

Product placement as an efficient marketing tool within the media mix: The case of General Motors and Transformers

Alicia Martín García

Assistant Professor. EADE Business School. Spain. ORCID: [0000-0002-3670-7281](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3670-7281).

aliciamartin@eade.es.

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Abstract

Product placement has existed in its most primitive form since the dawn of cinema. Now, due to the saturation of conventional advertising, this technique has reached its zenith, with brands appearing in an environment without competition, as a natural element of the plot. The automotive sector has been present from the beginning and soon understood the expressive possibilities that were offered. General Motors began its journey in the film industry in 1933 following an agreement with Warner. Since then, the General Motors group has had a growing presence in the film industry, which reached its peak in *Transformers* (2007), an unprecedented type of product placement. It is possible to identify a clear cause-effect relationship in the company's sales, with product placement being an efficient marketing tool within the media mix, as we will show throughout this investigation. The study begins with a historical review of brand placement in North American cinema (1933-2014), then proceeds with a content analysis, following the methodology proposed by Méndiz (2001), of advertising placement in film and a structured interview with Norm Marshall, the director and founding partner of Norm Marshall & Associates, responsible for GM's product placements.

Key words

Brand placement; product placement; North American cinema; General Motors.

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1. Introduction

The advertising technique of product placement, which involves placing brands within fictional environments (primarily audiovisual) as natural elements of the plot (Méndiz, 2001), has existed since the dawn of cinema.

In 1896, as Newel (2005) confirms, the first PP¹ in history appears in the film *Défilé de 8e Batallion* by the Lumiere Brothers, featuring a poster for Sunlight soap, arranged by Francois-Henry Lavanchy Clark, a film producer and sales representative for that company.

Eckert (1978) dates the origin of PP to 1913, in the film *Age of Consent*, in which a poster for Coca-Cola is visible. The author says that it was placed by an advertising agent.

In reality, we would have to move forward in time, to 1945, to encounter the first case confirmed and verified by different researchers, marking the emergence of the technique: *Mildred Pierce* by Michael Curtiz.

According to Nebenzhal and Secunda (1993), the first documented case occurs when the actress Joan Crawford, who played Mildred, drinks Jack Daniel's Bourbon Whiskey (a perfectly recognizable drink) on camera, with a very different use than those mentioned above; it is the first case negotiated and agreed upon in exchange for a financial sum, as part of the brand's advertising strategy.

It was not until 1982 that the technique became fully effective and advertisers understood the possibilities offered by Hollywood. The most famous placement in movie history is the Reese's Pieces brand in Steven Spielberg's *ET*. Elliot, the young protagonist, is able to gain the trust of his alien friend by placing a row of colorful pieces of chocolate candy on the floor, in an attempt to entice ET to return to his home. He succeeds in luring the alien, with the aforementioned candies displayed in the foreground. This scene was a turning point for the Reese's Pieces brand, which increased its sales by approximately 70%. The producers offered this opportunity to the brand following M&M's refusal to be associated with what they considered "that ugly alien."

As Victoria (1999) confirms, from that moment on, we begin to encounter brands in all kinds of movies, but the absence of specific regulations leads to problems, controversies and dissenting opinions expressed by different associations. As a result, advertisers were reluctant to invest in a type of communication that did not offer sufficient guarantees.

To restore the lost credibility of this technique, in 1991, the Entertainment Resources & Marketing Association (ERMA) was created within the Hollywood industry, to establish rules for settling disputes and regulating the PP contract process. The technique thus achieved an agreed-upon standardization and full professional recognition.

Following the creation of the ERMA, the technique soon became a practice that does not require any kind of explanation for consumers, becoming another form of advertising and one just as valid as the others, given that programs charged for it.

¹ Acronym for product placement

From this moment on, PP has been broadly accepted, with brands using it as a stable form of communication. The widespread use of this technique demonstrates the confidence of companies in the ability of PP to connect consumers with their brands.

According to López (2015), product placement increases the awareness of a product by 20% and, combining it with a conventional spot, increases average brand awareness from 47% to 58%; the effectiveness of the placement also depends on the preexisting level of familiarity with the brand.

Consumers are beginning to have more power than brands and, as such, they have revolutionized corporate communication, transforming it into one of proximity, making it possible to create community and restore human relationships in the realm of consumption (Alonso, 2015, p. 78).

González (2016) argues that with the emergence of new means of communication, companies and professionals have begun to use product placement as part of their strategies to promote their brands, products and services. In particular, they seek to understand their potential consumers and their market behaviors and, through them, to identify consumer attitudes toward marketing. This will enable them to develop more accurate and effective advertising strategies.

2. Objectives and methodology

The general objective of this investigation can be summarized as a description and evaluation of product placement as an efficient marketing tool within the communication mix because it is an excellent combination and would complement other media. To this end, we present the case of General Motors and *Transformers* and identify the main strategic lines of action developed.

With regard to the methodology, it was first necessary to consult and analyze bibliographic sources, ranging from books that examine the PP technique to scientific publications in the field of marketing and commercial communication and specialized articles. The main sources are the leading experts in the field, such as Méndiz, Victoria, Baños and Rodríguez.

We have also used content analysis to study how General Motors conveys its values and business philosophy through PP, as well as the subsequent translation into sales. To this end, we analyze the key movie project in which General Motors was involved, i.e., *Transformers* (2007), as confirmed by Norm Marshall for this research.

With regard to the study's temporal and geographic scope, we perform a historical review of placements in North American cinema, beginning in 1933, when the first General Motors placement occurred, until 2014, when the third installment of *Transformers*, which is the most recent high-profile example of placements in Hollywood movies, was released.

Content analysis, according to Berelson (1952), is a research technique that aims to be objective, systematic and quantitative when studying the explicit content of communication. For Bardin (1986), content analysis is a set of methodological instruments applied to what he calls extremely diversified discourses (contents and containers).

The methodology for this content analysis was proposed by Méndiz (2001), a pioneer and the sole researcher to establish a methodology that is universally applicable to placements in any type of film. It is thus considered the most appropriate methodology for the objective of our study, in order to identify how General Motors conveys its brand values in the cinematic environment, defining six variables: four for strictly quantitative analysis and two for partially quantitative/qualitative analysis (3 and 6).

The variables are as follows:

- a. Product.
 - b. Brand: Brand refers to each of the possible commercial names of advertisers that “place” products in television series.
 - c. Type of placement (active, passive, hyperactive and verbal).
 - c.1. Active placement: Active placement refers to the interaction between the product or brand and the actor in the series or movie. There is no appraisal of any kind, although there may be commentary on the product.
 - c.2. Passive placement: The brand is integrated into the set of the series or movie, but there is no interaction between actor and product. This is divided into primary passive (although the actor does not interact with the brand, the brand contributes to the context) and secondary passive (when the brand is an inactive element or a prop).
 - c.3. Hyperactive placement: there is manipulation and interaction between the actor and the brand or product, and this is incorporated as a narrative resource in the script.
 - c.4. Verbal placement: when there is an explicit allusion made by the actors.
 - d. Type of presence (hero, neutral or background shot).
 - d1. Hero shot: Close-up or detailed shot.
 - d2. Neutral shot: The brand is located on the same plane of action as the character.
 - d3. Background shot: The brand is located in the background of the action.
 - e. Duration (expressed in seconds).
 - f. Relationship to the context (defining, natural and artificial placement).
 - f1. Defining placement: The placement contributes to defining the character through a certain degree of symbolism. The brand describes the characters—and vice versa—and establishes a lifestyle.
 - f2. Natural placement: The placement is appropriate and relevant, without being meaningful. The placement is recognized as legitimate and pertinent.
 - f3. Artificial placement: Its relevance to the context is not apparent. It is jarring and out of place, inappropriate and even detrimental to the advertiser.
- Baños and Rodríguez (2003) also confirm that the variables for measuring product placement should be quantitative and qualitative.

Finally, a particularly useful qualitative technique is the structured interview conducted with Norm Marshall, the director and founding partner of Norm Marshall & Associates Entertainment, which has been exclusively responsible for General Motors movie placements since 1999. Contact was first made via email, followed by several telephone interviews in 2016.

3. General Motors and product placement

General Motors first became involved in the film industry in 1933 following an agreement with Warner, but despite this initial agreement, it curtailed its presence in movies until the 1970s, when the first PP agencies and communication groups began to appear.

In 1976, General Motors started working with Vista Group, a hybrid agency specializing in the automotive sector, focusing on movie and television placements. General Motors was its first client and engaged its services to achieve a brand positioning objective and improve the company's image; Vista Group's first success was placement in *Smokey and the Bandit* in 1977.

General Motors also began to work with another agency, Norm Marshall, in 1983, with this agency managing Chevrolet placements. General Motors ceased working with Vista Group in 1999, and Norm Marshall became the exclusive agency for placements for the entire group.

Norm Marshall confirms² that they currently have a large fleet of vehicles available for movies and television and he believes, based on the figures, that they have the highest percentage of exposures/integrations of any automaker.

General Motors intensified its presence in the 1990s, following the standardization of the technique, with *Days of Thunder* (1990), considered to be the first major multimillion-dollar deal between an automotive company and a film production company (Phatton, 1996). In that movie, starring Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, the protagonist played a young racecar driver, whose car was a modified Chevrolet Lumina.

Figure 1.

Chevrolet Lumina in *Days of Thunder*



Source: IMCDB

² Telephone interview conducted on 10-25-2016

The Chevrolet division of General Motors invested \$10 million in cars and promotional activities, which required 30 cars.

Norm Marshall, director of the agency and responsible for Chevrolet placement in *Days of Thunder*, stated in the interview that this was the largest placement of cross promotions made by an automotive company to date, with an extensive promotional campaign and a budget that has yet to be invested in any other film, neither in *Bond* by BMW nor in *The Bourne Ultimatum* by Volkswagen nor even in *Transformers*. It is not considered a success, however, as the film did not achieve expected box office numbers.

The next prominent case in the 1990s occurs in 1993, for *Demolition Man*, starring Sylvester Stallone, Wesley Snipes and Sandra Bullock; General Motors placed advanced prototype vehicles valued at €69 million (Gayl, 1993).

The movie is a futuristic action thriller set in the city of Los Angeles in 2032, with a positive vision of the future, in which crime has been eliminated. The vice president of corporate communication for General Motors, Bruce Macdonald, at a reception preceding the General Motors annual meeting, said that the film depicts a bright future for the company, presenting an excellent portrayal of the vitality of General Motors in 2032, and that this is the type of future project in which the brand will be involved, leveraging its corporate resources to make an impression on millions of consumers. The producer, Joe Silver, contacted Vista Group after seeing a photo of the General Motors Ultralite on a magazine cover.

After eight months of negotiations, in 1992, General Motors provided the Warner Bros. production company with 17 prototype vehicles that had already been used in auto shows.

Figure 2

General Motors Ultralite in *Demolition Man*



Source: IMCDB

Another successful placement was the Oldsmobile Silhouette minivan in *Get Shorty* (1995) by Vista Group. Vista Group had to compete against Ford and Chrysler, the latter of which was the number one seller of minivans in the US. Because no other minivan had a door that could open automatically, the scales tipped in favor of General Motors. The movie's success did not translate to an immediate increase in sales; 3,540 units were sold during the first four months of 1996, while 3,946 were sold over that same period in 1995.

Nonetheless, the brand was very satisfied, as Oldsmobile dealers reported receiving constant calls asking about the model as well as visits to the showroom; the brand's main problem with the Silhouette model was that many people were unaware of its existence (Brown, 1996).

According to Vista Group, it is important to ensure that the right car appears in the right movie, from futuristic vehicles to an old GMC, such as Clint Eastwood's car in *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995).

In 1998, the placement of the Pontiac Grand Am in *Lethal Weapon 4* is particularly noteworthy. It is an 8-minute placement, with part of the scene set on a Las Vegas freeway, which had to be blocked off for an entire week. According to Pontiac spokesman Rick Asher, "It was a good opportunity for Pontiac and General Motors because the vehicle was put to the test and passed it like a champ."

This placement focuses on the solid design of the vehicle, and the chase scenes in which it appears reinforce the sound and solid structure. Asher says that they will continue to seek out placements that make sense for their vehicles (Phatton, 1996).

The vehicles used in the chase scenes were later used for promotional purposes. Warner Bros sent one car to Australia and another to Europe for promotional use, and Pontiac sent one and a video to the lobby of the General Motors headquarters in New York (Maynard, 2000).

In 1999, Norm Marshall & Associates, which already managed Chevrolet placements, also took over the Buick, Oldsmobile, Cadillac and Pontiac divisions.

Phil Guarascio, vice president of advertising and corporate marketing at General Motors, confirms that same year that the company was looking to change its types of placement agreements, going even further, to have more control over the movies and scenes and use it as the central part of a spot (Finnigan, 1999).

This is still its policy today, reaching its zenith in *Transformers* (2007), considered an unprecedented type of placement.

After participating in the first installment of the saga and following its success, General Motors was also part of *Transformers 2* (2012) and *Transformers 3* (2014).

3.1 Transformers

Transformers 1 (2007), starring Shia LeBeouf and Megan Fox, was directed by Michael Bay and produced by Steven Spielberg.

It is based on the popular toy brand that was enormously popular in the 1980s and the subject of a successful animated television series.

The plot involves two different species of robots, the Autobots and the Decepticons, who want to take over the world and thus embark on a war, with the young protagonist as the one who can save the world.

The movie was a box-office success, with a budget of \$150 million and a gross of \$710 million, according to data from IMCDB³.

General Motors is considered to have taken PP to another dimension with this movie, as the cars are the true protagonists; they are the heroes.

The “good” robots, responsible for saving the world, called Autobots, transform into General Motors vehicles.

The deal was made with General Motors rather than any other brand because of the preexisting relationship between the movie’s director, Michael Bay, and General Motors. William Morris represents both, and Michael Bay had a previous relationship with General Motors: he had directed two Chevrolet spots. It is thus evident why the scales were tipped toward this brand.

In 2005, Michael Bay visited the General Motors design center in the San Fernando Valley, where he was shown hundreds of Pontiacs, Hummers, Cadillacs and Chevrolets, quickly deciding that the Chevrolet Camaro would play a leading role in the film.

The terms of the contract with the Paramount production company involved supplying 65 vehicles for the movie, worth approximately \$1 million, as well as approximately \$2 million for promotional and marketing campaigns. Michael Bay directed several General Motors spots promoting the film.

The brand has revealed that with this large investment, it was able to achieve its objective of improving sales, at a moment of fierce competition and in an economic crisis (Chang, Newell & Salmon, 2015).

The four cars with leading roles are the Hummer H2, Pontiac Solstice, GMC Topkick, and new Chevrolet Camaro, which did not go on sale until 2009. Two prototypes were created specifically for the movie, providing the perfect opportunity to unveil the Camaro on the big screen. The Chevrolet Camaro become the main *Transformers* character Bumblebee.

This film is aimed particularly at a target audience of young people between 18 and 34 years old, and the brand believes that this film significantly increased the number of visits to dealerships by

³ Internet Movie Cars Database: Online database of automobiles, motorcycles and other motorized vehicles in movies

this customer profile, as it is a similar target to that of the Chevrolet Camaro and *Transformers* (Philip, 2007).

In terms of sales results, Norm Marshall, the director of Marshall & Associates, responsible for GM's placements, says that thanks to its appearance in this film, sales of the Chevrolet Camaro increased by 10% every year, from 2007 to 2017, making it the sales leader in its sector in the US.⁴

In 2009, the Chevrolet Camaro was the leading car in online searches, according to Yahoo!Autos, and in 2010, the Camaro was at the top of the sports car market in the United States, dethroning the Ford Mustang for the first time in 24 years. It continued to lead the industry in 2011, propelled by the launch of the Camaro Convertible. In 2012, the Camaro recorded sales of 40,275 units, compared to 30,206 for the Mustang (Louis, 2013).

3.1.1 Transformers 1 case analysis

Table 1

Content analysis of product placement in *Transformers*

No.	Product	Brand	PP Type	Shot	Duration	Context
1	Car	Chevrolet Camaro	Hyperactive. The scene revolves around the vehicle, as the protagonist and his father are going to buy a car. The Chevrolet Camaro becomes the center of the action when it is the car chosen by the protagonist.	Hero (7") Neutral (66")	73	Defining
2	Car	Chevrolet Camaro	Hyperactive. Sam, the young protagonist, is getting ready at home and is thrilled to be able to drive his new car. The scene ends with the boy excitedly getting into the car.	Hero (2") Neutral (6")	8	Defining
3	Car	Chevrolet Camaro	Hyperactive and verbal. Hyperactive. Sam drives the car to meet his high school classmates. The car breaks down and stops, and the scene revolves around the car. The hood is opened, and a female is able to fix it, so he gives her a ride on his way home. Verbal. "Hey, bro. That car. It's nice." "Whoa, nice headers. You've got a high-rise double-pump carburetor. That's pretty impressive, Sam. It squirts the fuel in so you can go faster". "Oh, my God. I love my car"	Hero (3") Neutral (238")	252	Defining
4	Car	Chevrolet Camaro	Hyperactive. At night, Sam hears that his car has started and is driving on its own, although	Hero (4") Neutral	9	Defining

⁴ Telephone interview conducted on 10-25-2016

			he believes that there is someone driving the car and it has been stolen. Sam calls the police to report the theft and chases the car on his bike, until it arrives at a junkyard, where the car transforms into a robot. Sam is about to be attacked by dogs when his car saves him.	(5")		
5	Car	Chevrolet Camaro	Hyperactive and verbal. Sam chases the car to the junkyard, meeting the female on the way. Sam is chased by a police car, which transforms into a "bad" robot that asks him about a website and tries to kill him. The Chevrolet invites them to get in. When the female comments on how old the car is, it transforms into a late-model Chevrolet Camaro, and Sam and the female drive off in it. Verbal. "Why, if he's supposed to be, like, this super-advanced robot, does he transform back into this piece-of-crap Camaro?"	Hero (45") Neutral (96)	141	Defining
6	Car	Chevrolet Camaro	Hyperactive. The Chevrolet Camaro takes the protagonists to the place where the rest of the Autobots are going to appear.	Hero (14") Neutral (12") Background (2")	28	Defining
7	Car	Hummer 2	Hyperactive The Autobots come to earth as meteorites. Once they arrive on earth, there is a close-up of one of the Autobots, transformed into a fire engine. A Hummer H2 breaks through a fence to join the rest of the Autobots.	Hero	3	Defining
8	Car	Pontiac	Hyperactive. A Cadillac dealership appears in the foreground, with "Cadillac" in large glowing letters, and a robot begins to smash the letters. The camera focuses on a Pontiac that is prominently displayed in the showroom, placed on top of a rotating elevator, and the car can be seen from all angles. The car begins to come to life before the astonished gaze of a female. Later, all the Autobots are together, and the Pontiac reappears, with a close-up of the side and the tire as well as an aerial view of all the vehicles.	Hero	13	Defining
9	Truck	GMC	Hyperactive. The front of a GMC truck appears, with the letters in the foreground; the truck joins the other Autobots.	Hero	1	Defining
10	Car	Chevrolet Camaro	Hyperactive. The Chevrolet Camaro, with the protagonists inside, goes to meet the other Autobots at a secret location.	Hero (11") Neutral (4")	15	Defining

11	Car	GMC	Hyperactive. The police come to Sam's house to find out where the robots are. The police drive four GMC SUVs, and a chase scene unfolds, with the police chasing the robots in those cars; the GMC logo clearly visible.	Hero (10") Neutral (70")	80	Defining
12	Car	Chevrolet Camaro	Hyperactive. The Chevrolet Camaro chases the police cars because the teenagers are inside, trying to rescue them.	Neutral	5	Defining
13	Car	GMC Topkick, Pontiac and Hummer H2	Hyperactive. The three cars speed to the air base where the Chevrolet Camaro is located	Neutral	2	Defining
14	Car	Chevrolet Camaro	Verbal. "Hey, you want to lay the fate of the world on the kid's Camaro?"	-	3	Defining
15	Car	Chevrolet Camaro	Hyperactive. The Chevrolet Camaro flees with the protagonists and the cube inside.	Hero	13	Defining
16	Car	Pontiac, GMC Topkick, Hummer H2 and Chevrolet Camaro	Hyperactive. The four cars are speeding down the road, fleeing from the Decepticons.	Neutral	7	Defining
17	Car	Pontiac	Hyperactive. Bumblebee is injured, and the Pontiac stars in a chase scene with the Decepticons.	Hero	6	Defining
18	Car	GMC	Hyperactive. Bumblebee is still injured, and Micaela attaches him to a GMC crane to continue fighting; she drives and he shoots.	Hero	6	Defining
19	Car	Chevrolet Camaro	Hyperactive. The final scene shows the protagonists kissing on top of the vehicle while Optimus Prime's voiceover talks about the Autobots remaining on Earth to protect the humans.	Neutral	4	Defining
20	Car	Hummer H2 and GMC Topkick	Hyperactive. The movie ends with a shot of the two vehicles protecting the world.	Neutral	5	Defining

Source: Own.

4. Results

The main results from the content analysis of *Transformers* are that all the General Motors placements are hyperactive because the products are the protagonists of the movie, with a large number of hero shots.

They convey connotations of strength, technology, safety and endurance and “they are the heroes responsible for saving the world and watching over the humans.”

Throughout the movie, General Motors is associated with the “good guys,” as even the police drive GMC SUVs.

Particularly noteworthy is the presence of several Ford models as Decepticons, i.e., “bad guys,” with the Ford logo appearing on several occasions, and the subsequent destruction of those vehicles, in addition to verbal placement at the beginning of the movie, when the protagonist rejects a Ford.

It is thus clear that General Motors, with its presence in this movie, wants not only to position its vehicles but also to demonstrate its supremacy over its most direct rival: Ford cars are destroyed, while General Motors cars resist any type of attack.

Finally, with regard to content analysis, those General Motors placements are defining, as it is a North American car brand, emphasizing the fact that the action takes place in the US, which is not only consistent with the action but also reinforces the idea that an American young man and an American car brand save the world.

With regard to the results of the structured interview with Norm Marshall, director and founding partner of Norm Marshall & Associates, responsible for placements of the General Motors Group, it is striking that the turning point is the early 2000s, when the evolution of placements is reflected in a fierce competition among brands to appear in the most promising films. For Norm Marshall, the best proof of the evolution is the large fleet currently available from automotive companies—particularly General Motors—for loans and leases.

He also believes that *Transformers 1* is, to date, the best proven case of a direct cause-effect relationship in sales, as well as an unprecedented worldwide box-office success, compared to the brand’s previous movie placements.

Although the Chevrolet Camaro was promoted not only through product placement in movies but also through conventional media such as spots or nascent digital media in 2007, such as advertising banners, Norm Marshall & Associates has found that the key to success was the PP in *Transformers*.

The measurements carried out were both quantitative and qualitative. The qualitative measurements included pretests and posttests performed in different environments: among visitors to showrooms, at dealerships with customers, as well as in post-sales questionnaires.

5. Conclusions

We find that the antecedents of current brand placement date to the dawn of cinema, becoming more professional in 1991 with the creation of the ERMA. This technique is now a perfect complement to conventional advertising, considering the saturation of the latter and that brand placement appears in an environment with no industry competitors, delivering greater credibility and increased viewer attention.

Despite its early emergence and apparent maturity as an advertising technique, PP was an ancillary, nonprofessionalized practice, used in a very intuitive way. A decisive change occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when General Motors began to use agencies to arrange placements, reviewing scripts and seeking out opportunities. However, self-regulation was still a priority, a goal that was achieved in 1990 with the creation of the ERMA.

General Motors made a very early commitment—in 1933—to placing its vehicles in Hollywood productions and has maintained that strategy to the present day. It has appeared in most of the major blockbusters from 2000 to the present.

The role played by General Motors in its key movie projects is that of a car-hero. The vehicle becomes the real protagonist in the case of *Transformers*. Consequently, it attracts as much attention as a movie star because it can save the protagonist and help him save the world. It thus has powerful emotional connotations and becomes an extension of the protagonist's personality. General Motors conveys its essence as an American vehicle, with the Chevrolet Camaro as the star model, demonstrating its versatility and power.

The general objective of this investigation is therefore achieved, namely, a description and evaluation of product placement as an efficient marketing tool within the communication mix, based on the case of General Motors and *Transformers*. The results (box-office success, hyperactive role...) show that, thanks to that placement, the brand has been able to become a sales leader in the US, with the Chevrolet Camaro model increasing its sales 10% every year since it appeared in the movie, based primarily on having connected with the young audience (18 to 34 years old). General Motors, in this case, conveys its philosophy as a brand in a narrative cinematic context that gives its discourse credibility, resulting in increased sales.

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