
DECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY: AN EXERCISE TO CLARIFY THE DETERMINANTS OF BRAND LEGITIMACY

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This paper presents a teaching innovation designed to explore several consumer behavior concepts as they relate to branding and perceptions of brand legitimacy including identity, markers of sub-cultures, and self-congruency theory. The innovation encourages students to deconstruct their own identities using their brand choices as “markers” that signify meaning to others. In doing so, it enables students to recognize the inherent cultural diversity present in many environmental contexts as well as the degree of ‘shared meaning’ possible with others; even those who are not a part of our subculture.

This teaching innovation is designed to explore several consumer behavior concepts as they relate to branding and perceptions of brand legitimacy including identity, markers of sub-cultures, and self-congruency theory. The exercise encourages students to identify their own identity construction through their choice of brands as “markers” that signify meaning to others. In doing so, it enables students to recognize the inherent cultural diversity present in many environmental contexts as well as the degree of ‘shared meaning’ possible with others; even those who are not a part of our subculture. Students are able to recognize the barriers and challenges brands face as they seek to develop relationships with consumer segments.

The concept that consumers consume to extend, develop, or portray their self-identity is widely acknowledged and has been studied by numerous researchers (e.g., Belk 1988; Holt 1995). Brands, products, and styles provide a tangible method of meaning transference for consumers who seek to both fit in while expressing individuality. This phenomenon is often studied using unique subcultures as a type of case study. For instance, punks (Fox 1987), gays (Kates 2000), Harley Davidson owners (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) and Star Trek

fans (Kozinets 2001) have all been the focus of research on consumerism as it relates to their respective subcultures. Kates (2002) noted that each of these studies emphasized the ways members used marker goods as indicative of those who belonged to the group. By doing so, the members were constructing an identity, and a symbolic boundary, which could be portrayed to the outer world.

Arnould and Wallendorf (1994 p. 495) noted that abstract cultural values are ultimately translated into a variety of actual meanings in practice. Thus, as individuals – and their subcultures/ reference groups – seek to translate values into statements of meaning, brands, in particular, become a widely available tool for that expression. Of course, brands are not the only tool available to consumers. Many subcultures are known for specific “styles.” Yet, as brands increasingly build personalities and seek to relate to consumer identity as a method of relationship marketing (c.f., Fournier 1998), they form a sort of , providing consumers perceived access, a sense of belonging, and an expression of individuality. Kates (2004) described the importance of wearing the Calvin Klein label to a gay man who sought to be accepted by the gay sub-culture. Some celebrities have established a form of subculture by mixing high-end labels with generic apparel. Known popularly as “bobo,” the subculture encourages consumers to express their individuality by using brands in what might appear to be a “sacrilegious” manner.

Identity-related consumption instills a great degree of flexibility and individualism in each consumer. One can integrate a brand into one’s life in subtle or flashy ways. This flexibility is seen as consumers choose whether to subscribe fully to the identity of a subculture or only partially. Bouchet (1995 p. 73) insightfully

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viewed consumer culture as a menu from which consumers fashion identities.

While some have sought to understand how consumers affiliate with sub-cultures through identity construction, others have focused on the brand perspective. Aakin's (1997) work on brand personality likens brands to people. Clearly, the implication is that consumers will be drawn to brands which represent their actual or ideal selves. Sirgy (1982) points out that consumers seek out choices that are congruent with their views of their own identity. Fournier (1998) investigates the relationships consumers develop with brands. From an applied perspective, knowing the self a consumer wishes to portray to the world is valuable information that can be used to guide strategic choices ranging from segmentation and positioning to communications and creative appeals. At the same time, brands must be perceived as legitimate. Without legitimacy, a brand's marketing strategy will not resonate with the target audience and it will be unlikely that the brand will be chosen as a "marker" by consumers.

Suchman (1995) describes brand legitimacy as a social fit with a society's or community's shared norms. He goes on to refer to a brand's legitimacy as "the generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate with some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (p. 574). Kates (2002) applies Suchman's concept of brand legitimacy to the relationship gay men have with various brands. In that study, Kates insightfully notes that brand meaning is not only created through a brand's intended communications. Consumers construct meanings around brands and, ultimately, cocreate a brand's identity.

Identity Deconstruction

Each of the related topics introduced above are frequently broached in marketing courses, particularly in consumer behavior and advertising classes. The ability of brands to relate to consumer segments is a focus of positioning strategies and brand image. Communications strategy, from creative development to media planning, is built on a foundation of matching brand personality, media, and consumer identity. Yet, these topics tend to challenge students with their degree of complexity, abstractness, or application.

Students, as consumers, understand the role of brands in society and also recognize their own attempts to seek inclusion from others using material possessions and style. However, students may also be uncomfortable with these concepts as it forces them to admit their role in constructing their own identities. It brings students

face to face with the insecurities that often drive them to seek group membership to begin with. By introducing this exercise, students have an opportunity to dissect their brand relationships. In doing so, each concept can be addressed and integrated with the others. Further, because identity deconstruction inherently considers group membership and exclusion, it sets the stage for issues of diversity, particularly when used with a discussion of segmentation and targeting.

Procedures

The basic exercise relies on several discussion questions designed to target the primary concepts of interest. Depending upon the time available, the questions may be used to guide a classroom discussion or assigned as an essay assignment followed by discussion in class. Students may be better able to reflect on the topics when asked to reflect in writing on their identities and brand experiences. The assignment can be adjusted to emphasize any of the target concepts (identity construction, brand personality, brand legitimacy, self-congruency). Students may not initially realize the multitude of self-concepts they live by (e.g., athlete, environmentalist, liberal, etc.) so it is important to introduce the concept of identities and sub-cultures and begin by providing examples of the professor's own identities. Students should identify two advertisements. One ad should be for a brand that the student feels represents them (and the identity on which they focus) well. The other should be for a brand that clearly targets them, but fails (or seems illegitimate).

- *Who are you?* Each of us has several identities – some we share, some we hide. List your various identities (e.g., NASCAR fan, intellectual, feminist, best friend, fashion trend-setter, avid reader, family historian, etc.) and indicate which of your identities are hidden or visible to others. Choose from this list one identity that you will focus on for the remainder of your essay.
- *For the identity you selected, what "markers" indicate that you belong to the sub-culture (the sub-culture accepted by others with the same identity)?* For instance, if you wear a tattoo, does this signify your belonging to a sub-culture? Are any of the markers material possessions? Brands? *What "identity messages" are encoded in the brands you purchase and the choices you make? What makes these brands "congruent" with your identity?* (Note that material possessions may serve as markers; though markers may be other symbols as well.)

- *What brand really “gets” you? Select one brand that you feel effectively targets the sub-culture to which you belong. How does the brand show you that it understands you? Does it use markers to communicate its knowledge of and respect for your identity? Explain. Evaluate an ad for this brand. Why and how do you relate to the brand as depicted in the ad? Does the brand appear to understand the underlying culture and norms of the identity in question? Why do you think so? Use the ad to further your description of how this brand “gets” you.*
- *What brand tries to reach your identity but fails? How do you know that this brand seeks to target your identity? Explain the clues you used to determine that the brand in question sought to relate to you through one or more of your identities. Evaluate an ad for this brand. Explain how the ad illustrates that the brand seeks to target your identity. Why did the brand and this ad fail? How did you decide that it wasn’t legitimate? Use the ad to further your discussion of this brand’s failure to legitimately target you and others who share your identity.*
- *What have you learned from this assignment?*

A discussion of the assignment takes place following submission of the essays. It is important to emphasize to the students that the in-class discussion of the assignment is a private discussion among class members—what is said in class will stay in the class. It is also helpful to acknowledge that everyone will feel some degree of vulnerability discussing the questions.

Outcomes

The responses vary from student to student and class to class, but several examples pulled from past courses are provided below. What identities have students chosen as the focus of their responses? Examples include glitz and glam queen, bargain hunter, traditionalist, feminist, cat person, fraternity brother, lesbian, foodie, writer, liberal, football fanatic, philanthropist, social butterfly, counter-culturist, urbanite, musician, gamer, athlete, Christian, caffeine fiend, and theatre buff, among others. Regardless of the identity emphasized, responses to the questions should illustrate identity, markers of sub-culture, and brand legitimacy. The following excerpt offered by Tommy, who defined himself as an underground rapper, illustrates the value of the assignment.

“I consider myself an entertainer because I am a rap music artist. I am what you would call an under-

ground rapper. I don’t rap about money, jewelry, drugs, or violence. I rap about life and preserving Hip Hop. I see Hip Hop as more of a state of mind rather than just music. Some people see it as something to exploit to make money. I am not one of those people....The main way I communicate who I am to the world is through my clothing....My clothes are baggy and give off a rapper image. I don’t buy brands like Sean John and Rocawear because those lines are owned by rappers who don’t view Hip Hop the same way I do. I also wear high-top sneakers with big tongues. High tops with big tongues have an 80s feel when Hip Hop was in its purest form....(Explaining a legitimate brand) Avirex shows an understanding and appreciation for my sub-culture. The ads use Method Man as a celebrity to endorse their product. Method Man was an original member of the Hip Hop group Wu-Tang. Avirex uses him because those who truly appreciate the culture will recognize Method Man for his accomplishments in the Wu-Tang. The advertisers print the word “fly” in the forefront of the ad. Method Man is sitting on airport grade scaffolding along with an airplane helmet and oxygen equipment. The use of the word fly separates those who belong and those who don’t... “fly” next to airplane equipment... is Method Man going for a ride? No, fly is a slang word for style. Those who are versed in this underground culture will see this and appreciate its cleverness. Avirex has shown it is educated in the Hip-Hop sub-culture.... (Explaining an illegitimate brand) Ecko offers a clothing line targeting underground Hip Hoppers. They did this by creating shirts with messages on them that made fun of rappers who only rapped for money and about ignorant things like drugs and violence. But, then I saw a commercial for Ecko and a rapper named Fat Joe was the person in the ad wearing the clothes. Fat Joe is a materialistic pop rapper. I thought [Ecko] was on my side, not representing people like Fat Joe.”

Leslie described herself as an African-American fashionista and explained how the brand Rocawear legitimately appeals to this identity.

“Ever since I can remember I have been in to fashion. When I was younger, I participated in various fashion shows in the DC area. Someday I plan to work for a fashion pr firm. Being an African-American is also a part of who I am. I take pride in my heritage. My afro centric identity is visible to others, especially by my choice of hairstyle, which is a bush. My style as an urban fashionista is apparent to all – I always sport the latest trends in clothing and accessories. Despite my limited income, I still want to wear fashionable clothes. Rocawear’s focus is to offer fashionable clothing for the urban woman. They target young, African-American women who are into the latest fashion trends. Rocawear’s aim is to pro-

vide streetstyle at your fingertips. They claim, 'Rocawear is so hot even the logo is blazing.' (Referring to a Rocawear ad) The text that reads 'We run the strip' refers to slang used in urban, black communities. The statement implies that if I wear Rocawear, I will triumph, not only in fashion, but in my 'hood' as well."

Melanie, an athlete, explained Nike's success and Asics' failure targeting female athletes.

"I practice for two and a half hours a day. I run extra fitness and swim for added cardio. I am a caffeine fiend, a perfectionist, and a day dreamer.....Nike meets every detail of an athletic life and does it oozing confidence. Nike took tomboys and made them chic. They made being a strong, athletic female a good thing. The swoosh tells the world that I am proud of my abilities, believe that sportsmanship should have a "w" in it, and am confident in my body, not for what it looks like, but for what it can do.....Asics clearly targets me as an athletic woman. But they fail, because they assume that my athleticism runs counter to what some might call traditional gender roles. I can be an athlete and a strong woman, and like decorating my apartment. These identities are not at odds as this ad would have us believe. I am a strong enough woman to acknowledge that I also like girlie things."

Assessing the Assignment

What do students learn from the assignment? Below are several quotes from students on what they learned from the exercise.

"I realized that marketers really take risks when deciding on a new target market. The main resource they have is stereotypes but stereotypes leave out much of the culture of what they are targeting."

"At first, I was skeptical that I would find any brand that even comes close to representing me, but then before I knew it, I was actually struggling to pick just one as an example."

"As I reflected on my identities, I realized that most were considerably different from friends in the very same age, sex, and race group."

"To effectively market to people with identities that are different from my own, I have to be open, listen to them, and observe them instead of simply judging them based on demographics."

"Before this assignment, I never really understood why a brand wouldn't try to appeal to a mass audience. This assignment gave me an awareness of just how diverse and vast audiences are."

"I have to say that this was hard. I do express my identity, and yes, even construct it by choosing certain brands that I know will send a message to others. But, it was difficult to express this to others. For me, it was most enlightening to think about the idea of brand illegitimacy... it explains why something that might meet my functional needs can still fail to appeal to me."

Variations on the Assignment

Variations on this exercise are possible. It is possible to use the questions as a guide for an in-class discussion without including the essay component. The questions remain the same, but are introduced in the class preceding the planned discussion. Students should bring the two ads to class for use in the discussion. The concepts can also be approached using a projective technique. Instructors choose advertisements that target different cultural groups to exhibit in class. Rather than asking students to explain their own identities and brand relationships, students would analyze the identities of the characters represented in the ads. The following questions may be used: "Who is represented in this ad? How is the identity constructed in the picture? How legitimate is this brand? Is the identity and brand relationship accurate as depicted? Is it stereotypical?" Students will still relate to these ads and may feel more comfortable discussing the topic from the perspective of an onlooker.

Concluding Remarks

This exercise is useful for explaining several concepts commonly approached in marketing classes: sub-cultures (and segmentation), identity, self-congruency, and brand legitimacy. Instructors can approach topics that may otherwise appear distant and intangible or topics that are sensitive in nature. It is an opportunity to connect theory to application. To maximize the effectiveness of the exercise, instructors must probe for depth in each response, reiterate the meaning of key concepts, emphasize the need to understand sub-cultures in order to target segments, underscore the ability for consumer sub-cultures to recognize the legitimacy of the brand targeting them, and utilize diversity of identities as a tool for building tolerance and understanding.

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