

The Ethics of Product Placement in Television

by Kay Tang July, 2019



Product placement in television refers to embedding a commercial product in a TV program. The practice has become more common with the prevalence of digital video recorders that allow viewers to skip traditional forms of advertisement and a drop in the number of people who watch TV commercials. While advertisers can capture a viewer's attention by using product placement, various ethical issues arise.

Transparency

The public may not be aware that an advertiser has paid for a product placement. Commercials are typically stitched in before, after and between programming segments and are clearly delineated from content. Product placement blurs the line between promotion and content. In this way, audiences can be manipulated into viewing a commercial. While some television producers append a list of product placements to

the credits at the end of shows, viewers have already watched the embedded advertising without prior warning.

Endorsement

Even if the show is fictional, audiences may perceive the use of products by actors as implicit endorsement. They may also believe that the claims about the product made in fictional programming are true. As the use of product placement grows, certain brands dominate the airwaves. This trend may result in a skewed perception by viewers of a brand's popularity, according to Larry Percy's 2008 "Strategic Integrated Marketing Communications."

Integrity and Creativity

When product placement was first introduced as a marketing tactic, products were used as props and didn't affect story lines. As the use of product placement increased, writers have come under pressure to weave products into the content. An entire episode may revolve around a particular brand, according to Shay Sayre's 2010 "Entertainment and Society: Influences, Impacts, and Innovations." In response to product placement requests by Mattel, a toy manufacturer, the writers of the sitcom "Will & Grace" created a storyline in which the character Jack grew preoccupied with a Cher doll. If marketing goals take priority over creativity, the editorial integrity of television programming may be compromised.

Impact on Children

The food and beverage industry uses product placements to target children with messages about junk food. For example, sweetened soft drinks regularly appear in prime time programming. Sarah Speers' report on "Child and Adolescent Exposure to Food and Beverage Brand Appearances During Prime-Time Television Programming" noted that children consume about 200 calories from soft drinks daily, and soft drinks are known to contribute to child obesity. Because children may be more vulnerable to disguised promotion in content, product placements of nutrient-poor foods raise public health concerns.