

Chapter 56

Brand Pathologies: “Monstrous” Fan Relationships and the Media Brand “Twilight”

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ABSTRACT

The Twilight media brand is a global consumption phenomenon which speaks to female consumers who enter into fantastic and corporeal relationships with its market manifestations (books, films, merchandising, and consumption communities). Twilight’s brand narrative reifies the psychological power and socio-cultural allure of the ‘monstrous’ vampire myth, and enables a spectrum of relational exposure from ‘Twi-hard’ (devoted Twilight fan) fandom to addictive and obsessive, compulsive, and transgressive behaviors. The consumer’s relational exposure to this brand is the subject of this study. The authors discuss the tensions and paradoxes which underpin female consumption of this powerful brand. They also demonstrate disturbing dimensions to the construction of consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998) which impact on not only the imaginative life but the physical lives of the Twilight fans. In so doing they extend current thinking on the spectrum of fan behaviors, and comment on ideological dimensions to the construction of fan-brand relationship.

INTRODUCTION

Monstrous bodies are the remarkable presences that appear as signs of civic omen, or trauma, and which demand interpretation: they offer a bit of each, apocalypse as well as utopia. (Ingebreetsen, 2001, 39).

Relationships are purposive, involving at their core the provision of meaning to the persons who engage them...Relationships are multiplex phenomena: they range across several dimensions and take many forms... in response to contextual change... [brand relationship is] a vibrant psycho-socio-cultural construal. (Fournier 2009, 5, 9, 15, 19)

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The Twilight media brand is a world-wide consumption phenomenon which predominantly speaks to female consumers who enter into both fantastic and corporeal relationships with its market manifestations (books, films, merchandising, and consumption communities). Twilight's brand narrative reifies the psychological power and socio-cultural allure of the 'monstrous' vampire myth. The historical familiarity and wide-spread diffusion of the vampire trope enables a range of behaviors to be readily surfaced by its consumers. This branded accessibility proffers its consumers a spectrum of relational exposure which begins with 'Twi-hard' [devoted *Twilight* fan] fandom which can intensify to produce addictive and obsessive, compulsive, and transgressive behaviors.

The consumer's relational exposure to this brand is the subject of this study. The authors discuss the tensions and paradoxes which underpin female consumption of this powerful brand. They also demonstrate disturbing dimensions to the construction of consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998) which impact on not only the imaginative life but the physical lives of the Twilight fans. In so doing they extend current thinking on the spectrum of fan behaviors, and comment on antithetical, ideological dimensions to the construction of consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998).

BACKGROUND

Brands and Relationships

If brands are symbolic devices (Holt 2002; McCracken 2005; Ritzer 1993; Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling 2006; Thompson and Arsel 2004) framing "horizons of conceivable action, feeling and thought" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 869) they are also receptors and mediators of socio-cultural values (Holt 2004). In this way they become "transformative devices" (Heilbrunn 2006) operating in systems of meaning, that allow contradictory and paradoxical tensions or ideas to cohabit and, acting as receptors and mediators of socio-cultural values, can "channel and reproduce consumers' thoughts and actions in such a way as to defend domina[n]te (sic) interests in society (Hirschman 1993)" (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 874).

Via such market mechanisms consumers can create a sense of self (Belk 1988; McCracken 1986), construct narratives of identity (Holt 2002; Levy 1981), become involved in communal relationships (Cova 1997; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), and actively form mostly positive, dyadic relationships between their desired brand and themselves (Fournier 1998; Keller and Lehmann 2006).

In the latter relational instance agency can be seen to be demonstrated by both the consumer and the brand. There is active reception by the consumer as an "interpretive agent" of the messages the brand delivers, and there is the active promotion of brand messages which conventionally represent "dominant representations of consumer identity and life-style ideals" (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 874). As a result, co-productive relational exchange takes place in which brand intention and brand meaning is evaluated, and identity projects are created and/or affirmed.

In the case of the media brand Twilight, the authors have previously reported how their predominantly female audience displayed active agency and positive relationships with the brand via collective and communal activities such as fan blogs, simulated brand narratives (proms), conventions, book club and signing events (Schau and Buchanan-Oliver 2012). These consumers also used their relational attachment to the media brand to question and debate their personal, sexual and political identities (Schau and

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