Dramas of a Patriotic Brand: Conflicts on the Process of Legitimating the Local Belongingness of a Brand

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We analyzed the conflicts involved in the legitimation of a brand local belongingness. We carried out a netnography on the perception of the Fiat brand on Italy. Results highlight the belongingness created from a social drama, in which the brand is analyzed through the moral frame of its consumers.

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Brands are complex symbols that become powerful narrative resources to express identity and national belongingness (Holt, 2002, Holt, 2004, Dong & Tian, 2009, Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010). However, few have been said on dysfunctional cases on the relationship building between a brand and its consumers (Arsel & Stewart, 2016). On a noteworthy exception, Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel (2006) use the term *doppelgänger* to diagnose the vulnerabilities of the cultural history of a brand. Recently, Geisler (2012) also used the concept of *doppelgänger* to analyze the dramas in the brand legitimation process, demonstrating that brands are subjected to the circulation of negative images and stories on the cultural universe in which they participate, promoted by other stakeholders, resulting in the contestation of the narrative desired by the brand owners.

In this specific study, we shed light on the political and territorial aspects involved in the building of a brand, aiming at understanding the process of local belongingness legitimation of a brand in a given community. Using the concept of social drama (Turner, 1988) that recognizes that social processes are negotiated inside a social system and become visible mainly when there’s an inflexion of social norms by one of the involved actors, the study analyzed the conflicts involved in Fiat brand legitimation in Italy.

A netnography was carried out to analyze the information flow on the internet - Youtube three websites that congregates car lovers, in which we follow 60 pre-existent discussion forums and we created three specific forums on the theme of our study - to understand the narratives involved in a marketing campaign of the Fiat brand in Italy entitled ‘Questa é l’Italia che piace’ (This is the Italy we make). Release in 2012, this campaign represented a change in the communication of the brand in Italy, aiming at becoming a protagonist in a period of evolution and growth after the economic crisis of the previous years, through a strong nationalist assertion. Fiat is the main motor company in Italy and it’s considered a symbol of the country. However, the attempt of strengthening the local belongingness of the brand was developed along with an attempt of strengthening the global position of the brand (Vergine, 2014). Our data analyzes resulted in four themes, involving a process started with the brand deterritorialization, a drama personalization around the Fiat president figure, an inflexion around the mutual perception of guilt and gain, closing with the doppelgänger of the brand doppelgänger.

In this sense, our results emphasize the social drama involved in the judgment of consumers regarding the performance that the brand should have in a given community. Inspired on the idea of social drama of Turner (1988), analyzing the case of the Fiat brand in Italy, we can observe that the dramas on constructing and legitimating the local belongingness of the brand follow the aesthetical form of the Ancient Greek tragedy, involving phases of rupture, crisis intensification, restorative action and the denouement.

Our research demonstrates that brands incorporate a local commitment in its historical construction in a given community (such as a country), similar to the commitment of its citizen, involving notions of self-governance and rights and aware of the values and social norms (Turner, 1997). The dramas are constituted on the tension between what is expected of a ‘citizenship brand’ and the economic and market dynamics. This tension includes questionings and reinforcement of the political constructions, such as the neoliberal practices globally disseminated, in which the companies would have complete freedom to find locals that provide more profitability as a counterpoint for the conception that it’s the citizen duty to defend the nation, reinforcing a nationalist duty of the brand.

Consonant with the findings of Geisler (2008), Luedicke *et al.* (2010), Humphreys and Latour (2013), the main contribution of our paper resides in demonstrating that the dramas on the construction and legitimation of the local belongingness of a brand is oriented by moral evaluation of the brand narratives. The consumers moral frame direct the attention to particular aspects of the brand, making, for instance, that someone guided by a nationalist frame question the deterritorialization of the brand, while others guided by a liberal frame praise this deterritorialization.

Therefore, this paper demonstrate that the brand local belongingness is not constructed in a singular and universal form, but interpreted and reinterpreted through the lenses of the consumers’ moral frames. These findings allow us to broaden the complex analysis of the relationship between brands and consumers, by considering notions of local belongingness as a key element on the brand narratives construction, even in globalized markets. Equally, the results have potential implications to the comprehension of dilemmas of contemporary society in the search for political models intermediated by the market, recognizing that the brands are seen as citizens of a determined community and evaluated under the aegis of its moral behavior in that community.

**REFERENCES**


