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Silence of the brands

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Abstract Since the late 1980s, brands have gained centre stage in marketing and in the managerial discourse. From having been a mere marker that identifies the producer or the origin of a product, the brand is today increasingly becoming the product that is consumed. For the corporation, the brand is conceptualised as the essence of the firm, its most crucial “asset”. In the literature, branding is described as a process of expressing core values through the use of persuasive stories. By questioning the conception of brands as corporately managed stories, the article aims to re-conceptualise branding as a process of aesthetic expression, where the conventional distinctions between senders and receivers become blurred. The paper looks into how brands have become depicted in the branding literature, and thereafter discusses the narrative and pictorial modes of communication. On the basis of this, the article finally discusses how images are used and reused in the joint construction of brands, thus challenging the idea of brands as stories crafted and controlled by the corporation.

An emerging brandscape

Distant are the times when it was supposed that “a good product speaks for itself”. With the abundance of products in the Western world, the managerial challenge, it seems, has become that of differentiating similar products; of creating a sense of uniqueness. While it is claimed that “anyone can manufacture a product”, the real route to commercial success is supposed to be found in the artful creation of images and brands. To infuse meaning into products, to transform commodities into concepts and lifestyles has become the prime task for the “symbolic expertise” made up of brand strategists and managers. When branding is the core business, the activities of marketing, advertising and branding are no longer categorised as supportive functions, but rather as the essence of the enterprise.

In a social and economic order that is moving “from substance to image” (Alvesson, 1990), the production and proliferation of signs have become more important than the production of material objects. As Lash and Urry (1994, p. 15) write, there is also an:

... increasing component of sign value or image in material objects. This aestheticisation of material objects can take place either in the production or in the circulation and consumption of such goods. Further, goods often take on the properties of sign-value through the process of “branding”, in which marketers and advertisers attach image to goods.

With the shift in focus, from tangibles to intangibles, the core activity of many corporations is transformed: from the production of things to the production of images. As has been shown by Klein (1999, p. 22), the super-brand companies



have to an increasing extent out-sourced their manufacturing so that the corporation can be “free to focus on the real business – creating a corporate mythology powerful enough to infuse meaning into these raw objects just by signing its name”.

From having been a mere marker that identifies the producer or the origin of a product, today the brand in itself has become the sign that is consumed (see, e.g. Baudrillard, 1983; Featherstone, 1994). For instance, an Adidas apparel or a Prada garment are not just physical products, but constitute in themselves symbolic signs on an expressive level. In the form of images or signs, brands are being consumed as aesthetic expressions. Hence, on a marketplace that, to an increasing extent, is concerned with the production and consumption of signs, the brand is not only a marker of identification, but also a product in itself.

From a corporate perspective, brands have come to be conceived of as the commercial use of signs for the transformation of products into value-laden concepts. Brand management is generally considered to be an issue of expressing a story which makes the company/product distinguishable and attractive on the marketplace. Brand theories, it seems, are to a high degree viewing the brand as a deliberate expression of the corporate self; a for-public-consumption story which is supposed to convey the inner meanings and values of the corporation or product. As such, the brand is frequently depicted as an asset; an equity owned and carefully controlled by the corporation. Like in much of the marketing theory, the branding literature seems to categorise the market place into senders and receivers; producers and consumers. The branding companies are sense-givers, while the consumers are considered to be sense-takers in the on-going production of meaning.

For the critics, the single-voiced brand discourse is not only considered to be too dominant, but also far too loud. As brands, rather than commodities, are flooding the marketplace, the social landscape is, in many aspects, turned into a commercial “brandscape”. When the village square is replaced by a commercial mall, the natural scenery is hidden behind huge billboards, cultural spheres become more dependent on corporate sponsors, etc., brands seem to invade private and public space (see Klein, 1999). The marketplace has become “a battlefield of brand names, images and logos striving to be heard” (Christensen and Cheney, 2000, p. 247).

In both the branding literature and in more critical cultural studies, the consumer is generally regarded as a passive receiver of pre-defined branded stories. Where the marketing monologue is loud, individual agency is said to be reduced to the corporately managed act of consumption. Yet, brands are not so much heard as they are seen. The way they speak to us, we would argue, is not primarily through stories but through visual images. Whereas storytelling is a narrative mode of communication that aims at creating meaning, we would argue that the language of brands to a high degree is pictorial. That is, brands are here to be understood as symbolic images. If stories are connected with

meanings and persuasion, images are more an issue of feelings and immersion. As figural signs, brands are based on visual impression and expression. And these images are open to reflection and distortion. By focusing on the images and expressions of brands, the perspective points towards the double agency that makes up the brandscape. Brands are not just produced and then passively consumed. The consumption of signs can be regarded as a form of aesthetic activity through which individuals strive to create expressive effects (see Featherstone, 1994).

So, how are these expressions created? Can expressions be controlled by the branding company? What are the roles of consumers and producers in the construction of expressive brands? The aim of this paper is to discuss how brands become constructed and reconstructed in an ongoing creation of images. By questioning the metaphor of story-telling that seems to be underlying much of the branding literature, our aim is to reconceptualise brands as a process of aesthetic expression, where the conventional distinctions between senders and receivers become blurred. In the paper, we will first look into how brands have become depicted in the branding literature, and thereafter we will turn into a discussion of the narrative and pictorial modes of communication. On the basis of this, we will finally discuss how images are used and reused in the joint construction of brands, thus challenging the idea of brands as stories crafted and controlled by the corporation. As we shall see, the creation of meaning is in this sense an effect rather than a starting point.

What's in a brand?

Brand theorists state that brand building no longer is what it used to be. Goodyear (1996) describes a development of an individual brand where the brand initially is undifferentiated. Over time, the brand becomes more developed, and through life-style advertising, user- and need-based segmentation, the strength of the relationship between the consumer and the brand increases. Such developments are becoming increasingly rare. As consumers become increasingly powerful, there is no time and no rationale to build brands in slow steps. When markets mature quickly, the marketing initiatives are turning symbolical, the brands turn into icons, and companies turn into corporate brands. When the brand increases in importance, as compared to the product or service in itself, brand building becomes an activity of prime importance.

In a world where brands are central, brand theorists become increasingly interested in how brands are to be managed. Apéria (2001) states that brand building is an activity with the purpose of differentiating a particular brand through building a relationship between brand and buyers or consumers. Increasingly, the brand is thereby taking a position at the heart of business activities. Brands are assets, and as such they need to be managed. Aaker (1996) is explicit in the necessity of considering a brand to be an asset as he

coins the concept “brand equity”. The concept denotes the portion of firm equity that stems from the brand. Hence, the brand is an asset that needs to be carefully managed in order not to depreciate in value, or in the worst case, be transformed into a liability.

Brand equity consists of four major asset categories:

- (1) brand name awareness;
- (2) brand loyalty;
- (3) perceived quality; and
- (4) brand associations.

These asset categories create value, not only for the brand owner, but also for the consumer. A well-known brand helps the consumer interpret and understand information, and the brand may contribute to the experience of satisfaction both when the consumer buys and uses the branded product (Apéria, 2001, p. 48). Brand theory is, however, not primarily concerned with how consumers are socially affected by branding, but how brands conquer consumer perception. This is to say that brand theorists are interested in how consumers recall and recognise brands (e.g. Keller, 1993), how brands relate to perceived quality and price (e.g. Zeithaml, 1988), and what types of associations brands evoke (e.g. Rossiter and Percy, 1998).

Kapferer (1992) calls for a more integrated view of brands and suggests the concept of brand identity. Brands, states Kapferer (1992), are examined by the parts that make up the whole: name, logo, design, packaging, etc. To Kapferer (1992), brand management rests on a strategy and an integrated vision, where brand identity, not brand image, is at the centre. Aaker (1996) speaks of brand identity in terms of core identity and extended identity. The core features of a brand, such as the so-called soul of a brand, and the fundamental beliefs and values, constitute the core identity. The extended identity, consisting of sub-brands, sponsoring etc., contributes to the fine-tuning of the core identity and is thereby vital to the construction of the brand identity.

A slightly different approach is the one forwarded by Melin (1997). To him, brand building is a parallel process that concerns both the brand owner and the consumer, although his perspective is that of the brand owner's. His focus is the core value of a brand (Melin, 1997). A brand's core value should, according to Melin (1997), be valuable and possible to communicate from the perspective of the consumer, and hard to imitate from the perspective of the competitors. The way that Melin (1997) sees the brand building process is that a company builds a brand through particular product attributes and brand identity. From the perspective of the consumer, brand awareness, brand sensitivity and loyalty are pointed toward the brand. To Melin (1997), it is in the junction between the company and the consumer perspectives that the value of brand equity arises.

Lately, scholars have been increasingly interested in the narrative features of branding (e.g. Jensen, 1999). In the narrative perspective, brands are seen as

stories about values. Brands are stories about the corporate self; they carry a message of the inner, core values of the organisation or the product. In this perspective, the brand-owner is a story-teller, and the market is an audience. Corporations are continuously trying to tell trustworthy and sustainable stories; i.e. actors in corporations explicitly attempt to express desired properties of identities.

How then, are we to understand brand theory? In general, concepts such as awareness, associations, loyalty, and narration are central. Such concepts are central if the perspective of the brand-owner is applied. The perspective represents a single-voiced brand owner, communicating to an audience who is receiving the message. Brand management, to brand theorists, is an activity that fine-tunes the story, in order to better communicate the desired message. Even though the narrative perspective often is implicit in the branding literature, the language in use displays an inclination towards the “audial” approach to branding. The consumers are conceptualised as an audience, communications are about making the message heard in media noise, and the brand is supposed to tell a story. This is to say that the brand theorists, although in different forms, see a sender, a message, and a receiver.

Even though branding might be read as a monopolising marketing monologue, and the story-telling metaphor appears to be attractive, the perspective is limited. As the brand is no longer a conveyor of product information, but rather has become the product itself, the brand is not so much a story about values and benefits as it is an image of aesthetic expression. Detached from any physical need or object, the brand becomes an image that is consumed in its own right (see Baudrillard, 1983).

Brands are literally pictorial signs, relying more on design and images than on stories and meaning. In this sense, brand management is concerned with the production of impressions. The brandscape is to a large extent an imagery; a world of visual signs and pictures. Rather than being a global language, “a business Esperanto” (Kapferer, 1992), brands can be seen as symbolic icons that make up an easily recognisable imagery repertoire.

Stories and images

A brand is commonly defined as a graphic sign that distinguishes a product from other products. But, as Schmitt (1999, p. 30) reminds us, brands are not just identifiers. “Brands are first and foremost providers of experience”. What consumers want, Schmitt (1999) continues, “is products, communications, and marketing campaigns that dazzle their senses, touch their hearts, and stimulate their minds” (Schmitt, 1999, p. 22). As a competitive tool, the brand has come to be regarded as a concept, a sign-value to be created in the image associated with an object. Branding is thus an issue of expressing a particular set of values, in an effort to position the brand as unique and valuable. In this sense, the branding project has moved beyond “splashing one’s logo on a billboard”,

and instead branding has become an issue of fostering powerful identities and concepts (Klein, 1999, p. 20). It is a process of “re-enchanting” commodities; of conveying an aura to mass-produced goods (see Shields, 1991, quoted in Lash and Urry, 1994, p. 277).

And the way these values, the aura, is supposed to be communicated to the audience is through the use of stories. As Jensen (1999, p. 53) writes, stories are value statements, and the product is just an appendix to embody whatever story is being sold. A sustainable corporate story, states Van Riel (2000, p. 157), will make stakeholders more receptive to corporate messages. With the focus on stories as the prime mode of communicating brand values, branding has come to be conceptualised as a narrative/verbal process. Marketing in itself can be read as a form of story-selling. A story told/sold to the market, which, even though it might contain some feed-back seeking elements (see, e.g. Dutton and Dukerich, 1991), most often appears to be a monologue. Marketing as story-telling is a form of narration where the company relates what it is and what it stands for; thereby making sense of activities and products.

In a narrow sense, a story is a verbal account of actions and events. The story as a narrative form requires, according to Czarinaawska (1998, p. 2) at least three elements: “an original state of affairs, an action or an event, and the consequent state of affairs”. For the three elements to become a story a plot is required; that is, an explanation of what leads to what. Much marketing and advertising can indeed be read as such stories. “If you feel lonely and sad, buy these potato chips and you will have a great moment of joy”, might be an archetypal commercial story where the action of buying the item thus will change the state of affairs. Often advertising takes the form of these kinds of stories, where the benefits or values of the product are communicated through appealing stories. Stories are in this sense informational or persuasive in their attempts to assign meaning to products which otherwise have little, if any, meaning, apart from their possible functional benefits (i.e. reducing hunger in the case of potato chips).

Even though it might be argued that all forms of communication in essence could be read as stories, we will here make a distinction between stories and visual images. Lash (1988), drawing on Lyotard’s earlier work, elaborates this distinction in his discussion of the “discursive” and “figural” sensibility. In the discursive mode words are given priority over images, and the focus is on the creation of meanings. The figural, on the other hand, is visual, and not concerned with what a sign means, but what it does (Lash, 1988, p. 314). The figural communicates through icons which are not systematically structured in the same way as language. According to Lash, the discursive can be understood as an aesthetics of interpretation, and the figural as an aesthetics of sensation.

Thus, while stories are verbal narratives, which are primarily concerned with cognition and meaning, visual images are pictorial signs which operate

more on an aesthetic and expressionist level. The distinction is not clear-cut, and there may of course be a blurring of the boundaries between verbal and visual signs. Still, we would argue that in order to deepen our understanding of brands, it might be useful to distinguish between the two modes of communication. It is the increasing use of image, we hold, that distinguishes “traditional” marketing from the emergence of the commercial brandscape. It is a distinction between voice and vision.

Whereas marketing, as argued above, might be read as a form of storytelling, branding is an expressive form that relies more on images and visual signs. Brands constitute a different mode of communication. As visual signs, brands are silent when it comes to stories, but highly visible in terms of aesthetic expressions. Brands are, in this sense, not so much creators as they are cultural artefacts in the “aestheticisation of everyday life” (Featherstone, 1991). If stories primarily speak to our sense, images on the other hand are more concerned with our senses.

The aesthetic experience relies not so much on cognition as on immersion. Aesthetics refer to the sensual and experiential understanding of the brand, in contrast to the logico-rational perspective suggested by brand theory. This implies that focus is on the lived experience of people as they act. Thus, when we speak of aesthetics, we are not referring to the concept as it is used in the classical sense, usually in art, where it is concerned with judgements of beauty, balance, or harmony. The concept aesthetics originates from the Greek verb *aisth*, which means feel. Aesthetics is thus the knowledge yielded by the sensory organs. Aesthetics, hence, is not to be understood as a concept that denotes a quality of art, but rather as sensory experiences (see Strati, 1999). Whereas traditional brand theory puts focus on the creation of meaning, an aesthetic approach, on the other hand, is based on an epistemology concerned with feeling, intuition and immersion. A brand could in this sense be understood as a visual sign where the aim is to create impressions rather than conveying meaning.

Brands thus operate on a different level than “traditional” advertising. Whereas ads often tell stories, brands are highly abstract signs whose value not are to be found in the meaning they create but rather in the impressions they make. Hence, the increasing transformation in marketing from product advertising to brand building can be read as a shift in the mode of communication. In a crowded marketplace there appears to be no room for more stories. In the noisy world of corporate storytellers, sound effects are increasingly hard to achieve. Instead, images or signs are invading the market space. In many product areas, the brand becomes the product itself: a symbol or a cultural artefact detached from any goods or story.

The proliferation of brands has been made possible by the explosion of information and mass media. TV, Internet, films, magazines, etc. constitute the various media through which images are produced and reproduced. In

Appadurai's (1996) framework, the "mediascape" constitutes one important dimension of global cultural flows (Appadurai, 1996, p. 35). In the mediascape, large repertoires of images are disseminated throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed. It can thus be argued that the mediascape is a prerequisite for the emergence of a branded world, or what we would like to refer to as a "brandscape". That is, a landscape where the production and consumption of commercial icons take place. If the mediascape allows for the proliferation of images, the brandscape is the arena where these images are being expressed, impressed or suppressed in the commercial imagery. It is a landscape of impression and immersion; an aesthetic field of image-based experiences.

Hence, by shifting focus from stories to images, our ambition is to explore how commercial signs increasingly are turned into cultural artefacts. As Lash and Urry (1994) point out, consumption is in a process of becoming less functional and increasingly aestheticized. Even though many products and services still operate on a functional level, the emerging brandscape points toward an aesthetization of generic goods where images, auras, and signs are used as unique selling points (see Goldman and Papson, 1996). The proliferation of visual images has made branding more an issue of creating impressions than providing information about the product's physical characteristics. Hence, the consumption and production of brands may, for more and more products, be understood as an aesthetic process. The predominance of cognitive knowledge is in this sense being challenged by the focus on feeling, intuition, and immersion. Rather than regarding branding as an issue of infusing goods with meaning through the use of stories, brands can, in our view, increasingly be understood as aesthetic artefacts. Far more abstract and much more abbreviated than the story, the brand is a visual sign that becomes a brand as the sign is transformed to an aesthetic product in itself. However, this transformation is not a one-way process owned by the branding company. As we will develop in the next section, it is through the expressive strategies of both producers and consumers that signs become aesthetic artefacts.

Expressions in the marketplace

In the brand management literature, brands are described as important competitive tools in the hands of the corporation. The consumers, it seems, are no more than grateful receivers of pre-defined sets of values. The aim for the branding company is to build loyalty and purchasing commitment through the launching of even more convincing stories about the benefits accompanying the brand (see, e.g. Aaker, 1996). Olins (2000, p. 52), even states that brands are "the greatest gift that commerce has brought to popular culture". Brands do not only make choice easier in a competitive, noisy world, but brands can also help

us as consumers to reinforce our individuality as they provide us with meaning (Olins, 2000, p. 61).

Far from this positive view of brands, various critical cultural studies, on the other hand, rather point to the manipulative and controlling aspects of advertising and branding. Through global advertising, the individual is claimed to have been transformed from a citizen to a consumer; which implies that citizenship has become a matter of consumption rather than of political rights and duties (Lash and Urry, 1994). Individual agency is thus increasingly to be found in the corporately managed act of consumption. As Appadurai (1996, p. 42) writes:

... these images of agency are increasingly distortions of a world of merchandising so subtle that the consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where he or she is at best a chooser.

Hence, the emerging brandscape can be criticised for reducing individuals to consumers, trapped in the global web of super-brands. Super-brands do not only foster the cult of consumption, but also seem to monopolise the production of meaning. As brands invade public space, infiltrate every-day life, and monopolise the public discourse, there is neither space nor choice left (see, e.g. Klein, 1999). In this view, branding will ultimately produce a giant global Disney World inhabited by silenced citizens and even more powerful corporations.

However, by focusing on the aesthetic/expressive aspect of brands, a third stance might be constructed. Being neither overwhelmed by the acclaimed benefits of brands, nor lining up with the doom and gloom of the scenarios of a super-branded world, this perspective rather focuses on the double agency that makes up the brandscape. At the same time as the escalating flows of information and culture in the mediascape shape the individual, and the proliferation of signs might involve an emptying out and flattening of subjects and objects, the access to the very mediascape itself and the consumption of these cultural signs might open up new possibilities for individual agency. As Lash and Urry (1994, p. 4) write:

... alongside these silent majorities, the small-screen addicts, the "black hole" of Baudrillard's semio-scape, there are large numbers of men and women who are taking on an increasingly critical and reflexive distance with reference to these new institutions of the new information society.

Brands are not just produced and then passively consumed. Rather, the consumption of signs can be regarded as a form of expressive activity through which individuals shape themselves and the world.

As the primary image offered to the modern citizen is that of the consumer (Du Gay, 2000), it can well be argued that the realisation of the self indeed has become an act of consumption. "I shop therefore I am", seems to have been turned into a mantra for the late-modern individual in constant search of a

“brand” new identity. Living in a world that has come to resemble a brandscape, visual signs surround us and make up contemporary life. The brandscape constitutes a visual scenery of aesthetic expression. Brands are about appearances or imageries and the consumption of brands then becomes an act of expression through the use of icons rather than through the use of objects or meanings.

This is to say that brands do not carry any inherent meaning. Most of the time, brands pass by unnoticed or they just become icons void of meaning. For meanings to arise, if at all, interaction is needed. It is when consumers actively use brands that brands become more than markers of identification. To Lash and Urry (1994), the way consumers use brands might be read as a form of aesthetic reflexivity. It is a form of reflexivity where self-interpretation and realisation are performed through the use of signs. Consumption is thus not only utilitarian, but also expressive in the sense that the use of brands provides individuals with possibilities of creating identities. Certain brands constitute cultural artefacts that can be used and re-used in consumers’ ongoing construction of expressive effects.

Wearing a Burberry trench coat was formerly part of a strictly confined repertoire of products. It was a sign of quality and function, appreciated by the noblesse, and part of a well-established traditional English style. Today, however, a Burberry coat can well be combined with a pair of Nike-sneakers, a pink Prada top and a Swatch watch as an expression of individual aesthetic performance. In the cultural flows, traditional social structures can be subverted and de-territorialised, opening up space for individualisation. Identities are freed from social structures, and identity building becomes an act of using signs and brands in self-achieving projects. The consumption of signs is an aesthetic game where anyone can become anybody (Featherstone, 1994, p. 67).

In this sense, as consumers we are not mere passive receivers of pre-defined images. We are not an audience watching images flickering by. Signs are turned into value-laden brands only when consumers absorb, get immersed into, and use the brands. Brands are created in actions; on the streets, in consumption, in self-realisation, etc. Who is watching and who is creating the expressions?

Let us look at the clothes company Fred Perry. With laurels in its logotype, with high-quality sports-wear, its target group is sporty individuals from the upper-middle class. The Fred Perry logotype is clearly embroidered on the front of the shirts. But Fred Perry clothes are not only used by the target group. In the streets of Europe, skinheads, i.e. young men with shaven heads and army boots, known for racist opinions, wear Fred Perry tennis shirts. A Fred Perry shirt, in combination with a shaven head, is a sign of belonging to the international skinhead community. Skinheads in Fred Perry shirts is not what the Fred Perry marketing executives wish for, but since at least two decades,

the skinheads keep buying expensive, high quality, preppy upper-middle class Fred Perry clothes.

The construction of the brandscape is thus a process involving both producers and consumers, neither of which can control what the signs do or what they are turned into. How are signs to be received when an upper-middle class tennis-player bumps into a skinhead on the street, and they both wear brand new Fred Perry tennis shirts? Even though stories can be read into the brand images, there is no ready-made story waiting to be unfolded. Rather, any story that might evolve, any meaning that might be produced, is an outcome rather than a starting point.

In a reflexive consumerism, corporate brands have more and more come to be questioned. With an increasing critique of the ethics of business corporations and a growing media attention to corporate scandals and double standards, many a super brand has been publicly accused for marketing corporate values that are not lived up to (see Christensen and Cheney, 2000). As many corporations have tried to face their critical interest groups by placing their brand in a moralised discourse, moral values such as “equality”, “diversity”, “freedom”, etc. have become frequent attributes attached to the brand. Yet, at the same time as the corporations are trying to become “the chief communicators of all that is good and cherished in our culture” (Klein, 1999, p. 335), they also become more vulnerable to public critique and scrutiny.

One of the more extreme forms of aesthetic reflexivity can be found in the critique of brands as expressed through “cultural jamming”. This is a kind of reflexivity where the aesthetic language of brands is used in order to question the dominant corporate use of images. In the active distortion of corporate brands and other commercial icons, corporate movements use the images the corporations use themselves in a visual critique of the corporate hypocrisy in moralised brands (see Klein, 1999). Brands are thus not only elements for individual expressionism, but part of a societal discourse beyond the control of the corporation.

By parodying ads and hi-jacking billboards, “adbusters” use the same aesthetic language as the branding companies, thereby subverting the intended message. As subvertisers distort brand icons, creating alternative images, the idea of the corporately controlled sign is effectively challenged. It is a questioning of the assumption that branding is a one-way communication flow. By the mere act of transferring a visual sign to a new context a completely new experience is created.

As an e-mail attachment, a document entitled “Reklamas” is circulated. Nowhere on the document it is stated who has produced it, and it is unclear how many people that have seen it. It contains a number of advertisements, among them one for Gillette (see Figure 1).

In the advertisement for Gillette, it is unclear whether it is the Gillette brand that is the sender of the message. When looking at the ad, however, it appears



Figure 1.
Advertisement for
Gillette

unlikely. The brand name is used, and it is sent out to large numbers of individuals/consumers. What such an ad does to the brand is impossible to say. Yet, it clearly illustrates how signs can be subverted and distorted through the mere use of alternative images.

Brands may be distorted with regard to their logotypes and their names. In Figure 2, in the Benetton slogan “The Colors of Benetton”, a “true” is added. This distorted logotype is produced by Adbusters, and on their Web site, postcards of tens of distorted logotypes and ads can be ordered. A store in Berkeley, California, specialises in T-shirts with prints, and has an entire section with distorted logotypes.

Hence, brands are not corporately controlled. Like in art, signs are used and reused, contextualised and re-contextualised, thus acquiring new appearances.

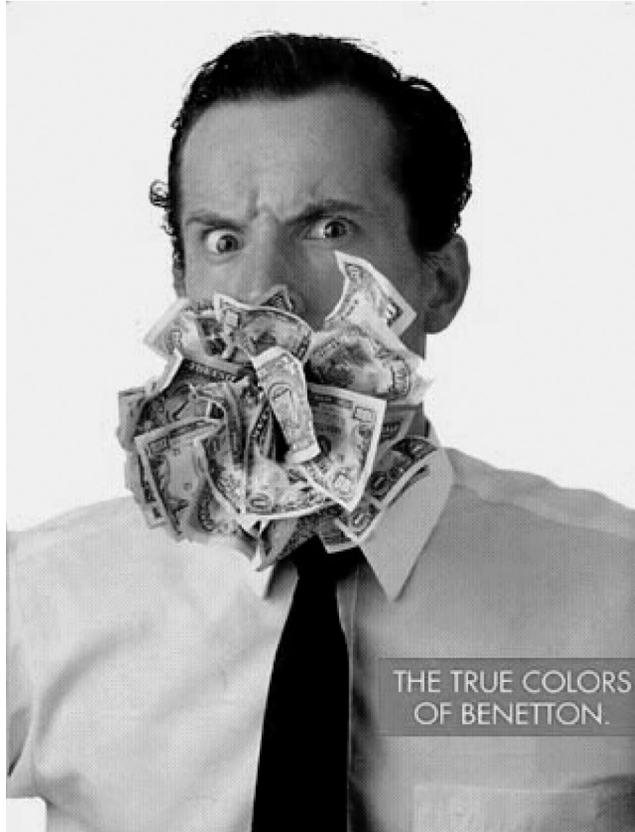


Figure 2.
Distortion of the
Benetton advertising

And the companies can never gain control over how these expressions are created. Thus, far from being a spectacle with actors and an audience, the brandscape can be understood of as an arena of aesthetic reflection and expression. Signs are turned into brands in actions. Corporate control is not exercised in a social vacuum and image-values are constructions that take place in a social context.

Losing control

In this paper we have tried to problematise the view of brands as corporately controlled stories. By distinguishing between stories and images, we have proposed the idea that brands can be understood as visual signs. In the “brandscape” the production and consumption of brands takes place in a free-floating self-referential system of signs, where there are no fixed meanings. As Baudrillard (1981) has shown, consumption rather than production lies at the heart of social order. To him, there is a code of consumption that organises objects as signs, and consumption is a systematic manipulation of signs. This

is to say that consumers use brands any way they like, and are not obliged to use brands in a way intended by the producer.

The direct functions of objects cannot easily be changed. For instance, a football shoe cannot be replaced by a hamburger. But on the sign-value level, objects can be substituted infinitely. Brands, no matter which object they denote, could be signs of prestige, status, youth, etc. Consumption then becomes a play of expression through the use of signs.

Is this to say that all that is left is the signifier; that is the image, the sound, or the print? To Baudrillard (1981), consumption is nothing but this signifying “play”. Meaningless or not, what the brandscape constitutes is first and foremost a late-modern arena for the production and consumption of signs. It is an arena of aesthetic expressionism where corporate signs are turned into brands as the sign becomes the very good that is consumed.

By questioning the metaphor of story-telling that seems to be underlying much of the branding literature, our aim in this article has been to reconceptualise brands as a process of aesthetic expression. If stories are connected with meanings and persuasion, images are more an issue of feelings and immersion. As figural signs, brands are based on visual impression and expression. And these images are open to reflection and distortion. As has been shown, the consumption of signs can be regarded as a form of activity through which individuals strive to create expressive effects. The active part of consumers in using and re-using brands as cultural artefacts points towards the double agency that makes up the brandscape. Brands, as aesthetic experiences, are not just produced and then passively consumed. Rather, we argue that the idea of the corporation controlling and owning the brand needs to be revisited.

In the emerging brandscape, brands are, to an increasing extent, becoming elements of consumers’ expressive repertoire. While stories, through structured language, are concerned with cognition and meaning, visual images provide an indefinite array of possibilities for sensation. Images rely on aesthetic experiences making logico-rational interpretations secondary. In a marketplace which can be characterised as a cacaphony of stories promoting unique values of generic products, branding seems to have become an attempt at producing visual effects rather than audial messages. Branding as a corporate activity is in this sense silent. Branding can thus be understood as a production and distribution of symbols which need to be consumed, contextualised and mobilised in order to become meaningful. Thereby, as the brandscape becomes more visual and sensory, the idea of corporate control becomes more volatile.

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