Young Thai and Uk Consumers' Experiences of Television Product Placement- Engagement, Resistance and Objectification

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This paper reports a cross-cultural interpretive study of young Thai and UK consumers’ experiences of television product placement. It sets this within first-hand practitioner accounts of current practice in each country which show that product placement is a booming industry operating within relatively ill-defined regulatory parameters, resulting in some illicit practices. The consumer data were interpreted through three pre-eminent themes: engagement, resistance and objectification. Within a prevalent mood of acquiescence there was some evidence that Thai consumers exhibit ‘Generation Y’ resistance to incongruent placement practices. This limited resistance occurred within a general mood of acquiescence to, engagement with and reflexive understanding of, product placement practices.

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YOUNG THAI AND UK CONSUMERS’ EXPERIENCES OF TELEVISION PRODUCT PLACEMENT-ENGAGEMENT, RESISTANCE AND OBJECTIFICATION
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ABSTRACT
This paper reports an interpretive study of young consumers’ subjective experience of television product placement in Thailand and the UK. The discussion of findings is structured by three pre-eminent themes induced from the data, labeled “engagement,” “resistance,” and “objectification.” The paper elaborates on these themes drawing on supporting data extracts and sets its analysis within an overall review of TV product placement research and practice in the respective countries. In conclusion, there was some evidence that young Thai consumers exhibit “Generation Y” resistance to incongruent placement practices, but that this limited resistance occurred within a general climate of acquiescence to, engagement with, and reflexive understanding of, product placement practices.

INTRODUCTION: TV PRODUCT PLACEMENT AND “EXPERIENTIAL” MARKETING
Brand marketing organisations have typically been content with seeing brand exposure in mediated entertainment as an add-on, but many are now putting specific resources into the technique. One of its perceived advantages over traditional advertising is the access it affords to consumers’ daily experience. Unlike, for example, recently announced a 20% reduction in its global TV advertising expenditure and an increased expenditure on product placement in television shows.¹⁹ Proctor and Gamble have announced a similar diversion of cable TV advertising “spend” to new media to reflect their “experiential” marketing approach.²⁰ Through placement in TV soap operas, situation comedies, quiz shows, dramas, and other genres, brands can feature as meaningful artifacts in narrative contexts which have a powerful resonance for consumers. This resonance is recognised by brand clients, who, according to one Thai TV product placement practitioner interviewed in the course of this study, are “increasingly [concerned with] consumer engagement, not just consumer reach but engaging the consumers...connecting them emotionally...with your brands...connection, emotional connection, not just contact point but emotion, [a]deeper route.” It is the quality of the engagement with TV product placement that this study sets out to explore with respect to young Thai and UK consumers.

Brand clients are extremely keen to get their brands exposed within TV programming. A recent exposure in the UK Sunday Times newspaper revealed the wide extent of paid-for product placement in the publicly funded, non-commercial, BBC television channel. Product placement, the insertion of brands into the script, scene, lyric or plot of mediated entertainment, is against the rules of the BBC, which forbid it from carrying any advertising whatsoever.

In the UK, the Ofcom²² regulatory framework also forbids paid-for product placement on commercial TV channels. The UK product placement industry operates ostensibly as a free prop service for cash-strapped production studios that want to enhance the dramatic realism of their shows with branded props. Agencies take substantial fees from clients to ensure that it is the clients’ brands which appear. No financial consideration is supposed to be involved, but the Sunday Times showed that this rule is regularly transgressed with payments in cash or kind changing hands in exchange for coveted exposure in popular TV shows.

Some four months before the scandal of product placements at the BBC broke, a practitioner in a top Thai advertising and media agency casually mentioned during a depth interview for this research study that “...despite what they say, commercial TV in the UK has product placement...technically I’ve seen it in the BBC, even though its very subliminal...that’s because I look, I like watching product placement.” It appears from this comment that the pressure on TV studios to place branded products is considerable, and may be understood more thoroughly by the industry than by the UK TV channels, the regulators, or the public.

Brand clients feel that product placement is a cost-effective yet powerful way to engage with consumers in an experiential context. Audiences may be aware that brand appearances in entertainment are probably not accidental, but most viewers do not have detailed knowledge of how placements are negotiated between studios and brands. Product placements or related sponsorship techniques cannot easily be evaded by “zapping” through pre-recorded programming slots to avoid the advertising.

In this paper we will firstly outline our interpretation of the strategic rationale lying behind the rising expenditure on product placement by the brand marketing industry. We will then offer a review of published research in the field. This review will illustrate that, while several robust findings have emerged, relatively few previous studies have adopted an interpretive perspective to explore the nature of the engagement between consumer and brand within the dramatically heightened experience of a product placement exposure in a TV entertainment program. In addition, previous research has normally focused on movie product placement rather than TV. Finally, there have been relatively few cross-cultural studies, and none involving young Thai and UK TV-show consumers. We will then describe the data-gathering method used and the theoretical frame adopted. After this, we establish a context of the material practices of product placement in each country, drawing on depth interviews with leading practitioners and secondary sources. The findings section offers our interpretations of the consumer data, and the discussion following will elaborate on the major themes that emerged.

¹⁹ “Consumer Giant Cuts TV Advertising Expenditure by One-Fifth,” The Independent, September 17, 2005.
PRODUCT PLACEMENT RESEARCH STUDIES

Product placement is seen as a “hybrid” marketing communications technique that combines elements of sponsorship, celebrity endorsement, and publicity (Balasubramanian 1994; d’Astous and Chartier 2000; Ford 1993). Many variations on this “hybrid” technique share one feature; the promotional intent of the brand exposure is not made explicit. Product placement, also referred to as brand placement, “embedded” marketing or “entertainment” marketing (Hackley 2003; Tiwsakul et al. 2005) has been popular in movies from Hollywood to Bollywood since the 1920s (Barn 2005; Fristoe 2005). Most product placement research to date has focused on movies (Gupta and Lord 1998; Karrh 1998) with some attention paid to placement in computer games (Nelson 2002). Exceptions are provided in the work of Russell (1998, 2002) who has studied the effect of modality and plot connection on attitude and brand recall, though with a limited sample. In Stern and Russell (2004), gendered responses to product placements in an artificially created mock TV sitcom were analysed. Some studies have taken a comparative cross-cultural perspective (e.g. Gould et al. 2000; Karrh et al. 2001; McKechnie and Zhou 2003). Most product placement studies have been located within the attitude measurement theoretical paradigm (Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993) using questionnaire methodology to elicit attitudes, measure brand recall, and to link these with purchase intention (Mortan and Friedman 2002). Findings have confirmed generally positive consumer attitudes to product placement in comparison with advertising, though with some expressed reservations where a) placements are too contrived or overt and detract from the quality of the entertainment, and b) where ethically problematic products such as weapons or medicinal drugs are placed. The ethically problematic aspect of product placement’s covert promotional motive has been explored in some studies with regard to public policy implications (Avery and Ferraro 2000).

A relatively small number of studies have explored the experiential dimension of this topic (e.g., DeLorme and Reid 1999) and fewer still have done so broadly within the hedonic, experiential consumption methodological paradigm (Hirschman and Thompson 1997, Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). An exception, as noted earlier, is Stern and Russell (2004), who explore the responses of young US consumers to product placement in a TV soap opera focusing on genre and gender. It is important to understand the differing dramatic roles product placement can play in differing narrative genres of TV programming. It is also important to appreciate that “reading” strategies applied to social texts are gendered, as Stern and Russell (2004) show. Nonetheless, the priority of the present study was to generate insights into a general category of engagement with TV product placement in a previously un-researched comparative context, so issues of genre and gendered responses were not the primary focus.

There are studies outside the product placement field which might hold some clues about the nature of the engagement between viewer and brand in the dramatic context of a TV show. For example, studies in advertising have shown how young consumers use ads in their daily discourse to signify their “literacy” or competence in this young person’s discourse (O’Donohoe 1997; Ritson and Elliott 1999). Young consumers use ads and appropriate the meanings within them for their own social uses. While advertising is generally considered an explicit form of persuasive communication, studies of rhetoric show that implicit communication forms such as product placement can also be resonant. In spoken rhetoric, what is left unsaid but implied can be more powerfully suggestive than what is made explicit (Billig 1987, 1991). This principle has been applied to research into advertising, which can be seen as visual rhetoric (Schroder 2002). Tanaka’s (1994) distinction (referred to in Hackley 2005) between “ostensive” and “covert” meaning operationalises the rhetoric of implicit-ness in advertising. Ostensive meaning is explicit in the sense that the sender is known and the message is explicit. Covert meaning differs in that the sender is not known and the message is not explicit. It is never made clear in a TV show whether placed brands are there because of a directorial decision or because of a contract with the brand. Moreover, in product placements, there is rarely an explicit message as such. The brand is merely a presence in the scene. Studies such as these may provide opportunities for developing new theories of the engagement between consumer and brand in TV product placement.

The present study has been devised to develop three main areas of the literature. Firstly, it focuses on television product placement rather than that in movies. Product placement in movies may have attracted more research attention because of its high visibility and easy access, but it is clear that television placement is more accessible for many brand clients and less risky. Daily TV shows guarantee a regular audience, while some expensive movie placement deals come to nothing because the movie is not a commercial success. Moreover, if the goal of product placement is to weave the brand into the consumers’ daily subjective experience, then TV shows are potentially a more resonant, localised, and immediate medium. Secondly, comparative cross-cultural studies have also been relatively rare. This study places two very different cultural economies in juxtaposition. The UK is an advanced economy with a well-established television broadcasting and regulatory system. Thailand is a rapidly growing economy with one of the most sophisticated advertising and media environments in Asia. Thirdly, this study develops a relatively neglected methodological perspective by taking an interpretive approach to qualitative data to elicit an experiential perspective. The overall aim is to generate new insights into the way these young international consumers experience and engage with product placement.

METHOD

The research approach was qualitative, consisting of depth interviews, discussion groups, and auto-ethnographic narratives. Pilot interviews were conducted among international consumers in the UK in summer 2003. These highlighted the need for an experiential perspective to build on findings from previous survey-based research studies. Pilot discussion groups were conducted in London, UK in 2004. The main data-gathering phase took place between June and October 2005 and consisted of depth interviews with practitioners and discussion groups with young consumers. In addition, auto-ethnographic narratives were elicited in the UK and Thailand. Participants were asked to write a short passage about their experience of product placement on TV. No distinction was made between differing categories of product placement, and participants’ responses covered all main categories. Neither was there any differentiation made between genres (game show, soap opera).
The purposive sample of research participants was categorised into five groups: 1) UK or Thai practitioners; 2) UK-based, English-speaking, non-Thai young consumers; 3) UK-based, English speaking, Thai young consumers; 4) Thai-based, English-speaking, Thai young consumers; and 5) Thai-based non-English-speaking, Thai young consumers (transcripts were translated from the Thai). Consumer participants were between the ages of 20 and 30, with one exception. Most had a university education, some were current or post-graduate students, others were full-time workers who had previously attended higher education. Some respondents had no post-16 education. The aim in sampling was to pragmatically access a group which would provide as much range as possible within the category. In all, data consisted of six depth interviews with product placement experts, six focus groups, and 42 auto-ethnographic narratives, 26 from females, 16 from males.

**PRODUCT PLACEMENT PRACTICES IN THAILAND AND THE UK**

Thailand has one of the most highly developed advertising and media infrastructures in South-East Asia and has experienced the fastest rate of growth in advertising expenditure in that region in recent times (Punyapiroje et al. 2002). Thai urban centers are heavily consumption oriented and domestic economic growth is rapid. Thais love creativity and humor in their advertising, reflecting their culture. Virtually every Thai has access to a TV, even in rural areas. Thai consumer culture has been influenced by the West since the outward-looking reigns of Kings Rama IV (1851–1868) and King Rama V (1868–1910). Western education, ownership of Western goods, and wearing Western clothes became marks of wealth and sophistication during this time. Western brands still retain this prestige, to the relative detriment of indigenous brands, although some Thai brands such as Chang Beer, Singha Beer, and Jim Thompson silk are beginning to gain exposure in Western markets. The Thai advertising industry has been heavily influenced by Western norms of advertising practice, though the many Japanese- and American-owned ad agencies tend to have a more flexible creative approach in their Thai branches than their domestic counterparts, reflecting the preference of Thai consumers for soft sell, entertaining promotion.

Product placements are ubiquitous on Thai TV, and are even seen in news broadcasts and documentaries. Coffee mugs in the color of a well-known coffee brand are placed conspicuously on the newsreader’s desk in early morning news broadcasts. The studio receives contracted payment for these placements. There is no direct translation for product placement in Thai, and it is known colloquially as kodsana phang, literally, “implicit advertising.” Product placement is generally more conspicuous on Thai than UK TV. The regulatory framework for television product placement in each country is quite different. As mentioned earlier, paid-for product placement in UK TV is not permitted under Ofcom rules. TV studios are keen to enhance the realism of their drama shows with branded props which are officially provided by the “free prop” supply product placement agencies. As we note above, product placement appears to be a thriving business in the UK in spite of the “no fee” rules. In Thailand, TV product placement is permitted, and it is ubiquitous. There are rules covering certain categories of placement, though these can differ in application since each channel has its own scrutiny committee. The Thai Food and Drug Agency (FDA) rules on food and drug placements. There is no “written rule book” as one practitioner put it, but each product placement incident is negotiated (and paid for) separately. However, as in the UK, there are ways of getting around the various rules that exist. For example, in Thailand, medicinal products such as contact lenses and asthma inhalers cannot be advertised or placed, but they are shown in mini-documentaries, 30-second to 1 minute advertisement-like slots which are written as instructional aids, showing consumers how to correctly apply the items. The only hint that the slot was paid for by a brand manufacturer is the conspicuously “in-shot” presence of the branded item.

**FINDINGS**

A thematic interpretative analysis of the transcribed consumer data was grouped into three main overlapping themes. We called these engagement, resistance (to placement that lacked subtlety and credibility), and objectification.

**Engagement**

Regarding engagement, it seemed from many responses that young consumers of both nationalities used product placement events in their social discourse. They expressed a sense of engagement with it, as a normal and typical part of their cultural landscape, illustrated by comments such as “TV programs such as Friends make me feel happy...you want to go to the café and drink coffee with your friends...the clothes they wear are normally designer brand labels like Guess, Armani, Gucci…” (T. female, 22, UK). Some participants were clearly tuned in to the placement spotting game as a credible source of consumption cues: “Well, Matrix, with the Nokia phone, the Nokia 7610, rocked! Blade Trinity, there was a reference to one of the characters...it was with reference to the IPOD...she was clever and independent as a woman and went against all odds...while slaying vampires at the end, a scene where she is about to die, she managed to find her IPOD and save tunes to it! Pimp My Ride—there are many references to alloy wheels called Lexianni and Giovanni rims...The OC has many nice cars in it. The parents own a Land Rover Vogue in the series. They are rich, trendy, and caring parents” (D., male, 19, UK).

General approval of the technique was evident from most comments: “…this is the modern form of advertising…the good points are not hard selling, not annoying...” (S. female, 24, Thai). Other respondents were keen to offer their consumer expertise on the topic: “Sponsorship of programs has become more prominent. For instance, Friends sponsored by Blossom Hill, Desperate Housewives sponsored by Herbal Essences and Sex and the City...I rarely notice to be quite honest” (C., female, 24, UK).

The “I rarely notice” comment seems to betray some lack of self awareness, given the unprompted list of TV sponsorships which preceded it. Others were more insightful about the effect TV placement had on their behavior: “I used to order a delivery pizza because I saw an actor eating it on TV...it happens the same for products like Starbucks Coffee and Dairy Queen ice cream...the way products were presented were persuasive, for example in a scene, people walked into a Dairy Queen kiosk to buy an ice cream. Later on, it reminded me when I walked past Dairy Queen and bought one” (T., female, 24, Thai).

This last comment might be significant in showing how product placement triggers delayed recall in an experiential context. Psychologists differentiate between semantic memory (factual, decontextualised) and episodic memory, which is located within an experiential narrative.
The Dairy Queen brand in the example above may not have been recalled at all on a simple post-exposure recall measure. However, just as contextualised recall assists in police witness programs, a memory of the scene may be stimulated when the consumer is next in the environment that was portrayed in the TV show. Brands shown in typical settings of experience and behavior might resonate with TV viewing consumers who identify with the characters in the show.

Resistance

One main cultural difference emerged concerning resistance to TV product placement. More Thai participants expressed negative views about product placement than UK participants. We categorised such responses as “resistance” to product placement. Resistance was a response to the relative lack of subtlety with which products are often placed in Thai TV, in contrast to typical UK practice in which brands are integrated into the plot or scene, or clearly placed in sponsorship announcements within the show’s TV slot, but are distinct from the advertising. UK participants were approving of placement, possibly because they were used to seeing it integrated into the programing in a way which does not appear obtrusive, as shown by the following comments: “I don’t mind product placements at all because they are quite subtle. I don’t necessarily remember seeing a product in a TV program, but when I see a brand later on in a shop I’ll remember it from the program” (S., female, 24, UK). “I do not have any views about product placement in TV programs” (H., male, 27, UK).

Thai consumers, in contrast, had experienced more obtrusive placement techniques: “The use of product placement techniques in Thailand can often be seen in soap operas, where the brand owners try to have their products in the scenes, such as a posh car an actor drives or a mobile phone he uses. Sometimes a camera zooms onto the name of a famous department store or hotel in close up” (N., female, 29, Thai). Some expressed irritation with such clumsy techniques as zooming in on the brand: “When I watch TV shows and see presenters, guests or characters mention branded products I feel uncomfortable sometimes—instead of providing audiences with entertainment they want to sell the products” (S., female, 25, Thai). “Sometimes I feel its too obvious….in Thailand, product placement isn’t subtle” (S., female, 24, Thai).

Two participants expressed their limits of tolerance with regard to TV product placement: “Product placement is acceptable if it’s realistic and fits into the program” (V., female, 25, Thai). “When the product placement is good and may be funny, to the point, for example Bailey’s in Sex and the City, I have neutral and positive feelings. However, when it is tacky and thoughtless, for example Appleteiser in Friends, I have negative feelings” (D., female, 22, UK). This resistance may reflect what Stern and Russell (2004) refer to as the Generation Y phenomenon, whereby young consumers previously regarded as Generation X are now more jaded and cynical towards marketing strategies designed to reach them. Thai consumers seemed to show the effect of much greater exposure to TV product placement than their UK-based counterparts in this respect. However, it was noticeable that the resistance was limited to clumsy techniques of product placement and not to product placement itself.

Objectification

Objectification. Even though participants were asked to relate their own experiences of TV placement, a proportion objected to their responses, offering authoritative views as if they felt a need to be au fait with a contemporary discourse of young consumers like themselves: “I think product placement is a less invasive form of advertising….consumers are less easy to persuade by traditional advertising methods” (J., female, 24, UK). More quasi-expertise was offered: “In my opinion, product placement affects audiences mentally. They watch programs, just for fun…but when they go shopping, see branded products that their favorite characters mention, they might want to buy the products” (K., female, 25, Thai). “I think advertising embedded to TV programs is better than traditional advertising because audiences don’t feel interrupted when they’re watching TV programs. The audiences see products as part of the scenes—that makes it look natural. Seeing other people using the products can make the audiences feel like they want use those products themselves” (K., male, 27, Thai).

These behavioral theorizations positioned the speaker outside the discourse of product placement, yet also within it, portraying the speakers as detached experts. One participant offered another dimension on this, giving some plausible insight into the change in UK TV placement culture: “I would say that I first remember seeing overt product placement in East Enders in the 1990s. Breakfast cereals were placed square-on to camera, when previously the BBC would actually get their props department to make up fake FMCG products to adorn sets. It adds a sense that the brand is mainstream and ‘out there’ ” (C., male, 27, UK). In general, the category “objectification” seemed to reflect a relatively sophisticated, reflexive understanding of product placement. Research participants seemed aware of their awareness of it, and also that their awareness did not render them immune to influence from the practice.

We do not suggest that our three interpretive categories are the only possible ways to sort these data thematically, but we do feel that they offer compelling abstraction that have explanatory value in understanding the quality of the engagement of young international consumers with TV product placement.

DISCUSSION

This study has used a purposive and pragmatic sampling frame to seek qualitative insights into the quality of engagement young international consumers have with TV product placement. In the tradition of scholarly interpretive studies we have drawn extensively on direct quotes from our data sets to make the reasoning behind the inferences drawn as transparent as possible. Acknowledging the limitations, several insights have emerged. TV product placement, known as kodsana phaeng in Thailand TV, is a marketing technique which young international consumers are not merely aware of, but are attuned to its nuances and engaged with the brands involved. Many research participants excitedly recounted placement incidents in their favorite shows. This sense of engagement evinced research into advertising as a discourse which young consumers actively deploy in their self identification and group identification social strategies. Just as some ads are cool and some are not (Ritson and Elliott 1999), some TV placements are seen as cool, and some not. Product placement has a quality of being marginal yet also central to TV entertainment, which makes it an attractive source of comment and discussion for young people. Spotting the placements could be a game to test
one’s media-savvy credibility. Product placement brings another dimension of inter-textuality (O’Donohoe 1997) to young peoples’ media experiences as they can connect the social texts of advertising, branding, movies (well-known sources of product placement) and TV show genres from soap operas and TV dramas to quiz, game, chat shows, and even documentaries and news broadcasts. In effect, this is strengthening the cultural presence of the brand in a powerfully self reinforcing way.

A further category of response added to the sense of engagement. “Objectification” occurred where participants used the cue to describe their experience of TV product placement to offer an expert judgment on the effects of the technique. We interpreted this in terms of a perceived need to seem competent in young peoples’ discourse. If participants had expressed worry that they were not aware of placement incidents they opened themselves up to the suspicion that they may not be competent in this important discourse for young people. By objectifying their responses, they positioned themselves as experts within that discourse. In this sense, opinions expressed may betray something of the ideological character of product placement as a form of persuasive communication which naturalises certain social practices and sustains the belief that they are benign, inevitable, and unremarkable (Eagleton 1991). The particular quality of TV product placement is that it promotes consumption in a context that is self evidently disguised, but which produces a sense not merely of acquiescence but of active complicity. Consumers know that brand marketing organisations are playing a game with them, a game that, by and large, they seem to enjoy. In resisting the game, consumers are expressing their preference for controlling the rules of the game.

We found that young consumers’ engagement with TV product placement has a reflexive quality. They are aware of their awareness of the technique, and also aware that they are far from immune to its persuasive force. They do not feel that the technique necessarily compromises their enjoyment of entertainment; instead, it enhances the realism of their entertainment experiences, where there is editorial integrity to the placement. Where this integrity is lacking, resulting in clumsy or inappropriate placements intruding into the narrative contexts of the TV show, we find resistance to the practice. This resistance, though, is not towards TV product placement as such, but towards placement that impairs the quality of the entertainment. This engagement might be theorised drawing on the literature on rhetoric and its psychological force as an organising principle of communication (Billig 1991). Applied to marketing and advertising (Schroeder 2002), we can see that the visual, as well as verbal aspects of promotional communication can be rhetorically powerful. Product placement makes no explicit claims about brands but places them in juxtaposition with TV stars in the narrative context of a particular TV show genre. Nothing more needs to be said: the presence of the brand in such a context sends a strong message that it is current, cool, and relevant to the audience.

Several respondents referred to the narrative contexts of the placement within a storyline and scene, explaining that viewers might mimic the consumer behavior portrayed when they themselves were in the same situation. Many research studies have measured recall of brands in controlled conditions of exposure to placements. But this relies on a particular theory of memory as a decontextualised information storage and retrieval bin. This theory, called “semantic memory” by psychologists, contrasts with the “episodic” memory theory which locates memories within narrative structures or life episodes. Episodic memory can be triggered by a small scene, an experience, an act. TV placements that mimic typical consumer experience, like walking past a Dairy Queen ice cream parlor in Bangkok, can trigger powerful recall cues when the consumer engages with the same situational contexts as those portrayed in the TV show.

**CONCLUSION**

More studies within local cultural contexts are required to develop the role of TV product placement in young consumers’ identity formation and social positioning. This study suggested that TV product placement has a profound resonance and meaning for young consumers in two very different cultural contexts though with somewhat differing attitudes towards incongruous placements. Our findings imply that brand recall may be tinged with negative associations if consumers resent having the dramatic quality of their TV viewing impaired for the sake of a spurious product placement. In the current review being undertaken on UK TV product placement guidelines by the UK media regulator Ofcom, the potentially damaging effect of TV placement on program quality and viewer enjoyment will have to be balanced against the apparently irresistible economic pressures behind the growth of TV product placement practices.

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