

Meet the Parents: A Parents' Perspective on Product Placement in Children's Films

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ABSTRACT. The ethics of advertising to children has been identified as one of the most important topics worthy of academic research in the marketing field. A fast growing advertising technique is product placement, and its use in children's films is becoming more and more common. The limited evidence existing suggests that product placements are especially potent in their effects upon children. Yet regulations regarding placements targeted at children are virtually non-existent, with advertising guidelines suggesting that it remains the prime responsibility of the parents to provide guidance for children. This study measured the ethical evaluations of parents in the UK and Canada regarding product placements in children's films. After exposing parents to a four-type typology of product placements, results show that explicit placements of ethically charged products were perceived as the most unethical type of placements. Parents in the UK were more sensitive to the use of the technique and there was a significant difference in relativism between the two groups. Both sets of respondents would like to see more regulation on the use of placements, especially placements of alcohol, tobacco and fast foods.

KEY WORDS: advertising ethics, children, marketing ethics, MES, product placement, parents

Given the significant role played by media in the lives of the nation's children, it is time to move forward with new academic research initiatives in this realm (American Psychological Association, 2004).

Children all over the world are exposed to an ever-growing number of advertising messages. Advertising spending on children's programming amounted to \$2.1 billion in 2005 in the US alone,

up 7% on the year before. The typical North American child takes in some 38 h of commercial media every week and sees between 20 and 30 ads per hour (Laczniak and Palan, 2004). Children's beliefs are strongly influenced by advertising, particularly by advertising that uses celebrity endorsement (Atkin and Block, 1983; Comstock and Paik, 1991).

Not surprisingly, as the competition for young audiences continues to increase, the use of product placement in children's entertainment media is becoming common across a range of media. Table I lists a number of children's films that contain product placements, but placements are not confined to movies. In a new teenage book called *Cathy's Book*, Procter & Gamble made a deal with the authors to include products such as Cover Girl's Shimmering Onyx eye shadow and Metallic Rose in exchange for promoting the book. Marketers seeking to attract young consumers, such as McDonald's, hire agencies to embed their brands within song lyrics and music videos. Finally, it is predicted that more than one-third of product placement in video games by 2009 will be in the form of 'advergaming', where advertisers create a game around a product rather than place their brands within a well-known title (Abelson, 2005). Worldwide, spending for paid product placement swelled 42.2% in 2005 to US\$2.2 billion. With non-cash promotion and barter deals included, the value of global placement in 2005 was up 27.9% to \$6 billion (PQ Media, 2005).

In response to the increasing use of product placements in children's entertainment, there have been calls for more research focusing on the influence of such marketing tactics (Hudson and Hudson, 2006; Krider, 2006; Moore, 2004; Morton