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Junior Mints and Their Bigger Than Bite-Size Role in Complicating Product Placement Assumptions

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“Who’s gonna turn down a Junior Mint? It’s chocolate, it’s peppermint—it’s delicious!” While this may sound like your typical television commercial, you can thank Jerry Seinfeld and his butter fingers for what is actually one of the most renowned lines in television history. As part of a 1993 episode of *Seinfeld*, subsequently known as “The Junior Mint,” these infamous words have certainly gained a bit more attention than the show’s writers had originally bargained for. In fact, those of you who were annoyed by last year’s focus on a McDonald’s McFlurry on NBC’s *30 Rock* may want to take up your beef with *Seinfeld*’s producers for supposedly showing marketers the way to the future (“Brand Practice: Product Integration Is as Old as Hollywood Itself”). Widely recognized as one of the most memorable instances of product placement, “The Junior Mint” may very well seem a bit more like a twenty-minute commercial for the bite-size candy, than a typical episode of the “show about nothing.” But before you start pointing fingers at the producers of what remains one of the most beloved shows in primetime history, you should consider the various implications of this booming phenomenon. That is, forget everything you thought you knew about product placement and try to understand the true complexity of this growing industry.

Six months ago, as I set out to begin my research in this field, I, like most people, assumed I knew what product placement was. I came up with what I thought was a brilliant idea to somehow distinguish between realistic and non-realistic product placements by using none other than *Seinfeld* as my subject matter. Regarded as one of the most branded television shows of all time because of the amount of product it featured, *Seinfeld* appeared to be the ideal series for helping me make this distinction, and moreover, uncover a trend in the industry’s development thanks to the show’s nine-year run on NBC. What I realized, however, was that while I already knew that product placement has become exceedingly

prevalent over the years, it is actually a lot more complicated to define than I had ever imagined. I had hit a road block. Yet as I struggled to see how I could incorporate my findings into my original idea, I realized that what I had discovered was not something that has been addressed by many scholars. Thus, I decided to shift my focus towards explaining the various complications and ethical dilemmas surrounding this issue.

As one of the fastest growing industries in this country, product placement is something that has always interested me long before I even knew what it was, or rather, what I thought it was. Given the advent of digital video recording (DVR) and the growing popularity of TiVo, wherein viewers can choose to fast forward through traditional commercial segments with just the click of a button, and the overall change in the way we watch TV, product placement has become an increasingly popular marketing technique over the last decade. Not only can we skip over commercial breaks, but thanks to On-Demand TV and the accessibility to free TV online, we no longer have to stay in on a Saturday night to catch our favorite shows either. And while traditional commercial segments are scheduled to air at a specific time of day to an audience which matches the intended target market, there is no longer any way of knowing exactly when and where television shows are being watched. As a study conducted in 2004 by the Forester Agency reveals, nearly 60 percent of all TiVo owners watch pre-recorded or recorded television shows, and a whopping 92 percent of advertisements are being skipped (Lehu 32).

Troubled by what is no longer a passive audience, marketers have turned to product placement in order stay afloat in today's tough economical times. According to the Nielsen Company, there were roughly 205,000 instances of product placement in just the first six months of 2009 alone (Leonard). Furthermore, as people continue to adapt to the digital age,

product placement is likely to become even more prevalent. While we continue to refer to product placement as a trend, many people believe that it is in fact a “revolution in its infancy” (Lee 205). Whether we like it or not, product placement is here to stay. “In today’s advertising-propelled media environment, we may try to run, but we can’t hide,” says Lawrence A. Wenner. “Advertising is more and more embedded into the entertainment vehicle itself. Programming has become the Trojan horse, with product placements playing the role of the armed warrior lodged inside.”

Wenner is among the multitude of critics to discuss what is perhaps the biggest concern of all in his article, “On the Ethics of Product Placement in Media Entertainment.” “It is generally argued, given the present state of product placement, that an ethical line has been crossed,” he writes. “Reliant on a virtue ethics logic, such excess is deemed harmful in that it enmeshes entertainment, storytelling, and consequently the imagination in the logic of commodity culture.” Unfortunately, Wenner’s argument contributes to the common misconception that most people have about product placement. That is, people automatically assume that they are being advertised to whenever they see a product appear within a show. Moreover, Wenner raises a number of concerns people generally have about product placement because of this assumption. He also claims that “product placement is a fairly simple concept.” I will therefore be utilizing his ideas throughout my argument in order to explain how, contrary to what he believes, product placement is actually quite complicated.

Wenner’s argument is one that generally complies with the widespread misunderstanding that people have about product placement. By automatically assuming that all product placements are part of a marketing scheme, viewers notice such placements and immediately become aware of what they presuppose is an advertiser’s attempt to sell them

something. This, in turn, can aggravate the viewer, who now begins to feel more like a consumer. Yet while many product placements are in fact paid for by advertising agencies, particularly the increasing amount of placements within television today, some of the most memorable instances of brand appearances were created for reasons entirely unrelated to marketing purposes. In fact, many times a show will incorporate a specific product simply because it relates to the script or because it adds humor. However, this is something that Wenner and so many other critics fail to mention in their critical analyses of product placement. How then do we even begin to try and define product placement when, aside from the assumptions that people have, there are such varying definitions being put forth by critics?

While many definitions limit product placement to its appearance in entertainment for direct advertising purposes, such as calling it “a combination of advertising and publicity designed to influence the audience by unobtrusively inserting branded products in entertainment programs such that the viewer is unlikely to be aware of its persuasive intent,” it has also been defined as the “purposeful incorporation of a brand into an entertainment vehicle” (Russell). Although this latter definition is not restricted to the use of product placement for commercial purposes, both definitions do in fact imply that it is done intentionally. The second definition, however, suggests that perhaps product placement refers to any inclusion of a brand, including those not necessarily embedded for advertising purposes, thus contradicting the previous definition.

In accordance with the definition first put forth by Gupta and Gould in 1997, Wenner agrees that product placement “involves incorporating brands in movies in return for money or for some promotional or other consideration,” although he does add that it is often seen in

television as well. Not only do I believe that it is exceedingly myopic to refer to product placement as a “simple concept,” but according to how Wenner explains the technicalities of the practice, instances of product placement such as “The Junior Mint” might as well be disregarded as such since, contrary to popular belief, there was no exchange of money made between the show’s producers and the owners of the Junior Mint brand. While there is no mention of this particularly famous so-called product placement within the article, Wenner does list a number of examples of paid-for placements. Although some sources do offer more expansive definitions of product placement beyond those which are paid for and intended to increase brand awareness, Wenner is not alone in his more restrictive definition. Yet if we take a look at the history of product placement, it is easy to see how the term itself has been distorted over the years as the nature of television advertising itself has changed.

Despite its increasing popularity over the past decade, product placement actually dates back to as early as the beginning of the film industry itself, although most critical texts fail to identify such instances of it prior to the 1980s. The first documented instance of product placement, however, occurred in 1896 when French filmmakers Auguste and Louis Lumière placed two cases of Lever Brothers soap into a scene showing two woman hand-washing tubs of laundry. As part of an agreement with François-Henri Lavanchy-Clarke, the Swiss representative for the Sunlight brand of soap sold by Lever Brothers (now Unilever), this remains the first documented appearance of product placement. Yet the on-screen use of products was not at all recognized by any particular appellation until around 1915 when it began taking on such terms as “publicity by motion picture,” “moving picture advertising,” “co-operative advertising,” “tie-in advertising,” “exploitation,” or simply “plugs.” It was during this time that the famous Model T Fords began making frequent appearances in Mack

Sennett comedies and Buick automobiles became used exclusively in ten different Warner Brother's pictures, each of which was conversely promoted in Buick ads.

It wasn't until the 1980s, however, that the term "product placement" became universally used during a time which many people believe to be an enormous turning point in the history of the practice. As stated in "The Hidden History of Product Placement," "it took a movie about a child-sized alien lost on Earth to place the advertising practice of product placement into the public consciousness" (Newell 575). This, of course, refers to the 1982 release of Steven Spielberg's *E.T.*, which, thanks to the infamous alien following a trail of Hershey's Reese's Pieces towards his new home, has gone down in history as the single most recognized use of product placement.

"As a consequence of *E.T.* 'phoning home,' product placement took off in the late 1980s and became standard operating procedure in the 1990s," says Wenner. After officials for the M&M brand turned down the opportunity to have their product featured in the movie, a placement which ironically would have cost them nothing at all, Reese's willingly agreed to have their product used as a means to lure the alien out of the shed where he was hiding. According to an article written just one month after the release of *E.T.*, sales of this small, peanut-butter flavored candy had shot up by a considerable 65 percent in the preceding weeks ("Dividends: How Sweet It Is"). Prior to the success of this film and the skyrocketing sales of the candy it featured, media companies actually had to pay the owners of the products they used; that is, until the distributors realized they had been doing things backwards. From then on, companies began paying movie makers to incorporate their products. Thus, the popular trend of product placement within Hollywood films began.

Despite the frequent use of product placement within film, the sponsored nature of televised programs created a very different environment for this practice which was initially met with aversion from television networks. “With the successful diffusion of television into American homes, product placement became an adversarial encounter between the networks and paid sponsors on one side and product promoters on the other,” writes the authors of “The Hidden History of Product Placement.” Nevertheless, as product placement began to make its way into the realm of television, it was not at all uncommon for advertisers to sponsor entire programs. While television itself was still a relatively new phenomenon, it was decided that the most effective way to target consumers would be to create shows that featured a single product or line of products from a single company. In fact, if you ever wondered where the term, “soap opera” came from, you may be surprised to learn that the name came about because of the soap companies that sponsored them. Similarly, some of the most popular television shows of 1950s included *Kraft Television Theater*, *Colgate Comedy Club*, *The Texaco Star Theater*, and *Coke Time*. Some such shows were actually produced by advertising agencies rather than television studios as they are today.

While this practice proved to be an effective way of advertising for a while, television was becoming increasingly popular among the American people and as more people began watching television, the networks began increasing the cost of doing business. As a result, it was no longer feasible for companies to sponsor an entire show. “Even some of the biggest companies were beginning to feel the pinch of sponsoring an entire program,” said NBC executive Sylvester L. Weaver. “I could envision the day when no corporation would be able to afford a whole hour, or even half-hour, in prime time week after week” (“Sylvester Weaver: Revolutionary Warrior in Programming, Ads”). As a solution, Weaver introduced

the “magazine concept” of television advertising in which sponsors could purchase blocks of time from a network without having to sponsor the entire show. Advertisers would be able to insert their advertisements into a given show much like they would do with a magazine or newspaper. These insertions soon became known as commercials and, as we all know, remain standard practice even today. At the same time that shows were becoming sponsored by various companies, they also began to feature various products rather than just one. Furthermore, although television only caught onto this phenomenon years after the film industry already had, it has since evolved into what is now a vastly commercialized medium.

As one of the first television shows to incorporate product placements to the same extent that they are used today, *Seinfeld*, which aired on NBC from 1989 to 1998, has been regarded by many as the watershed to the industry. Universally known as “a show about nothing,” *Seinfeld* has certainly done a little more than nothing in giving way to product placement within television. In fact, if the release of *E.T.* gave birth to product placement within the film industry, then it’s safe to say that *Seinfeld*, with its name often appearing simultaneously to *E.T.* in a number of articles, changed the world of television by these same means. “It was, for much of its nine-year run, a brand bonanza,” writes T.L. Stanley in his 1998 article, “Wanted: Ally McBeal.” “Because *Seinfeld* opened the door, many in the industry believe products could begin showing up more frequently on regular series programming,” he reported almost twelve years ago. And as it turns out, Stanley and the rest of the industry were absolutely right.

“*Seinfeld* in its day was rife with product placement,” writes Bryan Curtis in “*Seinfeld*: Master of Madison Avenue’s Domain.” Indeed, a number of products have played crucial roles throughout the nine seasons including Snapple, Snickers, Yoo-hoo, Drake’s

Coffee Cakes, and Rold Gold Pretzels to name a few, not to mention the twenty or so boxes of cereal that stocked the shelves of Jerry's kitchen over the years too. Yet according to *The Hollywood Reporter*, "they didn't need to settle for mere placement on a shelf in a kitchen scene. With a little creativity, a product could find its way into the script, becoming an integral part of a storyline and assuring that audiences would remember it the next day." Never mind the next day though; fast-forward to today, nearly twelve years since the show went off air, and people are still talking about *Seinfeld* and its blatant use of product placement, particularly in "The Junior Mint."

While hundreds of products can be spotted throughout *Seinfeld's* nine seasons, "The Junior Mint" episode is arguably the most memorable instance of early product placement in television. In this 60th episode, Elaine asks Jerry and Kramer to stop by the hospital with her on their way out one day so that she can visit her ex-boyfriend Roy, a starving artist with whom she had broken up with (because he was fat) and who is scheduled to have surgery on his spleen. The following day, Kramer convinces Jerry to observe Roy's splenectomy from an open viewing gallery among students studying to become doctors. Hovering anxiously over the balcony, Jerry notices that Kramer is eating out of a box of Junior Mints. Kramer repeatedly offers one to Jerry who insists that he stop asking and pushes the Junior Mints away, causing one to come flying out of the box, bounce off of a respirator, and land inside the open cavity of the patient's body unnoticed. While the initial prognosis comes back negative, Roy ends up surviving much to George's disappointment who had just invested in \$1900 of his art because he was sure that Kramer and Jerry had killed him and that his art would be worth a lot more once he died. Meanwhile, Kramer and Jerry never admit to anyone but George that they accidentally dropped the Junior Mint into Roy's open cavity.

While this would hardly seem a likely scenario for a commercial advertisement, Junior Mints are nonetheless praised repeatedly throughout the twenty-minute segment. Returning to what is perhaps the most famous line in product placement history, Kramer says to Jerry after he asks him why he forced the Junior Mint on him, “Who’s gonna turn down a Junior Mint? It’s chocolate, it’s peppermint—it’s delicious!” “That’s true,” Jerry says, as Kramer goes on about how they are “very refreshing.” And as if a leisurely afternoon of watching someone have surgery from an open viewing gallery and accidentally dropping a Junior Mint into their body isn’t absurd enough, Roy’s doctor later attributes his miraculous recovery to something much greater than medicine. “I have no medical evidence to back me up, but something happened during the operation that staved off the infection,” he tells Roy, “something perhaps from above.” While many viewers may not make the connection, it’s as if the doctor is unknowingly suggesting that the Junior Mint which accidentally fell inside his body may have actually saved his life. Of course neither he nor Roy has any idea that the whole incident even happened. Kramer then holds up a box of Junior Mints and offers one to everyone in the room and the doctor responds, “those can be very refreshing.”

Although this may sound like a costly, over-the-top product placement, there was in fact no exchange of money made between the show’s producers and the owners of the Junior Mint Brand. “We never got a dime, and we never asked for a dime,” Howard West, the show’s executive producer, told *Hollywood Reporter*. “We didn’t want to be restricted creatively.” The same is said to be true of many, if not all, product placements appearing throughout the show’s nine seasons. Rather, the show’s producers claim to have integrated hundreds of products on the premise that “specificity is funny” (Baldwin).

In a behind-the-scenes interview, Andrew Robin, who wrote the script for this particular episode, says that “The Junior Mint” is ridiculous and totally out of character for the show,” claiming that *Seinfeld* is always so “realistic and conversational.” While *Seinfeld* can hardly be called realistic given its inimitable take on life’s dullest moments, Robin agrees that it is “totally implausible that there wouldn’t be this physical barrier between people that could watch the operation and the patient.” When Robin initially drew up the idea for this episode in his head he knew that he wanted Kramer to think of watching the operation like going to see a movie. What better cinema snack than Junior Mints to mimic this movie-going experience? “At first I thought a piece of popcorn falls into the patient. I ran that by my brother, and he said, ‘No, Junior Mints are just funnier.’”

Junior Mints certainly weren’t the only thing that made this episode so funny, though. Like the rest of the nine-seasons-worth of *Seinfeld*, “The Junior Mint” revolves around highly unlikely, ridiculous events. Aside from the fact that Jerry and Kramer are able to watch Roy, whom they barely know, have surgery within harm’s way of the procedure, they seem to have nothing better to do anyway since neither of them have real jobs. Unlike most people who stress about work and money, Jerry and Kramer are worried about potentially killing a man with a Junior Mint. Since the characters themselves fail to see the humor in the situation, it then becomes that much funnier to the audience.

Today, “The Junior Mint” still remains one of the most famous instances of product placement in history. According to an article written in London’s *Daily Telegraph*, advertising experts have identified “The Junior Mint” as the “watershed in product placement.” Thanks to Robin’s sense of humor, “advertisers realized that they didn’t need to be content with just having their product in shot; they could actually have it worked into the

script. And so ‘product integration,’ the second and far more lucrative arm of the embedded advertising, was born.”

According to Wenner, “If the original impetus for product placement came from opportunities that were ‘already in the script,’ then it might be said that the locus has shifted in a refinement known as ‘product integration’ to ‘becoming the script.’” For all intents and purposes, product integration ups the ante on the simpler form of product placement. The various boxes of cereal that stocked Jerry’s kitchen shelves throughout the years, including such popular brands as Apple Jacks, Cheerios, Trix, and Grape-Nuts, are a perfect example of product placement. However, when the show’s characters begin to talk about or interact with a product, it becomes known as product integration. Unlike age-old product placements which typically lingered in the background, such product integrations are impossible to miss.

“The Junior Mint” is a perfect example of product integration wherein the audience not only sees the characters interacting with an actual box of Junior Mints, but repeatedly mentioning the brand name itself. Under these conditions, in which the product is both seen and talked about, the placement accordingly becomes that that much more prominent. Not only this, but the Junior Mints were also an integral part of the script. While many product placements could be removed from a scene or deleted from context, the show itself relied on this product. In essence, Junior Mints became the script.

Knowing that “The Junior Mint” was not paid for, despite the obvious integration of the candy itself, product placement seemingly becomes a much more complicated concept than its critics often suggest. It’s no wonder that most people generally assume all brand appearances within movies and television shows are done intentionally when the majority of articles referring to “The Junior Mint” fail to mention this rather technical bit of information.

Given these assumptions there arises a number of critical arguments when dealing with this topic. The first issue is, of course, how to even define product placement. Many people, particularly those that have never studied marketing or its related fields, know very little about what product placement is. As we already know, these people assume that product placements are intentionally created by advertisers as a means of hypercommercializing the given product to a non-passive audience, one that now has the ability to skip over traditional commercial segments thanks to DVR. Although this term actually loosely refers to any and all product appearances, including those that are non-paid and non-commercial, the assumptions of these people have opened the door to an array of misunderstandings nonetheless, hence the multiple arguments surrounding the issue.

Many people believe that product placement is an unethical practice and there is a lot of controversy as to whether product-driven shows are even able to remain artistically viable and hold an audience while becoming something just short of infomercials. The product placement industry's own trade organization, The Entertainment Marketing Association (EMA), has even put forth a "Code of Standards and Ethics" to ensure that product placements are created in a sensitive and responsible way. According to this code, an example of a good placement would be one that not only doesn't call a lot of attention to itself, but in no way jeopardizes the creative integrity of the film or show it appears in. According to advocates for the sensible use of this practice, product placements should be "seamless" and "organic" within the context of the story.

However, product placement has also been criticized as "stealth advertising" (Lee 205). Although the EMA states that product placements should appear naturally within the context of a show, many critics argue that such placements are deceitful because people are

essentially unaware of their commercial intent. As a nonprofit organization co-founded by Ralph Nader, Commercial Alert argues that such product placements are “an affront to basic honesty” (Lee 210). The organization believes that “product placements are inherently deceptive because many people do not realize that they are, in fact, advertisements” (Lee 210).

Commercial Alert is just one of the many organizations to go after the Federal Communications Association (FCC) for not enforcing stricter regulations on the use of product placements. Because the FCC is responsible for regulating interstate and international communication within all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and among all United States possessions via radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable, it thus has the authority to mandate new guidelines for product placements. Many people therefore believe that the FCC is ignoring the increasing issues surrounding this practice. While the FCC does currently require that networks and television stations disclose paid placements and list program sponsors, those against it believe that this is not enough. Moreover, they believe that viewers need to be informed that they are being subjected to an advertisement every time a paid product placement appears. Commercial Alert, for instance, hopes to establish an FCC-regulated system of onscreen pop-up notifications that disclose the advertising intent with each product placement that occurs. Yet, doesn't this go against the EMA's standards wherein a product placement should not call too much attention to itself?

As critics continue to argue from both ends of the spectrum, another reason arises for why product placement has come under so much ethical scrutiny. Assuming that a placement is paid for and that a product is made to be an obvious prop within a television show because of budgetary reasons, the writer's creative abilities thus appear to be undermined just so that

the show can cut costs by accepting money from an advertising agency that in turn benefits through brand recognition. “Is it going to get to the point where the tail wags the dog?” asks Alan Wurtzel, NBC’s Vice President of Standards and Practices. “All of a sudden, it’s not about character and story; it’s about, ‘I have to mention this product three times because it’s helping to pay for this show.’ It becomes the proverbial slippery slope (Wenner 103).

Moreover, how is the audience’s viewing experience affected by this deliberate placement? While there have certainly been instances of product placement that have taken heat for these very reasons, to call the entire practice of product placement unethical would be similar to saying that all of all television violence is exploitive. Product placement, like individual television programs, should only be brought under such scrutiny on an independent basis.

In almost every instance, a particular product appears within entertainment intentionally. The Snapple bottle that Elaine repeatedly reaches into Jerry’s refrigerator for and offers to others is not a part of the show simply because Elaine likes Snapple or because when she reaches into the fake refrigerator this real product has somehow miraculously appeared in it. Conversely, the chosen product, for whatever reason, was made to be a concrete part of the script. Often times, particularly in *Seinfeld*, such product placements appear as a comic fodder. In other instances, real products are used to add realism to the show. “It always bothered me when Archie Bunker reached for his can of beer and it was some non-brand,” said Glenn Padnick, President of Castle Rock Entertainment, the studio where *Seinfeld* was filmed. “For a second it took you out of the show” (Baldwin). This belief has undoubtedly added additional complications to the practice of product placement and the further ethical dilemmas that surround this issue.

Another major issue surrounding product placement is whether or not it creates a realistic ambiance within the show. Advocates for product placement have often argued that this practice adds to realism by using real, everyday products, rather than generic, made-up brands. Barbara Maulsby, vice president of UPP Entertainment Marketing, one of the nation's largest product placement agencies, says that, "Brands help develop a story and make a statement about who the characters are. It doesn't damage creative integrity, it can enhance it." Similar to Padnick, Maulsby states that, "when you see a fake brand, it takes you out of the reality of the situation" (Leonard).

Despite this reasoning, those against product placement argue that realism is inherently compromised nonetheless. As Wenner argues, "products that are placed in entertainment vehicles are, almost without exception, positively cast." Moreover, "to say that product placements enhance reality is necessarily a fallacious claim. It is akin to saying that television commercials reflect reality. What is reflected is of course a highly selective vision of the world that is in the best interests of the sponsoring party" (Wenner). On the contrary, those who draw negative attention to a product risk legal action. Such was the case in the movie *Jerry Maguire* when unbeknownst to Reebok, the character played by Cuba Gooding Jr. exclaims "Fuck Reebok, all they do is ignore me, always have always will" (Wenner). Thus, the role of product placement agencies is to ensure that products are placed in a way that is both positive and appropriate. According to many people, this qualifies product placement as a deceptive practice.

Perhaps the larger issue here is hypercommercialism. We live in a highly commercialized world in which advertisements are virtually inescapable. The amount of advertisements that people living in North America are exposed to has exploded over the past

decade. “The whole process of selling, promoting, and commercializing has permeated every nano-second, every pore of our culture,” says Bob McChesney in the film, *Behind the Scenes: Hollywood Goes Hypercommercial*. As Linda Kaplan Thaler, chief executive at the Kaplan Thaler Group, a New York ad agency, once told *The New York Times*, “Ubiquity is the new exclusivity.” Thaler also points out that, as marketers, “We never know where the consumer is going to be at any point in time, so we have to find a way to be everywhere.” And everywhere they are.

Still, the question remains, what exactly is product placement? Moreover, how can Wenner claim that it is a “fairly simple concept?” And when did the innocuous use of Junior Mints as a means of comedy become such an ethical dilemma? Here we have a script that is built around a product, not simply fit in afterwards to meet the needs of an advertising agency. The writer’s creative abilities are in no way undermined by the use of this product but rather elaborated and yet the 30-minute segment in which it appears does in fact resemble a commercial in and of itself. Herein we see how truly complicated this practice really is. Unfortunately, the practice has earned itself a bad rap because of how it has evolved since the days of *Seinfeld*, when TiVo was never even an option and viewers were forced to either sit through the commercial breaks or switch to another channel. Still, to say that all of product placement is unethical or to argue that it adds realism to entertainment is in many ways unwarranted. To truly understand product placement, one must forget what they think they know, dismiss all assumptions, and furthermore reconsider the context in which each individual product is being used within a script. Despite the increasing use of paid product placements, many of the most speculated instances of the practice remain unpaid even today.

NBC's *30 Rock*, which first began airing in 2006, has been the latest contender to come under scrutiny for its own unvarying use of product placement. Similar to *Seinfeld*'s, "The Junior Mint," *30 Rock* has received a lot of hype over a 2009 episode, "St. Valentine's Day," in which McDonald's made a guest appearance. Simply stated, McDonald's was everywhere. First, a McDonald's bag appears in a scene with the characters, Jack and Elisa. Later, while spending Valentine's Day in an actual McDonald's restaurant, the couple talks about what makes the McFlurry so great when Elisa goes as far as to say, "Let a McFlurry be what it is: the world's best dessert." As if the supposed commercial intent couldn't be any more obvious, an actual advertisement for the fast-food chain can also be spotted during the show. Yet, was there really any commercial intent after all? According to various sources, the answer is no.

"It gives me great pleasure to inform you that the references to McDonald's in last night's episode of *30 Rock* were in no way product placement," said the show's executive producer, Tina Fey. "We received no money from the McDonald's Corporation. We were actually a little worried they might sue us. That's just the kind of revenue-generating masterminds we are" (Mitovitch).

In his article, "Behind the Scenes of the McFlurry-*30 Rock* Deal That Wasn't," Brian Steinberg claims to have made a few phone calls of his own to the McDonald's director of entertainment alliances, Jennifer Lane Landolt, who also confirmed that the placement was in fact not paid for. According to her, officials for the show had contacted restaurant executives in advance, asking for permission to include McDonald's in their script. "If we felt that something disparaged the brand, we would have pushed back on what they did, but no, we didn't make any changes," she told Steinberg. There was, however, one exchange of money

made. That is, *30 Rock* had to compensate the owner of the restaurant franchise in New York City where the show was filmed for the loss of income while closed for shooting (Steinberg).

Similarly, ABC's *Modern Family* recently gained a lot of press for their use of the Apple brand iPad throughout an entire episode of the show. As it begins, the character Phil exclaims that, "The iPad comes out on my actual birthday. It's like Steve Jobs and God got together to say, 'We love you, Phil.'" He also tells us that it's "a movie theater, a library and a music store all rolled into one awesome pad" (Axon). Phil continues to impress upon us his need for the iPad throughout the better part of the show, until finally his wife surprises him with one as a present. Thanks to the "Happy Birthday Cake" app, Phil blows out the virtual birthday candles while the rest of the family begins to mull over the device in awe. Yet, according to Apple, the placement was not paid for as any sort of pre-arrangement with the show.

"Apple may not have paid for its new and much-ballyhooed iPad device to be woven into a main storyline in last night's showing of *Modern Family* on ABC, but everyone is certainly acting as if they did," says Steinberg in "*Modern Family* Featured an iPad, but ABC Didn't Collect." Steinberg also writes that Jesse Tyler Ferguson, who plays Mitchell on the show, wrote this on her Twitter: "I will say that no 'Product' has been 'Placed' in my itchy little palm. I am excited about the iPad and will probably break down and buy one!" According to Steinberg, Apple isn't one to pay for appearances within television shows. Rather, their products are seen as "status symbols" and "cultural icons" which make the television characters that use them appear hip and trendy. Of course, most people still assume that the placement was paid for.

Herein lays the biggest complication surrounding product placement. According to an article written nearly four years ago, in 2006, “mass media is all advertising, all the time, and the fear is that it will create a generation of cynical viewers who look at everything on the screen as an attempt to sell them something” (Levin). Sure enough, today’s television audience has in fact become leery of the product placements they see on TV. Yet, despite the common assumption that product placements are always paid for as means of advertising, little is known about the effect that such placements have on viewership. Furthermore, the effectiveness of product placements themselves has also yet to be determined. While various studies have attempted to examine the exact efficacy of embedded advertising through the use of implicit and explicit measures, there remains no way of knowing whether their impact is negative or positive on consumer behavior. Moreover, while there is evidence that people are annoyed by the increasing amount of product placements within television, there exists just as much evidence of a willingness to accept it.

As a member of the audience myself, I find product placements to be amusing when used creatively and appropriately. I also do not believe that it is fair to refer to the entire practice as unethical, especially when those that are paid for and those that are not, are equally regarded as such. Wenner accuses product placement of being a deceptive practice because viewers are not necessarily aware of its commercial intent, yet he fails to mention any of the various instances in which product placement have not been paid for. While I agree that products placements which are paid for by an advertising agency should be incorporated into the script such that the writer’s own ideas are in no way compromised, it is not an issue that affects me as a viewer but rather the writers themselves. Given this, I think that product placements, whether paid for or not, only need to be approved by the involved

parties, that being the show's writers and producers, as well as the owners of the products being featured. As for the rest of us, we should not feel deceived by something that we are already susceptible to beyond the realm of television. Television has simply offered advertisers a means to be more creative in their work. More importantly, we mustn't assume that every instance of product placement is an advertiser's attempt to sell us something.

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