

Algorithmic brands: A decade of brand experiments with mobile and social media

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Published in *New Media and Society* here:

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1461444815605463>

Citation: Carah, N. (2017). Algorithmic brands: a decade of brand experiments with mobile and social media, *New Media and Society*, 19(3): 384-400.

Abstract

This article examines how brands have iteratively experimented with mobile and social media. The activities of brands – including Coca-Cola, Virgin and Smirnoff – at music festivals in Australia since 2005 are used as an instructive case. The article demonstrates how these brands imagined social media, attempted to instruct consumers to use mobile devices, and used cultural events to stimulate image production tuned to the decision-making of social media algorithms. The article contributes to debate by articulating how brands are important actors in the development of algorithmic media infrastructure and devices. Accounts of algorithmic media need to examine how the analytic capacities of social and mobile media are interdependent with orchestrating the creative participation of users.

Keywords

Branding, social media, mobile media, algorithms, participation, surveillance, music festivals

Introduction

Branding is a process of continuous experimentation with markets, media and culture. That experimentation involves 'hard' technical and calculative processes and 'soft' cultural elements that involve intuition, imagination and creativity (Lury 2009: 12).

This article examines a series of brand experiments with mobile and social forms of media over the past decade. The aim is to trace how culturally-embedded and participatory forms of branding became integrated with the predictive and analytic capacities of social media. Earlier forms of participatory branding engaged consumers as agents in the creation of meanings they took to be an authentic reflection of their identities and ways of life. This form of participation was primarily discursive, brand and consumer worked together to create and act out shared values. With the emergence of mobile and social media the logic of participation has shifted. Participation now unfolds in responsive algorithmic media infrastructure. Drawing on a series of participatory brand experiments with social and mobile media since 2005, I demonstrate in part how this shift has unfolded. In tracing this series of events, I argue that brands depend less on consumers as participants in the creation of specific meanings, and more on their capacity to act in ways that can be watched and responded to (Dean 2010). I illustrate how brands have iteratively developed the capacity to stimulate the production of content and data that addresses the decision making logic of algorithmic media. By doing so, the article contributes to efforts to conceptualise forms of media where creative participation and algorithmic decision-making are interrelated.

Participatory data-driven branding

Interactive media systems are characterised by the participation of users in the creation and circulation of content and the collection and application of data to structure that participation. Critical accounts of branding in the past decade have tended to focus their attention in one of two directions. One is the understanding of brands as lived cultural practices. Rather than target discreet messages, brands are open-ended social relations (Banet-Weiser 2012, Moor 2003, Holt 2002, Lury 2009). These accounts focus on the

role that consumers and cultural producers play in embedding brands within their cultural practices and identities. A critical debate in these accounts is the extent to which brands use participation to make themselves an 'authentic' and 'meaningful' part of consumers' lives (Holt 2002, Banet-Weiser 2012). Brands generate value by working with the productive sociality of consumers (Zwick et al. 2008). Branding relies extensively on the creativity and agency of consumers. The more agency consumers have, the more value they are likely to create for brands. Where some accounts see consumers as more empowered by the process of 'co-creating' a brand that reflects their values and creativity (Arvidsson 2005, Holt 2002), others emphasise how participatory strategies appropriate the labour of consumers and the cultural spaces within which they live their lives (Banet-Weiser 2012, Hearn 2008, Zwick et al. 2008).

The other significant account relates to the data-driven media system within which brands operate. This account tends to focus on the relationships between advertising and media industries, but in doing so demonstrates how brands collect and use data to segment and target audiences (Andrejevic 2013, Couldry and Turow 2014, Turow 2011, Zwick and Knott 2009). The emergence of data-driven web-based media enables brands to customise and personalise content. And, the data consumers generate enable media organisations to qualify the audience attention they sell in increasingly refined ways (Couldry and Turow 2014: 1715). In this account the consumer appears to be largely passive. Couldry and Turow (2014: 1712) argue that content is selected and decided for citizens on 'the basis of criteria unknown to them, and calibrated... to big data-generated assumptions' that generate valuable forms of attention for marketers.

While in the first account branding is an open-ended process that relies on the active participation of consumers, the second account depicts a media system more capable than ever of controlling passive consumers with targeted content. In this article, by tracing how brands have experimented with mobile and social media, I argue that the activities each of these accounts describes are interdependent components of branding. The data consumers generate is produced as part of their open-ended and creative participation in the mediation of cultural life. While they might be understood at one moment of the process as a passive target on the end of a data-driven decision-making logic, they can only be constructed as a target because of their creative ability to make themselves present as data-bodies in online social networks. The implication of this, I argue, is that accounts of data-driven media need to pay attention to how brands coordinate consumer participation; while accounts of the open-ended nature of branding need to consider how it is interrelated with the effort to broker attention using algorithmic decision making.

Structuring consumers' use of mobile devices to mediate everyday life is critical to the production of databases that algorithms act upon. Algorithms are the range of automated or procedural decisions media systems make in assembling flows of content and brokering audience attention. Hallinan and Strihas (2014: 3) define algorithmic culture as the 'use of computational processes to sort, classify, and hierarchise people, places, objects, and ideas, and also the habits of thought, conduct and expression that arise in relationship to those processes'. If an algorithm is the 'computational process', what is of interest is how that process sets in motion a series of connections brands develop between devices, people and cultural spaces. If algorithms need data, then

systems and processes need to be developed to create a routine flow of data. The algorithm is one component of a larger network of devices.

I argue that engaging with consumers in their cultural world enables brands to tune their activities to the decision-making logic of algorithms. Schull (2012) also uses this notion of 'tuning' in describing the design of poker machine algorithms to modulate the activity of players. Facebook continuously experiment with the decision-making logic of the news feed algorithm to increase engagement on the site (Justice-Leibrock 2013). The logic of 'tuning' suggests an interdependent relationship between participatory and data-driven modes of branding. Branding is algorithmic when it works to craft forms of participation that address the decision making logic of algorithms (Hallinan and Striphas 2014).

Brands as cultural infrastructure

Branding increasingly involves structuring and managing how consumers use media devices in real-world cultural spaces. In 2014, the Danish brewer Carlsberg encouraged drinkers in bars to use Instagram to upload images to large screens. The more images consumers uploaded the longer Carlsberg beers would remain cheap and the more likely their friends would see them drinking in the bar on Instagram. In 2013, Heineken created a beer bottle that had LED lights, motion and audio sensors in its base. The sensors stimulate the lights to flash to the beat of the music and the movement of people in clubs. People react to the bottle by pulling their phones out, taking pictures and videos and circulating them through social networks. The bottle prompts people to convert the sociality of the club into media content and data.

Speaking at Australia's largest media and marketing conference the Chief Creative Officer of DDB – Heineken's advertising agency – Amir Kassaei explained that advertising in the digital age was not about 'content' but about the management of 'infrastructure' that channels human action and engagement around brands. He told the industry audience that 'digital is not media' and social media 'doesn't exist', all that exists is infrastructure for coordinating the social relationships that produce markets. Those relationships are about what people do and how they feel. Kassaei explained that 'people remember how they feel, not what you say'. Following that logic, brands prompt us to affect one another in digital networks. Rather than being only symbolic content, a brand is – in a larger sense – a network of human relationships mediated by a digital infrastructure that orchestrates action, generates data, and shapes flows of attention through time and space. Brands come into being and create value when they enable consumers to make themselves seen and felt in the social world. Consumers generate affinity – a sense of attraction – between one another by using mobile media devices to circulate content and interact in online social networks. Facebook 'tunes' its algorithms to recognise how that affinity is performed (Bucher 2012): when actors in the network acknowledge or recognise one another, go to the same places, share similar interests, express similar ideas, share connections in common. Heineken's bottle and Carlsberg's interactive screens are both attuned to a form of media where algorithms broker attention by recognising the performance of relationships of affinity.

These experiments with mobile media in material cultural space illustrate several core components of contemporary branding. Firstly, brands rely on consumer participation in the creation and circulation of content (Arvidsson 2005, Holt 2002, Zwick et al. 2008). Secondly, consumers use mobile devices to engage in structured forms of

participation in real-world social spaces. As a Carlsberg representative put it, the 'future of online is offline'. And thirdly, consumer participation with mobile devices in real world spaces generates data. That data registers connections between brands and consumers, their tastes and interests, their social networks, the places they go and the things they do. This is an open-ended and responsive form of branding in the sense that the more consumers engage with the brand the more the brand is able to use algorithms to attune itself to their identities, cultural lives and the online flows of information they are immersed in. This capacity to respond to cultural life is not based on brands understanding the meanings people attribute to cultural practices but rather the capacity of brands to use data-driven media to modulate consumer action.

At first inspection the 'effectiveness' of Carlsberg's and Heineken's experiments is unclear. In its first six months Carlsberg's campaign only averaged thirty images from consumers per week. Heineken's prototype bottle is not easily scalable. Critical accounts of branding need not always pay attention only to successful campaigns. As Cochoy (2012) argues, 'ephemeral' and even 'failed' attempts to develop devices that organise consumer participation still contribute to the ongoing effort to establish a "larger 'market engine'". In this article, I examine a series of brand activities over the course of a decade, some of which were 'effective' and some of which were not, in order to illustrate the broader trajectory of brand experiments with social and mobile media. This helps to articulate how branding is interrelated with the development of social, mobile and algorithmic media technologies and practices. I use the term experiments deliberately to emphasise that branding is an iterative and ongoing process of assembling technologies within social life. By doing so, I illustrate how brands 'imagined' the media system they were participating in building. Importantly, I acknowledge that brands of

course were not the only driver in the development of an algorithmic media system. Nor was there a simple linear progression in brands' efforts to engage consumers as producers of content and data. My claim is that brands' incremental experiments are a critical dynamic in the development of media technologies. And, even if not always successful, their intentions are instructive. By viewing brands as experiments we can focus on how they are part of ongoing media and market processes of stimulus, response and adaptation (Cochoy 2012, Hallinan and Striphas 2014, Schull 2012). The activity of brands helps to illustrate the role media play in assembling and managing populations, audiences and markets.

By using the activities of brands at music festivals in Australia (from 2005 to 2014) as an instructive case, I examine how brands have sought to connect participatory and data-driven media and marketing activities. This has not necessarily been brands' explicit or pre-determined intention, but rather has emerged through a series of iterative experiments with mobile and social media at cultural events. The chosen cases are drawn from a larger project involving fieldwork at festivals, interviews with marketers, cultural producers and consumers, analysis of brand collateral and activities online and analysis of industry discussion. In this article I draw specifically on activities by Coca-Cola (2004-2006), Virgin (2007-2008), Nokia (2004-2007), HP (2008-2009), General Pants (2013-2014), Jagermeister (2011-2012), Strongbow (2011-2012) and Smirnoff (2011-2014).

I use Coca-Cola's 2006 Coke Live campaign as the beginning point for charting these experiments. This approach is similar to Hallinan and Striphas' (2014) use of the Netflix Prize as a 'situation', a moment from which the transformation of media and cultural

systems can be understood. I trace a sequence of events in three steps. Firstly, Coke Live is a significant campaign because it was an early attempt to build a prototype social media platform where consumers produced online representations of themselves as part of their participation in cultural events. Secondly, brands attempted to offer consumers structured ways of using mobile devices to generate content and data at cultural events. Thirdly, brands designed cultural events to orchestrate forms of consumer participation that respond to the algorithmic decision making of devices like the Facebook news feed.

I am not claiming that each of these brand campaigns are explicitly linked together, or follow each other sequentially, although as large campaigns in the relatively contained Australian media and marketing industry they would have been well aware of one another's activities. Rather, I am using this range of campaigns to demonstrate a sequence of events playing out at the industry level. What I am tracing here is the infrastructural developments in assembling a participatory and data-driven mode of branding. In following this lineage I illustrate how brands moved from using culture primarily as a symbolic resource to using culture as a platform to leverage consumer participation in channelling social life into databases.

Simulating mobile and social media

Between 2004 and 2006, Coca-Cola ran a campaign called Coke Live in Australia. Similar campaigns were run in countries throughout the world. These campaigns were part of Coca-Cola's shift toward more participatory and collaborative modes of branding (Foster 2013: 46). As Coca-Cola's marketers came to understand brands as 'the creations of consumers as much as the products of designers, researchers and

advertisers' (Foster 2013: 49), they shifted their efforts toward orchestrating consumer participation. The Australian Coke Live campaign involved advertisements, live music concerts and an interactive website. The advertisements promoted a 'music as it should be' manifesto. Coke appropriated a range of aspects of rock music culture and expressed them as intrinsic brand values. This manifesto was materialised via live music performances. Coke ran large all-ages music concerts featuring popular Australian bands in capital cities around Australia. The live music gigs made the brand a lived cultural experience. A marketing professional involved in the campaign explained to me that attending a live music event is a formative memory. People always remember their first live gig and Coke wanted young consumers to remember Coke being there. The marketer illustrated neatly how the material strategies of brands are entangled with their affective claims. The process of organising real-world cultural events is also about structuring memories and feelings over time.

The cultural experience of the gig was also leveraged as an opportunity to engage with fans on emerging social media platforms. Myspace offered some limited opportunities for brands and fans to interact, mostly via text-based forums and blogs. Social media prior to the launch of Facebook's news feed in late 2006 and the web-enabled smartphone in 2008, however, was only a prototype of what we call social media today. Prior to these developments social media was not characterised by a live and continuous flow of content generated from within everyday life. The 2006 Coke Live website illustrates how brands were 'imagining' the trajectory of mobile and social media interwoven with the experience of real world cultural events. The website simulated a music festival. To access the site consumers had to build a digital avatar who 'attended' the virtual festival. The avatar was constructed from a series of symbolic

resources that the brand made available: gender, skin colour, hair style, clothes and fashion accessories. The combinations enabled consumers to express themselves within a limited range of pre-determined cultural categories: skaters, emos, surfers, indie rockers. Building the avatar involved answering many questions like 'where do you hang out with friends?' and 'what bands do you listen to?' The more questions a participant answered the more resources were made available to fashion a cultural identity. Diligent participants might be able to add a skateboard, branded hoodie or cooler sneakers to their avatar. Participants had to answer enough questions to earn tickets to the 'free' concerts. Once the avatar was built consumers entered the virtual festival site. They could move about the site going to various music stages where they could access exclusive content like video interviews with bands and interact via chat with other avatars on the site. There was little evidence of interaction on the site. Participants had no incentive for the avatar to be a faithful representation of their identity or for them to use the avatar to perform their identities in an ongoing way after they had accumulated the required points for concert tickets.

Despite its limitations, the website offers a revealing example of branding as an open-ended process of experimentation. The site attempted to build the infrastructure for translating consumers' creative ability to construct their identities, express their tastes, and enjoy a music festival into content, attention and data for the brand. The site simulated several processes that are now embedded within social and mobile media infrastructure: (1) the generation of data about ourselves; (2) the creation of a visual representation of the self, built in part from the cultural and symbolic resources of commercial popular culture; and, (3) the integration of the mediation of everyday life with the real world activities of brands.

The generation of data about ourselves

The Coke Live website asked participants detailed questions in order to collect demographic and cultural information about consumers. This required the active participation of the consumer to 'self-report' data. The collection of data is now increasingly passive and ambient. We live our lives in a media infrastructure where we generate a continuous stream of expressions and information about our identities, movements and interactions (Andrejevic and Burdon 2014). Brands don't need to ask us direct questions in order to compile information required to create detailed portraits of our identities and cultural worlds.

Creating a visual representation of the self

On the Coke Live website the brand provided a series of cartoon-like, simulated, cultural resources. We now use our phones to create representations of our self and we update those representations using photos, videos, news stories, memes and other content we produce or find on the web. We routinely incorporate brands within these depictions of our self. Banet-Weiser (2012) illustrates how girls creatively draw on the resources of a commercial popular culture when performing their identities on YouTube: the pop songs, fashion, branded products, hairstyles and so on that they use replicate the symbolic framework of the commercial culture they are immersed in. Hearn (2008) calls this activity the construction of a branded self. The work of self-branding comprises two elements: using brands as symbolic resources in the presentation of our own identities and adopting the promotional logic of brands in the way we position ourselves in competitive and promotional ways.

Coke Live's avatar was a lo-res prototype of the high-res branded selves we build today. Social and mobile media provide expanding opportunities for images of our bodies to be used by brands. In 2006, Coke had consumers select their clothes from a finite number of choices in order to build a symbolic representation of their self. In 2013, the fashion retailer General Pants sent photographers into the Big Day Out music festival to look for hip festival-goers wearing General Pants clothes. When they found them, they took a photograph, and posted that photograph to Facebook tagging the individual with links to the General Pants retail site where the items of clothing could be purchased. In a mobile media system, the branded self is also beginning to extend beyond incorporating brands into visual depictions of our identities. The labour of the branded self will involve our bodies becoming objects that media devices can respond to. General Pants are perhaps anticipating a media system where smartphones and social media are capable of recognising objects like faces, clothing, locations, patterns and brand logos in images we publish. It is not unimaginable for instance that we will soon be able to use smartphones to scan and identify the clothes that others are wearing at cultural events. As media become more mobile, sensor-driven and algorithmic our bodies become not just representational elements within media but also scannable codes that others can respond to using their mobile devices.

Mediating cultural events

Coke's website imagined a music festival where the audience generated a continuous stream of content and data about their experience. The web-enabled mobile device and the live and flowing social media platform brought this to fruition. Audiences at live music performances now use mobile devices to capture images and video. This activity is particularly intense at key moments such as when a performer enters the crowd, or

the lights are particularly brilliant, or during the chorus to a favourite song. As the audience enjoy the 'liveness' of the performance and the excitement generated by the crush of bodies and movement, they translate the moment into images. After capturing the image, they edit it with filters that articulate its mood, they log hashtags and tags that position it within social networks online. They observe the flows of images they contribute to, adding information in the form of tags, likes, shares and comments. The images convey feelings, make festival-goers visible in the flows of attention related to the festival, and register connections in the databases of social media (Carah 2014). In 2006, Coke could only simulate a moment that is now integrated into the festival infrastructure. Rather than build a digital avatar, music fans now carry a smartphone and become a mobile media device that produces a digital representation of their identity, tastes and life and channels it into the databases of social media as both content and data. In the next section, I examine how brands invited consumers to use their mobile devices at music festivals.

Prompting consumers to create and circulate images

The web-enabled smartphone was critical to realising what the Coke Live website imagined. Between 2004 and 2009, device manufacturers and mobile service providers engaged in 'pedagogical' forms of branding. They aimed to instruct consumers how to use their phones and digital cameras to create and circulate content within their everyday lives. Just as Coke Live's website was a simulation of a music festival as a site of content and data production, Nokia's Music Goes Mobile (2004-2005) website simulated a phone that could capture and stream live video content about everyday life. Nokia sponsored musicians and music fans to create video content at music festivals and events using their feature phones (the pre-cursor to smartphones). Nokia's

marketers explained that they intended to educate consumers on the content production possibilities of mobile devices. Their activity fit the 'democratisation' of media production narratives of the time, whereby ordinary people became increasingly visible as producers of media content (Turner 2010). While Nokia's phone could create images and video, they were low quality and could not be connected to a broader flow of content online. Instead, Nokia had the video content uploaded to their Music Goes Mobile website where it played within an animated mobile phone.

To make the camera phone useful, brands needed consumers not only to produce images, but also to register them on the social web. Virgin (2007-2009) and HP (2008-2009) each tried to imagine this connection between the phone and the emerging social web. These experiments came just as smartphones became available (2008 in Australia). While mobile devices had the technical capacity to upload images to social media, taking and circulating images online as an everyday cultural practice depended on the development of a larger network of market devices: high quality cameras, large bandwidth, generous data plans, seamless social media apps, and ubiquitous 3G or wifi coverage. By 2010, Facebook were encouraging mobile carriers to 'zero rate' Facebook on data plans, telling them that if accessing Facebook from mobile was 'free' that would speed up the process of getting consumers 'hooked' on mobile internet services more generally (Palihapitiya 2010).

As these infrastructural developments were unfolding between Facebook, device manufacturers and mobile carriers, brands were engaging in the pedagogical activity of advising consumers how to use mobiles to mediate everyday life. At the V festival in 2007, Virgin Mobile set up a large video screen in partnership with Nokia at the main

stage and invited festival goers to send images to the screen using the new MMS function of camera-enabled feature phones. Few people had a phone with a quality camera, on most mobile plans it cost several dollars to send an image, and it was hard to get the bandwidth to send it. In 2009, HP built a space at the Big Day Out music festival where festival-goers could upload images from their digital cameras or phones. This involved visiting the HP activation, taking the memory card from a device or connecting it via cable, downloading the images on a HP PC, uploading the images to a photobucket account, and creating HTML code to embed in a Myspace blog or creating a Facebook photo album. Few festival-goers used the HP installation because the process of uploading images to the social web was too disconnected from the 'affective flow' (Schull 2012) of enjoying a music festival.

Nokia's, HP's and Virgin's activities were each attempts to leverage brand activations at festivals by connecting them to the mobile and social web. They attempted to pre-empt a live flow of content about everyday life generated from within real world cultural spaces. What was missing though was the seamless connection between the mobile device and a live social media feed. There was no 'flow' of content about everyday life that we contributed to from within cultural spaces. Consequently, using a phone to create images was not quite yet useful in making yourself seen and felt in the social world. As web-enabled smartphones, large data plans, ubiquitous coverage, and functional social media apps came together, images began to acquire a new usefulness in the experience of social life.

The emergence of a flow of content that we contribute to in real time using a mobile device was critical to the emergence of native, participatory and data-driven branding.

Brands' initial impulse by instructing consumers how to create and circulate images was to extend the brand narrative into the stories people tell about themselves online. While mobile devices became critical to the production and circulation of content, social media corporations like Facebook worked to develop devices that would assemble that content into customised flows that increased engagement with their platforms. Facebook's news feed is a key media innovation because it is the catalyst for expanding 'targeted advertising' (as described by Turow 2011) into a 'native' mode of branding.

Facebook's news feed is the stream of content a person sees when they login to Facebook. In the moment that a user logs in, Facebook scans their network to produce a stream of content it judges they will be most likely to engage with. Facebook's news feed algorithm 'uses several factors to determine' what users see, including 'the number of comments, who posted the story, and what kind of story it is' (Facebook 2014). Schull (2012: 181) documents how poker machine designers develop algorithms that recognise users and adapt game play to keep them engaged on the machine for as long as possible. Facebook's news feed design is strikingly similar: the news feed iteratively adapts to users in order to keep them engaged on the device for as long as possible. The longer they are engaged, the more data they generate, and the greater the capacity of the device to adapt to them. While this has broad-ranging implications for public life and culture (Andrejevic 2013, Couldry and Turow 2014), it also marks a fundamental change in how brands work. The news feed is a real time 'broker' of attention (Dijck 2011).

The kinds of data algorithms use to make decisions are generated by human judgements, sense-making and movement. Algorithms do not organise flows of culture

by understanding these judgments, but rather by observing how they form patterns that are predictable over time. Hallinan and Striphos (2014: 6) argue that algorithms shape culture as much as they respond to it. In their account of the Netflix recommendation algorithm, they argue that customised recommendations produce 'more customer data which in turn produce more sophisticated recommendations, and so on, resulting – theoretically – in a closed commercial loop in which culture conforms to, more than it confronts, its users'. Culture begins to 'address' itself to the decision making logic of algorithms (Hallinan and Striphos 2014). To be visible, a cultural product – like a brand – needs to be recognised by the algorithms that broker attention and engagement. On Facebook, brands accumulate affinity as the algorithm recognises how close consumers' preferences and interests are to the content the brand posts. Brands that don't generate engagement or affinity will be 'filtered out' of news feeds (Bucher 2012). In the next section I consider how brand's activities in real-world cultural spaces began to 'address' themselves to algorithms.

Brand activations from the coolhunt to the algorithm

Examining how brands imagine and construct a participatory data-driven media system is an important critical strategy. It enables us to see brands not only as representational ideological projects but also as ongoing efforts to experiment with media and culture to create valuable formations of attention. Coke Live illustrates brands' attempts to imagine cultural events as a site where they could structure the participation of consumers in generating content and data about their lives and identities. Nokia, HP and Virgin each tried to construct the infrastructure for consumers to use smartphones within real world cultural events to create content and data.

Each of these activities involved brands building material installations at cultural events. 'Activation' is the industry term for themed spaces, activities and services that brands embed within cultural events. Brands began building activations at cultural events like music festivals in Australia in the early noughties. Brands have built themed spaces that include bars, stages for emerging artists, water tanks and drinks, mobile phone charging services, lockers, cooling and rest areas, art spaces, and sneaker and fashion accessory design workshops. These 'activate' the brand within the material and symbolic infrastructure of cultural events. The first generation of activations were extensions of 1990s coolhunting – the effort to find hip consumers and become part of the sociality, atmosphere and memories of their cultural events. Coolhunting was one part of marketers' efforts to be more responsive and reflexive. Unable to direct the action of an increasingly fragmented market, command and control marketing gave way to flexible and just in time methods (Holt 2002, Moor 2003). Corporations sought to position brands within constantly evolving frameworks of meaning.

These activities have been understood as a form of 'corporate appropriation' of 'authentic' culture (for a critique, see Banet-Weiser 2012). Holt (2002) argued that these strategies had a diminishing return because they would eventually 'exhaust' the authentic cultural resources they co-opted. This way of understanding culturally-embedded branding assumes that corporate culture exists in opposition to authentic culture (Banet-Weiser 2012: 8). Banet-Weiser argues instead that we consider how cultural practices are 'transformed' into productive brand-building activities. Following this, authenticity is not something located in specific essentialist meanings, but rather an ongoing social process of recognition. Brands create value not by categorically co-opting or stating what is authentic, but rather by mediating the process by which

authenticity is 'felt' via social practices of recognition (Meier 2011). Brands build an infrastructure for reflexively responding to the open-ended nature of cultural life. To follow Turner's (2010: 25) formulation of commercial media that rely on audience participation, brands operate 'like an ideological system but without an ideological project'. Activations are a platform for harnessing the productive sociality of consumers, rather than a site for making intrinsic claims to authenticity. The emergence of mobile and social media increases their usefulness in generating affinity and attention.

The reach of brand activations prior to mobile and social media was limited to the peer networks and word of mouth of people attending the event. The activation and its mediation didn't spread much further than the consumers who visited the space and the official media channels of the event. Furthermore, it was difficult for marketers to generate data that would enable them to evaluate the return on investment of these culturally-embedded experiments. Social and mobile media make brand activations far more valuable because they offer the technical capacity for real world interaction with consumers to be put to use in influencing how attention is brokered online.

Smirnoff, Strongbow and Jagermeister have built activations at the Splendour in the Grass music festival since 2011. Smirnoff built a large multi-level cocktail bar where artists painted murals on the walls throughout the festival weekend. The brand encouraged festival goers to 'check in' and employed intermediaries like fashion models to post content using their own Instagram accounts and brand hashtags. Strongbow built a bar around a large antique wooden sailing ship. At night the ship was lit up with fairy lights. Festival goers would sit on the deck drinking cider, imagining they were 'sailing' through the festival crowds. Jagermeister built a hunting lodge themed bar.

With its log cabin walls, fireplaces, chandeliers and mooseheads, the bar was a dark, warm and inviting space within the often wet and cold winter festival.

Each of these spaces is tuned into the ambience and atmosphere of the festival. In the first instance, they are spaces within which festival-goers can affect one another and perform the festival as a shared social event. Drinking alcohol, taking drugs, dancing, feeling the movement of bodies to performances are all part of 'feeling' the festival experience. Performances at music festivals are a stimulus to affect and be affected. They offer opportunities for consumers to make themselves visible within the social networks that form around the festival. Brand activations fit the sociality of the festival. They don't operate in an ideological sense by trying to convey specific values as much as they work in an affective sense to create a space within which the festival can be experienced and felt. Having stimulated the productive ability of festival-goers to affect and be affected, brands then leverage activations as a platform for orchestrating mediation. Brands send cultural intermediaries – photographers, models, fashion bloggers – through the crowds to take photos and circulate them online through brand accounts, brand hashtags and personal profiles. Promotional staff encourage people in the audience to share photos, check in, or tag the activation.

Elsewhere, I have conceptualised brand activations as sites from which consumers are engaged in creating and curating flows of content that embed the brand within their depictions of their identity and cultural practices (Carah, Brodmerkel and Hernandez 2014). Following the trajectory of brand experiments with mobile and social media at cultural events since 2005, we also need to think about how activations are interrelated with the increasingly algorithmic nature of these media systems. One way we can

understand activations is as a device for ‘addressing’ algorithms (Hallinan and Striphas 2014). Activations make data about relationships of affinity available to the algorithms of social media. They signal to those algorithms that the brand is a part of specific relationships between people and cultural events, tastes and places. Some attention has been paid to the way that algorithms shape the delivery of cultural content (Andrejevic 2013, Hallinan and Striphas 2014). In addition to these accounts, the development of brand activations illustrate the importance of conceptualising how the need to respond to or pre-empt the decision-making logic of algorithms will shape the design of real world cultural spaces and events. Brands conceptualise and develop activations in part as devices that stimulate forms of content production algorithms will recognise.

At the entrance to the Smirnoff activation in 2014 a small sign read ‘Smile! You’re on camera! Filming in progress. By entering this area, I understand that I may appear on camera and my image or voice may be used for advertising and/or trade purposes’. A large video screen above the entrance to the venue told festival-goers to ‘hashtag your Instagram pics #vipublic’ and the hashtag was printed on all the cups served at the bar. Festival-goers use their smartphones to create, circulate and code images using hashtags. This activity registers image-based relationships between the festival, brand and their own peer networks. Facebook iteratively develops its algorithm to better ‘recognise’ these relationships of attention and convert them into engaging content. The brand activation acts a ‘set’ or ‘stage’ that stimulates the production of content that both visually represents the brand, and forms relationships between individuals and brands that algorithms recognise. The brand activation is a part of the effort to ‘structure feeling’ as images, attention and data on social media (Hearn 2010). Brands that rely more on algorithms to broker attention in the social and mobile web, also become more

reliant on the affective capacity of users to generate attention using their smartphones within real world cultural spaces.

A decade ago, the industry narrative about activations was that they enabled brands to go beyond 'interruption marketing' and into the cultural lives of young and hip festival-goers. Most assumed this meant that brands would be perceived as an authentic part of the symbolic landscape of the cultural event, that they had a 'tangible' role to play as one industry figure put it. In a mobile and social media culture, however, activations enable brands to avoid interrupting the affective zone of flow and play that music festivals create. The engagement with the brand becomes part of a seamless and ongoing mediation of cultural life. Following Schull (2012: 165), individuals and media systems lock together in cycles of stimulus, response and adaptation. Activations enable those engagements to be coextensive with the affective networks of cultural life. Brands are open-ended experiments with media, designed to continuously adapt to social life. Brands now operate as cultural infrastructure modulating consumer participation, rather than seeking to channel specific cultural meanings into their strategic planning and positioning.

Algorithmic branding as tuning affinity

As brands become more social and less symbolic (Arvidsson and Pietersen 2014), corporations develop modes of control that aim to structure the participation of consumers. This involves connecting together material cultural spaces, mobile devices and participatory data-driven media systems. Brands use algorithms not only to categorise and target consumers, but to modulate relationships of attention in an open-ended way. Cheney-Lippold (2011: 177) explains this as a shift from a disciplinary logic

that aims to shape subjects around norms, to a control-based logic that opens and closes possibilities. Brands seek less to shape individuals and more to establish a terrain upon which they can watch and respond to individuals, channelling their productive sociality into an apparatus of decision-making and adaptation. Algorithmic branding is the process by which brands attune themselves to the way algorithms broker attention and manage consumer's productive sociality. If in a broadcast media system a brand produced relationships of attention by buying media space, then in an algorithmic media system brands need to enact relationships that algorithms recognise. Brands work to make sociality productive, designing spaces and connecting together devices that regulate and modulate attention (Schull 2012: 174).

This iterative experimentation is the work of 'fine-tuning' the performance of affinity (Packer 2013). Packer (2013: 297) follows Friedrich Kittler's understanding of media as 'data collectors, storage houses and processing centres.' In this formulation, digital media is computational, it 'predicts, collects, assesses, guides, directs, processes, opens, shuts, invades, experiments, and expands every data-producing moment' (Packer 2013: 295). Participatory and algorithmic media enable brands to operate as 'devices for the reflexive organisation of a set of multi-dimensional relations' (Lury 2009: 68). In Coke's effort to create a website that collected data and harnessed participation; in Nokia, Virgin and HP's efforts to get consumers to use mobile devices at cultural events to channel social life into the networks and databases of the emerging social web; in Smirnoff, Jagermeister and Strongbow's use of activations to generate affinity that social media algorithms recognise we can observe brands operating as cultural infrastructure.

Brands and algorithmic media organisations negotiate about the production and valuation of audiences. In a mass media system, conventions like ratings systems were created for the description of audiences. Algorithmic media enables not only better targeting, evaluation and integration of editorial and advertising (Turow 2011, Couldry and Turow 2014), it also enables an expansion of the facets and qualities of audience attention that can be assembled and calculated (Lury and Moor 2010). The algorithms that corporations like Facebook develop are devices around which agreements are reached between brands, investors, users and platforms about how attention will be managed and valorised. Facebook offer to conduct experiments for brands to identify valuable formations of attention within the algorithmic flows of the platform (Crossley 2014). Facebook work with major brands to integrate data from the social media platform with companies' internal marketing data in order to determine how engagement online is translated into sales. Facebook is also becoming increasingly integrated into the wider web. Data collected from engagement on the platform can be used to customise the offerings in brands' online stores and it is possible that online sales will become integrated within the Facebook platform over time. If brands do not control the algorithms that broker attention, they need to understand how these algorithms work and attune themselves to that decision-making logic.

Conclusion

Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012: 8) observes that brands do not encroach on authentic culture but rather 'transform and shift' cultural practices into market formations. Following her account, I argue that we should examine how brands use culture as an infrastructure for organising attention and action. Brands are critical players in the imagination of, and investment in, the 'primary cultural form(s)' (Banet-Weiser 2012: 8)

and media infrastructure that undergird public life. Media platforms and the forms of social and cultural life they afford need to be understood as partly the product of the impulses and experiments of brands over a long period of time. The capital brands invest (or that others invest in an effort to generate revenue from brands) employs the creative and technical professionals who imagine, instigate and manage the process by which media become social, mobile and algorithmic.

The role brands play in the development of these media platforms is evident in the iterative trajectory described in this article. The history of brand experiments over the past decade does not suggest that brands are developing more sophisticated ways to appropriate meaning from cultural life, insinuate themselves into our identities, or rely on our creativity. The basic coordinates of these brand strategies have been in place since the 1960s. What the last decade of brand activity does suggest instead is that brands have worked to experiment with media as infrastructure. While this may well have evolved from their efforts to become 'authentically' embedded in cultural life, in the process it has taken them beyond attempting to co-opt specific 'authentic' meanings.

Brands' move away from claims to 'specific' meanings coincides with their efforts to experiment with media as platforms for orchestrating action. Coke Live, Nokia's Music Goes Mobile, and Virgin's interactive screen were not just attempts by those brands to appear 'cool' or co-opt some shared cultural values as much as they were attempts to use media technologies to make consumers visible as content and data in order to modulate attention and action. These brand activities have developed interdependently with the emergence of social and mobile media platforms. The simultaneous nature of these developments illustrates an important feature of the exercise of power in a social,

mobile and algorithmic media system. Brands are a 'primary cultural form' (Banet-Weiser 2012) in an increasingly 'algorithmic culture' (Hallinan and Striphas 2012). Banet-Weiser's (2012) and Hallinan and Striphas' (2014) concepts can be brought into a useful exchange with each other. Hallinan and Striphas (2013) argue that algorithms do not only respond to culture they also shape cultural content. If, however, we follow Banet-Weiser (2012) and examine the 'form' brands take in an 'algorithmic culture' in terms of the experiments they conduct, then we can observe how their actions indirectly shape the form and infrastructure of culture. The media platforms that brands invest in, or that respond to brands' imperatives, seek to make culture available as a zone for generating extensive and ongoing flows of attention and action. The form culture takes is not one that aims to shape coherent subjects with specific meanings, as much as it is one that intends to engage individuals in uninterrupted flows of attention and data sharing. As a simple and ubiquitous example, the Facebook news feed might be seen as a brand-driven project of building an algorithmic cultural form that extends engagement on a mobile media platform in order to enable native integration of sponsored content.

In an algorithmic media system power does not rest in the symbolic capacity to express oneself as much as it does in the differing capacities of actors to use media devices and infrastructure to experiment with individuals and populations. The activities of brands are reflective of a broader move toward media as experimental platforms. In this system brands are an integral part of the process of configuring culture as a continuous 'zone of play' (Schull 2012) that makes us available to ongoing experiments. Consumer creativity and participation is critical to a media system that exploits communication in general (Dean 2010). In these formations what is said matters less than the capacity of

media infrastructure to harness and modulate the ongoing process of communication. Rather than rely on the specific expressions of subjects, branding is a cultural form that works to make the human capacity to give and gain attention available to the decision-making logic and learning sequences of algorithmic media.

Brands' activities demonstrate the need for a critical account of participation in experimental media systems. This is an account that does not default to an understanding of participation as the expression of meaning, but one that considers the consequences of individuals having their attention, affects and bodies made available to experiments they do not control. Following Banet-Weiser (2012), brand culture is 'ambivalent' in the sense that the opportunities afforded for self-expression simultaneously enrol us in larger experiments with attention and action. Brand imperatives and investments stimulate the creation of the media infrastructure that increasingly undergirds our cultural formations and public life. That makes brands a 'primary cultural form' (Banet-Weiser 2012) in a material and infrastructural sense. Banet-Weiser (2012: 10) argues that 'a great deal is at stake in a life lived through the culture of brands' (Banet-Weiser 2012: 10) because brand culture privileges the individual as the site of political action and cultural change. In addition to the cultural resources brands make available for how we understand and act in the world, a critical account of brands as a 'primary cultural form' must also address how they imagine, invest in and experiment with the media technologies and platforms that constitute public cultural life.

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