






# Dynamics of Influence: The Role of Product Placement of Luxury Brands in the 'Succession HBO Series

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**Abstract.** In the increasing advertising saturation, product placement remains a distinctive tactic in brand communication, subtly integrating into audiovisual content. This research focuses on unraveling how this strategy is perceived by viewers in Lima, concentrating on the dramatic television series *Succession*. Through a qualitative approach, the dimensions of recognition, evaluation, recall, and coherence of the included brands are explored, using semi-structured interviews to capture the public's perspective. The results indicate that product placement in the selected context is received positively, integrating naturally without being perceived as intrusive. There is high recall of prominent brands, and it is evident that associating these with characters from the series strengthens their impact and purchasing desire among viewers. Luxury brands, in particular, benefit their perception through alignment with high-status characters, enhancing the viewer's identification with the product. This research contributes to the advertising field by confirming that the effectiveness of product placement remains current, adapting effectively to the times and various social contexts. It suggests the importance of coherent integration with the narrative to maximize brand recognition and inclination toward consumption, offering valuable perspectives for brands seeking to position themselves in international markets. The study lays the groundwork for future research on the dynamics of non-traditional advertising and its cultural adaptation.

**Keywords:** advertising, perception, viewers, product placement.

## 1 Introduction

In a world where consumers are bombarded by commercial messages, advertising saturation has led to a retreat towards more integrated and less intrusive brand communication techniques [1]. Product placement, a confluence between advertising and entertainment, is making a comeback, welcoming brands into an audiovisual narrative environment that facilitates a positive attitude towards them [2]. This technique transcends traditional commercials, integrating into series, movies, and video games [3], presenting unexplored potential in the Peruvian market due to scarce local research.

The acclaimed HBO series 'Succession', with its story of a dysfunctional family at the helm of a media empire, provides fertile ground for this study, highlighting the

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interaction between luxury brands and a narrative of power and privilege [4]. Viewers from West Lima, Peru, whose consumption patterns and affinity for the series stand out, form the core of this research.

Despite the recognized effectiveness of product placement in terms of choice and recall [5], and its integration with characters and plots [6], there is a notable absence of studies addressing the perception of product placement from a local Peruvian perspective. This gap in the literature points to a unique opportunity to investigate how product placement is processed and valued in a specific cultural context, considering factors of recognition, evaluation, and brand coherence.

In response to the need to better understand these dynamics, the goal of this study is to analyze in depth the perception of product placement within the series 'Succession', paying special attention to how the concepts of recognition, evaluation, recall, and verisimilitude are interpreted by a diverse and culturally rich audience.

This study aims to enrich the academic and professional understanding of product placement, providing a detailed analysis of its reception among the Peruvian public, and exploring the various valuations of brand placement within a series of international renown but observed in a distinct cultural context.

To address these objectives, the concept of product placement is defined, its types are classified, and its relationship with the plot is examined. Additionally, instances where these brands make an appearance are analyzed, and semi-structured interviews with viewers are conducted to capture their detailed perceptions. Ultimately, this study responds to the central question: What is the perception of viewers in West Lima regarding product placement in high-profile series and complex plots?

## **2 Theoretical Framework**

The phenomenon of product placement has evolved from mere product cameos in the media to become an integrated and strategic marketing tool, combining promotion and advertising to subtly impact the audience [7]. This advancement is well documented in studies exploring its presence in television shows, movies, and video games, where branded products are incorporated to influence consumer perception [6]. Chan & Lowe [8] argue that product placement is a deliberate strategy designed to integrate brand information into media communication with the intention of influencing viewers. Kongmanon & Petison [9] expand this definition, highlighting the role of product placement as a non-intrusive technique that enhances brand image and increases brand awareness.

### **2.1 Types of product placement**

Visual insertion comes in two forms: as part of the background or in the foreground, allowing the product to be displayed prominently or subtly [10] (see Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Apple branded tablet in Season 03 - Episode 07 "Too Much Birthday" (2021). Source: Screenshot, Max.

Product displacement is defined as the presentation of a product in such a way that only part of it is shown, avoiding the explicit appearance of the logo, and sometimes presenting products without branding or with fictitious branding [11] [12].

Verbal insertion, which may include a storyline around the brand, is used to prevent viewers from feeling compelled to consume advertising, creating a more natural and narratively integrated interaction [10].

The effects of product placement are influenced by the congruence with the plot and the relationship with the characters. Research indicates that viewer reaction can be negative if the brand placement does not match the plot or the television program, affecting consumer behavior and intentions towards the brand [13]. Neale & Crokindale [14] agree that integration congruent with the plot is more accepted by the audience, provided that the product is made use of in a way that reinforces its presence in the story.

Naderer et al. [6] suggest that when a character interacts with the product, either by using it or mentioning it, this interaction can transfer the character's valuation to the product. The effectiveness of this transfer is amplified if the character consumes or uses the product, thus reinforcing the viewer's perceived value [15]. On the other hand, the character's attitude towards the brand, whether positive or negative, can influence the viewer's attitude if there is a strong identification with the brand or the character [16].

## 2.2 Product placement of luxury brands

The placement of luxury brands can not only support the narrative, but also define and enrich the profile of the characters that use them, alluding to their status and implicit characteristics, such as elegance or power [17]. Rossi et al. [18] highlight the importance of contextual execution and individual viewer factors for product placement to be successful. The alignment of the brand with the environment and the narrative is crucial to capture the viewer's interest.

The acclaimed HBO series 'Succession', with its story of a dysfunctional family at the helm of a media empire, provides fertile ground for this study, highlighting the interaction between luxury brands and a narrative of power and privilege [4]. Viewers

from West Lima, Peru, whose consumption patterns and affinity for the series stand out, form the core of this research.

### 2.3 Effectiveness of product placement in TV series

The television format offers unique advantages for product placement, such as the possibility of multiple placements throughout a series and the ability to target segmented audiences with defined interests [19]. Borrero-Ojuelos & Bermejo-Berros [5] state that product placement not only generates recall, but also unconscious choice, highlighting its effectiveness as a marketing technique. In turn, the linking of product placement with specific characters can be a crucial factor for its success, influencing the trust and desire of viewers towards the brands represented [20].

### 2.4 Context: 'Succession' and its Prestige Brand Environment

The HBO series 'Succession' is positioned as an ideal scenario to study product placement because of its narrative and the presence of luxury brands, reflecting the luxuries and lifestyles of the characters. This series has achieved high ratings and generated a loyal following that positions it as a relevant platform for the study of product placement [21] [22].

Brands such as Apple, Ray-Ban, Mercedes-Benz, among others, presented in 'Succession', stand out for their congruence with the plot and characters, which provides a solid basis for the analysis of product placement and its impact on the viewer's perception (see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).



**Fig. 2.** Ray-Ban glasses in Season 02 - Episode 10 "This Is Not for Tears" (2019). Source: Screenshot, Max



**Fig. 3.** Cadillac car in Season 03 - Episode 05 "Retired Janitors of Idaho" (2021). Source: Screenshot, Max

This paper proposes a critical and detailed analysis of product placement, reflecting on its practical and academic application, and seeking to advance knowledge of the subject beyond current findings.

### **3 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Approach and Paradigm**

This study is framed within the interpretive paradigm, since it seeks to understand how the viewers of "Succession" interpret and assign meaning to the product placement within the series. This approach is essential to understand the subjective perceptions and personal experiences of the target audience. The qualitative approach is justified in the context of this research as it allows to probe deeply into the attitudes and beliefs of individuals and is particularly suited to explore the complexity inherent to the recognition and valuation of brands embedded in an audiovisual narrative [23].

#### **3.2 Sampling Strategy Design**

The qualitative methodology adopted takes the form of a case study design, which provides a detailed analysis of the product placement phenomenon in the selected series. To collect representative data, a purposive sampling was chosen, selecting regular viewers of "Succession" from West Lima, who represent a wide range of perceptions due to their socioeconomic diversity, as indicated by IPSOS reports [24]. Participants were selected based on their knowledge and active following of the series to ensure an informed and relevant discussion.

#### **3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Techniques**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather information about viewers' perceptions, following a detailed question guide that allows the necessary flexibility to delve into emerging themes during the interview [26]. This method is relevant to

explore the opinions, attitudes and feelings of the participants in relation to the valuation, recognition, recall and verisimilitude of the product placement of the brands shown in the series.

The sample consisted of regular viewers of the series, specifically those residing in the West Lima area. To be included in the study, participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria:

**Inclusion Criteria** In crafting the inclusion criteria for this study, it is imperative to delineate the parameters that define the population under investigation:

- Be residents of the West Lima area, where there is presumably a high density of viewers of the program.
- Have watched all seasons of "Succession" up to the most recent study date to ensure familiarity with the content and product placements.
- Be at least 18 years of age to ensure that participants could provide informed consent.
- Show willingness to participate in an approximately 30–60-minute interview about their viewing experiences.
- Belong to socioeconomic levels A and B, which, according to IPSOS [24], represent a significant percentage in the West Lima area and are, therefore, a group of interest for luxury brand analysis.

**Exclusion Criteria** By clearly outlining these criteria, we aim to exclude individuals whose inclusion could potentially confound the study's outcomes:

- Casual viewers or those who had not seen the entire series as of the most recent date, as they may lack the depth of experience necessary to contribute to the discussion on product placement.
- Minors under the age of 18, due to ethical and legal restrictions on consent and understanding of the subject matter.
- Individuals outside the geographic area of interest since the study focused on cultural and social perceptions specific to West Lima.
- Individuals reluctant to openly discuss their opinions in an interview, which could affect the quality and sincerity of the data collected.

The final sample consisted of 20 interviews with participants selected through a convenience sampling process, with the objective of obtaining a diversity of perceptions while maintaining control over demographic and socioeconomic factors relevant to the study. A snowball technique was used to identify potential participants who met the inclusion criteria, starting with initial contacts known to the researchers and expanding through their personal and professional networks. Interviews were scheduled and conducted from April 18 through June 5, 2023.

This approach ensured that the data collected was rich in context and insights, allowing for a detailed interpretation of the target audience's perception of product placement.

The interview guide (see Table 1) was carefully developed to align the questions with the research objectives and underlying theories. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic content analysis, where emerging patterns and themes were identified and categorized.

**Table 1.** Semi-structured Interview Guide.

Category	Questions
Introduction	How do you feel about advertising within TV series? Do you think it's more effective in series than in movies? Why?
	Do you think this form of advertising should appear less or more? Why or why not?
	Have you seen the HBO series <i>Succession</i> ? Can you tell me what it's generally about?
	When you see brands within the plot, do you perceive them as advertising? Does it bother you?
	Do you think the brands that appear in the series are paid to be there? Who do you think pays?
	Does the series pay for the brand to appear, or does the brand pay to appear in the series? Why?
Recall and valuation	The series contains a large number of luxury brands, what brands do you remember seeing throughout the series? In what context does the remembered brand appear?
	Do you find any appearance intrusive or forced? Which one and why?
	Do you like the brands that appear in the series? Which ones and why?
	What brands do you remember seeing more often or more frequently?
	Do you like the type of product placement used for the mentioned brand? Why?
Product placement with characters	What do you think about the appearance of these brands in terms of interaction with the characters? Do you think it increases the brand's value to see it used by a character?
	Do you think the Mercedes Benz brand helps to characterize the character? Why?
	Do you find it credible that the character Logan Roy uses the Samsung brand? Why?
	Have you been able to identify with any character or admire any?
	Do you remember any of the brands that this character has used? Which ones? Do you like these brands?
	What catches your attention more, when a character uses the brand or when the brand appears alone? Why?
Product placement with plot and luxury brands	Do you think an antagonistic character like Logan Roy could make good advertising for a brand? Why? Do you think this brand benefits Logan Roy?
	Do you think the brands shown are consistent with the plot? What other brands would you like to see on the scene?
	Do you remember any brand that appeared in a funny moment? Which one?
	What would you think if in the series they replaced all the Mercedes Benz with Volkswagen Beetles? Would you like it? Would it make sense? Why?
	What would you think if in the series all Apple products were replaced with Samsung? Would you like it? Would it matter to you? Would it make sense? Why?
What would you think if, within the series, a Mercedes Benz appears in a suburb? Would you like it? Why?	

### 3.4 Scientific Rigor and Validity

To ensure the scientific rigor and validity of the research, triangulation procedures were applied, seeking to corroborate the findings through multiple sources and perspectives. In addition, peer review processes were implemented to evaluate the consistency and interpretation of the data collected. The research process, from data collection to data analysis, was documented in detail to allow for reproducibility and transparency of the study.

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

All interviews were conducted with the informed consent of the participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of personal data. The ethical guidelines established by the Universidad Peruana de Ciencias Aplicadas (UPC) were followed, ensuring that research ethics standards were maintained throughout the process.

## 4 Results

This study has uncovered valuable findings related to the perception of product placement by viewers of the HBO series "Succession". Through semi-structured interviews with residents of West Lima, significant patterns and opinions around the brands presented in the series were identified.

### 4.1 A Brand recall and valuation

The brands most remembered and valued by the participants were Apple, Mercedes Benz and Voss (see Table 2). Product placement was considered subtle and well-integrated into the context of the series, as indicated by the following quotes:

*"I don't find it intrusive or forced as it is part of the environment or their lifestyle and also goes with the series" (E02, 18).*

*"I remember a lot that many scenes use cell phones as Apple" (E20, 22).*

**Table 2.** Brands Remembered and Rating.

Brand	Frequency of mention	Positive rating
Apple	19 times	18 participants
Mercedes Benz	11 times	11 participants
Voss	9 times	7 participants



## 4.2 Product placement interaction with characters

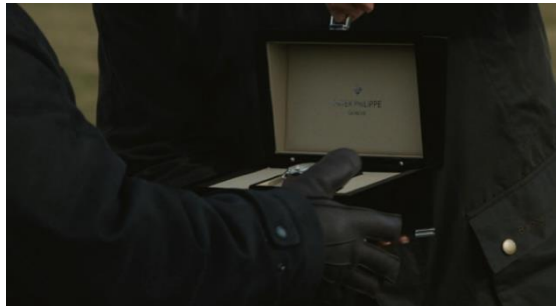
The interviewees emphasized that the brands (see examples in Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) contribute to the construction and characterization of the characters:

*"If the appearance of the brand stays with the characters, which in this case it does, because it works well and even supports the development of the story and character formation" (E04, 22).*

*"It makes them more real" (E19, 21).*



**Fig. 4.** Voss water in Season 02 - Episode 06 "Argestes" (2019). Source: Screenshot, Max.



**Fig. 5.** Patek Philippe Geneve brand watch in Season 01 - Episode 01 "Celebration" (2018). Source: Screenshot, Max.

## 4.3 Coherence of the Product Placement with the Plot

Most interviewees agreed that the presence of high-profile brands such as Mercedes Benz was coherent and realistic within the context of the series, but not the presence of low-end brands such as a Volkswagen Beetle:

*"The series itself (...) symbolizes the sophisticated, the top, the... that is, the rich. So, replacing it with something less would not symbolize the series (E13, 22)."*

In the same vein, most participants agree that the presence of Apple makes more sense than that of a Samsung in the context of the series.

*"Of course, it does [increase value], because as I tell you, not everyone uses it, only the most important [characters] in the series" (E12, 40)."*

There is unity between the brands with the highest frequency of perceived consistency (see Table 3), i.e. Mercedes Benz and Apple, with their contribution to the character's status. All participants saw the presence of both brands in the plot as coherent, as well as agreeing that they contribute to the status of the characters that accompany them.

**Table 3.** Mentions of brand coherence with the plot and its contribution to the status of the characters of the leading group.

Brand	Perceived consistency with the plot	Contribution to character status
Apple	20 mentions	20 mentions
Mercedes Benz	20 mentions	20 mentions
Samsung	8 mentions	8 mentions
Volkswagen	1 mention	1 mention

Perceived coherence is the number of respondents who mentioned that the presence of the brand was logical with the plot. While **Contribution to the character status** is the number of respondents who mentioned that the presence of the brand was logical with the character using it.

A special case happens with the antagonist character Logan Roy, who in the series is a user of both Apple and Samsung brands and who is more associated with Samsung, a brand that has some models that compete with Apple (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Mentions of brand consistency with the character Logan Roy.

Brand consistency	Frequency of Perceived Consistency	Character
It is not consistent for me to use Samsung.	5 times	Logan Roy
It is consistent for me to use Samsung.	15 times	

## 5 Discussion

Participants' positive perceptions of product placement reflect Kongmanon & Petison's [9] propositions about its non-intrusive nature. The trend toward brand choice and preference seen in "Succession" supports Borrero-Ojuelos & Bermejo-Berros [5] theories and suggests a direct impact on viewers' purchasing decisions.

The recall of specific brands such as Apple, Mercedes Benz and Voss align with the literature on the effectiveness of product placement in series with longer duration, supporting the findings of of several studies [21]. However, the relationship between

humor in scenes and brand recall was not as evident, offering an interesting divergence from Chan & Lowe's [26] observations that merits further exploration.

The congruence of product placement with plot and characters, highlighted by Neale & Crokindale [16], was confirmed by participants and was considered critical to audience acceptance. Shoenberger & Kim [20] highlight the importance of association with characters, and this study found that admiration or identification with the characters in "Succession" fosters interest in the associated brands.

## 6 Conclusions

This study concludes that the perception of product placement among "Succession" viewers was generally favorable. The product placement was perceived as harmonious with the environment of the series, contributing to brand recall and the formation of positive impressions towards them. This confirms its potential to influence choice and purchase, aligning with the brands and characters admired. These findings underscore the effectiveness of carefully integrated product placement and support its strategic use in high-end television series as a marketing tool. Implications for advertising practice suggest that narrative consistency and appropriate character selection are critical to maximizing the impact of product placement. For future research, it is recommended to explore the effect of product placement in various genres and cultural contexts to better understand its dynamics and predictive power on consumer behavior.

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