pop brands

branding, popular music, and young people

NICHOLAS CARAH

Preface

Studying brands in culture

Contemporary accounts of branding emphasize the productive activity undertaken by consumers and citizens in the construction of brand meaning and value. In this book I explore the interconnections between young people, popular music and corporate brand-building. These intersections unfold in both physical and mediated social space.

This book is organized into three main parts. The first chapter examines different approaches to conceptualizing and studying brand-building. I engage with both strategic accounts of brand-building and critical accounts of the impact of branding on social life in order to explore the contradictions and paradoxes of the relationship between branding and social life. The middle of the book, from chapter two to chapter five, studies the productive brand-building activity of young people, musicians and other participants in the culture industry. The final three chapters explore the social narratives of brands in a savvy and reflexive popular culture.

Examining brand-building labor raises questions about the flexible, interactive and participatory nature of mediated social life. While brands (with their strategic interests) argue that experiential branding empowers consumers and citizens, critics question the extent of this empowerment. The relationship between strategic and critical accounts of mediated social life serves as a key prism for conceptualizing how people make sense of and act in a mediated social world. Savvy participants reflexively negotiate between these discourses in order to avoid being a passive dupe.

When I first began exploring the interaction between corporate branding practices and popular music culture in 2003, I followed street teams within a straight-edge hardcore music scene. Street teams are a marketing practice whereby corporations, through local marketing agencies, recruit young people in subcultural groups and give them branded merchandise and promotional items to distribute in their peer networks. The items include stickers, CDs, DVDs, magazines, t-shirts, event tickets and other products. In the local culture I was exploring, street teams were closely connected with hardcore bands. Both bands and corporations used street teams to promote themselves. Street teams performed a kind of labor for the bands and corporations they distributed material for. This labor was both material and immaterial. It involved the material distribution of promo-

tional items. But more significantly, the real value for corporations, and the reason they wanted young people to do this brand-building work in local cultural spaces, was the taste and meaning-making resources they brought to the role of a street teamer. They had the right cultural capital to embed brands deeply within social space. Many of the street teamers didn't necessarily see their activity as unpaid labor though. They felt rewarded for their actions in terms of status, merchandise and access to gigs and events that came with being in a street team.

As I examined street teams, spent time at the hardcore night clubs they were connected to and spoke with street team members I began to realize there were at least two ways through which I could think about what they were doing. I could consider it from a strategic perspective and evaluate it as a new form of brand-building. If I chose to do this I would consider how effective street teams were at creating brand value for corporations. I could however, also consider street teams from a critical perspective. If I chose to do this I would consider how branding programs like street teaming commodify and commercialize social life. It became apparent that the two approaches were fundamentally different.

The difference between the two approaches is essentially that a critical approach to branding examines marketing and culture within its social, historical and economic context. In contrast, a strategic approach serves the instrumental goals of corporations. The strategic perspective has no real questions about capitalism as a social system, whereas the critical perspective does. The strategic mindset wants to work out how to play the game better; the critical mindset wants to question the rules of the game. This difference has persisted since the beginning of mass communications research (Smythe and Dinh, 1983). To marketers, branded social spaces are just a new and efficient form of brand-building. But to critics, they are the outcome of the historical and spatial transformations of our social world caused by capital.

Capital has profoundly changed the spatial organization of our social world (Harvey, 2000, 2001; Lefebvre, 1991). The emergence of capital as a social and economic system drove the colonization of the developing world since the Industrial Revolution. It reordered space by building large urban cities with their mix of residential and industrial space. Capital drove the development of transport infrastructure such as railways, roads and air travel. It has been instrumental in the development of communications infrastructure such as telephone, cable and satellites that underpins the information society (Giddens,

1990; Harvey 1989, 2003; Jameson 1991; 1998; Schiller, 1999; Thompson, 1995). Experiential branding is a new strategy for capital accumulation, but it is also situated historically within capital's accumula-accumulation of physical, mediated and social space. Brands are developed in physical retail spaces, clubs and music festivals. They are also constructed through interactive websites, social networking sites and other forms of media production. Branding entwines the physical and mediated production of space.

In the first chapter I engage with multiple approaches to young people, popular culture and branding. I draw on cultural and media studies, marketing and branding literature, critical theory (including contemporary critiques of branding and audience labor) and the political economy of communications. These perspectives serve as a theoretical framework to critically engage with empirical material collected through ethnographic fieldwork between 2005 and 2009. The ethnographic approach engages participant-observation at live music events, retail spaces and online, analysis of cultural and branded texts (print, broadcast and online), and interviews with young media-makers, music fans, musicians, culture industry workers and brand builders at global corporations.

I trace the intersections between corporations, popular music culture and young people. They intersect in highly regulated, physical and mediated social spaces. Spaces like corporate websites and music events are publicly accessible but privately owned and operated. The social action occurring in these spaces is contingent upon the communicative architecture of the space. Following a contemporary ethnographic method I aim to demonstrate the 'relationship between forms of heterogeneous action rather than trying to identify and explore culture as a whole' (Silverman, 2004, p. 9). I take a critical, interpretive and reflexive stance to these social spaces, paying attention to how they are constructed and how participants engage with them.

Taste, meaning and media making

From chapters two through to five I explore the interaction between young people and corporate brand-building through several branding programs. I examine the productive activity of young people who embed brands and their narratives within popular culture. In the second chapter I examine the manifestos and mythologies of authentic popular music that corporations engage with. I explore how young music fans relate to the claims corporations make about live music and authenticity. I illustrate how young people's taste and meaning-

making practices constitute a form of affective labor that builds brand value. Corporations harness the taste-making practices of young music fans in the process of building valuable brands. In the second and third chapters I draw on fieldwork from two branded music events: Coca-Cola's Coke Live and Virgin's V festival.

Coca-Cola ran Coke Live in Australia between 2004 and 2006. Coke Live was a marketing communications program that engaged with Australia's live music culture. The program comprised the largest all-ages music tour in Australia, an interactive multimedia website, programs supporting independent bands and musicians, music television and print and TV advertising. The two most significant elements of Coke Live in Australia were the interactive website and the all-ages music event. Young music fans had to use the interactive website to accumulate rewards points that they could then spend to secure tickets to the all-ages music festival. Tickets to the festival had to be purchased with rewards points. The points could only be accumulated online by entering the barcodes off Coke bottles or by entering social, cultural and demographic data. The more personal details participants logged on the site the more points they accumulated. The all-ages tour was the largest of its kind in Australia, for many young people it was the easiest way for them to see their favorite pop bands perform live. The performances by bands were interwoven with branded content on big screens, endorsements of Coca-Cola by celebrities, filmed trips to meet the bands backstage and promotional events for Coke Live partners (like XBOX and Motorola). Similar variations of Coke Live have been run in other national markets in the past five years including the United States, several nations in Europe and the Middle East, New Zealand and Asia-Pacific. Each local version was adapted to local cultural tastes and media practices. Coke Live integrates traditional branding methods like advertising with experiential branding techniques. Coke Live illustrates how brands are socially and experientially constructed through the activity of marketers, musicians and young music fans.

The V festival is a live music festival run by Virgin (and other corporate partners) in Australia (since 2007), the United Kingdom, United States, Canada and other nations. Like Coke Live the V festival is supported by a website with a mix of branded and popular music content. Prior to the festival the V festival website releases exclusive content, podcasts and vodcasts. As part of the 2009 festival Virgin also staged a Right Music Wrongs campaign where they asked music fans to vote Vanilla Ice 'guilty' or 'innocent' of crimes against music. Virgin use their website to collect information off their audience (through

email lists and audience surveys) and engage them in savvy taste-making practices. Through Right Music Wrongs the audience was encouraged to nominate examples of 'musical wrongs,' discuss the nominations, and to post their own comments and questions about the V festival. The V festival is staged in a similar fashion to other live music events. Music fans buy tickets for cash and are largely enticed to the festival by the chance to see their favorite bands live. There are a few key elements of the festival that distinguish it from other live music events: the festival site features many Virgin logos and installations, the selection of bands reflects niche musical tastes that appear to target an adopter market, the festival promotes cell phone and digital camera use, and Virgin Mobile customers get treated like celebrity VIPs (access to special bars, hair and make-up services, and toilets). Where Coke Live offered pious and sincere manifestos of support for authentic popular music, the V festival undertakes a more reflexive and nuanced engagement with young music fans and their meaning-making practices.

In the third chapter I illustrate how young music fans' meaning- and taste-making practices are connected with their media-making activities. Young people produce both individual brands and a social context for the practice of branding. The labor of brand-building involves both producing affect (taste, meaning, authenticity and enjoyment) and information commodities. The central point around which young people's meaning- and media-making practices unfold is the live performance of popular music. Young people at music festivals participate in the mediation of the live performance and its articulation with corporate brands.

The centrality of the live performance to mediation and brand-building leads, in the fourth chapter, to an examination of the role that musicians undertake in the construction of valuable brands. The period in which this research was conducted is marked by fundamental and rapid change in the music industry. The decline of the traditional record business has diminished the importance of the musical recording as a commodity and increased the importance of musicians and their live performances as commodities that validate commodified social spaces (Connolly and Krueger, 2006). If young people won't buy musical recordings, then corporations need to find more efficient ways of commodifying popular music.

In a rapidly changing music industry, bands and musicians find that they no longer just commodify their musical recordings. They also earn an income by connecting their image, meanings, values, and performances to corporate brand-building activities. Throughout this

chapter I draw on observation of branded live music events and programs and interviews with the musicians involved. I attempt to traverse the contested terrain of being an authentic musician working within a thoroughly commodified social world. To illustrate these contested negotiations between brands and bands I talk with musicians involved in branding programs run by Coca-Cola, Virgin, Jack Daniel's, Tooheys beer and Jagermeister liqueur. Of these programs, I engage in depth with Tooheys' Uncharted and Jagermeister's Jager Uprising. These two programs are emblematic of other branding programs that engage 'unsigned' or up-and-coming bands and musicians (examples of similar programs include Virgin's Garage2V, Jack Daniel's JD Set, V energy drink's Local Produce, and Nokia's Connecting Beats).

The Jager Uprising was run by Jagermeister in Australia in 2005 and 2006. The program gave local indie bands the chance to perform live in local music venues. The program attempted to engage with tastemakers in local music scenes in Australia's capital cities. Bands played the Jager Uprising gigs for guaranteed positive coverage in the local street press, the chance to play in a good venue in the city's local scene and to win time in a recording studio. Jagermeister's strategy was aimed at local indie music aficionados, who are perceived to be influential in the local music and bar scene. Jager Uprising was a local adaptation of a program Jagermeister has run for many years in hard rock cultures in the USA. The Australian distributors were told to adapt the USA strategy for the Australian market.

Where Jagermeister's focus was local, Toohey's is national. Tooheys Uncharted is a program whereby unsigned bands compete to win a band development package that includes a record deal, a spot on a major music festival and national media exposure. Bands enter the competition with a demo that is showcased on the Uncharted website. From there bands are selected for the finals, where they spend time with industry insiders who give them advice, and perform at a showcase gig in an inner city venue, before one band is selected as the winner of the band development package. Both Tooheys and Jagermeister promote their programs as a socially responsible investment in the Australian music scene. One of the festivals that bands who win Uncharted get the chance to tour on is the Big Day Out. In both Jager Uprising and Tooheys Uncharted musicians contribute their performances and taste-making practices to the brand in exchange for access to media and exclusive zones of production in the culture industry (venues, festivals, recording studios, and industry executives).

In chapter four I examine musicians who participate in brand-building programs in the hope of getting exposure and access to the closed zones of production of the culture industry. In chapter five I move to examine young media makers who are recruited into brand-building programs. I focus on young music fans who participated in HP's Go Live branding program. Go Live offered a young music fan the chance to go backstage to interview bands and report on the action at the Big Day Out. HP's Go Live was one of many partnerships developed between the Big Day Out and corporate brands (Virgin, Converse, V energy drink, Durex, Le Specs, Sony Ericsson, Lipton, Phillips, Jack Daniel's and Tooheys have all had branding partnerships with the Big Day Out in recent years). The development of the Big Day Out helps to illustrate the growing interconnection between branding and popular music culture. Since beginning in 1992, the Big Day Out has become Australia's largest summer music festival. The festival acquired much of its cultural capital by emerging alongside the explosion of 'alternative' music. The Big Day Out has successfully integrated this history into its creation myth and brand value. Since the festival began in 1992 it hasn't only made money from selling over 2 million tickets,[1] it has also made money by selling its audience as a captive group of young people who are influential in their peer networks. The 'media rights' to the Big Day Out are managed by the experiential marketing firm Peer Group Media. Their audience offers a unique value proposition for corporate partners. Music festivals, like traditional media businesses, produce audiences for sale (Smythe, 1981). The advantage they have over the traditional media business is a capacity to integrate multiple media channels and social spaces around the enjoyment of popular music culture. Experiential branding leverages the latent surplus value in popular music festivals like the Big Day Out. For many years the Big Day Out audience was an underperforming asset, by putting the audience to work performing valuable brand-building labor they 'unlock' their latent value.

Like the music fans at Coke Live and the V festival, the participants in the HP Go Live program offer their taste, meaning- and media-making practices to the brand. In distinction to the music fans in chapters two and three, these participants however see their labor for the brand as a form of cultural work where they are paid in opportunities and experience that they hope will pay off in the future. They hope to one day 'make it' in the creative and cultural industries and feel that brand-building labor is one way to acculturate themselves, meet the right people and get access to the right spaces. To them, offering their cultural capital to the brand helps them to build their own

cultural capital. I move, in chapter six, to consider how these young people who undertake the labor of building particular brands also produce branding as a holistic social and political logic. Their work creates the branded social world within which brands thrive. As these activities unfold, brands get articulated with, and play an active role in shaping, social, cultural, political and ethical discourses. Branding becomes a prism through which young people envision their participation in the social world.

The social narratives of brands

Throughout this book I emphasize the social activity of brand-building. Brands aren't inert logos, they are the product of constantly evolving social relations. From a strategic perspective brands are most valuable when they aren't offered as 'cultural blueprints but as cultural resources, as useful ingredients to the production of the self' (Holt, 2002, p. 82). One of the narratives of contemporary life I aim to unpack in this book is the assumption that in an interactive media culture, brands that open themselves up to constant consumer innovation thrive; they both become more valuable and engender more progressive and empowering politics and social relations. The social lives of brands are more messy and complex than they first appear.

To accommodate savvy consumers and a social world with contradictory and competing interests, brands take up a variety of techniques. Holt (2002) aptly overviews these techniques; he argues that brands develop ironic and reflexive persona. They distance themselves from overt attempts at persuasion. By appearing disinterested brands authentically engage with social life. They coattail on what Holt (2002) calls cultural epicenters, weaving themselves into expressive cultural spaces and communities. They engage with and create origin myths. Adidas was there at the birth of hip-hop; Virgin was there when punk music emerged; Jack Daniel's articulates itself with southern American music traditions. Brands partner up with taste makers (young music fans, musicians and culture industry workers) who embed the brand within social life.

Brands that attempt to engage with the social world in an authentic and disinterested manner strike several contradictions (Holt, 2002). Throughout the book I attempt to illuminate these contradictions and the ways in which they are significant from both strategic and critical points of view. Brands find that consumers are increasingly skeptical of their contrived ironic distance. Consumers counter brands' irony with their own irony and cynicism. As brands engage

with origin myths and cultural spaces, they unintentionally alter the way authenticity works within popular culture. Where it was once pious and sincere, it becomes slippery, distant and ironic.

Experiential branding is the corporate response to a series of changes over the past generation (economic, political, social, cultural, and technological). In responding to these challenges experiential branding has bred its own internal contradictions. Brands need to appear disinterested, when they plainly aren't. Brands want to appear authentic, yet notions of authenticity in a commodified popular culture are fundamentally contrived. Brands want to be seen as good corporate citizens, yet there are significant gaps between the brand's rhetoric and the corporate mode of production. Brands want consumers to be active meaning makers in the branding project but find that consumers can take the brand in unspecified directions or place harsh demands on it. This poses both strategic questions for marketers and critical philosophical and political questions for theorists and critics of branding.

Holt (2002, p. 89) echoes other theories of branding (cf. Arvidsson, 2005; Firat and Dholakia, 1998; Hearn, 2008; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Zwick and Knott, 2009) in concluding that the market:

> thrives on…unruly bricoleurs who engage in nonconformist producerly consumption practices. Since the market feeds off of the constant production of difference, the most creative, unorthodox, singularising consumer sovereignty practices are the most productive for the system. They serve as grist for the branding mill that is ever in search of new cultural materials.

Marketers would see Holt's conclusion as a strategic issue. At the same time that experiential branding effectively harnesses the labor of consumers through their meaning-making practices, it also opens itself up to the possibility that consumers may drive the brand in unspecified directions and make challenging demands on the corporation.

Marketers need to strategically develop experiential branding programs that effectively harness consumers' and other taste and meaning makers' labor at the same time they effectively control the brand-building process. This is why I use the term brandscape throughout this book. Although this term is used only in the cultural marketing and critical branding literature (Goldman and Papson, 2006; Sherry, 1998; Thompson and Arsel, 2004), it effectively captures the strategic logic of experiential branding: corporate branding is about facilitating a social space that produces profitable brands,

which involves engaging the right taste and meaning makers, giving them the right cultural resources, and controlling the production of meanings. Global network capitalism is characterized by just-in-time factories that reflexively respond to new production demands (Lash and Urry, 1994; Louw, 2001). The brandscape fits within this logic; it is a reflexive social space that produces profitable brands by constantly adapting to market change.

Critics of branding would see Holt's (2002) conclusion as reflective of an intensification of capital's penetration of social space and life. They would dispute the 'liberatory' claims of marketers like Firat and Venkatesh (1998). Where marketers see consumers actively producing meaning and authentic brands, critics see this as part of capital's accumulation of social space. To critics, consumer activity and empowerment are really just free labor given to corporations as part of a thoroughly commodified social life.

In chapter six I examine the narratives of social responsibility that brands craft and the savvy responses to those narratives from young music fans. I organize this exploration around two installations at Virgin's V festival, one a public safety campaign to curb drunken violence and another a stealthy linking of cigarettes and popular music. In each of these instances I examine how brands are subtly woven into social life. The exploration of multiple brand-building activities and spaces and the narratives of social responsibility that brands craft leads, in chapter seven, to a consideration of the role marketers play in building profitable brands.

In chapter seven I draw on interviews with marketers involved in experiential branding to articulate two important and contradictory themes. Marketers construct an emphatic narrative that experiential branding and branded social space empowers consumers like never before, enabling them to direct the brand-building action and make the key decisions about brand values and the role of brands in social life. This narrative of empowerment is premised on consumer activity in branded social spaces that generates unprecedented data about social life. The interactive and mediated nature of branded social spaces enables marketers to develop sophisticated return on investment mechanisms. At the very moment when brands claim to radically empower consumers, they also exploit their labor and social world more efficiently than ever before.

The final chapter of the book links the narratives that are emerging around experiential branding with similar discourses regarding interactive media, web 2.0, blogging, citizen-journalism and other participatory projects in a wired society. I view these narratives of partic-

ipation and empowerment in light of contemporary critical political theories of identity politics and labor. I ask how productive ironic and cynical participation in a branded social world is. I argue that the most troublesome aspect of a branded social world appears to be its incapacity to reflect on the practices of branding, and acknowledge their limitations. This inability to be self-reflective inhibits participants from imagining fundamentally different political and social formations. Young people are very 'skilled' brand builders. They even thoroughly enjoy brand-building (though they might also see right through it). In all their feverish meaning- and media-making action though, are they being ensconced in a social world that obfuscates its material reality? Brands might offer young people resources to build a 'self' of their choice, but what of the political (not to mention social, cultural and ecological) world that self lives in?