

## **Brands as the real heroes of the movies: Between praise and criticism**

Maud Derbaix  
Associate Professor  
Head of the Expertise Centre Creative Industries and Culture  
Kedge Business School  
maud.derbaix@kedgebs.com

Maud Derbaix is Associate Professor of Marketing at Kedge Business School, France and Head of the Expertise Center Creative Industries and Culture. Her research focuses on consumer behavior in the context of artistic and cultural activities, in particular music, cinema, live performances and heritage.

Marek Prokupek  
Assistant Professor  
Kedge Business School  
marek.prokupek@kedgebs.com

Marek Prokupek is Assistant Professor at Kedge Business School, France and a member of the Expertise Centre Creative Industries and Culture. His research interests lie in the area of business models of arts and cultural organizations, finance in arts and cultural sector and fundraising and philanthropy in museums and its ethical aspects and dilemmas.

### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of our research is to better understand consumers' perceptions to brands fully integrated into films. beyond mere product placement. More specifically, we focus on films where brands play a key role - from the product/brand supporting or saving the hero in a particular situation to the product/brand being the real hero of the film - and try to understand whether branded entertainment can be a source of reflection for consumers and have an impact on society and culture (the social/societal role of brands) or, conversely, provoke more criticism of brands and the film industry (the purely commercial/promotional role of brands in films). Our research is part of a trend that invites us to go beyond the characteristics of execution and effectiveness of product placement to focus more on the dynamic links between placement and entertainment content.

**Keywords:** Product placement, movies, plot integration, branded entertainment, exploratory research

## Introduction

*“Despite the undeniable talent of Margot Robbie, Ryan Gosling and Greta Gerwig, it goes without saying that since the film is a Mattel production, which doesn't shy away from taking up a large part of the narrative, it's not a philanthropic enterprise, constantly flattering the brand, including through the sieve of self-mockery, a highly effective weapon of mass seduction, when it imposes very precise limits on itself. Visually, Barbie is nonsense for the eyes, and we'll leave it up to you to decide whether the message is relevant, clever, outrageous or stupid”.* (Allociné, Spectator)

In a film industry dominated by superheroes, franchises and remakes, the "Barbie" film caused a surprise in 2023 by topping the billion-dollar mark at the global box office. Never has a film directed by a woman - Greta Gerwig, a leading figure in the “revival” of women directors - made so much money. Despite the criticism that the film may have provoked - some see it as a two-hour commercial – many agree that the director's vision of Barbie has redefined the image of this icon of popular culture and, above all, brought a truly unexpected feminist dimension to the character. In other words, in this feature film, the Barbie brand is the real heroine of the film, renewing its positioning while offering a reflection on our society. This summer's blockbuster is obviously one of the most extreme examples of product placement in movies. But many earlier films have also integrated brands into their plots - with varying degrees of success : certain brands have been at the heart of the story (e.g. Coca-Cola in *The Gods Must be Crazy*, 1981; Facebook in *The Social Network*, 2010), brands have supported (e.g. DeLorean in the saga *Back to the Future* beginning in 1985; Wilson in *Cast Away*, 2000) or even saved (e.g. Apple in *Independence day*, 1996; Head & Shoulder in *Evolution*, 2001) the main characters in the film, or brands, like Barbie, have been the real heroes of the film (e.g. Volkswagen's Beetle in *The Love Bug*, 1968; *The Lego Movie*, 2014).

The aim of our research is to gain a better understanding of consumers’ perceptions and reactions to brands fully embedded in films - brands as integral part of the plot of a feature film - beyond pure product placement. More specifically, by focusing on films where brands play a key role - from the product/brand supporting or saving the hero in a particular situation to the product/brand being the real hero of the film - we would also like to understand whether branded entertainment can be a source of reflection for consumers and have an impact on society and culture (social/societal role of brands) or, conversely, generate more criticism of brands and the film industry (purely commercial/promotional role of brands in films).

Our research is therefore part of a trend that calls for moving beyond the execution and effectiveness characteristics (e.g. brand awareness and recall, positive effect on attitude) of product placement - widely studied in existing literature (Balasubramanian, Karrh, and Patwardhan, 2006) - to focus more on the dynamic links between placement and entertainment content (Russell, 2019). In addition, Kerrigan (2017) reports a growing interest in the practice of branded entertainment but notes that academic research is still very limited on this phenomenon.

### 1. Theoretical framework

#### 1.1. The complex relationship between the arts, the market and brands

The arts, the market, and brands have always had a complex relationship, which marketing researchers have been trying to clarify and structure since the early 2000s. While some researchers (Botti, 2000; Colbert and St-James, 2014) have focused on the arts and culture sector in order to clarify the definition of arts marketing and the different possible research perspectives, others (O'Reilly and Kerrigan, 2010), in a more global approach, have examined the different facets of the connection between the arts and the market/marketing (marketing *of/in/through/from/as* art) highlighting their multiple interrelationships. Finally, more specifically, others (Baumgarth, 2018) have drawn up a summary of the different relationships that can exist between brands and the arts/artists - collaboration, co-operation, co-creation and inspiration - drawing in part on the art infusion phenomenon. Relying on a consumer-focused perspective of art, art infusion is defined as *‘the general influence that the presence of art has on consumer perceptions and evaluations of products with which it is associated’* (Hagtvedt and Patrick, 2008). One of the facets proposed by O'Reilly and Kerrigan (2010), *‘marketing through art’*, is fairly close to art infusion and deals with issues such as product placement, advertising or muzak. This perspective is based on the assumption that the arts have significant potential to influence and develop individuals' tastes and consumption choices (Kerrigan, 2017). In other words, *‘marketing through the arts’* refers

to the 'use' of different works of art (in the visual arts, music, literature, cinema, etc.) by marketers with the aim - for the product or the brand - of being associated with art and the values it reflects, and of being well perceived and evaluated by consumers. As mentioned by Loose (2015), there is no denying that artistic productions in various forms are now commonly used by marketing and brands to promote various products and reach new targets through the creative and cultural industries. More than ever before, and particularly because of the proliferation of media and ad skipping, brands are vying with each other in their creativity to attract the attention of consumers. According to Lehu and Bressoud (2008), product placement and, by extension, branded entertainment, are communication techniques increasingly used by brands to recreate and strengthen their relationships with consumers.

### **1.2. Branded entertainment: Integrating brands into the stories**

Traditionally associated with the cinema, product or brand placement technique is also used in other media such as television series, video games and music videos. As far as the film industry is concerned, movie product placement is defined as the placement of a brand or a firm in a movie by different means and for promotional purposes (d'Astous and Seguin, 1999). Russell (2002) has identified three major characteristics of brand placement in movie: prominence, audiovisual nature and integration into the plot or storyline. This last characteristic refers to the degree of connection between the product and the action and translates into brand participation in the story. Product placements with low integration do not contribute much to the story, whereas product placements with high integration are a major thematic element, occupying an important place in the story, driving the story or even building the persona of a character.

This high degree of brand integration in films has been growing steadily over the last twenty years, reflecting an evolution in the relationship between cultural products and advertising called 'branded entertainment'. The basis of this technique is creative storytelling to promote a brand, so that the script of an entertainment product such as a film revolves around the positioning and promotion of the brand (Stolley, Kerrigan and Yalkin, 2021). Hudson and Hudson (2006, p.492) defined branded entertainment as "*the integration of advertising into entertainment content, whereby brands are embedded into storylines of a film, television program, or other entertainment medium*". These authors - suggesting that branded entertainment is a term to describe a more contemporary and sophisticated use of product placement - propose a continuum from pure or passive product placement to branded entertainment.

It is also important to consider that branded entertainment involves many players: creative producers, broadcasters and talent, marketing communications or branding professionals, and consumers. Also, the players behind and in front of the camera can use branded entertainment not only as a funding mechanism, but also to consolidate an objective or message they consider important (Stolley and Glynne, 2023).

### **1.3. Consumer acceptance and/or resistance to brand integration in films**

Referring to the characteristics of product placement and the usefulness of this relationship between brands and cinema, Lehu (2007) talks about the need for "realism of a consumerist universe" and "credibility of the environment". A successful brand/product placement must be anchored in the everyday life of the film's characters and heroes and, for example, present products and brands as natural or indispensable accessories, personalizing and giving credibility to the hero, which will make it easier for viewers to identify with him or her. Brand placements that are consistent with the characters and the film's plot and universe are more popular because they are considered less intrusive. Certain brands are therefore integrated in order to enhance the characters and to provide specific contextual elements to a scene (Stolley and Glynne, 2023). Moreover, branded entertainment must use a compelling narrative. It is important that the branded entertainment narrative aligns with the overall brand narrative in order to be seen as authentic and build a sense of trust. The audience must not perceive the narrative as a disguised sales attempt, as this will be deemed insincere and inauthentic (Van Loggerenberg, Enslin and Terblanche-Smit, 2022).

While simple or passive product placement seems to be well accepted by consumers, branded entertainment (and the different levels of brand integration in films, cf. Table 1.) can also lead to a certain amount of resistance from consumers. Previous research has shown that, when confronted with marketing tactics that they consider inappropriate - such as the inconsistent or even intrusive placement of a brand in a film - consumers can develop resistance behaviours (Roux, 2007) or even sharp criticism of the company or the film industry - in our case, the film industry. In this research, we also assume that the reaction of consumers (positive perception/negative

perception, acceptance/resistance) may be attenuated by the social dimension (the film as an object of reflection on our society) and the message that the director/actors and brands wish to convey through the film or, on the contrary, exacerbated by the purely commercial role of the brands.

## 2. Methodology

The exploratory nature of this research has led us to choose to use a qualitative research method. This technique seems to be the most appropriate for gaining an in-depth understanding of viewers' perceptions and reactions to brands that are highly integrated into the plot of films and to films content.

More specifically, we carried out two different types of study: firstly, we conducted a netnography by collecting comments from Internet users on the Allociné website. We focused on four films in particular with different levels of brand integration: *Fight Club* (average spectator grade of 4.5/5; over 2,000 reviews); *Transformers* (average grade of 3.1/5; over 2,000 reviews); *Evolution* (average grade of 2.8/5; 217 reviews) and *Barbie* (average grade of 3.1/5; just under 2,000 reviews). Secondly, we conducted a focus group with Generation Z viewers who have some degree of involvement with the cinema. The choice of interviewing Generation Z is justified by the fact that they tend to place a high value on entertainment and are known to consume a lot of cultural content. An animation guide was used to collect the perceptions and reactions of our respondents after viewing the film extracts. More concretely, the focus group was thus conducted with seven participants, all students from KEDGE Business School. The participants had diverse backgrounds: six were enrolled in the MSc Arts and Creative Industries Management program, and one was in the MSc Marketing program (Details on participants can be found in Table 2). The focus group session lasted 120 minutes. The session began with participants introducing themselves and describing their profiles as movie consumers. This was followed by a set of questions centered on the role of brands in the film industry and the practice of product placement. In the third part of the focus group, participants were presented with nine movie posters: *Barbie*, *House of Gucci*, *Air*, *Back to the Future*, *The Internship*, *Cast Away*, *Evolution*, *The Lego Movie*, and *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. Participants were encouraged to react to and elaborate on the role of brands in these movies. Subsequently, they were asked to create a grid to identify which brand placements were perceived as less intrusive. The fourth part involved showing clips from four movies: *Fight Club*, *Evolution*, *Transformers*, and *Barbie*. After each clip, participants were asked to discuss their thoughts on the role of brands in these movies, whether the brand presence was justified, and the reasons behind their opinions. The final set of questions addressed the societal aspects of brand placements in movies, focusing on their impact on society and culture.

An initial thematic analysis was carried out by the two researchers to identify the main themes emerging from the data.

## 3. Results and Analysis

The following section presents the results and the analysis of the focus groups combined with the results of the netnography conducted on the AlloCiné website. This section is divided into four main themes:

- Positive perception of brands in films
- Negative perception of brands in films
- Social role of brands in films
- “Pure” Commercial role of brands in films

### 3.1. Positive Brand Perception in Films

The most consistently mentioned factor for positive brand perception is the **relevance of the brand to the film's storyline**. Brands that are naturally integrated into the narrative tend to be perceived more positively. For instance, participants appreciated the integration of Aston Martin in *James Bond* and cars in *Fast and Furious* because these brands are relevant to the film's core elements—action and luxury.

*“So I think it can be a good practice if it is position in a right way and if the product has the same values as the film is trying to show, or what the specific scene is trying to show. Because some of the films without the product placement, they would not be as powerful, maybe like Barbie. Imagine how many barbie dolls were sold because of the film. Or how much the pink colour you have seen even in other brands. And even FNB industry, food was*

*becoming look like pink because of the movie, but I think it should be very well thought of. But it can have a bad turn, if it is just too forced and I think this is seen more in series than movies.” (Participant 2)*

**Subtlety** in brand placement is crucial. Participants responded positively to placements that felt **seamless and unobtrusive**. In *Fight Club*, brands like Starbucks and Ikea were used to critique consumer culture, which aligned with the film’s themes, making the placement feel integral to the story rather than a commercial interruption. But in this example, it is positively seen in the movie, but not for the brands as expressed in following statement:

*“I think this is like critique of capitalism, the fact that there are a lot of brands, this is not a good thing for the brands. Because there is no product placement, I do not think they got paid from Starbucks for saying that we are all like clones. But it is clever in the meaning of the movie. Same with Ikea, because they say everybody is just buying stuff, everyone's place looks the same. So it makes sense in the mind of the movie” (Participant 1)*

Brands that **enhance the viewing experience**, either by adding authenticity to the setting or contributing to character development, are perceived positively. In *Cast Away*, the use of Wilson as a "character" was seen as a clever integration that added depth to the story without feeling forced as expressed by following statement:

*“I have mixed feelings, really. I think it should be positioned in a very smart way and the strategy should be really thought of, so it can fit smoothly in the scene without us being disturbed. Because I think the most annoying thing is when you watch a movie and then you remember you are watching a movie because something in the scene made you get out of the movie and product placement could be one of them.” (Participant 2)*

Similarly, the portrayal of Barbie in the 2023 film was appreciated for rebranding the doll in a way that aligned with **contemporary societal values**, thereby enhancing the film’s narrative.

These findings from the focus group does not directly correlate with reviews on AlloCité, demonstrated by following review about *Cast Away* and the omnipresence of the Fedex brand:

*"Unfortunately, this film has a few problems, including one that somewhat degrades the film's message: the almost omnipresent product placement of the Fedex company brand during the second half of the film... So when it's discreet and adds a modicum of interest to the story or helps the hero in a few secondary situations, like with the volleyball, I don't mind, and I can tolerate it, but what was going through Zemeckis's head to use an American company and a transport company for advertising throughout the film? Several of the company's employees were extras in this film, so why do this? Fortunately, Tom Hanks' acting, the story, the music and the direction make up for this detail, otherwise I'd have been inclined to grumble in front of my screen". (Allociné, Spectator)*

The **context** in which a brand is presented significantly affects perception. Positive perceptions arise when the brand **fits the film’s setting and context**. For example, the portrayal of Nike in the movie *Air* was well-received because it was contextually appropriate and added to the narrative about the brand’s history and significance as expressed by following quote:

*“I watched it and honestly I think it was quite well done. And it was good for the marketing of the brand. Because before the movie I think that it is like a line Air, when the story behind it, it is quite good and positive story. For me, I started to look at the shoes differently. Story in contrast with House of Gucci, which was negative, for Air it gives more positive.” (Participant 6)*

Understanding the **target audience** and **aligning the brand placement with their expectations** is key. Participants noted that while *Transformers* effectively showcased car brands, the inclusion of luxury brands like Porsche felt misaligned with the film’s broader, younger audience. Successful placements are those that resonate with the audience’s interests and expectations.

Participants found the product placement of Head & Shoulders shampoo in *Evolution* to be **humorous** and well-integrated into the storyline. The shampoo was not only featured prominently but also played a critical role in the plot, contributing to the comedic tone of the film. The use of Head & Shoulders was seen as a clever and entertaining twist, enhancing the film's comedic appeal as expressed by following quote:

*"It is super interesting, because in France that is what we call "nanar", which is a movie that is bad on purpose to create like a funny atmosphere. So, I really like it, we have seen only a few minutes of the movie, but I think it is a good way to show an image of the brand. We see it can be fun." (Participant 1)*

These findings are strongly corroborated by the review analysis on AlloCiné. For the film *Evolution*, the heavy integration of the Head & Shoulders brand into the script does not seem to bother viewers. On the contrary, many found it a film where the **humor** should be appreciated with a **second-degree** (or even third-degree) **perspective**. While they did notice the overt product placement, this was largely forgiven or overlooked due to the film's genre—humorous science fiction with quirky humor—the director (known for the cult classic *Ghostbusters*), and the presence of renowned actors like Julianne Moore, who is not typically seen in this type of film. This opinions are demonstrated by following statements from AlloCiné.

*"Evolution is a wildly successful sci-fi comedy, clearly funded by a ridiculous shampoo brand. The final ad scene is crude and can make you hate the previous 1 hour 40 minutes in the space of a second. But it's better to forget this clumsiness because the 1h40 is worth it." (AlloCiné, Spectator)*

*"I really like this SF comedy. For its characters, its humour and the product placement in the finale. A meteorite crashes on Earth, and, in a very short space of time, an entire race of aliens develops in a matter of days where it took humanity millions of years. There are some excellent lines, the unexpected and plenty of humorous scenes." (AlloCiné, Spectator)*

Brands perceived as **ethical and responsible** tend to be viewed more favorably. Participants expressed concerns over negative impacts of certain portrayals, such as the perpetuation of unrealistic beauty standards in *Barbie*. Ethical considerations, such as avoiding over-commercialization and promoting positive values, are important for maintaining a positive brand image as expressed by following statement:

*"I think the film industry and brands, they need to find a balance to make product placement more ethical. Mostly in movies targeted for kids, because some movies are received a lot of critics because they promote over consumption of brands and fast food and all of this." (Participant 5)*

Finally, brands that **contribute to the film's overarching themes and messages** tend to be viewed positively. In *Fight Club*, the critical use of consumer brands enhanced the film's commentary on capitalism and consumerism, making the placements feel thoughtful and purposeful. This thematic contribution can turn a product placement into a meaningful element of the narrative. These findings from the focus group are as well supported by reviews on AlloCiné. Bellow are two examples of reviews:

*"Fight Club" is one of my favourite films, one of my greatest cinematic experiences. By making spectators reflect on their lives as consumers in a society ruled by money and materialism, "Fight Club" shocks, hypnotises and also makes spectators reflect on their place in society, thanks to a crazy, funny and completely anti-conformist story." (AlloCiné, Spectator)*

*"First of all, the film is immediately critical of consumer society. For example, at the beginning of the film, Edward Norton's character orders a whole range of equipment to furnish his flat, a sign that he is a victim of the sales strategies of big business, a criticism that is well illustrated by this line: "If I saw something ingenious like a coffee table representing yin and yang, I had to have it". The film is also critical of advertising, which promotes the image of the ideal man as muscular and the ideal woman as slim. So Fight Club is much more than just a 'fight' film, it's a film that makes you think about different areas." (AlloCiné, Spectator)*

### 3.2. Negative Brand Perception in Films

While successful brand placements can enhance the viewing experience and reinforce positive brand associations, poorly executed placements can lead to negative perceptions. This analysis explores the factors that contribute to negative brand perception in films, drawing insights from the focus group.

One of the primary reasons for negative brand perception is the **forced and intrusive nature of the product placement**. When a brand's presence feels unnatural or overly commercial, it disrupts the narrative flow and detracts from the viewing experience.

Brands that **do not align with the film's theme or target audience** can create a sense of dissonance. When the brand's target demographic does not match the film's audience, the placement can feel out of place and ineffective. In *Transformers*, the inclusion of luxury car brands like Porsche was seen as misaligned with the film's younger, action-focused audience. This misalignment led to perceptions that the placement was more about marketing than enhancing the story as demonstrated by following quote:

*"I do not really liked it, I think it was too much and I do not understand the strategy of Porsche. Because I do not think target of Porsche is not the same as target of Transformers. I think it was too much."* (Participant 1)

**Excessive commercial content** can overwhelm the narrative, leading to viewer fatigue and a negative response. When a film appears to prioritize brand promotion over storytelling, it can result in a diminished cinematic experience. *The Internship* was described as a two-hour commercial for Google. While the film integrated Google into its storyline, the overwhelming presence of the brand was perceived as prioritizing commercial interests over narrative quality.

The context in which a brand is presented can significantly influence perception. If a brand is associated with **negative or controversial elements** within the film, it can lead to unfavorable associations. Participants expressed concern about the portrayal of cars in violent and chaotic scenes in *Transformers*, which could lead to negative associations with the brand as demonstrated by following statement:

*"For me it was more like negative image of Porsche, because it is all about violence and something very chaotic, it is nothing cool."* (Participant 6)

On the other hand, some participants appreciated integration of Porsche in the movie since it shows its performance and capacities as expressed by following statement:

*"I think I liked it because the scene shows the capability of the car not the luxuries part of the car, so I think it worked well. It kind of sold itself. The car was saving the character so it makes us as an audience love the car because it saves our hero. And it was not for example like Head and shoulders only focusing on the brand on the name. Here we could see what the brand can do, so this is I loved it."* (Participant 2)

Subtlety is crucial for effective product placement. When a brand is **highlighted too prominently or repeatedly** in a way that feels **unnatural**, it can become distracting and annoying for viewers. In *Evolution*, while some found the Head & Shoulders placement humorous, others felt it became overly intrusive as it dominated multiple scenes, reducing the subtlety of the placement.

Brands that contribute to **negative societal impacts or ethical concerns** are likely to be perceived poorly. This includes promoting unrealistic beauty standards, unhealthy behaviors, or over-consumption. The film *Barbie* was criticized for perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards, despite its efforts to rebrand the character. This led to concerns about the film's impact on societal perceptions of beauty and body image as demonstrated by following quote:

*"I did not like Barbie at all, in sense for the marketing, for the promotion of the brand it is a very good move for them. But if you look at it from the movie industry, they are promoting women to be character in society who does not need Ken, but it from my perspective, it also promotes... you will see Barbie, who is a perfect girl, in a perfect shape, very beautiful, etc. Knowing especially in the USA there are many cases of girls, who have anorexia, plastic surgeries to look like her. I read in one article that after the movie was released, the demand for plastic surgeries to look like Barbie, to have smaller waist, to have the face shaped like that, increased. For the marketing it is good, but it is also evil, because it does not impact society well."* (Participant 6)

### 3.3. Social Role of Brands in Films

Films have the power to shape and reflect cultural norms and values. When brands are integrated into these narratives, they can reinforce or challenge existing societal standards. *Barbie* was discussed as a film that

attempted to rebrand the iconic doll to reflect contemporary **values of inclusivity and empowerment**. Participants noted how the film's portrayal of Barbie aimed to shift cultural perceptions of femininity and beauty standards, promoting a more inclusive and diverse image. Moreover, the inclusion of diverse brands and products promote representation and inclusivity, reflecting a broader range of experiences and identities. The film "Barbie" was praised for its efforts to include diverse characters and portray a more inclusive world. This positive representation can help normalize diversity and promote inclusivity in society. This result from the focus group is also supported by the following review on AlloCiné:

*“Between Barbieland and the real world, these two places will merge to create a true reflection on the place of women and men in society, as well as their personal development. With its pink and sunny colours, crazy scenes, Ken's unforgettable song and choreography, and subtle but powerful message, Barbie exceeds all our expectations and delivers a truly colourful and, above all, intelligent piece of entertainment.”* (AlloCiné, Spectator)

At the same time, some participants expressed concern that the attempt to convey this message failed and that the movie still promoted stereotypical vision of beauty and that after the release in the USA, the number of plastic surgeries increased. These findings are consistent with the review analysis on AlloCiné. For the film Barbie, there is a notable 'contrast' between Greta Gerwig, who represents a new wave of female directors in Hollywood, and Mattel, a giant in the toy industry. The reviews are highly polarized, significantly influenced by the type of viewer. Film critics show a clear divide: some, predominantly female, appreciated the film's message and humor, while others criticized it for Mattel's overt influence, viewing it as a brand manipulation to enhance its image and condemned the message as misandrist.

Films that incorporate brands to **highlight or critique social issues** can raise awareness and provoke thought among audiences. *Fight Club* used brand integration to critique consumerism and capitalism. By prominently featuring brands like Starbucks and Ikea in a critical light, the film encouraged viewers to question their own consumer habits and the societal impact of capitalism.

While brand integration can add realism to a film, it can also contribute to the **normalization of consumerism**, making branded products seem like a natural part of everyday life.

Participants discussed how the integration of brands in *Transformers* and *Evolution* normalized the presence of these products in their respective narratives. This can subtly influence viewers to accept constant brand presence as a normal aspect of life.

Poorly considered brand integrations can have **negative societal impacts**, such as promoting unhealthy behaviors or reinforcing harmful stereotypes. The focus group highlighted concerns about the film *Barbie* potentially perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards, despite its efforts to promote inclusivity. This dual impact underscores the importance of careful consideration in how brands and their associated values are portrayed.

### 3.4. “Pure” Commercial role of Brands in Films

Brand integration in films not only provides an additional revenue stream for film production but also offers brands a unique platform to reach and engage with audiences.

Brand integration serves as a **significant revenue source** for film production, helping to offset costs and support the financing of films. This financial support can be particularly crucial for independent and smaller-budget films. Participants discussed how brand integration can provide necessary funding for films that might otherwise struggle to secure financing demonstrated by following quote:

*“To answer a question if it is a good practice in the film industry. I think sometimes there are a lot of movies that struggle to find funding to create the movie and they must use product placement to finish the movie. So sometimes, a movie is too independent or too creative, too weird, it is hard to find a funding. So if it is the way to have more diversified movies, for me it is a good practice.”* (Participant 1)

Films offer brands a unique opportunity to enhance their visibility and reach a broad audience. The exposure gained through integration in popular movies can significantly boost brand awareness and recall. The extensive



marketing campaign around *Barbie* involved numerous brand partnerships, including collaborations with Zara, Microsoft, and Google. This wide-ranging visibility helped reinforce the Barbie brand and ensured that the film's release was a major cultural event as demonstrated by following statement:

*"It was a great marketing, it was very impressive and it was one of the best of the last years. I mean this summer, everything was barbie, they did so many partnership with brands, with Zara, with Microsoft with Google. It was impossible not to know that barbie was released."* (Participant 1)

Associating with popular films can **enhance a brand's image**, aligning it with the film's themes, characters, and values. This can lead to positive brand associations and increased consumer affinity. Participants noted that the integration of luxury cars in *Transformers* aimed to showcase the vehicles' performance and design, potentially enhancing the brand's image among viewers who associate the cars with the film's excitement and action.

Effective brand integration can **influence consumer behavior** by embedding products within the narrative, making them more desirable. This can lead to increased sales and brand loyalty. Participants in that sense mentioned for example the Lego movie as demonstrated by following statements:

*"It is a good way. Lego is about creating a universe, so it is a good way to promote the product, like Look all you can do with our products, it is creative, it is funny, it is animation, so it is mostly for kids, which is the main target of the toys."* (Participant 1)

*"I enjoyed Lego movie and I was very naive because I did not realize they were selling lego. I just watched the movie and I did not realize that. I think many people, kids they just go and they do not realize even though it is very clear."* (Participant 3)

Films provide a platform for **strategic brand positioning**, allowing brands to target specific demographics and align with particular lifestyles or values depicted in the film. In *Evolution*, the humorous and memorable use of Head & Shoulders shampoo was seen as a strategic move to align the brand with the film's comedic tone, potentially appealing to a broad audience that appreciates humor.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

Over the last twenty years or so, product placement has taken a new turn, with products and brands becoming increasingly integrated into the film script. Films show images in which products and brands are an integral part of the setting and the plot, in a much less subtle way than before. To a certain extent, in the film industry, the boundaries between brands and culture sometimes seem to blur and, in the most extreme cases, the brands become the real heroes of the films. But for some people, product placement in films can be also so intrusive that they can sometimes get the impression that these placements are disguised advertisements for brands.

Drawing primarily on the work of Russell (2002, 2019) and proposed research perspectives, this research provide a better understanding of how placements and their integrations into stories and plots affect perceptions and reactions to brands themselves but also to entertainment content. The integration of brands in films serves as a double-edged sword, offering significant commercial benefits while posing challenges to creative integrity and audience reception. This duality is evident in the diverse reactions captured in the focus groups and AlloCiné reviews.

Figure 1 summarizes our results. Negative perception of brands and of their "pure" commercial role arises from forced and intrusive placements, lack of subtlety and fluidity, over-commercialization and the promotion of controversial value. Positive brand perception and acceptance from the audience hinges on realism and credibility of the context (Lehu, 2007), authentic narrative (Van Loggerenberg, Enslin and Terblanche-Smit, 2022), the use of humor and the talents involved (film directors and actors/actresses). Finally, the cinema audience is perfectly capable of embracing the brand and branded entertainment proposition if contemporary social and societal values are promoted, as well as ethical and responsible representations and a response to the target audience's expectations.

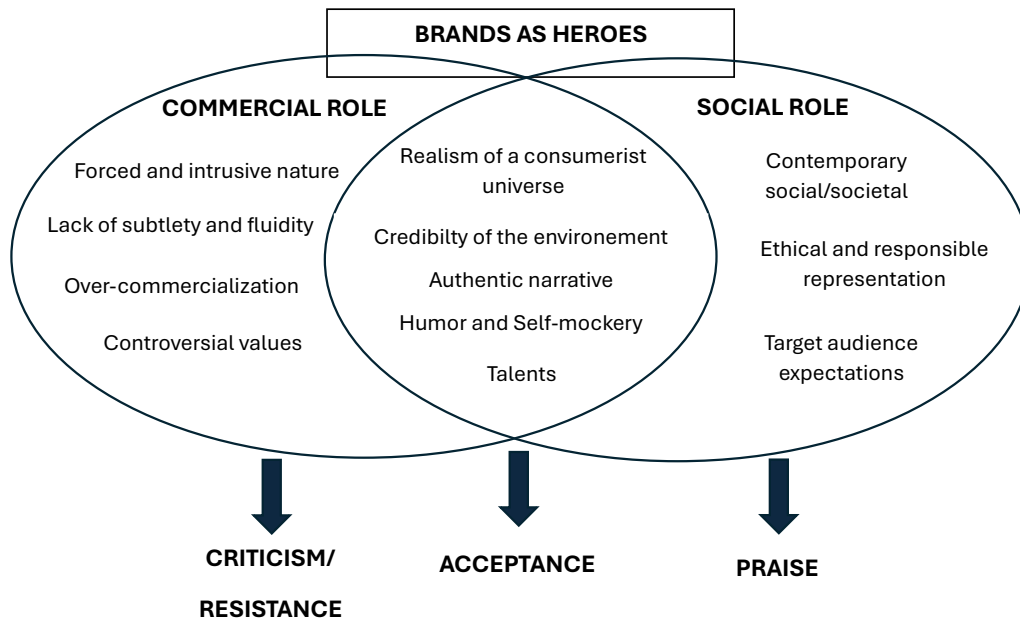


Figure 1. Brands as the real heroes of the movies

Effective brand integration in films plots requires a nuanced approach that considers relevance, subtlety, context, audience alignment, and ethical representation. Brands and filmmakers must collaborate to ensure that placements enhance the narrative while maintaining artistic integrity and fostering positive audience perceptions. This balance is key to leveraging the commercial benefits of brand integration without compromising the film’s creative value or audience experience. If consumers see branded entertainment not as a great advertisement, but as something they voluntarily seek out, enjoy and are entertained by, the relationship with the brand can be strengthened (Stolley & Glynne, 2023).

Finally, this research is not without limits. The list of films analyzed is not exhaustive, and they reflect different eras (and have therefore affected different generations), genres and target audiences, all of which need to be taken into account when analyzing our results in greater depth. We therefore feel that it would be appropriate to place this research within the "film brandscape" which is composed of the various brands involved in the production, content and consumption of a film (O’Reilly and Kerrigan, 2013). In the "film brandscape", brands compete for or reinforce brand meaning in the minds of consumers, so that commercial brands can benefit from association with artistic brands. Adding this 'landscape' to our analysis of branded entertainment could prove particularly useful in further nuancing our research.

## References

- Balasubramanian, S. K., Karrh, J.A. and Patwardhan, H. 2006. "Audience response to product placements: An integrative framework and future research agenda", *Journal of Advertising*, 35, 115-41.
- Baumgarth, C. 2018. "Brand management and the world of the arts: collaboration, co-operation, co-creation, and inspiration", *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 27 (3), 237-248.
- Botti, S. 2000. "What role for marketing in the arts? An analysis of arts consumption and artistic value", *International Journal of Arts Management*, 2 (3), 14-27.
- Colbert, F. and St James, Y. 2014. "Research in Arts Marketing: Evolution and future direction", *Psychology & Marketing*, 31 (8), 566-575.
- D'Astous, A., and Seguin, N. 1999. "Consumer reactions to product placement strategies in television sponsorship", *European Journal of Marketing*, 33, 896-910.
- Hagtvedt, H. and Patrick, V.M. 2008. "Art Infusion: The influence of visual art on the perception and evaluation of consumer products", *Journal of Marketing Research*, 45, 379-389.
- Hudson, S. and Hudson, D. 2006. "Branded Entertainment: a new advertising technique or product placement in disguise?", *Journal of Marketing Management*, 22, 420-450.
- Kerrigan, F. 2017. *Film Marketing*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lehu, J.-M. 2007. *Branded Entertainment – Product Placement and Brand Strategy in the Entertainment Business*. London: Kogan Page.
- Lehu, J-M. and Bressoud, E. 2008. "Effectiveness of brand placement: New insights about viewers", *Journal of Business Research*, 61(10), 1083-1090.
- Loose, R. 2015. "The other side of marketing and advertising: Psychoanalysis, art and addiction", *Marketing Theory*, 15 (1), 31-38.
- O'Reilly D. and Kerrigan, F. 2010. *Marketing the Arts – A Fresh Approach*. New-Yotk, NY: Routledge.
- O'Reilly, D., and Kerrigan, F. 2013. "A view to a brand: Introducing the film brandscape". *European Journal of Marketing*, 47(5/6), 769–789.
- Russell, C.A. 2002. "Investigating the effectiveness of product placements in television shows : the role of modality and plot connection congruence on brand memory and attitude", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29, 306-318.
- Russell, C.A. 2019. "Expanding the agenda of research on product placement: A Commercial Intertext", *Journal of Advertising*, 48, 38-48.
- Stolley, K and Glynne, S. 2023. "Marketing through arts: The case of Branded Entertainment". In Kerrigan, F. and Preece C. (Ed.) *Marketing the Arts: Breaking Boundaries*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Stolley, K., Kerrigan, F., and Yalkin, C. 2021. "Branded entertainment: A critical review". In McDonald, P. (Ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Van Loggerenberg, M. J.C., Enslin, C. and Terblanche-Smit, M. 2022. "A conceptual framework of authentic narrative in resonant branded entertainment: Practitioner perspectives", *Journal of Brand Strategy*, 11 (3), 273-289.

Level/Type of brand integration		Movie	Date	Film director	Brand
At the heart of the film's story	Criticism of consumer society and the Western world	<i>The Gods Must be Crazy</i> <i>Fight Club</i>	1981 1997	Jamie Uys David Fincher	Coca-Cola Ikea, BMW and Volkswagen
	Famous brand stories	<i>The Social Network</i> <i>Steve Jobs</i> <i>The Founder</i> <i>House of Gucci</i> <i>Air</i>	2010 2016 2016 2021 2023	David Fincher Danny Boyle John Lee Hancock Ridley Scott Ben Affleck	Facebook Apple (Mac) McDonald's Gucci Nike (Air Jordan)
Support for the film heroes or even save the film heroes		<i>Back to the Future</i> <i>Independence Day</i> <i>Cast Away</i> <i>Evolution</i> <i>The Italian Job</i> <i>Transformers</i>	1985 1996 2000 2001 2003 2007	Robert Zemeckis Roland Emmerich Robert Zemeckis Ivan Reitman F. Gary Gray Michael Bay	DeLorean Apple FedEx and Wilson Head & Shoulder Mini Cooper Chevrolet and Porsche
Brand as the real hero of the film		<i>The Love Bug</i> <i>Toy Story</i> <i>The Internship</i> <i>The Lego Movie</i> <i>Barbie</i>	1968 1995 2013 2014 2023	Robert Stevenson John Lasseter Shawn Levy Phil Lord and Christopher Miller Greta Gerwig	Volkswagen Beetle Mattel Google Lego Barbie

Table 1. Typology of brand integration (for products and brands embedded in film plots/scripts)

Participant	Gender	Age	Nationality	Initial Impressions
1	Male	24	French	A frequent cinema-goer, he appreciates both commercial and artistic films. His favorite movie is <i>Interstellar</i> , admired for its widespread appeal and high-quality production. He also holds a high regard for Leonardo DiCaprio and production studios like Warner Bros and A24
2	Female	24	Lebanese	An aspiring film director, she prefers fiction, sci-fi, and drama. Although she acknowledges the importance of cinema, she mostly watches films on streaming platforms due to convenience. Her favorite films include <i>Bastards</i> by Tarantino for its smart script and <i>Titanic</i> for its timeless appeal. She admires Ryan Reynolds and Jennifer Lawrence
3	Female	29	Mexican	Disliking action films, she enjoys animation and both cinema and streaming equally, depending on the attraction of the film. Her favorite movie is <i>Ninja Turtles</i> because of the animation. Anne Hathaway is her favorite actress
4	Female	22	Gabonese	She enjoys horror films and cinema d'auteur, watching primarily on streaming platforms due to accessibility. Her favorite film is <i>Errementari</i> , appreciated for its shocking elements. She admires Daniel Candia and A24 productions
5	Female	22	French	Frequently visits cinemas and enjoys independent movies. She dislikes horror films and her favorite recent film is <i>Anatomy of a Fall</i> for its intelligent script and acting. She likes Emma Stone and Leonardo DiCaprio
6	Female	30	Azerbaijani	Enjoys films that combine deep narratives with action. Her favorites include <i>Matrix</i> and <i>Gladiator</i> . She admires Keanu Reeves, Timothée Chalamet, and Meryl Streep for their acting skills and personas
7	Male	29	Martinique	Prefers philosophical films that question life perspectives, such as <i>The Beach of the Fifth Sense</i> . His favorite recent film is <i>The Yellow Book</i> , appreciated for its optimism and strong character portrayal. He does not frequently watch films independently

Table 2. Focus Group - Participants Profiles