

Chapter 5

The Influence of Immersion on Product Placement Effectiveness: A Synthesis and Review of Product Placement in Traditional and Digital Media

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ABSTRACT

With a focus on the factors that determine the effectiveness of product placements, we compare the use of product placements in traditional and digital media. Despite the enthusiastic use of product placements in both forms of media, research has not provided conclusive results as to the effectiveness of this form of marketing. After reviewing the factors that alter product placement outcomes, we present a conceptual model designed to highlight the processes that we perceive as altering the consequences of product placements. We presume that whether or not a product placement results in positive consequences for an embedded brand depends on a combination of influences that stem primarily from the degree of a consumer's immersion within the media experience. The highly stimulating and self-directed nature of digital media is predicted to produce profitable consequences for embedded brands, making it a prosperous venue for marketers to utilize to feature their brands.

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INTRODUCTION

Brands have been integrated within culture narratives for non-promotional purposes as early as Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), within which the *Pickwick* carriage line was featured (Newell, Salmon and Chang 2006). Now, brand integration, or product placement, has become an increasingly popular alternative to conventional advertising. The expectation is that global investment in product placement marketing strategies will increase from \$3.46 billion in 2004 to an estimated \$6.94 billion in 2009 (PQ Media 2005).

The source of this trend toward rapidly increasing investment in the placement of brands within entertainment media is both due to a change in marketing strategy and new developments in media technology. The more subtle appearance of a brand within entertainment narratives effectively circumvents consumers' resistance to the influence of advertising on their brand preferences and brand choices. Such resistance is more likely to occur in response to more overt forms of advertising (Balasubramanian, Karrh, and Patwardhan 2006). Moreover, recent technological advancements (e.g., *TiVo*; the availability of television programs online) have given viewers the opportunity to avoid traditional forms of marketing, such as advertisements that are broadcasted during television commercial breaks (PQ Media 2005). As a consequence of these developments, there has been a proliferation of product placement in contexts ranging from motion pictures and television programs to children's learning books (e.g., *The M&M's Brand Counting Book*; Neer 2003), best-selling novels (e.g., *Bulgari*, the Italian jewelry company, sponsored Fay Weldon to feature the brand in the title of her novel, *The Bulgari Connection*; Neer 2003), and video games (e.g., in *CSI 3: Dimensions of Murder*, Visa's fraud-protection service alerts players to a stolen credit card, providing an essential clue for solving a murder mystery; Brown 2006).

Accompanying this growing ubiquity of product placements is the lack of a comprehensive understanding as to its effectiveness at increasing consumers' choice of a brand over its competitors. Indeed, in some cases, product placements have been controversial enough to negatively influence consumers' attitude toward a brand, without any corresponding influence on their actual purchasing behavior. For example, the authors of the best-selling novel, *Cathy's Book: If Found Call 650-266-8233*, recently disclosed that they described characters as wearing specific makeup lines by *Cover Girl* in exchange for promotional ads for the book on *beinggirl.com*, a website aimed at adolescent girls and owned by *Cover Girl's* parent company. However, pressured by the public and media's criticism of both the brand sponsor and the book's publisher, the book's authors removed all product placements from the book in its newer release. Nevertheless, there was no evidence that the public's negative reaction to this instance of product placement translated into lower sales either of the book or of *Cover Girl* products (Rich 2008). Despite the staggering amount of money spent globally on the embedding of products within entertainment media, this type of incident raises questions as to whether such marketing strategies necessarily translate into changes in consumer behavior.

A growing body of literature reveals that brand placements do not inevitably convey a benefit to the brand with respect to the most relevant outcome variables; consumers' evaluation of a brand over its competitors (i.e., brand attitude) and their actual choice of the brand among competing alternatives (i.e., brand choice; e.g., Cowley and Barron 2008; Law and Braun 2000; Russell 2002). Furthermore, measures of product placement effectiveness commonly rest upon the presumption that a product placement is effective if the experience of encountering a brand within entertainment media is memorable. That is, marketing experts often use success in later remembering a product placement event as a surrogate for the effective-

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