

A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON BRANDS AND SYMBOL AFFIRMATION. THE THEORY OF CULTURAL AND ICONIC BRANDING REVIEWED

A. BRICIU¹ V-A. BRICIU²

Abstract: *The purpose of this article is to provide an in-depth approach to the theoretical issues stated about brands and branding from a cultural perspective. Following contemporary debates in defining the concept of brand and branding in relation to various marketing and organizational communication definitions, branding models that can be used in relation to places, in general, have been highlighted over time: the consumer branding model inspired by the functional tradition of the theoretical and practical marketing approaches, used and applied on products or services and the organizational or corporate communication model, from an identity approach. That is why, a different tendency is highlighted in analyzing branding models and their applicability on places, through a new proposed approach, of neo-Marxist nature, as a moderate response to the paradigm of postmodern brand management, defined by the iconic brand and cultural branding theories - presented in this article -, on the one hand, and the anti-capitalist, anti-corporate and anti-branding movement, on the other.*

Key words: *brands, branding, cultural branding, iconic branding.*

1. Introduction

The available resources that deal with the issues of brands and place branding reflect the perspectives of the public or private sector, the scientific or practical interest or the various conceptual orientations. Place branding has captured the imagination of sociologists, geographers, political analysts, economists and university researchers. Individual research directions have led to important findings (Papadopoulos, 2004; Anholt, 2006, 2008, 2010b; Hanna and Rowley, 2008). Moreover, there are a multitude of published studies that provide insights into how branding is used for places (Anholt, 2005, 2007, 2010a; Skinner and Kubacki, 2007; Govers and Go, 2009). From a theoretical point of view, the academic resources related to place branding that are published in the international scientific flow have contributed to the (relative) establishment of generally accepted aspects, such as: (1) places can be subjected to the branding process (Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Kerr, 2006);

¹ *Transilvania* University of Braşov, arabela.baican@unitbv.ro, corresponding author

² *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

(2) in many aspects, places differ from products (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2000M Fan, 2006); and (3) as a consequence, place branding is a special type of branding that differs from other fields of application (e.g., products or companies), requiring additional theoretical research (Gudjonsson, 2005; Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2008) and the development of unique processes in the online environment (Simeon, 2001; Florek et al., 2006, 2011; Pitt et al., 2007; Alonso and Bea, 2012).

2. Conceptual Clarifications regarding Brands

The term brand has multiple interpretations. One of the definitions is given by Aaker (2005), for whom a brand is a name and/or a distinctive symbol (such as a logo, trademark or packaging design), used to identify products or services as belonging to a certain producer or group of producers and to differentiate those goods or services from those of the competition. Thus, a brand signals the source of the product to the buyer and protects both the buyer and the producer from competition, who will try to provide products that are as similar as possible. However, Stern (2006) argues that the notion of brand has acquired a surplus of meanings and new interpretations, which has led to a variety of different definitions. This has caused difficulties for researchers, who might study the same concept under different names or different concepts under the same name. Continuing this idea, Stern (2006) suggests that “both literal and metaphorical meanings are considered important aspects of construct definition, whereby everyday language is translated into formal language terms for scientific discourse” (p. 217). Stern (2006) argues in favour of the term brand, classified both as an entity and as a process, depending largely on whether it is used as a noun or a verb. When expressed as a noun, it is associated with a person, place, or thing; as a verb, branding refers to the process by which a product gains meaning. The dual function of the brand concept, the brand identity and the brand reputation (both used as nouns) show the flexibility of this concept. On the other hand, the terms branding and branded are expressed as verbs, with the purpose of indicating how the meaning of the term brand changes over time. Next, Stern (2006) explains that, in the material world, a brand is a name or trademark associated with a product, while, in people's minds, the brand refers to the mental representation or perception of psychological significance.

Authors like Kotler (1997) and Arthur Rooney (1995) define brand as a name, a sign, a symbol, a drawing or a combination of these elements, their main purpose being to identify a company's products and services and to differentiate them from those of competition. The purpose of this definition is to highlight the tangible elements of the brand and the fact that one of the central objectives of a brand is to differentiate a company's product from those of the competition. In this regard, an important aspect is that Kotler (1997) uses the term “differentiation”, while Arthur Rooney (1995) uses the word “distinctiveness”. This terminological change reflects the effort of evolving, from being different from others (“differentiation”), to being unique (“distinctiveness”) by capturing the inimitable aspects of a specific product. In addition, Urde (1994) postulates that the brand is the future of many organizations.

Kay (2006) approaches the issue of brand differentiation, supporting the thesis that branding means being different. However, being different is insufficient if this difference

does not create significance. Therefore, the author emphasizes that the power of a brand is not due to the intensity with which the differentiation is created, as perceived by the consumer. More so, the brand's longevity is due to the significance that it creates. Brands are best understood in terms of a particular "logical structure" that channels consumer perceptions. Representing titles associated with experiences, brands can be considered logical structures similar to metaphors, allegories or other representations. As associative representations, brands are used to explain why products and services make sense to consumers. Therefore, the function of a brand is to create meaning.

In addition, Klein (2000) points out that the main directions of the marketing theory encourage companies not to classify brands as a series of attributes, but rather to evaluate the psycho-social role that organizations play in both contemporary culture and in the lives of consumers. A brand adds value to the products and services that companies offer by impregnating them with emotional, social and even spiritual resonance.

3. The Cultural Approach on Brands

Recently, anthropologists, historians and sociologists have looked at brands from a cultural perspective, by accepting their importance in society and by offering complementary points of view regarding the management or psychological visions of brands, e.g., Bently et al., 2008; Koehn, 2001; Lury, 2004 (apud Schroeder, 2009, pp. 123-124). Given the existing cultural diversity, brands are regarded as symbols - full of meanings and emotions, being prized in society. The most powerful symbolic brands, bearing the name of "iconic brands, are some of the most famous in the world: Coke, Nike, Apple, Starbucks and the like" (Holt, 2006, p. 357). The perspective of cultural branding implies the existence of the consumer in a space of globalization, imperialism and cultural standardization, "embedded in the symbolic universes of branding" (Heding et al., 2009, p. 211), and the owner of the brand or the marketing specialist deliberately endows the brand with cultural content. Through this, the brand will play an important part in the consumer culture. The brand is seen "as a storied product putting shared myths related to cultural identity projects up for consumption" (Heding et al., 2009, p. 212). 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" (Holt, 2006, p. 357). Individuals, considered *homo mercans*, "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" (Holt, 2006, p. 357).

Starting from Roll's (2006) statement regarding the influences of the strong brands from popular culture and the tendencies manifested in a given social space, Dinnie (2008, p. 14) describes perspectives that are also found in Holt (2004) and Grant (2006) and translates the way brands become icons through creative interaction with their environment, through a process that D. B. Holt calls "cultural branding" – "a process that he considers particularly suitable for applying to nations" (Dinnie, 2008, p. 14), because the fundamental premise of this theoretical model is that iconic brands perform myths of national identity that solve cultural contradictions.

Holt (2004) bases his cultural branding theory on the idea of cultural icons, seen as “society's foundational compass points — anchors of meaning continually referenced in entertainment, journalism, politics, and advertising [...] symbols that people accept as a shorthand to represent important ideas” (p. 1), transgressing this information to iconic brands that “provide extraordinary identity value because they address the collective anxieties and desires of a nation” (Holt, 2004, p. 6). Pryor and Grossbart (2007, p. 297) comment that, despite the results of a product analysis, Holt (2004) indicates the possibility of also applying his cultural branding model to “marketed entities that people rely on to express their identity” (p. 5). The author also includes tourist destinations, other places (e.g., nations, cities, neighbourhoods, districts).

Thus, iconic brands become the central theme of the theory, expressing brand identity, which addresses the identity value of a cultural icon. An identity brand is a brand with a story, and its value for consumers derives mainly from its identity value. Identity value is an aspect of brand value that derives from the brand's contributions to the consumer's self-expression. A cultural icon is a “person or thing regarded as a representative symbol, especially of a culture or a movement; a person or an institution considered worthy of admiration or respect” (Holt, 2004, p. 11). An icon is an exemplary symbol. Cultural icons are exemplary symbols that resonate with most individuals and offer the most valuable and relevant solution to a situation with cultural connotations, at a given time. The same goes for iconic brands: “they have to address the most general concerns of the time in the most skilful way. In that sense, they have to perform more representative and powerful myths to mainstream culture than the identity brand” (Heding et al., 2009, p. 217).

The secondary theme that we identify in the iconic brand discourse is related to cultural consumption. Anthropologist McCracken conceptualized “a cultural perspective on consumption in the 1980s. His theories have since become central to the understanding of consumption in a cultural context” (Heding et al., 2009, p. 214). The notions of culture and consumption are central to the theory of cultural consumption acting as a system. This paradigm of cultural consumption accepts that “goods not only have a utilitarian character, they are also able to carry and communicate cultural meaning. The cultural meaning is mobile, flowing and always in transition. Meaning is transferred from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods and through the consumption of goods integrated to the lives of consumers” (Heding et al., 2009, p. 215).

Holt (2004) identifies and uses seven key axioms for explaining the cultural branding model. These are:

- 1) Iconic brands address acute contradictions in society – individuals building their own identities in response to historical changes with national influence;
- 2) Iconic brands perform identity myths that address these desires and anxieties - in everyday life, individuals come into contact with various types of social disturbance that are later transposed into personal anxieties. Myths soothe these tensions, helping them with identifying a purpose in life and establishing the imagined identity;
- 3) Identity myths reside in the brand, which consumers experience and share via ritual action – as the brand acts as a myth, the audience will perceive that the myth belongs to the brand markers (i.e., name, logo, design elements), ultimately becoming a symbol, a personification of that myth;

4) These identity myths are set in populist worlds – places that are separate from everyday life or the realities of the commercial world or of elitist control. In these worlds, individuals share a distinct ethos, which gives them intrinsic motivation to their actions;

5) Iconic brands perform as activists, leading culture – encouraging individuals to think differently about themselves, promoting cultural change;

6) Iconic brands rely on breakthrough performances, rather than consistent communications – they become all the more desirable, as they are the result of genius performances, which have managed to identify the myth, and not of a consistent presence through media communication.

7) Iconic brands enjoy a cultural halo effect – when a brand delivers a powerful myth that is considered useful by consumers in establishing their own identities, this identity value forms a halo over other previous aspects of the brand (pp. 6-10).

In expressing the characteristics of cultural brands, one starts from the idea that their significance should function similarly to other cultural products, such as novels, films, actors, sportsmen and politicians:

- like other cultural products, brands are intertextual constructions, so we must pay attention to the relationships between brands and other forms of mass culture, as well as to other collective consumption influences.

- since brands are culturally sustainable and adaptable agents – more similar to an iconic person, such as an actor, a musician or a politician, rather than a book or a movie - we need to track the brand expression trajectory over time (Holt, 2006, p. 359).

- brands are also useful through their immateriality. Branded objects are only partial manifestations of the brand's "essence" or "personality". This is something that articulates on the abstract level of "emotion", "experience" or "metaphysics", and can sometimes be too abstract to be expressed in words (Feldwick, 1999 apud Arvidsson, 2006, p. 126).

- when we use a brand, the significance network of the social and aesthetic relationships that are established around it allows us to perform and propose a certain personality or to associate ourselves with a certain group of individuals. "What brand-owners own is the privilege of guarding and deriving value from this relational network" (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 126).

- brands consist not only in the relations between things, but in the relations between things, people, images, texts, as well as the physical and informational environment. "This way brands embody the cross-mediality that marks informational capital in general" (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 126).

- brands are the perfect example of the integration "of aesthetic production... into commodity production generally", an aspect that post-modern theorists have long noted (Jameson, 1991 apud Arvidsson, 2006, p. 126).

- the network-type feature of brands also means that they do not belong to any physical space, in particular; "like a deity that is everywhere and nowhere (e.g., a special brand space), such as NikeTown or the Apple Store, it may function as a temple, but the utility of the Nike brand is not at all related to that particular space, but can be invoked in several contexts of life)" (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 126).

- the brand corresponds to the condition of a "network culture", in which social mediatisation has progressed to the point where maintaining a distinction between the

media and reality is no longer useful, and the information is no longer something that expresses a reality, but something that creates the ambiance for reality to unfold.

- like the media in the information age, capital is not something you encounter in a physical space (e.g., factories), but rather something in one's everyday life context. "The brand is one example of capital as an informational milieu. Brands are inserted into the environment of life where they work as a sort of "platform for action" (Lury, 2004 apud Arvidsson, 2006, p. 127).

The cultural approach to branding, elaborated in 2004 by Holt, is also found in the work of Grant (2006 apud Dinnie, 2008, p. 14), who defined the brand as "a cluster of strategic cultural ideas". Holt is the one who synthesizes, in a personal vision, the entire theoretical and applicative experience of branding so far, establishing a classification based on the variants considered when building the identity value of brands. In the following, we will compare the characteristics of these different perspectives on branding, alongside the forth one, the cultural branding model, proposed by Holt (2004). See also Briciu and Briciu (2016, p. 140) for this synthesized analysis:

1. Mind-Share Branding – promoted since the 1970s, on cognitive considerations;
2. Emotional Branding – as an improved version (starting in the 1990s) of the first model, affirming the emotional and relational side of the branding model;
3. Viral Branding – born with the rise of the Internet, as a favourable environment to the affirmation of branding (Holt, 2004, p. 13). As with the other models, we start from the idea that society is the one establishing the identity of a brand, defining for the consumer the way in which a product shapes the identity of the consumer, as well as the reason behind it. This branding model is the least useful for branding a place from the perspective of a long-term strategy (Pryor and Grossbart, 2007, p. 296).

Only with the growth and influence of the internet, a third model develops the viral branding. Together, these three models could include, from a theoretical point of view, almost any attempt of branding by any agents, consultants, holders, etc. (Briciu and Briciu, 2016, p. 140).

4. Conclusions

The element that cultural branding and the other models have in common is the assumption that the branding process is a managerial process, in which companies perform identity myths.

The societal reaction to the central theme of the cultural branding theory (i.e., iconic brands) was the No Logo movement (Klein, 2000; Holt 2002, p. 70). The agenda and the objectives assumed by the anti-branding movement are of interest for the cultural approach, because these mechanisms must be known when they aim at the "iconic brand status" (Heding et al., 2009, p. 214).

References

- Aaker, D. (2005). *Managementul capitalului unui brand: cum să valorificăm numele unui brand* [Managing Brand Equity. Capitalizing on the Value of a Brand Name]. Bucharest:

- Brandbuilders Publishing House.
- Alonso, I., & Bea, E. (2012). A Tentative Model to Measure City Brands on the Internet. *Place Branding and Diplomacy*, 8(4), 311–328, <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2012.22>.
- Anholt, S. (2005). Editorial: Some important distinctions in place branding. *Place Branding*, 1(2), 116-121, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990011>.
- Anholt, S. (2006). Public diplomacy and place branding: Where's the link? *Place Branding*, 2(4), 271–275, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.6000040>.
- Anholt, S. (2007). *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Anholt, S. (2008). Editorial: Place Branding: Is it marketing, or isn't it? *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 4(1), 1-6, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.6000088>.
- Anholt, S. (2010a). *Places. Identity, Image and Reputation*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Anholt, S. (2010b). Editorial: Definitions of place branding - Working towards a resolution. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 6(1), 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2010.3>.
- Arthur Rooney, J. (1995). Branding: a trend for today and tomorrow. *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, 4(4), 48-55, <https://doi.org/10.1108/10610429510097690>.
- Arvidsson, A. (2006). *Brands - Meaning and value in media culture*. Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- Briciu, V.-A., & Briciu, A. (2016). A Brief History of Brands and the Evolution of Place Branding. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brasov. Series VII*, 9(58), 137-142. Retrieved from http://webbut.unitbv.ro/bulletin/Series%20VII/BULETIN%20I/22_Briciu.pdf.
- Dinnie, K. (Ed.). (2008). *Nation Branding. Concepts, Issues, Practice*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Fan, Y. (2006). Branding the nation: What is being branded? *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 12(1), 5-14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356766706056633>.
- Florek, M. (2011). Online City Branding. In K. Dinnie (Ed.), *City Branding. Theory and Cases* (pp. 82-90). Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Florek, M., Insch, A., & Gnoth, J. (2006). City Council websites as a means of place brand identity communication. *Place Branding*, 2(4), 276-296, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.6000036>.
- Govers, R., & Go, F. (2009). *Place Branding. Glocal, Virtual and Physical Identities, Constructed, Imagined and Experienced*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grant, J. (2006). *The Brand Innovation Manifesto. How to Build Brands, Redefine Markets and Defy Conventions*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Gudjonsson, H. (2005). Nation branding. *Place Branding*, 1(3), 283-298, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990029>.
- Hanna, S., & Rowley, J. (2008). An analysis of terminology use in place branding. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 4(1), 61-75, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.6000084>.
- Heding, T., Knudtzen, C. F., & Bjerre, M. (2009). *Brand Management: Research, theory and practice*. Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- Holt, D. B. (2002) Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29, 70-90,

- <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/339922>.
- Holt, D. B. (2004). *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*. Boston: Harvard Business Press.
- Holt, D. B. (2006). Jack Daniel's America: Iconic brands as ideological parasites and proselytizers. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 6(3), 355-377, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540506068683>.
- Kay, M.J. (2006). Strong brands and corporate brands. *European Journal of Marketing*, 40(7-8), 742-760, <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560610669973>.
- Kerr, G. (2006). From destination brand to location brand. *Brand Management*, 13(4-5), 276-283, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2540271>.
- Klein, N. (2000). *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs*. London: Flamingo.
- Kotler, Ph. (1997). *Marketing Management: Analysis, Planning, Implementation, and Control*, 9th ed. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Kotler, Ph., & Gertner, D. (2002). Country as brand, product, and beyond: A place marketing and brand management perspective. *Brand Management*, 9(4-5), 249-261, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2540076>.
- O'Shaughnessy, J., & O'Shaughnessy, N. J. (2000). Treating the Nation as a Brand: Some Neglected Issues. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 20(1), 56-64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146700201006>.
- Papadopoulos, N. (2004). Place branding: Evolution, meaning and implications. *Place Branding*, 1(1), 36-49, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990003>.
- Pitt, L. F., Opoku, R., Hultman, M., Abratt, R., & Spyropoulou, S. (2007). What I say about myself: Communication of brand personality by African countries. *Tourism Management*, 28(3), 835-844, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2006.06.003>.
- Pryor, S., & Grossbart, S. (2007). Creating meaning on main street: Toward a model of place branding. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 3(4), 291-304, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.6000080>.
- Roll, M. (2006). *Asian Brand Strategy: How Asia Builds Strong Brands*. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schroeder, J. E. (2009). The cultural codes of branding. *Marketing Theory*, 9(1), 123-126, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593108100067>.
- Simeon, R. (2001). Evaluating the branding potential of Web sites across borders. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 19(6), 418-424, <https://doi.org/10.1108/02634500110405432>.
- Skinner, H., & Kubacki, K. (2007). Unravelling the complex relationship between nationhood, national and cultural identity, and place branding. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 3(4), 305-316, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.6000072>.
- Stern, B.B. (2006). What Does Brand Mean? Historical-Analysis Method and Construct Definition. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 34, 216-223, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092070305284991>.
- Urde, M. (1994). Brand orientation – a strategy for survival. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 11(3), 18-32, <http://lup.lub.lu.se/record/1778970>.