The Meanings of ‘Kod-Sa-Na-Faeng’- Young Adults’ Experiences of Television Product Placement in the Uk and Thailand

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This study uses an interpretive approach to explore the ways in which young adult Thai and British consumers inscribe meanings to the brands they experience as part of their television entertainment and the roles these meanings have in their experiential worlds. Drawing on transcribed and translated focus group discussions, depth interviews and purposively elicited auto-ethnographic narratives the findings suggest that television product placement constitutes a powerful discourse of brand symbolism to which international consumers are highly attuned. Brands in television shows can have deeply personal and nuanced meanings which engage with consumers’ iterative identity projects.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“… when I see they use it in Sex and the City, I feel like if I use it I can be like Jessica Parker … Jessica guarantees it.” (Female, Thai, 24)

Young adults around the world have a commonality in their experience of brands and marketing practices. Product placement has no direct translation in Thai, it is known as ‘kod-sa-na-faeng’ or ‘implicit advertising’. This is partly because product placement and sponsorship are not separate categories on Thai television but aspects of the same practice. Nevertheless, consumers in Thailand, as well as those in the UK, are well aware of the various promotional techniques deployed in their television viewing. Television offers a powerful medium for the promotion of brands. Consumers often have an intimate engagement with their favourite television shows. Television is a medium conducted in a localised vernacular. In Thailand and the UK even where syndicated foreign shows or advertisements are broadcast they are framed by localised announcements and locally produced shows. TV is often engaged with on a daily basis in domestic environments. It has the dual quality of both normalising and glamorising consumption practices. Brands are ubiquitous in television as they are in everyday life: studio directors need brands in order to populate storylines with familiar objects which connect with the viewers’ own reality. Television is consequently an ideal vehicle for product placement, yet its role as a vehicle for consumer cultural meaning transfer (McCracken, 1988) and a resource for personal identity projects in an international context is still relatively under-researched.

Previous studies have begun to conceptualise some of the dynamic characteristics of product placement in, for example, explorations of the influence on consumer attitudes towards the brand of the connection between plot and brand (Russell, 2002), character-product associations (Chang and Roth, 2000) and the alignment of consumer attitudes towards the placed brand with those of a character with whom viewers identify (Russell and Stern, 2006). However, most previous studies have been attitudinal and individual in orientation (e.g. Karrh 1994, 1995, 1998; Balasubramanian, 1991; Vollmers and Mizerski, 1994; Nelson, 2002; Gupta et al., 2000; Nebenzahl and Secunda, 1993). So far, more studies have focused on movies as a television as a product placement medium than television (exceptions include LaFerle and Edwards, 2006; Russell, and Puto, 1999; Russell et al, 2004; Tiwsakul et al., 2005) but thus far phenomenological approaches have been rare and non-US national contexts have seldom been explored in their consumer cultural context.

Attempts to define and categorise product placement practices suffer from the limitation that they do not take account of differences in regulation and practice in different countries. For example, Balasubramanian (1994), Gupta and Gould (1997), Ford (1993) and Baker and Crawford (1995) suggest that product placement is ‘paid for’ with cash or other considerations going to the studio, usually in the person of the producer or broadcaster. This ignores two issues: one is the fact that many brands appear in entertainment as content simply directors need them. Placements give a brand much-needed visibility and credibility regardless of whether payment was made and public relations agencies go to great lengths to bring about ‘coincidental’ placements. The second issue is that, in the UK, product placement is common but brand owners are forbidden by current regulations from paying programme makers. Instead, they pay product placement agencies who use their contacts with studios to push their clients’ brands into programmes as freely supplied scene props.

This paper describes research among consumers in two differing cultural contexts, the UK and Thailand. In each country the media infrastructure is mature with many domestic television shows being made. Each country has a vital consumer culture and lively interest in brands both domestic and non-domestic (although in Thailand consumer culture is concentrated in the major urban centers where buying power is highest). One important difference between them is that in Thailand television product placement is well-established and although there is media censorship there are relatively lax regulations governing placement practices. In contrast, in the UK under current regulations television programme makers are forbidden from receiving payment from brand owners for featuring their brands as scene props or in storylines. Nevertheless, this does happen legally under the ‘free prop supply’ system. It is widely assumed that UK regulations will soon change to allow paid-for placements. The UK thus has an immature and highly regulated television product placement environment while Thailand has a mature and relatively under-regulated one.

This paper draws on interviews and written narratives from a selective sample of UK-based and Thai-based television-viewing young adult consumers supplemented by interviews with leading practitioners. Taking an interpretive theoretical stance, the findings suggest that young adult consumers in both countries are similarly attuned to television product placement incidents: they seek them out, describe them vividly, and clearly enjoy their sophistication in discerning not only brands, both global and local, but also the marketing techniques by which brands are inserted into their entertainment. Consumers displayed a high degree of reflexive self-awareness in being aware of their subjective responses to brands placed in television shows and articulating the underlying motivations for their affective response. Specifically, they deployed their knowledge and awareness of brands in identity strategies. The paper develops these themes using direct quotes and then draws on the findings to develop and integrated discussion around international consumers’ experience of television of product placement, identity, brand symbolism and the movement of consumer cultural meaning.

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