The Harry Potter Phenomenon:

A Marketing Masterpiece

Abigail L. Werner

Texas Tech University

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The word phenomenon is defined as a fact, occurrence, or circumstance observed or observable: something that is impressive or extraordinary. This is an excellent word to describe the Harry Potter book series’ explosion into a worldwide sensation. Considering J.K. Rowling’s humble beginnings, scribbling her manuscript onto napkins in local coffee bars, it’s fair to say that no one could have predicted the magnitude of global impact her writing’s have made, on society and culture. The purpose of this paper is to examine Harry Potter’s marketing strategy and its paramount role in the establishment of Pottermania: the crazed transnational consumption of the most popular children’s fantasy fiction series in publishing history. This paper will review three scholarly articles that delve into the “story-dominant” marketing logic and discuss their overarching themes and connections. Finally, this paper will take a critical look at the conclusions that can be drawn from these common themes.

Brown and Patterson (2010) plotted the Harry Potter series central stories onto Booker’s seven-element theory of narrative “emplotment” and considered how consumers interact with the Harry Potter brand phenomenon. According to Booker (2004), seven basic master plots occur in Western cultural tradition, plots that are constantly recycled in various representational forms. These timeless plots are rags to riches, rebirth, the quest, overcoming the monster, tragedy, comedy, and voyage and return (Brown, Patterson, 2010). Using the framework, the authors asserted that the Harry Potter stories adhere to Booker’s seven-element theory. The seven plots in the Harry Potter stories that they focused on are: novels story, author’s story, books story, movies story, merchandise story, critics’ story, and cyber story. Brown and Patterson believed that Harry Potter’s possession of all of Booker’s plot elements is directly related to its
unparalleled consumer engagement in its brand phenomenon. They assert this by discussing how consumers are more likely to become engaged in content if the content follows a plot that they are used too.

Prior to the release of the iconic book series’ first movie, Brown (2002) published Harry Potter and the Marketing Mystery: A Review and Critical Assessment of the Harry Potter Books. Brown’s article was released at the peak of the Harry Potter book series’ global influence, before the movie adaptations brought new life to pottemania. In Harry Potter and the Marketing Mystery, Brown discussed the concepts of fads, and asserted that while some may view rampant pottemania as a fad, destined to fade away as quickly as it burst to life, it would be ignorant to do so. According to Brown (2002), the Harry Potter books “…deal with marketing matters, they replete with marketing artifacts, they contain analyses of marketplace phenomena, and they hold the solution to an ancient marketing mystery” (Brown, 2002). Brown went as far as to say that the books are not merely a marketing masterpiece, they are a marketing master class. While this is a rather profound contention, Brown did an excellent job providing examples to back up his beliefs. He explained how the Harry Potter stories reference almost every element of the marketing mix, as well as aspects of buyer behavior, environmental conditions, marketing research, and various others (Brown, 2002).

I chose to continue my trend of analyzing articles written by Stephen Brown because it was easy to identify his deep understanding of the Harry Potter series and its potential implementations in the marketing field. The final article I reviewed was Marketing for Muggles: Harry Potter and the Retro Revolution and was published by Brown in 2001. In this particular article, Brown (2001), discussed how the Harry Potter
series used the past to sell the present or future by means of retromarketing. Brown defined retromarketing as a marketing strategy that appeals to consumers’ nostalgic or emotional connection to the past (Brown, 2001). In his article, Brown attempted to extract the conceptual implications of the retromarketing revolution by relating it to the Harry Potter phenomenon, an example he feels is a marketing masterpiece. Essentially, Brown (2001) asserted that J.K. Rowling’s rags to riches rise to international fame is a story that parallels the rags to riches theme that has pervaded our literature and society for centuries. In particular, Brown related her story to the classic fairy tale: Jack and the Bean Stalk. Brown asserted that Harry Potter is a marketing masterpiece because its content and its author’s personal story mirrors a theme that consumer relate to and enjoy.

After critically considering each of these three articles, it is clear that the transnational adoration of the Harry Potter franchise is a phenomenon that can and should be used as a learning tool for marketers. Brown identified key concepts and ideals that were invaluable to the marketing of the Harry Potter series, many of which have the potential to be implemented in any type of marketing. When I was exposed to the first Harry Potter text as a child, it was clear to me even then that this series would not merely be a fad. At seven years old, children are honing their reading skills, most with significant reluctance. The Harry Potter series’ use of retromarketing and the seven basic master plots that Brown (2001) noted, helped to create a literary product that made children excited about reading again. Additionally, the story dominant marketing logic perpetuated in the dissemination of the books was relatable. Families respected J.K. Rowling and revered her for overcoming her situation through imagination and creativity. Her struggle’s exemplified lessons that parents wanted their children to learn. The
content portrayed in the Harry Potter books was uplifting to the masses, and promoted timeless values that are applicable to every generation such as: bravery, imagination, friendship, family and other important values. The assertions made in the articles published by Brown were expertly supported, and leave not doubt to the reader that the Harry Potter franchise is a marketer’s masterpiece.
Works Cited


