Where Can Rock Exist? Musical Meanings and Consumer Activism

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Social movements can no longer be regarded as solely political activities, as they create spaces for musical and other kinds of cultural production and consumption. Signifying the relationship between power and music, music acts both as a catalyst in mobilizing the crowds and a paravane for consumption activities. This paper studies the preliminary findings to interpret (musical) codes in social contexts and in consumer identity projects by illustrating a four-year long consumer activism movement. The emerging themes all denote a multiplicity of meanings and the significance of aesthetic codes in interpreting them.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Changes in technology, culture and politics have transformed the meaning of consumption in society toward a recognition that consumption is a creative act (Baudrillard 1981; Featherstone 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1993, 1995), requiring consumers’ activities to be reconsidered for broader insights into the human condition through consumer research. In this new frontier, for the past three decades, understanding consumer activism under the context of ‘new social movements’ (Touraine 1977; Melucci 1996) has become particularly important, especially in illuminating concerns such as anti-branding, ecology, and anti-globalization (Firat 2004; Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Providing space for cultural growth and experimentation, social movements are no longer merely political activities where, at times, musical and other kinds of cultural traditions are made and remade (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). The research reported in this paper explores the role and place of music as it influences social movements. Such investigations can be used to better interpret different contexts of consumption and production.

Activists often try to distinguish the political from the cultural and, partly as a result of this separation, social movements are usually discussed and interpreted in political terms (i.e., ideologies, tactics, issues, campaigns, strategies, organizations). Yet, the setting of a social movement contains more meanings for cultural experience. When present in such settings, musical effects are always superimposed by their discursive and social contexts. In fact, music makes available possible identities, constructs audiences (Frith 1981, 1996; Middleton 2001), and builds up new hierarchies, rather than represent pre-existing social facts. Music can maintain a movement even when it no longer has a visible presence in the form of organizations, leaders, and demonstrations, and can be a vital force in preparing the emergence of a new movement (Eyerman 2002; Yazıcıoğlu and Firat 2007). In particular, songs sung, as bearers of traditions, are powerful weapons in the hands of the members of social movements (Garofalo 1992; Wicke 1995).

Data was collected using several methods to provide insights into the meanings of consumption of music in a context where consumer activism takes place, at the Rock for Peace Festival in Istanbul, Turkey. These methods included participant observations at the Rock for Peace Festival in the last three years and at the organization committee meetings. Photographic records were used, as well as videography, twenty-six in-depth interviews and conversations with activists, and observations of e-group discussions as major sources of data. Semiotic and narrative textual analyses were used to analyze the texts (Barthes 1973; Patton 2002). This paper illustrates the preliminary findings to interpret (musical) codes in social contexts and consumer identity projects (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Holbrook 1986; Goulding, Shankar, and Elliott 2002) by illustrating a four-year long consumer activism movement.

Rock for Peace was first organized in 2003 as a reaction to CocaCola’s, professionally-run and expensively budgeted “luxury” Rock’n Coke Festival, initially claiming that “Rock can’t exist in a bottle.” Using a picnic area with no facilities. In fact, both festivals aimed to own the legacy of rock culture by reminding rock fans of the legendary Woodstock. However, the some characteristics of Rock for Peace has changed by becoming an equally popular activity as Rock’n Coke. Although the activists removed the entrance fee after the second year, due to its increasing popularity, Rock for Peace has started to generate considerable revenues handed over to a third party to organize the stage, equipment, and security, with exclusive rights to sell food and beverages in return since 2004. That is to say, activists only coordinate the artistic features (e.g., stage performances, selections of bands, and speeches), media relations, and participation of other civil rights associations and unions. Removal of money from the artistic domain in this way symbolizes the protection of amateurism and naivety for activists. However, the market logic has slowly started to become apparent in representations and orientations of the activists due to their increasing power, pointing to tensions between collective and individual identities. For example, instead of targeting a single global brand as their adversary, they currently share all other greater global activism concerns and try to establish international liaisons to make the activity a bigger ‘happening’. Eventually, the success of Rock for Peace, which started as a means to protest against the dominance of the market, has become an end in itself. Ironically, the market logic has been reflected not only with the increase in the number of advertisers, but also in the number of supporters. Previously hesitant ‘activist’-rock bands strive to perform in this now popular and crowded festival, but unfortunately not all of them are ‘eligible’ as the activists aim to select the best band to perform. Findings reveal that the rock festival not only becomes a place for rockers, artists, workers and students to become a part of the cause, but especially creates an exclusive space for the ‘activists’.

From a consumer research perspective, these observations show how music becomes an instrument in consumer activities, as discussions among the participants largely revolve around the topic of music; having the power to acclaim the authenticity of musical codes, activists can reject some bands for not performing “the real rock,” or some of them want to utilize the rock culture dictum to attract more bands to improve the popularity of the festival. Confirming the relationship between power and music (Attali 1985), music acts both as a catalyst (i.e., mobilizing the crowds by celebrity rock bands) and a paravane in consumption activities (i.e., global “rock culture” represents a legitimate discourse and a base to maintain peace and equality and actualize possible identities). Finally, the emerging themes all denote a multiplicity of meanings, as well as emerging tensions among and the significance of (glocal) aesthetic codes in interpreting them.

References
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