Corporate Brand Activism: An Exploration of Advertising Polysemy and Online Interpretive Communities

Abstract

In recent years there has been the emergence of "woke capitalism" with marketers drawing inspiration from social movements such as "Black Lives Matter" and "Me Too". While there has been much media commentary on high-profile examples of brand activism for companies like Gillette and Nike, there is little empirical research which explores the consumer perspective, our paper is guided by the research question: How do online interpretive communities read brand activist advertising campaigns? We adopt a netnographic approach and explored the comments of interpretive communities in relation to three brand activist campaigns. We identified six reading strategies adopted of "Meaning Acceptance", "Meaning Rejection", "Cynicism", "Interpretive Community Questioning", "Brand Criticism" and "Competitor Promotion". We conclude that brand while activism can be positive for a brand it has significant risks and requires the brand to act as a legitimate social activist to be considered authentic.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we consider corporations who engage in brand activism and how online interpretive communities read their advertising meanings. In recent years, we have witnessed the emergence of what Rhodes (2023, p. 8) has labelled "Woke Capitalism" which he defines as '…corporations…who align themselves with social movements while using that alignment in widespread publicity and advertising'. Marketers have drawn on wider social movements, particularly "Black Lives Matter" and "Me Too", which have been incorporated profitably into contemporary advertising campaigns (Sobande, 2020). While there has been much commentary on high-profile examples of brand activism for brands like Gillette ("The Best Men Can Be") and Nike ("Dream Crazy"), there is little empirical research which explores the consumer perspective on these recent campaigns, particularly in an online context, our paper is guided by the research question: How do online interpretive communities read brand activist advertising campaigns? We begin with an exploration of the relationship between brand activism and advertising and consider advertising polysemy and the role of consumer interpretive communities in the meaning making process. We then analyse the online interpretive community response to three brand activist advertising campaigns, for Gillette, Pepsi and Nike. We identify six reading strategies adopted by consumers in relation to these campaigns, some of which are novel to a digital context, and finally consider what these findings imply for advertising and branding theory.

2. Brand Activism and Advertising

Brand activism is an emerging marketing strategy and increasingly popular practice by which an organisation publicly takes a stance on a contested socio-political issue (Sarkar and Kotler, 2018). It consists of business efforts to 'promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to make improvements in society" (Sarkar and Kotler, 2018, p. 554). Brand activism differs from corporate social responsibility (CSR) in terms of the nature of the issue in question, while CSR involves generally accepted, non-divisive, and prosocial issues (Bhagwat et al. 2020), brand activism addresses controversial, contested, and divisive topics (Özturan and Grinstein, 2022, p. 74). Brand activism contributes toward the issue through both messaging (advertising) and practice (organisational practices, policies, donations and partnerships) that are expected to be long-term and embedded (Vredenburg et al., 2020). There is a distinction to be made between authentic brand activism and inauthentic brand activism. When brands are active in messaging

about their stance but their corporate practices and values do not align with the message, it is "inauthentic" brand activism, in other words, "woke washing" (Mirzaei et al., 2022). In contrast, authentic brand activism aligns corporate purpose and values with activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practice (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Given the contested and divisive nature of the issue, brand activism is often considered a risky strategy (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 444). Research has shown that brand activism is likely to create a polarized response across stakeholders (Bhagwat et al. 2020), affecting and activating those who oppose the cause the brand promotes. Similarly, Jungblut and Johnen (2021) found that when a brand takes a stance on a controversial socio-political issue, consumers are more likely to engage in boycotting behaviour, paying more attention to negative issues than positive ones. In addition, Pöyry and Laaksonen (2022) show how brand activism can alienate those consumers who disagree with the cause and that the opponents use a variety of strategies to undermine the campaign (e.g., aggressive, hostile behaviours, anti-brand actions targeted at a brand).

Despite its inherently risky nature, most consumers expect and want brands to take a stand on socio-political issues in today's marketplace (Sobande, 2020, p. 2740). A study based on the perspectives of 1,000 UK consumers found that up to 80 per cent of consumers would stop using a product or service provided by a company if they disagreed with its response to a specific social issue (Hickman, 2018). Brand activism can transform markets and society by 'shaping what is considered right/wrong, good/bad, or worth/unworthy in the industries in which [brands] operate' (Wieser et al., 2019, p. 153). Key et al. (2021) has also shown how brand activism can drive social change which is consequently beneficial for a brand as well as the market in which it operates.

3. Advertising Polysemy and Interpretive Communities

The meaning of advertising texts are polysemic in nature, a concept which is defined by Puntoni et al. (2010, p. 52) as '…the existence of at least two distinct interpretations for the same advertising message across audiences, or across time and situations'. The rhetorical and polysemic structure of advertisements has been noted in previous studies (Warlaumont, 1995), and advertising meanings often contain complexity and ambiguity. In discussing polysemy in the context of television programming, Fiske (1986, p.402) refers to the "fissures of the text" and the multiple discursive composition of meaning within the genre. Advertising texts are similarly multi-layered in terms of their meanings and contain both intertextual (texts outside

the boundaries of advertising) and intratextual (texts inside the advertising genre) references that contribute to their semiotic power and resonance (Cook, 1992).

Consumers as readers of advertising have a key role in the ascribing of meaning to advertising texts, as Iser (1976, p. 107) has observed '…reading is not a direct 'internalisation', because it is not a one-way process…the reading process as a dynamic *interaction* between text and reader'. Hall (1980, p.136-137) has argued for television programs that people can adopt different reading strategies in relation to media discourse, which can include reading them via the "dominant-hegemonic position", "negotiated code" or an "oppositional code". In discussing the interactive role of the consumer in terms of advertising meaning, Hackley and Hackley (2022, p.56) have recently noted how '…the meaning of a text is not wholly encoded into the work itself but extends beyond the work…the meanings of brand texts are culturally mediated, they are produced through language in interaction by readers who interpret the meaning of the text in the light of their cultural knowledge'. The work of Scott (1994) has been particularly instrumental in considering the role of the consumer as engaged and creative reader of advertising and one that had been neglected within traditional advertising research.

Individuals can form different interpretive communities around text (Fish, 1980), and similarly consumers can form interpretive communities around advertising meanings (Yannopoulou and Elliott, 2008). Ritson et al. (1996) for example demonstrated how consumers can form subcultures of interpretation around particular advertising meanings and personalise advertising in terms of their specific subcultural group identity. While advertisers may encode advertisements within what Hall (1980) refers to as a dominant or hegemonic position, consumer communities adopt their own interpretive strategies to the reading of advertisements which are active, negotiated and in some cases oppositional to what advertisers may have intended (Kates and Shaw-Garlock, 1999). It is to investigate online interpretive communities in the context of brand activism that the focus of our paper will now investigate.

4. Methodology

In this paper, we sought to explore how online interpretive communities engaged with brand activist advertising campaigns on the video sharing website YouTube, which has been identified as a rich source for consumer narratives and discourses (Pace, 2008). We adopted the principles of netnographic research (Kozinets, 2010), and explored the comments that interpretive communities contributed to YouTube in relation to brand activist campaigns. We chose three particularly high-profile campaigns that have been prominent in the mass media as examples of brand activism, specifically Nike (featuring Colin Kaepernick, focussed on issues

of race in sport), Gillette (focussed on issues of gender and masculinity) and Pepsi (featuring Kendal Jenner, focussed on issues of race and the "Black Lives Matter" movement). We downloaded user comments on each advertisement using an open-source data scraping tool provided by Learning Orbis (available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uD58-EHwaeI&t=71s) and focussed on up to 1,000 comments per advertisement which left us with a data set of approximately 95,000 words and 181 pages of single-spaced text.

We used a grounded-theory approach to the data and sought to theorise consumer reading strategies from the posts we collected (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). We analysed the data line-by-line, and used procedures of "open coding" and "selective coding" to identify the reading strategies adopted by interpretive communities in relation to these campaigns (Glaser, 1992; Strauss and Corbin, 1992). We identified six specific reading strategies, some of which are contextual in terms of the digital domain, and highlight ways in which brand activist campaigns are both read and evaluated by these online interpretive communities.

5. Advertising Meaning Acceptance

Consumers would read the advertisements in what Hall (1980, p. 136) would describe as the "dominant-hegemonic position" and take meaning from the brand activist campaigns as the advertiser had intended. This generally led to advertising messages being accepted, championed and applauded by some interpretive communities:

I might have cried a bit ! I want this aware generation of men for heterosexual women to date. **(Gillette)**
Love this commercial, deep and powerful **(Nike)**

This reading strategy led to consumers promoting the message of the advertisement and extolling the values of the brand for tackling what they saw as critical social issues around race and gender in society. In this way, the brand became a key legitimacy advocate for important social issues (Kates, 2004), consumers appreciated the message it was promoting and the stance it had taken on a matter they regarded as crucially important.

6. Advertising Meaning Rejection

There were also reading strategies which were a direct rejection of the meaning of the advert and the message it sought to promote, adopting what Hall (1980, P. 138) describes as an "oppositional code". There were many critical readings of each commercial:

This commercial makes no sense. It accuses men of being one way, then at the end of the video the men come to the rescue. **(Gillette)**
This ad is soooooo cringey. All the protestors are there like "we're here to protest police brutality!" And Kendall Jenner basically goes "I know what will fix years of systemic abuse! A can of Pepsi!" **(Pepsi)**

Consumers have been found to interpret advertisements in the complete opposite way that advertisers have intended and can engage with messages rejecting the premise as well as the brand (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997). Consumers engaged in quite emotional discussions of the advert and its meanings, and provided deep and often profound consumer narratives about the issues under discussion online (Pace, 2008). The meaning rejection was quite a prominent discursive strategy for online interpretive communities, particularly for FMCG brands Gillette and Pepsi which were regarded as having less brand authenticity in relation to the wider social issues of gender and race than that of Nike.

7. Advertising Cynicism

Some of the readings of the commercials were based upon a high degree of cynicism toward the advertising and the corporations who were promoting the message. While cynicism itself is culturally contextual and must be interpreted either within an advertising text or by its reading (Scott, 1994), we found evidence of cynicism directed specifically at the advertising message:

George Floyd should have had a Pepsi **(Pepsi)**
Don't just be a spoiled alienated narcissistic corporate bully, become the President of the United States of America! **(Nike)**

As an active audience of advertising, consumers have been shown to have sophistication and complexity in how they engage with advertising texts and are considered a highly competent audience for meaning (O'Donohoe and Tynan, 1998). This sort of sophistication was illustrated via this particular reading strategy of the interpretive community, it was expressed in cynicism toward the advertisement, the brand and in some cases the celebrity endorser who featured in the commercial (Colin Kaepernick is specifically referenced in the example above).

8. Interpretive Community Questioning

An interesting reading strategy which we argue is specific to an online advertising context is for consumers to question the controversy over the advertisement itself or the outrage of certain members of the online interpretive community toward the message.

I get the sense that there are a lot of people confused about this ad, and confused people who are confused about the confused people... including me. Why the hell is everyone so upset? **(Gillette)**
I'm sorry am I missing something? I don't see what's wrong about this **(Nike)**

These comments contribute to the sense making amongst the interpretive community (Fish, 1980), and generated a lot of discussion on the forum with consumers using what Hall (1980, p.137) would refer to as the "negotiated code" to discuss their own interpretation of the

commercial or the public feeling toward the advertisement and the brand. The interpretive community questioning enabled consumers to further understand the meanings of the advert but also to appreciate why other members of the community may have taken a different meaning from it. We posit that this form of interpretive community questioning is very specific to an online context, where consumer community interaction is facilitated via computer-mediated communication (Kozinets et al., 2008).

9. Brand Criticism

Brands are considered totemic of consumer capitalism and are thus often open to criticism and subject to forms of consumer action such as protests or brand boycotts (Holt, 2002). Some consumers felt critical toward the brand of the advertisements, and this criticism could sometimes extend to the celebrity endorser also as previously noted:

Ha-ha it's been a year and I still haven't bought a single Gillette product, get woke go broke **(Gillette)**
Contrary to bad publicity being a good thing, I'll never drink a Pepsi again - when people are just plain stupid **(Pepsi)**

Interestingly, brand activist campaigns seemed to have a polarising effect for certain brands, particularly the FMCG products which received a greater volume and harsher criticism than the sports and fashion brand Nike, although there was consumer criticism directed toward this brand, also. Brands are increasingly adopting brand purpose missions and engaging in activism around so-called "woke" causes of race and gender equality, although in the absence of genuine brand authenticity in relation to these issues this could be regarded as a form of corporate "woke washing" in some instances (Sobande, 2020).

10. Competitor Promotion

The final reading strategy we identified was that of competitor promotion, where the interpretive community would actually engage in the promotion of rival brands in their evaluation of the advertisement.

Gillette has fallen to Feminism...but there's one that still holds value, That's called Dollar Shave Club, thanks for being there in a moment of darkness in society. **(Gillette)**
Ladies and gentlemen, this is why you should always choose Coca-Cola over Pepsi. **(Pepsi)**

It may be an irony of a brand activist advertising strategy that it could inadvertently lead to the promotion of a rival brand online, consumers discussed the merits of other brands and their intention to switch as a result of being offended by the portrayals in the advertisement. In this particular instance, the advertisement had led to the development of "oppositional brand loyalty" (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), where the online interpretive community would support

a rival brand in direct opposition or contrast to the advertised brand. While brand activism is a brave strategy in some instances, it also has the potential to backfire on the brand in question, and thus carries significant risk if poorly executed or inappropriate cultural codes are used in the advertisement (Holt, 2004).

11. Conclusion

This paper has highlighted brand activism as a marketing strategy and the ways in which online interpretive communities engage with polysemic advertising messages. The analysis illustrates that while these advertisements can be interpreted in a positive way by consumers, it is a strategy that can also backfire negatively and entails significant risk for a brand which tackles wider social issues. It is apparent that brands require a level of cultural authenticity in order to operate as a legitimate social activist brand (Kates, 2004), and it was also clear that brands with a track record of social activism (Nike) received a more positive reading than those with no previous link to these concerns (Gillette and Pepsi). We posit this paper has contributed a novel perspective on online interpretive communities and their response to brand activist advertising campaigns in a contemporary era.

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