



S. Social Impact

From brand management to brand governmentality

ESCP Impact Paper No 2021-43-EN

Benoît Heilbrunn
ESCP Business School

[From brand management to brand governmentality

Benoît Heilbrunn
ESCP Business School

Abstract

Brands are usually analyzed either from an agency perspective or from a media perspective through which they are considered to be cultural catalysts and forms of relationships to be built between stakeholders. The rising importance of the idea of brand purpose confronts us with a new paradigm which goes largely beyond a managerial paradigm. What we propose in this paper is to look at brands from the perspective of governmentality as it was defined by Michel Foucault, that is an activity meant to shape, guide or affect the conducts of people's lives. It appears to be an interesting paradigm to understand how brands can promote virtuous behaviours enabling a change in the lives of individuals and societies.

Keywords: brands, branding, governmentality, cultural engineering

From brand management to brand governmentality

A brand is an interface between an organization and its various publics. This is the reason why a brand is a relationship based on trust. Nonetheless, there are different ways to look at a brand : from the organizational point of view, from the consumers' point of view and from a more societal point of view. Each corporation has its own way of considering its brand, even though some recurring metaphors can be outlined. Douglas Holt (2004) has demonstrated that there are at least four ways to metaphorize the brand whether one considers the brand as a mental imprint based on the idea of brand DNA which implies a static and ontological vision of the brand or whether one considers the brand as a living partner in the life of consumers, which implies a more dynamic vision of the brand, as if the brand were alive. It seems clear that the dominant metaphor of branding today is based on the idea of cultural engineering. It means that the role of brands is to produce iconic products, words and images that become cultural references. Cultural engineering means that the role of brands is to manipulate how consumers think, talk, imagine and act. In other words, brands can structure social relationships by promoting strong cultural ideologies and linking these ideologies to the products, services and experiences they sell. This explains why the discourse of brands has become more ideological and why some brands do not hesitate to give out strong political and social statements. Brands have become major actors of social and cultural debates and gone is the time when brands were just considered as logos endorsing products to reassure consumers and to sell them at a higher price. Brands have always been story producers, because the narrative dimension is unavoidable in the process of meaning construction; except that brand stories have now become commodities as such. Hence the fact that brands differentiate themselves more through narratives with their capacity to produce cultural iconicity, rather than through product differentiation that tends to fade away.

The downstream shift of value creation from the production sphere to the consumption sphere clearly indicates that the value no longer lives within the product or the service but within the capacity of the brand to create relationships with consumers and with society, having an emotional and cultural resonance. But how does this cultural shift resonate with organization theories and how can we conceive the role of brands in today's society?

The evolution of brand management paradigms

Two major paradigms have dominated brand management until recently. The first one focuses on the agency and considers that a brand essentially serves as a tool alongside other managerial functions within corporations. Hence the creation in the fifties of the brand manager a function that steadily replaced the product manager and symbolised a shift from product-centric culture to brand-centric culture in most organizations. From the consumer society viewpoint, this paradigm views brand management as a way to deploy systems of symbols and icons in a social and cultural space

The second brand paradigm is based rather on structure and considers the brand as a social catalyst and a system for managing corporations. From a societal and consumer point of view, it implies that brands act as an interface to restructure relationships between stakeholders. A new paradigm seems to have emerged embracing sustainability and CSR issues. : the governmentality paradigm. This paradigm is based on the idea that a brand has a purpose, a *raison d'être*, meaning that they have to justify their existence. This paradigm implies that brands become key actors in the changes concerning society and life styles. The governmentality paradigm clearly resonates with the rise of a transformative economy through which organizations and brands should justify their existence and their capacity to

affect the life of individuals and societies in a positive way. This is the reason why defining the purpose of a brand requires imagining how the world would be without the brand. This raises two critical issues. First, what can the possible scope of a brand purpose be in addition to creating economic value? Second, do all brands have a purpose which means a capacity to structurally affect the life of millions of people? In other words, is brand purpose a new strategic barrier for some brands to erect or should it be considered as a must for a brand to legitimize its existence on the market? This is what the governmentality paradigm can allow us to think about.

Table 1 : Three paradigms of brand management

	Focus on agency	Focus on structure	Focus on governmentality
The organization as a level of analysis	<p>Thesis: The brand as a management tool</p> <p>Problem: how to use the brand as a tool alongside other managerial functions</p>	<p>Thesis: the brand as a cultural catalyst</p> <p>Problem: how to use the brand as a paradigm for managing corporations?</p>	<p>Thesis: The brand as a <i>raison d'être</i></p> <p>Problem: how to define the societal contract and the commitments of the organization?</p>
Society and consumption as a level of analysis	<p>Thesis: The mark as a system of signs</p> <p>Problem: how brands deploy systems of symbols and icons in social and edifying space</p>	<p>Thesis: The brand as a medium</p> <p>Problem: How do brands act as an interface in restructuring relationships between stakeholders?</p>	<p>Thesis: The brand as an actor of changes in society and lifestyles</p> <p>Problem: how do brands promote the promotion of virtuous behavior?</p>

Inspired and adapted from Martin Kornberger (2010, p. 31)

Thinking the governmentality of brands

Governmentality is a concept that has been largely developed by Michel Foucault who was interested in the how of government – both how governing happens and how it is thought. “This word [government] must be allowed the very broad meaning it had in the sixteenth century. ‘Government’ did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather, it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed – the government of children, of souls, of communities, of the sick ... To govern, in this sense, is to control the possible field of action of others” (Foucault, 2002, p. 326).

The rise of the governmentality paradigm outlines the fact that the symbolic power of brands have tremendously evolved over the last decades. In an era of ‘world disenchantment’, new ideological sources of power emerge. In a secular society, a society which is no longer structured by a system of religious beliefs and largely depoliticized, brands largely contribute in constructing meaning and in shaping citizen’s modes of thinking and action. There seems to be a sort of displacement of current ideology sources, from the theological and the political towards the economic. In a ‘desecularised’ context, economic entities (and mostly brands) have taken up the symbolic place left empty by the

retreat of the divine. Brands now pre-empt symbolic spheres which used to be the privilege of either religion or the political. Among the numerous examples which could be quoted is the borrowing of religious myths by brands, or the capture of highly symbolic activities (weddings, burials) by economic entities such as retailers. Brands reach individuals always at an earlier stage and become part of their cultural background. Hence for example the fact young mothers in hospital are provided with sponsored baskets containing branded diapers, baby bottles and other baby products so as to create a strong emotional attachment towards these brands in a moment which is both symbolically and affectively of high significance for parents. Brands have extended tremendously their sphere of actions. The management of urban quarters or even cities might be delegated to brands. Disney manages attraction parks but also a city with its own banks and supermarkets; Disney provides its own currencies to be used in the American parks where it is possible to buy products with "Disney dollars". Some brands have the power to walk on the flat lands of States because of their tremendous economic, symbolic and cultural power. This is why some brands have become governing brands. We should understand governmentality in the Foucauldian sense as 'the conduct of conduct', that is to say, a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons. Governmentality implies the capacity to shape the sphere of others' thoughts and actions. In this sense, governmentality concerns not only brand-consumers' relationships, but also more globally relations within societies. Through the power of their ubiquity, their visibility and their ability to promote endless discourse, brands shape the way we see ourselves, others and the world in general. They govern part of the way we consider our daily universe and most of our daily actions through very prescriptive discourses. In order to participate in any kind of societal governmentality, brands act as utopian entities. One can truly talk about a government exercised by some big brands, which are surreptitiously being slid into our intimate daily lives, succeeding at shaping our attitudes and our behaviours. Such brands have become governing bodies because they have largely pre-empted the physical, symbolic and ideological space of Western societies and have succeeded in governing our ways of thinking, speaking and acting. To play this role of governance over body and soul, brands have become powerful ideological driving forces, a sort of story-making machine to stage the products of consumption and to make them omnipresent in social space. A brand like Nike is, for example, a gigantic stage-setter of products allowing the individual to live certain experiences (pushing oneself to the limit, achievements in sports, etc.). This ideological power of brands is specifically possible because of the size of their operating budgets (which, it should not be forgotten, are often comparable to the budget of entire governments) which allow them the gift of ubiquity and a constant presence in the media. But to which extent is brand governmentality compatible with the promotion of virtuous behaviour?

Brands and the Ethics of the Common Good

In the French tradition, the government essentially gives the capacity to carry out the common good to the State. Stemming from the Christian tradition and its philosophical reasoning, made secular by the State, the common good is the basis for the entirety of the perception of the State and the fundamental purpose of all government. Thus, it is what unites us, and without which power would have no justification. But what exactly is (and should be) the ability for brands to want to govern the common good? It seems that branding reaches the finalization of the philosophical project elaborated in Plato's *Republic*, namely the organization of a harmonious and happy city through the auspices of rational speech (Quessada, 2002). Moving out from their strictly commercial function, brands have literally engulfed each practice aimed at the public. In so doing through publicity, brands surreptitiously claim the status of discourse of discussion, that exact status boasted by philosophy. However, philosophy, by denying the seductive power of sophism (this art of spectacle-making with words,) has also disqualified public opinion. In this way, the brand would be an actualization of what philosophy would potentially contain. Brands have, in

some way, by reusing sophism, reclaimed the ideals of platonic philosophy by making them incarnate within the reality of Republic of the Consumer. Branding contributes to the definition of an order by establishing the place and the functions of good objects, which is to say, those which are designated to enjoyment. The sophisticated techniques of marketing essentially allow brands to contain a general understanding of desires and of society; they become like the custodians of knowledge of the order, which allows them to define (as philosophy did in the past) the only proper way to achieve happiness, an attitude that continues in the discourse of brands as it does in philosophy by adhering to a discursive rationality. Consequently, the brand is both to promote the ideal elaborated by Plato and to finally bring into being the philosophical project in the city-world. In this way, the brand often raises itself up as a eudemonic or universalist principle by ultimately representing the principal themes of antique philosophy. From the moment brands no longer become an apparatus of management, but an instance of governmentality, to what extent can brands be structured by any sort of ethical principle? One might think that the growing confusion between the spheres of governmentality and management cause problems, since the directing values and principles that they represent are not homothetic. Of course, "to manage" etymologically relates to the management of households and private affairs. Nevertheless, to manage is above all to steer an organization with the objective of creating value that is financial, but also human, technological, societal and, therefore, ideological. However, the brand is no longer often only steered by business, it is situated at an intersection of a network of actors (the stakeholders). Additionally, "our societies are acted upon by three normative forces that might converge or be opposed: firstly the economy which supplies values (efficiency, returns, competition) as well as a rationality by which everything is evaluated in terms of costs/benefits; secondly the technical-scientific which, by using an operational rationality, provides procedures and means to the economy; thirdly, the law, which, by regulating social situations, establishes norms and interdictions. There is no obvious reasons to suppose the existence of a systematic harmony between that which ethics recommend and that which requires the maximization of profit," (Van Parijs, 1996, p. 464). Is brand purpose just a way for organizations to confiscate morality?

Conclusion

How can we reconcile a brand purpose (a must have) with a purely economic necessity which consists in creating economic (and very often financial) value? We shall accept the idea that this focus is not only possible, but desirable, that one can think of the reason for it being transformative. This therefore means that capitalism may not be amoral nor be it immoral either, as has been too often claimed. It also means that the virtue of brands and organizations can be meaningful and that ethics can produce positive externalities that are beneficial to all. Far from any blissful paragon of virtue or maintaining a cynical discourse on business, we have a duty to believe in the idea of a possible virtuous capitalism

References

- Foucault M. (2002), 'The Subject and Power' in M Foucault, in Faubion J.(ed), *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3: Power*, Penguin.
- Heilbrunn B. (2015), *Market mediations. Semiotic investigations on consumers, objects and brands*, Palgrave McMillan
- Holt D. (2004), *How brands become icons*, Harvard UP
- Kornberger M. (2010), *How brands transform management and lifestyle*, Cambridge UP.

Quessada D. (2002), *L'esclavemaître*, Verticales.

Van Parijs Ph. (1996), « Ethique appliquée, in Canto-Sperber M. (ed.) 1996, *Dictionnaire d'éthique et de philosophie morale*, PUF, Paris.