This study examines young Chinese viewers’ interpretations of the consumption stimuli encoded in U.S. TV programs. I argue that the young viewers’ use of pirated U.S. TV artifacts reflects their active viewership and social agency, defying both the official broadcasting policy in China and the dictates of global copyright industries. Meanwhile, through in-depth interviews with the viewers and a microanalysis of the actual product placement/integration that they encounter, I found that product placement/integration increases the viewers’ awareness of and/or desire for the promoted products/brands. This study bridges the cultural imperialism and active audience theses. Young Chinese viewers are active, yet the extent and the consequences of their activity confirm the critiques that constitute the essence of the cultural imperialism thesis.

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An original focus of the cultural imperialism thesis is the uneven flow of media and cultural values from Western countries to the rest of the world (Beltran, 1978; Boyd-Barrett, 1980; Guback, 1984; Nordenstreng & Varis, 1974). Since the 1980s, however, much counterevidence to this thesis has emerged in studies of active audience interpretation and of regional productions by culturally peripheral countries. Critics of the thesis contend that foreign content does not have unmediated impact on local audiences (Ang, 1985; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Lull, 1988; Tracey, 1985); audiences often prefer culturally proximate content over imports and display diverse and complex interpretations (Straubhaar, 2007), and the existence of geolinguistic regions limits the global appeal of Western cultures while giving advantages to regional media players (Sinclair, Jacka, & Cunningham, 1996).
In reaction to these criticisms, cultural imperialism theorists have come to acknowledge local audiences’ ability to develop subversive interpretations, appropriate dominant conventions, and adopt new status symbols. More importantly, these theorists are moving away from the original nation-centric approach and directing recent criticisms toward a new form of cultural domination, which is, in Herbert Schiller’s view, less American than multinational and corporate (1991). As the concept of Western or U.S. cultural domination reaches its theoretical limit in the face of the above counterevidence, critiques of a transnational corporate cultural imperialism may find continuing relevance.

For instance, as Lee Artz (2003, p. 26) notes, the Western cultural hegemony is “bundled in capitalist globalization, corporate media hegemony, and social class divisions,” which are “all ideologically tied together by consumerism.” The cultural product of this hegemony is a transnational commercial reality wherein images of consumer culture transcend local and national boundaries (Straubhaar, 2007). This commercial reality promotes principles of material acquisition at the expense of moral behaviors, human solidarity, and aesthetic values (Herman & McChesney, 1997). Moreover, the corporate media hegemony meets “the prerequisites of entertainment and profit, thereby weakening and undermining its political edge, class independence, and counterhegemonic potential” (Artz, 2003, p. 21). It converts third-world audiences to the virtues of a market economy and transforms them into global consumers, whose lives obtain meaning through brand consumption and whose sense of creativity and empowerment is linked to their consumption behaviors (Xu, 2007). It suppresses “the possibility of imagining a world that is not branded or one where the values associated with brands are distinctly different than the brand purveyors would like us to believe” (Wenner, 2004, p. 127). In other words, this transnational corporate cultural imperialism, and its cultivation of consumerism among local audiences, is supplementing American cultural imperialism as one of the research foci of many cultural imperialism theorists.

On the other side of the theoretical debate, the active audience thesis, although having successfully documented local audiences’ negotiated or oppositional interpretations, has been criticized for failing to account for the institutional and economic setting of active audience interpretations and for advancing a romanticized vision of audience empowerment, according to Morley (1997, 2006). In other words, in the current era of media corporate synergy, which sits astride publication, music/film/TV production, theme parks, community formation (in the case of Celebration, Florida), advertising, and cross-promotions with nonmedia sectors, it is almost pointless to extract a single media artifact from this seamlessly mediated cultural environment and use varied audience interpretations of it to validate individual empowerment whereas dismissing the structural dominance of media and nonmedia corporations. More importantly, the active audience thesis has not yet responded to the notion of transnational corporate cultural imperialism that imperialism theorists have begun examining. Specifically, many studies of the active audience tradition have documented local audiences’ negotiations with certain cultural values and practices.
reflected in transnational media corporations’ (TNMCs) programs that they deem “American,” such as individualism, feminism, sexism, homosexuality, and Western cultural supremacy. However, the studies have yet to evaluate the audiences’ reactions to the commercial messages from these programs. This study seeks to bridge this research gap.

This study also presses forward an approach that considers transnational corporate cultural imperialism and audience activity as mutually complementary, an approach that according to Morley (1997, p. 104) does not swing between “a romantically vision of audience ‘empowerment’” and “an unreconstructed politic of media manipulation.” In particular, I analyze the dynamics between young audience members in China and two structural features of the contemporary TNMCs—the enormous threat of digital piracy and the practice of converging entertainment and advertisement through product placement and integration. The study also takes into consideration a structural factor specific to China: its contemporary economic and cultural environment, which has been described by many scholars as neoliberal, market-friendly, and consumption-oriented (Dan Schiller, 2005; Lee, He, & Huang, 2006; Xu, 2007; Zhao, 2003).

Digital piracy and product placement/integration, two parallel trends at first glance, find their connection in young Chinese viewers’ active consumption of U.S. TV programs that are mainly accessible in pirated formats in mainland China. The goals of this study are to (a) evaluate young Chinese viewers’ power of interpretation and social agency vis-à-vis the branding messages in U.S. TV programs and (b) reassess the influence of piracy on TNMCs, as it may assist U.S. programs to circumvent the broadcasting policy in China on foreign imports and help spread their branding messages to Chinese viewers.

This study will start by examining the global influence of Western copyright industries, and then analyze their biggest contemporary threat: digital piracy. I argue that digital piracy, in the form of young Chinese viewers’ everyday consumption of pirated DVDs or streamed content from person-to-person (P2P) file-sharing websites, provides further evidence to the active audience thesis and sustains our belief in audience agency. On the other hand, these active viewers’ interpretations of the pirated materials caution us against underestimating the structural power of neoliberal corporate consumerism; inscribed in pirated materials through product placement/integration, it thereby finds another entryway to the dorms or bedrooms of young Chinese viewers. Ironically, pirated media artifacts, loaded with product/brand placements, become the messengers of transnational corporations and facilitate the installation and entrenchment of capitalism in China. More importantly, young Chinese viewers’ reactions to product placements in U.S. television indicate their active participation in neoliberal corporate consumerism. The sheer existence of their active viewership is not enough to relieve our concerns over transnational corporate cultural imperialism. Rather, the strengths and limitations of their activity in a specific context require us to refine the thesis of transnational corporate cultural
imperialism so that it accounts for the intricate, and often complementary, dynamics between audience activity and corporate cultural dominance.

Copyright industries and dissenting voices

Let me begin my arguments on digital piracy with a brief discussion of U.S. copyright industries and the recent critiques leveled against them by scholars and activists. In U.S. society, copyright is a form of legal protection provided to the creators of “original works of authorship,” including literary, dramatic, musical, artistic, and certain other intellectual works (United States Copyright Office, 2008). The U.S. copyright system premises itself on several philosophical assumptions: property is a natural right; intellectual property (IP) is equivalent to material property; protecting IP motivates IP owners to continue their creative work; and the author is the locus of creative origin (Yar, 2008). The copyright industries sustain their domestic power through lobbying, litigation, technology, and public education (Freedman, 2003; Jordan, 2007), and expand their global influence through the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement, as well as through unilateral means such as Special 301 and Generalized System of Preferences (Wang & Zhu, 2003).

As the copyright industries continue to commodify forms of creative expression and command a price and market share of their availability (Jordan, 2007), they engender a wide range of critique and resistance, including the Copy-Left Movement and Creative Commons Licensing (Broussard, 2007). Critics assert that U.S. copyright laws favor publishers, distributors, and transnational corporations, not necessarily individual authors or artists (Bettig, 1992; Wang, 2003; Yar, 2008). Moreover, the philosophical foundation of copyright is flawed since the concept of copyright as a natural right is a Western, capitalist construction that emerged along with capitalism and the printing press in the 15th century (Bettig, 1992). It suppresses the alternative notion of the commons (Yar, 2008), the idea that we inherit freely a wide variety of creations of nature and society, which we should share freely and hold in trust for future generations (Bollier, 2003). It also denies the fact that any culturally creative act must involve borrowing and copying from existing cultural works (Yar, 2008). In short, copyright is the economic right of capital (Bettig, 1992), and the allocation of copyright is a means for “locking away a large part of our culture into the vaults of a very small number of large corporations” (Becker & Stadler, 2003, p. 1) at the expense of authors’ privileges and consumers’ rights.

U.S. copyright faces serious criticism in a transnational context as well. By reinforcing copyright protection and various antipiracy campaigns through WIPO and TRIPS, the U.S. copyright industries have claimed a commanding position in global information capitalism. As access to information and entertainment is often restricted to those with the ability to pay, copyright protection inscribes a “tale of two worlds”: One is information rich, and the other information poor (Yar, 2008, p. 617). To some
extent, transnational piracy is the copyright industries’ self-inflicted threat since the industries often price their products so high they are beyond the reach of most of the target audience (Yar, 2005). Many developing and underdeveloped countries believe that copyrighted materials should be a collective good; strict protection not only increases the monopolistic power of transnational corporations (Lu & Weber, 2008), but also skews benefits toward developed countries who deploy copyright regulations and force other countries to comply (McElhinney, 2005).

In particular, the idea of copyright and its implementation contravene the most fundamental values in mainland China: the Confucian belief in learning by copying and the communist belief in public commons (Mun, 2003). As Yatsko contends, “copying enjoys a long tradition in China and does not carry a stigma. Copying a masterpiece was historically considered an art form in its own right, while Chinese students have been taught for centuries to copy their teachers as accurately as possible before attempting to create” (Yatsko, 2000, p. 216). Meanwhile, under mainland China’s socialist tradition, creative ideas and expressions belonged to the public as part of the state property (Mun, 2003). These values are very much alive today and still influence state policies and public attitudes toward transnational copyright issues (Mun, 2003; Wingrove, 1995).

As Lu and Weber observe (2008), the Chinese party-state views copyrighted materials as a collective good and worries that strict protection will result in more costly access to information by Chinese citizens. Therefore, the party-state intentionally tolerates piracy—evidenced by its legal reluctance and loose law enforcement on local levels—in order to satisfy the grassroots demand for free, universal access to copyrighted materials. Moreover, a bottom-up civil movement has emerged among Chinese end-users, who mobilize core values of patriotism and collectivism to resist the economic exploitation enabled by copyright and to challenge the cultural assumptions of copyright, such as individualism and commercialism.

This study also questions the U.S.-based global copyright industries and their antipiracy campaigns. It provides evidence that piracy brings certain unintended benefits to the copyright industries by advancing capitalist goals and nurturing a consumer base in China for both transnational media and nonmedia corporations. This counterintuitive argument can find similar evidence in many previous studies. Wang and Zhu (2003) contend that pirated VCDs in China may cut into the profit margin of TNMCs in Hollywood, but they nonetheless circulate the products of Hollywood, reinforce its dominance in the global media market, and cultivate a local demand for more of these products. Marshall (2004) reveals that bootlegging, as a form of piracy, profits the music industry by consolidating a community of fans and promoting, in an underground manner, a large number of official releases. Katz and Shapiro (1985), Ji (2007), and Hui and Png (2003) prove that pirated movies can increase the legitimate sales of the movies, and the word-of-mouth effect of a pirated product can enhance the demand for that product (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975).
Research approach and techniques

This study shares these scholars’ unique view of piracy. However, it differs from the above analyses as it focuses not on such political and economic factors as expanded market, increased sales, or stabilized fan base, which indicate the unintended benefits of piracy to the copyright industries. Rather, it looks at the ability of pirated content to carry corporate consumer values and consumption stimuli to transnational viewers through product placement/integration. This function of piracy becomes especially salient when official content is either limited (for instance, in China under the broadcasting policy on foreign imports) or simply too expensive for most viewers in the developing world to access.

This critical cultural point of entry into the issues of transnational piracy, product placement/integration, and corporate cultural domination impels me both to examine the commercial messages and selling pitches encoded in some TV programs that travel from the United States to China through pirate conduits, and to interpret young Chinese viewers’ reactions to these commercial messages. The first half of this microanalysis examines the texts of several U.S. programs and draws from reports in U.S. trade magazines to demonstrate the programs’ representativeness in the television placement industry. These programs were not preselected but arrived at when I interviewed a group of young Chinese viewers.

The second half of the microanalysis presents the young viewers’ interview narratives, which reflect both the influence of product placement/integration and the strengths and limitations of the viewers in reaction to these consumption stimuli. The viewers were recruited through my social network in Beijing and Shanghai through the method of snowball sampling on a single criterion—they must watch some U.S. television in their everyday lives. Overall, from June 2007 to February 2009, 81 women and 69 men between the ages of 18 and 24 from the two cities participated, among which 114 are college students and 36 are young professionals. All participants have good English skills and are able to enjoy U.S. programs with or without Chinese subtitles. With middle-to upper-middle-class backgrounds, they represent an expanding group of young Chinese viewers/consumers in urban China who are willing to save to splurge (Black, 2007). Meanwhile, they also constitute the primary viewing population of U.S. TV programs in China (Wen, Wang, Yang, & Wang, 2008).

Interviews with participants usually lasted 2–3 hours for each individual unless the participant wanted to spend more time. The interview locations were chosen by the participants and included their university dorms, off-campus apartments, and public places such as restaurants or cafés. The interview (conducted in English, Chinese, or both, given a participant’s preference) usually started with casual conversation and then led into a list of questions focused on their habits of media consumption, their knowledge and perceptions of product placements in U.S. programs, their consumer behaviors, and the symbolic meanings they attach to transnational products/brands encountered in U.S. programs (see Appendix A for sample questions). The second
half of the interview often became open-ended and informal as the participants revealed their experiences and observations related to the subject matter.

The purpose of the analysis is not to establish a causal relationship between the viewers’ memory of a product/brand and their viewership of a certain placement/integration in a TV artifact. Establishing such an exclusive causal relationship entails a scientific study in a controlled media setting, which, as I mentioned above, does not exist in our current commercial environment, which is a tangle of multiple advertising formats and branding messages. This to some extent explains why many previous scientific studies attempting to define such a causal relationship are often inconclusive (Yang & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007).

This study therefore takes a cultural approach instead, using in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations, and treats product placement/integration and pirate conduits as an inherent part of the transnational corporate cultural universe. For my participants, watching U.S. television may not be the only explanation for their familiarity with and love for certain transnational brands/products. Yet, as they reflected in the interviews, the U.S. programs nonetheless helped increase their awareness of—and sometimes their desire for—the promoted products/brands.

**Product placement and integration**

As Newell, Salmon, and Chang (2006) summarize, the process of product placement was first documented in Lumière Brothers films in 1896, but it was Thomas Edison’s films, beginning in 1897, that turned placement into an ongoing business. In the 1920s, the practice was expanded with promotional tie-ups between businesses and movie makers, and then became routine in Hollywood in the 1950s and 1960s. The practice gained force after that but remained largely under the radar of public consciousness until 1982 when the little alien in *E.T.* followed a trail of Reese’s Pieces to the main characters’ home, bringing the practice to the surface (Newell, Salmon, & Chang, 2006).

Today product placement has grown into an estimated $3.5 billion industry represented by the Entertainment Marketing Association (EMA). The EMA consists of 42 specialized product placement agencies in North America, 14 studios or production companies, 14 active client members, additional integrated marketing communications agencies, and numerous companies involved in placement practices on various levels (Russell & Belch, 2005). In normal circumstances, there are two ways corporations compensate studios to expose their products or brands in various media venues. The first is cash payment, which, as PQ Media reports, accounts for 29% of the entire worth of placement deals. The second is barter arrangement, by which corporations offer their products to media companies as a stage prop, take up some of the promotional cost of the movie or TV program, or on a more advanced level develop cross-promotional tie-ups with media companies (64%).

Product placement in television, in particular, did not generate much enthusiasm among advertisers and TV producers at first, because placements, originally with no
Product Placement and Digital Piracy

Y. Shi

cash payment, seemed to offer “nonadvertisers” an access to TV viewers that advertisers of conventional commercial slots were actually buying (Newell et al., 2006). In the past few years, however, product placement has become one of the hottest ways for advertisers to build a relationship with viewers, who often time-shift their media consumption and, in the process, bypass product messages by using TiVo and DVRs. As PQ Media reports, $1.87 billion was spent on product placements on television, a boost of 46% over the previous year, and 21.5% each year since 1999. According to Nielsen, during the first three quarters of 2007 alone, there were 136,078 placement occurrences for cable and 22,046 for broadcast networks. Automobiles, beers, and sodas are the most frequently placed products (Galician & Bourdeau, 2004; Pompper & Choo, 2008). Coca-Cola, Nike Apparel, the Boston Red Sox, Netzero, and Ford are the major practitioners of placement in television.

Product or brand placements have been criticized as deceptive. They function as “subliminal inducements” that in the context of a movie or TV entertainment wield their subliminal impact “not only from their cinematic camouflage but also from the pleasant welter of associations” (Miller, 1990). They portray our material lives in a positive light, where identity can be bought and reflection is reduced to escape. As Wenner summarizes:

Once the product placement door is opened, there is great temptation to put a larger wedge in, with the net result being that the viability of mass art becomes judged based on its abilities to serve as a Trojan horse for products, product tie-ins, and as an uncontested site for the logic of commodity culture (2004, p. 123).

One larger wedge that media corporations and marketers are trying to insert is product integration, a more strategic approach where products are not just shown or mentioned in media venues, but used to “drive the creative form and content of media entertainment” (Wenner, 2004, p. 109). According to Advertising Age (Hampp, 2008, May 26), TV producers, in order to raise the $16 billion upfront investment for their programs, are increasingly offering advertisers the option to weave the characteristics and symbolic meanings of their brands or products into a story that captures viewers’ interest. For instance, Sunkist as a brand name not only appears frequently in One Tree Hill, a teen-themed series by CW, but also emerges in one episode as the sponsor of a charity concert, which is the central event of that episode. The concert projects Sunkist as a community-friendly philanthropist who cherishes the vibrant culture of American youth.

NBC’s copresident of entertainment took his 65-week program schedule to ad clients a month before the industry’s conventional Upfront meetings with advertisers, in order to develop long-term product integration plans with them. One article in MediaWeek quotes David Lang, Director of Programming of Mindshare Entertainment, to describe the current placement industry: “Everyone is trying to put up branded entertainment shingles, and clients have many choices in terms of where to go and who to engage to try and develop ideas. So I still think it’s the wild, wild West
Indeed, in this era of branded entertainment, TV studios are linked more intimately than ever to their nonmedia advertising clients.

Thus far, I have illustrated the prevalence of product placement and integration in U.S. television. Next, I will analyze the particular programs commonly watched by my participants through illegal conduits: Gossip Girl (CW), Heroes (NBC), Friends (NBC), American Idol (FOX), The Apprentice (NBC), and Greensburg (Discovery). Given the space limit, I cannot discuss all the programs mentioned in the interviews (there are 57 of them; see Appendix B). Instead, I focus on those watched with the greatest frequency by the majority of participants. Interestingly, these shows also frequently appear in trade magazines such as Advertising Age and MediaWeek as successful cases of product placement and integration. The following discussion uses textual analysis as well as comments from trade magazines to illustrate the kinds of consumer values and consumption stimuli that U.S. programs as a whole manage to convey to my participants, albeit through unofficial means.

**Gossip Girl**

In 2007, four major U.S. telecommunications marketers fought to get their cell phones into the hands of the teen cast of *Gossip Girl* (a drama series featuring the lives of socialite teenagers living on the Upper East Side of Manhattan), as *Advertising Age* reports (Steinberg, 2007, October 22). Verizon won the placement/integration deal. Since then, viewers have been seeing these wealthy teens using all kinds of Verizon cell phones. As Steinberg describes, “Each character has his or her own phone, with Serena van der Woodsen—the show’s queen bee—using a blue LG Chocolate 2.0; rival Blair Waldorf makes do with an orange EnV. Serena’s not-so-well-to-do suitor, Dan Humphrey, sports a Motorola Krzr.” The characters use the phones to call one another, take and share photos, text messages, or even receive admissions letters from Yale (see the episode aired on January 19, 2009). In fact, the entire network of gossip, which reveals secrets and spreads rumors and therefore shapes the characters’ relationships and builds climactic scenes, is actually a cell phone network. Such an arrangement between Verizon and the CW, along with several intricate cross-promotional deals, is a textbook illustration of product integration. With the phones and Verizon’s services featured in the glamorous, trendy lives of NYC’s Upper-East-Siders, this integration appeals particularly to young viewers, as it makes the characters into trendsetters and uses their celebrity endorsement to sell a sense of fashion and coolness.

**Heroes**

*MediaWeek* once described Nissan’s sponsorship of *Heroes* (a sci-fi series revolving around individuals with superhuman abilities) as “one of the most creatively fruitful in scripted programming history . . . Promotion surrounding the company’s Versa model melded almost seamlessly into the storyline” (Frutkin, 2007, August 20, p. 14). This “seamless” integration started in season one when two main characters of the series, Hiro and Ando, arrived at the Los Angeles International Airport, and then tried to choose their means of transportation to NYC. While Ando pointed out the...
obvious, the connecting flight to NYC, Hiro insisted that they should rent a car because the comic book, which forecasts their future, indicated so. No surprise, Hiro asked for a Nissan Versa at the Hotspur car rental office: “Nissan Versa. Nissan Versa.” The Hotspur employee replied: “That’s a popular choice. Let me check to see if we still have any left.” As the story developed, the two characters toured the entire country in a Versa, mentioning the car in almost every episode. Nissan was very pleased with the results of its partnership with Heroes, and extended its integration and tie-up deals into the second season of the series. Nissan Rogue was prominently featured in season two, for which Nissan sponsored the season premiere on September 24, 2007, commercial-free (Frutkin, August 20). In this case, Nissan milked the superhero hype and hijacked the thrilling, futuristic, and adventurous spirit of the show to reflect on its Versa and Rogue.

Friends
In its 10-year airtime (and even afterward when products not originally featured were digitally added to the show’s reruns and DVDs), Friends was a friendly host to many products and brands: Buitoni pasta, Nestlé Toll House cookies, Oreo cookies, Pottery Barn furniture, and Snuggle detergent to name a few. Once again, the storyline of the sitcom often revolved around a brand or product. In “The One with the Apothecary Table,” Rachel ordered an apothecary table from Pottery Barn but told Phoebe that it was an antique from a flea market since Phoebe hates mass-produced products. The lie grew difficult to keep as Rachel bought more pieces from the furniture store, which created many comical moments for viewers. Entertainment Weekly (Cruz & Bal, 2004, May 7) ranked this story as the best product placement of the year. A similar arrangement appeared in the episode of “Phoebe’s Grandma’s Cookies,” in which Phoebe’s Grandma’s secret recipe turned out to be Nestlé’s. Another industry-acclaimed product placement in Friends was that of the Dyson vacuum. MediaCom, a U.S.-based marketing agency, put the vacuum in the hands of Monica, the neat-freak of the sitcom, who used a hand-held vacuum to clean her beloved Dyson. As the agency’s vice president G. Alex Singh proudly reflects: “You can’t get a placement like that for a bottle of water. Our product lends itself to having pieces of a show written around it.”

American Idol
Although this FOX reality show celebrates singing sensations competing for a record contract, its “real winner” is Coca-Cola because ad agency Universal McCann has placed Coca-Cola Co. in the heart of the music talent show, according to Advertising Age (Friedman, 2003, September 29) and USA Today (Howard, 2002, September 8). Throughout the show, viewers witness the judges drinking out of red Coca-Cola cups and observe contestants being interviewed by the host in the “Coca-Cola Red Room.” The Red Room displays Coke coolers, Coke pictures, a Coke-branded pinball machine, and Coke’s signature ribbon swooped along the back of the red couch. In addition, Coca-Cola collaborates with Universal McCann to create commercials
wrapped around the idol theme, such as the “good luck to Kelly and Justin” spot aired moments before announcing the winner of the first season. As American Idol has gained in popularity in the past few years, its product integration with Coca-Cola has escalated into a full slate of marketing initiatives, including debuting new commercials during the show and launching a popular online megarewards program that has attracted 3.5 million Idol fans to redeem their Coke points for 1.5 million Idol-themed rewards (Coca-Cola Press Center, 2007, January 17). Such extensive product and marketing integration leads Katie Bayne, senior vice president of Coca-Cola North America, to call the show “our AMERICAN IDOL program,” which offers “a great way to get things rolling” (Coca-Cola Press Center, 2007, January 17).

The Apprentice
Chrysler’s campaign with NBC’s The Apprentice was the marketing hit of 2005. As MediaWeek reveals (Consoli, 2005, June 20), the $13.2 million campaign went well beyond the conventional 30-second commercial spots to include full product integration, car giveaways, cross-promotional initiatives, and other strategies. Chrysler’s Crossfire, along with other Chrysler brands, was not only promoted in NBC’s commercial breaks with category exclusivity, but also featured in The Apprentice as the award for the winner of the reality competition. The cars were scripted into the “unscripted” show when Donald Trump assigned one competing team the task of negotiating a weekend rental at a Chrysler dealership. In another episode, a team had to manage the Chrysler Trump Celebrity Golf Classic Tournament, where guests of the tournament were seen cruising around in Chrysler Pacificas. In the season’s finale, a Crossfire, picked by the fans of the show through the Chrysler-sponsored Apprentice website, was awarded to the winner, who thanked Chrysler on air and drove away from the scene in the Crossfire. Indeed, The Apprentice had Chrysler’s brand name smeared all over it, rewarding Chrysler with a sales spike of 266%. Meanwhile, Dove enjoyed similar benefits through The Apprentice. In one contest, teams had to create their own commercials for Dove Cool Moisture Body Wash. Despite the fact that one team created an ad verging on pornographic and the other displayed a blatant misuse of the product, Dove profited since the competition set the stage for introducing its official commercial at the end of the episode. In fact, the episode lured 3,000 visitors per minute to dove.com in the moments immediately after its broadcast and led to the distribution of 400,000 samples (Consoli, 2005, June 20).

Greensburg
Greensburg is a new documentary series aired on one of Discovery’s new networks, Planet Green. It tells the reconstruction story of Greensburg, Kansas, a town devastated by a tornado in May 2007. As Advertising Age reports (Hampp, 2008, May 26), GM is a major sponsor of the documentary and its Chevrolet is integrated into the program. The program, in one story, portrays the rebuilding of Dwane Shank Motors Inc., an environmentally friendly Chevrolet dealership, which helped project a green image for GM. GM also commissions Discovery Studios to produce in-house ads for
its brands to further align the two companies’ green marketing messages. The integration and commercials aim to sell viewers the fuel-efficient cars and trucks, hybrids, and alternative-fuel vehicles of GM. Although GM and Discovery’s philanthropic and educational efforts through *Greensburg* deserve praise, their intention to tap into a growing population of eco-conscious viewers and consumers is questionable in an ostensibly educational context where content should not be associated with branding messages.

The above six cases of product placement/integration are only a small fraction of the commercial messages that my participants encounter in U.S. programs. In the interviews, as their list of U.S. programs grew, a range of other placements/integrations that infiltrate their TV viewing emerged, including Apple’s iPhone in *Moonlight* (CBS); Ford in *24* (FOX); Cover Girl in *America’s Next Top Model* (CW); Sunkist in *One Tree Hill* (CW); Procter & Gamble and Johnson & Johnson in *Gilmore Girls* (CW); GE, Home Depot, Reebok, Target, and Frito-Lay in *Survivor* (CBS); and many, many more. What are the young Chinese viewers’ reactions to these branding messages? Can we call them active viewers/agents vis-à-vis both the copyright industries and the corporate consumer culture? The following sections seek to provide some answers. Let’s first look at the young participants’ active viewership illustrated by their narratives.

**Active audience and resistance to the copyright industries**

Piracy is the primary means by which the 150 participants access U.S. TV programs. All participants reported using pirated DVDs and/or P2P file-sharing websites such as 6.cn and tudou.com to watch U.S. TV programs. In contrast, cable channels and satellite broadcasts are used only as supplementary means of access. When asked why they prefer pirate sources, a common explanation was that there is not enough U.S. content available through legal sources.

This theme of shortage in content supply through legal conduits was also cited by Wang and Zhu (2003) when they explained film piracy in China. Such shortage partly results from the Chinese government policy that no TV station can broadcast foreign content for more than 25% of its programing (Yan, 2000). Meanwhile, Chinese TV stations are less motivated to import U.S. and other foreign programs because such programs must go through lengthy review processes, and their dialogs must be dubbed in Chinese, making their appearance on Chinese television more than a year behind the running time in their home countries. Savvy and globally wired viewers in China usually cannot accept this delay (Wen et al., 2008).

In response to this shortage of supply, my participants resort to unofficial sources such as pirated DVDs and P2P file-sharing websites. Their active viewership is reflected in the range of programs they watch and in their up-to-date knowledge of U.S. television culture. They mentioned 38 TV series (see Appendix B), ranging from old series such as *Friends* (NBC) and *The Sopranos* (HBO) to new dramas such as *Lie to Me* (FOX) and *Life on Mars* (ABC); from the teen-themed *One Tree Hill*
Product Placement and Digital Piracy

Y. Shi

(CW) and the sci-fi Heroes (NBC) to the paranormal, romantic Moonlight (CBS); from stories of suburban American housewives (ABC’s Desperate Housewives) and elite Manhattan upper-east-siders (CW’s Gossip Girl) to those of hospital interns in Seattle (ABC’s Grey’s Anatomy), and Pittsburgh gays (Showtime’s Queer as Folk). Their inventory also includes almost every popular show in the history of U.S. reality television: Survivor (CBS), Who Wants to be a Millionaire (ABC), The Apprentice (NBC), Dancing with the Stars (ABC), American Idol (FOX), Project Runway (Bravo), and America’s Next Top Model (CW), to name a few. Moreover, many of the participants are zealous fans of Discovery and its related networks. Apart from the previously mentioned Greensburg (Planet Green), they reported watching The BIG! (Discovery), Planet Earth (Discovery), Man Versus Wild (Discovery), and Ocean’s Deadliest (Animal Planet). Finally, this list of sitcoms, dramas, reality shows, and documentaries, according to my participants, reflects only what they could recall at the time of the interview rather than the entirety of the U.S. programs they watch.

The young viewers always keep themselves up to date. As viewer J from Shanghai revealed: “We try to stay in sync with the running schedule in the United States, and whoever is uploading and sharing the new episodes is doing a great job. Thanks to them, we are able to enjoy the recent episodes of 24, Prison Break, or Gossip Girl usually within a week of their original U.S. running time.” “Within a week” appears to be a modest reflection of reality. According to Wen et al. (2008), it takes only 12 hours for a new U.S. episode to appear on public or college-based file-sharing websites in China. The efficiency of the pirate network explains why, at the time of this writing, the young viewers are already fussing about new shows such as Lie to Me and Life on Mars.

In fact, watching U.S. shows has become fashionable among the interviewed youth, and being “in sync” is central to their fashionista status. H from Shanghai commented: “Websites are much faster [than official imports], but you’ve got to stay tuned. Missing too much will make you an outsider among your peers.” In addition, many participants repeatedly expressed a sense of cultural superiority. For them, the ability and the “taste” to enjoy U.S. TV programs distinguish them from the older generations, the rural poor, and from their less-educated peers, who are often content with local programs or, at best, Japanese or Korean imports. “Being left behind,” as Q from Beijing reflected from another perspective, “is not acceptable. It would be as if we were not part of the advanced world and we were still in the pre-reform era when China was regarded as a poor and isolated country by the rest of the world.” Z echoed Q’s opinion in another interview: “U.S. shows represent the hot, the new, and the modern. They represent global trends. Not knowing these makes us culturally handicapped. Knowing these offers us cultural currency as well as chances to infuse our traditional cultures with transnational elements.”

This sense of urgency to stay “in sync” with a cultural “out there” drives the viewers’ active use of pirated materials. Their narratives indicate that this “out there” consists of not just the trendy media artifacts, but also what the artifacts represent, that is, a symbolic universe of modernity, postmodernity, and globalization. Watching
these artifacts through illegal sources offers the participants a means to achieve direct and immediate participation in this modern or postmodern cultural universe, otherwise impeded by global copyright laws and China’s broadcasting policy on foreign imports. This cultural participation is important to Chinese youth because it provides a sense of agency in that they can control what, when, and where they watch. Living in a society that suffered decades of political seclusion and economic standstill, Chinese youth, and the Chinese public in general, share a mentality of “catching up” with the developed world in cultural and technological areas. As a result, the young generation is no longer willing to wait for transnational media’s official landing in China.

Throughout the interviews, participants were very open about their use of pirated materials and expressed no sense of guilt, yet an almost nationalistic sentiment surfaced in some narratives. For instance, when we ran into the issue of piracy, K from Shanghai said:

Well, copyright [originated] from Western countries, right? The idea is new to us and a little hard to accept. They [western countries] used our inventions of making papers and gunpowder without paying copyright fees, right? They used the image and story of the Monkey King in their films, also without paying copyright fees. There are lots of such examples. I am not saying we should start charging them copyright fees for elements from our cultural heritage. Similarly, I don’t think it is fair for us to pay for creations that should have been shared by people.

T from Beijing commented from a more critical angle:

In this commercial world, it is always poor and isolated peoples who are at the receiving end of new information and popular entertainment. Sometimes they are allowed access decades later. Sometimes they are completely isolated. We [young Chinese viewers] are not in that bad of a situation, but lots of us would go broke if we bought the official version of every U.S. show we are watching. Most of the shows do not even have official versions in China. Well, if pirated shows are available, why not [use them]? I don’t want to wait forever for everything.

As these narratives indicate, the young viewers’ reliance on piracy for cultural participation can be interpreted as a form of “self-empowerment,” to use Wang’s words (2003, p. 37). As Wang contends, pirated media products can function as a quick solution to the perceived disparity between the information rich and the information poor.

So far, I have demonstrated that the participants’ complicity in transnational piracy constitutes a form of resistance within the current entertainment/information environment that is otherwise limited by the global copyright industries and local broadcasting policies. Yet, I want to balance this view of active audience by highlighting a fact that supports the cultural imperialism camp’s allegations. By consuming pirated programs from the United States, the participants expose themselves to the consumption stimuli and branding messages integrated in these programs. I now
turn to the participants’ reactions to these branding messages and reassess their active viewership in this commercial context.

**Active audience and consumers**

In contrast to their activity in seeking alternative access to copyrighted U.S. programs, the participants either do not have adequate knowledge of the practice of product placement/integration or hold exceedingly positive attitudes toward this practice. As their narratives reflect, product placement/integration can generate or increase their desire for certain promoted products, or even lead them to buy these products. Of the 150 participants, 78 reported that they were not aware of the practice of product placement/integration, or of the fact that U.S. TV programs are made not only to entertain viewers, but also to sell viewers’ products or brand names. Fifty-two participants said that they were aware of product placements but did not mind seeing them. Only 20 participants were both sensitive to and critical of the commercial intention of the programs.

In fact, as many as 98 participants agreed that watching U.S. TV programs helped increase their knowledge of the consumer products and brands incorporated in people’s lives in the United States, whereas 88 participants said watching the programs helped increase their desire for the promoted products and brands. The following accounts stand out among all the narratives and can illustrate the success of U.S. TV programs as venues of transnational advertising.

Participant M from Beijing told me that watching *Gossip Girl* is currently in style among her peers. “*Gossip Girl* offers a sneak peek into the lives of Manhattan’s Upper-East-Siders,” she said, “showing the cell phones they use, the clothes they wear, the brands they prefer, the parties they go to . . . I have never before seen such classic and trendy things for young people in other shows . . .” Participant F from Shanghai said: “All the girls around me are impressed by what Serena and Blair have—their cars, cell phones, and dresses . . . The dresses are designer products, some classic and some vintage. And the accessories!! They are made in New York, right? That is why this show can keep me informed of the latest trend . . .”

As the above accounts indicate the participants’ increased knowledge of trendy products used by their New York counterparts, the following reveals their desire for these products. N from Beijing admitted: “I love the new designs in *Gossip Girl* . . . I would buy the entire wardrobe of Blair Waldorf. So cute!” G from Shanghai had a different wish: “I come to know many different types of cell phones through *Gossip Girl*. I want to buy one with a 24-letter touch board because it looks very convenient and cool.”

R from Shanghai has the fashion page of gossipgirlinsider.com bookmarked on her computer, which breaks down the fashion in each and every episode of the series. She showed me a photo on the website of Serena van der Woodsen, one of the main characters, who, as R explained by citing the information on the website, wears a vintage coat, Cheap Monday jeans, a Petit Bateau striped T-shirt, and a Ralph Lauren
scarf, and carries a Coach bag, and a vintage Vuitton suitcase. She frequents this website because: “Many of these products are new to me, [so] I cannot identify the brands just by seeing their signage in *Gossip Girl*. I googled the show and this website popped up. Exactly what I need . . .” In this case, the commercial stimuli in the series led R to search for more brand/product information. Finally, a sense of desire surfaced in her comment: “Too bad . . . many of these items are not yet available in Shanghai.”

As the above accounts indicate, *Gossip Girl* serves as a trend setter and shopping catalog for the interviewed viewers, who aspire to appear glamorous and cool and to celebrate their youth. As such aspirations find temporary fulfillment in U.S. TV programs, transnational marketers find chances to sell. The fashion contributors to *Gossip Girl* might be thrilled to know that they have already secured a pool of young consumers even before they officially launch their apparel and accessories in China.

The commercial influence of U.S. TV programs is further evidenced in participant D’s narrative of Dyson and Discovery’s program, *BIG!* D, a white-collar professional, loves watching the Discovery Channel, which according to him “showcases the forefront of science and technology . . . and represents human exploration and innovation.” As D revealed, *BIG!* increased both his knowledge of and desire for Dyson products and ultimately led him to buy one:

Last summer, my elder sister was getting married, but I did not know what wedding present to give her. I wanted something cool and edgy but useful as well. Then I ran into an old show by Discovery called *BIG!* where craftsmen and designers built a 16-foot-tall Dyson vacuum. The huge Dyson was inducted into the Guinness Book of Records. That was cool. The vacuum struck me as something my sister and her hubby could use at home. I checked out the product, called a few places, and spent my savings on a Dyson All Floors Upright.

Young people like D who chase new technologies and can afford the best, albeit by saving money, are the exact target audience that marketers seek to reach through Discovery. In other words, the educational image and the symbolic meanings of Discovery (science, innovation, and exploration) are smartly transmitted to the products or brands integrated in its programs to appeal to viewers who love educational content.

Another product brought to some participants’ notice by a U.S. TV show is Apple’s iPhone. Participant A from Beijing revealed that the vampire series *Moonlight* (CBS) introduced the phone to him: “In the episode ‘Sleeping Beauty,’ I saw the main female character getting messages from her iPhone. Such a sleek handset! I had not seen anything like that in China. It beats all the Japanese and Korean phones.” He and his friends became instantly attracted. As A revealed, after the episode, they started searching for more information about the phone, from news stories and reports in *Macworld*, to Steve Jobs’ keynote speeches at the Worldwide Developers Conference (WWDC). The message that they interpreted out of these sources is reflected in A’s narrative:

The iPhone is a revolutionary handset. Its multi-touch screen, wireless connection, video features changed how we interact with cell phones . . . Look at
how Apple presented the phone at WWDC! They think from the user’s perspective. They make the phone to maximize individual user’s experience. The phone means comfort, convenience, and customization. Really a piece to show your taste!

Apart from A, the iPhone was mentioned by 120 participants as one of the top transnational consumer products that they know of. Interestingly, the phone is not officially sold in China but is nonetheless the most sought-after item by young consumers in the underground market, which claims one million unauthorized iPhone users in China (Hong, 2008, July 8). The TV series, as A’s comments indicated, not only generated the young people’s knowledge of and desire for the phone, but started word-of-mouth promotion and led the young people into Apple’s official advertising sphere through outlets such as WWDC.

Moreover, Sunkist would be delighted to read the following account. Unlike many of the participants, B from Beijing is very conscious of the practice of product placement/integration. Instead of feeling offended by the commercial interest, B uses the placement as a means to “stay in touch” and to construct her identity as a person who is part of the cultural zeitgeist of the present. She is a fan of One Tree Hill (CW) and once commented:

Sunkist must have spent lots of money to have its logo, vending machines, and soft drinks appearing in almost every episode of the second season of One Tree Hill. I drink Sunkist all the time. I just did not know it was American until One Tree Hill. I guess the series makes me like Sunkist more because obviously American teens in the show like it. I feel connected to them somehow and this feeling of connection is why I watch U.S. television in the first place.

Again, the series’ influence in increasing B’s knowledge of and desire for Sunkist can be detected here. Another theme in A’s narrative is the sense of connection. Many young people desire connection, and staying connected, as discussed above, signifies the agency of the young people whose media consumption is often sequenced and delayed by TNMCs. However, it is problematic that young people like B achieve such a connection not only through collective viewership of a media artifact, but also more increasingly through their consumption of the same product/brand thereby reducing global cultural participation to global brand-name consumption.

Other examples illustrating the influence of product placement/integration on the young viewers include the participants’ increased knowledge of the Chrysler Crossfire through The Apprentice and of Nestlé through Friends, as well as their growing interest in Reebok through Survivor and Nissan cars through Heroes or Desperate Housewives. Given the space limitations, I will not elaborate on the many additional examples. Taken together, the examples in this section substantiate the argument that pirated U.S. TV programs and their product placement/integration contribute to the cultivation of a generation of young Chinese consumers who are receptive to U.S. TV programs as well as to the products and brands endorsed by
them. It is not a coincidence that the top transnational brands listed by my participants, such as Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Nike-Converse, Procter & Gamble, Johnson & Johnson, Unilever, Apple, Ford, and GM, are all aggressive marketers in the product placement/integration industry and frequently featured in trade magazines.

More importantly, as integration is in essence a content-wrapped celebrity endorsement that strongly affects young viewers, as Pompper and Choo (2008) reveal, it is able to convey to young viewers the symbolic meanings that marketers would like to associate with their products or brands. When asked about what the integrated products and brands symbolize for them, the participants responded with a list of meanings that are overwhelmingly positive. For them, transnational brands such as Apple stands for being avant-garde and trendy; Nike signifies vitality, freedom, and independence; Crossfire, Lincoln, and Cadillac indicate status; iPods and iPhones denote luxury, mobile lifestyle, and e-identity; Converse and Levi’s suggest rebellion and individuality.

The present case of young Chinese viewers vis-à-vis transnational consumer culture thus indicates that piracy ironically delivers young Chinese viewers up to transnational marketers. The product placements in pirated content could add to the marketers’ campaigns already unfolding in China (for instance, in the case of Procter & Gamble), or help prepare a consumer base eagerly waiting for their products to arrive in China (as with iPhones). Thus, piracy, often portrayed as a global epidemic, should be interpreted through a different angle. It surely takes away potential copyright incomes of TNMCs, should their shows be properly exported to China. On the other hand, however, piracy not only enhances the appeal of their programs among Chinese viewers, but also advances their capitalist goals by making their product placements/integrations widely accessible to these viewers. As the TNMCs’ immediate economic interests are harmed, their advertisers’ interests are enriched. Furthermore, the irony of piracy in China, where the government limits foreign imports to shore up local media markets for its own media corporations, is that without pirating the products of the TNMCs, the economic interests of the nonmedia transnational corporations cannot be advanced through product placements/integrations. The irony implies that our analyses of piracy should look beyond rampant flows of pirated content and the profit losses of the copyright industries. We need to consider at the same time the commercial nature of the content, its selling messages and materialistic values, as well as local audiences’ actual reactions to these messages. As previously argued, the influence of product placement/integration on my participants is achieved in large part through pirated programs.

**Audience agency and structural constraints**

Now that we have looked at both the strengths and the limitations of the young viewers’ activity in relation to pirated media advertainment, let us now expand the critique of the structural factors of advertainment and the transnational corporate consumer
culture, beginning with a description of the economic and cultural atmosphere in China, the immediate environment of the young viewers’ activity.

The neoliberal, market-oriented, and consumption-friendly atmosphere of contemporary China offers few alternative symbolic materials, which the participants could have utilized to interpret advertainment in U.S. television in a critical light.\textsuperscript{20} After 30 years of reform, a new ruling bloc has emerged in China that consists of bureaucratic capitalists within the Chinese party-state, an elite group of business investors, managers, professionals, and consumers in China, as well as transnational corporate investors. These people have found unprecedented opportunities to enrich themselves via the reform process and are the driving forces behind China’s continuous integration into global capitalism. Meanwhile, the Chinese party-state, through global integration, has transformed into a capitalist, bureaucratic-authoritarian system (D. Schiller, 2005; Hu, 2003; Lee et al., 2006; Zhao, 2003, 2008; Zhao & Schiller, 2001). It preaches “developmentalism” and portrays commercialization as the destined path for China’s future. It has also replaced the communist doctrine of austerity with the capitalist ideology of consumption (Xu, 2007). As Ci (1994) observes, since the 1980s, public discourse in China has taken on varying degrees of hedonism with the proliferation of such ideas as consumerism, individualism, and self-reliance. The party-state is also complicit in the construction of an apolitical, commercial youth culture. For instance, as Fung (2006) asserts, the party-state collaborated with Viacom and admitted MTV into the Chinese media landscape hoping the channel’s music and commercial values would absorb certain counterhegemonic cultures such as youth culture and hip-hop culture into the “manageable zone” of the state. Such collaboration sells to young Chinese viewers “a modern symbol of the capitalist West,” which creates a “potpourri of emerging youth’s desires—the yearning for modernity, materialistic aspirations, and individual pursuits—with few political overtones” (Fung, 2006, p. 77).

Finally, China’s own TV system has undergone a quick commercial transformation with TNMCs as its driving force (Shi, 2005). Since the 1980s, the party-state has redefined its broadcasting units as commercial enterprises (Hu, 2003; Zhao, 2008). In particular, China Central Television (CCTV), the authoritative station created as the mouthpiece for the party-state, now has transnational and domestic advertising as its main source of funding (Zhao, 2008). One direct result of this transformation, as I argued elsewhere (2009), is that Chinese television is now speaking to viewers more as consumers than as citizens. The Chinese TV professionals, meanwhile, are adopting commercial practices mastered by their U.S. counterparts, including the practice of product placement and integration.\textsuperscript{21} In short, the apolitical, consumption-oriented atmosphere in China functions as one structural constraint that disables the young viewers’ critical thinking in regard to consumerism.

Meanwhile, the transnational corporate consumer culture and its new structural feature of advertainment function as another constraint. Advertainment, as illustrated by the participants’ narratives and consumption behaviors, exposes the young people to subliminal commercial messages, increases their awareness of and desire
for transnational brands and products, and appropriates the meanings created in the symbolic context of television—free will, individuality, vitality, rebellion, etc.—for marketing purposes. Such a perspective is supported by evidence from this study, which, in turn, confirms previous scholarly arguments (DeLorme & Reid, 1999; Miller, 1990; Olson, 2004a, 2004b; Pompper & Choo, 2008).

Specifically, advertainment channels the viewers’ agency toward consumption rather than toward alternative thinking. As evidence from this study shows, my participants are not passive recipients of what the structure offers. Yet, they are as active in seeking unofficial access to U.S. TV programs as they are in finding out the prices, features, models, and retail locations of the products or brands promoted in these programs. No participant, unfortunately, uttered any critical comments about their beloved brands or the corporations behind those brands. Issues such as electronic waste, sweatshop conditions, and global divisions of labor often associated with transnational corporations were not raised by the participants as reasons for them to reevaluate their desire for the products or brands. This does not mean that the young people are completely unconscious of these larger issues. Yet, their raving about the products/brands without a critical pause nonetheless remind us of the scholarly criticisms reviewed at the beginning of this study: The transnational corporate consumer culture—including its new advertainment component—weakens and undermines audiences’ political edge and counterhegemonic potential (Artz, 2003). It suppresses the possibility of “imagining” a world that is not branded (Wenner, 2004). It converts third world audiences into consumers of global brands, whose lives obtain meaning through brand consumption and whose sense of creativity and empowerment is linked to their position as individual consumers (Xu, 2007). In short, the changing nature of media artifacts from entertainment to advertainment, the transnational corporate consumer culture, and China’s neoliberal, consumption-oriented public culture all work toward cultivating my participants into savvy consumers who are better informed about transnational brand names than about local and global politics.

Finally, by presenting the strengths and the limitations of the young Chinese viewers’ activity side by side with the influence of the transnational corporate consumer culture, this study speaks to the debate between the active audience thesis and the cultural imperialism thesis. As reviewed at the beginning of the study, empirical findings of local audiences’ activity are often used to challenge the idea of Western or American cultural invasion. While acknowledging the power of local audiences, many scholars believe that such a theoretical antithesis between the active audience camp and the cultural imperialism camp oversimplifies the nuanced dynamics between audience, media, and ideological structures. For instance, Kraidy (2005) recognizes both audience activity and the ideological structure that is often reproduced by active audience interpretations. According to Herman and McChesney (1997), Oliveira (1993), and H. Schiller (1991), the local production of telenovelas preserves Brazilian folk cultures in a transnational context, but at the same time reproduces commercial values and reflects the hegemonic power of the corporate consumer culture. Finally,
Morley (2006, p. 104) calls for a mediate, negotiated stance between the scholarly vision of audience empowerment and that of media manipulation. I share these scholars’ views. This study shows that when the dichotomy of American invasion versus local resistance reaches its theoretical limits in light of local audience negotiations, hybrid local productions, and the postcolonial phenomena of cultural diversity (Appadurai, 1990), our knowledge of transnational corporate cultural imperialism complements our vision of audience activity. The mediation between corporate cultural domination and audience activity is vividly illustrated by Participant B, for instance, when she uses the placement of Sunkist in One Tree Hill to actively construct a consumer identity shared by American teens.

In other words, audiences’ very real manifestation of agency, or lack thereof, help us measure the power of the corporate consumer culture in a particular local context. As discussed previously, my participants are always active viewers, using pirated materials to overcome the limitations of their location at the lower stratum of the global copyright hierarchy. They make an effort to stay connected to the modern part of the world. They acquire status symbols and cultural capital through watching U.S. TV programs. Yet, the commercial nature of these programs, as well as the neoliberal, apolitical discursive surroundings in China, directs their agency toward consumption while disabling an alternative consciousness that could have carried their agency outside of the neoliberal, capitalist confines. In this particular case, the extent of the young viewers’ activity (limited by consumer cultural ideologies) and the consequences of their activity (such as their transformation into active consumers with few counterhegemonic ideas) validate cultural imperialism theorists’ criticisms of the transnational corporate consumer culture and the diminishment of public spheres. It is in the context of audience activity that we find the strengths, limitations, and consequences of their agency, and, more importantly, a need to refine the thesis of transnational corporate cultural imperialism so that it both presents and theorizes the nuanced mediation between audience agency and structural power.

Notes

1 The nation-centric approach, which is premised on “the West versus the rest” dichotomy, has induced revisionist works such as Tomlinson’s, which highlights cultural diversity and fragmentation and unsettles the assumption that cultures are geographically isolated and internally homogeneous (1991).

2 This does not mean that the early imperialist critique of U.S. domination is entirely invalidated. The topical substance of this critique may have been diminished by changes in the real world such as the counterflow of local/regional productions, but the revisionist work of imperialism scholars keeps finding new evidence that proves the continued global influence of the U.S. cultural hegemony. Specifically, the commercial model of Hollywood-based TNMCs has been treated as the evolutionary model by many media systems in developing countries (Herman & McChesney, 1997; H. Schiller, 1991; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1997). U.S. genres impose effective boundaries on local
productions, and the U.S. genres’ underlying consumption messages are often replicated in local programs (Straubhaar, 2007). Furthermore, the U.S. ICT hegemony still dominates the world despite competition from India and China (Boyd-Barrett, 2006).

Although I refer to the programs as U.S. TV programs in this study, they are products of U.S.-based TNMCs that in turn depend on transnational advertisers. It would be imprecise or nation-centric to view these programs solely as the products and the agents of “American” cultures or values in this global media environment.

I chose young viewers since, as Donnalyn Pompper and Yih-Farn Choo (2008) discover in their interviews with global marketers, product placement/integration is youth-oriented. It uses celebrity endorsement and therefore is more effective in selling new trends and avant-garde products to teens and young adults. Also, as Weihua Wen et al. (2008) report, the viewing population of U.S. TV programs in China is primarily made of teens and young adults.

Participant responses given in English are presented word for word in this study; bilingual responses and those in Chinese are presented in this study after my translation.

The remaining 7% of the placement happens with no fee or compensation arranged (Graser, 2005, April 4).

As cited by Marc Graser (2005, April 4).

PQ Media as cited by Marc Graser (2005, April 4).

The remaining 7% of the placement happens with no fee or compensation arranged (Graser, 2005, April 4).


As cited by P. Orsini (2007, April 30).

For each of the following shows, there are many more placement/integration examples than I have space to detail.

Sixty participants said they regularly watch programs from the Discovery channel and its related networks, such as Planet Green and Animal Planet.

Xu (2007) and Wen et al. (2008) made similar observations in their research.


Scholars worry that the positive symbolic meanings of the products and brands, once transmitted, could serve as a nucleus of the young people’s individual or collective identities that in turn rationalize and encourage their consumption behaviors. As these scholars argue, young viewers derive symbolic meanings out of the consumer products seen in TV placements and use the meanings to construct their identities. These meanings include security, belonging, coolness, and being unique and cutting-edge (DeLorme & Reid, 1999; Kretchmer, 2004; Olson, 2004a; Pompper & Choo, 2008).

Unlike images of the Chinese party-state as an anticapitalist regime ruling through dictatorship and a tight control of citizens’ private lives, the new party-state and its
political and economic strategies have changed, as many scholars observe, especially after China’s accession into the WTO. I will describe some of these changes in the following paragraphs. Meanwhile, I want to highlight that the party-state now governs through new authoritarianism, which advocates control over political power and public opinion in public spaces while allowing more openness in private spaces (Lu & Weber, 2008). Specific to the present study, the apolitical entertainment and commercial materials of U.S. television accessed by my participants are not necessarily counterhegemonic in the eyes of the bureaucratic capitalist party-state, which by its own choice follows the commercial U.S. model to reform its media system (Shi, 2008) and works in alliance with TNMCs to cultivate an apolitical youth culture in China (Fung, 2006). This explains why so far no authority in China works to regulate individuals’ access to U.S. programming through pirate sources. In addition, none of my participants expressed concern that their access to pirated U.S. entertainment programming is subject to government punishment. Meanwhile, as I mentioned previously in the article, the party-state tolerates piracy intentionally through legal reluctance and loose law enforcement on local levels, in order to satisfy the grassroots demand for free, universal access to copyrighted materials (Lu & Weber, 2008). Although the party-state occasionally launches antipiracy campaigns, the campaigns primarily target piracy networks, illegal websites, etc., but rarely criminalize individual end-users (Lu & Weber, 2008). Finally, the party-state’s limit on broadcasting official foreign imports, as explained in note 15, is more economically driven than ideologically motivated (Fung, 2006; Lee et al., 2006; D. Schiller, 2005; Shi, 2005; Xu, 2007; Zhao, 2003, 2008). In short, the party-state’s stance toward young people’s access to U.S. programming through pirate sources is more tolerant than many people imagine. From another perspective, however, a follow-up study would be beneficial as to whether the Chinese viewers perceive their use of pirated U.S. programs as a subversion of the government control over official imports.

21 This practice in China is new and, as yet, underdeveloped. A follow-up research on product placements in Chinese television and on Chinese viewers’ responses will supplement this study and provide a complete view of the dynamics between the Chinese audience and the practice of advertainment.

References


Product Placement and Digital Piracy

Y. Shi


Toronto, Canada: Rowman and Littlefield.


Appendix A: Sample interview questions

U.S. TV consumption:

1. What are the U.S. TV programs you watch? Please list all the genres, such as sitcoms, drama series, reality shows, documentaries, and others.
2. How do you gain access to these U.S. programs? Please list your primary methods of access.

The influence of U.S. programs that carry product placements:

1. Do you think watching these U.S. TV programs helps increase your knowledge of certain consumer products and brands? If yes, could you provide an example?
2. Do you think watching these U.S. TV programs helps increase your desire for certain consumer products and brands? If yes, could you provide an example?
3. What are the other consumer products and brands that you see in these TV programs?
4. Please list the brands and products that first come to your mind as foreign or transnational, including both those you see in U.S. TV programs and those you see in everyday life.
5. What do these brands and products that you have mentioned so far symbolize for you and your peers? Do you like them? Please provide examples.
6. Are you aware of the fact that the U.S. programs you watch often contain product placements that are intended to sell you certain products?
7. If you are aware of the product placements, do you mind seeing them? Explain your thoughts.

### Appendix B: TV programs listed by the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TV Series</th>
<th>Number of Participants Watching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title of Program</strong></td>
<td><strong>Produced by</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>NBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gossip Girl</td>
<td>CW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heroes</td>
<td>NBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison Break</td>
<td>FOX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desperate Housewives</td>
<td>ABC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ugly Betty</td>
<td>ABC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grey’s Anatomy</td>
<td>ABC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lie to Me</td>
<td>FOX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost</td>
<td>ABC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Tree Hill</td>
<td>CW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing Pains</td>
<td>ABC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moonlight</td>
<td>CBS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex and the City</td>
<td>HBO</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sopranos</td>
<td>HBO</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gilmore Girls</td>
<td>CW</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSI</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chuck</td>
<td>NBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Minds</td>
<td>CBS</td>
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<td>Everybody Loves Raymond</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House</td>
<td>FOX</td>
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<td>Kyle XY</td>
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<td>Life on Mars</td>
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<td>The OC</td>
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<td>Samantha Who</td>
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<td>Lipstick Jungle</td>
<td>NBC</td>
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<tr>
<td>The War at Home</td>
<td>FOX</td>
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<td>Cashmere Mafia</td>
<td>ABC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Veronica Mars</td>
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<td>24</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Rock</td>
<td>NBC</td>
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<td>Private Practice</td>
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*(continued)*
**TV Series**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Program</th>
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<tr>
<td>32 Queer as Folk</td>
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<td>33 Shark</td>
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<td>34 Boston Legal</td>
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<td>35 Terminator</td>
<td>FOX</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 Supernatural</td>
<td>CW</td>
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<td>37 The West Wing</td>
<td>NBC</td>
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<td>38 Will and Grace</td>
<td>NBC</td>
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**Reality Shows**

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<tr>
<td>1 The Apprentice</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 American Idol</td>
<td>FOX</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Project Runway</td>
<td>Bravo</td>
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<td>4 America’s Next Top Model</td>
<td>CW</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>5 So You Think You Can Dance</td>
<td>FOX</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Survivor</td>
<td>CBS</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 Who Wants to be a Millionaire</td>
<td>ABC</td>
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<td>8 Amazing Race</td>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 Hell’s Kitchen</td>
<td>FOX</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 America’s Got Talent</td>
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<td>11 Dancing with the Stars</td>
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<tr>
<td>12 Queer Eye for the Straight Guy</td>
<td>Bravo</td>
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**Documentaries**

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<thead>
<tr>
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<td>1 Greenburg</td>
<td>Planet Green</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Planet Earth</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Man vs. Wild</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 The Big!</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Ocean’s Deadliest</td>
<td>Animal Planet</td>
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**Animated Series**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Animated Series</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 The Simpsons</td>
<td>FOX</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 South Park</td>
<td>Comedy Central</td>
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产品置入和数字盗版：中国年轻观众对文化全球化合作的非传统方法反应

Yu Shi
宾州州立大学哈里斯堡分校人文学院

【摘要：】

本研究探讨了年轻的中国观众对美国电视节目中的消费刺激内容的理解。作者认为年轻观众对盗版的美国电视节目的观看反映了他们积极的观看意图和社会作用，这既是中国官方广播电视政策也是对国际版权产业的公然挑战。同时，通过与观众的深度访谈和对中国观众所接触的实际产品置入/整合的微量分析，作者发现产品置入/整合增加了观众的意识或对所推广的产品/品牌的购买欲。本研究将文化帝国主义和积极的观众这两个议题相结合。年轻的中国观众是积极的，但其行为的程度和后果更加巩固了对构成文化帝国主义的论题本质的批评。
Le placement de produit et le piratage numérique : comment les jeunes téléspectateurs chinois réagissent-ils aux méthodes non conventionnelles de la mondialisation culturelle des marchés?

Yu Shi

Cette étude examine les interprétations que font les jeunes téléspectateurs chinois des stimuli de consommation encodés dans les émissions télévisées des États-Unis. Je soutiens que l'usage par les jeunes téléspectateurs d'artefacts américains piratés reflète leur statut de spectateurs actifs et leur agentivité sociale active, bravant à la fois la politique officielle de télédiffusion chinoise et les oukases des industries mondiales du droit d'auteur. Par des entretiens en profondeur avec les téléspectateurs et une microanalyse du placement de produit auquel ils sont exposés, j'ai découvert que le placement de produit augmente la connaissance et/ou le désir pour les produits et les marques dont la publicité est faite. Cette étude fait le pont entre la thèse de l'impérialisme culturel et celle des auditeurs actifs. Les jeunes téléspectateurs chinois sont actifs, mais l'ampleur et les conséquences de leur activité confirment les critiques qui constituent l'essence de la thèse de l'impérialisme culturel.
Product Placement and Digital Piracy: How Young Chinese Viewers React to the Unconventional Method of Corporate Cultural Globalization

상품배치와 디지털 불법복제: 젊은 중국 시청자들은 어떻게 기업적 문화 글로벌라이제이션의 전형화되지 않은 방법에 대해 반응하는가

Yu Shi
Penn State University-Harrisburg, School of Humanities, Middletown, Pennsylvania 17057, USA

요약

글로벌 미디어 연구문헌내에서의 상황에서, 본 연구는 미국 텔레비전 프로그램에 내재된 소비자극에 대해 젊은 중국 시청자들이 어떻게 반응하는가를 연구하였다. 본 논문은 젊은 시청자들이 불법복제된 미국 텔레비전 프로그램을 사용하는 것은 그들의 활발한 시청의욕과 사회적 기구를 반영하는 것으로 주장하고 있는바, 이들은 중국내의 공식 방송정책과 글로벌 지식재산산업을 무시하는 행위들이다. 반면, 시청자들과의 인터뷰와 실제 상품배치의 분석을 통해, 본 연구는 상품배치/통합은 이들 상품들과 브랜드들에 대한 시청자들의 인지도를 높이는 것을 발견하였다. 본 연구는 문화재국주의이론과 활동적인 오디언스 이론 사이의 간극을 이어주는 것이다. 젊은 중국시청자들은 활발하지만, 그들행위의 결과들은 문화재국주의이론의 핵심을 구성하는 요소들, 특히 기업문화이데올로기의 세계적 지배와 대안적 의식의 감소를 확인하는 것이다.
La Colocación de Producto y la Piratería Digital:
Como los Jóvenes Televidentes Chinos Reaccionan al Método no Convencional de la
Globalización Cultural Corporativa
Yu Shi
Penn State University-Harrisburg, School of Humanities, Middletown, Pennsylvania 17057,
USA

Resumen

Este estudio examina las interpretaciones de los Jóvenes Televidentes Chinos sobre el estímulo
de consumo codificado en los programas de TV de los EE.UU. Sostengo que el uso de artefactos
de piratería de los EEUU por parte de los jóvenes televidentes refleja su recepción activa y su
agencia social, desafiando la política oficial de emisiones de China y los dictados de las
industrias globales de derechos de autor. Mientras tanto, a través de entrevistas en profundidad
con los televidentes y un micro análisis de la colocación/integración actual que ellos encuentran,
descubrí que la colocación/integración de productos incrementa el nivel de conciencia de los
televidentes y/o su deseo por las marcas de los productos promocionados. Este estudio crea un
puente entre las tesis del imperialismo cultural y de la audiencia activa. Los jóvenes televidentes
Chinos son activos receptores, pero la extensión y las consecuencias de su actividad confirman
las críticas que constituyen la esencia de la tesis del imperialismo cultural.