposed toward the regulation of placements, supporting H4b. Respondents from Finland appeared somewhat neutral about this issue.

As was mentioned previously, Europe has a rich tradition/history of viewing films as art. It has been pointed out that 'the European notion of film, its status, and its function, is essentially different from that of the United States' (Everett 2005a, 10). Europe has a tradition of *auteur* cinema and filmmaking that is independent and personal, whereas mainstream US (Hollywood) movies employ commercial formulas and cater to the masses (Everett 2005a, 2005b). Movies may be considered more seriously in Europe, thereby engendering extra caution and scrutiny. In contrast, it is popular in the USA to approach movies as a form of entertainment, as opposed to art. US viewers are therefore less likely to exhibit as much interest in regulating placements as their European counterparts. US attitudes toward television as a medium also reflect this view (Kubey 2003).

In comparing attitudes toward regulation of placements between Italy and Finland, it is worth noting that regulation makes sense if there is substantial material (i.e., media content and possible placements) to regulate. As discussed earlier, Italian regulations for placements do not include foreign movies. For the past 20 years, the number of domestic productions in Italy has ranged between 100 and 150 films per year. In 2010, of the 380 new movies released in Italy, 131 were domestically produced (ANICA 2011). With respect to Finland, the domestic productions are also on a relatively smaller scale: 109 movies released in 2010 originated from the USA, but only 23 were of Finnish origin (Finnish Film Foundation 2011). Comparable data on the Finnish television sector is more evenly distributed: the 2010 share of domestic, European and North American content amounted to 39%, 23% and 34%, respectively (Vähämaa, Härmälä, and Matikainen 2011). Considering that (1) prior Finnish regulations did not explicitly address product placement, (2) those regulations did not apply to movies, and (3) imposing regulations on foreign productions (that are usually ‘acquired ready’) is a near impossible task, it is clear that there is less material to regulate in the product placement domain in Finland.

Conclusion

This study extends the findings from Gould, Gupta, and Grabner-Kräuter (2000) and addresses two specific research suggestions mentioned therein, namely the investigation of the attitude toward advertising-in-general construct and the inclusion of countries other than those already addressed in previous research. In addition, we explore three key attitudinal constructs: attitude toward credibility of advertising, attitude toward placement-in-general and attitude toward regulation of placements.

Our analyses test for measurement invariance before conducting cross-national comparisons. Using a multi-group analysis approach in structural equation modeling, we first assessed measurement invariance for four research constructs in the broad product placement domain. The baseline measurement model supported configural invariance across countries, indicating that the pattern of factor loadings was similar across countries. Since partial metric invariance was supported, we continued with further analysis in order to establish scalar invariance. These steps enabled us to conduct cross-national comparisons of latent means of all constructs studied.

The motivations for product placement include theoretical/practical, historic/legal and perceptual/contextual considerations with implications for both the supply side (editorial content providers such as moviemakers) and the demand side (sponsors/brands placed within such content). Our findings have considerable relevance to the practice of product placement in the context of different national markets.

Movies and television programs tend to be standardized across geographic audiences. Hence, product placement – due to its embedded nature – is also standardized by default. However, marketers should be aware that the effects of product placement may vary across countries and cultures, as we find in our study, and therefore need to carefully evaluate the effectiveness of inserting brands in media that have an international audience.

Our results show that even within the Occident several differences exist between nations with regard to the acceptability and attitude toward commercial communications. These differences in national contexts have to be considered in the development of international advertising strategies as they influence the standardization versus adaptation choices (Papavassiliou and Stathakopoulos 1997).

The results of this study indicate that European audiences are more skeptical of advertising and its truthfulness than their US counterparts. Finns and Italians also have less

positive attitudes toward advertising-in-general than Americans. Therefore, marketers should be aware of the fact that if advertising messages and executions are standardized across these three nations, they can produce different reactions in each country. Notably, Finnish and Italian audiences may be less receptive and more critical of these persuasion attempts than US audiences.

Of the three countries, respondents from Finland had the most positive attitude toward placement-in-general, followed closely by the USA. These positive attitudes combined with rather neutral attitudes toward regulation suggest that placements are likely to be well received in these two markets. Especially before the introduction of the AVMSD, Finnish regulatory bodies (e.g., the Finnish Communications Regulatory Authority) were concerned about the (forbidden) surreptitious advertising in certain programs such as the Finnish versions of reality television shows 'Queer Eye for the Straight Guy' and 'Big Brother' (Sabour 2008). Assuming that such monitoring activities were motivated to protect viewers, this disquiet appears somewhat one-sided as the neutral attitudes toward the regulation of placements exhibited by Finnish respondents do not point to strong concerns over brand appearances. In the case of the USA, the size of the product placement market – \$4.26 billion in 2011 (PQ Media 2012) – is a clear indication that marketers firmly believe in the effectiveness and potential of placements in targeting American audiences.

Finally, the results also show that Italians are most predisposed toward the regulation of placements. For example, in 2008 the film 'Caos Calmo' was not well received by Italian audiences as it prominently featured a BMW 535d car. Furthermore, one of the main characters was played by an important Italian actor and movie director, Nanni Moretti, who in the past had condemned the (then illegal) practice of product placement. This backlash from viewers was seemingly fueled by a perceived lack of artistic integrity. Marketers should keep in mind that if the number of placements Italian viewers are exposed to grows significantly, the perceived need for regulation may become stronger. This, in turn, may attract stricter regulations and potentially erode consumers' attitudes toward placement-in-general.

A limitation of this study is that it is based on convenience samples of students from each country studied. However, the use of student samples is commonplace in product placement research given that (1) students comprise a large percentage of the movie-going population as mentioned earlier, and (2) they are very familiar with the subject matter (Nebanzahl and Secunda 1993). Another limitation is that while we chose countries that were significantly different in terms of national contexts, all three are part of the Western world. There are many other countries, for example, China and India, where television and movie audiences are much larger, making the practice of placing brands within entertainment media much more critical. This could hence be a future research direction. The changing regulatory environment also poses challenges. For instance, the AVMSD is still fairly recent in terms of the implementation process but its effects have become noticeable to the general viewing audience (e.g., programs containing placements have to be accompanied by product placement notifications at the beginning and end of the program and after commercial breaks). Any changes in legislation regarding advertising and product placement as well as the subsequent publicity could affect consumer attitudes. Therefore, the regular monitoring of these attitudes and their evolution is important for both marketers and policy makers.

In this paper, we tested hypotheses and presented rationales for the observed differences in latent means across the three countries studied. Future cross-national research should move beyond measurement invariance and address relationships between the four constructs by developing and testing robust models for structural invariance.

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Notes

1. Hall and Hall (1990, 6) state that ‘context is the information that surrounds an event’, and together the two produce a given meaning. Cultures differ with regard to the ‘need for context-ing – the process of filling in background data’, with high context cultures needing little and low context cultures requiring detailed background information (Hall and Hall 1990, 7). According to Korac-Kakabadse et al. (2001, 6), high context and low context are terms which refer to ‘the cultural rules around information exchange and, in particular, the degree to which information in a culture is explicit, vested in words or precise and unambiguous meaning (low-context) and the degree to which it is implicit, vested in shared experience and assumptions and conveyed through verbal and non-verbal codes (high-context).’
2. Uncertainty avoidance captures the degree of comfort that members of a given culture have with situations that are new and out of the ordinary (Hofstede 2001). According to Hofstede (2001, 148), cultures high on uncertainty avoidance wish to minimize ambiguity and their members seek ‘structure in their organizations, institutions, and relationships, which makes events clearly interpretable and predictable.’

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