The Legitimate Brand

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Certain brands attain legitimacy, that is, social fitness through dynamic framing processes described in this article. Drawing on qualitative data collected from gay consumers, this article explores the ways brands are co-created in a gay men’s community. Collective action frames, the shared ways of interpreting meanings within social interaction, provide the connection between a community and its socially legitimate brands. Informants routinely inscribe some brands with the frames of the gay community, and when applying brand litmus tests, bridging, and delegitimizing a brand assess whether other brands share a fit with the sociocultural meanings of the gay community.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Certain brands attain legitimacy— that is, social fitness— through dynamic framing processes described in this article. Drawing on qualitative data collected from gay consumers, this article explores the ways brands are co-created in a gay men’s community community. Collective action frames, the shared ways of interpreting meanings within social interaction, provide the connection between a community and its socially legitimate brands. Informants routinely inscribe some brands with the frames of the gay community, and—when applying brand litmus tests, bridging, and delegitimizing a brand— assess whether other brands share a fit with the sociocultural meanings of the gay community.

A brand’s legitimacy—the “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity [a brand, in the present context] are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995, p. 574)— may be negotiated among consumers, affecting its cultural meanings. Yet, the question of how, whether, and when consumers co-create the brand and exercise some agency (or control) in non-brand-focused contexts is still open for further research. This study draws on ethnographic, qualitative data to understand the ways consumers co-create certain brands’ sociocultural meanings when the brand is not the community’s central focus.

Cognitive legitimacy occurs when consumers routinely inscribe frames on a brand with little reflective or critical thought. Yet, in other instances of brand consumption, there are potentially transformational and critical processes that occur— reassessments of a brand’s moral legitimacy. This article reports three collective action frames— (1) camp interpretations of brands, (2) rewarding legitimate brands, and (3) punishing illegitimate brands that characterize cognitive legitimacy. It also reports three dynamic framing processes that change brands meanings over time or that actually change the community’s frames themselves over time— (1) applying brand litmus tests, (2) bridging, and (3) delegitimizing a brand—that characterize moral legitimacy. Findings include brand stories that illustrate each of these instances.

Legitimacy highlights the notion that brands are much more than the sum total of their product attributes. They are vital social and cultural entities that represent important sociocultural meanings related to social justice. Recently, a global anti-brand backlash has reminded us of brands’ political and sociocultural aspects (Klein 1999), highlighting the darkest meanings of our humanity. Yet, despite the recognition that brands have vital and complex social connotations, current thinking still conceptualizes brand equity— particularly that dimension comprised of brand associations (Aaker 1996) — as uniform and fairly stable across markets (see Keller 1993). No allowance is made for the fact that pluralistic concerns, cultural fragmentation, and diverse consumers’ efforts at negotiating legitimacy (or illegitimacy) are meaningfully altering the landscape where brands reside. Yet, current understandings and measurements of brand equity do not take into account the dramatically negative meanings and effects of these cultural particularities. This is fertile territory for future research.

REFERENCES


