Cultural Engagement in the Age of Social Media

Joachim Scholz, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, USA
Henri Weijo, Bentley University, USA

This study develops the notion of cultural engagement in social media marketing by integrating the cultural branding paradigm (Holt 2016; Holt and Cameron 2010) with recent research on brand publics (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2015) and polarization of expressions in social media (Lee et al. 2014).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

On April 12, 2015, 9:24 AM local time, London, UK, Hannah Atkinson pulled out her smartphone to make a public stance against how advertisers objectify women’s bodies. She stands on the platform of an underground subway station, in front of a bright yellow, gigantic advertisement for Protein World’s Weight Loss Collection. Featuring a toned model in a yellow bikini, the ad asks: “Are you beach body ready?” (see image 1). Hannah types “This advert pretty much sums up everything that I despise about how we treat and value women’s bodies,” snaps a photo, and tabs “Tweet.” Her’s is the second post about Protein World’s newest advertising campaign, and the first one to go viral: Five hundred and fifty-seven retweets, 505 favorites.

Conventional social media wisdom suggest that Protein World should have taken immediate action to appease the crowd of over 500 people who retweeted Hannah Atkinson’s angry tweet. Protein World, however, did not apologize when it was called out by Hannah Atkinson and others who complained about their portrayal of women’s bodies. Instead, it antagonized critics with tweets like “@dazburn [strong arm emoticon] - here is a shoulder for you to cry on [kissing emoticon and heart]” ~ @ProteinWorld, April 27. Responses like this further fueled the controversy: By the end of April, advertisement posters have been vandalized, 70,000 people signed an online petition to remove the ads, and about 100 people gathered in Hyde Park to protest the campaign (Boland 2015; Sweeney 2015). Protein World found itself in the midst of one of the fiercest social media storms in history, and even received a bomb threat to its headquarters. However, and to the surprise of many observers, Protein World’s engagement strategy paid off. Thousands of Twitter users voiced their support for the brand, whose Twitter follower base grew by 15% over three weeks. Fanning the flames also brought in new sales: Protein World claims to have gained 30,000 first-time customers and a profit of £2 million since the campaign began (Daubney 2015).

We analyze the Protein World case through qualitative (Kozinets 2010; WeiJo, Hietanen and Mattila 2014) and quantitative analysis of tweets and other online publications in order to develop the notion of distributed infuriation as a social media strategy. As we discuss below, current conceptualizations of consumer engagement cannot explain why Protein World has been successful (at least initially) with its distributed infuriation strategy. In order to fill this gap in the consumer engagement literature, we expand the cultural branding paradigm (Holt 2016; Holt and Cameron 2010) to explain the dynamics of the distributed infuriation strategy. In particular, the purpose of our research is to explore (1) how brands can orchestrate distributed narratives that are ideologically informed, and (2) how the distributed narratives impact the ideological alignment of the brand itself.

We used both qualitative and quantitative analysis techniques in order to answer our research questions. Most of our data for the qualitative analysis is collected by searching for tweets that contained “@proteinworld,” “#proteinworld,” or “Protein World.” Because of the large volume of tweets, only a subset of data from nine different days was used for the qualitative analysis. During this analysis, certain keywords (e.g., #fitshaming, #growupharriet, and #gamer-gate) emerged as particularly important. In addition, we viewed and read images, articles and Facebook posts that were attached to these tweets. We used the Sysomos software application in order to conduct a qualitative analysis the Protein World controversy. We analyzed the frequency of keywords mentioned in combination with @ProteinWorld mentions in order to better understand what different factions emerged over time. Finally, we visualized the different ideological camps that emerged during the Protein World controversy through interactional clustering analysis (figures 1).

Our findings have practical implications for marketers who wish to employ this strategy. As our analysis revealed, purposefully antagonizing critics on social media in order to mobilize brand supporters can be beneficial for a brand. However, there are inherent risks involved in this strategy: The focal brand can easily become associated with, or even accidentally endorse, extremely polarized narratives (e.g., rape threats) that would harm its image in the eyes of most customers. When using this strategy, brand managers should (1) frame both sides of the ideological battlefield according to their needs, (2) enable supporters to engage with critics from across the clearly defined ideological fault line, and (3) prevent fragmentation and hyper-polarization of the ideological battlefield. The last step not only involves banning critic-trolls, but also banning and marginalizing support-trolls whose actions would harm the original ideological fault line.

Aside from these managerial implication, our study advances the cultural branding paradigm by highlighting how it can be adapted to the age of social media and its emphasis on consumer-to-consumer interactions. While others have pointed out that cultural branding becomes even more suitable to position a brand in the age of social media (Holt 2016), our research is concerned with how the cultural branding paradigm can help marketing managers to tell their brand stories and engage consumers via social media (i.e., cultural engagement). We highlight how marketers can use cultural framing strategies (i.e., creating a clearly marked ideological fault line) in combination with established cultural branding tactics (e.g., cultural jujitsu and evoking ideological flashpoint; Holt and Cameron 2010) in order to facilitate brand supporters’ interactions with brand critics across the ideological fault line. And most importantly, we show how the distributed narratives that are exchanged in cultural engagement strategies can impact the ideological alignment of the brand itself.

REFERENCES


