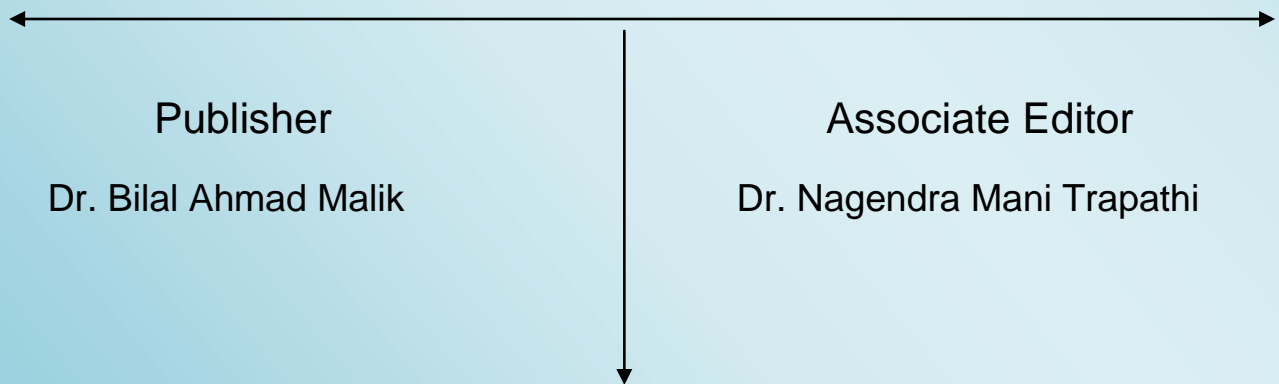


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## Of Vodka Martini and Aston Martin-The lure of the big screen: A closer look at product placements as a promotion option- A case study of ‘Fashion’ and ‘Aisha’

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Advertising is not new, people from the industry say that it is in-fact as old as the hills, literally having begun as early as the Egyptian civilization. Accounts of traders in ancient times, advertising their wares to increase their chances of sales, abound many academic and non-academic texts. Over the years advertising has changed form/shape, style, approach and platforms. What has not changed however, is the penchant to influence the mindset of the consumer. Product placement in films, a considerably recent derivation of advertising, has its roots in Hollywood films. Products began to be displayed in as early a film as The Garage, a 1919 comic caper with the famous Buster Keaton in the lead. This trend which began in the twentieth century continues to be a popular form of promoting products even in recent years. The present paper explores the concept of product placement in Hindi films with a special focus on the kinds of products being promoted, the manner in which the entire process takes shape and the fit between the product being promoted and the story-line of the film. The paper draws strength from the Agenda Setting theory to understand the present phenomenon.*

**Keywords:** Product placement, Films, Agenda Setting.

### **INTRODUCTION**

History reveals that the Neanderthal man communicated extensively regarding his life, struggles and survival through the innumerable cave paintings. These pictorial remnants are a legacy of a past that is a rich tapestry of man's evolution. Much later the Egyptians etched their messages on papyrus creating a unique platform of communication; this according to many represents the beginning of advertising.

As time progressed the messages turned to wall paintings and carvings, proof of which can be found in the ruins of Greece and Rome to this day. In ancient India, the traditional way of sending a message was the beating

of drums. Thanks to the industrial revolution and the invention of the Guttenberg printing press, communication got a huge boost and things were never the same again. India being under the control of a colonial power got a firsthand experience of the said invention since the British introduced the technology, albeit for a selfish motive-governance. With dramatic changes happening in the field of communication, advertising got a much needed thrust and fillip. What had begun as a hesitant overture by tradesmen and marketers to display wares to seek the attention of the prospective buyer, became a game changer for most business houses by the early twentieth century.

Over a span of sixty odd years advertising has grown remarkably leading to the belief that the domain has experienced a change nothing short of a revolution. With the establishment of the first advertising agency *N. W. Ayer* in Philadelphia, the world of advertising became legitimate and formalized. Advertisements progressed from print to radio and then to television. The entry of broadcast media brought in many changes in the field of advertising such as the change in nomenclature- advertisements began to be referred to as TVCs or television commercials- and the seriousness with which businesses began to relate to the field of advertising, are just a few changes to begin with.

With films becoming a popular medium by the early twentieth century it was not long before advertisements made their way to this new platform. From the simple straightforward product advertisements placed before the commencement of a film and during the interval break, things changed dramatically for advertising. The idea was to inveigle the message of the product into the story line of the film to gain greater visual presence as well as legitimacy. The power of moving images was very apparent and marketers did not want to leave any stone unturned in their quest to capture the attention of the buyer. The process and concept of product placement had begun.

Films have been a very important part of Indian society ever since its inception in the early twentieth century. Starting from the era of silent films-iconized by the father of Indian cinema Dada Saheb Phalke- to the latest from the stock of young directors of India, people have loved, adored and made films a part and parcel of their lives. The acceptance has been so great that people have started to connect with on-screen characters and subsequently modified their behaviour and lifestyle in accordance to the latest trends shown in films. Film goers are so blinded by the film stars that they readily accept endorsements and advertising messages presented by their favourite actors.

Advertisement messages thus placed either as product placements or endorsements in films have begun to have a strong impact on peoples' tastes. The fact of the matter here is actors are not only believed but the products they endorse take on a special aura influencing consumers and their buying behaviour.

Significant research has been conducted on celebrity endorsement, which reveals that consumers take in the information given through the endorsements which they then evaluate, using the credibility standards, and finally accept the same. There are enough and more questions being asked about the efficacy and power of celebrity endorsement with varied opinions being passed off as answers to questions posed, with nothing conclusive emanating from such ongoing discussions. Many in the advertising industry however agree that celebrity endorsements help the brand achieve quick recognition and effective brand recall.

There have been instances when companies have resorted to celebrity intervention especially during crisis situations. Examples abound in the Indian context. After the beating that Cadbury India took during the 'worm-in-the-chocolate' crisis, it was left to the good offices of superstar Amitabh Bachchan to resort to public bonding through certain select advertisements to improve the tarnished image of Cadbury. Still later when the two Cola giants (Coke and Pepsi) faced the wrath of the consumer forum in India for toxic chemicals in their respective drinks, it was again left to yet another popular figure from the Hindi film industry to resurrect their individual images. The irreverent and funny Coca-Cola advertisements of Aamir Khan, went a long way in creating acceptance in the minds of the prospective consumer. Notwithstanding the advertisements, Coca-Cola used Aamir Khan to mouth many public service announcements to clear the air regarding pesticides in the Cola drinks.

Advertisers have time and again used film personalities to drive home the promotion message. The on-screen persona of the actors goes a long way in convincing people to buy a product. The move from celebrity endorsements to product placements in films has been a smooth one. Not only do film stars endorse a product while wearing the actors' hat but the characters they play on screen too lend their support and might to the campaign at hand.

This phenomenon can be understood if seen through the lens of the Agenda Setting theory propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. The theory essentially gives emphasis to the power of select communicators- in this case mass media- and its effect on the communication process involving the general public. People are impressed with the persona of the iconic communicator (using the mass media platform) and allow themselves to be molded to the extent that their very thought process is affected. In other words, public

opinion and public perception is influenced by the use of choice media. Media professionals and celebrities thus are successful in setting up the agenda for discussion and debate.

Marketing professionals have been successful for quite some-time now in bringing about a change in people's thinking, tastes, understanding and perspective by leveraging the message through celebrities using mass media channels. It is not surprising, therefore, to find people buying and subsequently using products that have been vouched for by their favourite celebrity on TV or in film.

Hollywood has been vociferous in its use of the film space to influence public opinion. From the earliest forays of the Lumiere brothers' short films to the latest 2 hour long production, film professionals have sought out marketers to showcase consumer products. The financial benefits are very apparent to anyone who has a keen sense of the money. The film maker gets a much needed financial boost with the advertisers queuing to place their products on film and advertisers in-turn get the much needed public attention they seek. So we have a male protagonist who will swear by a brand of coffee on screen and the female lead will be equally passionate about a brand of car or personal accessory. Iconic stars paid to mouth great words in favour of a product influence sales like nothing does. The credibility of the marketing message is indeed high if a product is used by a character in a film.

Product placement has been a tried and tested tool to convey the idea of a product. Coke-a-Cola, Pepsi, Oreo cookies, Nike, D&G, liquor brands like Vodka, car brands like Aston Martin have used product placement to promote the products with great success. Nicole Kidman's character *Suzanne Stone-Maretto* in the film '*To Die For*' gave a boost to *J C Penny's* off the rack clothing brand. Julia Roberts's character Vivian Ward in '*Pretty Women*' endorsed popular brands such as Armani and Calvin Klien as displayed in the popular Beverly Hills store Boulmiche. James Bond followers cannot imagine their favourite secret service agent drinking anything other than his signature vodka martini (shaken not stirred) iconized in the very first Bond film '*Dr. No*', but over the years marketers have tried to insert new drinks into his repertoire. The change has happened keeping in mind the popularity of the Bond franchise with the global audience and has, therefore, taken advantage of the Bond brand to sell their products. The attempt has been made by many manufacturing companies to take the product placement route for popularizing their goods across the world. BMW, Avis and L'Oreal are the additional entrants to the world of product placement, choosing to make use of the Bond brand, as seen in the 1997 Bond film '*Skyfall*'. Since the 1990s the international man of mystery is seen sipping Heineken, clearly indicating a preference and liking for variety, shifting away from the tired old stuff.

The past years have seen producers/directors and the advertisers putting a great deal of effort in deciding beforehand how the script would progress and how and where the products could be strategically placed within the frame while maintaining the aesthetics of the film. So fine-tuned are marketers that the details of the product are worked within the story line of the film seamlessly to give it the much needed position in the scheme of things.

In India too, Hindi films have successfully used product placement to reap benefits on all fronts and for all concerned. Hindi film makers have understood the power of celebrity associations and have thankfully become clever users of product placement for promoting products.

This calls for extensive research on the product, the film, story-line, credibility/image of the film stars shown using the product on screen. The popularity of the actors, director and the production house is very crucial for the success of the promotion. If the team is a strong one, it is bound to positively affect the outcome of the promotion strategy. A case in point are two Hindi films Madhur Bhandarkar's '*Fashion*' and Rajshree Ojha's '*Aisha*', that went on to become extremely successful at the box-office for a variety of reasons.

Both films draw heavily on product placement for the much required finances and advertisers on their part placed a stream of products in the two films by way of promotion tactics. With author backed roles and a strong sense of the individual, the female leads in the two films ensure an impactful presence for the diverse products displayed.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It is on record that product placement made its presence felt as early as the first films made by the Lumiere brothers. Jean-Marc Lehu (2007) suggests that films produced by Auguste and Louis Lumiere in 1876, were made at the request of a representative of the Lever Brothers in France, subsequently their early forays into film making by way of the short films displayed *Sunlight* soap, a popular brand of soap from the house of Lever.

According to John Dudovskiy, a marketing professional writing in his article 'Product Placement as an Effective Marketing Strategy' says this.... "Product placement is a marketing strategy that has accidentally evolved a few decades ago. Nevertheless, the efficiency of the product placement has been spotted by professionals and since then various companies engage in product placement activities in various levels with varying efficiency."

Most of the studies have focused on the nature and prevalence of product placement and can be found in the works of DeLorme & Reid (1999), Sapolsky & Kinney (1994), Avery & Ferraro (2000). The very obvious conclusions that can be made from all the above studies are that firstly product placement is fairly common in movies, secondly the majority of product placements are for low-involvement products, and lastly the automobile industry accounts for 18% of all product placements (Sapolsky & Kinney, 1994).

Product Placement is a widely used tool of marketing communication. The effectiveness and its reach to the audience is seen in the paper titled *Communication Strategies to Enhance the Effectiveness of Product Placement in Movies: The Case of Comparative Appeal.* by Alain d'Astous, Chems Berrada (2011).

Denise E. DeLorme and Leonard N. Reid, in their paper titled *Moviegoers Experience and Interpretation of Brands Revisited* state that regardless of age or movie going frequency, the informants are active participants in the viewing experience and actively interpret brands encountered in the movies. However, to the older movie goers, brands in movies symbolize social change whereas to the younger informants, they symbolize belonging and security (1999).

According to Kishore Budha, PhD scholar from the Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, UK, who while writing in his blog **Edit Room** (a part of the Wide Screen Journal Editor's blog) says this- "the lines between advertising and content are constantly thinning, partly thanks to new distribution technologies such as internet, browsers, mobile digital video and audio players..... Films and product inserts share multi-layered relationships. On one hand, film texts cannot escape the 'afilmic' reality. Thus the relationship between the plot/theme of a film and the product inserts is pre-determined by the real and ordinary world from which they are derived. However, at the consumption level of the spectator we can theorize two separate phenomena, first the film being sought as yet another good, and second the product cameos as further information about other goods. However, the product cameos do not appear as disjunctures in the narrative but as natural habitants of the diegesis".

Product placement in Indian movies is not something new. A discernible trend as regards using storyline of the film to advertise products has been noticed in the recent past. The products chosen for advertising through this medium have varied from automobiles to soft drinks, garments, gift items, services, pharmaceuticals to name a few (Kaur, 2014).



Product Placement in movies as an advertising medium has an edge over others. Brand awareness increases with captive audience which in turn increases consumer memory and recall of the brand. Films are an effective platform to bring desired change in consumers' attitudes or overall evaluations of the brand (Kaur, 2014).

There is an instant recognition of the product/brand in the media vehicle, more so at the point of purchase. It is able to bring out a favourable change in the audiences' purchase behaviours. The cost of product placement is quite low as compared to the above-the-line methods of advertising or endorsement. Unlike advertising, product placement does not interrupt programming and hence is less obtrusive. Products gain greater credibility when popular and respected movie and television stars use them. This medium has more reach as the film's release in a wide geographical area and across borders, increases the brand's corporate image manifold (Kaur, 2014).

## METHODOLOGY

The present paper seeks to build a better understanding of product placement as a promotion tool by analyzing the process of product placement as carried out in two Hindi films-*Fashion* directed by Madhur Bhandarkar, starring Priyanka Chopra, Kangana Ranaut and Mugdha Godse (release date 2008) and *Aisha* directed by Rajshree Ojha starring Sonam Kapoor and Abhay Deol (release date 2010).

The primary data for the present research paper is drawn from content analysis and expert interview giving a clear picture about the role played by product placement in attracting the attention of the prospective consumer.

The secondary data is culled from select articles in journals, newspapers, magazines, both off-line and on-line. Further validation for the present research comes from the existing research work on the said topic.

### Content Analysis

Content Analysis involves a careful and meticulous screening and analysis of varied content- text, visuals, song lyrics, colour, design- anything that can be interpreted to create meaning and add to the larger understanding of things. The content of the two films selected by the researcher in the present context have many scenes in which multiple products are shown i.e. product placement has been utilized.

## Expert Interviews

All research require some form of expert validation. With this objective an expert interview was conducted enabling the present research to grow in strength and substance. The expert interview adds the much needed informed perspective to the research.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### I Content Analysis

The first film scrutinized is Madhur Bhandarkar's *Fashion* featuring Priyanka Chopra, Kangana Ranaut and Mugdha Godse. The story traverses the growth of a small town girl who goes through a huge transformation- from being an insignificant element of the fashion world to becoming an iconic figure. Though male characters abound the film they do not play a significant role in taking the story ahead. Barring the negative character played by Arbaaz Khan, all other male roles are small and insignificant.

The film is largely women centric and predominantly caters to a young audience. The director, Madhur Bhandarkar is known for his path-breaking films especially when it comes to dealing with issues related to women. His other films like *Page-3* and *Heroine* have had similar plot lines with strong empowered women as the lead character. Bhandarkar makes sure that the audience is kept engaged in the film with a liberal use of sex, glamour and gloss- the three main components of his women-centric films.

*Fashion* fared well at the box office, considering that the collection crossed 60 crore rupees. This movie claims to be Madhur's highest grossing film till date. The movie won two awards at the 56 National Film Awards. The movie also garnered critical appreciation for Priyanka as well as Kangana for their acting skills and for Madhur for bringing out the seamy side of the fashion industry.

The second film *Aisha*, directed by Rajshree Ojha, is based on *Emma* a novel by Jane Austen. The story revolves around a young woman born with the proverbial silver spoon, who sets out to change people's lives, much to the discomfort of her near and dear ones. Her penchant for matchmaking creates more trouble than ever in her otherwise planned and organized world. Sonam Kapoor playing the indulged and spoilt socialite with a heart of gold (displaced though are the good intentions) was commended for her acting skills. Aply supporting her in the film are Abhay Deol, Arunoday Singh, Cyrus Sahukar, Lara Hayden, Ira Dubey and M K Raina.

The film though not a stupendous success was popular with the young viewer for the fabulous clothing and accessories displayed by the characters.

In *Fashion*, four popular products find a placement within the story-line- L'oreal, Sunsilk, Lenovo and Kimaya. Of these L'oreal and Kimaya are pitched at the high end consumer. Sunsilk and Lenovo allude to the low end or the middle class consumer. This is done by showing the iconic figures of the fashion industry using the former products showing their money power and clout, while the struggling heroine, essayed by Priyanka Chopra is seen using Lakme and Lenovo. With success Priyanka changes over to the high end products clearly indicating that an achiever does not settle for the low brow products. The strategy works well for the products. The placing of the products are done with a lot of care and study so as to fit into the story-line seamlessly. When the heroine (Priyanka Chopra) is on the ramp, modeling clothes, partying with the movers and shakers of society or having dinner with the society big-wigs she is clearly sporting high end products like L'oreal and Kimaya. She is given the special treatment as befits a top model by her designers and make-up team using only high end products like L'oreal and Kimaya on her. In contrast when she is at home her dresser –drawer displays Lakme very prominently, clearly indicating that high end products are within her access only at her work place which is the very epitome of the fashion world- strewn with the best of the fashion products. Thus by placing high end products as inspirational the marketers succeed in pitching the said products to the targeted consumer- who are in a position to afford the high end products. With such planned positioning not only do the consumers benefit (they know clearly the nature and class of the product), but the marketers are able to create the right kind of image/brand out of such positioning.

In *Aisha* too, a successful positioning is achieved for the varied products. The most dominant product placements in the movie are for L'oreal, Elle, Christian Dior and Louis Vuitton. The female lead (actor Sonam Kapoor) is an image conscious socialite who is a fervent brand follower. The scenes and sequences thus lend themselves to positioning the cosmetic, clothing and accessory line. Whenever the heroine is seen dressing up for an outing or event, the many products of L'oreal are showcased brilliantly The L'oreal, products exhibited are rouge/blusher, lip gloss, eyeliner, eyeshadow, lipsticks and lip colourants, wide range of lotions and a host of beauty products that the brand is famous for. The product is shown clearly and the camera focuses on the brand name before a close-up shot of the heroine is seen applying the products on herself. The pattern is repeated several times in the film. The L'oreal brand is shown seven times during the course of the entire movie.

The second product that finds itself successfully positioned in the movie is Elle magazine. This magazine is touted as one of the most prestigious magazines in the world as far as fashion is concerned. This magazine is largely targeted at upper class and upper middle class youngsters who are extremely fashion conscious and are fortunate enough to be in a financial position/bracket to indulge in such pastimes. The placement of the magazine is done strategically, where-in the magazine is placed near the bedside of the protagonist at the very start of the movie. This helps in building the image of the character and nature of the heroine, which is that of a moneyed, classy, brand conscious young socialite. The magazine gets to be focused upon several times in the course of the story-line. The objective is to emphatically establish the idea of the young lady to be viewed as a fashionista of sorts doling out fashion advice to all and sundry. Thus her preoccupation with a top fashion magazine, her keen sense of fashion, the need to always be kitted out in the best- every single image gels to create a world of money, class, breeding and high fashion. Through it all a constant companion to this young lady is Elle magazine, which is prominently seen when she travels all the way to Rishikesh on a camping trip with her close friends. Even in the confines of the tent, *Aisha*, the protagonist, is found reading the magazine along with her friend who is newly introduced to the world of fashion and is seen desperate to be considered fashionable, having come to the city recently from a small town. The magazine is showcased three times in total. *Aisha* takes her new friend under her wing to make her more city-friendly or city-worthy- read-mall hopping, brand conscious and city styled. Such a scenario begs for the afore mentioned products like L'oreal, Elle, Christian Dior and Louis Vuitton products which helps in building a distinct up-market identity.

The film also shows the heroine *Aisha* driving a yellow Volkswagen Beetle. The car is shown to be driven around recklessly with no care for the people or traffic around. This was supposedly done to show-case the German engineering of the car company which stands for sturdy rather than style. The car is shown five times in the film, and each occasion has the heroine behind the wheel. The idea was to appeal to the female car purchaser for a change, since most car advertising invariably targets the male.

Both the films promote varied products meant for both low end as well as high end consumers. While *Fashion* sees the products being promoted in a manner many would consider contrived or forced, *Aisha* promotes products with a greater sense of ownership, in that the story seems to afford itself towards the promotion of the products- there is a seamless flow in the manner in which the characters endorse the products being displayed. Contrarily in *Fashion*, the sense of artificiality is

heightened creating a more disruptive image of the product than the viewer would have liked to have had.

A second facet of product promotion done in both the films is the fact that while in *Fashion* the promotion happens only in the first half with nothing being overtly promoted in the second half, in *Aisha* product placement happens through the entirety of the film. The obvious feeling of trying too hard that one unfortunately gets in *Fashion* is thankfully absent in *Aisha*.

Both the movies are feminist in their premise in that both represent a strong women centric perspective taking a pro women stand, be it posing questions of women's stand in choosing a life partner, living life according to ones' own terms, in matter of employment and so on, yet while *Fashion* is dark, serious and broody, *Aisha* is a lighthearted, feel good movie with a lot of happily-ever-afters. Both movies thus have very specified audiences targeted even within the female viewer. While *Fashion* makes a case out for single, ambitious, bolder women who are not necessarily from the big city, *Aisha* targets the urban, educated, cultured, big city girl who is yet to make a mark for herself and is still under the protection and care of a patriarchal figure. Thus the products placed in the two movies are expected to attract the attention of a wide spectrum of female audience, one way or the other. It can be said decidedly that product placement does pay dividends after having been placed in such movies.

## II Expert Interview

Mr. Swapnil Shinde of **Seagull Advertising Agency**, Pune and Mr. Sumesh S a freelance advertising consultant, spoke extensively on the concept of product placement in Hindi films in recent times. Both agree that product placement is indeed a popular form of promoting products in the market today. While Swapnil is of the opinion that there is an increasing shift towards this form of promotion since the other advertising platforms such as posters, billboards and OOH advertising though have their benefits, product placement has the strength of celebrity endorsement. The fact that the screen characters are seen to be using the products come as a huge boost to consumers for reciprocating in kind and thereby end up purchasing the products. The celebrity association is very crucial to the popularity of the products shown on screen. Further, Mr.Swapnil draws the researcher's attention to a very important feature of product placement which is-the essential simplicity of the

idea. In industry parlance product placement is considered do able and well within one's reach of achievable goals, thus its popularity.

Both Swapnil and Sumesh agree that products get a very good coverage through such placements in movies and that they cannot for-see any other platform that can provide the kind of exposure that product placement can. They also are of the opinion that certain products fare well in the realms of product placement, in that they are highly suited for the film platform. Generally FMCGs (fast moving consumer goods), automobiles, clothing, electronic goods lend themselves to product placement. Products more esoteric and abstract do not find a place in the scheme of things as far as product placement goes. For example alcoholic beverages, contentious/controversial products like cigarettes, medicines cannot be easily placed within the story line of the movie. Both the experts however are of the opinion that advertisers are trying their best to include almost anything as part of the product placement repertoire and in future we may get to see a wide spectrum of products taking to the screen to woo the viewer.

## CONCLUSION

In an era of tremendous mass media proliferation information is a vital commodity that is considered a product of primacy and high value. The disseminators of information are seen as purveyors of change and creators of impact. It goes without saying that media professionals over the years have become iconic figures to be revered and taken seriously, so much so that the levels of influence they wrest on the content consumer is nothing short of stupendous. The influence of mass media has never been stronger than the present time. Be it news coverage, TV/Radio discussions, sports commentaries, quiz programmes or a reality show- the media agenda is very clear. In an era of heightened consumerism where everything is for sale to the highest bidder, the race to control the minds of the consumer is at a peak. Post LPG (Liberalisation, Privatisation & Globalisation), things are no different in India. Like the West where media has a stronghold on the human mind and thinking, here too a similar scenario is being played out with very similar results. Newspapers, magazines, TV/Radio channels, on-line media function with the sole purpose of pandering to big business. Barring few exceptions as is wont to happen in every society or community, media largely has only one agenda which is to appeal to consumers, to be able to push forward the business agenda of companies and corporates. It may be a local politico, an educationist running a school, an officer from a renowned bank, a celebrity from the film industry, a sports personality or a local community leader, all have been successfully co-opted into the media agenda system.

Never has the theory of agenda setting been more potent than now, with media messages maintaining a constant high decibel to attract the attention of the prospective buyer.

The market today is inundated with consumer centric messages, pressuring the average Joe in the market to bow down under pressure and purchase commodities that he would hardly need or want. There is little or no thought at all given to the ethics of media content since much of media ownership ironically is in the hands of big business and corporates. It comes as no surprise that the information hegemony that Antonio Gramsci spoke of in the early twentieth century finds a strong resonance in present day market era.

Product placement seen against the backdrop of media agenda setting indicates a clear path to the future of film promotion. It is no longer the loudest voice that will win over the undecided buyer, it is the voice of the celebrity, and it is the voice of the planned marketer who through skillful use of the film format will successfully inveigle into the minds of the consumer to influence them to buy commodities or subscribe to a philosophy.

So the next time we see James Bond hurtling in his latest four wheeler that is as good as his old Aston Martin, we can be assured that the top British spy himself is not immune to the best of the message creator from the advertising world, proving yet again that the lure of the big screen is too strong to ignore.

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