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‘Tele-branding in TVIII: the Network as Brand and the Programme as Brand’

Catherine Johnson

‘TVIII, at least at this juncture, must be considered the age of brand marketing’ (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves, 2002: 48)

“‘Branding’ has emerged as a central concern of the television industry in the age of digital convergence’ (Caldwell, 2004: 305)

‘[In the digital era] The companies that succeed will be the ones that rapidly create the strongest brands.’ (Todreas, 1999: 156)

In the era of TVIII (sometimes referred to as the digital era of US television), a time of deregulation and multimedia conglomeration, when the expansion of television networks has made competition for audiences increasingly fierce, it seems that branding has emerged as *the* defining industrial practice.¹ If TVIII is the era of branding, then this article aims to open up the academic analysis of branding, and to explore it not simply as an industrial feature of television networks, but as central to the understanding of television programmes and their relationships with viewers. In doing so, this article will

focus on the example of HBO and two of its signature programmes, *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-) and *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001-05).

There are three major changes in the era of TVIII that make branding particularly valuable: the escalation of media consolidation with the emergence of large media conglomerates; the shift towards first-order commodity relations (where viewers pay directly for subscription or pay-per-view services); and an increase in the number of sites through which television can be distributed. For a media conglomerate branding can be used to link together or differentiate the products/services produced by the range of companies owned. Branding can also reduce the financial risks of developing new products by exploiting existing relationships between consumers and established brands (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves, 2002). Furthermore, for the first-order commodity relations that characterise subscription and pay-per-view services a clear branded market identity is necessary to attract potential subscribers (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves, 2002). A primary function of branding is to manage the relationship between consumer and producer by creating and conveying 'a close "fit" between the consumer's own physical and psychological needs and the brand's functional attributes and symbolic values' (Hankinson and Cowking, 1993: 10). When a viewer is paying directly for a service, as in first-order commodity relations, establishing and maintaining this 'fit' becomes central. Finally, as Timothy M. Todreas has argued, as the distribution bottleneck that characterised the eras of TVI and TVII is broken, 'A handful of digital brands will emerge as the principal means to organize content for the information weary consumer. The firms that have an opportunity to create the best digital brands are television

networks.’ (1999: 99). A clear brand identity can help viewers to choose between the wide range of different channels by providing points of access that are recognisable and reliable, while also helping to establish a strong and loyal relationship between viewers and networks which then makes the network a prerequisite for any cable operator putting together a package of channels (see Todreas, 1999: 156-63).

However, in the era of TVIII, branding is not simply a feature of television networks. The dominant practice of co-producing means that one programme could potentially be understood as part of the brand equity of a range of different companies. For example, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a co-production between Twentieth Century Fox Television, Mutant Enemy, Kuzui Enterprises and Sandollar Television. Brand logos for all four companies appear at the end of each episode. Meanwhile the series was initially transmitted on the WB network, where it was a central part of their re-branding strategy as the teen network in the mid-1990s (see Johnson, 2005). However, the series later moved to the emergent UPN network, while Twentieth Century Fox distributed the series on DVD and video, and licensed its merchandise. While Todreas argues that networks, rather than producers, hold the power in the television industry in the era of TVIII, the increasing importance of the ancillary merchandise market does complicate his argument.² Todreas argues that with programme production, ‘Any unique identity usually is associated with the stars or theme of the program and not the producer’ (1999: 175). However, the example of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* suggests that the unique identity associated with a programme is one that can be exploited by the owner of the rights to the programme across a range of different media. While this does not necessarily place

power in the hands of production companies such as Mutant Enemy, it does suggest that owning the rights to programming emerges as a potentially valuable way to make profits within the era of TVIII.

The laws associated with the development of branding further support this. Trade mark law protects distinctive graphic signs used to distinguish goods and services (see Lury, 2004: 99-100). As brands are signified in part by graphic logos, trade mark law is the means through which brands are legally constituted and protected. Trade mark law does protect the consumer from copycat products that play on the distinctiveness of a successful brand. However, as Celia Lury argues, 'trade mark law does more than protect the mark owner from unfair forms of competition. It makes it possible for mark owners to exploit new forms of production and exchange' (2004: 123). An example of this is in the merchandising of television programmes, where the trade mark becomes a valuable commodity that can be profitably sold in licensing deals. To return to the example of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, it is apparent that Twentieth Century Fox's ownership of the trade mark for the series has enabled it to exploit the series across profitable platforms in ways not open to the series' producers or to the networks on which the series was screened (WB and UPN).

Therefore, in the era of TVIII branding emerges as a powerful and commercially important strategy in two different ways. First the branding of television networks enables them to compete effectively in an increasingly crowded marketplace by creating strong, distinctive and loyal relationships with viewers. Second television programmes

themselves can act as brands that can be profitably exploited across a range of different media platforms in order to increase profits for the owner of the associated trade mark. Both of these strategies can be linked as, in an increasingly consolidated industry, conglomerates will often own networks, production companies and a range of media holdings that can exploit a successful license. As Westcott argues, 'licensing is a game for the big players and its likely to remain so as long as the likes of Disney, Warner Bros. and Nickelodeon continue to exercise their vertically integrated muscle around the world.' (1999: 26).

To examine further the ways in which the branding of networks and programmes works in practice I want to turn to the example of HBO, and two of its most important programmes, *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*. Rogers, Epstein and Reeves argue that HBO is central to understanding TVIII because of 'its pioneering efforts in introducing first-order commodity relations to the commercial television landscape' (2002: 46). A subscription channel owned by the media conglomerate AOL/Time Warner, HBO was the highest rated pay-TV network in 1999, based on projected revenues (*Broadcasting and Cable*, 13 December 1999: 31-40). Its flagship programmes *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* were central to the development of its brand image as the home of quality original programming, and HBO's exploitation of the rights to these (and other) programmes have been an essential part of their recent industrial strategy. As such, both in terms of its own status as a branded network, and in its branding of its original programming, HBO epitomises the industrial changes in the era of TVIII.

HBO: the network as brand

HBO began broadcasting in 1972, primarily showing premium sports events and theatrical films. From the 1980s HBO's strategy focused upon increasing its production of original programming (see Rogers, Epstein and Reeves, 2002, and Metz, 2004). In a deliberate attempt to differentiate itself from other networks, HBO exploited its position as a subscription channel not subject to the same FCC requirements as the advertiser-funded networks regarding profanity, sex and violence, and produced edgy, controversial and adult-orientated original programming (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves, 2002). Over the late 1990s, HBO increasingly used the critical acclaim and exclusivity of its original programmes and films to develop a brand identity as the home of quality television in the US. Eleven of the fifteen films nominated for Emmys between 1999 and 2002 came from HBO, and HBO gained the Emmy for Best Movie nine times between 1992 and 2002 (Haley, 2002: 10A). HBO also combined its popular sports events with a portfolio of authored sports magazine programmes and documentaries that Metz claims 'represent the only critical examination of sports in American life on American television' (2004: 1113). In the early 2000s HBO doubled its number of original documentaries in order to attempt to establish itself as 'the industry standard in documentaries' (Metz, 2004: 1113) and the home for new documentary talent (Haley, 2002: 14A). Finally, HBO's original drama series, such as *The Sopranos*, *Sex and the City* and *Six Feet Under* have gained critical acclaim and been successful in the Golden Globe and Emmy awards.³ As Rogers, Epstein and Reeves argue of *The Sopranos*, these original drama series take 'the threads of what had been different about HBO's previous original programming – sexuality,

graphic violence, profanity – and puts them in a context where they all work together to become a unique and distinctive product’ (2002: 53).

One of the primary ways in which brands are made visible and the values of the brand are communicated to consumers is through the use of logos and idents (Lury, 2004: 79).

HBO uses an ident at the beginning and end of every programme when it is originally broadcast, on DVD release, and when broadcast abroad. The ident starts with a black screen on which a white line fades up accompanied by an electronic sound akin to the switching on of a television. The white line opens out vertically to fill the screen with ‘snow’ (the image received when a television is not getting any signal) accompanied by a fuzzy hissing sound and the HBO logo fades up through the snow. The background fades to black with ‘HBO Original Programming’ in the centre in white, as the hissing is replaced by a single low note held to the end. The screen fades to black and the programme begins. At the end of each episode this logo is almost reversed. From a black screen the words ‘This has been a presentation of Home Box Office’ fade up, in-filled with ‘snow’. The background then fades up with the ‘snow’ image, engulfing the letters. This is all accompanied by a combination of the low single note and the hissing sound from the opening logo. The snow then collapses vertically to a horizontal bar against a black background which recedes to a white dot and then fades out, accompanied by the electronic sound of a television being switched off.

As a representation of a television switching on at the beginning of the programme and off at the end, the HBO logo evokes the impression of an appointment to view with each

programme, creating a separate and special place in which its programmes are encountered. The HBO logo suggests that your television is switching over to a uniquely 'HBO' place for the duration of the programme, and hence the logo exemplifies the brand value of providing programmes not found elsewhere on television. In addition, the placement of the logo at the beginning of each programme provides an aural and visual trigger that indicates to the potential viewer that their programme is starting, and over time becomes a powerfully evocative trigger for the emotions associated with watching HBO programming. However, the logo contributes further to the network's brand identity through its resonance with an earlier age of television. The 'snow', the slow 'warming up' of the image, the fade to a white dot, and the use of black and white, are all evocative symbols of a early period of television when receivers took a while to warm up, when programmes were broadcast in black and white, and when close-down, with its snow and fade to a white dot, was a regular occurrence. HBO's logo, therefore, offers a symbolic evocation of an earlier period of broadcasting, one commonly associated with a Golden Age in US television, contributing to the creation of a brand image that offers quality and something other (and better) than television as we currently know it.

In doing so, HBO draws on a broader set of aesthetic discourses about television in order to target a niche audience defined by their 'taste cultures' (Lury, 1993: 46). HBO's 'difference' from free-to-air network television is thus articulated in a brand strategy that draws on a critical history of US television in order to position both its programming and its audience as 'elite' and sophisticated.⁴ This association of difference and quality is furthered in HBO's key branding slogan: 'It's not TV. It's HBO.' This slogan draws on

the rhetoric of high culture and can be understood as an example of what Jim Collins (2002) has termed 'high pop'. Collins argues that the separation of high culture from other forms of culture only emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century when culture was divided into popular and elite arenas as part of a political project to secure hegemonic control over cultural life. The distinction between high and popular culture remained relatively stable until the late 1950s when the emergence of pop art challenged the bifurcation of high and popular culture and the former sacralization of culture by attempting to move the popular into the world of legitimate high culture. Collins argues that in the 1990s there was a further change in the relationship between popular and elite culture with the emergence of forms of high culture as popular entertainment – cultural forms that Collins refers to as 'high pop'. The emergence of high pop refers to the massification of 'tastefulness' in which high cultural rarity becomes a part of mass cultural production.

High pop is essentially based on what Collins refers to as the '*remystification* of the aesthetic' (2002: 14) so that the appeal of high-pop is as 'something other than *mere* popular culture' (ibid.). As such, high-pop depends on the modernist understanding of artistic production as removed from commerce, labour and mass production, while its attempt to make an 'elite' aesthetics available within mass culture goes against the rarefaction of art that is central to the modernist conception of high culture. As such, high-pop paradoxically 'insists on the apartness of genuine aesthetic expression, but at the same time promises to deliver that experience to a mass audience' (Collins, 2002: 24). It is precisely this paradox that is being conveyed in HBO's brand slogan 'It's not TV.'

It's HBO.' The slogan suggests that HBO is offering something more than television, more than mass culture, while providing it paradoxically though television, as television.

What is ironic about this brand identity is that it depends on asserting the value of HBO's programmes by devaluing television itself. HBO produces high-quality dramas that demonstrate quite how good television can be as a dramatic form, but in its brand strategy it implicitly devalues television as a medium. HBO's slogan suggests that its programmes are good *despite* being television, rather than because of it. This brand strategy does not emerge because HBO executives do not like television, but because HBO in developing its brand strategy is appealing to values that it imagines its audience will share, and hence playing on the bourgeois devaluation of television as a cultural form. In exemplifying the ideology of high-pop, HBO's brand identity effectively contributes to the devaluation of television as a medium even while the network is proving that television as a medium can produce high quality programming. This is not to argue that the programmes themselves are not of a very high quality, but that the brand values that they support are embedded in a discursive rhetoric that implicitly undermines what they are – high quality *television* drama series.

The Sopranos and Six Feet Under: programmes as brand

HBO's signature original programmes, such as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* clearly contribute to the development of its brand identity, 'It's not TV. It's HBO.' Yet these are programmes that have not just been screened on HBO but have also been widely exported abroad, sold worldwide on DVD and video, and merchandised across a range of different

media. Since his appointment as CEO and chairman of HBO in 2002, Chris Albrecht has specifically attempted to extend and solidify the HBO brand by moving into theatrical film, home video, syndication and other non-television outlets. Such non-subscription revenue is important for HBO's financial future, as the growth in subscribers has slowed (Higgins and Romano, 2004: 6). Writing in 2004, Higgins and Romano argue that HBO 'is now dependent on businesses like DVD sales and theatrical movies for 20% of its revenues' (2004: 6). *The Sopranos* alone had generated \$240 million for HBO in DVD sales by 2004 (ibid.: 1). Although syndication of most HBO programming would involve re-editing for nudity and language, the network is also looking towards the syndication market for its potential to be both 'revenue and awareness producing' (Albrecht, cited in Haley, 2002: 18A). As Kathy Haley argues, syndication, home video and other kinds of merchandising are valuable for HBO 'not only to boost revenue, but to expose the HBO brand to non-subscribers' (2002: 4A). Therefore, the extension of HBO's brand beyond broadcast television not only provides a valuable alternative source of income, but also allows the programmes to convey the HBO brand to an audience of non-subscribers. However, although extension of the HBO brand beyond the subscription network is a valuable marketing device, as the non-subscription market becomes increasingly important to HBO, an understanding of the HBO brand simply in relation to its subscription channel becomes problematic. The removal of these programmes from their original broadcast environment complicates their function as part of HBO's brand equity. To explore this further I want to examine the sale to the UK and the worldwide merchandising of *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*, two high-profile programmes which

are central to the development of HBO's network brand, and to HBO's strategy of looking beyond the subscription market for revenue.

Both *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* were sold to the advertiser-funded, public service terrestrial network, Channel 4, for transmission in the UK. Channel 4 was established in 1982 as a commercial public service broadcaster with a particular remit to provide innovative programming that was not found on the other public service channels in the UK, and to acquire this programming from independent producers rather than producing it in-house. Imported US programming has been a part of Channel 4's schedules from its inception, including drama and comedy series such as *Cheers*, *Roseanne* and *Hill Street Blues*. However, as a central part of Channel 4's raison d'être was to boost the independent television production sector in the UK, foreign imports have historically been problematic for the channel. After the 1990 Broadcasting Act (which expanded Channel 4's remit to include the need to represent the 'diversity' of British life and allowed Channel 4 to sell its own advertising for the first time⁵), Channel 4 was accused of turning its back on its previous innovations, focusing excessively on attracting a youth audience, and too frequently relying on sensation as a selling point (see Beckett, 2000: 2-4). Related to these accusations was what some saw as an over-reliance on US imports. The acquisition of US imports accelerated over the 1990s, with programmes such as *ER*, *Friends*, *NYPD Blue*, *Homocide*, *thirtysomething* and *Ellen*, and later, *The Sopranos*, *Sex and the City*, *The West Wing* and *Six Feet Under* forming an important part of the Channel 4 schedules. Paul Rixon notes that 'By the 1990s, because of Channel 4's continued financial success and, for some, their over-dependence on a large number of

US imports, the Independent Television Commission (ITC) moved to force Channel 4 to use more domestic productions' (2003: 55).

However, although US imports have caused problems with the regulator, Channel 4 has used US (and particularly HBO) programming as an important part of its brand identity. In many ways, the brand values of HBO are shared by Channel 4. As with HBO, Channel 4 has a commitment to screen the kinds of television programming not found elsewhere on British television. As with HBO, Channel 4 has a remit for creativity and innovation in its programming. As the *Channel 4 Report and Financial Statements* for 1999 stated of the channel's purpose: 'Since 1982 Channel 4 has been making television that matters – offering an alternative to the mainstream on other channels and placing a premium on innovation, originality and diversity.' (inside front cover). Meanwhile the *Channel 4 Report and Financial Statements* for 2000 claimed, 'We aim to be a place of individual authorship, a consistent source of surprise, invention and brainfood. We are for viewers who expect to be challenged, provoked and entertained by new ideas and new talent' (2000: 8). Channel 4's US imports complement this brand identity. As Janet McCabe argues, 'Reliance on American syndicated material has helped Channel 4 build a distinct corporate brand identity for itself' (2005: 212). Indeed, Channel 4 International signed a deal with HBO in 2004 to distribute more than two hundred hours of its factual programming, in a move that built on the long-standing relationship between the two channels established through Channel 4's acquisition of a number of HBO original drama series (see Mutel, 2004: 9).

However, while HBO is funded from subscriptions, freeing it from the requirements for the representation of violence, sex and language applied to the free-to-air US networks, Channel 4 is a free-to-air public service channel funded by advertising and regulated by an independent body (currently Ofcom). The regulator places restrictions on the acquisition and scheduling of imported programming. In 1999 (the year that *The Sopranos* was first transmitted on Channel 4), Channel 4's target for original programming (which excluded imported programming) was 60 percent, rising to 76 percent in prime time (*Channel 4 Report and Financial Statements*, 1999: 2). In addition to restrictions on the transmission of imported programming in prime time, there are also restrictions on the kinds of programmes that can be scheduled before 9pm. It would be impossible, therefore, for Channel 4 to schedule *The Sopranos* in the 8-9pm slot in which it has been placed on HBO, without making significant cuts to the series. The first season of *The Sopranos* was scheduled on Channel 4 between 10 and 11pm, from 15 July to 30 September 1999. Subsequent series were scheduled even later with, for example, season five screening on Channel 4 at various times between 11pm and 1am from August to November 2004. The late (and sometimes erratic) scheduling of *The Sopranos*, and the lack of marketing for the series by Channel 4, was criticised in the press with Emily Bell complaining that 'it would not be too much to ask that having had the courage to commission or import a daring series, that channels go the extra mile with the marketing and scheduling' (1999: 20). Similarly the first episode of *Six Feet Under* was transmitted on Channel 4 at 11.10pm on 10 June 2002, with subsequent episode airing at various times between 10pm and 1am. Again, this was criticised in the press with Penny Hughes

arguing that the scheduling of *Six Feet Under* ‘has become infamous as an example of Channel 4’s bizarre scheduling’ (2002: 1).

One of the ways in which Channel 4 has been able to deal with the restrictions placed on it regarding the acquisition and scheduling of imported programmes is through the use of its digital channels. As Paul Rixon (2003: 55) argues, at the point at which the ITC enforced restrictions on Channel 4 imports, Channel 4 launched a new digital channel, E4 (which began transmission on 18 January 2001), that was not subject to the same regulations as it was only available through subscription cable and satellite services.⁶ E4 is a classic example of brand extension, taking the core brand values of Channel 4, but developing them to provide a linked but different service. Channel 4 describe E4 as:

offering the same, distinctive brand of cutting-edge entertainment pioneered over the last two decades by Channel 4, E4 is the next logical step in Channel 4’s cross-platform strategy. It will protect and develop the Channel 4 brand in an increasingly fragmented and competitive television landscape and reinforce Channel 4’s reputation as the home of cutting-edge entertainment and the best new comic talent. (*Channel 4 Report and Financial Statements*, 2000: 33)

However, while E4 was established to extend the Channel 4 brand, a year after its launch E4 had lost Channel 4 £37.3 million (Wood, 2002: 17). It was essential, therefore, that Channel 4 develop strategies to improve E4’s ratings and profitability, and from the second half of 2001, E4 was using the scheduling of US imports to attract audiences.

Hence, while the first two seasons of *The Sopranos* had premiered in the UK on Channel 4, the third season was initially screened on E4 on 24 June 2001, five months before it would premiere on Channel 4 on 1 November 2001. Similarly, on 9 September 2002, E4 began transmitting the second season of *Six Feet Under* just one week after the first season finished its run on Channel 4, and eight months before it would be screened on Channel 4 on 25 May 2003.⁷ While in 2004, Channel 4 shifted to a strategy of screening new seasons of *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* on E4 only one week before they aired on Channel 4, the final season of *Six Feet Under* was only screened on E4, and at the time of writing there were no plans to show it on Channel 4.⁸ As such, in the early 2000s, first-runs of US imported series became a central part of E4's strategy and a key aspect of its brand identity.

Consequently, imported HBO (and other US) series such as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* contribute significantly to the brand equity of E4 and Channel 4. As such, this example demonstrates that programmes can contribute to the brand equity of more than one corporation. The association of *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* with the HBO brand is valuable for Channel 4, as Channel 4 and HBO share a number of brand values, and Channel 4 has been able to exploit the critical acclaim and popularity of these series in order to attract audiences to its new digital service, E4. However, despite some of the shared brand values between Channel 4 and HBO, the representations of bad language, sexuality and violence have been problematic for the free-to-air broadcaster, Channel 4, and programmes such as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* seem to have found a better home on E4 rather than on Channel 4. In addition, the association of these programmes

with HBO is also difficult for Channel 4 because as foreign imports they do not fulfil Channel 4's remit to represent the diversity of *British* society, and to support the independent production sector in Britain. When HBO programmes such as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* are imported to the UK, therefore, the HBO brand values that they convey simultaneously support and undermine the brand values of Channel 4 as a broadcaster.

While foreign exports and imports demonstrate the ways in which programmes can contribute to the brand equity of different networks, the practice of merchandising demonstrates that programmes can act as brands in their own right. While merchandising has been a feature of broadcasting even before the arrival of television, it has emerged as a valuable industrial practice in the era of TVIII. In a period of increased competition with a vast range of different channels competing for audiences, merchandising acts as a valuable way of promoting and marketing specific programmes. As has been argued above, for a subscription channel such as HBO, marketing outside of broadcast television is particularly valuable in providing audiences with knowledge of the kinds of programmes and services offered by the network. Furthermore, in a period of increasing conglomeration, merchandising enables one programme to make profits for a range of different companies owned by a single corporation. While certain shows, particularly those that target child or fan audiences (such as *The Simpsons* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) may lend themselves to merchandising, such practices have become an increasingly common factor in much television production. This is especially apparent in relation to drama and comedy series. Indeed, both *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* have

their own merchandise. However, quite different merchandising strategies are adopted in relation to each series.

The merchandise for *The Sopranos* can be understood as falling into three different categories: the diegetic, the pseudo-diegetic and the extra-diegetic. Diegetic merchandise refers to products that belong to the fictional world of the series, products that the characters themselves own or use. Examples of diegetic merchandise in *The Sopranos* would be the car horn owned by the character Paulie (Tony Sirico), which plays the theme tune to *The Godfather*.⁹ These products may not specifically carry the logo or trademark of *The Sopranos* or HBO. However, they are often sold as *Sopranos*' merchandise because they are associated with the series by certain consumers/viewers. While diegetic merchandise refers to products that have actually featured in the series, pseudo-diegetic merchandise refers to products that do not appear in the series' diegesis, but that stem from or directly relate to the series' fictional world. Examples of pseudo-diegetic merchandise would include the wide range of BaddaBing products,¹⁰ such as the black thong printed with the words 'Property of the BaddaBing Club', the Baddabing inscribed ashtray, cigarette case, cigar holder, coasters, shot glasses and hip flask. In addition, the Artie Bucco Food Gift set,¹¹ which contains cooking sauces branded with Artie Bucco's name, and *The Sopranos Family Cook Book*, including recipes for dishes featured on the series, would also fit into this category. While these products would not appear in the diegetic world of the series itself, they are designed to invite the viewer/consumer to share in the fictional world of *The Sopranos*, by making recipes that the characters regularly eat, or using an ashtray that could have belonged to the club

where Tony conducts much of his business. Both diegetic and pseudo-diegetic merchandise encourage the consumer to act out their involvement with the diegetic world of *The Sopranos* by blurring the boundaries between the 'real' world of the viewer and the diegetic world of the drama. By contrast to diegetic and pseudo-diegetic merchandise, extra-diegetic merchandise refers to products that explicitly explore and are concerned with the series as a television programme. This would include episode guides, trivia quizzes, posters and cast photos, books about the series, CDs, DVDs and videos, scripts, and screensavers. These are all products that are explicitly outside of the fictional world of the series, but are either emblematic of the series (such as posters) or provide the consumer with more information about or access to the series, such as the books, DVDs, and so on. All three types of merchandise do share some similar functions. For example, all three kinds of products would act as a reminder of the pleasures associated with watching the series, as an indicator of one's appreciation of the series, and as a form of marketing for the series. However, these different kinds of merchandise also have distinctly different functions, most overtly in that diegetic and pseudo-diegetic products invite us to engage in the fictional world of the series, while extra-diegetic products invite us to engage with the series as a fictional construct.¹²

While some television series have all three kinds of merchandise, this is by no means always the case. By contrast with *The Sopranos*, most of the merchandising for *Six Feet Under* is extra-diegetic. It is possible to buy T-shirts, caps, mugs and glasses that carry the image of the tree and the words *Six Feet Under* taken from the final frame of the series' opening credits. It is also possible to buy books on the series, a CD of music from

the series and DVDs of the entire series, as well as posters, a trivia game, photos, and ringtones. It is also possible to buy T-shirts with 'Fisher and Sons' printed on them. However, while these T-shirts are akin to *The Sopranos*' pseudo-diegetic merchandise (such as the BaddaBing ashtray), they actually function much more as extra-diegetic merchandise. While the BaddaBing ashtray is the kind of product that one might find in the fictional world of *The Sopranos*, a 'Fisher and Sons' T-shirt would not appear within the diegetic world of *Six Feet Under*. The only piece of *Six Feet Under* merchandise that could be considered a pseudo-diegetic product is the book, *Six Feet Under: Better Living Through Death*. This book on the history of the characters in the series contains items that stem from the fictional world of the series, such as Clair and Billy's instant text messages, Nathaniel's letters to Ruth from Vietnam, Brenda's childhood poems, report cards from Clair, Nate and David's school days, and so on. In the introduction to the book, Alan Ball describes it as a collection of 'relics – albeit fictional ones left behind by fictional characters' (2005: 5). As with *The Sopranos Family Cook Book*, therefore, the primary aim of the book is to deepen our engagement with the fictional world of the series. Overall, however, the merchandise for *Six Feet Under* is extra-diegetic in nature.

It could be argued that these differences between the merchandising for *The Sopranos* and for *Six Feet Under* merely emerge because of the different strategies put in place by their respective marketing teams. However, I want to go on to argue that if each programme can be understood as a brand, then their related merchandise can be understood as a kind of brand extension that needs to share and convey the brand values of the programme. Hence, the differences in these merchandising strategies can be

understood to stem from the different brand values held by each programme. *The Sopranos*, in depicting the business and family lives of New Jersey mobsters, offers a window into a world that is beyond the experience of most viewers. In her research into the responses of British men to the series, Joanne Lacey noted that for many of her interviewees the series offered an escapist fantasy.

The figure of the gangster in general (in terms of the male interviewees' filmic/media mob education) and its performance in *The Sopranos* in particular offers an escapist fantasy, a surface, a heavily styled body upon which to play out fantasies of power, protection, belonging – living outside the law. This is grounded by the knowledge that being a gangster means being violent, or living under the very real threat of violence. In *The Sopranos* the violence is seen to be realistically portrayed as an integral part of the gangster's everyday life (2002: 106)

Hence, while *The Sopranos* offers an escapist fantasy through its representation of the hidden lives of mobsters, paradoxically this is a fantasy that depends on the authenticity of the world that is represented. This authenticity stems from the extensive use of location shooting, and from the series' ability to ignore the FCC rules on acceptable content for television drama. As Lavery and Thompson argue, '*The Sopranos* offered reality through its extension of the palette of language and its break with some of the traditions of television drama that tone down and clean up any subject matter' (2002: 24). The combination of authenticity and fantasy also emerges through the series' extensive

references to the representational codes of the gangster genre. As Glen Creeber argues the series uses references to the ‘golden age’ of the modern gangster era epitomised by *The Godfather* trilogy to express Tony’s own longing for an long-gone age of “rules” and “standards” (2004, 101) within the mob world, while satirising ‘the exploitative ingredients of the contemporary gangster movie’ (2004: 104). As such, then, the authenticity of *The Sopranos* stems in part from the ways in which it uses generic references with which the audience will be familiar to locate the fictional world of the series.

The brand values of authenticity and fantasy are reflected in the merchandising strategy for *The Sopranos*. It is unsurprising, therefore, that much of the merchandise surrounding *The Sopranos* invites audiences to act out their engagement with the fictional world of the series that (as the series conveys it) is paradoxically both horrific and attractive, both alien and authentic. This is apparent, for example, if one considers the relationship between the representation of food in the series and the food-related merchandise associated with the series. Sara Lewis Dunne notes of the series’ representation of food that, ‘Sometimes the food of *The Sopranos* bespeaks “otherness” and underscores the difference between the characters’ lifestyles and culture and that of most of the viewers. At other times the show’s food bespeaks “us-ness”, showing how much the crime family members are like us the viewers.’ (2002: 216). As such, she suggests that the representation of food articulates the series’ larger representational strategy to present the world of the characters as both authentic (and hence like our world) and other. The food-related merchandise for the series (a cookbook and cooking sauces) specifically invite the

audience to bridge this divide by sharing one aspect of the lives of the characters – their cuisine – and providing a means through which to mimic the authenticity of the series’ representations. As such, the merchandise offers a fantasy space akin to that offered by the series overall, one that marries fantasy and authenticity.

By contrast to *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under* is a family drama set in a funeral home, that is primarily character driven. The fictional world represented is one that is less removed from the world of the viewers than the mob world of *The Sopranos*. While few viewers will have worked as undertakers, most will have encountered the world of the funeral home, and the loss of family and friends. In contrast to *The Sopranos*, therefore, *Six Feet Under* does not create a fictional world that could act as a fantasy world to escape into. Rather it opens a window onto a world that exists, but that most of us hope not to experience – a world of grief, death and embalming. While *The Sopranos* constructs its authenticity in part through reference to earlier generic representations of gangsters, as Akass and McCabe argue, *Six Feet Under* is generically more difficult to place (2005: 2-3). Indeed, David Lavery (2005: 22) argues that *The Sopranos* lends itself more easily to brand marketing than *Six Feet Under* because *The Sopranos* functions within an identifiable genre.

Furthermore, *Six Feet Under* has an explicitly anti-commercial morality within its narratives that lies in stark contrast to the conspicuous consumption that is central to the world of the gangster in *The Sopranos*. From the first season of *Six Feet Under*, when the Fishers have to fight a potential take-over from a large corporate funeral company, the

characters express their dislike of cheap marketing gimmicks that would diminish the sanctity of their family-run, personalised funeral business. This is an ideology upheld by the series more generally, particularly in the first episode which includes fake adverts for funerary products that satirise the commodification of the funeral business. Indeed, the most overt conspicuous consumer in *Six Feet Under* is Brenda's mother, one of the least sympathetic characters in the series. It is difficult to promote consumption in relation to a series that actively critiques it. The merchandising strategy for *Six Feet Under* retains the values of the series in its tendency to avoid the commodification of the fictional world of the series. Thus, it is unsurprising that most of the merchandise surrounding the series is extra-diegetic and that the one piece of pseudo-diegetic merchandise for the series, *Six Feet Under: Better Living Through Death*, is a literary extension of the series' fictional world, rather than a commodification of its diegesis (as with, for example, the Baddabing thong).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is much more common for series to have extra-diegetic and pseudo-diegetic merchandising, than to have diegetic merchandise. A brief examination of the merchandising of HBO's current series (in May 2006) suggests that there are additional factors at play here. Those series that have generated diegetic merchandise do share the construction of an authentic fantasy world that is apparent in *The Sopranos*. For example, the merchandise for *Sex and the City* includes replicas of items of jewellery worn by members of the cast (available on Amazon.com), while it is possible to buy replicas of the Gambler and Derby hats worn by characters in *Deadwood* at HBO's online store (<http://store.hbo.com/home/index.jsp>). Both of these series create an authentic

fantasy world, whether through the aspirational construct of *Sex and the City* or the revisioning of the Western in *Deadwood*, that is akin to that explored above in relation to *The Sopranos*. However, it is notable that *Rome* (a co-production with the BBC) has the least amount of merchandising (logo T-shirts), despite offering a richly textured ‘fantasy’ world within its diegesis. This suggests that the context of production, the longevity and the popularity of a series are all additional factors that determine the merchandising strategy put in place, and certainly more work needs to be done to tease out the relationship between these different factors.

Despite this, however, it is clear that it is not possible to make sense of these different merchandising strategies by simply understanding them as part of HBO’s brand. While, as argued above, each series does function as part of HBO’s brand equity, the merchandise for both *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* plays a much greater role than simply acting as marketing devices for the HBO network. Each product is designed to convey and cohere the core values that each series epitomises, and as such, to convey the brand values of the programmes, over and above the brand values of HBO as a network. While television programmes can be understood as part of the brand equity of particular television networks and channels, they can, therefore, also be understood as separate brands in themselves. If one adopts Celia Lury’s understanding of the brand as ‘a set of relations between products and services in time’ (2004: 2), then the programme-as-brand can be understood as the set of relations between the programme and the various products that make up its merchandising. Furthermore, the programme-as-brand can also be

understood to exist beyond the moment of transmission, and hence to transcend and exist separately from the network-as-brand.

Understanding programmes as brands provides a way in which one can analyse the wide range of products that now make up the ‘texts’ of television. In addition to the kinds of ancillary merchandise described above, the Internet and mobile phones are providing innovative new platforms for extra-textual material associated with particular programmes, from Internet episode guides and on-line games to mobile phone text updates and mini-series. At present the mobile and on-line content for *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* corresponds to their broader merchandising strategies, with *Six Feet Under* only offering extra-diegetic material on-line and through the mobile, while *The Sopranos* includes pseudo-diegetic material.¹³ New developments in the use of the Internet and mobile phone technology to deliver audio-visual content is likely to extend and complicate further the range and function of television’s ancillary texts.¹⁴ This will increase the need for strong brand identities for television programmes in order to provide a coherent identity across the range of media platforms and products that will form the texts of television. Exploring the relations between these different products is likely to become increasingly important in furthering our understanding of the ways in which television programmes and the products surrounding them create meaning.

If TVIII is the era of branding, then the role and function of branding needs to be considered not simply as a feature of television networks, but also as a feature of television programmes. In this era the non-broadcast arena has become an increasingly

important part of the television industry, and of the ways in which viewers engage with television programmes. Branding can help to analyse the relationships between the texts of television (from programmes to websites), to explore their relationship with networks and producers, and to examine their consumption by audiences. Branding emerges in the era of TVIII not simply as a logo or a set of values, but as (to paraphrase Lury, 2004) a set of relations between producers, writers, networks, texts and viewers, that emerges in the branding of networks and in the branding of programmes.

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¹ While, as Paul Grainge argues, branding was apparent in the US film industries from the first decade of the twentieth century, it was only by the 1990s that 'branding had become an especially powerful imperative for both new and established media companies' (2004: 344).

² Westcott (1999: 25) claims that ‘The worldwide licensing industry is worth an estimated \$132 billion’.

³ By 2005, *The Sopranos* had won seventeen Emmys and five Golden Globes, *Sex and the City* had won seven Emmys and eight Golden Globes, and *Six Feet Under* had won seven Emmys and three Golden Globes.

⁴ The appropriation of an aesthetic discourse by the television industry is, of course, not new, and has been extensively explored in academic literature on the development of ‘quality television’ (see for example, Jancovich and Lyons, 2003, Feuer et al, 1984, and Gitlin, 1994). While the commercialisation of aesthetics as a marketing strategy has been understood as devaluing critical tools for aesthetic evaluation (Thompson, 1997), as I have argued elsewhere, such arguments depend on establishing a rather problematic binary in which aesthetics is understood to be inherently and necessarily separate from industry (Johnson, 2005).

⁵ The 1990 Broadcasting Act also changed the status of Channel 4 from a subsidiary of the IBA to a public corporation, but it was not until February 1999 that Channel 4 was allowed to keep all of the revenue from the sale of its advertising.

⁶ E4 was subsequently available through Freeview, a free digital service that requires the one-off purchase of a set-top box, or a digital television.

⁷ The same strategy was used by E4 for other imported US series, and is also used by other digital, satellite and cable channels in the UK such as Sky One.

⁸ The fifth season of *The Sopranos* began on E4 on 10 August 2004, and began on Channel 4 on 16 August 2004. Similarly, the fourth season of *Six Feet Under* started on E4 on 12 August, but was not shown on Channel 4 until 17 August 2004.

⁹ The horn is advertised on the fan site ‘Sopranoland’ as ‘The Godfather Car Horn. Just like Paulie has!’, see <http://www.sopranoland.com/mall/misc.html>, accessed 19 January 2005.

¹⁰ The BaddaBing is the strip club in *The Sopranos* in which the mobsters conduct much of their business.

¹¹ Artie Bucco is a childhood friend of Tony Soprano, who owns the restaurant Vesuvio, frequented by the mobsters and their families.

¹² Matt Hills’ (2005) work on episode guides demonstrates the significant role that merchandise can have in managing viewers’ relationships with programmes. He argues that written and on-line guides function to manage the seriality of television programmes and contribute to the positioning of programmes as ‘quality’.

¹³ *Six Feet Under* has series information and a trivia game available on-line, as well as images, video clips, a ringtone of the series’ theme tune, and episode guide available through HBO mobile. In addition to this, *The Sopranos* also includes ‘Big Pussy’s Poker Heaven’, an online game where you play with one of the characters from the series, two card games through HBO mobile, and ringtones featuring lines spoken by characters from the series.

¹⁴ The ABC series *Lost* provides a good example of this. The series has used a number of innovative diegetic marketing and merchandising strategies. For example, Channel 4 ran a fake advert for a company featured in the series during transmission of the second season, encouraging viewers to call a number that directs them to a fake website. The website makes direct reference to a novel, *Bad Twin*, that featured in the television series. Hyperion published *Bad Twin*, which was marketed as being authored by Gary Troup (an

anagram of purgatory) a fictional character who was aboard fictional Oceanic flight 815 which crashed at the beginning of the series.