

Activationism: How Tobacco Marketers Hacked Global Youth Culture

Robert V. Kozinets, Rossella Gambetti, Maribel Suarez, Timothy Dewhirst, Ulrike Gretzel & Caroline Renzulli

Abstract — Expanding on long-term, in-depth research carried out in partnership with the non-profit organization, Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids (CTFK), we conducted a 10-country netnography concerning the use of branded events and social media to market tobacco brands to young people. Our study revealed how youth culture and activist discourse are subverted and transformed through an interlinked series of events, training sessions, sponsorships, branding moves, and recruitments. To distinguish this new form of marketing from activism, we term it “activationism.” Alongside offering an initial definition of the term, this paper broadly outlines some of its contours, theoretical connections, and implications.

Robert V. Kozinets, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA, rkozinets@usc.edu
Rossella Gambetti, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy, rossella.gambetti@unicatt.it
Maribel Suarez, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, maribels@coppead.ufrj.br
Timothy Dewhirst, University of Guelph, Guelph, Canada, dewhirst@uoguelph.ca
Ulrike Gretzel, Netnografica LLC, Los Angeles, USA, gretzel@usc.edu
Caroline Renzulli, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, Washington, USA, crenzulli@tobaccofreekids.org

Address correspondence to Robert V. Kozinets and Rossella Gambetti

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I. INTRODUCTION

Tobacco companies are legally restricted and morally sanctioned regarding the manner in which they are permitted to market their addictive and cancer-causing products to prospective customers—especially to individuals under the legal smoking age. Historically, governments have approached these tobacco control policies in a piecemeal fashion in which particular media of tobacco promotion are prohibited whereas advertising in other media or to other groups remain permissible. These regulatory environments facilitate shifts in promotional spending, whereby partial tobacco advertising bans do not generally result in reduced advertising output, but rather in media substitution and reinvestment (Saffer and Chaloupka 2000). For example, when cigarette advertising was no longer permissible in the broadcast media, as observed in many jurisdictions during the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, the tobacco industry shifted their promotional spending towards sponsoring broadcast sports events as a means of compensating for lost

broadcast advertising exposure (Blum 1991; Cornwell 1997; Dewhirst 2004).

Thus, these restrictions, intended by governments to reduce smoking behaviors, also have the unintended side effect of drawing tobacco company marketers to innovative, cutting-edge marketing campaigns that allow them to circumvent and/or undermine regulatory interventions. This makes them a fascinating site for the study of the intersection of contemporary consumer culture, new media formations, and marketing techniques and technologies. The use of social media by tobacco company marketers offers an example of how tobacco companies craftily navigate a stringent regulatory environment in order to market tobacco using the latest marketing technology and technique to affect global consumer youth culture.

The cases of marketing and consumer culture infiltration presented in this paper provide intriguing glimpses into the shadowlands where online meets offline, market becomes culture, ethical boundaries blur, and brands merge with activism. These various crossovers have the potential not only to impact

our understanding of contemporary marketing practices but also our conceptualization of marketing systems, activism, and media resistance in a new age of influencers, social media, and brand ambassadorship.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids (CTFK) is the leading advocacy organization working to reduce tobacco use in the United States and around the world. Globally, CTFK works in low- and middle-income countries where more than 80 percent of the world's smokers live. Beginning in 2015, CTFK conducted long-term in-depth research revealing that the world's four largest private tobacco companies (Philip Morris International, British American Tobacco, Imperial Brands, and Japan Tobacco International) are actively using social media marketing methods to recruit young people to market tobacco products to their peer networks.

Originally conducted over four months in late 2016, our research expanded the initial investigatory work conducted internally by employees of CTFK. Netnography, the adaptation of ethnographic research to the particularities of mobile and digital communications (Kozinets 2015) constituted the core of the project. We were members of a team that planned, developed, and executed a multi-site, multi-researcher, multi-language ten-country netnography where social media data collection expanded into participant-observation of branded events, online and face-to-face interviews, document analysis, and investigation into major industry players and facilitators. Alongside a number of research partners, and under central direction of our team leadership in California, the research examined social media posts in Russia, the Ukraine, Egypt, Brazil, Uruguay, Italy, Indonesia, the Philippines, Moldova, India, and some other parts of the Middle East, Latin America, and Eurasia.

Our focus in this case was holistic and cultural. Although we began with insiders' viewpoints and knowledge, the project's key objective was to develop a culturally-nuanced and system-level understanding of how tobacco companies around the world are using social media advertising ecosystems to attract and affirm their relationships with young consumers, and to promote cultural interrelationships between young people, their own culture, and branded combustible tobacco consumption. In so doing, we hope to reveal more general understandings about the current state of the global marketing systems in which this tobacco advertising via social media system is embedded. Although different agencies and individuals are involved, along with diffuse layers of responsibility as well as what seem to be deliberate separations of particular elements, we obtained enough complementary information from multiple companies, with enough similarities between them to draw reasonable conclusions about the sophisticated interrelation of these campaigns as well as their organization, intention, and structure. We frame these findings in the current paper as a form of activationism, a type of youth culture hacking in which activist overtones are deployed to

encourage brand recruitment by online and offline layers of paid and unpaid brand ambassadors.

III. FINDINGS

A. *The Dynamics of Tobacco's Marketing System*

Our netnographic study of the use of social media to market tobacco brands to young people discovered theoretically intriguing innovations that help contribute to our knowledge of contemporary marketing and consumer culture. We might also think of our investigation as a type of "market system dynamics" study (Giesler and Fischer 2017) in which contemporary tobacco markets are revealed as both discursive negotiations and shared practices of multiple stakeholders including marketing-activated consumers, consumer-activating marketers, government regulators, advertising and public relations agencies, social media platforms and companies, as well as activists and their cultural milieu. In particular, we discovered how both youth culture and activist discourse and practice are subverted and transformed through the market system dynamics of a complex and interlinked series of consumer-activating events, training sessions, sponsorships, branding moves, and recruitments. Although a fuller portrayal is beyond the scope of this paper, in this section we outline some of the general contours of this subversion (or culmination) of tobacco markets' systemic dynamics.

If we consider youth culture to be those aspects of popular culture embraced by young people both locally and globally, the "manifestation of a transnational, market-based ideology" (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006, p. 232) that includes the identity-related functions of flowing cultural "youthscapes" (Lipsitz 2013), then tobacco companies are attempting to hack youth culture, subverting or repurposing elements of it in order to promote their brands and ideals. The way they perform this hacking operation is through an integrated local set of operations in which young people are given the freedom and choice to become subjects in various types of promotional activities. These include: (1) accepting recruitment through social media platforms to become tobacco brand ambassadors; (2) becoming social media promoters through unpaid and/or paid posts that use tobacco company hashtags, parties, event backdrops, and/or products; (3) visiting social media pages and registering for exciting local events; (4) attending local lifestyle-based tobacco-company themed events; and (5) attending or coordinating local brand ambassador training programs. With these integrated tobacco marketing campaign elements, in-person events, social media platform pages, and consumer social media posts intertwine to become local social media promotions for tobacco products and brands.

B. *Activism and Activationism*

In our study, promotions for embattled tobacco brands like Philip Morris's Marlboro involved the creation of new brands at events and online. In Egypt, for example, Infinity Promotions held #RedMoveNow hashtag-branded events where attractive young (mainly female) ambassadors distributed Marlboro

cigarette packages, socialized with event attendees, handed out printed documents with the #RedMoveNow hashtag, and assisted and encouraged attendees to post messages to their social media accounts with the hashtag. In addition to that, many of the influencers used to attend events and promote #RedMoveNow were actual Egyptian celebrities like fashion bloggers, comedians, and radio DJs. Backdrops for social media photos and selfies were present throughout the events, and these backdrops emphasized not only the #RedMoveNow branding, but also colors, shapes, and design elements from the branded Marlboro cigarette package. In particular, the color and term red were important to the campaign. The color red is associated with the full flavor and higher tar yield version of the Marlboro cigarette, as well as with the Marlboro parent brand. Marketing planning documents from the company also reveal that the color red has the most appeal to youth markets worldwide. Thus, red color-centered campaigns such as the Egyptian #RedMoveNow campaign were not only marketing the Marlboro parent brand, but also the highest tar yield, and most carcinogenic, version of the product to youth.

Our central finding is that the companies and their campaigns marketed much more than high tar yield cigarette—they marketed a new type of commercially colonized cultural resistance. The term activation has recently become a buzzword in marketing vocabulary to signify planned marketing efforts aimed at eliciting consumers' emotional arousal. This arousal is channeled into an immediate call-to-action toward a specific brand (e.g., asking for information, sharing news with peers on the web, visiting a branded store, buying a branded product). In psychological consumer behavior studies (Kroeber-Riel 1979, p. 241), activation has been deemed an inner tension state providing the organism with energy, one that is responsible for the psychological and motor activity of the organism. In this regard, creating forms of brand communications stimuli that are able to arouse consumers' emotional states and encourage immediate action is activation—an important element of marketing plans that utilize the latest persuasion and nudging techniques to gain consumer engagement and market behavior. Activation need not occur on the simple stimulus-response level of psychological intervention. On a cultural level, activation occurs as sophisticated marketers leverage their symbolic proximity to consumers' cultural worlds in order to stoke their desires for various types of meaningful freedoms, such as freedom of expression. In line with this, social media brand strategies deploy an expressive visual rhetoric to reinforce the storytelling capacity of the brand, positioning it as a cultural entity embedded in the worlds of consumers, permeating their lifestyles, and influencing daily rituals, interactions, expression, and all manner of meanings.

Activism is the use of intentional actions to bring about social change, usually involving activity taken against or in conflict with prevailing social structures, organizations, policies or relations (Weaver 2018). Activism thus inevitably includes a type of resistance, and that resistance is to existing institutional forms—regardless of whether those forms are beneficial (or protective) or harmful. To distinguish this new form of marketing from both activism (intentional social acts of

resistance) and activation (marketing aimed at emotional arousal), we term it *activationism*. Activationism is a neologism that represents the blend between “consumer activism” and “brand activation.” With this term we seek to depict the emerging form of technologically-mediated consumer activism encouraged by the current brand activation campaigns of companies such as those we observed undertaken globally by the world's four largest private tobacco marketers. These campaigns make sophisticated use of social media influence, rhetoric, and symbolism to stimulate an immediate, massive and culturally-resonant call-to-action of consumers that benefits the brand.

Unlike traditional activism, activationism by its very nature tends to be mindless, immediate, ephemeral, non-ideological, automatic, and unreflective. It emerges as a manifestation of the contemporary, easily-distracted consumer tribes or brand publics (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016). Expanding on Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser's (2012) conception of “commodity activism” that reflects on how current facets of commodity culture and consumerism are shaping social activism and change in the current internet age, activationism always occurs between consumers and brands. It only exists inside the networking ecosystem generated by the interactions between brands and consumers. In the case of our study, activationism is the result of a culture hacking strategy conducted by the four largest private global tobacco companies, which subtly plays within the blurred ethical contours of counter-market dynamics such as culture jamming, guerrilla and undercover marketing.

C. *Relation of Activationism to Culture Jamming and Culture Hacking*

Work on culture jamming and hacking describes numerous concepts that help us understand its targeted inversion in the tobacco marketing system's youth hacking (DeLaure and Fink 2017). In order to understand activationism, we must then also understand other related terms, such as culture jamming and culture hacking in particular. The interconnections between these terms are subtle and important, and we develop them in this section.

Dery (1990) defined cultural jamming as artistic “terrorism” directed against contemporary information society. Later, he more broadly defined culture jamming as an “elastic category” that incorporated a range of subcultural, artistic, and semiotic resistance, satirical, and appropriating practices (Dery 1993). Hacking is related to breaking into computer systems and creating programmed viruses which upend existing data structures and subroutines, putting them in the service of the system hacker. We can conceive of culture hacking as related to computer hacking, but undertaken on a cultural level. Culture hacking would thus be the term for an overcoming of institutional and cultural defense systems by decoding and mimicking them in order to alter meaning-related routines and subroutines, putting a culture or aspects of it in the service of the culture hacker.

Activationism is related to these terms, but distinct. It is a type of marketing activation in which culture hacking is

employed to create a marketing campaign with a resistant tone, one emphasizing desire, action, and freedom, encouraging recruitment and the communal elements of grassroots organization that are traditional hallmarks of activism, but are linked to the interest of brands. The resistant tone refers to two different forms of symbolic oppositions that conceive of resistance as an act of freedom against consumption resistance. These forms of opposition embedded in culture hacking occur at both the consumer and brand level, and are described as follows.

First, consumers resist their moral institutional concerns that should prevent them from smoking. This resistance is encouraged and exploited by activationist tobacco campaigns through an appealing and deceptive use of micro-celebrities, visual rhetoric, and symbolic discourse on social media that emphasize empowerment, impulsivity, action, and freedom. Thanks to these campaign elements, consumers feel empowered to think freely and take immediate actions that satisfy their elicited desires of freedom to express and to act (responsibly or irresponsibly, as in this case by choosing to smoke).

Second, brands hold themselves out as role models of resistance by resisting the stringent regulations that restrict them from advertising their tobacco products to consumers who desire them. This resistance, similar to culture jamming counter-advertising discourse, occurs through bottom-up, grassroots consumer recruitment initiatives carried out both on social media and in the streets by brand ambassadors that disguise the illegal promotion of tobacco brands as a form of fancy lifestyle enhancers (e.g., paying influencers to post images on social media with packages of cigarettes, paying ambassadors to distribute packages of cigarettes for free at parties, organizing cool events in fancy places). The two kinds of resistance are symbolically related as brands unveil massive campaigns showcasing their wealth and power to consumers who are encouraged to be similarly subversive and free regarding broaching the cultural regulations that constrain their own individual and collective behavior.

D. Another Example: #TasteTheCity

A Brazilian example of activationism was developed by Souza Cruz, a subsidiary of British American Tobacco, using the platform and hashtag #TasteTheCity to promote the Dunhill brand. Through events and social media posts, TasteTheCity has the goal of building positive meanings for Dunhill, relating the brand and use to new experiences and pleasurable situations, linking the brand to a young, sophisticated, and trendy lifestyle. TasteTheCity activities most typically take place at upper class venues, parties and events, and occur at the same time as events of national interest. For example, Souza Cruz sponsored different initiatives throughout the Brazilian Indie event and the MECAnhotim Festival, which combined the Inhotim museum's qualities with additional values imported from musical shows, workshops, and the uniqueness of the festival's attendees. With expensive entrance tickets, drinks and meals, these events target young and affluent consumers living in the large Brazilian urban centers. #TasteTheCity initiatives are

promoted throughout Facebook and Instagram, amplifying the Dunhill experiences and meanings as presented at the parties.

The research has also identified activities of digital influencers charged with creating an aura of celebration, sophistication, and fashionable lifestyle among friends. Souza Cruz invited a select group of young people engaged in creative jobs or occupations, such as photographers, fashion models, party producers, or artists, among others, presenting detailed reports of their experience, under the #tastethecity hashtag. TasteTheCity hosted exclusive events, such as a Pool Party, an after party, and DJs performing in the middle of the museum, using special tents and presenting gifts offered to and by the digital influencers. Social media served as a strategic space to display and spread the TasteTheCity aura of cool gentility, creating the impression of an elite group, enjoying experiences not available to common or less affluent people. One of the social media posts following an event, for instance, stated: "tastethecitybr: A weekend occupied by new findings. #TasteTheCity #MECANhotim." The term "Occupied" likely references social movements contesting global financial systems, most notably Wall Street, but which also were spun off into many urban environments around the world merging with local social movements or causes including those in Brazil. TasteTheCity, thus, appropriates the concepts of youthfulness and may question the same establishment thinking and established rules that underscore the "Occupied" movement and its progeny.

If culture hacking can be construed as a type of inverted culture jamming, then activationism is a related but distinct type of activism. The linkages between live events, their provision of backdrops, the affordances of social media platforms, the norms of selfie culture in global youth culture, live ambassadors, the practice of encouraging social media posting, and the carefully designed synergies of branded elements derived from cigarette packages, designs, and hashtags create a self-reinforcing promotional circle that tobacco companies can readily hack in the service of this form of guerilla marketing. This promotional virtuous circle is intensified when tobacco companies engage in co-opting popular hashtags to camouflage their promotional content as social media posts. For example, in Italy, influencers were specifically instructed to include numerous popular hashtags in their promotional posts, not only to make the tobacco-related hashtags less noticeable (a subtle form of undercover marketing), but also to reach the widest possible network of peers by taking over hashtags that ensure the visibility of contents on social media platforms. Co-opted hashtags typically elicited the world of self-expression and lifestyle, evoking passions such as travel, music, and art (see, for instance, #party, #fun, #curious, #dreams, #likeme, #lovetravel, #dj, #technomusic, #artwork, #artshow, etc.) with the aim being to associate these imaginative cultural elements with the freedom to smoke.

IV. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Not long ago, marketing relied upon a small number of regulated media channels to spread its messages. Under this

historical situation, tobacco companies originally thrived, creating some of the most culturally resonant advertising messages on record. The dangerous nature of their product was exposed afterwards, and litigation in the U.S. revealed the inner workings of the tobacco companies' marketing to children and teenagers. In response, governments tightly regulated tobacco company's media presence through legal settlements, and these corporations began to lose cultural power and influence. However, the rise of social media and its marketing implications opened new doors of marketing opportunity for global tobacco companies. Although they are closely watched in North America and most of Western Europe, they have been conducting experimental incursions into the world of social media marketing to hack global youth culture in a number of other countries around the world. Our research reveals these formerly hidden experiments.

The implications of this effort are significant, not merely for marketing practice, but for an understanding of its ever-changing and underlying dynamics. In his day, Foucault suggested that the West is transforming from the command-and-control discipline necessary in a manufacturing-based economy to a more subtle control of laborer and consumer desires that is necessary to keep a service-based economy functioning (Foucault 2012). The key to managing consumer desire in our current digital economy is a state of what Deleuze (1990, p. 174) called "continuous control and communication," something that fits much easier into a so-called information-based society than a service or manufacturing based one. Under the new state, information and knowledge are unrestricted. Instead, technologies and more open institutions grant consumers and workers almost unlimited access to information and knowledge, which also include emotion-laden imagery, routine-rich interactions, and symbolically-powerful language.

In this regard, the open and participative nature of social media has facilitated and enhanced the development of networks where consumers' ideas and values are created, transformed, spread, and rapidly circulated through webs of informational interactions, but these data networks also affect what consumers do and think (Christakis and Fowler 2009). As Harold (2017, p. 68) put it "what appear as new freedoms also enable business to increasingly modulate every aspect of life". Social media became systems that assist us in our desire to share news and personal updates, but also to assist in the corporate engineering and manipulation of other people's interactions and desires. As Van Dijck (2013) argues, "in order to be able to recognize what people want and like, Facebook and other platforms track desires by coding relationships between people, things, and ideas into algorithms" that create an "automated connectivity" coded by technology (p. 12). Corporations gain a level of control over consumers' daily routines, disguising manipulation under the surface of increasing consumers' technologically-enabled freedom to self-express.

Control and communication are visual, poetic, emotional, and sensory. Bypassing moral and cognitive filters, tobacco marketing hashtags become new brands that appeal directly to young people's socialities, hunger for status, and consumer desire. Using the embedded, simplistic, action-oriented

language of advertising, the names of these new brands focus on the immediacy of behavior and sensory experience, community, transformative possibilities, hip urban gentility, and the liberty of choice. For example, #tastethenight, #tastethecity, #redishere, #pleasureteam, #sublimemovers, and #mydaynow evoke the power of immediate experience, the hedonism of status, and the richness of urban life. Transformative and communitarian ethos are evoked in the new brand hashtags #evolve, #likeus, #nighthunters, and #forwardparty. The new brands #youdecide, #mstart, #stayfree, #staytrue, and #dontbeamaybe focus on decisiveness, choice, and freedom.

Alongside these decisive, transformative, and immediate brand invocations, consumers are spurred to action by visual rhetoric and the authenticity of consumer-generated media. The activationist campaign is designed as a form of immediate resistance, where with one pack of cigarettes consumers can resist the quasi-moral strictures that hold them back from enjoying their liberty and life by breaking the bonds that hold back their choice to smoke. In a code whose decipherment becomes clear when elaborated by further exposure to the brand principles through events and social media, consumers learn that "taste the city" is another way to say taste the Dunhill brand of cigarettes being marketed by British American Tobacco. The words "Stay Free" are a command and a challenge from Japan Tobacco International's Winston brand to think independently when deciding whether to smoke cigarettes or not. The mystique surrounding the NightHunters group is a way to both hunt for fun and adventure in the night, and also to join in Philip Morris's promotions of Iceball cigarettes as a type of underground social actor. Joining the groups who adopt such slogans is a sign of fierce independence, the type of independence celebrated throughout youth culture especially, and consumer culture certainly, but celebrated and affirmed collectively through tobacco company's lavish events and sponsored social media promotions.

Positioning participation in tobacco social media marketing as a form of consumer activism is a semiotic move on the part of tobacco companies to disarm moral protest about tobacco's effects by using social media, ambassadorship, and events to subtly position the choice to smoke tobacco not only as a moral right of consumers but as an act of self-empowerment. Don't be a maybe, Marlboro provokes: when it's time to light up with your friends, make a decision to act. Digital activism has been described recently with the trivializing terms "hashtag activism" and "clicktivism" (Bayne 2018). In our field research among the integrated campaigns of hashtags and planned events of global tobacco marketers, we discover a type of "call to action-ism," a belief that brand-related action is its own form of resistance, one that is closely related to hashtag activism, but that transpires in the realm of brand activation and activationism.

Call-to-actionism, hashtag activism, and activationism are new marketing strategies that our fieldwork reveals in hashtag driven campaigns to be inspired, seize the day, taste the city, or become a night hunter. Calling for action at party-like marketing events is an attempt to manage and manipulate

desire. Social media provides companies with new levers to extend these attempts. Party moments, social interactions, and smoking rituals interface with consumers' technologically-enabled freedom to self-express. Tobacco company marketing today benefits immensely from media corporations' influence over consumers', especially young consumers', cultural and digital connectivity.

What we see in these tobacco brand activationism campaigns is the market system dynamic of a new form of technologically-empowered capitalism, which has been defined as technocapitalism: an evolution of market capitalism that is rooted in rapid technological innovation based on corporate power and its exploitation of technological creativity (Suarez-Villa 2009), including consumers' collective creativity (Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017). This rapid innovation does not just allow consumers to express themselves freely, it also allows tobacco marketers similar liberties to spread their message to youth around the globe. Working hand in hand, marketing and technocapitalism leverage the network society to transform the connectivity of youth culture into a valuable economic resource. As this case exemplifies, the theoretical and pragmatic consequences of these developments are potentially profound. Facebook (and Instagram), LinkedIn, and Twitter further their own interests by increasingly influencing and monetizing consumers' online social experiences, thereby encouraging marketers to take advantage of a new algorithmic social reality. Without increased and better government regulation better suited to the realities of our current times, we are likely to see more of these cutting-edge campaigns that connect hashtags, live events, and brand ambassadors into social media campaigns and which activate the desires of increasingly interconnected, and vulnerable, young consumers around the globe.

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