Work With Me Or For Me: the Effect of Implicit Self-Theories and Role of Brands on Product Preference

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Four studies show that consumers’ implicit theories of personality interact with brand roles and influence their preference. Specifically, incremental (entity) theorists prefer a brand that portrays as a partner (servant) more since it fits their learning (performance) goal orientation. This effect is moderated by task difficulty.

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Brand-Mediated Ideological Edgework:
Negotiating the Aestheticized Human Body on Instagram - The Case of American Apparel

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INTRODUCTION

Brands make vast use of social media platforms such as Instagram to connect with “cultural intermediaries” and engage consumers (Carah and Shaul 2016, 69). Recent research finds that consumers – on new sites such as Twitter or Instagram – rather use brands in an instrumental manner for self-presentation, publicity, self-branding or bragging (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016; Marwick 2015; Presi, Maehle, and Kleppe 2016; Rokka and Canniford 2016). So, how can brands engage consumers? Contrary to these findings, the Instagram account of American Apparel (AA) – a fashion brand that is well known for its controversial visual ads – provokes considerable consumer reaction and gender-ideological discourse on Instagram. How do brands use visual rhetoric to initiate ideological discourse on otherwise quite self-centered social networking platforms? And how do these brand visuals mediate what Thompson and Üstün (2015) denominate as consumer ideological edgework?

I ideological edgework refers to marketplace performances of consumers that “challenge orthodox gender boundaries, without losing sociocultural legitimacy” (Thompson and Üstün 2015, 1). Thompson and Üstün (2015) describe ideological edgework as a form of gender work, but focus on the consumer as primary actor. However, brands also play a significant role in the (de-)construction of social reality, and market morality. Prior research describes the active role of brands as facilitators of networked brand performativity (von Wallpach, Hemetsberger, and Espersen 2017), and as catalysts of moral coalition formation (Stoeckl 2014). Research on the facilitating and catalyst role of brands in ideological discourse is scant.

This study aims to investigate into the role of brands as mediators of ideological edgework on social networking sites. Our analysis focuses on the visual and textual discourse that enfolds on the Instagram account of American Apparel. We analyze the visual performances of the brand, as well as brand-mediated consumer practices, and how these practices co-construct (body) ideologies in the digital marketplace. Findings reveal three brand, and three consumer practices. The brand authenticates, sets agendas and sensitizes through provocative visual performances of the body. Consumers textually applaud, moralize, and negotiate. We introduce and discuss the notion of brand-mediated ideological edgework, point out limitations of this study, and offer future research possibilities.

THEORY

Brands and Consumers on Social Media

In the age of digitalization, social media became an indispensable medium for brands to connect, communicate, and interact with consumers. Scholars find that consumers do interact with brands on social media, but use brands merely as a mediation device to gain publicity, and self-promotion (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016; Marwick 2015; Presi et al. 2016; Rokka and Canniford 2016). These consumer practices do not lead to the development of a collective identity around the brand of interest (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016), but rather to a multitude of identities that can destabilize the “spatial, temporal, symbolic and material properties of brand assemblages” (Rokka and Canniford 2016, 1). Closely related to this phenomenon is the notion of the microcelebrity (Marwick 2015). Microcelebrities mimic celebrity culture by “using the familiar trappings of thin but buxom bodies, sports cars and designer clothes” (Marwick 2015, 157). These studies rely on the concept of the “demiotic turn,” which describes the possibility to acquire mass audiences through the display of “a set of physical and aesthetic criteria” (Marwick 2015, 157). The relationship between brands and consumers can be described as unidirectional, where consumers use brands as means to gain publicity in social networks. On the other hand, studies point out micro-practices of consumers that aggregate and eventually change social institutions, such as fashion (Dolbec and Fischer 2015; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013).

Our aim is to extend this stream of research by studying how consumers and brands co-construct and challenge dominant ideological formations around idealized body and gender norms. Performativity theory offers a theoretical lens that allows investigating the co-construction of social norms through brands and consumers.

Performativity Theory

This study draws on performativity theory (Austin 1975; Butler 1990, 2010; Callon 1998; Lash 2015) in order to investigate how a brand visually performs the human body on Instagram. The central idea of performativity theory is that social reality, in our case the human body, is constructed through repetitive performances by brands and consumers. Performativity is constituted through the three elements of actors (brand and consumers), performances (the body), and socio-materiality (visuals) (Lucarelli and Hallin 2014). Performativity theory is based upon the idea that linguistic acts, practices, and visuals form a (perlocutionary) force that shapes reality (Austin 1975; Butler 2010). In the context of this study, this implies that a brand’s visual performances combined with consumers’ linguistic acts provide a discursive space, in which these two actors negotiate conceptions of the human body. A performance of the body is a “stylized repetition of acts” by multiple actors (Butler 1990, 140), that is, the hegemonic body ideal is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations. The representation of the body by fashion brands can be subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structures of hegemonic body representations. Thus, fashion brands can produce and dispute body ideals and claims for naturalness and originality.

This study focuses on a brand’s visual performances of the human body, and how this perlocutionary act is re-constructed by the brand’s audience. We study socio-material (Instagram brand images), as well as linguistic acts (comments of consumers) (Callon 1998). Applying this performativistic view onto the co-construction of human body aesthetics in the context of Instagram provides a more nuanced understanding of how brands and consumers contribute to the performance of the human body in the digital marketplace.

METHODOLOGY

Our study uses a netnographic approach to investigate how a brand mediates ideological consumer discourse in the digital marketplace (Bartl, Kannan, and Stockinger 2016; Kozinets 2015). Our primary source of data was the Instagram account of American Apparel (@americanapparelusa) as a prime example of a brand that induces ideological discourse through controversial visual body performanc-
es on Instagram. We collected 2528 posts from a total of 4842, covering a time frame from 2012 to 2017. We browsed through all Instagram posts of AA and selected all posts with an extensive comment section. The final sample comprised 37 Instagram posts with slightly more than 8000 comments in total. Data analysis encompassed an iterative process of inductive categorization (Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep 2006; Spiggle 1994) and abstraction to derive major themes related to the visual performances of AA and the textual discourse of the consumers. An interpretive group of three authors coded independently, and reached final consensus and intercoder reliability in extensive rounds of discussion (Arnold and Fischer 1994; Kreiner et al. 2006).

**FINDINGS**

The majority of brand accounts on Instagram show little to no interaction among consumers in the comment section, or between consumers and brands (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016). In contrast, we found an extensive discourse among consumers, reacting to non-conventional brand-mediated portrayals of the human body, for instance to a portrayal of an elderly model, a gay couple or other body forms and performances that deviate from prevalent fashion market ideologies (Dolbec and Fischer 2015). Consumers draw on the visual performances of the AA brand and address previous comments of other consumers in their attempt to (re-)construct ideologies of the human body. In the following we provide a detailed description of the discursive practices of the brand and the consumers (Table 1).

**Visual Brand Performances: Authenticating, Agenda-Setting and Sensitizing**

We find that the posts that trigger extensive consumer discourse employ a number of authenticating performances (Arnould and Price 2000) that embrace the natural and imperfect nature of the human body. Performances include featuring employees as brand models. The brand intentionally uses the hashtags #AAmodel or #AAemployee to emphasize whether the model is a professional or an employee. Sometimes the brand links the Instagram username of the model or the employee in the caption. AA also commonly adds personal interests of the models in the caption; that is, personalizing the ads to diminish the objectification of the depicted female bodies. Diversity is emphasized by depicting all body sizes and shapes, as well as all ethnicities and age groups in their ads. The posts are neither photo-shopped, nor retouched the depicted bodies. Various posts exhibit natural features of the human body, i.e. armpit hair on women, nipples or women with visible stretch marks, practices that aim to subvert the normalized social body, authenticating naturalness instead.

**Agenda-setting** contrasts the socialized body with ‘out of the norm’ visuals thus setting a mental agenda for public discourse (Ragas and Roberts 2009; Sutherland and Galloway 1981). AA, for instance, supports minorities, i.e. the LGBTQA+ community. For example, one ad depicting two black gay men featured the caption: “American Apparel celebrates sexuality! #LegalizeGay.” AA further cooperates with activist movements, i.e. the Human Rights Campaign, and challenges ideologies of youth by portraying Jacky O’Shaughnessy, a 64-year-old model, for their campaign “Sexy has no expiration date.” Agenda-setting performances question aestheticized body ideologies that go beyond the institution of fashion, addressing the social body. AA’s agenda-setting addresses consumers to follow the brand’s effort to challenge societal issues.

A third performance of brand-mediated ideological edgework is sensitizing through visuals (Hirschman and Thompson 1997). The edgy and provocative ads differ from mainstream ads pursuing contemporary norms of human body shape, health, or hygiene. AA regularly depicts bodies that deviate from aesthetic ideologies, i.e. pregnant or hairy women. Sensitizing refers to practices of repetitively introducing visuals that raise awareness of the implicit persuasiveness of the normalized social body. That is, AA’s visual performances can be interpreted as an attempt to problematize taste regimes and management of corporeality in contemporary society (Bauman 2005; Dolbec and Fischer 2015).

**Brand-Mediated Consumer Practices: Applauding, Moralizing and Negotiating**

How does the brand’s audience react to brand performances? First, we find that consumers *applaud the brand*. They do so textually, i.e. “Love it!” but also sign-based, using emojis. We find that consumers embrace the visual performances of the brand on Instagram to express visions of a different human body ideology. For example, one consumer commented on an ad depicting model Jacky O’Shaughnessy: “I am so fucking proud to have a company like this based in America. #gousa #4alove.”

Moreover, consumers embrace the idea of “*real human beings*” that defy “the made up concept of beauty” in our society. Consumers further defend the brand against negative comments and brand-attacks of other consumers. They bond with the brand to “*shatter the delusions […] of youth obsessed culture*,” emphasizing the collaborative character of ideological edgework (Fournier 1998).

Second, in response to AA’s brand performances we find *moralizing* consumer discourse (Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010). Consumers regularly attack the depicted human bodies. Human bodies that deviate from beauty conventions are targeted with negative comments in an attempt to (re-)stabilize current social norms of beauty and social order. Consumers do not only attack the depicted human bodies, but also the LGBTQA+ community as such, religious beliefs of other consumers, and AA itself for their attempt to break institutionalized norms of beauty, sexuality, and religion. For example, one consumer commented: “American Apparel goes too far to break the boundaries of ‘beauty’ sometimes.”

In contrast, counter-ideological moralizations defend brand-mediated edgework and argue for freedom of speech and belief. We find that these consumers verbally defend the brand’s visual rhetoric. As one consumer put it: “I love how you all are shattering standard societal beauty norms.” Moralizing consumer discourse addresses the brand or other consumers directly, mostly by the use of the affordability “[@username]”. Consumers and the brand form a moral coalition and destabilizing force to break the rigidity of social conventions and beliefs in normalized body aesthetics.

Third, we also find that consumers *negotiate body-related ideologies* initiated by the brand’s visual performances (Rokka and Moisander 2009; Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006). Negotiations comprise gender-related ideologies, i.e. what does it mean to be a woman or a man in our society; where does beauty start and where does it end. For instance, consumers discuss the role of body hair and shaving practices. An ad of AA featuring a young woman showing her armpit hair initiated negotiations of women’s liberation, and why men do not have to shave off armpit hair, but women do. In defense of armpit hair, a consumer comments: “YES. Just a huge yes to promoting females loving their body even they don’t match standards for women these days.”

Similarly, consumers negotiate body sizes and shapes (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013), or argue for more ethnic diversity and sexual freedom. Consumer negotiations comprise discourse of liberation and empowerment and include consumers as well as the brand. In contrast to moralizing, negotiating practices articulate consumers’
### Table 1: Findings

#### Visual Brand Performances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authenticating</th>
<th>Examples of Visual Brand Performances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Naturalizing the human body</td>
<td>![Image of woman with stretch marks]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Displaying the imperfect human body, i.e. stretch marks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Displaying diversity, i.e. body shapes, sizes, ages, ethnicities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personalizing the ad, i.e. “Meet Jacky”</td>
<td></td>
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#### Agenda-setting

| • Expressing solidarity with minorities through the use of hashtags, i.e. “#LoveConquersHate” or by producing products that express solidarity, i.e. “This month purchase a shirt or tote and proceeds will support the Equality Act and the fight to end #LGBT discrimination” | ![Image of diverse group of models] |
| • Adding agenda-setting captions and hashtags to the IG posts, i.e. “#LegalizeGay” or “#MakeAmericaGayAgain” | |

#### Sensitizing

| • Edgy and provocative visual performances | ![Image of provocative visual performance] |
| • Display of ideology-deviant human bodies in an aestheticized fashion | |
| • Provocative captions and hashtags, i.e. “Sexy has no expiration date” | |

#### Brand-Mediated Consumer Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applauding</th>
<th>Examples of Consumer Data</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Expression of positive feelings towards the depicted human body, i.e. through comments, likes and emojis</td>
<td>“This is beautiful, she is beautiful and the commentators on the AA Instagram are always so disappointing. This is a great ad and those who think a human body past a certain age is gross are just ignorant. This deserves more positive comments and I applaud AA for not letting comments like these stop the use of models of all shapes, sizes, ages and colors”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Embracing the brand’s visual performances</td>
<td>“Beautiful! Let’s shatter the delusions we’ve created in this youth obsessed culture! I hate to tell you guys, but just as she was a young woman once, so shall each of us age. Let’s accept that and not judge people based on their age. How is that any better than judging based on ethnicity or gender?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Embracing the marketing style of AA</td>
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<tr>
<th>Moralizing</th>
<th>Examples of Consumer Data</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Attacking</td>
<td>“Shame on your company @americanapparelusa! Maybe you should just try to make quality clothing to sell your product instead of using porn to draw attention. On a side note your clothing is boring and monochromatic”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• the depicted human body</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• the brand</td>
<td>“Everyone has their own beliefs no matter what religion is. We need to stop those who want to cause harm to innocent people. No matter what religion, race, gender or sexual orientation we cannot let people die cause of what they are. Humans are all born equally and we need to join together and share peace and love with the world! Violence isn’t the answer. LOVE IS!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• minorities, i.e. LGBTQA+ community</td>
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<tr>
<td>• religions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Defending</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• the depicted human body</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• minorities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• freedom of speech</td>
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<td>• freedom of belief</td>
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<tr>
<th>Negotiating</th>
<th>Examples of Consumer Data</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Gender ideologies</td>
<td>“[…] because for decades now women have been molded to fit a certain image and if you don’t meet up to this image you aren’t worthy, beautiful, etc so with her not giving a fuck about the natural hair she has and that we were ALL born with and sharing her confidence with the world, can uplift and encourage a way bigger movement than just you and I and everyone else commenting on this damn thing. Not sure why this needs to be explained to so many women it’s frightening and the only gross thing about this fucking post”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Female objectification vs. liberation and empowerment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Freedom of the feminine body</td>
<td>“[…] Anyway. Only us women argue about body hair. I, myself, don’t like hairy armpits, vagina, upper lip, or nothing that looks ungroomed. No hair on those parts of my body make me feel clean and feminine. I don’t even like too much hair on men. So it’s not a “I’m a sheep who follows society’s rules about women.” But I guess didn’t do my research enough to know that nothing screams out “I am a rebel” or “F*** you, society rules!!” like hairy women. #VivaLaBush (tree-emoji) I’m out.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ethnic diversity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Freedom of sexuality</td>
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opinions towards societal ideologies per se. Brand-mediated ideological edgework is applauded as liberating and at the same time contested for simply abusing human bodies for marketization.

DISCUSSION

This paper introduces the notion of brand-mediated ideological edgework to illustrate how brands induce consumer discourse that challenges societal ideologies and norms. Interestingly, in the case of AA, we find that a commonly monologue oriented social media platform provides a discursive space enabling powerful visual rhetoric for brand-mediated ideological edgework. Our notion of brand-mediated ideological edgework extends Thompson and Üstün’s (2015) perspective by showing how a brand becomes a central actor in ideological edgework. We define brand-mediated ideological edgework as a brand’s effort to mediate consumer ideological discourse that destabilizes and (re-)stabilizes social convention and order. Ideological edgework thus becomes collaborative work of diverse market actors, embracing brand performances that exert an intentional (illocutionary) force (Austin 1975; Butler 2010) followed by a perlocutionary act visible in consumer discourse (Schechner 2006).

Our study shows that social formations around a brand within a digital environment are more multifaceted than the notion of brand public implies (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016). Our findings suggest that social media based consumer culture may very well be structured by discourse, and not only by affects, intended to generate publicity and fame (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016; Marwick 2015; Presi et al. 2016; Rokka and Canniford 2016). The case of American Apparel demonstrates that brands mediate consumer discourse in that consumers use brand rhetoric to express their concern and form coalitions with brands to engage in ideological edgework about beauty ideals, body, and gender norms.

This study has two main limitations. First, our study focuses on one brand and one digital platform. Second, findings are still exploratory. Further research should therefore investigate ads in detail, i.e. using a critical visual analysis (Rokka and Canniford 2016), and adopt a processual perspective in order to capture the dramaturgy of brand-mediated ideological edgework. Social network analysis could further illuminate central themes and key players that manifest the public negotiation of the human body in the social network of a brand.

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