Show Bizz Becomes Show Buzz; How Viral Diffusion Changes the Traditional Meaning-Making Process of a Rising Star

Kristine de Walck, HEC, France
Gachoucha Kretz, HEC, France
Dina Rasolofoarison, HEC, France

Studying the case of a young French rapper called Kamini, the authors show how the viral diffusion of a new creative product, such as a song, radically changes traditional meaning-making processes. Instead of the top-down approach in which product positioning is carefully constructed and transferred to consumers, marketers are faced with a bottom-up trend in which consumers increasingly participate in blogs and online forums to talk about products (thus, creating and diffusing meaning) before any marketing action is undertaken. Our study aims to understand the interactions and tensions between market forces that result from this pro-active role of the consumer.

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**SESSION SUMMARY**

It is now well-established that consumers form special bonds with brands and celebrities (Fournier 1998). This session was organized around three tightly connected presentations that analyze the evolution of consumers’ relationships with commercial referents.

The session began with a paper by Paul Connell and Hope Schau of the University of Arizona on those relationships that emerge early in consumers’ lives. Consumers’ relationships with artifacts from childhood are explored and their contributions to the consumers’ selves are analyzed through depth interviews and netnographic data. Fournier (1998) referred to these relationships as Childhood Friendships, and defined them as infrequently engaged, affectively laden relationships reminiscent of earlier times that yield comfort and security of the past self. Emergent themes in Connell and Schau’s research indicate that that Childhood Friendships also play an important role in building and sustaining the current self. Animated spokescharacters provide a useful meaning repository for public presentation of the self in cyberspace since they are pervasive and have become part of the consumer culture.

The session continued with research focused on the diffusion of a commercial persona by Kristine de Valck, Gachoucha Kretz and Dina Rasolofaroison of HEC School of Management in Paris. The case study of an emerging celebrity, a young French rapper called Kamini, highlights trends in the spontaneous development of brand relationships by consumers in the marketplace. They show how the viral diffusion of a new creative product, such as a song, radically changes traditional meaning-making processes. Instead of the top-down approach in which product positioning is carefully constructed and transferred to consumers, marketers are faced with a bottom-up trend in which consumers increasingly participate in blogs and online forums to talk about products (thus, creating and diffusing meaning) before any marketing action is undertaken. Their research aims to understand the interactions and tensions between market forces that result from this pro-active role of the consumer.

The concluding paper by Cristel Russell, of Auckland University of Technology, and Hope Schau, of the University of Arizona, focused on the final phases of consumers’ relationships. Drawing from the literature on grief and mourning, they analyze the process consumers go through when their favorite television characters go off the air. Survey and observational data collected during and following the final seasons of three television programs provide insights into the grieving period, the ceremonies and rituals associated with the final episode, ways of coping with the loss of parasocial friends, and the mechanisms viewers put in place for remembering and respecting them.

Together, the three presentations highlight key phases of consumer-brand relationships, from birth to death. Sidney Levy, the Coca Cola Distinguished Professor of Marketing at the University of Arizona, added his own insights. The title of this session was inspired by his pioneering work on “the psychodynamics of interpersonal relations” (1956) and, in particular, his analysis of the phases of relationships that audience members develop with public personalities (Levy 1962). Sidney shared his views on the evolution of consumer-brand relationships and his thoughts on how researchers can tackle this complex but fascinating phenomenon.

**ABSTRACTS**

“Once Upon A Time: Childhood Relationships and their Role in the Self-Memory System”

Paul M. Connell, University of Arizona  
Hope Jensen Schau, University of Arizona

Brand spokescharacters have become a pervasive part of popular culture. These characters have transcended the realm of advertising and product packaging and now carry symbolic meaning to consumers. Brand spokescharacters serve as a means to give personality to the plethora of choices that line grocery shelves. The symbolic meaning of Dig’em the Frog and Sugar Bear serve as a diverting way to differentiate two virtually identical sweetened puffed wheat cereals: Kellogg’s Honey Smacks and Post Golden Crisp (the current euphemistic names of products formerly known as Sugar Smacks and Super Sugar Crisp).

Consumers build relationships with brands in much the same way they would with other people (Fournier 1998). One of these many relationships is the Childhood Friendship. Childhood Friendships are affect-laden relationships that are reminiscent of earlier times, and yield feelings of comfort and security to the past self. The past self is accessed via autobiographical memory. While there is some debate over the exact definition of autobiographical memory, it generally consists of knowledge that makes up the story of one’s life. Autobiographical memory is of fundamental significance for the self, for emotions, and for the experience of personhood, that is, for the experience of enduring as an individual, in a culture, over time (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000). Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) propose that the self and the autobiographical memory store are two independent systems that interact with one another in a Self-Memory System. One’s memories shape the sense of self, and one’s sense of self creates the filter through which the world is perceived and autobiographical memories are encoded and retrieved. The goals of the self play a major role in both the encoding and accessibility of autobiographical memories. Highly accessible autobiographical memories are those that had high self-relevance when originally encoded, and the most accessible are those that retain a high level of self-relevance at retrieval (Conway and Holmes 2004).

Media characters provide a convenient meaning repository for expressing the self since they have become part of the popular culture and are easily recognized by many. Commercial referents such as cereal spokescharacters have become a sort of shorthand for creating complex meanings based on their symbolic properties (Levy 1959; Schau and Gilly 2003). The purpose of this research is to explore the childhood friendship relationship with consumables, and how individuals not only use Childhood Friendships to engage affective memories of the past self, but also use them to build and maintain the current sense of self. Netnographic inquiry (ethnography of Internet users) was employed in order to unobtrusively observe the personal websites and blogs of 65 individuals (Kozinets 2002). Blogs are a type of personal web page where the author typically writes a personal diary of thoughts on a regular basis. An advantage of naturalistically collecting in situ data is that the researcher does not produce demand effects, and there is no social compulsion on the observed individuals’ part to give socially desirable responses or to distort responses for research purposes.
These postings about cereal spokescharacters yielded more than 400 printed web pages.

Eleven informants that created the web postings related to animated cereal spokescharacters were recruited from the pool of 65 personal web sites and blogs in order to participate in depth interviews. In order to accommodate the geographic dispersion and communication preferences of the informants, eight interviews were conducted over the telephone and three interviews were conducted via instant messaging. While the telephone interviews yielded a greater quantity of data than instant messaging interviews over a similar time period, similar themes emerged between the two interview types. Interview questions were kept broad initially with grand tour questions and were structured loosely so that informants could discuss topics in a way that would seem natural to them, and in order to facilitate interviewer-interviewee rapport (McCracken 1988a). Prompted questions were used to probe informant responses more deeply in order to explore research themes. Overall, the 11 interviews ultimately yielded 144 pages of single-spaced transcribed data.

Identical behaviors have greater impact on the self-concept when performed publicly rather than privately (Tice 1992). Since these informants create postings about these characters on the Internet, a public but anonymous forum, we find that childhood consumption referents are accessed not only in order to gain affective rewards linked to the past self, but also serve as a means of building and maintaining the sense of self in the three ways. First, childhood consumption referents provide a conduit for creativity, which enhances a positive sense of self (Belk 1988; Csikszentmihalyi 1996). Informants in this study used childhood consumption referents creatively in two ways: by altering the advertiser’s narrative in a phenomenon known as textual poaching (Jenkins 1992), and by identifying with characters in order to create a narrative about the past self, the current self, or the ideal self.

Second, childhood consumption referents help in building bridges to close relationships, other possible selves, and life projects. In close relationships, cognitive representations of the self and other often overlap (Belk 1988; Cialdini et al 1997). Informants described attachment to objects connected with the childhood self, fondly remembered childhood memories of consumption with their parents, and sought to engage in shared consumption with their own children. Informants that did not have their own children used childhood consumption referents in building a life project. For example, one informant has published a book comprised of advertising icons directed toward children from his own childhood.

Finally, memories of childhood consumption can contribute to perceived self-improvement. As actual time increases, individuals become more critical of their earlier selves, conceivably in order to create the illusion that they have improved over time (Wilson and Ross 2003). While informants strategically used cereal spokescharacters as a means of building and maintaining the self, most of them expressed that they no longer consumed the associated products because their tastes had changed and they now preferred less sugary, healthier cereals, and many proclaimed their reticence to allow their own children to consume the same cereals they blogged about.

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France, July 2006: a 26-year old male nurse, Kamini, who aspires to a career in music sends his self-produced song and accompanying video to several record labels by means of an exclusive Internet link. On September 11, 2006, a trainee, who finds the clip amusing, posts the link on a trendy website that is frequently visited by influencers in the music and designer scene. Within hours, the video is viewed by a couple of hundreds website visitors, many of which spread the link among their friends and acquaintances. Within days, thousands of people click on the link and watch the video. Exposure continues to grow exponentially: Kamini is invited on national television and radio shows, and his success story is widely covered in the press and on the Internet. Once the buzz has proven his potential (by the end of October, 5.5 million people saw the video), the record labels are quick to offer him a contract and he signs with RCA (Sony Music) at the beginning of November for two albums. Only two months after his entrée in the public arena, Kamini is a celebrity and a new-born star.

Kamini’s case is an example of the growing number of wanna-be stars that have encountered success thanks to personal publishing sites such as YouTube or MySpace. Creative work that stands out can quickly gain momentum through the principle of viral diffusion. The selection and marketing methods that are ordinarily used by the creative industry to launch new singers, bands, movies, and shows are carefully crafted to reach an optimal mix of messenger(s), content, channel(s), and target audience. However, instant celebrities like Kamini are in many respects predefined by their success before marketers enter. As a result, the meaning-making process is no longer first prescribed by the industry, but has already taken shape in the marketplace through fans, media, and commentators. The extant research has examined the interplay of meaning-making processes between producers and consumers in the context of established brands (e.g., Kozinets 2001, Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Schau and Gilly 2003), and brands that have been abandoned by the producer (Muniz and Schau 2005). Our paper intends to contribute to this stream of research by focusing on the introductory period when a brand (or human brand [cf., Thomson 2006]) acquires meaning in the eyes of consumers. Specifically, we are interested in situations where the Internet has played a defining role in engaging a diverse audience in meaning-making processes, and diffusing these meanings around the globe, before marketers have had their say. With the constant development of digital technologies that allow people to create, connect, and communicate, consumers’ role in the marketplace is increasingly pro-active instead of reactive. Insight into the tensions and interactions of meaning-making processes between market forces surrounding brand introductions, and the tactics and strategies that are employed to deal with differences in meaning, is important to inform our understanding and theory-building of the dynamics of today’s marketplace.

This paper uses the rise of Kamini as a case study to examine how the various players in the marketplace negotiate the meaning and positioning of a new (human) brand that wins an audience before it is commercially marketed. Data collection started on day one of the buzz and will continue at least until the release and reception of Kamini’s first album, planned for Spring 2007. It consists of archiving all posts on Kamini’s official website, as well

1 A telling anecdote is the buzz generated before the Summer 2006 release of Snakes on a Plane, a New Line Cinema (NLC) movie featuring Samuel L. Jackson. Fans of Jackson were so intrigued by the title that they invented stories lines, dialogues, and alternative settings up to the point where NLC ordered five days of additional re-shooting to incorporate feedback of the fans. On fans’ probing, the movie was also upgraded from a PG-13 to a R-rating (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snakes_on_a_Plane).
as all posts and comments on 28 purposefully selected blogs that are considered as opinionating because of their rich content and wide readership. Furthermore, we register all traditional media coverage of Kamini in France, and all Kamini-related marketing actions undertaken by RCA. Together, these sources provide a rich, developing data set containing many (re)presentations of Kamini (in texts, images, video, and audio) that can inform us about meaning-making processes. Our analysis, which draws from semiotics (Mick, 1986; Peirce, 1960), focuses on how these processes interact, and how they develop over time.

Preliminary analysis makes clear that the public discourse is dominated by themes of originality, complicity, and authenticity. Kamini, who is black, presents himself as the anti-thesis to the stereotypes of gang member and rap artist. His song tells of his childhood in rural France where he suffered from solitude and racism, but the tone is non-aggressive and full of self-spot. The video, taped in his home town, features waving neighbors, dancing friends, and numerous cows. Initial influencers, appreciating him mainly for being original, find his clip humorous, his lyrics ‘fresh’, and his music so-so. Quickly, Kamini emerges as a ‘spokesperson’ for those that recognize themselves in his story of being different from the rest and growing up in a remote area: he makes them feel proud of their origin. Traditional media invent the label ‘rural rapper’. In the blogger community, Kamini is appropriated to serve all kinds of causes: marketers use him to explain how to generate buzz, politicians use him to show some failure or success of the social system, etc. Some bloggers question Kamini’s authenticity. In their eyes, Kamini is a ‘spoof’ orchestrated by the music industry to launch their latest concept. To tackle these allegations, Kamini repeatedly explains how he made the video with the help of some friends, that it was never intended for public viewing, and that his sudden success has come as a surprise. RCA’s first marketing action is an online quiz about Kamini’s provincial hometown. Thus, RCA strengthens Kamini’s image of rural rapper. Simultaneously, Kamini uses interviews to distance himself from this image, talking constantly about the other ‘concepts’ he wants to develop.

The presentation involved a thick description of the interactions and tensions between the five market forces that play a key role in Kamini’s meaning-making process: (1) the fans, (2) the traditional media, (3) the opinion leaders that maintain personal or professional blogs, (4) RCA, and, (5) Kamini himself.

“Until Cancelled Do Us Part.: Mourning the Loss of A Relationship”
Cristel Antonia Russell, Auckland University of Technology
Hope Jensen Schau, University of Arizona

The final paper in this session focused on how consumers manage ending relationships. Few consumption experiences persist as long as that of television series which often last several years. The relationships that viewers develop with the characters within the series form and evolve much like interpersonal relationships (Russell and Puto, 1999). Thus, the loss experienced when television series end can be paralleled to the loss of other social relationships. In particular, when viewers are highly connected (Russell et al., 2004) and experience strong parasocial relationships with the television characters, the period of mourning is likely to be similar to that following the real loss of a friend.

Drawing from the literature on grief and mourning, we analyze the process consumers go through when their favorite television characters go off the air. The theoretical framework is derived from Worden’s model of the grieving process (1991). He identified a series of tasks that must be accomplished for successful recuperation following a loss. Individuals must accept the reality of the loss, then work through the pain of the grief, before they can adjust to an environment where the deceased is missing, and be able to move on with their lives. This last phase may include developing relationships that can fulfill the roles previously performed by the deceased.

Survey and observational data were collected during and just following the final seasons of three television programs. In each study, respondents were recruited on the basis of their history with the television series. In the first study, 262 fans of Friends were contacted several months after the final episode of the program aired. In the second study, viewers of The West Wing and Will & Grace participated in the study the week after the final episode of their favorite program aired. The online survey instrument gathered both quantitative and qualitative data regarding the respondent’s history of consumption of the television series, their degree of connectedness to the television program and its characters (Russell, Norman, and Heckler, 2004), and their emotional and behavioral responses to the final episode. In both studies, the majority of the respondents had watched the television program since the very beginning, or over six years.

The quantitative survey findings indicate that the more connected viewers were to the television characters, the more difficult the grieving period was. Viewers who had developed intense relationships with the characters experience a greater sense of loss, and as a result, express more anxiety and sadness due to the ending television series. They have a more difficult time letting go and moving on. Less connected viewers were more likely to rationalize the loss by claiming that it was time to move on.

Qualitative observations provide insights into the separation phase, in particular the ceremonies and rituals associated with the final episode. We observed that, in order to cope with the loss of their parasocial friends, viewers often relied on their social networks. Some viewers eased the pain of saying goodbye by participating in a social gathering to celebrate the end and reminisce about the past. For instance, one of our respondents reported attending a themed party organized by a friend for a small group of “real fans” of the West Wing in honor of the final episode. She reported that “The host wore an academic gown and was the Chief Justice, there to swear in the new president. … There was a West Wing trivia contest, and the winner got a finger towel with the White House insignia on it. There were also chocolates with the faces of Presidents and first ladies on the wrappers.” Without such socialization process, the sense of loss is likely to be prolonged, in a fashion similar to when people are not able to talk openly and discuss the loss of a loved one (Brown, 1989). Thus, much like wakes and funerals, these rituals are important social events that provide an opportunity to socialize, honor the “deceased,” and comfort family and friends (Crissman, 2004).

The findings also illustrate the mechanisms viewers put in place for remembering and respecting their missing parasocial friends. For instance, through reruns and recordings, the viewers are able to relive their favorite moments and cherish the memories of their missing friends. Similarly, connected viewers are more likely to seek out the characters in their spin-off afterlife. For instance, highly connected viewers of Friends were more likely to have watched the television series Joey, casting one of the Friends’ characters. However, interestingly, although the spin-off allowed Friends fans to maintain high levels of parasocial attachment with Joey, the spin-off without the entire cast accentuated the sadness and anxiety associated with the departure of the other friends leaving many viewers sad and disappointed.

The discontinuation of an emotional bond brings distress and grief (Bowlby, 1979) and this process applies to those relationships that consumers form with products or services. Collectively, the
studies provide insights into how consumers deal with the loss of a relationship and suggest an agenda for continuing research in the final phases of relationships.

REFERENCES