Networked political brands: consumption, community and political expression in contemporary brand culture

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Abstract

This article synthesises theory from the fields of marketing and communication to understand how the practices and outcomes of branding have evolved into systems of symbolic expression and community building. Through an exploration of parallel theoretical models of branding and mass communication, we posit a new theory of 'networked branding' that better takes into account how communicative power is distributed within a brand culture that is heavily mediated by networked communication technologies. Applying this theory of networked branding to the realm of politics we explore the ambivalent outcomes of branding in relation to capitalism and civic culture. Through an interrogation of two examples of networked branding from the political realm – the successful presidential campaign and subsequent administration of Donald Trump and the co-optation of the National Park Service's brand by activists rallying against the Trump administration – this article explores how branding is utilised within politics as a platform for communication and social organisation. Drawing on the affective, interactive and social dynamics of modern mediatised branding, we interrogate the powers and limitations of consumer agency in contemporary brand culture.

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Contemporary culture has been widely characterised as being organised by the logics of 'branding' (Banet-Weiser, 2012a; Lury, 2004; Moor, 2007; Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2006); that is, the forms of symbolic communication pertaining to (1) perceptions of 'value' and (2) associations of meaning related to commercial products and services (and the companies/organisations that produce/provide them). Although originating in a marketing context, in which they are considered valuable for their persuasive and loyalty-retention functions (e.g. Farquhar, 1989; Warne, 1962), as well as for the financial equity assigned to them (Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Lury, 2004; Rocha, 2014), brands now function as a ubiquitous system of symbolic expression and collective meaning-making under late capitalism. Moreover, as this article argues, the transformation of branding strategies and outcomes that has resulted in the emergence of 'brand culture' opens up new possibilities for individuals and collectives to engage in civic and political activity that is intimately tied to, and extends from, branding.

'Branding' exists as the practices undertaken by organisations and their marketing teams to build an identity around a product or set of goods and/or services. 'Brands', alternatively, emerge out of complex relationships among producers, marketers, commodities and consumers. They exist as a multitude of objects (both physical and digital) with complex associated meanings in the minds of consumers. In the context of politics, they are defined as 'an associative network of interconnected political information and attitudes, held in memory and accessible when stimulated from the memory of a voter' (Smith and French, 2009: 212). Indeed, politics is one of the key domains of social life in which the growing influence of branding can be clearly seen. There is a two-fold relationship between brand culture and politics in that (1) the expression of an individual's politics is increasingly channelled through the consumption of branded products or services and (2) the practices of electoral politics have been transformed by marketing logics and corporate 'brand management' strategies such that political parties and individual candidates have themselves become branded entities (Scammell, 2015; Smith and French, 2009).

As politics and branding are increasingly entwined, the experience of *community* that emerges from this interplay gains increasing importance. While *individual* acts of *collective* consumption form communities around politically inflected branded goods and services, the identity-affiliation that emerges from branded parties and candidates results in a shared collectivity among supporters – and a subsequent forming of communities – within the realm of electoral politics. At the same time, transformations to the conventional practices of branding brought on by the rise of networked communication technologies have resulted in a reorganisation of communicative power that have significant ramifications for the relationship between citizens and branded political actors.

This article moves to theorise these changes in three steps. First, we introduce from marketing theory the concept of 'brand communities' and, by drawing parallels with theoretical models from communication studies, make the case for its utility in examining political and civic action. We then analyse the social structures assembled around brands and the significant roles that cultivated affect, brand personalism and brand co-construction play in the development and maintenance of brand communities. Second, we introduce the concept of 'networked branding' as a means of addressing the distribution of communicative power within brand culture in an age of ubiquitous networked communication technologies. We then discuss the contradictory – and ultimately, we

argue, ambivalent – outcomes of networked branding as an emergent phenomenon that both reaffirms capitalism as a necessary platform for communication and social organisation *and* allows for new forms of consumer agency within capitalism. Finally, we analyse the role brand communities play in the organisation and conduct of institutional politics, drawing on two salient examples from the contemporary United States: the ascension of Donald Trump to the presidency and the co-optation of the National Park Service (NPS) brand as a site for ideological struggle against the new administration.

Affect, personal experience and brand communities

Marketing theory has traditionally maintained a firm-centric transmission model of branding in which consumers are passive recipients of centrally managed brand messages originating from marketing agents (e.g. McGarry, 1958; Warne, 1962). According to this model – echoing Harold Lasswell's (1948) classic formulation of the mass communication process (Butler and Harris, 2009: 158) – marketers develop persuasive messages which they transmit to consumers via mass media, with measurable effects on brand perceptions and sales volume (e.g. Bendixen, 1993; Erdem, 1998; Neuhaus and Taylor, 1972; Selnes, 1993). Consequently, scholars of branding have placed primary emphasis on the work of brand-focused marketing agents, or *brand managers*, endeavouring to understand the processes by which branded communications are produced, and consumers (and profit margins) consequently affected (Blackett and Denton, 1992; Farquhar, 1989; Low and Fullerton, 1994; Morwind, 1992). Turning against this manager-centred perspective on brands and looking beyond the production of brands, scholars since the 1990s have investigated *consumers*' roles in the processes of branding, turning an ethnographic eye on the roles and meanings of brands in consumers' everyday lives (Cova and Cova, 2002; Cova et al., 2007; Holt, 1997, 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Schouten et al., 2011). Research in this vein has offered various (and varied) accounts of branding processes, proliferating numerous theories of socially embedded practices. John Schouten and James McAlexander (1995; Schouten et al., 2011), for example, proposed the idea of 'consumption subcultures', wherein communities are built around identification with a particular object or activity, and are consequently governed by a unique ethos associated with the brand of that object/activity. Within these subcultures, brands 'serve as the basis for interaction and social cohesion' (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995: 43). Bernard Cova and his colleagues (Cova and Cova, 2002; Cova et al., 2007), alternatively, proposed the concept of 'tribal marketing', in which consumers form communities (or 'tribes', as they call them) around a particular brand in response to a sense of societal uprootedness caused by postmodernity, which the brand tribe alleviates. And perhaps most famously, Albert Muñiz and Thomas O'Guinn (2001: 412; O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005) theorised the 'brand community', which they defined as 'a specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand'.

Common to each of these conceptualisations of brand communities is the centrality of affect to their formation and subsequent endurance. As Cova and Cova (2002: 598) wrote, brand communities are 'held together essentially through shared emotion and passion'. These affective relationships may be either positive *or* negative in their valence,

and they may be experienced more strongly *among consumers*, rather than between individual consumers and the brand. As Banet-Weiser (2012a, 2012b) and Douglas Holt (2004, 2006a) have each argued, the development of iconic brands – brands with which individuals have strong relational ties and which the public recognise instantly as being of cultural significance – relies upon an *accumulation of positive affect* stemming from shared cultural mythologies, historical nostalgia, personal experiences and memories, and the roles brands play in individuals' daily lives. In developing positive affective orientations towards a brand, and thus personal pseudo-relationships with the branded entity, consumers are bonded together in triadic relationships with one another via the brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001).

At the same time, *negative* affect also plays a significant role in the formation of brand communities. As O'Guinn and Muñiz (2005) noted, consumers often develop their identities as brand community members via oppositional brand loyalty, or differentiation between themselves and 'others', where the others are devotees of a competing brand. For example, they cited community rivalries between Apple computer loyalists and Windows-Intel ('Wintel') fans: 'The purpose of the Apple community is as much anti-Wintel as it is pro-Apple' (O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005: 260). Yet, these pro- and anti-orientations are not rational evaluations of product quality or even aesthetic preference, but *emotional* differentiations based on affectual ties to consumers' brand of choice.

Significantly, therefore, brand community is not formed purely as an aggregate of individual affective bonds to the brand, but as affective bonds *among consumers* of the same brand (e.g. Cova and Cova, 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). In the words of Holt (2004: 150), 'Consumers of iconic brands are loyal because they're locked into a social network. Much of the value of the brand is imparted by other constituents, not just the one-to-one relationship with the brand'. Indeed, each brand community theorist offers evidence of the role of consumer-to-consumer relationships in the development and sustainment of communities: Schouten and McAlexander (1995) discussed the emergence of subcultural norms, social governance structures and affect-laden symbolic behaviours among bikers in the Harley Davidson brand community. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001: 426), in their study of brand communities around automobiles and computers, found 'the communities actually serve to strengthen family and other interpersonal ties', as well as to form new, enduring ties. And Cova and Cova (2002: 599) characterised brand communities as consisting of 'network[s] of societal micro-groups, in which individuals share strong emotional links, a common subculture, a vision of life'. It should thus be apparent that processes of branding in contemporary culture are in fact *not* firm-centric in that the cultural significance and both the positive and negative affect generated by the brand are not solely the outcome of top-down brand management.

Moreover, as Nicholas Carah and Daniel Angus (2018: 180) convincingly argue, brands 'operate not so much as defined symbolic messages but rather as cultural platforms and programming devices'. They also, as Billard (2018) argues, are sites for social exchange and interaction at which consumers' own cultural productions using the platform of the brand circulate. This argument follows those of other researchers, such as Banet-Weiser and Lapsansky (2008: 1253), who discus how automobile manufacturer 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' (see also Arvidsson, 2005; Holt, 2002). As such, contemporary branding practices depend upon a participatory opportunity structure that reifies the bond between brand communities and the branded entities around which they are organised.

These 'producerly consumer practices' (Holt, 2002: 94) have further implications for contemporary brand culture in that they represent a newly dominant logic within branding: the co-production of brand meaning. Recent theorising in both marketing and brand culture has recognised that brands are co-constructed by firms and consumers – as well as by other relevant actors within the network of brand affiliates and participants – such that brand meanings no longer result from a 'projected brand identity' (Schroeder, 2009: 125), but from a complex and involved negotiation among actors (Berthon et al., 2009; Brodie et al., 2017; Butler and Harris, 2009). Moreover, brand communities serve as the foundational contexts for these co-creative activities (Hatch and Schultz, 2010; see also Cova and White, 2010). As O'Guinn and Muñiz (2005: 268) observed, '[b]rand community members increasingly regard marketers not as owners of the brand, but as temporary stewards, stewards who can be held immediately and directly accountable for transgressions' against the productive wills of the community.

Consequently, we push back against characterisations of contemporary branding advanced by some critics in cultural studies who continue to place brand managers at the centre of brand cultures as dominant forces shaping their contours. For example, Banet-Weiser (2012a) has argued that brand managers 'set the terms for brand cultures' (215) and 'build culture around brands through emotive relationships' (112). Similarly, Arvidsson (2005: 244) has argued 'brand management works by enabling or empowering the freedom of consumers'. However, such perspectives are limited in that they maintain the overriding power of the branded entity in brand co-construction, as if brand managers have their fingers on the tap that can, at any time, stem the flow of consumers' meaning-making (and equity-making!) cultural productions within the brand space. Yet, we know from empirical research in marketing and consumer culture that this is not the case: consumers retain co-constructive powers that they exercise even (and often) in ways that run expressly counter to brand managers' objectives (e.g. Billard, 2018; Brodie et al., 2017; Cova and White, 2010; Hatch and Schultz, 2010).

This is not to say that brand managers play no role, or even an insignificant role, in the processes of branding. Such an argument would be absurd considering the immense symbolic (and commercial) power that marketing agents have in originating both (1) the brands around which communities form and which they subsequently transform and (2) the logics by which contemporary culture is organised. However, it is to say that, in the words of Pierre Berthon et al. (2009: 358), 'meaning ascription is neither top-down nor bottom up, but rather a middle-out process'. Contemporary culture is organised around complex 'brand assemblages' (Lury, 2009) that *involve* marketing agents, but do not centre on them. Marketing agents, as Brodie et al. (2017) have argued, are able to initiate and to facilitate certain brand-constructing activities, but the actual processes of meaning-making are so diffused over so many actors that they cannot maintain 'control' over these meanings. Indeed, 'consumers of every stripe are getting their information about brands through non-marketer controlled channels in a way that is unprecedented' (O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005: 265). In that same vein, brand managers may initiate or

facilitate forms of branded communication, but they cannot shape the culture of branding itself; brand culture is constituted by the consumers, organisations, institutions and economic and social stakeholders that exist within it and their interrelations.

Networked branding and the ambivalent necessity of capitalism

Accordingly, we argue that contemporary brands can be best characterised as 'networked'. That is, the practices of meaning-making within contemporary brand culture, and the diffusion of power that allows for actors – both human and non-human – to engage in such meaning-making, are emblematic of what we see as 'networked branding'. In using the term 'networked branding', we refer to the structure of contemporary brand culture that enables consumer participation in the development, sustainment and transformation of a brand's equity, as well as its cultural capital. This notion follows the observation that modern consumerism – spurred by contemporary branding practices – manifests in ways that subvert traditional notions of consumer behaviour as transactional and individualistic (McCracken, 1987). Contemporary brands exist not simply as advertising or marketing resources; rather, brands actively attempt to cultivate social connection through and around their symbolic resources, and in doing so open themselves up as *spaces* for the exchange of social and cultural meanings (Arvidsson, 2005; Pitt et al., 2006). Within these spaces, consumers form social networks (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001), which serve to both sustain the brand and (re)define its cultural meanings (Arvidsson, 2005). Consumers also utilise the symbolic resources provided by the central brand in transformative ways that restructure the meaning of those resources – and the brand – in service of a wide range of collective ideas, identities and goals (Billard, 2016, 2018).

As such, our conception of networked branding necessitates active participation on the part of the consumer to define the meaning of the brand (Arvidsson, 2005), as well as the structure and goals of the network that forms the brand space. While this necessarily decentres the branded entity and the profit-seeking motives that drive their branding practices, it foregrounds the sociality of consumer-to-consumer connection within the brand space that produces the brand equity from which firms profit (Farquhar, 1989; Schau et al., 2009). Furthermore, it makes salient how transformations in technology have disrupted traditional dynamics of producer–consumer relationships in favour of more horizontal distributions of *communicative power* (Castells, 2009).

Furthermore, transformations in technologies have introduced new actors beyond the dyad of producer and consumer, making flows of communication more complex and diffuse. Kjerstin Thorson and Chris Wells (2016) theorise the existence of numerous 'curating actors' that influence the flow of communications through networked media, including strategic communicators (such as brand managers), individual media users, social contacts and non-human actors such as algorithmic filters (Thorson and Wells, 2016). Given that branded communications overwhelming circulate via digital media, which are to a large degree curated by algorithmic filters, understanding branding as a networked practice affords researchers the opportunity to examine the role of both human and non-human actors in the making and remaking of brand meanings. For example, Carah and Angus (2018) illustrate in the context of the Splendour in the Grass music festival how

algorithmic filtering, independent of the parent brand, sorts branded communications into categories that are then circulated back to brand network participants according to their own individuated algorithmic classifications. The key implications of this are two-fold. First, non-human actors that are beholden neither to the brand manager nor to consumers operate within the network in ways that impact brand meanings by rerouting flows of communication. Second, theories of triadic brand relationships no longer accurately reflect the realities of contemporary brand culture as brand networks are not structured by communal relations between atomised members via the brand but rather by technologies that simultaneously individualise and interconnect communicative participants.

This organisation of social relations has, however, two contradictory outcomes. On one hand, the constitution of social relations by brand networks necessitates the persistence of capitalism and capitalist logics of commodification (of self, of community, of ideas, of emotions; for example, Banet-Weiser, 2012a; Clarke, 2008; Hearn, 2008, 2010; Littler, 2005) for social relations and communication within society to even *be legible*. In the words of Banet-Weiser (2012a: 126–127), 'realms of culture and society once considered outside the official economy – like politics – are harnessed, reshaped, and made legible in economic terms'. Thus, without capitalism the 'language' of culture and society becomes meaningless.

At the same time, the networking of brands produces new forms of consumer agency within capitalism relative to early post-Fordism. In a networked brand culture, consumers' communicative actions and cultural productions within the brand space can transform the nature of the brand, its cultural meanings, its ideological values and even its economic capital (Billard, 2018; Cova and White, 2010). As cited earlier, Banet-Weiser and Lapsansky (2008) pointed to Chevy's attempts to network the marketing of their Tahoe sport utility vehicle as an instance in which consumers expressed new forms of citizenship and empowerment by utilising the tools of the brand for their own anti-Chevy communications. Similarly, Cova and White (2010) discussed the practice of 'counter-branding', whereby digitally empowered consumers co-produce *negative* brand value by producing spin-off brands to resist the exploitative corporate practices of the parent brand's firm. And, as we discuss in the next section, we see citizen-consumers capitalising on the networked nature of political brands to structure oppositional brand communities and to express and organise political resistance using the brand resources of political entities. Of course, these forms of consumer agency are *communicative* agency, not absolute agency; consumers are still subject to the usual forms of restricted agency possible under neoliberalism. But this form of agency is nonetheless important, as it grants consumers new modes of resistance and new levers of power within an otherwise remote system of socioeconomic organisation.

These contradictory outcomes direct us to – drawing on Banet-Weiser (2012a) – the *ambivalence* of contemporary brand culture. As she wrote, 'Power is often exercised in contradictory ways, and brand cultures, like other cultures, are ambivalent, often holding possibility for individual resistance and corporate hegemony simultaneously' (Banet-Weiser, 2012a: 12). Brand communities and brand networks work to destabilise 'marketplace power relations' (O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005: 268), moving beyond the *individual* resistance Banet-Weiser acknowledges into *collective* resistance. However, these modes of collective resistance depend upon brands as their platforms for action and means of

social integration, without which they cannot function. Following Holt (2006b), we must recognise that brands are *economic assets* for their parent firms and so they capitalise (quite literally) on the immaterial labour of consumers connecting and communicating *through* the brand (Arvidsson, 2005), but at the same time this economic benefit is only derived to the extent that the brand is indeed occupied and controlled by consumers. In essence, firms and consumers become inextricably linked both in their successes and in their failures, and each action by one within the brand network necessarily disrupts the whole network's social, economic and political relations.

Brand consumption, brand community and collective political expression

Contemporary institutional politics is organised by the same logics of brand culture as the rest of society. Political parties, candidates for elected office and even government agencies are branded entities in a manner uncannily akin to corporate entities (Butler and Harris, 2009; Needham, 2006; O'Cass, 2009; Scammell, 1999, 2000, 2015; Smith and French, 2009). Moreover, like corporate brands, political brands develop around them brand communities (Smith and French, 2009) and they are increasingly networked, offering new resources for political expression (Billard, 2016, 2018).

Margaret Scammell (1999) has written that branding practices in politics were historically focused on the propagandistic functions of corporate-styled marketing communications. More recently, however, political branding has come to emphasise image, reputation, loyalty and other key features of contemporary relational brands (Scammell, 2007; see also Billard, 2016). Picking up on this shift in political branding practice, Smith and French (2009) argued that these new political marketing practices followed citizen-consumers' use of political brands for increasing community involvement, reaffirming cultural identities and reinforcing self-concepts – the same roles brands play in non-political social domains.

Consequently, citizen-consumers and the brand communities they form within political brand spaces are likewise *active* ones, and the dynamics of political branding are transformed accordingly. As Billard (2018: 425) has written: 'In politics, this active consumer role takes the form of citizen engagement through branded communications, and the social networks formed within the brand spaces of parties and candidates become engaged supporter bases'. Accordingly, political actors stand to benefit from moving beyond traditional marketing communications to the cultivation of political brand spaces in which community networks can form, as these networks consist of more active and committed participants than one-time mobilised voters. However, as with corporate brand communities/brand networks, the necessary decentralisation of brand control means political brands become open to 'consumer participation in both the creation and subsequent transformation of brand meanings and messages' (Billard, 2018: 425). This is not to say citizen participation is inherently positive for political actors, as the surrendering of the brand space that accompanies decentralisation necessarily exposes the political brand to ineffectual or worse yet adversarial, brand messaging. And these dynamics apply not only to individual candidates' brands in contexts of electoral campaigns, but also to the branding of political parties and government agencies.

Indeed, two salient examples from contemporary American politics illustrate the dynamics of political branding in contemporary brand culture quite clearly: the presidency of Donald Trump and the transformation of the NPS brand into a site of resistance against Trump's administration.

Donald Trump: an unholy marriage between branding and politics

Donald Trump's ascension to the presidency of the United States manifests an almost parodistic merger of brand culture and politics. He entered the race for the Republican nomination on a brand name built through a decades-long media career during which he established a corporate empire. Throughout the campaign, he sought to import that personal-corporate brand into the political realm, and since his election products and services with his personal brand have become daily features in the administration of the country – from his time spent at Trump-brand properties (Bump, 2017); to visits from elites wishing to curry his favour at the Trump-owned Mar-a-Lago resort (which has since been restyled alternatively as 'the Winter White House' or the 'Southern White House'; for example, Rascoe, 2017); to public statements about retailers who dropped his daughter Ivanka's clothing line (Pérez-Peña and Abrams, 2017); to the official White House website advertising his wife Melania's QVC jewellery line (Snell, 2017).

The personal/corporate brand (the lines are blurred here; Sherman, 2017) and the political brand are so inextricably linked in the figure of Trump that changes in the value (social and economic) of one brand influences the value of the other (Fischer, 2017; Mahdawi, 2018; Torres-Spelliscy, 2018). In fact, Trump's historically low approval ratings as president have driven the value of his personal/corporate brand to similarly historic lows: a YouGov BrandIndex poll of consumer brand perceptions in late 2017 found that of over 1600 brands towards which it measured perceptions, Trump's brand (as well as Ivanka Trump's) fell in the bottom 10.

As a result of this collapse in corporate brand equity, companies and organisations licensing the Trump brand name have scrambled to rebrand (Torres-Spelliscy, 2018). For instance, a golf course in Dubai removed 'Trump' from their name in the course of the 2016 campaign, while buildings in New York, Toronto and Panama, among others, have either sought to rebrand or succeeded in rebranding under new names since his election (e.g. Fahrenthold and O'Connell, 2018; Torres-Spelliscy, 2018). These efforts include those by residents of Trump-brand condominiums in New York, where residents have pressured the building owners to break their licensing agreements with Trump and rebrand (Mahdawi, 2018), and by the Trump International Hotel in Panama, which the Trump Organization has threatened with legal action should they proceed with rebranding without the Trump name. Yet even the Trump Organization has taken to rebranding its corporate endeavours, launching a new line of (lower priced) hotels branded 'Scion', instead of 'Trump', which they announced in a press release from which the US president and principal of the company's name was notably absent (Torres-Spelliscy, 2018).

The collapse in the equity of the Trump corporate brand, like his political brand, did not occur as a mere financial calculus. Immense amounts of (communicative) work by citizen-consumers and institutions within the Trump brand network transformed the meaning of the brand in ways that (seemingly irreparably) damaged its social and

economic equity. That is, active (re)interpretive work and brand-based communications on the part of citizen-consumers disrupted relations within the brand network, transforming its social meaning and resultant economic value, precisely because the networked nature of contemporary brand culture decentralises parent firms' control over 'their' brands. And particularly because Trump is a branded entity in a three-fold manner – as a person, as a company and as a politician – he has become an open platform for struggle over brand meaning in each of these now-intersecting domains. Indeed, the term 'citizen-consumer' has never been more apt than in this moment of total context collapse, as brand-based expressions of political approval are made in the marketplace (such as in the mass boycotts of Trump-brand goods and services and the retailers/licensees who provide them; for example, Doerer, 2017; Surowiecki, 2017) and brand-based marketing communications are made in politics.

Already Billard (2018) has addressed in the significant role citizens played in Trump's political brand network during the 2016 election, using the resources of the brand to express ideological resistance and transform the social meaning of his campaign brand. As he noted in that article, and elsewhere, citizens generated and virally distributed new logos based on the one released by the Trump/Pence campaign to mock the candidates' homophobic policies that 'rendered the logo's interlocking T and P sexually suggestive' (Billard, 2018: 427; see also Jenkins and Billard, 2018). The extent of these logos' influence over social media was so great the campaign issued a new, less adaptive logo – a simple sans-serif wordmark containing their names. Even after the release of this redesigned Trump/Pence logo, however, citizens circulated branded communications within the Trump network that continued to transform his brand. These designs included, for example, adaptations of Hillary Clinton's logo and slogan replacing the arrow-adorned H with an arrow-adorned N and replacing 'stronger together' with 'nasty woman', and adaptations of the famed Obama logo that inverted the symbol so the waving flag looked like hair and recoloured it orange and yellow while replacing the slogan 'hope' with 'hate' (see Billard, 2018: 425, 428). As such, 'resistance to Trump's politics could still be expressed through supportive affiliation with [his] opponents' in ways that 'attack[ed] the equity of the parent brand and transform[ed] its public meaning' (Billard, 2018: 428).

These examples further bring to the fore the relevant distinction between 'brand communities' as have typically been conceptualised in studies of brand culture and 'brand networks' as we conceive of them in our (re)articulation of contemporary brand culture: individuals within Trump's brand community (e.g. the 'Alt-Right', networks of donors and groups of volunteers) of course exist within his brand network and work to contribute positive to the equity of the Trump political brand, but they are not the extent of the brand network – the network also includes those who oppose the Trump political brand and work (seemingly more successfully) to restructure relations within the network in ways adversarial to the brand. And indeed, networks of citizen-consumers within the Trump brand space since his election have succeeded in rendering the Trump brand unambiguously negative in meaning. As Arwa Mahdawi (2018) discussed in her article in *The Guardian* on the post-election crash in Trump's real estate business, hundreds of residents of Trump-brand buildings in New York successfully petitioned Equity Residential to sever ties and rebrand. 'The brand no longer signified premium, but prejudice, said residents: it had become an embarrassment' (Mahdawi, 2018).

The NPS: using the government against the government[1]

Perhaps unexpectedly, the US NPS has taken a central role in brand-based political communications since Trump's ascension to the presidency. It began just hours after Trump's inauguration when the NPS Twitter account retweeted a side-by-side photographic comparison of the crowd size in attendance that day compared with Obama's first inauguration. After being forced to take down the tweet, the NPS was reportedly instructed not to use the social media platform at all. In response, members of the public took up the traditional branding of the NPS in order to create resistance, both online and offline, to the newly inaugurated President's strict control over the government's public communications. More specifically, members of the public used images and icons associated with the NPS as symbols of resistance, using branded images like Smokey Bear to communicate messages critical of the new administration, both in direct response to its actions against the NPS and its authoritarian politics in general.

For instance, individuals protesting Trump's political agenda redesigned classical advertisements featuring Smokey Bear to carry messages of general discontent with the new administration and to issue calls for civil resistance. The NPS logo – the agency's most identifiable brand resource – was redesigned into the shape of a fist, a symbol of the Black Power movement. Branded imagery was paired with riffs on Smokey Bear's slogans such as 'Only you can resist fascist liars' and 'Smokey says resist'. And 'Wokey Bear', as he was redubbed, became a staple of protest signage at the multitude of anti-inauguration demonstrations. Beyond the physical protests, these new branded images circulated online with the sharing of protest images on social media sites, the dissemination of new Smokey designs, and even the sale of merchandise featuring 'Smokey the Resister'.

Yet, the transformation of the NPS brand went far beyond the mere sharing of 'Wokey Bear' imagery, including the creation of alternative NPS social media accounts dubbed 'AltNPS'. These accounts were designed to mirror the brand strategy of governmental accounts in order to reclaim the agency's messaging in the face of censorship from the Trump administration. This use of the NPS's brand resources to protest governmental authority transformed the meaning of the NPS brand itself, such that it now represents resistance to a government of which it is, in reality, *a constituent part*.

This networked nature of the NPS brand results from the confluence of several trends increasingly common in contemporary brand culture, namely the participatory nature of branded entities' public communications, the cultivation of personal identity-affiliations with brands and the ease of digital manipulation of iconographic brand resources in an age of technologically empowered amateurs (Billard, 2016, 2018). However, it is further fuelled by the NPS brand's *iconicity* (Holt, 2004). As Holt (2004: 1) has written, 'the crux of iconicity is that the person or the thing is widely regarded as the most compelling symbol of a set of ideas and values that a society deems important', and the NPS (and Smokey Bear as a symbol of the agency) stands in many ways as the most compelling symbol of the federal government's mandate to engage in service to the public. That is, the NPS brand is particularly potent given the NPS's role in the personal history of millions of Americans who grew up going to, and continue to frequent, National Parks, and for whom Smokey Bear is a resonant cultural icon from childhood.

Moreover, the individual connection citizens feel with the public spaces guarded by Smokey and the NPS has been central to the NPS's branding efforts, and can be seen clearly in their social media strategies. Rather than actively producing original brand content, the NPS relies on crowdsourced branding materials contributed by citizens through social media, which collectively builds a brand image reliant on their network of brand participants. The primary social media feeds used by the NPS – Twitter, Facebook and Instagram – utilise the hashtag #findyourpark to source images from their wide network of visitors to populate their feeds. Currently the Instagram version of the hashtag has been attached to over a million images from users around the United States. Such images exist not only as messages between individual creators and the NPS but, utilising the conversational affordances of social media platforms, cultivate sharing and conversation between consumers. Accordingly, given the centrality of users to the maintenance of the NPS brand, and the personal affective attachments individuals have with both the public spaces being promoted and their fellow national park frequenters, it is unsurprising that individuals feel an identity-affiliation with the brand resources used by the NPS.

Rather than seeing this as an example of brands' vulnerability to hijacking, as Lance Bennett (2004; Bennett and Lagos, 2007) has portrayed in similar instances, the NPS case illustrates the complexities of political brand management in a networked era. Despite the NPS being a governmental agency, and thus subordinate to the executive administration, its reliance on the public for the development of its brand image distributes power over brand meaning across a network of individuals and institutions. Consequently, when institutional powers attempt to reclaim centralised control over the brand – for instance with the Trump administration's removal of information about climate change from the NPS's online presence – relations within the brand's network are disturbed. The locus of control over the brand's meaning no longer resides with the branded entity, but rather is collectively held across the network of brand participants (albeit unevenly). This decentralisation of power means that the government cannot prevent its own subordinate brand from becoming a site at which counter-governmental resistance can organise. Furthermore, the 'openness' (Pitt et al., 2006) of the NPS's brand imagery (including and especially Smokey Bear) offers a set of branded communicative resources through and with which the collective political aims of the newly resistant brand network can be expressed.

As a testament to the power of citizen-consumers to transform the social meanings of political brands in substantive ways, and as an illustration of the complexities of relations within brand networks, the United States government's Ad Council has recently begun a new wave of media campaigns featuring Smokey Bear, despite no notable increase in the need for anti-wildfire messaging. And these campaigns have been far-reaching, including television advertisements, covers on the backs bus stop benches, and social media hashtags (and those are just ones we have personally witnessed). Indeed, the nature and timing of these campaigns indicate a concerted governmental effort to reclaim 'ownership' of Smokey Bear and to transform his social meaning into a symbol of 'personal responsibility' for environmental issues (as was communicated by Lisa Sherman, president and CEO of Ad Council, in the press release announcing the new campaigns; Ad Council, 2017). While the success of these campaigns have yet to be seen, the fact that the Ad Council has chosen to develop and deploy them illustrates

how in contemporary brand culture brands, even political or governmental ones are networked such that control over their meaning resides no longer with the parent organisation but rather is distributed across networks of citizen-consumers who take active roles in the branding process.

Conclusion

The theory of networked branding explicates the structure of contemporary brand culture that allows for the active participation of consumers in the development, sustainment and transformation of a brand's meaning and value. It departs from classical definitions of brands as cognitive associations designed to enhance the equity of a product and instead highlights how brands exist as spaces within which communication occurs and relationships are built. Furthermore, networked branding encapsulates shifts in brand culture that have minimised the influence of top-down corporate (or, in the case of politics, campaign) 'brand managers' in the sustainment of brands and instead better captures the roles consumers play in utilising brands as sites of social connection in which social and cultural meanings are co-created and exchanged. As spaces for communicative exchange, brands offer themselves (often actively) as symbolic resources for consumer-citizens to use and, consequently, transform.

Our theorisation of networked branding both revises and extends theories of 'brand community' by pulling back the lens to reveal the full extent of participation within brand spaces. That is, networked branding recognises that there exist a multitude of participants – both allied to the brand and oppositional, long-term in their participation and short-term, human and non-human – beyond those that have been already theorised. The metaphor of networks also avoids the conceptual baggage of 'community', while allowing for a thorough understanding of the sociality of participants' ongoing and ever-evolving interrelations. Moreover, conceptualising these interrelations as networks allows us to think about relationships of power in non-hierarchical ways; power over meaning and value in contemporary branding is diffused among network participants, rather than held centrally by corporate or political communicators.

As a consequence of theorising branding as a networked practice, our object of analysis is no longer the centralised figures of corporate and political brands, their official communications, and the effects of those communications on audiences and brand equity. Rather, our object of analysis becomes the communications that occur within networks, the complex flows of those communications among network members and the processes of meaning-making that those networks enable. When we consider practices of branding in political communication specifically, networked branding refocuses our attention from only election campaign marketing and brand loyalty to electoral parties to the *continuous* communicative work involved in the creation and evolution of political brands.

The primary implication of the inextricable bonding of brand culture, politics and community is the necessity of capitalism as the platform for communication and social organisation. A secondary, but contradictory implication, is that reinscribing sociopolitical power into networked brands also gives citizen-consumers new forms of agency within capitalism. There is an ambivalent tension between these two implications that means social, economic and political relations in contemporary brand culture

depend upon the stability of fragile dynamics of networked communicative power. While this ambivalence has profound implications for the civic and political potentials of branding that cannot be adequately addressed within a single article, networked branding offers a necessary theoretical framework with which to apprehend the contradictory nature of contemporary brand culture.

Authors' note

Funding

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Note

1. For a fuller analysis of this case, see Moran and Billard (in press).

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