

**Product Placement: Krispy Kreme in *Saban's Power Rangers***

**Media Ethics**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this case study is to evaluate the ethicality of product placement in movies. The 2017 film, *Saban's Power Rangers*, features the product placement of Krispy Kreme multiple times throughout the run. Beyond a mere mentioning or displaying of the brand, a brick and mortar location of Krispy Kreme is integral to the plot. Specifically, in the middle of the final climactic battle, the main antagonist, Rita Repulsa, stops and enjoys a bite of a Krispy Kreme donut. This scene and the placement of Krispy Kreme's brand will be analyzed using the Potter Box model. The Potter Box model is a method of analyzing the ethics of media messages based on facts, values, loyalties, and ethical principles. The ethical principle that will be applied to the Potter Box analysis is Aristotle's Golden Mean. This case study will answer three main questions on a micro, midrange, and macro-scale respectively. 1) Does the realism of an existing brand such as Krispy Kreme offset the obtrusiveness of product placement? 2) Should consumers that pay to see media be accepting of product placement? 3) What recommendations can be made on how to properly perform product placement?

**Facts**

The first part of the Potter Box is about the facts of the case. The 2017 film, *Saban's Power Rangers*, will be used as the primary example as it features the product placement of Krispy Kreme multiple times throughout the run. The movie is set in the town of Angel Grove. Five teens have found power stones that gifted them the abilities of the Power Rangers. The five teens are Jason Scott, portrayed by Dacre Montgomery, Kimberly Hart, portrayed by Naomi Scott, Trini Kwan, portrayed by Becky G, Billy Cranston, portrayed by RJ Cyler, and Zack Taylor, portrayed by Ludi Lin. It is revealed to these teens by Zordon, a figureless being portrayed by Bryan Cranston, that these stones are alien artifacts from his homeworld and that he was the original Red Ranger (the leader of the Power Rangers). Previously, six Power Rangers existed to protect the universe's Zeo Crystals--sources of life on all planets. However, one of the six Power Rangers, Rita Repulsa, portrayed by Elizabeth Banks, betrayed the team and began to steal Zeo Crystals for power. Stealing these crystals renders all life on the respective planet null. In a battle on Earth 65 million years ago, all six rangers clashed and ended up killing each other, leaving the crystal safe yet unguarded.

Now in modern-day, the crystal is discovered buried beneath the local Krispy Kreme of Angel Grove by Billy Cranston. Upon finding the power stones, the five teens revived both Zordon and Repulsa which set in motion the battle once more. Zordon, however, could not regain form as his body was destroyed. This holds significance as it is revealed that Zordon can fully revive himself using the power of the new Rangers. The new Rangers' first battle with Repulsa results in the death of Billy Cranston due to the Rangers' inability to summon their Power armor. Zordon opts to give up his chance to return in order to revive Billy Cranston--who upon coming back from the dead, one of the first things he says is "we need to go to Krispy

Kreme” (Israelite, 2017). Eventually, the new Power Rangers clash with Repulsa in a final battle to defend Krispy Kreme which results in the destruction of much of the city. During this battle, and every moment leading up to the encounter, Repulsa is shown to be focused only on achieving her goal and having no interest in things of the human world that do not benefit her. Even when Repulsa learns that Krispy Kreme is the location of the Zeo Crystal by torturing Billy Cranston, she does not know what the place is. Despite this, in the final battle when she is out-numbered five-to-one and desperately wants the crystal’s power, Repulsa finally manages to get to Krispy Kreme where she decides to stop, lean casually against a table, and enjoy a bite out of a well-positioned donut--halting all action for a brief moment (Israelite, 2017). This final climactic battle scene, where Repulsa stops and Krispy Kreme’s product placement occurs, will be the main focus of this case study. The scene can be viewed here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wa\\_9eIwrEK8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wa_9eIwrEK8) (*Power Rangers (2017) - The Destructive Goldar Scene (7/10) | Movieclips*, Movieclips, 2017)

The large sponsorship from Krispy Kreme helped cushion the necessary return on investment the film needed to have. Krispy Kreme also participated in cross-promotion by creating their own Power Ranger themed donuts and dedicating sections of their website to the film (Flynn, 2017). According to an interview article, Director Dean Israelite knew that product placement would be incorporated prior to filming and decided to make it integral to the plot (Aguilar, 2017). Israelite wanted the *Zeo Crystal* to be buried under something ‘contemporary’ since it had been buried for millions of years (Aguilar, 2017). Finally, it was written that the product placement of Krispy Kreme would be the very thing that houses the most central plot device in the film.

## Values

The second step of the Potter Box is to examine the possible values of having Krispy Kreme be a part of the final battle scene (Patterson et al., 2019, p. 105). Values are ideas, philosophies, and principles that one holds as more important than other things in life (Patterson et al., 2019). One of the core values of this scene is *product placement*. It is important to understand the fundamental ideas of product placement as well as creators' reasoning for using it. Media creators often cooperate with brands in an agreement to feature or promote said brands' products or likeness within media products in exchange for funding, resources, or cross-promotional services (Dodds, 2015). However, there has been an ongoing discussion of determining a proper way of doing so. "Product placement is a combination of advertising and publicity designed to influence the audience by unobtrusively inserting branded products in entertainment programs such that the viewer is unlikely to be aware of the persuasive intent" (Balasubramanian, 1994). One of the keywords in this description is 'unobtrusive.' The ideas behind proper product placement are to successfully promote a brand without invoking a negative response from the viewer. Patterson et al. (2019) support this concept saying,

Ultimately, success in product placement still comes down to whether the placement fits the plot. 'The needle we have to thread,' according to Johnathan Prince, [...] 'is to have brand integration that is effective enough to have resonance, but . . . subtle enough so that it doesn't offend' (Manly 2005, A16 as cited in p. 91).

This balance of product placement that integrates branding into a film's plot, or reality, without intruding on a viewer's experience is what media professionals strive to achieve. In *Saban's Power Rangers*, Israelite wanted the product placement to be performed "really absurd in the right way for this movie" (Aguilar, 2017). The aim was to 'thread the needle' by integrating the

product placement of Krispy Kreme into the fantasy world of the Power Rangers in a believable way for the audience.

Other values of the creators of *Saban's Power Rangers* are *Reciprocity* and *tenacity*. Reciprocity is “treating others as you wish to be treated” (Patterson et al., 2019, p. 41). Tenacity is “knowing when a story is important enough to require additional effort, both personal and institutional” (Patterson et al., 2019, p. 41). Reciprocity is shown in this scene by making Krispy Kreme such an integral part of the climax. The reasoning for this being an act of reciprocity is due to the amount of cross-promotion performed by Krispy Kreme to promote the movie. In addition to creating Power Ranger themed donuts, “Krispy Kreme also built a dedicated Angel Grove page on its site, complete with an immersive 3D virtual tour of the store built with Matterport’s software” (Pressberg, 2017). The final product placement scene with Repusla, which puts the entire focus of the audience on Krispy Kreme for a moment, showed an appreciation to the brand and treated it the way the film wished to be treated.

The value of tenacity is exhibited by the film production’s creativity. Realizing the story was important, as was the product placement of the sponsor, the film production applied additional effort to find a way to incorporate the sponsor into the story itself. This displays a value of tenacity by going beyond merely displaying the product occasionally in scenes.

### **Ethical Principle**

The ethical principle that is useful for this Potter Box analysis is Aristotle’s Golden Mean. Aristotle’s Golden Mean can be described as the behavioral moral balance found at “the mean between two extremes of excess and deficiency” (Patterson et al., 2019, p. 10). Relating back to the description of proper product placement being ‘threading a needle’ in order to get product placement just right can also be associated with Aristotle’s Golden Mean. Too aggressive

of product placement (excess) may 'offend' audiences, while too little (deficiency) may go unnoticed--defeating the purpose of product placement entirely. Another important element of Aristotle's idea of balance is that it is different for every individual (Patterson et al., 2019). Every person has unique traits to their being that make specific behaviors more or less acceptable.

This understanding will give insight into whether or not the product placement of Krispy Kreme in the final battle scene by the film producers was an act of deficiency, excess, or somewhere properly in-between. Based on the prior definition of ideal product placement and an understanding of the specific behaviors of Rita Repulsa, this scene was obtrusive and excessive for a few reasons. First, Repulsa would not have stopped to perform this act being so close to her goal and while being pursued. Second, the setting of the scene is confusing to the viewer as the Krispy Kreme building is shown being destroyed while Repulsa is still inside eating a donut. The audience has an expectation for Krispy Kreme to be destroyed but not for Repulsa to impede the destruction. The scene of Repulsa eating the donut could be removed and the scenes before and after would still have continuity. This makes it seem as though the scene was added forcibly. This product placement breaks emersion and goes into the realm of *excess* and obtrusiveness. For this reason, this scene does not fit within the Golden Mean of product placement.

### **Loyalties**

The final step of the Potter Box is to examine the loyalties of the film creators. Loyalty can be described as having devotion toward certain individuals, ideas, principles, organizations, or philosophies and oneself in a way that one would sacrifice other things for (Patterson et al., 2019, p. 98-101). The creators have loyalty to the story, to the audience, to the characters, to the investors, to the sponsor, and to the cast and crew. The film creators have a story to tell and are loyal to creating scenes that do so. The film creators have a loyalty to their audience which are

their paying consumers that will experience the story. There is also loyalty to the characters. The characters must make sense and behave in a way that fits their values and motives. The investors of the film are the ones that fund the project at monetary risk. *Saban's Power Rangers* was funded primarily by Saban Capital Group and, therefore, the creators are loyal to the wishes of the organization. Being a sponsor and providing cross-promotion, the creators are loyal to Krispy Kreme. Israelite insisted that the loyalty to Krispy Kreme was not based on money by stating “for all the haters out there, go to Krispy Kreme and enjoy a donut, and know that this wasn’t some kind of money grab or conspiracy” (Aguilar, 2017). Finally, the film creators are loyal to the cast and crew. The members of the team responsible for producing the movie--this includes the film creators themselves. They are loyal to paying their crew, taking care of them, and creating a product that fits within the crew’s values.

### **Judgment**

The Krispy Kreme scene was obtrusive and broke up the action and tension of the climax. The climax of a story is “the point of the highest tension and conflict. This is the moment that should leave the reader wondering what’s next” (Author Learning Center, n.d.). To disrupt this moment of tension and conflict in order to promote a product is poor product placement. Krispy Kreme is already the center of attention in the movie and done so creatively by being integral to the plot. This scene feels like an advertisement on top of product placement and is not done so in a way that ‘the viewer is unlikely to be aware of the persuasive intent’ as discussed before. Without this scene, the product placement of Krispy Kreme in the film *Saban's Power Rangers* is performed in a proper way that fits within the philosophies of Aristotle’s Golden Mean.

### **Micro Question:**



**Does the realism of an existing brand such as Krispy Kreme offset the obtrusiveness of product placement?**

In the past, it was commonplace for media creators to use made-up names for brands and products (Patterson et al., 2019, p. 92). Another technique used was to cover up logos or create blank products with no branding (Klein, 2018). These techniques are still used to this day in media where creators do not wish to have product placement or perhaps do not have permission to use a brand's likeness. In these scenarios, there is an attempt by media creators to portray an image of reality without using real products. The goal is to create a realistic scenario that the audience can relate to without drawing attention to the product--or associating the scene with a product (Klein, 2018). A term for this action of removing brands is "product displacement" (Klein, 2018). A hypothetical example of this would be a scene of two people talking and one offering the other a soda. One person hands the other a blank red can or a can that just has the word 'Soda' written on it. This scenario is one that the audience members can easily relate to as cans of soda are very common. However, what is not common in reality is for the can of soda to be brandless. This may result in having the opposite effect. "The use of generic products in a film can draw attention away from the film's message" (van der Walddt et al., 2007, p. 19).

This is where product placement may find its value as an asset of storytelling and media creation. Replacing the soda can with a can of Pepsi, for example, creates a scenario that many audience members will find more believable (van der Walddt et al., 2007, p. 19). "Product placements strengthen a film's link to real life. Product placements, therefore, add realism and authenticity to scenes in films" (van der Walddt et al., 2007, p. 19). When done properly, product placement can draw audience members more into the story when compared to brandless or made-up products which may be a distraction. However, as described before, there is an art to

product placement that requires creators to 'thread the needle' when delivering to consumers. As long as it is not performed with either deficiency or excess, such as a character-breaking moment to pitch the product or a deliberate scene meant to draw extra attention to the brand, product placement offers a realism that offsets its obtrusiveness.

**Midrange Question:****Should consumers that pay to see media be accepting of product placement?**

One of the common understandings of modern-day media models for consumers is that media which consumers do not have to pay for will have some form of a commercial break, mid-roll advertisements, product placement, and/or an incorporated message from a sponsor (Christie, 2020). In this sense, consumers of non-paid media are accepting of this kind of advertising. It may be thought that the opposite must be true--which is consumers that pay for media should not be paying to be advertised to. However, viewers of paid media services such as cinema attendees or Netflix subscribers are also accepting of advertisements in the form of product placement, and they should be. There are many benefits for consumers that having product placement included in their paid media offers. As discussed before, properly executed product placement can add realism to a scene which can help immerse audience members. Additionally, some media content may not exist at all without funding and resources from product sponsors (Gaille, 2015).

Companies behind the sponsorship of media also often have the media content and audiences' best interest in mind--brands want the media to succeed and for viewers to enjoy it. "If people enjoy a movie and there are product placements involved with it, then those positive feelings get translated to the brand" (Gaille, 2015). For these reasons, consumers of paid media should be accepting of product placement.

**Macro Question:****What recommendations can be made on how to properly perform product placement?**

There is an art to performing product placement properly. Prince's description of 'threading a needle' to get it just right is accurate. There are a few guidelines that can help advertisers and creators find that balance. Tunikova (2018) has developed a list titled "Principles of Successful Product Placement" with many great recommendations. First, "make sure the brand is noticed but avoid making it the star of the show (even if it is a few seconds we're talking about)" (Tunikova, 2018). This ties strongly back to the Krispy Kreme product placement in *Saban's Power Rangers*. Krispy Kreme was certainly noticed throughout the film by being cleverly adapted into the plot itself, however, in the final battle scene (and only for a few seconds) it made itself the star of the show. A second recommendation is to "keep your target audience in mind. This will help you understand which genres and media formats to focus on" (Tunikova, 2018). Getting product placement just right in media scenes is already a challenge, but it will be even more difficult if the target demographic of the media product is far off from the target demographic of the advertised product. A final recommendation is to "pick movies and TV shows whose main idea is aligned with or at least does not contradict the values your brand stands for" (Tunikova, 2018). The core message of the media and the values of the product should complement one another. Following these recommendations will help advertisers and creators properly perform product placement.

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