

Consumer–brand assemblages in advertising: an analysis of skin, identity, and tattoos in ads

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This paper discusses how the use of tattoos in advertising renders diverse brand-consumer assemblages visible. In considering advertising practitioners as professionals of entanglement, the paper emphasizes the embeddedness of practitioners' use of tattoo symbolism in institutionalized marketing systems and in the cultural history of tattooing. In accordance with the recent emphasis on the importance of material devices for understanding contemporary sociality, this paper presents a semiotic analysis of a convenience sample of advertisements depicting tattoos. Tattoos are productive for the study of brand-consumer assemblages because they are situated on the human skin, which is a mediator between the individual and the socio-material world. Furthermore, tattoos reproduce discourses of both mainstream fashion and deviant subcultural identification, which imbue tattoo symbolism with communicative potency. This analysis demonstrates how the emergence of brand tattoos in advertising challenges the dominant consumer centrism in consumer research and suggests a networked, emerging understanding of the subject in which agency is distributed in socio-technical assemblages.

Keywords: consumer-brand assemblage; advertising practices; tattoos; consumer subjectivity; branding; brand culture; entanglement; brand extended

Brands have taken center stage in contemporary consumer culture, furnishing consumers with cultural materials with which they can construct experiences, social relations, and identities (Arvidsson 2006). Although the concept of brands has traditionally been closely related to products (Strasser 1989), brands clearly are emerging as vehicles of meaning that not only offer consumers a lens through which to experience the world (Holt 2002) but also provide firms with a central focus for organizing business (Komburger 2010).

In this context, the marketer's task of building strong brands develops foremost into an exercise of meaning management (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003). Marketers and advertisers become professionals of entanglement in an ongoing attempt to assign products a set of cultural meanings that position these products as if they were already part of consumers' lifeworlds. This perspective, prevalent in interpretive consumer research, often assumes a certain relationship between brands and consumers, in which brands foster identity formation and social orientation by establishing emotional ties between the consumer and the brand (Fournier 1998). Scholars have recently criticized this understanding of the consumer-brand relationship as being

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influence through mimetic behavior. Holt outlines a historical institutional analysis of branding practices that delineates three paradigmatic forms of branding, each carrying implicit assumptions about consumers' relationships to brands. These paradigmatic forms also appear in the literature on advertising.

Modern branding, according to Holt, is characterized by the axiom of cultural engineering, which denotes the ability of advertisers and brand managers to associate specific cultural meanings and moral ideals with brands. In such a perspective, consumer desire and taste is channeled without difficulty from marketers to consumers. Consumers appear passive and easily contained within well-defined social groups, where brands serve as markers of group identity and affiliation. In advertising research, this perspective materializes in Ewen's (1976) notion of advertising practitioners as "captains of consciousness," which portrays the consumer as the unknowing victim of corporate manipulation of the subconscious. Williamson (1978) argues that advertising operates in accordance with a semiotic system by which the meaning of the ad is given - independently from the reader. Through a dialectic movement, Holt argues for the development of a postmodern branding paradigm emerging from consumers' increasing awareness and criticism of the manipulative techniques of modern cultural engineering principles that contrast sharply with modern ideals of individualism and freedom of choice. The postmodern branding paradigm portrays an active, participative consumer engaged in the creation of brand meanings and celebrates the imagery of the emancipated sovereign consumer, who mobilizes brands as cultural resources and uses these as building blocks in the formation of personal biographies and identity narratives (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). In advertising research, this representation of consumer subjectivity was initially advanced by Scott (1994), who draws on reader-response theory for the analysis of consumers' active interpretation of market communication.

Along similar historical lines, Arvidsson (2004) argues that market research techniques have developed from being strategies of containing consumer identities within predefined categories to strategies that exploit consumer creativity in the process of value creation. That is, the subjectivity of the consumer converts from passive to active and from stable to dynamic. In an emerging post-postmodern branding paradigm, the urge for brand authenticity and relevance as an identity resource is challenged by the anti-branding movement, in which brands are no longer undisputedly accepted as a pool of cultural resources. Instead, brands are critically examined and embedded in an ethical agenda for organizational behavior that reaches beyond formal organizational boundaries and requires transparency and consistency in all organizational matters.

Within this post-postmodern branding paradigm, the relationship between brands and consumers does not depend on the cultural engineering of producers or the creative efforts of sovereign consumers but on brands that "act like a local merchant, as a stalwart citizen of the community" and demonstrate civic responsibilities (Holt 2002, 88). This view suggests a different role for the brand in society and implies agency. Such an outline of the institutional development of branding practices accentuates the dialectic relationship between the wider consumer culture and marketers' practices of entanglement. With respect to the use of tattoo imagery in advertising this dialectic relationship means that advertising practitioners can employ tattoos in their cultural calculations, because tattoos signify a set of consumption and identity-creating practices in the economy of qualities. Hence, advertising agencies use tattoos and tattoo practices in marketing communication in concordance with the axiomatic conventions of branding. In turn, advertising provides the economy of qualities with institutionally isomorphic

depictions of brand-consumer relationships. From this perspective, the expressions of brand images in advertisements are not creative revelations but are pieces of text or visual representations rooted in a specific cultural context. Advertising therefore constitutes a “cultural system” (Sherry 1987; McQuarrie et al. 2005), within which a variety of brand-consumer relationships are assembled within different brand cultures.

Clearly, the assemblage of consumer-brand relationships in marketing communication is neither trivial nor neutral. Through the analysis of print advertisements and TV commercials deploying tattoo imageries, we identify three different consumer-brand relations that reproduce more widely shared depictions of consumer-brand relationships within the marketing literature and amplify more recent understandings of these relationships.

The Body **Inc.**

The use of the body, in general, and tattoos, in particular, in marketing communication constitutes a particularly fertile area for the exploration of institutionalized consumer-brand assemblages in branding and advertising. Consumer researchers generally agree that the body has increasingly become a malleable object that consumers use in constructing identity (Schouten 1991; Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Askegaard, Gertsen, and Langer 2002). The malleable body becomes part of the constant creation and re-creation of coherent autobiographical narratives of the self (Giddens 1991). In such a context, the body becomes a feasible site for consumption that can be changed and improved to meet or oppose socially desirable ideals. Contemporary consumers employ a variety of techniques, products, and services, such as body building, tanning, anti-wrinkle creams, steroids, dieting, fat farms, plastic surgery, and tattoos, to either change or keep the body intact in order to be able to present a body that corresponds to perceived socially desirable ideals (Jensen 1999). Changing the shape and appearance of one’s body to conform to cultural standards of beauty has a long history (Schouten 1991). Practices such as tattooing have been performed for at least 5000 years, and foot-binding of Chinese women - creating the so-called lotus foot - can be traced back to the Sung dynasty (AD 960-1280).

In Western societies, however, the role of the body has changed (Turner 1996). The emergence of a consumer culture has produced a shift, by which “the labouring body has become a desiring body” (Turner 1996, 2). The body’s job in society has moved from that of being a resource for capitalist production and for military power, where bodily desires had to be kept under control, to that of being a consuming body in consumer cultural capitalism. Another shift in the cultural meaning of the body is the collapse of Cartesian mind-body dualism (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). This breakdown has meant that in late-modern consumer culture, the body has become a site for self-reflexive identity articulation, a malleable object which not only can but should be worked on (Shilling 2003).

These shifts in the meaning of the body signify that body modifications formerly associated with marginal or sub-cultural milieus have become part of the general consumer culture and part of the fashion system that draws on the cultural resources available for meaning transfer purposes (McCracken 1986). Previous research on tattooing has debated whether contemporary tattoos are simply body adornment or something more significant. Turner (2000, 40) contends that body marks such as tattoos are narcissistic and thus playful signs of the self and posits that “tattoos have become a regular aspect of consumer culture, where they add cultural capital to the body’s surface.”

Consequently, in a society of individualization, the modern tattoo becomes simply another sign to be read within consumer culture. Thus, Turner's position is that tattooing today, in postmodern neo-tribalism, is characterized by voluntary membership, so that marking of the body is optional. Nevertheless, the socio-historically established cultural meaning of tattoos associated with deviance and subcultural formations remains, and manifests the divergence of tattooing from other bodily self-care practices: "In this way, tattoos reiterate within cultural and strategic arenas as emblems of consumer identity, agency, and, often, deviancy, informed by cultural histories of skin, sexuality, and resistance" (Patterson and Schroeder 2010, 263)

To be recognized as meaningful, a brand has to draw on existing cultural resources and structures of cognition. But following the market logic, an advertisement must also differentiate itself. Working along the continuum of recognition and differentiation, advertising agencies draw on cultural resources. In this space between recognition and uniqueness, the tattoo appears to be a meaningful symbol that, over time, has gained broad acceptance as a way of expressing mainstream identity, and has become resource for mass cultural expression. Simultaneously, the tattoo has kept its momentum of transgression because of its permanence and irreversibility, which separate it from other modes of identity expression and communicative signs and symbols (Sanders 1989). Although tattoos have increased in popularity, the practice of changing the body permanently in this way is still associated with uniqueness, for consumers as well as for the advertising industry that seeks to associate these meanings with a certain brand image.

Some scholars hold that not only the socio-historic meanings of tattooing lend it communicative potency and analytical strength (Patterson and Schroeder 2010). These characteristics also arise from the mediating nature of human skin between individual agency and social structure and the ability to debate the naturalized understanding of the sealed individual self. Discussion of the borders between individuality and sociality is relevant to the variety of consumer-brand assemblages produced in advertising through tattoo imagery.

Method

The study of consumer culture includes the study of the stuff that surrounds us and makes up the material world in which we live. Miller (2010, 5) has recently argued for a more serious treatment of "stuff" as the pathway to a more insightful understanding of subject-object relations. As much as humans make stuff, stuff makes us; not necessarily in the sense that stuff represents who we are, but that it offers a way of understanding the complex relationships between people and things. Actor-network theory takes a similar stance in that it assigns agency not only to human actors but also to things, technologies, and devices (Latour 2005).

We take this dialectic between subject and object as a starting point for the study of how marketing communication materializes consumer-brand relationships through various strategies of representation. To demonstrate how marketers are engaged in the assemblage of specific consumer-brand relationships, we examine a convenience sample of print advertisements and TV commercials originating from numerous countries. To collect the empirical material, we employed both online and offline searches. Ads were collected from Adforum (www.adforum.com) and the gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender ad critic organization, The Commercial Closet (www.commercialcloset.org). Further data were gathered from two websites

specializing in tattooing (www.tattoo-passion.com and www.tattoo-net.de). We also searched for print ads in five volumes (2000-2005) of the US editions of the men's magazine *GQ* and the women's magazine *Cosmopolitan*. These data-collection efforts generated a convenience sample of over 150 print ads and broadcast commercials.

The data were analyzed using critical visual analysis (Schroeder 2006) and include visual genealogical perspectives emerging from the historic development of tattoo culture to show how advertising draws on historically embedded visual histories (Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Visual research approaches consider ads to be both aesthetic objects and socio-cultural artifacts - that is, they are symbolic forms of culture and they are also situated on wider systems of representation (Schroeder and Zwick 2004; McQuarrie et al. 2005). Ads hence constitute "ethnographic material," the analysis and interpretation of which can provide insights into cultural categories and their dynamics just as other ethnographic materials do, such as documents, consumer interviews, literature, and the like. As part of our investigation, we use a semiotic analysis (Mick 1986) to interpret the relationships between the brand, the body, and the tattoo and hence the kinds of possible assemblages of consumers and brands at stake.

Representation of tattoos in ads

The following section offers a categorization of advertisements based on different genres of tattoo imageries. The categories reflect the preceding theoretical position and have emerged through an iterative process of theoretical reflection and empirical examination of the collected material. Our analysis begins with an interpretation of the types of cultural discourse of body modification the ad draws upon, which in turn assembles different kinds of consumer-brand relations. The use of Peirce's semiotic taxonomy - *symbol*, *index* and *icon* (Mick 1986) - enables us to distinguish between assemblages of consumer-brand-tattoo that represent institutionalized and emergent consumer-brand relations. A symbolic relationship between tattoo and brand emerges through conventional association, which generally implies reproduction of existing cultural meanings and categories. In other cases, the relationship between the brand and the tattoo is either one of resemblance or of shared attributes. Such an indexical relationship between tattoo and brand visually depicts an affinity between the characteristic of tattooing/tattoos and the brand. Finally, the iconographic relationship is characterized by physical resemblance between the tattoo and the brand - either the product itself or the brand logo.

From previous research on tattoo culture among mainstream and subcultural producers and consumers as well as readings of the cultural history of tattoo practices primarily in Western cultures, we identified three forms of tattoo-brand-consumer assemblage, each implying and reproducing a specific consumer-brand relation: the body as canvas, fashion expression, and the brand extended. While we explicate all three genres, we analyze the brand-extended category more extensively since it represents a different form of consumer-brand assemblages, and in the practices of entanglement it draws on the other two genres.

The body as canvas

The first category, the body as canvas, represents a genre of tattoo consumption that is closely related to the body modification subculture (Goulding and Follet 2002) and

socio-historically established cultural meanings associated with tattooing more widely. This category represent parts of tattoo culture that consider tattoos an essential part of the body and as collectible items (Vail 1999). The body as canvas draws on discourses rooted in “traditional” body modification subcultural expressions, including traditional tattoo imagery (such as Maori tribal tattoos), tattoo practices associated with biker and sailor subcultures, and the body modification subculture in general. The body modification discourse refers extensively to the irreversible and transgressive nature of tattooing and represents the body as a project of malleability in accordance with the institutional prescriptions in the diverse subcultural settings (Sanders 1989). Tattoos falling into the body as canvas category are generally constituted as being either marginal or in opposition to mainstream culture. In our sample of ads with tattoo imagery, we find examples of body as canvas advertisements that portray stereotypical images of tattoos, suggesting a relationship between tattoos, low cultural capital, and, for example, criminal activities.

The decisive commonality between this set of different tattoo imageries and related practices is the explicit association of the tattoos with distinctive and recognizable social groups. This association means that the body as canvas category is reproductive of a consumer imagery that presupposes consumer subjectivity as easily contained within confined limits of social groups, of which the tattoo serves as a recognizable marker. This presupposition in turn assumes the responsiveness of consumers to marketers’ manipulative meaning management. In this way, the tattoo indicates, along with other semiotic signifiers of the ad, the potential meanings ascribed to the consumers of the brand in question. The specific entanglement of imageries of tattoo practices with particular social groups expresses a cultural calculation that assumes the potential ad reader finds resonance with the cultural world depicted.

In Figure 1, which is a business-to-business ad for a telecom company, a lawyer and his client appear in front of a well-known Danish prison. The tattoo on the arm of the client reinforces (intentionally or not) the classic stereotypical relationship between social groups and tattoo culture. Again, the relationship between the tattoo and the brand is, at best, conventional. In the assemblage of the ad, the tattoo serves merely as a prop that draws on the socio-historically established meanings of tattoo culture.

In an ad for Adidas’s sponsorship of the New Zealand rugby team All Blacks, the use of a tattoo plays a fundamentally different role in relation to the brand. A picture of a traditional Maori face tattoo is printed in black and white with the logo of Adidas and All Blacks in the top left and right hand comers respectively (we have not been able to obtain copyright permission to reprint the ad but the image is used to sell All Blacks merchandise t-shirt, see <http://www.thewoolpress.com/shop/mates-rates.all-blacks/all-blacks-face-t-shirt/> for illustration). This ad represents the body as canvas category by entangling the cultural history of tattooing (a traditional Maori tattoo), the rugby team, and the brand to construct a culturally resonant representation. The ad seeks to establish a positive brand image through a symbolic constellation with Maori warriors and probably project a certain fearlessness rather than fashionableness.

Without determining in any concrete manner the potential readings by consumers or advertiser intentions of these examples, we suggest that advertising practitioners, through their conventional uses of tattoo symbolism, evoke a consumer-brand relationship that assumes resonance with consumers by way of a cultural calculation of knowledge of social identity stereotypes.

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- God dækning i hele Danmark - og i udlandet
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Læs hvordan advokatsfirmaet Nørster & Jacobsen har fået sikker mobil adgang til virksomhedens følsomme data på tdec mobil.dk/mobilvirksomhed. Få mere at vide om vores løsninger på 80 80 80 22 eller hos din kontaktperson hos TDC Mobil.

Venlig hilsen
Jesper Kjaer, CEO

TDC Mobil
kom nærmere

Figure 1. TDC Mobil print advertisement. (Published with permission from TDC.)

Fashion expression

Fashion expression reflects a genre that in many ways stands opposite to the body as canvas. This category represents the use of a single or a few tattoos as a fashionable way to adorn the body in accordance with contemporary mainstream fashion discourse (Kjeldgaard and Bengtsson 2004). Fashion expression as a category draws on a fashion discourse that increasingly embraces certain kinds of tattoos along with other body modifications, accentuating existing mainstream bodily ideals. A fashion tattoo can be distinguished by being an “innocent” expression that does not cause any major objections in mainstream culture. Fashion expression tattoos often play peripheral roles in ads and are often only one cultural element in specific entanglements to represent a certain contemporary style in the ads. This peripheral role means that the tattoo could be exchanged for another fashionable element holding similar cultural

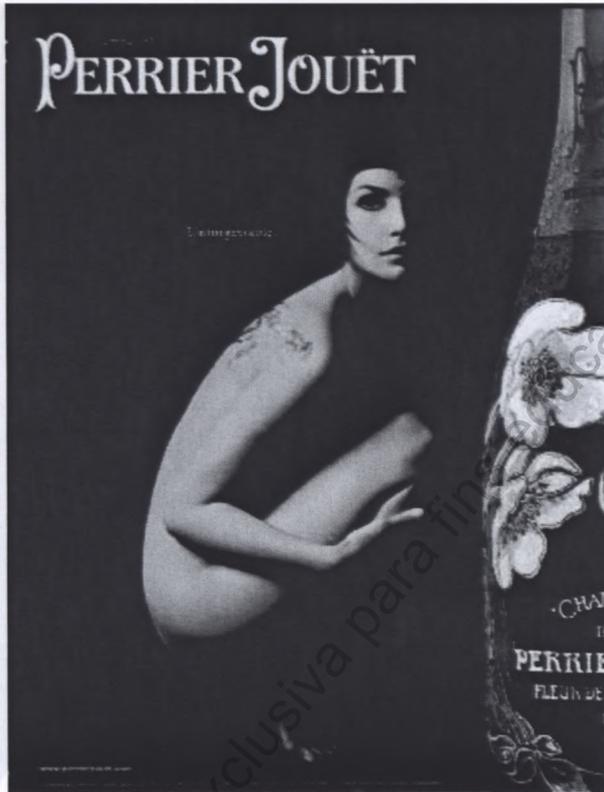


Figure 3. Ad for Perrier Jouët. (Published with permission from Champagnes GH Mumm & Perrier Jouët, Pernod Ricard. The advertisement has not been used by Perrier Jouët after 2005.)

as reflecting a perhaps small existing cultural practice, nor as an encouragement for consumers to emulate this kind of consumption practice. Also, we do not interpret the ads as expressions of consumer identity projects realized through intimate brand relations, as the prevailing lens of a consumer culture theory perspective would (cf. Fournier 1998). Instead, we argue that by using tattoos, the materialization of marketing practices assembles yet another imagery of brand-consumer relationships that reaches beyond the consumer subjectivity of a creative and emancipated individual. By inscribing commercial symbolism onto the body, marketing practitioners render the double-sidedness of the human skin as both the boundary of the individual body and interface with social structure visible (Patterson and Schroeder 2010).

Discussion

In the brand-extended category, we show how two wider contemporary cultural discourses inflect the advertisements analyzed, namely the body modification discourse and the fashion discourse. Both discourses treat the body as malleable. One is rooted in marginal, subcultural traditions of Western societies that are used by “modern primitives” (Velliquette and Murray 1999) to explore the possibilities of bodily articulation. The other is rooted in the modern fashion system’s logic of innovation and planned obsolescence. The discourses and their manifestation in the ad categories explored

above stand in a dialectical relationship, since the fashion discourse will draw on the body modification discourse for inspiration and the body modification culture will change its practices to maintain its oppositional relationship to mainstream culture.

Prior consumer research has suggested that tattooing has become part of mainstream culture (Goulding et al. 2004). Our sample of marketing communication featuring tattoo imagery in mainstream media vehicles provides further support for this idea. However, the cultural meaning associated with tattooing suggests that this type of body art is far from acquiring equal status with other mainstream body adornment practices. We find examples of advertisements that play on classification of certain social groups, advertisements that depict the practice of tattooing as something undesirable, and advertisements in which tattooing is used to give persons depicted in the ads a rebellious, transgressive persona.

The practice of tattooing is, then, situated in the wider cultural history of this practice rather than having gained a “value-neutral” status as free-floating commodity sign. In this sense, the ads reproduce existing, historically constituted meanings of the tattoos and the bodies they adorn. We have argued that the symbolic relationship between the tattoo and the brand to which it is supposed to lend meaning implies a reproductive use of conventional cultural meanings surrounding the body and tattoo practices. As we have demonstrated, this use applies to tattoo imagery within both the fashion and the body as canvas categories.

However, these two categories evoke different consumer subjectivities and assemble different relationships between the consumer and the brand. The body as canvas category is steeped in the production of stereotypical consumer classifications and combines the tattoo with the brand to form a marker for group identification. Thereby this category evokes an image of the consumer as being easily contained within predefined segments and a passive recipient of marketing practitioners’ production of ready-to-wear cultural resources. In opposition, the fashion category assembles an emancipated, mobile, and creative consumer whose relationship to brands does not depend on the authoritative narration of marketing practitioners. Instead, the consumer-brand relationship assumed by the fashion category resembles Holt’s descriptions of the post-modern branding paradigm. Given that tattooing has become a widespread practice, one might conclude that marketing communication is no more than a mirror of society, and as such we can expect tattoos to appear in the communication of brands. While marketing communication reinforces myths in that it stereotypes which consumer types engage in tattooing, it also circulates the practice more widely in consumer culture. Hence, the practice itself becomes demystified by its increasing presence in mass media and by being drawn into the mass market commercial sphere. As we saw in a range of ads, tattoos are used in a distinctly positive manner (because of the transgressive qualities discussed above) and tattooing specifically and body modification more generally are inserted into the range of signs that potentially are available for style and identity construction.

Komberger (2010) expresses the crucial role of brands in the following terms: “They (brands) are so mashed up with our social world that they have become a powerful life-shaping force” (xii). Instead of understanding brand tattoos as the extension of individual identities through brands, we propose a networked understanding of consumer-brand relationships in which brands extend onto the bodies of consumers and acquire agency. Such an understanding of brands as a cultural form entangled in socio-technical agencements disputes the consumer-centric nature of consumer

research by questioning the imagery of the consumer as a sealed individual vis-à-vis the social world.

Conclusion

Our discussion of the production of consumer-brand assemblages through the use of tattoos in marketing communication seeks to contribute to an emerging body of literature concerning the multitude of brand cultures (Schroeder 2006). In this area, others have stressed the importance of understanding brand cultures as historically and contextually rooted and argued for a more reflexive understanding of branding and brands (Cayla and Amould 2008; Schau, Muniz, and Amould 2009). In addition to these important contributions to the understanding of brands as central cultural forms in contemporary society, we wish to allude to the variety of consumer-brand relationships circulating among both academic expert systems, marketing practice systems, and wider communications theories (Ringberg and Reihlen 2008).

The assemblages of consumer-brand relations identified here through the semiotic analysis of tattoos in advertising are embedded in Western advanced capitalist contexts dominated by assumed individualized subjectivities and as such exemplifies how advertising practitioners, as central cultural producers, assemble possible consumer-brand relations through practices of entanglement and cultural calculation. We argue that a more reflexive concern for the mobilization of various consumer-brand relations inform the understanding of how brands operate and may potentially serve to circumvent the consumer-centric understanding of contemporary consumer research and move it toward an understanding of identities as multiple, networked, and emerging (Epp and Price 2010). The assemblage of subjects and objects into socio-technical agencements offers a fruitful course for analyzing the contemporary brand culture. The study presented in this article does so in a relatively narrow empirical scope focussing on commercial representations. However, an assemblage perspective could fruitfully be applied in more complex social contexts, such as identity performance in a Goth context (Goulding and Saren 2009), to analyze the emergence of consumer-object relations beyond a mere contextual or consumer-centric analysis. Furthermore, applying a networked perspective on brand cultures would facilitate analyses that include multiple actors, practices, cultural discourses, material objects, and cultural representations. This would move the study of brand culture beyond but including consumer life worlds, producerly practices or historical accounts. Future research is needed that continues recent attempts (Holt and Cameron 2010) at an integrated, networked perspective on brand culture.

Thus, to unfold the nature of the brand as a cultural form, future research could focus on other brand culture contexts undergoing a transformation toward marketization. In such contexts, the processes of entanglement in the branding process may stand out more clearly and potentially provide insights into other cultural calculations of the relationships between consumers and brands.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Fleura Bardhi, Northeastern University and Matthias Bode, University of Southern Denmark for comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this article. We would also like to thank Emma Gregg, Freelance Picture Editor, UK for her research on copyright permissions for the visuals in this article. Finally, thanks

to TDC, R3 Comunicazione, VF Corporation and Pernod-Ricard for granting permission to publish their advertisements.

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