Hooligan’S Holiday: Rethinking Deviant Consumer Behavior and Marketing
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Marketers have, through the years, touched upon a variety of behaviors that are considered to be aberrant, inappropriate, illicit, disreputable, and otherwise undesirable by marketers, consumers, and society at large. The following paper points out the limitations of current definitions of deviant consumer behavior and provides a framework for exploring such behaviors. The author identifies four distinct categories of consumer behavior based upon the dimensions of institutional and cultural norms. Those behavioral categories include abiding, anomic, carnivalesque, and aberrant behaviors. The paper ends with a brief discussion of three of these behavior types as well as suggestions for future research.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer communal activities in the marketplace have received considerable research attention (e.g., Kates 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Muniz and Schau 2003). As a generalization, this research focused on issues of consumer resistance and emancipatory potentialities of such activities. What remains unexplored is the possibility that some consumer communal activities are concerned with maintaining and defending the prevalent symbolic order, rather than challenging and subverting it. The paper engages the concept of vigilantism to explore this possibility. Toward this end, it examines some activities, carried out by the Louis Vuitton brand community. The paper suggests that these activities are aimed at preventing the crime of counterfeiting but also at policing and reinforcing certain social symbolic boundaries.

The socio-historical studies on vigilantism define this social phenomenon as voluntary activities by private individuals, undertaken without explicit sanction of authorities and motivated by desire to defend an existing social order ‘from some form of attack or subversion’ (Sederberg 1978). Vigilantism is said to occur when there is a (perceived) lack or weakness in the ability of the officialdom to respond to an activity, which vigilantes see as a serious problem (Johnston 1996). More generally, social situations in which there exists some threat to important values appear particularly conducive to the emergence of vigilante activity (Brown 1975).

The notion of consumer vigilantism emerged during a netnographic study into activities of brand community. The case presented here is a part of the study conducted in the internet-based community devoted to the Louis Vuitton brand in the period from November 2003-May 2005. This research follows the guidelines of Kozinets’ (2002) netnography, but is less participatory. A number of data sources were accessed and generated during the study period, including magazine articles, government reports, press releases, court reports and field notes. Given that social activities are dialectically inseparable doings and sayings (Schatzki 2002), the data collection and analysis focused on practical as well as discursive aspects of communal activities. The data was analyzed iteratively, allowing persistent themes to emerge, then moving back and forth between these themes and the literature to develop an understanding of the themes and to propose a possible interpretation of the observed phenomenon.

To explain the core issue of the vigilantism in the community, it is essential to consider, first, what the Louis Vuitton brand is, and, second, the relation between the notions of counterfeit and fake. The Louis Vuitton brand (LV hereafter) is an iconic brand (Holt 2004). It is a symbol of status, affluence and glamour (Twitchell 2002), in Holt’s (2004) terminology, LV embodies a cultural myth, an aspirational story of life of luxury and leisure, associated with the brand’s famous patrons, many among them past and present royals and celebrities. As with any iconic brand, LV is a matter of high emotional and financial investment for many LV community participants. Being the symbol that it is, LV is among the most counterfeited brands (Business Week 2005). Even so, fakes rather than counterfeits are the issue for the community. To present the issue of fakes as it appears in the community, the paper draws on Baudrillard’s (1993) orders of simulacra to outline three orders of fakes: counterfeit (direct copy of original), production (imitation of a look) and simulation (‘a real without reality’—the Louis Vuitton brand as a representative symbol of luxury). These orders are explicated to suggest that the first two orders contribute to an enactment and maintenance of the original, and all orders are problematic to some extent for the community.

The LV community takes the issue of fakes seriously, because they feel fakes “ruin” their LV experience and make them vulnerable to criticism about paying high prices for purses. Against these feelings, the community believe that “LV corporate” does not do enough to fight fakes, and worse, inadvertently promote faking, in particular by advertising LV as ‘must-have’ fashion item, targeting youth and increasing prices. Still, when it comes to the activities directed at others, the community adopts the discourse of the social threat of terrorism, one of the normative anti-counterfeiting arguments. This discourse mobilizes the community, and it makes protecting the brand, their own status, and community at large a moral imperative.

Four sets of vigilante-type of activities emerged from the data: educating, patrolling, responding and self-policing. Educating mainly involves distributing information about “what is real what is not,” as well as edifying the public about counterfeits. The latter is directed at relatives, friends and colleagues, and occasionally strangers. Patrolling refers to observation of vendors and other consumers, both celebrities and average people. It also involves monitoring and reporting incidents of “fake attacks” in certain places and in media. Responding is taking actions against vendors of fakes. This includes reporting to authorities, approaching potential buyers with warning, and publicly exposing vendors. Self-policing is monitoring own community, which includes self-censorship in order to prevent any unwitting assistance to counterfeiters or promotion of fakes. Significantly, self-policing also involves unmasking fakes among “the LV lovers and supporters” themselves to assure that all participants are fitting or proper LV owners.

In summary, vigilantism as revealed in the context of the LV community, includes acting as if with a law enforcement agency and encompasses the notion of surveillance. Vigilante activity appears to arise from the perception that the participants and the brand are threatened by fakes, while authorities fail to deal with the threat.

Conceived as polemic, the paper concludes by pointing out three issues that arise from framing some activities of the LV brand community as consumer vigilantism. The first has to do with the perception of inadequate institutional protection of products’ aesthetic features against the background of increasing value of aesthetics in the marketplace (Postrel 2003). The second concerns the issue of anxiety about social status and cultural boundaries, associated with fakes. The case evidences that one response to a (perceived) threat of symbolic instability is to defend boundaries through acts of vigilantism (cf. Holt 1998). The third is the question about the nature of consumer collective power. Specifically, whereas previous research has conceived it largely as positive, affording emancipatory potentialities, here it is at least ambivalent.

REFERENCES
