

Product Placement : A Critical Review Based on Ethical Theories

* *Mohammad Masrurul Mowla*

** *Md. Nazamul Hoque*

Abstract

The ethical dilemma in case of product promotion is not a new phenomenon. Advertisers are always controlled by the ethical rules and regulations of various countries, regions, social groups, and religions. Subsequently, product placement, which is a part of integrated marketing communications (IMC), has established its strength in the present time as a newly formulated promotional tool in the field of marketing. Corporate giants have adopted product placement as a part of their regular promotional activities. As marketers used non-advertising media for product placement, most of the marketing ethicists and religious analysts paid bare attention to product placement. But now, all social groups, ethicists, and religious thinkers have focused attention on product placement to analyze whether this way of product promotion is ethical, rational, as well as permitted by the beliefs of various religions. In this study, product placement is analyzed in light of existing ethical theories with a view to minimize ethical dilemma faced by the marketers.

Keywords : product placement, integrated marketing communications (IMC), corporate giants, ethical theories

Integrated marketing communication (IMC) has evolved as an integral part of the firms' marketing strategy to ensure their survival in the competitive business environment. It is widely accepted and every company has been emphasizing on IMC before any external communication efforts. Product placement is a part of IMC, which was started in the early 1920s by using cigarette, cola, and automobiles in Hollywood movies (Fristoe, 2005, Hackley, Tiwsakul, and Preuss, 2008). It was unknown to the people engaged with marketing for many years. Consequently, marketing ethicists paid bare attention to product placement, but now, the situation has changed dramatically.

From the beginning of the IMC, some criticisms have been implicated on marketing activities that such activities motivate customers towards overconsumption by stimulating rapacity and materialistic behavior. As marketing is the basic instrument to earn profit, some capitalistic criticism has been made like eroding of natural resources and polluting the natural environment (Hackley et al., 2008). Now, product placement is the new instrument by which companies are promoting their products or services to the customers. Companies are using non-advertising media to place their products as a part of promotional activities, and subsequently, it is very difficult to prove these as marketing practices. Hence, it is not easy to make an ethical evaluation.

Objectives of the Study

- ❖ To make clear the basic idea of product placement.
- ❖ To explore product placement-ethical issues dilemma based on existing theories.
- ❖ To put forward some recommendations to uphold the ethical practices and to suggest a direction for future research.

Methodology

The study was both desk-based and ethnographic. Scholarly articles and books on promotional activities, especially product placement by corporate giants were reviewed. The total analysis has been divided into two parts: first, product placement of adult products and the second, product placement of children's products. Eventually, a critical analysis based on the existing literature has been provided to explore the ethical dilemma of product placement.

This study was undertaken in the third quarter of 2010 to the first quarter of 2011. Although the authors tried their level best to make the study authentic and updated as per the recent information and facts, still, the same is plagued with

* *Associate Professor*, Department of Business Administration, International Islamic University Chittagong, Chittagong, Bangladesh. E-mail: mmm_jiuc@yahoo.com

** *Assistant Professor*, Department of Business Administration, International Islamic University Chittagong, Chittagong, Bangladesh.

a lot of limitations that were inevitable. Primary data would have made the research visionary and well directed, but due to time and economic constraints, primary data was not collected. So, the lack of primary data is another significant limitation of the study.

Product Placement as a Concept and Meaning

Product placement is a sophisticated and well accepted communication tool in which all ingredients like the message, the sender, and the intents of a brand are often implicit in movies, television shows, and computer games. Presentation of a brand on different media usually refers to product placement as scripting of a mediated message and entertainment (Hackley et al., 2008, p. 118). Product placement is also known as entertainment marketing because it has been transferred from one media vehicle to other vehicles like movies to television and radio programs, computer games, books, popular songs, and stage plays (refer to Exhibits 1- 4) (Hackley and Tiwasakul, 2006 ; Hackley et al., 2008).

Product placement is increasing in popularity and is becoming more acceptable as a standard marketing channel. It basically involves placing products in various media for monetary return and promotional support. It has become a common part of movie scripts and helps to decrease the production cost. In 1982, product placement first established its strength by increasing 65 percent sales in a month due to peanut butter candy Hershey's Reese's placement within *E. T. the Extra - Terrestrial* (Gupta and Lord, 1998; Hackley et al., 2008; Karrh, 1998).

Today, product placement is highly recognized nationally and internationally by all types of entertainment media. This has moved marketing one step ahead allowing both explicit and implicit placement of products (Hackley et al., 2008). On the contrary, many scholars like Ford (1993), Baker and Crawford (1995) stated that product placement has been treated as a 'hybrid' promotional technique, which combines the elements of celebrity endorsement (Exhibit 5), public relations, and sponsorships.

So, in this context, there is no way to deny that advertising and entertainment industries have interlaced. In addition, these practices have become quite sophisticated and highly organized. Product placement is a kind of practice by which marketers and producers negotiate to place brand name, packages, signs, logo, trademark, and corporate names in movies and television shows like - BMW was placed carefully in a James Bond movies, Apple computers were used by

Exhibit 1 : Product Placements in Movies

Cars in the Movies	
Movie	Car
Herbie, the Love Bug	Volkswagen Beetle
RoboCop	Ford Taurus
Back to the Future	DeLorean
Smokey and the Bandit	Pontiac Trans Am
The World Is Not Enough	BMW Z8
Lara Croft: Tomb Raider	Jeep Wrangler Rubicon

Source: Retrieved from <http://money.howstuffworks.com/product-placement.htm>

Exhibit 2 : Product Placement in TV

Cars on TV	
TV Show	Car
Miami Vice	Ferrari Testarossa
The Prisoner	Lotus 8
Magnum P.I.	Ferrari 308i
Starsky & Hutch	Ford Grand Torino
Dukes of Hazzard	Dodge Charger
Knight Rider	Pontiac Trans Am
Charlie's Angels	Ford Mustang Cobra
Hardcastle & McCormick	DeLorean Coyote
24	Ford Expedition

Source: Retrieved from <http://money.howstuffworks.com/product-placement.htm>

Exhibit 3 : Product Placements in Books

- **Skittles Riddles Math**, by Barbara Barbieri McGrath, Roger Glass
- **The Cheerios Counting Book**, by Rob Bolster
- **The Hershey's Milk Chocolate Bar Fractions Book**, by Jerry Pallotta
- **The Hershey's Kisses Addition Book**, by Jerry Pallotta, Rob Bolster
- **More M&M's Brand Chocolate Candies Math**, by Barbara Barbieri
- **The M&M's Brand Counting Book**, by Barbara Barbieri McGrath
- **The Crayon Counting Book**, by Pam Munoz Ryan
- **Twizzlers Percentages Book** by Jerry Pallotta, Rob Bolster
- **The Cheerios Christmas Play Book**, by Lee Wade
- **Reese's Pieces: Count by Fives**, by Jerry Pallotta, Rob Bolster

Source: Retrieved from <http://money.howstuffworks.com/product-placement.htm>

Exhibit 4 : Product Placements in Songs

*Take me out to the ball game,
Take me out with the crowd.
Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack,
I don't care if I never get back,
Let me root, root, root for the home team,
If they don't win it's a shame.
For it's one, two, three strikes, you're out,
At the old ball game.*

Source: Retrieved from <http://money.howstuffworks.com/product-placement.htm>

Exhibit 5 : Product Placement on TV - Judges of "American Idol" sitting with Coca-Cola glasses



Photo courtesy Ray Mickshaw/FOX

L-R: Judges Simon Cowell, Paula Abdul and Randy Jackson

Source: Retrieved from <http://money.howstuffworks.com/product-placement.htm>

Tom Cruise in *Mission: Impossible*. Recently, such placement of products has been advanced to the next level, where whole entertainment programs have been made around a product, which is popularly known as “branded entertainment”.

Ethics and Related Theories

It is almost impossible to be ethical universally in marketing communication. Because the term 'ethics' is relative, which is defined by religion, culture, education, social system, values, and beliefs of the society. Therefore, one thing that is unethical in a society can be ethical in another society or religion. A handful of literary works on ethics in IMC are available. In 1937, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) tried to sketch the ethical boundary of marketing and advertising, which was modified in 2006 and revised permanently in the 'New Ethical Code Guides Marketing Communication Worldwide' in Paris.

A study of the existing literature revealed that advertising deception and advertising content have been emphasized as more significant components of 'ethics' (Nebenzahl & Jaffe, 1998). Deception can be explained as a fraudulent or misleading claim in an advertising message. Whereas, advertising content means use of informative versus emotional

advertising, persuasive advertising, using messages with fear and sexual appeals in advertisement to children and minorities (Hacker, 1987 ; Kunkel, 1988; Nebenzahl & Jaffe, 1998). A relevant question is raised, how could ethicality be measured? Nebenzahl and Jaffe (1998) suggested that ethicality should be measured depending on to what extent it is harmful for the consumers and the corresponding society. They prescribed harm as : **i)** violation of autonomy by control or manipulation, **ii)** invasion of privacy, and **iii)** the violation of the right to know. In addition to these, some ethical theories based on moral philosophy are available by which marketers are being guided. In order to bring focus to ethical theories, ethicists now are extending their efforts to capture the attention of marketers as well as consumers. Marketing practices have been evaluated ethically by three moral philosophies: Utilitarianism, Deontology, and Virtue Ethics (Robin & Reidenbach, 1987). Recently, many scholars have emphasized on Religious Models of Ethics, and some of these theories are briefly discussed below :

- ❖ **Utilitarianism:** Is an evaluation of marketing and deals with highlighting its usefulness to society. Utilitarianism is internally concerned with the mutual benefit of the producers and the consumers, and externally stimulates the society enjoying the benefits of marketing strategies.
- ❖ **Deontology:** Is a philosophy related to the issues like marketing unsafe and shoddy products and unethical ways of marketing ethical products.
- ❖ **Virtue Ethics:** Is concerned with the intention of a person initializing the marketing activities and its consequences.
- ❖ **Religious Models of Ethics:** Based on religion, beliefs, social norms and values.

Product Placement for Adults

❖ **Literature Support on the above Issue:** Out of the existing literature, a few studies have focused on product placement for the adult consumers. In this context, all could be considered as the scholarly works on product placement for the mature consumers except which has directly dealt with the children's segment.

Balasubramanian (1994) commented that product placement intends to stimulate the target audience by a message through an organized and invisible entry into an entertainment media. Nebenzahl and Jaffe (1998) stated that product placement is nothing but a selling-cost by which the manufacturer of a brand strives to convince the target audience to purchase the brand via an appealing message. Reviewing these comments, an inference can be drawn that product placement is a powerful and advanced communication tool in a competitive situation. Spence and Heekeren (2005), on the other hand, argued that if the product placement is not vivid as a communication tool to the customer, they would always be in risk of making a wrong purchase decision. Moreover, ethicists have been raising their voice by questioning the ethicality of product placement. Basically, they have expressed their concern on the explicitness and implicitness of product placement in movies and television programs, and whether the product category is ethically charged for.

❖ **Consumers' Perception:** A group of researchers suggested that consumers are mainly concerned about two aspects : one is practice and the second is particular product categories (Gould et al., 2000 ; Hackley et al., 2008; Zhou & McKechnie, 2003). One of the major criticisms based on consumer feelings is that producers use 'subliminal' or 'subconscious' promotional effects. It is clear that the effect under the conscious awareness level of the audience is mostly beyond their control to accept or reject the message. Some audience perceive it as a deceptive practice because many-a-times, the message stimulates the consumers to purchase a product, though they are not aware of the persuasive intent of product placement (DeLorme & Reid, 1999; Hackley et al., 2008).

❖ **Legal Framework:** In the UK and the USA, the legal framework controlling product placement in media vehicles is insufficient and to some extent, inappropriate. Therefore, manufacturers can easily manipulate and violate the law maximizing their own interest at the costs of the society. Hackley et al. (2008) suggested that ethically principled regulation of product placement should contain two key issues:

- ◆ How much strategy of the product placement of program makers, media owners, and brand owners are explicit to the audience and ;
- ◆ How this placement strategy is commercially sophisticated.

❖ **Critical Analysis:** In this section, two important issues would be examined. The first issue describes the product placement of an ethical and an ethically charged product, and in the second issue, the explicitness and implicitness of product placement is judged on the basis of ethical theories. From the utilitarian point of view, successful product placement of an ethical product is ethical because in this way, it is assumed that consumers will take their purchase decision in a rational way, and the company can earn more revenue. The proposition is that higher sales indicate that consumers are more satisfied with the product. For example, the DeLorean Brand's placement in *Back to the Future* movies played a significant role to ensure more sales, and consequently more profits (refer to Exhibit 6).



As the cost of product placement is less than other promotional tools, companies can produce their products with lower costs, which could enhance the benefits accrued to shareholders, customers, and employees (Hackley et al., 2008). So in this way, more people are benefiting from product placement, and this is the fundamental theme of utilitarianism to support product placement of ethical products. Conversely, it is argued that there is a risk to undermine the quality and the integrity of the mediated messages as product placement is increasing. Consequently, it might reduce social benefits, but increase economic gains. However, utilitarianism advocates that the ethically charged products like guns, cigarettes, and alcohol are unethical with respect to their inherent nature. Utilitarianism is not concerned with the explicitness or implicitness of product placement, but it takes into account the long-term harm of the consumers and as well as the society.

From the deontological perspective, harmful or ethically charged product placement is of prime concern, and it also raises voice against the unethical method of ethical product placement. For example, the brand placement of Audi RSQ in the movie *I, Robot*. As can be inferred from the Exhibit 7, the product placement is implicit. This type of product placement does not give due credit to the audiences' sovereignty. Thus, this kind of product placement is unethical from the deontological perspective.

Virtue ethics deals with the intention of the marketer in which the particular promotion is executed rather than the ethical states of the act. It is quite tough to focus on the customer's benefits only, overlooking the costs to the society. The nature of the product, consumer sovereignty, and market segmentation are the critical variables measuring ethical evaluation. It is noteworthy to say that placement of ethical products is less objectionable than that of ethically charged products in view of virtue ethics. Explicitness and implicitness are not the major concern of virtue ethics. Rather, it always emphasizes on the intent of the marketer in case of product placement.

It is very important to consider religious models of ethics in case of product placement, because product placement is targeted at the society, and a marketer should take into account the cultural differences, norms, and values of the society. Most of the societal norms and values have been developed based on religion. For example, advertisements with sexual connotations (Exhibit 8) are prohibited in Muslim society. Some Muslim countries are rigid, and some are moderate regarding the use of women in advertisements. Because of their strict religious creeds, women are not

Exhibit 7 : Product placement of Audi RSQ in the Movie "I, Robot"



Photo courtesy Audi.com

Will Smith and the Audi RSQ

Source: Retrieved <http://money.howstuffworks.com/product-placement.htm>

Exhibit 8 : Brand Placement with Sexual Connotations



Source: Retrieved from <http://money.howstuffworks.com/product-placement.htm>

exposed as men. In addition, in the Muslim society, it does not matter whether the product placement is either explicit or implicit, but what matters is how harmful a product is for the consumers and the society, and whether there is any religious barrier to the various product categories. Similarly, some religions are flexible in use of sex appeal and using women as models in advertisements. Hence, with regard to product placement, there is a limitation in the Muslim society regarding the type of movies that can be chosen for product placement.

Considering the above discussion, it can be said that marketing communication has the right to devise innovative tools for spreading the intended message to the target customers. In this sense, product placement in the non advertising media could be the right choice for the marketers. Implicit product placement could also be an ethical way, because it is done under the level of conscious awareness of the audience, so that they are interested to know about the product, and are subsequently motivated to purchase the same. If it is unethical, then target marketing communication would be unethical too, because the communication message is developed for the target audience, but this message could be sent to the other vulnerable groups, for example, poor people and children.

Product Placement for Children

❖ **Literature Support on this Issue:** Ethical evaluation of advertising targeted at children has recently received considerable attention from researchers. Evidence can be found in the existing literature which strongly supports the idea of product placement for children as an effective communication tool (Hudson et al., 2008). Research shows that children in the USA spend an average 38 hours every week watching commercial media and watch 20 to 30 ads per hour (Laczniak & Murphy, 2006).

❖ **Parent's Perception:** Contemporary research works show that most of the British and North American parents perceive that explicitly placed ethically charged products are the most unethical, and they also believe that placement of soda and fast food with high fat is also unethical (Hudson, et al., 2008). British parents are comparatively more sensitive to the placement of fast food than Canadian parents. So, it is evident that parents are fairly more worried about the product placement of ethically charged products than the placement of ethical products as children are especially vulnerable to product placement as they lack the cognitive skills to evaluate this type of elusive promotion.

❖ **Legal Framework:** The Office of Communications (Ofcom) in the UK has some rules and regulations controlling product placement on television. This code does not apply to the BBC because it is a non commercial media regulated by its governors. This code includes three sections: **1)** broadcasters must control full editorial content, **2)** editorial content and advertising must clearly be separated, and **3)** product placement is prohibited (www.ofcom.org.uk). Considering the recent epidemic of childhood obesity, the Food Standard Agency (FSA) and government food watchdog were pressed for pre-watershed ban on all junk food commercials.

In the United States, the advertising industry is regulated by self-regulatory policies established by the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU). All advertisers making children specific ads should follow CARU's guidelines, but it has no legal controlling authority. CARU has 20 advisers and 35 supporters - most of them are from Burger King, Frito-Lay, McDonalds, General Mills, and Nabisco. These evidences give a fairly clear picture about the legislative structure of the western countries in controlling unethical and harmful product placement in advertisements targeting children.

❖ **Critical Analysis:** Every philosophical theory has focused on the same message in children's vulnerability to unsafe and shoddy product placement, but in a different way. Children lack cognitive skills and articulation, and they are not conscious enough about the motive of the product placement until the age of 10 years (Gupta, Balasubramanian, Klassen, 2000 ; Gunter, Oates, & Blades, 2005; Hackley et al., 2008).

According to a utilitarian view, children are the foundation of a society's future, and for the betterment of the society, they should get a secure and safe environment where they can grow up with a positive attitude. So, ethical products could be showcased to children by using product placement and considering the maximum social benefits.

Deontological philosophy suggests that both explicit and implicit product placement to the children are unethical. Explicit product placement for ethical products might be allowed by this philosophy, but for ethically charged products, their placement is prohibitive. For example, children are not capable enough to understand the contract between the sponsors and the TV network, while adult viewers of TV soaps are normally exposed to some identifiable sponsor, and this type of product placement is deceptive. Hence, this philosophy has been paying recurring attention to deceptive practices, i.e., unethical method of marketing ethical products.

Virtue ethics is concerned with the intention of the marketers, and not their activity. So, the objective of the marketers would be judged by this philosophy. For example, because of the product placement of fast food and processed food items in media viewed by children and adolescents, the children pester their parents for fast food and processed food items, consume soft drinks, and eat junk foods. It has been reported that children in the U.S. obtain 50 percent of their calories from fat or added sugar. So in this case, virtue ethics might raise questions about the intention of the marketers.

Religious models of ethics are also concerned with the vulnerability of the children. No religion would expect its followers to break the socio-cultural norms and disregard the beliefs and core values of the religion. In addition, parents try their best to protect the fundamental values of a social system, and instill good values and beliefs in their children that are commensurate with the value system of the religion practiced by them. These evidences substantiate the logic that no argument can justify the idea of product placement targeting children because of their adolescence and their inability to comprehend the deceptive messages that lay below such promotions.

Conclusion

This study provides an ethical evaluation of product placement for adults as well as for children based on ethical theories. Throughout the analysis, it has been clearly established that implicit or unobtrusive product placement in various media is not ethical because it is deceptive. On the other hand, the product category itself for the product

placement is unethical if it (the product) is ethically charged. It is also observed that children are soft targets due to unethical product placement in the children's entertainment media. Thus, it is a matter of serious concern for the sake of the society and nations that calls for appropriate mechanisms controlling the marketers, especially with reference to ethically charged product placement targeting children. Stringent legislative framework and its proper application as well as monitoring can improve the situation.

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