

EMERGENCE OF PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN THE INDIAN WEBSERIES

The change of media environment in India

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Abstract: This paper studies the transition of Indian viewership from Television to the web-series and the strategy of product placement in it. With advertising clutter and growing competition, brands are seeking the opportunity to promote through these online shows. Product placement is a planned insertion of brands, or products and services within the fictional format to persuade the viewers to buy it. This paper examines and presents the work done by researchers across the globe in the area of media communication and marketing.

Keyword: Media, Product Placement, Consumer Awareness, Web Series, Brand, Advertising Clutter, Branded Entertainment, Attitude and Behaviour.

INTRODUCTION:

The primary function of marketing is to differentiate the company's product and services from their competitors. To create a niche for the brands, advertisers build various cues and motivations in their promotional messages. However, in recent times this has created more "clutter" than differentiation. The entire process is expensive, from creation & production of commercials to the final media buying process. (Arul, 2014). The audience is more aware and selective in his choice of brands and is not easily attracted to persuasion techniques of advertising.

In the recent decades the media environment has changed and diversified. With the advent of internet and mobile technology, the audience is now fragmented and scattered. It is difficult to capture viewer's attention for any advertising between their favourite shows whether in television or the radio. There are so many ad-commercials across media channels that the attention span for these promotions has decreased drastically. There are numerous brands with similar product lines, so a viewer may follow the strategies of zipping and zapping. "Zapping" is defined as changing the channel in order to avoid commercials and watch something else. "Zipping" is fast-forwarding the commercials in a recorded programme (Cronin 1995). Recently, "zipping" also refers to digitally recorded content which automatically removes advertisements. (Rouwenhorst & Zhao, 2017). Consumers' avoidance may reduce the promoted brand's recall and recognition and it also reduces the effectiveness of that media. (Webb and Ray, 1979 & Rotfeld, 2006).

Most of the brands are now trying new ways to engage consumers through innovative marketing strategies and one especially using online media. (Dahl, 2009). Dahl talked about how even online video games are also used for advertising. The use of online media also ensure that the brands reach their target audience effectively.

With the above mentioned scenario, Branded web-series have become a desired mode of integrating brands within popular fictional content. The brand or the product may appear within the show in different ways: sometimes as a background and sometimes the characters using it or talking about it.

I. MEDIA AND THE AUDIENCE

There is numerous research on the importance of media on consumers and how it may affect them in various ways. The web series viewership, can also be related to some classic yet relevant theories of mass communication. The theory of Katz, Haas and Gurevitch (1973) proposed five basic needs fulfilled by mass media:

- 1) *cognitive needs*
(e.g. acquiring information, knowledge and understanding),
- 2) *affective needs*

- (e.g. the need for emotional and aesthetic experiences),
 3) *personal integrative needs*
 (e.g. a need for self-assurance),
 4) *social integrative needs*
 (e.g. a need to strengthening contacts with family and friends),
 5) *tension-release needs*
 (e.g. the need for escape and diversion).

The Media Model assessed the relationship between consumer and their media habits. The media influence is said to be greater or lesser according the psychographic and demographic traits of the individual who consumes the media content. (Steele & Brown,1995).

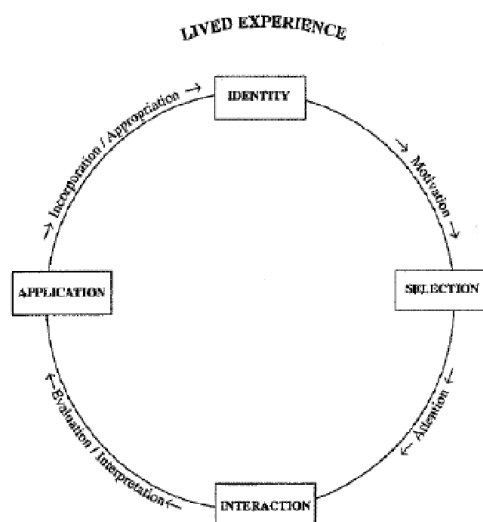


Figure 16. The media practice model of identity construction (Steele & Brown 1995)

In the year 2009, Bowden also mentioned that there is a need for various measurement model that that could assess the strength of consumer's emotional response to the consumption of a product or service. Even media content is a "service" itself and therefore an important domain to be measured and recorded.

Most media theories focussed on the psychological influence, few reiterated the concern about growing violence in media content. Newer studies integrated media theories with advertising strategies of the brands. The last decade focussed on product placement specially in movies and television shows. For instance, Khan & Sumarjan (2013) proved that Film and television shows shot in multiple outdoor locations influenced the consumer's choice of travel destinations.

II. FORMATION OF CONSUMER ATTITUDE THROUGH MEDIA CONTENT

Consumer attitude refers to the general feeling towards any stimulus object. It can be favourable or unfavourable. The attitude can be based on the attributes of the perceived object. The advertising messages may give a person more desired attributes or benefits of the product which in turn may give a positive feeling for it. The attitude for certain things can exhibit a shift or a change. (Fishbein, M., & Ajzen, I. 1975)

Fishbein mentioned four major variables which influence consumer attitude:

1. *Beliefs*: It is based on prior information. To gain new information a person may search different media, interact with people, observe events which lead to create inferential beliefs
2. *Attitude*: The belief forms the base for the formation of certain attitude.
3. *Intention*: The change in attitude may lead to change in intention.
4. *Behaviour*: The changes in intention may result in changed behaviour

Thus the consumers purchase behaviour is a complex phenomenon and it needs probe into the consumer's life routine, interests and major influences. Since media consumption is important to modern day consumers, the task to find the significant relationship between media content and the consumer behaviour. These media messages can greatly influence a person's existing beliefs about the brands.

Another theory of relevance is of Bandura's (1978) which was later improved upon by Peter and Olson (1987). It explained the three attributes of consumer behaviour: *Cognition, Behaviour and Environment*. *Environment* relates to the external stimuli and the physical surroundings. It is not mere single factor influence rather all three work together to influence the consumer. *Cognition* relates to the mental reasoning of the person where he reasons out his present and future actions. It is considered to be the process of subconscious. *Behaviour* is the actions which can be observed and noted.

Bandura's theory highlighted the importance of media as an important external stimulus to drive the purchase for the audience. This is applicable with web-series viewership too. The product placement in web series is part of external stimuli and the initial choice of viewing a certain web series with all its elements may be the work of cognition and the act of viewing and responding to its messages is behaviour. The environment, the personal self and the behavioural elements are the subsets of an integrated system.

A consumer relates to a particular media content because he may relate it to himself and his life in some way. The content and the background in the series can be used by viewers as entertainment, or as reference guide about world and materials. As Nabi (2009) observed that media personalities may prompt the viewers to learn certain behaviour. The media may perform the role of a teacher, instructor and demand obedience from the audience. The anchor or the omniscient narrator in media may also frame certain parameters of "good" and "bad" in a specific topic.

The influence through fictional formats may happen through:

1. *Setting* of the show
2. *Real Events* discussed in the show
3. *Narrative typology* on which the story progresses which is usually moving from the state of confusion to the final state of enlightenment and happiness

It is equally important to ascertain of when and how the products are woven into the script. (Russell 2002). The product placement professionals believed that the audience are more receptive to a product when there is strong connection between the product and the storyline of the character. (Cowlett 2000). It has also been found that the brand recall and recognition is higher when it is very prominent either in background or part of an important scene. (Gupta and Lord 1998)

III. INTRODUCTION TO THE WEB-SERIES

Today's young population consumes media as '*watch on demand*' trend, and web series is the chosen format. Web series are sometimes being referred to as "web TV" which is the content specifically made for online distribution. The viewers may watch it on their computers or mobiles through various OTT platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime or YouTube. The growth of these web-series is an indication of changing tastes and preferences of the viewers. Also it has encouraged new production houses and creative teams to present their work in lesser budgets and lesser restrictions in comparison to traditional media. It is being considered as democratization of media industry in India. The funding for these series are usually financed by established or new Brands. The Branded web series is entertaining and integrate advertisement within contents, "allowing the advertiser to convey its brand values in a subtler and less aggressive manner than conventional publicity" (Calder, Malthouse and Schaedel, 2009)

The web-series with its modern and fresh perspective on life presents ample opportunities to insert brand messages relevant to the context presented. Also it fits perfectly in the lifestyle of the city audience who consumes their entertainment through different platforms and media. (Simelio and Ruiz, 2013). The relevance of Product placement in the web-series is definitely relevant to the youth of the country.

IV. PRODUCT PLACEMENT

The origin of product placement is sometimes related to *Lever Brothers* strategy to use their branded soaps in movies of 1890s. *Warner Brothers* too had a deal with multiple brands to be seen in their movies. The luxury car *Ashton Martin* became famous because of its placement in *James Bond's* movies. The concept and definition of Product Placement has evolved in all these years. It is definitely not a new practice because and has been part of movies for almost seventy years.

Balasubramanian (1991) defined product placement as the “*planned insertion*” of products into movies and television-shows which might influence the viewers’ opinion about that product. A recent development in product placement has been the use of different media like novels, plays, songs, cartoons and even video games. Friedman in 1991 documented the use of product placement in different media forms. Many websites today, create branded games and graphics to enhance the brand recall and engage its customers

The product placement strategies are divided into three categories by the researchers (D’Astous and Seguin 1999):

1. *Implicit product placement*: the brand or the product may be seen in the background or in set design without being formally introduced or spoken about.
2. *Integrated explicit product placement*: the product is spoken about formally in the show. It may be a crucial element of script.
3. *Non-integrated explicit product placement*: the product is presented at the right moment but not necessarily integrated into the script. It may form as part of sponsorship agreement.

The intentions of product placement can be *Serendipitous, Opportunistic, and Planned*.

Serendipitous placements may be unintentional and is there just add to set design. *Opportunistic placements* are planned by marketers after fully reviewing the script and looking at various opportunities of insertions.

Planned placements are the most effective and powerful strategy where the brand is part of the script. This is done through an agreement between the brand and the production team. The last strategy has become quite popular in movies and television shows. (Chang, Newell, and Salmon 2009).

With respect to recent web-series in India, brands are very strategically “woven” into the script which create a stronger connection between the character, viewer and the brand itself. It is said to be an integration of advertising and entertainment. The product placement is preferred over advertising as the former is more realistic in approach and is in better context. The information is not processed through interaction but by what is represented through media. The product placement within the series is a way to influence an idea about “good living” and its effect can be referred to as “*third person effect*” (Davidson,1983).

Many researchers have mentioned the growing dislike of consumers for the advertising commercials, but there appear to be less discomfort with the brand being embedded into the script. Yet, the marketers need to be cautious about their brand positioning before any brand integration. An impactful product placement leads to enhanced awareness and a positive attitude towards that brand which may finally result in a purchase (Karrh,1995). A research confirmed a positive relationship between product placement and brand loyalty. (Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993).

The differences in terms of geography and culture cannot be ignored and needs to be validated whether Indian youth reacts to product placement the same way as their counterpart in other parts of the world. There is 2003 research by McKechnie and Zhou which mentions that the Asia Pacific region showed an acceptance for product placement, which created a market promotion opportunity.

Product placement is the mix of advertising and publicity. Arjona (2012) considered branded web-series as an emerging advertisement strategy for the teenage and young population as they are considered to be extensive internet users. In the Indian web series, the product placement can be seen in many forms: Brand name visible in the background; products and package visibility; verbal mentioning of brand in dialogues or an advertisement within the script.

The online media consumption of younger audience is higher in all parts of the world. The viewership of the web series in India is also dominated by the young urban audience, who are more acceptable to the global lifestyle and taste. They are the appropriate target group for the product placement because the probability of acceptance would be better in comparison to older audience.

There are few examples from India: *The Viral Fever* (TVF) and *Culture Machine* had multiple brands integrated to their content. The integration between production houses and Brands also solves the funding issues of production. The 'fan followings' for these web series is usually above a million which is great impetus for the brands. Established companies like The *Tata* also worked with web series '*Tripling*' to promote its *Tiago*. The popular show '*What the Folks*' introduced the viewers to brands like Greek yogurt '*Epigamia*' and self-drive car rental '*Zoomcar*' which were definitely some newer concepts for Indian consumers.

In the audio visual mediums, the placement is accentuated by the use of colour, movement and sound. Every movie or show has a certain target, so consumer segmentation becomes easier. In the recent studies majority of audience accepted the practice of product placements and a greater brand recall and recognition was also noted. Everything in the frame can give certain meaning and message. It can include: setting, décor, lighting, depth of a space, costume and makeup etc. The visual appeal of the web series may include settings, furnishing and décor or cues & dialogues to elicit a certain emotions of nostalgia, wedding, festivals, school or a basic need based problem. The solution provided may become a parameter for the viewers to evaluate their own preparation for a certain event or real problem.

V. PRODUCT PLACEMENT vs. BRANDED ENTERTAINMENT

Brand stories told through fiction and content produced and created by Brands is called as *Branded entertainment*. The social networks and online platforms are part of these marketing strategies. The branded content, is allowing the advertiser to convey its brand values in a subtler and less aggressive manner than conventional publicity (Calder, Malthouse and Schaedel, 2009) and with more effective and potential users (Costa-Sánchez, 2014). Several researchers have indicated the importance of product placement as an additional element of the promotional mix, but there is a need to conceptualise the bigger umbrella of Branded entertainment and its impact on the marketing landscape.

Some examples of branded entertainment cited by Hudson in 2005 were *Coca-Cola*, *BMW*, and *Ford*, which produced several entertainment programs through their own media productions. The creative content is either funded or even created to have a stronger brand association with its audience. The outcome is an integrated value chain between all media stake holders: producers, creative department, distribution channels, publicist and brands. The brand is then fully integrated with the content. Through the funded programming, brands have a greater control over the creative integration of brand with entertainment. For example *Sonyliv* launched '*House Pad*' which focusses on home makeovers in association with *Asian Paints* as it truly resonates the brands positioning. *Ola cabs* had a great brand recall when it sponsored the famous web series "*Permanent Roommates*". The same series made property- search website '*Commonfloor.com*' an acceptable name amongst its viewers. Recently a web-show on the Indian middle class family life '*The Aam Aadmi*' was supported by the brand *Flipcart*. The target viewers for this show were their potential customers. The script focused on middleclass dilemma of 'saving and spending' and *Flipcart* usually serve the customers by providing deals in terms of lower pricing models.

Another advantage of the branded content is that it is consumed in various channels through various social media platforms like *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *WhatsApp* and therefore provides a wider reach at a lesser cost than a traditional advertising campaign. There is limited studies conducted to study this growing phenomenon of branded web series as it is still in the introduction stage.

LITERATURE GAP

Product placement is an important promotion strategy in the modern era. This research paper attempts to open the dialogue on the use of product placement specifically in web series. The digital platform is a newer phenomenon in India but is emerging as one of the most popular form of entertainment for the young audience. Since the youth may also be moving away from the traditional media of television, the focus of marketers and academia needs to be redirected to the online content.

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