

## The Social Life of Brands

I was mesmerized by a pair of Converse sneakers the other day. Riding on the morning F Train to my office. I couldn't stop staring at them across the aisle. Black High Tops, exactly like the ones my childhood friend Tom Teubel used to wear, circa 1967. And they stared back, white toe caps, with a black line along the front, not quite smiling, but bold, self assured, engaging, and, at the same time, jarringly anachronistic.

With some effort, I looked up to regard a hip young woman, probably in her late 20s. She was wearing jeans that were frayed at the knees and one of those gaily colored woolen Sherpa hats with ear flaps. She was pale, and waifish. An artist, or maybe a graduate student in Cultural Studies at NYU. She returned my glance with that mixture of indulgence, and censure that beautiful young women often level at middle aged admirers on the subway. In this instance I didn't return to my reading, but instead fell back into the Proustian reverie sparked by her sneakers.

My wife, who is a good deal younger than me, had told me at least a year ago that Converse sneakers were back. This, I figured, had something to do with the appeal of the genuine, the authentic, the retro, the mish mash postmodern to her generation. Judging from the Sherpa woman's whole ensemble, I guess you could add distressed to this admittedly provisional list of traits that make Converse sneakers cool.

But the *way* those sneakers are cool today is nothing like the way they were cool back in 1967 when Tom Teubel tied them on for a game of PIG at our neighbor's backyard basketball court in suburban Philadelphia. In Philly speak at the time, both Tom and his sneakers were boss... (roughly translated, a mix of cool, and put together). Nothing remotely retro, or alternative about Tom Teubel's sense of style. (He was the first kid in our neighborhood to have a banana seat bike, a "real" skateboard with lucite wheels, and Desert Boots.) And notions of distressed, postmodern, and retro, if they had the slightest toehold in American culture back then, were as alien to our suburban teenage sensibilities as global music or Buffy the Vampire Killer.

This paper takes a look at how we animate brands and brands animate us--- How we recognize ourselves in a pair of Converse sneakers, how we singularize ourselves, and at the same time place ourselves within a wider and always changing cultural frame.

### ***A Word on Theory***

Anthropologists have long been interested in the cultural construction of the self—the “me,” the “I,” our subjective connections to the world around us. How are ideas, perceptions, and experiences of self mediated by culture? What makes a person a person in Papua New Guinea, in 19<sup>th</sup> century working class England, in present day Silicon Valley? One of Anthropology's fundamental and most subversive discoveries is that such taken for granted concepts and experiences can be quite different at different times, in different places, and in different cultures.

Research on consumption has been a part of this inquiry for well over a century. In very broad strokes, our perspectives have shifted from studying how hierarchy and class based identities are articulated, to how these and other identities are crafted, communicated and “read”, to how they are experienced.

Mixing or shifting frames of reference between the overtly social and the subjective, (the socio-cultural and the phenomenological) has always been a part of an anthropological framing of consumption. As recent studies show, life ways are enacted, take shape, come to life, through consumption. Likewise, life changes, particularly at key moments in the life cycle, are expressed and in some measure experienced through relationships that consumers develop with brands.

This essay examines the nature of such relationships. It builds on the simple premise that as our relationship to, and experience of brands changes, so too does our understanding and experience of the self. And it draws upon the analytic concept of participation, with roots in Melanesian ethnography and early 20<sup>th</sup> century efforts to understand a radically different concepts of self and person from our own (Mauss 1970, Leenhardt 1979, Maschio 1994).

Melanesian ethnography offers a long tradition of examining the mythic dimensions of self--how the self is experienced and given cultural meaning through participating in mythic forms of life. (What Maurice Leenhardt and others have called “living myths”). This perspective is not so well developed in consumer studies where the focus of late has been on the performative dimensions of consuming. Melanesian ethnography provides a chance to see consumption as a narrative act. It gives us the chance to twist our analytic lens half a turn, to frame consumption, consuming brands in particular, as a form of participation, however provisional, in mythic forms of life.

Not myth in the grand, classic, or literary sense, but myth with the small “M”, the everyday myths and leit motifs that provide our lives with narrative structure. For instance, the American myth of super abundance, (our taken for granted ability produce and consume limitless quantities of goods), that consumers *live* when they go shopping at Costco’s, or Sam’s Club. Or the myth of “boss” that my friend Tom Teubel was living with his Converse sneakers, his Schwinn bike and his Desert Boots. Returning to our earlier question, it is by living such small everyday myths that we animate brands and brands animate us.

Brands provide the imaginative space for such narrative acts. Let’s take a quick look at why this is the case. And then consider *some* of the ways that brands are implicated in our contemporary notions and experiences of self, specifically, one important, emerging aspect of the self, a fragmented, situational, relational self, that exists “out there” in the public spaces of consumption.

### ***What’s in a Brand***

What is the difference between Cheerios and its generic counterpart positioned a few strides apart on the cereal aisle of your local grocery store? Putting aside product features for the moment, such things as taste, color, texture, appearance, and composition, what makes these two boxes of cereal such dramatically different animals? As any marketer will tell us, it is brand values.

This other quotient of value, illusive to grasp but hardly insubstantial in market terms, derives from what Harvard anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls the “social life of things”--the cultural meanings and values we attach to things, the social, symbolic and political uses which they serve.

Even a humble breakfast cereal has a social life. According to fifteen year old Floridian Andy Cochran, out doing the family grocery shopping with NY Times business reporter Molly O’Neill, Cheerios and an array of other items he tosses into his cart—Nabisco cookies, Coke, Tide, Del Monte canned goods--are “labels with history” (NYT March 14,1998: D1,14).

History in a box of Cheerios does sound a bit jarring. But intuitively it seems right. Cheerios are indisputably an icon of the American breakfast table. And it is not hard for us to imagine how a fifteen year old boy buying groceries for his family in these socially fragmented times would choose a brand that conveys a sense of continuity and connection with the past. A box of cereal is a fairly ephemeral thing, especially in a household with teenagers, but who is to say what emotional succor that warm yellow box, and those buoyant, brown, little donut shapes bobbing in milk may bring.

What seems most remarkable, is not the notion of groceries “with history,” but the self reflective way this young consumer parses his buying behavior. He is shopping *for* history. Inadvertently, he poses some provocative questions--what does it say about brands and what does it say about *us* at the start of a new century.

What is a brand ...in a radical sense what are its meanings, its qualities, its origins, its substance. To many, such questions will seem a little off the mark. Talk about “origins” and “substance” give brands a thing-like status that perhaps they do not deserve. Aren’t brands basically “symbolic,” a kind of modern-day heraldry invented to stand for and differentiate a seemingly endless supply of things, products, enterprises, companies, these days even people. Think of Tom Peter’s latest, “The Brand You.”

Brands clearly do function as signs. And a persuasive argument could be made that brands exert a profound influence on how we “read” and interpret the world around us. In fact, brands are largely responsible for a resurgence of an iconographic mind set, a move away from particularism, so characteristic of modern modes of thought, towards a more synthetic, holistic apperception.

The suggestion that brands, a seminal creation of modern times, could have the effect of rejuvenating an essentially medieval mode of thought is provocative—and perhaps a bit too neat of a package. But brand literacy is certainly a promising topic for semiologists

and symbolic anthropologists, indeed anyone who is interested in the dynamic connections between symbols, signs and our perceptions of the order and nature of things.

As a social anthropologist, I have other fish to fry. I am interested in the ways that we use brands to navigate within the social worlds that we inhabit. Back to Appadurai's project, I am interested in the social life of brands. To confirm that brands indeed do have a social life we have only to look at the language of experts, those professionals in the worlds of marketing and advertising who are charged with the care and feeding of brands.

In the most direct sense, brands are identities. Cheerios *are* those studies in roundness and that sun yellow box. It's identity has been cultivated through years of advertising with Rocky and Bullwinkle, and its prominent place on grocery shelves among General Mills' pantheon of cereal brands.

These graphic, symbolic, potentially iconic dimensions of brands are the stuff that marketers create and manage. They are a odd amalgam of ideas, images, and substance, something betwixt and between, part intellectual property, part commercial strategy and part made goods. They exist in the public's mind and, keeping with our example, on their breakfast tables.

Brands have images, personalities, history, equity. And they are inextricably connected to the things--products, services, offerings they come to embody and represent. In this sense brands are meant to be experienced. They are meant to be consumed. To paraphrase the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss this makes brands "good to think."

Brands hybrid identity, being both "thing" and "image", makes them especially good carriers of meaning. Where "traditional" societies endow certain objects with magical and religious significance and make them signposts and carriers of identity, (think of icons in the Russian Orthodox church, totem poles in the American Northwest, the Virgin of Guadeloupe, the Churinga of an Australian Aboriginal band, the Queen of England), we consumers of the dawning 21st century have brands.

In a *fin de siecle* ironic twist, brands have re-enchanted our world. Indeed any brand worth its salt has some of this magical quality. Mr. Clean is a talisman against germs, IBM Consulting a protective amulet against the critical gaze of upper management, Kraft Mac and Cheese an antidote to ennui, Chevy Truck a bulwark of American Manhood.

Brands bring enchantment, color, design, frission, variety, to our made, material world. They can be a source of continuity or creativity. Their influence can be subversive or profoundly conservative.

Stripped of any metaphysical grounding, certain brands can become a concentrated expression of group identity and experience, however disposable. Is it too much of a

stretch to think that Porsche owners or Harley riders or Macintosh users are, to paraphrase Marcel Mauss, “living the myth (s)” that these products embody? Certainly not in the marketing departments of these companies.

But this is precisely where brands part company with the churingas, and totems and queens of different social worlds. Brands are disposable, possessable, consumable. We put them on and take them off, deploy them in endless variations that express the situational identities of our everyday lives. What they lose in magical depth they gain in versatility. They suit the spirit of our times.

And this is where the cat jumps out of the bag, where brands can slip out of the grip of their handlers. The meanings of brands are inherently situational and so, reworkable. Brand identities are reiterated, and tweaked in every context they are “consumed.” We are continually toying with brands, floating private meanings in public places, conversing in a mute but lively language of signs and gestures.

The social life of brands depends on our native ability to talk and think “in brands,” to fashion new meanings and identities for the things we consume, to make brands our cultural property. Did you know for instance that Rolls Royce owners flash jars of Grey Poupon mustard to one another when they pass on the road? Sometimes marketers are directly engaged in these conversations, sometimes they’re not.

### ***The Husk of Material Reality***

Because brands *embody* abstract ideas, images and values they are thoroughly implicated in the *enactment* of these ideas, images and values, what anthropologists call “cultural reproduction.” What is being reproduced, (which is a more distant way of saying lived and felt), are everyday myths, myths with a small “M”.

*Someone* discovered that Cheerios are the perfect finger food for gum-toothed babies. No doubt babies played a big role here since they are clearly pleased to exercise their new motor skills, matching their little fingers with those little “Os”. Their moms saw they weren’t choking and *voila*, countless strollers and baby travel bags are stocked with Ziploc bags full of Cheerios.

Simultaneously a whole new set of brand values starts to take shape around these experiences that have a wider cultural meaning. Add some new facets to Cheerios’ brand identity: autonomy (first foods without any help from mom), mobility and independence (mom and baby getting out of the house), play (eating as play, out with baby as play, watching baby eat as play).

Through such homespun discoveries Cheerios have become part of our myths of parenting, particularly the narratives that we share about early childhood development. Not surprisingly, Cheerio’s marketers have picked up on these possibilities. On a recent trip to Barnes and Nobel I noticed Cheerios story books in which pre-readers can fill in

perforated pictures that accompany the text with Cheerios. (No doubt inspired by the “Cheerio art” being produced in preschools )

Brands’ status as cultural artifacts makes it hard not to be “brand identified” or at least brand fluent. Claims to the contrary seem dubious, churlish, and vaguely undemocratic, like a frog sitting on a lily pad who claims he doesn’t like the water and pretends he doesn’t know how to swim. Brands do add a price, sometimes a hefty premium, to the things we consume but to chalk all this up to dim witted fetishism misses a great deal of what brands are all about.

This brings us back to our earlier proposition. Brands are good to think, because they provide what 19<sup>th</sup> century social philosopher William Robertson Smith calls the “husk of material reality” to what are often rather slippery cultural abstractions—Frenchness, parenting, interactivity, athleticism, the new domesticity, etc.

Of course, not all brands and products are such fertile vessels for our cultural imagination. There is a huge category of brands and goods which some marketers call “low involvement”, things like toothpaste, toilet paper, detergent where our buying habits are more or less on automatic pilot. But, if involvement is so low, why aren’t we all value shoppers (the majority of us are not switching between Colgate and Crest depending on what coupons are in the paper).

Actually, we are most likely to make such changes during major transitions in our life cycle: when we go off to school, or get married for instance. At such moments, brands become mundane expressions of our new selves, though interestingly, once we’ve kicked up our heels a little bit, many of us go back to the detergent mom has always used.

Such loyalties point to a complex connection between brands and the ongoing construction of self. Kids and teenagers are acutely conscious of brands, fiercely loyal and fickle in equal doses. They are in effect changing hats, developing and experimenting with new facets of themselves. Brands are so charged at this time because they are linked so publicly and personally to self discovery, a bit more clinically, what social psychologists call individuation.

We adults stay true to our Scots Tissue (so deeply rooted in early childhood socialization) and play with “high involvement” brands and products—cars, fashion, wines, computers, power tools, sneakers, cookware--to cultivate and express different facets of ourselves. But even this taxonomy is far from stable as “low” and “high” involvement brands switch places in the swirling currents of cultural change. Witness the vibrant commercial success of The Body Shop which takes a formerly “low” involvement product, soap, and connects it to a whole set of associations and experiences having to do with sensuality, pleasure, healing, spirituality and Eco-politics.

## ***Brands and Us***

Brands are implicated in the stories we tell one another about who we are. Consuming brands, we participate in re-making the small myths and motifs of everyday life. And through such narrative acts—living myths—our selves are constructed. This has a lot to do with the nature of brands, being both thing and image, material goods and cultural values. It is after all this embodiment of value, the “husk of material reality”, that brings our everyday myths to life—myths of American abundance, myths about continuity and family life, motifs surrounding parenting and development. I am sure we’ve all felt the vibrations when we tie on a new pair of sneakers.

Such meanings do not come to us preformed, prepackaged, as it were, by marketers. Consuming brands, we participate in creating their meanings, values and identities. This implies some kind of collective action. Just as myths are shared, the meanings we assign to brands, if they are to have any cultural resonance, are public. Likewise, in consuming brands, we are creating relational, situational selves, selves that exist “out there” in the public spaces of consumption.

How does this concept and experience of the self compare with the private self so characteristic of our culture? The private, bounded self truly comes into it’s own in the beginning of the modern era. This familiar “me”, separated by a skin of daily social experiences that confirm a distance between self and other, between inner and outer worlds is, at its base, a Western development. It is supported by popular ideologies and myths of individualism and nurtured by an array of cultural forms associated with the rise of the middle class, such things as diaries, novels, biography, and more recently, film, psychoanalysis, and market research.

And it is often contrasted with a relational self, one that develops and is supported through human participation and interaction— a concept of self associated with the “traditional” peoples anthropologists have encountered over the past century, (Melanesians, Bedouins, Africans, Amerindians), where boundaries between self and other, that seem so clearly articulated to us, are far more permeable.

Originality, a supreme expression of the private self, provides what is perhaps the starkest contrast to a relational self. The notion that we are all original, unique, different, like snowflakes our mothers told us, is a very modern indeed, probably not more than a century and a half old. And quite tellingly, it develops in the age of mass consumerism.

Originality is of course the coin of the realm in the arts and literature (how many adjectives can critics conjure for the latest “voice” out there.) And while distinctive voices are yet to be highly regarded in most business settings, we are all trying our damndest to think out of the box.

There is as much to be praised as critiqued in our nearly boundless esteem for originality. It provides the license for creativity and freedom as well as the tyranny of the new and the fresh. It provides us with the cultural warrant to reinvent our institutions while at the same time it often obliterates our institutional memories. It also fuels our appetites and desires for a constant parade of new products.

The myth of originality comes to life consuming brands. Our consumer culture provides a vast banquet table of possibilities that enable us to cultivate our tastes, create a pastiche, express, and “be” ourselves. Without such expression, the meanings, and varied experiences of originality would be lost on us.

In this sense, originality and the private self contain the seeds of the new, emerging self that we have been examining. In rough outline, this “new” self is remarkably similar to the open, participatory, relational self of archaic and traditional societies. What makes it postmodern is its fragmentary and situational character. As Paul Edwards put it in a recent marketing think piece: “One person can be more different at two times than two people at the same occasion.”

These are selves, perhaps it is better here to talk in the plural, that we create when we think and talk in brands. They are expressive, iconographic and relational. They take shape outside the inner, private, bounded worlds that we also inhabit, in the public spaces of consumption. And they are supported by new, emerging cultural forms and technical possibilities—cyberspace, interactivity, the new iconographic literacy associated with personal computers and the internet, and of course, the growing ascendancy of brands .

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