How Commercial Myths Compete For Identity Value Through the Ideological Shaping of Collective Memories and Countermemories

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Through a comparative case study of two influential New South myth makers, we analyze the ways in which the identity value of commercial myths is negotiated at the market system level. We identify several key historical tensions and marketplace pressures that impel these national magazine editors to employ ideological strategies, each tailored to their distinctive competitive agendas, for effacing racial countermemories that contradict their mythic representations of Southern identity. Based on this analysis, we develop a conceptual model which highlights ideological, competitive, and historical influences on commercial mythmaking that have not been addressed by prior accounts of the meaning transfer process.

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SESSION SUMMARY

Consumer culture theorists have developed highly nuanced accounts of how consumers actively and creatively use narratives and meanings conveyed through brands, products, and servicescapes as resources for identity construction (Arnould, Price, and Tierney 1998; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Holt 2002; Holt and Thompson 2004; Kozinets 2001; Peñaloza 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Östuner and Holt 2007). However, this research stream has given relatively little consideration to the production side of consumer culture and the tacit theories, goals, and competitive and ideological influences that shape the actions of commercial mythmakers.

One reason for this recurrent oversight is that consumer researchers have, in accordance with their defining disciplinary orientation, been most concerned with the consumer side of the consumer-producer dyad. A more ideologically driven rationale is that consumer researchers have often tacitly assumed the role of a theoretical counterpart to critical theorists who portray consumers as relatively passive dupes of the culture industry (See McCracken 1986). Rather, consumer researchers have aligned themselves with an active model of media reception (Scott 1994) and have accordingly, emphasized the ways in which consumers creatively and, at times critically, read the texts of commercial culture in relation to their own goals and life circumstances (Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Scott 1994). This theoretical framing places power in the hands (and eyes and ears) of consumers while suggesting that commercial producers have relatively little control over how their message is actually decoded and understood; instead, they are merely interjecting additional symbolic resources into the grand pastiche of consumer culture. From this standpoint, consumers are, at minimum, co-creators of consumer culture, acting as bricoleurs (e.g., Thompson and Haytko 1997) and they often act in terms that are even more explicitly productively creating their own forms of popular culture, now easily distributed through the democratizing sphere of Web 2.0 (Jenkins 2006).

Nonetheless, there are some exceptions to this general tendency to focus on the consumer side of co-creation. These studies attend more closely to how commercial culture, in its variegated forms, is actually produced and seeks to explicate the factors that influence these institutionally situated commercial agents (Holt 2002, 2004). In this spirit, for example, Cronin (2004) explores the different ways in which advertising research functions as a commercial currency that advertising practitioners and their clients differentially leverage to enhance their relative positions in a given relationship. Arguing against the critical view of advertising as a super efficient capitalist machine, Cronin (2004) concludes that the production of advertising campaigns is more contingent, hesitant, and reactive than commonly supposed. Advertising practitioners are embedded in shifting relations of power organized by competitive forces, conflicts between self-promotion aims and client interests, and idiosyncratic turf battles that emerge between account managers and brand managers on the client side.

Peñaloza (2000, 2001) also explores the production of commercial culture in her ethnography of Western stock shows. She highlights the ways in which ranchers and other key players in the beef supply chain enhance their market position by selectively leveraging the Old West mythology in ways that celebrate "the winners of the West, white ranchers, and their rural way of life" and, in so doing, privilege meanings emanating from "white rural culture" (p. 395) while marginalizing the cultural positions of non-Whites. She further observes that consumers, as they move through the various promotional exhibits, often formulate resistant readings that run against the ideological grain of the representations. Nonetheless, consumers’ oppositional interpretations “demonstrate a disjointed structure and are constrained by the interests of beef marketers and producers” (Peñaloza 2001, p. 393).

Our special session expands on some key implications that follow from these studies. First, the ways in which commercial culture is actually produced, particularly in terms of servicescape stagings and ideological framing of identity, can predispose consumers toward certain perceptual and experiential orientations, including their oppositional readings. This shaping effect affirms the importance of attending more closely to the production side of commercial culture and explicating the historical, competitive, and ideological factors that influence the actions and choices of institutionally situated commercial producers. A related implication that is particularly germane to this special session is that commercial producers are neither fully in control of their actions nor are they necessarily acting in strict accord with predetermined ideological and persuasive goals. The papers in this session share a common orienting premise that commercial producers, like conventional consumers, are embedded in pre-existing historical, ideological, and socio-cultural structures and that their creations are negotiated within this nexus of constraints and resources.

In this sense, commercial producers are also co-creators who must draw from a pre-existing legacy of mythic meanings and their production are negotiated in relation to a shifting field of competitive contingences, brand/organizational histories, and social and cultural conditions. The studies in this session all address the ways in which commercial productions designed for contemporary competitive and socio-cultural conditions are shaped by prior historical meanings, myths, and practices associated with the product or servicescape category. Each of these studies profile how commercial producers’ professional outlooks, decisions, and predilections are constituted within these historical networks and how their actions are channel by the intersections of history, competitive forces, and prevailing socio-cultural conditions.

The three presentations approach this common dynamic from differing perspectives and explore how these dialectical negotiations are manifested across different forms of cultural production. Accordingly, each presentation analyzes this relationship between cultural history and the actions of commercial producers in relation to distinctive theoretical questions related to 1) the staging of servicescapes and the intersection of local and global forms (Dannie Kjeldgaard and Jacob Ostberg); 2) the media construction of a mythologized regional identity and the efforts of commercial producers to manage problematic racial countermemories (Craig Thompson and Kelly Tian); and 3) the complex processes through which iconic brands function as ideological parasites whose actions also reciprocally shape the cultural meaning systems from which they draw inspiration and identity value (Douglas Holt).

This session addresses an important, largely overlooked, and paradoxical question of how the historical trajectories of commercial culture influence the production of new forms of commercial
The papers in this session also advance new theorizations of commercial producers as agents who actively pursue their competitive goals while also being subjugated to ideological and mythological structures not of their own making. Within this common theoretical frame of reference, these presentations respectively explicate specific insights related to the experience economy, collective memories, and the cultural and identity functions of brand meanings. For this reason, this session should appeal a broad segment of the EACR audience. Each of these studies has been completed and each speaker has agreed to serve if the session is accepted.

Our discussant for this session will be Søren Askegaard. Professor Askegaard’s research has integrated issues related to the production of commercial meanings, the dynamics of globalization, consumer ideologies, and brand meanings. His background is ideally suited to discuss the production side issues explored in this session and the specific substantive theoretical contributions offered by each presentation.

PRESENTATION ABSTRACTS

“Coffee Grounds and the Global Cup: Glocal Consumer Culture in Scandinavia”
Dannie Kjeldgaard and Jacob Ostberg

This presentation explores the glocalization of consumer culture by analyzing the coffee servicescapes in Scandinavia. The presentation explores how the servicescapes, which are influenced by the hegemonic brandscape as outlined by Thompson and Arsel (2004) become glocalized in the Scandinavian context. The presentation shows that while the hegemonic brandscape stemming from Starbucks exerts a global structure of common difference on local coffee cultures across the globe, historically constituted global cultural flows institutionalized in local market contexts implies different competitive and positioning roles for Starbucks and the like through the presence of pre-existing coffee cultural styles. Furthermore, the presentation discusses how both historical and contemporary global flows of coffee culture have been shaped by a specific Scandinavian consumer culture that interacts with global structures in the process of glocalization. Coffee culture seems an eminent site of exploration as Scandinavia constitutes the world’s highest per capita consumption of coffee.

Our empirical investigations in Scandinavia, a cultural setting where Starbucks has yet not entered the market albeit gained significant cultural influence, show that there is a long-standing historically established coffee culture that exists in parallel to both a starbuckified coffee culture and a coffee connoisseurship culture. Our detailed analysis of this coffee servicescape illustrate that there is a plurality of cultural styles along which the different types of coffee establishments differ. At the same time, we show that there are tendencies toward the hegemonic influx of starbuckified dimensions suggested by Thompson and Arsel. We identify three ideal typical overall coffee cultural styles:

The first one we term Americana reflecting the recent global diffusion of the lactified coffee cultural consumption style most notably symbolized by Starbucks. The Americana coffee cultural style is heavily influenced by the coffee cultural ideals of Starbucks. As already mentioned, the dominant global player has yet to enter the Scandinavian market making room for plenty of simile brands that draw on the style originally laid out by Starbucks. According to an interview with the franchisee at an Espresso House in Lund, the owners of the Espresso House corporation travel to the US a couple of times a year just to visit Starbucks outlets and be inspired. They proudly announce that there is no difference whatsoever between Starbucks and the particular local variation of Espresso House and hence stress an authenticity that is grounded in the imitation of the global epitome. In addition to these simile brands a number of outlets such as restaurants, hot dog stands, and gas stations utilize the structure of common difference of the coffee shop menu.

The second coffee cultural style we term Culinaria which is a more recent tendency that stress authenticity in the form of exoticism and high quality. The cultural style of Culinaria makes references to a number of different types of authenticity. One type is through what is perceived as an indexical authenticity through a reference to place of origin, most notably Italian cafés but also French brasseries. The Culinaria category also house a different type of connoisseur café equally obsessed with authenticity but more eclectic in their inspiration than the Italian cafés described above. These places are a postmodern concoction of everything “authentic”, the menus are comprised of fascinating juxtapositions of elements from across the globe. Others emphasize authenticity by selling products of certain production methods such as organic and “politically correct” products. Rather than interpreting this refined culinary experience as an opposition to the influx of the starbuckified hegemonic consumptionscape we see it as part of a general gastronomic slow food movement not only opposing global standardized consumer culture but equally as much local consumer culture that has deterioted gastronomic qualities.

“How Commercial Myths Compete for Identity Value through the Ideological Shaping of Collective Memories and Countermemories”
Craig Thompson and Kelly Tian

In his classic study Mythologies, Roland Barthes (1956/1972) defined popular myths as rhetorical systems that ensnare contemporary socio-cultural conditions in an aura of historical incontrovertibility and inevitability. According to Barthes (1956), popular myths work by glossing the consequences of historical contingencies, political conquests, and social conflicts as an essentialized and naturalized cultural order. This rhetorical reification allows unsettling questions about social stratifications and institutionalized inequities to simply “go without saying” (Barthes 1956, p. 143). Placing a Nietzschean spin on Barthes’ critical structuralism, Foucault (1977) conceptualized countermemories as the linguistic, material, socio-cultural, and institutional traces of contradictory historical narratives, powers struggles, fractious voices of protest and dissent, socio-political oppressions, and tactics of resistances. These countermemories can be obsfuscated, but never fully erased, through the invocation of grand mythic narratives such as the triumph of good over evil, the taming of a wild and dangerous nature by the rationalizing forces of civilization, and the inexorable march of progress. A genealogical analysis aims to discern the nexus of countermemories that are subordinated to a mythic gloss and to explicate the ways in which these historical effacements have shaped specific (and often institutionally dominant) representations of collective memory (also see Giroux 1997; Lipsitz 1990; Haraway 1994).

The dynamic tensions that arise between countermemories and the commercial uses of myths are the focus of our genealogical analysis. In the age of postmodernity, commercial culture (i.e., advertisements, products, branding strategies, entertainment and infotainment media, touristic sites, servicescape stagings, and public relations) has become a very significant societal medium for the material representation of collective memories and their corresponding arrays of social identifications, symbolic distinctions, moral valuations, and implied status hierarchies (Marcoux and
We propose that important negotiations over identity value occur at the market systems level whenever different cultural producers, pursuing their own competitive and ideological agendas, differentially leverage a common mythic legacy. Even though these cultural producers may not be directly competing in the same product or service markets, in the media mélange of postmodernity, they are invariably competing in a broader “myth market” (Holt 2004, p. 56-61) for identity value. As a case in point, the cultural mythology of the American West has been widely appropriated in various quarters of commercial culture in ways that are ideologically diversified and which have cumulatively affected the identity value offered.

Our genealogical analysis explores the ways in which these confluences of myth market competition, prevailing commercial and ideological objectives, and historically contentious countermemories structure the representational choices of cultural producers—including those which seem more intuitive than calculated—as they seek to manage the ideological contradictions and historical fissures that could undermine the identity value offered by their commercial appropriations of myth. Our context of investigation concerns the contested cultural memories of the antebellum and Confederate South which have been adapted to a variety of commercial and ideological purposes. Much like the mythology of the American West (Slotkin 1992), the South’s (mythologized) heritage, and the enduring socio-economic patterns set by the aftermath of Reconstruction, has generated prominent ideological templates through which race relations in the United States have been mapped and contested (Foner 1988; Lipsitz 2006; Roediger 1999) and which have fundamentally shaped the identity value offered by commercial appropriations of Southern traditions and Southern icons (i.e., the good ole boy, the redneck, the hillbilly, the Southern belle, the Southern gentleman to name a few).

We provide a genealogical analysis of the transformative intersection of historically contested racial countermemories and the commercial and ideological agendas that shape the representational choices and strategic aims of two prominent New South mythmakers. As editors of nationally distributed Southern lifestyle magazines, our participants play an important and quite active role in shaping their respective publications’ content. As we will show, their mythic representations are structured by different ideological aims, and sensitivities toward different countermemories, that emanate from distinctive competitive positions. Through their ideological strategies to manage these diversified, but equally, problematic countermemories, these New South mythmakers are also engaging in a market system negotiation over the identity value of their proffered commercial myths, which is itself embedded in a still broader cultural conversation over the South’s place in the socio-cultural landscape of American society.

Prior consumer research has established that negotiations between commercial mythmakers and consumers play an integral role in the co-creation of identity value. We show that parallel and equally consequential negotiations occur at the market system level, as competing commercial mythmakers conjure collective memories that serve their market interests while also seeking to ideologically contain contradictory and destabilizing countermemories. We conclude by developing a model of the transformative relations that arise between market systems, cultural myths, countermemories, and competing commercial interests that is compared to prior formulations of the meaning-transfer process (cf., McCracken 1986; Murray 2002; Thompson and Haytko 1997).

“Jack Daniel’s America: Iconic Brands as Ideological Parasites and Proselytizers”

Douglas B. Holt

Cocacolonization. Jihad vs. McWorld. The Lexus and the Olive Tree. Brands are routinely accused of, or celebrated for, playing a key ideological role in the advance of consumer society. Given their prominence, it’s not hard to believe that brands play a role. But what is it, exactly, that these brands do? Dozens of scholars and critics have penned diatribes lambasting the cultural power of brands (e.g., Lasn 2000), while apologists have responded with odes that stridently deny such accusations (e.g., Twitchell 1999). This Manichean discussion rarely moves beyond vague formulations: brands as global hegemons versus brands as lifestyle props reflecting basic human desires. The pertinent question cannot be whether or not brands influence society—like any other well-resourced cultural actor, of course they do. Rather we need to specify carefully what brands do in society, and assess their (social, political, cultural) effects.

In this study, I present some key findings from a larger ongoing project examining the genealogy of Jack Daniel’s whiskey. Jack Daniel’s Tennessee Whiskey has sustained an iconic position in American culture for nearly fifty years. The brand succeeded because it became a valued articulation of the gunfighter myth, an immensely powerful myth in the postwar era. To explain Jack Daniel’s success, then, we need to disentangle how a particular whiskey brand came to be collectively understood as an icon for this myth.

This study relies upon three kinds of data:

- Analysis of archival records of the company’s marketing activities and press clippings, at the Brown-Forman archives and at their ad agency.
- Oral histories with a variety of managers, including the company’s first marketing manager who directed the brand’s breakthrough ad campaign in the Fifties.
- Interpretation of Jack Daniel’s representations in popular culture from the Fifties to present, particularly in rock music and in films.

I am interested in understanding the ideological impact of brands that have the most powerful and durable cultural significance, what I’ve termed iconic brands (Holt 2004). Since iconic brands gain their power through the symbolic “work” that they perform in society, studies of such brands must venture out into the world and examine what it is that these brands do. For theory to move forward, comparative and detailed analysis of the social construction of brands is required, what I call a brand genealogy (detailed in Holt 2004). My brand genealogy of the rise of Jack Daniel’s Tennessee Whiskey provides a detailed explanation for how iconic brands as ideological parasites

Brands become iconic when they are successfully articulated to a thriving myth market. Iconic brands typically enjoin and embellish existing myth markets, rather than contributing substantially to their formation. Iconic brands play a supporting role to other ideology-driving media, instantiating the myth in a distinctive commodity so that the ideals can be ritually experienced in every-
day life. Brands become iconic when they are woven into the most potent ideological currents in society. The power of Jack Daniel’s symbolism came from its articulation to the gunfighter myth. Likewise, in other genealogies I’ve conducted—see for instance studies of Harley-Davidson, Volkswagen, Budweiser, Snapple, Mountain Dew, Coke, and ESPN (Holt 2004)—it is clear that, to the extent these brands are successful, they are ensconced in the ideological turf wars of the day via expressive culture.

Iconic brands are mercenaries, following ideological demands wherever the action is. So we find iconic brands articulated to a diverse array of ideological positions: from the frontier myth of Harley and Jack Daniels to the Hobbesian sporting worlds of Nike and ESPN, to the aesthetic self-actualization of Apple and Volkswagen, to the sustainable development mythos of Patagonia and Ben & Jerry’s. While managers may be oblivious, we can observe analytically a process of cultural selection at work in which many hundreds of brands compete for the public’s affection, producing a profusion of creative experiments that inevitably lead some brands to stumble upon the major myth markets in play in a society in a given period.

Critics who contend that iconic brands manipulate culture mis-specify their influence. Iconic brands rarely rework significantly emerging symbolism. Cultural products other than brands—including films, television programs, politicians, sports teams, and novels—do the ideological heavy lifting in modern culture, reconstituting myths to pioneer emerging ideals, creating what I term myth markets. Brand marketing laps up what these other media produce.

In fact, Jack Daniel’s emerged as an iconic symbol of the gunfighter despite the owners’ contrary marketing efforts, which attempted to turn the brand into an urbane professional’s drink. Their aspirations were subverted as the military, celebrity elites, and journalists all identified a much better cultural fit for the brand. Soon enough, the company’s ad agency adroitly picked up on this emerging symbolism and convinced management to launch a seminal print campaign that had a tremendous influence in solidifying the brand’s position as the champion of gunfighter values. This chronology is typical of what I’ve found in other cases: companies happen upon a way to ride the coattails of an existing myth, usually discovered by ad agency creatives. Large marketing companies are poor at seizing cultural opportunities due to the pervasive psychologization of brand strategy over the past forty years (Holt 2004, 2005).

In sum, iconic brands are ideological parasites. Brands succeed in becoming powerful cultural symbols when they tag along on emerging myth markets led by far more potent cultural forms (films, books, sports, politics and so forth). Why do people so value iconic brands then? I would argue that iconic brands play a useful complementary role because commodities materialize myths in a different manner, allowing people to interact around these otherwise ephemeral and experientially-distant myths in everyday life. Whereas an iconic film must be routinely re-watched (or reimagined) to play a ritual function, myth-infused brands provide a distilled and less-involved means of experiencing the myth via consumption. And whereas iconic politicians or actors or athletes are mediated entities, far removed from everyday life, brands offer a more accessible form of iconicity that attends to people’s desires to directly experience valued myths.

So, while iconic brands play a key role in diffusing myth, they have little influence over the specific direction of these ideological revisions compared to other cultural actors. Brand critics have distorted the ideological role of brands simply because they have ignored the various non-marketing agents’ contributions in creating ideology-infused culture. [In the presentation, I will also develop the role of iconic brands as ideological proselytizers, which I have excluded from this abstract due to length restrictions.]

REFERENCES
Lipsitz, George (1990), Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.


