

Product Placement in Online Variety Shows-A Case Study of Qi Pa Shuo

Jia Jia

Human Computer Interaction, California College of the Arts, San Francisco, USA
jiajia@cca.edu

Abstract: Online variety shows have become hugely popular in recent years, turning into a key channel for brands to advertise. *Qi Pa Shuo*, a debate-style talk show, stands out with its unique format, strong viewer engagement, and flexible content, making it a typical example of product placement in online entertainment. This paper looks at how *Qi Pa Shuo* uses different types of product placement, explores its creative strategies, and discusses both the positive effects and controversies that come with it. The study finds that while the show is successful in blending ads into its content and encouraging user interaction, it also faces problems like over-commercialization and audience fatigue. Additionally, the paper highlights the implications of such strategies for brand perception and audience emotional response and suggests areas for future research including demographic differences and the potential influence of AI-driven advertising strategies. This research offers insights for better balancing content and branding in online media.

Keywords: product placement, *Qi Pa Shuo*, online variety shows, content integration, user experience

1. Introduction

With the rapid expansion and widespread adoption of online video streaming platforms, variety shows have increasingly transitioned from traditional television formats to internet-based channels. This shift has facilitated the emergence of innovative content structures and monetization strategies, among which product placement has emerged prominently, gradually superseding conventional commercial breaks in popularity and effectiveness [1]. *Qi Pa Shuo*, produced by the Chinese streaming giant iQIYI, exemplifies this new wave of digital entertainment through its unique debate-oriented format. Launched in 2014, *Qi Pa Shuo* has successfully completed eight seasons, consistently capturing audiences' attention with its engaging discussions on trending social topics. The show is particularly noted for its vibrant exchanges between celebrities and influential internet personalities, which have enhanced its attractiveness as an advertising medium due to high audience engagement and emotional resonance.

Some scholars believe that the show's appeal to advertisers stems from its creative and frequent integration of product placements seamlessly into the content [2]. By embedding advertisements within dialogues and debates, *Qi Pa Shuo* effectively blends commercial messaging with entertainment, creating a viewing experience that audiences perceive as both authentic and engaging. The integration of advertisements into the dialogue-driven content is especially significant because it

allows for subtler, more thematic forms of brand messaging, thereby reducing viewer resistance typically associated with overt commercial interruptions.

This research systematically explores how *Qi Pa Shuo* achieves such a natural blend of brand-related content within its debates, examining the strategies and narrative techniques employed to align advertising messages with the show's core content and viewer expectations. Furthermore, the research investigates the impact of these strategies on the overall viewer experience and the broader implications for the show's brand identity. By using an analytical framework consisting of detailed case studies, comprehensive literature reviews, and direct content observation, the study seeks to provide valuable insights for both academic researchers and industry practitioners on effectively managing the balance between commercial imperatives and creative integrity.

Moreover, *Qi Pa Shuo*'s approach to product placement is reflective of broader trends observed globally across digital entertainment platforms. International streaming services like YouTube, Netflix, and TikTok have similarly adopted creative, integrated forms of advertising that blur the boundaries between content and commercials. Particularly as younger generations become increasingly adept at recognizing and resisting traditional advertising forms, digital creators are compelled to develop more engaging and less intrusive methods of brand promotion. *Qi Pa Shuo*'s advertising strategy effectively captures audience attention within this new "Attention Economy," leveraging the appeal of its content to enhance brand visibility and audience receptivity in an increasingly competitive digital media landscape.

2. Case analysis

Each season of *Qi Pa Shuo* features 12 to 15 episodes, each centered on a debate topic. Hosted by Ma Dong and joined by well-known guests like Cai Kangyong, Ma Weiwei, and Li Dan, the show uses a free-flowing, humorous tone and high flexibility in content, making it an ideal platform for soft advertising.

According to a 2023 report by iiMedia Research, Season 7 of the show had 34 advertising partners, covering categories like drinks, food, hiring platforms, education, and lifestyle. Notable brands include Genki Forest, Haitian Soy Sauce, BOSS Zhipin, and Zhihu. Compared to traditional commercials, *Qi Pa Shuo* includes more frequent and varied ad formats, with at least three brand mentions per episode on average.

iQIYI, the streaming platform behind the show, is known for targeting younger urban audiences, making it a top choice for lifestyle and tech brands looking to reach Gen Z and millennial consumers. The platform relies heavily on subscription and advertising revenue and shows like *Qi Pa Shuo* are key tools for attracting both users and advertisers.

Relevant research shows some points out that the show mainly uses three kinds of ad placements: spoken mentions, set design, and audience interaction. Since the ads are usually linked to debate topics, viewers tend to find them more acceptable [3].

3. Key features of product placement

The advertising strategy of *Qi Pa Shuo* prominently features frequent and seamless product placements, integrated organically throughout each episode. Advertisements consistently appear from the show's opening moments through mid-show commentaries, and even within interactive voting segments, cumulatively occupying over three minutes per episode. This consistent exposure ensures that viewers are repeatedly reminded of the brands without feeling overly disrupted, creating a subtle yet persistent advertising presence.

The integration leverages playful and humorous language, effectively utilizing jokes or internet memes to resonate strongly with the youthful, digitally engaged audience. For instance,

advertisements cleverly embedded in dialogues like “You found a job on BOSS Zhipin, I’ll beat you with my talent,” not only entertain but also create memorable moments that encourage viewers to share these instances on social media, amplifying the brands' reach organically.

Qi Pa Shuo strategically aligns its debate topics closely with sponsor messages, enhancing both relevance and viewer receptivity. A notable example includes episodes debating topics like “Should you quit your job without a backup plan?”, which naturally complements the core messages of job recruitment platforms, providing a relevant and contextual background for product integration. Such deliberate alignment transforms advertisements from potential interruptions into meaningful enhancements of the viewer's experience.

And the program places significant emphasis on audience interaction, inviting viewers to actively engage with branded content through interactive elements such as voting on ads or unlocking exclusive, ad-related content. This active participation not only heightens audience engagement but also fosters a deeper connection between viewers and brands, enhancing overall advertising effectiveness [4]. People further argue that this multi-layered, culturally resonant approach to advertising creates stronger narrative integration, turning what might otherwise be perceived as intrusive commercials into organic extensions of the show’s storyline [5]. Consequently, viewers perceive ads not merely as marketing tools but as integrated elements that contribute positively to their overall entertainment experience, reinforcing long-term brand loyalty and effectiveness.

4. Types of product placement

Over the course of its eight seasons, *Qi Pa Shuo* has evolved significantly in its approach to product placement, mirroring broader trends in Chinese digital media. Initially, branded content in the show was largely confined to separate segments or visual background placements. As the show gained popularity and attracted bigger sponsorship deals, the integration of branded content became increasingly sophisticated and deeply embedded into the show's narrative. Recent seasons have featured prominently sponsored opening segments, carefully curated debate topics, and subtle yet impactful placements woven directly into contestant interactions and jokes, reflecting an intricate alignment with the platform's monetization strategies.

4.1. Spoken ads

Spoken advertisements represent the most direct and arguably the most impactful form of product placement on *Qi Pa Shuo*. Hosts and contestants frequently incorporate casual mentions of products or brands into their dialogues, enhancing the natural flow of the debate rather than disrupting it. For example, in an episode discussing work-life balance, host Ma Dong skillfully integrated an ad by stating, “With BOSS Zhipin, finding a job is more flexible.” This type of spoken placement seamlessly aligns the advertised product with the thematic content of the episode, making the advertisement appear natural and contextually relevant. According to this, this method is highly effective as over 60% of viewers perceive spoken ads as less intrusive and more acceptable due to their conversational and informal presentation. The audience tends to remember these places better because they feel organic and spontaneous rather than forced or disruptive [6].

4.2. On set branding

On set branding is another significant type of product placement prominently used by *Qi Pa Shuo*. Visual brand placements appear consistently and subtly throughout each episode, creating continuous yet unobtrusive brand exposure. Examples include strategic placements of products such as Genki Forest beverages prominently displayed on tables used by contestants, logos visibly integrated into background designs, and various branded props subtly featured during debates. This form of

placement is designed to maintain viewer immersion, preventing interruption of the viewing experience while ensuring steady brand visibility. The report notes that this “soft exposure” effectively builds brand recognition without compromising the integrity of the show’s content, thus creating positive brand associations in viewers' minds over extended periods [7].

4.3. User interactive ads

Interactive advertisements engage viewers actively and creatively by involving them directly in brand-related content. Haitian Soy Sauce, for example, introduced an innovative interactive campaign allowing viewers to participate in ad-related activities, such as voting for hidden ad “easter eggs” or receiving virtual rewards through the comment system. Some reports emphasize that such interactive experiences transform viewers from passive observers into active participants, significantly enhancing viewer engagement and satisfaction. These interactive elements foster a deeper emotional connection between the audience and the brand, increasing recall rates and positively influencing consumer attitudes toward the products [8,9].

4.4. Topic sponsorship and framing

Topic sponsorship represents a nuanced, yet impactful form of product placement wherein specific debate topics appear deliberately aligned with sponsor values or messages. *Qi Pa Shuo* often features episodes that resonate strongly with the sponsoring brand's core themes. A notable example I just talked about includes the debate topic "Should You Quit Without a Plan?", which clearly resonates with the core message and branding strategy of the recruitment platform BOSS Zhipin. Although direct evidence of explicit brand involvement in content creation remains limited, the alignment of debate topics and sponsor messages significantly benefits both the brand and the show. While such practices successfully integrate commercial interests into entertainment, they raise ethical questions regarding transparency and viewer autonomy. Critics argue that audiences may be subtly guided toward specific conclusions or behaviors favored by sponsors, potentially blurring the critical distinction between genuine public discourse and brand-driven content. But never mind with this strategy.

5. Impact, innovations and challenges

5.1. Long term brand impact

Product placement in *Qi Pa Shuo* is not just about immediate exposure; it also contributes to long-term brand perception. By associating with a show known for intelligence, wit, and cultural relevance, brands benefit from the show's credibility. For example, BOSS Zhipin has managed to position itself not just as a recruitment platform, but as a youth-friendly, modern brand that aligns with open dialogue and career empowerment. This kind of associative branding has proven effective in driving brand loyalty over time. Some scholars suggest that integrated placements in popular online shows often yield higher recall rates and more positive emotional associations compared to traditional commercials [10].

However, long-term effects also depend on consistency and subtlety. If advertising becomes too overt, it may lead to viewer backlash and undermine the brand’s image. Successful placement requires careful alignment between the brand's values and the show's themes, as well as a deep understanding of the target audience.

5.2. Audience identification and emotional response

Another important element of *Qi Pa Shuo*'s advertising strategy is its emotional resonance with the audience. Because the show discusses relatable social issues—like work pressure, family relationships, or love—viewers often project their own experiences onto the debates. When a brand appears during such emotionally charged moments, it has the opportunity to connect with audiences on a deeper level [3]. This phenomenon is “empathetic placement,” where emotional identification enhances brand memorability.

And the casual, humorous tone of the show helps reduce audience resistance to advertising. Viewers don't feel like they're being sold something—instead, they're being entertained. This psychological comfort increases openness to brand messages and makes the audience more likely to recall and discuss them later. However, this strategy only works when the emotional tone of the ad matches that of the content. Misalignment can lead to confusion or even brand aversion.

5.3. Innovative

Qi Pa Shuo has successfully differentiated itself in the competitive landscape of online variety shows through its innovative and effective product placement strategies, which are specifically tailored to resonate with modern, digitally savvy audiences. A notable feature of this innovative approach is the humor-based delivery of advertisements, whereby commercial messages are creatively embedded within jokes, puns, and playful banter. This method transforms advertising from a conventional interruption into an engaging element of entertainment, effectively capturing and retaining audience attention while simultaneously encouraging viewers to share these humorous moments across various social media platforms. According to Implantation strategy, the humorous framing of advertisements significantly increases their appeal and shareability, thereby amplifying brand exposure organically and cost-effectively [11].

Another critical innovation within *Qi Pa Shuo*'s advertising strategy is the meticulous alignment of commercial content with the show's thematic elements. By selecting debate topics that directly relate to everyday issues encountered by their audience—such as job hunting, romantic relationships, financial decisions, and lifestyle choices—the show creates a natural and relatable context for brand messaging. This alignment ensures that advertisements appear seamless and relevant, enhancing their credibility and acceptance among viewers rather than eliciting resistance or skepticism. It fosters a deeper emotional connection between the brand and the audience, making the commercial messages appear integral rather than peripheral.

Qi Pa Shuo enhances viewer interaction through strategic social engagement practices. Audience members are actively encouraged to participate in advertising content via interactive features, such as voting on sponsored topics, commenting on advertisements, and sharing brand-related content within their social networks. This interactive dimension effectively transforms traditional passive advertisement viewing into active engagement, enriching the overall viewing experience and strengthening audience-brand relationships. These interactive methods significantly blur the boundaries between advertisement and entertainment, positioning commercials as compelling content rather than interruptions, ultimately leading to higher viewer retention and deeper brand recall.

5.4. Challenges

Despite its innovative approaches to advertising integration, *Qi Pa Shuo* has encountered significant criticism, particularly from its online audience on platforms such as Weibo and Douban. Many viewers have expressed dissatisfaction, suggesting that the frequency and overt nature of certain product placements detract from the viewing experience, making the advertisements feel intrusive rather than organic. For instance, a widely circulated post from 2022 humorously criticized the show,

stating, “It’s no longer a debate show-it’s just a sponsored TED Talk,” highlighting audience perceptions of excessive commercialization overshadowing the program’s original content and intent. Audience fatigue emerges as another pressing concern, with growing evidence indicating a potential decline in viewer receptivity towards integrated advertising. According to a 2023 survey conducted by iResearch, approximately 41% of respondents admitted to skipping or ignoring advertising segments, even when such content was creatively woven into dialogues. This tendency to disengage from advertisements underscores a broader issue facing digital content producers: balancing commercial imperatives with maintaining viewer engagement and content authenticity.

The ethical concerns have been raised about the potential influence of sponsors on content selection. Critics argue that certain debate topics appear meticulously crafted to mirror sponsors’ marketing strategies, raising questions regarding editorial independence and the authenticity of the show’s discussions. Specifically highlights this dilemma, noting that excessive alignment between brand interests and debate themes risks compromising the show’s credibility, reducing it from a platform of genuine public discourse to merely a vehicle for branded entertainment. This erosion of authenticity may diminish the show’s ability to critically engage with relevant social issues, ultimately impacting its reputation and audience trust [3,4,7].

Therefore, producers face an ongoing challenge to strike an optimal balance, ensuring product placements enhance rather than detract from content value, while safeguarding editorial independence and preserving audience trust in the show’s integrity.

6. Conclusion

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the innovative advertising strategies employed by the popular online variety show *Qi Pa Shuo*, examining how product placement has been creatively integrated within the show’s unique debate-based format. Through a comprehensive approach utilizing case studies, literature reviews, and direct content observation, the research explores various methods of product placement, including spoken advertisements, visual on-set branding, user-interactive ads, and topic sponsorship. These methods have collectively contributed to transforming traditional advertising practices into more engaging and contextually relevant forms of audience communication.

Specifically, the paper highlights how *Qi Pa Shuo* effectively blends commercial content with its entertainment elements by leveraging humor, thematic alignment, and active audience participation. These innovative techniques not only facilitate seamless brand integration but also enhance viewer receptivity and emotional resonance with advertised products. Additionally, the analysis sheds light on the evolving nature of digital advertising, illustrating how *Qi Pa Shuo*’s approach aligns with global trends where subtle and interactive product placements have become more prevalent due to increasing audience resistance towards conventional advertisements.

Despite the effectiveness and creativity of these strategies, the paper also critically addresses significant challenges that accompany extensive commercialization. Balancing commercial interests with content authenticity remains a complex task, and excessive or poorly integrated advertisements risk alienating viewers and diluting the show’s core appeal. Therefore, the research suggests future directions for producers, emphasizing the importance of improving advertisement relevance, managing advertising frequency, and exploring novel advertising formats.

All in all, *Qi Pa Shuo* exemplifies a successful model of integrating product placements in a manner that aligns commercial interests with audience engagement and content authenticity. Looking forward, it is essential for producers and advertisers to continuously innovate and adapt to viewer expectations and technological advancements, such as AI-driven personalized advertising, while remaining vigilant about ethical considerations such as user privacy and content transparency. This

approach will ensure sustainable success and maintain audience trust in an increasingly competitive digital media landscape.

References

- [1] Dong, H.Y. (2017) *China's network variety shows are implanted with new forms of advertising-taking "Qi Pa Shuo" and "Mars Intelligence Bureau" as examples*. *Media*, 23, 66-67.
- [2] Zhang, A.J. (2022) *Research on the content operation of Tencent's self-made video variety show*. Diss. Hunan University.
- [3] Li, M. and Qiu, Y. (2024) *On the success of the online self-made variety "Qi Pa Shuo"*. *Journalism and Communication Science*, 12(6), 1469-1474.
- [4] Yin, R.H. (2019) *Analysis of the success factors of the online self-made variety show "Qi Pa Shuo"*. *Audio-Visual*, 10, 2.
- [5] Zeng, L.P. and Yu, H. (2010) *On the effective use of product placement advertisements in variety shows in China*. *Television Times*, 3, 26-29.
- [6] Quail, C.M., Larabie, C., Kalis, E.M., et al. (2005) *The Commodification of Talk Show Culture*. *Counterpoints*, 152, 29-45. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42976868> (Accessed 16 Apr 2025).
- [7] Li, Y.J. (2021) *From Implantation to Integration: A New Path of Variety Show Brand Marketing*. *Audio-Visual*, 4, 194-195.
- [8] Krishen, A.S., Raschke, R.L., Kachroo, P., et al. (2021) *A Broad Overview of Interactive Digital Marketing: A Bibliometric Network Analysis*. *Journal of Business Research*.
- [9] Smith, J., Johnson, T. and Brown, R. (2020) *User Interaction with Online Advertisements: Temporal Modeling and Optimization of Ads Placement*. Available at: <http://www.researchgate.net/publication/339748752> (Accessed 10 May 2024).
- [10] Huang, Z.Y., Li, X. and Wang, Q. (2022) *The longer the sponsorship, the better" or "the more the better" - a study on the impact of long-term sponsorship and multiple sponsorship on brand assets*. *Nankai Business Review*, 25(1).
- [11] Huang, Q.Y. (2021) *Analysis of communication strategies of product placement in network variety shows*. Diss. Jiangxi Normal University.