Boundary Crossing and the Diffusion of Cultural Innovations

Pierre-Yann Dolbec, John Molson School of Business, Concordia University, Canada

How do markets “remember”? What are the roles of market memories in the diffusion of cultural innovations? I show how consumers construct a boundary infrastructure, or a memory for a market, and how this boundary infrastructure facilitates the translation, transference, and transformation of a local innovation to a trans-national niche.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1022311/volumes/v44/NA-44

[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/.
Boundary Crossing and the Diffusion of Cultural Innovations
Pierre-Yann Dolbec, Concordia University, Canada

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research examines the development of a musical scene in Croydon, UK in the late 90ies and early 2000s (the FWD>> scene), which later developed into the dubstep music genre (in the early-to-mid 2000s), and was integrated into the popular music category of Electronic Dance Music (EDM) (in the early 2010s). I concentrate on the transference, translation, and transformation of the knowledge associated with this innovative new sound between a local scene, a trans-local niche, and a mainstream market.

The emergence of electronic music in the popular music market offers an ideal field site to inquire about the role of consumers in the creation of objects that foster the preservation of cultural innovations and their transformation to fit existing mainstream market conventions.

Electronic music, an umbrella category that regroups a number of different genres, started in the late 70s and early 80s in the U.S. Since then, more than 300 genre names have been alluded to in this category (McLeod 2001). Some of these genres were started in local clubs, such as the Warehouse for house music (Reynolds 2012), the Blue Note for drum ’n’ bass (Burns 2013), and the Happy Days club nights for UK garage (Titmus 2014), before moving to the niche of electronic music, and then to the popular music market. A number of these genres are still being enjoyed by consumers and produced by musicians. Some of the more popular genres are now the anchoring elements of the US$6B market constructed around EDM.

I answer the two following research questions: first, what actions do niche consumers and prosumers perform to foster the creation of a boundary infrastructure and second, how does a boundary infrastructure facilitates the crossing of the boundaries between each market level. Previous research has seldom examined the market processes underlying the accumulation of cultural innovations and ensuring their continuation over time, instead concentrating on the intentional efforts of market actors in enacting changes (see Dolbec and Fischer 2015). Moreover, the diffusion of cultural innovations is often perceived as the result of the active work of market actors (Crane 1999; Lena and Peterson 2008), which relegates to the background the role of the knowledge-based infrastructure necessary for the discussion of such innovations across a number of social worlds.

This research project aims at contributing to the extent literature by showcasing the role of consumers and to producers in the construction of a boundary infrastructure and fleshing out dynamics happening at the boundaries between three different market levels: local, niche, and mainstream. Such an approach provides a new conceptual lens to the study of the diffusion of innovation and the evolution of market systems (e.g., Giesler 2008; 2012; Martin and Schouten 2014).

My findings emerge from the analysis of an extensive qualitative data set comprised on 14 long and 32 short interviews as well as a 14 months netnography, and archival data from newspaper articles (369), secondary interviews (101), and conference panels (32). I iterated back-and-forth between the data collection and the analysis and triangulated my findings between sources and time periods. My findings were devised both from a theoretically-grounded approach and an emergent one. This approach follows existing recommendations in the literature (Belk, Fischer and Kozinets 2013; Langley 1999; Spiggle 1994).

I adapt Carlile’s (2002, 2004) framework on boundary crossing to explain how actors construct and use a boundary infrastructure, effectively creating a memory for a market, to bridge all three market levels. I explain how the interactions between consumers and producers lead to the creation of a boundary infrastructure, a “stable regime of boundary objects” (Bowker and Star 2000: 313) that facilitates the bridging of the boundary separating two “worlds” (such as in this case a local market and a transnational niche market). First, knowledge crosses an information-based syntactic boundary through knowledge transfer through the use, for example, of taxonomies, storage, and retrieval technologies. For example, as dubstep was emerging as a local innovation from the city of Croydon, a consumer created an important library of pirate radio shows that became a goto destination for consumers interested in learning about dubstep. I show how actors’ efforts to archive and catalog the productions and evolution of the FWD>> sound facilitated the knowledge crossing from Croydon to the greater niche of electronic music. Second, knowledge crosses a meaning-based semantic boundary through knowledge translation through the use, for example, of cross-functional teams (or in this case niche consumption communities) and boundary spanners. A key point here is the generation of a shared understanding for consumers and producers located on each side of the boundary. I show how the creation of niche consumption communities was an important step in the creation of shared understanding. Third, knowledge crosses a politically based pragmatic boundary through knowledge transformation through the use, for example, of objects and models that demonstrate possible form, fit, and function (Carlile 2004). Boundary objects such as prototypes and exemplars contribute to the crossing of the pragmatic boundary. I identify the creation of a compilation by London superclub Fabric as a key moment in the transformation of dubstep which moved the center of the community away from Croydon and allowed for an influx of producers interested in developing the new sound highlighted on this compilation. It had as a consequence the reinterpretation of the power dynamics and the transformation of the sound into what is now known as dubstep.

This paper repositions the work of the online conversations and initiatives of consumers by highlighting their crucial role in creating a boundary infrastructure that participates in the diffusion of innovation. This represents a departure of the role of consumers’ online work, which previously has been conceptualized as being individualistic and centered on the self (e.g., Belk 2013), or centered on the creation of innovations (e.g., Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau 2008). This work is of interest for a variety of scholars studying market system dynamics, the diffusion of innovations, digital marketing and the work of consumers.

REFERENCES

Belk, Russell W., Eileen Fischer, and Robert V. Kozinets (2013), Qualitative Consumer and Marketing Research, London, UK: Sage


