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Experiential Branding and Curating the Social Space

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Experiential Branding and Curating the Social Space

Overview and Rationale

Branding is as an important critical lens through which to view our cultural norms. This is especially so when it comes to experiential branding. Notable examples of experiential branding include Samsung Studios 2012 Olympics booth where visitors could try their Olympic Games app and have their photos taken, while the booth itself sold no products. Disney promoted their Doc McStuffin children's show about a child that heals toys by offering ten-minute immersive clinics in toy stores where children took the role of Doc and diagnosed with other children what was wrong with a large teddy bear. In the UK, Adidas created a pop-up store with NBA star Derrick Rose and watched as fans competed to win a new pair of sneakers by jumping ten feet in the air in order to try to reach them on a high shelf.

The branding of experience, which works to strengthen consumption practices by tying them into social and group behavior, is an extension of previous efforts that likewise attempt to brand traditionally non-commodified societal institutions including education (Twitchell, 2004), religion (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Twitchell, 2004), and our everyday lives (Moor, 2007). The logic of branding has crept into areas of our lives that previously were not branded – into large institutions like schools and museums and into micro-level everyday experiences and social relationships. This is possible today, in part, due to the rise of networked, social-media-based, smart phone technology that transforms our communication and looking into labor. This communication is increasingly visual; photos, gifs, video, and emoticons, for example, mirror the basic components of a brand.

This current assignment *does not* engage with the prescriptive marketing practices of “self-branding” because undergraduates often lack the intermediate steps that allow them to pull back and interrogate this advice from critical perspective. Students tend to see branding and the branding of themselves as positive, uncontested strategies they need to employ as they transition from undergraduate to graduate. As such, this assignment attempts to build that critical lens by investigating the branding of students' relationships and environment. Instructors wishing to engage with self-branding can draw upon Hearn (2008) and Banet-Weiser (2012) and repurpose the framework of this assignment for a latter-half of the semester follow-up assignment to examine the pros and cons of self-branding.

This activity is focused on sociologist Adam Arvidsson's work on experiential branding, with a particular focus on the social relations formed around brands and the meaning-making from which brands derive their value (Arvidsson, 2005). Ultimately, for Arvidsson (2005), brand value is also based upon consumer-sustained community, commitments, and values—the space these brands occupy within the life-worlds of individuals. This activity also draws upon Jenkins' (2006) concept of convergence culture, which has helped shape the active role that branding plays within the public's vocabulary, understanding, and imaginary. While this lesson is certainly not built upon a “strong effects” style argument, it nonetheless assumes that brands act as cognitive organizers and invite individuals to use brands in ways that favor certain lifestyle choices. The increasingly immaterial component of our digital cyborg (Haraway, 1985) selves allows our communication and social behaviors to be valorized via our labor of looking, liking,

self-branding (Hearn, 2008), and situating ourselves publicly. For example, as emoticons, Snapchat, and Instagram become fundamental communication applications, they also support and intensify experiential brand culture.

This lesson offers students an opportunity to self-reflexively observe the strategies brands employ to embed themselves within the basic structure of students' sociality and communication. The rationale for this lesson is that typically undergraduates possess a high level of awareness regarding brands and their associated marketing campaigns. However, typically, undergraduates have a looser grasp of the tools that would allow them to look critically at the intentions of marketers and intersection between brand concepts and social-media-based sociality and experience. The goal of this lesson is to provide students with an increased understanding of the role branding plays within their social relationships and to question the differences between emotionally-based relationships between human beings and those mediated by brands. Just as today we rhetorically ask "did it happen if I didn't take a selfie?" we can also ask "can you have an experience that is not sponsored, programmed, or designed?"

Timeline

This assignment is most appropriate for undergraduates in their second or third year of study. The course for which this assignment was designed meets twice a week: once physically and once online. The class size has ranged from 17 to 37 students. This assignment occurs earlier in the semester so it can be incorporated into a midterm usually via essay question. The assignment is designed to occur over a two-week period but instructors can parse out or condense assignment components as necessary. The assignment is typically explained to students during face-to-face class-time during the first week, then, students post their initial findings later in the week during their online class meeting. In the second week students can present either live or via media presentation during the face-to-face class.

Detailed Lesson Plan

For this assignment, you're going to investigate what relationship you have to branding in your everyday life. This week, you're to have read selections from some of the leading branding scholars to provide context for this assignment. As you know from our class, everyday life includes both our corporeal and digital selves. Why does this activity focus on branding exactly, and not, say, privacy? Well, branding can act as a powerful medium between you and the experiences you choose to participate in and also imagine participating in. Whether you're conscious of it or not, you're not just exposed to advertising, but also to branding—and exposed to it to such a degree that you probably have stronger feelings about it than you ever realized you did.

Meeting 1: Face-to-Face (Week 1)

In preparing for this first meeting, students are to read selections from Twitchell (2004), Arvidsson (2005), and Hearn (2008). Students should have posted responses to questions about these particular readings and be ready to expand upon those answers or ask new questions during this first face-to-face class meeting. As always, students will be graded on their online responses.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the class will transition into going over the instructions for the remainder of the assignment. These instructions are listed in the section titled, “Meeting 2: Online.”

Meeting 2: Online (Week 1)

As you know, we meet both face-to-face and online for this class. During our last face-to-face class, we read and discussed selections on branding. Now, for today’s online class meeting, I want you to self-reflexively investigate three areas of your life and its relationship to branding. Those three areas are:

1. The relationships you have with other people in which a brand or product plays a large role (think hard)
2. I want you to scroll back through at least two of your social media accounts for at least a few days – if not one week – and log all the times a photo or text you posted featured prominently a product or brand (or this brand was really the sole reason you posted).
3. Look through our college’s event calendar and/or walk around the student center and see how many events are hosted by, supported by, or built around a particular brand or product.

You will need to wear firmly your hat of sociological imagination for this assignment as you will need to investigate yourself and your choices as if you were a stranger. Also, think of yourself as a curator who is sifting through the text and artifacts of this person (you) and institution (our college) to organize and make sense of how and why branding exists where and when it does.

There are three forms you will use to record and organize your findings. These forms should be submitted in the form most convenient to your instructor. [*Note to instructors: if blogging is a component in the class, you can also save a step by having students copy and paste the digital version of this form into their weekly online blog posting*]. The forms are: 1) the relationship form; 2) the DIGITAL YOU form; and 3) the events form. Each form is provided at the end of this document. You **MUST** complete and turn in *one* form by this online class meeting by writing a rough draft about the experience, using the data you collected and reported on the form. Organize your rough draft about the experience around the questions you answered on the data collection form you chose to complete. It may be helpful for you to situate your answers from the data collection sheet next to the questions you answered online regarding this week’s readings from Twitchell (2004), Arvidsson (2005), and Hearn (2008). The objective for this component is for students to get comfortable with the data collection process and, via the rough draft, challenge themselves to think thoroughly about both the methodology of data collection and the project as a whole. Please attach the completed form to this rough draft; you will be evaluated on your data collection and insights from the experience. If turned in on time, the instructor will provide brief feedback on your rough draft and return it to you to help you prepare for your presentation. [*Note to instructor: you may also assign short selections from additional readings as appropriate (e.g. Klein (2000), Jenkins (2006), Banet-Weiser (2012)), to clarify students’ understanding as conveyed through their rough drafts*].

Meeting 3: Face-to-Face (Week 2)

In this week's face-to-face meeting, you must prepare a finalized media presentation (PowerPoint, Prezi, etc.) or online blog post complete with supporting images, sounds, or video. This presentation's data should be culled from your three completed forms (relationship, digital you, and events – each listed at the end of this document). You will present briefly in class, using this presentation and the data you collected to support your answer to the following questions:

1. What spaces for alternatives (defined either as where or when) exist since emotional connections to branding can begin so early in life?
2. What is the consequence of individuals partaking in valorized promotional speech online and visual evidence of product enthusiasm in their everyday lives?
3. If you were president of our college, what rationale would you use to balance our campus space as a not-for-profit, educational space versus a sponsored, commercialized space for adults ages 18 to 22?

It might be easiest for you if you organize your presentation by these three questions and referencing directly the specific form and data that support the answers you come up with. The instructor will also post a list of critical tools and perspectives from last week's readings as well as additional readings to help orient your synthesis and critique within the answers you present in class. The objective for this component is for students to gather data on branding strategies that exist in their development, online social relationships, and academic environments. By collecting this data, students will gain awareness beyond the obvious observation that "brands are everywhere" to a more sophisticated understanding of the specific strategies involved in the way in which brands colonize traditionally non-commodified areas of life. The third objective is to provide students with more experience in conveying information succinctly, using visual support, and presenting publicly face-to-face in front of a live audience of their peers. Students will be evaluated on their presentations based on the following criteria: data collection; insights and answers gleaned; and clarity of presentation. See the forms below to gather your data and work up to answering the above final questions.

Relationship Form

Begin by brainstorming in the space below ten people you know and whether a certain brand or product plays a significant role in your relationship.

Name	Product/Brand

Choose your best relationship example from the box above and answer the following questions as specifically and thoroughly as possible:

1. How long have you known this person?
2. What is the nature of the relationship (if not obvious)
3. What was the original experience (to the best of your ability to remember) or activity around which you shared the product or brand
4. What emotions do you associate with this person? With this brand? (be specific and nuanced)
5. Have you or your person ever had a “falling out” with this product (started not using it for some reason)? Did it affect your relationship?
6. Was this product associated with a particular life event or ritual that was significant to you at the time?
7. How do you feel if, for some reason, you couldn’t buy or use this particular product anymore?

Please find either digital photos that you possess showing you experiencing the product, or if you don’t possess any, find a representative photo or video showing people using the brand in a similar fashion. Be sure to include this within your final presentation along with your notes and answers.

DIGITAL YOU form

Choose up to seven social media accounts you or your friends use regularly and search back through your or their posts for texts and images purposefully posted that involved a product or brand. If you are not comfortable using your own data, you can rely on friends so long as they are ok with it. If you are comfortable with sharing your own data, feel free to use multiple of your own accounts for your data. Before you do, you'll need a systematic methodology, so establish these parameters first:

- a. My data came between the dates _____ and _____
- b. The social media accounts I used were _____
- c. The five keywords I used to search included: 1) _____; 2) _____; 3) _____; 4) _____; and 5) _____
- d. I captured any images posted to _____ on my phone/computer and labeled them using the following filename _____
- e. Texts and images posted to my account that dealt with the related yet different subjects _____ were NOT included because _____

Categorize your texts by answering the following questions:

1. Is the post describing a brand name or type of product?
2. Did the post use emoticons in association to the product?
3. Is the product the main subject of the text or mentioned as an aside?
4. Did friends reply to or like the post?
 - if likes, how many?
 - if replies, what did they highlight about the brand?
5. Did the post get shared or favorited?

Categorize the images by answering the following questions:

1. Is the person holding or prominently presenting the brand in the image?
2. Is the brand featured amongst friends?
3. What activity is occurring in the image?
4. Where is the activity or setting for the photo?
5. Who took the photo?

Organize all your texts and photos first. Then attempt to group texts with texts, photos with photos, and texts with photos that feel like they belong under the same theme or category. Your final presentation should follow this smaller group of themes or categories in relation to the questions you answer.

Events Form

Mark of all of the following you used to learn about events at our college:

I looked online to the events calendar and scrolled through multiple weeks _____

I found a physical flyer, poster, or newspaper that listed the events _____

I walked to a campus center and looked around at events occurring on a busy day _____

Answer the following questions about campus events:

1. How many events did you find? _____
2. How many events featured or were sponsored by a brand? _____
3. Did the brand match the event theme or subject matter?
4. Were any of the activities at the event built around the brand or product?
5. Do you feel this is the kind of event where people would socialize, bond, or generally make friends?
6. Was the college's logo, name, or brand presented alongside the commercial brand's name?

If you were able to observe or attend the event, try to take a few images of it. If you only saw the event on the calendar, photograph the listing or copy and paste it from online.

Grading Rubric

Your grade for this assignment will be based upon the following measurements (utilizing a five point scale for each measure for a total of 25 points; one equaling the lowest, and five the most points earned):

1. Collecting data on all three forms / engagements with branding
2. Organization of data; using systematic techniques
3. Did you connect your observations to theory from the assigned readings?
4. Did you make connections between relationships, your own social media presence, and choices the college made?
5. Did you prepare a polished and thorough multi-media presentation for your observations, and turn it in on time?

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Biography

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Jonathan M. Bullinger is a doctoral candidate at Rutgers University School of Communication and Information in the area of media studies. He has published a branded perspective on the memory of World War II in the online journal *ReConstruction* (2011) and the representation of the war in video games in a book chapter from Continuum's volume *Playing with the Past* (2013). His dissertation is concerned with the collective memory of World War II in the U.S. during the late 1990s as understood via Landsberg's (2004) theory of prosthetic memory. Jonathan currently teaches undergraduate hybrid courses in the Rutgers digital communication, information, and media (DCIM) minor including *The Structure of Information* and the *Senior Capstone*. You can find short writing samples on collective memory, historicizing, and myth on the author's personal website: www.jonathanbullinger.com.