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ARTICLE

### Jack Daniel's America

Iconic brands as ideological parasites and proselytizers

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*Abstract.* Branding is often viewed as a form of ideological influence, but how brands impact ideology has not been carefully specified. I use a genealogical study of the emergence of Jack Daniel's 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.

*Key words*

consumer culture • consumption • marketing • masculinity

**COCACOLONIZATION. JIHAD VS. MCWORLD. THE** Lexus and the Olive Tree. Brands are routinely accused of, or celebrated for, playing a key ideological role in the advance of consumer society. Given their prominence, it's not hard to believe that brands play a role. But what is it, exactly, that these brands do?

Dozens of scholars and critics have penned diatribes lambasting the cultural power of brands (e.g. Lasn, 2000), while apologists have responded with odes that stridently deny such accusations (e.g. Twitchell, 1999). This Manichean discussion rarely moves beyond vague formulations: brands as global hegemon versus brands as lifestyle props reflecting basic human

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desires. The pertinent question cannot be whether or not brands influence society – like any other well-resourced cultural actor, of course they do. Rather we need to specify carefully what brands do in society and assess their (social, political, cultural) effects.

#### NARROWING THE DOMAIN

To examine the ideological role played by brands, we first need to narrow the relevant domain to the small fraction of brands that could plausibly carry symbolism potent enough to yield such effects, what I term iconic brands. Existing brand theories suffer from overly grand ambitions, proposing universal models. In both pragmatic marketing circles and in the more esoteric social theories, one-size-fits-all models of brands are common. Such frameworks are excessively vague and necessarily misleading because they smooth over the heterogeneous ways that brands work (see Holt, 2005, for a critique of the former). For most brands, symbolism is of negligible importance and, so, requires other disciplinary lenses to understand economic and social effects. As a first cut, I suggest that the study of brands can be organized according to four analytic prisms associated with different disciplines (Holt, 2002), described below.

#### **Economics: Brands as reputation signals**

For economists, brands are simply a form of information. They are economic signals that circulate in the economy, which allow companies to establish credible information about their offerings. Brands warrant that products are of a particular quality and reliability, and that their manufacturer will be around in case something goes wrong. For example, a brand like Toyota has achieved influence primarily through its economic reputation, garnered over decades, for making very reliable and safe autos at a good price.

#### **Sociology: Brands as trust mechanism**

For some purchases, customers cannot specify precisely what they are buying in advance. Consider hiring doctors, lawyers, auto repairs, ad agencies, or consultants. In such cases, the brand serves as a mechanism to guarantee that the firm will address only what the customer needs, provide satisfactory service, and will charge appropriately, despite the lack of a specific contract. For a professional service brand like Goldman Sachs, this trust component is central to the brand's value.

**Psychology: Brands as heuristic frames**

In consumer psychology, a dominant paradigm in marketing, brands are understood as devices that simplify consumer decision making and lower search costs. Brands that readily fit this model are low-involvement products that have enough technical complexity to make it difficult to assess – soaps, toothpaste, over-the-counter medicine. Companies like Procter & Gamble and Unilever were built on this type of branding.

**Cultural disciplines: Brands as symbols**

In the various cultural disciplines, brands are viewed as symbols – vessels of meaning and sentiment that are valued in society. The most powerful brand symbols, what I call iconic brands, are some of the most famous in the world: Coke<sup>®</sup>, Nike<sup>®</sup>, Apple, Starbucks and the like.

I am interested in brands whose market power is based upon this symbolic dimension, iconic brands that have become prominent and enduring cultural symbols. Such brands work to organize collective identities, as expressions of the major social axes such as class, gender, and race within a particular national discourse and beyond. People use iconic brand symbolism to firm up their identities and to enact the basic status and affiliation processes that are the bread-and-butter functions of all symbols (see Holt, 2004 for a more extensive description).

Though they are a very small set of the total universe of brands, iconic brands are extremely important both to business and to social theorists. Consider the consulting firm Interbrand's ranking of the top 100 Global brands published in *Business Week* each year. While the methodology for generating precise economic values is suspect, few would quibble with the rankings themselves. My guess, based on industry knowledge, is that symbolism is important for roughly 40 percent of the Top 100 brands and is the primary driver for about 20 percent.

**PRIOR RESEARCH**

I have found only a handful of academic studies that begin to address the ideological role of brands in society. Instead, academics tend to study advertising – whether individual ads, or the industry as a whole. The best ad analyses reveal the mechanics underlying how marketing communications produce cultural effects (e.g. Williamson, 1978; Wernick, 1991; Goldman, 1993; Lears, 1994). However, the inferential leaps that these authors often make from the analysis of an ad or a campaign to the societal influences of a brand are suspect. Ads are one tool (of many) concocted by one author

(of several) to express the brand. So ad analyses are necessarily myopic. Studying ads independently rather than as one constitutive element of the brand is like studying the designs of a priest's vestment while ignoring the historical construction of the religion that the vestment ritualizes, and the variety of other actors, actions and representations that contribute to the religion's ongoing (re)construction.

Two important books get closer to what I have in mind: Goldman and Papson's *Nike Culture* (1998) and Frank's *The Conquest of Cool* (1997). Goldman and Papson's book is an empirically substantial study: it synthesizes a vast range of branding material, and is informed by interviews conducted at both Nike and its ad agency Wieden + Kennedy. However, for my purposes, it is important to consider what the book does not do. While we get a detailed semiotic account of Nike ads, we don't learn why these particular expressions resonated so powerfully in the halcyon days of Nike symbolism (about 1988–95). That is, the authors don't consider what is going on in society and culture that made the identity ideals posited by Nike so appealing. Second, the authors do not consider how these ads work in conjunction with other cultural producers (television, journalism, etc.) that were centrally involved in the production of the key discourses that Nike leveraged (namely competitive sports and the 'hood'). Third, the book does not consider how consumers collectively act on the brand to inflect its meanings. Without these three complementary pieces of analysis, it is impossible to specify Nike's role in constructing ideology.

Frank documents the epochal shift in advertising (and, by inference, consumer culture), from the orchestrated mass culture of the 1950s to the 1960s' rebellious countercultural individualism, what he calls hip consumerism. His primary goal is to demonstrate that advertising, especially through the brand campaigns for some of the iconic brands of the day (e.g. Volkswagen, Pepsi<sup>®</sup>, 7-UP<sup>®</sup>), played a significant role in the transition. Frank does better than Goldman and Papson in locating the emergent desires for hip symbolism in the social and discursive structures of the day. However, he too makes no attempt to disentangle the work of advertising from other cultural producers; nor is he interested in how consumers may have influenced the construction of hip consumerism. In the end, Frank delivers on his thesis with panache, but it is an argument that few who have read about the 'creative revolution' of 1960s' advertising would find surprising. A more interesting question is the more specific one: what was the relative impact, roles of, and interactions between the different cultural actors – advertisers, film, television, books, the intelligentsia, journalism, the hippie counterculture – that produced hip consumerism? Because he is

thematizing an era, Frank does not systematically analyze any particular brand in enough detail to delineate the role of corporate marketing efforts relative to other agents of ideological change.

### BRAND GENEALOGY

Since iconic brands gain their power through the symbolic 'work' that they perform in society, studies of such brands must venture out into the world and examine what it is that these brands do. For theory to move forward, comparative and detailed analysis of the social construction of brands is required, what I call a brand genealogy (see Holt, 2004). The basic idea is that brand symbolism should operate similarly to other cultural products, such as novels, films, actors, athletes and politicians. So analysis should proceed following the methods that have been developed by the extensive body of research that has accumulated for studying these other types of expressive culture. We need a hermeneutic approach, locating the meaning and value of brand symbolism in a particular historical context. Ideally we should combine a macro understanding of how brand expressions play off contemporary social institutions and cultural discourses with a micro understanding of how brands are understood and used in everyday life-worlds. Further, like other cultural products, brands are intertextual constructions, so we must pay attention to the relationships between brands and other mass culture as well as collective consumer influences. Finally, since brands are enduring and adaptable cultural agents – analogous to an iconic person such as an actor or musician or political figure rather than a single book or film – we need to trace the trajectory of brand expressions over time. Relevant methods can be found in the more systematic studies conducted by cultural historians and media studies scholars. To my mind, Richard Slotkin's masterful trilogy (Slotkin, 1973, 1985, 1998) on the role of the frontier myth in American ideology is the most impressive model, and there are many other superb examples that have influenced my thinking (e.g. Denning, 1987; McAlister, 2001).

I want to understand the particular role played by iconic brands in narrating the imagined nation (Anderson, 1991[1983]). Specifically, in prior research, informed by Barthes (1993) and Slotkin (1985, 1998), I've established the central role of national myth/ideologies in the development of American iconic brands (Holt, 2004). Myths are imaginative stories and images that selectively draw on history as source material, which function to continually re-imagine and revitalize the nation's ideology. Because myths are narratives rather than rational arguments, their ideological effect works through the magical elision of facts and ideals. Hence, myths serve

a conservative political function, smoothing over contradictions and challenges to ideology. At the individual level, myths are key source material for stitching people to national identities, imbuing personal identity with the solidity, status, and camaraderie that comes from the felt participation in collective ideals and achievements.

### JACK DANIEL'S GENEALOGY

In this study, I present an excerpt of a larger ongoing project examining the genealogy of Jack Daniel's whiskey. The study relies upon four kinds of data:

- analysis of archival records of the company's marketing activities and press clippings, at the Brown-Forman archives and at their ad agency;
- oral histories with a variety of managers, including the company's first marketing manager who directed the brand's breakthrough ad campaign in the 1950s;
- in-home ethnographic interviews with 20 Jack Daniel's' loyalists in three American cities;
- interpretation of Jack Daniel's representations in popular culture from the 1950s to the present, particularly in rock music and in films.

Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey has sustained an iconic position in American culture for nearly 50 years. The whiskey's transformation from a tiny regional brand into a national icon began in the 1950s, the period that I examine in this article. The brand succeeded because it became a valued articulation of the gunfighter myth, an immensely powerful myth in the post-war era. To explain Jack Daniel's success, then, we need to disentangle how a particular whiskey brand came to be collectively understood as an icon for this myth.

### Whiskey and the frontier

Colonial settlers made whiskey in backyard distilleries from the corn, rye and barley they grew on their farms. Whiskey was the common cheap liquor, readily available on the frontier. And whiskey was the favored drink of the early American soldiers who were largely volunteers and conscripts drawn from farmers and frontiersmen. These early fans of whiskey didn't favor particular brands. If anything, they leaned toward brands other than Jack Daniel's. Prior to prohibition, Jack Daniel's was one of many dozens of regional whiskies made in the Kentucky-Tennessee 'whiskey belt' (Gaston, 1999). The earliest recorded Tennessee distillery was opened by Evan Shelby in 1771. By 1810, over 14,000 whiskey distilleries were

registered in the USA, which together produced over 25 million gallons of whiskey. Tennessee was becoming a major producer – due to a combination of good soil to produce the grain, ample hardwood for barrel-making, abundant limestone water, as well as effective river transport links – but production was equally strong in New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania. During the Civil War, whiskey production became illegal so that grain could be used to feed the troops. The Jack Daniel distillery was the first to reapply for registration after the war, which provided the rationale for the brand's claim to be the first registered distillery in the USA.

By the end of the 19th-century, the industry had consolidated considerably with production in Tennessee and Kentucky dominating. But Jack Daniel's did not become a significant regional whiskey producer until well into the 20th-century. In the 1870s, a nearby distillery, Tolley & Eaton, produced about four times more volume than Jack Daniel. Prior to prohibition, Cascade (now George Dickel) was the largest and also the most aggressively marketed Tennessee whiskey. The brand was popular amongst soldiers in the Spanish–American war, and the company hired the D'Arcy ad agency in St. Louis, then doing work for Coca-Cola®, to develop communications for the brand. It became popular as far away as San Francisco.

Jack Daniel's Whiskey first attracted attention in 1904, when the tiny distillery won the Gold Medal at the St. Louis Exposition over many much bigger distilleries. Other major awards followed. Founder Jack Daniel sold the distillery to his nephew Lem Motlow when an amputated leg limited his mobility. But, shortly thereafter, in 1909, Tennessee implemented prohibition and all of the distilleries were forced to shut down. Motlow sought to dodge prohibition by moving to less restrictive states, Missouri and Alabama. Eventually, national prohibition required all distilleries to close. Upon repeal, only two Tennessee distilleries would relaunch: George Dickel and Jack Daniel.

### **The frontier myth**

One central tendency of American ideology originates in the country's story of development: poor European immigrants and religious outcasts who industriously carved out a new nation from a vast wilderness in a brutal conquest over 'barbaric' indigenous peoples. Compared to the blighted urban conditions of industrializing Europe and its tamed pastoral countryside, America's vast tracts of wilderness populated with non-European natives provided a striking contrast. Americans found in this vast fertile land a religious sense of re-creation: pioneering a 'city

on a hill,' whose abundant splendor would redeem the sins of the old world.

American ideology dramatizes the development of American character through violent confrontations on the frontier – those places where the emerging society bordered on wilderness. By the 19th-century, this wilderness encounter had become a potent source of American mythology, and continues to have a profound impact to this day. The frontier was viewed as the great socializer of American men, and, hence, the fountainhead of America's strength as a nation. Over time, stories accumulated dramatizing how men attained virtuous traits – courage, self-reliance, honesty – through their perilous encounters on the frontier. The frontier produced the type of men that America relies on when the going gets tough, heroic men who can single-handedly change the course of events.

This myth became dominant in the mid-19th-century, spread through immensely popular novels such as Cooper's Leatherstocking tales, and iconic characters such as Daniel Boone and Davey Crockett (Slotkin, 1985). Since then, the frontier myth has been routinely re-imagined, reacting to shifts in society, technology, and the country's evolving ideological needs. The frontier as myth became particularly poignant once the real frontier was closed toward the end of the 19th-century, at which point the myth required additional sustenance in expressive culture, including politics. East Coast aristocrat Owen Wister's Wild West novels became best-sellers. His friend Teddy Roosevelt extracted bits of Wister's vocabulary and imagery to paint his vision of a country in need of frontier ideals to combat the soft emasculating taint of city life. He reinforced this myth through his reputation as a big-game hunter, by writing memoirs of his times with fellow cowboy Rough Riders fighting in the Spanish–American war, and by setting aside vast areas of the West to remain as wilderness in the form of National Parks so that Americans could continue to seek out something like the frontier experience. When cinemas opened across the country, Westerns soon became an important genre. But the Western did not peak in terms of popularity and influence until the post-war era, a time during which tumultuous social and political changes led to an enormous collective demand for symbolism that reinforced the centrality of America's historic masculine ideal.

In Western novels and films, whiskey was usually found wherever there were gunfighters. Whiskey was conceived as one of the gunfighter's dearest possessions, along with his horse and his gun. Novels, films and television programs have routinely depicted gunfighters in saloons of the Wild West, with whiskey generously flowing from bottle after bottle that the bartender



would plunk on the counter. From these clear unlabeled bottles, gunfighters pour generously into their glasses and knock back the whiskey with abandon, round after round. When things got out of hand, we would often see gunfighters gulping their whiskey straight from the bottle, occasionally using the bottles as weapons. It is not surprising, then, that in the 20th-century, as the frontier disappeared, whiskey became an icon for the frontier, allowing city men access to the country's historic values. But how is it that of the hundreds of brands on the market, Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey emerged as the iconic whiskey brand? We need to consider both the rise of a particular national myth market for the brand to inhabit was on the rise, and various cultural actors would serendipitously combine to articulate the brand to this myth.

### The gunfighter myth market

A series of disruptive social changes following World War II created potent demand for a revised version of the frontier myth, what Slotkin (1998) terms the gunfighter myth. We can summarize the most important socio-economic and ideological changes driving this myth as follows:

- the economic reconfiguration of the country, from small businesses and farmers to one dominated by large corporations and a national welfare state, which was given an extraordinary push by the post-war expansion of American business overseas;
- American political elites and media had whipped the public into a frenzy over a possible nuclear Armageddon with the USSR, with the threat that the Soviets could put Americans in state-run collective farms if they didn't rise to the occasion;
- a new homogeneous mass culture lifestyle – stereotyped as the modern grey-suited businessman living in the suburbs with his nuclear family – became dominant in magazines and the new television medium.

From the viewpoint of America's historic masculine ideals, constructed around rugged individualism and mythologized by the frontier, these changes all posed emasculating threats to men's freedom. American men demanded symbolic products, allegories that would mend these insecurities.

Cultural producers used the Western genre to respond, shifting characters and plots to make the stories relevant to the post-war zeitgeist. One result was the revisionist construction of a fictitious Western character – the gunfighter (Slotkin, 1998). In hugely popular films like *The Gunfighter*, *High Noon*, and *Shane*, as well as various John Wayne vehicles, gunfighters

were portrayed as professional killers for hire on the western frontier. They are a special breed of men whose character is forged in rough-and-tumble land not yet ruled by social institutions and that lacks the basic accoutrements of modern life. So gunfighters are self-reliant, vigorous, plain-spoken men who live by a personal code-of-honor hewn from living in lawless and dangerous places. Their violent proclivities must be tolerated because gunfighters, ultimately, are the only people with the character and strength to uphold America's values. Gunfighters are reactionary populists who stand up for self-reliance and use their semi-barbaric aptitude to take on 'totalitarian' modern institutions and ever more vigorous barbarian enemies.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, various expressions of gunfighter myth were effective in sustaining the identities of American men. Brands become iconic when they perform distinctive expressions (via ads and other media) that articulate to resonant national myths such as the gunfighter. During the mid-1950s, a combination of magazine articles, columnist and celebrity endorsements, a well-timed advertising campaign, and a popular film together combined to develop these articulations for Jack Daniel's. In the mid-1960s, the creatives at the Leo Burnett ad agency would again borrow directly from this myth market – creating Marlboro Country on a Texas longhorn ranch borrowing the theme song from *The Magnificent Seven*. But 10 years earlier, Jack Daniel's was already embedded as an up-and-coming gunfighter symbol, led by two magazine articles whose authors well understood American men's frontier desires. Interestingly, and not at all unusual, this articulation was the last thing that the brand's owners had in mind at the time.

### **Company marketing: Urbane professional's liquor**

Lem Motlow returned Jack Daniel's to production in late 1938, with the help of investors from Nashville. While prohibition ended in 1933, Tennessee lagged in changing its laws and Lem became a state legislator to push through legislation that finally allowed him to return to business. The distillery was barely up and running when the war hit and the government severely restricted grains used in liquor production. Most distilleries – many of which were already producing blends – were now blending with any alcohol they could get their hands on, as well as buying up stocks of barreled whiskey from small producers. The average quality of whiskey in the country plummeted. Motlow, who shared the founder's passion to make the best whiskey, would have nothing to do with this tactic. So, instead, he produced medicinal alcohol for the war rather than making inferior liquor.

When production started up again in 1948, this stubborn insistence on retaining quality seemed to pay off as whiskey cognoscenti began to sing the praises of Jack. Still, the whiskey sold mostly in nearby states, though Motlow industriously courted the media and retailers nationwide. Jack was still a tiny niche brand, but one that was developing a reputation as a connoisseur's drink.

In this period, the company had begun a modest advertising campaign that relied on ads that mimicked liquor conventions of the day. The ads sought to associate the brand with prestigious upper-middle-class men's lifestyle using line drawings of well-dressed professional men and cliché copy suggesting that Jack was the preferred drink of dapper, urbane men throughout the country. This generic symbolism was combined with a benefits campaign built around the whiskey's distinctive charcoal mellowing process. Ads and promotions used the tagline 'drop by drop' – which referenced how the raw liquor dripped through 10 feet of pulverized hardwood maple charcoal before barreling. Ads talked about this process as an 'extra blessing' that made the whiskey smoother than its competitors. Another newspaper campaign used cartoons that equated Jack Daniel's with a work of art. The header read 'You Ought to TASTE Jack Daniels' and followed with 'if you can ever get it'.

The media strategy emphasized 'prestige magazines' including *True*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Holiday*, *Esquire*, *New Yorker*, *Time*, *Fortune* and *Gourmet*. Likewise, sales and promotion efforts followed the same strategy. The company's news-sheet to distributors advocated that Jack be positioned as a 'luxury whiskey, a natural for clubs, hotels, and bars with an exclusive atmosphere and discriminating clientele, any place with customers who really appreciate the finer things in life'. Displays that dramatized the filtering process were developed for high-end men's clothiers and other unusual retail channels where the linkage to upper-middle class men would be clear. A display unit incorporated the statue of Jack Daniel and the cave spring, with a demonstration of the 'drop by drop' process. The company produced a silver-plated server for the bottle, which was packaged in a fancy blue box, as a retail promotion.

### **Inventing the articulation**

Despite these early marketing efforts, the fight to establish the distinctive Tennessee charcoal filtering process as a point-of-difference in the top tier of the category had little influence. Rather, the myth-constructing activities of consumers and the mass media had begun to give the brand a mystique other upscale whiskey brands lacked.

### The military

During World War II, Lem Motlow took advantage of the fact that General Patton was using nearby property as a staging area for his troops. The precise details were not recorded, but it appears that Lem befriended Patton and his senior officers, showing them hospitality with his whiskey, and likely also sent liquor to the troops. From the 1950s onward, Jack Daniel's caught on as the liquor of choice in the military, one of the core modern stewards of the gunfighter ethos.

### Celebrity male drinkers: Faulkner, Huston, and Nixon

In the post-war period, Jack Daniel's gained fans in two elite circles: a circle of macho artists and amongst hawkish political elites (especially Nixon and various people in the state department). The artists, led by Humphrey Bogart, were likely more influential simply because their brand preferences were more widely reported. William Faulkner, famous for his alcoholic binges as much as his writing, loved Jack Daniel's and this was occasionally reported in the media. But, in this era, the most influential drinker was John Huston, for whom Jack Daniel's was the elixir of choice. (Frank Sinatra would also become famous for his Jack Daniel's consumption, but not until the late 1950s, a discussion I've excluded for space reasons.)

Huston drank Jack Daniel's with Bogart, Lauren Bacall and their crowd, representing what might be called the Hemingway school of Hollywood actors, writers and directors. They unabashedly championed an old-school view of manhood, aligned with the western frontier, which directly challenged the new suburban organization man. John Huston was a major celebrity in his day; the media closely reported his film-making and lifestyle. During the making of his film adaptation of *Moby Dick*, magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Harper's Bazaar* reported on the director's finicky tastes: he liked tweed caps, cigarillos, Jack Daniel's, and hunting in Ireland. John Huston was a quintessential gunfighter character: he both lived the life as well as sought to capture the existential tensions that such men face in his films, particularly the quartet of films he made with Bogart. The cigar-chomping womanizing Huston bought a castle in rural Ireland where he went on sabbatical to hunt, drink and be merry. And, when he tired of his castle (and his wife at the time), he sold it, bought a strip of Mexican jungle on the Pacific Ocean only accessible by boat, married a young Mexican woman, and lived in a compound he built there.

Journalists with an affinity to the Bogart-Huston school of masculinity jumped on the bandwagon. Lucius Beebe was a flamboyant high-society gourmand, educated at Yale, who became a writer for upscale publications

while also pursuing his deep interests in the American West. He wrote dozens of books on trains, and moved to middle of the desert in Nevada to start a newsweekly. In his magazine and newspaper columns he trumpeted his affection for Jack Daniel's alongside travelogue accounts of the West.

#### 'Fortune' and 'True' articles

The whiskey's mass media linkages to the gunfighter myth were concocted by two magazine photojournalists, who saw in this small-time distillery in Lynchburg the makings of a potent parable. The first article, titled 'Rare Jack Daniel's' appeared in *Fortune* in July 1951. The lead played off the headline, telling of Jack's word-of-mouth reputation amongst whiskey aficionados as one of the best-made, if least known, whiskeys in the country. The whiskey's quality was attributed to the small rural distillery, which hadn't changed its methods since the mid-19th-century, located in a picture-perfect 'sylvan' setting as if reliving 19th-century pioneer life. Photos featured Lem's sons, who now ran the distillery, as old-time pioneer types doing business the old-fashioned way, gossiping on the porch of their one-room office in suspenders and hats, having a chat in a cluttered old office, a panoramic shot of the stacks of maple ricks set against the hollow, and an employee checking the huge oak leaching tanks, the primitive construction and hand-written signs again evoking life a century past.

The *True* story, which appeared in November 1954, largely followed the framing of the brand developed by *Fortune* three years earlier. The feature-length article was embellished with photos of the Lynchburg distillery, the hollow, and its old-time whiskey makers, similar to the *Fortune* photos. The cover promoted the feature title 'Sippin Whiskey and the Shirtsleeve Brothers' (Gowen, 2004), which told in loving detail about the pre-modern frontier values and processes that have distinguished Jack Daniel's from the days of the founder through the Motlow family in the post-prohibition era. The story introduced the reader to the kind of place that was quickly disappearing: Lynchburg, a tiny dry southern town that retains its pre-industrial charm and values. The story and images showcase savvy old-timers who take a leisurely approach to their business, but have the know-how and stubbornness to not mess it up, the old-fashioned distillation process done in huge wood vats, and the great burning ricks of maple charcoal fore-grounded against the wooded hollow. The story proved very popular and the distillery used the article aggressively in subsequent promotions.

These articles relied on a romantic storytelling format to diffuse what had been an elite niche drink to a mass upper-middle-class male audience.

For the small coterie of elite connoisseurs, these articles lent colorful backstories confirming the old-world artisanal processes that yielded such a good quality whiskey. But for the mass market audience to whom the stories catered, the particulars of whiskey making were not intrinsically interesting. Rather, these evocative details helped to paint a picture of men who still lived the frontier life, and who stubbornly made whiskey the old-fashioned artisanal way. These details imbued in the whiskey a story that resonated powerfully in America's post-war culture.

These articles pushed hard against the communication codes that were conventional for the liquor category and, more generally, most consumer product categories of the day. Companies were trying to align their brands with the new 'modern' values of high technology, suburban life, and conspicuous consumption. Like Jack Daniel's early 1950s' communications, whiskey brands were trying to modernize their symbolism by taking American men's historic favorite drink out of the backwoods and into middle-class suburban life. The magazine articles pushed Jack Daniel's in exactly the opposite direction. By emphasizing the stubbornly traditional ways of frontier whiskey making, these stories promoted Jack Daniel's as the reactionary champion of the old whiskey values of the frontier, reasserting the values of the nearly extinct gunfighter who threw back glassfuls of whiskey in saloons.

### **Cementing the articulation**

#### **The postcards campaign: Lynchburg as frontier**

While the brand was winning acclaim in small elite circles, sales were soft in the early 1950s and the warehouses full of aging liquor weren't turning over fast enough. So, for the first time, the distillery decided to develop a national marketing effort. The company's new ad agency, Gardner Nelson, worked directly with the photojournalist images and folksy narratives of Lynchburg that had appeared in *Fortune* and *True*. The diffusion of the Lynchburg narrative from journalism to advertising was helped along by a well-regarded photojournalist from *Life* magazine whom the agency hired to work with them on the project. He had wanted to run a photo-essay on Jack Daniel's in *Life* but couldn't get the article published. Like his fellow scribes at *Fortune* and *True*, he was enamored by Lynchburg as a powerful metonym for historic America as the country rapidly suburbanized its way out of its past.

The first ads of the campaign experimented with inserting the *Fortune/True* images and language (using the term 'sippin whiskey') into the existing drop-by-drop benefits campaign. Instead of the men in suits who

previously had populated the ads, we suddenly find ourselves in the heart of Lynchburg, portrayed as Norman Rockwell's small town USA. Soon enough, likely because of the strong response to the imagery, the whiskey's attributes and benefits were treated more organically, built into the Lynchburg storyline, which celebrated everyday life in Lynchburg and work at the distillery. The ads were dominated by photojournalist portraits of the distillery and town shots of Lynchburg – men overseeing the charcoal burning, barrelmen pushing barrels to be aged, old men whittling outside the general store. We see grizzled men dressed in overalls, portrayed as people who time forgot, men who cared little about what was happening in the world outside Lynchburg.

The campaign came to be called 'Postcards' as the ads were narrated in a personal homespun style from the proprietors in Lynchburg to the rest of the country, alerting them to the local goings-on. The main innovation beyond the prior magazine stories was to develop an appropriately folksy yet sassy voice for the brand – conveying the folk wisdom that comes only through hard experience, not professional expertise. Long body copy was used written as a newsletter style, gossipy homespun language that gently boasted about the value of the old world while poking a gentle finger at 1950s' obsessions with modern life. The campaign's mode of communication was also critical in building the brand's authenticity as a relatively 'unmarketed' product. The ads presented the owners of the distillery talking to customers in simple, straight-talking discussion about the product, the distillery and the town, which made the advertising feel like everyday talk rather than brand communication. As opposed to the massively hyped brands of the era, Jack came across as the real deal – not a marketing company but a real distillery. This innovative communication style predated by 5 years Bill Bernbach's famous Volkswagen campaign, which has been widely recognized as inventing this style of communication.

Launched in an era during which the Western had become the most potent rebuke to the glossy modern suburbs as well as a nervous call-to-arms to revive the gunslinger to fight the commies, a whiskey brand championing such symbolism could only have been read as a clarion call to revive the gunfighter's frontier values. Jack Daniel's championed old-fashioned artisanal production over high-technology and mass production; and simple honest communication over slick glossy post-war media world. The images and art design reinforced this celebration of the rustic, antique qualities that Americans associated with the frontier. The Postcards campaign picked up where the magazine articles left off, cementing Jack Daniel's association with the gunfighter myth.

## HUD

Jack Daniel's position as the iconic whiskey of the gunfighter myth was further etched in stone in 1963 by the film *Hud*, Paul Newman's most memorable early film. Hud is a hard-drinking womanizer working on his father's Texas ranch, a self-described frontier luddite who will not tolerate modern incursions into his cowboy way of life. He drinks Jack Daniel's from the bottle throughout the film – whether chasing women, getting into bar fights, or wrestling pigs. He's a laconic tough guy, not interested in settling down. The film opens with Hud leaving the house of a married woman with whom he's been sleeping. He returns home and orders around his attractive maid, and hits on her as he's doing it. The film cuts to a barman sweeping glass from the pavement, telling a passerby: 'I had Hud in here last night.'

A cow has died mysteriously on Hud's father's ranch. The ranch hands gather around the cow to discuss the death, hoping that it wasn't caused by the dreaded hoof-and-mouth disease. If one cow is infected, the government will slaughter the entire herd. Hud is upset by the general idea of such government intervention and walks away to fire his gun at some birds. Another cowboy disapproves: 'There's a law against killing buzzards.' Hud responds: 'I always say the law is meant to be interpreted in a lenient manner. That's what I try and do. Sometimes I lean to one side, sometimes I lean to the other.'

The contagious hoof-and-mouth disease is becoming epidemic on cattle ranches throughout the country and the government is working to stop it. To do so, they are sending federal inspectors around the country to slaughter any herds with infected cattle. With this suspicious death, the government send inspectors to test the dead cow. The plot is set in motion by Hud's reactionary views on this dilemma, pushing against his father's willingness to acquiesce to the government's intervention. While he built the ranch from nothing, and is depressed about what is happening, the father does not hesitate to go along with what the government and what their scientists tell him to do. Hud will have none of it. He wants to drive the cattle north and sell them off before the government agents' return:

Shoot your cows out from out from underneath you on account of a schoolbook disease. They don't have to agree to nothing. They're the law. Twenty-four years labor. Calluses. I want to get my work out of it. Ship the herd out north. ('And start an epidemic?') This whole country's run on epidemics. Where you been? Epidemics is big business: price fixing, crooked game



shows, income tax finagling, souped-up expense accounts. How many honest men do you know? You take the sinners away from the saints, you're lucky to end up with Abe Lincoln. I say let us put our bread in that gravy while it's still hot.

His father will not allow it. So when the test on the cow comes in positive and the government agents arrive to post quarantine signs, Hud gets drunk on the corral fence, contemplative, melancholy, swigging from his bottle of Jack Daniel's. He smashes the bottle on the ground and walks away. He's still spewing: 'Spend years raising the best stock in the country. Now we've got the government paying us four bits on the dollar for them.' He's drunk, smashing cupboards looking for more whiskey.

Hud: Where's that bottle? Where's that bottle of Jack Daniel's stashed in that cupboard?

Maid: You drank it at dinner Wednesday night.

Hud: Don't remember.

Maid: Why don't you stick your head in a water trough and sober up for lunch. [Hud makes pass at her.] Don't you ever ask?

Hud: The only question I ever ask is when is your husband coming home?

Later he takes his nephew Lon to a bar to teach him how to drink beer and chase girls. Lon lives with Hud and his father because Hud's brother, Lon's father, had been killed in an accident. 'Wanna put a little kick in it?' Hud pours whiskey (we assume it is Jack Daniel's) into the beer from a paper bag. As Hud begins a promiscuous conversation with someone else's girlfriend, trying to set up Lon, a bar fight begins. Hud is clearly an experienced fighter, enjoying every moment, and Lon jumps right in. Hud steps aside, swigs his whiskey, and watches Lon fight. Lon enjoys himself: 'That was one hell of a night. I could do that six times a week.'

In the end, the government wins. The huge herd is shot to death by a small army of cowboys, bellowing their last pleas in a mass grave in a memorably grizzly scene. Hud decides to leave the ranch. His father has gone for a walk to overcome the grief and has a heart attack. Hud and Lon come upon him and, panicked, try to revive him. Hud fetches a bottle of whiskey from the car to get him to drink it as a curative. The old man says 'don't make me drink that stuff'. He dies in Hud's arms.

Hud is a reactionary cowboy, a loner who lives by frontier values, and is unwilling to bend regardless. He fights to retain his libertarian ideals of personal freedom from big modernizing institutions, while expressing his manly virility through women, whiskey and fighting. Jack Daniel's is Hud's

comrade and truth serum. It consoles him when other men fail to uphold his values, and it allows him to assert these values in the most aggressive and even violent way. HUD's popularity, and Paul Newman's rise to fame in cowboy roles, served to cement Jack Daniel's iconicity as the drink for those American men who identified with these values in the face of a rapidly evolving society.

#### OUTLINE OF A THEORY OF ICONIC BRANDS: IDEOLOGICAL PARASITES AND PROSELYTIZERS OF ADVANCED CAPITALISM

From this sketch, we can make the following conceptual inferences, which are corroborated by more extensive genealogies I've conducted on other brands (e.g. Holt, 2004):

1. Iconic brands garner cultural power from their role in expressing identity myths: ongoing revisions of national (and occasionally global) myths that provide collective salves for major contradictions in society. Jack Daniel's cultural power stems from its role in sustaining a particular ideal of masculinity in American society. In the 1950s, Jack Daniel's came to be conventionally understood as a vital expression of the gunfighter myth, a revision of America's frontier myth that was particularly resonant during this period.
2. Mass media outside the firm's direct control – films and television programs in this case, books, music, sports, and journalism as well in other cases – are the primary agents promulgating identity myths. The gunfighter myth was constructed primarily in the Western films and television programs that dominated American mass culture in the 1950s and early 1960s. This myth evolved through the serendipitous trial-and-error processes typical of cultural selection as various mass culture texts posited alterations in ideology via expressive culture. This cultural competition created what I term a myth market: a wide range of cultural products gather around one particular genre of myth as early market successes demonstrate that audiences identify strongly with its narrative.
3. Brands become iconic when they are successfully articulated to a thriving myth market. Iconic brands typically enjoin and embellish existing myth markets, rather than contributing substantially to their formation. Iconic brands play a supporting role to other ideology-driving media, instantiating the myth in a distinctive commodity so that the ideals can be ritually experienced in everyday life.
4. In addition to marketing, a variety of additional agents and social

processes can be involved in constructing the articulation between the brand and the myth, such as:

- a. Status competition: In the process of collective identity formation to assert status, people sometimes rely upon branded commodities as markers. In this case, elite men sought to set themselves apart from the dominant discourse of mass culture and the organization man by forging identifications with the pre-industrial ideal of the gunfighter. They adopted Jack Daniel's as a symbol for this status claim.
- b. Subculture affiliation: Members of a subculture can collectively select a brand to symbolize their ethos. The US military, whose ethos has long been saturated in gunfighter values, serendipitously selected Jack Daniel's as the whiskey brand they used to ritualize these values.
- c. Journalist packaging: Journalists search for new ways to package stories that resonate with their audiences and so often play the role of ideological entrepreneurs. The articles on Jack Daniel's in *Fortune* and *True* were the first to construct the linkage between Lynchburg and the frontier myth.
- d. Film props: Films can play a powerful role in amplifying the brand's articulation to myth. Occasionally films lead ideological change and bring commodities along with them (see, for example, my discussion of *Easy Rider* in Holt, 2004). But most of the time, filmmakers use brands as a cultural shorthand and, so, rely on extant consensus symbols. Nonetheless, when a popular film uses a brand as a central prop, it has a substantial effect. When Paul Newman's *Hud* treated Jack Daniel's as a comforting elixir supporting his curmudgeon refusal to give in to modern society, powerful connective tissue between brand and myth was forged, far more substantial than what is possible in a print ad or 30-second television spot.

#### ICONIC BRANDS AS IDEOLOGICAL PARASITES

Brands become iconic when they are woven into the most potent ideological currents in society. The power of Jack Daniel's symbolism came from its articulation to the gunfighter myth. Likewise, in other genealogies I've conducted – see, for instance, studies of Harley-Davidson, Volkswagen, Budweiser<sup>®</sup>, Snapple<sup>®</sup>, Mountain Dew, Coke, and ESPN (Holt, 2004) – it is clear that, to the extent these brands are successful, they are ensconced in the ideological turf wars of the day via expressive culture.

Iconic brands are mercenaries, following ideological demands wherever the action is. So we find iconic brands articulated to a diverse array of ideological positions: from the frontier myth of Harley and Jack Daniel's to the Hobbesian sporting worlds of Nike and ESPN, to the aesthetic self-actualization of Apple and Volkswagen, to the sustainable development mythos of Patagonia® and Ben & Jerry's®. While managers may be oblivious, we can observe analytically a process of cultural selection at work in which many hundreds of brands compete for the public's affection, producing a profusion of creative experiments that inevitably lead some brands to stumble upon the major myth markets in play in a society in a given period.

Critics who contend that iconic brands manipulate culture mis-specify their influence. Iconic brands rarely rework significantly existing symbolism. Cultural products other than brands – including films, television programs, politicians, sports teams, and novels – do the ideological heavy lifting in modern culture, reconstructing myths to pioneer emerging ideals, creating what I term myth markets. Brand marketing laps up what these other media produce. (My research suggests that the only American brands that have significantly led culture are Volkswagen (circa 1960s) and Nike (circa 1988–93)).

In fact, Jack Daniel's emerged as an iconic symbol of the gunfighter despite the owners' contrary marketing efforts, which attempted to turn the brand into an urbane professional's drink. Their aspirations were subverted as the military, celebrity elites and journalists all identified a much better cultural fit for the brand. Soon enough, the company's ad agency adroitly picked up on this emerging symbolism and convinced management to launch a seminal print campaign that had a tremendous influence in solidifying the brand's position as the champion of gunfighter values. This chronology is typical of what I've found in other cases: companies happen upon a way to ride the coattails of an existing myth, usually discovered by ad agency creatives. Large marketing companies are poor at seizing cultural opportunities due to the pervasive psychologization of brand strategy over the past 40 years (Holt, 2004, 2005).

In sum, iconic brands are *ideological parasites*. Brands succeed in becoming powerful cultural symbols when they tag along on emerging myth markets led by far more potent cultural forms (films, books, sports, politics and so forth). Why do people so value iconic brands then? I would argue that iconic brands play a useful complementary role because commodities materialize myths in a different manner, allowing people to interact around these otherwise ephemeral and experientially distant myths in everyday life. Whereas an iconic film must be routinely re-watched (or

re-imagined) to play a ritual function, myth-infused brands provide a distilled and less-involved means of experiencing the myth via consumption. And whereas iconic politicians or actors or athletes are mediated entities, far removed from everyday life, brands offer a more accessible form of iconicity that attends to people's desires to directly experience valued myths.

So, while iconic brands play a key role in diffusing myth, they have little influence over the specific direction of these ideological revisions compared to other cultural actors. Brand critics have distorted the ideological role of brands simply because they have ignored the various non-marketing agents' contributions in creating ideology-infused culture.

#### ICONIC BRANDS AS PROSELYTZERS OF MYTH

That brands rarely lead ideology does not mean that corporate efforts to market iconic brands are a benign force. Once companies happen upon a profitable cultural vein, they exploit it as best they can via the techniques of ubiquity and proliferation described well by Naomi Klein (1999). The social effects of iconic brands come less from the manipulation of desires than in the heavy-handed expansion of ideological expression once resonant linkages have been established. Profit-maximizing brand owners use their extensive war chests to monopolize these expressions in social life through the sheer weight of their marketing spend. Such branding efforts serve a decidedly conservative function. Encountering 'Just Do It' stories everywhere you look is politically narcotizing, making it existentially difficult to question 'Why do it?' To find comfort in a tumbler of Jack Daniel's after work helps to naturalize the American political imagination – that one's coterie of fellow gunfighters are winning the good fight against the bad guys around the world. (In a future version of this research, I will report on how loyal Jack Daniel's drinkers use the brand in just this way.)

Modern myths work to naturalize the status quo, containing otherwise destabilizing changes in society. In the alchemy of myth, social contradictions are transformed to cultural tensions, which are readily mended by the therapeutic salve of a 'truthful' parable. Social and political problems in the USA have been increasingly managed through mythmaking and consumption, rather than through democratic debate. We are moving further away from Habermas's ideal of rational discourse in the public sphere, not closer. Mythmaking has expanded from a more delimited role as one mode of cultural expression to the country's foundational cultural architecture, a myth society if you will. Iconic brands play a specialized role in this myth society. While they are relatively impotent compared to a John Wayne,

Martha Stewart, Ronald Reagan or Michael Jordan, they serve an important yet unremarked role in sustaining the polity. While other types of icons serve as the nation's ideological artists, crafting myths to fit the ideological needs of the day, iconic brands are the tireless proselytizers, diffusing these myths into every nook and cranny of everyday life.

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