

Brands as Today's Practical Philosophies

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Abstract

The study of brand choices can lead us to consider, in a more realistic way, the construction of individuals and today's world, as well as trades and relations that undertake a range of interconnected social processes. Eventually, the extensive process of media consumption - choosing, buying, and using - of goods and services, could provide us with answers to important questions, like who the social actors are, what kind of rules do they follow, or what their values are.

In this sense, this paper will try to discuss the importance of cultural factors that are involved in the "brand to consumer" communication process, social and advertising campaigns, in targeting the emotional potential of the target audience.

Following Marshal McLuhan's theory that each historical period is dominated by a certain human sense, we will debate over the status of brands as practical philosophies that promote a certain vision of our contemporary world. We will therefore take into consideration Marx's perspective that the concept of 'praxis' becomes central to the new philosophical ideal of transforming the world through revolutionary activity.

Furthermore, we will try to encourage a reconsideration of the structural transformations of our contemporary society and the public's huge exposure to the consumerist ideology.

Keywords: *brand, advertising, philosophy, hyper-consumerism, value.*

Obviously, with the analysis of the phenomenon of "brand" and "branding" we enter more and more the territory abstraction, of conceptualisation and signs. Too many attempts to define the brand have made it to be surrounded by a conceptually nebula, oscillating from the pragmatic concreteness of the economics, to the holistic approaches of the philosophy of culture. One explanation for this diversity may be that, although the term "brand" has been discussed by marketing experts, over the years its definitions were adjusted for the reference framework of practitioners or teachers from related fields of the communication sciences, social

sciences, or design. We believe, therefore, that the word “brand” and the discussions around it are the best contextualized summary of the contemporary world.

We chose to address such a topic from the perspective of practical philosophy because of the critical approach to its discourse. We will also try to support the role of philosophy in modern society, by presenting brands as a possible forms of practical philosophy that shape reality.

Therefore, we will try to justify philosophy’s role in conceptualising the brand’s activity from at least two points of view:

1) First of all, philosophy may be able to conceptualize in specific notions the fact that brands and the branding activity are fundamentally linked to the way we experience our contemporary life and how we offer a meaning to it.

2) On the other hand, a philosophical perspective on branding as “praxis” can improve the way in which a brand is thought and built, by proposing models of actions at a social level. Acting as real “guidelines” of behaviour engaged in an open dialogue with the public, the powerful brands from nowadays can develop descriptive models for the way we establish a relationship, we think or we behave ourselves – establishing different ways of social activity.

While analysing in a thorough way the content of the Social Sciences, more and more theoreticians state the fact that definitions tend to be seen as “an endless spiral of language twisters.”¹ We draw on the attention on the Social Sciences’ perspective in order to reflect the similarities between different remarks as to identify an essence of what could be “a brand philosophy”. Nevertheless, if we tried to analyse these various definitions not as concurrent, but as complementary ones, then we could be able to “unblock” them or to reactivate them in connection with their integrated and virtual history. Our work is going to support the approach of the branding phenomenon from a cultural perspective, contextually and dynamically speaking and according to the contemporary definitions given in an interdisciplinary approach. This means that the contribution of every perspective, including here the practical philosophy, participates in forming a perspective which is in a permanent exchange of contents and of the lens through which the phenomenon is visualized.

¹ David Glen Mick, “The End(s) of Marketing and the Neglect of Moral Responsibility by the American Marketing Association,” *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* 26(Fall): 2007, pp. 289-292, retrieved from <http://stakeholder.bu.edu/2007/Docs/Mick,%20David.%20Ends%20of%20Marketing.pdf>, on December 2, 2010.

If we recognize the capacity of the many ways through which the brands were comprehended and interpreted, then we cannot agree with just one definition to the concept of “brand” or “branding”. The rich contexts and environments in which brands operate nowadays call out inevitably the multiplication of the definitions concerning this topic to an interdisciplinary approach.

As brands are considered in Economic Sciences as being immaterial entities that can propose new concepts, rules of social behaviour and values that endow with life, we advance the assumption that brands could be analysed as real formulas of practical philosophy that endow with life our contemporary period, giving it a specific perspective.

However, we are trying to start our approach from the simplest definition. In a short way of speaking, following Philip Kotler's conception, every brand can be analyzed as a name or a symbol which define or makes the difference between entities (not only at an economic level, such as products, but also at a personal stage) and which distinguishes itself throughout its attributes, benefits, values, culture, personality; all these features are being regarded as positive meanings sent from one field to a targeted other. And we should not be deceived: we speak about personal branding as well as we speak about a product brand or the brand of a country, because the “brand” notion is not granted to commodities. More than that, from a semiotic point of view every brand was defined as a mechanism which can produce speeches having a meaning that is going to be transmitted to the receivers.² It is the *sign-concept* characteristic of a brand that transforms it in a meaningful vector and places it among the post-fordism³ approaches which emphasise its imaterial aspect, its mental image and the way in which these looms involve and associate symbols.

We define “the brand philosophy” as the overall coordinates concerning the existential identity of the trademark which are able to determine behaviour conducts at the social level. As a notion introduced by the language of the economic sciences, the “brand philosophy” is here considered as representing a specific behaviour of a brand towards its socio-cultural content. Expressions like *brand architecture*, *brand strategy*, *brand equity*, *brand value* which belong to the

² Carlos Scolari, “Online Brands: Branding, Possible Worlds and Interactive Grammars,” *Semiotica*, 169(1), 2008, pp. 169-188.

³ *Post-fordism* refers to the name given to the dominant system of economic production, consumption and associated socio-economic phenomena, in most industrialized countries since the late 20th century. In our paper we will take in consideration the Neo-Schumpeterian approach, based upon the theory of *Kondratiev Waves*, in which post-Fordism is seen as the techno-economic paradigm of the fifth wave, which is dominated by Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

brand philosophy's glossary, point out the rational essence of the brand made up of ideas and concepts. These are means to describe the contemporary world by analyzing in a critical way the contents to which they belong. More than that, the mission, the vision or the values communicated by a brand's identity seeks to propose some patterns of value and behaviour to its targeted public.

From an organisational perspective, brands act on the community as indicators, by grouping values and immaterial characteristics in recognizable packets located on different levels of trust or approval. From the public's point of view, brands are not just a shortcut for our conception about the world but, however, they can be an expression of unuttered aspirations. This is, of course, the main care of the critics concerning brands as commercial instruments – in the way they create the desire, rather than accomplish it. Nevertheless, we believe that in this global context in which the hyper-customer is already educated concerning consumption, it is quite easy to recognize the strategy of the brands as to create a meaning for ourselves and for the others.

As O'Malley and Tynan⁴ have already shown, the metaphor of interpersonal relations is quite useful here for analyzing the relations concerning brand communication. Taking into account this point of view, a brand can be comprehended as *an entity with personality whose characteristics are very much alike to those of human beings*. Recent studies concerning brand research have pointed out an important and revealing reconsideration about how branding operates at this level in terms of anthropomorphism. Studies have proven the transference of the attention from the producers to the public's response in order to differentiate services as to understand the way in which brands create value at a social level.

Thoughts on Brands and Anthropomorphism

The outlook of the brand anthropomorphism has been cultivated since 2000, starting with the sensory branding and the emotional experiences said to be offered by this entity (ex. Martin Lindstrom, *Sensorial Brands*), up to the idea of “the marriage” between a customer and a brand (according to William McEwen's point of view, *Married to the Brand*) and even to the affirmation of brand concept as “*Lovemarks*” founded love and respect (in Kevin Roberts' *Lovemarks* version).

Every brand appears to the contemporary society as an immaterial entity, “a living entity enriched and weakened by time, the cumulative issue of thousands of

⁴ Lisa O'Malley and Caroline Tynan, “Relationship Marketing in Consumer Markets: Rhetoric or Reality?,” *European Journal of Marketing* 34(7), 2000, pp. 797-815.

little gestures” (Michael Eisner, CEO, Disney), turned into a real social and cultural phenomenon. In a society in which a choice of rational consumption is more and more replaced by a personal and emotional one, brands present themselves though “transparency, *positiveness*, consistency, ordinance, and affiliation – that is everything that human beings need as to define themselves. Brands mean identity.”⁵

However, Gilles Lipovetsky considers that this emotional consumption corresponds only partially speaking about trademarks; it designates much more than the effects of a marketing trend, it belongs to the customer, “appearing as a self-conscious logic, based on the research of the sensations and of the great subjective benefit.”⁶ This fact matches with a re-evaluation in human being’s nature and his relations with the objects around him; we do not look for the product any more, we do not want objects, but the vision and the imaginary view of a brand, the emotional involvement in its consumption. Therefore, it is natural why more and more brands try to assume an anthropomorphic appearance. In fact, we consider that the post-fordism period of time crossed by the contemporary society would correspond with a reevaluation of the subjectivity, a keen need of individualization and personalisation at the social actors’ level. This claim of the subject is not demanded in the absence of the merchandise, as our contemporary individual is aware of the power already gained by these objects. The regain of the vitality concerning the subjectivity will be therefore done by relating to the objects. The individualisation of Man begins with the very consumption of commodities.

We live in a universe of hyper-realities consumed in a more and more assumed ways, in which patterns, language twisters and social codes determine and maintain behaviours, in which the multimedia communication offer experiences much more intense than the ordinary reality. In this world, human beings abandon the desert of everyday life in the favour of the isolated tastes offered by the patterns of the mental images. Thus brands are feeding our imagination. This means only the fact that brands have become much more than a mark of the producer. They look like an environment or a social engine because they establish a relationship between people, they “touch” them in different ways and meanings, they transform their lives and, therefore, they transform themselves.

From this point of view, what makes the difference between a brand and any other type of sign is its extraordinary inconstancy of its senses. In other words, the

⁵ Wally Olins, *Despre Brand* (On Brand), Comunicare.ro, Bucharest, 2008, p. 27.

⁶ Gilles Lipovetsky, *Fericirea Paradoxală* (Paradoxical Happiness), Polirom, Iași, 2008, p. 37.

practical quality of a brand consists in the fact that there is no meaning that should be patterned before this process or forever. Being tributary to a social content (even to a global one), the brand is predestined to an endless semiotics “but not from the Pierce’s point of view in which every sign supposes an infinite semiotics, as every person who interprets something becomes in his turn a sign,”⁷ but with the meaning of a perpetual readjustment of the sign to the forever changing social reality. Following the pattern of ideologies,⁸ brands can be comprehended as mental conceptions due exactly to the limited matrix of meanings, to the competitive contents of notions in which they were generated. In other words, taking into account the fact that brands join the human being’s accomplishment in a certain socio-cultural space, this fact becomes necessary for the conceptual environment of our society of hyper-consumption and it is obvious for us to recognize the everywhere presence of the brands in our existence.

By recognizing the power of advertising to express the identity of the brands, Bernard Cathelat sustains the fact that “advertising is not only a commercial speech, but also a political speech, a social speech, a moral speech and at the same time, an ideological one.” Therefore, an extremely important issue for analysing brand philosophies is the socio-cultural influences on human being by taking into account the messages of the brands communicated in advertising’s rhetoric. Cathelat discusses this topic from McLuhan and Baudrillard’s perspectives, in the sense of assembling human individuality on external seductive factors which leave their mark on us from early childhood. We are not in full agreement with such a perspective, but we may notice the external socio-cultural references that lead the social actor to pass through different levels of intercepting suggested behaviours. During all “the training” received in their education, the individual assimilates (and sometimes interiorise) different principles, standards, roles, values, patterns of moral behaviour that facilitate his social integration.

On the other hand, the contemporary sociology emphasizes the fact that, as to be able to interact at the social level, every person has to adopt some forms of behaviour accepted by the community, by appropriating and gathering certain accepted forms of behaviour, such as social and cultural rules, or lifestyles. These are in most cases their reasons of behaviour, this one becoming the engine of their activities.

⁷ Nicoleta Corbu, *Brandurile globale. O cercetare cross-culturală* (Global Brand. An Cross-cultural Research), Tritonic, Bucharest, 2009, p. 77.

⁸ Stuart Hall, “The rediscovery of ideology: return to the repressed in media studies,” in ***, *Culture, Society and Media Studies*, Arnold, London, 1982, pp. 52-86.

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In these circumstances, advertising fulfils an important role; it tries to please every person's needs from a symbolic point of view (although, we may say, not only from this point of view) while taking into account the cultural patterns of our society. In this process of hyper-consumption, more than ever, advertising has to assume this role, in view of the existence of a universe with pulverized values, a universe divided and segmented according to some norms that belong rather to the subjectivity of lifestyles than to the educated norms (either ethic, social or aesthetic ones). Advertising has to address to a cultural level and propose symbolical satisfactions which should correspond to the social re-evaluated patterns, ways of living, self-images, patterns of existence and behaviour with which individuals can relate themselves.

In the same way, we ought to take into account the norms which determine the roles that every person assumes during their social existence. These norms show the social attitudes that the person adapts to every situation. These norms depend on social and socio-cultural models, on domestic and professional models, on stereotypes of behaviours that depend, among others, on age, sex or social statute.

Brands, Advertising and Lifestyles

We must draw every one's attention to this point and make the distinction between "ordinary norms" and "role norms" as perceived in practical philosophy. The ordinary norms are those that can suffer a generalization concerning a group or even our society. All these form the totality of values, convictions and even life habits of a group or of our society. The role norms have a much more restricted signification, an individual social function, being those that determine the role that every person plays in the social life, the way he chooses to participate as a social actor in a context. They are however registered in a collective logic and they have to be first of all accepted from a social point of view.

In this way, the brand communication allows the consumer to respect some norms, to assume its role, respectively to assume its statute by accepting the values that the product and the brand propose or promote. In the same time, it helps the customer to adapt to social changes, to the evolutions and the transformations that belong to the local trends or other social manifestations working just as a practical philosophy "guide". The transmission of life governing rules from a brand's perspective to its public can be realized by using the communication models of the media. These models rely on contemporary norms of socio-cultural interaction and play their part of social guidance.

As a communicative link of the brand philosophies, the advertising discourse proposes to decode the human beings' role expectations and especially to discover the link between the products and these expectations, allowing the product through its symbolical power to confirm and to impose a role for its consumer. By its adjustment, structure, regularity or its complementary process, the product guarantees to its user the acceptance of the role that it suggests. Sometimes, these roles are static and easy to be determined; the power of the contemporary advertising consists in the discovering the dynamic ones and accomplishing them, or, even more, discovering new roles, and imposing them by using an associative presentation. In this way, promoting the idea of changing the social rules, respectively of the new roles that could result from this, means to put an end to some educational schemes, while we expect to the human being to put up resistance in this respect. A new pattern could be adopted if it is presented on the basis of some patterns that already exist, socially accepted and registered in the culture of the group. As far as we recognize the important role that it plays, we may say that advertising is an element of balance for the contemporary hyper-consumerist towards the loss of his/her values. Though its communication models, advertising permits the diminution of social differences, the attenuation of the conflicts between classes, the reduction of the differences between generations, the development of the tolerance of everything that may be different, etc.

Therefore, the value of the brands consists, at last, of the ability to organize more or less distinct forms of affective turnovers on the personal level. A brand becomes a mechanism that includes, strengthens and examines such emotional investments as to offer measurable and consequently valuable results. In the same spirit of what we have presented up to now, we can maintain the fact that brands are mechanisms used for transforming the affective "energies" into valuable forms of immaterial work. That is why the point of view that we take into account in this paper aims to emphasize the fact that every brand, regarded as an immaterial entity, has become for the society of hyper-consumption a mirror that expresses itself as personality, affiliation, individualization, by describing, concisely speaking, conceptual patterns and way of behaviour that can be registered in a pattern of philosophical practice. That is the reason why we consider an absolutely necessary the study of integration in the brand activity, of life governing rules in their synthesized and evocative form.

The challenge that brands address to their public represent, in fact, the voice of an entire media culture which tries to express itself with the help of specific means. In this way, we try to put forward a challenge concerning the brand

philosophies from another point of view than the one we were used to, meaning the brand philosophies seen as real forms of value communication of a consumption culture. These take upon themselves not only an instructive and practical role in the contemporary society, but they also succeed in joining the chaotic development of a person who knew the postmodern decentralization. In the same time, a brand never forgets to advance the value norms of the products and of the society. On the other hand, as long as branding uses advertising as the voice for the masses, this communication instrument must be regarded as the emanation of a certain social, political and cultural order in which the public would recognize itself or would want to recognize itself. That is why the life styles proposed by the different brand philosophies -- such as "Think different!" (Apple), or "Just do it!" (Nike) – can be easily used and exploited for the purpose of forming the socio-cultural progress as to offer alternatives to the cultural styles and to the speeches that have existed up to now.

Therefore, *we consider that brands and the lifestyle models proposed by them (what we called brand philosophies) act on the social level in the same way the modern philosophical systems used to function: by shaping ways of behaviour and by supporting a certain point of view concerning the contemporary world with which they identify themselves.* The way we accept that every branding activity reflects the reference of the contemporary human being to the world and this activity is capable to propose different models of human activity and interaction, the existential co-ordinates of the mark identity – presented by us as brand philosophies – can become legitimate topics of a critical and philosophical approach.

However, the *praxis*⁹ trends of the contemporary brands, which have become more and more powerful and capable of living for the present interdisciplinary research, proposes to open the perspective of a new approach of the topic, by offering some viable premises regarding a new research direction to the practical philosophy. As the artisan of the qualitative progress of the products, as well as the interpolation that permitted a new direction in valuing companies' profit to the consumer, the brand philosophies have brought first and foremost maybe the most important ethical value of hyper-consumerist society: freedom of choice.

⁹ A term used since Aristotle; by *praxis* we will not understand "something distinguished from theory", but more an "accepted practice or custom". We will consider in here Marx's perspective that the concept of *praxis* becomes central to the new philosophical ideal of transforming the world through revolutionary activity.

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