MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES IN APPROACHING BRANDS AND EXPRESSING PLACE IDENTITY

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Abstract: This article aims to present, in a synthetic and theoretical manner, the perspectives associated with the theory of branding, such as economics, psychology, public relations, sociology, and the ways in which brands become icons through creative interaction with their environment and the applicability of the model in the sphere of place branding. Within the sociological approach, there is a certain paradigmatic position, as part of the interdisciplinary social theory of neo-Marxism, a school of thought that expresses a moderate position, with socio-economic influences, between the cultural approach and the theory of iconic brands, and the postmodern anti-branding movement, both positioned in a constructivist-interpretivist paradigmatic scheme, the latter being analysed in the second part of the article.

Key words: brand theory, neo-Marxism, identity, iconic brands, place identity.

1. Introduction

The interest in brands and the research around them arose from the intermingling of the management, marketing and strategy spheres (Briciu and Briciu, 2013; Briciu, 2013), which are generally aiming to propose pragmatic models regarding the "effects" produced by brands, through quantitative analyses (e.g., Keller and Lehmann, 2006). More recent studies following the constructivist paradigm, which reflect the "nature" of the brand, "as a living entity (with a personality with which we can form a relationship and that can change and evolve over time)" (Hanby, 1999, p. 12), indicate a reconsideration of the general functioning mechanism of brands and the focus shift from products and their producers to the response and services provided to the consumer, in understanding the process of building brand value (e.g., Muñiz, Jr. and O' Guinn, 2001). Within this community-based approach, consumers, employees and organizations are seen as making, building and performing their own identities and concepts, testing new roles and creating their own identities within and through brand culture. We believe that this approach can capture brand characteristics in more detail, including in the online environment, as there are "three main characteristics of

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cyberspace: its spatial expansion, its social component and the fact that it can only be accessed through a physical interface" (Briciu et al., 2019, p. 150). Thus, this community-based approach is the first model that explains the dynamics of consumer subcultures, a first approach focused on the context of communities, where the brand is the centre of social interactions. But what is frequently missing from these observations and analyses is the focus on the cultural processes that affect or influence contemporary brands, including historical context, ethical concerns and cultural conventions. In other words, "neither managers nor consumers completely control branding processes - cultural codes constrain how brands create value" (Schroeder, 2009, p. 123). This observation outlines the model of the cultural approach presented here, as opposed to what Holt (2004, p. 14) synthesized, in a personal vision, the entire theoretical and applicative experience of branding, establishing a classification based on the variants considered when building the identity value of brands; these theories of branding are: *Mind-Share Branding*, *Emotional Branding*, *Viral Branding* (Briciu and Briciu, 2016; Briciu and Briciu, 2020).

Using a critique of former models, Holt (2006b) states that existing branding theories are overly ambitious, "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" (Holt, 2006b, p. 356). For many brands, the symbols and meanings attached to them are not a priority or they are of less importance, so the use of other disciplines is necessary in order to understand the economic and social effects.

2. Economics and Brands - Signals of Reputation

For economists, brands are simply a form of information, focusing on marketing strategies, and not on the point of view of brand management paradigm (Briciu and Briciu, 2019, pp. 389-390). These are economic signals circulating in the economy, which allow companies to establish credible information about their offers. Brands guarantee that the products have a certain quality and reliability and that their manufacturer is present in case something might not function properly in the market. 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" (Holt, 2006b, p. 356). Following the relationship between brand determinants, the effects that brands have on consumers and their economic value, Kotler and Gertner (2002) propose the following explanation: "Brands differentiate products and represent a promise of value. Brands incite beliefs, evoke emotions and prompt behaviours. Marketers often extend successful brand names to new product launches, lending existing associations to them. As a result, they speed up consumers' information processing and learning. Brands have social and emotional value to users. They have personality and speak for the user. They enhance the perceived utility and desirability of a product.

Brands have the ability to add to or subtract from the perceived value of a product. On one hand, consumers expect to pay lower prices for unbranded products or for those with low brand equities. On the other hand, they pay premiums for their treasured or socially valued brands. Brands have equity for both customers and investors. Brand equity translates into customer preference, loyalty and financial gains. Brands are

appraised and traded in the marketplace. Brand equity has been pointed out to include many dimensions, such as performance, social image, value, trustworthiness and identification" (Kotler and Gertner, 2002, pp. 249-250).

3. Psychology and Brands - Heuristic Systems

In consumer psychology, which is a dominant paradigm in the marketing process, "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 them difficult to assess – soaps, toothpaste, over-the-counter medicine. Companies like Procter & Gamble and Unilever were built on this type of branding" (Holt, 2006b, p. 357).

From the perspective of behavioural psychology and the learning process, the importance given to image could be discussed, "in a service industry setting in the 1960s, in the context of retail store image" (Kunkel and Berry, 1968 apud Govers and Go, 2009, p. 32). In the following years, however, psychologists reached the conclusion that image represents "more than learned expected reinforcements (stimuli) associated with prior experience. Imagery was described as a distinct way of processing and storing multisensory information in working memory. In essence, it is now believed that 'imagery processing' depends on more holistic, or Gestalt, methods of representing information" (Govers and Go, 2009, p. 33). The study conducted by Rodriguez et al. (2013) is representative in this discussion, as he sought to determine the influence of Gestalt principles expressed in destination logos, defined as dimensions of their image and country brand (p. 93), in relation to the public's intention to visit a country and its degree of recognition, based on its tourism icon. Thus, "a total of 154 logos were collected from the tourism websites of 116 countries […] Two graduate students in journalism and mass communication who have had intensive undergraduate and graduate courses in visual communication rated the extent to which six gestalt principles—similarity, proximity, continuity, figure-ground, closure, assimilation – were present in each logo" (Rodriguez et al., 2013, p. 99). The results show that the logos that are richer in Gestalt attributes (e.g., Peru, New Zealand, Japan, Tanzania) can influence the extent to which people recognize country logos and the consumers' intention to visit those places (Rodriguez et al., 2013, pp. 99- 100). Image processing is often described as a mental visualization, although sight is not the only sense that helps create it. "Imagery can include any or all of the senses – sight, sound, smell, taste and touch (though the latter three are considered inferior by far" (Atkinson et al., 1987 apud Govers and Go, 2009, p. 33). Image processing is in contrast with "discursive processing", which is characterized by pieces of information or individual attributes, rather than general impressions. This holistic view is essential, however, in the process of branding a place, "as an attempt is made to build positive place images by (re)constructing and projecting identities, building expectations around worthwhile place experiences" (Govers and Go, 2009, p. 33).

4. Public Relations and Brands - Managing Perceptions

Dolea and Țăruș acknowledge the prominent role played by international public relations in building place brands, "representing the systematic and planned effort of a

company, institution or government to establish mutually beneficial relations with the audiences of other nations" (2009, p. 18). PR offers that mobility and life to the attributes and promise of a brand, by creating believable situations and providing support for the honesty of the imagery behind a branding campaign. These actions are all the more important as they are perceived by the ever-changing, evolving media and business environments. Developing a successful PR strategy involves four elements: (1) Identifying different brand attributes and characteristics, e.g., its values and behaviours that support them, positioning and identity. Once they have been identified, an assessment related to their organizational implications is necessary. Afterwards, a public relations platform can be built based on brand attributes, features and promise; (2) The perceptions of all external stakeholders must be evaluated. This assessment should go beyond product perceptions and include vectors of reputation: leadership, innovation, financial value, management quality and corporate citizenship; (3) The organizational communication function should use brand attributes and characteristics internally to inform employees about the company's position on various topics, in order to support change initiatives, to emphasize credibility in crisis situations and to guide behaviour; (4) An annual, measurable PR plan should be created, anchored in the brand promise, with the goal of modelling audiences' perceptions of management, customer relationships, market, innovation and corporate responsibility (Bowker, 2003, pp. 154-155).

But perhaps the most important conclusion is the one of authors Curtin and Gaither, according to which "the cultivation of the image does not exclude the techniques of general public relations that a certain government can use to relate with its own citizens, including those who, in this globalized world, live and work in other countries" (2008, p. 42). In fact, strong arguments can be made in favour of the claim that "public relations strategies for internal and external audiences are the ingredients of a recipe for creating the national image. A positive image is considered an economic gain, as it generates tourism, creates cordial relations with other governments and increases that country's chances of benefiting from aid" (Dolea and Ţăruş, 2009, pp 19-20). Place branding can be used as an example on public-private partnership platform for tourism development and citizens' engagement (Baptista et al., 2019; Nechita, 2019).

5. Sociology and Brands - Mechanisms of Trust

If we consider that for certain purchases, customers or consumers cannot specify exactly what they want to buy in advance (e.g., hiring doctors, lawyers, auto repair shops, advertisers or consultants), then in such cases "the brand serves as a mechanism to guarantee that the supplier 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" (Holt, 2006b, p. 356). Holt is the only theoretician who proposes a new field of analysis specific to brands, advocating for a sociology of branding, in order to be able to describe and explain contemporary politics and society, a neo-Marxist theory, as a moderate response to the paradigm of postmodern brand management (defined by the theory of iconic brands and cultural branding, on the one hand and the anti-capitalist, anti-corporatist and anti-branding movement, on the other). He argues: "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" (Holt, 2006a, p. 300). Holt (2006a) considers, as the basis of the theory he proposes, that branding represents "a distinctive mode of capital accumulation. [...] it generates profits by creating and then exploiting various kinds 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" (Holt, 2006a, p. 300). This aspect denotes a form of ideological influence in a Marxist sense, similarly to how economic transactions developed in the US after the Second World War, through international expansion, introducing the term "coca-colonization", reminding us under this acceptance - of false consciousness or understanding - of the famous words of Marx: "they do not know this, but they are doing it" (Marx and Engels, 1966, p. 88), expressing a conditioning, a mechanical reproduction of the capitalist system. This term explains the model by which "companies earn higher profits when their brands are woven into institutions (e.g. Coke in the family and schools in the 1950s), everyday practices (e.g. brushing one's teeth with Colgate), and cultural discourses (e.g. Nike as a global symbol of achievement in a hypercompetitive 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" (Holt, 2006a, p. 300). 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" (Holt, 2006a, pp. 300-301). As Dussart (2001) and Mitchell (2000) have shown, "the balance of power is beginning to swing away from distributors and manufacturers to customers" (apud De Chernatony and McDonald, 2003, p. 305), and the assets and capital of a brand are produced "by consumers themselves, beyond the direct control of the salaried organization" (Bengtson and Östberg, 2004 apud Arvidsson, 2005, p. 239). This point of the sociological approach expresses a certain paradigmatic position, as part of the interdisciplinary social theory of neo-Marxism, a school of thought that expresses a moderate position, with socio-economic influences, placed between the cultural approach and the iconic brand theory, and the postmodern anti-branding movement, both positioned in a constructivist - interpretivist paradigmatic scheme.

6. Neo-Marxism and Brands - Consumer Domination

According to this approach, brands act as parasites that associate with other cultural forms that have more social power, and then use their market power, through proselytizing actions, to impose their own ideology of consumerism and capitalism. As a result of this process, "through ubiquity and repetition, brands transform emerging culture into dominant norms" (Holt, 2006a, p. 302). This is the source of the branding paradigm of "cultural engineering", as Holt calls it (2002, p. 70), having as a point of reference the consumer culture, which gives cultural authority to market norms and to marketing. This concept refers to the dominant type of consumption that is structured

by the collective actions of brand owners, organizations, through their marketing activities. In order to function properly, "capitalism requires a symbiotic relationship between market prerogatives and the cultural frameworks that orient how people understand and interact with the market's offerings" (Holt, 2002, p. 71).

The critical theories of the Frankfurt School propose new perspectives on the concept of consumer culture (as a derivative of the dominant ideology, called "capitalism") through the reinterpretations and extensions brought to the ideas of social philosopher Marx (Garlitz, 2005, p. 2). As we can remember, "branding started with consumer products. The basic idea was to produce consistent quality and standard prices for a range of ordinary household goods" (Olins, 2006, p. 67), while today brands shape consumer desires and actions (Holt, 2002, p. 71), creating new identities. Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944] 1996) argued that "new consumer identities were highly attenuated, produced primarily through choosing from a range of slightly differentiated goods. Market segmentation is inherently a technology of domination. Segmentation is about classifying, organizing, and labelling consumers rather than providing product differences that are substantial. Product differences are quantitative, mechanical" (Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 1996 apud Holt, 2002, p. 71). The disciplinary paradigm of marketing (Holt uses the term "social engineering") (observes Arvidsson, 2005, p. 243) - market research, segmentation and mass advertising – leads to the "channelling of culture that erases idiosyncrasies" (Holt, 2002, p. 71).

In a world of hyper-capitalist globalization and mass consumption, the critical ideas of "Neo-Marxian cultural criticism have become increasingly relevant and practical to a wide range of consumers" (Garlitz, 2005, p. 17). Thus, the idea that brands are built based on the immaterial workforce of consumers is supported: their ability to create ethical surplus (e.g., social connection, shared experience, shared identity) through productive communication. This work is generally "free in the sense that it is both un-paid and more or less autonomous. Contemporary brand management consists in a series of techniques by means of which such free labour is managed so that it comes to produce desirable and valuable outcomes" (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 235). These records are dominated by a cultural discourse. Marketing specialists, the representatives of social "marketing" and "economy" through contemporary brand management, are portrayed as cultural engineers, organizing people's thoughts and feelings, through branded commercial products. "Omnipotent corporations use sophisticated marketing techniques to seduce consumers to participate in a system of commodified meanings embedded in brands" (Holt, 2002, p. 71). Similarly, consumer culture is organized around the principle of submission, of obedience to the cultural authority of marketing specialists, so that "people who have internalized the consumer culture implicitly grant firms the authority to organize their tastes" (Holt, 2002, p. 71). Horkheimer's and Adorno's ([1944] 1996) views of how they define "culture industries" is *locus classicus* for these ideas. They assert that "the system of mass cultural production, a set of techniques for rationalizing culture as commodity, is the ideological glue that maintains broad consensual participation in advanced capitalist society" (apud Holt, 2002, p. 71).

7. Conclusions

Arvidsson (2005) describes brands as mechanisms that allow the direct valorisation

(e.g., through contribution to the price) of the ability of individuals to build trust, an affective state and meanings shared within the consumer community, thus evoking Tarde's (1902) perspective, according to which "the public construction of 'truth', 'beauty' and 'utility' are important factors that contribute to establishing the economic value of goods and services" (Tarde, 1902 apud Arvidsson, 2005, p. 236). Today, when referring to brands, we can say that the connection between public communication and economic value has gained unprecedented importance, because for organizations, "the most valuable asset is the public standing of their brands; the place that these have acquired in the life-world of consumers" (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 236). In the Marxist sense, brands are immaterial capital, because their value is the monetary value of what they can mean to consumers. They are, after all, "monetizable symbolic values" (Gorz, 2003 apud Arvidsson, 2005, p. 239). The limits of the approach are defined by the determinist point of views that consider the economic effects of brands and not the gradual change of them, from the economic model of consumer branding initially defined by the simple provision of information for utilitarian purposes, the origin and quality of products and services, expressing their transactional side, to the organizational communication model, defined by an identity-type approach, as an expression through which branding techniques have penetrated and redefined the organizational environment, crystallizing a tradition of socio-economic constructivism.

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