Things Fall Apart: The Dynamics of Brand Audience Dissipation

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Contribution statement:

This paper introduces two concepts, first the notion of an epistemic brand and second, the notion of brand audience dissipation. It uses an assemblage theoretic perspective to understand the process of audience dissipation for an epistemic brand and the role of consumers in that process. In addition, it offers a conceptualization of aggregation of consumers that distinguishes between brand community, consumption communities and audiences and points to heterogeneity within latter.

Abstract

While a considerable amount is known about how fans of a brand can contribute to the value enjoyed by other members of its audience, much less is known about the processes by which fans contribute to the dissipation of that audience. Drawing on longitudinal data on the *America's Next Top Model* brand and conceptualizing brands as assemblages of elements with varying capacities, we examine how fans exercising their expressive capacities can, in conjunction with other elements of the assemblage that have salient material capacities, contribute to the dissipation of audiences of which they have been members. Our work advances conversations on consumers' roles in brand value creation by examining a related but distinct phenomenon: consumers' roles in brand audience dissipation. Furthermore, it highlights brand audience as a construct that is distinct from but related to other aggregations of consumers, providing conceptual clarification for future work at varying levels of aggregation.

> Three stars of *America's Next Top Model* have been dropped from the long-running TV show, after falling ratings. Photographer Nigel Barker, runway coach J. Alexander and photo-shoot director Jay Manuel will not return, said the show's host Tyra Banks. The show follows a group of girls as they are put through a series of modelling tests in order to become the ultimate series winner. Barker said he had been expecting to be dropped for some time. "It wasn't a shock. I'm friends with Tyra and the producers," the photographer, who joined the show in 2004, told E! News. "There had been a discussion that ratings were down and that something like this would happen…." *America's Next Top Model*, which airs on the CW channel in the US, has lost more than half of its 2005 audience, and is currently watched by less than two million people. (BBC News Arts and Entertainment 2012)

The phenomenon of a once-powerful brand losing popularity is far from rare. It is particularly visible among serial entertainment brands, such as *America's Next Top Model* (ANTM), which is referred to in the quotation above. Serial entertainment brands such as ANTM share with some other brands the property of being epistemic consumption objects (Zwick and Dholakia 2006); that is, they are always changing and unfolding over time and thus can evoke attentive sense-making efforts on the part of engaged consumers. We refer to serial entertainment brands as "epistemic brands"; examples of other categories of epistemic brands include celebrities (e.g., Beyonce), sports teams (e.g., Manchester United), and corporate brands (e.g., Apple). In this paper, our interest focuses on the processes that lead audiences to gradually stop trying to make sense of an epistemic brand and to turn their attention elsewhere.

Research has frequently examined fan engagement with epistemic brands (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Kozinets 1997, 2001; Lanier and Schau 2007; Schau and Bucchanan-Oliver 2012; Schau and Muniz 2004). A particularly relevant addition to this literature is Russell and Schau's (forthcoming) study of how highly engaged audience members cope when brands they are avidly following are withdrawn from the market. Yet, while we know a considerable amount about how fans engage with and add value to fellow audience members' experiences of such brands, we as yet know little about the processes that result in the majority of fans turning their attention away from a brand even while producers are attempting to sustain its life span. We refer to the process of audience loss as "brand audience dissipation."

Most extant research that sheds light on why consumers grow disenchanted with a once-favored brand (Commuri 2009; Grégoire and Fisher 2006, 2008; Johnson, Thomson, and Matear 2011) is of limited value to understanding the loss of attention by a fan base because it explains individual, not audience, level defection from brands. Somewhat more relevant to our audience-level focus are certain studies of "satiation" with entertainment brands. The satiation perspective holds that consumers can become satiated on specific attributes of goods after consumption exceeds a certain level, after which they seek variety (McAllister 1982). Such accounts have been used to explain why fans of serial entertainment brands, such as movie franchises, prefer sequels that have individual names to sequels that are numbered (Sood and Drèze 2006): it is posited that sequels with names promise more variation from the original movie than those that are merely numbered. These accounts, however, cannot explain why audiences continue to pay attention to and engage with some brands that introduce variety while losing interest in others that do so.

Nor do they shed light on why satiation—if satiation is indeed what accounts for attention loss among consumers of epistemic brands—sets in among a wide swath of fans at or around the same time. Moreover, these accounts render fans as passive recipients of brand offerings, taking little account of the notion that consumers may actively try to understand epistemic consumption objects, such as serial entertainment brands.

Thus, available theoretical perspectives seem unlikely to allow us to address our central research questions which are: what are the dynamics of audience dissipation, and how do consumers contribute to these dynamics? To address these questions, we adopt the perspective that brands can be regarded as "assemblages" comprising heterogeneous and evolving sets of elements with varying capacities. Various scholars, such as DeLanda (2006) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987), have developed assemblage theories. Consumer researchers have recently adapted these theories to explain the stabilization and potential destabilization of individual consumers' experiences (Canniford and Shankar 2013), of families' practices (Epp, Schau and Price 2013), and of consumption communities (Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013). Sociologists have recently argued that brands, too, can be regarded as assemblages (Enwistle and Slater 2012, 2013; Lury 2009). An assemblage theoretic perspective is particularly suitable for studying brand audience dissipation for several reasons.

First, assemblages are conceptualized as networks of diverse components that interact with one another in ways that can either stabilize or destabilize a brand's identity (DeLanda 2006, 12). In a social assemblage such as a brand, these network elements can include both people and things, such as the consumers of the brand, the elements of the product itself, and the technologies of distribution that allow the consumer to access the

brand. Conceptualizing brands as networks that include not only elements that marketers directly or indirectly control but also the audiences they are able to enroll (however temporarily) facilitates consideration of how consumers, as parts of an assemblage interacting with other assemblage elements, may contribute to its destabilization.

A second helpful element of assemblage theories is that they draw attention to the "capacities" of assemblage elements: capacities are defined as what components have the potential to do when they interact with other social entities (DeLanda 2006, 7). One type of capacity is "material," which refers to an element's potential for shaping or supporting interactions of elements; another type is "expressive," which refers to the extent to which an element of an assemblage can, in interaction, stabilize or destabilize the identity of the assemblage (DeLanda 2006, 12-15). Considering the material and expressive capacities of brand assemblage elements in conjunction helps draw attention to how elements exercising a largely material capacity (e.g., platforms supporting fan communication) may interact with those exercising an expressive capacity (e.g., fans conveying their interpretations of events on an episode of a show) and thus contribute to processes that stabilize or destabilize the assemblage.

The third notable premise of assemblage perspectives is that the elements of assemblages are not fixed (DeLanda 2006; Epp and Price 2010). Rather, new elements can be integrated into an assemblage, and those that were once central to it can detach from it. This idea corresponds well to what we know about how powerful brands evolve over time through the introduction of new "stories" (Brown 2005; Holt 2004; Sherry 2005). It also facilitates examining the processes that might lead audiences to become disentangled from the brand assemblage. Indeed, a focus on the loss of elements from an

assemblage and on its destabilization is consistent with an assemblage theoretic perspective: a major premise of such perspectives is that assemblages are constantly at risk of breakdown (Law 2009, 2). As Canniford and Shankar (2013, 1059) note in studying how consumers form assemblages to experience nature, "resources often fail to work together." They adopt Callon's (1986) term "betrayal" to refer to the destabilization that occurs in an assemblage when elements cease to cohere and the identity of the assemblage is destabilized. This notion of the potential for "betrayals" or breakdowns seems particularly relevant given our focus on the processes that give rise to audience dissipation.

We use this assemblage perspective to answer our research questions regarding the dynamics of audience dissipation and how consumers contribute to these dynamics. We draw on data collected in the context of the brand ANTM. Through our analysis, we identify three framing processes through which fans within a brand assemblage contribute to audience dissipation; these include framing new elements as contradictions, framing existing elements as tarnished, and framing the loss of element as brand erosion. We also identify the important role of two elements with critical material capacities: discussion boards and media covering fan interpretations of the brand.

Our research is important because it complements individual-level work that illuminates why consumers actively turn against brands they once loved (Grégoire and Fisher 2006, 2008; Johnson et al. 2011), illuminating why a fan base may gradually lose interest in brands that once held their attention. We also complement existing work at the audience level that analyzes the value of creating practices common within brand communities (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009) by highlighting how brand value may be

diminished by those most engaged with the brand or its community. Our research is also important because our field's understanding of how brands decline—which accompanies audience dissipation—is limited relative to its understanding of how they emerge and thrive. While examples of accounts of successful brands abound (Brown et al. 2003; Diamond et al. 2009; Giesler 2012; Holt 2004; Thompson and Tian 2008), few address the decline of once powerful brands.

To establish a foundation for our work, we review prior literature relevant to understanding consumer (dis)engagement with brands. We then outline our methodology and describe our findings. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings and directions for future research.

UNDERSTANDING BRAND (DIS)ENGAGEMENT

Individual consumers' relationships with brands have been the subject of much research, especially since Fournier's (1998) seminal article on the topic. Given our audience-level focus, however, we cannot anchor our work conceptually in the brand relationship literature, because it is not clear that all audience members feel a relationship with a brand to which they pay attention. For example, Thomson (2006) distinguishes between celebrities to whom consumers pay attention but feel little attachment and those to whom they pay attention and feel strongly attached. Thus, we regard individual-level brand relationships and audience brand engagement as distinct concepts. That said, we highlight some selected brand relationship studies that help shape our understanding of disengagement from, or loss of attention to, a brand.

Of particular interest is research on relationship trajectories that entail decline or erosion. Fournier (1998) notes that brand relationships only sometimes involve committed, continuous partnerships: relationships instead can evolve through gradual growth, to decline, to a plateau; can emerge and erode quickly like a passing fling; or can exhibit a cyclical resurgence. Fournier stops short of explaining the factors that precipitate relationship erosion or decline, but studies conducted since have addressed this gap. For example, Grégoire and Fisher (2008) find a "love becomes hate" effect when once-loyal consumers feel that brands have done them an injustice by violating a perceived norm of fairness; under such conditions, they may retaliate by, for example, posting negative word of mouth about the brand. Johnson et al. (2011) find that brand relationships that are highly self-relevant are those that are most likely to be transformed into brand enmity that entails antibrand behaviors. Interestingly, Johnson et al. (2011) find that those who have used a brand but have little sense that it is self-relevant are unlikely to become actively hostile toward it when they stop patronizing it. Finally, Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004) find that relationship trajectories are a function not just of the consumer's relationship with the brand but also of brands' identities. For example, they find that brands positioned as "exciting" are less apt than those positioned as "sincere" to suffer relationship decay as a result of some transgression. These studies help provide the profile of a fan who will become a brand antagonist (more likely a passionate fan who once found a brand self-relevant) versus one who will simply start ignoring a brand to which he or she once paid attention (more likely someone who once found a brand entertaining or useful). They also draw attention to the idea that characteristics of the brand identity (e.g., brand personality) matter to how consumers

react when potentially destabilizing events, such as a brand transgression, occur. However, these studies do little to illuminate why the majority of an audience will gradually stop paying attention to an epistemic brand at the same time.

Consumer research on brand communities is more aligned with our audience level of analysis. Considerable work on brand communities has highlighted how they serve identity-reinforcing and affiliation need–related purposes for members (Kates 2004; Kozinets 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005). This research is helpful for understanding the importance of consumer–brand and consumer–consumer relationships within brand communities (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002), but it stops short of shedding light on audience dissipation. Potentially more relevant is brand community research that explores the common practices exhibited by members of brand communities (Schau et al. 2009). Although this work focuses on value creation, and has been silent on audience dissipation, we view the practices it highlights as potentially relevant to both processes. Other relevant work at the collective level is that of Humphreys (2013), who investigates not audience dissipation but audience formation in an "attention economy" (see also Humphreys and Kozinets 2009). Humphreys (2013) notes that attention is a scarce commodity in contemporary markets in which, for example, YouTube upstarts vie with established (person) brands for attention. She posits that a critical factor in accumulating an audience is for early fans to cultivate new fans by publicizing the work of the emerging attention-object. Although Humphreys stops short of elucidating how or why audiences may shift their attention away from an emerging or established brand, her focus on the roles of consumers in brand audience accumulation informs our investigation of their potential role in brand audience dissipation.

METHOD

Context

To answer our research questions, we investigated ANTM, a reality television (TV) series once considered one of the most popular brands in its category (Marikar 2009). Created in 2003 by the model Tyra Banks and broadcast twice a year, ANTM has produced 20 cycles (cycle 20 was on the air at the time of submitting this manuscript). Every cycle features a small group of aspiring fashion models living together under one roof and competing over several weeks in various challenges. Each one-hour episode follows reality TV script convention as contestants' characters are revealed through the narration of their ongoing trials and tribulations. Insider tips and techniques are shared as industry professionals teach the contestants the art of modeling and the tacit norms of the fashion industry. The cycles' highlights include contestants' dramatic makeovers, trips to a new international destination each cycle, attendance at "go-sees" (i.e., casting calls), and a spectacular finale. At the end of each episode, a panel of expert judges led by Banks evaluates the aspiring models' weekly performances and eliminates one contestant. In the final episode of each cycle, a single contestant is awarded the ANTM title and prizes, such as a contract with a reputable modeling agency, a cover and spread in a fashion magazine, and a lucrative contract with a cosmetic brand.

Before concluding our characterization of the ANTM context, we review how its audience has altered over time. Drawing on data purchased from the Nielsen Company, we trace the trajectory not only of ANTM's audience but also of some brands in the same category. Although ANTM has been a successful brand for many years, its audience is

now at risk of dissipation. Data shown in figure 1 indicate that while the series enjoyed relatively stable viewership until its ninth cycle (2007), it has experienced steadily decline in viewership from cycle 10 onward.

- INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE –

To consider the possibility that ANTM's fate is simply tied to that of the reality TV genre, we compared ANTM's percentage changes in viewership each year with that of two relevant serial entertainment brands in the same category: *American Idol* (AI) and *Project Runway* (PR). We chose AI because of its indisputable popularity and position as a leader in this category (Jenkins 2006), and we chose PR because it is anchored in the fashion industry, like ANTM. The data depicted in table 1 indicate that all three programs enjoyed increases or remained reasonably constant in viewership from their inception until 2007.

- INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE –

Between 2007 and 2008, AI experienced a decline in viewership of 6.1%, while PR enjoyed an increase of 15.02%. In contrast, ANTM experienced a precipitous decline in viewership of 18.15%. In the years between 2008 and 2012, the cumulative drop in ANTM's ratings has been far greater than that of AI or PR. This suggests that though demand in the reality TV category may be softening, the decline in ANTM's viewership cannot be attributed merely to fatigue with the category or to a disinterest among viewers in the fashion industry. Thus, our research explores the audience dissipation of a brand that was once a global powerhouse with syndication in more than 120 countries and brand extensions such as a set of ANTM dolls by Bratz doll maker MGA Entertainment (Grant 2008).

Research Procedures

To examine the processes by which an epistemic brand's audience dissipates, and how fans themselves affect the processes of brand audience dissipation, we adopted a longitudinal approach. We derive our data from a multisite netnography (Kozinets 2010), product and promotional materials, Nielsen Company national average TV ratings, and press commentaries.

First, from Spring 2007 to Spring 2009, while ANTM was at the height of its popularity, the first author became fully immersed in the brand community. Participant observation involved being engaged on ANTM-related discussion boards, specifically Television Without Pity (TWoP), Fans of Reality TV (FORT), Reality TV Games (RTVG), and The CW Model Lounge (selection was based on insight from preliminary interviews with fans and casual observation conducted as an audience member between 2005 and 2007). Engagement ranged from following specific discussion threads, to asking or answering questions, to participating in extensive discussions, and, occasionally, to exchanging e-mails or private messages with other fans and a former ANTM contestant. Participant observation also involved regular reading of media coverage of ANTM using Google Alerts (press, websites, and blogs) and watching ANTM, its franchises (e.g., *Canada's Next Top Model*), and competitor series (*The Janice Dickinson Modeling Agency, Make Me a Supermodel, A Model Life,* and *The Agency*). Immersion in the context also led to attending *The Tyra Banks Show* and *Next Top Model* auditions in New York City and Toronto. Reports from participation at these events were shared with other fans. From summer 2009 onward, as ANTM ratings were slipping and online activity declining, the first author pursued observation and began monitoring ANTM

social networking data through tweets, news feeds, and channels from the series official accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Throughout the project, the netnographic data collected included publicly available user-generated content (e.g., posts on discussion boards, social networking sites, and blogs, YouTube videos, memes, and fan art), interview transcripts, e-mails and private messages, and field notes.

Second, both authors collected all ANTM cycles as well as available promotional materials (e.g., advertising posters, flyers, TV spots), evidence of prizes (e.g., winners' covers and ANTM-related profiles in magazines), memorabilia (e.g., dolls), and website materials (e.g., schedules) from ANTM's official network, the CW, and other syndicated North American networks.

Furthermore, to gain insight into the timing and magnitude of the brand's decline in popularity, we purchased national average TV ratings for cycles of ANTM (2003–2012, for 18 cycles) from the Nielsen Company. To get a better sense of the historical evolution of the competition-based reality series product category, we also purchased audience ratings for the same period for AI and PR. Finally, we used press coverage from *The New York Times* to understand judges, contestants, and competition.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was an iterative process of interpreting; deriving new questions; searching for and collecting new data; and rejecting, confirming, and refining our emerging interpretation until reaching sufficient interpretive convergence and theoretical saturation. Following Kozinets (2010) and other scholars (Muniz and Schau 2005) we adopted netnographic conventions in our analysis, moving continuously among

the various sources of data. We used ATLAS.ti software to assist in this process. As our focus on brand audience dissipation emerged, and as we applied concepts from assemblage theory to understand this phenomenon, our analysis focused on how fans exercised their expressive capacities.

FINDINGS

Figure 2 provides an overview of our insights into the process of brand audience dissipation. Here, we briefly describe them; in the paragraphs that follow we elaborate. Our theory suggests that after initial elements of a brand are assembled by the producer, and audience members plus elements of intersecting assemblages are enrolled, changes to the elements of the assemblage arise partly owing to deliberate actions on the part of the brands' producers. As the assemblage elements change, fans of the epistemic brand may exercise their expressive capacities to frame the changes as detrimental to the brand. Specifically, when fans frame changes as contradicting, tarnishing, or eroding elements that support the brand's identity, audience dissipation is fueled. The material capacities of elements of assemblage—in particular, discussion boards and media covering fan framing—are essential to this process because they facilitate communication of the framing offered by some fans to a wider portion of the audience. In the next section, we identify the key founding elements of the ANTM brand assemblage that made up the brand at inception, as well elements of intersecting assemblages, because these are the points of departure for the destabilizing processes fueled by fans.

-INSERT FIGURE 2-

An Assemblage Theoretic Characterization of the ANTM Brand

Our analysis indicates that three narratives informed the brand's identity in its early phases and were supported by elements with varying material and expressive capacities. The first is the *narrative of high fashion.* In the fashion industry as a whole, haute couture garments custom-made by a select group of fashion designers (http://www.modeaparis.com/en/federation/) embody the notion of high fashion as artifacts and practices that are trendsetting, artistic, and exclusive. In the modeling subfield of the fashion industry, the narrative of high fashion is inextricably linked with certain kinds of modeling contracts, known in the industry as "editorial work," that involve demonstration of artistic sensibility (Parmentier, Fischer and Reuber 2013). Among modeling industry insiders, only a select subset of models are regarded as having the editorial looks or unconventional beauty that deviates from popular taste but that allows them to engage credibly in editorial work (Entwistle 2002).

At its inception, ANTM's premise was that it would select contestants capable of getting editorial modeling work as America's next top model. It was purportedly for this reason that fans were originally denied the opportunity to vote on which contestants would advance through the competition, a practice common in other reality TV talent competitions. According to the creators of the show:

> Unlike the world of *American Idol* which is "you like that singer or you don't like that singer", the fashion world is very different because there are very specific skills and very specific looks that the fashion world wants and that much differs from mainstream popular taste. So, we really couldn't have the American public vote on this one. We had to have a panel of true fashion experts

> who could make that decision. (Ken Mok, *Special Features: Reliving the First Season ANTM Cycle 1 DVD*, 2005)

By highlighting the selective tastes and knowledge of industry insiders and eschewing the uneducated preferences of fans, ANTM deliberately aligned itself with the narrative of high fashion.

The second founding narrative of ANTM is the *narrative of meritocracy*. This narrative is particularly prevalent in North America and suggests that an individual's advancement will be the outcome of his or her ability and achievements (Frank and Cook 1995). In its ideal form, this narrative affirms that no barriers, such as social class or race, will be impediments to "getting ahead" so long as one works hard and has the requisite talents (Wheelock Stahl 2002, 221). The narrative of meritocracy underlies ANTM's premise that its judges will consistently select the one deserving champion, out of its selective set of contenders, who truly has "what it takes to be … *America's Next Top Model*" (see figure 3). This narrative is not unique to ANTM, but is rather common across reality-based TV competitions (Murray and Ouellette 2009).

-INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE-

The third founding ANTM narrative is what we refer to as *girls behaving badly*. We define this as a celebration of the cattiness found in "girly-girl" culture (Orenstein 2011). One blogger from the entertainment news website Wetpaint provides an illustrative summary of how this narrative is typically associated with ANTM:

> The trouble with women living together (never mind competing for a modeling contract and living together) is that a fight can erupt over anything—lotion, dish detergent, Mentos. And those are just the really serious arguments. There are also

> those daily spats rooted in some tragic misstep: someone pronounces a word incorrectly, breathes weird, or makes a strange face while eating salt and vinegar chips only to have a roommate accuse her of sabotage. (Lauren Bull, Wetpaint, August 11, 2010)

ANTM reinforces this narrative through its advertising efforts with taglines such as "Being beautiful can get really ugly: 10 women, 8 weeks, 1 house" (print advertising, ANTM cycle 1) or "Welcome to the jungle, ladies" (print advertising, ANTM cycle 8).

These identity-defining narratives were supported by multiple elements of the ANTM series with varying material and expressive capacities elements, such as sets, advertising, and the production equipment used to film and edit the show. However, we identified three particular elements of ANTM that were originally integral parts of the assemblage and that were supported by and supportive of the narratives outlined above. The first is *recurring contestant character types.* Although more than 200 contestants have appeared on the series, a small set of recurring character types has consistently been enacted by contestants (Fetters 2013). Recurring types are often important elements of reality TV programming (Burnett 2001; Hearn 2006). On ANTM, the "ugly duckling," the "underdog, and the "mean girl" are three particularly noteworthy types, each of which can be seen to be linked to one of the brands identity narratives.

The ugly duckling character type is closely associated with the high fashion narrative in the modeling field. Stories abound of successful models who were, as children, teased for being too tall, too thin, or for being ugly (Entwistle 2002). Like Hans Christian Andersen's misfit who eventually found his place among beautiful swans, odd-looking young women may find that they belong with another kind of elegant species:

editorial fashion models. On ANTM, contestants Shandy Sullivan (ANTM cycle 2) and cycle 15 winner Ann Ward typify this archetype.

The underdog constitutes a second character type and resonates with the narrative of meritocracy. Paharia et al. (2011b) find that consumers appreciate brands positioned as underdogs who come from behind to succeed; such character types are also popular in competition-based reality TV (Paharia, Keinan, and Avery 2011a). On ANTM, contestants like Heather Kuzmich (ANTM cycle 9) embody the underdog type. The link between such a character and the narrative of meritocracy is reflected in the following:

> Heather Kuzmich has the neurological disorder known as Asperger's syndrome. She is socially awkward, has trouble making eye contact and is sometimes the target of her roommates' jokes.... A gifted art student from Valparaiso, Ind., she has a lean and angular look well suited to the fashion industry.… Early in the show, she appears socially isolated, the girls whisper about her within earshot, and viewers see her crying on the phone to her mother.… But while Heather's odd mannerisms separate her from her roommates, those same traits translate as on-the-edge high fashion in her modeling sessions.... Ms. Banks, the '60s-era model Twiggy, and the fashion photographer Nigel Barker, who all appear on the show, marvel at Heather's ability to connect with the camera. (Tara Parker-Pope, *The New York Times*, December 4, 2007)

Media observations such as these both reflect and reinforce the underdog character type and its link with the narrative of meritocracy.

The mean girl is a third contestant character type, and fits with the girls-behaving-badly narrative. Through her displays of aggression and bullying, the mean girl type

amplifies tensions between contestants and ignites malicious melodrama. Jade Cole (ANTM cycle 6), who famously reminded her peers that ANTM did not stand for "America's Next Top Best Friend" (ANTM cycle 6, episode 3); Bianca Golden (ANTM cycle 9); and Alexandria Everett (ANTM cycle 16) are just a subset of contestants who have embodied this character type.

Prestigious prizes are a second important assemblage element supportive of the brand's identity. When ANTM winners are awarded contracts to do a magazine cover and an editorial spread for *Elle Magazine* or *Vogue Italia*'s beauty supplement or to work with reputable agencies such as IMG Models, Ford Models, or Elite Model Management, the high fashion narrative is both instantiated and supported.

Industry insider judges constitute the third element with both material and expressive capacities that we identify as providing support to the brand's identity. Figures recognized for their cultural capital within the fashion modeling field, such as mod-icon Twiggy, American *Vogue* contributing editor André Leon Talley, and one-time supermodel Paulina Porizkova, have all, at various time, held regular positions on the judging panel. Their presence clearly reinforces the high fashion narrative. Moreover, outspoken cast member Janice Dickinson (a former top model) also contributed to the girls-behaving-badly narrative by enacting an antagonistic relationship with Tyra Banks both during episodes of the program and when giving interviews in other venues.

Assemblages Intersecting with ANTM

Any assemblage intersects, that is, shares elements, with other contemporaneous assemblages (DeLanda 2006). The ANTM assemblage intersects with many other

assemblages, such as mainstream media and broadcast networks. One particularly noteworthy intersecting assemblage, given the material capacities of the elements shared with ANTM, is the network of discussion boards. Discussion boards found on websites, such as FORT or TWoP, have been important to ANTM because they feature discussion threads that provide a space where ANTM fans can interact with one another and post information and opinions on episodes, contestants, and judges. As our analysis below will reveal, to understand the role of the expressive capacities exercised by fans in the dissipation of the ANTM audience, it is also important to take into account the material capacities provided by discussion boards with threads devoted to ANTM.

A second assemblage that shares elements with ANTM is media that covers the entertainment industry. This includes outlets devoted specifically to covering the TV shows (e.g., *TV Guide*) and sections within more general media (e.g., *The New York Times*) that cover the industry. Of particular interest to our analysis is media that report on fans' reactions to dynamics in the ANTM brand assemblage.

Dynamics of Audience Dissipation

Having established what we regard as the elements that contributed most to ANTM's identity from the outset, we now examine how fans of this epistemic brand contributed to the destabilization of that identity. Specifically, we discuss how fans may frame new elements as contradictions, frame existing elements as tarnished, or frame elements once present as having eroded.

Framing New Elements as Contradictions. When fans frame changes in the brand assemblage as *contradictions* to the brand as a whole, they interpret elements that were

not previously part of the assemblage as incompatible with preexisting elements. Fans of ANTM engaged vigorously in this kind of framing process when a new element slowly became entangled with the assemblage. This new element, which we refer to as the *persona-branding narrative*, was imported into the ANTM assemblage by virtue of its growing association with ANTM producer and host Tyra Banks. On June 1, 2008, *The New York Times* ran an extensive profile on Banks, providing an account of her migration from celebrity model to media mogul (see figure 4).

-INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE-

By 2008, not only was Banks anchoring ANTM, the top rated show for the CW network with syndication in more than 100 countries and countless international adaptations (e.g., *Canada's Next Top Model*), but she was also performing daily on her daytime Emmy-winning talk show *Tyra*. Through these and other ventures, Banks, according to *Forbes*, was earning more than any other woman on prime-time TV (US$30 million; Rose 2009) and attracting more than 13 million viewers weekly (Hirschberg 2008). The *Top Model* creator, who wanted to build "an empire like Oprah's" ("with a little more cleavage") (Samuel and Peyser 2004), was transforming into an entertainment brand of her own.

Although Banks's celebrity had been an important element in drawing viewers to ANTM, her new persona presented a vexation for fans who saw it as both distracting attention from other elements of the ANTM assemblage and as clashing with her original premise as a modeling mentor. Fans active in the Tyra Banks thread on TWoP expressed this irritation as follows:

I think Tyra makes ANTM; I couldn't imagine it without her. I really liked cycles 1-3 because she was more involved and this was all before she decided to become a plump talk-show host. The woman knows how to model and she was a really good mentor in modelling-related issues from cycles 1-3…. She said herself that she puts on a "dramatic" voice for the ANTM eliminations and I just love the cheesy-ness. If Tyra just learned to leave the 'Tyra Show' Tyra at the studio and spent more time coaching the girls in how to model, I'm sure a lot of people would be back on the Banks-Wagon. (Youdee, TWoP, May 30, 2006)

I used to LOVE Tyra. I read all the *Seventeen* magazine with her on the covers, I thought her CG [Cover Girl] ads were cute, I even liked her in the first three seasons of ANTM. I can almost still stand her now, I just have to look at pictures of her when she was a real model to remember why Tyra is amazing. I do not, however, love talk-show Tyra.… Sometimes, Tyra, it is not all about you. Stick to modeling. (LovinTheHawk, TWoP, June 19, 2006)

Once upon a time, Tyra's antics at panel were moderate and made us all believe she was a cool girl who we'd love to hang out with. She seemed like she was down to earth but had ultimate star qualities, presence, charisma, looks and wits, but was still funny and out of the box in a very entertaining way. Then she started getting more and more nuts and self-centered…. (Lucius Hip, *TWoP*, November 30, 2007).

Banks inspired countless spoofs and sarcastic comments not only from fans but also in the media, on comedy programs such as *The Soup* (http://gawker.com/5546298/the-soup-bids-adieu-to-tyra-banks-talk-show), and on pop culture blogs such as Rich Juzwiak's (The Daily, Gawker, fourfour). A typical post is as follows:

> To prepare you for the joyous biannual occasion that is the America's Next Top Model cycle premiere, I've assembled a video montage of an ANTM premiere hallmark: worshipful fawning over Tyra Banks.... And she deserves it -- she works so hard day and night to innovate facial contortions, contradict herself, create arbitrary rules and to insert herself into any relayed story and/or situation. (Rich Juzwiack, fourfour, September 9, 2009)

Producers of the show, perhaps unaware of or indifferent to the fan and media reaction to the introduction of the persona-branding narrative, further entangled it with the ANTM assemblage when they extended it beyond Tyra to the actual contestants. Although originally there were no mentions of contestants needing to create individual personae, by 2011 the practice of requiring them to do so had become entrenched. In cycle 17, titled "All Stars," returning contestants were explicitly instructed in how to build their own brands. The abstract below taken from a formal TWoP recap (see http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/show/americas-next-top-model/recaps/) of the episode provides an illustration:

> Tyra introduces her small manfriend as Martin Lindstrom, a global branding expert…. Apparently he is a genius, who wrote a book called, *Brandwashed: Tricks Companies Use to Manipulate Our Minds and Persuade Us to Buy*….

> He's going to help the girls to corral their 15 minutes of fame into a life-long career.... Tyra leaves, and Martin starts talking to the girls in an accent from the country of Foreignia. He says that they've done pretty well so far, but he hasn't seen them on any magazine covers or TV shows recently. Well, they're on *America's Next Top Model* right now, aren't they? Martin says there's a huge step they have to take now to get to the point of world domination, and that is branding. Martin says that branding is all about one word. For example, if Martin says "cowboy" you think about one particular tobacco brand.… What's Martin's branding word? Mock turtleneck? Shyster? Martin and the crack team of *ANTM* researchers have talked to fans to get perceptions of the girls, and now he's about to share info about their public images with them. (Potes, TWoP, September 26, 2011)

Fans observing the new focus on persona-branding were quick to note the disparity between it and the treasured high fashion narrative that had been part of the original ANTM assemblage. As one fan put it: “I really find it ironic that this show is now focusing on “branding” more than modeling.… [H]ow would you expect consumers to buy your products that you sell when in fact the show has already “given” them a brand” (MickeyMouse, RTVG, May 2, 2012). Another fan noted:

> The 'branding's*** has been the final nail in the coffin for ANTM.... At least the show used to pretend it was about finding serious working models now it seems to be about making yourself a D-list reality TV star. I mean, why is releasing a [recording] single part of the winners prize for a modelling show? Designers, editors etc don't want girls with a really strong identity/look too. They want a

> blank canvas that they can turn into what they want. Later in a model's career when they want to branch out, maybe, but ANTM girls are NOT at that level. (Vague, RTGV, May 3, 2012)

As this last fan post clearly illustrates, fans frame the introduction of an element that emphasizes people seeking to create a memorable, distinctive persona as directly contradicting the narrative of high fashion, which emphasizes that editorial models are meant to be blank slates whose fame in no way interferes with branding of the products they are selling (Parmentier et al. 2013).

Fan engagement in the framing of the persona-branding narrative as contradictory to the original elements of the ANTM assemblage can be compared and contrasted with the doppelgänger brand images that sometimes emerge for high profile brands, such as Botox (Giesler 2012) or Starbucks (Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006). Both constitute challenges to the identity of the brand. However, at least in the instances of doppelgänger brand images studied previously, an unflattering image arises when opponents of the brand reframe or reinterpret original elements of the brand. In the process we highlight here, reframing emerges within the assemblage when avid audience members interpret an element introduced by the producer as inherently contradictory to original, valued elements of the brand.

To provide another illustration of the process of framing new elements as contradictory, we discuss how fans interpreted producers' decisions to begin including contestants whose faces or body types deviate from the ideals of the fashion industry. Fans of ANTM have been quick to note the disconnect between the materiality of contestants who are average in height and weight or conventionally pretty in looks and

the narrative of high fashion, which insists that editorial models are unconventional in terms of their height, slimness, and form of beauty. As one fan writes:

> I … don't see the point in "normal" girls competing on a modeling show…. At the very least they could, you know, actually pick hamsters [fan slang for contestants] who *look* like models." (KFC, TWoP, November 18, 2005).

Fan reactions to individual contestants who deviated in appearance from editorial models, however, were modest in comparison with their reaction to cycle 13, in which the producers decided to feature only "petites" (i.e., women 5'7" and under) as competitors. The following thread illustrates how fans framed this decision as being in direct contradiction to the show's founding high fashion narrative. The first post, from Milkyaqua, begins with a quotation (with capitalization added for effect) from the directions issued by the producers when casting for cycle 13:

> *Quote: "8. You must be AT OR UNDER five feet and seven inches (5'7") in height, although Producers reserve the right to make case-by-case exceptions. Please note the change in this requirement from past cycles of the Series."*
> Good grief what on earth does Tyra have planned for number 13? Both the application and the eligibility requirements state the same thing about the height so I don't think it's a typo. (milkyaqua, TwoP, February 17, 2009)

> It's a joke right? Casting models under 5'7"? Haha Tyra, you can come out now and release the actual application. (soBlu, TWoP, February 17, 2009)

> I guess America's Next Top Petite Model? Surely she won't have them do runway. I mean, I understand because there *is* a petite modeling market, so if she aims it

completely and totally toward that I guess it would be the bitchiness and campiness that I enjoy otherwise, but I'm just not going to deal with it if she tries to put these girls in the same arena with conventional modeling. (JAZ853, TWoP, February 18, 2009)

I swear if this is true, I'm totally gonna boycott this show. (sfs324, TWoP, February 18, 2009)

I don't think there is a petite model market. Maybe commercial, but even then most commercial models hover around 5'6" or so.... So maybe she's teaching them all how to be catalog? Also, this would totally change the prizes. Well, at least the contract with Elite. (nicenessness, TWoP, February 18, 2009)

If this is true, I wish Tyra would make a new show, not at the expense at another cycle. I agree that the girls shouldn't be taught about editorial poses, and the competition should be commercial/catalogue focused. (themilkshakeman, TWoP, February 18, 2009)

I mean, as someone who's short I suppose I'm less opposed to it than others, especially if petite catalog/commercial/whatever is an option, but I'm not in the mood to watch her CHANGE THE INDUSTRY with some poor hamster, and then not really change it. She'll probably go on about how Twiggy is 5'4".

I will be *very* interested to see if Elite and Covergirl stay with her that cycle. (JAZ853, TWoP, February 18, 2009)

I guess we'll find out on 28 Feb when the first open call happens. It plainly states on both the application and eligibility requirements that they want 5'7" and under and to note the change from previous cycles. That's why I don't think it's a joke or a mistake/typo. It's cycle 13 so who knows what Tyra has planned but I'm curious as to who the sponsors/modeling agency are going to be since several of you have brought that up. It's a legit question for sure because all the eligibility requirements says is that the grand prize will include a contract with a modeling agency. (milkyaqua, TWoP, February 18, 2009)

It's possible the typo was not found on both the eligibility and the application, is it possible that someone could call the CW or email the producers about this? I might have to give up ANTM for a cycle if the girls are all 5'5”. (soBlu, TWoP, February 18, 2009)

Could she maybe be focusing solely on spokesmodel work? Acting and actual commercials only? Like, something you'd be on a talent board for but not a model board? We should have all seen this coming eventually. (JAZ853, TWoP, February 19, 2009)

> Tyra has lost her mind! At this point what is the difference between ANTM and The Bad Girls Club???!!! There is no way I am watching a show that doesn't even *pretend* to be about modeling. (ags, TWoP, February 19, 2009)

This conversation nicely illustrates how fans who are attempting to make sense of the epistemic brand exert their expressive capacities in their interpretations of other elements of the brand assemblage. In the first post of this string, Milkyaqua draws on texts issued by the show's producers (the changed eligibility requirements for cycle 13), alerting others that the producers appear to be doing something so contradictory to the show's other elements that it must be a mistake. The initial sense of disbelief at the seeming incongruence between petite models and the high fashion narrative, echoed by others, gives way to a consideration of the implications for fit between this new element and others. For example, it would be incongruous, in JAZ853's opinion, for petite contestants to "do runway." Both Nicenessness and Milkyaqua also point out that it would be incongruous for a petite model to be given the prize of a contract with Elite Model Management. By highlighting the contradictions between preexisting and new elements of the brand assemblage, these fans contribute to the destabilization of the brand's identity in the eyes of others. Their stated intentions of ceasing to watch as a result of these contradictions further suggest the consequences of such destabilization.

The notion that the addition of new elements to an epistemic brand assemblage could trigger processes that undermine that brand seems contradictory to the literature on satiation, which has argued that consumers become satiated after repeated exposure to a brand with certain attributes and that introducing variety can reduce satiation (Nelson, Meyvis, and Galak 2009; Schumann, Petty, and Clemons 1990; Sood and Drèze 2006).

However, the satiation literature has not taken into account the possibility that, for epistemic brands that audiences attempt to understand as they evolve, fans will interpret some new elements as contradictory, even if other new elements complement and help stabilize a brand assemblage.

Framing Existing Elements as Tarnished. The second process we identified through our data analysis is framing existing elements of the brand assemblage as *tarnished*. In what follows, we provide instances of fans (and, subsequently, of the media) framing ANTM's original narrative of meritocracy as tarnished.

In line with conventions of talent-based reality TV programming, most cycles of ANTM have typically begun with audition footage of the contestants. During episode 1 of cycle 9, contestant Saleisha Stowers, prompted by Tyra Banks herself, revealed to the audience that she had attended Banks's "T-Zone self-esteem camp just for girls" as a teenager and thus had a prior connection with the executive producer before entering the competition. Possibly to minimize perceptions of a potential conflict of interest, Banks then said that because she knew Saleisha, she was going to be tougher on her. Despite this assertion, the revelation provoked suspicion among dedicated fans who believed this prior connection could constitute an unfair advantage for Stowers. Suspicion mounted when fans discovered that Stowers had prior experience that violated one of the long-standing eligibility requirements publicized by the show, notably Eligibility Rule #10: "You must not have previous experience as a model in a national campaign including appearances on television" (www.cwtv.com/images/topmodel/antm_cylce9_eligibility.pdf). Fans publicly

questioned whether the key narrative of meritocracy was untainted as they escalated what would become known as the “Scandaleisha” incident.

In that instance, fans created what Jenkins (2006) refers to as collective intelligence through detective work that ultimately provided “evidence” that contestant Saleisha Stowers was included in the set of contenders and eventually won because of favoritism, not merit. This evidence was eventually picked up by the media; as one media outlet reported: “Sharp-eyed fans soon dug up footage showing Saleisha walking the catwalk in an ANTM cycle-six fashion show, as well as appearing on the runway in an episode of *The Tyra Banks Show*. Viewers also found that Saleisha had appeared in a nationwide Wendy's commercial that aired in 2006” (Hall 2007). The following conversation, taking place soon after episode 3 when Stowers’s poor performance landed her in the bottom two, illustrates some of this collective intelligence in action:

> Re: Saleisha - Cycle 9
>
> I was watching the [ANTM] cycle 6 marathon on MTV and did anyone else notice that she [Saleisha] was in the Gen Art fashion show that the girls went to after their makeovers? (sourpatch, FORT, October 6, 2007)
>
> YESSSS!!!!! And I took pics with my phone ... will post in a minute! I knew I saw her!! (ANTM Addict!, FORT, October 6, 2007)
>
> Lol, I looked at those pictures and didn't think it was her, then I turned on that episode on my DVR and, lo and behold, there she was! (It's actually episode 3, if

> you count auditions.) Interesting ... think it's a conspiracy? (StarrieEyedKat, FORT, October 6, 2007)

As the cycle progressed, and fan detective work accrued, the framing of the narrative of meritocracy as a tarnished element gained momentum. One fan wrote of Stowers:

> I think she's incredibly unattractive, both physically and behaviorally and she's yet to show me any real "model" in her, despite all her experience and the great judges comments and blah blah blah.… It's so obvious they are propping her. (watchergirl, TWoP, November 15, 2007)

Another said:

> [I]f Saleisha wins I think I'll really do my damnedest not to watch this show anymore. Unless she makes a major improvement (which I highly doubt) then the 1% of credibility they have left will be flushed down the toilet if she wins. (RealChic1999, TWoP, November 15, 2007).

On December 12, 2007, Saleisha Stowers won the ninth cycle of ANTM. Her win was interpreted by fans as concrete evidence that the narrative of meritocracy had been seriously undermined. The following comment by a fan illustrates some of this disillusionment:

> We're in an era of unaccountability in America right now.… I guarantee that Tyra and her cronies will let Saleisha take the title and the heat while they formulate a strategy to justify their "absentmindedness" on Saleisha's past.… They have become masters at spin and they don't really give a damn what the fans think as long as the ratings are right. I think that is unfortunate because the arrogance of knowingly letting a girl connected to the host into the competition

> in the first place must have made Tyra feel invincible. (Sain, TWoP, December 14, 2007).

As this quotation illustrates, although fans targeted some of their distaste toward the offending contestant, their greatest concerns were with the show's producers and Tyra and her "cronies," whose "spin" suggested that merit matters most but whose actions pointed to blatant favoritism. During cycle 9 and after, fans fueled the framing of the meritocracy narrative as tarnished by spreading bricolage (Jenkins 1992), such as in figure 5, in which a fan satirically adapted Roger Hargreaves's *Little Miss Sunshine* with Saleisha's infamous haircut and an unequivocal title that points to "cheating" rather than merit as the source of Saleisha's success.

- INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE –

We contrast this use of fan art to draw attention to a tarnished narrative with the creation of consumer-generated content that constitutes an evangelizing practice in Schau et al. (2009). While consumer-generated content can help attract new consumers to a brand by enhancing the brand's value, as Schau et al. find, it also has the potential to erode brand value for existing consumers (even though it may entertain them in the process) when it highlights for them tarnished elements of the brand assemblage.

Framing the Loss of Elements as Brand Erosion. The last fan process we identified is framing the loss of an element of the brand assemblage as *erosion.* Erosion framing occurs when fans interpret the departure or dismissal of some element of the show as a loss to the assemblage as a whole. One example is fan reaction to the firing of certain judges, such as former supermodel Janice Dickinson who "made past seasons so damn addictive" (tagline for ANTM's TWoP "Past Season" forum,

http://web.archive.org/web/20130120042015/http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showforum=663). The following quote is from a fan rewatching cycle 3, which featured Dickinson:

> [A] Cycle 3 marathon was on Saturday, and I realized exactly how useful Janice actually was. I came in on the episode where she did a really good lesson on posing in different outfits. She actually took the time to work with [the contestants] individually, and told them some really helpful things. I'm sure this took several hours and we got a 5 or 10 minute montage of it, but she really drove home the whole "how not to pose in a swimsuit" bit. Admittedly, she was pretty damn vicious to Kelle for her entire run, especially the beauty shot critique.… However, I think at the end of the day, there were multiple interpretations to what Janice was saying during her meaner moments. (Domina Noctura, TWoP, May 25, 2009)

This post highlights both the ways Dickinson was framed as supporting the narratives treasured by fans and that her departure from the brand assemblage is regarded as erosion of the brand as a whole. Fans had similar reactions when the three cast members mentioned in the opening vignette of this paper (Nigel Barker, J. Alexander and Jay Manuel) were let go. The next posts serve as illustration of the common reaction on discussion forums and blogs:

> **Re: America's Next Top Model Fires Nigel Barker, J. Alexander and Jay Manuel:** I have to say, when I read this, my jaw dropped. This has got to be a sign of the end. … I don't know what the hell Tyra is thinking.” (Critical, Moderator, *FORT*, April 20, 2012)

> Loyal America's Next Top Model fans might have a hard time processing this news: Tyra Banks has fired Nigel Barker, J. Alexander, and Jay Manuel. All three cast members have been staples of the show since the series premiere in 2003: Nigel Barker sat with Tyra on judges panel, looked dreamy; Jay Manuel directed all the photoshoots, was in turns exasperated and inspired, but consistently orange; J. Alexander taught eighteen seasons worth of contestants how to walk the runway, was sassy. I've tried and tried to imagine ANTM without Nigel and the Jays, and I can no sooner see a world in which Tyra Banks herself takes leave of the longtime modeling competition. …The changes will take effect next season, which will be the show's nineteenth. *The New York Post* reports that Tyra & co. are planning to better integrate social media with the series, and have already reached out to prominent blogger and man-about-Intertown Bryanboy. "Cool." (Nika Mavrodi, *The Fashion Spot*, April 20, 2012)

This last remark is made tongue in cheek: blogger Nika does not view the fashion blogger Bryanboy in particular, or social media in general, as likely to be able to contribute to the ANTM brand in the same way as had the discarded cast members. She "cannot imagine" ANTM without them any more than she can see the brand as coherent if its host and executive producer, Tyra Banks, were to depart.

Fans regarded this purge of regular characters as an attempt to revive the show's falling ratings by introducing novelty in the form of new judges and coaches. However, the tight coupling that fans had come to expect between these cast members and the key narratives of the show meant that fans found the brand as a whole diminished, not

refreshed, when the long-serving cast members were dismissed. For example, the following fan posts explicitly speculate on the impact of firing judges who contribute to supporting the brand's core narratives while keeping or potentially bringing on judges who do not:

> The Jays and Nigel are not the problem with ANTM, so I'm pretty flabbergasted that Tyra fired them (but is keeping that wet blanket Kelly [Cutrone, fashion publicist].... Um WTF?! Bring back the boys, Andre [Leon Talley, former *Vogue* contributing editor] and Janice, please and thank you)!!!... Top Model used to be really focused on making the girls into viable, employable models. Now it's focused on making them into celebrities. Newsflash: we have enough vapid "celebs" running around.... Put the MODELING back into Top Model!!! (Tiffany Gonzalez, ANTM's Facebook page, April 20, 2012)

> Losing one of these guys would really hurt the show; all three gone at one time pretty much eviscerates it. And even worse, I guess the way things have been going with guest judges recently, we can expect Nigel, Ms. J and Jay Manuel to be replaced by Spencer Pratt, Heidi Montag and whichever Kardashian works cheapest.... It's really a shame The CW just announced the show got renewed, right before this news. I'm more convinced than ever that they should've pulled the plug after C16, and not let Tyra try this ridiculous revamp of the show. (SurrnderDorothy, FORT, April 20, 2012)

In these posts, fans offer interpretations about the implications of the loss of elements of the brand that have been framed as both reinforcing and supporting valued narratives.

They point out that less relevant elements have consistently been introduced in what amounts to a "ridiculous revamp" and suggest it would be better if the show ended than if it continued its ever-less-coherent path.

These observations should not, however, be taken to imply that every departure of an element from a brand assemblage will be interpreted as an instance of erosion. As has been argued in the case of revived or retro brands, older elements of assemblages can be replaced with newer ones in a way that makes the brand more appealing to consumers (Brown et al. 2003). In the case of ANTM, fans considered J. Alexander a successful substitute when he took over a role previously played by others (Beau Qillian, cycle 1; Eric Nicholson, cycle 2; Nole Marin, cycles 3–4). The key notion we are stressing here is that when an element interpreted as complementary to the identity of the brand as a whole is lost, fans are likely to frame this as eroding the brand unless the element is replaced with one that they view as supportive of the brand's identity.

The Role of Elements with Material Capacities Facilitating Dissemination. To fully understand how framing practices exercised by consumers of an epistemic brand can fuel the process of audience dissipation, we must consider the elements in the assemblage whose material capacities matter to this process. Our analysis leads us to identify two especially important material elements, each of which is shared with intersecting assemblages. This first is discussion boards devoted to ANTM; these discussion boards are elements of both the ANTM assemblage and what might be called a television fan forum assemblage. The second is press coverage of fans' framing practices, which we consider an element of both the entertainment media assemblage and the ANTM assemblage.

The material capacities of both ANTM discussion boards and press coverage of consumers' framing of dynamics in the ANTM assemblage are critical because they expose fans who are less engaged with ANTM to the opinions and inferences drawn by fans who are more deeply engaged. Without archived, searchable material being saved on discussion boards, those who merely visit such boards intermittently would be likely to miss the posts of fans who are explaining how a particular dynamic within the brand is creating contradictions within, tarnishing elements of, or altogether eroding the assemblage. In addition, without press coverage of fans' activities and reactions, the reach of their framing activities would be limited to those who are motivated to pay attention to discussion boards from time to time.

Two significant caveats are important to acknowledge here. First, both discussion boards and press coverage can disseminate any positive fan framing that occurs. Thus, the material capacities of these elements are not restricted to spreading the kinds of framing we have identified here as fueling audience dissipation. Our point is simply that without the material capacities of these elements, the potential impact of fan-framing practices would be much more limited. Second, in focusing on the material capacities of these elements, we are not suggesting that they lack expressive capacities in their own right. The media in particular has frequently been identified as a powerful voice that shapes and frames how consumers understand brands (Giesler 2012) and entire markets (Humphreys 2010; Humphreys and LaTour, forthcoming). Here, we highlight the material capacities of discussion boards and media simply because these capacities afford the possibility of disseminating fans' framing.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Canniford and Shankar (2013, 1053) note that theories of assemblage provide a "framework to consider how value emerges from networked associations established between diverse kinds of consumption resources." In our work, which examines a serial entertainment brand as an assemblage of elements with both material and expressive capacities, we use the same theoretical perspective to explore the erosion of value within a network, as the associational linkages within that assemblage fray over time and assemblage "betrayal" escalates. Whereas Canniford and Shankar (2013) highlight consumers' efforts to mend betrayals and restore the coherence of assemblages, our work illuminates how consumers can play the opposite role as well. In the context of an epistemic brand assemblage, the sense-making efforts of consumers can highlight and amplify the incoherence of the assemblage elements and fuel the devaluation of the assemblage as a whole.

Our work provides a useful complement to existing accounts that helps explain the dissipation of audiences for serial entertainment brands: rather than positing that consumers become satiated with brand features that are too invariant over time, our work suggests that consumers find diminished value in assemblages they believe have lost coherence whether because new elements are contradictory or because original elements are tarnished or the assemblage as a whole is eroding. Unlike the satiation perspective, our works sheds light on the success of long-running serial entertainment brands, such as nightly news shows or late night talk shows. While these shows do evolve over time (e.g.,

by introducing new hosts), they add or replace elements in a way that, in the eyes of audience members, maintains the coherence of the assemblage as a whole.

Our work also complements prior research on branding that has focused on narratives, images, myths, and stories to such an extent that the material capacities elements of brands have sometimes been obscured from view. Entwistle and Slater (2012, 23) recently criticized the ways marketing scholars conceptualize brands as a "largely semiotic construction, signs that derive their meanings within language-like codes, that secure much of their power from their articulation with deeper and more pervasive semiotic structures (myths, ideologies, etc.) [without adequately considering] the broad range of relations, the huge assemblage of practices, through which relations between goods and signs are established, stabilized and exploited."

To illustrate the value of our analysis for remedying the overly semiotic conceptualization of brands, we compare our perspective with the cultural resonance model developed by Holt (2004). Holt argues that successful brands, or at least "iconic" brands, are those whose identifying narratives (1) address acute contradictions in society; (2) provide extraordinary value because they address the collective anxieties and desires of a nation by embodying identity myths set in populist worlds separated from everyday life and from realms of commerce and elite control; and thereby (3) perform as activists, leading culture and encouraging people to think differently about themselves. Holt stresses that iconic brands cannot tell one consistent story over time, but rather must update their narratives to achieve historical fit.

Our analysis does not contradict Holt's (2004) argument that brands can attain and sustain a following by achieving resonance or "fit" within the larger historical

contexts in which they are embedded; however, it does draw attention to the multiple assemblages with which a brand intersects (e.g., distribution systems, mainstream media, TV networks) and to the idea that intersections with some of these assemblages may be critical to how brands evolve those narratives. For example, Giesler's (2012) study of the challenges the Botox brand faced demonstrates an instance in which successfully updating a brand's narrative depended on managing the intersections between the Botox brand assemblage and the mainstream media assemblage.

Our analysis also suggests that when brands add narratives to create greater cultural resonance, they are more likely to be successful if the new narratives can readily be construed by audience members as cohering with or complementing elements already present in the brand assemblage. Not all brands that attempt to achieve cultural resonance are successful in doing so, and one reason they fail in this attempt is likely that new narratives are prone to being framed by audiences as discordant with preexisting elements. If we consider ANTM in this regard, we might argue that by allowing the persona-branding narrative to be imported into the brand assemblage, executives may have been trying to embody popular identity myths, address collective anxieties and desires, and encourage people to think differently about themselves, much in the manner Holt (2004) advocates. However, the tensions audience members perceived between the new narrative and the preexisting elements in the ANTM brand assemblage appear to have prevented this particular execution of a cultural branding strategy from having the desired impact.

Taken as a whole, our work suggests that if researchers are to expand our understanding of how audiences for epistemic brands in particular (and, perhaps, for other kinds of brands) are sustained after a brand has achieved a measure of success, they

must examine the elements of brands not only with expressive capacities but also with material capacities. To analyze a focal brand of interest, they may also need to attend to the dynamics in one or more intersecting assemblages that can contribute to the stabilization or destabilization of the focal brand.

Beyond these implications, our work draws new attention to the audience level of analysis. Although scholars in other disciplines have studied audience as a concept (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998; Ang 1985; Liebes and Katz 1990; Marwick and boyd 2011), among consumer research scholars it has been relatively neglected compared with other aggregations of consumers, such as brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), consumption communities (Thomas et al. 2013), and brand tribes (Canniford 2011). A notable exception is McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips (2013), who examine how bloggers accumulate audiences and suggest that audiences are different from communities, though without explicitly addressing the nature of the differences. Recently, scholars interested in aggregations of consumers of brands have tried to distinguish conceptually between brand communities and other aggregations of people who consume the brand (Arvidsson 2013; Caliandro and Arvidsson 2013; Canniford 2011; Zwick 2013). Based on our research, we propose that a brand audience—that is, an aggregation comprising individuals and collectives who pay attention to the brand—is heterogeneous, in that members vary along three dimensions. The first is the extent to which they feel a sense of attachment (Thomson 2006) to the brand; some may feel considerable attachment, while others may feel much less, if any. Second, some audience members may feel a sense of community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) with others who consume the brand, while others may feel little, if any, connection with other audience members. Third, some may be

quite involved in the consumption community assemblage (Thomas et al. 2013) that revolves, for example, around reality TV programs, while others may not be enrolled in other intersecting assemblages.

As we indicated at the beginning of this article, the only common element that can characterize all audience members is that they pay (some level of) attention to that brand; if an individual is completely disinterested in a brand and pays it no attention, that person is not a member of its audience. If he or she does pay attention, he or she may vary considerably along the three dimensions delineated previously.

We emphasize this point in part to clarify how audience, as an aggregation of consumers, differs from other aggregations, such as brand communities (in which people feel connected with one another and are presumed to be highly attached to a focal brand; see Schau et al. 2009) and consumption communities (in which people feel connected with one another, are enrolled in an assemblage that intersects with multiple brand assemblages, but are not necessarily strongly attached to a brand; see Thomas et al. 2013). Our discussion also helps support and extend the notion advanced by Arvidsson and colleagues (Arvidsson 2013; Caliandro and Arvidsson 2013) that researchers need to acknowledge variations between consumers in the extent to which those who pay attention to a brand (or a consumption category or practice) feel attached to it, or to any other consumers who also pay attention to the same brand (or category or practice). In emphasizing the heterogeneity that characterizes audience members for any given brand, we draw attention to the possibility that within most of the aggregations studied by consumer researchers, considerable variability likely exists among members along one or more of these same dimensions. Moreover, aggregations such as brand audiences

comprising a multiplicity of consumers who exhibit different combinations of all three dimensions may be fertile ground for further research, because most attention to date has been on aggregates for whom some homogeneity along one or more dimensions are assumed.

That said, taking into account such heterogeneity when studying an aggregation such as an audience poses a methodological challenge that must be acknowledged. It is a limitation of our work, similar to the work of other scholars who have examined consumer aggregations, that the audience members we paid closest attention to are those who were most visible because they publicly posted about ANTM. We speculate that the consumer data we obtained best represent the views of consumers who are (or were) not just audience members but also members of the ANTM brand community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) or its brand public (Caliandro and Arvidsson 2013). Although we do not know that those who felt strongly attached to the brand or were very interested in the reality TV genre differ from other audience members, we acknowledge that the views of those who once paid attention to ANTM but never made their thoughts and feelings public are underrepresented in our work. We do not believe that this undermines the credibility of the theoretical insights we offer into processes that precipitate audience dissipation, but we recognize that it remains for future work to fully mine the dynamics that affect audience members who are less visible because they share no opinions publicly. We hope that our study serves to sensitize researchers to the notion that those who constitute part of the audience for a brand do not need to be visible to be considered part of it and to find ways to include them as effectively as more visible audience members.

We also hope that our work, which relied on the analysis of a single epistemic brand, stimulates additional research that will allow us to compare and contrast the processes we identify for this brand with others. We refrain from assuming that the same kinds of theoretical dynamics we identify are applicable to audiences for less epistemic brands, but we believe that studies that examine the processes of decline in the assemblages of other types of brands are urgently needed. We also cannot assume that the factors we identify as contributing to consumer engagement with brands are sufficient for understanding the processes of audience disengagement.

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FIGURE 1
ANTM Ratings Over Time

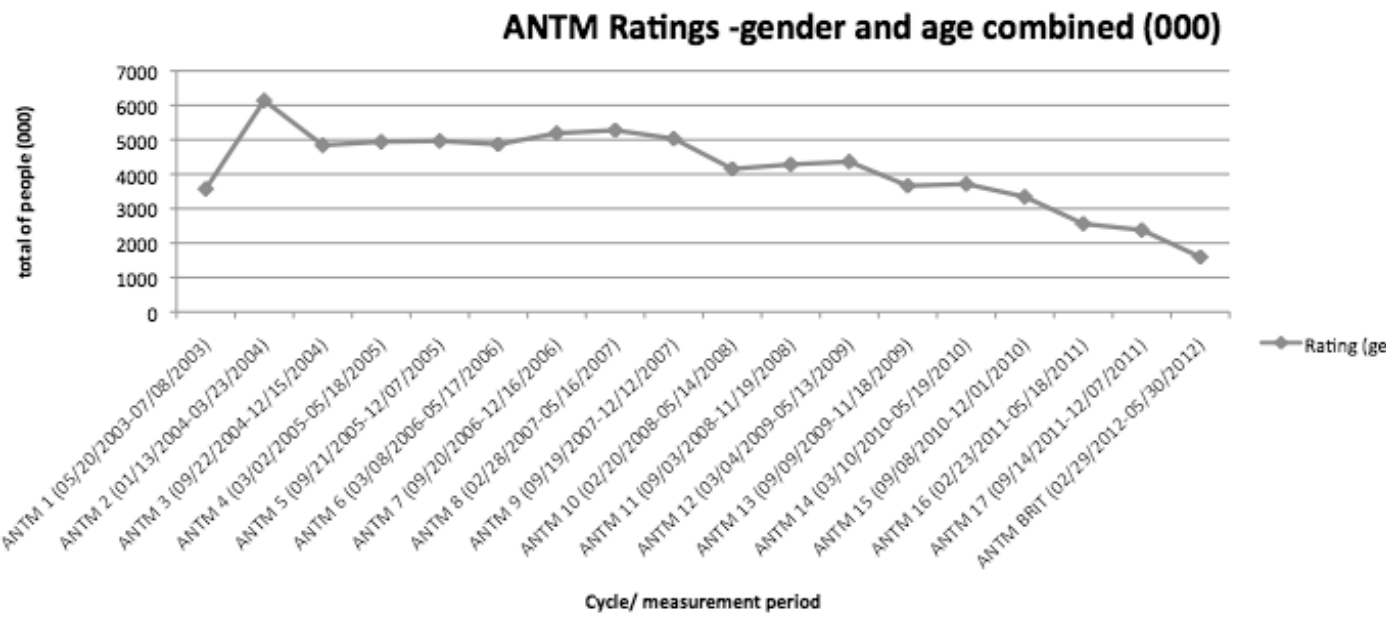

FIGURE 2
Overview of the Process of Brand Audience Dissipation

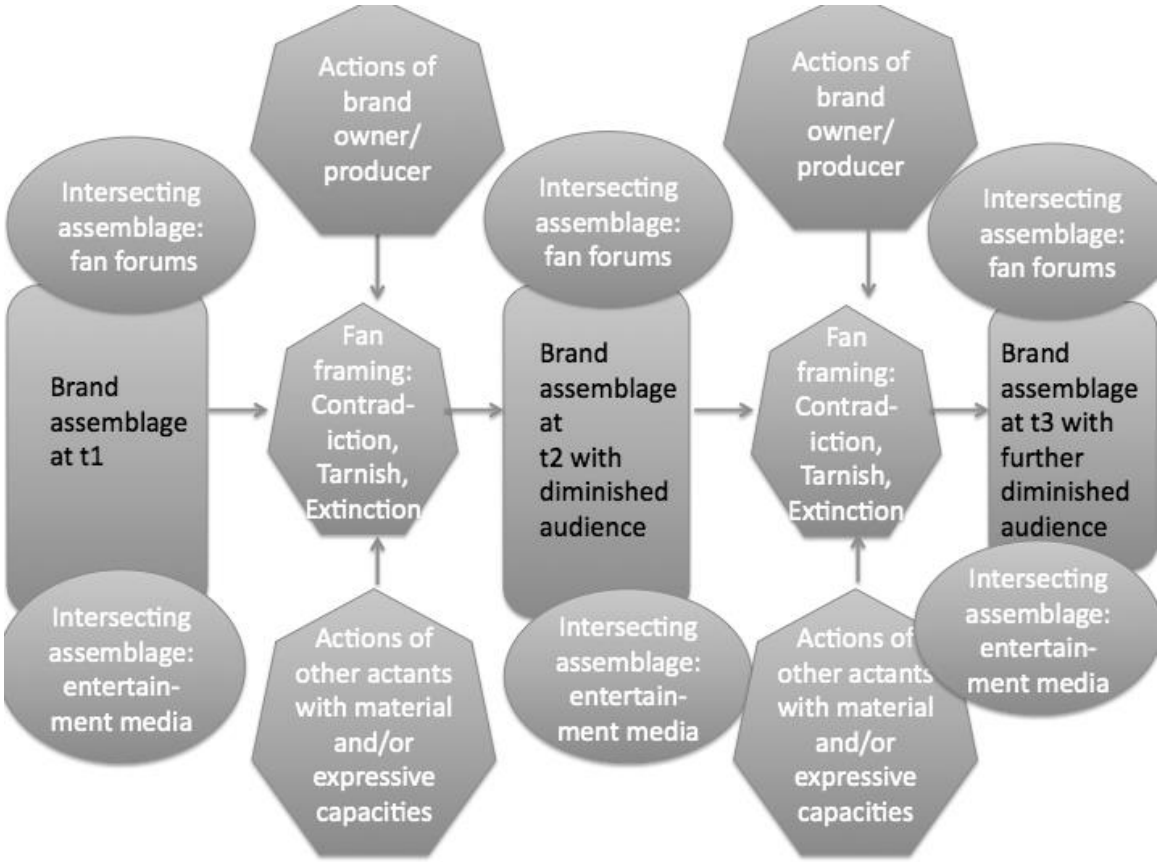

TABLE 1
Variations in Ratings Over Time (ANTM, AI, and PR)

Period	ANTM (%)	AI (%)	PR (%)
From 2002 to 2003		69.87%	
From 2003 to 2004	53.64%	14.32%	
From 2004 to 2005	-9.77%	7.08%	-8.54%
From 2005 to 2006	1.49%	14.79%	29.67%
From 2006 to 2007	2.51%	-0.56%	14.65%
From 2007 to 2008	-18.15%	-6.12%	15.02%
From 2008 to 2009	-4.86%	-6.43%	115.01%
From 2009 to 2010	-12.09%	-8.88%	8.02%
From 2010 to 2011	-30.02%	3.37%	-12.63%
From 2011 to 2012	-35.39%	-23.26%	-26.71%

FIGURE 3
Print Advertising, ANTM Cycle 2

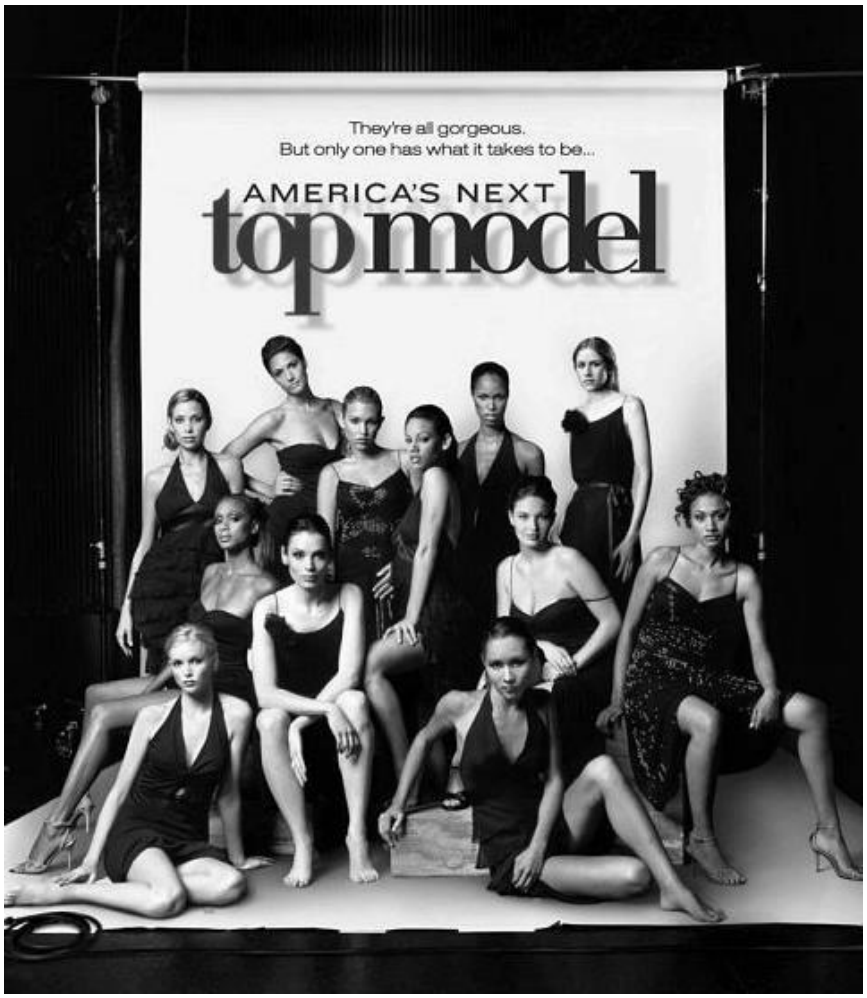

FIGURE 4
Tyra Banks's Cover for the *New York Time Magazine*

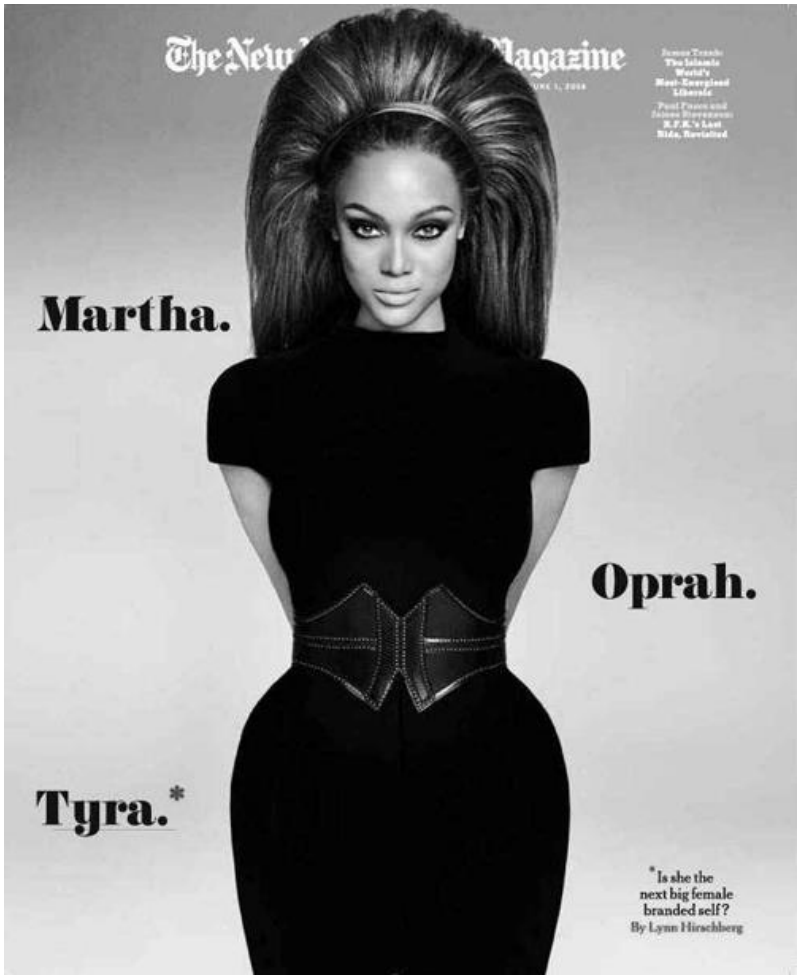

FIGURE 5
Satirical Fan-Made Bricolage (by ClrDeLun, FORT, April 17, 2008)