Disruptive Self-Brand Play: the Izikhothane Journey

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Morally disengaged members of the Izikhothane subculture in South African townships adhere to “live life as if you have money, even though you don’t.” They engage in disruptive self-brand play with expensive high-end brands, using and destroying brands as part of their self-concept enhancement. When they morally reengage, play stops.

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Paper #1: The Game Day Experience: Consumers, Brands and Brand Celebrations
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Paper #2: Follow the Code: The Impact of Linguistic Brand Codes on Brand Journeys
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Paper #3: Disruptive Self-Brand Play: The Izikhothane Journey
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Paper #4: Where Do We Go From Here? Consumer-Brand Relationships After Brands do Bad
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SESSION OVERVIEW
The importance of relationships between consumers and brands is made manifest by the amount of attention that the topic has received from researchers and practitioners alike (Fournier 1998). We propose a session exploring dynamic consumer-brand relationships. These consumer brand journeys start with firms’ strategic efforts to strengthen ties with consumers, and consumers’ agency defining brand relationships in their own terms. Consumer-brand intimacy creates a sense of inclusion (we-ness) that enhances brand loyalty and brand equity. Inevitably, inclusion necessitates exclusion (otherness) that sparks controversy and consumer resistance. As consumer-brand relationships escalate, dialectical wars and oppositional discourses generate within consumers and between consumers and their brands. At the extreme, relationships become dysfunctional when consumers engage with brands in disruptive ways, or when firms abuse the trust of consumers. The studies in this session unpack the tensions between brand acculturating forces and consumer agency that may result in brand loyalty, opposition, or brand abandonment.

In the first paper, the authors propose a model to explain firms’ roles in initiating and supporting consumer-brand relationships. In the second paper, researchers explore consumer’s agency interpreting brand cultural objects (Schroeder 2009) and show how the strengthening of consumer-brand ties inevitably results in ingroup-outgroup dynamics and exclusion. A third paper explores disruptive consumer-brand relationships illustrating the manner in which consumers normatively excluded from high-end brands still use those brands in anti-normative ways in order to express aspirational pseudo-identities. In a fourth study, the authors investigate what happens when valued brands do bad, and consumers engage in repair processes to continue the relationship to avoid the potential loss of identity related with a breakup.

The presenters take a variety of interpretive approaches and methodologies to analyze data from four very different contexts (tailgating, Starbucks, a South African subculture, and Volkswagen community). Together, the studies shape a lively conversation on consumer-brand relationships in the form of a “brand journey” from the initial steps towards building intimacy to the dissolution of ties. These papers further our understanding on consumer-brand relationships, exploring a purposely broad the spectrum of relationships to illustrate what happens at and beyond the boundaries of consumer-brand ties. Brand journeys have significant managerial and theoretical implications, and our session aims to generate discussion and raise questions, such as: How are brand communities and brand-engaged subcultures created and maintained, leveraging brand cultural objects and consumers’ active negotiation of meaning? How do the respective roles of firms and consumers impact the nature and strength of consumer-brand relationships; what is the interplay between these relationship partners and the consequences of their interplay? How does “good” and “bad” consumer and firm behavior impact consumer-brand relationships and their boundaries?

The Game Day Experience: Consumers, Brands and Brand Celebrations
EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Brand communities are embraced by marketers and consumers alike for the keen ability of those communities to enliven the brand and keep it connected with its users. Beyond the experience of community, the present research seeks to explain how events engage communities in support of the brand. Prior studies of Trek- kies and their conventions (Kozinets 2001), Harley Owner Group (HOG) members and their rallies (McAlexander et al. 2002), or distance runners (Thomas et al. 2013) theorize the import of community member interactions. In particular, those studies find roles for shared rituals and norms to sustain community engagement and interaction of members over time through various mechanisms. While much is understood about how relationships between consumers and brand contribute to brand loyalty, there is an opportunity to explore roles for the firm in contributing to and sustaining consumer-brand relations beyond brand actions themselves. One mechanism that seems to be impactful in the development and continuity of community for some brands is the orchestrated gathering of community members to celebrate the brand.

Through an ethnography of collegiate tailgating, we explore roles for firms in supporting consumer-brand relationships. More specifically, we seek to explain roles for firms in constructing and executing events for brand communities in service to developing relationships to the brand through events orchestrated on behalf of the community, and to foster relationships with other fans. Collegiate tailgating is often a university orchestrated event where the university invites alumni, donors, and fans to celebrate the brand around a football contest. While colleges are a unique form of brand, many firms aspire to create loyalty similar to that fans have for their favorite athletic teams. The zeal of fans for athletics is not lost on university officials who recognize home football games as opportunities to engage with various stakeholders in support of broader university goals and objectives. And, many universities have developed formal organizations to orchestrate such events. Consider this account:

We have an Office of Special Events and Protocol... [we] formed an Ad Hoc committee... It was probably a 15 or 17 person committee. It had alumni on it... [University] trustees... security personnel from the NFL... It was a very diverse group, and they studied the whole game day experience at Blackthorn because, intuitively, we felt that it could be better. We were getting a lot of feedback around the tailgating and the pregame activities that wasn’t really positive... This group did their work and they broke it down into three buckets – safety and security is number one; hospitality is number two; and communication is number three... [The] report had about
Despite the lack of deliberate examination, the existence of linguistic codes shared and used within consumption communities and brand communities is widely recognized. Thomsen, Straubhaar and Bolyard (1998) use the words “jargon or group speak” to describe the insider code used within cyber-communities. Schau and Muñiz (2002) find a “community jargon” shared in brand-related personal websites. Langerak et al. (2003) use the term “specialized language” for the jargon spoken within an e-brand’s virtual community. In their ethnography of the new bikers, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) define subcultures of consumption as having unique jargons, and their data illustrates several examples of “biker vernacular.” One of the Trekker sub-communities described by Kozinets (2001) revolves around the constructed language Klingon. Muñiz and Schau (2005) describe a characteristic “formulaic language” within users of the discontinued Apple Newton. Whereas the presence of brand codes has been repeatedly acknowledged, their relevance to consumer researcher theory and marketing implications have yet to be explored. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by putting the spotlight on this particular brand cultural object.

We bring together Bourdieu’s cultural capital theories (e.g. Bourdieu 1986, Bourdieu & Passeron 1990), a brand culture approach (Schroeder 2009), and a consumer research reading of sociolinguistics to study the practices and discourses created by branded jargon and dialects. Starbucks is our context for studying brand codes. Brand-specific linguistic codes were studied using an ethnographic (Kozinets 2002) approach complemented with in-store observation. Brand related conversations were extracted from official and fan-created websites, Twitter messages and YouTube videos. Findings were further informed by naturalistic observation in Starbucks coffeehouses.

Findings confirm the appropriateness of the “brand language” metaphor, revealing the ubiquity of its use among consumers and illustrating the many ways in which linguistic brand codes mirror natural languages. Specifically, this study sheds light on the largely unexplored topic of how “brand literacy” (Bengtsson & Firat 2006) is acquired. Careful examination of Starbucks’ linguistic brand code reveals “jargon” to be an insufficient term to refer to a code with grammar-like properties in which issues of syntax (e.g. word order), pragmatics (e.g. tacitness and sub-textuality), and style (e.g. redundancy) matter. Linguistic competence in “Starbucksese” is revealed as a continuum ranging from complete lack of fluency to “native-like” competence. Two main opposing discourses co-exist around Starbucks’ ordering script. A wide range of oppositional and skeptical consumers see the brand code as unnecessarily cryptic, putatively designed to pretentiously sound “vaguely European” or simply exert Starbucks cultural hegemony. A second discourse (as voiced by baristas, and endorsed by most fans) is to discount the need for the code and the barriers to learning it without denying its complexity.

Among the most brand loyal customers endorsing the latter discourse, competence in Starbucks linguistic code signals commitment to the brand (and hence, status within the fan community). These fans often police the brand discourse and community in such a way that lack of fluency is tolerated, if looked down upon, but oppositional discourse is attacked and silenced.

On the other ideological end, oppositional customers, in their own words, “make a point” of not learning or using the linguistic brand code while ridiculing those who do and sharing with like-minded users their successes in defying Starbucks cultural dominance. Interestingly, they do so while still being Starbucks customers (many of them declared frequent customers).

Amid this dialectical war, occasional and unaligned Starbucks customers must still manage to navigate the brand code. Lacking

Follow the Code: The Impact of Linguistic Brand Codes on Brand Journeys

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Successful brands are active producers of cultural objects, rather than mere parasites that appropriate popular culture. Indeed, brands create symbols, myths, and even prescriptive models for the way consumers think and behave – their goals, ideals, and values. Eavesdropping on someone ordering a drink at Starbucks or talking about Star Trek will make obvious that brands also change the way consumers talk. Despite the widely-accepted centrality of language to culture (Crawford & Valsiner 1999), brand-specific linguistic codes have been largely overlooked in cultural approaches to consumer research.
fluency, they do so using a variety of compensatory strategies that typically result in negative feelings or suboptimal outcomes.

Fans use brand codes as a field-specific cultural capital and a source of identity, belonging, and group status. In the case of a highly accessible brand like Starbucks, cultural capital is more tied to how to consume and less to what is consumed (Holt 1998). Whereas less-than-expert customers are needed if code competence is to be a signal of high status, deniers of the value of “speaking the brand” are a menace to status-seeking fans who have learned the code. Lack of fluency is described by consumers as a source of rejection and anxiety. Consistent with previous theory (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, Lamont and Lareau’s 1988), cultural and social exclusion prove to be a central component of the status game. On the other hand, and deviating from previous literature on consumer resistance, we find oppositional consumers who are “anti-Starbucks” rather than anti-Starbucks. Consumers can be polarized not only for and against a brand (as in Thompson & Arsel 2004, Kozinets & Handelman 2004) but for and against a brand’s cultural objects while still consuming the brand. Eric interpretation of this form of consumer cultural resistance is that consumers are inverting the sign of marketer-imposed codes (Ozanne & Murray 1995) while still using them for status-seeking purposes. As Holt (2002) points out, opposition does not liberate from the market, but instead drives consumers to build their resistance identity through the market. We extend Holt’s findings by adding that even opposition to a brand’s cultural objects does not emancipate from the brand: knowing and denying brand cultural objects can be two fields within the same context; two strategies in the same status-seeking game of cultural capital.

Disruptive Self-Brand Play: The Izikhothane Journey

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer-brand relationships take on myriad forms. A preponderance of this research has focused on the positive associations between consumers and their brands as relationship partners (Fournier 1998), as extensions of self (Escalas and Bettman 2003), and as identity signals (Levy 1959; Schau and Gilly 2003), yet others have pointed to more adverse aspirational, materialistic, and compulsive consumption practices (Berk 1988; Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton 1997). In this research, we introduce self-brand play, defined as incorporating brands into the self to create an alternative play reality, with no rules or responsibilities. The self is tied to the brand, and the brand determines the value of the self. Self-brand play is viewed as an escape with purpose of enhancing the self. When one plays, the rules and norms of society do not apply, actively allowing for play accompanied by moral disengagement. Bandura (1999) propounds that different types of moral disengagement strategies are employed to make detrimental conduct acceptable through self-regulatory systems. Indeed, moral disengagement has previously been used to explain the perpetuation of inhumanities, both actual (Leidner, Castano, Zaiser and Giner-Sorolla 2010; Ososfky, Bandura and Zimbardo 2005) and in virtual video games (Hartmann and Vor derer 2009).

Disruptive self-brand play operates at the intersection of brand signaling, aspirational consumption, and moral disengagement. We argue that when moral disengagement ensues, consumer-brand relationships can escalate beyond what is deemed appropriate and acceptable by standard social norms, and result in detrimental consequences to the brand, oneself, and others. The context for our research is the Izikhothane subculture within South African townships. Izikhothane is the term coined for the behavior of poor South African township males who as collectives (or “crews”) engage in aspiration-al consumption of high-end brands and participate in dissing practices (or “battles”) to destroy these expensive brands, as evidence of their ability to afford them (Howell and Vincent 2014; Mnisi 2015; Nkosi 2011).

We explore disruptive self-brand play as part of Izikhothane subculture practices using an interpretive approach. We first conducted a focus group with five Izikhothane members to obtain a general understanding of the subculture, individual roles within the crew, rituals and practices with regard to expensive brand consumption, shared norms (e.g., having gold plated teeth sharing shape symbols), and the preparations and practices related to battles. These discussions provided the groundwork for the depth interview protocol in which we examine the journey of members of the Izikhothane subculture, specifically the enticement and motivations for self-brand play, moral disengagement for aspirational consumption and experiences in disruptive self-brand play, as well as moral reengagement as part of the Izikhothane journey. We purposively sampled from four Izikhothane crews, recruiting 29 members. All informants were at least 18 years of age when interviewed, having participated in the Izikhothane subculture for two to ten years. Four interviewers from a South African research firm conducted the interviews in Soweto, South Africa at specific locations identified by participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Our findings document that the Izikhothane subculture is grounded in the informants’ life circumstances, marked by broken middle class homes in South African townships, where these young men are looking for ways to express their identity, and vie for fame and attention. They are attracted to this subculture because of their love of brands, high fashion associations, dancing, and observed “famous” lifestyle. Expensive brands, cash, taxis, and music are the key props for the battles between the crews. The subculture is bound by, “Live life as if you have money, even though you don’t,” with the intent of creating a pseudo-identity.

As informants report becoming more committed to the Izikhothane subculture, we observe moral disengagement. The township youth, with few financial resources of their own, lie to get cash from their family members, save their lunch money, hustle jobs, and sometimes sell drugs or stolen cell phones to buy these expensive shoes, clothes and food products needed for the battles. Crews organize the battles, which are typically one-on-one “competitions” in which food and alcohol are thrown at one another with the express intent to destroy the expensive brands; sometimes there is tearing of expensive clothes and burning of cash. Informants, across all crews, reframe their conduct to downplay the consequences from the behavior, and devalue or dehumanize victims of harm. Moral disengagement occurs throughout and is not only related to high-end brands, but also with regard to girls who serve as groupies and “snacks.”

As informants reflect on their Izikhothane membership over the years, many acknowledge their moral disengagement as having significant collateral damage, and report that they are in the process of leaving the Izikhothane. They link the disruptive self-brand play to distraction from schooling and the need to repeat grades or even drop out, with disrespect of parents and teachers, and with the denigration of others which often leads to jealousy. Some suggest their Izikhothane “successes” and “fame” make them safer, whereas others have concern for their own safety, perceiving their visible display of high-end brands makes them targets of crime and violence. As informants contemplate their futures, they recognize their failures (not going to school or working to their potential) and their wastefulness of money (that could be used for my family or others who have financial needs), as well as the bad influence they have on their siblings and young township children. Their reflections acknowledge
a moral reengagement, and a call to question the value of this disruptive self-brand play. As they morally reengage, this play stops. Many report transitioning from the Izikhothane lifestyle by rather focusing on the practicality of life with attention to life goals of completing their education and finding jobs.

Our research contributes to the work on consumer-brand relationships and consumer journeys, providing unique insights into how disruptive self-brand play is at the center of creating an aspirational pseudo-identity. Moral disengagement serves the Izikhothane well through their self-concept enhancement in a resource-constrained environment, yet acknowledgement that this pseudo-identity has deleterious effects over time reengages a moral compass to pursue a new life-path and identity.

**Where Do We Go From Here? Consumer-Brand Relationships After Brands do Bad**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

“On September 3, 2015, Volkswagen AG disclosed at a meeting with the California Air Resources Board and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that emissions software in four-cylinder diesel vehicles from model years 2009 until 2015 contained a ‘defeat device’ in the form of hidden software that could recognize whether a vehicle was being operated in a test laboratory on the road. The software made those vehicles emit higher levels of nitrogen oxides when the vehicles were driven in actual road use rather than laboratory testing.” (Michael Horn’s testimony, as President and CEO of Volkswagen Group of America, before the U.S. House Energy and Commerce Committee, 10/08/15)

Brands do bad. Volkswagen’s “Dieselgate” scandal is but one example of the deliberate misdeeds brands sometimes engage in that we might expect to provoke outrage among consumers and culminate in relationship dissolutions (Bechwart and Morris 2003; Hemetsberger, Kittinger-Rosaneli, and Friedmann 2009). Even heartfelt love may become hate, as devoted consumers feel betrayed and seek revenge through anti-brand activity (Grégoire and Fisher 2008; Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009; Johnson, Matear, and Thomson 2011).

Although transgressions are often thought to lead to weakening or termination of consumer-brand relationships, previous research has shown that other trajectories are possible, and some consumers do retain relationships after revelations of malfeasance (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Lin and Sung 2014; Sung and Choi 2010). The present paper thus investigates the repair processes consumers undertake to continue in relationships with wrongdoers.

Prior research has focused on factors that motivate consumers to maintain such relationships, while overlooking consumers’ active relationship repair work. For example, Aaker et al. (2004) emphasize how brand personality matters to relationship progress after good brands do bad, finding that violations prompt the reinvigoration of relationships with exciting brands (i.e., those associated with energy and youthfulness) through gains in knowledge about the partner and the relationship (per intimacy and partner quality development), reactivation of self-connections, and intensification of interdependency levels. The consumer-brand relationship literature also posits that there may exist different kinds of relationship dynamics that prevent consumers from turning away from transgressors, including love, mixed-valence (e.g., love-hate engagements), and negative relationship types (e.g., master-slave, dealer-addict, and villain-victim) (Alvarez and Fournier 2016; Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012; Fournier 1998; Fournier and Alvarez 2013). Sung and Choi (2010) reinforce that consumers might not easily discontinue the relationship with a brand if they perceive they have made a great investment which could not be recovered if the relationship dissolved. Lin and Sung (2014) argue that brand identity fusion (i.e., consumers’ feelings of oneness with a brand) trigger relationship-sustaining behaviors because individuals interpret brand misbehaviors as threats to their identities, increasing their tendencies to engage in biased information processing and motivated reasoning that confirms their positive beliefs about the brand.

Arsel and Stewart’s (2015) research constitutes one notable effort to uncover the coping strategies consumers use to continue relationships in the face of negative information about the brand. They find that consumers may deny brand failures, claim moral superiority as they develop oppositional narratives, and keep product use secret from others. However, the authors investigate consumers’ response to identity-degrading meanings arising from doppelgänger images rather than ethical missteps. These two situations may pose different challenges to consumers.

Our qualitative research has analyzed online consumer posts about “Dieselgate” in the comments sections of major US news outlets, automotive magazines, and blogs. Data collection and analysis started at the outbreak of Volkswagen’s emissions scandal in September of 2015, and continued for the following seventeen months. Results show that consumers engage in three main repair processes to maintain relationships despite awareness of brand misdeeds: contextualizing, recalibrating, and refocusing.

“Contextualizing” refers to mobilizing the institutional context of the automobile industry (and its long history of scandals) to downplay negative interpretations of “Dieselgate” by contrasting Volkswagen’s misdeeds with other automakers’ misbehaviors “just like” or “worse than” theirs. In the process of “recalibrating,” consumers reframe the magnitude of the sins, for example, by positioning the use of defeat devices as acceptable when regulations are considered excessive or unwarranted. They may also weigh Volkswagen’s wrongdoings against unethical behaviors pervasive in everyday life (e.g., gaming school tests), and compare the pollution caused by vehicles with defeat devices to that caused by “legal” technologies (e.g., older car models, factories). Finally, in “refocusing,” consumers minimize the importance of certain product features (e.g., environmental benefits) while playing up other attributes (e.g., economic benefits) as the critical ones for everyday usage. Implications for both the consumer-brand relationship and the branding literatures are discussed.

**REFERENCES**


