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# Product placement in video games as a marketing strategy: an attempt to analysis in Disney company

Inés Küster, Elena Pardo and Torpong Suemanotham\*

## Abstract

This qualitative case study research examined product placement strategies in video games to identify the differences in the effectiveness of traditional placement approaches compared to the branded entertainment approach, which involves the use of proprietary character in a video game. Although video gaming has increased in popularity in the past decade and uses product placement strategies, the effectiveness of the different strategies has not been previously examined. The research used a case study methodology examining the use of product placement strategies at Walt Disney with primary data obtained from interviews with Disney staffs from Disney Interactive Marketing Group and a focus group of consumers of Disney video game products. The results of the study indicated that the branded entertainment approach to product placement enhanced existing awareness of the branded character and the parent Disney brand. In addition, the consumers of the video game product perceived the branded entertainment approach as less intrusive than a traditional product placement in which a branded product was inserted into the video, audio or action content of the video game. The consumers also perceived the branded entertainment approach more suitable than traditional product placement for video games aimed at children.

**Keywords:** product placement strategies, effectiveness, qualitative study.

**JEL Classification:** M3, M37.

## Resumen

Esta investigación de carácter cualitativo que se aproxima al método del caso intenta examinar la aplicación de la estrategia del product placement en el ámbito de los videojuegos a fin de identificar las diferencias en enfoques de product placement más clásicos y aquellos otros más centrado en la marca. Se ha escogido el estudio de Walt Disney, empleando tanto entrevistas con personal de la compañía, como dinámicas de grupo con usuarios de videojuegos de esta empresa. Los resultados indican que enfoques más recientes del product placement resultan más adecuados para destacar la notoriedad de la marca analizada. Adicionalmente, los consumidores opinan que este tipo de estrategia es menos intrusivo y más adecuado para el público de los niños.

**Palabras clave:** estrategias de product placement, eficacia, estudio cualitativo.

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\* I. Küster, E. Pardo and T. Suemanotham: University of Valencia. Contact author: ines.kuster@uv.es.

## **1. Introduction**

Between 1996 and 2006, the video game market in the United States alone increased from \$2.4 billion in annual sales to \$7.6 billion (Walsh et al., 2008). Because of the growth in popularity of video games, advertisers are increasingly attracted to the medium as a means of reaching targeted age demographics that include children, young adults and adults between the ages of 18 and 34. Advertising expenditures for product placement in video games is forecasted at \$733 million by 2010, with the majority of the advertising aimed at the target market of adult males who are the most common users of video games (Gerdes, 2006).

While advertisers are increasingly attracted to video games as an appropriate location for product marketing, the effectiveness of the medium and placement strategy remains uncertain. Researchers investigating advertising effectiveness disagree on the value of product placement in video games and the methods firms should use with product placement strategies. Some evidence suggests that product placement in video games can increase brand and product awareness, but may not motivate the consumer to take an action such as purchasing the product (Nelson et al., 2004; Winkler, Buckner, 2006). The general attitude of the consumer toward advertising may also influence the effectiveness of product placement in video games (Beirne, 2008). In addition, the effectiveness of “branded entertainment approaches” to developing video game content used by the large multimedia firms has not been extensively investigated (Winkler and Buckner, 2006). Because video gaming is likely to continue to grow in popularity, assessing the effectiveness of product placement in video games has importance for the development of advertising and marketing strategies suited for the media. The way in which the placement occurs in a video game may be more critical for achieving the desired outcomes of increased awareness and motivating purchase decisions than with product placement in other types of media. In this sense, the purpose of this qualitative study is to identify the differences in the effectiveness of product placement in video games when using “traditional placement approaches” compared to the “branded entertainment approach”. The “traditional approach” to product placement in video games involves the product appearing as a visual object that is passive, used by characters and players or mentioned in the audio, which functions as an advertisement for the product (Shrum, 2004). The “branded entertainment approach” to product placement in video games involves integrating a proprietary character into the theme or plot, with the branded product anthropomorphised (Winkler and Buckner, 2006). “Branded entertainment” differs from the “traditional approach” because the plot of the entertainment is fully focused on the branded product.

The case study will focus on the Walt Disney Corporation (Disney), which uses product cycling in branded entertainment types of video games. Disney was selected for the case study because it has created numerous proprietary characters that can be considered product franchises because the characters appear in many different media and types of products. Because of the increased popularity in video games, Disney has also produced video games incorporating these characters. The product placement strategy of the firm in its video games is part of its integrated advertising and marketing strategy (Gilbert, 2005). So, the research design used a case study approach, which is suitable for investigating research questions intended to provide exploratory or descriptive information about a topic (Yin, 2003). The purpose of this research is to investigate the perceptions of marketing staffs and consumers towards product placement in video games and the effectiveness of the placement. The purpose of the research is exploratory and intended to determine whether marketing staffs and consumers perceive differences in the effectiveness of traditional product placement strategies and branded entertainment.

## **2. The product placement in marketing: the application in videogames**

Product placement is traditionally defined as ‘a paid product message aimed at influencing movie (or television) audiences via the planned and unobtrusive entry of a branded product into a movie (or television programme)’ (Balasubramanian, 1994: 29). It is a composite type of messages involving visual, auditory, and plot components that can potentially overcome some of the problems associated with traditional advertising in media such as television in which the viewer can delete or avoid advertising with zipping or zapping (Kuhn, Love, & Pope, 2004). The development of new forms of entertainment media requires an extension of the definition to include video games and other forms of computer-mediated entertainment.

A product placement occurs when a product not directly related to the content of the entertainment media is visually presented or mentioned in the audio track (Newell, Salmon, & Chang, 2006). The product can be used by a character in the media or it can be merely present in the background. Product placement is a form of marketing communication that can achieve different marketing objectives (Shrum, 2004). It can function as an advertising and publicity message, which increases the consumers’ awareness of the product and may result in a purchase decision. Because the product placement is not clearly identified as an advertisement, however, it has some characteristics associated with publicity (Balasubramanian, 1994). The use of the

product by the characters in the entertainment medium can also explicitly or implicitly suggest to the audience that the product possesses attributes that increase its value to the consumer. From this perspective, product placement is related to branding theory because it is intended to increase awareness of the product and knowledge about product attributes (Haugtvedt, Machleit, & Yalch, 2005).

In branding theory, the marketing communications of a firm about products function to increase the amount of knowledge among consumers about the attributes of the product (Keller, 2003). The branding is an effort to build equity by creating positive associations between the product and functional or non-functional attributes the consumer values. When the consumer receives repeated messages about the attributes of product, it becomes part of their knowledge base about the value of a product. The amount of knowledge about the product theoretically influences the purchasing decision by creating greater certainty that the product will meet their needs or desires (Chiou, 2000). The brand knowledge is subjective in nature, and involves linkages between the product and the attributes the company believes the consumers value (MacDonald & Sharp, 2003). The implication of branding theory for product placement is the opportunity for the consumer to gain greater awareness of the subjective product attributes. Linking the product with the consumers' positive perception about the entertainment character's use of the product increases the subjective knowledge of the consumers' about the product's non-functional attributes (Shrum, 2004). It may also function as an endorsement of the product by the media character. Because of the ability of the media to create positive associations between the events depicted in the media presentation and the product, the product placement strategy is increasingly used in public relations to enhance the image of brands (Pardun & McKee, 2000).

Branding theory also implies that the attributes associated with a parent brand can be extended to cover all subsidiary products associated with the brand (Schultz, Antonini, & Csaba, 2005). This practice is known as brand extension or umbrella branding. In this approach, a firm establishes a general brand identity for all products associated with the company, such as the brand identity established by Disney. The firm attempts to associate general attributes such as quality with the parent brand. When the firm introduces a product or subsidiary brand under the parent brand umbrella, the brand equity theoretically transfers to the new product or brand. The subsidiary products or brand can then focus on establishing a brand identity associated with other types for functional or non-functional attributes. Research examining the effectiveness of the brand extension approach indicates that it is effective as long as the new products meet the expectations of the consumer for the attributes associated with the parent brand

(Milberg, Park & McCarthy, 1997). The application of the brand extension theory to product placement suggests it can result in the loss of brand equity if the media product does not meet the expectations of consumers for quality or other attribute associated with the brand placed in the media. In effect, product placement represents a risk to the firm using it as an advertising tactic.

Because product placement involves embedding the product in an entertainment venue or medium such as film or video game, theorists suggest that the consumer may process product placement information differently from traditional advertising (Shrum, 2004). The theoretical model further suggests that individuals process information differently when they recognise that a message is intended to be persuasive when compared to situations in which they do not recognise the message to be persuasive (Grigorovici & Constantin, 2004). The consumer is generally aware of the persuasive purpose of an advertising message and can easily ignore the message or engage in mental counterarguments reducing the effectiveness of the persuasion (Panda, 2004). With product placement advertising, however, the consumer theoretically has greater difficulty ignoring the message because it is intertwined with an entertainment communication in which the consumer has interest. As a result, the product placement approach can theoretically increase the awareness and knowledge of the consumer about the product. In an entertainment product such as a video game, the player interacts with the medium and becomes thoroughly immersed in playing, which increases the level of engagement (Ivory & Kalyanaraman, 2007). The disadvantage to product placement, however, is that it may produce hostility if the recipient recognizes the placement as a persuasive message inappropriate for the medium (Grigorovici & Constantin, 2004).

In product placement theory, the presence of a product in entertainment media is also presumed to have a reminder effect on the viewer (Auty & Lewis, 2004). When the product placement is part of an integrated marketing communication system, the consumer has received information about the product from multiple sources. The consumer is reminded of this information when seeing or hearing about the product in the entertainment media, thereby reinforcing the message about the product's attributes. The theory implies that the placement of the product may be ineffective for increasing consumer knowledge and awareness unless it is part of a larger marketing communication plan. Branded characters can play a stronger reminder role because the consumers associate the character's socially desirable attributes with the product (Calvert, 2008). The way in which the product is placed in the entertainment media can also influence the reminder effect, with auditory information processed differently from

visual information (Panda, 2004). As a result, viewing the character can function as a brand reminder even if the brand is not shown in the entertainment medium.

Product placement has generated considerable legal and ethical debate because it theoretically involves a subtle form of advertising that can be used to exert inappropriate commercial influences on audiences. Product placement of medical devices and pharmaceutical products has involved uses that are not authorised by regulators or found in general medical practise (Turner, 2004). In addition, tobacco product placements are very common in films, suggesting that tobacco firms use product placement strategies to circumvent industry and regulatory restrictions on permissible advertising venues (Sargent, Tickle, Beach, Dalton, & Ahearns, 2001). While this product placement strategy can produce short-term benefits for brand recognition and awareness of the attributes associated with products, it risks long-term reduction in brand equity if negative publicity develops because of the practise (Pardun & McKee, 2001).

According to Hudson & Hudson (2006), branded entertainment is a more sophisticated form of product placement intended to create close alignment between the entertainment product and the brand. Producing branded entertainment requires that a firm have the ability to develop an entertainment product and the competencies to weave the brand attributes and desired image into the entertainment product. Because of its complexity, only a few firms have the capabilities to produce branded entertainment products.

### ***2.1. Effectiveness of product placement***

Determining the effectiveness of product placement in entertainment media is significant for determining the rates that advertisers should pay for the placement (Panda, 2004). The evidence from research examining the effectiveness of product placement has produced mixed findings. Effectiveness of product placement has been defined as an increase in brand knowledge or awareness (Beirne, 2008) and as a trigger to induce an action such as a search for additional information or the purchase of a product (Calvert, 2008). Effectiveness has also been defined as developing a positive attitude toward the brand (Panda, 2004). Some evidence suggests that product placement is most effective with a younger demographic such as children and young adults because they are less aware that the product placement is an advertisement (Calvert, 2008). The traditional approach to measuring the effectiveness of product placement examined the rate of aided and unaided recall for brands visually depicted or



mentioned in a film (Galician, 2005). The measurement approaches have subsequently expanded to include the effect of the product placement on consumer attitudes towards brands and purchase intentions. The effect of product placement on purchase intentions may not be a valid measure of effectiveness because of the many other variables that can influence the purchasing decision (Galician, 2005).

Research investigating brand recall and awareness among consumers from viewing media with product placements indicates that the design of the placement is a critical factor for effective recall (Haugtvedt, Machleit, & Yalch, 2005). Products that are prominently displayed in the media and have a close connection with the plot result in higher aided and unaided recall compared to products merely displayed in the background with no connection to the plot (Law & Braun, 2000). In addition, products placed with both audio and visual sensory inputs have higher rates of recall. Yaveroglu & Donthu (2008) examined the effect of different banner placement strategies used in internet advertising on brand awareness and intention to click on the banner, which functions as an action to obtain more brand information. The findings indicated that repetition of the banner in different on-line environments increased the memory of the brand name and was associated with greater intention to click on the banner advertising. Repetition was also more effective in a competitive internet environment than in a non-competitive internet environment, with a competitive internet environment involving game playing as well as other interactive tasks. The findings also showed that repetition was most effective for brand name recall when the banner advertising is relevant to the contents of the website. The support the general conclusions of Law & Braun (2000) indicating that the advertising should have some connection with content for maximum recall effect.

Law and Braun (2000) conducted research examining the effect of television product placement on choice and recall. While the findings indicated that products placed in the show as part of the plot with both visual and audio references had high recall, the effect on product choice in the purchasing decision was variable. The researchers concluded that recall and choice were different psychological mechanisms, with product placement operating differently with the two mechanisms. Subsequent research examining the relationship between brand image and brand recall in product placement in television shows found that the placement enhanced brand image but had a variable effect on brand recall (Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2007). When the product was integrated into the plot of the television show, improvement in the brand image was directly proportionate to the number of episodes viewed by consumers. The recall of the brand, however, did not increase with the number of episodes viewed. The underlying

assumption in this research was that the viewer liked the television show with the positive attributes associated with the show transferring to the placed brand. The findings of both these studies support the theoretical position argued by Shrum (2004) that product placement is linked to different cognitive and psychological processes than those found with traditional advertising.

Croteau and Hoynes (2005) noted that excessive product placement in an entertainment product can be counterproductive and reduce brand equity by fostering a negative attitude towards both the entertainment product and the placed product. Because of the increasing prevalence of product placement in the media by many different firms, it has a cumulative effect that creates an unfavourable attitude among consumers (Lenderman, 2006). In research investigating attitude changes towards brands resulting from placement in film and television, Homer (2009) also found that repetition of prominent product placements of known brands has a negative effect on brand attitudes. In contrast, subtle product placement has a positive effect on attitude towards the brands. These findings suggest that the consumer of entertainment media products have a threshold tolerance for advertising and branding with product placement. The variation in the tolerance level among consumers as well as the method used to place the product in the entertainment product may account for the differences in research findings concerning the effectiveness of product placement. The concept of excessive product placement in entertainment media, however, remains difficult to measure. Lehu and Bressoud (2007) found no relationship between the number of different product placements in film and the next day recall of at least one brand by a film's viewers.

Cowley & Barron (2004) examined factors leading to the development of a negative perception of a brand from different product placement strategies in television programmes. Prominent product placement produces a negative attitude toward the brand when the viewer liked the programme but had a positive shift in attitude towards the brand when they did not like the programme. Subtle rather than prominent product placements did not produce the same degree of negative shift in attitude toward the product regardless of whether the viewer liked the programme. Panda (2004) also found that congruity between the product placement and the plot of films had a positive effect on the attitudes of viewers toward the brand. In addition, the degree the user of an entertainment product likes the film, programme or game, the greater the favourable attitude toward products placed in the media (Lehu & Bressoud, 2007).

Psychographic and demographic factors can influence the perceptions and attitude of consumers, mediating the effectiveness of product placement (Galician, 2005; Ozer, Argan, Suher, Akin, & Argan, n.d.). Stafford & Faber (2005) conducted cross-cultural research into perceptions of product placement in media based on sample populations in the United States and Latin America. The findings showed that cultural differences have a significant effect on attitudes towards product placement and its effectiveness for improving brand equity and favourable impressions of products. Consumers from many Latin American cultures perceive product placement as a deceptive practice creating an unfavourable impression of the product. Consumers from the United States, however, were neutral towards product placement. The findings of the study suggest that firms should carefully consider the cultural demographics of the target market when using a product placement strategy. A similar study by Gould, Gupta & Grabner-Krauter (2000) examining differences in acceptance of product placement among film viewers in the United States, Austria and France also found significant cultural differences in cultural and national groups. Factors such as type of product and duration of placement exposure moderated the cultural differences. Hernandez, M, Chapa, S., Minor, M., Maldonado, C., & Barranzuela (2004), however, found no significant cultural differences among Hispanics with respect to attitudes toward product placement in branded entertainment.

Homer (2009) that regulatory issues can affect product placement in different nations. In the United Kingdom, for example, the public is generally hostile towards product placements, and a requirement exists to inform the audience every 20 minutes that a product has been placed in the entertainment product. If the product is an integral part of the story or plot, however, the requirement to inform is suspended. As a result, national regulations can place limitations on the product placement techniques and frequency.

## **2.2. *Product placement in video games***

A video game can be broadly defined as a game based on software played on an electronic device allowing the presentation of graphical imagery and the interaction of the player with the software (Wolf, 2008). The game requires the player to perform specified tasks to achieve objectives and to remain within the rules for the game established by the constraints embedded in the software. The types of tasks necessary to the player to accomplish depend on the targeted age demographic for the game. Children's video games requiring simple tasks and relative slow speed command inputs for play. Games targeted for adult males, however, usually require complex tasks and

rapid inputs that require a high level of manual dexterity. Slower moving video games that require reflection rather than dexterity are designed for other target markets. When the player becomes fully engaged with the gaming experience, the video game is considered as an immersive virtual environment (IVE) (Grigorovici & Constantin, 2004). Galician (2005) indicated that the level of brand immersion within the IVE can range from associations to illustrations about use of the product depending on the way the brand is integrated into the tasks required for game play.

The perceived quality of the video game by the player can affect the general attitude towards the game, which is analogous to the attitude of individuals towards other entertainment products (Ozer, Argan, Suher, Akin, & Argan, n.d.). Research has also determined that the level of technological advancement and content of video games can influence the players' sense of presence, involvement, and physiological arousal (Ivory & Kalyanaraman, 2007). These findings suggest that players can become fully immersed in the play video games to the point they have a physiological response. The content or story line of the game, however, does not appear to influence players.

Russell (1999) proposed a three-tiered framework for assessing the way in which a product is placed in a video game. The first tier involves screen placement in which the brand or product is visible in the screen frame. The second tier uses script placement in which the audio content mentions the brand or product. The third tier involves plot placement in which the brand or product is incorporated into the plot. These placements are analogous to the way in which product placement occurs in film. Because of the nature of the video game, a fourth tier to the framework includes the degree of interaction between the game player and the brand. In effect, the video game adds an additional dimension to product placement by allowing the user to interact with the product, which theoretically increases engagement and awareness.

Because the video game involves software, product placement in the game involves a more complex relationship between the software developer and the advertiser. The advertiser must license the use of the product image and likeness to the game software developer. In addition, the advertiser must allow the software developer to transfer the license to the user of the game as part of the general license associated with the game (Rosini, Mash, & Rupp, 2008). When the advertiser licenses the product to a software developer, it must ensure that the product is used in the way the advertiser intends. The issue of licensing does not arise for the large multimedia firms that create their own video games using placement of proprietary products or characters.

While the traditional approach to product placement in video games is to embed the product in the game play, content or motif, it is also possible to create a game solely around a brand or a branded character. These types of video games are referred to as 'branded entertainment' and 'advergames' (Winkler & Buckner, 2006). These games are often provided to consumers without cost and are played on the internet, although sometimes the firm owning the brand makes a nominal charge for the product (Mathieson, 2005). The larger media companies, however, produce video games for console or computer play that can be considered branded entertainment by using a proprietary character as the central figure in game play. The development of the advergames is becoming increasingly sophisticated, with the sponsor of an internet-based advergame able to obtain psychographic information about the players from their interactive choices (Galician, 2005). In many cases, the players of these games are unaware that the game is used to obtain marketing data.

Yang, Roskos-Ewolden, Dinu, & Arpan, (2006) identified an emerging practice in video games played on the internet or requiring a periodic internet connection of rotating product placement. In effect, the branded products placed in the background of the game can change over time as the promotional contracts with the game sponsors change. This type of approach has also been used to promote new gaming products in the run-up to launch based, with the relatively short life-cycle of video games requiring firms to continuously develop new gaming products.

### ***2.3. Effectiveness of product placement in video games***

The evidence from research investigating product placement in video games has produced mixed findings. Effectiveness for product placement in video games is defined in various ways, which may account for the mixed findings. It is defined in terms of improving brand equity or the favourable impression of the brand (Nelson, Keum, & Yaros, 2004). Effectiveness is also defined as prompting the consumer to take an action such as an information search or the purchase of the product (Beirne, 2008). The approaches to determining effectiveness of product placement in video games are similar to the approaches used to assess product placement effectiveness in other media (Galician, 2005; Haugtvedt, Machleit, & Yalch, 2005).

Beirne (2008) cited statistical evidence from a survey assessing the response to a Burger King product placement in a sports video game, with the placement functioning as an advertisement more than as a traditional placement. The findings showed that one-third of the respondents had favourably viewed the placement and engaged in a greater

information search as a result. The findings of the survey, however, indicated that the placement increased brand awareness and was not a trigger inducing a purchasing action by the consumer. Winkler and Buckner (2006) also found that branded entertainment games increased brand awareness and knowledge, but did not motivate a purchase decision by the consumer. In addition, the findings indicated that the branded entertainment approach was not effective for increasing awareness for brands that the consumer did not already recognize. Yang, Roskos-Ewolden, Dinu, & Arpan, (2004) found that product placement in video games increased both explicit and implicit brand awareness. In addition, Kuhn, Love & Pope (2004) cited early studies in which playing a video game with product placement improved brand recall even after an extended interval between play and recall testing. These finding supports general product placement and branding theory indicating that the placement improves awareness and knowledge about the product (Macdonald & Sharp, 2003; Shrum, 2004).

Nelson, Keum and Yaros (2004) conducted research using netnography and survey questionnaires to assess the attitude of video gamers towards product placement. The findings indicated that the gamers considered the practise acceptable only when it added realism to the game. A product placement unrelated to the content of the game produced a negative response among gamers. In addition, individuals who had negative attitudes towards advertising were negative toward product placement regardless of the use of the product to establish realism. Gamers with a positive attitude towards advertising were more likely to respond to the product placement by purchasing the product. The findings of a survey conducted by Vorhaus (2009) among teenage male video games produced similar results. The findings indicated that the gamers accepted product placement and even direct advertising in video games if it was related to the game content. These findings also appear to contradict the research of Cowley and Barron (2008) determining that prominent product placement in television programmes viewers liked produced a negative shift in attitude toward a brand.

Hernández, Chapa, Minor, Maldonado, & Barranzuela (2004) developed a model showing that negative attitudes towards product placement in games develop following the perception that the placement is intrusive, which involves interference with the goals or objectives of the consumer for using the media. The perception of intrusiveness increases the negative attitude toward the brand. The factors directly influencing the perception of intrusiveness are congruence of the product placement with game theme and the extent of the exposure in the game. Incongruence and extensive exposure increases the perception of intrusiveness. Irritation can also

influence negative perceptions towards the brand, but irritation is controlled by intrusiveness and the entertainment value of the game.

Research conducted by Lee & Faber (2007) determined that many different factors can influence brand awareness with product placement in video games. The position of visual placements in the game must be sufficiently prominent to attract the notice of the gamer when engaged in a high involvement task. Experienced players are more likely to observe and assimilate the product placement message because they are less engaged with gaming tasks. The findings also showed that the degree of continuity or relationship between the product and the game content was a critical factor for the gamer to become aware of the placement. Hernandez, Chapa, Minor, Maldonado, & Barranzuela (2004) also determined that product placements in video games involve a fantasy or a deviation from the simulated reality of the game had a negative effect on the player's attitude toward the brand.

Grigorovici & Constantin (2004) determined that the level of engagement of the video game player with the IVE influences brand recall, with greater involvement reducing recall. Brand preference tends to increase with greater player engagement. The change in brand preference resulting from playing a video game was determined by using a pre-test and post-test measure. The finding of Grigorovici & Constantin (2004) suggest that a subliminal process occurs during high engagement video game play increasing brand preference without increasing awareness or knowledge about the brand. To some degree, these findings support the argument of Ivory & Kalyanaraman (2007) indicating that technological advancement increased the level of immersion and physiological response to the video game, with content less relevant than the perceived entertainment value from playing the game. In addition, the findings are similar to those of Yaveroglu & Donthu (2008) concerning the relationship between higher brand memory of banner advertising and the relationship of the advertising to the content of websites.

According to Mathieson (2005), firms offering branded entertainment products via the internet to fixed or mobile playing platforms measure effectiveness based on the number of downloads. This approach solely examines the reach of the advertising and branding effort, with a download considered a customer contact. In addition, ratings agencies such as Nielson and game producers such as Activision have established tracking methods for internet game players to obtain information about the degree of engagement with the game and the type of brand information they have been exposed to because of play. This approach for determining effectiveness adopts the premise that

exposure to the product information will lead to greater brand awareness and a favourable image.

### **3. Research questions and objectives**

The main research question for this study is: *RQ: What are the differences in the effectiveness between” traditional product placement in video games” and the “branded entertainment approach to product placement in video games”?*

The “traditional approach” to product placement is to embed the product in the entertainment media (Winkler and Buckner, 2006). The traditional embedding can involve visual positioning, auditory mention, or use of the branded product by a character in the media (Newell et al., 2006). In the “branded entertainment approach” to product placement, the brand itself is the central aspect of the entertainment and is not merely incidental to the story or plot (Hudson and Hudson, 2006). The dependent variable for the study is effectiveness of product placement in video games, which has many different definitions. Effectiveness can include rates of aided or unaided recall of a brand (Galicia, 2007). It can also involve the influence of the placement on the favourable attitude toward by brand among consumers (Lenderman, 2006). Effectiveness includes the influence of the product placement on the willingness of the consumer to take an action such as purchasing a product (Beirne, 2008). The variable definitions of effectiveness and the difficulties with measuring these types of perceptions and reactions among consumers suggest that the approach to answering the research question should be qualitative.

A subsidiary research question derived from the main research question is: *RQ1: What are the strategies used for product placement in video games?*

In this sense, for product placement in film media, placement strategies include visual placement allowing the viewer to observe the produce, mention of the brand or product, and use of the brand or product by a character (Russell, 2009). These traditional techniques have been used in video games, but may involve different approaches to factors such as prominence or repetition (Yang et al., 2006). Video games may included other types of placement strategies including branded entertainment in which the game is played using a branded product as a theme or character (Mathieson, 2005). The different types of strategies may have an influence on the effectiveness of product placement in video games.



A second subsidiary research question is: *RQ2: What are the perceptions of marketing staffs and consumers of the effects of “traditional product placement strategies” versus “branded entertainment in video games” on the general brand awareness?*

Product placement has influences on brand awareness, although uncertain exists in research concerning the degree of the influence (Beine, 2008; Ivory and Kalyanaraman, 2007; Shrum, 2004). Brand awareness has been assessed through recall measures (Galician, 2005; Law and Braun, 2000). Variability exists, however, in the way in which recall is assessed, with some approaches examining independent recall of the placement with no secondary stimulus (Law and Braun, 2000) and other approaches examining recall following a stimulus (Lehu and Bressoud, 2007). The branded entertainment approach to product placement may result in differences in perceptions concerning awareness of the brand in addition to merely recalling or recognizing the brand after the entertainment product has been used.

A third subsidiary research question derived from the main one is: *RQ3: What are the perceptions of marketing staffs and consumers of the effects of “traditional product placement strategies” versus “branded entertainment in video games” on the awareness of specific brand attributes?*

This aspect of product placement has not been extensively examined in previous research. Winkler and Buckner (2006) as well as Yang et al. (2004) determined that product placement in video games increased brand knowledge, but did not examine the difference in effects between traditional placement and branded entertainment. The “branded entertainment approach” to product placement may provide the consumer with greater knowledge about the range of attributes the company desires to associate with a product.

A final research question is: *RQ4: How do demographic factors influence perception of the effectiveness of “traditional product placement strategies” versus “branded entertainment in video games”?*

Demographic factors can influence responsiveness and attitudes toward product placements in entertainment media (Galician, 2005). Culture can also influence attitudes towards product placement and the effectiveness of various placement strategies (Gould et al., 2005). The general theoretical model is based on the assumption that a relationship exists between product placement strategies in video games and the effectiveness of the placement for increasing brand recognition, awareness of the

brand's attributes, and a favourable impression of the brand. The theoretical model also presumes that many intervening factors can influence the relationship between product placement strategies and effectiveness such as the perceived entertainment value of the game, the degree of immersion in game play, and the thematic content of the game. As a result demographic factors function as moderating variables, influencing the relationship between product placement strategies and effectiveness.

#### **4. Methodology**

The selection of Disney for the case study was based on defined criteria and the information-oriented selection process recommended by Flyvbjerg (2006). The criteria included the use of product placement by the firm as a marketing strategy, the use of “branded entertainment approach” as part of the product placement approach, and sufficient video game products to allow consumers to be familiar with the content and product placement in the products. An additional criterion was the willingness of marketing staffs from the firm to provide data for the study. The information-oriented selection process sorts firms meeting the initial inclusion criteria based on a specific characteristic intended to provide the desired type of information. Because of its size and planned marketing procedures, Disney was considered a critical case in which conclusions about the use of product placement in the firm could be considered representative of product placement in the video gaming industry.

The data collection consisted of (1) interviews with marketing staffs from the firm, (2) a focus group conducted with consumers of Disney video games, and (3) review of information available to the public from secondary sources about Disney video games. The interview is appropriate for data collection in qualitative research because it allows the interviewees to establish the direction taken when answering open-ended questions (Darlington & Scott, 2002). The focus group is also appropriate for gathering qualitative data because it allows the participants to discuss theoretical issues using the language and terms that construct meaning from their perspective (Darlington & Scott, 2002).

Defined criteria were used to identify individuals to participate in the interview and focus group segments of the study. Because of the inclusion criteria, a purposive sampling approach using a snowball methodology was used to identify participants in the study (Gliner, Morgan, 2000). The selection process resulted in four interviewees agreeing to participate in the study and nine participants in the focus group. Table 1 and Table 2 shows some information related to the participants.

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Information Interviewees*

Interviewee Number	1	2	3	4
Date of Interview	7/7/2009	7/7/2009	9/7/2009	12/7/2009
Position	Marketing Team	Product Manager Assistance	Production Team	Marketing Team
Gender	DIMG M	DIMG M	DIMG M	DIMG M
Age	37	41	29	33
Experience at Disney	8 years	3 years	4 years	6 years

**Table 2**  
*Participants in the Focus Group*

Participant	Age	Gender	Occupation
1	32	F	Shop Worker
2	37	F	County Council Employee
3	27	M	Shop Worker
4	39	F	Estate Agent
5	42	M	IT specialist
6	23	M	Student
7	29	F	Junior School Teacher
8	36	F	Shop owner
9	34	F	Chef

The data analysis procedure involved synthesising the data obtained from the interviews, focus group, and secondary sources to create the case study. The primary data from the interviews and focus group was initially analysed using a thematic content approach. Content analysis is an appropriate method for analysis when the research

design is qualitative and the purpose of the research is to obtain information about factors that may be causally related to the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2007). The content analysis identified the themes and patterns within the data related to the research questions. It consisted of the three stages of open coding, axial coding and narrative as recommended by Daymon and Holloway (2002). The findings of the content analysis was combined with the secondary data to develop the case study of Disney's use and perceived effectiveness of product placement and branded entertainment in video games. The reliability and validity of the data was established based on the trustworthiness criteria used in qualitative research as recommended by Daymon and Holloway (2002). Trustworthiness in qualitative research is composed of the elements of credibility and dependability of the methods, and applicability to the research problem, and ability to confirm the findings of the study.

## **5. Results and discussion**

The results of the study are organised in four sections (1) a description and content analysis of the interviewees from Disney staff, (2) a description and content analysis of the focus group participants, (3) the case study of Disney based on a synthesis of the data, and (4) the discussion linking the findings to the literature review. Only some results from fourth section are shown.

The findings suggest that Disney uses a subtle approach to product placement involving the use of branded characters rather than placing specific products into the background or incorporating the product into the game play. Based on the framework for assessing product placement developed by Russell (1999), Disney uses the most sophisticated product placement strategy by incorporating the product, which is the branded character, into the action of the game play. The effect is to create closer alignment between the entertainment product in the form of the video game and the branded product in the form of the character, which is the outcome of branded entertainment proposed by Hudson and Hudson (2006).

The interviewees indicated that the current strategy is to use video games as an extension of a branded entertainment product based on the assumption that increasing the number of game players increases the general market awareness of the branded character, and therefore leads to sales of other products associated with the character. The results also suggest that the "branded entertainment approach" to product placement may be more effective for increasing brand awareness and a favourable

impression of the brand than the more “traditional product placement approaches” of depicting a product in the background or the use or mention of a product by a character. Previous researchers have also found that carefully managed product placement in video games can increase brand awareness among gamers (Kuhn et al., 2004; Winkler and Buckner, 2006; Yang et al., 2004).

The concern of many focus group participants that product placement in all entertainment media including video games has a stronger effect on children conforms to the findings of Calvert (2008). The participants suggested that children do not recognise a product placement incorporated into the theme or content of the game as advertising or marketing. The results further suggest that Disney does not excessively use product placement in video games (is not intrusive); with the participants in the focus group indicating that the use of branded characters in the game is appropriate.

The findings also suggested that determining the effectiveness of product placement strategies in video games is complex because product placement interacts with other variables such as the degree of general engagement with the game. These results are similar to those of Grigorovici and Constantin (2004) who determined that the perceived entertainment value of the video game influences the gamers’ attitudes toward product placement.

The participants of the focus group reached no conclusion concerning the perceived effect of the video game on the purchase intentions of the children playing the games. The participants also suggested that the purchase intentions are driven by the affinity of the child for the branded character, with any product associated with a likeable character considered desirable.

The results provide evidence to refute the argument of Winkler and Buckner (2006) that branded entertainment should be considered an advergame under all situations. The interviewees and participants in the focus group considered the video games to be primarily an entertainment medium with some advertising or branding elements incorporated into the game. The participants in the focus group distinguished between a video game created around an existing product and a video game using a character created for entertainment purposes.

## **6. Conclusions and recommendations**

The findings of the study supports the conclusion that the branded-entertainment approach to product placement in video games is more effective for achieving greater brand awareness and positive brand perceptions than the traditional product placement approach of placing the product into the content of the video game. The traditional approach to product placement in video games is to embed an audio or visual reference to the brand in the game or to have the player use a branded product to perform a task associated with game play (Russell, 1999). This approach appears to be a direct transfer of the techniques used in film, television and other passive entertainment media. In the branded-entertainment approach in video games, the entire game functions as a product placement, with the gamer interacting with the branded character (Winkler & Buckner, 2006). The findings of the study indicated that Disney, the producer of the video games using the branded entertainment approach, believed that it was more effective for increasing awareness among consumers of the attributes associated with both the branded character and the overall Disney brand. The findings of the study also indicated that consumers of the video games find the use of a branded character less objectionable than the use of a direct product placement as occurs in other entertainment media and video games that do not use branded entertainment.

The findings of the study also support the conclusion that the strategy used for product placement in video games can have an influence on brand awareness. Prior research has determined that product placement in video games affects brand awareness because the gamer becomes immersed in play of the game and reduces mental barriers to processing advertising and brand information (Yang, Roskos-Ewolden, Dinu, & Arpan, 2006). The findings of the study suggested that branded entertainment in which the brand is the subject of all video game activities may be highly effective for indirectly or implicitly communicating information about brand attributes to the game player. The interviewees from Disney indicated that the approach was effective for communicating the attributes of both the character and the Disney brand. The participants in the focus group also indicated that they had a positive perception of the Disney brand because of its use of branded characters in video games.

An additional conclusion of the study is that product placement in video games has the potential to generate negative brand equity if the placement is intrusive or perceived as a deceptive advertising practise. If the brand placement is incongruent with the content of the video game and if the brand is excessively repeated in the game, it contributes to the perception that the brand placement is intrusive (Hernandez, Chapa,

Minor, Maldonado, & Barranzuela, 2004). The perception of intrusiveness results in negative attitudes toward the brand and an ultimate reduction in brand equity. In a worst-case situation, gamers become so annoyed with the brand placement that they avoid purchasing the brand. The findings of the study, however, indicated that this type of problem with the perception of intrusiveness is less likely to occur with branded entertainment. The gamer has an expectation that the brand in the form of the character will be an integral aspect of game play. In effect, the gamer accepts that a character product will be part of the gaming activity before engaging in play. The study, however, did not provide sufficient information to determine the degree that this expectation of encountering a branded character during the course of play affects the way in which the gamer processes the implicit marketing message. Theoretically, consumers process product placement information differently from other forms of advertising (Shrum, 2004). The mechanisms that consumers used to process branded entertainment messages may also differ from the mechanisms used to process information conveyed by traditional product placements.

The issue of greater acceptability among consumers of product placement in video games by using a branded entertainment approach is particularly relevant to large multinational firms that create video game products for international distribution. Cultural differences can have a significant influence on the perception of the appropriateness of product placement strategies (Stafford & Faber, 2005). As a result, the branded character approach with no other brands placed in the video game may provide multinational firms developing products for international sales with a general product placement strategy that is acceptable across cultures. Disney uses only a branded entertainment approach to product placement in video games and very sparingly places brands not already associated with the branded character into the video game. As a result, the firm increases the marketability of the product in all geographic regions where the video game is distributed. The conclusion that can be drawn from the findings is that a branded entertainment approach in which the only placement involves a branded character may be more effective for firms in international markets for increasing acceptance of the product than the traditional approach of video or audio insertions of a product into a video game.

An additional conclusion of the study is that the demographics of the target market for a video game should influence the product placement strategy. The Disney video games are targeted at a child and young adolescent demographic. In theory, this demographic is more susceptible to marketing messages using product placement (Calvert, 2008). At the same time, video games aimed at this market have to ensure they

conform with regulations in different nations concerning marketing to children as well as the perceptions of the adults that often make the purchases of video games. The findings of the study support the conclusion that the adults involved with video gaming with children find the branded entertainment approach an acceptable marketing method. Although playing the video game reinforces the interest of the child in the entertainment and other products related to the character, the adults perceive the marketing aspects as secondary or subordinate to the entertainment value. In addition, findings indicated that Disney designs its video games to market its branded characters to children in a manner that adults deem acceptable.

The findings of the study also support the conclusion that the branded entertainment approach to product placement can be used to increase existing brand knowledge and to introduce the brand to consumers that have no prior knowledge of the brand. In theory, product placement in video games as well as other media functions as a means to communicate information about the attributes of the brand by associating the brand with the content of the game (Pardun & McKee, 2000). The purchase or internet play of a video game with a specific character depends to some degree on the prior awareness of the consumer of the attributes of the branded character. In most cases, the consumer is initially attracted to the branded entertainment video game because of a pre-existing affinity for the branded character as well as the presumed entertainment value of the game. As a result, the consumer often has some level of knowledge and awareness of the attributes associated with the character. The video game functions to reinforce and build on an existing knowledge base. Ideally, the outcome is for the consumer to have a positive gaming experience, increasing awareness and affinity for the branded character. At the same time, the video game has to be designed to provide some information about character attributes to consumers that have no prior knowledge of the character. This dual process suggests that the branded entertainment approach to video game content is more complex than the traditional approaches in which products are merely placed into the game environment. As noted by the interviewees from Disney, the development of a video game using a branded character requires close coordination among software developers, game content planners, and marketing.

### **6.1. *Limitations of the research***

The findings and conclusions of this research are limited by the use of the case study approach, which focused on the video game products produced by Disney. The Disney brand is well-established in the market for children's and young adult entertainment products. As a result, the firm has a strong emphasis on protecting its



existing brand equity and avoids using product placement strategies that the firm perceives as representing a risk to its brand equity. The findings and conclusions of the study may not reflect the attitude of consumers towards product placement and branded entertainment products of firms that do not have a well-established reputation in the marketplace. In addition, the conclusions and findings of the study may not reflect the perspectives of adult gamers toward product placement in video games. In addition, Disney does not use a range of different product placement strategies in video games, which limits the ability to assess the perception of differences among consumers of the product.

## ***6.2. Recommendations for future research***

While the findings and conclusions of this study indicated that the branded entertainment approach to product placement in video games is more effective in a children's target market than the traditional approaches to product placement, it did not assess product placement strategies among other demographic groups. Future research should examine the specific attitudinal, awareness, and recall responses of consumers through a direct comparison of the different types of product placement strategies used in video games. This type of research should assess the response of consumers in carefully defined demographic segments to products placed in video games using various combinations of audio, visual and character use of the product to more carefully determine the differences between these product placement strategies and the branded entertainment product placement strategy.

Future research should also examine the extent that branded entertainment approaches to product placement in video games can be linked to traditional product placement methods. The combination of branded characters and traditional product placement has been successful in film for creating brand awareness for the product when it is associated with the branded character and the product is relevant to the plot of the film. It is not certain, however, whether this same effect would occur with a video game.

## **Appendix A**

### Interview Questions

1. What is Disney's approach to product placement in its entertainment products?
2. How does Disney's approach to product placement in video games differ from product placement in its films or other entertainment products?
3. How does Disney use branded entertainment? (Explain: Branded entertainment refers to the use of a branded character as the central character of the story line or content in a video game.)
4. How does Disney assess the effectiveness of product placement and branded entertainment in video games?
5. What is the relationship between product placement in video games and consumer awareness of the Disney brand and its attributes?
6. In what ways can product placement in video games create negative attitudes towards brands among the players of the games?
7. What methods does Disney use to ensure that product placement and branded entertainment video games result in a positive attitude toward the Disney brand among players?

## **Appendix B**

### Focus Group Guidelines

Moderator will initially define the meaning of the product placement and branded entertainment concept. The moderator will also ensure that the participants understand the concepts.

1. What is your attitude toward product placement in video games?
2. Do you have a different attitude towards product placement in video games than in films or television shows?
3. What type of product placement in video games do you find annoying?

4. Have you ever played a Disney video game online? If so, which ones?
5. What do you remember about your experiences playing these games?
6. Have you ever played a Disney video game offline? If so, which ones?
7. What do you remember about your experiences playing these games?
8. What is your attitude towards Disney games that are based on a Disney character such as Hannah Montana or Bolt?
9. If you played a Disney video game with children, do you think that the characters or products used in the game had an influence on their attitudes?
10. Did playing a Disney video game motivate you to purchase another Disney product related to the character in the video game?

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**Ivie**

Guardia Civil, 22 - Esc. 2, 1º  
46020 Valencia - Spain  
Phone: +34 963 190 050  
Fax: +34 963 190 055

**Website:** <http://www.ivie.es>  
**E-mail:** [publicaciones@ivie.es](mailto:publicaciones@ivie.es)