

The Not-So-Reality Television Show: Consumerism in MTV's *Sorority Life*

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Writer's comment: I originally wrote this piece for an American Studies seminar. The class was about consumption, and it focused on how Americans define themselves through the products they purchase. My professor, Carolyn de la Pena, really encouraged me to pursue my interest in advertising. If it were not for her, UC Davis would have very little in regards to studying marketing.

—*Kyle Dunst*

Instructor's comment: Kyle wrote this paper for my American Studies senior seminar on consumer culture. I encouraged him to combine his interests in marketing with his personal fearlessness in order to put together a somewhat covert final project: to infiltrate the UC Davis-based *Sorority Life* reality show and discover the role that consumer objects played in creating its "reality." His findings help us de-code the role of product placement in the genre by revealing the dual nature of branded objects on reality shows. On the one hand, they offset costs through advertising revenues. On the other, they create a materially based drama within the show that ensures conflict and piques viewer interest. The ideas and legwork here were all Kyle; the motivational speeches and background reading were mine.

—*Carolyn de la Pena, American Studies*

WHAT DO *THE OSBOURNES*, *Road Rules*, *WWF Making It!*, *Jack Ass*, *Cribs*, and 12 seasons of *Real World* have in common? They are all examples of reality-MTV. This study analyzes product placement and advertising in an MTV reality show familiar to many of the students at the University of California, Davis, *Sorority Life*. I argue that this reality series did not depict reality, but was rather an advertisement for MTV and its sponsors. It fuses advertisements and programming. It's the sponsored products in *Sorority Life* that provoke conflict and tension that successfully sell the reality-TVshow. This paper doesn't intend to evaluate product placement's effectiveness, but simply to record how it can help to move a story along.

My methodology for this study consisted of research I conducted before the first show aired, program observation once the series started, and interviews with three sorority members. The identities of the interview subjects will remain anonymous to protect the women from the legalities of their contracts with MTV. These interviews provided insider knowledge about the program and laid the foundation for this study. Unfortunately, because of various license agreements and sponsor secrecy contracts, it was extremely difficult to obtain much inside information about MTV and its business partnerships. Most of this research is my own qualitative analysis of product placing in the show.

John Miller, the executive producer of *Sorority Life*, chose to film UC Davis in order to deviate from the party-school stereotype associated with Greek sorority students (Kushman). At least this was MTV's excuse for not getting permission to film any National Panhellenic Conference sorority. Instead, the show follows around six of fourteen Sigma Alpha Epsilon Pi pledges through their initiation into the Jewish interest sorority. Unlike members and pledges in previous years, select members and pledges of this sorority received gifts throughout the year from sponsors like IKEA, Yukon, Paul Frank, Schwinn, Frito-Lay, Pepsi/Aquafina, Jansport, Mavi, Cover Girl, Starbucks, Bumble and Bumble, Steve Madden, Yahoo!, Hamilton Beach, Greek101.com, Secret Solid, and American Eagle because of MTV filming. Some of MTV's gifts on loan to the pledges included a fully furnished house and a new Yukon sport utility vehicle (Dunst).

Although there isn't much information available regarding MTV or its sponsors, it is apparent product placement occurs during each episode. Product placement, sometimes referred to as 'embedded' advertising, originated with the movie industry in the early twentieth century (Singer and Menashy). It is the process of integrating a clearly

visible advertised product into a picture, movie, or television show, and it costs relatively little compared to airing commercials. It is not clear whether product placement is beneficial or not, but companies spend millions of dollars paying producers and actors to use their brands (Hazan, Lipton, and Glantz 998–1000). Tami Glen, founder and president of Hollywood International Placements, explains, “Let’s face it: People want to mirror Hollywood in their own lifestyles” (*Wired News*). Her company profits by finding products to place on television stations such as MTV.

Since August 21, 1981, MTV has obtained practically all of its revenue through its advertising. Its programming content reflects this. Companies want to associate themselves with MTV productions because of MTV’s uncanny ability to successfully attract a youthful target audience (Weimann 175). Further, what makes MTV unique is that the advertising promotes a lifestyle through the use of brand names. According to John Pettegrew,

Advertisers looked at MTV and knew they were getting a viewing environment in which it made less and less sense to separate selling from entertainment and consumption from enjoyment. MTV’s programming amounted to almost a complete context of selling. (490)

Although Pettegrew refers to music videos here, I believe the same “context of selling” exists in *Sorority Life*. This is not to say that reality-TV contains a rampant amount of advertising. However, it does imply that MTV’s reality programming presents its sponsors in an inconspicuous way. It does this, almost naturally, by fitting products into the confines of reality-tv’s definition.

Richard Gizbert of ABC News defines such programming as “Placing ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances.” For the purposes of this study, reality-TV encompasses three important elements: it’s voyeuristic, it’s unscripted, and it presents conflict. *Sorority Life*, in part, incorporates each characteristic through the use of its sponsors and products (Joniak 13). For this reason, reality-TV is an excellent medium for broadcast advertising through product placement.

The first element of a reality-TV show is the aspect of voyeurism. Each episode focuses on what appears to be a regular person in a natural environment so the audience experiences an impression of spying. However, this is not truly the case when sponsors incorporate their products into the episode. For example, six of the four pledges in *Sorority Life* shared an IKEA furnished house complete with a heated

pool and Jacuzzi (Dunst). Normally, pledges live without such luxuries, and they do not live together. Yet when the television crews film, old customs change in order to accommodate an audience. The pledges' sponsored products created unnatural situations during the pledge period, and they received their own close-up shots at times.

Not once did the pledge computer escape the display of the Yahoo! name and logo. There is a moment when one of the pledges is on the phone at the computer desk and it is impossible to miss the superimposed scrolling logo that is meant to look like a screen-saver. The logo is flashed on beach balls, a mouse pad, and even the back of a pledge's laptop computer. Since Viacom announced in 1999 that it wanted to improve the online sites around its MTV and VH1 cable channels, Yahoo! and MTV have been in partnership (Freedom du Lac). MTV's *Sorority Life* website continues the show's advertising through placing products and more advertisements in its photo flip book.

From a product placement perspective, giving the pledges their own house proved to be beneficial to most of the sponsors. Cristel Russell's dissertation on product placement's effectiveness notes, "Connecting the brand to the plot was also known to enhance memory." IKEA accomplished this during the second episode when the chosen pledges moved into their lease-free home. Obviously, none of the women complained about any of their IKEA-furnished living conditions because everything was new and free. The pledges lived in a sponsored environment, and what's not to love? In the beginning, at least.

IKEA is not the only company guilty of blatant product placement. Since 1996, PepsiCo and MTV have co-branded to "establish a partnership to develop international programming, cross promotions, marketing tie-ins and special events" (Kuharich). Currently, only Pepsi products, such as Aquafina and Doritos, are prevalent in MTV programming. For example, in *Sorority Life*, Aquafina and Pepsi bottles appeared in each episode around the pledge house living room, kitchen, bathroom, hall table, computer desk, and car. There is even an instance when a pledge drinks a competitive brand's beverage, probably Coca-Cola, and MTV scrambled the label on the bottle. This illustrates MTV's obligation to complete sponsor support. They offer product superiority by not allowing competitor products to exist on their programs. In fact, Coca-Cola missed the opportunity to advertise to an average 1.9 million viewers every Monday night.

Starbucks, another *Sorority Life* sponsor, utilizes the same technique as PepsiCo. On more than one occasion the pledges enjoy a cup

of coffee at Starbucks. During the series, no other coffee shops seem to exist even though there are many places to enjoy coffee in the city of Davis. Yet the viewer is never aware of this because the women of Sigma go to the Starbucks in Davis because they receive free drinks when accompanied by MTV. Also interesting to note, PepsiCo and Starbucks formed the North American Coffee Partnership and are joint companies (PepsiCo). With the exception of all the unmarked bottles of alcohol, MTV televised only the beverage products from both these companies.

The second element that reality-TV utilizes is a lack of scripting. Characters in the show play themselves and are not acting because a set script doesn't exist. Not only does this lower production costs, but it also allows for events to occur spontaneously. For example, a terminating relationship or a death in the family is as significant as the producer makes it be. (Both these instances occur during the season for one of the pledges.) Thus, the show appears to present a certain realness with this pledge because she is truly distraught. However, when examined closely, it seems possible for the producer to tone up or down the significance of her ordeal. During less exciting periods, though, the sponsors arrive to move the show along. In one instance, Caesar's Palace does for the pledge vacation what IKEA does for the pledge house.

During a later episode in the *Sorority Life* series, five pledges embark on an adventure to the Las Vegas strip. What makes their vacation special is the fact that Caesar's Palace hotel and casino fund everything. From the beginning, costumed hosts of the hotel escort the pledges up to their high roller suite, and continue servicing the women with a limousine ride downtown and free tickets to shows. The pledges are speechless upon seeing the grandeur and lavishness of their room but not once do they question their surroundings. What does Caesars Palace hope to attain by pampering the pledges? The answer: recognition via product placement. In this case, the producers connected the hotel to the plot, as well as flash the Caesars Palace logo on screen before, during, and after the pledge vacation. This is an example of a sponsor creating an event for the women that would not have naturally occurred.

But in promoting itself, the sponsor also separated the pledges from their sorority sisters back at Davis. In doing this the sponsors helped put the pledges at odds with the Sigma sorority. This allowed conflict, the most important element in a reality-TV program, to drive the show. It's the drama and action in conflict that keeps an audience

interested (Russell). However, this conflict is not always natural because the sponsors and MTV enticed it. During the final episodes, the Sigma vice president becomes distraught after realizing the pledges' uneasiness and distance from the Sigma sorority. According to an anonymous Sigma member, such division never occurred in the pledge periods before. It was the filming for *Sorority Life* that brought irregularity to the sorority. For example, there is an incident when five pledges move in on the first day, and split up their housewarming gifts. However, one week later MTV adds a sixth member to live in the house. Here, the producer created a sense of tension between the existing house pledges because the women knew nothing about the new pledge's intentions for moving in. In fact, their being uncomfortable made for interesting viewing.

The *Sorority Life* pledge class was not like those of years before because there was more conflict involved. Rumors exist that the better-looking pledges received monetary aid from MTV, and jealous sorority members always questioned each pledge's motives for joining. An anonymous member of the sorority mentioned, "The show focuses on the pledges that go out and get drunk. These girls are not like the other Sigma members" (Dunst). She is concerned that the pledges' motives for joining are for television recognition, and their "gifts" from MTV raise suspicion. Basically, products intensify conflict between the girls, and conflict helps to sell the show.

Sponsors wanting attention gave their products only to the pledges on camera. For example, Schwinn offered six bicycles to the pledge house, and Jansport provided backpacks to women with prominent television spots. Not everyone in the sorority, especially the original members, received the same benefits as the filmed pledges. Thus, separation and tension formed as a result. Although each member's level of dissatisfaction might not have been as intolerable as MTV portrayed, there was enough tension for the producer to design a story. One anonymous sorority sister announced, "out of all the fundraising and community service events we do, MTV only focuses on the negative stuff" (Dunst). But this is true of all reality-TV programs. Take COPS as an example. Producers use only the footage of chasing and arresting criminals. Like *Sorority Life*, not much is shown to reflect the less action-oriented footage. It is here, when products can help to create another atmosphere.

Sometimes these products were able to divide those six pledges from the sorority. For example, GMC provided the pledge sisters with

a Yukon vehicle and MTV paid for all gasoline expenses. Having these resources invited the pledges to escape more often and bond without the others in the sorority. The Sigma women, sometimes perplexed by the pledges' behavior, did not understand why such conflict existed between themselves and the pledges. However, they did know their sorority was changing.

The Sigma sorority changed just as the future of advertising changes now. MTV realizes that broadcast advertising is not about catchy thirty-second spot jingles anymore, and it adjusts its programming accordingly. Commercials must transform to accommodate the problems newer technology creates. For example, it's more difficult and expensive to promote general products when cable television offers more of a channel selection to niche markets. Also gaining popularity is TiVo, a hard drive based recording device that allows television viewers to forward past commercials. Such devices make spending approximately \$500,000 for a 30-second spot in prime time unprofitable for companies (Eisenberg). However, sponsoring a show like *Sorority Life*, or at least placing a product in it, offers brand recognition for considerably less cost.

Reality-TV offers an ideal environment for placing products. Unlike other programming genres, it allows for what seems like natural viewing of the pledges. However, as I mentioned earlier, the *Sorority Life* women's situations were not at all natural. MTV and the sponsors created a non-traditional environment for the pledges: their house and their adventures contained pseudo-advertisements. Average viewers may not recognize that product placement targets them, but they will watch drama. It is the conflict in MTV's programming that appeals to an array of Y Generation factions. Advertising, then, is evolving into a more pervasive force. Most times, audiences don't realize they are being sold to. It doesn't occur to them which company owns what company, or who benefits from what partnership. All the audience sees is a story with the products in front of them.

Broadcast advertising, as this study suggests, is about manipulating reality to sell a product. It attempts to convince its viewers that they have material needs. Under most circumstances, people realize that advertisement portrayals are not actual reality. However, with product placement more apparent in television programs and movies, the distinction between advertisement and show begins to blur. Thus, the advertised products appear less intrusive to their viewer. Advertisers don't just manipulate during their allotted commercial breaks any-

more; they manipulate during the programming as well. I believe this is the direction advertising is heading. Given this trend, I conclude that your best bet is to read a book.

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