Advertising Resistance? The Analysis of New Social Movements as Brand Communities

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Abstract

Branding and advertising practices, which basically aim to facilitate persuasion and action on the side of individuals, can be considered as crucial means for social movements to mobilize the masses. Besides, the visual creation of meanings attributed to the core goals and values of social movements by their agents, function as advertising facilities. This research argues that with the unique dynamics of branding and advertising, social movements realize themselves as brand communities and analyzes the use of advertising in branding social movements from the context of Turkey. Undertaking a semiotic analysis of the visuals published by the agents of social movements, this research analyzes the ways in which the characteristics of brand communities are semiotically encoded as it aims to contribute to the existing literature by the critical elaboration of the use of advertising in branding social movements

Key Words: Advertising, Branding, Brand Community, Semiotics, Social Movements, Turkey, Visuality, Visual Culture.

1. Introduction

With the advent of consumer cultures and the rapid increase in the use of social media, the notions of branding and advertising are subject to transformations by exceeding their traditional boundaries. Today, the notions of branding and advertising surpass their traditional roles and effectively take part in the construction of meanings in cultural, social, ideological, and political terms, rather than merely serving as tools for economic activities. On the other hand, in the 21st century especially with Occupy Movement at USA and Arab Spring, social movements are organized through cyber networks and increasingly practicing the means of visual communication. The use and the sharing of icons and symbols depicting the main goals and values of social movements are rapidly increasing, aiming to advance the effects of social movements on a mass scale.

In this respect, it becomes possible to stress that a particular activity of branding takes place by the creation of icons and logos that symbolize the core goals and values of social movements.The analysis of new social movements in this regard requires an interdisciplinary scope of research, ranging from branding and advertising to social movements and political protest. This research aims to point out the complexities of this phenomenon from Turkish experience of social movements, namely, Gezi and Rabia protests that occurred in 2013. For this purpose, this research aims to point at the ways in which these social movements were visualized through posters and other illustrations that aim to attract the attention of wide range of audiences as well as to call these audiences for action. Following a semiotic method of analyzing visuals, this research argues that social movements are increasingly visualized in our contemporary society and are likened to brand communities that communicate to its followers in a rhetorical fashion similar to advertising.

2. Social Movements and Advertising

Since the earliest stages of history, social movements existed as collective attempts against a political or a social structure in order to actualize change. Social movements fundamentally symbolize the collective gathering of individuals around certain sets of beliefs, values, and goals (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Social movements have been defined as purposeful and collective set of actions that tend to change social institutions and practices (Zald & Ash, 1966).

Common problems that individuals share constitute the basis of social movements, by which individuals gather to provide a solution (Toch, 1965, p. 5). In this regard, social movements have been defined as collective behaviors of individuals whose purpose is to alter more powerful social and political agents with gaining more power with programmatic set of act(Tarrow, 1998, p. 2) (Turner, 1969).

Any organized attempt towards social change can be categorized under social movements regardless of their success or failure (Jenkins & Form, 2005). In modern era when social conflicts and uprisings increased, social movements have mostly been associated with the working class uprisings against the capitalist class. However, a distinct kind of social movement emerged with the second half of the 20th century, characterized as "new social movements", which propagated collective concerns with regard to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion and ecology, rather than merely the class factor. In this era, newsocial movements have been evaluated as rooted in cultural identity politics (Touraine, 1981, p. 30). New social movements gained another momentum in the 21st century, with rapid digitalization of culture (Castells, 2012, p. 2), which provided social movements such as "Occupy" movement with the chance to spread its arguments globally via the use of the internet and visual rhetoric.

In the 21st century, social movements have increasingly been visualized particularly with the activists' sharing of visual illustrations, posters and other related massages on social media (Doerr, Mattoni, & Teune, 2013). Today, social movements are substantially organized online and later carried out in urban settings. Therefore, social movements gain a visual medium by which activists can create and distribute their messages that call for action freely through a wide range of audiences. Visualization of social movements further necessitates a discussion on the ways in which the activist campaigns are advertised to the rest of the public. As a tool for persuasion, advertising has initially appeared as a medium for producers to communicate their trade messages to consumers. The notion then transformed into an apparatus that has the capacity to convey ideological messages(Dyer, 1982) (Goldman, 1992)(Jhally, 2006) (Williams, 1999) (Williamson, 1978)and create a rhetorical action on the side of the audiences, particularly with political advertising. The hypothesis of this research points out that the rhetorical strategies of advertising has come to be used by activists as well who aim to propagate their causes to the wider audiences so that a rhetorical action for the cause can be realized. The complexities of this transformation underscore that traditional boundaries of advertising, as well as of new social movements, are being challenged as illustrated with the recent social uprisings.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Semiotic Analysis

This research aims to show that new social movements are being advertised with rhetorical visuals designed by activists online. These visuals semiotically construct certain meanings with regard to the values and goals of social movements. By decoding visual and textual strategies by which meaning is encoded, semiotics aims to expose the underlying mechanisms of meaning attribution processes in a given text or visual material(Barthes, 1957) (Rose, 2001, pp. 69-71). Semiotic approach towards visuals determines certain codes that are conveyed by visual materials and classify the visuals among those codes in order to conduct a detailed analysis of the systems of signification (Rose, 2001, pp. 62-65). Different than content analysis where research is conducted with large amount of data, semiotic analysis can be conducted with low amount of visuals that characterize the dominant codes, so that a detailed analysis of the signification process can be revealed.

3.2. Brand Community

In order to analyze the semiotic strategies of meaning construction, this research determines three dominant codes that are characteristics of the main messages conveyed by protest materials: Consciousness of Kind, Rituals, and Traditions, Moral Responsibility. These codes have been derived from the characteristics of "brand community," theorized by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001).Brand communities refer to collective organizations that individuals generate around a brand. Different than the companies' way of defining their brand personality, individuals recreate the brand themselves with their own values, expectations, goals, and emotional attachments.

By this way, individuals manage to create a community firstly by a "consciousness of kind," which refers to a sense of "we-ness" that unites individuals (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 418). Secondly, individuals gathering around brands form communities by practicing "rituals and traditions"; which refers to the shared experiences and stories regarding the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 421). Thirdly, individuals who gather around a brand

constitute a community by attaching themselves with a "moral responsibility" towards that community; actualized by the recruitment and helping the adaptation of new members (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 424). As observed in Harley Davidson, WW Beetle, Saab, or Macintosh communities, individuals are not simply passive consumers but active participants of the brand's meaning production. This research argues that the characteristics of brand communities can also be observed in the dominant codes of the visuals created by the active participants of social movements. For this aim, this research analyzes total of sixsocial movement posters under the dominant codes determined by semiotic research of the visuals.

4. The Analysis of Social Movements as Brand Communities

4.1. A Background on Social Movements

4.1.1. Gezi Movement

In May 2013, there was a public debate regarding Gezi Park, which is located next to Istanbul's Taksim Avenue, that it would be transformed into a construction site for a shopping mall. The sequence of events that led to Gezi protests began on 27th of May 2013. After public debates objecting to the project, a group of earth movers of the municipality arrived at the park to dislocate the trees. The attempt was followed by further protests and there have been clashes between the police and the protestors during 30th and 31st of May. On June 1, the police withdrew from the park and the protestors occupied the park with their tents. On 15th of June, the police organized an intervention to the park and the park was once again emptied from protestors. In the following days, Gezi protests spread around the country as there have been anti-government protests in Turkey's different cities. During the protests, more than 10 people died as a result of violent clashes and hundreds of people were injured. Throughout the events, activists shared their calls for action particularly through the social media. Besides, many consumer items appeared such as t-shirts, mugs and stickers, symbolizing Gezi protests that turned Gezi into a commercial brand. During the process of activism, the circulation of posters and creative designs that aim to create a community of protestors has been a significant attempt pointing at the ways in which social movement is advertised as a brand community.

4.1.2. Rabia Movement

On 28th April 2013, the opposition in Egypt initiated a call for the President Mohammed Morsi's resign with the aim to gather 15 million signatures. Claiming that 22 millions of signatures have been gathered, the opposition demanded his resign until 17.00 on June 30th. While Morsi refused to resign his post, the opposition gathered at Tahrir Square for mass protests. On June 3rd, the army undertook a coup d'état and removed Morsi from his post. After this period, violent clashes began between Morsi supporters and the army. One of the most important clashes occurred on July 26th and 27th at Rabia Square, where 1500 died and more than 10000 injured. Eventually, Rabia Square gained a symbolic importance for activists who protested the coup d'état and it has been widely used as a symbol by activists in online communities to increase the public attention towards the events. In Turkey, Rabia activism spread as a movement to support Egypt's Muslim politicians who were removed from their positions with the coup d'état. Rabia symbol was further acquired by Turkish politicians to diplomatically support the anti-coup protests. During this period, Rabia was also turned into a commercial brand by the distribution of products such as mugs, stickers, necklaces and others. Furthermore, the images associated to Rabia protests widely circulated through social media, which points out the forming of a brand community on a semiotic basis.

4.2. Semiotic Analysis

4.2.1. Consciousness of Kind

The first characteristic of brand communities is referred to as "consciousness of kind" where individuals gather around a brand with a sense of "we-ness" and communitarian solidarity, despite they may not know each other in their daily lives. The visuals in this regard play an important role in forming a sense of "we-ness" among the members of the brand community, which can also be analyzed to comprehend their impact on social movements. The image of "women in red" has been popular among Gezi Park activists since the initial days of the uprising. On the first day of the events while the park was under the siege of the police that attempted to expel the protestors, a group of activists resisted the attempts by the police as one of the police officers attacked a young woman with tear gas. The event was photographed by the activists nearby and was considered as a symbolic shot that draws attention to the police violence continued afterwards.

Figure 1 is an illustration of the photo, which was widely circulated among activists in social media and became one of the iconic images of the activism. The figure includes significant details in terms of the ways in which the event was narrated by the activists' point of view. The figure includes three crucial signifiers that portray the activists' interpretation of events and the core aims of their activism. Firstly, different from the actual scene that has been photographed; the illustration portrays the woman in larger portions than the police officer. The difference connotes that the activist figure stands in a more powerful position than the police.

Secondly, despite the attack of the police towards the woman, she is not harmed and contrarily, the woman's vertical positioning of her hair connotes that she is resisting with great achievement. Thirdly, the shadows of the police officer and the activist signify another meaning of empowerment since the shadow of the police officer is represented as thicker than the shadow of the activist. The difference of the shadows connotes that the police represents the oppressing forces whereas the woman symbolizes the good and the resisting will of Gezi Park activists. In sum, the illustration encodes the core values of the activism, namely, the power and the resistance of the activist against the police. The semiotic establishment of this meaning contributes to the ways in which the activists gather around the community with a sense of togetherness and a consciousness of communitarian solidarity.

Figure 2 is an image widely distributed among Rabia activists in Turkey especially through social media. The figure consists of a collage of three photographic images that are brought together for a semiotic encoding of a meaning regarding Rabia activism. The visual is further accompanied with a textual component that aims to complement the kind of meaning constituted by the visual strategy. The visual involves three main layers of meaning construction: The photographic collage, the text and the logo. The photographic collage includes three different photographs representative of a real event where individuals are protesting in despair. The first photograph portrays a man looking upward; he is clearly in grief and emotionally in dense situation. The background consists of a collective act of protesting people which is whitened with illustration. The second photograph portrays three women who are crying while they are at the same time protesting with sorrow. Similar to the man does, women look upward and actively use their body languages that are indicative of the emotional stance that they experience. The national flag of Egypt in the background signifies the national importance of the event.

The third photograph portrays another man who experiences a deep emotional state with lamentation. The collage involves the images of people who are protesting but at the same time grieving against the events unfolded after coup d'état in Egypt. The negative meanings attributed to the emotional state of the protestors connote that they are waging an impossible struggle against the coup holders. The use of photographic imagery aims to better convey the lived and actual experience of the sorrowful events. Furthermore, the whitened background of the crowds signifies mourning and death; as according to the Islamic belief, the color white is the color of the coffin, thus resembles death. The logo and the text is positioned below the image that complements the kinds of meanings attempted to be conveyed with the visual. The logo is the Rabia symbol which is used by the activists during their protests against the coup. The text supplements the coup by stating the following in Turkish, Arabic and English: "Rabia is the tear, the sadness, the sobbing." The text almost translates the meanings constituted through visuals. In sum, the image conveys the main values of the Rabia community by emphasizing the sorrow and the mourning that the activists go through due to their traumatic experience of the coup; therefore, constitutes the element of "we-ness" in the viewer as a result of the mechanisms of signification encoded within the visual.

4.2.2. Rituals and Traditions

Rituals and traditions constitute another important element in the generation of brand communities. Individuals gathering around a brand share their experiences and common stories emerge as one of the founding elements of these communities. In a similar manner, the sharing of stories and lived experiences constitute another important aspect of social movements, especially with the circulation of visuals that narrate those stories. Figure 3 represents the image which has been created by Gezi Park activists and was distributed to the public attention through social media. The image portrays the name "ALİ" in capital letters and contains further words within these letters. The name "ALİ" refers to Ali İsmail Korkmaz, a 19-year-old activist who was brutally beaten by anti-Gezi protestors and died on 10th of July 2013 after remaining in coma for 38 days. The video footage of the event has been revealed soon after it took place and the atrocity drew wide public attention. Since then, Ali İsmail Korkmaz has been one of the icons of Gezi Park resistance.

The illustration in Figure 3 displays mourning towards his loss and further complemented with certain signifiers that constitute the rituals and traditions of Gezi Park activism. The semiotic organization of the visual consists of two main layers of meaning attribution: The background and the text. The background with black color signifies loss and death. Meanwhile, the text "ALİ" is organized as a visual element within itself.

The textual component involves a narrative, which tells the story of Ali İsmail Korkmaz as follows:

"My name is Ali İsmail Korkmaz. I'm 19 years old. In Eskişehir, the police pushed us towards the back streets. There men with civil outlook attacked on me and kicked my head and body with sticks. When I woke up, I went to hospital. They told me to go to the police station and bring a document. When I fainted 20 hours after the event, they took me to the hospital. I was going through a cerebral hemorrhage. I was asleep. It was too late. I stayed in coma for 38 days. The video of the event was given to the police. However, the minutes when I was attacked was erased. My name is Ali İsmail Korkmaz. I was attacked on 3rd of June 2013. I died on 10th of July 2013. My murderers are wandering among you. My name is Ali İsmail Korkmaz."

The text narrates the story of Ali from his point of view and aims to communicate the voice of a deceased activist to the wider public. In this sense, the text establishes a ritualistic practice for the activists to commemorate the event and mourn for the loss of the activist. The textual strategy is constituted in a way which would facilitate identification in the viewer with Ali, who has been one of the icons of Gezi Park resistance. Eventually, the poster manages to evoke sensations of the activists with a commemoration ritual that strengthens the bonds between activists in the community.

On the other hand, as a visual illustration by Rabia activists, Figure 4 portrays "Habiba" as one of the resistance icons of Rabia movement. Touching upon lived experiences similar to Gezi activists, the lived experience of Habiba inspires Rabia activists and motivates their struggle. HabibaAbd el Aziz was a journalist working for a Dubai based newspaper Xpress. She passed away due to police attack while she was among the demonstrations on 14th of August 2013. Habiba became an iconic figure of Rabia movement when her text messages that she exchanged with her mother prior to her death were revealed after her death, stating her belief in the protestors and wish to further struggle against the coup d'état. The semiotic arrangement of the visual's meaning is constructed in three layers: The text, image, and the logo.

The visual manifests rituals and traditions by representing Habiba's murder from the activists' point of view with the following sentences: "Her name is Habiba." She is an Egyptian Girl. Not a terrorist. Not a Thug and not a criminal. All her fault that she said 'no' for 'the military coup'". The textual component speaks on behalf of Habiba and becomes her voice for the wider public. The text emphasizes the innocence of Habiba by connoting it with her white dress, and draws attention to the atrocities committed by the coup holders. The image, inspired from the photographic reality, portrays Habiba who is looking directly at the viewer. She is not desperate or in grief; she rather looks determined and confident in herself. The image connotes that the activists should keep their faith in themselves during the struggle with the military coup by following Habiba's example. In the third layer of meaning, Rabia logo is positioned in the upper left corner of the poster, which directly links the cause narrated by the visual specifically to Rabia movement. The yellow color of the logo is used in the text as well in order to strengthen the brand image portrayed by the logo. In sum, the icon of Habiba is turned into a common ritual and tradition to commemorate her and to motivate the activists for further struggle with communitarian solidarity.

4.2.3. Moral Responsibility

The third characteristic of brand communities is the element of moral responsibility. Members of brand communities develop a sense of morality which becomes particularly active in forming the boundaries of the community by inviting new members or helping members for their integration to the group. The unofficial rules of brand community are recognized by the members which allow them to reassess their and others' conditions of belonging to the community. The visuals of social movements also manifest the sense of moral responsibility among the members of the community.

Figure 5 portrays a poster distributed online by Gezi Park activists, which is a call for action towards the trials regarding the deaths of symbolic Gezi Park activists, Ali İsmail Korkmaz and Mehmet Ayvalıtaş. The semiotic arrangement of the visual is conducted in two layers of meaning; the background, the main body text and the headline text. The background is an illustration of a wall as the remaining text seems as if they are written on a wall. The image of wall writing connotes that the activism is still active in the streets and continues its struggle.

This connotation is important since the poster was distributed on February 2014; almost eight months after the events took place. Since the pace of activism decreases as the time passes, activists aim to increase the public attention towards Gezi Park activism with the visual connotation of wall writing. The second layer of meaning is the main body of the text, which involves the statements made by Gezi Park activists, Ali İsmail Korkmaz and Mehmet Ayvalıtaş. In the messages, the activists call for struggle and resistance against power structures. The text also includes the images of activists who look towards the viewer in order to enhance the identification of the viewer in the activists.

On the right side of the images, the dates of the trials are provided as a note for the audience. On the third layer of meaning, the headline is written in red color as follows: "Time for loyalty for Gezi resistance." The visual conveys a rhetorical message by calling the viewer into action to attend the trials and show a sense of loyalty towards the happenings in the past. The color red signifies the urgency of the call and the atrocities behind the deaths of activists. In sum, the semiotic arrangement of the visual is a call for activist community to perform their loyalties to the cause as a part of their moral responsibility.

The element of moral responsibility is further asserted as a semiotic strategy in Rabia posters. Figure 6 is a commemoration poster for World Rabia Day, which is celebrated on August 14th, 2014. The semiotic arrangement of the poster can be decoded in three different layers: The background, the headline text, and the logo. Similar to the Gezi poster at Figure 5, the background image of Figure 6 also includes a wall image, which connotes the active state of the social movement after more than a year passed since the beginning of the cause. The second layer includes the headline text with a slogan and two separate visuals. The text is a rhetorical advertising strategy towards the viewers, which states: "Raise your voice for the humanity!" The images that complement this rhetorical element involve the concomitance of two different photographs.

The first photograph portrays Asmaa El Beltagy, a young woman who was killed as a result of police attack during the anti-coup protests in Egypt and became one of the icons of Rabia movement. The second photograph is a scene where a young girl looks at her deceased baby brother who was recently born in Palestine. The photographic reality is semiotically arranged to refer to the intersexuality of meaning which brings together the Egyptian and Palestinian experience of struggle against hegemonic structures in different political contexts. In the third layer, the logo is reworked and transformed into a Rabia sign with the colors of Palestinian flag, as an indicator of an intercultural meaning attribution. Also providing the website and the social media account of the cause, activists call the members of Rabia community into action by reminding them of the political violence at Palestine and asserting the need for the activists to be morally responsible for what is happening against Muslims in the Middle East. Eventually, the poster exhibits the intention of the activists who tend to reintegrate their members into the cause as well as to recruit new members by emphasizing the traumatic lived experiences that their social and political community is exposed in the region.

5. Conclusion

The transformation of new social movements with the increasing use of digital technologies and social media necessitates rethinking of these movements particularly from the perspective of visual culture. Advertising and branding, which have significant roles in the visual manifesting of meanings, can clearly be observed in the ways in which social movements publicize themselves with certain slogans, icons, and symbols in order to elicit a rhetorical response in audiences. As a result of a semiotic analysis, this research attempted to show that new social movements, that are increasingly digitalized and visualized, bear resemblances with brand communities, according to the dominant codes that they semiotically construct through visuals. In this sense, Turkish experience of social movements illustrate that the visual expressions of Gezi and Rabia movements signify the embodiment of brand communities, where members of the causes are tied to one another with certain structures of signification that involves the practicing of the dominant semiotic codes such as consciousness of kind, rituals & traditions and moral responsibility.

The outcomes of the interrelationships between social movements, brand communities, and advertising can be summarized with the following remarks:

1- The visuals of new social movements problematize the notion of authorship; since creators of the images is unknown and is not relevant. What matters is the circulation of the image in the public with the meanings invested by anonymous agents in a non-hierarchical way.

2- Every individual under the social movement/brand community can reproduce images/advertisements that convey the goals and values of the cause, which forms a pluralist and a democratic environment.

3- The semiotic likening of advertising/branding to social movements also blur the boundaries of the traditional sense of advertising and branding since it shows that these practices of meaning construction and attribution gains more ideological significance, rather than merely serving as tools for market interests.

4- The postmodern/visual turn in new social movements characterized with the "death of the author" (Barthes, 1977)challenges the traditional sense of social movements since social movements are performed as brand communities that are advertised with icons and symbols on a semiotic level; which further raises questions about their potentials for success against the hegemonic social and political structures in the future.

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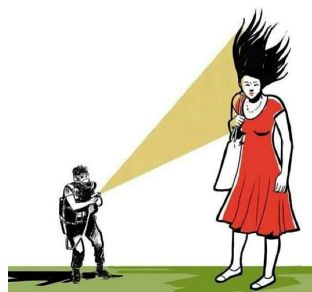Zald, M., & Ash, R. (1966). Social Movement Organizations: Growth, Decay and Change. Social Forces(44), 327–341.

Figures

Figure 1: Icon of Women in Red

Figure 2: Rabia Poster

Figure 3: "Ali" Poster

Figure 4: "Habiba" Poster

Figure 5: Gezi Call for Action Poster

Figure 6: Rabia Call for Action Poster