



Anti-brand communities, negotiation of brand meaning, and the learning process: The case of Wal-Mart

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In this article, we employ a case-study method to investigate the learning processes used to negotiate brand meaning within an anti-brand community. The negotiation of brand meaning is a social process where community members engage in brand-related discourses, interpretations, and sense-making. Situated within new social movement theory, we investigate the anti-Wal-Mart community. Our study identifies three learning processes that are fundamental to social movement formation and mobilization: (1) counterfactual thinking, (2) discursive storytelling, and (3) noncompulsory observation. We conclude the article with a discussion of our findings and offer suggestions for future research.

Keywords: brand meaning; anti-brand community; learning; social movement

Introduction

Marketing managers strive to instill brands with symbolic meanings (McCracken 1986, 703), to attach unique personalities to brands (Levy 1959; Aaker 1997), to provide self-image congruency between the brand and the consumer (Heisley and Cours 2007), and to make emotional connections with consumers through brands (Smith, Fisher, and Cole 2007; Belk and Tumbat 2005). However, consumers do not always accept these marketer-driven strategies. Forms of resistance to culturally constituted brand meanings resemble a continuum of responses, ranging from passive to active behaviors. Passive resistance includes forms of frugality (Connolly and Prothero 2003; Lastovicka et al. 1999), brand avoidance (Banister and Hogg 2004; Lee, Conroy, and Motion 2009), voluntary simplification (Leonard-Barton 1981; Zavestoski 2002), and voluntary dispossession (Cherrier and Murray 2007). Active forms of resistance include expressing dissatisfaction (Ward and Ostrom 2006), culture-jamming (Klein 1999; Lasn 2000), boycotting (Sen, Gurhan-Canli, and Morwitz 2001), corporation-focused retaliation (Barclay, Skarlicki, and Pugh 2005), social display (Maxwell 2003), authenticity celebrations (Kozinets 2002a), transformative festivals (Kates 2003b), and anti-brand activism (Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Our study focuses on the latter, giving emphasis to how anti-brand activists learn as they negotiate a brand's meaning.

We define negotiation as the process of interpreting “experiences and conceptions” of brands (Thompson and Haytko 1997, 15), which may include the negotiation of the brand's personality, the brand's role in society, or the brand's relationship with

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public policy objectives. To negotiate brand meaning is to engage in discourse (deliberately or indiscriminately) related to a brand's identity (see Klein 1999). Brands are cultural symbols with identities that can be used to provide meaning (Levy 1959; McCracken 1989, 2005). In our study, the anti-brand community represents the shared context where meaning-making takes place.

In the same way that pro-brand communities form around a common passion for a brand (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), anti-brand communities consist of members who have a common detestation for a brand. Both pro-brand and anti-brand members have passionate and committed relationships with a brand; however, anti-brand members' focus is to enhance social justice. Holt (2002, 70) refers to these activist efforts as "global anti-branding movements," which are distinguished by large numbers of consumers joining together to voice their disapproval of corporate actions. It is important to study such social movements, as they represent important social, cultural, and ideological transformations.

The anti-brand movement is one example of a broader anti-consumption social movement where consumers resist capitalism (Varman and Vikas 2007), globalization (Thompson and Arsel 2004), marketing efforts (Smith, Fisher, and Cole 2007; Binkley 2003), and corporate branding strategies (Ozanne and Murray 1995; Klein 1999). Thompson and Arsel (2004) use the term "hegemonic brandscape" to describe the effects of global brands on cultural discourses, consumption practices, and anti-brand identifications. According to recent studies, activists are acting upon emancipatory desires in creating anti-brand communities (Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Thompson and Arsel 2004). Examples of anti-brand communities include: anti-Starbucks (Thompson and Arsel 2004), anti-Wal-Mart, anti-McDonald's (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2006), anti-Nike and anti-GE consumption communities (Kozinets and Handelman 2004).

We selected Wal-Mart as the target firm for our investigation because it is a highly controversial firm, and consumers typically have either a love or hate relationship with the brand. As described in one popular press account, "Wal-Mart might well be both America's most admired and most hated company" (Bianco et al. 2003). Anti-Wal-Mart community members include three main constituents: local business owners, employees, and local community members. For this study, we define the anti-Wal-Mart community as multiple related and interconnected communities (e.g., website communities, WakeUpWalMart's campaign, local protests). Members may be associated with several anti-Wal-Mart communities such as a web-based community, a local community, and a traveling community (WakeUpWalMart campaign); or may be associated with just one community (e.g., a local protest). We found that the multiple communities are interconnected via the Internet, which allowed us to examine the overarching anti-Wal-Mart community (e.g., local protests are updated via the web, campaign news distributed via the web).

Our study is situated within new social movement theory as we examine one form of resistance against global brands. Since Wal-Mart is the largest, most powerful retailer in the world, anti-Wal-Mart ideologies are especially important when studying the dynamics of anti-brand communities. According to Mayer (1989), attention needs to be given to the way in which movement ideologies resonate, emerge from, and create popular cultures of resistance. Movements are often the visible tip of an iceberg of alienation, disaffiliation, and opposition that are expressed through member interactions, organization, habits and practices (Garner and Tenuto 1997). Movements traditionally have inchoate forms of resistance, and emergent identities, the subject,



and a sense of agency are all socially constructed (Mueller 1992). It is with this struggle for change that social activists employ a variety of cognitive processes for emancipatory praxis.

Research question: negotiation of brand meaning

The overarching research question that guides our study is: What learning processes take place when anti-Wal-Mart members negotiate the meaning of the Wal-Mart brand? Research shows that consumers “uncover and activate their own brand meanings,” apart from the meanings ascribed by marketers (Brown, Sherry, and Kozinets 2003, 29). As demonstrated in prior studies, consumers interpret, negotiate and adapt brand meanings to fit with their own lives (Ligas and Cotte 1999), to create and define a self-concept (Escalas and Bettman 2005), and to become part of a reference group (Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007). Social influences play an important role in brand meaning negotiation (Sirsi, Ward, and Reingen 1996), as consumers communally interpret a brand’s meaning to self, to society, and to the global environment. Brands are negotiated through interactive forms of communication in order to make sense of marketplace conditions, and the negotiation process may change the meaning of a brand.

To understand the learning processes that anti-brand members use to negotiate brand meaning, we attend an anti-Wal-Mart rally, observe an anti-Wal-Mart meeting, investigate anti-Wal-Mart websites and conduct depth interviews with anti-Wal-Mart community members. Our investigation uses an extended case-study method by employing ethnographic techniques. Our study is situated within the United States, as we examine the power and influence of one corporate brand: Wal-Mart.

We begin by providing a review of new social movement theory and four goals that motivate activists. Next, we summarize Wal-Mart’s history and expansion within the United States with a focus on the key drivers that foster anti-Wal-Mart sentiments. Then, we outline our research method and present our results. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and areas for future research.

New social movement theory

Social movements are normal manifestations of democratic societies representing an important force for social change (Gamson 1990; Holst 2002). Movements typically have loose organization and fluid membership, which allows for rapid adaptation to a changing environment. Social movement theory is the study of the conditions under which collective action will arise, typically emerging from a sense of grievance or injustice (Mueller 1992). New social movement (NSM) theory has been the “dominant framework for the analysis of European social movements since the 1970s” (Hourigan 2001). The NSM framework generally focuses on situations where movements articulate “new” sources of popular protest. New social movements can be classified as “identity-oriented” (Touraine 1981), and key terms associated with NSM theory include: “discourse,” “discursive framing,” “collective identities,” and “cultures of resistance” (Garner and Tenuto 1997).

In contrast to new social movements, old social movements in the United States can be classified as “strategy-oriented” (Touraine 1981). Old social movements mobilized support through the development of a clearly defined goal that attempts to deliver benefits to a narrow segment of society (Mayer 1989). In the United States, old

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social movements were prominent between the years 1945 and 1970 and were associated with economic growth, distribution, and security (e.g., workers' rights, civil rights). Family, work, and consumption-centered social matters were disputed with clearly defined goals aimed at changing the political-economic system (e.g., justice, liberty, equality, emancipation).

The NSM framework represents modern culture and is associated with peace, feminism, ecology, and personal autonomy (e.g., gay and lesbian movement, feminist movement, environmental protection movement). When juxtaposed with old social movements, new social movements are more individualized, and social transformations are based on individuals' interests (Finger 1989). The characteristics of new social movements involve advocacy for single causes, group identity, and individual survival (e.g., green movement, new peace movement). Social, political, and personal transformations are at the core of new social movements.

New social movement theory is vast and diverse in terms of its utility and applicability. We summarize the goals associated with new social movements into four overarching themes: (1) fighting for an identity, (2) gaining autonomy, (3) radicalizing modern values, and (4) transforming the individual person. We discuss these four themes, in turn, in the following paragraphs, emphasizing the relevance to anti-brand community membership.

Fighting for an identity

The central task for new social movement actors is the construction of a collective identity (Melucci 1985). This is a negotiated process in which the "we" involved in collective action is defined by meshing ideologies between the individual and the activist community. "Participation in social movements frequently involves an enlargement of personal identity for participants and offers fulfillment and realization of self" (Gamson 1992, 56). Furthermore, the creation of an ongoing collective identity determines the success of movements, as it maintains the loyalty and commitment of participants (Melucci 1985). Implicit in new social movement theory is a rejection of the centrality of class. Participants do not define themselves in terms of their common social location in a class or ethnic group (Gamson 1992). New social movements originate from political strategies, but with relatively little attachment to a specific political party.

In anti-brand communities, the construction of a collective identity requires a clear self-image and a collective brand meaning. According to Gamson (1992), some nascent movement groups fail because they are unable to form a collective identity that engages the participants' self-definition. Anti-brand activists define themselves in opposition to "the evil of greedy corporations" and to "the selfish, greedy consumer consciousness" that hegemonic corporations create (Kozinets and Handelman 2004). The "we" that anti-brand movements construct is adversarial to mainstream consumption, and the goals that bring anti-brand activists together are to change consumer culture.

Gaining autonomy

New social movement actors are striving for autonomy, and aiming for greater control over the development of the socio-cultural world (J. Cohen 1985). The struggle for autonomy is situated within relationships seeking power over a shared cultural



orientation. According to Welton (1993, 153), new social movements are not attempting to seize the “centralized state (the Leninist dream)” or to transform the entire “productive system (the Marxian dream).” Rather, new social movements consist of a social struggle that generally focuses on creating an “autonomous and exuberant civil society” (Welton 1993, 153).

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In an effort to gain personal autonomy, anti-brand members negotiate the meaning of brands to expose alleged corporate agendas which may include an imbalanced distribution of goods and services, deceitful marketing tactics, or unequal access to information (see Dobscha 1998). Anti-brand activists view a brand’s position and strategy as heavily weighted toward internal interests (e.g., profit-driven) rather than external interests (e.g., the wants and needs of the consumer). Negotiating the meaning of brands provides anti-brand activists with a sense of control, as they feel socially conscious and more aware than mainstream consumers. According to Kozinets and Handelman (2004, 702), anti-brand activists portray mainstream consumers as “unaware, hypnotized, selfish, and lazy” and they view themselves as “aware, free, altruistic, and mobilized.”

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Radicalizing modern values

Participants in new social movements struggle for autonomy through radicalizing modern values. New social movements are guided by the notion that political and economic modernization yields true democracy (Welton 1993). As such, a liberal-democratic culture opens up possibilities for personal autonomy and individualization through collective action. Rather than rejecting institutions or modernization, participants in new social movements strive to overcome limitations, partial rigidities, and malfunctioning through collective action (Offe 1985).

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Anti-brand activists seek radical economic, political, and cultural changes in relation to brands. Economic changes may include modernizing the practices and policies of corporations (e.g., inadequate employee benefits, fraudulent marketing practices). Political changes involve revolutionizing laws that govern society (e.g., increasing minimum wage, restricting zones for commercial centers, improving environmental standards). Cultural changes include reshaping lived experiences by transforming consumer consciousness (e.g., filtering out pervasive advertising messages, limiting the ideals of materialism, avoiding inauthentic practices).

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Transforming the individual person

As suggested by Offe (1985) and Welton (1993), another characteristic of new social movements is the quest for personal development. This quest centers on finding where one’s place is in the world. Many participants in new social movements strive for spiritual harmony within a nonhierarchical world (Finger 1989). In essence, social movement actors attain personal autonomy through individual transformation.

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Anti-brand communities provide a liberating environment where consumers can create their own consumption meanings, practices, roles, and identities. The connection with like-minded consumers provides moral and emotional support and a spiritual harmony which aids in the personal development of the individual (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2006). The spiritual aspects of activism are linked to self-renewal and enlightenment. For example, Kozinets and Handelman (2004) compare anti-brand activists to “religious converts” as these activists see “beyond the veil of a consumerist

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ideology.” The community context provides an appropriate environment for personal and spiritual development, including affiliation, achievement, intimacy, and identity (Johnson et al. 2006).

In summary, consumers are motivated to negotiate the meaning of brands in order to seek a new identity, to gain autonomy in the marketplace, to radicalize modernized values, and to develop personally by transforming the self. The goals of anti-brand activists are to bring about change within the marketplace, or otherwise “go against” mainstream consumption patterns.

A brief history of Wal-Mart

According to *Fortune* magazine (Ellis 2007), Wal-Mart is the world’s largest retailer and America’s largest corporation in terms of annual revenue and number of employees. Wal-Mart is the largest private employer in the world, employing 1.9 million people worldwide, and is the fourth largest utility or commercial employer (Ellis 2007). Wal-Mart is an international company with wholly owned operations in Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Puerto Rico, and the UK (Moreton 2008). In addition, Wal-Mart is the largest grocery retailer in the United States, with an estimated 20% of the retail grocery market, and is the largest US toy seller, with an estimated 22% share of the toy market (Collins and Yeskel 2006). According to Hausman and Leibtag (2007, 1157), Wal-Mart supercenters have had the biggest impact on food retailing, as they compete with traditional supermarkets and “offer many identical food items at an average price about 25% lower than traditional supermarkets.”

Under the reign of Sam Walton, Wal-Mart’s marketing strategy has consisted of a strong focus on customer orientation and a dedication to lowering retail prices (Ritson 2005). Walton, from rural Oklahoma, made it his goal to give back to small-town Americans, and he predicted that people would buy national products locally rather than drive to the nearest city to buy the same products (Vance and Scott 1994). After Wal-Mart’s first opening in Bentonville, Arkansas in 1962, the retailer has rapidly increased in number of stores and retail sales, gaining power and brand loyalty by bringing the lowest possible prices to its customers. For example, every seven days, more than 100 million Americans shop at Wal-Mart; and each year, 93% of American households shop at least once at Wal-Mart (Fishman 2006). Wal-Mart sales on a single day top the combined GDPs of 36 sovereign nations (Moreton 2008), and in a typical day of media coverage, Wal-Mart is mentioned in more than 100 news stories (Fishman 2006). Along with unprecedented sales and widespread media coverage comes the burden of being in the spotlight and under the scrutiny of the public eye.

According to popular media sources, there are hidden costs associated with Wal-Mart’s low price strategy, as its 21,000 suppliers are forced to cut costs by laying off employees and closing US plants in favor of outsourcing products (Fishman 2003). Key drivers of activism and resistance include local business concerns (low operating costs, expansion and growth), employee concerns (low wages, inadequate employee benefits), and local community concerns (homogenization of rural landscapes, deterioration of historic commercial center, environmental preservation). Several of these concerns are justified, as academic studies demonstrate that Wal-Mart stores’ effect on existing local retailers is negative (Artz and Stone 2006). Employment studies show that “a Wal-Mart store opening reduces county-level retail employment by about 150 workers, implying that each Wal-Mart worker replaces approximately 1.4 retail

workers” (Neumark, Zhang, and Ciccarella 2008, 405). Put simply, research demonstrates that Wal-Mart store openings lead to declines in county-level retail earnings of about \$1.4 million (Neumark, Zhang, and Ciccarella 2008). Economic studies in Ohio show that the presence of a Wal-Mart store increases local commercial property tax assessments and Medicaid expenditures (Hicks 2007). In addition, research confirms that small retail stores are forced to use creative survival strategies in order to compete (McCune 1994; Peterson and McGee 2000).

However, despite opposition, criticism, and negative publicity, scholars attribute several factors to Wal-Mart’s continued success. Arnold, Kozinets, and Handelman (2001, 244) demonstrate how Wal-Mart has grown in the US market as it “connects itself symbolically to the dominant ideologies of American life” by means of imagery through flyers. Symbolic acts such as support of community charities, front-door greeters, and patriotic displays provide the retailer with a strong community orientation (Arnold, Handelman, and Tigert 1996). International studies convey that Wal-Mart’s business model lends it success both inside and outside the United States (Colla and Dupuis 2002; Arnold 1999). Moreton (2008, 59) suggests that Wal-Mart has thrived by resourcefully overcoming local objections to its business model and by pioneering a managerial culture that has proven to be “cutting-edge.” Likewise, according to a study based in China, corporate culture plays an important role in Wal-Mart’s international success (Davies 2007).

Wal-Mart’s continued success is an important stimulus that motivates consumers to engage in social action. As the brand becomes more powerful, consumers join forces to fight against the brand. In order to bring about change, anti-brand activists engage in negotiating the meaning of the brand.

Method

We employed an extended case-study method, which “applies reflexive science to ethnography in order to extract the general from the unique,” all by building on pre-existing theory (Burawoy 1998, 5). During a five-year period (2001–2006), we studied anti-Wal-Mart communities that have the following key characteristics: (1) there are authority figures who exemplify the values of the community, (2) there are followers who accept the values as their own, and (3) the community is interconnected through regular interactions among members. We used these criteria in our selection process as the characteristics resemble those of established communities (Bender 1978; A. Cohen 1985; Shepard and Hayduk 2002; Anderson 1983).

Our data are triangulated using four complementary qualitative data collection methods: (1) observations and interviews from a rally opposing a Wal-Mart grand opening, (2) observations from an anti-Wal-Mart meeting, (3) a netnographic analysis of an online anti-Wal-Mart community, and (4) depth interviews with anti-Wal-Mart community members. The use of multiple methods, multiple investigators, and multiple data sources strengthens the validity of our findings. Emerging interpretations are examined within all four sources, and analyses were reformulated and modified until redundancy was reached in all categorical themes.

A rally against Wal-Mart’s grand opening

The researchers attended a Wal-Mart rally in Atlanta, Georgia. A synopsis of the rally is located at http://walmartwatch.com/blog/archives/activists_rally_in_atlanta/. The

rally was associated with WakeUpWalMart.com activists. As anti-Wal-Mart activists travel across the United States, their mission is to educate consumers about Wal-Mart and to recruit others to join their efforts. Rallies focus on challenging large corporations like Wal-Mart to uphold ethical and socially responsible standards. For more information about WakeUpWalMart's campaign, a tour blog is available at <http://www.wakeupwalmart.com/tour/blog/>.

Extended observations allowed the researchers to systematically record participants' behaviors. While observing, the researchers blended into the setting, becoming a natural part of the scene. Observations in this study were recorded by means of field notes and photographs. The researchers compared notes and identified behaviors that lead to a broader understanding of the culture and context of the rally. These descriptive data were used to establish common themes. Semi-structured interviews with 12 rally participants corroborated our observations. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

An anti-Wal-Mart community meeting

The researchers attended a three-hour community meeting in Highlands, North Carolina. Highlands is a small town located in the Western North Carolina Mountains. Locals strive to keep fast food chains and large retail stores out, and they take pride in preserving the beauty of their town, describing it as "the Aspen of the South." The community meeting occurred on Saturday, 13 November 2004, and was arranged to coalesce forces in order to prevent the construction of a Wal-Mart store. (This meeting was not connected with the rally in Atlanta, Georgia.) During the meeting, we were silent participants, taking notes and some video. After the meeting, informal interviews were conducted with five participants. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Netnographic analysis

The Internet provides a place where anti-brand consumers can connect with one another. Virtual communities involve a combination of virtual interaction, social imagination, and identity. "They may be distinguished from physical communities in that virtual communities extend the range of community, and individuals can tailor their personal communities" (Shumar and Renninger 2002, 2). Online communities examined in this study include <http://www.mcspotlight.org/>; <http://www.mcspotlight.org/beyond/companies/antiwalmart.html>; <http://www.sprawl-busters.com/>; and <http://www.hel-mart.com/>.

Data analysis primarily focused on [mcspotlight.org](http://www.mcspotlight.org) and [sprawl-busters.com](http://www.sprawl-busters.com), as these two anti-brand communities have been in existence for more than 10 years and have regular participating members (e.g., daily interactions). Using netnographic methods proposed by Kozinets (2002), online documents (e.g., chat logs, web pages, email transcripts) from the web communities were analyzed. Using a constant comparative method of data analysis, individual and community analyses were conducted. Descriptive data were used to establish common traits or themes. In addition, online interviews were conducted with six community members.

Depth interviews

In order to reach respondent saturation, additional interviews were conducted that shed light on the rally, the meeting, and the online community. Depth interviews



allowed the researchers to delve deeper into categorization, integration, and iteration with the data. One-on-one interviews were conducted with 15 anti-Wal-Mart community members. Informants were selected using a snowball method (e.g., one interviewee led us to the next interviewee). A range of informants agreed to participate in our study, representing a balance of both males and females; various ages, from 18 to 62; and a diverse set of backgrounds (e.g., Wal-Mart employees and retirees, local officials, local small business owners). Interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes in length; took place in public parks, via the phone, and in restaurants; and were recorded and transcribed.

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Analysis

Data analysis and interpretation sought to “uncover the macro foundations of a microsociology” (Burawoy 1991, 282). First, we identified theoretical propositions premised upon the extant literature. Next, we aggregated the data (e.g., interview transcripts, field notes) and then condensed participants’ experiences, using the constant comparative method to interpret common patterns and identify themes. Finally, we compared emergent themes with pre-existing theory, fleshing out a thick description of the case context with the definitive goal of extending theory.

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Negotiating the meaning of the Wal-Mart brand

The meanings, relations, and ideologies that consumers form around brands may be completely different than what sponsors have intended (Kates 2004). According to Kates (2004), firms exhibit little control over a brand’s socially constructed values, beliefs or definitions. Extant literature suggests that the social meanings of brands are more important for conveying meaning than firms’ marketing efforts (Kates 2002, 2003a, 2004; Escalas and Bettman 2005). Consumers develop socially constructed connections between the brand and the collective, as they strive to affiliate with some groups and disaffiliate with others (ingroup versus outgroup; see Escalas and Bettman 2005). Communal groupings “tend to have similar cultural understandings... are based on sustained interaction... and are constituted and sustained through social processes” (Holt and Sternthall 1997, p. 326).

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Our central thesis is that the negotiation of brand meaning is a social activity, and that activists learn as they negotiate. Our findings reveal that community members engage in three learning processes when negotiating the meaning of the Wal-Mart brand: (1) counterfactual thinking, (2) discursive storytelling, and (3) noncompulsory observation.

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Counterfactual thinking

Research in social psychology demonstrates that being socially connected to others provides community members with perceived benefits (Johnson et al. 2006). Social activists participate in anti-brand communities, because such participation meets underlying psychological needs (Johnson et al. 2006). Building relationships with other members provides a means for mental simulation, societal debate, and counterfactual thinking (Markman et al. 1993), all of which involve the framing and reframing of popular brands. Counterfactual thinking represents social activists’ effort to compare their own situation with better or worse conditions. As Markman (1993, 87)

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suggests, “we live in neither the best nor the worst of possible worlds.” In essence, people choose to imagine possible alternatives by comparing their reality to better or worse conditions (Markman et al. 1993).

Counterfactual thinking raises a variety of issues that are important for both anti- and pro-Wal-Mart community members, and Table 1 highlights these communal concerns. The concerns presented in Table 1 are the most prominent issues that emerged from our findings, based on members’ discussions from the websites, the rally, and the community meeting.

It is interesting to note that several of the same issues are important for both anti- and pro-Wal-Mart community members, and that the two antithetical groups mix on occasion. For instance, pro-employees will post messages on anti-Wal-Mart websites, picket anti-Wal-Mart rallies, and decry anti-Wal-Mart meetings via the local newspaper. Anti-Wal-Mart members will do the same on pro-Wal-Mart websites, at store opening rallies, and at local meetings for a new store opening. We posit that one group fuels the other group’s cause. Based on our findings, the most overlap and rivalry is evident among employees. For example, anti-Wal-Mart and pro-Wal-Mart employees focus on the functional values of working at Wal-Mart, such as healthcare, wages, and job opportunities. The following are pro-Wal-Mart postings on an anti-Wal-Mart website on 18 June 2006. Pro-Wal-Mart members share their appreciation of Wal-Mart with anti-Wal-Mart members. In this example, the online forum serves as a place where both pro- and anti-Wal-Mart employees engage in counterfactual thinking regarding their concerns.

My husband is an assistant manager in the Ankeny Supercenter. Recently I was taken to the hospital by ambulance with a bleeding ulcer. Wal-Mart was right there with support for my husband asking if there was anything that we needed. They gave my husband the time off to sit at the hospital while I was in CCU, and also when I finally came home from the hospital 9 days later. I am also a Wal-Mart employee. I work in the pharmacy at the Boone, 1A Wal-Mart. The health insurance was a big help with the hospital bills.

Table 1. Wal-Mart’s communal constituents and their primary concerns.

Community members	Anti-Wal-Mart concerns	Pro-Wal-Mart concerns
Local business members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Price-sensitive consumers cause loss of patronage • Global competitive advantages • Rapid expansion and growth • Low operating costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing the economy • Partnership strategies • Expansion and growth • Attracting consumers
Employee members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate healthcare coverage • Low wages • Poor retirement benefits • Lack of equal opportunities for jobs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable healthcare coverage • Fair wages • Retirement benefits • Job advancement opportunities • Training and development opportunities
Local Community Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deterioration of historic commercial centers • Homogenization of rural landscapes • Reduction of wildlife habitat • The impact of traffic on air quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charitable giving • Low-price options • Convenience • Familiarity • Increased tax revenues for local government

If not for Wal-Mart, we wouldn't have health insurance. So I am thankful for what Wal-Mart did for my family. (Susan, online posting, 18 June 2006)

Good for you Susan! You are one of the only people I know that actually has good, reliable insurance from Wal-Mart. I also work at Wal-Mart and my insurance sucks when compared to other people I know. I have higher premiums, lower overall coverage, and higher deductibles than several people I know. I think Wal-Mart could do better! (Howie, online posting, 18 June 2006)

Community members engage in counterfactual thinking by comparing their own personal experiences with worse or better scenarios. Susan compares her Wal-Mart insurance with the less attractive scenario of having no insurance coverage at all. When judging her own circumstances, Susan, the pro-Wal-Mart employee, imagined how things would be in worse situations, which in turn enhanced her present view of the Wal-Mart brand. In contrast, Howie compares his Wal-Mart insurance with the more attractive scenario of having insurance that is comparable to the coverage that his acquaintances enjoy. As a result of Howie's counterfactual thinking, he developed a jaundiced view of the Wal-Mart brand.

Taylor et al. (1983) suggest that many accident victims upgrade their perception of reality by comparing their situations with hypothetically worse realities. Susan and Howie improve or worsen their personal judgments about Wal-Mart's healthcare for employees by focusing on more attractive or less attractive scenarios. Sherman et al. (1983) propose that judgments may be based on facts available in memory at the time of judgment or social influence. That is, social activists' own experiences in conjunction with other social standards of comparison influence the likelihood of engaging in counterfactuals. For example, Joanne, who is a member of the same pro-Wal-Mart community, reinforces Susan's perceptions of Wal-Mart by sharing her story:

[T]heir insurance is incomparable. After leaving Wal-Mart, my premiums doubled, for virtually the same coverage (same deductible); and now I have a lifetime cap, unlike Wal-Mart's unlimited option coverage... Walmart excels in training. Over the years, I attended several classes ranging from personal growth to improving my management skills. Those classes included Dale Carnegie, Excel and Word classes, replenishment classes, communication skill, etc. I was promoted several times over the years – limited only by my personal goals! (Joanne, online posting, 19 June 2006)

It seems that the only people who appreciate Wal-Mart's insurance plans are people in management – go figure! Managers always have better plans than the hourly employees. (CJ, online posting, 20 June 2006)

I agree with you CJ! If I had a management position I would probably think much different about our benefits. It sucks for us! (Kim, online posting, 20 June 2006)

Joanne's story represents a less attractive scenario, and it provides another means of social comparison. As Joanne focuses on worse possible scenarios, her satisfaction with Wal-Mart is enhanced. However, CJ and Kim compare their situations with better possible scenarios: managerial benefits. According to Markman et al. (1993), counterfactuals often resemble "if only..." statements, pinpointing how given scenarios could be better. The members of the anti-Wal-Mart community imagine more attractive alternatives (e.g., better wages, better customers, and better management), and this counterfactual thinking stimulates negative attitudes toward the Wal-Mart brand.

According to Touraine (1981), identity movements are defined by the goal to be recognized. Our findings demonstrate that counterfactual thinking is a mechanism for legitimizing members' own situations and a means for improving future outcomes. For instance, thinking about how things might be better "if only..." will ensure that one tries to bring about the "if only" situation (Markman et al. 1993). Inherently, community members are empowered by imagining better possible worlds. For CJ and Kim, the possibility of a non-hierarchical organization encourages participation in social movement agendas. Counterfactual thinking is also a form of condolment, as the virtual dialogue provides individuals with a level of comfort in expressing personal views and an ability to deal with stressful or negative situations.

This finding advances our understanding of anti- and pro- brand communities in that individual needs are met through the groups to which one belongs, including both the "ingroup" cooperation and the "outgroup" competition (Deaux, Mizrahi, and Ethier 1995; Escalas and Bettman 2005). Counterfactual thinking plays a role in cooperation and competition by allowing members to learn about alternative scenarios from members of both the anti-Wal-Mart and pro-Wal-Mart communities. Through counterfactual thinking, the anti-brand community deconstructs and reconstructs an ideal of a better possible world, and this vision is what drives the group to action.

Discursive storytelling

Discursive storytelling is the generation of knowledge by sharing meaningful stories based on personal experiences. Stories are typically based on making a claim or argument through reason, rather than intuition, and storytelling topics cover a wide range of subject areas (see Table 1 for a summary of topics). Research suggests that consumers build relationships with brands through storytelling (Papadatos 2006; Woodside, Sood, and Miller 2008; Simmons 2006). In the same way that consumers create positive brand images through storytelling, they construct negative images of brands through the use of stories. According to Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel (2006), brand image is a matter of "perceived meaning," and the anti-brand community provides a cultural mythology that fosters that meaning.

Storytelling is an important process as it reinforces the morals, values and goals of the community. Valkenburg and Buijzen (2005) suggest that social and communal influences begin at an early age and continue into adulthood and can be used to predict consumer behaviors, including brand loyalty or defection. Our findings show that personal beliefs framed within a story are strong social influences. For example, Henry shares a discursive story about the degradation of urban sprawl:

In my own small town, Wal-Mart is about to move to a bigger, grander building for the Super Wal-Mart. Some people in the community continue to fight this move, but we feel like we're spinning our wheels. I agree with Al, Sam Walton did not want to wrestle with big city developers and saturated markets. And why should he – land is cheap in rural America! There are less zoning restrictions and sometimes no zoning at all. I can't get people to realize that zoning restrictions will protect our town. I got in an argument with a "good old Southern boy" the other day about how Wal-Mart has brought deterioration and decay to our once thriving historical town. He just refused to see Wal-Mart as bringing nothing more than low prices to our town. People are just blind to the series of economic and social problems that follow in the wake of a Wal-Mart opening. (Henry, online posting, July 2006)

Storytelling is a means for deconstructing a brand's marketing strategy. For Henry, Wal-Mart makes inauthentic claims about delivering low prices, and Henry poses an alternative view through his personal story by emphasizing Wal-Mart's abuse of power. Henry suggests that Wal-Mart's focus is on profits rather than long-term societal and environmental interests. Henry deconstructs Wal-Mart's low-price strategy by dissecting the means for delivering low prices: "land is cheap in rural America," and "less zoning restrictions." Another example of deconstructing the low-price strategy is Jeremy's story, as he makes claims about employee wages, benefits, and lack of mobility within the organization:

I used to have a real job, but was laid off last year. I had been consulting as an engineer and a programmer. I had hoped it would be brief, but with a Bush in the White House, escape won't be easy. Then I found my job at Wal-Mart. My boss is a micromanager and a tyrant. Whether I'm being berated for using an unauthorized scrap of cardboard for packaging material or shoveling mud from a sump while being told this job is for people who can think, I can tolerate it. What I CANNOT tolerate is when people applaud Wal-Mart and its low prices! Do they know that the employees are paid just above minimum wage? Do they know that Wal-Mart offers horrible benefits? Do they know that employees can never move up in the company? I have two children and a wife that depend on my paycheck and if it were not for them, I'd tell Wal-Mart to kiss my A——. (Jeremy, M, 33, online interview)

The diversity of community members creates a range of possibilities for deconstructing a brand's marketing message. As demonstrated here, Henry presents a local-community perspective, and Jeremy presents an employee perspective. Together, their stories deconstruct Wal-Mart's low-price strategy. The anti-brand community provides a collaborative environment where each member offers different socio-culturally developed understandings which, in turn, contribute to the collective storytelling process. A collective identity emerges through storytelling, as the community's consciousness is raised by the concerns of all three constituents: local business members, employees, and local community members.

According to Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel (2006), inauthentic claims lead to marketplace resistance and backlash, and brand parodies and criticisms can coalesce into a coherent set of opposing meanings and cultural myths. Storytelling resembles a mythic formulation as brand strategies are transformed into negative brand messages. As demonstrated by our findings, the cultural mythology of a once heroic Wal-Mart that delivered low prices to rural communities is reframed by anti-brand members. As a result, the corporation is portrayed as a negative force that damages small-town life. Building upon prior studies, our findings illustrate that negative images are reinforced through storytelling, as concerns among the three constituents mesh (see Table 1). For example, employees are aware of their own situation and immediate concerns. Through the process of storytelling, they also learn about the concerns of local community members and business owners.

In addition, conflicts with competitive "outgroups" (e.g., pro-Wal-Mart's) is often embedded within the story. Outside challenges add to the emotional strength and persuasiveness of personal stories. For instance, Henry claims, "I can't get people to realize" and "people are just blind" to Wal-Mart's destructive forces. Jeremy states, "my boss is a micromanager and a tyrant." Outside challenges draw members together by reinforcing the need for socialization and identity-formation, and the cultural myths snowball and gain momentum as stories are passed from one

member to the next. The sharing of stories is a learning process that is informal and group-driven, and this dynamic interaction leads to a mutual development of oppositional brand meaning.

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Noncompulsory observation

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When we asked informants to recount their first exposures to anti-Wal-Mart demonstrations, we found that members often engage in a search for more information, which may include being a spectator at an anti-Wal-Mart rally or perusing an anti-Wal-Mart website. “Noncompulsory observation” refers to knowledge acquired through incidental exposure to anti-Wal-Mart demonstrations. For instance, at anti-Wal-Mart rallies, spectators listened to vocal opposition and witnessed vivid illustrations of organized resistance. Through peripheral attention to activists’ activities, spectators engage in consciousness-raising and critical thinking. Spectators discover that Wal-Mart practices influence local businesses, employees, and local community members. As demonstrated by Raymond, spectators typically come to the rally with more knowledge from one of the three constituents (see Table 1).

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I came here today to see what other small business are doing about the new Wal-Mart opening, and I’ve learned about the many problems that are facing future Wal-Mart employees and our community. (Raymond, M, 63, rally participant)

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Informants that were spectators at the rally developed a stronger stance against the Wal-Mart brand. Spectators became emotionally charged, even though they did not physically display their negative sentiments. As Patricia explains, she observed silently and then made a conscious decision to “strongly” oppose the brand:

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When I got here, I was not strongly against Wal-Mart, but now I’m definitely against it. Hearing about other peoples’ testimony is really moving, especially the stories from employees. I applied for a job at Wal-Mart one time, a long time ago, and now I’m so glad that that never worked out. I wouldn’t have lasted long, not with their sorry benefits. I could easily see myself standing up there on that stage saying same kinds of things. People just need to know, and I guess that is where I fit in. We just need to tell people about the things Wal-Mart does. (Patricia, F, 52, rally participant)

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Patricia felt a sense of shared identity with the spokespeople at the rally and was moved to take on the same values, pluralism, and openness as the anti-Wal-Mart community. For several spectators, the rally served as an enlightening experience that spurred them on to becoming social activists. According to Goldstein and Cialdini (2007), observers define themselves by observing how people with a merged sense of identity respond – not to them, but rather to circumstances relevant to the observers. Therefore, individuals “learn about themselves from appraising the behaviors they observe others performing” (Goldstein and Cialdini 2007, 403). After attending the rally, Patricia’s self-perception changed (as she was not “strongly” against Wal-Mart before the rally), and this learning experience inspired her to behave consistently with the behavior she witnessed anti-brand members performing. Noncompulsory observation plays a central role in the development of the anti-brand activist’s identity and the “constant redevelopment” of the self-concept (Goldstein and Cialdini 2007).



In addition, noncompulsory observation takes place on the website as visitors learn about the anti-brand community's mission, goals, and core values by clicking on various links and perusing web-based resources (e.g., posted articles, promotional ads, discussion boards). For example, Margy explained that she first joined the anti-Wal-Mart community after reading about members' negative experiences with Wal-Mart. Margy's attitude toward the Wal-Mart brand changed after visiting an anti-Wal-Mart website because she was influenced by the collective:

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I never understood why Wal-Mart was so controversial until I read some of the posting on the Web. I never really thought about all the imported goods from China that Wal-Mart is responsible for and I never really considered the working conditions that employees have to deal with. Once you read about other people and their struggles with Wal-Mart, it makes you think twice about shopping there. It gives me a whole new perspective of the store. (Margy, F, 27, online community member)

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Margy's narrative is representative of how the social dynamics within anti-brand communities can influence a brand's image. Margy learned about the cultural backlash associated with Wal-Mart's practices as she perused the anti-brand website, and the negative publicity made her question her Wal-Mart patronage. When disparaging images and stories about Wal-Mart circulate, via an anti-brand website or rally, Wal-Mart's brand meaning can coalesce into a coherent set of defamatory representations that rapidly spread to various social networks.

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Noncompulsory observation plays an important role in the public discourse that is stimulated by social movements, as observers make an emotional connection with like-minded activists. Social movement participation originates from a connection with others and is a potentially transformative experience where subjective definitions of self become linked to a shared social construct, which is capable of exacting loyalty and commitment to the movement (Mueller 1992). For Corey, he was first drawn to the anti-Wal-Mart website because he enjoyed reading activists' stories; he later acknowledged that he became an active member because he first "felt a connection to the people on the website." Corey's beliefs about the Wal-Mart brand changed after learning about Wal-Mart "through the eyes of other people."

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At first, I would just read about the bad experiences that Americans are having at Wal-Mart. I enjoyed reading the accounts and I got a good laugh out of many of them. It is just crazy to think about how Wal-Mart has changed our society and the way we function. Wal-Mart sets the price for goods, regardless of what the supplier has to do to make the goods at that price. I guess I have a new awareness of the state of our economy and I got more interested in it after learning about Wal-Mart through the eyes of other people. (Corey, M, 25, online community member)

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As Corey's narrative illustrates, noncompulsory observation sustains social movements by moving ideas from the more general level of societal mentalities and political culture to the broader domain of public discourse. Anti-brand activists attempt to influence public discourse by the way they frame issues, define grievances, and stage collective actions to attract the public's attention. As demonstrated above, Corey is convinced that Wal-Mart negatively "changed" society and the way it functions. Social movements are held together by shared knowledge and beliefs, and these ideas are disseminated to individuals who identify with a particular constituency or group within the movement (see Table 1). As such, noncompulsory observation contributes to increased consciousness, recruitment, and voluntarism.

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Discussion

According to NSM theory, activists join together to establish a new identity, to gain autonomy, to radicalize modern values, and to transform the individual person, in order to bring about change in the marketplace. Our research builds upon NSM theory by exploring the learning processes that are fundamental to achieving a movement's goals. In forming a collective identity, which is the central task of "new" social movements according to Melucci (1985), activists must first learn about alternative identities in order to form a connection to the collective. To form a collective identity, the community must define itself as a group, and its members must negotiate shared views of the social environment, negotiate goals, and negotiate opinions about the possibilities and limits of collective action (Melucci 1985). During the course of negotiation, the community engages in collective learning processes. A major contribution of this research is outlining these learning processes: counterfactual thinking, discursive storytelling, and noncompulsory observation. Our findings also bring attention to the important roles the collective and counter groups play in the learning process.

The collective learning process

Understanding the learning processes used to negotiate brand meaning requires not only a concept of the individual as a negotiator and constructor of knowledge, but also an understanding of the centrality of the community vision that drives members to action. The negation process develops a collective identity in relation to the brand, and communal dialogue forms the nature of that identity: shared goals, meaning and strategies. To examine one anti-Wal-Mart community member's negotiation experience would exclude the community environment provided by the three constituencies identified in our study (see Table 1). Our findings illustrate that the community and the concerns of its constituents shape how the learning takes place and what is being learning by the collective.

Counter groups and the learning process

An important aspect of social movement construction is the protest of imbalances and injustices. Defining the roots of such problems means identifying an antagonist (Mueller 1992). With regard to activists' opponents, Kozinets and Handelman (2004) suggest that an "effective consumer activist ideology would not radically exclude dissenting consumers," nor would it claim an "essential difference" or "superiority." Although we acknowledge that this strategy may be more effective, our findings demonstrate that the opponents (e.g., global corporations, pro-Wal-Marters) play an important role in identity formation and, more specifically, the learning process. The image of an antagonist drives the collective identity associated with the movement and the learning processes that are used to negotiate that identity.

Counterfactual thinking is learning through examining alternatives, and our findings demonstrate that opponents help activists to visualize the possibility of better outcomes. The possibility of a better future also paves the way for a new identity (e.g., better-paid employees). By focusing on improving future living conditions (e.g., through social comparison with opponents), anti-brand activists are stimulated to challenge dominate culture and deconstruct restrictive categories (e.g., consumer roles, employee roles). Through comparison and competition, community members learn about alternative viewpoints from both anti- and pro-Wal-Marters.



Discursive storytelling is a mechanism used to share personal beliefs embedded within a story, and our findings illustrate how personal stories tend to focus on fighting the antagonist. For instance, anti-brand activists view Wal-Mart's low-price strategy as an undisclosed tactic that is destructive to society in multiple ways (e.g., low wages, deterioration of historic commercial centers, homogenization of rural landscapes). When conveying personal stories, activists are able to dramatize partial rigidities between "enlightened" activists and "unenlightened" mainstream consumers, and bring attention to perceived malfunctions within the marketplace (e.g., hegemonic corporations).

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Noncompulsory observation is learning through peripheral attention to social movement activities. Social movements seek to provide explanations of activism by situating its roots in opposition to an antagonist. The learning content must be adversarial in some way to "smoke out the invisible and arbitrary elements of the dominant cultural codes" (Gamson 1992, 60). In our case, anti-Wal-Martians frame their protest in opposition to pro-Wal-Martians. How activists frame their identities in opposition to the opponent is essential for increasing public consciousness, recruitment efforts, and voluntarism.

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Successful movements depend upon maintaining an oppositional identity and creating a world apart from mainstream society. Although it would be ideal to bring two opposing groups together to "acknowledge the validity of their different needs" (Kozinets and Handelman 2004, 703), we find that the process of shaping a collective identity involves an investiture of brand meaning that defines itself in relation to the opponent. From this view, we suggest that anti-brand community participation promotes a kind of cultural endogamy that erects boundaries between opposing groups (e.g., anti-Wal-Martians and pro-Wal-Martians). These boundaries serve to elevate "group consciousness" as well as "oppositional consciousness" (see Taylor and Whittier 1992), both of which are important for social movement success.

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Future research

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The concept of anti-consumption community has the potential to illuminate many aspects of marketplace behaviors. In the same way, the concept of anti-brand community, as further developed here, opens up new possibilities for social science research. We identify three learning processes that take place when negotiating brand meaning, and we posit that there are additional learning processes to be explored. For instance, the popular *Super Size Me* documentary, directed by Morgan Spurlock, uses entertainment and humor to teach others about an alternative meaning of the McDonald's brand. YouTube videos, celebrities, and other sources of entertainment are potential tactics to be explored when investigating other ways in which brand meaning can be negotiated.

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Future research might examine how activists construct shared visions of social justice in relation to brands. The context, general atmosphere, physical setting and concurrent background events influence the negotiation process. Thus, members of anti-brand communities learn and act together. In the process, they promote their shared ambitions, and the group provides a framework for studying this phenomenon.

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Future research could concentrate on the similarities and differences between brand communities and anti-brand communities. Product category could also play a role in determining consumers' perspectives toward brands and the relevant communities associated with a brand. That is, brand communities play a large role in the



meaning of some products (e.g., recreational vehicles), but, most likely, they play almost no role in the meaning of other products (e.g., tissue paper). However, there may be product categories that are in between, such that brand communities play some reduced role (or some different role) in shaping brand meaning.

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