

# TAIWANESE IDOL DRAMA: THE INFLUENCE OF IDENTIFICATION ON PRODUCT PLACEMENT EFFECTIVENESS

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## ABSTRACT

*This article looks at the effect of product placement in Taiwanese idol dramas on the consumer behaviour of Taiwanese female students. It argues that the more the female viewer is able to identify with either the plot or actors in the drama, the more this influences product placement effectiveness. This paper draws on previous research on product placement in realistic environments and a web-based survey evaluating to what extent viewers are able to identify themselves with a drama series. It will also look at whether this level of identification changes consumer attitudes and alters purchase intentions.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Product Placement, Identification, Consumer behaviour.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2001, the trend-setting television series *Meteor Garden* (*Liuxing Huayuan* 流星花園), an adaptation of the Japanese manga *Hana Yori Dango* (Boys over Flowers), set the tone for future Taiwanese popular drama series: Taiwanese idol dramas (Liu and Chen 2004: 68). Since then, East Asian TV Industries have seen the success of these dramas and have produced many of these series. The story tells of four rich young men dominating their high school territory and one lower-middle-class girl, as they engage in intricate and complicated (love) relationships, along with showing “trend-setting representations of

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how young East Asian urbanites skilfully consume, fashion and capitalize on the materiality of the new 'global' culture" (Deppman 2009: 93). Many idol dramas portray a setting where the lives and/or characteristics of the actors and the Taiwanese consumers are likely to have similarities. Actively trying to mirror a real-life environment provides scenes with which women can more readily identify themselves (Deppman 2009: 93).

Taiwanese idol dramas, specifically regarding the aspect of identification, play a major role within the consumer market. Consumer behaviour can be influenced in many ways using different methods, for example through the use of product placement, which is the most prominent type of advertising within drama series. Placement marketing is a way of advertising a product during a movie or television show, where brand messages can be directly promoted in the media (Chen *et al.* 2013: 357). Many companies are using this type of marketing by having lead actors use a particular product such as a mobile phone or computer of a specific brand.

## IDOL DRAMA AND IDENTIFICATION IN TAIWAN

The rise of an industrial culture within Taiwan after the 1970s led to significant social changes, including changes that influenced the role of women in society (Rubinstein 2004: 244), such as government investment in better and higher education for women, more and more women moving into the paid workforce due to industrialisation, and a decrease in stress on extended families and family life. These developments helped women attain greater independence and self-confidence (Shaw and Tan 2014: 251). Despite these modern developments, the media continued to stress the importance of marriage, housewives and the family system. The above-mentioned changes are often touched upon by idol dramas.

Survey respondents mentioned a number of idol dramas they believed were closely related to real life. Two of the most mentioned series included *A Good Wife* (*Qin aide, wo ai shang de, wo ai shang bie ren le* 親愛的, 我愛上別人了) and *In Time With You* (*wo keneng bu hui ai ni*, 我可能不會愛你). Survey respondents mentioned a number of idol dramas they believed were closely related to real life. In *A Good Wife*, the lead female character finds herself torn between the level of control her parents exert and her own desires. Graduated from one of the top schools of architecture and born into a wealthy family, she is now forced into being a housewife, trying desperately to have children

and taking care of her husband; a top award-winning architect. Unable to express her opinion and making her own decisions, she then finds her happiness elsewhere, by starting an affair. At the end of the series, the female lead actress is not looked down upon when starting another relationship, but is instead applauded for choosing her own path and breaking free from the traditional household. In *In Time With You*, a highly educated 30-year-old woman is often criticised by family and friends for not having a husband or partner, as they believe she puts too much focus on her career, being the manager of a shoe manufacturer. However, the pressure from society and her fear of aging makes her increasingly eager to get married before the age of 35. From both of these series, topics were selected to ask more in-depth questions.

Topics related to love and conservatism not only make viewers reflect upon their own experiences, but also stimulate viewers to create their own reality based upon these topics and believing it to be true (Li 2014: 6).

## **SURVEY RESULTS: IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION**

Fiske researched aspects of realism in television series/sitcoms. He argued that television has the ability to “carry a socially convincing sense of the real” (1987: 17). According to Fiske, aspects of realism in a sitcom or series indicate that there is a continuous repetition of a character, meaning that like the viewer, the actor has a past, a present, and a future, and that “audience members are invited to relate to them in terms of familiarity and identification” (1987: 121). It is not the idol itself that brings this familiarity, but it is the personality it creates, thus creating the idol (Bennet 2008: 32). Some results have been left out for the purpose of this article.

## **SURVEY RESULTS PART I: LOVE AND MARRIAGE**

<i>Percentage of respondents preferring a successful career over love</i>	78%
<i>Percentage of respondents preferring love over a successful career</i>	22%
<i>Percentage of respondents believing marriage is one's obligation in life</i>	15%
<i>Percentage of respondents believing marriage is not an obligation</i>	85%

**SURVEY RESULTS: PARENTAL CONTROL AND PRESSURE FROM SOCIETY**

<i>Percentage of respondents believing they feel pressured by society to live and act in a certain way</i>	92%
<i>Percentage of respondents believing they do not feel pressured by society to live and act in a certain way</i>	8%
<i>Percentage of respondents believing their parents pressure them into getting married</i>	12%
<i>Percentage of respondents believing their parents do not pressure them into getting married</i>	88%

**SURVEY RESULTS: FEMALE ROLES IN SOCIETY AND WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION**

<i>Percentage of respondents believing men should take care of women</i>	43%
<i>Percentage of respondents believing men do not have to take care of women</i>	57%
<i>Percentage of respondents believing women's emancipation is a positive development</i>	94%
<i>Percentage of respondents believing women's emancipation is negative development</i>	6%

**SURVEY RESULTS PART II: IDENTIFICATION WITH DRAMA SERIES**

<i>Percentage of respondents believing Taiwanese idol drama reflects traditional family values</i>	92%
<i>Percentage of respondents believing Taiwanese idol drama does not reflect traditional family values</i>	8%
<i>Percentage of respondents who believe they are able to identify with a female actress, when she feels pressured by traditional family values</i>	53%
<i>Percentage of respondents who do not believe they are able to identify with a female actress, when she feels pressured by traditional family values</i>	47%

<i>Percentage of respondents believing Taiwanese idol drama reflects current society</i>	65%
<i>Percentage of respondents believing Taiwanese idol drama does not reflect current society</i>	35%

<i>Percentage of respondents able to identify with a female actress feeling pressured by traditional family values</i>	53%
<i>Percentage of respondents not able to identify with a female actress feeling pressured by traditional family values</i>	47%

## FINDINGS

Women's emancipation seems to be a prevalent topic among female students. 82% of the respondents believe women's emancipation is a recent development within Taiwanese society and 92% of the respondents still feel pressure from society to live and act in certain ways, due to gender. According to 85% of the respondents, marriage is not an obligation. Moreover, 78% of the respondents prefer a successful career over love relationships. In contrast, only a slightly larger percentage of respondents (57%) feels that women can take care of themselves and do not need to be taken care of by their partners, which may suggest that the main focus within women's emancipation among female students relates to the portrayal of women in society, as opposed to individualism (Chang 2009: 8).

Many of the results on how female students feel towards the role of women in society correlate with how well they are able to identify themselves with the plot or lead actor of a Taiwanese idol drama. Out of those questioned, 92% feel idol dramas reflect traditional Taiwanese family values and 65% believe idol dramas portray current Taiwanese society. 53% of the respondents are able to identify with the lead actress when she feels pressured by traditional family values, compared to 46% who identify with a lead actress feeling pressured by traditional cultural values, suggesting the family system is still of importance in Taiwanese society, although traditional views may have shifted towards more Western views within the (female) younger generation (Thornton *et al.* 1994: 394). In topics relating to love, the majority of respondents hoped to find a future partner who is similar to male lead actors in an idol drama. This hope for finding a partner based on a fictional character, correlates with Li's (2014: 6) research, as he mentioned

viewers of drama series creating their own reality, and reflecting these ideas on their own life.

Results show that many current issues concerning Taiwanese traditional society and the role of women appear in Taiwanese idol drama. Moreover, students' beliefs on these topics correspond with to what extent they are able to relate themselves to the story of a series or the identity of the lead actor. Answers given on topics on love and relationship suggest unrealistic hopes and dreams related to finding a future partner, which may lead to altered ideas of the viewer's own reality.

### PLACEMENT ADVERTISEMENTS AND REALISM

Research on how viewers interpret placement advertisements suggests that the more realistic the environment of the placement and the more it has specific cultural meaning, the more viewers are attracted to it (Russell 2002: 307). In one study, which examined the influence of plot connection on brand recall, results showed that there was a significantly higher number of viewers that were able to recall placement advertising with a high plot connection, in contrast with product placement with a low plot connection (Chen *et al.* 2013: 363). This suggests high plot connection leads to better information processing by audiences (Bressoud *et al.* 2010: 376).

The genre of drama should relate to viewers' social context and/or past experiences, in order for them to create a sense of personal value (Fiske 1987: 151). Therefore, a drama genre should imitate real life, enabling viewers to identify with the story and the characters (Liang *et al.* 2014: 13). A study by Namdar *et al.* (2013) researched how local television dramas in Pakistan affected female viewer perceptions of products and whether this increased or altered purchase intentions. In this research, 81% of the survey respondents believed local television dramas reflected Pakistani society. Additionally, 85% responded that they were paying attention to the products used in said drama series. This suggests a connection between drama series incorporating a realistic plot and product liking.

#### TAIWANESE IDOL DRAMA MARKETING

The production of Taiwanese drama series developed more indigenous characteristics, while holding on to the specific model. Several set elements were connected to the story in order to make a series successful. These

elements include particular kinds of symbolism, specific kinds of music, specific locations, a set number of occupations given to the actor, branded commodities, and the pop idols themselves.

In the Taiwanese idol drama *In Time With You*, mentioned as one of the top dramas closest to reality by the survey respondents for this research, many different types of product placements occurred in the series. For example, IKEA and China Airlines served as locations that were visited by the main actors. Furthermore, the profession of the female lead actress in the series was related to retail and management, where she often wore and promoted a particular type of shoe brand. Xu *et al.* (2013: 11) researched the effectiveness of these placements by conducting interviews and surveys, which verified that five out of the six types of the placement advertisements observed in *In Time With You* had a positive effect on consumer behaviour, however not indicating whether this also increased product consumption. The study furthermore argued that this positive effect on consumer behaviour was partly due to the fact that realistic behaviour in the series led to altered purchase intentions.

### SURVEY RESULTS PART III: PRODUCT LIKING

<i>Percentage of respondents always liking items or clothing an actor is using or wearing in a series</i>	42%
<i>Percentage of respondents often liking items or clothes an actor is using or wearing in a series</i>	42%
<i>Percentage of respondents hardly liking items or clothes an actor is using or wearing in a series</i>	13%
<i>Percentage of respondents never liking items or clothes an actor is using or wearing in a series</i>	3%

The above survey results suggest that spending time actively assessing a product could also lead to product liking (Xu *et al.* 2013: 11), and thus should result in altered purchase intentions.

**SURVEY RESULTS: PRODUCT PURCHASE 1**

<i>Percentage of respondents usually feeling tempted towards buying a product or item of clothing an actor was wearing</i>	5%
<i>Percentage of respondents sometimes feeling tempted towards buying a product or item of clothing an actor was wearing</i>	27%
<i>Percentage of respondents hardly feeling tempted towards buying a product or item of clothing an actor was wearing</i>	47%
<i>Percentage of respondents never feeling tempted towards buying a product or item of clothing an actor was wearing</i>	26%

The results show that the number of students altering buying attitudes as a result of liking a product is as low as 5% and those who sometimes feel tempted to purchase a product shown in a series is 27%. In contrast, the combined number of respondents who showed hardly to no interest in potential purchase of a product is 73%. A study by Katona (1946) rebuts the assumption that identification leads to altered purchase behaviours, as it argues that the consumer would have already been willing to buy a product before, and placement advertising furthermore simulated that willingness (quoted in Edwards 2012: 702). As much as consumer manipulation could have subliminal effects (Neacşu *et al.* 2013: 188), Katona's findings do somewhat correlate with the survey results for this study, shown below.

**SURVEY RESULTS: PRODUCT PURCHASE 2**

<i>Percentage of respondents often buying products showed in idol dramas</i>	1%
<i>Percentage of respondents sometimes buying products showed in idol dramas</i>	27%
<i>Percentage of respondents hardly to never buying products showed in idol dramas</i>	72%

The outcome suggests that even though product liking due to watching idol dramas may have increased among the respondents, this does not necessarily alter or increase buying intentions, as a mere 1% of the respondents actively purchased products used in a series.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Since the 1990s, Taiwanese drama series have continuously appealed to the imagination of the viewer. When characteristics in a series are understood by the audience, it has positive effects on product placement effectiveness (Liang *et al.* 2014: 15), as product liking is enhanced. Drama series use a certain fixed structure, making use of certain dramatic effects, music, scenery, and storylines, which appeal to the viewer's emotions.

This article researched whether identification with the storyline of a series or the identity of the characters played by the lead actors are important factors in increasing consumer purchase behaviour among female Taiwanese students. This study found that a scenario or character's identity relating to the lives or experiences of the viewer enhances product liking, therefore suggesting that Taiwanese idol dramas are a suitable media genre for placement advertisements. Further research has to be done to verify whether besides affecting the consumer, product placement also influences consumer behaviour and purchase intentions.

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