Negotiating Distinctions: How Brands Become Cultural Resources

Risto Moisio, University of Nebraska - Lincoln
Eric Arnould, University of Nebraska - Lincoln
Zeynep Arsel, University of Wisconsin - Madison

The metaphor of “cultural resource” has been widely used by researchers in CCT to describe the role of brands in the production of culture. The purpose of this presentation is twofold. First, we provide an overview of the different interpretative uses of the cultural resource metaphor in the recent CCT literature on brands. Second, we employ the concept of brand system to explain how consumers use brands as unique cultural resources. Our findings reveal that brands become cultural resources only with respect to consumers’ social communications about them. Implications are discussed using Apple’s ipod music player as an empirical example.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13840/eacr/vol7/E-07

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The metaphor of “cultural resource” has been widely used by researchers in consumer culture theory (see Arnould and Thompson 2005) to describe the role of brands in assisting consumers in the production of culture. In his dialectical theory of brand and consumer culture, Holt (2002), for instance, emphasizes the ability of brands to become “authentic cultural resources” (p. 70) as they “inspire and provoke and stimulate” individual “identity projects” (p. 87). Investigating the consumption patterns of gay communities, Kates (2004) contends that The Body Shop and Absolut Vodka are authentic cultural resources as they are jointly negotiated “between the marketer and the community” (p. 463). The idea that brands serve as cultural resources is also reflected in the consumer literatures on branding and identity (e.g. Holt and Thompson 2004), the cultural meaning of brands (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001) and brands and consumer emancipation (Giesler and Venkatesh 2005). Yet despite its widely acknowledged significance, particularly in the context of consumption, we know little about the processes by which brands are discursively constructed as cultural resources.

The goal of this presentation is to address this gap in knowledge. We proceed as follows: First, we provide an overview of the different interpretative uses of the cultural resource metaphor in recent consumer culture literature on brands. Then we use the interpretive key construct of brand system (Giesler and Venkatesh 2005) to elaborate the processes by which brands are discursively constructed as cultural resources. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for the relationship between brands and consumer culture using the example of Apple’s ipod mp3-player.

We establish our analysis on four fundamental definitions: We understand “resources” as material or immaterial input factors for production. Following Habermas (1984b; 1984a), we define “culture” as an amalgam of social communications. In the social entourage of brands, consumers, marketers and mass media are the most relevant cultural “observers.” A “brand,” according to Giesler and Venkatesh (2005), can be defined as a set of economic, social, political, and aesthetic distinctions. Apple’s ipod music player, for example, is distinguished from other mp3-players by its function, price, logo, claim, and design, yet above all by the communications it has created and still creates.

These concepts are brought together in Giesler and Venkatesh’s notion of the “brand system” (2005), which makes it especially useful for our purpose. Following these authors, “a brand system embeds consumers’ and marketers’ brand related social communication” (p. 16). In this sense, brand-related communication develops and alters elements of culture. In the ipod example, observers can either accept, ignore, alter, or oppose Apple’s suggested meaning of the brand (e.g. Elliott 1998). Competitors may use the ipod’s characteristics to refine their own brands and thus allow for more complex markets (e.g. Aaker 1995). Consumers may use it to reshape their identities or create communities around and against it (e.g. Kozinets 2002; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002). Mass media may report on the ipod, and researchers may reflect on how consumers socialize around it. In summary, these communications shape the brand system and make it a resource for further communication.

Based on this concept, we propose three key characteristics of brands as cultural resources: First, brands can only become cultural resources with respect to an observer. Yet no matter how the observer adopts the brand, as long as it does not go unnoticed, communication is created and thus new elements of culture. Second, consistent with the suggested meaning of the word “resource,” brand systems assist consumers in the production of culture. Relying entirely on intangible operations, they proliferate with every reference made, but fade at the speed of oblivion in the moment consumers fail to communicate about them. Third, as brand systems and culture are established on and brought forth by communication (Luhmann 1995), they resist both ownership and exclusion.

In sum, the proposed concept of brand system helps consumer culture theoreticians to understand better the social potentialities of brands to create and reproduce culture through ongoing communication.

REFERENCES

Habermas, Jürgen (1984a), The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, Cambridge, UK: Polity.
