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Progressive's Flo: Convergence Brand

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Progressive's Flo: Convergence Brand

“The architecture of participation turns into an architecture of exploitation and enclosure, transforming users into commodities that can be sold on the market.”

– Søren Petersen, “Loser Generated Content: From Participation to Exploitation”

“...celebrities are both labor and the thing that labor produces”

– Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*

Overview

This course module includes a series of screenings, readings, and exercises that invite students to investigate branding through a case study of immersive brand phenomenon Flo, the Progressive Insurance mascot. As the students will find, Flo is a fascinating hybrid of regressive styling and futuristic aesthetics – she looks like an apron-wearing 1950's housewife but works in a space that resembles a clean room and is identified as a representation of virtual reality. She is also a convergence era celebrity whose image is spread across multiple media platforms. By following a series of scaffolded assignments, students work collaboratively to construct a multi-modal reading of Flo, the Progressive Insurance mascot and of the Progressive SuperStore, the virtual space that she inhabits. The readings, screenings and exercises ask: in what ways can we read the representation of the Progressive SuperStore, a digital space made literal (and material) through Flo's presence there, as an emblem of the shift from manufacturing products to manufacturing images which is typical of the paradigm of branded culture? And, how do we read and interpret the labor of fans, producers, and consumers of the Flo brand identity as an example of the unpaid and freely given “immaterial labor” typical of the *prosumer*, brand-oriented era?

Rationale

As Naomi Klein notes in *No Logo*, “the old paradigm had it that all marketing was selling a product. In the new model, however, the product always takes a back seat to the real product, the brand” (21). Brand identity has become the primary object of exchange in media culture, and the labor of spreading that identity is increasingly being outsourced to consumers. This new paradigm is especially prevalent in advertising, whose ubiquitous role in consumption experiences across media platforms “forms a vast superstructure with an apparently autonomous existence and an immense influence” on culture (Williamson, 11).

This immense influence functions according to the logic of what Henry Jenkins calls “affective economics” (20). In an affective economy, consumers do more than consume, they labor on behalf of the brand. As members of a “brand community” (Jenkins, 20) these consumers construct, exchange, promote, and disseminate the brand in a process that “can only be described as spiritual” (Klein, 21). The “corporate transcendence” brand marketers practice is largely achieved through the production of paratextual, immersive brand experiences that invite consumers to engage in performances of fealty to brand images (Klein, 21). In essence, these brand experiences offer a representative model of work that consumers eagerly adopt. Because of her omnipresence in the current United States media landscape, Flo offers a robust object of study that can be approached in a number of ways, each representing a key modality for

media studies, with an emphasis on critical branding. Flo can be analyzed as: a conventional fictional character in television commercials; a superflat celebrity spread across a range of digital spaces; and, a real time fan-culture phenomenon. This module asks students to characterize the look of the digital workspace as it is represented in contemporary advertising and to compare it to previous representations. It provides exercises that allow students to contextualize issues of immaterial labor and fan practice within a discussion of advertising, digital media, and branding practices. The module further introduces students to key terms that establish a vocabulary for speaking about brand culture, women in the workplace, work in the neoliberal era, and celebrity as a form of labor.

Assignment Structure

The structure of the module employs traditional modalities for studying media texts (reading critical essays, answering close reading questions) and innovative strategies for using new media assets to encourage collaborative knowledge production (using Google Docs to collaboratively build a small archive of evidence for their paper). The students begin each class with readings that introduce them to the analysis of advertisements (Williamson), contextualize issues of work and advertising (Klein), discuss convergence culture (Jenkins), and assess the changing role of celebrities in the digital era (Dreissens). Students receive a handout that accompanies each of the readings prior to completing the reading; these handouts allow them to come to class with preliminary answers to the reading questions and preliminary definitions of the key terms. Each class session includes a variety of exercises as well as a provocative guiding question that frames the in-class activities.

On the first day of the module, students will discuss the key terms from the readings. They will also spend a significant portion of class time doing a shot-by-shot analysis of two early Flo ads: “Man Bag” and “Who are Them?” This will prepare them for doing a series of similar analyses of Flo and Flo TV ads on their own in preparation for writing the final paper.

On the second day of the module, students will arrive ready to discuss convergence culture. Students will complete an in-class writing exercise (which includes still image analysis, comparative assessment, and collaborative analysis) before watching and discussing evocative clips that frame issues of materiality in representations of the workplace. The students will then be given an assignment that asks them to gather data from analyses of Flo TV ads. Students will answer a set of questions about each Flo TV ad using a Google Form, which will feed their answers into a spreadsheet that the students can then consult as a collaboratively produced resource when writing their paper.

On the third day of the module, students will discuss key terms and concepts from the reading. They will also share the key findings from their resource building assignment. They will then work in groups to link key terms and concepts from the readings to analyses of Flo paratexts. They will give brief, informal presentations that describe their analyses. Then, students will receive the paper assignment and rubric and have time to discuss the assignment as well as to ask questions about the assessment.

Class session 1:

Prior to class:

Assign readings (Williamson, Klein) and distribute key terms & reading question handouts

Class session:

- Put guiding question on board/screen
- Discuss readings & key terms (Williamson, Klein)
- Screen & discuss “Man Bag” and “Who are They?” Flo TV ads
- Assign readings (Jenkins) with key terms & reading questions handout

Guiding question:

What does Flo's brand image communicate about women workers in the digital age?

Activity one/discuss:

Students work with partners to compare and contrast definitions of key terms (assign each student group two terms to work on). Ask students to share collaboratively assessed answers and citations of page numbers where key terms are found in readings with rest of class. Ask other students to comment on correctness of key term definitions.

Activity two/screen:

Watch Flo TV ads one time through and ask students to take notes. Give them two minutes to write after first screening. Then, re-screen and have them to add further detail to their notes. Then, engage class in shot-by-shot analysis of Flo TV ads, with an emphasis on the representation of Flo, while taking notes on discussion. (Note to instructor: You may want to create a slide show with screengrabs of each shot to make this process easier.)

Activity three/synthesize:

Use reading questions to connect conversation about Flo TV ads to issues raised in the readings.

Activity four/assign:

Distribute reading questions and key terms handouts for Jenkins.

Class session 2:

- Put guiding question on board/screen
- Discuss reading & key terms (Jenkins)
- Pre-screening in-class writing exercise
- Screen and discuss: *Modern Times* & Intel Pentium ads
- Assign archive building exercise & reading (Dreissens) with handouts

Guiding question:

How has the shift toward convergence culture affected representations of the workplace? And, in what ways do those representations reflect cultural attitudes about work?

Activity one/discuss:

Students work with partners to compare and contrast definitions of key terms (assign each student group two terms to work on). Ask students to share collaboratively assessed answers and citations of page numbers where key terms are found in readings with rest of class. Ask other students to comment on correctness of key term definitions.

Activity two/write:

Students work both singly and together to compare and contrast images of workspaces.

Activity three/screen:

Watch clip from *Modern Times* and Intel Pentium ads. Give students five minutes to write reflections after each screening.

Activity four/synthesize:

Use reading questions to connect observations about the representation of workspaces from screenings to issues raised by readings.

Activity five/assign:

Discuss archive building assignment. Show students how to access Google Form. Distribute reading question and key terms handout for Dreissens.

Class session 3:

- Put guiding question on board/screen
- Discuss reading (Dreissens)
- Discuss key findings of archive building exercise
- Pre-paper in-class paratext analysis and informal presentation exercise
- Discuss paper assignment & rubric

Guiding question:

What does the ubiquity and variety of Flo paratexts signal to us about the relationship between celebrityization and immaterial labor?

Activity one/discuss:

Have students work with two partners to compare and contrast the evidence they gathered while analyzing the Flo TV ads. Assign each group of three a different ad to discuss. Have the groups share the key points of their discussion with the class. Ask students to engage key terms from Dreissens reading to explicate and analyze Flo's celebrity status. Engage previous readings to link issues of celebrity, fan labor, immaterial labor, and hegemonic representation in order to contextualize discussion of Flo.

Activity two/analyze:

Place students in groups of 2-4 and assign each group a Flo paratext. Ask the students to collaboratively produce an analysis that links their paratext to key terms from the readings, with emphasis on issues of convergence culture, immaterial labor, and celebritization. Then, have each group give a brief presentation to the class that describes their paratext and their analysis.

Activity three/assign:

Read the paper assignment and the paper rubric to the students. Ask for questions.

Resources for class assignments and activities**Class session 1:****“Meaning and Ideology” (Williamson) reading questions and key terms****Reading questions:**

1. Why do ads have an independent reality?
2. What is “the world of things”?
3. What is the difference between use-value and exchange-value?
4. How does advertising orient us toward signs?
5. How does advertising affect the relationship between people and objects?
6. How do ads affect the relationship between production and product?
7. Whose voice speaks to us through advertisements?
8. How do ads create meaning?

Key term:

commodity
exchange value
use value
ubiquitous
pervasive
tenacity
the “ad world”

false materiality
structures of meaning
social discourse
sign
symbol
materiality
ideology
self-perpetuating

“New Branded World” & “The Brand Expands” (Klein) reading questions and key terms

Reading questions:

1. What have material things come to represent?
2. What has replaced material things as the primary product of companies?
3. Why do manufacturers feel they need to “establish emotional ties” with consumers?
4. What does it mean when Klein characterizes branding as “spiritual”?
5. What effect has the dominance of logos had upon clothing?
6. What is the effect of advanced branding on a host culture?
7. Describe the relationship between brands and culture.

Key terms:

weightlessness
consumers
corporate transcendence
branding

neoliberalism
market distortions
value

Links to Flo TV ads:

Flo: “Man Bag”: <http://youtu.be/vkPSNPI8TZg>

Flo: “Who Are They?": http://youtu.be/455o05o2_ww

Class session 2:

“Introduction: Worship at the Altar of Convergence” (Jenkins) reading questions and key terms

Reading questions:

1. Why does convergence mark a cultural, rather than a technological, shift?
2. What does the Bert is Evil story tell us about shifts in media use?
3. Identify some ways that consumer participation affects media content.
4. Where does convergence occur?
5. Describe the relationship between participatory culture and media concentration. How does this relationship impact culture?
6. What are typical behaviors of “new consumers”?
7. What problems are associated with the participation gap?
8. What is a knowledge culture?

Key terms:

flow	extension
old media	synergy
new media	franchise
media platform	conglomerate
emerging technologies	convergence
modalities	collective intelligence
situated context	participation

Images of the workplace: pre-screening writing exercise:

For this exercise you will analyze images of workplaces. Doing some preliminary analysis of these images will help you to identify key themes and visual tropes that will help guide your observations as you watch clips later in class. This writing exercise has 3 parts: you will complete the first two parts on your own and the third part with a partner.

1. Observe and identify (10 minutes)

Write a list of observations about each of the following two images. This list should include observations about the following categories: framing, color, characters, actions depicted, objects depicted, and prominent visual elements. Be sure to use descriptive language and offer at least two observations about each category.

2. Compare and contrast (10 minutes)

Using the observations you assembled above as evidence, write a short essay that compares and contrasts the ways that workplaces are represented in the different images.

3. Peer review and discussion (10 minutes)

Exchange your short essay with a classmate and read their essay. Underline sections in your partner's essay in which they identify key themes and visual tropes. Then, after you've both done this, hold a discussion about those key themes and tropes. Write a separate list that identifies points around which you find consensus between the two essays. (You may each want to write this list in your notes so you can refer back to it when studying.) At the end of the ten minutes, you will be asked to write this list of key themes and visual tropes on the board, so we can compare and assess the collected observations of the class in preparation for screening the clips.



Links to screenings:

Modern Times: <http://youtu.be/DfGs2Y5WJ14>

Intel Pentium Processor Ads: http://youtu.be/H3_OwaHcrw0

Archive building exercise:

(Note to instructor: To create this assignment in this format you need a Google+ account. Use Google Drive forms to create a form that includes questions 1-10 below. Then, share the link to the form with your students. The data that the students enter will be collected in a spreadsheet that you can then share with the students. This allows the students to read an archive of collected analyses for each advertisement. The assignment could, of course, be completed in an analog format by giving the students the questions and links on a piece of paper. Or, by using a spreadsheet function in a course management software program such as Moodle, Blackboard, or Canvas.)

For this assignment you will answer the following questions about each Flo TV ad in the list below. For each ad you will write a 50-100 word response to each question listed below. You will submit the assignment using a Google Form. You will complete a separate form for each ad.

Links to ads:

Flo Breaks it Down in the SuperStore: <http://youtu.be/gvVac1CeDhw>

The Specialist: <http://youtu.be/2bNTAIRXw10>

Blinded Me with Science: <http://youtu.be/vkPSNPI8TZg>

Money Suit: <http://youtu.be/3PFebslqRiI>

Nametag: <http://youtu.be/itDejkU20Ig>

Snapshot: <http://youtu.be/DzNFuC08Fgw>

Questions:

1. Name of ad
2. Your name
3. Describe the way this ad invokes a brand identity.
4. Describe the ad's editing strategies (fast, slow, synchronous, asynchronous, etc.)
5. Describe the camera movement in the ad (close, far, rapid, slow, long, short, etc.)
6. How is gender represented in this ad? Describe the visual and aural cues that reinforce this presentation.
7. How is race represented in this ad? Describe the visual and aural cues that reinforce this presentation.
8. How is work represented in this ad? Describe the visual and aural cues that reinforce this presentation.
9. Does this ad revise or refresh historically prevalent trends or themes for this type of commodity? What are they?
10. What was the one thing that stood out to you the most about this ad?

Class session 3:

“The Celebritization of Society and Culture: Understanding the Structural Dynamics of Celebrity Culture” (Dreissens) reading questions and key terms

Reading questions:

1. What is the difference between celebritization and celebrification?
2. What does Richard Dyer mean when he says celebrities are “both labour and the thing that labor produces”?
3. What is the “myth of the mediated center”?
4. How do ideas of celebrity relate to ideas of democracy? What problems are inherent to associating democracy and celebrity?
5. How has media diversification affected the status of the celebrity?
6. What is the relationship between personalization and the disembedded individual?
7. How does celebritization exemplify neoliberalism?

Key terms:

celebrification	mediatization
celebritization	migration
commodification	neoliberalism
democratization	hegemonic
diversification	personalization

Flo paratext analysis exercise:

(Note to instructor: If you have a smart classroom and course management software, you could ask students to take a screenshot of their paratext which they could then upload to the course web space. This way, the students can share an image while giving their informal presentations.)

For this exercise, you will work with a group of students to analyze one of Flo's paratexts and link that analysis to key ideas and concepts from our readings. To complete the exercise, work with your partners to write a 150-200 word description of your paratext. Then, answer each of the questions about the relationship between your paratext and issues of work in the neoliberal era, representations of women in the media, and celebrity as a form of labor. This will prepare you to make a brief, informal presentation to your classmates where you describe your paratext and summarize your answers to the questions about what the paratext tells us about advertising, representations of work, and participatory culture.

Links to paratexts:

Flo video game: <http://at.progressive.com/fun-and-entertainment/superstore-chase-game>

Flo food truck contest: <http://www.progressivecommercial.com/hub/food-truck/>

Flo parody ad: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y153tBqESrM>

Flo costumes:

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00EGNIZ2C/ref=pd_lpo_sbs_dp_ss_3?pf_rd_p=1944687762&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe1&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=B009B14SA2&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_r=0M7HP2JRD1GPX3YRQCMB

&

http://www.amazon.com/Progressive-Collection-Insurance-Costume-One_Size/dp/B009B14SA2

Flo Twitter controversy: <http://trustedadvisor.com/trustmatters/flo-and-progressive-insurance-how-not-to-do-trust-recovery>

Flo fetish vlog: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jcF-ICT90Fw>

Flo gifts: <http://www.cafepress.com/+progressive-flo+gifts>

Flo ad agency: <http://greatworkworks.com/creative/work/flo-progressive-girl>

Flo Bobblehead: <http://www.flourishagency.com/progressive-bobblehead/>

Flo Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/flotheprogressivegirl>

Interview with actress who plays Flo: <http://www.businessinsider.com/meet-progressives-flo-standup-comic-stephanie-courtney-2012-2?op=1>

Flo makeup tutorial, standard: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tUxxx-cym8>

Flo makeup tutorial, alien etc.: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQdiSgsys2M>

Flo Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/ItsFlo>

Questions:

1. In what ways does your paratext reflect participatory culture?
2. What does your paratext tell us about the relationship between celebrityization, work and culture?
3. Identify the ways that your paratext uses hegemonic imagery, particularly about Flo as a working woman.
4. In what ways does your paratext promote or reflect a neoliberal ethos?
5. In what ways are the producers of your paratext participating in immaterial labor practices?

Flo paper prompt:

For this assignment you will write a 2,000-2,500 word essay that engages our coursework on Flo, the Progressive Insurance mascot. Your essay should draw its evidence from our collaboratively produced close reading analyses of Flo TV ads and the readings assigned for this course module. Be sure to cite your sources, substantiate your claims, and make a clear argument about the relationship between brand identity, work, and Flo.

Your essay should take up the following observation and questions as a prompt:

As we have discussed, brand identity has become the primary object of exchange in media culture, and the work of spreading that identity is increasingly being outsourced to consumers. This is to say that, in an affective economy, consumers do more than consume, they labor on behalf of the brand.

What does Flo, the Progressive Insurance mascot, tell us about work and convergence culture in the 21st Century? In what ways can we read the representation of the Progressive SuperStore, a digital space made literal (and material) through Flo's presence there, as an emblem of the shift from manufacturing products to manufacturing images which is typical of the neoliberal era? Further, how should we read the hegemonic ideology behind representations of Flo, herself? And, how do we read and interpret the labor of fans, producers, and consumers of the Flo brand identity?

Flo paper grading rubric	
Didn't do (0); inadequate (60-69); needs improvement (70-79); meets expectations (80-89); exceeds expectations (90-100)	
Cited and specific evidence	
Integrated quotes, key terms and concepts	
Compelling and logical argument	
Quality of writing	
General comments	
Final grade	

Evidence drawn from close reading analysis of Flo ads: Does this writer include cited and specific evidence of that supports a clear and provocative reading of the representation of Flo and the SuperStore?

Citation and analysis of readings: Does this writer correctly cite and effectively integrate quotes, key terms, and major concepts from the readings assigned on this topic?

Quality of argument: Does this writer make a compelling and logical argument about the way that Flo's brand identity reflects issues of convergence culture, neoliberalism, hegemonic representation and work in the 21st Century?

Quality of writing: Does this writer employ logical organization and a professional format? Does this writer manipulate complex sentences for effect, employ a sophisticated vocabulary, an appropriate and consistent tone, a well-developed central idea, and an abundance of evidence? Is the paper virtually error-free?)

General comments

Total score

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Biography

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Leah Shafer is an Assistant Professor in the Media and Society Program at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, where she teaches courses in the aesthetics of consumer culture, television history, and new media. She has published work on media studies pedagogy in *The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy* and *The Cinema Journal Teaching Dossier*. She is currently writing a textbook that reads US History through television commercials for Rowman & Littlefield. Her ongoing, collaboratively produced experimental documentary project on the Declaration of Sentiments can be viewed at vimeo.com/leahshafer.