“Will We Hate Google One Day?” a Convention Theory Perspective on Public Brand Evaluations

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This study investigates public brand evaluations of Google from a convention theory perspective. Findings exhibit two major evaluative strategies of negotiating a leeway of acceptable brand conduct and allocating responsibilities. Public brand evaluations accommodate a brand with ethical capital and serve as a brand monitoring tool.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1021943/volumes/v44/NA-44

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

With ubiquitous access to online social media and the democratization of consumer voice, everything and everyone potentially becomes subject to public evaluation. For many years now, researchers have observed how consumers engage publicly in rating, commenting, and contesting brands online, and how these evaluations cumulate to a more networked, better informed, and potentially more powerful public opinion (Arvidsson 2008; Benner, Reinicke, and Witte 2004). A rich body of research has studied brand evaluations and their commercial relevance for brands in the context of brand communities (Schau, Mühiz, and Arnould 2009), innovative consumer communities (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau 2008), and brand publics (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016). Fournier and Avery (2011, 200) link critical consumer evaluations in social media with the assessment of brand value, when stating that—in an age of criticism—the accumulations of consumers’ “authoritative judgment and critique” determine the interpretations of brand messages and the value brands afford. Arvidsson (2010) identifies an increasing tendency of consumers in an information society to objectify the ethical value of brands in general sentiments rather than in formal ethical standards.

Although these observations suggest that public brand evaluations build on a plurality of opinions about a global brand’s value, consumer researchers thus far neither account for the multiplicities of values engaged in public brand evaluations in global audiences, nor do consumer researchers account for the strategies that apply in public brand evaluations. To address these gaps, this netnographic study sets out to investigate public brand evaluations directed at the Google brand, one of the most debated brands in public for its continual reinterpretation and violation of existing social arrangements (Giesler 2015).

Drawing on convention theory’s notion of test (e.g., Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 [1991]; Dansou and Langley 2012), this study identifies, analyzes, and interprets public brand evaluation directed at the Google brand over an eleven year time frame (2004-2014) on one of the largest, global online tech platforms—Slashdot.org. For data selection, we followed the netnographic criteria on traffic and data richness defined by Kozinets (2010) and ended up with seven threads (with, typically, between 400 to 600 and 1,000 comments) per year. Convention theory provides a conceptualization that aids the uncovering of evaluative principles at work in public critique and justification. It argues that in moments of test, in which current understandings are under critique, actors do not only argue from their individual perspectives, but also underline and justify their arguments by showing their relevance to a limited set of higher-order principles or orders of worth (e.g., Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 [1991]; Thévenot, Moody, and Lafaye 2000) and “engage discursively, and even strategically, with [these multiple orders] to justify their position and achieve legitimacy” (Ramirez 2013, 848).

Findings reveal a plurality of orders of worth mobilized in discussions and illustrate how tests of the Google brand predominantly raise civic, market, and industrial orders of worth. We find two major evaluative strategies that coordinate public brand evaluation: negotiating a leeway of acceptable brand conduct and allocating responsibilities. Contributors to Slashdot continually negotiate the leeway of acceptable brand conduct by comparing Google’s conduct with what they regard to be worthy or to be common goods—best for the general public (Moody and Thévenot 2000). Overall, tests are either directly based on orders of worth or they refer to other entities and perform benchmarking procedures. For example, actors repeatedly mobilized the civic world when they argued that Google’s actions were compliant with the law—a common good according to the civic order of worth. Benchmarking procedures often involved comparisons to industry players (e.g., Microsoft) or similar cases. For example, actors relativized Google’s business practices by mobilizing market orders of worth and comparing them to business practices of competitors. Actors situated brand actions either within or outside the negotiated leeway, continually reset the boundaries of acceptable brand conduct, and allowed acceptable actions to balance unacceptable ones.

Allocating responsibilities is an evaluative strategy through which actors want to make sure that the right party is scrutinized. The allocation of responsibilities can either be based on an established leeway or can involve the recognition that the brand under scrutiny is moving in a grey area, as there are no precedents or clear leeways of acceptable conduct to draw on. In discussions of privacy issues (situated mostly within the domestic or the civic order of worth), for example, justifications of the Google brand aimed to shift responsibilities to the government or even the individual. Actors argued that the government should not ask for user data and that individuals are responsible for their online footprints. Shifting responsibilities to other entities is most important for a brand when it allegedly operates outside of its leeway of acceptable brand conduct.

The contribution of this study is threefold: Firstly, we discuss public brand evaluations as a form of ethical engagement in a globalized economy. We suggest that when the lack of global governance systems makes it difficult to assign collective moral duties on brands and to monitor compliance with collectively defined rules (Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Holt 2002), public brand evaluations provide a dynamic and potentially powerful tool for auditing a global brand’s conduct and for charging or deflating a brand with “ethical capital” (Arvidsson and Peitersen 2013, 92). Secondly, we introduce a convention theory perspective on public brand evaluations. Convention theory offers a huge potential by emphasizing “systemic and structuring influences” (Askegaard and Linnet 2011, 381) and allowing researchers to “escape from the alternative between formal universalism and unlimited pluralism” (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 365). Thirdly, we offer a nuanced interpretation of how public brand evaluations can direct brand conduct in global arenas—similar to a brand monitoring tool (cf. Giesler 2012; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006)—and influence public understandings of brands against a macro-context. By observing brand critique and justification in test situations, brand managers can learn about the evaluative criteria applied and entities involved in benchmarking processes.
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