

Unveiling The Relation Between Product Placement and Consumer Minds in the 'Stranger Things' Series

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ABSTRACT

Product placement is a marketing strategy that involves the integration of branded products into media content. One of the most popular TV series that effectively uses product placement is 'Stranger Things', created by The Duffer Brothers. This paper analyzes the impact of product placement on consumer behavior in the context of the 'Stranger Things' series. This paper examines the brands that have been featured in the series, the value of their placement, and the effect on consumer behavior. This research uses traditional literature reviews, with analyzing data and journals as the main sources of data. The findings revealed that the appearance of branded products in the series has increased brand awareness and recall among viewers. The paper concludes that product placement in 'Stranger Things' has been a successful marketing strategy that has influenced consumer behavior and it is a step that future marketers should consider.

Keywords: product placement; Stranger Things; consumer behavior; figure and ground

INTRODUCTION

Communication is an important aspect of human life as social creatures. Without it, humans are unable to communicate their intentions and messages to one another and hence are unable to communicate and converse their thoughts to one another. There are numerous ways for people to communicate with each other, one of which is through the use of a tool or media as a medium. Because of technological advancements, media such as radio, television, and the internet, which can be accessed easily via smartphones or laptops, have become a feasible place for advertisers to market their products or services.

Due to the rising trend of social media, most companies are now opting to introduce their brand to the people through these media. Marketers used to market their products through commercials break in the middle of a television show or another platform such as physical promotion (banners, posters, etc.) but never to incorporate them into the actual show. However, in recent years, a noticeable increase in the practice of product placement has been apparent (McKechnie & Zhou, 2003).

Consumer behavior can be defined as the behavior that consumers display in searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services that they expect will satisfy their needs (Schiffman et al., 2011). It focuses on how individuals make decisions to spend their available resources; namely time, money, and effort; on consumption-related

items, including what they buy, why they buy it, where they buy it, how often they buy it, how often they use it, how they evaluate it after the purchase, the impact of such evaluations on future purchases, and how they dispose of it. It is also central to the planning, development, and implementation of marketing strategies.

One of the concepts of consumer behavior is consumer perception and positioning. It talks about understanding how perception shapes consumers, through stimuli, and internal and external factors, and to further delve into how consumers perceive imagery and risks. One of the main objectives of this subject is to understand how people organize the stimuli that they receive from external parties such as relating to advertisements and others. People do not perceive the countless stimuli they choose from their surroundings as independent and discrete sensations; rather, they collect them and perceive them as unified wholes. Thus, even the smallest stimulus's perceived qualities are evaluated as a function of the whole to which the stimulus appears to belong (Schiffman et al., 2019). Balachandar et al. (2024) said that use of product placement in movies has become a popular marketing strategy to impact intention to buy for consumers. Marchand et al. (2015) confirmed that even very low levels of placement prominence can worsen host brand evaluations. Thus, product placement strategy can have a positive or negative impact on brand performance.

Product placement takes place when the advertised product (i.e., the figure) is deliberately integrated into the TV show or film (i.e., the ground) in one or more of the following ways (Schiffman et al., 2019). Product placements can be in the form of verbal mentions in dialogue, real use by a character, visible displays such as corporate logos on vehicles or billboards, trademarks utilized as set decorations, or even snippets of actual radio or television commercials. Product placement itself can be analyzed through the Tripartite Trilogy, the trilogy (three) dimensions of mind. The three dimensions include visual dimension, auditory dimension, and plot connection dimension (Russell, 2002). The visual dimension of a brand or product on a screen is related to its visual look. Parengkuan et al. (2020) stated that visual dimensions have a positive relationship to brand recall. The auditory dimension is associated with the mention of the brand or product in a conversation. The plot connection dimension refers to incorporating the product or brand into the plot. These three dimensions act as a foundation for this research, classifying mental activities into cognition, affection, and conation.

Product placement is an excellent marketing strategy, proven through the success seen in the 2016 'Stranger Things' series. The series is considered one of the few series that has successfully incorporated product placement into their franchise without getting as much backlash over the marketing strategy. Some of the few brands that have profited from their product placement include big brands such as Coca-Cola, Eggo, Lacoste, Rebook, and Jif Peanut Butter, amongst others. Data received from YouGov has proven a growing amount of income surrounding the release of 'Stranger Things' fourth season, in relation to the product placement throughout the new season.

The influence of product placement on consumers, especially through analyzing a specific series, is a topic that is rarely discussed and still needs more insight into. This research will take a look at the influence of product placement in the 'Stranger Things' series, how it influences brand image through the eyes of the consumers, and what the important aspects are that make a good product placement.

METHOD

This research used traditional literature reviews (TLRs). Sogunle & Sogunle (2023) explained TLRs on its own or as an essential inclusion in various study methodologies, involving the description of existing knowledge relating to a topic or theme theoretically and contextually. In TLRs, literature published in books, paper-based journal articles, and electronic bibliographic databases are subjected to narrative review and critical analysis. This research will only delve deeper into the figure and ground principle.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Figure and Ground Principle

The term 'figure and ground' refers to the interaction between the stimulus itself (i.e., figure) and the environment or context in which it appears (i.e., ground) (Schiffman et al., 2019). It is the physical proof of how stimuli having a contradicting contrast with their surroundings are more likely to be picked up by the brain. One of the visual illustrations mentioned in the book is looking at a figure on the ground (i.e., background). It would result in the figure being perceived more clearly because of the contrast presented in the background, either through a brighter or paler color or vice versa. The ground is usually perceived as indefinite, hazy, and continuous, while the figure is perceived more clearly and gives the figure a greater definition. This principle has implications for advertising and marketing, as the figure-ground relationship can affect how consumers perceive print ads and online ads. The background must not overshadow the main figure to make sure that the stimulus is being picked up the way it is meant to be.

The Rubin vase, an optical illusion that portrays a vase in the centre, which is the figure, and two faces on either side, which constitute the ground, is a real example of the figure and ground principle. When you initially glance at the image, you might notice the vase or the faces, demonstrating how the figure and ground can change based on perception. This theory applies not just to visual perception but also to non-visual notions such as melody/harmony, subject/background, and positive/negative space. It is very significant in visual design since it helps us make sense of complex compositions, and it is employed in a variety of industries including art, design, and advertising. The figure and ground principle are critical in the context of design for developing effective visual compositions. To create a clear and compelling visual hierarchy, designers apply this idea to ensure that the main topic (the figure) stands out from the background (the ground). This can be accomplished by using design elements such as contrast, color, size, and positioning to draw the viewer's attention to the intended focus point. (Practical Psychology, 2023)

Other than designers, marketers could apply this principle in the way they visualize their brands and advertisements. A marketing technique widely used nowadays is inserting advertisements into entertainment content, called product placement. It is based on the main principle of figure and ground, making the product stand out from the background, in this case the entertainment. With the rising popularity of many kinds of entertainment media, this

marketing technique can be further used to attract consumer's attention, differentiating themselves from ordinary advertising.

Exploring Future Marketing Techniques

The marketing landscape for 2023 and 2024 is painted by several key trends that are expected to continue shaping the industry. Conversational marketing and AI-driven interactions, video marketing and short-form content dominance, the rise of AI-powered marketing, the rising importance of contextual advertising, and ad campaign automation and optimization are among these trends. Marketers are increasingly using video to tell compelling brand stories, demonstrate products, and interact with their customers on a deeper level. AI-powered solutions are being used to analyze massive volumes of data, unearth relevant insights, and automate repetitive operations, making campaign management more efficient and successful. Contextual advertising is projected to grow increasingly more lucrative to marketers as users see it more favorably than other forms of advertising. Ad campaign automation and optimization will continue to grow, and marketers will need to focus more on improving user experiences on their websites and social media pages. These developments indicate a change toward more personalized and targeted marketing methods, which are being driven by technology, data, and consumer preferences. (Gaier, 2023)

These trends show an increasing emphasis on employing technology and data to create more individualized and targeted product placements in the context of product placement. Marketers will increasingly rely on AI-powered solutions to evaluate consumer data and automate product placement in a more relevant and engaging manner for their target consumers. Furthermore, the advent of video marketing and the dominance of short-form content suggests that product placement in video content will remain a crucial approach for marketers. Product placement inside video content will provide a fantastic chance to showcase items and establish deeper connections with audiences as video content becomes more ubiquitous.

Product Placement on Buying Behavior

Product placement, as previously stated, is a marketing tactic in which a company's product is inserted into a television show, film, or other media in exchange for payment or other consideration. Product placement, according to Schiffman et al. (2019), entails incorporating an advertised product into a TV show or film by having it utilized by the cast, integrated into the plot, or related to a character. Putri et al. (2023) shows that product placement has a significant effect on brand awareness and product placement also has a significant impact on the repurchase intention.

The product placement to be featured naturally and inconspicuously, potentially reaching a huge audience. They can provide explicit and implicit advertising impacts such as instilling good feelings about the advertised brand, creating changing attitudes about brands, and increasing purchase intent (Kenton, 2022). A case study of the Transformers franchise discovered that product placement in movies can increase brand exposure and indirectly promote the brand, leading to audience purchasing behavior (Wu et al., 2021). Meyer et al., (2016) stated that product placements have also been shown in studies to affect movie evaluations and audience consumption psychology, as well as increasing brand popularity and make advertising more acceptable to the audience. Consumers believe that incorporating brands into the content adds realism (Kaur et al., 2023). Gamage et al. (2023) found that a

combination of product placement and TV commercials forms give the highest impact on both brand recall and purchase intention.

The impact of product placement on customer behavior, on the other hand, might vary depending on factors such as the audience's attitude toward the product placement and spending power. A brand being too integrated into a media may produce negative feelings towards the brands from a viewing standpoint, especially viewers with a huge liking towards the series. Vice versa, viewers who liked the program less would be more inclined to feel positive about the product placement.

Tripartite Trilogy

Tripartite Typology of Product Placement is a framework for analyzing product placements in diverse media, such as movies and television shows (Russel, 2002). This typology categorizes product placements according to three dimensions: visual, auditory, and plot connection. The Tripartite Product Placement Typology has been discovered to be a beneficial way of identifying product placements and understanding their efficiency in increasing product recall and brand memory (Russell, 2002). According to studies, a combination of visual clues and vocal references to the brand in movie sequences is the most effective, however, it may also cost the most money to spend. Furthermore, it has been discovered that participants in focus group research are more likely to recognize brand placements that they currently enjoy and use (Dudovskiy, 2012). Visual Dimension is concerned with the presentation of the product on the screen and might vary depending on the number of appearances, camera shot style, and so on. The auditory dimension of product placement consists of the brand's name being spoken in a conversation. Variations within this type of dimension include voice tone, frequency of mention, and overall context. Plot Connection of product placement dimension involves the product being connected to the storyline's plot. For example, the association of Aston Martin automobiles with James Bond films is an example of product placement in the plot connection dimension.

Stranger Things: Exploring Product Placement Influence

'Stranger Things' is a Netflix series first released in 2016; an American science-fiction horror drama television series created by the Duffer Brothers. The storyline mainly revolves around Eleven, played by Millie Bobby Brown as the main character, staged in Indiana back in the 1980s and it talks about a group of young friends witnessing supernatural activities and secret government exploits. As they delve deeper into the mystery in their city, they end up getting more and more involved in the secret, having Will Byers played by Noah Schnapp, being the first one disappearing from the town.

Figures 1. Brand Collaborations with Stranger Things



Source: Stranger Things series (2016)

Spanning over its upcoming fifth season, ‘Stranger Things’ remains one of the highest-grossing series ever released by the iconic red and black platform, Netflix. As of 2019, ‘Stranger Things’ has garnered Netflix a profit of about \$378 million worldwide and it is now a franchise that is worth over \$20 billion. Even without the statistics, it is very clear that the series is a hit through many advertisements and brand partnerships with the series. From partnerships with huge brands such as LEGO by creating their own LEGO version of the series, to making shirts with the ‘Stranger Things’ references with the huge clothing brand, PULL&BEAR. Both collaborations have proven to help the show reach a new audience through fashion and also provide an additional revenue stream for the show itself. But nothing beats the number of attentions garnered from having product placements inside the series itself.

Analyzing the Effectiveness of Product Placement in the ‘Stranger Things’ Series

In order to further understand the effects of product placement in the ‘Stranger Things’ series, first is to divide the placement into the three dimensions of product placement as mentioned before through the Tripartite Trilogy. This way, it can show the different effects that contribute to the audience’s attitude and purchase desire with the brands.

Visual Dimension

Regarding the audience’s view of brand placement through the visual dimension, it is most likely to be the one viewer are not easily influenced or even notice in the first place. Some examples of the visual dimension in ‘Stranger Things’ can be seen through the images below.

Figures 2. Visual Product Placement in the ‘Stranger Things’ series



Source: Stranger Things series (2016)

Based on the pictures above, there are two major brands that most of the viewers already knew before: Burger King and KFC. These examples are included in the visual dimension because they are not directly mentioned in the scene (Auditory Dimension) or incorporated into the plot (Plot Connection).

In the first picture, viewers can clearly see the sign ‘Burger King’ behind the two major characters, Eleven and Max, as they further explore the mall. This only provides viewers with a glimpse of the brand, without directly showing any marketing for the burger brand itself. In the second picture, it can be seen that Barb’s parents are having dinner with Steve Harrington, played by Joe Keery. At first glance, viewers might also view this as a normal scene. But upon further inspection, viewers can see the KFC logo being highlighted in the centre of this scene. But then again, the brand isn’t being mentioned or inserted into the plot, so the relation to the viewer’s purchase desire might be smaller compared to the other product placement in the series.

Auditory Dimension

Different from the visual dimension being clearly shown through the screen, the auditory dimension markets the product through a form of audio, either it being mentioned by the characters in the series or just blatantly talked about in the series. One of the most mentioned brands in the series is a waffle brand owned by Kellogg called 'Eggo'. While most brands are not being mentioned through audio due to being overly marketed, Eggo gets a special pass for 'Stranger Things' because it also correlates with the main character's plotline, Eleven, played by Millie Bobby Brown. This makes the Eggo Waffles a combination of auditory dimension and plot connection, making it one of the most known product placements and an iconic implementation in the series itself.

Figures 3. Eggo Waffles being marketed as "Eleven's Eggos"



Source: Stranger Things series (2016)

Plot Connection Dimension

The third and final dimension would be one of the most interconnected product placement dimensions between the three, as it holds many relations to the brand being presented through the series. One of the most prominent examples is the leading Coke brand, Coca-Cola, proven through them being the highest-grossing brand in regard to their product placement in the series. Coca-Cola is being interwoven into the series in many different ways, but one of the most noticeable plot connections is how viewers can visibly view the brand name on the can label as Eleven is training her kinetic abilities. Although this scene is one of the most memorable scenes where the brand is shown, it is not the only time where Coca-Cola is mentioned.

Figures 4. Eleven training her abilities with a Coca-Cola can



Source: Stranger Things series (2016)

Quoted by the Duffer Brothers, “No product placement in the series is non-intentional.” Those brands are personally selected due to the nostalgic feel they’re giving, much like the kind of tone the series is trying to portray. Coca-Cola being the leading brand being marketed supports that idea, as it’s one of the brands that rose to popularity during the 1900’s. The Duffer Brothers want the product placement to be equally genuine and not too overboard to the point that it makes the viewers view it negatively.

Figures 5. Other scenes where Coca-Cola is being placed



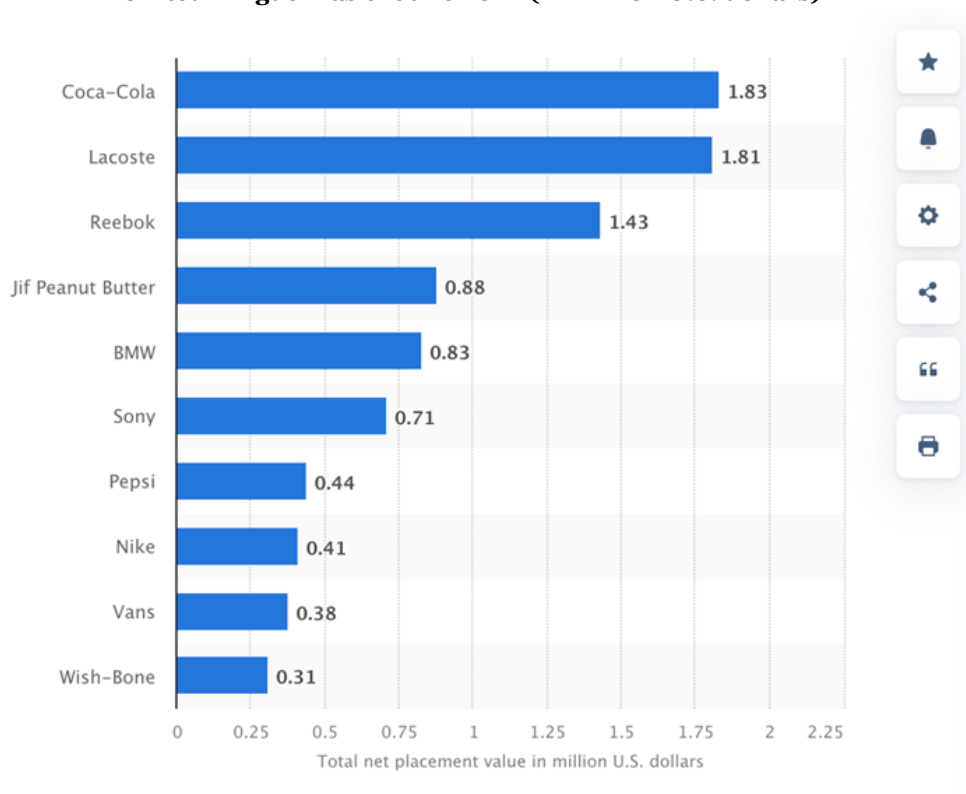
Source: Stranger Things series (2016)

It also has a connection to the ‘feel’ of being connected with the character in the series. Consumers would still prefer to see Eleven train her kinetic abilities with Coca-Cola rather than a nameless soda brand. Consumers would see familiar names such as Coca-Cola and feel that the scene is more realistic, connecting better with the characters because they don’t just look, talk, or act the same, but they enjoy the same kind of brands. This is the kind of connection that the series is trying to achieve with those product placements.

Product Placement Impact on the Brands

The product placement being presented through the series could act as a stimulus for consumers and act as a purchasing desire after viewing it being advertised directly or indirectly. This could then act as a domino effect on the brand’s profit garnering more consumers through those product placements, proven by the rising number of revenues from these advertisements. That’s the main reason why brands do these product placements in the first place.

The product placement in ‘Stranger Things’ has been significant, with brands such as Coca-Cola, Lacoste, Sony, and Reebok generating a combined brand placement value of over \$27 million in the show's fourth season (Lepitek, 2022; Nguyen, 2022; Sagar, 2022). A study conducted in 2022 investigated the product placement value of products used in the fourth season of Netflix's original ‘Stranger Things’. Coca-Cola had the highest product placement value of 1.83 million US dollars. Clothing brand Lacoste finished in second with 1.81 million US dollars in product placement value, while sneaker brand Reebok came in third with 1.43 million US dollars. This highlights the significant exposure and advertising value gained by brands through product placement in the show. (Karlovitch, 2022)

Figures 6. Brand placement included in Stranger Things season four in the United States and the United Kingdom as of June 2022 (in million U.S. dollars)

Source: Dencheva (2023)

In terms of the brands' revenue, it can be deduced that the large exposure from product placement in 'Stranger Things' has a favorable effect on the businesses' revenue. Exposure to a large audience, along with association with a popular and well-received show, can result in greater brand visibility, consumer engagement, and eventually, revenue.

The Issues on Product Placement

As the phrase goes, every coin has two sides. The impact of commercial placement in movies on consumer purchasing behavior is not entirely favorable. In terms of movie commercials, some sort of product placement will disrupt the audience's watching continuity to varying degrees, affecting the audience's typical acceptance of the film. If the product placement is too deliberate, it would end up leaving a bad impression on both the series and the brand being marketed instead would impact the viewer's desire to purchase it.

This phenomenon has also proven to impact the brands being marketed through the 'Stranger Things' series. The series received some backlash following the release of their latest season with the final ninth episode of the season having featured more than 35 different brands during its two-and-a-half-hour run with \$7.3m in placement value. The latest season garnered troubling remarks, most notably the viewers feeling fed up with all the brands being advertised throughout the season. This fact suggests that even with the success of product placements, marketers and companies still need to be careful in using this technique in order to keep the viewing experience enjoyable for the viewers and develop a positive brand image through the marketing technique.

CONCLUSION

Product placement in media, including TV shows, is an effective marketing tool that can drive consumer behavior and increase brand visibility. A study by BENlabs (2023) found that 63% of consumers have positive emotions after seeing products or brands on TV content, while 47% say they enjoy seeing their favorite brands in shows. Additionally, 86% of U.S. marketers who have tried product placement rate it highly, while 75% of U.S. consumers have searched for a product or brand online after seeing it in a TV show or film. The fourth season of 'Stranger Things' has been a big platform for product placement, with brands generating a combined brand placement value of more than \$27 million. The enormous exposure from product placement in 'Stranger Things' is likely to have a beneficial influence on the brands' income. Exposure to a large audience, along with association with a popular and well-received show, can result in greater brand visibility, consumer engagement, and, eventually, revenue. However, it is critical to achieve a balance between being visible without requiring persuasion knowledge and without aggravating users with prominent placements. Overall, product placement can be an effective marketing approach; however, it must be utilized with caution and plan to minimize negative consequences on customer behavior and brand perception.

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