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**Article**

## Digital Brand Disruption - How Opinion Leaders Evoke Unexpected Brand Meanings

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## Influencer Marketing



# Digital Brand Disruption

## How Opinion Leaders Evoke Unexpected Brand Meanings

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Digital brand management demands anticipatory awareness for the origin of brand meanings. As opinion leaders acquire psychological brand ownership to construct self-identities, they inevitably influence a brand's public perception. An exploration of the brands Birkenstock and New Balance demonstrates the disruptive capacity of today's opinion leaders.

**Daniel Dietrich**

### Note

To some extent, this article provides preliminary research results. These are part of an ongoing research process with data that provide the fundament for further investigations.

**O**pinion leaders, including brand advocates, social media influencers, or celebrity ambassadors, grow fast in popularity for social branding strategies (Schulten/Mertens/Horx 2012). At the same time, conventional marketing theories assume that brand owners define and control the meaning of brands by themselves (Keller 2013). Opinion leaders are utilized to spread marketer's desired brand meanings within society (Summers 1970; Brown/Hayes 2007). This relates to the models of influence, as explained by Watts and Odds (2007; figure 1). In the traditional two-step flow model, opinion leaders ("stars") transfer culturally constituted meanings to consumption objects and from there to consumers' perception (McCracken 1986). Along with the rising digital connectivity, the network model became popular since it reflects reciprocal, multi-level flows of information. Herein, the "stars" disappeared, as nowadays any consumer can become a potential opinion leader without legal obligations to marketers' intent.

Today's opinion leaders acquire, consume, display, exchange, discuss or even dispose brands in ways that fit best to their own identity goals. Contrary to the traditional perspective, modern marketplaces provoke a rapid and uncontrollable spread of multifarious brand meanings. Such meanings may be either desirable or harmful to a brand. For marketers to handle and foresee this non-transparent process of brand meaning disruption it is essential to recognize opinion leaders' adoption of psychological brand ownership. Hence, the study's purpose is to develop a systematic understanding of how opinion leaders evoke unexpected brand meanings. Results should facilitate a more differentiated discussion of digital brand disruptions and support legal brand owners to predict and prevent the public spread of undesired brand meanings.

### Theoretical Foundations

Literature reveals that brand ownership has a double-edged character. Beside of objective property rights, there is an attitudinal perspective (Demsetz 1967; Etzioni 1991). A possessive state of mind can be characterized as psychological ownership if consumers feel material or immaterial assets to be 'theirs'. Such a feeling of possession enfolds "thoughts, beliefs, and awareness, coupled with an emotional or affective sensation" (Pierce/Kostova/Dirks 2001, p. 299). Psychological owners may sense their possession as an extension of their self (Belk 1988). Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks (2001) attribute psychological ownership to three causes: (1) efficacy and effectance – the desire to control the surrounding

environment, (2) self-identity – the urge to possess for symbolic identity expression, and (3) having a place – the desire to own home territory. Similarly, opinion leaders can acquire psychological ownership over brands and consume them how and where they like. This can result in unpredictable ostentations of brand meanings as marketers lose their immediate authority over the public brand appearance (cf. Thompson/Haytko 1997). Allen, Fournier, and Miller (2008) argue that individual consumers, consumer collectives, and cultural mechanisms are central sources of a brand's meaning. Especially "individuals who [are] likely to influence other persons in their immediate environment" (Katz/Lazarsfeld 2009, p. 3) hold substantial capacity to disseminate brand perceptions (Watts/Dodds 2007). Moreover, electronic word-of-mouth and social media networks reinforce this influential capacity (Hennig-Thurau/Walsh 2003). Chan and Misra (1990) revealed that opinion leaders have three characteristics in common: (1) strong personal involvement with the brand, (2) high level of product familiarity, and (3) public individuation, i.e. the desire to be different and to gain public attention. These imply the ulterior motives for opinion leadership, namely disseminating decisive information, persuading others towards a distinct position, and creating a positive self-representation (Winter/Neubaum 2016).

In a favourable scenario, opinion leaders utilize their publicity to strengthen existing or create new brand meanings in line with marketers' intention. Oprah Winfrey's personal involvement and public proclamation of the brand Weight Watchers is a prominent example of such a positive psychological adoption (Brodessner-Akner 2017). Beside of generating a

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personal ‘weight loss’ success story, she invested in the company and spread her positive brand perception. On the contrary, in an unfavourable scenario opinion leaders appropriate brands for their own identity-work and individual interests, regardless of marketers’ intentions. This can generate harmful brand meanings or evoke public brand dislike (Dalli/Romani/Gistri 2006). To date, researcher analysed such negative brand disruptions mostly within isolated concepts:

**1. Doppelgänger Brand Images**

(Thompson/Rindfleisch/Arsel 2006)

‘Emotional branding’ is characterised as a consumer-centric and story-intensive way of building profound customer relations. ‘Doppelgänger Brand Images’ put this marketing approach at risk (e.g. distortions of the Starbucks logo). Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel (2006, p. 50) conceptualize these as “disparaging images and stories about a brand that are circulated in popular culture by a loosely organized network of consumers, anti-brand activists, bloggers, and opinion leaders.”

**2. Conspicuous Brand Usage**

(Ferraro/Kirman/Matherly 2013)

Conspicuous brand usage (i.e. brand-related practices to gain public attention) can provoke serious brand meaning dilution; for example, if someone wears Gucci sunglasses indoors to impress others or elicit envy. Depending on the level of self-brand connection, the authors showed that consumers alter their brand attitude after observing attention-seeking behaviour. As an underlying motive for conspicuous brand

usage ‘impression management’ was identified, which is often associated with the lifestyle of opinion leaders.

**3. Consumer Brand Sabotage** (Kähr, et al. 2016)

Consumer brand sabotage comprises practices (e.g. disgracing brands in social media) intended to harm a brand by impairing its publicly perceived meanings. The researchers argue that consumers’ progressive interconnection enables such hostile aggressions. Besides, the mental escalation process towards consumer brand sabotage is chiefly rooted in value-based stimuli (e.g. unethical brand practices), negative emotions (e.g. anger or frustration), and hostile cognitions (e.g. identity threat or betrayal).

**Explorative Study**

To pursue the research objective two brand disruption cases, namely of Birkenstock and New Balance, were qualitatively analysed and compared. First, both brands were subject to an explorative netnography. As Kozinets (2002) describes, netnography is the transfer of ethnographic procedures to the internet. Thus, brand-related consumption practices were studied online, in-depth, and prolonged. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) highlight the web as a capable source to explore consumers’ behaviour, their value systems, and their relationships to objects. Birkenstock and New Balance were traced within newsgroups, online forums (e.g. www.dasneuebirkenstockforum.eu, www.sizetag.de) and social media channels (e.g. www.facebook.com, www.instagram.com). Second, to enrich online data phenomenological interviews

**Figure 1: Models of Influence**



Source: Watts/Dodds, 2007.

were conducted (Thompson/Locander/Pollio 1989). The objective of this interviewing technique is to permeate informants' perspectives by encouraging them to narrate on context-related experiences (Moustakas 1994). A total of 25 participants (primarily Swiss postgraduate students aged between 25 and 30) were questioned regarding their individual perceptions of brand disruptions. Each interview was audio-recorded with lengths ranging from 45 to 90 minutes. To derive decisive insights, data were verbally transcribed, axially coded, and repeatedly compared to literature. In accordance with Strauss and Corbin (2015), this iterative exploration grounded in theory and data aimed to reveal a profound understanding of the underlying behavioural practices that lead to brand meaning disruptions.

### Case 1: Birkenstock

Birkenstock, an orthopaedic health-sandals brand, was founded in 1774. The German shoemaker primarily produces slabs with a rubber-cork-mix sole and leather straps, often perceived as the 'antithesis of fashion' (Jervell 2015; figure 2). The traditional audience is composed of elderly looking for comfortable home slippers, professionals (e.g. nurses), and the anti-establishment (Soller 2014). Yet, due to Birkenstocks vast lack of coolness, new customer groups were attracted to the brand. It became a countercultural identification symbol for both the hippie movement and the hipster community (Jervell 2015).

Netnographic results revealed that about five years ago Birkenstock sandals suddenly started to appear on international fashion weeks, in exclusive boutiques, and in lifestyle magazines. Today fashionistas all over the world publicly enjoy the former unaesthetic slippers. Notably, this boost of popularity was not triggered by Birkenstock's marketers. As the company's CEO states, Birkenstock's marketing strategy is highly rudimentary with a budget "close to nothing" (Jervell 2015). Opinion leaders, in particular, the German model Heidi Klum, took psychological possession of the homely brand and made it a desirable fashion symbol (Bosman 2006). The underlying motivation for Klum's behaviour may be her desire to persuade others of her distinct taste (Winter/Neubaum 2016). Although marketers had no initial interest in positioning the brand within the high-fashion market, the disruption was beneficial, as the brand meaning altered into an eligible direction, traditional customers were not deterred, and Birkenstock's overall market share increased.

Interestingly, the Birkenstock case was also substantiated by the phenomenological interviews. Participants expe-

**Figure 2: Birkenstock sandals**



Source: michaelablog.com

rienced a recent shift in the brand's meaning. Social media influencers were noticed to consume and discuss the brand more often and more positive. Observing celebrities or peers wearing Birkenstocks in public, made interviewees change their brand perception. Some gave the comfortable slippers a first try. However, other informants stated, that despite of the realized fashion trend, they still consider the sandals as highly unappealing. They argue for a momentary hype, which will not change their consumption habits.

### Case 2: New Balance

The second brand disruption concerns New Balance, an American sports footwear manufacturer founded in 1906. After a slow growth, the company expanded globally in the 1980s and became a leading brand for high performance athletic and active lifestyle footwear (New Balance 2006). New Balance notably differs from its competitors by still producing an essential part of its footwear in the United States. As netnographic findings indicate, this unique selling proposition was likewise the cause for a tremendous brand disruption. After Trump's election at the end of 2016, New Balance's vice president declared that "we feel things are going to move in the right direction" (Maheshwari 2016). The rationale behind was his interest in Trump's opposition to the Trans-Pacific-Partnership (TPP) since this treaty jeopardizes New Balance's U.S. production strategy. Yet, consumers misinterpreted the statement as a distinct endorsement of president Trump and denounced the brand in social media. Moreover, the Daily Stormer, a neo-Nazi blog known for its anti-Semitic, anti-foreigner, and homophobic content, took on this movement and declared New Balance as "the official shoes of white people" (Maheshwari 2016). Affiliated opinion leaders encouraged right-wing followers to purchase New

**Figure 3: New Balance brand disruption**



Source: Watts/Dodds, 2007.

Balance shoes. This behaviour is in line with Winter and Neubaum’s (2016) finding of opinion leaders intending to disseminate decisive information. Although the brand explicitly distanced itself from these proclamations, consumers’ brand perception changed radically. Former New Balance enthusiasts not only stopped wearing but also publicly trashed or even burned their shoes (Ewen 2017; figure 3). Consumers’ strongly offended and boycotted New Balance to express their protest against the right-wing affiliation.

Yet, interview data indicate limited reach of the New Balance brand disruption to European millennials. After being informed about American right-wing extremists favouring New Balance, most interviewees were appalled. In fear of any personal association to the neo-Nazi community, informants reconsidered wearing the shoes. Several participants recognized parallels to New Balance’s brand perception in Germany during the early 2000s. Back then, the brand suffered under intense public pressure due to neo-Nazi consumption. The

**Table 1: Disruptive consumption practices**

Category	Practices	Specification
Perception of Brand Meanings	Observing	Observing consumption habits (online and offline) of other market participants is essential for the adoption of brand meanings.
	Informing	Brand-related information is commonly drawn via social media content, peer reviews, and own experiences. Marketing is less relevant.
	Debating	Perceptions are often formed and adjusted by debating brand meanings with trustworthy market participants and social peers.
Disruption of Brand Meanings	Identifying	Consumers utilize brands for self-construction. This identification process can provoke the emergence of consumer stereotypes.
	Signalling	Public brand consumption is frequently performed to signal status, values, identities, or the affiliation to social groupings.
	Sharing	By sharing idiosyncratic brand meanings consumers often oppose the brand perceptions of others and thus disrupt meanings.
Reaction to Disrupted Brand Meanings	Passivating	In case of low self-brand connection, the cognition of undesired brand utilization by other market actors can cause passive brand withdrawal.
	Resisting	For high self-brand connection, meaning disruption usually releases some kind of resisting behaviour (e.g. boycott or retaliation).
	Promoting	Upon brand meaning disruption, opinion leaders tend to promote their own brand perceptions by gaining social and public attention.

Source: Own illustration.

primary reason here was the ‘N’ symbol on shoes being related to ‘Nazi’. This insight makes it even more incomprehensible how the vice president could take such a risky stand.

## Discussion

The two presented brand disruptions can both be attributed to opinion leaders’ adoption of psychological brand ownership. Unexpected brand meanings were created and propagandized for individual identity objectives, irrespective of marketers’ interests. In alignment with Peirce’s Theory of Signs (cf. Short 2007) opinion leaders use brands to function as signifiers and shape appendant significates by their personal characteristics, consumption behaviours, and social media activities. Followers perceive these significates, share their experiences with peers, and re-assess own behaviours. Due to this constant process of reinterpretation and negotiation, the values, characteristics and habits of opinion leaders are transferred to brands’ meaning. To better understand this process of brand meaning disruption, the table below gives an overview of nine substantial consumption practices, which opinion leaders and following consumers repeatedly exert (table 1). These practices result from the qualitative analysis of the conducted phenomenological interviews and represent an aggregation of participants primarily discussed topics (Strauss/Corbin 2015). The table shows three main categories of disruptive consumption practices: (1) perception of brand meanings, (2) disruption of brand meanings, and (3) reaction on disrupted brand meanings. These include different ways how information flows between opinion leaders and followers, how consumption signals are interpreted, and how they translate into reactive consumer behaviours.

For Birkenstock the cultural-driven fashion system, represented by the opinion leader Heidi Klum, altered the brand’s meaning (cf. Summers 1970). Due to institutionalized fashion rituals (e.g. Paris fashion week), observable consumption practices (e.g. fashionistas publicly wearing Birkenstocks), and social media sharing (e.g. #birkenstock on Instagram), the orthopaedic health-sandals were charged with aesthetic associations. In contrast, New Balance faced a harmful disruption. Right-wing extremists, represented by opinion leaders from the ‘Daily Stormer’, appropriated the brand for their radical propaganda purpose. Thus, they transferred their societal hatred to the meaning of New Balance. The public aversion of being connected to any neo-Nazi context caused consumers to refuse and publicly accuse the brand. Likewise, brand disruptions can pose a severe and lasting risk to brands’ existence.

## Conclusion

The derived overview of brand disruptions practices enables marketers to better understand how brand meanings emerge outside of their sphere of influence. In particular, opinion leaders’ can decisively influence the public negotiation of dominant brand meanings. Their adoption of psychological brand ownership combined with the desire for self-representation are key drivers for disruptive consumption practices. Two brands, Birkenstock and New Balance, illustrate the unforeseeable potential of brand disruptions. In both cases, legal brand owners lost control of their brands, as opinion leaders altered the brands’ public perception. Although only two cases were analyzed and interviews were limited to Swiss millennials, these results may be alarming for marketers. Hence, future research needs to profoundly investigate opinion leaders’ intention to involve in disruptive consumption practices.


Overall, digital opinion leaders can exert significant influence on a brand’s positioning and undermine marketing activities. On the one hand, this could be beneficial, as an integration of customers into the process of brand building

## Key propositions and practical implications

1. **Foresee:** The basic premise to dynamically manage a brand and foresee unexpected disruptions is the profound understanding of a brand’s meaning synthesis. Cultural forces and individual consumers have to be accepted as brand meaning co-creators. Any stakeholder, in particular opinion leaders, can take psychological brand ownership and shape a brand’s public perception outside of firms’ control.
2. **Prevent:** To deter undesired brand meanings from emerging and spreading, it is essential to stay loyal to the core brand values and avoid potential misinterpretations by polarizing consumer groupings. The extended marketing ‘Ps’ (i.e. product, price, promotion, place, people, process, physical evidence) should be managed in a way so that unwelcomed consumers do not gain interest in utilizing a brand for their own self-creation purpose.
3. **Countervail:** In the case of a harmful brand disruption, marketers should continue communicating with their target audience and not engage with the anti-brand movement. Counteractive opinion leaders and social media influencer can help to spread the intended brand message. Moreover, it is critical to stay authentic and keep delivering what the brand promises. Only then, a brand can recover efficiently from unexpected disruptions.



certainly increases commitment and involvement. Yet, losing control over one's own brand is often considered as a major flaw. Brand managers need to accept the ongoing cultural change, which comes along with the rapid growth of digitalization and social media. They have to rethink their own role and allow for brand co-creation within regulated borders. Releasing parts of their brand control will facilitate

marketers to better predict and utilize brand disruptions for their own purpose. Finally, based on the three categories of disruptive consumption practices (table 1) the key propositions (see prior page) should guide practitioners to foresee, prevent, and countervail the contingency of hazardous brand disruptions. 

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