Towards Symmetry in the Law of Branding

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Towards Symmetry in the Law of Branding

Rebecca Tushnet*

Starbucks recently opened the 15th Ave. Coffee & Tea Company, whose outlets have none of the ordinary indicia of a Starbucks coffee store.\(^1\) As the corporate logo reproduced above shows, the stores note that they are “inspired by Starbucks.” This is perhaps technically true, but in an odd and misleading way: they are run by Starbucks. I say misleading because “inspired by” violates the standard rules of conversational implicature, which direct speakers to offer the appropriate amount of information, no more and no less.\(^2\) A Starbucks company that calls itself “inspired by” Starbucks is not saying enough given the circumstances, any more than a statement that said “Politician X had a romantic dinner with a man last night” would do so if the speaker knew that the man was her husband.

Well, so what? As Jeremy Sheff’s presentation at this symposium suggested, withholding from consumers the information that the store is a Starbucks operation is not necessarily wrongful.\(^3\) The

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concern I have is essentially one for fairness. One way to talk about the examples of un- and re-branding that Professor Sheff discussed is as an example of “heads I win, tails you lose.”4 The very companies that want to use our credit and browsing histories to decide about how to deal with us, and who tell us that to walk away from an underwater mortgage is immoral regardless of whether the law allows abandonment,5 want to be able to walk away from their own reputations whenever that would benefit them by making it harder for us to figure out who they are.6

Sometimes this is by rebranding. Sometimes it is by marketing techniques that make it look like other people approve of the trademark owner. We have different names for this—buzz marketing,7 stealth marketing,8 Astroturfing,9 and so on. Trademark law probably does not have much to say about rebranding in itself. But there are definitely things that could go wrong with trademark in terms of the balance between source identification and freedom to compete and to speak as a result of such practices. And this is where my concern for symmetry arises.

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4 See id. Part II.
5 See Brent T. White, Underwater and Not Walking Away: Shame, Fear and the Social Management of the Housing Crisis, 45 Wake Forest L. Rev. 971 (2010) (analyzing the pressures on homeowners not to engage in strategic default, by contrast to the expectations that corporations will behave rationally).
9 See George Monbiot, These Astroturf Libertarians are the Real Threat to Internet Democracy, Guardian, Dec. 13, 2010, available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/libertycentral/2010/dec/13/astroturf-libertarians-internet-democracy?showallcomments=true#comment-fold (“An astroturf campaign is one that mimics spontaneous grassroots mobilisations but which has in reality been organised.”).
So, “inspired by Starbucks” really means owned and operated by Starbucks. But compare that to the copycat colognes pictured below, labeled as “inspired by Obsession,” “inspired by Hugo,” and so on. This perfume seller has no business relationship with any of the named perfume makers and is trying to communicate something very different: that its products are (cheaper) substitutes for the name brands, with similar smells.

You might think that this is wrongful behavior—in Europe they certainly do\(^\text{11}\)—but in the United States it is generally considered legitimate comparative advertising to explain that a product is a copy of another product, as long as it’s clear that the statement is comparative.\(^\text{12}\) Given that there’s no other brand name on the

\(^{10}\) From Author’s collection.

\(^{11}\) See Directive 2006/114/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 December 2006 Concerning Misleading and Comparative Advertising and Repealing Council Directive 84/450/EEC, 2006 O.J. (L 376) 23 (“Comparative advertising shall, as far as the comparison is concerned, be permitted when . . . it does not present goods or services as imitations or replicas of goods or services bearing a protected trade mark or trade name.”); Case C-487/07, L’Oreal SA v. Bellure NV, 2009 E.C.R. I-05185 (holding that “an advertiser who states explicitly or implicitly in comparative advertising that the product marketed by him is an imitation of a product bearing a well-known trade mark” has engaged in unfair competition within the meaning of Council Directive 84/450).

\(^{12}\) See August Storck K.G. v. Nabisco, Inc., 59 F.3d 616, 618 (7th Cir. 1995) (“The FTC believes that consumers gain from comparative advertising, and to make the com-
bottles of cologne here, and that the well-known trademarks are in
the prominent place usually reserved for the seller’s own mark, this
particular instance may well be going too far to count as legitimate
comparative advertising. But the idea of being “inspired by” is
certainly a comparative advertising claim as conventionally un-
derstood.

The dual use of “inspired by” illustrates the larger issue: The
more subtle the trademark owners get in their references to them-
selves, the more scope they well have to claim ownership over all
references. In a world of 15th Avenues “inspired by” their corpo-
rate parents, even a prominent brand name of the product’s own
doesn’t clearly communicate separate ownership and comparison.

The problem gets worse when we think about things like prod-
uct placement. Some people have argued that undisclosed product
placement is deceptive. I do not want to spend too much time on
whether and how disclosure of product placement should be re-
quired because my interest here is in a particular argument often
made by disclosure skeptics: that disclosure is unnecessary because
reasonable consumers understand that undisclosed sponsorship
agreements are in place all over. As a result, the argument goes,
a reasonable consumer should know that the person touting a di-
etary supplement in the comments of a blog or writing her own blog
or newsletter may in fact be a paid shill. A reasonable consumer
should expect that any time she sees a car on television it appears
as a result of a sponsorship arrangement.

I think this idea has unappealing consequences for dynamic ef-
ficiency, among other things. If the reasonable consumer has to
assume that everyone else might be lying about their identity, we

13 See, e.g., Letter from Gary Ruskin, Executive Director, Commercial Alert, to Do-
nald Clark, Secretary, Fed. Trade Comm’n (Sept. 30, 2003), available at
14 See Zahr Said Stauffer, Embedded Advertising and the Venture Consumer, 89 N.C.
L. Rev. 99, 106 (2010) (arguing that the modern “venture consumer” “has a sophisticated
and perhaps even cynical view of the relationship between content producers and adver-
tisers. The venture consumer has less need for, and—one might speculate—
comparatively less interest in, what sponsorship disclosure law can offer”).
have the classic problem of the “market for lemons.”\textsuperscript{15} In the absence of external verification, the consumer has to assume that everybody is lying and discount everybody’s information, including that from actually independent sources.\textsuperscript{16} We need ways of sorting and evaluating the credibility of sources, but to the extent that a marketer can pretend to be someone else, many of those ways lose their force as well.

Some people suggest that consumers will eventually figure out who to trust, once consumers get used to the internet.\textsuperscript{17} But media are always in transition, and people have not gotten demonstrably better at figuring out credibility without help from an external regulator. It has now been over sixteen years since the enactment of the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (“DSHEA”), and the FDA has extremely compelling evidence that consumers do not understand that supplement claims are essentially unregulated by the FDA.\textsuperscript{18}

Does a reasonable consumer expect that weknowdiets.com, “a comprehensive database of information for people who are looking


\textsuperscript{16} This is related to the problem of heterogeneity, which is that we do not have the gatekeepers we once had; almost anyone can post a review on Amazon. If, say, ten of every comment or apparently informative article you read are actually sponsored by someone with a financial interest, you would not know which ten. So your discounting will inevitably be over inclusive—you will overly discount reviews that are actually independent and, if you are truly applying an average discount, you will also insufficiently discount those reviews that actually do come from a self-interested party. That’s inefficiency. See Tushnet, Attention Must be Paid, supra note 15, at 759–60. By contrast, a labeling rule telling you who sponsored what would allow differential discounting. There are efficiency costs to labeling as well, so I don’t want to contend that efficiency alone, absent normative considerations, provides an obvious answer.

\textsuperscript{17} See Said Stauffer, supra note 14, at 168 (“The venture consumer, unlike the novice researcher once tempted to rely on information merely because it existed online, has learned to interrogate her sources. If she has not yet learned this lesson, she must.”).

for a trimmer body and healthier lifestyle,” has undisclosed corporate sponsors and does not make independent recommendations?

On this site, “this week’s Editor’s Choice Award” for several months running was MiracleBurn®, which actually owned and operated this site. The Federal Trade Commission and the National Advertising Division of the Better Business Bureau both look with disfavor on these types of “astroturfing,” because they pollute the information environment and mislead consumers to think that such sites are as reliable as those offered by truly independent reviewers.\(^\text{19}\) I think the FTC and the NAD are right about how consumers

actually do perceive sites like this that do not disclose their sponsorship.

But aside from the descriptive point, I want to ask about the normative implications of positing that consumers expect undisclosed sponsorship. It would be a bad idea for us to live in a world where consumers expect that all mentions of a trademark are authorized, and we should push the law in the direction of preventing any such totalizing ownership claims. If the law were to take the position that a reasonable consumer in the modern ad-saturated economy must expect an association between a trademark owner and a depiction of the trademarked good or service (unless perhaps the depiction is relentlessly negative), then trademark owners’ control would expand unacceptably.

Consider product reviews. If the law were to take the position that reasonable consumers expect that there are lots of undisclosed connections between trademark owners and people who talk about trademarked goods and services, then trademark owners will be able to argue actionable confusion among a substantial percentage of reasonable consumers when reviews are not to their taste. (It is important to remember here that trademark law is willing to find actionable confusion when far less than a majority of consumers are confused—20% will regularly support an injunction, and plaintiffs have succeeded on far weaker showings.)

There are many plausible scenarios in which a rational trademark owner would object to a review, even one that wasn’t a vicious attack. Examples include positive but profane reviews, racist reviews, otherwise untoward reviews, mixed reviews, or reviews appearing alongside content which the trademark owner does not approve. Stealth marketers are, in fact, often accused of allowing supposedly skeptical reviews to appear alongside the positive ones.

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20 See, e.g., R.J.R. Foods, Inc. v. White Rock Corp., 603 F.2d 1058 (2d Cir. 1979) (upholding trial court’s finding of a trade dress infringement based in part on “the results of a consumer study showing a fifteen to twenty percent rate of product confusion”); James Burrough Ltd. v. Sign of Beefeater, Inc., 540 F.2d 266 (7th Cir. 1976) (holding that a 15% rate of consumer confusion was sufficient to support of finding of trademark infringement).
to make the overall site seem credible and to make the positive reviews seem just a little bit smarter in comparison.\footnote{21}

Thus, in a world where labeling of sponsorship is not the default, a reasonable consumer might even think that a trademark owner was behind a negative review—at least, the trademark owner would have every incentive to make this claim when threatening publishers of negative reviews. And, although Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act is designed to decrease self-censorship by immunizing online service providers from most torts committed by user-provided content, Section 230 explicitly excludes intellectual property violations from its coverage.\footnote{22} Thus, if what were defamation claims against a bad review became trademark claims, service providers would be pushed in the direction of automatically taking down challenged reviews to avoid secondary liability for distributing those reviews.

Similar problems of distorting belief arise with situations such as appearances in expressive works, where trademark owners may pay for less-than-perfect portrayals. On 30 Rock, Tina Fey mocked General Electric’s sponsorship while receiving it, following in the footsteps of Wayne and Garth of the movie Wayne’s World.\footnote{23} Sponsorship by the trademark owner is filling a place that we might once have thought reserved for parody, which we would have expected twenty years ago to actually be unauthorized. To take another example, 7-11 ran a promotion briefly rebranding itself as the Quik-E-Mart, which began as a parody of 7-11 in The Simpsons.\footnote{24} Mattel licensed the song Barbie Girl for use in its commercials\footnote{25} after unsuccessfully suing the record label for
trademark infringement and losing the case because the song was a successful commentary on Barbie’s plastic values.26

The problem goes deeper than entertainment promoted as such: some “real” news is fake. The “video news release” is a notorious example of advertiser-generated content presented to seem independent.27 The most sophisticated versions include space for a local broadcaster to put in questions from its reporters to make it look as if the station reported the story.28 If the savvy consumer believes that undisclosed sponsors lurk on every screen, then she could be confused about the source or sponsorship of actually independent productions.

Consider also rivalry figurines, which show one sports team’s heroic mascot dominating a rival’s pathetic mascot.29 These are licensed by both teams, though the pathetic team gets a smaller share of the revenues.

26 See Mattel, Inc. v. MCA Records, Inc., 296 F.3d 894, 907 (9th Cir. 2002).
If we took the existence of a licensing market for parodies as evidence that trademark owners were legitimately entitled to control such markets, because consumers expected that control, we would cut off important avenues of social and political criticism. Recall Ralph Nader’s successful defense against MasterCard when one of Nader’s political ads spoofed the “Priceless” ad campaign and slogan by arguing that other politicians were for sale.30 When Stephen Colbert “runs” for president in a campaign that actually appears to be sponsored by Doritos,31 and when the Supreme Court has endorsed unlimited corporate spending on campaigns,32 how are consumers to know where the line is to be drawn? Skepticism, supposedly a way for consumers to protect themselves according to the anti-disclosure account, can therefore lay the ground for confusion of another kind. In a low-trust world, we misunderstand the signals from the truly reliable and independent.

Trademark now faces the same problem copyright did in the past few decades: the emergence of owners who largely do not care about good reputation, but are satisfied just to get paid.33 This is the Paris Hilton model of licensing, where there is no such thing as bad publicity.34 Copyright dealt with this by declaring certain markets off-limits to copyright owners’ exclusive control despite their empirical willingness to license in those markets, because of society’s greater need for freedom of commentary, parody, and

34 See Hilton v. Hallmark Cards, 580 F.3d 874 (9th Cir. 2010) (finding that Hilton had a valid claim against a greeting card that seemed to make fun of her participation in a reality show).
analysis.\textsuperscript{35} Trademark needs to do this too, despite the official stories we tell about how trademark rights are generally defined by consumer perception.\textsuperscript{36}

First Amendment doctrine could do something for us here. In First Amendment law, we are used to accepting statements about audiences that we know are not true. These statements sound as if they are descriptive, but they are in fact normative statements.\textsuperscript{37} In part because we think the regulatory alternative is too dangerous, audiences for political speech must be treated as if they are able to make careful distinctions and judgments and weigh evidence for themselves, even when the speech at issue is probably misleading.\textsuperscript{38} We are thus committed to a particular definition of the “reasonable citizen,” regardless of how competent real citizens are or are not.

\textsuperscript{35} See, e.g., Bill Graham Archives v. Dorling Kindersley Ltd., 448 F.3d 605, 614–15 (2d Cir. 2006) (“[A] copyright holder cannot prevent others from entering fair use markets merely ‘by developing or licensing a market for parody, news reporting, educational or other transformative uses of its own creative work.’” (quoting Castle Rock Entm’t, Inc. v. Carol Publ’g Grp., Inc., 150 F.3d 132, 146 n.11 (2d Cir. 1998)); Twin Peaks Prods. v. Publ’ns Int’l, Ltd., 996 F.2d 1366, 1377 (2d Cir. 1993) (“A copyright holder’s protection of its market for derivative works of course cannot enable it to bar publication of works of comment, criticism, or news reporting whose commercial success is enhanced by the wide appeal of the copyrighted work.”)).


\textsuperscript{37} See, e.g., Lyrissa Barnett Lidsky & Thomas F. Cotter, Authorship, Audiences, and Anonymous Speech, 82 NOTRE DAME L. REV. 1537, 1586 (2007) (“The presumption that audiences will respond rationally to speech is integrally related to a second fundamental presumption in First Amendment jurisprudence, namely, that truth is best gathered ‘out of a multitude of tongues.’” (citation omitted); Neil Weinstock Netanel, Locating Copyright Within the First Amendment Skein, 54 STAN. L. REV. 1, 34 (2001) (“First Amendment jurisprudence posits that government officials should treat citizens as fundamentally rational, autonomous agents, capable of weighing the value and probity of speech for themselves.”); James Weinstein, Speech Categorization and the Limits of First Amendment Formalism: Lessons From Nike v. Kasky, 54 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 1091, 1137 n.157 (2004) (discussing “the core democratic precept that the government must treat listeners in their citizenship capacity as rational agents”).

\textsuperscript{38} See supra note 37 and sources cited therein.
Similarly, there is good reason to commit to a normative view of the “reasonable consumer” who does not need to expect undisclosed control, or even undisclosed ties, between a trademark owner and a person referencing, reviewing, parodying, or otherwise engaging with a trademark. The fact that product placement and unbranding are pervasive in some sectors of the economy should therefore be legally irrelevant to claims of likely confusion over unauthorized uses, even if those unauthorized uses look like product placement.

This principle can be reconceptualized as a matter of fairness: if a trademark owner gives up apparent control, it should not be allowed to claim a right to exercise real control over other people with whom it never actually contracted, even if those people are doing things that look like what the trademark owner (surreptitiously) authorized. In other words, even if trademark owners are covering the ground with “astroturf,” they should not be able thereby to control the real grassroots. Otherwise, when it comes to fooling consumers, trademark owners are in a “heads I win, tails you lose” position: able to disguise their involvement with apparently independent speakers and then rein in actual independent voices.