

Product Placement on Television: the Dangers for Public Health

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Submitted on behalf of The Alcohol Education Research Council and
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Summary

This response is on behalf of the Alcohol Education Research Council and the UK Centre for Tobacco Control Studies. Both organisations are strongly opposed to any relaxation of current restrictions on product placement especially for alcoholic, tobacco and smoking accessory products.

1.0 Introduction

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this consultation. Product placement is a key promotional channel that has been shown to influence brand recall and purchase behaviour. Its power is increased because there is no overt sales pitch, it gains from association with popular programming and avoids the problems of channel hopping that disadvantages conventional advertising. This brief report highlights the ethical dangers of the approach in general, and also the need to ensure that it is not used to encourage smoking through the placement of tobacco products and accessories, and drinking through the placement of alcohol products.

1.1 What is Product Placement?

The term product placement (also referred to as ‘brand’ placement) is the practice of paid inclusion of branded products or brand identifiers within mass media programming through audio and/or visual means (Karrh, 1998). This practice has become increasingly important because placement of branded products are viewed as an effective mechanism for reaching audiences (Yang and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007; Sargent et al., 2001).

1.2 Aims of Review

This review examines the evidence base of product placement to address the following questions:

1. What is the current state of the evidence base, and does it support a move to restrict television placement of smoking accessories and alcohol products?
2. What are the ethical issues surrounding brand placement and is there sufficient evidence to support restrictions on television placements of tobacco and alcohol products?

1.3 Report Structure

The extant literature demonstrates that placement of tobacco and alcohol products in the media, i.e. within television and movies, can influence smoking and drinking in three ways: 1) facilitate memory or recall for the brand; 2) promote favourable attitudes towards the

brand; and 3) encourage purchase intention and behaviour. The review therefore starts by examining the evidence for these three concepts. This is followed by an examination of research that has looked directly at consumer response to the ethics of placement of tobacco and alcohol in movies and television.

2.1 Brand Placement: Impact on Recall, Attitudes and Purchase Behaviour

Past research has examined the health impacts of tobacco and alcohol placement within television and movies, the role of placement as a communication tool and the extent to which consumers have been deceived by different forms of subliminal placements. Tobacco and alcohol placement within television and movies might influence consumers in three key ways (Yang and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007):

1. Enhance recognition of the target brand via repeat exposure
2. Promote favourable brand attitudes through character/brand association
3. Encourage purchase intentions and behaviour

2.2 Brand Recognition via Exposure

Considerable research documenting the effect of brand placements on memory (or recall) generally demonstrate that recall is improved for a brand that is placed within movies or television, compared with the same brand that is not placed within these media (Yang and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007; Law and Braun, 2000; Karrh, 1998). Portrayal of television product placement is thus problematic because brand loyalty is significantly related to the frequency of brand exposure (Avery and Ferraro, 2000), and this consequently increases liking for a brand (Homer, 2009).

A recent content analysis of the top ten UK programmes most watched by 10-15 year olds documented brand portrayals of alcohol, smoking and drug-related scenes (Cumberbatch and Gauntlett, 2005). Younger viewers who are more susceptible to messages portrayed on television (Wakefield et al., 2003) were frequently exposed to alcohol-related scenes, occurring at a rate equivalent to 12 incidences per hour, whilst smoking-related scenes also occurred frequently at a rate of 3.4 incidences per hour (Cumberbatch and Gauntlett, 2005). Other research has confirmed these findings and demonstrated that placements that are more visually prominent result in greater brand recall than placements that are less visually prominent (d'Astous and Chartier, 2000; Law and Braun, 2000). Russell's (2002) study also showed that recognition rate for brands with high visual placement was higher than recognition rates for brands with low visual placement. However, it should be noted that material that is seldom noticed may still be absorbed by viewers and retained in memory. Several studies assessing brand placement effectiveness found that consumers' recall and recognition of brands were linked to brand placement in movies and television programming (Auty and Lewis, 2004; d'Astous and Chartier, 2000; d'Astous and Séguin, 1999).

2.3 Brand Placement Exposure: Effects on Behaviour

As placements in television and movies help shape and reflect consumers' brand values and choices, evidence linking brand placement portrayals and recall are worrying because of the health concerns of smoking and alcohol use. The evidence from cross-sectional, longitudinal and experimental studies demonstrates the effect of exposure to smoking and drinking within movies and urges to smoke (Chapman, 2008; Dalton et al., 2002). Wakefield et al. (2003) noted that tobacco placement portrayals in films occurred with much more frequency than

expected because it impacts upon smoking rates (Goldstein et al., 1999; Stockwell and Glantz, 1997). In a related study, Sargent et al. (2009) found that adult smokers exposed to movie smoking had a higher urge to smoke after the movie, regardless of movie rating, and longitudinal research confirmed these findings in the US (Tanski et al., in press). This study found that exposure to smoking in movies at four time points over a two-year period predicted smoking uptake among adolescents. Similarly, Dalton et al. (2002) found that exposure to drinking and smoking portrayals in movies prompted adolescents to initiate these behaviours. For those with no parental restrictions on viewing movies 46% had tried alcohol while 35% had tried smoking.

Other research supports these previous findings by showing significant associations between higher exposure to movie alcohol use and increased risk of prevalent and incident alcohol use; suggesting a higher dose-effect relationship at lower movie alcohol exposure levels compared to higher levels (Sargent et al., 2006). The baseline study for this study found a strong relationship between exposure to movie smoking and smoking onset among a large sample of New England adolescents, with this statistical association remaining even after controlling for known risk factors of smoking (Sargent et al., 2001). Dalton et al. (2003) found that exposure to movie smoking at baseline predicted smoking onset 1 to 2 years later. The follow-up showed that the exposure preceded the behaviour, thus highlighting that movie smoking placement was predictive of smoking initiation. Indeed, nearly 20% of those in the highest-exposure quartile tried smoking compared to only 3% in the lowest-exposure quartile; and this relationship remained after controlling for smoking by family and friends, risk-taking propensity in adolescence, and maternal warmth and limit setting (as well as other sociodemographic variables). Interestingly, the effect was stronger among children of non-smokers than it was among children of smokers, suggesting that the movie exposure effect was potentiated by the absence of more traditional risk factors.

2.4 Brand Attitudes: Impacts on Behaviour

Research suggests that depictions of brand placement help build positive brand attitudes and purchase behaviours (Russell, 2002; van Reijmersdal et al., 2007). A study found that among adolescents who had never tried a cigarette, exposure to movie smoking was associated with more positive attitudes about tobacco use and the perception that most adults smoke (Sargent et al., 2001). Weaver and Oliver (2000) found that participants with a positive attitude toward the programme had more favourable attitudes toward a brand that was prominently placed compared with those with less favourable attitudes toward the programme.

Aside from exposure, positively positioning a brand with an attractive character in a television programme may help shift brand attitudes and beliefs (Karrh, 1998; Russell and Stern, 2006). The pairing of products with characters implicitly through product usage or handling can be a powerful endorsement because they convey a strong message of brand approval (Morton and Friedman, 2002; Russell and Stern, 2006; Jin and Villegas, 2007). Certainly, Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986, 2002) suggests that repeated exposure to modelled behaviour can significantly influence behavioural change. The underlying premise is that brand placement is more effective when paired with a character that displays one or more desirable traits (Karrh, 1998).

2.5 Ethical Issues: The Subliminal Effect

The added potency of brand placement over much traditional mass media advertising is thought to be the result of the subtle persuasion techniques employed (DeLorme and Reid, 1999; Bhatnagar, Aksoy and Malkoc, 2004). A key marketing strength of brand placement is

that consumers are not necessarily aware that the brand reference they see within their entertainment has a veiled promotional motive (Balasubramanian, 1994). The view among most consumers is that it involves subconscious promotional effects (Morton and Friedman, 2002), but this raises ethical concerns. This is a potentially harmful marketing practice that goes beyond the traditional definition of covert marketing by focusing more narrowly on situations in which consumers are unaware that they are being communicated to through a commercial message (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004).

Research has indeed demonstrated that television programme audiences are 'subconsciously' influenced by brands they have seen on television programmes. Thirty-four per cent of the sample indicated that it was highly unethical to influence audiences by using brand name products in television programmes. Most of them (over fifty per cent) considered brand placement as disguised commercial advertising, with a respondent asserting that placement offended the right of consumers because we already saw a great deal of advertising. With product placement being ranked almost on a par with subconscious advertising (Balasubramanian 1994; d'Astous and Chartier, 2000), there is probably no better way to achieve this objective for a company than to get their product placed within a popular television program.

3.0 Conclusions

Media is a big and integral part of young people's lives, accounting for a large proportion of their recreational activity. Product placement would therefore have massive reach amongst children and adolescents. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the placement of tobacco and alcohol products, especially within television and films, is an important predictor of adolescent smoking and drinking. Any relaxation of the rules on the placement of these products would therefore be extremely harmful to public health.

There is also good ethical reasoning to reinforce these conclusions: product placement is powerful because it gets under the critical radar of audiences. In this way it enters the terrain of subliminal advertising – which caused great concerns and was ultimately prohibited some fifty years ago.

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