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We, Us and Them: Multiple Identity Projects in Brand Community Conflicts

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Communities of opposition have been conceptualized as dyadic identity projects. However, when media events create direct conflict between brand communities, consumers engage in a complex negotiation of multiple identities. The four responses to conflict observed in our study demonstrated brand community identity defense, subcultural identity integration and out-group identity reproduction.

When considering an individual’s allegiance to a brand community there is a tendency to view it as a singular identity. In extension to this focus on the development of a single identity, the process of identity negotiation is considered to be constructed in comparison or competition to an opposition brand (Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010; Múniz and Hamer 2001; Múniz and O’Guinn 2001). This identity project means that individuals define who they are by differentiating themselves from who they are not. However, this simple dyadic between a single chosen identity and a rejected identity is an oversimplification of the identity formation process. This paper presents a case where a series of related media events brought two brand communities into conflict where multiple identities were enacted. The reactions of individuals to this conflict were influenced by which of their multiple brand identities they most strongly associated with.

It is proposed in this paper that the brand community of opposition dyadic is an oversimplification of brands in competition within the same product category. A clear example of this exists within the science fiction / fantasy (SFF) fandom communities, where individuals may identify with one or more SFF brands and also with the SFF subculture as a whole (Jenkins 1992). The freedom to simultaneously identify with multiple brands and with the wider subculture means that identity projects in this situation are much more complex than the dyadic of opposition between brands. The event that forms the basis for this paper was initiated by comments attributed to the brand heroes of two brand communities within the SFF subculture and reported in the media. These comments formed the basis for subsequent conflict between the two communities.

THE LITERATURE
The difference between brand communities and subcultures of consumption is somewhat amorphous as the terms have often been used interchangeably. The demarcation between these two concepts in the literature is that subcultures of consumption exist in tota as a social structure. Whereas a brand community is negotiated by each individual as they encounter each new social situation (Múniz and O’Guinn 2001). However, a more practical difference has developed where brand communities refer to the social networks that develop around specific brands (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Múniz and O’Guinn 2001), and subcultures of consumption tends to be applied to product classes or consumption activities (Cova and Cova 2002). Although this segregation does not exclude brand subcultures (Kozinets 2001), the development of the consumer tribe literature has led to the term brand community generally being applied to brand focused social networks.

THE STUDY EVENT
The conflict event was initiated by the publication in Time of an interview with the author of the Harry Potter (HP) series of books, J.K. Rowling (JKR), where two issues of contention arose (Grossman 2005). The first issue was JKR’s claim that she didn’t realize she was writing fantasy when she wrote the first HP book; the second issue was a quote from the reporter that described the fantasy genre as deeply conservative, and that HP’s success resided in its lack of SFF clichés. These two issues motivated the author, of the Discworld (DW) SFF book series, Terry Pratchett (TP), to write a letter to the editor criticizing the portrayal of fantasy literature and implying that comments made by JKR were disingenuous. The online activity following the publication of TP’s letter included thousands of posts made on DW and HP online fan sites.

THE BRANDS
DW and HP are two of the most successful fantasy brands in the world. The first DW book, The Colour of Magic was published in 1983. Currently 38 DW books have been published, with a new one published every year. The sale of DW books is estimated to be...
around 60 million copies and is primarily aimed at an adult readership.

In comparison, the HP series is a self-contained story arc of 7 books about a boy wizard and his time at Hogwarts School for Wizards and Witches, and the battle against the evil Voldemort aimed at young readers. JKR published the first book in the HP series in 1997 with *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* in the US). The series has now been completed with sales above 300 million copies and box office success with movie adaptations.

Both fantasy novel series have strong fan communities, although the international success of the HP series, for adults and children, makes it the dominant brand in the market (Múñiz and O’Guinn 2001).

**THE METHOD**

This conflict arose while the first author was engaged in a larger ethnographic study of the DW community. The nature of the event and its aftermath required extending engagement to the HP community. To do this the first author conducted participant and non-participant observation of online fan forums for both brands. Multiple sites were accessed to triangulate findings and provide differing perspectives on the interpretations of the event and responses of the various actors (Eisenhardt 1989). The second author provided an outsiders’ perspective to the data analysis and interpretation as they had limited experience with the brands, and no interaction with the communities involved. A total of three forums were selected based on the amount of activity present and whether the forum was officially supported. Relevant threads were downloaded and analyzed using Nvivo. Analysis of the forum threads followed the method outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

**FINDINGS**

In the case of brand communities in conflict the identity project of members goes beyond the protagonist seeking moral distinctiveness (Luedicke et al. 2010). HP community members engaged in active antagonist activities by signing up as members to DW community forums in order to attack the DW identity. The antagonist responses whose identity as HP fans were threatened included the adversaries, who remained within DW community social norms, and the screamers, whose identity project extended to challenge DW social norms. The DW community became defenders of their identity through the comedic response of sharing inside jokes. A large portion of the DW and HP communities saw themselves as SFF members whose identity was threatened by the mainstream media representation of their chosen genre. These members responded with debate of the genre, the media, and the brands as a legitimization of their subcultural identity.

The moralistic distinctions depended on whether the individual identified most with the HP, DW or the SFF subculture. This identification influenced their interpretation of the media event that initiated the conflict, HP fans tended to view Pratchett’s comments as “sour grapes” and JKR as undeserving of criticism. DW fans saw Rowling’s comment about not knowing she was writing fantasy as disingenuous and that TP had a legitimate right to point this out. At a subcultural level, the distinctions made were that the media viewed SFF as old fashioned and moribund while the SFF subculture saw the media as being biased and uninformed with resentment of their portrayal of the genre to a wider audience. Through the reactions of both brand communities to these issues each community was able to draw direct examples of behaviors on which to base their moral distinctions. These are likely to be more long lasting and accurate than internally generated identity differentiation projects and are more difficult to manage.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings from this study illustrate the importance of identification in brand community and subcultural conflict. Individuals are not engaged in a simple dyadic identity project but rather are negotiating multiple identities between a preferred brand, a familiar brand of opposition, and the product category subculture. This negotiation involves the identity defense between oppositional brand communities, the identity integration between the brand communities, and the subculture and the identity reproduction with the mainstream media.

Brand community identity took the form of identity defense, with antagonism in the form of adversary and screamer responses and protagonism activities in the form of comedic responses. These identity projects reflect a simple dyadic relationship between opposition brands (Luedicke et al. 2010; Múñiz and Hamer 2001).

The relationship between the brand community and the subculture was one of identity
integration. Brand communities position their identity through a process of negotiating subcultural norms and then differentiating the norms of that community from the wider subculture. For marketers this identity integration project is important as it forms the basis of the position that individuals form of competing brands in the category, and there exists a potential for values to be aligned or differentiated to attract subcultural members to new offerings.

The final identity project is identity reproduction which involves the communication of the product category identity to a wider audience of the out-group. When the media undermines the legitimacy of the genre, oppositional brand communities can unite to defend their identity against this out-group that is perceived to be marginalizing the subculture. Marketers form a key source of legitimizing communication about brands and product categories to out-group audiences. This research has highlighted the added complexity that exists in identity projects when the dyadic relationship between brand communities is extended to include their place within the wider subculture and market.

When considering an individual’s allegiance to a brand community there is a tendency to view it as a singular identity. While this identity may reflect a negotiated process between brand, product, marketer and other community members (McAlexander et al. 2002), it is focused on a single brand. Similarly, subcultures of consumption allow that multiple brands may be sampled to achieve a single cultural identity (Cova and Cova 2002). In extension to this focus on the development of a single identity, the process of identity negotiation is considered to be constructed in comparison or competition to an opposition brand (Luedicke et al. 2010; Múñiz and Hamer 2001; Múñiz and O’Guinn 2001). This identity project means that individuals define who they are by differentiating themselves from who they are not. However, this simple dyadic between a single chosen identity and a rejected identity is an oversimplification of the identity formation process. This paper presents a case where a series of related media events brought two brand communities into conflict where multiple identities were enacted. The reactions of individuals to this conflict were influenced by which of their multiple identities they most strongly associated with at a given point in the conflict.

It is proposed in this paper that the brand community of opposition dyadic is an oversimplification of brands in competition within the same product category. Examples of communities of opposition are Apple versus PC users where both brands exist within the computer subculture (Múñiz and O’Guinn 2001); Coke versus Pepsi as brands of cola (Múñiz and Hamer 2001), and Hummer versus Prius are both motor vehicles (Luedicke et al. 2010). This means that while individuals will negotiate their identity within a chosen brand community they are simultaneously negotiating their identity within a larger subculture of consumption of the product category. A clear example of this exists within the science fiction / fantasy (SFF) fandom communities, where individuals may identify with one or more SFF brands and also with the SFF subculture as a whole (Jenkins 1992). The freedom to simultaneously identify with multiple brands and with the wider subculture means that identity projects in this situation are much more complex than the dyadic of opposition between brands, as individuals negotiate their identity and opposition to multiple possible brands, and the wider subculture.

Also of concern within this case is that the conflict that arose was not only between two competing brands, but also between the subculture of consumption and mainstream media. The SFF subculture and respective brand communities have been found to have a tension between their in-group identity and the identity expressed to the mainstream out-group (Kozinets 2001). For instance, the wearing of Star Trek uniforms as a proper expression of membership to the in-group is interpreted as “get a life” by the out-group. The event that forms the basis for this paper was initiated by comments attributed to the brand heroes of two brand communities within the SFF subculture and reported in the media. These comments formed the basis for subsequent conflict between the two communities. Response to the conflict depended on which identity individuals most related to.

THE LITERATURE
The difference between brand communities and subcultures of consumption is somewhat amorphous as the terms have often been used interchangeably. The demarcation between these two concepts in the literature is that subcultures of consumption exist in tota as a social structure. Whereas a brand community is negotiated by each individual as they encounter each new social situation (Múñiz and O’Guinn 2001). However, a more practical difference has developed where brand communities refer to the social networks
that develop around specific brands (McAlexander et al. 2002; Múñiz and O’Guinn 2001), and subcultures of consumption tends to be applied to product classes or consumption activities (Cova and Cova 2002). Although this segregation does not exclude brand subcultures (Kozinets 2001), the development of the consumer tribe literature has led to the term brand community generally being applied to brand focused social networks. This is the perspective adopted in this paper where two brand communities, namely Harry Potter (HP) and Discworld (DW), exist within a wider product class of SFF subculture of consumption.

In addressing brand communities in conflict, the literature has limited itself to considering communities of opposition where the social identity of the community is partly formed by its opposition to a competing brand (Múñiz and Hamer 2001; Múñiz and O’Guinn 2001). This is a form of identity project where brand communities define who they are by what they are not (Múñiz and O’Guinn 2001). However, this phenomenon can go further where community members form moralistic distinctions about members of competing brand communities as deviants from the social norms and values that they themselves consider sacred (Luedicke et al. 2010). These moral distinctions build to form a community sense of self and their consciousness of kind (Múñiz and O’Guinn 2001). However, the literature has limited these moral projects to consider only opposition communities as dyadic: where one community, usually the smaller brand, compares itself to another dominant brand. This perspective is limiting in its scope of understanding the complexity of identity and moral projects that communities engage in to form their community identity. This paper presents a more complex view of communities in opposition beyond the dyadic of us versus them (Múñiz and Hamer 2001) to consider oppositional communities that exist within the same product class subculture of consumption. In this case it becomes “we”, the SFF subculture, against the mainstream media. This further complicates the identity project as members negotiate their identity between members of a specific brand community which both separates and unites them and their identification to a particular subculture.

The other contribution that this paper makes to our understanding of consumer identity projects is in considering communities in conflict, not just opposition. Research on brand communities in conflict is scarce, but especially so for those communities with an online presence. Exchanges within an online brand community typically include supportive interactions but conflict can also be a common feature. Both types of exchange are necessary aspects of an online community and form the basis of an intricate network of friendships and competition that defines the group beyond the technical and social limitations of being online (Fletcher, Greenhill, and Campbell 2006). Rather than being merely dysfunctional, conflict within and between brand communities can yield an alternative set of unifying principles and rationales for understanding brand identity, and also provide a more complete conceptual model for interpreting the simultaneous pressures for antagonism and antagonism that are sometimes observable in online brand communities (Campbell, Fletcher, and Greenhill 2009; Luedicke et al. 2010). The findings from the conflict event analyzed in this paper suggest that a typology of four reactions to conflict depend on which social group an individual identifies most strongly with at the time, and this association can change over the course of the conflict.

THE STUDY EVENT

The conflict event was initiated by the publication in Time of an interview with the author of the Harry Potter (HP) series of books, J.K. Rowling (JKR), where two issues of contention arose (Grossman 2005). The first issue was JKR’s claim that she didn’t realize she was writing fantasy when she wrote the first HP book; the second issue was a quote from the reporter that described the fantasy genre as: It's precisely Rowling’s lack of sentimentality, her earthy, salty realness, her refusal to buy into the basic clichés of fantasy, that make her such a great fantasy writer. The genre tends to be deeply conservative-politically, culturally, psychologically. It looks backward to an idealized, romanticized, pseudefeudal world, where knights and ladies morris-dance to Greensleeves.

These two issues motivated the author, of the Discworld (DW) SFF book series, Terry Pratchett (TP), to write a letter to the editor criticizing the portrayal of fantasy literature and implying that comments made by JKR were disingenuous. The key issues in this conflict were the apparent divergence of views between the brand heroes of two communities of opposition. This event also raised issues concerning the appropriate representation of fantasy and the fantasy subculture in mainstream media. The online activity following the publication of TP’s letter included thousands of posts made on
DW and HP online sites. The fans made numerous interpretations of the event, the role of the media, the motivation of the brand heroes, and how this affected the brand, the community, and the subculture. During the three to four weeks of brand debate, TP engaged with the online communities in an attempt to control the situation. In contrast, JKR has not commented to any public information source.

THE BRANDS
HP is a global phenomenon but its place within the fantasy genre may be less familiar, and the DW brand is less well known. DW and HP are two of the most successful fantasy brands in the world. The first DW book, *The Colour of Magic*, was published in 1983. Currently 38 DW books have been published, with a new one published every year. The sale of DW books is estimated to be around 60 million copies and is primarily aimed at an adult readership. However, four DW books for children are included in the series. The story context is of a flat world that is carried on the back of four elephants, which stand on the back of a tortoise that is slowly swimming through space. Each book is a standalone story, although character-based sub-sections exist, such as the Witches books, the Watch books and the Death books.

In comparison, the HP series is a self-contained story arc of 7 books about a boy wizard and his time at Hogwarts School for Wizards and Witches, and the battle against the evil Voldemort aimed at young readers. JKR published the first book in the HP series in 1997 with *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (this was published under the title of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* in the US). The series has now been completed with sales above 300 million copies and box office success with movie adaptations.

Both fantasy novel series have strong fan communities, although the international success of the HP series makes it the dominant brand in the market (Múñiz and O’Guinn 2001). The target readership of the brands influences the make-up of each community. DW is primarily adults, while HP targets a younger market, although HP reaches a wider and older audience successfully with the publication of adult cover art editions. This wide ranging success increases the involvement of people of all ages within the community (Brown 2007; Patterson and Brown 2009). The communities of opposition in previous studies assume exclusive ownership and membership to one brand. Most in the DW community have read the HP books, and some in the HP community have read the DW series. So while they poach each other’s brand as members of the SFF subculture (Jenkins 1992), individuals make their preferences known through their identification with a particular community. The following section details how the data of this event were collected and analyzed.

THE METHOD
This conflict arose while the first author was engaged in a larger ethnographic study of the DW community. The nature of the event and its aftermath required extending engagement to the HP community. To do this the first author conducted participant and non-participant observation of online fan forums for both brands. Both JKR and TP were contacted via email about the event, to which TP responded. A HP versus DW session at the 2007 Australian DW convention was conducted, where all attendees were readers of both brands and one attendee stated that she was a bigger fan of HP. These sites were accessed to triangulate findings and provide multiple perspectives on the interpretations of the event and responses of the various actors (Eisenhardt 1989). The second author provided an outsiders’ perspective to the data analysis and interpretation as they had limited experience with the brands and no interaction with the communities involved.

Besides the online forum which was the main source of data for the ethnographic study, other forums were accessed through each brand hero’s official website, and either entering the official discussion forum available or the unofficial discussion forums listed. A total of three forums were selected based on the amount of activity present and whether the forum was officially supported. The forums accessed were composed of two official fan forums, one created by the US publisher of DW and the other established by Warner Brothers the movie distributor for HP. The third forum was a Usenet group, which had been analyzed in previous studies (Múñiz and Hamer 2001). Usenet groups are slightly different to discussion boards as topics (also known as threads) can link across groups. So in the current case the DW and HP posts were combined and TP posted into the united thread. Only one forum did not have a moderator. This forum had a system of community enforced codes of conduct which resulted in user behavior not varying significantly from that found in moderated forums.

Relevant threads were downloaded and
analyzed using Nvivo. During the four week period of this study the forums yielded over 1,500 pages of discussion, with the highest concentration of posts occurring in the first week. Analysis of the forum threads followed the method outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Firstly, each post was coded based on the issues raised, and then categories were built. Finally, themes were developed and a theoretical understanding of the case generated. Discussions with fans and TP were used to verify our interpretations of the event and to build richer insight of the issues involved. The following section will present the impact that the media reports had on community responses.

FINDINGS
In the case of brand communities in conflict the identity project of members goes beyond the protagonist seeking moral distinctiveness (Luedicke et al. 2010). HP community members engaged in active antagonist activities by signing up as members to DW community forums in order to attack the DW identity. The antagonist responses whose identity as HP fans were threatened include the adversaries, who remained within DW community social norms, and the screamers, whose identity project extended to challenge DW social norms. The DW community became defenders of their identity through the comedic response of sharing inside jokes. A large portion of the DW and HP communities saw themselves as SFF members whose identity was threatened by the mainstream media representation of their chosen genre. These members responded with debate of the genre, the media, and the brands as a legitimization of their subcultural identity.

The moralistic distinctions depended on whether the individual identified most with the HP, DW or the SFF subculture. This identification influenced their interpretation of the media event that initiated the conflict. HP fans tended to view Pratchett’s comments as “sour grapes” and JKR as undeserving of criticism. DW fans saw Rowling’s comment about not knowing she was writing fantasy as disingenuous and that TP had a legitimate right to point this out. At a subcultural level, the distinctions made were that the media viewed SFF as old fashioned and moribund while the SPF subculture saw the media as being biased and uninformed with resentment of their portrayal of the genre to a wider audience. Through the reactions of both brand communities to these issues each community was able to draw direct examples of behaviors on which to base their moral distinctions. These are likely to be more long lasting and accurate than internally generated identity differentiation projects and are more difficult to manage. The following section presents the different responses to threatened community and subcultural identities.

Us versus Them: The Harry Potter Identity under Threat
The HP identity came under threat from the comments made by TP in his letter to the editor calling into question Rowling’s brand hero’s credibility as a fantasy author (Eagar 2009). As the brand hero is held to be the ideal because of their involvement in the brand’s creation or management, any attack on them is seen as an attack on the brand. Pratchett’s comments regarding Rowling was seen by the community as contravening the HP social norm that JK Rowling was inviolable (Brown 2007). HP members who strongly held this value actively sought to engage the DW community using two antagonistic characters: adversaries and screamers.

Adversaries: represent responses from individuals where strong and personal emotions about the TP letter were expressed. However these individuals were later prepared to engage in debate about points of fact rather than purely emotion.

Posted by: fury (terrypratchetbooks.com; post number: 1)
Oh My God. How could Terry Pratchett criticise the Amazing JK Rowling? Ms Rowling is so much more original and talented! He obviously stole the idea for a magic school from her and Esk in ER was stolen from the HP books!.

Harry Potter is my whole life!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Fury’s post was their first into the DW community and expresses her disbelief and (overwrought) emotions about the event. This post incited a discussion as to how TP could not have copied from JKR as his books came first. Fury defended her initial statement by claiming that time is irrelevant when it comes to copying HP. Yet, despite the illogical argument and the very negative interpretation Fury made of the initial letter, it also indicated familiarity with TP’s work. The mention of the character Esk from the DW book Equal Rites (ER) showed that despite having read both brands, this individual’s loyalty and identity was indelibly tied to HP. The amount of emotion in
this post, and the misinformation contained within it drew a response from the DW community.

**Posted by: The Sniper** *(terrypratchettbooks.com; post number: >1000)*

I thought Fist of Fury was taking the piss with the comment about Pratchett copying JK.

But then I saw that you weren’t. How could you possibly think that? The majority of his books were written before she came on the scene!

I don’t think for one second that either writer would go out to copy one another’s ideas. There simply has to be an overlap, since a lot ideas come from Mythology. Each just has their own slant on things.

The response of the community to the attacks of the adversaries was to attempt to engage in logical debate. In this case The Sniper points out the timeline of publication and also that neither author plagiarized, but that they simply function within the wider tropes of the SFF genre. This tendency to approach the extreme emotions expressed by the adversaries with logic was consistent across the boards. As a reaction to these “foreign invaders” it is quite interesting that the first recourse of the community was to engage the enemy in debate rather than combating them with insults or derision. In the case of Fury the logical debate approach resulted in their engagement with the community over the facts rather than continuing the negative emotions first expressed. This is in contrast with the screamers who are discussed next.

*The Screamers:* were those individuals who expressed personal offense to the letter, had a negative interpretation of TP’s motives, and were motivated to contact the opposition by posting on their forum. However, unlike the adversaries, which started out loud but who also engaged in debate, the screamers did not conform to community norms and actively tried to rile the community. The example below demonstrates the nature of the personal and brand insults that were exchanged between a HP invader and a long-term DW community member.

**Posted by william** *(terrypratchettbook.com; post number: 2)*

Actually, while I am a HP fan, I do happen to have read other literature. I am not some little kid. I merely was trying to answer to some of the things that Mr Pratchett had said in his statement. Also the “is a prat” thing, if you can’t tell that was a pun without italics then your brain needs changing. Also when you speak of HP fans coming in here spreading poison…do you mean like the useless comments that your beloved author has done with respect to HP today. The HP series is not merely for children as it, like the DW series I’m sure, transcends such petty barriers, though it does have an audience of primarily children. Also I have read one DW novel and started another and thought that it was like the idea I got of the previous one - uninteresting to me. I admit that YOU may find it interesting but I don’t. …May I also point out that if Mr Pratchett had wanted to voice his opinion he could have done it on another day - not JK Rowling’s birthday - or he could have kept it to himself so as to stop our opinions coming out in such a way in which we seem to now be arguing.

**Posted by Mac** *(terrypratchettbooks.com, post number: >1000)*

It was a piss poor attempt at a pun, as shown by my two vastly superior examples.

By the way, do the Harry Potter books or any other books you’ve read have paragraphs?

**Posted by william** *(terrypratchettbook.com, post number: 3)*

Am I not allowed to write in continuous prose? And a pun is a pun no matter what you say. I’m just sorry that mine was too intellectual for you to think he should have done it more obviously like ‘Prat chett’

In this case each poster questioned the others wit and intelligence as the discussion became increasingly personal. William’s posts continued on after this encounter and his refusal to use paragraphs remained an issue for the community. This forum had established a norm of using correct English, grammar and formatting conventions as many of the posters were from non-English speaking backgrounds. This poster’s refusal to defer to the group norm further antagonized the community. For the screamers their response reflected a high level of identification with the HP brand and an antagonistic reaction not just to the community values but also their social norms.

The adversaries and the screamers form the extreme end of negative reactions to the event. The response of the DW community to the threat to their identity posed by this invasion of HP antagonists was to create inside jokes that reinforced their value as the select few that “get the joke”.
Them versus Us: The Threatened Discworld Identity as Comedians

The DW community found its identity under threat from the active antagonistic attacks of HP fans. This invasion questioned the legitimacy of the brand, with claims of plagiarism, and the brand hero, with claims of “sour grapes”. In order to combat these undermining identity projects of the competing community, each DW community developed an “in-joke”. This occurred when the effect of the Potter fans had lessened due to their lack of posting and in both cases as a result of a comment made by particular antagonists. For example, in the terrypratchettbooks forum a comment about how there were no stories of an adult Harry led to an in-joke of possible adult versions of the Potter brand.

Posted by: White (terrypratchettbooks.com; post number: >30)

“I’ve tried to think of some Harry Potter adult books names - “Harry Potter and the Mortgage of Doom”, “Harry Potter and the Dead End Job”, “Harry Potter and the P45”???”

Posted by: Ellie (post number: >100)
Or:

“Harry Potter and the Jesus Juice trial to Neverland”

“Harry Potter and the Receding Hairline”

“Harry Potter and the Rapid Spread of AIDS”

The adult titles for HP books incited a long stream of responses from various community members. The in-joke exchanges within the DW community served dual purposes. They provided cohesiveness where they were able to say this is who we are by laughing at what they are not. For example, the terrypratchettbooks forum viewed themselves as not serious about HP and as such able to deride the books. This in-joke provoked a greater sense of community unity that was not present in the rest of the discussion during this event.

The second purpose of the comedians was as a defense mechanism against the attack from outsiders. The DW community used humor as an indirect method of alleviating the confrontation of the HP fans. These antagonism and protagonism responses to conflict formed an active and direct interpretation of the opposing community.

Posted by: fairy (terrypratchettbooks.com; post number: >1000)

the thing i find hilarious is that as soon as pratchett says something against rowling we get peope flocking here to tell us how horrible he is; yet if rowling ever said anything against pratchett, how many of his fans would go onto potter forums and say things against rowling.

I guess that gives a clear difference between the childrens and adults author.

The above post indicated the attitude of the DW community towards the HP community, with two clear points being made. The first is that DW fans were not like HP fans and would not enter the opposition’s domain to express displeasure. This is a statement of identity in confrontation, where the DW identity had been defined by how they reacted differently to the opposition. The second point is the self-perception within the DW community of having an identity of adults, or mature readers versus the less mature members from the HP community. These attitudes have been derived from the experience of interacting with the opposing community and as such the perception is likely to be more consistent and, it could be argued, more accurate over time.

We versus the Mainstream Media: The Debaters

The debaters comprised the majority of posters from both communities as they identified strongly with the SFF subculture alongside their brand community identity. These people engaged in a discussion as to the meaning and motivations of the players within the event, namely TP, JKR and the media. These individuals tended to express their opinions within the confines of their community, rather than deliberately seeking the opposition. The lack of exclusive brand readership means that there were multiple positions taken within a community. The role of the media was also a heavily contested issue. Debaters attempted to interpret TP’s letter, the original interview with Rowling and also the media’s role in hyping a brand and denigrating the SFF genre.

Posted by: d3 (alt.fan.pratchett/harry potter)

This particular interview is more recent, of course, but I remember similar comments in the mainstream press back when Harry Potter was first hitting the big time: “Good lord, J.K. Rowling has brought fantasy into the modern world! Amazing!”

“Children learning how to become wizards and witches? How frightfully original!”
In other words, in my mind, the books got damned as a result of their association with the ignorant and the snobbish who were praising them for (as it turned out) all the wrong reasons.

There are, obviously, many reasons to praise and love the Harry Potter books. But to claim that they’ve broken some sort of virgin territory in the fantasy genre, let alone rescued the genre from being nothing but medieval romances with magic, is simply not true.

Pratchett’s primary complaint is not against Rowling or Harry Potter, it’s against a mainstream media who (as he says) is incapable of lauding Harry Potter without denigrating the rest of the genre.

But, that being said, I frankly can’t think of *any* positive spin which can be given to Rowling’s claim that she didn’t realize she’d written a fantasy story until after writing and publishing a 300 page novel about witches and wizards fighting a Dark Lord (after plotting out a seven book saga). It’s impossible for me to believe that Rowling is actually that *stupid*, so the most charitable conclusion I can reach is that she was actively misquoted. (If she wasn’t misquoted, then the statement has a rather clear agenda behind it which doesn’t reflect well on Ms. Rowling at all.)

The above post encapsulated much of the debate about the media’s involvement in the event. It saw the role of the media as a negative influence with its misrepresentation of the genre and the possibility of misquoting JKR. Much of the debate focused on the differences between the two series and the aspects that made them superior in the eyes of each community. This debate indicated the familiarity of both groups with each other’s brand and the shared subcultural heritage.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings from this study illustrate the importance of identification in brand community and subcultural conflicts. Individuals are not engaged in a simple dyadic identity project but rather are negotiating multiple identities between a preferred brand, a familiar brand of opposition, and the product category subculture. This negotiation involves the identity defense between oppositional brand communities, the identity integration between the brand communities, and the subculture and the identity reproduction with the mainstream media.

Figure 1 illustrates this process of multiple identity negotiation and the following will discuss the implications of this model. When there are multiple affiliations available, this model illustrates three types of identity work that is conducted in brand community conflict. The first is identity defense between the brand communities in conflict. The identity defense projects are the protagonist and antagonist activities that communities engage in to establish their ethos and morality (Luedicke et al. 2010).

Within this study identity antagonism took the form of adversary and screamer responses where the opposition was sought for a direct confrontation to establish what the HP brand was not (Múniz and O’Guinn 2001). The protagonism activities to defend the community identity took the form of comedic responses to establish what the community was. These identity projects have been discussed in previous research and assumed to reflect a simple dyadic relationship between opposition brands (Luedicke et al. 2010; Múniz and Hamer 2001). The possibility for marketers to initiate a conflict between competing brand communities in order to highlight the differences and similarities between communities is a dangerous strategy as negative impressions of a community within the subculture can be formed. Such conflict is also inherently difficult to manage, shown through Pratchett’s efforts to contain the situation without success, and marketer interference may be viewed as an out-group manipulation. The following identity projects extend the dualism of identity by considering the identity work of subcultures and the mainstream.
The relationship between the brand community and the subculture was one of identity integration. Brand communities position their identity through a process of negotiating subcultural norms and differentiating the norms of that community from the wider subculture. This undermines the assumption found in much of the communities of opposition research that members only purchase or experience their own brand and, through inference, denigrate the opposition (Múniz and Hamer 2001; Múniz and O’Guinn 2001). The individual will integrate the subcultural identity into their identity matrix to a greater or lesser extent. The more integrated the subcultural identity is, the more aware they are of the position of their preferred brand within the product category milieu, and the more likely they are to debate the position of competing brands. For marketers this identity integration project is important as it forms the basis of the position that individuals form of competing brands in the category, and there exists a potential for values to be aligned or differentiated to attract subcultural members to new offerings.

The final identity project is identity reproduction which involves the communication of the identity of product category to the wider audience of the out-group. When the media undermines the legitimacy of the genre, oppositional brand communities can unite to defend their identity against this out-group that is perceived to be marginalizing the subculture. Previous research has highlighted the importance of this communication process to the wider audience to the sense of legitimacy that a subculture holds (Kozinets 2001). Marketers form a key source of legitimizing communication about brands and product categories to out-group audiences. This research has also highlighted the added complexity that exists in identity projects when the dyadic relationship between brand communities is extended to include their place within the wider subculture.

REFERENCES


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