



# Building a Brand From Fiction: *The Simpsons* and Duff

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**Abstract.** Reverse product placement provides many benefits to products positioned with this marketing strategy. This is the case of the Duff beer brand, an originally fictitious product presented in *The Simpsons*. Through content analysis, this research unravels the modes of representation and functions of reverse product placement in an episode of the series. The results reveal how a brand is constructed from fiction: the integration of a product that does not yet exist, such as Duff beer, in the plot of *The Simpsons* series, gives the product a prominent visibility, in addition to offering it significant narrative relevance. Thus, the product becomes a central element in the fictional universe and influences the viewers' perceptions and emotions. The presence of the fictional product Duff in the series provokes a cultural and emotional association that turns viewers into potential future consumers. In this article, it is shown that the audiovisual and plot attributes come from the use of narrative modes with two symmetrical functions: diegetic and emotional.

**Keywords:** Reverse product placement, modes of representation, spectator-consumers

## 1 Introduction

In today's society, multiscreen culture converges with the culture of entertainment and advertising. In this context, reverse product placement (hereinafter, RPP) is an advertising tool whose interest has grown ostensibly in recent years [1]. As is known, RPP is a marketing strategy that consists of advertising, in fiction, a product that only sometime later will be marketed in the real world. In the ideal scenario, this causes the product, still fictitious, to generate empathy and purchase intention in the real viewers. [2]. These potential customers of the product live experiences like the characters in the fiction. [3]. In this way, the brands of the originally fictitious products are positioned, in a solid way, in the minds of the consumer-viewers who, later on, will become consumer-customers in the real world.

The question is, then, what are the representation strategies used by the RPP to achieve this positioning? A positioning obtained with the RPP benefits the brands of the originally fictitious products. These brands tend to strengthen the emotional connection between characters and viewers. [4]. Although there is not enough empirical evidence [5] existing research highlights that there is a strong cohesion between brand and consumer lifestyle, since viewers see their habits and experiences reflected in the product visualized in fiction. [6].

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It is claimed that the product placement in the narrative “creates conditions of attraction and results in a stronger bond between the viewer and the media persona.” [7]. Thus, advertisers postpone the role of the product as a simple object to turn it into an element with an identity inseparable from the lifestyle of the viewer-consumer. [5]. This identification is more influential in the valuation than loyalty itself. It overcomes the obstacles that obstruct loyalty and can transform non-loyal consumers into brand lovers. Identification expands beyond simple purchase retention. It becomes an emotional bond that breaks the barriers of conventional advertising and creates meaningful relationships between real consumer and fictitious product. [8].

The behavior of the brand and the commitment of its attributes to consumers are imperative. More valuable, however, is the consistency between the values of the brand and those of the individual. [9]. This coherence is resolved in a symmetry centered on transactional relationships and rooted in shared values. [10]. It is necessary to analyze the audience to build a product of meanings and representations whose aim is co-creation as a participatory culture. [11]. In the process, the consuming audience ceases to be a mere receiver to become an active partner in the narrative expansion, which allows providing shared experiences that enhance engagement and connection with the brand. [12].

From this perspective, fictional products foster a sense of escape from reality and strengthen the sensitivity towards greater visibility. [13]. In audiovisual storytelling, such products generate “narrative absorption”, in which the viewer crosses the barrier of the fictional world, and enters into a visceral connection with the story, the context and the characters. Such immersion is powerful on an emotional level: it strengthens bonds with viewers and generates a strong impact on the perception of personal experiences. [3]. In this way, viewers escape from advertising saturation and obtain content that retains a strong meaning charge. [2].

To maintain a high level of engagement, values between the brand and the user's way of life must be formed from history. By integrating it coherently into the fictional narrative, the contextual and emotional construction between the product and the plot is allowed. This technique, apart from increasing brand the visibility, places its main areas of interest both in the public (reflecting in meaningful narrative contexts their values, lifestyles and aspirations) and in the recall and recognition in the purchase intention. [14].

Narrative management of the characters should be correlated with the product to improve its effectiveness. [4]. The character's character influences the purchase intention, which is conducive to the viewer's identification. [15]. Through certain attributes of the character, the identity that will be obtained in the purchase intention is registered. The most attractive traits are those that are effective in desire and purchase: the character becomes a model of meaning transfer [16]. To make visible and increase recall, the product is inserted into the story and its participatory role is strengthened as an articulated element in the story. [17]. Therefore, the product is not shown in a passive way, but actively integrated into the plot. [14]. The participatory level of the product must interest the main action: it can turn the product into the main character of the scene. This implies that the product plays a relevant role in the actions and in the evolution of the story and of the main characters, so that, at the narrative level, new layers of meanings are generated in the story that turn the fictional product into an integral part of the plot. [18].

However, [1] believe in the need to insert strategic visual elements that differentiate the product in the plan, since its visibility is concentrated in points of interest that

increase the generation of awareness. The location of the product should be planned and should avoid showing advertising or commercial intentions. [19]. This is less invasive and more effective advertising. Planning generates opportunities to design better segmented products, thereby increasing the interest and involvement of the future consumer before they move beyond the fictional world. [20].

To positively influence purchase intentions, audio stimuli and product placement, are interrelated in the plot, and brand recall, which is central to RPP marketing. [21]. To obtain an active involvement between consumers and brand, coherence is sought in the construction of the product culture. Thus, RPP is a means to connect with customers, establish strong bonds, and drive long-term unconscious marketing. [22].

This comprehensive strategy must be defined by a narrative that continually evokes an enduring and enriching relationship with viewers. It is a process that emotionally builds a deep-rooted connection between loyalty and engagement. [23]. The creation of social relationships is a positive tool to achieve attitudes towards the product. The strategy generates meaningful cognitive ties and provides solid ground for long-lasting attitudes toward the product. [24].

Despite the aforementioned research, there is not usually an abundance of research that analyzes in detail the application of the RPP in fiction series. From this point of view, this article aims to examine a particular case. To this end, it answers two research questions: what are the modes of representation of the RPP in the case of the Duff beer brand, in the episode “Waiting for Duffman” (season 26, episode 17) of the animated series *The Simpsons*? and what are the diegetic and emotional functions that these modes fulfill as part of the RPP?

## **2 Methodology**

### **2.1 Methodological design**

This work uses a hermeneutic design, which underlies the interpretive paradigm whose objective is to understand the fundamental nature of reality from emotional or subjective experience. [25]. A qualitative approach and a descriptive scope are used. [26]. In this sense, the hermeneutic design makes it possible to understand the cinematographic discourse through a reflexive and subjective interpretation of the meanings and values given to the advertising tool in question. [27].

### **2.2 *The Simpsons***

*The Simpsons* animated series has been running for 35 seasons to date. Its story is set in the fictional town of Springfield, and focuses on the life of the Simpson family, whose members are Homer, Marge, Lisa, Bart and Maggie. Each episode develops situations that reflect the daily lives of its characters in a comical and absurd way, which allows for a critique of American popular culture.

### **2.3 Selection**

To apply the content analysis technique, seven segments are selected from Chapter 17, entitled “Waiting for Duffman”.

**Table 1.** Selected segments according to scene and description

Segment	Scene	Description
1	1' 09" - 1' 34"	Parade where the brand ambassador rides on a fairground car with various elements that allude to the Duff brand.
2	1' 34" - 2' 23"	Citizens learn of the Duff brand ambassador's accident and show their concern and commitment.
3	3' 19" - 6' 40"	Fictional reality TV program to choose the new Duff man.
4	8' 16" - 8' 55"	Promotional video of Duff beer parodying the intro of <i>Game of Thrones</i> .
5	9' 41" - 12' 04"	Homer visits the Duff brewery appreciating different elements and history of the product.
6	14' 24" - 15' 24"	Homer, being the new ambassador of Duff beer, advertises the brand among the citizens by fighting the boredom of their daily activities.
7	15' 24" - 15' 45"	Fictional commercial for the product Duff where a jingle is mentioned throughout the commercial and at the end an advertisement for the beer is shown.

## 2.4 Technique and instrument

The data collection technique applied corresponds to content analysis. This allows coding and describing the aspects and information of the studied phenomenon. [28]. The use of this technique, in its audiovisual variant, is extremely relevant because it allows a detailed description of the RPP advertising tool by identifying reiterative patterns in the selected segments. In this way, the meanings conveyed by deciphering this representation and its impact on the narrative and the perceptions of the viewers are understood.

The instrument is an audiovisual content analysis matrix duly validated through expert judgment and test applications. The tool facilitated the constant and homogeneous recording of the phenomena subject to observation [29], and improved scientific precision through the use of theoretical categories and subcategories.

## 3 Results

The research set out to (1) establish which are the modes of representation of the Duff brand's RPP in the selected segments (Table 1), and (2) point out which diegetic and emotional functions these modes fulfill as part of the advertising tool.

### 3.1 Modes of representation and diegetic functions

There are six modes of representation of the RPP functions. These modes are organized in a sequence that goes from the most global to the most specific (Table 2). A diegetic function is defined as a function that affects the fictional sequence or plot. [30,31].

**Table 2.** Modes and diegetic functions of the RPP

Number	Mode (code)	Diegetic function (code)
1	Subtle introduction in the narrative (M1)	Passive appearance of the product moving the narrative (FD1)
2	Active participation in the narrative (M2)	Interaction of the product in the narrative context (FD2)

3	Fictitious media (M3)	Formation of the fictional media landscape (FD3)
4	Product-character connection (M4)	Relation of product with characteristics and tastes of the characters (FD4)
5	Character interaction (M5)	Sensory experiences between character and product (FD5)
6	Auditory and visual techniques (M6)	Product feature highlight (FD6)

With the first mode of representation (M1), the brand is subtly and coherently articulated in the narrative plot (FD1). The product is introduced in an underlying way, establishing a natural relationship between the story and the character. In segment 2, the Duff beer ambassador's accident is the focus. That incident moves the narrative course through an emotional response (reactions of astonishment and concern) of the characters to the accident. However, the product is also actively presented, thus the second mode of representation (M2) appears: the product is narratively erected, although not in an advertising way (FD2). In segment 1, as the sequence progresses, the product gains relevance; the narrative focuses on beer and obtains closer shots (M2). Realistic elements associated with real beer consumption are used: the girls with the beers, the fairground cart in the form of a canteen and the beer barrels (FD2). In segment 3, the product is integrated with a television introduction showing shots of beer bottles. This mode of representation (M2) creates a symbiotic relationship between what is seen and what is narrated. In this way, the narrative experience is enriched by making beer an everyday product: its naturalness is enhanced as the characters' emotions and memories flourish (FD2).

The third mode of representation corresponds to the media (M3). Television stands out, which is integrated into the main story, the experiences of the characters and their popular culture (FD3). At the end of the sixth segment, a *zoom out* showing the frame of a television set is used to reveal that the viewing integrates an alternate narrative within the television set: it is a fictional advertisement within fiction. This mode (M3) generates familiarity with the Duff ad (FD3). In segment 7, the focuses on a character pointing to a commercial while pressing the remote control: it moves to a following scene with elements of Duff beer (FD3). The fourth mode is the product-character connection (M4). Such a relationship adds depth to the story and generates a sense of authenticity (FD4). In segment 2, the characters cry near the image of the ambassador. The beer reflects their personalities and defines them by their actions, becoming part of the fictional local culture. The product-character interaction increases the sense of authenticity, perceiving it as a symbol with local meaning (FD4).

The fifth mode corresponds to the interaction between the characters that fosters a more organic integration (M5). In segment 5, Marge Simpsons shares a sensory experience while drinking a beer. Shown in the foreground is the foam on her lips; in the background, Homer with an expression of craving. Marge, after having drunk the beer, mentions: "Hey, this stuff is very good", thus generating a representation of evaluative interaction, where the product is mentioned and valued by the character [32]. The texture of the foam is highlighted and the pleasure of consuming beer is transmitted (FD5). In segment 7, a commercial with significant moments is presented: an astronaut receives beer instead of oxygen, a helicopter transports a barrel of beer in Rio de Janeiro (Christ the Redeemer in the foreground) and the Duff man holds a pack of Duff beers and the message "Duff 9-pack, because 7 cans are not enough". The decoding of sensory

exploration and perspectives is provoked: these are interactions so unreal that they capture the attention (FD5).

With the sixth mode of representation, auditory and visual techniques are highlighted (M6). Auditory, visual and flat techniques are employed that maintain emotional and narrative harmony. In segment 1, the ambassador tells the audience: “Drinkers, if you get on the bandwagon, make it the Duff beer bandwagon... Oh yeah,” and starts dancing. Along with the catchy beat music, an association with fun is created, prompting to make a wise decision and enjoy, metaphorically, the fun wagon (FD6).

In segment 3, closed shots focus on the characters’ faces in relation to dialogues or actions associated with beer (FD6). When focusing on the product, open shots are used; the naturalness of the insertion is more plausible and the characters’ feelings are given greater narrative and advertising weight. Likewise, through dialogue, a narrative assessment of the brand is introduced (FD6). When asked about the importance of Duff, Homer replies, “Without Duff I wouldn’t have brought three beautiful children into the world,” and his son, Bart, adds, “It’s true. “We’re beer babies.” A direct and memorable connection is made between the brand and happy moments of the protagonist characters. The shot placement and editing of segment 4 reinforce a visual connection, just as the sound of the bottles opening creates a sense of familiarity to real sensations: the freshness of a beer (FD6).

In segment 5, the owner of the Duff company mentions that people like to drink beer, to which Marge responds: “It’s already made me want to drink it.” This dialogue represents a positive reaction of the characters towards the product, integrating itself as a motivating part of their actions (FD6). During segment 7, a jingle is heard that alludes to the concepts of joy and acceptance of others if they consume beer: “Drink, you have to toast. You have to stay. Drink, more health to your beloved and she will love you more. Drink, drink more.” It is an advertising self-irony towards the brand’s values that is not out of place, since it expresses advertising sincerity (FD6).

### 3.2 Mode functions

The emotional functions are those that, from the diegesis [30,31], addressed the viewer and build with him/her a subjective perspective related to the product (see Table 3). To fulfill this function, audiovisual language usually focuses on the face and facial expressions [33].

**Table 3.** Emotional modes and functions of the RPP

Number	Mode (code)	Emotional function (code)
1	Subtle introduction in the narrative (M1)	Evoking sensations in emotional perspectives (FE1)
2	Active participation in the narrative (M2)	Achieving emotional identification between events and characters (FE2)
3	Fictitious media (M3)	Incorporate the product into the emotive culture (FE3)
4	Product-character connection (M4)	Associate emotional motivation with the characters actions (FE4)
5	Character interaction (M5)	Identify the characters with the brand values (FE5)
6	Auditory and visual techniques (M6)	Visual and emotional to promote the product (FE6)

The subtle introduction into the narrative (M1) seeks to establish a relationship that influences the plot through the evocation of emotions in the character (FE1). To this end, layers of narrative complexity are added in the sensations associated with emotional perspectives; Duff beer becomes an element that is integrated into the plot but is not highlighted as a cause or consequence of the scene (FE1). The RPP also fulfills a second function with the mode of active participation in the narrative (M2): it integrates the product into the plot to reinforce the coherence of its concepts and the identification between characters and events (FE2). In this sense, in segment 1, the product, as a plot driver, builds brand value (FE2). This function is evoked in emotional marketing and causes the product to stand out in a montage of protagonist shots. Contrary to what may be believed, this function does not overshadow the previous one (FE1), but rather adds to and complements the narratological sense, where each segment of the story makes use of a specific function as required by its characters or the plot (FE2).

The third mode (M3) allows the integration of the product, both narratively and in terms of advertising, into the emotional culture of the series (FE3). The product is presented in a natural way and avoids commercial over-perception. Such an interactive approach generates contrasts that increase attention and recall. Exposure of additional opportunities that highlight the product is achieved, as in segment 7, when the character uses the remote control to play a Duff commercial (FE3). These media fulfill the function of reflecting the society and culture of the narrative world, which allows associating and complementing it with the social values of the characters (FE3).

The fourth mode (M4) enriches the understanding of the actions based on the values that the product bestows, fitting with the essence of the characters (FE4). In segment 2, the awe of the accident not only grounds the narrative, but also allows a sense of belonging (FE4). Positive attitudes in segment 1 contribute to brand acceptance and evidence the characters' joy towards the product (FE4). In this mode (M4), the characters' actions establish a certain familiarity with Duff's values and sensations, so that, as a cause and consequence, it is understood that, if the brand has certain values, the characters in the fiction will behave similarly (FE4).

The fifth mode (M5) deepens the values of the brand and enriches the perception of the characters towards it (FE5). In segment 5, the association of historical and social elements incorporates the brand with social criteria: it allows a better association of these elements in the background with the foreground of the characters. This generates sensory and emotional experiences and allows a greater affinity between these elements and fictional figures, highlighting the usefulness of beer in their lifestyle and relevance in the plot (FE5).

Finally, the sixth mode (M6) consists of stimulating the promotion and consumption of the product by associating it with the product's values (FE6). The narrative formula provides nourished and concise message. Although in the jingle sung in segment 7 it is clear that this is an advertising strategy, M6 allows it to be naturally integrated into the narrative. In an unconventional way, new values are conveyed that offer unique and exciting experiences to fictitious consumers (FE6).

In sum, there is a symmetrical relationship between each mode of representation with a diegetic function and an emotional function (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Emotional modes and functions of the RPP

Mode of representation	Diegetic function	Emotional function
Subtle introduction in the narrative (M1)	Passive appearance of the product moving the narrative (FD1)	Evoking sensations in emotional perspectives (FE1)
Active participation in the narrative (M2)	Interaction of the product in the narrative context (FD2)	Achieving emotional identification between events and characters (FE2)
Fictitious media (M3)	Formation of the fictional media landscape (FD3)	Incorporate the product into the emotive culture (FE3)
Product-character connection (M4)	Relation of the product with characteristics and tastes of the characters (FD4)	Associate emotional motivation with the character actions (FE4)
Character interaction (M5)	Sensory experiences between character and product (FD5)	Identify the characters with the brand values (FE5)
Auditory and visual techniques	Product feature highlighting (FD6)	Visual and emotional impact to promote the product (FE6)

## 4 Discussion

The purpose of this research was to describe how the RPP is represented in the episode “Waiting for Duffman” of *The Simpsons*, in the case of the fictional Duff beer brand. The research focused on determining and describing the different modes used to represent this advertising tool, examining its diegetic and emotional functions.

The results show that the RPP of the Duff brand in *The Simpsons* incorporates strategies both actively and passively. Through diegetic functions, Duff beer becomes a natural plot element associated with the characters and the fictional culture. Emotional functions aim to evoke emotions and sensations that reinforce brand’s values. Subtly or actively, the product participates in the narrative, influences the evolution of the story and the construction of product concepts and values. Duff is represented as a fun, cheerful and carefree product (it appeases problems), whose values are reflected in the everyday life of the characters. This coincides with [2], who argues that the constant interaction between product and characters should maintain a balance of values and emotions. To this, [34] point out that such emotional narrative integration reinforces the strategic insertion of the brand, which allows generating experiential and emotional value. Likewise, such integration, to the fictional lifestyle, has a positive impact on the creation of memorable experiences with a fundamental role in the identification of their fictional consumers and, consequently, of real viewers [5].

The characters actively interact with the product, which maximizes the connection between them. The product is seen, in most of the scenes, in very unrealistic or not very everyday situations, which generates greater attention to what is being seen and heard. Such unconventional situations explore new narrative driving approaches that give greater weight and depth to the connection between the product and the characters. In this way, the degree of involvement of the product remains highly relevant to the main plot.

Active interaction generates dimensions in the meaning of the story that benefit the advertising perspective [18]. The representation of this tool also watches over the technical side. Its fixation on constantly interacting with characters allows it to position



itself in visual spaces and sound layers in the foreground. Its integration is granted in a more natural way by positioning itself in points of interest not only narrative, but technical, which allow it, according to [1], to increase awareness of the product being viewed, due to its segmentation in terms of strategic design.

For the product to maintain a certain narrative status and form integral layers of meaning, [18] ensures that it must connect and engage relevant connection with the main characters. The results obtained here confirm what has been said by [18], since the Duff product interacts and bonds emotionally not only with Homer, the main character, but also with the other characters in the community, whether they are relevant or not to the plot, generating a sense of community that connects to the product.

The representation of the RPP in *The Simpsons* series makes evident the evolution of the narrative influence that Duff beer undergoes throughout the plot of the chapter under investigation, since its relevance increases as the story progresses. It is noteworthy the use of real elements and situations about beer consumption that add realism to such representation. In this way, the fictional media play an important role by integrating the brand naturally into the story: an emotional interaction is created with the characters that is reflected in the culture of the fictional world of the series using creative elements that enrich the narratological experience. The product ends up becoming an integral part of the characters' lives and connects emotionally with them. This connection is based on their association of characteristics, tastes and needs born from the experience of the characters: are they who value the product and express their liking when interacting with it, which turns is towards a positive perception of the product itself.

This research has an obvious limitation in that it only focuses on one episode of one of the 35 seasons that make up *The Simpsons*. In this sense, future research could analyze the evolution of RPP representation throughout the other seasons. A second limitation corresponds to the fact that the study focuses strictly on the product's fiction. It would be important to analyze the impact that the RPP tool has had on real viewers in the promotion of Duff beer.

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