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Entertainment Marketing and Experiential Consumption[1]

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Abstract

The placement of brand references within mainstream entertainment (called here 'entertainment marketing') is a rapidly evolving marketing communications field in its scale and sophistication. Much previous research in the field has conceptualized entertainment marketing as promotion and focused on measuring consumer attitudes, purchase intention and brand recall in response to exposure to brand exposure. This conceptual paper suggests that there is also a need to understand the quality of the consumer engagement with brands in the context of mediated entertainment. The paper draws on phenomenological/existential research traditions to begin to theorize the role that entertainment marketing techniques may play in facilitating consumer self-concept and identity formation through brand exposure within dramatic portrayals of characters and lifestyles.

Keywords

Introduction

Brand communications planners are increasingly inserting brand references into consumers' experience of mediated entertainment. Product placement and sponsorship are rapidly growing research fields but the practices of the industry are evolving into hybrid techniques with one commonality: the brand must appear as a part of the entertainment and not as an overt promotion. There has been recent media coverage on this trend. For example, Proctor and Gamble's Global Head of Marketing claims that their marketing is based on 'experiential research' and adds that they (P&G) are disinvesting in cable TV advertising and increasing investment in new media because 'If the consumer's on the internet, if she's on a mobile, we have to find a way to market to her that is acceptable, involving and interesting'[2]. Another recent news item noted that MacDonald's was to pay hip-pop artists $5 each time they mentioned its products in their lyrics[3]. The common thread here is that fragmented audiences, changing media cost structures and consumer skepticism towards traditional benefit advertising are

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[2] *The Independent* Media Weekly, Monday, 27th June 2005, 'The Man With The $6bn Plan', by Raymond Snoddy.

[3] www.media.guardian.co.uk 11th July 2005.

driving the industry into pragmatic and innovative communications solutions. Weaving brands into the consumers' experience of mediated entertainment is a major thrust of this innovation.

This conceptual paper reviews previous research in fields extant to the emerging marketing communications area of 'entertainment marketing' and re-conceptualizes the phenomenon in terms of experiential consumption. To underline this point, 'entertainment marketing' in this paper does not refer to the marketing of entertainment. Rather, the term is used as practitioners in this field use it, to describe any means of inserting brands and brand references into entertainment vehicles. The term thus embraces but is not limited to product or brand placement, sponsorship and celebrity endorsement where these occur in the context of mediated entertainment. 'Embedded marketing' is sometimes used as a synonymous term, indicating that promotions are 'embedded' within entertainment vehicles such as movies, Video and PC games, TV and print media sports event coverage, or TV shows (as Nelson, 2002, has conceptualized under the category 'product placement').

Academic researchers have usually used the term 'product placement' when referring to many of the varieties of entertainment marketing. Product placement, as a variant of sponsorship, encompasses 'hybrid' forms of promotion within mediated entertainment (Balasubramanian, 1994; Ford, 1993; Baker and Crawford, 1995) which share one main feature: the promotional intent is not made explicit (d'Astous and Chartier, 2000) but is presented, ostensibly, as a part of the dramatic entertainment. In this way product placement inserts the brand into the consumer's experience with an intimacy that conventional promotion cannot match. Most importantly, the practice of entertainment marketing creates a symbiotic relation between promotional communication and the mediated entertainment and abolishes the category boundary that separates the two. It seems clear that there is a different cognitive and emotional engagement with entertainment than with advertising, the most obvious being that when a consumer is watching an advertisement, he or she knows that it is a paid-for promotion designed to persuade them to engage in a commercial transaction. This is clearly not necessarily the case with entertainment marketing. In fact, the point of entertainment marketing is to disguise the persuasive intent of the brand exposure. In this paper we suggest that the emotive and symbolic force of entertainment marketing cannot be fully understood through research techniques that treat the phenomenon in the same way as conventional advertising.

Scope and growth of entertainment marketing practice

Entertainment marketing (subsuming the better-known term 'product placement') is far from new. The Victorian entrepreneur Thomas Holloway paid for scripted references to his branded medicines to be placed in London stage plays of the time (Hackley, 2005). Hollywood movies have featured numerous paid-for props and script mentions since the 1930s, especially for drinks, cars and tobacco products (Fristoe, 2005). More recently, after exposure in the movie *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial* Hershey claimed 65 percent increase in sales of Reese's Pieces while the new BMW Mini ran out of stock in the US after starring in the re-make of the hit movie The Italian Job (Gupta and Lord, 1998; Karrh, 1998; Hackley, 2005). Since the sponsorship of US TV shows by Proctor and Gamble in the 1950's gave the term 'soap opera' to the English vernacular many brands have used product placement approaches other than explicit sponsorship deals as an arm

of their promotional mix. The proliferation of brands in entertainment contexts is well-documented in movies, music videos (Englis et al, 1993) and TV shows. Avery and Ferraro (2000) indicated that there were some 15 brand appearances per half hour of prime-time television programming. Most of these brand appearances were subtly inserted into dramatic portrayals of real life, intertwined with the story line and reinforced by character interaction. Sapolsky and Kinney's (1994) study of the top 25 American movies reported an average of 11 brands appeared in the films, with car and food product categories the most frequently displayed. Fawcett (1993) examined brand appearances in television programmes in 4 US network stations. Over 1,000 appearances of brand were found; with half of them the brand was both displayed and spoken.

Product placement is seen by practitioners as a cost-effective and precise method of targeting specified, pre-segmented audiences (McKechnie and Zhou, 2003). According to Wells (1996), product placement costs less than a 30 second advertising slot at the same time in the TV schedule (cited in Pervan and Martin, 2002). Consumer attitudes towards product placement are generally positive; in fact, product placement is often preferred to commercial advertising (Nebenzahl and Secunda, 1993). Product placement represents a relatively unobtrusive form of marketing communications that can enhance realism in entertainment (Gupta et al., 2000, d'Astous and Seguin, 1999; Karrh, 1998) and therefore may engage consumers on a level that conventional advertising cannot. There is an increasing establishment of agencies that specialize in product placement, particularly in the American market. From its establishment in 1991, the Entertainment Resources and Marketing Association (ERMA) has increased its members to nearly 100. This trade group composes of placement agents, studio representatives and marketers (Karrh, 1998). A similar group, the Entertainment Marketing Association (EMA) was founded in the UK. According to Curtis (1999), the EMA and New Media Group are the biggest television placement agencies in the UK[4]. The emergence of this large number of product placement organizations reflects the maturation of this market.

As mentioned above, the growth in the practice has partly been a consequence of changes in consumer attitudes to advertising and developments in the media infrastructure. Many consumers report negative attitudes towards conventional advertising (Gupta et al., 2000; Karrh, 1998) and often use video technology to adopt ad-avoidance techniques such as 'zapping' (Pervan and Martin, 2002; Avery and Ferraro, 2000). The targeting of specified market segments has become more difficult for marketers because of the boom in new media channels resulting from deregulation and the rise of digital communications technology. In addition, media vehicles have proliferated to reflect fragmentation of consumer audiences into many interest groups and sub-cultures. Entertainment marketing allows marketers to place brands to pre-segmented groups in dramatic scenarios. There are mutual benefits: brand exposure in popular entertainment confers 'coolness' on the brand and enhances the realism of the entertainment setting.

Previous findings in product placement research

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[4] But note that paid-for product placement in UK TV shows is not permitted under current Ofcom regulations. Instead, agencies provide a service offering the branded props of their clients free of charge to TV studios.

In this section we will briefly review some of the main findings of the product placement research field, this being the field most closely aligned to that of entertainment marketing. Studies in product placement have often been based on survey methods (e.g. McKechnie and Zhou, 2003; Nelson, 2002; Ong and Meri, 1994; Karrh et al., 2001; Gupta and Gould, 1997; Nebenzahl and Secunda, 1993; Vollmers and Mizerski, 1994) exploring consumer attitudes to the practice. These studies generated robust findings regarding the generally positive consumer attitudes towards product placement in spite of some disquiet over the ethics of the practice, and the apparently marginal or non-existent direct sales effect of product placement exposure. Many consumers report negative attitudes towards conventional advertising (Gupta et al., 2000; Karrh, 1998). Mayerhofer (1995) reported that 90 percent of the respondents found it annoying when films or programmes were interrupted by advertising (cited in Gould et al., 2000).

There have been some qualitative studies into product placement (e.g. DeLorme and Reid, 1999, DeLorme et al., 1994; and Wooten, 1995) using focus groups and depth interviews or combining these with survey methods (Tiwsakul et al, 2005). Broadly, the findings confirmed survey research findings regarding the lack of consumer (especially young consumer) resistance to the practice and the preference for product placement over conventional promotion. The authors concluded that viewers could validate their interpretations of the character, their purchase behavior and their own identity through the imaginative identification with the behaviour of a movie character. To date qualitative studies in this area have not explicitly theorized product placement from an experiential perspective.

The effect of entertainment marketing on consumers

The subtlety of the brand reference can be very important to the effect of product placement. There is some evidence of negative attitudes emerging where entertainment marketing practices are not well-integrated into the entertainment vehicle but appear so obviously contrived that they disrupt the entertainment narrative (Barn, 2005). Current wisdom among Hollywood agents handling brand links in movies is that the portrayal of the brand must 'tell a story' because simply 'showing the can' does not offer a sufficiently powerful narrative context to enhance the brand identity (Hackley, 2003). However, it is also the case that research studies have shown that brand recall is enhanced where product placement is less than subtle. Studies by Steortz (1987), Karrh (1994, 1995), Sabherwal et al. (1994) and Balasubramanian (1991) found that brand recall from product placement exposures was improved (from its typically low base figure) when the placement was enhanced by employing more than one modality i.e. visual and auditory, textual and verbal, or the use of pre-exposure cues. Sometimes referred to as "von Restorff" effects (Balasubramanian, 1994), such enhancements of memory can be achieved by the novelty and unexpectedness of the product placement. Whether the memory effect resulting from incongruous brand placement is accompanied by positive or negative attitudes to the brand is another question. Most consumers are drawn in to the entertainment experience and do not expect to find a promotional motive within that experience. In addition to improved recall, increased brand salience (recognition in relation to other brands in that product category) can result.

d'Astous and Chartier (2000) suggested that consumer memory of product placement was enhanced when the principal character was present and when the product placement was positively evaluated. However, Russell (2002) found a link between the congruency and persuasiveness while brand recall in itself did not necessarily influence attitudes to the brand. While a product placement made prominent by size, position on the screen or centrality to the action may improve brand recall (Gupta and Lord, 1998), the recall effects may not transfer to attitude or purchase intention. According to Russell (2002), the memory-attitude relationship is not necessarily linear. Vollmers and Mizerski (1994) found that recall results did not transfer to attitude. However, Nelson (2002) argued that memory-based evaluation was an appropriate way to test the effectiveness of product placement because the increased brand awareness is (ostensibly) the primary goal of product placement practice. Some studies of the relation between product placement exposure and purchase intention have suggested that a small (16%) increase in (espoused) purchase intention of previously favoured brands may result (e.g. Morton and Friedman, 2002; Baker and Crawford, 1995).

In general, we can see that evaluating the promotional effectiveness of product placement is no easy matter. Studies have focused on, among other things, recall, attitude and purchase intention. Studies of context effects in promotion (e.g. De Pelsmacker 2002, Janssens and De Pelsmscker 2005) usefully broaden the theoretical and empirical perspective on hybrid forms of promotion. However, to some degree they still rest on a category distinction between the promotion and the context. In entertainment marketing, there is arguably no such distinction and that is why the field requires a theoretical conceptualisation which captures the holistic quality of the consumer experience within which the brand references are located.

Product placement, identification and the transformation of experience

The 'transformational' concept was proposed by Russell (1998) to express the power of product placement in the context of the imaginative engagement of consumers with their favourite TV shows and movie stars. It proposed that product placement can transform the experience of using or consuming a branded product to match that shown in a film or television programme. There are four aspects of the transformational proposition that should be considered in order to understand its function: personal relevance, experiential/empathy, informational, and executional aspects (Russell, 1998).

The *personal relevance* is the degree to which a viewer connects him/herself with a television programme or movie. According to Hirschman (1986), audiences view themselves metaphorically as the characters in novels, plays and movies. Since Aristotle, identification with characters in dramatic narratives has been a part of dramaturgical theory. The pairing of branded products with celebrities explicitly (through verbal endorsement) or implicitly (when a product is used, worn or handled) can be a powerful endorsement because a celebrity brings the personality of his/her character to the product which can lead to the establishment of the strong approval message (Avery and Ferraro, 2000). The contrived values of the celebrities' 'brand' in the context of the TV show, movie or other entertainment or communications vehicle therefore become unconsciously associated with the product brand in the consumer's mind. As brands can be seen as social symbols, they serve as ways to display and reinforce one's self-concept (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998).

The *experiential/empathy aspect or projective function* is defined as an audience's vicarious emotional identification with television programmes or films. Placing real branded products in television programmes or movies intensifies their authenticity and salience and thereby increases empathy (Russell, 1998) if the brands cohere with those in the consumers' daily experience, since it contributes to the dramatic realism of the show. Popular culture (such as movies and television programmes) can be viewed as a valuable projective function for consumers (Hirschman, 1988) in this sense: viewers enter into new worlds through dramatic entertainment. The presence of brands within these exciting and aspirational worlds means that the consumer can connect with that world in his or her daily life long after his or her experience of the movie or show has ended.

The *informational aspect* refers to the ability of product placement to provide consumers with information about branded products. Unlike traditional advertising, product placement is mostly indirect and is not designed to offer its audiences factual information. It can, however, demonstrate how a brand is deployed within a given a social practice. For example, its use by the characters can signify friendship (if, say, one buys the other a branded beer) hostility (if one shoots the other with a known brand of pistol), or expertise (if one uses a brand to signify in-group knowledge). The *executional aspect* refers to the importance of likeability and memorability of the corresponding experience. This refers to the congruence of the placement with the plot and characters. As we have noted above, research has shown that incongruent placements can increase recall but are often considered to be irritating and un-cool, and so may reflect negatively on the brand.

We feel that Russell's (1998) helpful conceptualisation of the engagement between product placement exposure and consumer experience as a potentially transformational experience increases understanding. However, it is speculative and broad and requires further elaboration and grounding in experientially derived data. It is intuitively plausible that entertainment (and indeed brands) transforms experience. What we do not know is how this process occurs through entertainment marketing in different contexts and among different consumer cultures.

Existential/phenomenology, consumption and identity.

Existential phenomenology offers some useful concepts for understanding the experience of consumers in engagement with entertainment marketing. Put simply, such research would seek to understand how consumers' draw meaning from (and project meaning onto) entertainment marketing incidents and how they then integrate these meanings into their lived experience to reinforce or construct their self concept. Existential phenomenology in consumer research (Thompson et al, 1989) is influenced by phenomenological philosophy and its adaptation to social research (Gurswitch, 1974). Existentialism (Sartre, 1943, 1946) and humanism (Hirschman, 1986) have also proved highly influential. Phenomenological philosophy sought to apprehend direct experience unmediated by intellectual structures. Later adaptations of phenomenology drew on humanistic principles to emphasise the human search for authenticity and its expression through reflective, personal, subjective experience. Existentialism is broadly the study of being and existence; existentialist writers have emphasized our lived sense of mortality, autonomy and freedom. Fromm (1941) wrote of a 'flight from freedom' in

which we fail to grasp our own self-determinism and, instead, turn to displacement activities (such as consumption) so as not to have to face the agonising existential choices with which we could claim the freedom which we cannot face.

As Elliott (1997) has averred, the meanings of consumer goods are grounded in social practice (citing Douglas and Isherwood, 1978). The special quality of entertainment marketing is that it portrays brand consumption within a dramatic context that is ostensibly a 'real' part of the consumers' daily mediated experience. Many contemporary consumers enjoy mediated entertainment such as TV drama, movies and video/computer games every day as an intimate part of their lives. The engagement with entertainment entails particular social practices that are loaded with significance. Watching TV with friends, going to music performances and dancing in the crowd with thousands of other fans, switching on the same TV soap opera or radio show at the same time every day for decades, fulfilling fantasies of heroism and triumph in PC or video games, all these activities are deeply engaging and resonant with meaning. In particular, they form an intimate and enduring aspect of being 'you'. In other words, our entertainment consumption preferences, the music we like, the movies we watch, the video games we play, are powerful ways of producing our sense of social identity (Goulding and Shankar, 2004; Markus and Nurius, 1986; cited in Elliott, 1997). The availability of brand consumption choices helps to solve what has been characterized as the 'postmodern' dilemma of fragmented identity (Gergen, 1991). Brands offer a symbolic resource for the dialectical production of identity through the reconciliation of self image with group image (Jenkins, 2004, Elliott and Watanasuwan, 1998). As practitioners realise, when brands are subsumed within entertainment experiences, the brand that is featured and the brand that is the entertainment mutually reinforce each other to provide a powerfully resonant discursive resource for identity-formation.

As suggested by Bulmer and Oliver (2004), consumers do not only buy products: they buy the lifestyles, stories, experiences and emotions that products convey. Consumption can be conceived as a wide range of activities and states of being encompassing leisure activities, aesthetics, symbolic meanings, variety seeking, hedonic responses, daydreaming, creativity, emotions and artistic endeavours – collectively these can be categorised under the "experiential perspective of consumption" (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Self-concept is an important feature of experiential consumption since it reflects our subjective beliefs about our own attributes (Solomon et al, 2002) that are formed from and played out in our experiential reality. One way of expressing (or 'playing out') our own sense of self-concept is through identification with particular groups and norms of consumption practice. For example, the wine brand Jacob's Creek has sponsored the TV show Friends, so consumers who feel affection for the characters and longing for the lifestyle portrayed in Friends might consume the brand as a proxy to symbolically signify their sense of self concept.

In entertainment marketing, consumers engage with the brand not in the obviously contrived setting of an advertisement but in a far more powerfully suggestive context in an entertainment setting which itself has been chosen for viewing because it concords with the viewer's self concept. Consumption is a major site within which consumers negotiate dilemmas of identity: the questions 'who am I and how can I represent my identity in a way which others will recognise ?' is resolved into the question 'what shall I consume?'. In an entertainment marketing context the brand receives a double endorsement as the authentic choice of a pre-determined target group. By implication, any new viewers who wish to align their sense of self with the values and attributes of

the social group portrayed in the entertainment are also invited to share in the authenticity of this particular brand choice.

Product placement is an ideal vehicle for suggesting new associations between self-concept and consumption practices. Product placement potentially carries far greater resonance than advertising because the placement occurs within a dramatically charged setting (in plot, scene, titles or script) with which viewers may strongly identify, as with a favourite TV show or movie. Movie and TV stars are closely identified with the brand (though not in an obviously contrived and insincere 'celebrity endorsement') to imply that it is a natural part of their life and, moreover, to signal that the brand satisfies the consumption code (Cherrier and Murray, 2004) for membership of the consumer group represented by the actors. In this way product placement and its variants may act as a powerfully suggestive device of targeting, locating particular brands within a dramatic setting in which membership of a social group is implied and portrayed.

Research Implications

We suggest, then, that understanding of the emerging area of entertainment marketing can be enhanced by recourse to the existential/phenomenological research traditions. These approaches are needed in order to capture the distinctive quality of entertainment marketing, namely, that is blurs the cognitive separation between entertainment and persuasive promotion. We feel that these qualitative traditions of research can potentially provide fertile new directions for the area because of their ability to capture the integrity of consumer experience in holistic, contextually flexible and theoretically novel ways.

We suggest that three key, overlapping experiential research areas may be useful as thematic foci for future experiential research in this area. These are 1) Brand representation 2) Consumer experience and 3) Consumer identification.

Brand representation

Representation has been a significant area of discussion in qualitative consumer research (e.g. see the 2003 *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, special issue on representation in consumer research). Such debates focus on the integrity of the ways in which consumer research represents the quality of consumer experience in given contexts. Brands, in turn, can be seen as cultural representations (Holt, 2004, O'Reilly, 2005) aligned or associated with certain sets of implied values and qualities. Brand communications planners are themselves concerned with discovering the nuanced meanings that occur within different kinds of brand representation in entertainment marketing vehicles. The dramatic context for brand exposure in a movie, soap opera or hip-op lyric has many possible dimensions: for example, how is the brand being used as a social resource? What kind of social practice is the brand being used to portray? To ascertain this is it necessary to consider such matters as the camera angle and cinematography in the relevant scene(s), the scripted context of brand portrayal, the type of character who is interacting with the brand (age, sex, ethnicity, personality), the gaze and interpersonal relation of the other characters in the scene, the set, props, use of color, music, the juxtaposition of the scene within a sequence of scenes (what came before, after?), the time of broadcast scheduling and the age classification of the entertainment. All these factors (and no doubt others) locate the

brand within a given dramatic context, and any or all of these might be influential in casting the brand in a particular light. In order to understand how these elements might converge in a given identity for the brand in the context of an entertainment vehicle, the consumer experience must be understood.

Brand representation is not given or univocal: like identity, it is dialectical (Holt, 2002) and emerges within a given experiential context. There is, therefore, a need for studies which use qualitative methods to elaborate on specific, culturally contextualized examples of entertainment marketing as a regularly experienced cultural phenomenon.

Consumer experience

All the contextual elements that color the dramatic representation of the brand are subject to one constant: the subjective interpretation of each viewer. This interpretation may not be uni-dimensional. During the course of a focus group discussion or depth interview a single research participant may offer a number of differing or alternative versions of a perceived phenomenon. This does not necessarily imply that the number of possible interpretations is infinite. The issue for researchers is to access the subjective interpretations of consumers within particular sub-sets of entertainment marketing consumer. So, for example, young, educated consumers who watch the re-runs of US TV show 'Friends' might form relatively consistent interpretations of the brand identity of Jacob's Creek wine, as noted above one of the brands that has been featured in a non-integrated explicit brand placement within the show. Clearly, the interpretations need not be relatively consistent among all audiences, but given that TV shows or other entertainment vehicles are usually as careful about their brand positioning as any other market offering it is likely that such consumers constitute an interpretive community and share some common ideas, attitudes, demographic or lifestyle characteristics. Nevertheless, it remains important to understand the differing kinds of interpretive engagement consumers have with different media (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997).

Accessing the subjective experience of consumers requires research methods that are typical of the experiential consumer research field (see Hirschman 1986, Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), such as ethnography, phenomenological interviews, depth interviews, focus groups, auto-ethnography and narrative analysis, projective techniques and other theoretically informed qualitative data gathering approaches.

Consumer identification

The subjective interpretations consumer/viewers bring to the entertainment marketing experiences they encounter are one thing: what they actively do with these interpretations may be another. As Ritson and Elliott (1999) have shown, consumers actively reinterpret the symbols and meanings of advertising and use them in their strategies of social positioning and identity formation in ways which are not connected at all to purchasing behaviour. In other words, as we have noted, brands are used as a cultural resource. Just what implications are evident within entertainment marketing for this process of re-interpretation and identification? It seems plausible that entertainment marketing contexts can enrich the possibilities for creative engagement with brands, given that there is a greater variety of dramatic context available for brand exposure that there are in conventional 20-second advertising slots. The research question, therefore,

is not what an entertainment marketing incident does for the brand, but what it means for the consumer, because the former is predicated on the latter. That is, what it does for the brand is to suggest meanings that interest consumers enough to draw them into the cultural space shared by brand and consumer.

The ways that we see ourselves, our sense of social identity, and the ways in which we seek to express and validate this sense of identity, are highly personal, malleable and variable, and may not be entirely transparent even to ourselves. Our identity is intimately connected with our subjective experience, both framing and forming it. Experientially-focused qualitative research methods, imaginatively deployed, would seem to be the appropriate way to delve into this area for insights concerning its relation with entertainment marketing. Entertainment marketing incidents occupy an intimate place in consumer experience, perhaps somewhat analogous to what Bordieu (1993) referred to in the context of working social practices as 'habitus'. The elements of the consumer's habitus, their complex of practices and assumptions within their role in a complex of social relations cannot easily be delineated without delving into the consumer's experiential world as he or she experiences it. To the extent that the consumer habitus is orientated through cultural symbols and practices, it can be seen as a site of interest to entertainment marketing researchers who want to understand the role their practices play in give consumer cultural contexts.

Concluding comments

In this paper we have suggested that 'entertainment marketing' is a useful label for an emerging field of marketing communication which dissolves the cognitive boundary between promotion and entertainment. We have referred to distinct fields of research, focusing mainly on previous research into product placement as a variation of sponsorship, to suggest that new theoretical conceptualizations are required. Specifically, while previous studies have generated robust insights, there has been a relative lack of studies which focused on how entertainment marketing techniques interpolate the consumer's phenomenologically experienced world. We have referred to well-established positions in consumer research and consumer culture theory to elaborate on the culturally constituted character of brands and their importance in the dialectical process of consumer identity formation. We have suggested that this emphasis on experiential research is not only of theoretical interest but, significantly, reflects a major turn in global marketing communications practice towards socially contextualized experiential research that is driving pragmatic entertainment marketing-based brand communications solutions. We conclude by suggesting three major thematic foci for a nascent experiential research agenda for the rapidly evolving field of entertainment marketing communication.

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