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Cultures of Unruly Bricolage: 'Debadging' and the Cultural Logic of Resistance

Douglas Brownlie, University of Stirling, Scotland

Paul Hewer, University of Strathclyde, Scotland

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Abstract

Arnould and Thompson note that the "marketplace has become a pre-eminent source of mythic and symbolic resources through which [people] construct narratives of identity" (2005: 871). Not only do consumers "actively rework and transform symbolic meanings" (ibid: 871), but in everyday practices they use "marketplace cultures [to] define their symbolic boundaries through an ongoing opposition to dominant lifestyle norms and mainstream consumer sensibilities (ibid: 874). The paper examines identity work done with cherished possessions, in this case cars. By means of a netnography we focus on everyday practices where consumers rework brand identity towards their local identity projects.

Introduction

A rich stream of research has explored consumers' resistance to commodity culture and brands (Arnould & Thompson, 2004; Holt, 2001, 2002; Dobscha, 1998; Fournier, 1998; Schor, 1998). Research has thus focused upon the anti-brand movement (Fischer, 2001), lovers of the natural world (Dobscha, 1998), downshiftees (Schor, 1998), to the voluntary simplicity movement (Murray, 2002) or the burning man movement (Kozinets, 2002b). Murray (2002) draws our attention to how such consumers, who are often cynical of commodity culture, seek to construct their sense of who they are, through what he terms their 'salient negations' to commodity culture. We reveal how consumer subcultures are engaged in forms of guerrilla warfare to affirm, maintain and consolidate their group identity through their appropriations of marketing brands.

Conceptualisation

In their recent synthesising overview of consumer culture theory, Arnould and Thomson discuss the constitutive and productive aspects of consumption, noting that the "marketplace has become a pre-eminent source of mythic and symbolic resources through which [people] construct narratives of identity" (2005: 871). They remind us that not only do "consumers actively rework and transform symbolic meanings" (ibid: 871), but that through a variety of everyday practices they also use "marketplace cultures [to] define their symbolic boundaries through an ongoing opposition to dominant lifestyle norms and mainstream consumer sensibilities (ibid: 874). In this paper we construct a line of argument based on those thematic observations, exploring in particular the identity work that is done by consumers through modifying cherished possessions, in this case cars. We focus, paradoxically perhaps, on the site of everyday practices by means of which consumers de-badge, or perhaps, re-badge their vehicles, or otherwise rework its brand identity, in pursuit of local identity projects.

Methodology

In our quest to understand the consumer practices and tactics of 'debadging' we drew inspiration from the netnographic work of Kozinets (2001, 2002a). We started by 'lurking' at a number of web forums devoted to car cultures. These included amongst others: MBWorld Discussion forum, otherwise known as the forum for Mercedes-Benz enthusiasts; VWvortex forum, otherwise known as the Volkswagen enthusiast website; Mini2.com, otherwise known

as 'fuel for your mini obsession'; Hondacivicforum.com; and 7thGenCivic.Com. Most of the forums advertise themselves in much the same way that the Honda Civic forum does: "as a discussion forum & one stop resource for all Honda Civic related discussions, with forum topics including Honda Civic vehicle maintenance, tech help with car repairs, and performance upgrades."

Findings

The findings are organised under three key themes: first to unravel what we mean by the practice of debadging; second to theorize the consumer as a designer; and third, to explore the forms of exchange, and affiliation exhibited by car enthusiasts. For instance, we find that design at the everyday level is about finding solutions to identity tasks and overcoming contradictions through bricolage. For many the changes made through de-badging their vehicles focus upon the achievement of a particular look, where the reclamation of de-signing is intended to achieve a degree of anonymity, but also a form of cultural capital in itself in which such practices were engineered to speak to those who understand, and exclude others for their lack of aesthetic and technical knowledge and appreciation. The informants display a sophisticated understanding and appreciation of the state of things and are restless in their pursuit to change the things that matter in their lives.

Conclusions

The analytical focus of the paper is directed towards a virtual community of car enthusiasts and a series of online reports of consumer bricolage in the empirical setting of car modification. This opens a window on a variety of everyday practices that characterize how consumers actively use cars and other resources of popular culture in creative ways as symbolic resources for constructing and sustaining social identity. Also illuminated are ways in which arenas of anti-consumption are invested with particular meanings that are grounded within practices of daily life. Through analysing forms of reportage naturally occurring in those online sites, textual data is generated about consumption practices that can be read as constitutive of forms of consumer resistance. Theorising resistance through de Certeau's (1984) lens of everyday practice brings analysis to 'grounded aesthetics' (Willis, 1990) as a potential arena in which practices of consumer resistance are played out. Over an eight-month period an internet-based methodology generated observations of online posting activity on five different internet newsgroups attracting those with an interest in the highly particular pursuit of car modification. Participants used those web-forums not only to share information and insights, but to give individual and collective voice to enthusiasms towards car modification and customization as a way of improving vehicle aesthetic appeal. The term 'grounded aesthetics' (Willis, 1990) is used to describe 'articulations' (Kozinets, 2001, p. 70) between practices of everyday life and the creativity that consumers bring to their 're-appropriation of the product-system' (de Certeau 1984, p xxiv). For some informants the practice of debadging is a tactic to improve the look of the vehicle; for others it expresses a more radical practice that feeds-off desires to be free of what is seen as the thinly concealed calculation and manipulation of visible brand livery. Findings show that, as Denzin (2001) observes, "grounded aesthetics function both as vehicles and sites of resistance" (ibid, p.

328). The paper concludes that the discussion threads of the studied web-forums offer access to the interplay of discursive resources in circulation among interest-based collectives; and that they can usefully be understood as arenas for following how the discursive resource-base is nurtured, sustained and transformed through various interpellations, including the rehearsal of anti-consumption rhetoric and sentiment. But rather than being anxious or defensive about such forms of unruly re-appropriation, we advise that businesses, especially designers and consumer researchers, would benefit from following the discussion occurring on such sites—for this speaks of fragments of cultural change that, should it gather impetus, will circulate more widely within contexts of consumption.

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