

# The Evolution of Product Placements in Hollywood Cinema: Embedding High-Involvement “Heroic” Brand Images

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**SUMMARY.** This content analysis of the 15 top-grossing motion pictures of 1977, 1987, and 1997 uncovered 546 product placements present in fully one quarter (24%) of the total running time of the 45 movies. Product leaders were automobiles (21% of all placements), beer (14%), and soda (11%), with Coca-Cola the overall brand leader. Full-display appearances remained dominant throughout. Most appearances were brief; however, “key” placements—lengthier showcases featuring brands in central heroic roles and in idealized images resembling TV commercials—increased over the 20-year period. Other related notable changes were increases in high-involvement placements (89%), implied endorse-

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ment placements (83%) (coupled with a 9% rise in “verbal/hands mentions,” the most valued placement), and “mentioned” placements (75%) (similarly coupled with a 9% rise in “used” placements), and the number of brands placed (32%) along with decreases in liquor placements (60%), association with minor characters (40%) and non-stars (36%), and both “signage” (24%) and “clutter” (20%) placements, the least valued. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Brand names, brand placement, cinema, Hollywood, marketing, motion pictures, movie production, product placement, promotion

## INTRODUCTION

### *The History of Product Placement in Movies*

The history of Hollywood is a tale of the collision of art and commerce (Puttnam and Watson, 1998). Weisberg (1985) suggested that product placement—the practice of purposely placing brand-name products in the context of feature films—is Hollywood’s latest and sometimes stormiest marriage between these competing cinematic interests.

Motion picture studios have been using marketers’ products and advertisements as props in their films for decades (Magiera, 1990b; Turcotte, 1995). Rothenberg (1991) offered evidence that motion picture studios used product placement before the First World War. However, the practice intensified during the 1930s, when studios slowly advanced the idea of promoting products in movies by sending marketers shot-by-shot breakdowns of scripts with promotional opportunities clearly indicated to marketers.

When undershirt sales plummeted nationwide after matinee idol Clark Gable took off a dress shirt and exposed his bare hairy chest on screen in *It Happened One Night* (1934), corporate America took notice (Baird, 1997; Caro, 1996). By 1939, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer had become the first studio in history to open a placement office (Rothenberg, 1991), and Walt Disney Studios began selling plates and glassware depicting images from its popular films (“Tie-in Advertising,” 1951). In the first

documented instance of a movie star's plugging a brand-name product in a Hollywood film, movie audiences watched Joan Crawford slug Jack Daniels liquor in the Warner Brothers drama, *Mildred Pierce* (1945) (Nebenzahl and Secunda, 1993).

Product placement expanded slowly until the late-1960s, when a few movie directors began emphasizing reality-based themes in their films and, accordingly, infusing them with actual brand label products and advertising images (Weisberg, 1985). Driven by their own economic considerations, movie executives latched onto this directorial trend. While studio bosses had long recognized product placement as a means of subsidizing the enormous production and advertising costs incurred when making and marketing their movies, the studios' acute financial struggles in the early 1970s led to an increased emphasis on the device as a revenue source. Faced with diminishing ticket sales and skyrocketing film budgets, movie executives came to rely on product placement as a means of support for their beleaguered budgets (Magiera, 1990a).

But it was not until E.T. gobbled up Reeses Pieces in Steven Spielberg's 1982 movie—a placement credited with causing sales of the candy to leap 65% in three months—that marketers, now fully understanding product placements' commercial impact, began actively seeking their own product placements (Caro, 1996). Likewise, emboldened by this obvious proof of product placements' effectiveness at generating sales, Hollywood began courting movie placement deals with this waiting line of corporate marketer suitors.

### ***The Evolution and Influence of the Practice***

As the interdependence between studio executives seeking cost and advertising support and corporate marketers desiring product exposure has increased, the practice of product placement has evolved. What was once a Hollywood-based cottage industry has become a multi-million dollar enterprise (Caro, 1996). In 1998, the North American theater audience for Hollywood movies was almost 1.5 billion filmgoers; the international audience was twice that (Marshall, 1998; "Primetime," 1999). This massive, worldwide audience makes Hollywood an excellent communication medium and a very powerful consumer influence. Marshall (1998) estimated that approximately 1,000 brand marketers utilized product placement as part of their overall advertising mix.

Acknowledging the vast influence of movies on audiences, movie critics and consumer advocates alike have warned of the insidious nature of product placement (Miller, 1990) (see interview with Mark Crispin

Miller in this volume). In fact, opponents of product placements have gone so far as to ask for federal regulation of the practice (Magiera and Colford, 1991) (see interview with Michael Jacobson in this volume).

The practices and underlying beliefs of professionals working with brand placements have only been reported in a limited fashion by both the trade and popular press (Karrh, 1994). Because most of the information regarding marketers' use of product placement remains proprietary. In their content analysis of the 25 top-grossing films of 1991, Sapolsky and Kinney (1994) documented the amounts and kinds of nationally recognized brands embedded in motion pictures. Partially replicating the work of Sapolsky and Kinney (1994), the current study tracked the evolution of brand placement in Hollywood motion pictures from 1977 to 1997.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The research reported here asked the question: *How has product placement in the 15 top-grossing motion pictures of the year evolved from 1977 to 1987 to 1997?*

Eleven sub-questions focused the study:

1. Has the number of appearances of product placements changed from 1977 to 1997?
2. Has the length of appearance of product placements changed from 1977 to 1997?
3. Has the dominant type of product appearing in a product placement changed from 1977 to 1997?
4. Has the number of brands changed from 1977 to 1997?
5. Has the level of plot involvement (high or low) of product placements changed from 1977 to 1997?
6. Has the primary association with character (major character[s], minor character[s], or equal) of product placements changed from 1977 to 1997?
7. Has the primary association with star (star[s], non-star[s], or equal) of product placement changed from 1977 to 1997?
8. Has the theatrical context (positive, negative, mixed, or neutral) of scenes containing product placements changed from 1977 to 1997?
9. Has the level of display (full or partial) of product placements changed from 1977 to 1997?

10. Has the type (seen, mentioned, or used) of product placements changed from 1977 to 1997?
11. Has the level of value (clutter, signage, implied endorsement, or verbal or hands mention) of product placements changed from 1977 to 1997?

### **METHODOLOGY**

For this trend study, the 15 top-grossing Hollywood-produced motion pictures with nationwide domestic release dates of 1977, 1987, and 1997 (i.e., 45 movies) were selected using the annual wrap-up of the “Weekend Box Office Report” in the motion picture industry trade publication *Variety*. (Four motion pictures released in the last few weeks of 1976 (*A Star is Born*, *King Kong*, *Rocky*, and *Silver Streak*) were included as 1977 motion pictures because their total box office grosses were based primarily on 1977 attendance. For a listing of all 45 motion pictures analyzed for the three years, see Table 1.) All 45 movies were rented and viewed multiple times by the researchers.

The unit of analysis was the individual appearance of a brand (product or service) whether seen, mentioned, or used. Because it was not possible to distinguish intentionality from random inclusion, all brands observed were coded as product placements. An “appearance” was a contiguous product placement with limited interruption throughout a single scene. A product placement might have multiple appearances in a movie.

### **FINDINGS**

The answers to the 11 research sub-questions are presented first, followed by the answer to the overall research question.

#### ***#1. Has the Number of Appearances of Product Placements Changed from 1977 to 1997?***

The number of appearances remained fairly constant from year to year: 182 in 1977, 170 in 1987, 194 in 1997 (see Table 2). (Note: These totals reflect every single separate appearance by any brand; therefore, several individual brands might have multiple appearances.)

TABLE 1. The 15 Top-Grossing Motion Pictures of 1977, 1987, and 1997\*

1.	Star Wars (1977)	\$461.0 million
2.	Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977)	\$128.3 million
3.	Smokey and the Bandit (1977)	\$126.7 million
4.	Rocky (1976)**	\$117.2 million
5.	Saturday Night Fever (1977)	\$94.2 million
6.	The Spy Who Loved Me (1977)	\$46.8 million
7.	In Search of Noah's Ark (1977)	\$55.7 million
8.	Annie Hall (1977)	\$39.2 million
9.	Across the Great Divide (1977)	\$18.8 million
10.	For the Love of Benji (1977)	\$17.7 million
11.	Kingdom of the Spiders (1977)	\$17.0 million
12.	Looking For Mr. Goodbar (1977)	\$16.9 million
13.	Silver Streak (1976)**	\$89.2 million
14.	A Star is Born (1976)**	\$104.6 million
15.	King Kong (1976)**	\$89.7 million
1.	Three Men and a Baby (1987)	\$167.8 million
2.	Fatal Attraction (1987)	\$156.6 million
3.	Beverly Hills Cop II (1987)	\$153.7 million
4.	Good Morning Vietnam (1987)	\$123.9 million
5.	Moonstruck (1987)	\$80.6 million
6.	The Untouchables (1987)	\$76.3 million
7.	The Secret of My Success (1987)	\$67.0 million
8.	Stakeout (1987)	\$65.7 million
9.	Lethal Weapon (1987)	\$65.2 million
10.	Dirty Dancing (1987)	\$63.9 million
11.	The Witches of Eastwick (1987)	\$63.8 million
12.	Predator (1987)	\$59.7 million
13.	Throw Mama from the Train (1987)	\$57.9 million
14.	Dragnet (1987)	\$57.4 million
15.	The Living Daylights (1987)	\$51.2 million
1.	Titanic (1997)	\$600.8 million
2.	Men in Black (1997)	\$250.1 million
3.	The Lost World: Jurassic Park (1997)	\$229.1 million
4.	Liar Liar (1997)	\$181.4 million
5.	Air Force One (1997)	\$172.7 million
6.	As Good as it Gets (1997)	\$147.7 million
7.	Good Will Hunting (1997)	\$138.4 million
8.	My Best Friend's Wedding (1997)	\$126.8 million
9.	Tomorrow Never Dies (1997)	\$125.3 million
10.	Face/Off (1997)	\$112.3 million
11.	Batman and Robin (1997)	\$107.3 million
12.	George of the Jungle (1997)	\$105.3 million
13.	Scream 2 (1997)	\$101.4 million
14.	Con Air (1997)	\$101.1 million
15.	Contact (1997)	\$100.9 million

\*according to *Variety's Weekend Box Office Report*

\*\*released in the last few weeks of 1976 but included as 1977 motion pictures because their total box office grosses were based primarily on 1977 attendance

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TABLE 2. Product Placement Appearances in the 15 Top-Grossing Motion Pictures of 1977, 1987, and 1997

Year	Appearances
1977	182
1987	170
1997	194
TOTAL	546
MEAN	182

## ***#2. Has the Length of Appearance of Product Placements Changed from 1977 to 1997?***

The average total length of appearance per movie diminished slightly from 1977 (28.7 minutes) to 1997 (26.8 minutes) (see Table 3). Although accurate, these averages ultimately fail to effectively reflect how the length of product appearances has changed over time due to the influence of longer product appearances in the analysis. For example, during the climax of the movie *Face/Off* (1997), Nicholas Cage and John Travolta each commanded a Seacraft speedboat in a water chase scene lasting 13.3 minutes, skewing the average appearance length for *Face/Off*, whose other 17 appearances averaged only 5 seconds each. The Seacraft plug was emblematic of the failure of the means method to render a reliable average for appearance length over time.

*Proportional analysis.* For this reason, a proportional analysis of on-screen appearances to movie length was conducted, yielding the following: 25% in 1977, 25% in 1987, 22% in 1997; thus, for all three years, on-screen placements accounted for approximately one quarter of the length of all movies. That the percentage of on-screen time of appearances to movie length was constant is significant because the average movie length increased (1977 [116 minutes], 1987 [110 minutes], and 1997 [124 minutes]) while the number of appearances remained steady during that same period (1977 [182], 1987 [170], and 1997 [194]). On average, the top 15 movies of 1997 were 14 minutes longer than in 1987, and 8 minutes longer than in 1977. With the number of appearances approximately equal, this comparison indicates an increase in length of appearance from 1977 to 1997. Overall, the range for length of appearances was .04 (minutes) to 17.9 (minutes). In 1977 the range was .01 (minutes) to 18.6 (minutes), in 1987 .06 (minutes) to 12.9 (minutes), and in 1997 .06 (minutes) to 22.1 (minutes).

TABLE 3. Length of Appearance of Product Placements in the 15 Top-Grossing Motion Pictures of 1977, 1987, and 1997

	1977	1987	1997	Mean
Average length of movie (minutes)	116	110	124	117
Average length of appearance per movie (minutes)	28.7	27.9	26.8	27.8
Appearance/movie length	25%	25%	22%	24%
Length of appearance (range in minutes)	.01-18.6	.06-12.9	.06-22.1	.04-17.9
Number of Appearances (N)	182	170	194	182

*“Key” placements.* Although many of the appearances analyzed by the study remained brief throughout the 20-year period, the study identified a trend towards numerous “key” placements with an increasing length that have more in common with television commercials than traditional cinematic narratives. These key placements—some of them lasting as long as 10 minutes or more—often entailed an extended series of shots that featured the brand in an idealized display frequently characterized by rapid shifts in perspective and lightning-quick editing. Notable among them was a scene in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), in which Pierce Brosnan, as Agent 007, escapes from thugs with the help of a BMW motorcycle.

### ***#3. Has the Dominant Type of Product Changed from 1977 to 1997?***

Automobiles were the most dominant type of product appearing during each year studied (see Table 4). Of the 546 product appearances observed, 21% (104) featured automobiles, 14% (73) featured beer, and 11% (60) featured soda. Combined, these three categories alone accounted for 49% (182) of all product appearances in 1977, 44% (170) in 1987, and 38% (194) in 1997. Liquor appearances, the fourth most frequently observed type of product overall (7%), decreased from 8% (15) of all product appearances in 1977 and 10% (17) in 1987 to just 3% (6) in 1997.

*Automobiles as heroes.* Automobile appearances represented the most egregious examples of overused commercial film techniques—perhaps related to the extensive reliance on auto placements by many studios because of the expense of the vehicles. This study found it common for a filmmaker to zoom in on the auto’s brand-name, thereby connoting an auto placement deal. In 1977’s *For the Love of Benji*, a low-budget movie that relied heavily on placements, director Joe Camp used this



TABLE 4. Ten Most Dominant Product Types Appearing in the 15 Top-Grossing Motion Pictures of 1977, 1987, and 1997

1977	n	%	1987	n	%	1997	n	%
Auto	30	16%	Auto	39	23%	Auto	35	18%
Beer	30	16%	Soda	19	11%	Beer	26	13%
Soda	29	15%	Beer	17	10%	Soda	12	6%
Liquor	15	8%	Liquor	17	10%	Cable Co.	9	5%
Truck	7	4%	Cigarettes	6	4%	Television	7	4%
Airline	6	3%	Detergent	6	4%	Sunglasses	6	3%
Magazine	6	3%	Diapers	5	3%	Cigarettes	6	3%
Gas Co.	5	3%	Cham- pagne	5	3%	Liquor	6	3%
Restaurant	5	3%	Television	3	2%	Cellphone	5	3%
Aspirin	4	2%	Motorcycle	3	2%	SUV	5	3%
TOTAL	137	75%	TOTAL	120	71%	TOTAL	117	60%
	(N = 182)			(N = 170)			(N = 194)	

commonly observed technique to make sure audiences knew which auto maker provided the car for his film. *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977) also had extensive product placements, but what is interesting to note about that paean to Coors beer and long-haul trucking is that although Burt Reynold's Trans Am was integral to the narrative and featured throughout the movie, this placement did not engender the sense of intrusiveness observed in later movies like *Jurassic Park*, *The Lost World* (1997), whose Mercedes-Benz SUV placement exudes a sense of slick commercialism: The camera lingers so lovingly on a pair of Benz SUVs that it is clear this movie is being used as a showcase for the autos. In one scene, the newly developed Mercedes SUVs are filmed as if they were movie star heroes, riding out of the jungle and across the verdant plain of a fictional tropic isle. In another scene, the Benz SUV, along with its state-of-the-art push-button four-wheel-drive capability, saves Jeff Goldblum and Julianne Moore from plunging over a 500-foot cliff. In fact, Daimler Benz had mounted a much-publicized multi-million dollar co-promotional ad campaign prior to the movie's release, supporting the Spielberg dino-epic and hailing the German carmaker's entry into the lucrative SUV market (Jensen, 1997).

*Alcohol's disappearance.* The product types featured in the 15 top-grossing movies from 1977 to 1997 also provided a reliable reflection of changing societal conventions of their eras—for example, the major decrease in the number of liquor placements from 1977 (15) to 1997 (6).

In 1977's *A Star is Born*, Kris Kristofferson's randy fondness for liquor was fully portrayed; however, 20 years later, that kind of blatant alcoholic consumption did not appear in any of the 15 top movies of the year. Nevertheless, beer placements were the second most frequent product type from 1977 to 1997.

#### ***#4. Has the Number of Brands Changed from 1977 to 1997?***

As expected, the study found an increase in the number of individual brands embedded in Hollywood's 15 most popular films during 1977, 1987, and 1997 (see Table 5). The use of individual brands increased 12% from 1977 (117) to 1987 (131), and 18% from 1987 (131) to 1997 (154), with an overall increase of 32% in the number of individual brands from 1977 (117) to 1997 (154).

*Coke is it.* Coca-Cola was by far the most frequently observed brand-name overall with 44 appearances in a total of 20 motion pictures over the 20-year time span (see Table 6). Coca-Cola (Coke and Diet Coke) was the most frequently observed brand in 1977 (25 appearances in 8 movies) and 1987 (15 appearances in 8 movies) but was ranked only eighth in 1997 (4 appearances in 3 movies), when several other brands garnered more screen time: Mercedes-Benz (9 appearances in 4 movies), CNN (9 appearances in 4 movies), Pepsi-Cola (8 appearances in 2 movies), Chevrolet (7 appearances in 6 movies), BMW (6 appearances in 3 movies), and Marlboro (5 appearances in 3 movies).

The second most frequently observed brand overall was Mercedes-Benz with 18 appearances in 9 motion pictures.

#### ***#5. Has the Level of Plot Involvement (High or Low) of Product Placements Changed from 1977 to 1997?***

In both 1977 and 1987, the ratio of placements with low-level to high-level plot involvement was approximately 4:1 (see Table 7). How-

TABLE 5. Brand Appearances in the 15 Top-Grossing Motion Pictures of 1977, 1987, and 1997

Year	Brands
1977	117
1987	131
1997	154
MEAN	134

TABLE 6. Ten Most Dominant Brands Appearing in the 15 Top-Grossing Motion Pictures of 1977, 1987, and 1997

Brand	Number of Appearances	Number of Movies
Coke	44	20
Mercedes	18	9
Miller	17	8
Chevy	15	10
Pepsi-Cola	13	5
Schlitz	12	3
BMW	10	7
Jack Daniels	10	4
Cadillac	9	5
CNN	9	4

ever, this proportion changed dramatically in 1997 to 2:1, when the amount of high-involvement placements increased to 70 (36%), effectively doubling those of 1977 (37, or 20%) and 1987 (36, or 21%), whereas the number of low-involvement placements decreased to 124 (64%), compared with 1977's 145 (80%) and 1987's 134 (79%). This recent trend toward placements with more high-involvement with plot also caused the overall low-to-high ratio to drop to 3:1 (74%:26%).

*James Bond never dies.* The exemplar for this new trend was the 1997 James Bond film, *Tomorrow Never Dies*, a movie with more than 22 minutes' worth of on-screen product appearances. In addition to the sheer number of multi-million dollar placements in this film, its producers also included numerous scenes in which Pierce Brosnan's 007 must save the day with the help of several brand-name products, including an Ericsson cellular phone used as a remote control for a car and a thumb-print imager, an Omega watch used to foil a rocket launch, a BMW 750 used by Bond to escape his enemies by catapulting off a five-story parking garage, and a BMW motorcycle used by 007 to literally ride over the whirling blades of a chasing helicopter. For good measure the producers also included plugs for Avis, Heineken, Smirnoff, and Range Rover.

**#6. Has the Primary Association with Character (Major Character[s], Minor Character[s], or Equal) of Product Placements Changed from 1977 to 1997?**

A large majority of product placements were associated with major character(s) (more than 50% association with character integral to plot)

TABLE 7. Level of Plot Involvement of Product Placements in the 15 Top-Grossing Motion Pictures of 1977, 1987, and 1997

	1977		1987		1997		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
High	37	20%	36	21%	70	36%	143	26%
Low	145	80%	134	79%	124	64%	403	74%
TOTAL	182		170		194		546	

compared to other associations in all three years: 1977 (98, or 54%), 1987 (110, or 65%), and 1997 (97, or 50%) (see Table 8). While individual placements associated equally with major and minor characters increased over the 20-year period, association with minor character(s) clearly decreased.

***#7. Has the Primary Association with Star (Star[s], Non-Star[s], or Equal) of Product Placements Changed from 1977 to 1997?***

Product placements primarily associated with “star(s)” (more than 50% association with an actor named in the film’s opening credits as having a starring role) were a clear majority of those found in 1977 (84, or 46%) and 1987 (95, or 56%); however, this trend changed in 1997 when placements with “equal” association with star(s)/non-star(s) (83, or 43%) gained a slight edge over scenes with “star(s)” only (79, or 41%) (see Table 9). Most tellingly, scenes with placements associated only with “non-star(s)” decreased greatly from 1977 (50, or 27%) to 1987 (30, or 18%) and 1997 (32, or 16%).

The study uncovered a veritable *Who’s Who* listing of Hollywood actors who appeared in movies plugging products. Even “auteur” Woody Allen and soon-to-be Oscar-winner Diane Keaton appeared wielding Dunlop tennis racquets in several scenes in the 1977 movie *Annie Hall*.

***#8. Has the Theatrical Context (Positive, Negative, Mixed, or Neutral) of Scenes Containing Product Placements Changed from 1977 to 1997?***

Surprisingly, product placements appeared not only in scenes with a “positive” theatrical context but also in “negative,” “mixed,” or “neu-

TABLE 8. Association with Character of Product Placements in the 15 Top-Grossing Motion Pictures of 1977, 1987, and 1997

	1977		1987		1997		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Major	98	54%	110	65%	97	50%	305	56%
Equal	42	23%	40	23%	72	37%	154	28%
Minor	42	23%	20	12%	25	13%	87	16%
TOTAL	182		170		194		546	

TABLE 9. Association with Star Status of Product Placements in the 15 Top-Grossing Motion Pictures of 1977, 1987, and 1997

	1977		1987		1997		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Star	84	46%	95	56%	79	41%	258	46%
Equal	48	26%	45	26%	83	43%	176	32%
Non-Star	50	27%	30	18%	32	16%	112	21%
TOTAL	182		170		194		546	

tral” contexts (see Table 10). The study found an increase in “mixed” context placements from 1977 (42, or 23%) to 1987 (50, or 29%) and even more to 1997 (63, or 33%). In fact, scenes with “negative” contexts were the most frequent type in 1977 (50, or 27%) and second in both 1987 (46, or 27%) and 1997 (60, or 31%). “Neutral” context placements experienced a major decrease in 1997 (20, or 10%) compared to 1987 (30, or 18%) and 1977 (43, or 24%).

*Negative placements.* One of the most telling examples of marketers’ indifference to the nature of a scene context is 1997’s *Scream 2*, a film about a pair of psychotics busy murdering nearly a dozen small-town college students. This slasher film contained many prominent placements that were snappily interwoven with extremely violent and gory scenes of murder and mayhem. The Pepsi-Cola company evidently had few qualms about having its brands in *Scream 2*, a movie literally awash in Pepsi and Diet Pepsi images, including one scene in a cafeteria with dozens of Pepsi-Cola cans on every table.

Director John Woo’s 1997 action thriller, *Face/Off*, is another movie with numerous product placements spread among its many negative and

TABLE 10. Theatrical Context of Product Placements in the 15 Top-Grossing Motion Pictures of 1977, 1987, and 1997

	1977		1987		1997		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Positive	47	26%	44	26%	51	26%	142	26%
Negative	50	27%	46	27%	60	31%	156	28%
Mixed	42	23%	50	29%	63	33%	155	28%
Neutral	43	24%	30	18%	20	10%	93	18%
TOTAL	182		170		194		546	

disturbing scenes, including depictions of a vicious prison beating and mass murder. Nevertheless, the movie attracted several marketers with prominent product placement appearances, including Chiclet's chewing gum as bad-guy Cage's gum of choice.

#### ***#9. Has the Level of Display (Full or Partial) of Product Placements Changed from 1977 to 1997?***

In all three years, "full" level of display was used in approximately 60% of the 546 product placements in the 45 movies, as compared with 40% for "partial" placements (see Table 11).

*Techniques.* Even more important, significant qualitative changes occurred in the way these placements were filmed. Over time, an increased use of film techniques that emphasize the product to the detriment of the other movie elements can be observed. Among the most extreme examples of this phenomenon is a coffee placement in the movie, *George of the Jungle* (1997). The director simply pasted an actual television commercial as part of the film's narrative—filling the movie screen with the brand's image accompanied by a rousing corporate jingle. This technique occurred in several other motion pictures with the same effect.

Many of the motion pictures analyzed also contained product appearances in which their directors' blatant use of extreme close-ups to emphasize the product's brand label was obtrusive. Similarly, panning shots—with camera lenses trained on the brand—lingered ever so briefly before cutting away to other action, as in the Tag Heuer watch placement in *Scream 2* (1997).

Yet another method, also obviously borrowed from television commercials, framed a brand's image to the exclusion of all other shot ele-

TABLE 11. Level of Display of Product Placements in the 15 Top-Grossing Motion Pictures of 1977, 1987, and 1997

	1977		1987		1997		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Full	108	59%	97	57%	118	61%	323	59%
Partial	74	41%	73	43%	76	39%	223	41%
TOTAL	182		170		194		546	

ments, ensuring that the placement received the full attention of the movie audience, such as a scene from 1977's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* that featured McDonald's golden arches or the one from *Dragnet* (1987) that featured a beer truck that filled the entire movie screen with the Miller Genuine Draft brand.

#### ***#10. Has the Type (Seen, Mentioned, or Used) of Product Placements Changed from 1977 to 1997?***

The most frequently observed type of product placement in all three years was the so-called "seen" placement, which accounted for 50% (273) of all appearances (see Table 12). However, placements in this category decreased slightly (6%) with time, whereas "used" placements (204, or 37%), which ranked second, increased 9% over the 20-year period, and "mentioned" placements (69, or 13%)—the least frequently used overall—increased the most dramatically: 75%. Per Turcotte (1995): "Used" is any touching or interaction of a brand by a character; "Mentioned" is any appearance of a brand, including off-screen narration; and "Seen" is any visual appearance of a brand. For the current study, if a brand placement met more than one condition, it was coded according to the highest level (i.e., most valuable) of an accepted hierarchy of value established by the placement industry: A usage placement is more valuable than a mentioned placement, which is more valuable than a seen placement ("Let Us Put," 1996).

*"Mentioned."* A scene in *Throw Mama from the Train* (1987) provides an example of just how gratuitous a "mentioned" product placement can be. Toward the end of the film, Billy Crystal asks Danny DeVito if there is anything he wants. From out of nowhere, the obvious plug is visited on the audience when the diminutive DeVito utters, "Get me a Chunky."

TABLE 12. Type of Product Placements in the 15 Top-Grossing Motion Pictures During 1977, 1987, and 1997

	1977		1987		1997		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Seen	98	54%	83	49%	92	47%	273	50%
Mentioned	16	9%	25	15%	28	14%	69	13%
Used	68	37%	62	36%	74	38%	204	37%
TOTAL	182		170		194		546	

*“Used.”* While the prevalence of placements that are “used” by the actors remained constant from 1977 to 1997, there was also a change in the manner in which they were constructed. When an actor interacted with a brand-name product in a 1997 movie, the director would leave nothing to chance. Rarely would a 1997 appearance with an actor holding a product entail only a wide-angle shot, possibly producing an ambiguous placement that might leave the audience unaware of the brand-name or of the character’s use of it. More often than not, a 1997 “used” appearance would include a tight-angle shot, focusing not on an actor holding the product but on the product being held in an actor’s hand.

***#11. Has the Level of Value (Verbal or Hands Mention, Implied Endorsement, Signage, or Clutter) of Product Placements Changed from 1977 to 1997?***

Of the placements observed, the majority were valued as “verbal/hands mentions” (the highest level of value, per CES): 1977 (70, or 38%), 1987 (58, or 34%), and 1997 (76, or 39%) (see Table 13)—representing an increase of 9% over the 20-year period (and 31% from 1987 to 1997). Product placements valued only as “clutter” were the second most frequently used overall though they dropped 20% over the 20-year period, to third place by 1997. “Implied endorsements,” third most frequently used overall, increased a whopping 83% from 1977 (29, or 16%) to 1987 (40, or 24%) and again to 1997 (53, or 27%), taking a clear second place. “Signage” dropped 24% (to lowest place overall) over the studied period. This was analyzed per the method of rating brand placements as described by Creative Entertainment Service (CES), the recognized authority on post-production product placement analysis (“Let Us Put,” 1996). CES ranks product placements hierarchically from highest to lowest: “Verbal or Hand Mention” is an oral mention or phys-



TABLE 13. Level of Value of Product Placements in the 15 Top-Grossing Motion Pictures of 1977, 1987, and 1997

	1977		1987		1997		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Verb./Hands	70	38%	58	34%	76	39%	204	37%
Imp. Endorse.	29	16%	40	24%	53	27%	122	23%
Signage	33	18%	25	15%	25	13%	83	15%
Clutter	50	27%	47	28%	40	21%	137	25%
TOTAL	182		170		194		546	

ical contact of a brand by an actor or narrator; “Implied Endorsement” is an unseen or unspoken suggestion that a brand that is shown on-screen in close proximity to a character(s) has been or will be used by that character(s); “Signage” is a prominent display of a brand-name in the background of a scene, and “Clutter” is a non-prominent display of a brand in a scene.

***Overall Research Question: How Has Product Placement Advertising in the 15 Top-Grossing Motion Pictures of the Year Evolved from 1977 to 1997?***

This content analysis of the 15 top-grossing motion pictures of 1977, 1987, and 1997 uncovered 546 product placements present in fully one quarter (24%) of the total running time of the 45 movies. Although the actual number of product placement appearances as well as the average length of each (about 28 seconds per appearance) remained fairly constant, the number of individual brands increased dramatically (32%). While the majority of the 546 appearances lasted only 5 seconds or less, many so-called “key” placements actually increased in length over time, so that by 1997 some individual product appearances (“key” placements) lasted more than 10 minutes and one was longer than 20 minutes.

Product leaders in all three years were automobiles (21% of the 546 appearances observed), beer (14%), and soda (11%). Coca-Cola was the most frequently observed brand with 44 appearances in 20 motion pictures. Surprisingly, placements were no more likely to appear in positive contexts than negative contexts.

In addition to the increase in the number of brands, other notable changes from 1977 to 1997 were major increases in high-involvement placements (89%), implied endorsement placements (83%) (coupled with a

9% rise in “verbal/hands mentions,” the most valued placement), and “mentioned” placements (75%) (similarly coupled with a 9% rise in “used” placements), along with decreases in liquor placements (60%) and association with minor characters (40%) and non-stars (36%). “Signage” and “clutter” placements, the least valued, decreased 24% and 20%, respectively. Full-display appearances remained dominant at around 60% in each of the three years.

Even more telling than mere quantitative findings are the related qualitative changes: Brands in longer “key” placements typically were showcased in heroic roles crucial to the plot. Further, these placements were presented in idealized images resembling television commercials, often enjoying use or endorsement by major characters who were also usually the stars of the movies. In some cases, these key placements, which usually filled the screen with purposive zoom-ins and close-ups of the brand, were gratuitous and obtrusive.

## ***CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS***

### ***Implications***

In the three years studied, an astounding one-quarter of the running time in top-grossing Hollywood movies contained some kind of brand message. The startling increase in products other than the three dominant categories (i.e., autos, beer, and soda) may indicate a growing interest among marketers to add product placement advertising into their advertising mixes. (The decrease in the number of liquor placements in 1997, after being the fourth most frequent product type in 1977 and 1987, might be a reflection of the diminishing tolerance for liquor consumption.) This dramatic increase in the number of placed products and brands suggests that the practice of product placement has indeed gained acceptance among brand marketers over this 20-year period. Assuming this is indeed the case, what needs to be determined are the reasons for this growth and whether it can be sustained.

Underlining this acceptance of the practice is one of the study’s surprising findings. The literature suggested that most brand managers would hesitate to affiliate their brand with a negative film message and thus would be less willing to have their product appear in a film with an unsettling or violent storyline or alongside an unsavoury character. (Some product placement deals actually stipulate positive context placements.) However, this study found a prevalence of brand-name prod-

ucts placed in such gory and violent movies as *Face/Off* (1997) and *Scream 2* (1997). Surprisingly, product placements in negative contexts were slightly more prevalent than those in positive contexts, suggesting that what marketer's value most from product placement is the exposure it affords their brands, regardless of the tone. Beginning in the 1980s, when marketers began seeking placements based strictly on a film's likelihood of becoming a box office smash, the storyline has been considered secondary. Aiming to have their brands seen by the millions of teen fans expected to flock to *Scream 2* (1997), brand managers did not seem to mind being associated with a film containing scenes of murderous mayhem. Today's marketers may be operating under the maxim that there is no such thing as "bad publicity."

Regardless of the context, the new role of placed products appears to be set well within measurable parameters. What is most important regarding the evolution of product placement is the increasing number of high-involvement placements found during the 20-year period of the study. These high-involvement appearances nearly doubled from 1977 to 1997, further indicating that product placement has become an integral aspect of making Hollywood movies. A closely related trend—that the majority of all product appearances were associated with major characters and stars, while there was a major decrease in the number of placements associated only with minor characters and non-stars—further documents the full-scale foregrounding of these products. It might be that marketers are insisting on placements associated with a star, even if that star is not alone in the movie frame.

This figurative foregrounding of placed products is literally underscored by the consistent 3:2 ratio of full-to-partial display. Clearly, filmmakers take care to create placements in which their marketing clients' brand labels are not obscured. Again, it is worth noting that the qualitative nature of a so-called full placement has changed from 1977 to 1997. What is noticeable about many full placements is their singular on-screen presence in certain movies. The study found numerous examples of a camera zooming in on a brand label to the point that the entire screen contains the brand image. Viewed on a standard-sized movie theater screen, that image was a 10-foot tall can of soda or beer.

While "seen" placements accounted for half of all the placements in each of the three years, "used" placements were observed in more than one third of all placements during each year, and "mentioned" placements increased 75% over the studied period. Viewed in the context of a movie, "mentioned" placements are singularly obtrusive and distracting. Filmmakers must recognize that inserting a named brand into the

narrative runs the risk of distracting movie audiences. This is not to say that a “mentioned” placement cannot be inventive or entertaining; to the contrary, they can be quite humorous when used by a thoughtful, subtle director. However, most such plugs display neither of these directorial attributes, and, in most cases, having an actor use a brand-name as part of the dialogue provides a lackluster or perhaps even annoying product plug. Moreover, although “seen” placements are, for the most part, subtler than “mentioned” placements, they became increasingly intrusive over the 20-year period of the study. For the most part, the product appearances in 1977 were far more likely to be embedded quickly, without any undue intrusiveness. Conversely, the placement appearances in 1997 were more intrusive and seemingly designed with the sole intent of directing audience attention to the branded products. Likewise, in terms of the CES-rated value of the placements to their marketers, the majority of product placements in this study were the highest-rated “verbal or hands mention.” “Implied endorsements” appearances (ranked second in value by CES) increased greatly, while the lower ranked placements—“signage” and “clutter” appearances—diminished greatly.

A disturbing trend is that film directors have shifted toward using narrative and cinematic techniques that actively and often blatantly highlight the brands featured in their movies. The unmistakable impression after observing the 546 placements in the 45 movies analyzed for this study is that many of the scenes contained in Hollywood’s most popular movies have come to resemble standard television commercials rather than traditional cinematic fare. (The only difference is that the movie versions of these commercials are much longer and the audience is “captive.”) Placed products are now central to the plot (usually as heroes), idealized in visual presentation, and endorsed by the stars who portray the major characters. The dominant type of high-involvement “key” product placement—automobiles—is a prime example of this evolution. The influence of advertising techniques, such as zooming-in or lingering on a brand label to highlight the brands when filming these “key” placements, is obvious and intrusive, particularly when the screen is filled gratuitously with close-ups of them to the exclusion of anything or anyone else. Similarly, the increase in “used” and “mentioned” placement appearances displays a reliance on advertising film techniques by moviemakers. If this phenomenon continues, placement critics might be validated in their long-held argument that the practice has led to an over-commercialization of the cinematic art.

Of course, the increasing symbiotic economic benefits of product placement for brands and studios signal an ongoing demand for more product

placement opportunities. Expecting this to change in the immediate future seems unrealistic. It appears that the Hollywood motion picture industry will continue to expand its use and dependence on product placement advertising as well as on the tie-ins and cross-promotions that are part of this profitable practice. This study revealed that product placement practitioners have evolved specific styles and techniques when embedding brand images into motion pictures, which might lead to their overexposure—resulting in Hollywood motion pictures over-saturated with brand-name images that are all presented in the same manner. The parody presented in *The Truman Show* might become the norm.

### ***Limitations of the Study***

This analysis of product placement advertising in 1977, 1987, and 1997 could be used as a benchmark to predict future trends in the placement industry and their effect on the motion picture industry. This study examined product placements only in movies that ranked among the 15 top-grossing movies of the studied years. Because only one year was used to represent each of the three decades (i.e., a total of three years), the findings must be interpreted cautiously, and no confirmed “trends” can be established. Further research is needed to ascertain whether these three “snapshot” years at 10-year intervals are representative of their entire decade and, therefore, generalizable. Also, because of the proprietary nature of the product placement industry, it is not possible to confirm whether all observed product placements are intentional. Although precise operational definitions guided the coding of most of the categories, a few categories remained nevertheless somewhat subjective; thus, analysis by a different coder might yield different results. At any rate, it must be emphasized that content analysis does not allow the drawing of conclusions about audience impact or resulting consumer behavior.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

Further study in this area should be conducted to examine whether and how product placements in Hollywood motion pictures have changed since 1997. Also, the attitudes of movie audiences towards product placement advertising in motion pictures need to be re-examined using movies released since 1997. Likewise, the effectiveness of product placement advertising regarding audiences’ recall of brand-name products in motion pictures and brand awareness should be re-examined using motion pictures released since 1997.

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