

Brand play and brand attack by artists – Effects of non-collaborative co-creation on the observer’s brand equity

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Abstract

The paper explores how non-collaborative co-creation affects brand equity as perceived by observers in the market: observer-based brand equity (OBBE). A pilot study using real-life examples tests the general effect of such co-creation on OBBE. A laboratory experiment investigates how distinct forms of non-collaborative co-creation (brand play vs. brand attack) and different types of co-creator (consumer vs. artist) impact OBBE. It is shown that non-collaborative co-creation negatively impacts OBBE, also in the case of high equity brands. Furthermore, brand attack has a stronger negative impact than brand play. Artists either mitigate the negative effect or even positively affect OBBE. Hence, the paper is in line with previous work on positive effects of art (“art infusion effect”) on brands.

Keywords: art infusion effect, brand play, brand attack, brand co-creation, observer-based brand equity (OBBE).

Introduction

In recent years, a new age of brand management has evolved. Stakeholders are no longer seen as passive targets but rather as active partners that participate in brand meaning creation (e.g., Iglesias et al., 2013). Brand meaning comprises brand identity and brand reputation (Black and Veloutsou 2017) and its creation is not seen as an internal activity anymore, but meaning is rather regarded as an outcome of social processes between the brand owner and its stakeholders (e.g., Merz et al., 2009; von Wallpach et al., 2017). This new understanding of brands is coined brand co-creation (e.g., Ind et al., 2013; Hatch and Schultz, 2010).

Past research discussed mainly positive aspects of brand co-creation (e.g., Sawhney et al., 2005; Ind et al., 2013; Franke et al., 2010). What is overlooked by scholars so far, is the fact that whenever value is collaboratively co-created, it can also be collaboratively co-destroyed.

Especially, artists have an interest to playfully mock or even destructively attack a brand to raise awareness and to change the society. Artists have a great variety of techniques. The active change of commercial communication messages is called Culture Jamming (e.g., Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Sandlin and Milam, 2008). Culture jammers alter and give new meanings to popular cultural symbols that most often are represented by iconic brands (Romani et al., 2015). Culture jamming has many distinct forms, such as the subversion of advertisements, hijacking of billboards, the parody of websites or shoplifting goods (Sandlin and Milam, 2008). An example for the culture jamming is the network *Brandalism* which was founded by artists in the UK (<http://brandalism.ch>). In 2017, the project #SubvertTheCity was the world's first coordinated international ad takeover with over 60 creative actions in 38 cities in 18 countries around the world.

Although just a small number of artists or consumers participate in negative brand co-creation processes, a great number of observers is exposed to the destructed outcome which leads to the question whether negative brand co-creation has the power to dilute observer's brand equity (OBBE). The concept of OBBE is based on the idea, that the overall consumer-based brand equity is made up of the brand equity of the active co-creators (e.g., artists), the "participants", and the brand equity of the non-integrated consumers, the "observers" (Kristal et al., 2016). This paper focusses on the effect of non-collaborative brand co-creation by artists and consumers on the OBBE.

Theoretical foundation and hypotheses

In brand co-creation, brand meaning is seen as a continuous social process that is subject to ongoing negotiations and the belief is that any brand is dynamically constructed through social interactions between the legal brand owner and stakeholders (Iglesias et al., 2013).

However, social interactions and the integration of various stakeholders bear severe risks for the brand (Gassmann et al., 2010). Integrated stakeholders can misinterpret their "new role" and misuse their grown empowerment while pushing the brand in unwanted directions (Ind, 2015). Such non-collaborative behavior potentially has a negative effect on a brand's perception in the market and could decrease the value of brands that otherwise have attained competitive success (Thompson et al., 2006; Giesler, 2012). The result could be a brand equity dilution as non-integrated consumers in the market, the observers, are faced with an inconsistency of actual brand beliefs and perceived brand attributes (Pullig et al., 2006). Hence:

H₁: Non-collaborative behavior in co-creation has a negative effect on the OBBE.

When it comes to non-collaborative co-creation, it has to be distinguished between different forms. We argue for two distinct forms that both could cause a dilution in OBBE. First, a brand may be used as a fodder for humorous parody. We call this form brand play. The concept of brand play has been studied intensively in marketing-related research as a possible feeling in response to advertising (Alden et al., 2000). It has been noted that play is associated with the application of humor in ads (e.g., Rößner et al., 2017) and that a positive connotation is attached to it (Aaker et al., 1988). Playful subversion of a brand might create a positive impact on observers, but might nevertheless generate a disconnection between the actual brand image and the perceived brand attributes, and thereby lead to a revision of the initial brand meaning (Roedder John et al., 1998). Our assumption is that this

inconsistency between the initial brand image and the actual brand communication will lead to a weak dilution in OBBE.

Second, a brand can be attacked by for instance criticizing corporate practices. We call this form brand attack. Such anti-brand activism is strongly related to negative emotions towards the brand (e.g., Hegner et al., 2017). It is suggested by Tanner et al. (1991) and Alden et al. (2000) that attacking a brand’s image can actually engender fearfulness. Brand attack and the reaction to it can be interpreted as a brand crisis (e.g., Dutta and Pullig, 2011; Dawar and Pillutla, 2000). Thus:

H₂: The form of non-collaborative brand co-creation moderates the effect on OBBE. Brand attack leads to a stronger dilution in OBBE than brand play.

Besides consumers also artists engage in brand co-creation that exhibits both mentioned forms. Examples are: (1) German artist *Petrus Wandrey* who humorously mocks brand logos and turns “Nivea Creme” into “Naive Crime”. (2) *Ron English*, an American artist, and his design of a *Kellogg’s* cereal package, labeled as “Killfrog’s Sugar Smack”. In these cases, the brand is pushed in unwanted directions and important brand attributes are distorted. However, there is a general agreement that consumers perceive art in a different way than they perceive other objects (Joy and Sherry, 2003). The effect of the integration of art in products, packaging and/or advertising is discussed in the literature as the “art-infusion-hypothesis” (Hagtvedt and Patrick, 2008, b; Huettl and Gierl, 2012; Lee et al., 2015; Mantovani and Tazima, 2016; Moon and Kwak, 2010; Lacey et al., 2011). The studies show that the integration of art has generally a positive effect on a product or a brand independent if the artwork is evaluated positively or negatively by consumers. Hence:

H₃: The type of co-creator moderates the effect on OBBE. Non-collaborative brand co-creation by artists leads to a weaker dilution in OBBE than the brand co-creation by consumers.

Pilot study

The goal of the pilot study was to analyze the basic effect of non-collaborative co-creation by artists on OBBE and to test H₁. The pilot study focuses on real interventions by artists. Based on various pre-tests, two campaigns were selected. First, the street artist *Lobo* used the technique Adbusting for the brand *American Apparel* (see Appendix). Second, the Visual Kidnapping-technique used by the French artist *ZEVS* for the brand *Lavazza* (see Appendix).

To measure the impact of the chosen examples for negative co-creations, we conducted an online survey with three groups. A first control group (n=51) evaluated the two brands without any further information. A second (*American Apparel*, n = 49) and third (*Lavazza*, n = 51) group were confronted with one of the two campaigns. After the stimulus presentation, participants randomly rated one of the two brands. Additionally, a comparison of the demographic profile of the three groups shows no significant differences (age: group_{control} = 27.4; group_{American Apparel} = 28.1.; group_{Lavazza} = 29.2; male participants: group_{control} = 31.4 %; group_{American Apparel} = 38.8 %.; group_{Lavazza} = 37.3 %).

OBBE was measured by three constructs: brand attitude (5 items, semantic differential, 7-point scale, 1: negative, 7: positive; $\alpha = 0.95$), purchase intention (4 items, 5-point scale, 1: low, 5: high; $\alpha = 0.91$) and word-of-mouth (5-point scale, 1 item, 1: low level, 5: high level). For the statistical test of the difference between the control group and one of the two ‘brand’ groups t-tests were conducted (see Table 1).

	<i>American Apparel & Lobo</i>			<i>Lavazza & ZEVS</i>		
	control group (means)	‘artist’s campaign group’ (means)	t-test	Control group (means)	‘artist’s campaign group’ (means)	t-test
Brand attitude	4.30	3.17	***	4.72	3.73	***
Purchase intention	2.46	1.90	***	2.98	2.16	***
Word-of-mouth	2.04	1.84	n.s.	2.75	2.06	**

***: p<0.01; **: p<0.05; *:p<0.1; n.s.: non-significant

Table 1: Findings of the pilot study

Results indicate that in both cases negative co-creation by an artist has a significant and negative effect on several dimensions of the higher-order construct OBBE. Therefore, H_1 is supported.

However, this pilot study gives no further information about the reasons behind this effect. Hence, we designed and conducted a laboratory experiment to test H_2 and H_3 .

Laboratory experiment

In a before-after measurement we wanted to explore the effect of two independent variables on OBBE: (1) form of non-collaborative co-creation (play vs. attack) and (2) type of co-creator (consumer vs. artist).

Before the initial experiment, a qualitative study ($n = 19$ students) was conducted with the aim of getting a better idea how to design the two forms of non-collaborative brand co-creation. The participants sorted 29 real examples of distorted brand logos to the categories brand play and brand attack.

Two pre-tests (pre-test 1: $n = 38$ students; pre-test 2: $n = 45$ students) ensured the effectiveness of manipulations. All in all, we developed pairs of brand attack and brand play for seven brands using Adobe Photoshop. The scales for the measurement of brand play and brand attack were based on the work of Aaker et al. (1988) and Alden et al. (2000). As an outcome of the first pre-test, the manipulations for the brands Nike, Levi's and Burger King were effective. On the basis of the mean differences, we selected Nike and Levi's for the main study. The second pre-test analyzed the effectiveness of the second independent variable, whether the co-creator was a consumer or an artist. For the pre-test, we created several newspaper stories about the co-creation of the logos which included a hint on the type of co-creator: consumer vs. artist. The artist status of the co-creator was manipulated by reporting that he had exhibited in the previous year at the MoMa. For the "artist" measurement we used two items by Hagtvedt and Patrick (2008). The pre-test showed that this manipulation was successful.

The main study had a mixed design with time as within subject factor and form (play vs. attack) and type (consumer vs. artist) as 2 x 2 between subject factors. The 255 participants in the main study were students at a German university (age: 23; female: 60%). OBBE as dependent variable was measured by an established scale (Kristal et al., 2016). The empirical data supported the reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of the scale for both brands and both measurement time points ($Levi's_{before} = 0.908$; $Levi's_{after} = 0.939$; $Nike_{before} = 0.858$; $Nike_{after} = 0.954$). The effectiveness of both manipulations was checked by the same measures as the pre-tests. T-tests showed the effectiveness of the manipulation of the brand co-creation form: $Nike_{brandplay}$ (play = 4.45 > 1.53 = attack, $p = 0.00$); $Nike_{brandattack}$ (attack = 4.15 > 1.40 = play; $p = 0.00$), $Levi's_{brandplay}$ (play = 4.35 > 1.38 = attack): $p = 0.00$, $Levi's_{brandattack}$ (attack = 4.27 > 1.26 = play; $p = 0.00$). Also, t-tests support the second manipulation of the co-creator type: $Nike_{artist vs. consumer}$ (4.06 > 2.17, $p = 0.00$), $Levi's_{artist vs. consumer}$ (3.84 > 1.95, $p = 0.00$). Figure 1 shows the stimuli of the experiment.

	Brand play	Brand attack
Nike		
Levis		

Fig. 1: Stimuli of the laboratory experiment

In the main study OBBE was measured at two different points of time, before and after the exposure to the treatment. Pre-exposure OBBE was captured with the help of a booklet. Following unrelated filler material, respondents were confronted with the material which depicted the results of non-collaborative brand co-creation in the form of newspaper articles. Afterwards, OBBE was measured again.

An ANOVA found that for both tested brands there was a significant difference in OBBE-values before and after (see table 2). H_1 was accepted for both brands as non-collaborative co-creation affected OBBE negatively. Also for both brands the form of non-collaborative brand co-creation and the type of co-creator moderated the effect on OBBE. Hence, H_2 and H_3 were supported as well. Particularly, we found that brand attack caused a stronger dilution in OBBE than brand play and artists caused a weaker dilution than consumers. The negative effect of brand attack occurred independent of the co-creator type although the artist mitigated it in comparison to the consumer. Brand play in combination with a consumer co-creator caused a slighter dilution than brand attack. An artist in combination with brand play had either no effect on OBBE (*Levi's*) or led to an improvement (*Nike*).

	<i>Levi's</i>				
	General	Brand play		Brand attack	
		by consumer	by artist	by consumer	by artist
Before	3.84	3.80	3.83	3.85	3.87
After	3.21	3.42	3.83	2.46	3.04
Dilution*	-0.62	-0.38	0	-1.39	-0.83
	<i>Nike</i>				
Before	4.19	4.25	4.07	4.23	4.22
After	3.58	4.03	4.35	2.74	3.35
Dilution*	-0.61	-0.22	+0.28	-1.49	-0.87

*: negative sign: dilution of OBBE; positive sign: improvement of OBBE

Table 2: Main results of the laboratory experiment

Summary and managerial implications

Both empirical studies make clear that brand managers should not only consider benefits of brand co-creation, but there is the necessity to be aware of possible pitfalls.

Often artists are the co-destroyer of brands, because they play with the omnipresent symbols of the society (brand logos etc.) or they take a critical perspective on companies and consumption and attack brands. The two empirical studies prove that both types – brand play and brand attack – have a negative impact on OBBE. Therefore, the management should also observe the activities of single activists as they have a huge impact on a larger number of observers. In line with the literature on anti-brand communities (e.g., Popp et al., 2016) non-collaborative brand co-creations by single consumers or artists can also provide wake-up calls for brand managers. Such non-collaborative behaviors could act as ‘weak signals’.

From a theoretical standpoint, the main study shows the robustness of the art infusion hypotheses: The artist has a weaker negative or no negative impact compared to the consumer. Particularly, brand play by artists has in some cases even a positive impact. Hence, practitioners could think about promoting brand play by artists as an approach to strengthen the own brand. This result underpins the potential of arts-brand-collaborations (e.g., Baumgarth et al., 2014; Zorloni, 2016; Kapferer, 2014, Fuchs et al., 2013).

Limitations and further research

There are certain limitations that have to be taken into account which in turn suggest directions for further research.

Firstly, the main laboratory experiment is based on a student sample. We decided to use a student sample, because this procedure ensures the internal homogeneity of the sample (e.g., Calder and Tybout, 1999; Peterson and Merunka, 2014). Furthermore, the young generation is the main observer group of non-collaborative brand co-creation. However, future studies could analyze the effects in larger and particular more diverse samples.

Secondly, the experiment considers only two brands from two different product categories. Category effects (e.g., hedonic vs. utilitarian products; complex vs. simple products) and brand effects (e.g., strong vs. weak brand; luxury vs. mainstream brands) could not be analyzed by this study. Hence, future research should expand the number and types of product categories and brands.

Thirdly, our study incorporates with the distortion of brand logos one particular type of negative co-creation. Future studies should also consider different types of negative co-creation by consumers and artists. For example, the British artist *Banksy* organized the project “Dismaland” where visitors were part of the experience as they were able to walk through the exhibition. This strong experience and the high intensity of non-collaborative co-creation could increase the effect on OBBE.

Fourthly, our study interprets the co-creator as an independent co-destroyer. However, the hint to planned arts-brand-collaborations like the *BMW arts cars*, *Absolut Vodka* or *Louis Vuitton* shows, that often the artists are not independent. Hence, future research could analyze the (positive) effect of paid artists, who implement the brand play strategy in collaboration with the legal brand owner.

Finally, our non-collaborative brand co-creation is based on direct distortion of brands. However, artists often use brands as metaphorical elements to make a critical statement. The brand is not the primary goal of attack, but only a mean to gain attention. One such an example would be the “Simple Living” by *Nadia Plesner*. The question is if such indirect brand attacks have any effect on OBBE and if the effect is different to the results of direct attacks.

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Appendix

1. Visual Kidnapping by ZEVS



The French street artist *ZEVS* captured the public's attention by cutting a giant billboard model from an advertisement of Lavazza, a popular Italian coffee brand, in Berlin, Germany in April 2002. Lavazza campaigned with the slogan "Express yourself", which *ZEVS* accepted as open invitation. He left the destroyed billboard with the statement "Visual Kidnapping – Pay now". In addition, the artist displayed the ten-meter-high billboard model in his gallery and held her to ransom. In order to demonstrate his seriousness of this matter, *ZEVS* 'amputated' one finger of the billboard model and sent it to the Lavazza headquarter in Turin. Visual kidnapping is for *ZEVS* "like entering an interactive game: If the brand on the billboard kidnaps the attention of the public with the purpose of consumer demand, I reverse the situation and I kidnap the model on the poster and I demand a ransom of 500,000€ from the brand. This sum represents the symbolic price of an advertising campaign for the brand" (*ZEVS* quoted on pingmag, 2008). In other words, the actual goal *ZEVS* strove for was not to receive the payment, but instead to raise awareness and to fight back against corporations' aggressive and dominant ways of advertising.

2. Adbusting American Apparel Hamburg by Lobo



Adbusters is a Canadian-based "anti-advertising" magazine which publishes co-destructed advertisements and campaigns combined with consumption critical articles. The magazine, published by Media Foundation, was founded in 1989 by *Kalle Lasn* and *Bill Schmalz* in Vancouver and has a circulation of more than 40,000 copies today. *Adbusters* describes itself as "a global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to advance the new social activist movement of the information age." The magazine printed as well the co-destructed *American Apparel* advertisement of the German urban artist *Lobo*.