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## RED is the New Black: Brand Culture, Consumer Citizenship and Political Possibility

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Note: At the time of this publication, Sarah Banet-Weiser was affiliated with the University of Southern California. Currently, she is faculty member at Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

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## RED is the New Black: Brand Culture, Consumer Citizenship and Political Possibility

### Abstract

Any quick glance at cultural, social, and political life in twenty-first century United States discloses compelling evidence that regardless of identity, or generation, or socioeconomic status, we organize our lives within brand culture. While advertising continues to have a dominant presence in both public and private spaces, what characterizes contemporary culture is not so much the ubiquitous ad, but rather the normalization of brand culture, where consumer participation is not simply (or even most importantly) indicated by purchases made, but rather by brand loyalty and affiliation. By connecting brands to lifestyles, to politics, and even to social activism, brand culture permeates consumer habits, and more importantly, all forms of political, social, and civic participation. We examine two contemporary examples of branding strategies, the RED campaign and the Chevy Tahoe consumer competition, as a way to demonstrate the dynamic relationships between consumers and brand marketers. In particular, we discuss these campaigns as lenses through which we understand how brand culture is a space for the constitution of consumer citizenship. These two campaigns are also illustrative of the ways that brand culture is in a state of flux at this historical moment, and we explore this instability for its political impact.

### Keywords

Brand culture, Consumer citizenship, Consumer-generated content, Appropriation, RED campaign, Neo-liberalism, Participatory culture

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### Comments

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## **RED is the New Black: Brand Culture, Consumer Citizenship and Political Possibility<sup>1</sup>**

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Any quick glance at cultural, social, and political life in twenty-first century United States discloses compelling evidence that regardless of identity, or generation, or socio-economic status, we organize our lives within brand culture. While advertising continues to have a dominant presence in both public and private spaces, what characterizes contemporary culture is not so much the ubiquitous ad, but rather the normalization of brand culture, where consumer participation is not simply (or even most importantly) indicated by purchases made, but rather by brand loyalty and affiliation. By connecting brands to lifestyles, to politics, and even to social activism, brand culture permeates consumer habits, and more importantly, all forms of political, social, and civic participation. We examine two contemporary examples of branding strategies, the RED campaign and the Chevy Tahoe consumer competition, as a way to demonstrate the dynamic relationships between consumers and brand marketers. In particular, we discuss these campaigns as lenses through which we understand how brand culture is a space for the constitution of consumer citizenship. These two campaigns are also illustrative of the ways that brand culture is in a state of flux at this historical moment, and we explore this instability for its political impact.

Key words: Brand culture; Consumer citizenship; Consumer-generated content; Appropriation; RED campaign; Neo-liberalism; Participatory culture

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In 2006, General Motors held a user-generated competition to promote its new sport-utility vehicle, the Chevy Tahoe. Almost immediately, consumers began posting Tahoe “ads” that criticized the company by calling attention to the negative environmental impact of SUVs. In that same year, global pop star Bono and California politician and activist Bobby Shriver launched RED — a cause-related marketing campaign that donates a portion of profits made from the sale of consumer goods such as iPods, Dell computers, and Gap clothing to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, a non-governmental organization that supports efforts to treat women and children in Africa who are affected by HIV/AIDS. Both of these campaigns demonstrate the dynamic relationships between consumers and brand marketers, and articulate some of the contemporary industry practices that define brand culture. These campaigns are also illustrative of the ways that brand culture, defined as the complex set of arrangements, artifacts, and messages created and distributed by marketers to consumers in global society, is in a state of flux at this historical moment. At its core, marketing is about building some kind of predictable behavior (making purchases) into an unpredictable culture (a public with different tastes, behaviors, income, and politics). With consumers’ increasing access to new technologies (e.g., social networking sites, TiVo, etc.) and ever-growing niche markets, efforts to predict consumer behavior are increasingly more complex. We want to explore the resulting instability for its political impact. The Chevy Tahoe competition and the RED campaign offer interesting, albeit different, points of entry into examining the ways that consumer citizenship is articulated and experienced in this unstable brand culture (see Banet-Weiser, 2007; Cohen, 2003; Davila, 2001; Miller, 1998; Sender, 2004).

### ***The Space of the Brand***

Any quick glance at cultural, social, and political life in 21st century United States discloses compelling evidence that we organize our lives within brand culture, regardless of identity, or generation, or socio-economic status. While advertising continues to have a dominant presence in both public and private spaces, what characterizes contemporary culture is not so much the ubiquitous ad, but rather the normalization of brand culture, where consumer participation is not simply (or even most importantly) indicated by purchases made, but rather by expressing brand loyalty and affiliation (Klein, 2002; Moor, 2007). As Elizabeth Anne Moore (2007) describes it, branding is “the deliberate association of a product not just with a mere name but with an almost spiritual image, an idea” (p. 5). Indeed, brand culture invests in a kind of heightened commodity fetishism; it is not simply that specific products are filled with new meaning, but brand names — Apple, Chevy, Coca-Cola — signify whole environments of meaning. The “idea” and “spiritual image” of brands connect them to lifestyles, politics, and even social activism, so that brand culture permeates consumer habits and, more importantly, all forms of political, social, and civic participation. Current marketing trends have created a context in which the brand matters more than the product, and corporations sell an experience or lifestyle more than a thing. As cultural theorist Naomi Klein (2002) points out in her anti-brand manifesto *No Logo*, “What these companies produced primarily were not things . . . but images of their brands. Their real work lay not in manufacturing, but in marketing” (p. 4). The language of the brand is maintained by personal narratives — lifestyle, identity, empowerment — more than the historical language of advertising, which relied heavily on claims of a product’s efficiency in a competitive market. This historical language — that of the “hard sell,” or the

Unique Selling Position, or the “big bang” marketing model — simply does not resonate with, nor does it convince, 21<sup>st</sup> century consumers (Arvidsson, 2005; Holt, 2002).

This shift in the language of the brand emanates from economic, cultural, and political contexts. It is impossible to theorize the relationship between brand culture and the consumer without taking into account shifting dynamics in the economy. As Douglas Holt (2004) has pointed out, relationships between marketers and consumers shift and adjust according to broader changes in the economy. Thus, what it meant to appeal to a consumer within a modernist, early 20<sup>th</sup> century context is quite different from appealing to today's consumer whose identity is formed within the postmodernist environment of the late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The marketing models used during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century — selling position, constancy, product-oriented ads — changed drastically as consumers adapted to a changing environment. Contemporary marketing models take cues from psychographics of the 1970s and '80s and niche markets of the 1990s, which cater to the ironic, savvy consumer who occupies the 21<sup>st</sup> century landscape. Contemporary marketers deploy new strategies as a way to both recognize and exploit changing identities, resulting in an increasingly more sophisticated and complicated exchange between the consumer and the brand in a shifting cultural environment. Hugely successful brands no longer use traditional marketing techniques; as one marketer commented: “*The New York Times* called the success of these brands, ‘The Marketing of No-Marketing.’ But don't believe the headline. Behind each of these successes is a complex orchestration of activities that only *appears* inconsequential” (Wipperfurth, 2004, p. 4).

The RED campaign and the Chevy Tahoe competition are both examples of how these new marketing strategies operate. In 2006, General Motors invited consumers to make their own online 30-second commercial for the car company's new SUV, the Chevy Tahoe. The company was attempting to initiate a viral marketing campaign that tapped into and exploited the recent trend of consumer or user-generated content (UGC). As Drew Neiser, president and CEO of Renegade Marketing commented, “there's a gold-rush fever about consumer-generated content. Everybody wants to have consumer-generated content, and Chevy Tahoe doesn't want to be left behind” (Bosman, 2006). The Web site offered a limited assortment of ready-made clips of the Tahoe in action — scaling cliffs, traversing sand dunes, maneuvering through city streets, etc. — as well as eight musical soundtracks from which the consumer could choose to accompany their ad. The text of the ad was to be provided by the consumer. However, relying on consumer-generated content is a risky business, and despite the efforts made by GM to guide the user-generated commercials in a specific direction that benefited the company, the campaign took a decidedly different turn. Almost as soon as the competition began, consumers used the Tahoe Web site to create anti-SUV ads that quickly shaped the tone of the contest. Thousands of the more than 21,000 ads submitted to the Chevy Web site were anti-SUV ads (NYT, 4/4/06). These negative ads linked the Tahoe (and, by implication, all SUVs) to global warming, inconsiderate drivers, and irresponsible citizenship. The viral ads became fodder for the blogosphere, and the Tahoe Web site exploded with traffic in the weeks following its launch. GM made the decision to leave the ads online (although there was speculation that some of the more critical ads had been taken off), and being “Tahoe'd” quickly became industry code for the risks taken when inviting the “public” to participate in corporate creative strategies and practices (von Hoffman, 2006).

During that same year, Bono joined with Bobby Shriver to launch the media brand RED. RED operates as a licensing company that enters into partnerships with major corporations, who in turn make a five-year commitment to create and market unique products under the RED brand and donate a significant portion of the profits to the Global Fund. These retail corporations — including American Express, Gap, Giorgio Armani, Converse, Apple, Motorola, Hallmark, Dell, and others — have produced a wide array of luxury goods under the RED brand, including mobile phones, iPods, sneakers, laptops, designer sunglasses, and T-shirts. While resembling other “cause marketing” campaigns that tap into consumers’ desires to be charitable, the RED campaign also operates under a newly defined economic and cultural model, which is explicit and unapologetic about the profit potentials for its clients. Rather than euphemistically framing its objective as a morally upright, lofty and philanthropic endeavor, the purpose of RED is not veiled — it is about making money. It is crafted as a straightforward business model, and it promises that this kind of campaign will initiate a new “consumer revolution” (Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, 2006).

The Chevy Tahoe and the RED campaigns articulate a particular kind of consumer citizenship that occupy an increasingly visible space within contemporary brand culture and, we argue, is a specific consequence of a neo-liberal political economy. Contemporary brand culture needs to be situated within this political economy, where a multitude of brands populate the landscape, where new technologies allow for even greater consumer access and provide opportunities for participatory media culture, and where the illusion of the stability of the market is threatened.

Current brand management is marked by a tension between consumer participation and corporate control over messaging. We use the concept of “appropriation” to understand consumer activity and to parse out the spaces and contradictions within the relationship of brand culture and corporate messaging. The commonplace definition of appropriation involves an act of deliberate acquisition, often without the permission of the owner. However, it also implies different sorts of relations depending on who is conceived as having agency over the “act of acquisition.” Marx, for example, saw appropriation as a tool of capitalists who appropriated the laborer within a capitalist system that could lead to, among other things, the alienation of human beings (Marx, 1978). More recent conceptualizations of the term (often following Gramsci’s notion of hegemony and Michel de Certeau’s concept of “making do”) have placed appropriation back in the hands of the laborer (the “people”), and have theorized appropriation as the taking back of power — or at least signifying a struggle over power — where those who typically are denied resources in a hegemonic system appropriate dominant resources for their own ends (de Certeau, 1984; Gramsci, 1971). Here, borrowing from Bar, Pisani & Weber’s conceptualization of appropriation (Bar, Pisani & Weber, 2007), we emphasize this notion of struggle. Concentrating specifically on technology, Bar et al., (2007) examine different practices by which users of mobile phones “make the technology their own and . . . embed it within their social, economic, and political practices” (p. 1). The authors argue that these practices are specific forms of appropriation, defined as a “negotiation about power and control over the configuration of the technology, its uses, and the distribution of its benefits” (Bar et al., p. 1). This struggle for power is not necessarily one that takes place on an even playing field, but it is, nonetheless, a struggle — the outcome of which often changes the shape of both the specific technology as well as its social contexts. Bar et al. theorize appropriation along a continuum that ranges from a non-confrontational relationship between producers and consumers to a more hostile takeover of

the product by the consumer. We find the most fertile place to theorize this relationship within brand culture to be what Bar et al. (2007) would call an "infiltration strategy." This appropriation strategy involves a ". . . filling and layering [that] generally does not imply direct confrontation . . . [I]t begins by occupying the edges, continuing to fill-in the available space until it makes the center marginal" (p. 15).

Thus, appropriation is understood to work on multiple levels. To utilize this concept is, therefore, a refusal of the zero-sum game that pits market dominance against consumer agency. In other words, as a struggle over relations of power, appropriation is continual and dynamic. Yet, dominant marketing practices have demonstrated considerable skill in appropriating consumer subversion as a way to more expertly and subtly continue their dominance (Heath & Potter; 2004; Klein, 2002). In an era that is increasingly characterized by particular forms of consumer creativity that often involve media "interactivity" (such as the production of user-generated content) that could be framed or interpreted as "subversive," consumer creativity needs to be considered alongside issues of cultural labor, and companies' reliance and exploitation of the creations of consumers. As Dan Schiller points out in his work on the structure and history of information, "we should scrutinize especially the means whereby capitalist social relations are insinuated or accepted into what had earlier been non-capitalist forms. This encompasses interrelated and often conflicted historical tendencies toward production by wage labor and private appropriation; exchange via capitalist markets; *creation of new means of producing and distributing information and cultural commodities; attendant restructurings of the labor process; . . .*" (2007, p. 21, our emphasis) Appropriation in the contemporary media context is clearly about this kind of restructuring of the labor process, and as such, cannot be understood within a binary analytic of either consumer/producer or resistance/dominance. In other words, the rise of user-generated content within current brand culture is not necessarily a process by which capitalism "insinuates" itself into historically non-capitalist forms, as Schiller suggests; rather, consumer creativity in the context of the Tahoe competition is an *affiliation* with capitalism, not a denial of capitalist practices.

Related to these changing structures of labor and consumer creativity, the notion of 'open' and 'closed' brands (see Pitt, Watson, Berthon, Wynn & Zinkhan, 2006) may be useful as a way to theorize the possibility of consumer appropriation in current brand practice. Open brands have relatively unfixed meanings, allowing consumers' latitude and opportunity for participation in creating the meaning of the brand, whereas closed brands are more carefully managed, with the producers (brand managers) maintaining tight control over creation of the brand experience and messaging. As Adam Arvidsson (2005) argues,

new practices of brand management aim at defining the contours of what the brand can mean, by creating inter-textual links in media culture, [creating] a mediatic space that anticipates the agency of consumers and situates it within a number of more or less precise coordinates. Within those coordinates consumers are free to produce the shared meanings and social relations that the branded good will help create in their life. (p. 245)

It is these coordinates that define the contours of the terrain on which the struggle of appropriation takes place. The examples of the RED campaign and the Chevy Tahoe competition provide

us with a lens through which to examine the ways in “appropriation” does not have a singular meaning for consumers and/or producers.

These tensions within appropriation practices offer a potential contradiction within the management of brands, a space in which the “openness” of brands might be exploited. A relatively ‘open’ brand management strategy (one where the coordinates are less precise) like that employed by Chevy Tahoe affords a great amount of available space for the consumer to occupy, potentially leading to unpredictable results that differ greatly from the intentions of the brand managers. In the case of the Tahoe campaign, the space provided within the structure was so wide that it resulted in a kind of “brand hijacking,” where the consumer drove the development of the brand, even if momentarily (Wipperfurth, 2005). This style of appropriation and the resulting “brand hijacking” illustrate — to both the industry and the consumer — the inherent instability of brand culture.

In other words, by providing audio-visual resources and inviting consumer participation, Chevy provided an architecture that allowed for consumer participation in the creation of meanings and social relations surrounding the Tahoe brand, enabling an expression of one form of consumer citizenship and a form of empowerment. The Chevy Tahoe UGC campaign’s relatively open brand space is indicative of current brand management practices, in which consumers enjoy greater freedom to produce a shared set of meanings about the brand, and about the place the brand holds in social life (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 245). However, the “coordinates” are themselves defined by the brand manager, and therefore act as predetermined architectures that frame and delimit the meaning-making possibilities for consumers. The degree to which these brands are open or closed (or how precisely their coordinates are set) influences the kind of consumer citizenship that can be articulated within a given brand space. Though the consumer momentarily drives the development of the brand, it is not likely that the consumer is actually “free” to produce shared meanings and social relations, nor is it probable that consumers routinely “commandeer” a brand from the marketers.

One consequence, then, of media interactivity is that the cultural labor of consumers is used not for activism, but rather for the productive activity of marketing and market research. Through this lens, the Chevy Tahoe competition offers marketers a negative scenario, a “what not to do” example when attempting to harness user-generated content as a way to further develop a brand. As Marc Andrejevic has argued, corporate interest in consumer creativity and media interactivity performs a particular kind of labor within neo-liberal, contemporary culture. In particular, he argues that the relationship between consumers and producers in the contemporary context is characterized in terms of surveillance, where the consumer, through his/her “interactivity,” engages in what he calls “the work of being watched” by the producers. As Andrejevic points out, the distinction between activism and interactivity becomes particularly important “in an era when the simple equation of participation with empowerment serves to reinforce the marketing strategies of corporate culture. It is precisely the creative character of viewer activity that makes it more valuable to producers” (2008, p. 43). Thus, the openness of a brand is neither a guarantee that consumer interactivity will result in activism nor a certainty that the cultural labor of consumers will be wholly acceptable to or appropriated by brand managers.



The RED campaign provides us with an important counter example — a case where the coordinates of the brand are rather tightly defined and the space available for consumers to participate in the process of meaning-making is relatively limited. Within the RED campaign, which more closely resembles the traditional agency-created advertising, there is little available space for consumer-created meanings or cultural usages to “occupy the edges” (Bar et al., 2007). RED is a case where the producers, not the consumers, are in control of the appropriation process. RED has appropriated the language of social action and rebellion, and mixed it with a neo-liberal economic model of consumption in a way that anticipates the tension between the two. However, it resolves this tension in such a way that actually strengthens the pillars of the neo-liberal consumer culture on which it is premised. The result is that, instead of making the center marginal, the marginal is diluted and re-invented so that it seamlessly blends with and validates the center. Brand culture, then, provides a context in which consumers enjoy and enact *a kind of agency* — one that is precisely anticipated by the brand itself, and thus works to perpetuate the seeming inevitability of brand culture.

Both the RED and Tahoe campaigns allow for the construction of very different modes of consumer citizens by virtue of the degree of the brand’s openness. Despite their differences, both forms of consumer citizenship only make sense within a neo-liberal context. Much has been written and said about neo-liberalism and the ways in which it characterizes economic, social, and political life in the contemporary United States. In popular usage, neo-liberalism is equated with a radically free market. As David Harvey has argued, the theory of neo-liberalism takes the view that “individual liberty and freedom can best be protected and achieved by an institutional structure, made up of strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade: a world in which individual initiative can flourish” (Lilley, 2006).

While certainly one can trace the genealogy of neo-liberalism within theories of classic liberalism, there are key differences. As Wendy Brown has argued, classic liberalism kept the spheres of the economy and political rationality separate, albeit in minute ways. Even if the economy informs the political sphere (as theorists such as Marx and Weber have maintained), there remains a contradiction, a space between these two spheres that allows for a kind of political opposition to the capitalist economy to occasionally surface. Brown maintains that while, “classical liberalism articulated a distinction, and at times even a tension, among the criteria for individual moral, associational, and economic actions, neo-liberalism normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life” (Brown, 2005, p. 6). The individual citizen-subject within neo-liberalism is never constructed outside of the context of economic entrepreneurship; rather,

The model neo-liberal citizen is one who strategizes for her/himself among various social, political and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organize these options. A fully realized neo-liberal citizenry would be the opposite of public-minded, indeed it would barely exist as a public. The body politic ceases to be a body but is, rather, a group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers. (Brown, 2005, p. 7)

Within this context, we need to rethink those practices that historically have been considered “progressive” or even “anti-capitalist.” In other words, Brown argues that the subject-position of the

"progressive" cannot exist within the framework of neo-liberalism, as citizenship itself is measured by the success in entrepreneurship and "self-help" (Brown, 2005). The unabashed consumerism of the RED campaign echoes the ethos of neo-liberalism, in which profitability is the moral framework, and consumerism is an efficient route to social change, best achieved through "free" market forces.

The logics of neo-liberalism have permeated spheres that have traditionally been understood as separate from the everyday workings of capitalism, such as social activism. The way in which the RED campaign aims to cultivate consumers is through what Brown (2005) calls a bold "raw market approach to political problem solving." This "raw market approach" suggests that there is "a transformation of American liberal democracy into a political and social form for which we do not yet have a name" (p. 15), of which RED is an illustrative example. Indeed, upon first glance of the RED campaign's "manifesto," one cannot help but be struck by the boldness of its raw market approach:

We believe that when consumers are offered this choice, and the products meet their needs, then they will choose (RED). And when they choose (RED) over non- (RED) then more brands will choose to become (RED) because it will make good business sense to do so. And more lives will be saved.

(RED) is not a charity. It is simply a business model. You buy (RED) stuff, we get the money, buy the pills and distribute them. They take the pills, stay alive, and continue to take care of their families and contribute socially and economically in their communities. (See IRL: <http://www.joinred.com/manifesto/>)

In the campaign's appeal to consumers to buy RED products to help assuage the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa, there is no gesture toward a morally-informed social action, no effort to define the action itself as a kind of moral or social good. Instead, the appeal is framed as a way in which consumers can "upgrade their choice" in terms of products, much like one would upgrade a cell phone model or a television set (see IRL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsbvOvd3Q3s>). Thus, philanthropic practices, or the affect that may motivate these practices, are cast in terms of market rationality, and every action one takes is both developed and supported by institutional practices of profitability and individual entrepreneurship. In other words, within neo-liberalism, profitability *is* the moral framework. Through the manifesto, Bono and Shriver direct the economy of RED so that consumers are encouraged to buy products, and corporations are encouraged to partner with the campaign, not to realize a sort of social change or justice, but to keep the economy moving in the right direction. Buy RED as a competitive strategy for other companies, buy RED so that Africans "improve" the economic cycle in their communities, buy RED as a way to "upgrade your choices." In press releases and interviews, both Bono and Shriver have been crystal-clear that RED is first and foremost a commercial venture that benefits the companies as well as the Global Fund. As Shriver stated,

RED is not a charity or public fundraising campaign. It is a business proposition that brings together partners with distinct priorities into a mutually beneficial relationship. Companies expand their customer base and bottom-line by combining their products with a brand that is both culturally significant and compassionate, while the Global Fund

and its recipients gain . . . critical financial resources. (Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, 2006)

Indeed, RED is precisely *not* a charity, rather, Bono has explicitly defined RED as different from philanthropy, which he characterized as old-fashioned and even quaint. He attaches a hip identity to the RED products and consequently to social activism itself: "philanthropy is like hippie music, holding hands. RED is more like punk rock, hip hop" (Weber, 2006). Hippie music, holding hands (and the social context to which these practices refer) make sense in a different economy. Punk rock, hip-hop (and the ways in which these more post-modern cultural phenomena refer to a kind of capitalist logic) make sense within neo-liberalism.

The RED campaign thus demonstrates how, as Brown states, political subjectivities take on a different cadence within neo-liberalism. However, to argue that political subjectivity is redefined within neo-liberalism does not mean that negotiation over these identities is completely absent. In fact, we would argue that some degree of resistance is possible within brand culture, but that resistance itself is articulated in a different register. Indeed, the definition of resistance needs to be situated within current brand culture; it is not a resistance against capitalism necessarily, but more an oppositional stance toward *particular* capitalist and consumerist practices. For example, in the Chevy Tahoe competition, the users who created the anti-SUV ads were surely critiquing consumer culture, but only within the parameters of the space defined by consumer culture. It is precisely within these limitations that consumers are "empowered" as citizens, so that consumer citizenship itself is characterized by a struggle to define the relationships between individuals and brand culture. As in the case of a user-generated content campaign such as Tahoe, this consumer culture is increasingly enabled by what Henry Jenkins characterizes as "convergence" and participatory media culture, made possible by recent technological shifts (Jenkins, 2006). This offers an opportunity for us to re-think — and indeed, re-imagine — the conditions of culture as a space for redefining the meaning of citizenship.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Consumer Citizenship***

Campaigns such as RED and Chevy Tahoe pose a dilemma for understanding *both* consumerism *and* citizenship. In order to trouble the dynamic between consumers and citizens, it is necessary to historicize this relationship. Consumerism and citizenship have long been considered as oppositional categories; certainly citizens are also consumers, but the contours and borders between these two identities have been understood as necessarily distinct. However, in an era of neo-liberal capitalism, accompanied by new technological formations that enable the relative ease of consumer-generated content and an increasing ambiguity about what it means to be a "citizen," the divisive separation between the consumer and the citizen no longer holds the same salience in U.S. public culture as it has historically.

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<sup>2</sup> Current brand culture also calls for a re-definition of what it means to be "progressive," but this re-thinking is beyond the scope of this paper, and we thus focus this discussion on citizenship.

Clearly, what is entailed is a redefinition of the public understandings of consumerism, citizenship, and the relation between the two. The tensions contained in current definitions of citizenship are produced through opposing cultural relations in late-capitalist U.S. society. As scholars such as Nestor Garcia Canclini (2001), Arlene Davila (2001), and Toby Miller (1993, 1998) (among others) have argued, the resulting understanding of citizenship, by both the commercial environment and the citizen her/himself, is informed by two or more opposing kinds of subjectivity. Citizens are, of course, always consumers, and are in the current commercial environment “trained” to be selfish, individualistic, and loyal to goods and services. However, despite the ubiquity of this kind of consumer subjectivity, a more traditional political notion of the citizen continues to linger in commercial society, as a kind of residual identity, one that is community-minded and selfless.

Historically, empowerment — realized through individual effort and merit — has been a central component to the identity of the citizen within U.S. liberal democracy. To be an empowered citizen is to have autonomy, agency, to not be wholly determined by the market. Of course, this notion of an empowered citizenry outside the confines of the market is one that exists largely ideologically; as Lizbeth Cohen (2003) has detailed in her history of consumerism in the U.S., mass consumption often provided the platform for the realization of political, or civic behavior — not its impediment. Throughout the development of advertising, public relations, and brand management, as Cohen argues, the definition of “consumer” became a political category, or a subject of analysis, rather than a habit, something that one does. Consumption is rather part of what one *is*. Thus, a *kind* of empowerment has been a key factor in the construction of consumer citizens — consumerism is seen as the key way to access particular liberal ideals such as freedom, liberty, equality. As Cohen demonstrates, individual consumer behavior, rather than social policy, began to be seen as the conduit to politically engaged activity — purchasing war bonds during World War II was understood as a form of patriotism, as was rationing of particular consumer goods (Cohen, 2003).

While Cohen provides a useful framework for understanding the historical interconnections between consumerism and citizenship, these categories nonetheless persist to be perceived as distinct. Indeed, the distinction between what it means to be a consumer and what it means to be a political actor continues to be at stake for scholars theorizing how political agency might exist within a capitalist, neo-liberal context. In order to theorize the intersections between consumer and citizen, and in order to redefine these categories in a way that considers this relation as a particular *condition of possibility*, brand culture and brand management strategies need to be taken into account. Indeed, rather than lingering on the various ways in which brand culture is politically and culturally bankrupt, it makes more sense to us to critically interrogate the concepts we use to determine distinctions between commercial culture and political citizenship, such as “consumer” and “producer” (or what some have called, the “prosumer” [Jenkins, 2006]). What is at stake is not simply revisiting these terms to theorize what place they might hold in a cultural debate about the making of identity. Rather, a new conceptualization of these terms and the contradictions between them is needed as a way to account for changing practices of cultural production within a shifting economy. In other words, we want to critically examine what Henry Jenkins calls “participatory culture,” in which media users create a sort of community and belonging through artistic expression and civic engagement. But, in that critical examination, we also want to challenge the

possibilities of this kind of “participatory culture” within the context of a neo-liberal brand environment, and think seriously about its limitations.

How is thinking about brand culture as functioning as a kind of lifestyle politics for consumers — something one is, or does, rather than pointing to a particular consumer good one purchases — a means to conceptualize the ways in which consumer citizenship is situated in the contemporary economy? We argue that the relation between brand culture and consumers is one built on a particular kind of instability on a number of different levels: the political economy, cultural notions of citizenship, and the unpredictability of consumption practices and consumer production. Because of the shifting coordinates that organize consumer behavior within the space of brand culture, we need to think of new theoretical models with which to examine how consumer citizenship is constituted within the space of brand culture. Within this framework, consumer culture both supports a traditional liberal notion of citizenship and complicates this very same notion through defining citizenship within the contours of the brand. By rethinking these concepts in the current cultural economy, it becomes possible to address the dynamics of contradictory consumer practices and cultural production, and how consumer citizenship is neither a cause to celebrate capitalist consumption nor a bankrupt formation of identity.

Again, the Chevy Tahoe ad campaign offers us a context in which to begin this sort of rethinking. The promotion set out to be a model “viral advertising” campaign, where Chevrolet used marketing techniques that utilized pre-existing social networks among consumers in an effort to promote their new SUV, the Tahoe. Viral marketing attempts to capitalize on already-formed communities by inviting those communities to participate in the development of a particular product (with the hope that this invitation will facilitate and encourage consumers to pass along the marketing message to their communities). In other words, viral marketing is about appropriation at its core: it is a deliberate attempt of a marketer to appropriate the labor of a consumer community as a way to promote and solidify — indeed, develop — a particular brand.

In the case of the Tahoe, GM gave consumers the space to provide the text for the ads, although the Web site did offer “director’s tips,” such as “inform: deliver the key messaging in a straightforward, concise manner.” GM stated that they would evaluate submissions based on how well the ads communicated Tahoe’s brand promise of “more capable, more responsible and more refined” (“The Week,” 2006). The “tip” to “inform” consumers about the Chevy Tahoe was followed by many of the submitters — but the meaning of “inform” for consumers often distinctly varied in important ways from GM’s definition. Almost immediately, environmentalists and anti-SUV activists posted ads that explicitly linked gas-guzzling vehicles to global warming and inconsiderate drivers, and criticized the poor safety records and loose emission standards of SUVs in general. One ad, for example, depicted the Chevy Tahoe driving through a variety of environments: snowy vistas, the desert, mountain tops. The text of the “ad” read:

We paved the prairies. We deforested the hills. We strip-mined our mountains, and sold ourselves for oil. To bring you this beautiful machine, so you can finally drive to see what’s left of our wilderness. And now that we’re here, we can’t get out of the car.  
America 2006: the ultimate padded cell.

(see URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oNedC3j0e4> )

The overt politicized message of the user-generated taglines is a kind of citizenship practice, one of resistance, within the contemporary environment. In other words, the user-generated strategy “worked” — but not in GM’s favor, as the anti-SUV ads received attention from blogs and other Internet sites, and the GM site itself exploded with traffic (Zerbisias, 2006). GM predictably responded to the negative ads with their own spin; as Melisa Tezanos, Chevy spokesperson, commented:

The purpose was to encourage people to have one-on-one interaction with the Tahoe. Any time you do this type of promotion, there’s a chance you’re not going to like everything people do. Obviously, one of the activists involved with the campaign saw the connection between SUVs, the environment, global warming and Exxon and decided to put it together to spread the message. We definitely encourage people to express themselves. (Stringer, 2006)

The notion of “expressing oneself” taps into not only a conventional definition of citizenship, but also into a general entrepreneurial ethos supported by neo-liberal capitalism, where to “express oneself” often indicates a kind of expression that is only possible within the confines of a capitalist system, in this case, the images, music and technological platform provided by Chevy.

If we consider the Chevy Tahoe ad campaign within the context of appropriation, there is no single obvious way in which we can characterize it as either freedom of expression or corporate control. The instability of a brand environment which increasingly relies upon the activity of consumers in brand development and marketing means that the struggles over control and power regarding the “message” of the brand are also unpredictable. This kind of appropriation can, at times, make the “center marginal,” thus shifting the dynamics of power. The efforts of GM to appropriate the labor of the consumer were, in turn, appropriated by the consumer her/himself, in an act of labor that attempted to dismantle the brand message of the marketer. While certainly the anti-SUV ads for the Chevy Tahoe did not fundamentally shift the center of power from GM to the consumer, these ads did force into bold relief the instability of brand culture, enabling a space for expressions of citizenship. In other words, this kind of appropriation is not a literal takeover of power, but rather a kind of sharing of cultural space — an “indirect confrontation” (Bar et al., 2007).

Whereas the Tahoe campaign can be understood as a space for consumers to at least partially define their own sense of citizenship, the RED campaign *prescribes* a certain mode of citizenship for its consumers. The RED campaign is part of a growing trend in contemporary philanthropy, which is increasingly manifest within a mediascape that is both created and sustained by Hollywood celebrities, popular media personalities, and consumer participants. Humanitarianism, social advocacy, and “consumer citizenship,” in turn, are defined by lifestyle politics — wearing a RED T-shirt, for example. Such initiatives have appropriated social action and blended it with consumer activity. RED has pushed this trend to new limits — in describing the campaign, Bono and other representatives use a galvanizing, action-driven language usually associated with social change movements. RED is described as a “consumer movement” which is “crazy” and “revolutionary” and devoted to “fighting AIDS in Africa” (Blog RED, 2007). RED is advocating a politically-informed action that is defined through its unapologetic

consumerism. As Shriver says: "at the shopping malls and high streets around the world, consumers are going to work to help their brothers and sisters in Africa." However, he continues, "we don't want anyone to be thinking 'I'm not making money on this thing' because then we failed. We want people buying houses in the Hamptons based on this because if this happens, this thing is sustainable" (Spethmann, 2007). Or as a fashion reporter lauding the campaign points out, "when you have to decide if you're going to wear skinny jeans or if you're going to support the fight against AIDS in Africa, why not do both?" (Mosely, 2006).

The messages that have appeared both in the press coverage and the ads for products have, to varying degrees, explicitly equated shopping with positive action that can relieve a sense of guilt, without requiring inconvenience or sacrifice on the part of the consumer. Consumers are able to "look good and do good" without being asked to change their behavior or threaten the stability of capitalist logic. RED's unabashed insistence on the money-making motive coupled with this "consume without guilt message" seems to be advocating a view that activism and social responsibility can be enacted through consumption. Practices of consumer citizenship are not only *enabled* through the RED campaign, they are precisely *defined*, so as to be compatible with a capitalist political economy.

### ***Consumer Activism in the Space of the Brand***

"Let me explain what I'm doing here, and there . . . By 'there' I mean (Product) RED — which piggybacks the excitement and energy of the commercial world to buy lifesaving AIDS drugs for Africans who cannot afford them." Bono, explaining his role as guest editor for a special edition of *Vanity Fair* dedicated to Africa (Bono, 2007).

While the Tahoe campaign and the resulting "brand hijacking" brings to light the instability of brand culture and the tensions between consumer activism and consumption, the RED campaign anticipates this tension and puts forth a potential resolution. Under the logic of neo-liberalism, this resolution appropriates consumer activism and defines it as no longer in opposition to consumerism. In fact, consumption itself *becomes* consumer activism. In this case, the producer, not the consumer, is driving the appropriation, by bringing the marginal — resistance movements — *into* the center, so that consumer citizenship is no longer in tension with conspicuous consumption. RED has recognized that consumers place increasing importance on social responsibility when choosing the brands they will use as cultural resources. Communication scholar Jo Littler discusses the RED campaign as one example of a kind of "cosmopolitan consumerism," in which campaigns such as RED "sell us the idea that through buying their product, we can make the world a better, fairer, healthier, more just, more habitable or more equal place" (2008, p. 1).

But as Littler points out, while this social orientation has been accepted as part of the RED identity, it is, at the same time, marked by avoidance (through obfuscation) of the historical socio-cultural realities that have left Africa vulnerable to poverty and HIV. This dynamic — the consumer attachment to particular politics that are, in turn, attached to products — is yet another characteristic of contemporary neo-liberal brand culture and reflect a contemporary practice of commodity fetishism.

Marketing campaigns, such as RED, often use markers of race and ethnicity to demonstrate social or racial awareness, so that race itself comes to us as a commodity, as a "brand." Yet racial politics are evacuated in this transformation, so that race becomes a kind of empty signifier that is appropriated by RED and then "filled" with meanings: meanings of consumer citizenship, of cosmopolitanism, of social and racial awareness; as Marx argued in his critique of commodity fetishism, social relations are obfuscated by our relationships with things. In other words, RED creates a form of obfuscation where the campaign may function to satisfy a demand for participation in social activism while at the same time obscuring the way in which it is enabling the capitalist structures that have contributed to the very problem it claims to address. The "problem," as conceived by RED, is not simply AIDS in Africa, but more importantly the consumer's political obligation to engage with this issue. This notion of obligation is connected, in a general sense, within the context of colonialism between the West and Africa. This history is then refracted in the representations of race (and by RED's extension, Africa) that form the RED campaign. As a spokesman for Motorola said, "from the charity's point of view . . . [the (RED) campaign] . . . is a very effective way of bringing what can be a distant issue in Africa to the forefront of the consumer mind" (Donnelly, 2006). But what picture of Africa are they conjuring?

The way in which RED constructs an "African" identity has been noted by critics and bloggers (for example, see [blacklooks.org](http://blacklooks.org), 2006; [visualeditors.com](http://visualeditors.com), 2006), who have raised concerns over issues of racial representation in some of the ads and visuals used in the campaign and criticized the campaign in general for smacking of "khaki colonialism" in its attempt to make "buying Africa" sexy and fashionable (Kim, 2006). During an interview on NPR's Weekend Edition, for example, Rasna Warah, a correspondent for *The Daily Nation* in Kenya stated, "it's the only way you can feel less guilty about your lifestyle, about the choices you've made, about your extravagant and ostentatious lifestyle is if you pretend or look like you're helping Africa. And I'm sorry, the continent cannot be used to ease the conscience of . . . rich white folk in Beverly Hills or wherever. Africa is being used again to make someone else look good" (Simon, 2006).

There are several ways in which RED "uses Africa" to make consumers "look good." One is through the ahistorical conflation of Africa with AIDS. For example, none of the interviews or sound bytes for RED address or explain the causes of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa. It thus obscures the fact that colonization and exploitation from the slave trade by both the U.S. and the UK (the two countries where RED is currently running, coincidentally) hindered the development of Africa (Rodney, 1981), contributing to pernicious poverty and infrastructure issues that today contribute to the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Another way in which RED "uses Africa" is through practices of representation that continue to have currency among white consumers: the act of othering and exoticizing the African. In most of the communication distributed by the RED campaign, mentions of Africa seem to be confined to "proceeds go to help fight AIDS in Africa." When there is space for a longer soundbyte, RED spokespeople including Shriver and Tamsin Smith, President of RED, often elaborate that "5500 people are dying every day of a treatable and preventable disease" (e.g., Blog RED, 2006).

However, in cases where Africa is more prominently foregrounded, the representations have been particularly problematic. For example, the UK based newspaper *The Independent* ran a special issue



September 21, 2006, on the challenges facing women in Africa. The cover image of this issue is a picture of the model Kate Moss in black-face with features that were digitally altered to look more African, a move that some blogs have described as racist, bemoaning the fact readers will only relate to Africa through a white model in black face, rather than a "true" black person (e.g., see [www.blacklooks.org](http://www.blacklooks.org), 2006 and [www.visualeditors.com](http://www.visualeditors.com), 2006). A photo spread for Amex featured the white model Gisele Bündchen in scanty, revealing attire leaning seductively against a Masai warrior in traditional attire (see url: <http://www.newint.org/features/2006/11/01/red.jpg>). These images have created what Stuart Hall (1997) would describe as a "spectacle of otherness" that defines black as the other to Gisele Bündchen or Kate Moss's whiteness, while at the same time using sexually charged imagery to fetishize and exoticize the black body. It is yet another way that, as Kim writes, "buying Africa has become so sexy, so fashionable" (Kim, 2006). Indeed, as Littler points out, it is significant that "in the context of how traditional imperialist dynamics are being reworked and reproduced, that charity is being reconfigured as a kind of equitable and *fun* relationship between an international community of people" (Littler, 2008, p. 5).

Thus, while RED may be bringing Africa to a particular forefront, it may not be doing so in a way that, as the Motorola spokesman suggested, reduces the distance between the RED consumer and the Global Fund's beneficiaries in Africa. In fact, it increases the distance by its other practices that both exoticize the continent while eclipsing the ways in which the U.S. is truly connected to the "plight" of Africa — through the socioeconomic historical realities of colonization, the slave trade, and economic relations between the West and Africa that have contributed to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa. The advertisements' tendency to distance and other Africa thus serves as a distraction from the real connections between the U.S. and Africa born of the historical reality that the development of Europe and the U.S. (and the ability to enjoy luxury goods such as iPods and Razr phones) was enabled by the very exploitation that has left Africa vulnerable today (Rodney, 1981). These kinds of histories, in other words, do not have an obvious fit within contemporary neoliberal culture. Thus, a culture that denies the history of U.S./Africa relations is not likely to respond to a marketing strategy that is based on doing the "right" thing as a redemptive act; rather, doing the "right" thing is framed in a context of hip coolness, where "helping Africa" functions as another product choice.

### ***Convergence***

Here it makes sense to return to our key questions: What are some of the practices of consumer citizenship within brand society? And does it create the conditions of possibility for political resistance? In order to address these questions, it makes sense to consider whether or not either the RED campaign or the Chevy Tahoe competition was a "success," in terms of both marketing and consumer activism. For RED, determining its "success" is not a straightforward task: although specific dollar amounts vary from one source to another, there is no doubt that sales of RED products have generated a considerable amount of money that has been used for treatment and care in Africa. But it is not as clear whether more money has been spent on advertising than is actually given to the cause. In 2007, Advertising Age reported that \$100 million had been spent and only \$19 million donated (Frazier, 3/5/07) (though the numbers from officials of the RED campaign are slightly less disparate: they claim that \$50 million had been spent and \$25 million raised [Nixon, Feb. 6, 2008]). The most recent number, reported in *The New*

*York Times*, is that \$22 million has been generated by consumers buying iPods, RED Razors, Dell laptops and other RED Products (Nixon, Feb. 6, 2008).

Despite these numbers, it remains difficult to determine if the RED campaign has been a "success," primarily because this determination depends on the definition of "success" in the first place. While the RED campaign has indeed raised an impressive amount of money for the Global Fund (RED is the 15<sup>th</sup> largest donor to the Global Fund- more than Russia, more than China and more than Switzerland has pledged [Nixon, 2/6/08]), conflating consumerism and charity may not be the most efficient route to create social change; perhaps directly donating to the Global Fund would have more impact. But for many, "success" is not just a question of bottom line, but is also a question of the means and processes by which money is raised. Within this argument, the logic of the model is problematic. This new "punk rock" capitalism model of social contribution ties funding for crucial social issues to consumer market forces in problematic ways; as Brook K. Baker, professor and Chairman of Health Gap, a network of non-profits seeking more HIV/AIDS funding, asks "Do we really want something as important as HIV/AIDS to be funded by holiday shoppers?" (Nixon, Feb. 6, 2008).

The "success" of the Chevy Tahoe competition is equally difficult to discern. Success in this context seems to indicate at least two different developments: did the hijacking of the Chevy Tahoe competition lead to a shift in sales of SUVs, or in a more generalized consumer critical awareness about the problems of SUVs? And, were the submissions of anti-SUV ads part of an organized politics of coalition, or were they the products of individuals who see themselves as particular "culture jammers"? As we've argued throughout this essay, the definition of "activism" is called to question in an era of brand culture and within the context of new technological platforms such as user-generated content. Acts of resistance within neo-liberal culture are not monolithic; there are differences, for instance, between consumer citizens who use the terrain of consumption to strategically articulate their politics as a critique of neo-liberal cultural sites, and those who use these very same sites as a way to mock an individual corporation on their Web site. It seems as if the anti-SUV activity in the context of the Chevy Tahoe contained both of these kinds of citizens: users submitted more than 21,000 ads and have e-mailed these ads over 40,000 times; at the time of the competition, the Web site generated 2.4 million page views and the average visit to the site lasted more than nine minutes (*The New York Times*, 4/4/06). Some of the anti-SUV ads were part of a larger organizational effort, such as the non-profit Worldchanging.com, which claims on its Web site that it is a "solutions-based" organization "that works from a simple premise: that the tools, models and ideas for building a better future lie all around us." (worldchanging.com). But there were clearly other anti-SUV ads that were products of a savvy consumer base, who saw an opportunity to "culture jam" in this particular instance without projecting the ads as part of a long-term political project critiquing neo-liberal culture. Both of these efforts are political, but in different ways — again pointing out the crucial necessity to re-imagine the concept of "politics," "progressive" and "activism" within neo-liberalism.

As for whether or not the anti-SUV ads hurt Chevy Tahoe sales (ostensibly a sign of the "success" of these actions), it is impossible to directly link consumer behavior with sales of automobiles, as consumption is an information-rich environment, involving many different kinds of impacts and influences. While Chevy consistently spun the submissions of anti-SUV ads as not only anticipated by the company,

but welcomed in the name of “transparency” and “openness,” the site is no longer active, with all of the ads taken off the site as of this writing. One thing is certain: the competition garnered a great deal of public attention to Chevy Tahoe. As Ed Peper, general manager of Chevrolet, responded to the ads: “Anyway, it sure got people talking about the Tahoe. Which was the whole idea, after all” (Fastlane Blog, GM). Additionally, because of the visibility of the Chevy Tahoe competition, there is a more diffused impact on how other corporations will approach user-generated content in the future. Because of the kind of “success” of the Tahoe competition, in other words, the competition could have the paradoxical effect of corporations maintaining a tighter control of the brand coordinates we have discussed in this essay.

Anti-brand movements such as the “hijacked” campaign of Chevy Tahoe have demonstrated consumers’ abilities to appropriate the cultural resources created by brand culture, and in their critique of neo-liberal capitalist practices, they reveal the instability of brand culture. However, the logic that drives the RED campaign is not completely separate from the Chevy Tahoe competition; indeed, the very logics that enabled consumers to “hijack” Chevy leads to the reconfiguring of the practice of brand management in the RED campaign in a way that appropriates consumer citizenship practice into the new brand management strategies. RED combines the two seemingly adversarial currents into a whole that aligns social activism and consumer culture without calling into question the foundations of capitalist, neo-liberal structures. Both the RED campaign and the Chevy Tahoe competition offer a glimpse at how particular kinds of “entrepreneurship” are practiced within neo-liberalism; both are examples of the various ways in which consumer citizenship is realized within a context of brand instability.

We have looked at two models of consumer practice: a relatively open brand practice where meaning is created by the consumer (albeit with limited tools provided by the producer) in the case of Tahoe, and a collapse of consumer activism and consumption in the RED campaign that offers a potential restoration of the stability of the brand in the neo-liberal economy. Perhaps social action is only possible in the realm of a capitalist market insofar as consumers are able to make use of and highlight the instabilities of brand culture, as occurred in the Tahoe competition. However, as brand managers absorb and appropriate consumer practice as part of current brand strategies, marketing adjusts and re-builds its foundations so that consumer citizenship is incorporated and attached, indeed, anticipated, to a neo-liberal ethos. Thus a certain stability may be restored to brand culture, even if temporarily, through the obfuscation of the inherent contradictions within neo-liberalism. Both the RED campaign and the Chevy Tahoe user-generated competition allow us to question whether contemporary philanthropic and participatory efforts offer a viable route for social action, or whether they merely conflate consumerism with activism, confining social action within parameters that perpetuate some of the problems they claim to address.

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