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Brand hijacked: why campaigns and hashtags are taken over by audiences?

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Background of brandjacking

Communication today is increasingly based on diverse Issue Arenas, where discussions on brands and organizations are controlled by customers' and other audiences' interests and experiences (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). This issue centric thinking is challenging for brands and organizations, who find it difficult to get their messages across. Moreover, the individual customer experiences are central in shaping the organizational or brand reputation as well as customer engagement for better or worse (Bougie, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2003; Kareklas, Muehling, & Weber, 2015; Masum & Tovey, 2012). From the brand or organization's point of view, experiences are difficult to shape, as they may be formed as a combination of several factors beyond the brand's influence, for example customer emotions, context, sales situation, and word of mouth.

If the consumer experience with the brand or organization is less than ideal, campaigns run the risk of becoming hijacked by the consumers. Brandjacking (Langley, 2016) refers to undesired kidnapping of brand related communications either offline or online by non-brand representatives such as activists or other stakeholders. Though not all brandjacking is strategic but may merely rise from opportunity, brandjacking often harms the brand or organization targeted as it turns public focus onto unintended issues harming the target's reputation (Masum & Tovey, 2012).

One central arena where hijacking easily occurs is Twitter. Twitter hijacking refers to consumers taking over an identifier of the brand related content. Thus, Twitter hijacking is a form of brandjacking. A common type of Twitter hijacking is hashtag hijacking (or bashtag). It

has been defined as using the hashtag in unintended, negative, critical, or slanderous ways that run counter to its original purpose or creator (Virolainen & Luoma-aho, in press). Some of the most well known hashtag hijackings include the #McDStories hashtag created by McDonald's restaurants, that was originally intended to inform customers of the production process, but turned out to be hijacked by angry consumers ranting their experiences.

This chapter looks at the phenomenon of brandjacking and introduces a hijacking case of the popular brand Starbucks on Twitter. As the most common aims of brandjacking include gaining the attention of the target, gaining visibility for the opposition, entertaining and amusing others, enabling individuals to address topics of importance such as areas of neglect by the organization as well as establishing the role of the brandjacker in their own community (Langley, 2016), we analyze the case to understand the logic of why hijacking occurs and ponder its implications for brands and organizations.

Engaged customers, for better or worse

The norm of brands and organizations in the online environment has become the attempt of engaging customers to build a stronger brand love and commitment (Albert & Merunka, 2013). One could argue that hijacking is a form of engagement: engagement is understood as a multidimensional concept that consist of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014), and it is important for organizations because it has interactive and co-creative aspects with focal objects, such as consumer brands (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011). Moreover, brand engagement is defined as "the level of a consumer's 'cognitive, emotional and behavioral investment in specific brand interactions'" (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014, p. 62). As such, brand engagement is important for organizations as it means that certain immersion, passion, and activation towards a brand are created (Hollebeek

& Chen, 2014, 62) This is especially important for consumer brands because they want consumers to reflect their brand attitude and discuss the brand publicly, by even co-creating something new around the brand. However, there is the risk that such heavy brand engagement is not always positively-valenced.

In the marketing literature, negative brand engagement refers to unfavorable “thoughts, feelings and behaviours” related to brands and organizations (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014, p. 62). Moreover, Lievonen and Luoma-aho (2015) define negative engagement as “experience-based series of participative actions where negative issues concerning an organization or brand are publicly discussed” (p. 288). Negative engagement is usually caused by some triggers or negative experiences the consumers have had with the focal brand (Brodie et al., 2011; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012).

Brandjacking is a novel form of negative engagement, similar to other forms of negative engagement such as negative online reviews or negative electronic word of mouth communication (Brodie et al., 2011; van Doorn et al., 2010; Vivek et al., 2012) Negative word of mouth spreads quickly online. Reasons for this have been listed as the speed of information flow, either-or -decision making, networked nature of groups, free flow of information, social media bubbles, and inter-media dynamics (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014). In addition, negative engagement behaviors can evolve into behaviors that are more destructive in nature, and collectively orientate other consumers to even avoid and boycott certain brands.

Lievonen, Luoma-aho and Bowden (in press) categorize negative engagement according to two factors: whether the individual is public in their engagement and well connected such as through the internet, and how strong the emotion related to the engagement is. They (Lievonen, Luoma-aho, & Bowden, in press) distinguish between different categories of negative engagement ranging from weak negative emotions and private low connectivity (the least influential and the least dangerous type for brands and organizations) to extremely

strong negative emotions and high public connectivity (the most influential and most dangerous type for brands and organizations). Most cases of brandjacking fall into the harmful category of *hateholder* engagement (Luoma-Aho, 2015), where the brandjackers have moderate negative emotions toward the brand or organization, and via the internet quite high connectivity (Lievonen et al., in press). Some brandjacking cases also fit the most dangerous category of trolling, for example many Greenpeace campaigns aim at permanently harming the brand or organization targeted.

Some forms of negative engagement are not intended for harm but include merely venting the individuals' negative experiences via means such as humor or memes (Lievonen et al., in press). As such, brands and organizations cannot avoid all forms of negative engagement. Brands and organizations can prepare for negative engagement by monitoring the online discussions and by listening to customer complains.

Other places where negative engagement occurs online are the counter brand and alter brand communities (Cova & White, 2010). Online brand communities are especially persuasive due to their peer-to-peer influence, and they have emerged as “an effective avenue for brands to engage consumers” (Bowden, Conduit, Hollebeek, Luoma-aho, & Solem, 2017, p. 877) but often take a life of their own depending on the individuals involved. They are inherently linked to the brand despite their own organizational roots and activity, and hence can not be ignored by the focal brand (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013). The value that customers get from joining brand communities are not only related to the brand, but other similar customers and consumers (Cova & White, 2010). Negative experiences shared via online brand communities are especially viral, causing a threat to also those organizations and brands unaware of their existence.

Brandjacking explained

Defined as illegal use of brand or organizational names (Ramsey, 2009), Brandjacking can occur from within an organization by its employees or from the outside from stakeholders, activists and interest groups. Increasingly also non-human brandjacking is occurring including astroturf via bots and persona management software. Most often brandjacking is aimed at corporations or campaigns, but also NGOs and governmental entities in the public sector can face brandjacking. Though mostly associated with negative reputational effects, milder forms of brandjacking such as memes, irony, and mockery may also offer some advantages to organizations via heightened stakeholder attention and engagement.

Behind the rise of brandjacking is the increased power of publics to act through new technologies that enable access to mass audiences without much regulation. Brandjackers gain public attention and tempt others with similar experiences to join the forces. As stakeholder co-creation, interactivity, and engagement are normalizing, there is an expectation to be able to contribute to organizations and their communication. What differentiates brandjacking from other forms of co-creation and engagement is the lack of control from the organization: the brandjackers may re-produce the brand and organizational messages according to their own interpretations and serving their own purposes. Brandjacking is not the same as the related phenomenon of username squatting, facesquatting, or twittersquatting, which refer to outside individuals registering existing brands or trademarks on social networks with the intent of financial gains from selling the username to the brand (Ramsey, 2009).

The logic of brandjacking builds on the David-Goliath –principle where brandjackers see themselves as fighting against often large and powerful corporations. Though most brandjacks are caused by the organization itself, some cases are mere assaults. Asymmetry is at the heart of brandjacking, as the brandjackers are often individuals such as bloggers or hackers aiming to take on big corporations. In fact, brandjacking most often occurs to big,

multinational brands associated with ethical breaches or questionable practices. The targets of brandjacking have to be well enough established, for the public to engage and the hijack to receive attention.

Two different forms of brandjacking can be established on the continuum from mostly proactive to mostly responsive:

- Proactive brandjacking: where the brandjacking is initiated by the brandjackers themselves through trademark infringement, starting rumors or spreading false stories, or creating mock campaigns, including impersonations and fake campaigns of NGOs to harm brand reputation.
- Responsive brandjacking: where the brandjacking occurs based on organizational errors, staff misbehavior, and mistakes or ethical breaches of an organization. Brandjacking occurs as a negative response to the organization or sometimes its own invitation to engage. Examples include turning organizations' twitter hashtags into bashtags through posting mostly negatively associated content under the organizations' hashtag.

Causes of brandjack

The causes of brandjacking are still debated, but often organizational actions have played some role. Langley (2014) identifies 9 different categories of causes of brandjacks: internal policies, ethical failures, customer revolts, staff behavior, impersonations, fakes, aggregation of opinions, unanticipated responses, and cheekiness. If there is a neglected topic or issue raised by the brandjacker regarding the organization that has not been acknowledged, it may become a potential target of brandjacking.

Brandjacking occurs easier in cases where the original meaning of the campaign, brand, or hashtag is separated from the campaign identifier, such as the hashtag used in social

networking services (Albu & Etter, 2015). Brandjackers also activate dormant negative emotions among other stakeholders that may easily join forces. Malice forms of brandjacking similar to trolling may lack these shared experiences, if the aim is merely to harm and gain access to trolling communities. Whenever brandjacks receive large public support and interest, there is often a resonance of similar experiences such as issues unsolved by the organization or making false promises.

Whenever there is conflict between the message and the practice, hijacking is likely. Another potential cause for being hijacked is the comical nature of the campaign or hashtag itself. If the words combined make for a funny combination (Susan Boyle album party: #susanalbumparty) or another meaning or connotation of the words included can be found (Research in Motion Jobs: #RIMJobs). Also unprecise words or those in contrast to the practice or customer experience can easily become hijacked (#CheersToSochi Sochi Olympics related cheer hijacked by LGBT-activists to demand McDonalds and sponsors to stand up against human right violations in Russia). Moreover, recent crises awake new ones, as occurred with Starbucks' #SpreadTheCheer campaign, when the company's unpaid taxes and worsened working conditions took over the positive seasonal greetings. Another clear reason for hijacking is hashtags beginning with a question or requesting engagement, such as #AskACop, #AskJPM or #askJameis, that invite also the undesired questions from audiences and often also the legacy media (Virolainen & Luoma-aho, in press).

Case study on hijacked brand campaign

Starbucks is a multi-billion dollar coffee company and coffee shop chain. Started in Seattle in the 1970's in one store, the company has now over 28,000 stores all over the world. Starbucks has branded itself as a responsible company through communicating about its ethical sourcing, environmental responsibility, and community involvement. (Starbucks, 2018a) The work has

paid off as the company has been named by Ethisphere Institute as one of the World's Most Ethical Companies for twelve years in a row (Starbucks, 2018b).

Alike many brands and organizations, Starbucks has planned campaigns to increase customer engagement and make the company's voice stronger in current societal discussions to increase brand commitment and loyalty. In the spring 2015, Starbucks launched its #racetogether campaign, which was aimed at ending racism and evoking discourse on the challenging problem in society. As part of the campaign, Starbucks invited Twitter users to participate in the discussion under the hashtag #racetogether. In addition, the brand requested its employees and baristas to initiate race related discussions with customers by writing #racetogether on customers' cups. The hashtag went viral but not in a good way: the feed was filled with bashing, sarcasm, critique, and complaints.

The use of the #racetogether started out in a positive tone by Starbucks employees and leaders, who introduced the hashtag before any official statement about the campaign had been made. The tweets often included hashtag #tobeapartner, used by Starbucks employees. The tweets also included branded campaign photos, some of which had slogans such as "Shall we overcome?" and "When it comes to race we are all human".

The campaign was officially launched on Twitter with tweets linking to a press release about the campaign and to an article explaining the backgrounds of the campaign through an employee's personal story. During the launch, Starbucks' partner, *USA Today*, asked personal questions related to the campaign theme in its tweets. The campaign was still running smoothly after two hundred tweets sent with the #racetogether hashtag. Then, it all went wrong.

In the next two hours the hashtag was hijacked with negative and sarcastic tweets filling the #racetogether feed. At the same time, online media were writing both neutrally about the launch of the campaign and scandalously about the negative response the campaign got on

Twitter, and even collecting the funniest tweets and best Twitter responses to the campaign.

During the first hours of the hijack six types of hijackers could be recognized: 1. *Humorists*, who were criticizing the campaign and amusing themselves and their audiences through irony, sarcasm, and word play. In addition to speaking about Starbucks and the campaign, the humorists also talked about themselves and Starbucks' competitors. 2. *Critics*, who criticized Starbucks, talked about the hijacking, and had a very matter-of-fact style of tweeting. 3. *Complainers*, who complained about Starbucks' products and service in a declarative or humoristic style. 4. *Transmitters*, who retweeted and shared articles about the hijack adding only very little, if any, own words to the tweets. 5. *Hecklers*, who tweeted their negative thoughts about the campaign without any specific arguments. 6. *Opportunists*, who used the trending hashtag to get attention to their account or website.

Hijacking the #racetogether hashtag wasn't enough for Twitter users. In addition to spreading negative word-of-mouth and jokes about the campaign with the #racetogether hashtag, a spin-off hashtag #NewStarbucksDrinks was initiated for sharing invented new witty product names for Starbucks drinks, such as "Killed by a Coppa-chino" and "White Guilt Latte".

When Starbucks realized the negative response their campaign had received, it tweeted "It's worth a little discomfort" and later "We're committed to doing our part to address race relations in the US. We'll have more to say on #RaceTogether tomorrow." But Twitter didn't wait until tomorrow to continue the conversation and Starbucks didn't engage in the conversation on Twitter more than sharing press releases and answering allegations in a declarative style.

There was a real contradiction between the idea of the campaign and Starbucks' actions. Starbucks wasn't ready for dialogue. Even the Chief Communications Officer deleted his

Twitter account on the campaign launch day after feeling personally attacked by other Twitter users. This, of course, gave critics more reasons to feel negatively about Starbucks and the campaign. The company was putting the burden of having the dialogue with the public to the baristas but let leaders pull out from the crisis when they felt uncomfortable. The Chief Communications Officer returned to Twitter the next day and claimed to be ready for dialogue. However, deleting the account was such a strong statement that the game was already over.

Starbucks planned they would wait until the next day's annual general meeting to address the negative feedback and explain the idea behind the campaign. They failed to see Twitter as a medium of fast communication where discussions can't be controlled or put on hold. It was unrealistic for the company to think they can shift the conversation from Twitter to their annual general meeting and avoid confronting the public on the level playing field of Twitter. They planned grassroots activities but actually wanted to stay in their ivory tower.

During the next days Starbucks tweeted only a few times using the #racetogether hashtag. The passiveness of the Starbucks' official Twitter accounts resulted in some Twitter users to think the campaign was pulled and, as a result, the hijack was over relatively quickly (Carr, 2015). The campaign had had enough time to fail spectacularly.

The hashtag hijack was a result of poor planning, poor knowledge of the audience and their values, Twitter's technological features, and the nature of online media. As such, the campaign managed to attract unplanned stakeholders and publics with their own agendas drawing the campaign further away from organizational control (Luoma-aho & Paloviita, 2010). Publics involved in the #racetogether hijack were both the people creating and sharing negative content related to the campaign on Twitter and the online media, and their audiences. It remains unclear if the individual tweeters or anti-Starbucks groups or other activist groups made the campaign fail, but several unplanned groups were activated: for example, some tweets had #racetogether and #BlackLivesMatter tagged to them, which means the Black Lives

Matter activists were tweeting about the campaign.

Technology contributed, as Starbucks had not internalized Twitter's logic. An equal platform for sharing information, opinions, and thoughts (though ads are becoming more common) – Twitter suits poorly corporate messages that are aimed at maintaining a positive corporate image. It is based on networks of users and audiences formed by hashtags. The makeup of the platform forces its users to be brief and simplify complex thoughts. There are algorithms that pick up trending hashtags and systems that notify users about them. Starting a conversation about a sensitive and complicated topic without a clear campaign insight, just a hashtag, on Twitter, which does not allow users to write more than 140 characters, does not make much sense. The campaign was not considering the affordances of the platform or the reality of hectic morning hours when busy people want to grab their coffee quickly on the way to work, either. On the contrary, a good example of understanding the technology and the culture of the platform is the fall 2017 #MeToo campaign of reporting how common sexual harassment is in society. Of course, the starting point of that campaign is very different than for #racetogether, as the aim is empowerment and transparency, not the promotion of a brand.

To conclude, it was new technology, along with the gap between the worlds of customers and the organization that made the hijack possible. Hijacking results from unmet expectations and discrepancies between what the brand says and what the brand does in reality. The #racetogether campaign felt non-genuine and fake to the customers. The #racetogether campaign attracted a lot of negative publicity to Starbucks. Baristas stopped writing #racetogether on their customers' cups after a week from the launch day but the campaign went on with different types of more controllable activities. The whole crises could have been averted by asking customers: "Do you think your barista writing things on your coffee cup is a good idea to start up societal discussions?" The negative publicity caused by the campaign did not have any immediate negative financial effects, but recurrent crises can slowly affect the

brand and have cumulative effects on the brand value in long term.

Criticisms & discussion

The critics of brandjacking note that in the age of digital mass communication brandjacking is merely a form of opinion expression, and should not be taken as a negative phenomenon. Some argue that as the traditional forms of marketing do not enable dialogue and engagement, extreme forms of co-creation are called for. They also note that brandjackers may provide the organization with vital feedback and even innovative ideas, as they emerge to fill a communication void that was not detected previously by the organization (Virolainen & Luoma-aho, in press). As most brandjack cases remain negative in their outcomes for organizations, they are rarely acknowledged as innovative inputs of stakeholders.

In the case of Starbucks, the strong brand helped overcome the negative coverage and negative engagement it brought. The issue was not so much about the use of technology, but about a better understanding of the relationship that customers form with the brand. If the brand experience does not match the campaign, negative engagement is likely to result. Brandjackers usually cause reputational damage for organizations, as they move focus from the strengths toward the problems and breaches of brands and organizations. As a phenomenon, however, brandjacking holds several possibilities for reputation. The way the organization handles a brandjack could, in fact, increase stakeholders' trust in the organization, if it is conducted transparently and the feedback is acknowledged. Brandjacks that are ignored by the organizations tend to linger longer than those addressed.

Though there is no control, the use of humor has been suggested for resolving brandjacks. Corporate apology for the harm caused could also help resolve brandjacks, if they turn into organizational crises. In cases where the organization is clearly a victim and not the cause of the brandjacking, reputational recovery is easier and crisis response strategies can be

applied more freely.

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5 discussion questions for the classroom

1. What makes an organization, brand or campaign an easy target for brandjacking?
2. What are recent cases you can think of that have included a hijacking of a brand, organization or a campaign?
3. How does brandjacking affect corporate reputation?
4. What advice would you give as a communication consultant to an organization suffering from brandjacking?
5. How do you best guard against brandjacking?

Index:

Brandjack, brand hijacking, Twitter, Bashtag, Hashtag Hijacking, negative engagement, negative customer engagement, online brand community, reputation,