The Big Sell
Product Placement in Hollywood Films

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Major Findings

♦ 32 of the 50 films surveyed had product placement, 19 of those had more than one product in the film.

♦ Of the 32 films with product placement, 18 of them have the product significantly integrated into the film’s plot (characters either use the product, or it is verbally mentioned).

♦ There were two films, *Snow Dogs* and *Orange County*, which featured products that are owned by the same company that produced the film.

♦ The use of products in the films studied often normalized their use, particularly products which are heavily marketed in real life - soft drinks, beer, coffee, online companies and athletic apparel.

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GRIID has a lending library of books, videos and curriculum materials.
Films Reviewed

A Beautiful Mind
I Am Sam **
Slackers *
Life as a House **
Kate & Leopold **
American Psycho 2 *
Mothman Prophecies *
Harry Potter
Jeepers Creepers
The Others
Vanilla Sky **
AI *
Bubble Boy **
Jay & Silent Bob **
Riding in Cars with Boys
From Hell
Soul Survivors **
Bandits **
Don’t Say a Word *
The Glass House **
Hearts in Atlantis *
Corky Romano
Max Keeble’s Big Move **
Serendipity **
The Musketeer

Behind Enemy Lines
K-Pax *
The Majestic
Zoolander **
Original Sin
Black Hawk Down *
Ocean’s Eleven
Rat Race **
Spy Game
13 Ghosts
Not Another Teen Movie **
Domestic Disturbance **
Orange County *
Ali
Bones
Training Day **
Hardball **
Monster’s Ball
O **
Snow Dogs **
Black Knight
How High **
Rollerball *
The One *
The Kiss of the Dragon **

* signifies product placement in film
** signifies multiple products

Introduction

Product placement in films in nothing new. Films have featured everyday products since the early days of cinema. Having a character drink a beer or drive a car in a film are very natural acts for most of us. However, until recently it was rare to see an actual brand name used in films.

The current trend can be traced back to Steven Speilberg’s 1982 film *E.T. - The Extra Terrestrial*. Apparently, Speilberg initially approached the M&Ms company about using their product in the film. The producers said they would like to have E. T. eat M&Ms and asked how much would M&Ms pay for that? Insulted, M&Ms said the film producers should be paying them. Speilberg then went to the Hershey Foods Company and offered them the same proposal, this time using Reese’s Pieces. Hershey’s agreed. What was the result? Reese’s Pieces sales when through the roof after the film came out. Lesson learned? Both advertisers and movie producers realized that product placement in films could be a great way to generate new revenues.

Consequently since E.T. product placement has become the norm. Not only do products appear in films, they have become increasingly woven into the script. Movie companies and advertisers have
also teamed up to cross-promote their products prior to, and
during a film’s run. For instance, McDonald’s has signed
contracts with Disney to promote Disney film characters on
McDonald’s glasses or kids meals. This Summer’s Disney
cine film Finding Nemo gives us a good example. There was mul-
tiple cross-promotion on the ABC Saturday morning car-
toons, with stand alone movie trailers and Finding Nemo
promotional products as part of McDonalds commercials.

Another reason for the use of Product
Placement has to do with the greater
consolidation of media ownership. As media
companies own more and more media it just
makes “good business sense” that they would
want to cross promote products and services.

Disney owns several movie production
companies, TV stations and news outlets
(http://www.cjr.org/owners/disney.asp.) It
makes sense that a magazine or TV news
program they own would promote a new
Disney film.

Finally, people can also look at this
phenomena as a testament to our inherent
dislike with being bombarded by ads. It is common practice
for many of us while watching TV to hit the mute button or
change the channel when a commercial comes on. However,
if you are at the theatre you don’t have that luxury. You can’t
zap an ad during a film. The advertisers have a capture
audience with films than they do unlike television.

So, why conduct a study that looks at Product Placement

In films? People who love cinema might argue that to clutter
the screen with brand names and have actors increasingly use
products violates the artistic integrity of the film. That may be
ture, but in this report we will focus on the following: the
frequency and normalization of Product Placement in films;
target audiences, particularly teen and young adult; cross-
promotion of products by parent companies; and the
development of films as commercials.

The Normalization of Product
Placement

In Noami Klein’s book, No Logo, she makes
the case that we are living in an increasingly
branded consumer culture. Everywhere we
turn ads confront us oftentimes in the most
unconventional ways. More and more people
are wearing shirts, pants and hats that have
product logos on them. Indeed, people have
become walking billboards for companies.

Sports apparel is one of the most
common forms of branded ad-
vertising. Nike, Adidas and Reebok
have all invested tremendous
energy in getting their names and
logos in non-traditional advertising
venues. We documented the
Nike logo
on clothing in *I Am Sam*, *Max Keeble’s Big Move*, and *How High*; Adidas apparel could be seen in *How High* and *Bandits*; and Puma could be seen on clothes in the movie *O*. Nike also had an ad on the side of a bus in *I Am Sam*. The frequency of these ads in films tells us that this is just like life, that it is just normal to see the products we consume at the movies.

Another product that has been normalized in films is soda. We documented Pepsi in *Hardball*, *Hearts in Atlantis*, *The One*, and *Bandits*. Coca Cola, however was most widely advertised, appearing in 6 movies: *Life as a House*, *Max Keeble’s Big Move*, *Serendipity*, *Glass House*, *Rat Race*, and *Bubble Boy*. It is not enough to acknowledge a product’s presence in a film, it is also important to note how the products are being used.

In *Hardball*, Pepsi is being consumed by inner city Black youth while at a major league baseball game. Interestingly enough, one of the kids while taking his seat yells out “Hey, there’s Sammy Sosa.” It just so happens that at the same time this movie was out in theatres, that Sammy Sosa (plays for the Chicago Cubs), was starring in Pepsi commercials. Coke was being consumed in the cafeteria in *Max Keeble’s Big Move*, at dinner in *Glass House*, and at the movies in *Glass House*. This scene in *Glass House* very starkly illustrates the normalization of product use in films, especially since this film also targeted a teen audience.

Another aspect of life we found normalized in this movie study was the use of personal computers. Apple computers are used in *Max Keeble’s Big Move*, *Kate & Leopold*, and *Slackers*. An MSN account is used by John Travolta in *Domestic Disturbance*, and the main character in *Glass House* uses AOL.

One last area of product normalization that we documented were in scenes that involved playing sports or sporting events. There is a dog sled race in *Snow Dogs* with ads displayed by Kawasaki and Powerade. An ESPN truck is at the race and someone is even watching the race on TV and you can see the ESPN logo in the corner of the screen. Actors can be seen wearing product logos while playing sports in *O*, *How High* and *I Am Sam*. Even
the coach in *How High* wears a Nike baseball cap. The idea of athlete product endorsement is not completely lost on film producers. There is a scene in *Rollerball* that satirizes hyper product use. One of the main rollerball players, after scoring some decisive points, stops for the camera. He begins to drink a soda, when Cuba Gooding Jr.’s character tells him to turn the bottle so that the label can be seen.

**Targeting Audiences**

We have already touched on some films that have targeted audiences with soda and sports gear. Not surprising these films are targeted at teen and young adult audiences. Films like *Life as a House*, *Max Keeble’s Big Move*, *Slackers*, *How High*, *Glass House*, *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* and *Bubble Boy* target young teens through college age. Other films target the late teen through 25 age group such as *Serendipity*, *Vanilla Sky*, *Kate & Leopold* and *Rollerball*. The later films are particularly targeted at younger audiences who are more upwardly mobile.

In *Rollerball* one of the main characters drives a Corvette. There is a scene when the car is backing up that the Corvette name is very prominent. In *Serendipity* the main female character goes to a news stand, buys cert’s breathmints, and pops one into her mouth. (Here is an example of how a product used adds nothing to the plot other than to promote the product.) But, the most common product that is targeting young adult audiences is beer. There were 4 movies with late teen/early 20’s characters drinking or holding brand name beer: *Soul Survivors*, *Kate & Leopold*, *How High* and *Vanilla Sky*. In *How High* one of the characters is seen carrying an entire case of Sam Adams as they get ready for a party.

Younger audiences are targeted with Coke in *Max Keeble’s Big Move*, *Glass House* and *Life as a House*. In *Max Keeble*, Coke is prominent in the cafeteria and just before a food fight. A good example of targeting a teen audience is from the movie *Orange County*. The actor Jack Black, a favorite with youth, is seen watching *Sponge Bob Square Pants*. This is a kids cartoon on Nickelodeon, but it’s also popular with teens and adults. Jack Black’s character was also high from smoking marijuana while he watched this clever animated show about underwater sea creatures.
Cross Promotion

Having Jack Black watch Sponge Bob Square Pants not only is a way to target teen and adult audiences, but it is a great example of cross promotion. Sponge Bob Square Pants airs on Nickelodeon, which is owned by the media giant Viacom. Orange County was an MTV movie production, which also happens to be owned by Viacom. [http://www.cjr.org/owners/viacom.asp](http://www.cjr.org/owners/viacom.asp).

There was only one other example of blatant cross promotion in our 50-film study, which was in the film Snow Dogs. As was mentioned earlier (page 5), during the dog sled race viewers could see an ESPN truck. ESPN is owned by Disney, which also owns Buena Vista films, which produced Snow Dogs. ([http://www.cjr.org/owners/disney.asp](http://www.cjr.org/owners/disney.asp))

There were other types of cross promotion with major media outlets, not because they are jointly owned, but because it is “good business” sense for what media scholar Bob McChesney calls the top tier media conglomerates. McChesney believes that there is an agreement amongst the largest media owners; Viacom, Disney, AOL-Time Warner, NewsCorp and Bertelsmann. The agreement basically says they won’t go after each other, just the second and third tier companies. Even though they may not make money from promotion of other big media directly, it solidifies that agreement in the long run.

An example of big media promotion can be seen in the movie Snow Dogs. Cuba Gooding Jr.’s character is fantasizing about being on a beach, when suddenly singer Michael Bolton shows up to give advice. He doesn’t show up walking on the beach, he shows up as a talking CD cover. The CD cover is not made up, it is an actual CD cover for one of his recordings with the media giant Sony. A few other instances of big media use in films were in Serendipity and Black Hawk Down, where in both films characters can be seen reading the USA Today newspaper. USA Today is owned by Gannett, which is also the largest newspaper chain in the US. ([http://www.cjr.org/owners/gannett.asp](http://www.cjr.org/owners/gannett.asp))
Products as Plot

The last point we wish to emphasize from this study has to do with the increasing use of product placement as an integral part of movie plots. Products aren’t just in movie scenes, they are being used by actors and becoming central parts of the plot.

In *The One*, a Pepsi machine spits out cans of soda that aides Jet Li’s character in a fight scene. In *Bubble Boy* one of the main characters is watching TV and sees 2 consecutive retro commercials on a cable channel for the products Bubblicious and Mr. Bubble - an interesting play on words. However, the two films that took product placement to a new level were *Kate & Leopold* and *I Am Sam*.

In *Kate & Leopold*, an 18th century man enters the present and falls in love with Meg Ryan’s character. Since this guy is out of his element he comes in contact with modern life and modern products. There are lengthy scenes with him figuring out how to use Colgate toothpaste, Gillette shaving cream and Hungryman frozen TV dinners. The scene starts with a shot inside the freezer with the label prominently displayed. He then opens the box, looks at the frozen food, all the while holding the box so that the audience can continue to see the brand. This scene lasts more than 10 seconds.

The absolute winner in the use of product placement for this study was *I Am Sam*. The film begins with several minutes of Sean Penn’s character arraigning Equal sugar packets and Starbucks coffee cups, since he works in a Starbucks. He also rattles off how to make a decaf latte and interacts with the customers. It was like watching a 5-minute Starbucks commercial.

There is also a lengthy scene with Sean Penn and his daughter eating at a Big Boy. He even plays with a Big Boy bobblehead. He eventually loses his job with Starbucks, but then gets hired by Pizza Hut. Again, there is a lengthy scene with him serving food and interacting with the customers. A question that we have to ask ourselves at this point is, is it necessary for a film to be done well to have so much product placement?
Surrounded by ads

David Lubars, a senior ad executive in the Omincom Group, explains the industry's guiding principle with more candor than most. "Consumers," he says "are like cockroaches - you spray them and spray them and they get immune after a while."


This statement by ad executive David Lubars not only reveals the contempt advertisers have for the public, it illuminates the main reason for the increase of product placement in films. To sell audiences as often as possible to advertisers.

By way of conclusion let's look at one more example from our movie study. In Vanilla Sky, there is a scene where Tom Cruises' character is struggling with his identity. He pulls over in his car at a busy section of town. The camera rotates in a 360-fashion to show us what he is surrounded by. There are huge electronic billboards for Kodak and Marriott Hotels. This is a pivotal moment in the film. Cruises’ character begins to realize that his identity, his life is an illusion.

Our lives do not need to be determined by what we own or what we buy. Hollywood, in it’s varying ways, doesn’t need to depict life through branded products, but since it is driven by profit margins this is unlikely to change. Protect yourself from the infestation of advertising. Think critically.

Ad Repellant Resources

http://www.adbusters.org/
http://www.commercialalert.org
http://www.mediaed.org/videos/CommercialismPoliticsAndMedia/BehindtheScreens/studyguide/html

Methodology

The Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy viewed 50 films released on video between January 1, 2002 and June 30, 2002. We chose the most heavily marketed films released on video - films that had significant promotions while in the theatres and upon release on VHS and DVD. For a listing of the films in the study see page 3.

The following GRIID staff were involved in this project: Erica Freshour, Rob Dodde, John Kroondyk, Troy Hort and Jeff Smith.

For a video version of this report and other resources on commercialism in media contact GRIID. (see page 2)