Empirical Evidences of Brand Cultural Resonance: How Brazilians Demonstrators Appropriated a Fiat’S Campaign

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The study investigates facets of brand cultural resonance by the case of Brazilian demonstrators appropriating a FIAT’s campaign. The analysis of cultural texts and in-depth interviews suggests cultural resonance as an element of brand protection in turbulent contexts and highlights brands as a collective shared repertoire in increasingly fragmented societies.

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ABSTRACT

In 2013, various demonstrations occurred in Brazil sharing some of the characteristics of international movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. Brazilians united their voices against the increase in public transport fares, but soon included topics such as political corruption and the underfunding of education and healthcare in their pleas, while the Government was investing heavily in preparations for the 2014 World Cup. The protests spread all throughout the country during the Confederations Cup (seen as a warm-up tournament for the World Cup) after being violently repressed by the police. On the 20th of June the demonstrations mobilized 1.4 million people in more than 130 cities (Moreno 2013).

One of the surprising aspects of this movement was the appropriation by demonstrators of the advertising campaign “Vem pra Rua” (which is referred in this article as “Come to the Street”) created for Fiat, the car manufacturer. Launched in May 2013, shortly before the protests became a nationwide phenomenon, the campaign was seen on billboards and started trending on social networks, helping the movement to become vivid and fun. Its jingle was sung in the streets, it was given new lyrics and used to create YouTube videos showing the action of the demonstrators and the police. The original film can be seen in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxMiwZZPlcM&index=5&list=PL2GmqrT1YHV3exhvT-5RjlPOL050eYHiwc

Brands constitute the main paradigm of contemporary marketing (Holt 2002) and their study has achieved discipline status (Allen, Fournier, and Miller 2008). However, according to the authors “our understanding of brands is incomplete and sometimes even misaligned with revealed realities of the brand as experienced in today’s consumer, corporate, and cultural worlds.” Thus, there is a gap in our understanding as to how, why or when a brand’s private meanings are able to reflect and resonate the “spirit of their time” (Holt 2004).

The appropriation of the “Come to the street” campaign by the Brazilian demonstrations represents an opportunity to deepen our understanding about the concept of brand cultural resonance (Fournier, Solomon, and Englis 2008). Cultural resonance is “the degree to which a brand’s claimed meanings reflect, echo, reinforce and reshape the meanings from the collective social space that consumers access in defining and shaping their lives” (Fournier et al. 2008, 43). The authors suggest eight facets by which a brand can engender this specific type of resonance: 1) cultural bedrock; 2) currency value; 3) meaning oppositions; 4) role resonance and portfolio effects 5) category resonance; 6) cultural co-creation; 7) multivocality; 8) community.

In this paper, we analyze central aspects of the Fiat brand and its campaign “Come to the Street” that allowed its cultural resonance and consequent appropriation by demonstrators.

The investigation of the presence of brands in the context of the demonstrations can be performed within the theoretical framework of New Social Movement Theory that emphasizes logics of action in the spheres of politics, ideology, and culture. Melucci (1985) understands these new movements as constituting collective actions based on solidarity as well as being decentralized, de-bureaucratized, non-hierarchical and composed of networks of small groups. Their objectives are related to long-term social and cultural changes and also symbolic transformations for the dynamic building of collective identities. The actors are highly transitory and temporary and these networks allow multiple affiliations and part-time activism. In addition, Melucci (1985) suggests that collective action takes place because demonstrators communicate with each other and produce and negotiate meanings.

In this context brands constitute an important source of cultural resources (Holt 2004). According to the author, a strong brand carries a story that circulates in culture and that in some way is able to address cultural tensions of the moment. O’Guinn and Muñiz (2004) suggest that brands have become cultural platforms which, more than simplifiers of choice or reducers of risk, have the potential to constitute themselves as declarations of ideologies.

METHOD

Two distinct strategies were used in the study: the analysis of cultural texts (Hirschman, Scott, and Wells 1998) and in-depth interviews with demonstrators (McCracken 1988).

The video data were analyzed scene by scene and notes were taken for subsequent analysis. In order to understand the socio-cultural context in which the meanings were created and the tensions that formed the basis of these meanings, we adopted semiology (Barthes 1977). Binary oppositions - a fundamental Saussurian structure – were the key for understanding meanings (Mick 1986). The research analyzed the long commercial, the making-of video of the campaign and video interviews with executive and creators of the campaign (Reclame 2013). Both the analysis of cultural texts and the interpretation of signs, symbols and meanings are widely used in consumer behavior research (Hirschman and Holbrook 1992), mainly as from the 1980s (Askegaard 2010; Belk and Pollay 1985; Hirschman 1988; Hirschman et al. 1998; Mick 1986; Mick et al. 2004).

In addition, the research conducted 21 in-depth interviews in the city of Rio de Janeiro with informants aged 19-35 who had taken part in the 2013 demonstrations. Projective techniques were used to explore feelings and perceptions of the theme (Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2013), as well as stimulate memories regarding the presence of the Fiat brand in the protest movement. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed, totaling 415 pages of text. In the analysis process the research used the resource of codification, with the association of labels, highlighting important parts of each interview (Rubin and Rubin 2005). Some of these codes were suggested by the literature while others were created during interaction with the interviews. In addition, analytical summaries of each interview were produced, thus maintaining the holistic meaning of each interviewee’s experience while also allowing the comparison and confrontation of the various testimonies.

RESULTS

In Brazil, the car category expresses meanings such as masculinity, independence, achievement and wealth. Historically, the product’s high price has restricted its consumption and constitutes a “dream of consumption” that is present in all social classes (Stefano 2010). In recent years, however, its price has gradually declined and consumption has correspondingly increased, but the cheapest models still cost around US$ 12 thousand. Fiat has been the market leader for the last 12 consecutive years, what suggests the brand may have be-
come emblematic in the product category itself, achieving category resonance (Fournier et al. 2008).

Fiat’s portfolio targets mainly the low-end segment and the company has four models among the 10 top-selling cars in the Brazilian market. As a more affordable brand, Fiat harbors contradictory meanings in automobile category, like differentiation and inclusion; achievement and affordability. According to Fournier et al (2008) meaning opposition consists in an important facet that engenders brand cultural resonance. Hence, the brand seems to have gained an emblematic connection with the class of young and emerging consumers that constitutes the majority of the population. Additionally, in this sense, we also identify the role resonance facet (Fournier et al. 2008), which relates to meaning association of a particular social role.

The growth of the domestic vehicle fleet, together with the precarious state of the country’s transportation infrastructure and public transport systems, made mobility a central theme of the recent demonstrations. However, in this case Fiat did not suffer rejection of brand hegemony, a phenomenon studied by Cromie and Ewing (2009). In the context of the questioning of the current configuration of mobility conditions in the country, the appropriation of the Fiat campaign suggests that consumers do not feel trapped or disempowered or want to move beyond Fiat (as a representation of the category and the car industry). In the demonstrations motivated by mobility problems the company was surprisingly placed “on the same side as the demonstrators.”

Aired in all main media channels, the “Come to the street” campaign was created in order to strengthen the aspects of “passion” and “Brazilianess” of the institutional brand through its connection with soccer (Reclame 2013). The campaign prioritizes the construction of the collective dimension and diversity of “being Brazilian”, more than a segmentation and identification of the “FIAT consumer”. The video lasts one minute with images of people predominating (45 seconds). The campaign first of all shows the country’s diversity focusing on the micro-social dimension (family at home, couple on the beach, customers of a commercial establishment and people camping in the countryside, etc.) Then, suggesting that a game has just ended, people start going to the streets, forming a crowd that interacts harmoniously and has broad diversity in terms of gender, class, race and age. On ten occasions the video focuses on specific individuals in the midst of the group as a collective. These instances reinforce the suggestion of diversity and include: a white/young/slim woman, a white/adult/fat man, a masked man, three white/young/slim women, two young/black/slim women, two white/elderly men. The various social classes of these people could be inferred from the surroundings (e.g. alleys in a slum and a home with the paint peeling off the walls), durable goods, clothes and accessories. Thus the campaign seems to touch cultural bedrock meanings (Fournier et al, 2008), evoking durable and persistent Brazilian culture characteristics: the foundation myth of a mestizo people, constituted by the miscegenation of the white, black and indigenous races who coexist in harmony and reconcile diversity joyously. This same myth of a unified country, although constituted by differences, is also present in the testimonies of interviewees regarding their participation in the demonstrations:

“...” (B. 32 years old)

When analyzing the film it is noteworthy that cars, the company’s central product, appear only in short scenes totaling only 17 seconds. Moreover, the product is not even mentioned in the jingle. In the first images whole cars appear, stationary, but on the edges of the screen. It is the people who are in the center of the video. When the game finishes some cars circulate in the city. But, as the celebrations become intense the cars appear surrounded by the crowd, unable to move, for example in what motorists would normally consider an adverse situation. It is interesting to note that bicycles and a van of the type used for public transport also appear in the commercial, signs that are not often seen in car commercials. The Fiat logo appears for five seconds and is prominent in only two. Our interpretation is that in the “Come to the Street” campaign cars were shown in a supporting role, as if they were hierarchically inferior to people and metaphorically to the changes that society is currently undergoing.

In their accounts, our informants also highlighted the tension between “public transport is for ordinary folk” and “cars are for the elite.” Thus, by relativizing the presence of the car in the campaign, the company seems to have subverted the traditional viewpoint, approaching that of the population. In one of the projective exercises interviewees were asked to write a message to Fiat’s CEO, and the message reproduced below supports this view:

“...” (H. 19 years old)

During the interviews, the informants were shown a panoramic photo and asked to describe what they saw. Then they were asked: “If this were not a demonstration what else could it be?”. Many responses mentioned entertainment events such as shows and carnival. Thus, the image of the demonstration suggests an iconic reaction (Mick 1986) related to festivity. We suppose that the images of the festive crowd in the Fiat commercial, as well as its vibrant music, reinforced the association of patriotic demonstrations with the experiences of pleasure and hedonism of soccer celebrations and music concerts.

In the interviewees’ accounts of their experience of the demonstrations we can perceive a mixture of emotions varying between revolt and indignation with the status quo; fear of police violence and pride, pleasure and patriotism because they are taking part in a historic moment of the struggle to build a better country. Some even reported epiphany experiences:

“You know, for me it was really a fantastic experience. It was almost an orgasm! (Laughter). Because, really, as I said I had never had the opportunity to go to a demonstration, to show what I was thinking.” (B. 32 years old)

“At the beginning you are tense because the police create an atmosphere of intimidation. Then you see the people and they seem to be calm and so you calm down. You are enjoying yourself along with everyone else, everyone expressing themselves
as I saw in this demonstration. People in the buildings flicking lights on and off... It's great! Makes you feel good to be there. And then there is only the tension when the tear-gas bombs explode.” (B. 29 years old)

Thus, the sensorial aspects experienced by the demonstrators during the protests were similar to what was portrayed in the campaign. The feeling that it was necessary to take part in this collective spirit expressing patriotic feelings seems to evidence the currency-value aspects (Fournier et al. 2008), invoked by the “Come to the Street” campaign. According to the authors this is the ability to capture trends and reflect fashions of the moment. Since it was not an official sponsor of the Confederations Cup or the World Cup (and thus forbidden to make direct associations), Fiat chose the street (and not the stadium) as the focus of the jingle’s lyrics and the whole campaign. Thus, it was able to develop meanings of patriotism and collectivity from the point of view of the “street” the place where most of the population could be found and not from the “official” perspective, of the “system”, the “government”, or the “FIFA” stadiums.

The predominant scenario in the commercial is the urban, paved street surrounded by buildings. According to Roberto DaMattta, one of the main Brazilian anthropologists “home” and “street” are sociological categories for Brazilians that, more than geographical spaces, represent moral entities, spheres of social action, ethical dimensions, institutionalized cultural domains that arouse emotions and reactions While at home people are qualified by their belonging to a living network of relations, in the street they run the risk of being nobody. The street can harbor contradictions whereas the opposite occurs in private spaces. It is in the street that the collective dimension gains strength and volume and diversity is welcome (DaMattta 1997).

An analysis of the demonstrators’ testimonies reveals what does not belong to the street. The interviewees expressed their points of view about spaces when speaking, for example, about the people who stayed at home or in stadiums that are the domain of the elite. They described those that stayed at home in a negative fashion using expressions such as alienated, manipulated, egoistical, wanting to maintain the status quo of corruption. In the case of the stadiums, the comments were against the FIFA standard imposed for the World Cup. This standard involves making heavy investments in stadiums, thus meaning expensive tickets and restricting to the elites the spectacle of soccer, which is such an important element of Brazilian popular culture.

“There are groups that are completely alienated, who don’t even know what’s happening in this country... who are also simply egoistical: I don’t need public transport, I have a car, so damn public transport.” (B., 32 years old)

“We need the “FIFA standard” in the street and not only in places frequented by the elite.” (L. 25 years old)

One can say that the use of the phrase “Come to the Street” during or outside the demonstrations imparted singular cultural meanings to the movement. The interviewees perceived that people began to use the expression as a collective identity trait, in some cases, rejecting the direct association with Fiat. Consumers thus seem to have produced a resignification which gave the campaign a different meaning from the one initially proposed by the company.

“Besides the hashtag, some people sang during the demonstration. For example, when people are at home, in the apartment buildings looking out of the window people sometimes start singing “come to the street.” (B. 32 years old)

“Come to the street is a thing of the past, it is no longer a Fiat jingle. The lyrics changed to “Come, come, come to the street, come.” (L. 25 years old)

The above accounts suggest that the expression “Come to the Street” acquired new meanings generated by consumers in a cultural co-creation dynamic when others agents in the cultural system serve as sources for brand meaning creation (Fournier et al, 2008). The fact that the brand has a discreet presence and the company offered an open cultural content may have contributed to this fact. Fiat seems to have assumed merely a supporting role in the remodeling of meanings in the collective space. The company’s official replies to the press sought, however, to distance it from the meanings of protest and the uncomfortable role of “co-sponsor” of the demonstrations, affirming that “the campaign’s focus is solely and exclusively the joy and passion of soccer” (Pearson 2013). Specialized advertising news networks even aired that the campaign would be withdrawn but it was maintained, as originally planned, until the end of the Confederations Cup.

“Come to the Street” was the ninth most talked topic in Portuguese Facebook in 2013 (Facebook, 2013), suggesting its’ multivocality facet. According to Fournier et al (2008) multivocality is related to range and diversity of meanings and the power to attract diverse groups of society. The declarations of the respondents revealed some positive effects of the repertoire of meanings associated with the car manufacturer. Firstly, despite being a car company, interviewees emphasized that the appropriation of the phrase by a movement whose main concern was the issue of mobility did not entail any negative opinion regarding the Fiat brand.

“I did not see any type of action against the brand, but when I think of Fiat I think of come to the street.” (B. 32 years old)

“If I was the owner of Fiat I would be extremely pleased. I don’t have anything against companies earning a lot of money: I think they need to earn more. I think it was a great bit of marketing.” (L. 27 years old)

FINAL COMMENTS

This article sought to enrich the understanding of cultural resonance based on an empirical study of the appropriation by the 2013 Brazilian demonstrations of Fiat’s “Come to the Street” campaign. Protest is environments of uncertainty and tension especially for governments and companies which are usually targeted by the population. During the Brazilian protests, for example, attacks took place against Rede Globo (the country’s main media group) banks and large retailers (many were invaded, destroyed and sacked). This did not happen to Fiat. Although the problem of mobility was at the center of the protests, the company was not rejected, attacked or criticized. On the contrary, its campaign became a hashtag to convoke the population through the Internet and its jingle became the theme song of the demonstrations and was used as the soundtrack for videos that documented the action in the streets.

We suggest that Fiat, in its campaign, touched the social tension that was occurring at that moment, contributing as a cultural resource for creative and productive consumers, capable of generating a symbolic repertoire. This increased word-of-mouth commu-
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Da Matta, Roberto (1997), A Casa E a Rua: Espaço, Cidadania, Mulher e Morte No Brasil, Rio de Janeiro: Rocco.


TABLE 1

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<tr>
<th>Facets</th>
<th>Evidences in the Research</th>
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| Cultural Bedrock | * “Come to the Street” interpretation of the foundation myth of iBrazilians as a mestizo people, constituted by the miscegenation of the white, black and indigenous races who coexist in harmony and reconcile diversity joyously.  
* Car category as masculinity, independence, achievement and wealth. |
| Currency value | *Collective celebration of Brazilianness  
*Social inclusion.  
*Street as a “hot spot” and a “resistance space”. |
| Meaning oppositions | *“Come to the Street” campaign as an iconic representation of patriotic demonstrations (political acts vs. hedonic experiences).  
*The campaign was interpreted as if it was a claiming against the dominant ideology.  
*Cars as a symbol of wealth and status versus Fiat’s car as affordable and sign of inclusion. |
| Role resonance and portfolio effects | *Young and emergent consumers.  
*Social role embedded in campaign meanings. |
| Category resonance | *Fiat as a market leader for the last 12 years |
| Cultural Co-creation | *New representations of lyrics and videos using “Come to the Street” music.  
*#vemprarua (#come to the street) as a call for the demonstrations. |
| Multivocality | *“Come to the street” campaign as one of the most talked topic in Portuguese Facebook in 2013.  
*#vemprarua (#come to the street) viral effect.  
*The campaign served as an expressive element of solidarity among different groups in the movement, collaborating to construct a collective identity. |


