MANAGING BRANDS THROUGH CULTURE A CUSTOMER ORIENTED APPROACH

Aarti Sharma*

Abstract: *In consumer marketing, brands often provide the primary points of differentiation between competitive offerings, and as such they can be critical to the success of companies. Hence, it is important that the management of brands is approached strategically. However, the lack of an effective dialogue between functions that are disparate in philosophy and do not have a common and compatible use of terminology may be a barrier to strategic management within organizations. No more is this evident than between the functions of marketing and accounting. This article presents the relationships between the culture and concepts of branding, and to provide a framework and vocabulary that aids effective communication between the socio cultural marketing of the brands. A model for the management of brand cultural approach is also offered. The following discussion focuses on the concepts of cultural brand management and added value as they relate to the brand construct itself.*

Keywords: *Brand Management , Culture, Brand Icons***.**

*Assistant Professor, LR DAV College, Jagraon

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural approach is based on analysis of brands and branding in the light of cultural influences. The approach emphasizes the cultural forces in society and how these can be used to build iconic brands as well as the impact of branding practices on the globalized culture and market place. Starbucks is often referred to as a cultural icon or a brand icon. In 1971, Starbucks was founded as one single coffee shop in Seattle; by the end of 2006 the American corporation owned around 12,440 coffee shops and stores around the world. Starbucks initiated what subsequently has been referred to as the 'Starbucks Revolution' as an expression of how much Starbucks has changed the way coffee is consumed all around the world. The financial success is substantial and Starbucks is one of the global 'brand icons' serving as a common frame of reference. All in all, Starbucks is a tremendous marketing success. Starbucks is, however, also subjected to criticism for acting as a cultural imperialist and for not taking interest and paying enough attention to fair trade, etc. Its success hence goes hand in hand with being one of the brands that is most fiercely criticized by the anti-brand movement: 'Starbucks has become a cultural icon for all the rapacious excesses, predatory intentions, and cultural homogenizations that social critics attribute to globalizing corporate capitalism' (Thompson and Arsel 2004, p. 631). Seemingly contradictory, the common ground in the approach is the cultural brand perspective, in which the brand is regarded as an important part of and contributor to mainstream culture. Both parties (the literature concerned with the building of iconic brands and the anti-branding movement) are mostly concerned with the brands representing corporate America. These hugely successful brands are the ones that are pointed out as examples of best practice; meanwhile these brands are also the ones that attract the majority of critical voices from socially and culturally concerned citizen movements.

ASSUMPTIONS OF THE CULTURAL APPROACH

The individual brand perspectives introduced in the 1990s (the consumer-based approach, the personality approach and the relational approach) had different takes on understanding the exchange between a marketer and a consumer. The consumer-based approach turned the spotlight on the consumer, while the personality approach and the relational approach further constituted brand value as something co-created in a dialogue between marketer and consumer (the 'dyadic' brand relationship). The community approach added meaning

found in the social interaction *among* dedicated brand consumers (the 'triadic' brand relationship)to the main theories of brand value creation. Inspired by cultural studies, the cultural brand perspective adds the exchange between macro-level culture and brands to the picture. The literature deals with the way marketers can use cultural forces to build strong brands (ultimately brand icons) and what brands and branding do to culture. It is consumer culture rather than the individual consumer that is researched in the cultural approach. One could argue that the pivotal point is still the brand meaning found in groups of consumers just as in the community approach, but the focus of analysis is completely different: In contrast [to research in communities], this article focuses on brand co creation in a context where brands are not the central focus; thus, it is necessary to unpack the meanings and socio cultural processes that continually problematize and ensure a brand's legitimacy to its various consumer groupings.

THEORETICAL BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE CULTURAL APPROACH

The cultural approach is very different from the other approaches, which implies a different structure of the theoretical building blocks section. In the other approaches, a core theme is presented alongside its supporting themes. The core theme is the main theory behind the approach and the supporting themes are notions facilitating the deeper understanding of the core theory. The dualism and the tensions of the cultural approach are, however, reflected in the way this section is constructed. The theoretical building blocks hence consist of one supporting theme – cultural consumption – and one core theme, namely brand icons. The societal reaction to the core theme, the No Logo movement, is then reviewed followed by a viable theory (the citizen-artist brand) of how brand management can deal with the counter-reaction. The theory on cultural branding by Douglas B. Holt (*How Brands Become Icons*) is a cornerstone in the cultural approach and serves as the core theme. Different from the majority of the publications with a cultural perspective, this theory is focused on the *management* of brands. The cultural branding model is closely related to the theory on cultural consumption formulated by Grant McCracken. Understanding the basic way of thinking about consumption in a cultural context facilitates the further reading of the theory on how brands become icons, which is why it serves as the supporting theme. The review of these two elements could immediately seem like sufficient material to gain an understanding of brand management in cultural approach.
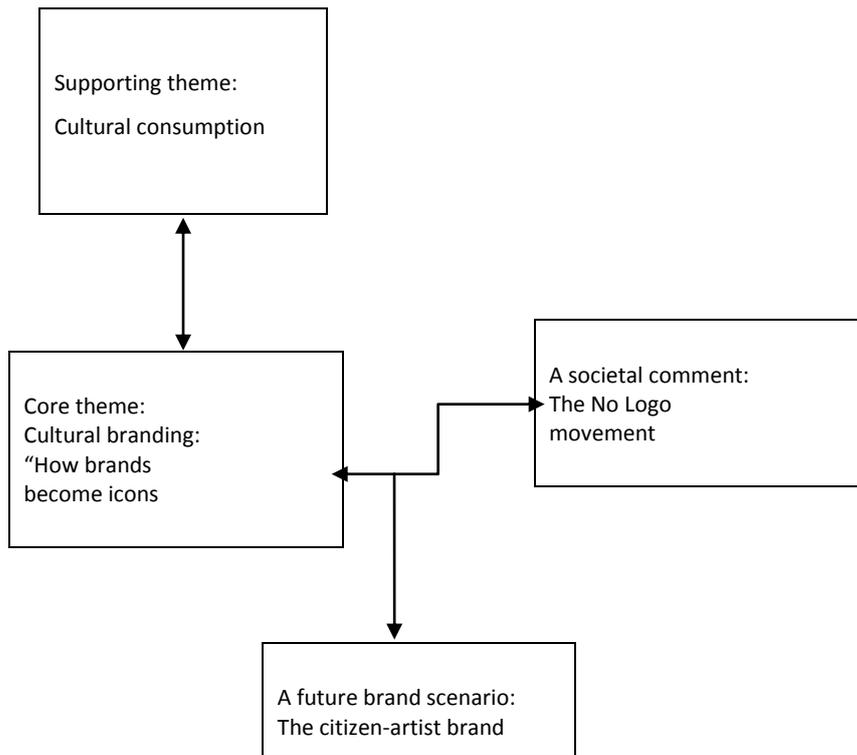
Supporting theme:

Cultural consumption

Core theme:
Cultural branding:
"How brands
become icons

A societal comment:
The No Logo
movement

A future brand scenario:
The citizen-artist brand

Figure:*1* Model of the cultural approach

THE SOCIETAL RESPONSE TO BRAND ICONS: THE NO LOGO MOVEMENT

In the No Logo movement branding efforts are critically analyzed and linked with environmental issues, human rights and cultural degradation.

Table :1.

A comparison between the mindshare branding model and the cultural branding model.

	The mindshare branding model	The cultural branding model
Brand communication	Persuasion The purpose of advertising is to influence consumer perception of the brand through rhetoric	Myth making Communication is the centre of consumer value. The brand is a 'storied' product and the product is merely a means to embracing the story
Brand components	Abstract associations The brand consists of a set of associations that is the brand's purified essence (brand DNA)	Cultural expressions The brand's value is found in the cultural contents of the brand's myth. The brand has a reputation for performing

		certain myths
Brand management	Consistency Brand management is about to upholding consistency in communications over time	Historical fit – brand management is about to adapting the brand's myth cultural changes in order to remain relevant

Source: Adapted from Holt (2004)

Moving through time and cultural changes and still staying relevant is one of the great challenges of the iconic brands. The powerful myth has to be reinvented over and over again in congruence with the socio-political-economic-cultural changes: 'Iconic brands remain relevant when they adapt their myths to address the shifting contradictions that their constituents face' . The cultural branding model is essentially very different from the mindshare branding model (Holt's term; in this book the consumer-based approach) as the mindshare model establishes that consistency in brand communication is what builds a strong brand. The aim of this book is the side-by-side presentation of the seven 'ideal types', not to discuss if one approach is superior to another. Emphasizing the differences between the mindshare model (the consumer-based approach) and the cultural model.After having established the nature of consumption in a cultural perspective and how cultural meaning can be activated in such a powerful way that brands become icons, we will now turn to the societal, critical comment on the cultural impact of the global iconic brands. focusing on the production of images. In that sense, *No Logo* is a serious attack on the idea of branding in itself and seriously questions whether the iconic brands are selling something of real value or only empty images and promises. Kalle Lasn is another significant voice in the anti-brand movement. Founder of Adjusters and advocating the 'uncooling', 'unswooshing' and 'demarketing' of America, Lasn's overall concern (1999) is that culture is not 'bottom-up' any more (significant cultural issues stemming from the people), but rather 'top down', reversed by big companies and global brand corporations. Thereby, culture is no longer created by the people, but by corporate America. Brands, products, fashions, celebrities, entertainments have moved from being spectacles surrounding culture to become the main constituents of culture. Human desires are manipulated through advertising; thereby an authentic life is no longer possible. The activist agenda of Adbusters encourages 'the people'

to fight 'the cool machine'. This can be done through 'culture jamming' (the distortion of commercial signs and mediums), by joining 'buy nothing days' and sticking to 'TV turnoff weeks'. Through these actions people can change the way cultural meaning is created in society. Activist anti-brand movements also monitor corporations closely and thereby pressure for corporate social responsibility (so-called corporate watch). This pressure for more corporate social responsibility has created increasing attention in management circles for the display of corporate social responsibility.

A FUTURE BRAND SCENARIO: THE CITIZEN-ARTIST BRAND

None of the other brand approaches holds opposing views in the same manner as the cultural. The fact that the absolute champions of the branding process (the brand icons) are also subjects to a 'revolutionary' agenda aiming at their downfall is, however, important to understand. But maybe the two views are not so opposite as they first appear. Just like critical voices can comment on the impact of the iconic brands, management can benefit from an analysis of the tension between the two sides of the spectrum in the cultural branding literature. One research article delivers an interesting take on the tensions between brand icons and the anti-brand 'No Logo' movement . It is the article that is mentioned as a key reading in the introduction to this approach. Holt's analysis provides a new logic to the opposites as he analyzes 'the emerging anti branding movement to understand tensions between the current branding paradigm and consumer culture to speculate on their future directions' . The brand icons are the champions of the postmodern branding paradigm (the branding techniques that have proven efficient since the 1960s). The pressure and criticism they are exposed to by the anti-brand movement should, according to Holt's analysis, be seen as the beginning of a paradigm shift. The same thing happened in the 1960s, when cultural changes implied a new marketing/branding paradigm to emerge. The pressure on the champions of the postmodern branding paradigms is hence nothing more than an indication that things are about to change. Below is an illustration with a short description of the postmodern branding paradigm and the post-postmodern paradigm of Holt's (2002) analysis. Changes in consumer culture have led to changes in the marketing function, and branding techniques have changed accordingly. The move from one dominant paradigm would another has been instigated by rebellion against the dominant marketing techniques. In that sense 'Consumers are revolutionary only insofar as they assist

entrepreneurial firms to tear down the old branding paradigm and create opportunities for companies that understand emerging new principles' . If a new branding agenda is about to emerge, it is relevant to look at the major differences between the existing and the new. 'Authenticity' is central to understanding the proposed shift from the postmodern to the post-postmodern branding paradigm. In the postmodern branding paradigm postmodern, 'stealth' branding (where the profit motive is disguised behind disinterested, ironic brand communication) is perceived as being authentic. In the post-postmodern paradigm, openness about profit motives should be accompanied by an engaged citizenship. The authenticity problem of disguising profit motives behind a laid-back, ironic brand attitude is what is being revealed by the anti-brand movement. In the post-postmodern branding paradigm the citizen-artist brands should be frank about profit motives, act as responsible citizens and be able to deliver original and relevant cultural material, consumers peel away the brand veneer, they are looking for companies that act like a local merchant, as a stalwart citizen of the community. What consumers will want to touch, soon enough, is the way in which companies treat people when they are not customers. Brands will be trusted to serve as cultural source materials when their sponsors have demonstrated that they shoulder civic responsibilities as would a community pillar. To reflect one final time on this somewhat different review of the theoretical building blocks of the approach: brand icons are brands capable of telling powerful myths commenting on the central cultural contradictions of the time. The basic understanding of consumption of goods as the consumption of cultural meaning facilitates the understanding of the cultural brand perspective and thereby serves as a supporting theme. How the culturally savvy brands influence mainstream culture is fiercely resisted by the anti-branding agenda. Even though it is not a supporting theme, but rather a societal comment, it is important to understand some of the challenges facing the branding champions. Evoking thoughts about the future of brand management, the future scenario of the citizen-artist brand is a central and managerially relevant comment on the societal resistance by the No Logo movement. Even though it seems contradictory at a first glance, the core elements of the cultural approach fit nicely together.

SUMMARY

Core to the cultural approach is the theory on how brands become icons. So-called identity brands (strong on self-expressive benefits) have the potential for becoming brand icons by adapting to the cultural branding model. The cultural branding model is closely related to McCracken's classic theory about cultural consumption In this view of consumption, the consumption objects are seen as cultural art effects carrying meaning from the culturally constituted world to the consumers. Brands are regarded as cultural resources just like movies, social movements, books, magazines, etc. In this brand perspective, the tools for building iconic brands are found. Through addressing the pressing cultural contradictions as a viable cultural 'text', and being able to reinvent as changes in societal contradictions occur, the brand can approach the identity value of a cultural icon. The anti-brand movement is concerned with what branding and globalization do to culture. The encouragers of civil activism, they also raise important political questions and push for corporate social responsibility. The tensions between brand icons and the anti-brand movement can be understood as a phenomenon indicating the beginning of a new branding paradigm. In this prospect of a post-postmodern branding paradigm the brand should act as a citizen-artist, meaning being able to deliver relevant cultural material while shouldering its social and civic responsibilities.

REFERENCES:

1. Aaker, D. A. and Joachimsthaler, E. (2002), *Brand Leadership*, Sydney: Free Press Business

2. Berthon P., Nairn A. and Money A. (2003), 'Through the paradigm funnel: conceptual tool for literature analysis', *Marketing Education Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2: 55–66

3. Bjerre, M., Heding, T. and Knudtzen, C. F. (2008), 'Using the dynamic paradigm funnel to analyze brand management', in K. Tollin and A. Caru (eds) *Strategic Market Creation: A New Perspective on Marketing and Innovation Management,* Chichester: Wiley

4. Kapferer, J-N. (1997), *Strategic Brand Management: Creating and Sustaining Brand Equity Long Term*, London: Kogan Page

5. Keller, K. L. (2003), *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity*, Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall

6. Kuhn, T. S. (1996), *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press