Special Session Summary  Consuming Television: Connectedness and Community in Broadcast Media
Hope Jensen Schau, Temple University
Cristel A. Russell, San Diego State University

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/8932/volumes/v31/NA-31

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
SESSION OVERVIEW

The concept of consumers developing relationships with brands has been well-documented in consumer research. Seminal work on this topic established that brands can serve as active relationship partners and serve as a basis for various types of consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998). Work evolving from this perspective has shown that such consumer-brand relationships also serve as the basis for the formation of brand communities, a fabric of relationships based on personal connections to specific brands (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002). Additionally, it has been shown that there is a reciprocal relationship between consumers and brands. More specifically, not only do consumers seek interpersonal relationships that reinforce their relationships with brands, but they may develop self-brand connections as a means of affiliating themselves with reference groups (Escalas and Bettman, 2003).

This session contributes to extant research by applying the concept of consumer-brand relationships to the context of the television consumption. While it has been proposed that consumers form relationships with TV programs and the characters in those programs (Russell and Puto 1999), research in this session examines this proposition in greater depth. Expanding our knowledge of television audiences beyond Nielsen aggregate analysis to the level of individual consumers and program-related communities of viewers, this session taps into consumer motivations and socialization, consumption stories, and the extension and creation of the TV program as a brand experience.

Cristel Russell and Andrew Norman presented a study on the relationship between program consumption and social interaction. Within the social network of a sorority house, they examine the interplay of the consumption of and connectedness to TV programs and interpersonal relationships. Mary Wolfinbarger and Hope Jensen Schau demonstrated the manner in which The Simpsons viewers bond in online communities through subversively explicating American notions of hyper-commercialization and commodity fetishism. Among active The Simpsons fans the brand experience is intricately informed by cultural critique, often including parodies of marketing and consumer behavior. Hope Jensen Schau and Albert M. Muñiz, Jr. examined a particular consumer-generated subtext of the former television series Xena: Warrior Princess to find how proponents of mainstream and subtext interpretations interact and impact the Xena brand. They find the Xena community is held together by a delicate dance of ambiguity that supports multiple interpretations of the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle. Finally, Mary C. Gilly, as the discussant, provided a critical perspective on the notion of connectivity as a specific consumption experience and discussed its potential in advancing our understanding of consumer behavior.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Exploring the Relationship between Television Program
Connectedness and Social Network Dynamics.”
Cristel A. Russell, San Diego State University
Andrew T. Norman, Drake University

This presentation focused on the socialization process that occurs around the viewing of a television series. We investigated this phenomenon by exploring brand communities that form around specific television programs. Watching television may be one of the most common social consumption events. Television has been referred to as a “lubricant to interpersonal communications” (Lee and Lee 1995). In particular, favorite TV programs are often watched regularly by groups of individuals and may serve as social bonds to others. Viewers might watch certain TV programs merely for their social utility (Morley 1980), providing a topic of discussion with other viewers during or after the airing of a program (Rubin and Perse 1987). Because of their recurrence, TV series may become ritualized events and extend beyond the mere watching experience, with preparation and follow-up activities (Russell and Puto 1999). Subcultures of consumption sometimes develop around television programs, with their rituals, paraphernalia, and participation in collective activities such as fan groups, conventions, and on the Internet (Kozinets 2001, Fiske 1992; Lewis 1991).

Research on subcultures of consumption and brand communities (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002) suggests that a strong bond between a person and a TV program and its characters may serve as the basis for interpersonal interaction and social cohesion. Empirical evidence shows that, as an individual becomes more connected with a given show, she/he will not only have a greater opportunity for social interaction around the program, but will also be more likely to seek out interactions with other viewers of the same program (Russell, Norman and Heckler 2004). Russell and Puto (1999) also emphasized the social embeddedness of the television experience and the importance of relationships within the community of viewers. Not only may viewers develop relationships with their programs and, even para-social relationships with the characters in the programs, but they may also use the TV program as a way to develop or maintain social relationships with other viewers (Frenzen & Davis, 1990).

The horizontal embeddedness of TV consumption and its relationship to previous research on connectedness was the focus of this research project. We reported the results of a study conducted with 28 college females living in a sorority house. These individuals reportedly gathered together at least once a week to watch a TV series, thereby providing us an opportunity to study TV consumption and connectedness in a real and relatively “close” social network of TV consumers. We administered an extensive survey to the participants. After providing information regarding their own personal history with the TV show, the respondents indicated their level of connectedness to the selected program as well as to another TV show of their choice. They also completed an extensive set of measures assessing the strength of their ties with each other sorority member and the level of their interpersonal interaction related to TV programming with each other sorority member.

Much like other studies conducted in fraternity or sorority houses (Reingen, Foster, Brown, and Seidman 1984; Ward and Reingen 1990), our findings provided a unique view of a well-defined subculture which represents a microcosm of television consumption as a whole. While all the respondents reported watching the show, the degree to which they connected to it varied. Within the complex social network of the sorority, we were able to identify pods of viewers of equivalent connectedness and levels similar patterns of TV-related interactions. Opinion leaders also became apparent loci of influence on other sorority members.
“Bonding through Cultural Subversion: Consumers’ Connectedness with the The Simpsons”
Mary Finley Wolfinbarger, California State University Long Beach
Hope Jensen Schau, Temple University

The television program, The Simpsons, is one of the longest running sitcoms in television history. Initially airing as short comedic sketches in a cartoon format on the Tracey Ullman Show in 1987, the show has earned both harsh criticism for its portrayal of a decidedly dysfunctional American family and alternatively praise for being the most “realistic” show on television (Rapping 1992) and the best television program of the century (Time 1999). Throughout 300+ episodes, The Simpsons has remained an “edgy” program, challenging the boundaries and norms of American popular culture and actively parodying the hyper-commercialization and commodity fetishism of Western, specifically American societies. So enduringly popular is the show that, Simpsonisms, like Homer’s “D’oh!” and Mr. Burns’ “Excellent” creep into the common parlance of American speech and are decoded with agility by viewers and nonviewers alike. Additionally, there is a proliferation of shows images, screen savers, sound bites, avatars, and cellular phone ring tones associated with the show and theme song.

In opposition to the fickle nature of most television trends, books declaring Homer Simpson to be an epic hero with his own philosophy (“The Philosophy of D’oh!”) and definitive show episode guides continue to be produced and sold (Mulhauser 2001).

Although the program has special appeal to the “jaded” mindsets of Generation X and Y (McClellan 1992) the show has a strong and growing multi-generational fan base. In syndication, The Simpsons enjoys an expanded audience as younger children are exposed to the early episodes and international markets air the program to fresh viewers. So, what accounts for its popularity and why are the characters and plotlines resonating with consumers? This research examines the subversive nature of the plots and characters of The Simpsons and more specifically addresses the consumer response to, identification with, and overall connectedness to (Russell, Norman and Heckler 2004) the program and its characters as a playful enactment of subversion, particularly in reference to the behavior of marketers and consumers.

With the expansion of internet access, broadband options, and consumer adoption of these technologies, an enormous amount of consumer-generated commentary exists online regarding The Simpsons. Active and resilient online communities revolving around the show, its characters, setting, and plots exist in several languages (English, Spanish, German, French, Swedish, etc.) and are hosted on resources in multiple countries. This enhanced consumer interaction provides insight beyond the aggregate data Nielsen can provide on audiences, to actual individual consumer interaction with all aspects of the program. Similar to recent consumer research on Star Trek, this study focuses on the online fan interactions and on the program content that serves as stimulus (Kozinets 2001). Noting an obvious selection bias, those who engage in The Simpsons’ communities online are highly involved consumers, but also are likely to reflect resonating themes of connectedness across a vast array of more casual consumers (Schlosser 2003).

Treating The Simpsons as a phenomenon, this research regards the program as a brand (complete with its own nearly inexhaustible list of licensed merchandise), its fan communities as brand communities (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001), and the fan sites inspired by the show as acts of consumption (Schau and Gilly 2003). Through analysis of the episodes, the official website (www.thesimpsons.com), two independent English language discussion boards where fans frequently interact with each other regarding episode content, and personal websites containing The Simpsons’ content, we find that the identification with, and connectedness to, the show revolve around the theme of subversive commentary that nevertheless often affirms traditional values and embraces the status quo, warts and all. The show and fan discussions serve as cathartic platforms for both serious, pointed critiques and affectionate acceptance of the tensions inherent in American values and norms.

The program content is itself a critical resource in understanding consumer and marketer behavior. Episodes of The Simpsons contain humorous, highly commercialized depictions of social contexts and distinctly marketing-oriented themes. For example, each episode includes Maggie getting run over by the price scanner at the grocery store; Krusty the Clown actively marketing low quality merchandise bearing his image and seeking to bypass parental decision makers; and Duff beer’s promotional efforts pervade plotlines (“Duffman never dies, only the actors who play him”). In fact, even the godly Ned Flanders has owned a niche market store for left-handed appliances (the Leftorium) promoted by Homer’s word-of-mouth campaign; as well, Ned briefly operated an ill-fated religious theme park in tribute to his deceased spouse, Maude. All participants in the marketing system are routinely parodied, including big business (the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant), smaller businesses (the Kwik-E-Mart and Moe’s Bar), consumers (e.g. Marge buying 15 pounds of Nutmeg to save money at the local discounter), consumer movements (e.g. Marge’s crusade against “Big Sugar”), marketing researchers (e.g. Springfield Elementary is covertly taken over to provide continuous feedback to a toy manufacturer) and advertisers (e.g. Itchy and Scratchy’s violent ad for a cereal branded as “Stabby-Ohs”).

Consumer reactions to the program reflect the fact that the sarcastic and critical stance of the program resonates with viewers who easily recite the episode content, incorporate it into their belief structures and ideology (Cantor 1999), and engage in prolonged discussions and debates surrounding program content and peer commentary. Initial findings reveal that while the show is a cartoon, consumers tune in and interact with it on a deeper socio-cultural and political level; for example, the statement “Life Imitates Bart” in postings serves as a signal that daily news and events prove the relevance of The Simpsons. Thus, Springfield and its inhabitants are stand-ins for the world consumers occupy in real life and the issues presented in the program become vehicles for larger social dialog. Participants are at times competitive, with each post seeking to be more clever and creative than previous posts to a discussion. Our analysis finds that these dialogs, like the show itself, critically explicate American social norms, including norms of business and consumer behavior, and are both subversive and affectionate. In fact, we argue that enjoyable subversion is the dominant consumer motivation for active participation in the online brand community.

“If You Can’t Find It, Create It: An Analysis of Consumer Engagement with Xena: Warrior Princess and the Creation of Consumer-generated Subtext”
Hope Jensen Schau, Temple University
Albert M. Muñiz, Jr., DePaul University

With an absence of strong, female action heroines and a dearth of lesbian themed programming in mainstream American media, it is not surprising that a resourceful consumer group would reinvent a show to accommodate both. Although similar in intent to the reframing of Ikea (Ritson, Elliott and Eccles 1996), the execution is considerably more subtle and durable for Xena. We find that fans of the television show Xena: Warrior Princess reframe the characters Xena and Gabrielle and the show’s plots to suit their needs.

Advances in Consumer Research (Volume 31) / 545
Noteworthy is that the program ceased production in June 2001, yet enjoys a dynamic consumer-driven community both online and offline.

Treating the program as the research focal point (Kozinets 2002), the interactions of the fan base factions as evidence of a thriving brand community (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001), and the fan websites as acts of consumption (Schau and Gilly 2003), this research tackles the tension between corporate and consumer control (Kates 1997) of the Xena brand. Specifically, we examine the birth and persistence of a community devoted to an interpretive reading of Xena: Warrior Princess as a lesbian love story between the medieval, heroic Xena and her present, ever-cheerful sidekick and scribe, Gabrielle. Moreover, we investigate the impact this community has on the perception of the Xena brand by the mainstream fan base.

The lesbian subtext is not merely a reinterpretation of the literal plot and characters, but includes fan-written fiction (short stories and novellas), teleplays (consumer-written episodes fans wish had been produced), manipulated and enhanced photographic images of the characters engaged in romantic and lustful behaviors, animated renditions of consumer-imagined character interactions, and discussion threads revolving around these consumer-generated texts and pictures. Although no official endorsement exists from the studio, the actress who played Xena, Lucy Lawless, has publicly acknowledged, albeit with ambiguous acceptance, the lesbian subtext as “one possible way to interpret the show.” It is also believed that the writers in very subtle ways gave fodder to the subtext through ambiguous scripting and directing. Our research suggests that it is this complex dance of ambiguity that keeps the factions in check and the Xena brand alive and strong, unfettered by potentially damaging, homophobic rejoinders.

The data for this project are culled from: 1) the television show content, 2) the mainstream brand community (defined as the official discussion board, personal websites, weblogs and offline conventions), the subtext community (as manifested online and offline). Both researchers have examined episodes of the show, the official online websites, fan websites, and the discussion threads associated with the subtext. The first author attended a large Xena convention in the East Coast region of United States to further witness the community interaction offline, the tension between the factions, and the impact of the divergent interpretations on the Xena phenomenon. The motivation of this project was to determine how mainstream consumers cope with the subtext and how the subtext impacts the Xena brand. Recognizing that consumers can and do form active relationships with brands (Fournier 1998), we analyze how the same characters (Xena and Gabrielle) can sustain such divergent interpretations of their feelings, intent and behavior, while maintaining core, universal identity attributes (heroic, honorable, empathetic).

Initial findings reveal the subtext is tacitly acknowledged by the mainstream community as a titillating piece of Xena trivia, but is not seriously endorsed or validated by mainstream Xena fans. Consumer-generated commentary from both Xena camps indicates that this ambiguity allows discrepant interpretations and loci of connectedness (Russell, Norman and Heckler 2004) to co-exist and protects the brand from lesbian associations concomiting with their heterosexual viewer segment. Similar to research on the Apple’s discontinued PDA, the Newton (Muñiz and Schau 2002), we assert that the fact that the program is a discontinued product (no new shows are being made) aids in the maintenance of the subtext because the corporate interpretation yields to consumer-driven, consumer-controlled dialogs. In essence, the studio does not contribute to the debate in any form, allowing the factions to create equally authentic interpretations because neither is formally deemed inauthentic by the Xena studio, cast, writers or producers. Had the show continued, perhaps the Xena producers would have been forced to take a formal stance on the subtext issue, potentially invalidating one faction and alienating consumers; thankfully the authentication never took place. Through maintaining an open text approach to Xena, both consumer factions can claim equal validity, hence Xena enjoys an expanded fan base.

REFERENCES


