The Meaning of ‘Product Placement’: an Interpretive Exploration of Consumers’ Experiences of Television Programme Product Placement in the United Kingdom and Thailand

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Product placement and television programmes could be considered as sites of meaning. The very richness of these meanings, including consumers, television programmes and placed brands are interrelated in a network of meaning construction, and transfer. This research study uses an interpretive approach to qualitative data to explore television product placement from the subjective perspective of young consumers in the UK and Thailand. Findings suggest that consumers bring to product placement, along with the media brands are embedded in, a network of meanings that they can interpret, engage with and respond to. There is also some evidence that consumers do not engage with embedded brands in the obviously contrived setting of promotion, but in a far more powerfully suggestive way in an entertainment environment, which has been chosen by consumers for viewing because it concords with their identities.

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**The Meaning of ‘Product Placement’: An Interpretive Exploration of Consumers’ Experiences of Television Programme Product Placement in the United Kingdom and Thailand**

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Television programme product placement is increasing in significance from both a managerial and a consumer cultural perspective. Product placement refers in this research to the inclusion of or reference to branded products or services in scripts or plots in any form of non-advertising mediated entertainment for promotional purposes. In Thai there is no precise translation for product placement. It is known as ‘implicit advertising’ or ‘kod-sa-na-phaeng’. Television studios are seeking new revenue streams to offset the decline in conventional paid-for advertising revenues, while branding and advertising agencies are moving towards more ‘experiential’ marketing tools to access consumers ‘under the radar’. Questions arise about the implications of this practice for international managerial practice and consumer experience, with attendant issues concerning ethics, public policy and regulation in a climate of increasing globalisation of brands. To date, with a small number of exceptions, research in the area has focussed largely on single-country studies measuring the attitudes of non-segmented audiences towards placements in movies.

Product placement has played an important role as a relatively new emerging tool of integrated marketing communications (IMC) for several decades. Brand marketing organisations have typically been content with seeing brand exposure in mediated entertainment as an add-on, but many are now putting resources into the technique. One of its perceived advantages over traditional advertising is the access it affords to consumers’ daily experiences. Through placements in television soap operas, situation comedies, quiz shows, and other genres, brands can be featured as meaningful artefacts in narrative contexts which have a powerful resonance for consumers. This popular culture phenomenon blurs the boundaries between entertainment and promotion. The meanings of the media and promotions, as a result, are intertwined through the postmodern practice of intertextuality by which consumers engage in endless cross-referencing (Jansson, 2002; Gould and Gupta, 2006). In other words, consumers bring an intertextual network of meanings through which they interpret and react to the placements to the product placements and media that brands are embedded in.

Although some literature (e.g. Fazio and Zanna, 1978; Smith and Swinyard, 1988) suggests that “attitudes formed through lived experience are stronger, more accessible, held more confidently, and more predictive of behaviour than those derived from mediated experience through advertising” (Wattanasuwan, 2003, p.72), in postmodernity mediated experiences of, for example advertising, product placement and television programmes, may be as powerful as lived experiences in forming attitudes relevant to ‘the symbolic project of the self’ (ibid). Branded goods are consumed not only for their utility but also for their symbolic value (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Media representations of brands in advertising and entertainment can be powerful in suggesting particular meanings in association with marketed products and brands. Effectively, products become commodity signs (Baudrillard, 1981).

Product placement in movies has been studied by academic researchers, usually from a neo-positivist perspective which measures the brand recall, attitudes of consumers, and purchase intention to the practice. There are some robust findings but more studies are needed which take into account several other dimensions. Firstly, television is potentially a more powerful channel than movies for reaching into consumers’ lives because the consumer engagement with favourite soap operas or dramas or other genres of the television show is more intimate and more regular than visits to the movies. Secondly, this quality of engagement cannot easily be accessed through quantitative data gathering methods. Thirdly, the strategies and rationalisations behind product placement practices need to be understood to complete the overall picture, since consumer interpretations are only one half of the process. In particular, the managerial strategies are important not only in making assessments about the contribution of product placement to the marketing management of brands but also in making judgements about the attendant ethical and public policy implications. Furthermore, product placement seems to carry features consistent with the ‘interpretive’ or ‘postmodern’ turn in consumer and marketing research, especially with regard to the symbolic role brands may play as resources for the production of self and social identity. In this regard it is important to consider product placement from an interpretive consumer cultural perspective, a perspective not yet evident in the literature. Finally, much is made today of the globalisation of brands and the emergence of consumer communities separated by ethnicity, nationality and religion yet linked through brand allegiance. It is therefore useful to examine the cross-cultural context. Consumers under forty constitute a useful group in this research as they are typically fully engaged with media and brand culture and are known to use brands in their self-identification processes.