



## Journal of Consumer Culture

### INTRODUCTION

# Toward a Sociology of Branding

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**BRANDS HAVE BEEN ELEMENTAL** to markets since traders first marked their goods as a guarantee for customers who lived beyond face-to-face contact. Yet it wasn't until the late 19th-century – when American hawkers of patent medicines began using their brands to promote not only physical remedies but also therapeutic salves for social ailments – when brands became important agents in what we now understand as consumer society. In the decades that followed, Madison Avenue creatives emulated this strategy, embedding intangible ideals in an assortment of everyday branded goods. Branding became an increasingly sophisticated enterprise, tagging along as western societies moved from uniform statuses of mid-century mass society to the fragmented individuated statuses of the postmodern.

In the past 20 years, neoliberal globalization has brought about a shift in the economic role of branding. Following the early examples of pioneering global brands such as Coca-Cola<sup>®</sup> and McDonald's<sup>®</sup>, multinational companies now view branding as a more consequential strategic activity that can have an enormous impact on their bottom line. Three causes are central to this shift: first, the rationalization of global supply chains has made it increasingly difficult for firms to garner a sustainable advantage in their product; second, in the postmodern economy, trade in symbols and experiences has proved to be a vast and profitable arena for business; and third, multinational firms with the opportunity presented by the neoliberal compact to expand into new countries and new product markets came to

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view brands as an efficient lever to pursue this expansion. As a result of these shifts, multinational companies now compete to acquire the most powerful brands, and then invest aggressively to expand their reach in order to fully exploit the brand's social value.

Today, branding is a core activity of capitalism, so must be included in any serious attempt to understand contemporary society and politics. Yet, despite its social significance, branding has rarely been subject to concerted empirical examination and theoretical development outside of business schools. While marketing gurus assign to brands near-religious powers, academics and critics have largely ignored brands except to shake their heads in disgust. As poignant symbols marking out where capitalism meets consumerism, it is hardly surprising that brands often stand accused as the capitalists' weapon of choice to prey upon anxieties and concoct false desires. But the most common academic stance is to simply ignore brands as too crass and too popular to deserve serious inquiry. I am not aware of a single academic article in the top social science journals devoted to the study of brands. It is as if Marx chose to ignore the rise of factories in industrializing England because they were too ubiquitous, or Simmel dismissed the rise of money economies because currencies had become too popular to be a legitimate object of study. The *Journal of Consumer Culture* provides a productive space to redress this omission. Our hope is that this special issue contributes to jumpstarting a sociology of brands.

Branding is a distinctive mode of capital accumulation. Firms have at their avail a number of techniques to increase profits – from building a better mousetrap, to controlling distribution channels, to squeezing supply chains. Branding is one such technique, distinctive because it generates profits by creating and then exploiting various sorts of social dependency. A brand becomes an economic asset for the firm when people come to count on the brand to contribute to social life, when it is embedded in society and culture. Companies earn higher profits when their brands are woven into institutions (e.g. Coke<sup>®</sup> in the family and schools in the 1950s), everyday practices (e.g. brushing one's teeth with Colgate<sup>®</sup>), and cultural discourses (e.g. Nike<sup>®</sup> as a global symbol of achievement in a hyper-competitive Hobbesian world). Brands are accepted into social life because they provide their customers real informational, interactional and symbolic benefits. But as they become lodged in social networks and cultural discourses as key actors – when a critical mass of people collectively 'agree' to rely on brands for such public purposes – companies are able to use this dependency as a means to extract economic rents. Thus brands are a paradoxical mode of capital accumulation: brands are more valuable to the

extent that they enter the public, less under the control of their owners. The three articles in this special issue provide clues as to how branding works as a mode of capital accumulation. Pushing beyond old formulations of false consciousness, the three studies show that brands work by molding existing ideologies to serve the needs of capital. Each article takes a different angle on this central theme:

*Wilk:* Many critics have commented on how capitalism works to commodify what were once non-market spaces (health, education, children, prisons, utilities). Yet rarely have academics specified the processes through which companies are able to accomplish this feat. Anthropologist Richard Wilk's essay on water explores the branding alchemy through which multinational companies have been able to convert a free public good into a commodity priced higher than oil. Wilk shows how marketers took advantage of people's fears about contaminated supplies (caused by other industrialists), to create the perception that only by privatizing the family's water supply could safety be ensured. His analysis is particularly adept at showing how companies use a variety of existing discourses that exude water-friendly connotations around purity and nature in order to shape perceptions that water that often comes from the same source as our taps has somehow escaped the taint of industrial 'externalities.'

*Goldman and Papson:* In the neoliberal era, multinational companies are making aggressive moves around the globe, pushing the boundaries of law and public expectations. At the same time, new watchdogs use the Internet to make detailed reporting on corporate activities widely available. In this environment, corporations have increasingly relied upon branding techniques to shape public opinion. They seek to convince skeptical publics that the company is a legitimate, even desirable, actor. These corporate branding techniques are a crucial area of study for any student of contemporary globalization, yet have received little attention. Sociologists Goldman and Papson have gathered a substantial database of corporate advertisements in order to analyze the landscape of global corporate branding. The patterned narratives in this dataset provide clues as to how companies today are able to create a sense of legitimacy by tapping into society's utopian dreams.

*Holt:* Branding is often viewed as a form of ideological influence. Brands came to be understood as potent ideological agents during the international expansion of American business following World War II, spawning the phrase 'coca-colonization'. Scholars and critics have argued about the ideological influence of the most culturally dominant brands ever since. I use a genealogical study of the emergence of Jack Daniel's Tennessee

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Whiskey as an iconic brand to specify the ideological role played by such brands in relation to other producers of ideological change, particularly the other culture industries. I demonstrate that brands play a distinctive role, quite different from that critics have described: brands act as parasites riding the coat-tails of other more powerful cultural forms, but then use their market power to proselytize these ideological revisions. Through ubiquity and repetition, brands transform emergent culture into dominant norms.

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