**Special Session Summary    Beyond Brand Image: Analyzing the Culture of Brands**

Craig J. Thompson, University of Wisconsin- Madison

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An emerging stream of consumer research suggests a far more encompassing and significant interrelationship between cultural processes/structures and brand meanings. Drawing from personal relationship theory, Fournier (1998) argues that consumers form emotionally-laden relationships with brands that anchor their self-concepts. Adopting an anthropological view, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) and McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) analyze brands as the loci of complex communities that cut across conventional geographic and societal boundaries. Rather than just being a symbolic resource for the construction of personal identity, communal brands are a foundation of group identification and experiences of social solidarity. Holt (2002) analyzes brands in relation to the co-evolution of marketing practice and consumer culture. He argues that, in the postmodern marketplace, marketers strive to ingratiate and integrate their brands into various spheres of popular culture. Brands that successfully accomplish this cultural emplacement acquire an aura of authenticity which consumers then covet as they seek to create distinctive personal identities and, paradoxically, to resist conventional corporate influences.

A major implication of this research stream is that marketing managers exert far less direct control over brand meanings than is commonly supposed in the brand management literature (see Holt 2002, 2003; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Furthermore, a nexus of politics of consumption issues are raised by a dialectical view of brand cultures that have not been broached by the existing consumer research literature. For example, consumers may attribute considerable moral-political significance to their brand preferences, on the assumption that these valued brands are in some sense anti-corporate, and these perceptions can be easily leveraged for marketing advantage. A dialectical conception also calls into question a prominent assumption that subcultures exist as autonomous groups, whose authentic meanings are inevitably appropriated by parasitic corporations (e.g., Hebdige 1979). An alternative view developed in this session is that marketing, brands, and subcultures exist in a far more symbiotic relationship where marketing discourses actually help to crystallize a subcultural identity and its ideological outlooks.

The goals of this session were three-fold: 1) to further advance understanding of the different processes through which brand meanings are culturally constructed and in a dialectical fashion, exert an influence upon consumer culture and consumer identities; 2) to profile key theoretical benefits that accrue from viewing brands as cultural forms; and 3) to stimulate future research into brand cultures and in particular, their politicized consumption meanings. Each paper in this special session offers theoretical insights into different aspects of this culture-brand dialectic.

Douglas Holt presented a historical analysis of the Patagonia brand. His brand genealogy traces the evolution of the Patagonia’s branding strategies and its changing relationship to the subculture of outdoor-adventurers who had been were the brands core customers in the development of Patagonia as an iconic brand. Holt argued against the conventional view which holds that subcultural consumers act as cultural producers, who take control of the brand to create powerful brand meanings that often subvert the meanings created by the marketer. Instead, he demonstrates that Patagonia acted first as a cultural leader within the subculture, articulating the so-called “dirtbag culture” of hardcore climbers with particular skill while developing innovative climbing equipment. Once established, Patagonia then used the subculture as what Holt calls discursive raw ingredients to develop a myth about adventuring in nature, a myth which appealed powerfully to a mass market of liberal, ecologically minded non-adventurers.

Thompson and Arsel’s presentation highlighted the influence that the Starbucks’ brand exerts over the seemingly diverse cultural milieu of local coffee shops. Using a combination of phenomenological interviews and ethnographic observation, they built a case that the cultural discourses that surround Starbucks and the basic structure of its retail servicescape exert a systematic influence on the milieu of local coffee shops, regardless of whether these shops are positioned as countercultural havens or a third-place hangout (Oldenburg 1989) for middle-class professionals. They introduced the concept of a hegemonic brandscape to explain this ideological mapping of the local coffee shop scene and the centrality of Starbucks’ meanings and ambiance to among local coffee shop patrons. Ironically, a key facet of the Starbucks’ brandscape is a nexus of aesthetic and social criticisms commonly directed at this brand (i.e., the anti-Starbucks discourse) and which express a general cultural anxiety over the effects of globalization. The anti-Starbucks discourse imbues consumers’ choices about coffee shop patronage with a set of political and moralistic meanings and it ideologically frames their experiences of local coffee culture. Reciprocally, meanings of Starbucks are constructed in relationship to the micro-market positions and customer communities of local coffee shops.

In keeping with this session’s thematic core, O’Guinn and Muniz discussed the new political left’s strategy of fighting market capitalism’s hegemony through purchases from major corporations. While all across the spectrum brands are becoming more a part of political discourse, the new left’s belief that they are striking blows against the empire by purchasing is particularly noteworthy in its oddity and paradox in the stream of modernist market critique. Their new left informants’ sincere (and purchase motivating) belief that by buying an Apple MacIntosh they are actually behaving in the tradition of sixties radicals is either testament that since mid twentieth century, there is absolutely nothing one can do politically outside the consumption juggernaut (Frank 1997), or that brands are (whatever the historical trajectory) increasingly politicized and must be conceived as socio-political entities. As branded consumption becomes more and more central to contemporary social existence, so the traditional lines (real or imagined) between the political fashion and material fashion fade. This phenomenon has many causes, but easy and inexpensive social aggregation and consumer-
to-consumer communication through the WWW has made the further politicization of brands all the more inevitable. O’Guinn and Muniz develop this theoretical implication through both face-to-face and computer mediated environment data on several brands.

In her introductory comments as discussant, Susan Fournier noted the theoretical and methodological diversity of the session audience, and called for the creation of bridges from postmodernist critiques of brand phenomena to actionable, substantive contributions in the brand management domain. What does the Starbucks study, for example, suggest about theories and methods for segmentation and positioning? Do these insights suggest a way to define rather than induct perceptual dimensions for brand positioning? Fournier also called for the crossing of methodological bridges to further develop current insights, as, for example, with survey tracking research to reveal trends in the politicization of brands, or field experiments to investigate the temporality and causality of manager-created versus consumer-created brands. Finally, Fournier encouraged debate regarding the relative utility and value of critical theory to brand theory development, particularly given the anti-business Marxist roots of the perspective, and the possibility for insight creation through alternate analytic paths.

Much discussion ensued and a good time was had by all. Afterwards, everyone put on their comfy Patagonia fleeces, relaxed with a nice Starbucks’ double cappuccino, and typed notes on the session into their super cool Apple iBooks.

References