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Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding

DOUGLAS B. HOLT*

Brands are today under attack by an emerging countercultural movement. This study builds a dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding that explains the rise of this movement and its potential effects. Results of an interpretive study challenge existing theories of consumer resistance. To develop an alternative model, I first trace the rise of the modern cultural engineering paradigm of branding, premised upon a consumer culture that granted marketers cultural authority. Intrinsic contradictions eroded its efficacy. Next I describe the current postmodern consumer culture, which is premised upon the pursuit of personal sovereignty through brands. I detail five postmodern branding techniques that are premised upon the principle that brands are authentic cultural resources. Postmodern branding is now giving rise to new contradictions that have inflamed the antibranding sentiment sweeping Western countries. I detail these contradictions and project that they will give rise to a new post-postmodern branding paradigm premised upon brands as citizen-artists.

The old political battles that have consumed humankind during most of the twentieth century—black versus white, Left versus Right, male versus female—will fade into the background. The only battle worth fighting and winning, the only one that can set us free, is The People versus The Corporate Cool Machine. We will strike by unswishing America™ by organizing resistance against the power trust that owns and manages the brand. Like Marlboro and Nike, America™ has splashed its logo everywhere. And now resistance to that brand is about to begin on an unprecedented scale. We will uncool its fashions and celebrities, its icons, signs and spectacles. We will jam its image factory until the day it comes to a sudden shattering halt. And then on the ruins of the old consumer culture, we will build a new one with a non-commercial heart and soul. (LASN 2000, p. xvi)

Kalle Lasn's (2000) angry call to symbolic arms exemplifies a potent new global movement. A counterculture is forming around the idea that the branding efforts of global consumer goods companies have spawned a so-

cially destructive consumer culture. In North America, the burgeoning influence of Lasn's muckraking magazine *Adbusters* (<http://www.adbusters.org/>), historian Tom Frank's books (1997, 2000) and sassy alt.culture journal the *Baffler* (<http://www.thebaffler.com/>), Eric Schlosser's best-selling *Fast Food Nation* (2001), the Center for a New American Dream (<http://www.newdream.org/>), and the *Utne Reader* together suggest that the antibranding movement is quickly becoming a dominant chromosome in the DNA of America's counterculture. In particular, Naomi Klein's book *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (1999) has spun together a global antibranding movement (see <http://www.nologo.org/>) that links firms' branding efforts to the central concerns—environmental issues, human rights, and cultural degradation—of those opposed to unchecked globalization. Standing in opposition to brands is no longer merely an antiestablishment badge for youth; it is a full-fledged social movement (*Economist* 2001).

Why do brands cause trouble? Viewed from within the confines of the discipline of marketing, this potent new movement is inexplicable. Academic marketing theorizes away conflicts between marketing and consumers. Such conflicts result only when firms attend to their internal interests rather than seek to meet consumer wants and needs. The marketing concept declares that, with the marketing perspective as their guide, the interests of firms and consumers align. The most puzzling aspect of the antibranding movement from this vista is that it takes aim at the most successful and lauded companies, those that have taken the marketing concept to heart and industriously applied it. Nike and Coke and McDonald's and Microsoft and Starbucks—the success

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stories lauded in marketing courses worldwide—are the same brands that are relentlessly attacked by this new movement.

The goal of this article is to develop a theory of consumer culture and branding that explains why current branding practices have provoked such a vigorous response. I want to specify the tensions that exist between how firms brand their products and how people consume. I begin with an empirical examination of the one research stream in marketing that has considered this question. The second section builds an alternative dialectical model of branding and consumer culture that explains how contemporary branding principles have evolved historically. Finally, I circle back to the emerging antibranding movement to understand tensions between the current branding paradigm and consumer culture to speculate on their future directions.

THE CULTURAL AUTHORITY MODEL

A variety of social sciences and humanities disciplines outside of business schools routinely examine the tensions between how firms market and how people consume. These critical accounts of marketing have long argued that, collectively, firms' branding efforts shape consumer desires and actions. The concept "consumer culture" refers to the dominant mode of consumption that is structured by the collective actions of firms in their marketing activities. To work properly, capitalism requires a symbiotic relationship between market prerogatives and the cultural frameworks that orient how people understand and interact with the market's offerings. The cultural structuring of consumption maintains political support for the market system, expands markets, and increases industry profits.

These accounts are dominated by the cultural authority narrative. Marketers are portrayed as cultural engineers, organizing how people think and feel through branded commercial products. Omnipotent corporations use sophisticated marketing techniques to seduce consumers to participate in a system of commodified meanings embedded in brands. Likewise, consumer culture is organized around the principle of obeisance to the cultural authority of marketers. People who have internalized the consumer culture implicitly grant firms the authority to organize their tastes.

Horkheimer and Adorno's ([1944] 1996) chapter on what they term the "culture industries" is the locus classicus for these ideas. They assert that the system of mass cultural production, a set of techniques for rationalizing culture as commodity, is the ideological glue that maintains broad consensual participation in advanced capitalist society. By the time they wrote this chapter, Horkheimer and Adorno (1996) had given up on the emancipatory politics of marxism. Instead, they set out to explain how consumer culture defanged political opposition by restructuring it as taste. They aimed their argument specifically at the mass culture industries that blossomed after World War II: television, consumer goods, music, film, and advertising. The modern era of consumer

capitalism was the first to rely upon the ideological premise that social identities are best realized through commodities. Challenges to capitalist interests, which regularly surfaced in early industrial capitalism in the form of labor conflict and radical political challenges, were smoothed over by the new mass culture industries. This commodified mode of subjectivity provided an extraordinary alliance between potentially antagonistic positions: it facilitated market interests in expanding profit while at the same time it provided people with identities that satisfied (or at least deflected) their demands for greater participation in the economy and polity.

Horkheimer and Adorno (1996) argued that these new consumer identities were highly attenuated, produced primarily through choosing from a range of slightly differentiated goods. Market segmentation is inherently a technology of domination. Segmentation is about "classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1996, p. 123) rather than providing product differences that are substantive. Product differences are quantitative, mechanical. The technologies of marketing—market research, segmentation, targeting, mass advertising—lead to a channeling of culture that erases idiosyncrasies. The logic of mass marketing leads to least common denominator goods that produce a conformity of style, marginalize risk taking, and close down interpretation. Today, Stuart Ewen (e.g., 1988) and George Ritzer (e.g., 1995) are often invoked as contemporary advocates of Horkheimer and Adorno's (1996) cultural authority narrative, in which marketing is largely successful in channeling consumer desires through brands.

Another marxist tradition, influenced by the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, presents a more optimistic spin on the same thesis. While most people fall prey to these marketing techniques, some are able to resist and take control of the meanings and uses of commodities. Against marketing's coercive cultural authority, individuals and groups fight back by investing commodities with more particularized meanings and using them in idiosyncratic ways. Michel de Certeau (1984) and John Fiske (e.g., 1989) are often referenced as advocates of this more optimistic variant in which consumers often are able to outflank marketers, reinscribing commodities with oppositional meanings through their consumption practices. The latter theory, widely diffused in mass communications and cultural studies, has been reworked in consumer research. Two contributions stand out as the most developed efforts to conceptualize consumer culture and how people might resist its normative pressures through their consumption.

Reflexive Resistance: Filtering Out Marketing's Influence

Jeff Murray and Julie Ozanne (1991) develop a model of consumer culture steeped in Horkheimer and Adorno's (1996) logic, as well as that of others associated with the Frankfurt School. Consumer culture is, following Jean

Baudrillard (1998), represented by the consumption code, the system of cultural meanings that the market inscribes in commodities. The code is an important example of what Jürgen Habermas (1985) terms "distorted communication." Habermas describes an ideal speech situation, an interaction in which each party has an equal chance to speak unencumbered by authority and in which norms of comprehensibility, sincerity, legitimacy, and truthfulness are upheld, as the standard by which to critique ideological domination. Marketing is a form of distorted communication in that marketers control the information that is exchanged. Marketers organize the code, and we as consumers have no choice but to participate.

Like de Certeau (1984) and Fiske (1989), Murray and Ozanne (1991) envision a method to combat this oppressive grid of imposed social meanings, and they recommend a list of specific procedures. Emancipation from this system requires what Ozanne and Murray (1995) call the reflexively defiant consumer, a consumer who is empowered to reflect on how marketing works as an institution and who uses this critical reflexivity to defy the code in his or her consumption. Consumer resistance is possible if one develops a reflexive distance from the code (i.e., becomes code conscious), acknowledging its structuring effects rather than living within the code unwary (Ozanne and Murray 1995, pp. 522–523). Consumers can fend off the marketer-imposed code if they are able to disentangle the marketer's artifice from the use value of the product.

Creative Resistance: Consumers as Cultural Producers

In a series of essays spanning more than a decade, Fuat Firat and Alladi Venkatesh (sometimes joined by Nikhilesh Dholakia) have developed a view of consumer culture and resistance that culminates in their advocacy of liberatory postmodernism (Firat and Dholakia 1998; Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Their conception of consumer culture parallels Murray and Ozanne, but they historicize the account. Echoing Horkheimer and Adorno (1996), they view marketing as a totalitarian system. Comprising a totalizing impulse, it operates as a panopticon. Large corporations apply rationalizing procedures to form consumers en masse. People who consume within this logic are passive, nearly inert beings, acted upon as objects (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 255).

According to Firat and Venkatesh, marketers continue to dominate contemporary social life even as all other sources of elite power have faded. Their liberatory view hinges upon the notion that the increasingly diverse and productively forms of consumption in postmodernity threaten the marketers' dominance. They suggest that we are in a transitional phase toward a full-blown postmodernity in which the proliferation of consumption styles will eventually liberate people from the market's domination. Consumers are gradually but inevitably eroding marketers' control through micro-emancipatory practices, practices that decenter market-deter-

mined subjectivity and that accelerate fragmentation (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 255). If a homogeneous market is a totalitarian one, a diverse heterogeneous market signals that firms no longer control consumers through their marketing efforts.

This view of consumer resistance is quite similar to that of Ozanne and Murray (1995). But Firat and Venkatesh do not see the need for rational analysis to figure out how to resist. They see a contemporary society already bubbling with various forms of resistance. Following Maffesoli (1996), they argue that consumers are beginning to break down marketers' dominance by seeking out social spaces in which they produce their own culture, apart from that which is foisted on them by the market. These spaces allow people to continually rework their identities rather than let the market dictate identities for them. In Firat and Venkatesh's (1995) postmodern mode of consumer resistance, people pursue a noncommittal fragmented lifestyle in which the production of self and culture through consumption is paramount. These nomadic lifestyles are most likely to flourish in social spaces removed from market influence.

In their later work, Ozanne and Murray (1995) suggest much the same thing. They propose that consumers can emancipate themselves from marketer-imposed codes by altering their sign value to signify opposition to establishment values. Since these oppositional meanings can be appropriated by marketers, consumer resistance requires nimble work. Consumers must change these alternative meanings as soon as the meanings lose their oppositional value (Ozanne and Murray 1995, p. 523).

Both theories are premised upon the same root metaphor for thinking about consumer culture and resistance. Consumer culture is an irresistible form of cultural authority that generates a limited set of identities accessed through commodities. Firms act as cultural engineers that specify the identities and pleasures that can be accessed only through their brands. So both theories espouse a radical politics in which people are able to emancipate themselves from market domination to the extent that they are able to free themselves from its cultural authority. Murray and Ozanne (1991) represent the marketing system as omnipotent but express hope that through reasoned reflexivity, consumers can be emancipated from its grasp. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) represent marketing as omnipotent but inevitably fading, eroded by the increasingly fragmented and self-productive consumption practices of postmodern consumers.

I will offer a critique and revision of these perspectives that begins with individual case studies of the everyday consumption practices that these theories describe. Then I will expand the analysis to develop a macroscopic historical account that challenges Firat and Venkatesh's (1995) narrative. I will argue that, while the cultural authority narrative aptly describes modern branding circa the 1950s, it is antithetical to the dominant postmodern paradigm and does not help to explain the antibranding movement that is now forcing the market to evolve. I offer an alternative framework

that seeks to explain the social tensions that animate contemporary branding.

METHOD

To study how consumer culture operates, I examine the phenomena that it structures, people's everyday consumption practices. In methodological terms, I will use microlevel data—people's stories about their consumption—to investigate macrolevel constructs. To pursue this goal, I follow the logic of the extended case method (ECM), the tenets of which I will briefly review.

The ECM originated in the Manchester School of social anthropology in the 1950s and today has become a favored methodology for researching macroscopic, often global, questions concerning markets and cultures from an interpretive perspective. Sociologist Michael Burawoy has been the most influential exponent of the method. His key works (Burawoy 1998a, 1998b; Burawoy et al. 1991, 2000) that clarify the distinctive aspects of ECM compared with other approaches inform this overview.

The ECM method refers not to data gathering techniques but to an analytical logic that is applied to the data types typically used in interpretive research (field observation, interviews, primary source materials, archived texts). The method is premised upon what Burawoy terms "hermeneutic science" (Burawoy 1998a) or "reflexive science" (Burawoy 1998b). In contrast to hermeneutics, ECM seeks to develop heuristic conceptual frameworks with explanatory power. Theory building in the ECM follows a logic similar to Karl Popper's falsificationist philosophy of science, in which objectivity "does not rest upon procedures but on the growth of knowledge, that is, the imaginative and parsimonious reconstruction of theory to accommodate anomalies" (Burawoy 1998b). Like Popper, the goal is to use anomalous data (data that existing theory should account for but does not) to develop theoretical advances.

The ECM is aligned with the sociological variant of cumulative theory building in that it seeks to build contextualized theoretical explanations of social phenomena. Unlike natural science approaches to theory, in which constructs are assumed to be stable and universal, the ECM seeks to map sociocultural structures that change over time and that often take on qualitatively different characteristics as they operate in different social contexts. As a discovery-oriented approach, the goal of the ECM is to construct fruitful extensions of theory rather than to subject alternatives to a test. As a "craft" mode of science, ECM embraces connection, proximity, and dialogue as compared with positive modes of science whose hallmarks are separation, distance, and detachment (Burawoy 1998b, p. 12).

Research Design

In line with the ECM, I chose cases that allow me to investigate theories of consumer culture and resistance. Specifically, I sought out cases that would allow me to analyze how theories of consumer resistance—reflexive code con-

sciousness and fragmented self-production—are enacted in everyday life.

To select these cases, I culled informants from the socioeconomic margins of American society. Sociological theory suggests that everyday resistance to the market is most likely to flourish at the periphery of the dominant social institutions and statuses to which the economy is bound. Those who live in subordinate positions with blocked mobility, who are the least vested in the market, who are most isolated from its network of social capital, are most likely to develop oppositional practices (Collins 1976). My informants live in positions structurally marginal to the market. They do not have regular jobs. They live off incomes below or near the poverty level and in relative social isolation. They are not integrated into mainstream social networks (organizations, clubs, associations, friendships), nor do they participate in normative family life. This sampling strategy is intentionally conservative to ensure that I will locate robust examples of consumer resistance.

I used a poster to solicit informants at a food bank in a small blue-collar town in central Pennsylvania that gave away donated food to people below 125% of the poverty line. This poster attracted 12 informants, men and women of European descent (except for one Korean-American woman), ages 35–75 years, who were either unemployed or working part-time in transient jobs. Most were on welfare of some sort. Otherwise, their backgrounds varied considerably. Some had trouble holding a steady job. Some suffered from mental illness. Some were working poor who had slipped into erratic marginal jobs. Some were physically disabled. And some made a strategic choice to live in a marginal economic position.

Data Collection

I conducted what Burawoy (1998a) calls narrative interviews to gather empirical materials. Narrative interviews provide a particularly good fit with my research goals. The theories that I investigate view resistance as determined, deliberate projects in which people have formulated a strategy for their consumption and seek to enact it. So these consumption-based projects should yield plenty of discursive material. And, with a sufficient variety of consumption stories from each informant, I should be able to triangulate on the central consumption practices that constitute these projects. Participant observation could have provided useful complementary data but was impractical given my teaching obligations.

The interviews, conducted in the homes of the informants (all lived in apartments or with parents), lasted from 90 minutes to three hours. In each interview, I sought to elicit numerous consumption stories and grounded discussions of tastes from which I could interpret patterns of consumption practice. The conversations were loosely structured by questions that introduced the most important lifestyle categories, such as home and decor, fashion, television and movies, reading, hobbies, socializing, tourism/vacations, food, and music. I followed the same basic interview structure and

technique that I have used in previous studies published in this journal (Holt 1997, 1998).

Analysis

Unlike either phenomenological studies or cultural ethnographies, the ECM, as a hermeneutic science, requires analytic reduction of empirical materials. Rather than represent cases in all of their contextual and biographical complexity, the goal is to examine the theory in question as it plays out in a particular sociohistorical context. The ECM analyses progress through two levels. First, I engage in analytic reduction across time and space to aggregate a wide variety of context-specific activities into the most prominent practices that my informants use to interact with commodities (microreduction).

After several initial rounds of interpretation, I worked with five of the initial 12 informants whose interviews revealed that they engaged in consumer resistance as defined in the literature reviewed above (see table 1 for descriptions). I mapped the dominant consumption practices in conversation with the various theories of consumer culture and resistance that I wanted to extend.

In the second stage of the ECM, structuration, the analysis moves from micro to macro. Consonant with other integrative social theories such as those advanced by Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, "hermeneutic science insists on studying the ethnographic world from the standpoint of its structuration, that is by regarding it as simultaneously shaped by and shaper of an external field of forces" (Burawoy 1998a). This interpretive movement requires that I link consumption practices to the social forces that shape how people consume: consumer culture and marketing. And, finally, in the last stage of the ECM, reconstruction, extensions of theory are developed. In the second part of the analysis, I construct an alternative historical narrative to that

offered by Firat and Venkatesh (1995), from which I develop an alternative theory of postmodern consumer culture and branding.

For purposes of exposition, I will develop the analysis using the two informants who best exemplify the two types of resistance described in the literature. The other three informants evidenced similar resistance but in more varied combinations (see table 1).

THE COMMODIFICATION OF PERSONAL SOVEREIGNTY

Case 1: How Reflexive Resistance Produces the Commodification of Personal Sovereignty

Dressed in camouflage shorts, a T-shirt, and gym shoes, Paul meets me outside his parents' ranch house. He shakes my hand enthusiastically and greets me with formality and deference. Paul is 32 years old, short and muscular, extremely intense, and articulate. After returning from a stint in the armed forces and a few years of college, he has lived at home for five years. A \$500-per-month disability benefit provides his income. He leads me through the house into the unfinished basement that serves as his apartment. We face one another across an 8-foot folding utility table that sits beneath an overhead fluorescent light. Paul chain-smokes Marlboros throughout our extended conversation.

Filtering Out Propaganda. Just as he views other mass media like television, radio, and films, Paul views marketing as propaganda. A self-trained student of film and journalism, Paul is engrossed by the techniques used by these media to shape how people feel and act. As a teenager, he began to understand how the media works to create anxieties and desires.

TABLE 1
CONSUMER RESISTANCE CASE SUMMARIES

Informant	Background	Reflexive resistance	Creative resistance
Paul	32 years old Single Disability income	Filters out marketing manipulation Distills use value Commodification of personal sovereignty	
Don	47 years old Wife deceased Itinerant work		Brands as cultural resources Producerly consumption Life world spaces Commodification of personal sovereignty
Joe	46 years old Married, separated Itinerant musician Elvis impersonator		Producerly consumption Life world spaces Commodification of personal sovereignty
Janice	36 years old Married Part-time day care worker	Filters out marketing manipulation Attempts to withdraw from market Commodification of personal sovereignty	Producerly consumption Life world spaces
Marian	54 years old Married Husband's disability income	Filters out marketing manipulation Avoids brand choice Commodification of personal sovereignty	Life world spaces

NOTE.—For seven other informants, negligible consumer resistance evidenced in interviews.

Paul (P): Something about *Dallas*: every time I watched that I became anxious and wanted money. I was pretty young when that was on. But every time I saw that stuff and I saw all of those beautiful people, I wanted money and power. I think I was probably 13 or 14 when that first came on. And I always remember, like I said, feeling anxious after watching this. When is it going to be my turn to have these things?

Paul deploys skepticism and knowledge as weapons against marketing's propaganda. To hone these skills, Paul studies all forms of mass media to understand how propaganda works. For instance, he claims to have watched Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* over 70 times because he's fascinated by the director's adept techniques in producing particular meanings and emotions. He is an avid history buff as well, using his readings to defend himself against the market's distortions.

Paul's teenage suspicions have evolved into a confrontational style in which he analyzes every commodity he encounters to reveal the marketer's distortions. (Not coincidentally, his favorite song is the Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again.") Each of his consumer acts begins with a deconstructive moment in which Paul seeks to strip marketer-imposed meanings from his decision calculus.

Denying Aesthetics to Distill Functional Utility. Paul assumes that aesthetic pleasures are created by marketing and therefore resists all products' aesthetic considerations. To him, aesthetic claims are always false, always subterfuge. He is only interested in those properties of consumer goods that serve functional purposes, and he aims to isolate the true utility of these goods from the fictional qualities claimed by marketing. He quickly dismisses photos of women's clothing I show him because they suggest that the women have needlessly succumbed to the false values imposed by the brands. Similarly, he refuses sensory pleasure in food: "Essentially I still try to just use food as sustenance and not to enjoy it too much. I really don't care as long as I'm not hungry . . . hunger pains and things like that." Recounting recent meals, his list includes four or five peanut butter and jelly sandwiches because they're quick. "Sometimes I'll wash a potato and just eat a raw potato, heating up a can of corn or heating up a can of green beans."

Paul's quest to extract authentic utility from all products forces him to reject most social life. Since he finds brand propaganda infecting most everything he encounters, he's adopted a solipsistic worldview and lives as a hermit in the basement. He allows entry only to those few materials that have successfully passed his ideology detection procedures. (As a representative of the academy, the symbol of skeptical and rigorous truth, I was quickly anointed.) He finds "shallow" those people who allow themselves to be corrupted by consumer culture. Paul metes out harsh criticism to those—"the ignorant"—who succumb to the seduction of market-created desires. His neighbors' fanatical pursuit of the perfect lawn and garden serves as a condensed figure for the "keep up with the Joneses" lifestyle of those who, devoid of critical reason, succumb to the dictates of consumer culture.

P: I don't like gardening. I don't like yard work. In fact, my ideal house would be a stone house with a copper roof with no windows. There would be no maintenance to do. And for a front yard I'm going to have pine trees. I'm just going to let them go, you know. I will not spend my years, especially my remaining years, retired years, I should say, cleaning up, fixing a goddamned house and cleaning the fucking yard. I'm going to do other things besides that, you know. But I am not going to spend my retired years, or from 50 until the day I die, working on my goddamned house, painting my fucking house, and . . . and cutting the frigging grass. [Agitated. Raised voice.] I'm not going to do it. I just . . . there's much more to live than this middle class, you know, thing, you know. And if I . . . and if I ever see . . . if I ever see one of those glass balls sitting in front of my yard. . . . Oh, those silly things.

Here, Paul argues for a utilitarian approach to lawn and garden. Rather than accept the expensive and labor-intensive aesthetic that the market posits as part of the good life, Paul advocates maximizing utility and minimizing labor.

Shopping as Sovereignty Game. Ironically, Paul's adamant quest to control market influences leads him to routinely enter market competitions with great dedication and zeal. Paul is a shopping engineer, evaluating consumer goods using a precise and comprehensive calculus similar to those advanced by economic decision-making models. He loves to shop, and he invests enormous amounts of time researching purchases in order to ensure that he only buys products of the finest construction and materials.

P: I tend to hunt out . . . I try to find the quality stuff. I mean I . . . I think that everything that I own is probably of pretty good quality because I've taken time and I just buy a piece a month you know. Like a pair of good tennis shoes. You know, buy something nice once a month.

Paul's acquisition of two Stiffel lamps for his unfinished basement apartment demonstrates his tenacity as a shopper, the high drama produced by the competition, and the sense of accomplishment he gets out of beating the market using exhaustive research.

P: Yeah. I have two brass lamps. Solid. Real nice brass lamps. Oh, here's the box of one. Okay? I like nice things. Okay? And if I only have a hundred bucks and I see a brass lamp, something that I don't have that I want, I'll spend the hundred bucks and get the lamp and then find some way to make it through the week. That's how I operate.

Interviewer (I): So what is it about the nice brass lamp?

P: They're sturdy. They're easy to clean. This particular brass lamp doesn't tarnish. All you have to do is wipe it off with a dust cloth.

I: So can you tell me: for the lamps or some of these other things you bought, what was the process of shopping for it? Sounds like you really spent time at it and enjoyed it?

P: Well, first I found the people who specialize in table lamps. And think there are only three in this county. Or in this area. The State College–Bellefonte area. And then I went to the one who had the most selection. And then I went through their catalog. I took an hour and went through their catalogs and I found the style I wanted. And I looked at the price. And if the price wasn't what I wanted, I went to another style. Went to another height of lamp. I . . . I knew what I wanted to spend. I went out to this place, this lamp . . . this electrical place, for instance. I wanted to spend somewhere between . . . for instance . . . just for an example, I wanted to spend somewhere between 300 and 450 dollars. Preferably below 350 dollars, you know. But if I had to go to 400 dollars, I would. And I tried to find a style that fit into my budget and what I wanted to spend for that product.

I: Let me ask you a question. Before, you were talking about how you're on low income right now.

P: Yeah, about 500 dollars a month.

I: And, you know, spending 50 cents for a movie, you said, is expensive.

P: It adds up. Yeah.

I: So it sounds like spending 300 bucks for some lamps is a lot. What makes it worth it to buy 300-dollar lamps instead of a 20-dollar lamp that you could buy at Lowe's or Wal-Mart?

P: Well, that's a good question. I've . . . well, they look cheap. You know, I went to Lowe's. I first went to Lowe's and Wal-Mart and was . . . came . . . went out . . . left completely disappointed. I couldn't find a solid brass lamp. . . . I couldn't find a *solid brass* lamp. Okay? Not one. Not even . . . not even on the lowest level. You know, they were all alloy or tin with brass plating, you know. I didn't want that because they looked . . . they didn't look good, you know. Just didn't look good. I went to Lowe's and I went to some of these discount places and I left disappointed.

Cost becomes irrelevant in these dramas. Paul describes the same methodical process for shopping for a variety of everyday items. Shopping is a psychically charged domain for him because it is through shopping that he can best demonstrate the viability of his propaganda-filtering mode of consumption. By winning many small battles with the market, Paul demonstrates that he is no marketing puppet.

P: I like to shop when I don't have to. Do you know what I mean? I like to work hard when I don't have to. You know? I like to cut corners when I don't have to. Because you're going on the offense. You're not on the defense.

Paradoxically, Paul's highly reflexive and focused defense against the market's attempts to trick him also draws him to participate in the market, creating for him a meta-identity as sovereign consumer. Manufacturers like Stiffel, positioned to express enduring quality rather than transient style, readily appeal to Paul.

Case 2: How Creative Resistance Produces the Commodification of Personal Sovereignty

Don is handsome, tall, and thin, 47 years old, with an ear-to-ear grin and bulging eyes. He resembles a character actor. A convivial man, Don bursts with infectious enthusiasm throughout the interview. He has avoided the dominant work-and-spend ethos all of his adult life, choosing leisure over income since he graduated from college more than 25 years ago. Don consciously minimizes his dependence on the market so that he can focus energy on his favorite activities. He rents a ramshackle double-wide trailer in a nondescript town.

Don (D): A place to live is just a place to hang your hat and hang out so you can go do something. Kind of like a motel when you go to the shore or whatever. It's just a place to sleep so you can operate from there. I don't put a lot of effort here because most of my effort goes, you know, to dancing, to bicycling, to racquetball. It goes out there.

Like housing, Don thinks that food and clothing are utilitarian items that should be attended with little expenditure (though still with a bit of panache, if possible). Once a week, he bikes 20 miles round-trip to shop for groceries, stopping at each of the three major stores to shop for the weekly loss-leader specials, stockpiling several weeks' worth of items that are especially cheap. Don fills out his supplies with miscellaneous canned goods and leftovers from local restaurants given to him by the food bank. Cooking is a creative endeavor in which Don works out recipes that provide some aesthetic variety using these basic goods, and he finds tasty ways to use up what he is given for free. Similarly, he buys most of his clothing at thrift shops, and much of it hangs on a clothesline strung across his living room. Don focuses his energies on his four current avocations: biking, film, dancing, and racquetball.

Culling Useful Cultural Resources. Don views marketing as an erratic sugar daddy, as the benevolent and prolific, but not particularly selective, provider of an extraordinary grab bag of playthings. Unlike Paul, Don has not developed a well-honed discursive critique of the market as the proselytizer of superfluous meanings. Rather, Don evinces a practical understanding of the market in which branded goods serve as vital resources because they are the props with which he constructs his avocation-driven life. However, because the market is so promiscuous in generating these props, they are often invasive. To Don, commodities demand a stern father figure, an iron-fisted editor who carefully selects those that are useful for current projects. He tenaciously eliminates goods that fall outside his current area of interest. Whereas Paul rejects branded goods as a threatening form of false consciousness, Don rigorously patrols the marketing and media channels to selectively control his intake. For example, he likes "good" ads and even watches reels of the award-winning television spots, but hates to have ads imposed on him repetitively. Before the advent of remote control, he jury-rigged a wire running from

his television to an on-off switch that he kept next to his chair so that he could zap ads.

Creative Self-Production in Nonmarket Spaces. Late afternoons, two days a week, Don rides his bike 10 miles to take advantage of the free open slots on the university racquetball courts. He does not set up regular games; instead, he plays anyone who is willing, until the courts are empty, sometimes as late as 11:00 P.M. He is totally absorbed by all elements of the game—strategy, endurance, and technique—and he is rarely sated. With inferior competitors, Don will play left-handed or work on one particular shot.

Don is equally passionate about dancing. He dances several nights a week, often traveling hundreds of miles on the weekends for a good dance. He dances four different styles (contra, waltz, English, and square) and constantly learns new moves. Like his other avocations, Don's style of consuming is to throw himself into the activity and push his creativity and skill development as far as he can. He is always looking for innovations.

D: I've done Busch Gardens [in Williamsburg, VA] several times. And the last time, Nick and I ran Beth through. We just did all the plays and the shows. And in fact I even copied one of their ideas for the square dance thing. When the square dancers put on these performances, like when we get together for a Clearfield weekend, one of the ones I did was dry bones. I took a skeleton and found where it naturally divided and got sticks with Velcro on and black lighted it and had all the people with the different sticks so when you disconnect them bones, you know, the head bone disconnects. Well, the person picks the stick up and you're standing there watching this and the neck disconnects and the arms disconnect and then you connect them all back up again. Tore the house down with that. Yeah. And I learned that at Williamsburg. I watched how they did it. And I said, "I know how they're doing that." So I brought that home. I like the shows because it's creative. It gets my mind involved.

Similarly, Don approaches film and educational television with the zeal of a good Ph.D. student conducting a literature review. He moves systematically through films using a movie guide, rating the films that he has seen and passing along recommendations to friends and family who are also movie buffs.

Don's fourth current avocation is biking. Don bikes with extreme gusto, seeking out the hardest, longest, most exhilarating rides. He grimaces appreciatively, reminiscing about "century" (100-mile) rides that leave his legs aching.

Just as Firat and Venkatesh (1995) advocate, Don's life is marked by a fragmented progression through life world-based avocations to which he is intensively dedicated. In addition to his current passions, he has previously been enthralled with playing banjo and bass guitar, singing in a local barbershop quartet, and flying kites (he still has 100 kites in his collection). When new opportunities arise (e.g., his new girlfriend encouraged him to try dancing), he shifts gears and throws himself into the activity until he loses interest. He avidly participates as an apprentice-enthusiast,

learning as much as possible and creatively building his abilities. These activities take place apart from the market in the types of spaces that Firat and Venkatesh (1995) admire, such as the halls borrowed for dances, the university intramural facility, and Pennsylvania's back roads.

Self-Production through Brands. Don's living room is crowded with five bikes, two of them assembled and the other three in various stages of rebuilding. Don is, in the colloquial terminology of American sports aficionados, a gearhead. Tour biking and mountain biking have evolved into extremely specialized industries with many small manufacturers competing to develop components with slight technical and design advantages. Don obsessively soaks up knowledge about these innovations, seeks out those that will improve his bikes, and coordinates the selected pieces in harmonic combinations like a symphony conductor. He is adamant that he relies on his own judgments about components, proudly bucking convention when he figures out, through trial and error, a better way of doing things. He spends 20 minutes patiently and excitedly guiding me through the ins and outs of arcane mountain biking gear. He subscribes to every bike magazine he can find: *Bicycling*, *Mountain Biking*, *Bike*, *Mountain Bike*, and *Mountain Bike Action*. A stack of these magazines towers above the arm of his chair.

I: When you're reading these biking magazines, what are you getting out of that?

D: What's going on in the industry. What's happening. What's the newest stuff. For instance, I saw a thing in there called a Sachs 3 × 7 hub. I now own two of them. Plus I own a seven-speed internal.

I: Is that good?

D: Oh, it's fantastic. A lot of people have seven-speed external.

I: What's a Sachs . . . let's start with the hub here you were talking about.

D: Okay. The hub is the . . . the . . . I can show you a Sachs 3 × 7 hub. See, there's three speeds internally and seven speeds externally. Three times seven. What's three times seven?

I: Twenty-one.

D: So I got 21-speed rear end with that hub. I got three rings up front. What's three times twenty one?

I: You got quite a few.

D: Sixty-three! [Screams.] There isn't a hill built I don't love. [Laughs.] I can put this thing in any gear I want. Now I wouldn't do that to my mountain bike. Just to my road bike. See, I have another one out there that's a 42-speed because it only has two rings up front. And that wasn't enough. I needed the third ring to get that extra bite on the hills. I got too much top end and not enough bottom end. I'd like two

more gears bottom end on this bike. So when you come to the really nasty stuff. And . . . check this out, see? That's a Girvin Flex. Front end suspension. See this? Check under here. See springs? There's springs up under there. There's gel here. I mean I'm talking comfort. I am not into pain.

I: You're talking hundred miles of shock after all this . . .

D: Yeah, exactly. Now I got a Soft Ride on that that's even more . . . this is just a little bit. But you don't need that much on a road bike. You need a lot more on a mountain bike. But that's a Sachs 3 × 7 hub. And they're like 200 bucks. But it's worth it. It's well worth it because it does what I need plus when I trade this bike in or give it to somebody else, I'm taking that wheel with me and it's going on my next bike.

I: How much do you think you have in this bike?

D: Probably close to a thousand bucks. Ouch. [Laughs.] And then the same with that one. I got five bikes. . . . But I wouldn't know about it unless I read the magazines.

Later in the interview, Don offers another example of his discerning iconoclastic preferences for gear that he has developed through his enthusiastic embrace of biking.

D: There's a guy named Breezer. Have you ever heard of a Breezer Beamer?

I: No. Breezer Beamer?

D: Yep. I can show you one in about a hot two seconds here. He designed a bike with shocks . . . you know, the most popular of those Rockshox. And they're . . . well, it's just easier to show you the bike. Here's what a Breezer Beamer looks like.

I: Oh, gee. I've never seen a seat like that. What is that?

D: That's the Soft Ride. Soft Ride system. Here's what a Breezer Beamer looks like. Only the Beamer, the frame comes down to here. There's no seat post to it. So I took the seat post out of here and when I give the bike up, I'm taking this with me. Soft Ride. Soft Ride—look at this. Does that have some . . . see, I don't have . . . so it's like having a regular bike, but you still got the suspension. And I mean fully suspended.

I: So you got just as much control and everything as . . .

D: A lot more. A lot more. The first time I was coming down the hill, in fact it was that bike. See the one sticking out over there? That's got the Soft Ride on it, too. I was screaming down the hill . . . where was that? Over by Ski Mount. Over in Boalsburg. I was coming back from Whipple Dam. I'm coming down Fire Road. I didn't see the damned pot hole. I'm looking for Ron and Jay back there. I'm looking over my shoulder and I turn around and boom. And that front wheel hit it and [makes sound], you know, and back out. Yes. If I wouldn't have had that on there [whistles] I would have lost it. I would have lost it. I mean bad. Slide sideways or who knows what.

I: So that's better than any of these shock systems you think? Or a lot cheaper?

D: Well, I like it because it's the best of both worlds. Your bike still rides like a hard tail, you know. But you still got the [makes sound] with none of the distractions. Like when you got telescopic shocks, a lot of times you have to put a stiffener on there because they tend to try to flex this way. The one will go down before the other . . . you don't have that with this. With this system. It's lighter than anything they can put out. It's got all the advantages as far as I'm concerned and none of the disadvantages.

I: Why do you think people are still buying the telescopic stuff? Because of the big expense? . . .

D: Because they haven't checked it out. They haven't read. They aren't informed. [Laughs.]

Don expresses a market-based engagement with cycling. He is a producerly expert who works market offerings to suit his highly discriminating tastes. He scours the trade publications to find the latest gizmos that will allow him to further experiment with his bikes' comfort and performance. Despite his limited budget and regardless of cost, he is always willing to make changes in what he owns if it will improve his biking.

Don, like Paul, offers a paradoxical case for understanding consumer resistance. Don is a commodity bricoleur, never accepting market dictates, always using brands for self-creation rather than allowing brands to define him. Yet he is also an exemplary consumer. He proudly asserts his identity through his fine-grained brand choices. He is totally immersed in the search for the new and improved, the exotic, the next big thing. For Don there is no such thing as sticker shock, only finding bargains within the parameters of the game the market offers.

I: Let me ask you a question. For somebody on, you know, not a super big income and you've got to watch your pennies. There's a lot of money in these bikes. What is it about this stuff that makes it so worthwhile putting that kind of money into it?

D: Well, I like biking and there isn't any other way to do that. That's the cheapest I can do it.

I: Huh?

D: That same bike by Breezer would be, like, 3,500 dollars. Yes. Hello. And I spent less than a thousand. So I got basically the same kind of ride, but for a third the price. And then I do other things. Like the tires on there, those are 24-dollar tires. I waited till they went on sale. I got them both for 24 dollars. So, you know, there's all kinds of ways around and around stuff. And you just got to know what you want and figure out a way to do it. And I enjoy doing that. These are my interests. I focus it that way. It works.

When I entered Don's trailer I was stunned to see an entire wall filled with audiovisual equipment. He owns nine VCRs

and his girlfriend has another seven, all with VCR-Plus so that they can be quickly programmed. Don masterfully games the marketing efforts of pay cable channels like HBO, Showtime, and Cinemax and videotapes hordes of films when they run trial promotions. Whether it is bikes, VCRs, or athletic shoes, Don “sucks up” large quantities when he sees a good deal for one of the brands that he has carefully sourced. His resulting inventories further fuel his avocations.

Don has trouble resisting merchandise that might advance his pursuit of the optimal experience. For example, he owns more than 100 Western shirts to wear dancing. Don does not feel compelled to justify acquisitions. He believes his purchases are essential because they allow him to enjoy his chosen activities to the acme of their possibilities. He believes that the most intensive pleasures are possible only with the best equipment and lots of it. He feels the greatest sense of accomplishment only when he approaches his avocations with this total-quality-management-styled ethos: “You know, I get into something, I just keep following it. See where it gets hard.” Don regularly uses the metaphor “sucking it up” to describe how he takes possession of commodities. This is revealing. Don is a scavenger, forever scouting for the right goods. When he finds what he wants, he hordes all he can possibly use, and more.

According to Ozanne and Murray (1995) and Firat and Venkatesh (1995), consumer resistance requires the critical ability to filter out market-imposed meanings and the creative ability to produce the self. Both views understand marketers to dictate the meanings and experiences of those in its grasp. The vast majority of consumers grant unreflexive consent to this mode of cultural organization, producing pleasures and identities by consuming as the market dictates. Liberated consumers are rugged cultural individualists who nimbly produce layer upon layer of local meanings. They cobble together covert social practices that escape marketized blueprints.

Interpreted using these theories, Paul’s and Don’s consumption styles are paradoxical. Both men are able to isolate marketers’ persuasion efforts and to articulate market offerings with their identity projects virtually at will. But they both locate their identity work within the marketplace rather than other organizing spheres of social life such as family, religion, community, and work. Paul exemplifies reflexive resistance, confronting the mass market head-on through distanced critical reasoning. Yet he is an über-consumer. His wholesale pursuit of critical praxis leads Paul to designate the market as the central symbolic arena in which he constructs himself.

Similarly, Don’s commodity artistry exemplifies post-modern resistance. He spends most of his hours in the nooks and crannies of society, in the types of spaces imagined by Firat and Venkatesh (1995) to provide a nonmarket respite from consumer culture. He is an extraordinarily creative and producerly consumer who works to gain local knowledge rather than succumb to market information. He works creatively on every commodity he purchases to make it his own. Yet, in so doing, he is strongly seduced by ever-chang-

ing market offerings that promise to allow him to further individuate his consumer projects. The market is a valued coconspirator in these life world expressions. Don’s playful artistic consumption style produces endless quests for commodities perfectly suited to enhance his avocations.

Don and Paul both resist marketing’s cultural authority, but neither ends up emancipated from the market. The opposite is true. Because each has committed to an identity project that centers on behaving as a certain type of consumer (in Paul’s case, one who sees through market propaganda; in Don’s, one who creates with the market’s cornucopian riches), each has no choice but to pursue these acts of agency primarily as agents of the market. The market continues to form the symbolically charged arena with which they form their identities. As each pushes the oppositional ideals of reflexivity and self-production to the extreme, producing identities through marketplace interactions becomes more, not less, important. Resisting the market’s cultural authority in order to enact localized meanings and identities produces a new consumer culture in which identity projects are aligned with acts of consumer sovereignty.

This analysis suggests that consumer culture now accommodates the quest for personal sovereignty. In the next section, I examine the historical record to specify when and how the commodification of personal sovereignty became central to consumer culture.

CONSUMER CULTURE AND BRANDING: A DIALECTICAL HISTORY

In this section I combine inferences from the case studies of Don and Paul with a variety of secondary academic sources and primary industry examples to develop an alternative view of consumer culture and branding. I construct a historical argument that traces the dialectical entanglement between firms’ branding efforts and consumer culture. Then I use this framework to project how branding and consumer culture will evolve in the future. As I developed this analysis, an alternative model of branding and consumer culture emerged. I present this model first, at the beginning of the analysis rather than at the end, to serve as a road map for the reader.

Dialectical Model of Consumer Culture and Branding

In any given era, a set of axiomatic assumptions and principles undergirds how firms seek to build their brands. Through a process that DiMaggio and Powell (1983) term “institutional isomorphism”—the mimetic and normative effects caused by peer interactions, the movement of managers between firms, and communications flows mediated by educators and consultants—major corporations tend to share a single consolidated set of conventions that provide a foun-

dation from which particular branding techniques are generated. These business paradigms are not stable. Rather, just as the dominant corporate strategy paradigm has transformed dramatically over the course of the twentieth century (Fligstein 1990), we expect that the dominant branding paradigm has experienced significant shifts as well. In this historical analysis of consumer culture and branding, I found that a dialectical institutional model similar in style to Fligstein's analysis of corporate strategy best explained the data. The skeletal elements of the model are as follows.

Consumer culture is the ideological infrastructure that undergirds what and how people consume and sets the ground rules for marketers' branding activities. The branding paradigm is the set of principles that structures how firms seek to build their brands. These principles work within the axiomatic assumptions of the extant consumer culture. As firms compete and experiment within the universe of possibilities defined by these principles, they derive a variety of branding techniques. As part of a tenuous consensus maintained by the collective actions of consumers and marketers, consumer culture deceptively connotes an equilibrium for what is actually a dynamic dialectical relationship. Contradictions between consumer culture and the branding paradigm propel institutional shifts in both.

1. Firms compete to add value to their brands, guided by the principles of the extant branding paradigm. Aggressive firms continually push the envelope, innovating new techniques that push the principles to their logical extreme. These techniques create contradictions in consumer culture.
2. As consumers pursue the various statuses and desires that are valued within the extant consumer culture, they become collectively more knowledgeable and skilled in enacting the culture, producing an inflation in what is valued. This inflation, combined with increasing literacy in how branding operates, produces reflexivity that challenges the accepted status of marketer's actions.

When firms push aggressively at the moorings of the branding paradigm, and as consumers become more knowledgeable and reflexive about the previously accepted mechanics of branding, the conventional branding techniques developed within the culture gradually lose their efficacy. Consumer culture becomes something to talk about rather than to live within. Cultural experimentation ensues as consumers seek to resolve these contradictions and as marketers seek new brand building techniques that improve efficacy. Countercultural movements push for consumer-led resolutions, and branding entrepreneurs devise innovative branding solutions to vault over competition stuck in the old paradigm. Cultural producers—artists, journalists, academics, filmmakers, musicians—find in these tensions fertile ground for creative expression. Their cultural products accentuate these tensions by interpreting them and making them more visceral for their audiences. Firms and consumers, drawing from these experiments in pursuit of their dif-

fering interests, engage in a collective selection process through which a new consumer culture and new branding paradigm become institutionalized. Resolutions will resonate with the broader public to the extent that they help to resolve the contradictions with the old. Firms will adopt particular resolutions to the extent that they provide the opportunity to expand markets and profits.

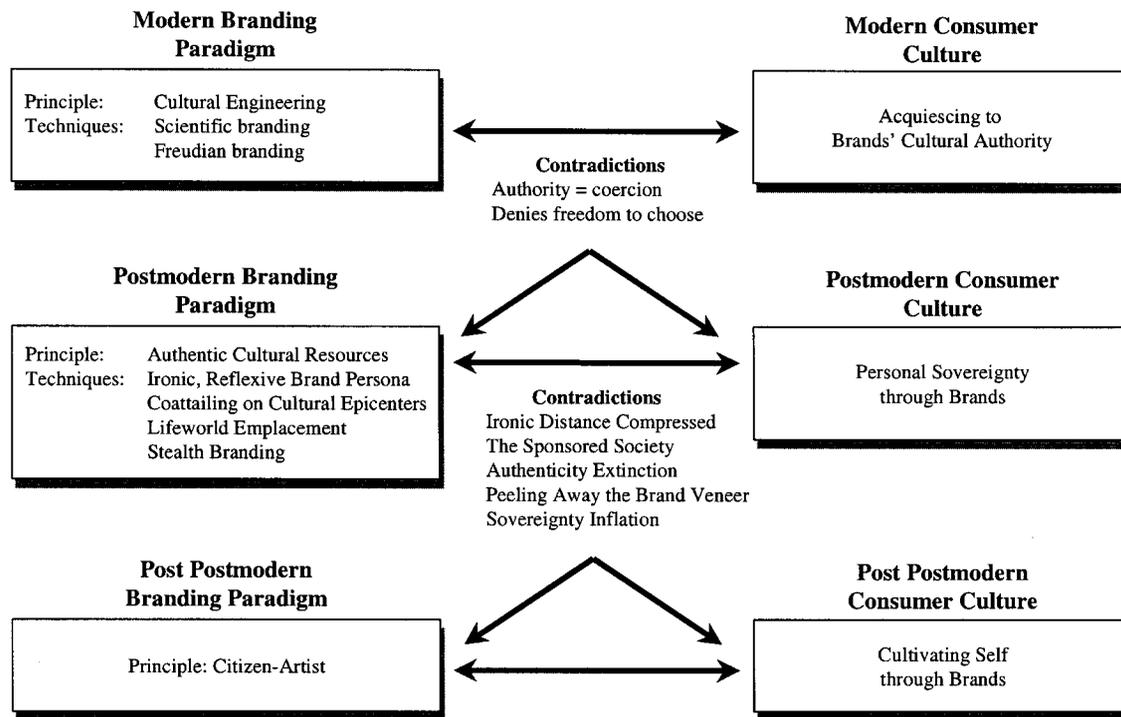
The Modern Branding Paradigm: Cultural Engineering

During the first few decades of the century, before the advertising industry had fully organized as an institution, branding was guided by two quite different principles. One principle, consistent with economic ideas of branding, was to establish a name to represent an ongoing business; to convey the legitimacy, prestige, and stability of the manufacturer; to educate the consumer about the product's basic value proposition; and to instruct on the use of novel products. The second principle, more influenced by P. T. Barnum hucksterism than staid economic ideas, was to treat consumers as gullible dupes who could be swayed if only product claims were inflated enough (Marchand 1985). In the 1920s and beyond, as the advertising business became organized, with self-governance, texts, courses, conferences, and recognized gurus, specialists gradually replaced these early strategies with what would become the modern branding paradigm.

The modern paradigm is built on two pillars: abstraction and cultural engineering (fig. 1). One of the first branding gurus, Earnest Elmo Calkins, developed the idea that manufacturers should strive to position their brands as concrete expressions of valued social and moral ideals (Lears 1995). Previous advertising tended either to highlight product benefits that were functional results closely related to the attributes of the product or to make miraculous claims. Calkins championed a new style of advertising that proposed that products materially embodied people's ideals (e.g., their aspirations concerning their families, their place in society, their masculinity and femininity), which were only tenuously linked to functional benefits. Through symbols, metaphors, and allegories, brands now were magically transformed by advertising to embody psychological and social properties (Heller 2000). From Calkins's initial leads, advertising legends like David Ogilvy and Leo Burnett ran with this idea and perfected the guiding principles of brand image. Rather than use puffery-laden messages about product benefits, marketers began to methodically drive home linkages between product attributes and a package of desirable personal characteristics that together was declared to constitute the modern good life.

Marketers made no pretense about their intentions in these branding efforts. They directed consumers as to how they should live and why their brand should be a central part of this kind of life. Advertisements shared a paternal voice that is particular to this era. By contemporary standards, these ads appear naive and didactic in their approach. This pa-

FIGURE 1
DIALECTICAL MODEL OF BRANDING AND CONSUMER CULTURE



ternalism reveals that, at the time, consumer culture allowed companies to act as cultural authorities. Their advice was not only accepted but sought out.

Prevailing academic theories on branding did their part to support this new paradigm. In the 1920s, Taylorist scientific management principles, then used to organize workers, were adapted by firms that wanted to orchestrate their customers' preferences (see Fligstein 1990, p. 125). Similarly, behaviorism began to influence advertisers to think of their craft as a methodical science. Former Procter & Gamble executive Stan Resor took over J. Walter Thompson in the 1920s and began to apply scientific management to marketing on the basis of "laws of human behavior which could be discovered through 'scientific' investigation, and a redefinition of advertising as a marketing tool" (Kreshel 1990). In the 1930s, Resor hired the famed behaviorist John B. Watson (who worked with the agency through the 1960s) to sell to clients the idea that emotion-laden stimuli could be used to manage consumer actions (Olsen 2000). In the period from the end of World War II until the creative revolution of the 1960s, advertising was dominated by four men: Resor, Rosser Reeves, Leo Burnett, and David Ogilvy. Resor and Reeves were the hard sell advocates, who advocated engineering consumer desires through cautious repetitive advertising guided by scientific principles. Burnett

and Ogilvy were the loyal opposition, soft sell stalwarts who produced ads that reflected the influence of the other great academic paradigm of the day, motivation research. Ernst Dichter, Pierre Martineau, and others convinced numerous large corporations that they could use clinical psychology to tap into the deep unconscious of consumers to magnetically pull consumers to their brands with archetypal images (Horowitz 1998).

Not coincidentally, marketing in this era was transformed from a low-profile function concerned mostly with distribution into a significant strategic tool for senior management and from a quasi-professional trade to an institutionally legitimated science supported by academic research, education, expanding doctoral programs, and licensing organizations. These heady days of modern branding were marked by a self-serving belief that sophisticated academic theories and methods would provide marketers with the tools to systematically direct consumers to value their brands.

Challenges to Modern Consumer Culture: The Sponsored Life Revealed

Three characteristics of the period following World War II allowed advertisers to seed a new consumer culture based upon acquiescing to the marketers' cultural authority. The

greatest GNP per capita increases in the country's history created for the first time a large nonelite class that had significant disposable income. A large cohort of Americans had discretionary money but had little socialization instructing them what to do with it. Advertisers were happy to fulfill this role.

During the first years of the fifties, the addictive new invention television exploded in popularity. The new technology created a new mode of persuasive communication. Advertisers no longer had to use devices to get the viewers attention, as they had to do with radio and print. Rather, they could move directly to selling messages, be they hard or soft (Fox 1984).

A final shift that sealed the deal for the cultural authority model was suburbanization. Americans flocked from tightly bound urban ethnic enclaves to suburbs where their neighbors were strangers, often with different ethnic backgrounds. So they sought a common lifestyle in order to fit in (Baritz 1989). National brands, which provided instruction for how to perform the collective good life, acted as the social glue that helped to bring together neighborhoods of strangers. (Also, they constructed seductive images of the modern good life that acted as the incentive for accelerating suburbanization.)

With their initial successes, scientific and Freudian branders pursued ever more aggressive cultural engineering techniques and pushed ever harder to spike demand with ideas like planned obsolescence and motivation research. Critics and consumers began to take notice. The doomsday Orwellian tones of Vance Packard and dispassionate dissections of John Kenneth Galbraith quickly captured the public's imagination with the idea that these branding techniques were an attempt to dupe people through artifice to buy into superfluous desires, to pursue material well-being far beyond what was necessary for human happiness. William H. Whyte, Jr.'s *The Organization Man* (1956), C. Wright Mills's *White Collar* (1953), Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* ([1964] 1991), and David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* ([1950] 1969) were also influential books in this period. The idea that corporations were aiming to program the minds of consumers resonated widely, coalescing into a broadscale attack on the deadening conformity of the homogeneous culture proffered by marketers. Together these books stimulated a national debate on how corporations influenced consumers.

As the modern branding paradigm became public knowledge, an anticultural engineering sentiment gelled that effectively cast these techniques as a threat to American ideals. A first principle of the culture of capitalism, the American variant in particular, is the primacy of the individual. Screeds against cultural engineering achieved broad resonance by demonstrating that modern branding strategies deeply contradicted this principle. While capitalism asserts that we are free to choose what we want to consume, large marketing firms seemed to be claiming the power to author our consumer lives through their branding. This contradiction cre-

ated the space in which alternatives to cultural engineering were seeded.

Collectively, marketers learned from this widespread resistance that the cultural engineering paradigm had hit a cultural dead end. Marketers' efforts to enhance brand value had somehow to be yoked to the idea that people freely construct the ideas that they want to express through their consumption. Branding could no longer prescribe tastes in a way that was perceived as domineering. People had to be able to experience consumption as a volitional site of personal development, achievement, and self-creation. Increasingly, they could not tolerate the idea that they were to live in accord with a company-generated template.

Postmodern Consumer Culture: Personal Sovereignty through Brands

Postmodern consumer culture was born, paradoxically, in the 1960s counterculture that opposed corporatism of all stripes. The so-called cultural revolution of the 1960s is now often associated with a lifestyle of drugs, rock music, and sexual experimentation pursued on the corner of Haight and Ashbury in San Francisco. But these cultural shifts cut a much wider swath across the country's landscape. Stirred by Herbert Marcuse, Norman Mailer, Paul Goodman, Alan Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, Andy Warhol, Frank Zappa, and many others, sixties youth culture pushed hard against the perceived cultural regimentation of corporate America to experiment with any and all societal mores, including theater, film, art, pornography, sexual preference, living situations, occupations, dress, and hygiene. This experimental moment reflected a passionate, reflexive concern with existential freedom. The revolution was to be a personal one, and it happened by treating the self as a work under construction, the authenticity of which was premised upon making thoughtful sovereign choices rather than obeying market dictates (Dickstein [1977] 1997).

From the 1960s onward, people increasingly viewed consumption as an autonomous space in which they could pursue identities unencumbered by tradition, social circumstances, or societal institutions. In this new environment, brands that seemed to embody marketers' engineered prescriptions for how people should live their lives were less compelling. But, curiously, consumers did not reject branded goods in toto. Rather, only brands that were perceived as overly coercive lost favor. In fact, as marketers learned how to negotiate the new consumer culture, brands became more central in consumers' lives, not less. Consumers no longer were willing to accept that the value of their brands could be created by marketing fiat. But, at the same time, postmodern consumer culture emphasized that, to be socially valued, cultural content must pass through branded goods. Whereas modern consumer culture authorized the meanings that consumers valued, postmodern consumer culture only insists that meanings—any, take your choice—must be channeled through brands to have value.

It is certainly no coincidence that interpretive consumer research became a viable enterprise at the same time that postmodern consumer culture was rising to dominance. This research has vividly documented postmodern consumer culture's central tendency: the use of consumer goods to pursue individuated identity projects (see Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Mick and Buhl 1992; and Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). As symbolic interactionists tell us, even sovereign identities require the interpretive support of others to give them ballast. Thus, consumers now form communities around brands, a distinctively postmodern mode of sociality in which consumers claim to be doing their own thing while doing it with thousands of like-minded others (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). With this shift, the means by which people express status through consumption has also shifted. In modern consumer culture, consuming market-consecrated brands expressed distinction; in the postmodern formation, such distinction tends to accrue through the ways in which consumers individuate market offerings and avoid market influence (Holt 1998). The market now glorifies the most successful acts of consumer sovereignty that move well beyond personalizing brands to wholesale qualitative reconstruction of what the market delivers.

Craig Thompson and his colleagues (Thompson and Haytko 1997; Thompson et al. 1994) add a productive spin to this line of thinking. In the postmodern era, consumers still hold onto the idea that companies act as cultural engineers, attempting to coercively install preferences. Thompson's informants see themselves as more clever than the gullible masses and so are able to negotiate a personal style in a sea of me-too meanings. People now use authoritarian marketing techniques as a trope to portray themselves as facile consumers able to outmaneuver brand managers. Thompson and colleagues convincingly argue that the cultural engineering paradigm is now a useful fiction that people use to construct themselves as sovereign consumers.

In modern consumer culture, consumers looked to companies for cultural guidance. In postmodern consumer culture, consumers strive to deflect the perceived paternalism of companies. It is curious that, as people push against corporate coercion, established brands have become increasingly valuable, not less so. Brands have become the pre-eminent site through which people experience and express the social world, even as the worlds that move through brands are less orchestrated by managers than before. To understand how brands have been able to gain power in a seemingly hostile world, we need to examine how the branding paradigm shifted to accommodate postmodern consumer culture.¹

¹This transformation roughly parallels the two modes of power described by Michel Foucault. Modern consumer culture was a poorly realized attempt to install marketing as an expert discourse in which scientific-therapeutic rhetoric was used to claim the cultural authority for particular institutional actors (marketing professionals and academics) to manage commodity sign production. The resulting "code," vaunted in the early work of Jean Baudrillard, is now fading in its semiotic potency. In its place, a postmodern system is emerging that follows a logic similar to Foucault's later writings on sexuality (Foucault 1978). Rather than an

The Postmodern Branding Paradigm: Relevant and Authentic Cultural Resources

The postmodern branding paradigm emerged in a *pas de deux* with the new postmodern consumer culture. Marketers experimented with new branding techniques that would work in a world in which marketers were no longer granted the authority to mold the culture of everyday life. The 1960s counterculture is not usually associated with marketing. But, as Thomas Frank (1997) points out, the ideals of the cultural revolution anchored a commercial bonanza for those advertisers savvy enough to make radical adjustments in their strategy. Pursuing cultural experimentation and existential freedom, the counterculture viewed corporations and their marketing efforts as the enemy. Corporate sponsorship of these personal sovereignty projects was an oxymoron. This contradiction set the barrier that postmodern branding tenaciously worked to overcome.

To participate in postmodern consumer culture, brands had to insinuate themselves as the most effective palette for these sovereign expressions. Advertisers in the 1960s, led by Bill Bernbach's agency Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB), aggressively experimented with new branding techniques that meshed with the emerging consumer culture. Journalists and academics routinely characterize the output of DDB and other renegade agencies as a creative revolution, suggesting that artistry took precedence over strategy. But it was quite the opposite. These seemingly wild-eyed creative treatments were actually a flurry of strategic experiments to locate a new branding model that would work in the shifting consumer culture. Bernbach, along with his peers (e.g., George Lois, Jerry Della Famina, Howard Gossage, and Mary Wells) cobbled together a new prototype that their progeny would perfect in later decades.

The postmodern branding paradigm is premised upon the idea that brands will be more valuable if they are offered not as cultural blueprints but as cultural resources, as useful ingredients to produce the self as one chooses. And in order to serve as valuable ingredients in producing the self, branded cultural resources must be perceived as authentic. Postmodern consumer culture has adopted a particular notion of authenticity that has proved particularly challenging to marketers. To be authentic, brands must be disinterested; they must be perceived as invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value. Postmodern consumers perceive modern branding efforts to be inauthentic because they ooze with the commercial intent of their sponsors.

Following a decade or so of experiments, a handful of successful techniques began to emerge. The recessionary decade of the 1970s pushed these techniques lower on the

expert discourse controlled by an institutionalized system, consumer culture is a popular, widely dispersed, rhizome-like technology of self-control ("biopower" in Foucault's terms) in which market power produces the "freedom" to construct oneself according to any imaginable design through commodities. See Slater (1997) for an argument along these lines.

agenda. But since the mid-1980s, they have returned full force, with many refinements and extensions added in the past 15 years. A new group of branding innovators led by ad agencies Chiat Day in Los Angeles and Portland's Wieden+Kennedy picked up where the 1960s innovators left off. By the 1990s, five new techniques had emerged, each of which sought to present brands as relevant and authentic cultural resources. Each technique creates the perception that brands provided consumers with original cultural resources untainted by instrumental motivations of sponsoring companies.

Ironic, Reflexive Brand Persona. One of the most famous advertising campaigns of all time, DDB's work for the Volkswagen Beetle brilliantly prefigured several key postmodern techniques. The signal innovation of the campaign is the ironic, reflexive brand persona. Directly countering the paternal voice of modern ads, classic DDB print ads such as "Lemon" and "Think Small" took a humble warts-and-all approach, poking fun at their product, speaking in a voice that suggested an overly conscientious friend rather than a father figure. The campaign often used irony and a reflexive acknowledgment that the point of the ads was to sell in order to forge distance between the brand and its competitors' hard sell commercialism. Volkswagen's anti-authoritarian voice trusted consumers to make the right choice. In the 1980s, Levi's "501 Blues," Nike's "Just Do It," and the "Energizer Bunny" rekindled the use of irony and reflexivity to distance the brand from the overly hyped and homogenizing conceits of conventional advertising. Ads that sought to distance the brand from overt persuasion attempts became commonplace in the 1990s (Goldman and Papson 1996).

Coattailing on Cultural Epicenters. A third postmodern technique is to weave the brand into cultural epicenters, the wellsprings of new expressive culture. These epicenters include arts and fashion communities (e.g., Absolut and Diesel), ethnic subcultures (e.g., the African-American ghetto for Tommy Hilfiger, Nike, Sprite, and Fubu), professional communities (e.g., professional sports for Nike, commercial arts for Apple), and consumption communities (e.g., surfers for PacSun, snowboarders for Burton, mountain bikers for Cannondale). A brand that forges a credible ongoing relationship within such a community creates an impression for the mass audience that the brand is a vested member of the community and that its stature within that community is deserved. When brands time their commitment to the epicenter to precede mass commercialization, for example, Mountain Dew's early sponsorship of extreme sports in the early 1990s and the Gap's seeding of the swing dancing craze in their famous 1997 advertising, they become perceived as cultural producers. They are part of the movement rather than mere cultural parasites that appropriate valued popular culture.

The most important epicenter today in the United States is what is euphemistically called urban culture, the culture (music, fashion, slang, body language, etc.) of America's

poverty-stricken African-American and Puerto Rican urban ghettos. As marketers have recognized the value of these cultural epicenters, they have sought out specific expertise. Thus advertising agencies have begun to open up shops within shops that specialize in the key epicenters. For example, Leo Burnett (Vigilante), DDB (Spike/DDB, led by filmmaker Spike Lee), and now BBDO (S/R Communications Alliance) have all invested considerable resources to deliver the cultural assets of the ghetto to their clients more effectively than their competitors.

Companies now work hard to weave their brands into cultural epicenters. Firms gain market power by effectively controlling the movement of culture that flows through these epicenters. For firms that pursue this model, monopolizing these channels of cultural creation has become of central strategic importance (Holt 1999). Hence we find that large consumer goods companies and ad agencies have moved aggressively to develop their ability to manage the market for cultural properties.

Life World Emplacement. In the postmodern worldview, authentic culture is a product not of cultural specialists but of the street. A third technique, life world emplacement, works hard to make the case that the brand's value emanates from disinterested everyday life situations far removed from commercial sponsorship. The Levi's 501 campaign in the 1980s popularized the use of *cinéma vérité* techniques to create the perception that the sponsor was offering the audience a transparent lens onto everyday life. Levi's quickly followed with a hugely successful *vérité* campaign to launch their new Dockers brand. Handheld cameras captured snippets of a seemingly live conversation of 30-something men spilling their guts to each other at bars and restaurants, all shot from the waist down, Docker to Docker. Many dozens of amateurish, seemingly candid spots followed in campaigns for brands such as Snapple, New York Life, and Miller Genuine Draft. In 2001, Nike, Levi's, Diet Coke, and Sprite have all produced candid-camera ads in which amateur BMX bikers, lip synchers, and rappers seem to be captured without artifice by a hidden camera. PepsiCo recently launched a Mountain Dew line extension called Code Red with an ad in which basketball stars Tracy McGrady and Chris Webber join a real pickup game on the streets of New York City. The ad, filmed with multiple hidden cameras, emphasizes the giddy excitement of the amateur players and the spectators who quickly gather, all thrilled to be part of this unrehearsed impromptu event. The tagline: "Code Red. As real as the streets."

Consumers now understand that marketers promiscuously stitch stories and images to their brands that may have nothing to do with the brands' real history and consumption. So they look for evidence that suggests that a brand has earned its keep either at some remove from marketing's propaganda engines or in historic eras that preceded the race to invent brand identities.

A new generation of backward-looking brands creates origin myths that prove that the brand's value stems from its popularity among people who have an acute sensitivity

to product performance. Marketing influence cannot be a factor because these people are too opinionated and savvy to fall for such stuff. Clothing companies seem to get the most leverage out of this technique. Levi's and Lee's compete with their heritages: sewing clothing for working men, miners, and cowboys who punish their denim. Lee has recently reintroduced Buddy Lee, a promotional doll that Lee used in the 1920s, who champions the indestructibility of the product with cranky humor. Similarly, L.L. Bean, Eddie Bauer, and Abercrombie & Fitch seem to suggest that their brands earned their keep by outfitting ancient mariners trolling for swordfish and World War II pilots flying off to battle the Nazis.

Consumer subcultures provide another resource for brands to build an origin myth that claims authenticity. Brands like Airwalk and Patagonia rest their laurels on their street credentials among the most discerning skateboarders and mountain climbers. Any product that has a credible historical or subcultural story to tell seems to be telling it.

The Harley-Davidson Company is a master of life world emplacement, working both the history and the subculture angles to enhance the perception that Harley's value stems from authentic sources. Harley managers have used product design, staged events, and sponsorship to create for their customers the idea that Harley is an anachronistic company whose heart remains in the 1950s. The company carefully orchestrates ties to outlaw bikers to convince mainstream consumers that Harley proudly upholds the moral codes of the outlaws' Hobbesian world. This imaginative construction of the Harley brand allows its customers to experience Harley's version of masculinity as the real thing, pulsing with the aura that the company calls "the Harley mystique." This authenticity work allows the company to camouflage aggressive commercial intentions, as evidenced by the brand's frenetic trademark licensing and the Harley cafes and fashion showrooms that now dot the country.

Stealth Branding. Of late, marketers have flocked to a fourth technique, stealth branding, as the new panacea that will allow them finally to escape consumer attributions of cultural coercion. Instead of direct branding efforts, companies seek out the allegiance of tastemakers who will use their influence to diffuse the idea that the firm's brand has cultural value (i.e., is cool). The promise of stealth branding has stimulated a publishing and consulting frenzy, promoting concepts like grass roots, viral, tribal, and buzz (e.g., Bond and Kirshenbaum 1998; Gladwell 2000; Rosen 2000; Rushkoff [1994] 1996).

This idea dates back to what used to be called public relations, wherein marketers would place products in popular television programs or films or hire celebrities to use brands like DeBeers and Lucky Strike. Today, product placement has expanded well beyond the obvious culture industry texts and stars to virtually anyone deemed to have social influence, including hipster barflies, gang members, and sociable people with lots of friends. By avoiding direct brand communications, the firm dodges attributions of cultural influence. As with urban culture, ad agencies have taken the lead in or-

ganizing to deliver stealth branding with names like Tribal DDB and Brand Buzz. Specialized firms like Sputnik and the Dream Team have organized armies of in-the-field operatives to execute these underground assignments.

In sum, marketers work with a palette of techniques derived from the foundational principle of the postmodern branding paradigm: consumers will view brands as valuable resources for identity construction when brand meanings are perceived to be authentic—original and disinterested.

THE FUTURE OF BRANDING AND CONSUMER CULTURE

The postmodern paradigm is now running into intrinsic contradictions that threaten its efficacy. As firms compete to build their brands with postmodern branding techniques, they pursue more aggressive, riskier gambits to create perceived authenticity. Cumulatively, this heated competition is raising the bar on what is considered authentic. As these techniques become more pervasive and more aggressive, consumers increasingly see them as crass commercial techniques.

Just as critics in the fifties rebuffed cultural engineering techniques, the anti-branding critics are now exposing these authenticity claims. Skeptical consumers have a healthy appetite for muckraking exposés that describe how stealthy, sponsored persuasion works. One sure reason for the popularity of Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (1999) is that she reveals to a countercultural audience many of the postmodern techniques that marketers now use. That the techniques are grounded in a basic deceit, a denial that what the brand stands for is motivated by the profit motive, seems to especially infuriate her audience.

In addition, the movement also attacks companies for building blissful meanings into their brands for consumers while treating nonconsumers with much less regard. Kalle Lasn's magazine *Adbusters* has for years encouraged its readers to culture jam ads, changing the ads' copy and images to subvert the intended message. Originally, most culture jamming activities were focused on concerns with modern branding—the manipulation of desires through advertising. Today, culture jamming is more frequently used to attack disjunctures between brand promises and corporate actions.

For example, in 2000, a Lasn acolyte culture jammed Nike's custom shoe Web site by placing an order for a customized pair of shoes. (Nike inscribes the shoes with a few words of the customers' choice.) Rather than personalize the shoes with his own name or favorite group, the jammer ordered them with a slogan inferring that Nike used sweatshop labor. In a heated exchange, the jammer went several rounds with Nike customer relations, pushing them into logical errors that revealed the contradictions between Nike's "Just Do It" philosophy and their decision to censor his shoe message. This interchange was widely published and circulated around the Web like wildfire. (I received three copies within a week after the jamming event went public.) More

formally, we can isolate five contradictions that now threaten postmodern consumer culture.

Postmodern Contradictions

Contradiction 1: Ironic Distance Compressed. For a time, ironic modes of communications were a viable means for deflecting perceptions that brand communications intended to shape consumer tastes (Goldman and Papson 1996; Sandikci 1999). When Levi's, Nike, Everready, and Little Caesar's relied upon irony-laced styles, they worked. But success bred imitation. These techniques have become pervasive, and competition for ironic distance has heated up. A handful of brands could earn kudos for mocking advertising conventions. But when dozens of brands copied this technique, it became clear to attentive consumers that ironic distancing from commerce was, after all, commerce. In 1996 the Miller Brewing Company restaged Miller Lite with a heavily ironic campaign built around a fictitious ad agency copywriter. The ironic cues backfired, and the campaign was dumped and the agency fired. Sprite has recently traded in its increasingly ironic "Obey Your Thirst" campaign as competitor 7-UP started to fight irony with irony. Ironic distance has moved from a credible anticommmercial cue to a clichéd "adworld" convention in the space of less than a decade.

Contradiction 2: The Sponsored Society. Marketers' stealth branding efforts execute an end run around consumers' perceptions of coercion by entirely avoiding direct contact. For this technique to work, the targets of stealth must be convinced that peers whose opinions they value are offering advice unadorned by corporate influence. But market competition is driving an inflation in the quantity and aggressiveness of stealth attempts. This inflation has led to heightened attention and criticism not only in the business press but also in newspapers, books, and magazines. Now that Malcolm Gladwell (2000) has revealed in elegant prose to managers the winning formula for locating the most potent influencers, marketers and their ad agencies are rushing to sign them up. Increasingly, the brand agents who are sent into bars and clubs and schools to diffuse a brand virus will be unveiled and scorned with the same venom now devoted to telemarketers.

Contradiction 3: Authenticity Extinction. In search of ways to communicate that their brands are disinterested, advertisers are making increasing use of cultural texts produced and consumed far away from Hollywood and Madison Avenue. As the authenticity market heats up, texts perceived as authentic are becoming scarce. For instance, consider the music that advertisers choose to use in their ads. At the birth of postmodern culture, ads were viewed as crassly commercial products while other culture industry texts were understood to be motivated by artistic as well as commercial vision. So branders tried to avoid tainted com-

merce perceptions by replacing the old Madison Avenue jingles with Top Forty hits or classic rock chestnuts. But, as we enter the entertainment economy, led by revved-up cobranding machines like Disney, consumers now recognize that there is little difference between the commercial conceits of an ad and those of a film or a CD or a sports team or a video game. To tap into culture that retains the perception of authenticity, marketers have become increasingly aggressive in searching out cultural texts that still have their aura intact, unstained by corporate sponsorship.

Now that ad agencies have mined the most accessible music, they are forced to search out more esoteric tracks that are still perceived as pristine. Leading creative agencies now use music from the distant past, from obscure genres, and from independent bands that are known to only a few thousand fans. Low budget independent films have become the favored stomping ground of brands like Miller beer and Starbucks and BMW. Starbucks routinely stages performances by barely known local folk musicians. Postmodern branding is now running a fine-toothed comb through the culture industry's dusty closets and countercultural dead ends to mine the last vestiges of unsponsored expressive culture. Authenticity is becoming an endangered species.

Contradiction 4: Peeling Away the Brand Veneer. Marketers are engaged in a tooth and nail ideological struggle with the antibranding movement over the meaning of authenticity. Brands are now on offer as authentic cultural resources. Firms create authenticity by placing brands in worlds (consumer subcultures, everyday life, professional subcultures, the distant past) far removed from the corporation. The antibranding movement instead wants to reframe authenticity as a quality of the sponsor. The movement demands that, to be authentic, corporations cannot simply act as ventriloquists but, rather, must reveal their corporate bodies, warts and all, to public scrutiny.

Consumers have responded by increasingly attending to contradictions between the brand's espoused ideals and the real world activities of the corporations who profit from them. The internet has become a powerful vehicle for the viral dissemination of the backstage activities of corporations. A diverse coalition of self-appointed watchdogs monitors how companies act toward their employees, the environment, consumers, and governments. Such monitoring will grow as a greater percentage of the population becomes socialized in this new form of aggregated consumer power.

These efforts act to blur the boundary between internal organizational decisions and external branding decisions. Sovereign consumers are no longer willing to watch whatever companies choose to present onstage. Rather, they now feel that they have been granted the authority to walk backstage to see the what the wizard is doing behind the scrim and to make sure that his character is consistent with what is presented onstage.

Brands like Benetton, Ben & Jerry's, and the Body Shop encountered early scrutiny simply because their explicitly politicized branding begged for it. But now brands whose

politics are less overt are starting to receive the same once-over. Nike is a prime example. Since the early 1990s, human rights groups have protested against the work conditions and wages paid in Nike's subcontracted shops in Asia. Nike did not budge, and the brand was not affected, as sales continued to grow through the mid-1990s. But as the anti-branding movement hit critical mass, the tide shifted. Grassroots organizing against Nike took off and received tremendous media coverage. Enough people resonated with this message that Nike management finally understood that their brand was at risk. So they made an about-face in their strategy. The company approved routine independent inspection of its subcontractors and has even opened up its operations to its most adamant critics (see the research project led by academic critic David Boje at <http://cbae.nmsu.edu/~dboje/nike.html>). To maintain consumers' trust in their brand, Nike has found it necessary to move toward becoming a transparent company.

Contradiction 5: Sovereignty Inflation. Collectively, postmodern branding floods social life with evangelical calls to pursue personal sovereignty through brands. To feel sovereign, postmodern consumers must adopt a never-ending project to create an individuated identity through consumption. This project requires absorbing an ever-expanding supply of fashions, cultural texts, tourist experiences, cuisines, mass cultural icons, and the like. As a result, we are in the midst of a widespread inflation in the symbolic work required to achieve what is perceived as real sovereignty. To access brands in a manner that feels sovereign requires making many learned choices and then cleverly executing improvisational symbolic work. But the current labor market does not allow people the leisure time required to acquire the knowledge or invest the time to actually accomplish sovereignty in a manner that market competition defines as successful. It is simply too taxing to constantly reassemble the knowledge and skills required to significantly rework commodity meanings when they proliferate so rapidly. One barometer for measuring this trend is the dependence today upon cultural "infomediaries" (e.g., Martha Stewart, *Entertainment Tonight*, *Spin* magazine, Zagat restaurant guides) and collaborative filtering devices (e.g., Amazon.com, Hollywood Video, TiVo) as a means to manage sovereignty inflation. Consumers want to author their lives, but they increasingly are looking for ghostwriters to help them out.

The Post-Postmodern Condition: Brands as Citizen-Artists

Extrapolating from postmodern contradictions, we can make some predictions. Brands will no longer be able to hide their commercial motivations. When all brands are understood as commercial entities, through and through, consumers will be less inclined to judge a brand's authenticity by its distance from the profit motive. Instead of a standard

of disinterestedness, the question of authenticity will shift to focus on the brand's contribution as a cultural resource. Consumers will look for brands to contribute directly to their identity projects by providing original and relevant cultural materials with which to work. So brands will become another form of expressive culture, no different in principle from films or television programs or rock bands (which, in turn, are increasingly treated and perceived as brands). Brands that create worlds that strike consumers' imaginations, that inspire and provoke and stimulate, that help them interpret the world that surrounds them, will earn kudos and profits.

Postmodern brands have little value in this new consumer culture. Because they rely so much on the cultural work of disinterested others and work so hard to deny that the brand itself stands for anything by itself (for fear of being tagged as cultural engineers), postmodern brands lack an original point of view that they can claim as their own. Rather than take a free ride on the backs of pop stars, indie films, and social viruses, brands will be valued to the extent that they deliver creatively, similar to other cultural products.²

Consumers will differ in how they make use of branded expressive culture. At one extreme of the distribution curve, we will find ravenous chameleon-like consumers like Don who thrive on the overabundance of cultural materials produced and want to engage this material as an artist might, as raw ingredients with which to create. Brands attending to this segment will present ever more microtargeted and consumercentric options for consumers to pursue DIY cultivation. (Rob Kozinets's [2002] *Burning Man* participants can be interpreted as an extreme case of this segment: a group of cultural elites who, for a week or so each year, demand complete control of the creative process, elbowing marketers away from their canvases.)

At the other end of the curve are those people who get semiotic vertigo from so much cultural fragmentation and dynamism. Some will opt out of brand-assisted identities to pursue other bases of identity formation (religion, local culture, work, art, ethnic enclaves, etc.). Others may make less of a departure and instead choose to erect narrowcast gated consumption communities to lock out all but a minuscule subset of the sponsored world. The proliferation of narrowly focused consumption communities, regardless of their particular content, can be understood as a defensive posture toward consumer culture. As mountain men and Harley bikers and Apple enthusiasts forge encapsulated communities through shared consumption, they eliminate from their lives the chaotic swirl of culture that today moves through commerce.

²Of course, for a brand to serve as an artistic expression does not imply it will no longer make use of other bits and pieces of expressive culture, such as music, celebrities, films, and even other ads. Art is often concerned with reorienting how we perceive conventional cultural texts. This is a particular preoccupation of the postmodern arts. There is a key difference between the postmodern reliance on parasitic reference (which simply embeds the brand in another valued cultural text) and an artistic use of these same resources (which redeploys these texts in an interesting and pleasurable way). This is a great topic for future inquiry.

In the vast middle of the distribution curve, people will continue to treat brands as cultural resources, as one of many original source materials that may be useful in their self-construction projects. These consumers will not have the time or the energy to follow the postmodern directive to be consumer-artists. So instead they will rely upon cultural specialists to do most of the heavy lifting in creating new cultural materials.

Of the brands that are able to make the transition to provide original cultural materials, consumers will carefully weed out those that they do not trust. Brands now cause trouble, not because they dictate tastes, but because they allow companies to dodge civic obligations. Postmodern branding is perceived as deceitful because the ideals woven into brands seem so disconnected from, and often contrary to, the material actions of the companies that own them.

When companies and their consumers exist in the same local geographic community, the two are necessarily linked. Early consumer products companies and retailers often discovered that being a good corporate citizen was good for their brands. Today brands often extend across many nations, and the hollowed-out postmodern corporation has no geographic center. Thus, linkages between corporate branding activities and what corporations do when they are not addressing consumers is necessarily veiled. Many companies have taken advantage of this situation, engaging in noxious practices like reengineering and raiding pension funds and avoiding environmental responsibilities, impressing Wall Street without worry of consumer rebuff.

Branding gurus today urge companies to forge all-encompassing brand identities (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000) so that consumers experience the magic of the brand at every corporate touchpoint. What these brand architects fail to understand is that consumer cynicism with this purely promotional logic will quickly poke holes in these seemingly encapsulated identities. The antibranding movement is now forcing companies to build lines of obligation that link brand and company. As 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.

CONSUMERS AND REVOLUTIONS

Today, Horkheimer and Adorno's (1996) arguments about marketers' cultural authority are abruptly dismissed by orthodox social scientists and solemnly observed as axiomatic tenets by radical critics. But it is theoretically unproductive either to genuflect to or to reject dogmatically their formulation. Horkheimer and Adorno (1996) accurately capture how managers understood themselves and the marketplace

circa 1945–58.³ Marketing gurus advised corporate leaders on how to exact market obedience from consumers through various scientific techniques, attempting to institute something akin to these critics' accusations.

Today's critical academic accounts of consumer culture freeze history at the zenith of modern branding, when firms assumed that they had *carte blanche* to push brands at consumers and shape their desires at will and when consumers often ceded this role. Ozanne and Murray (1995) accept at face value the Frankfurt School's accounts of an authoritarian mode of marketing, even though marketing-imposed codes fell into disrepair 30 years prior to their analysis. Firat and Venkatesh seem to tell a historical story but also advance a dated view of marketing that ignores the transformation of the branding paradigm over the past 40 years. In their view, the market stubbornly remains an authoritarian institution. Their description of the market's "totalizing logic," in which firms dictate how consumers participate in its "socially organized production" (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, pp. 255–256) reads like Horkheimer and Adorno (1996) circa 1944. Their call for cultural revolution—liberatory postmodernism—was absorbed into the firmament of consumer culture by the late 1960s.

These critical researchers espouse a politics of consumption in which consumers as revolutionary vanguard become liberated to the extent that they produce their own culture rather than ceding this activity to the market. But just the opposite is true. Postmodern consumer culture produces the consumer as liberated (Frank 1997). The consumer politics they advocate already exist as a not so revolutionary well-spring of demand for the postmodern market. Today, the market is organized to produce the experiential and symbolic freedom that Murray and Ozanne (1991) and Firat and Venkatesh (1995) envision as only possible through emancipation from capitalism. The two case studies demonstrate that these resistant acts are hardly revolutionary. The market today thrives on consumers like Paul and Don, unruly bricoleurs who engage in nonconformist producerly consumption practices. Since the market feeds off of the constant production of difference, the most creative, unorthodox, singularizing consumer sovereignty practices are the most productive for the system. They serve as grist for the branding mill that is ever in search of new cultural materials. In the postmodern market, the consumption style of stupefying passivity theorized by Horkheimer and Adorno (1996) is a failure of the system.

³These authors are usually read to argue that consumer culture is centered on the coercive production of conformity and passivity by mass marketing. Often lost is the more enduring aspect of their analysis, which anticipates postmodern consumer culture. They prefigure the ideas that consumer culture naturalizes the experience of subjectivity through consumer choice, that wise choices are a privileged site for negotiating statuses, that values inhering to consumer goods are produced by the marketplace, and that one accesses these values as sovereign consumers (see Slater 1997 for an excellent exposition). But Horkheimer and Adorno (1996) did not foresee that the organization, technologies, and methods of business practice could evolve in such a way that market expansion could proceed apace without a highly orchestrated mechanism to corral consumer preferences.

In the 1950s, consumers of this ilk would indeed have posed a threat to the modern consensus. But rather than a revolutionary vanguard, such consumers are more accurately theorized as participants in a countercultural movement that, working in concert with innovative firms, pursued market-based solutions to the contradictions of modern consumer culture. 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. Revolutionary consumers helped to create the market for Volkswagen and Nike and accelerated the demise of Sears and Oldsmobile. They never threatened the market itself. What has been termed “consumer resistance” is actually a form of market-sanctioned cultural experimentation through which the market rejuvenates itself.

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