In a Fashion Brand – Postmodern Tidbits

Xiuli Zhu[a], Wing-sun Liu[b], Yee-nee Lam[c]

[a]Fashion School, Zhejiang Sci-Tech University
[b]Institute of Textiles and Clothing, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
[c]Department of Fashion and Textiles, The Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education

Abstract

Originally, "brand" meant only a mark of identification. Brick makers in ancient Egypt marked their bricks to avoid blame for the collapse of a building [1]. In ancient times, potters would also put marks on their work for identification [2]. Today, the word "brand" has taken on a new meaning. Blackett has even argued that "…brands have come to symbolize the convergence of the world's economies on the demand-led rather than the command-led model." The symbolic function of brands is nothing new. As far back as 1959, Levy was already asserting that people do not buy products just for what they do but for what they mean [3]. This symbolic function of brands has been further accentuated in a postmodern era. Central to postmodernism is the issue of identity [4]. People are struggling in a era characterized by the fragmentation and saturation of identities [5]. With the decline of conventional institutions, the market has become a new institution where we can wield power and control [6]. In the postmodern context, the fashion brand is no longer simply a mark of differentiation; rather, we can avow our own existence with fashion brands [7]. This paper presents a contextual review of fashion brands in a postmodern discourse

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1. A fashion brand is more than an identification of the fashion; it is an identification of ourselves

Originally, "brand" meant only a mark of identification. Brick makers in ancient Egypt marked their bricks to avoid blame for the collapse of a building [1]. In ancient times, potters would also put marks on their work for identification [2]. In a postmodern era, this function of identification has already extended from the product to the consumers. A Gucci jacket tells you more about the wearer than the jacket. Carducci [8] asserted that "brands mediate the presentation of self in contemporary society. They constitute a system of signs, a language of consumption, a medium for negotiating exchange. Through the aura of the brand, individuals can display their "ideal me." This "ideal me" may or may not coincide with their actual socioeconomic status, personality traits, or family history. Rituals of social interaction, from chance encounters on the street to the most positive moments, are assisted by the aura of the brand, prosthetic of a commercial culture that is already there" (p. 39). We could have different brands for the different kinds of sel/ves that we want to project in accordance with the internal and external contexts: Gucci on Monday, Yohji Yamamoto on Tuesday, Adidas on Wednesday, Muji on Thursday, and so forth. With brands, we can truly be anyone we want [9]; with brands we can liberate [10] ourselves or, as Heath and Potter have argued [11], with the help of brands we can release the intuition from our repressed selves or our subconscious mind.

2. The issue is not about too many clothes; it is about too many selves

Douglas and Isherwood [12] have argued that we are have a culture of superfluous consumption. We might be bewildered or embarrassed by the volume of clothes inside our wardrobe. A vivid illustration of this is the comment made by one of the informants in my research on the purchase of clothing, who said, "When I open my wardrobe, the clothes just fall out." Years ago, I asked a class of 150 students how many pairs of jeans they owned. Back then, I was shocked to hear that the majority had 7 to 8 pairs; today, the number has increased to between 10 and 12. Although this was not an official survey, it is still indicative of a culture of consumption. The students have more than enough pairs; worse still, when they were asked to describe the details of their "lots" of jeans, the differences among the various pairs appeared to be minimal. What did stand out were the brand names. The following was typical of the kind of answer that the informants gave: " Well, I have three pairs of Levi's. A newly bought pair is a Diesel, and I have one pair of True Religion that's real cool…." Brands have become the major point of differentiation in the context. By invoking brand names in the context, not only is the informant effectively get across the idea that he or she has a rich collection of jeans, referring to Lacan [13] or Barthes [14], but this kind of language "slippage" or "glissement" can unearth the latent truth in the subconscious mind of the informant; in fact, this awareness could even be new to the informant. The latent message is, "Brands really matter."

We can imagine that this culture of superfluous consumption would meet with criticism [15, 16]. For example, Schor [15] has commented that this culture of consumption is only making us poorer; instead of a feeling of satisfaction we are more

dissatisfied with ourselves, since we are engaged in a never-ending competition with others. Klein [16] posited that in this context where brands dominate, we will be left with no space of our own; no choices that reflect our real needs; and jobs will be moved to where the labour can be exploited; there will no longer be decent jobs around.

The Postmodernist, however has a more positive outlook.. In postmodernity, we are consuming for the symbolic project of our selves[17]; hence, contextually, commodities in the markets are symbols [18]. To exemplify, one of our biggest concerns/challenges in participating in this conference was how many outfits we should bring with us, – in Goffman's [19]words, how we should manage the "impression" we make in the " social fronts" we were going to face in this conference. My brands, my look – you might feel indifferent, yet what is so real is the pleasant weight, the confidence I feel when I put on a designer suit, the existentialist ethos that is ignited, however irrational [20]. In this way of thinking, fashion does not consist simply of clothes; rather, they are symbols only. For a sportive look, you might want an Adidas; for something sportive yet rebellious, you could choose a Nike. For a business image, you might want a Dunhill; yet for a business image with more open-minded air, a Hugo Boss could do. It does not matter who you actually are, brands are a good resource [21] for you to draw upon to build up the kinds of selves that you would like to be. In extreme cases, if you are unable to afford to purchase a brand name item, you can buy a fake or even follow Featherstone's suggestion and "steal it" [9].

If fashion and clothing are about our identities, the superfluous consumption of fashion and clothing is not about the clothes themselves – this superfluousness could be extended to our identity. We are now in a dilemma of fragmented and saturated selves [22, 23]. Our wardrobe is in fact most revealing about that dilemma. Thus, a deep inspection of the different items we have in our wardrobe could lead to a new understanding of our own selves – an understanding that we are leading the kind of existence where what we have today could be more important than who we are [24]. To simplify, it is about understanding the different kinds of roles we have to play and the struggle that drives our behavior, including the fashion and clothes we buy. Some of these roles/identities may conflict with each other [4]; some could even be strange to us [25]. The mediation of our fashion and clothes is even more salient, more intense when fashion and clothes are branded. A plain white T-Shirt is just a white T-Shirt, yet one would sense the difference between a Nike white T- Shirt and a YSL white T- shirt.

3. A brand is not just a brand, it is a story, a person, a partner, a community, a religion….

In 1959, Levy [3] had already claimed that brands are actually symbols selling in the market. In a 101 class on the fashion business, we were told that the fashion industry is about fantasy. Decades after Levy's idea of brands as symbols for sale, the symbolic meaning of brands has become even more intertextualized: in a brand we find stories, persons, fraternity, community, and even god.

Twichell [26] aptly described a brand as "a story attached to a manufactured object" (p. 484). Brooks Brothers is selling its strong association with President Lincoln. In the company's website today there is still the story that   President Lincoln

wore a coat by Brooks Brothers. Hand stitched into the lining of the particular model of coat that Lincoln was wearing when he was assassinated is an intricate design featuring an eagle and the inscription, "One Country, One Destiny."[1] Li Ning, a top brand in China, is about the story of its owner, an Olympic Medalist, his perseverance, and the glory he brought to the country. Around 2000, Baleno was one of the best-selling brands in China, and its best-selling item was a plain windbreaker. It was said that much of the business the company generated in China was due to the spokesperson of the brand, Andy Lau; not only is he a superstar, but the positive stories about him appeal not only to youngsters, but to people paying for their purchases, parents. These stories surrounding the brand are evidence of the kind narrative transportation discussed by Escalas [27]. She argued that people become absorbed in a story like thoughts, when consumers "engage in mental simulation engage in narrative processing, which can transport participants, leading to persuasion from a reduced attention to weak argument and a generation of a positive effect" (p. 427). In other words, when the stories touch the consumers, consumers will become driven by emotion. [28] Elliott has contended that when a consumer becomes emotional, he or she will be in a state of illusory hedonism and self focus. He further explained that "when evaluating an item of clothing the consumer is likely to be imagining how they would look in the clothing rather than features of the clothing itself" (101).

In a seminal article, Aaker posited a framework of theoretical constructs of the brand personality construct by determining the number and nature of the dimensions of a brand's personality, including Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness [29], to cause us to think of a brand as a person. However linear the model is, it brings about a facelift in the realm of branding. In the consumer-brand relationship study of Fournier [30], brands are treated as a partner. Maffesoli [31] contended that we are in a time of tribalism, where people are in neo tribes that can be identified with their consumption. McAlexander et al. [32] sees communities forming around a brand, "in which there is a geotemporal concentration and richness of social context"; he regards them as "dynamic rather than static phenomena" (p. 38).

Muniz and O'Guinn [33] defined a brand community as a non-geographical community based on a set of structured relations between admirers of a brand, who share not just ownership of the brand but three traditional markers of community: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. In another study of brand community, the brand is "supernatural, religious and magical motifs are common in the narratives of the (brand) community…. These motifs also reflect and facilitate the many transformative and emancipatory aspects of consuming this brand" (p. 737).

Most of the abovementioned studies were not conducted on fashion brands; for example the study on the religious aspect of brands focused on Apple, the study on brand communities was on cars. Yet it should not be too difficult for us to think of a parallel fashion brand story, to find a favorite brand as a partner, to determine which fashion brand community we belong to, and to imagine what if Vivienne Westwood were the name of a Church. (By the way, in Thailand there is a temple for the

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[1] http://www.brooksbrothers.com/aboutus/heritage.tem

worship of David Beckham.)   A Fashion Brand is no longer just a Fashion Brand.

Postmodernism might be ironically viewed as "anything goes" [9], so I take the liberty to conclude this paper with a story about fashion brands.

Prada and Miu Miu are two sisters. Prada is the CEO of an international investment company. She is quite charming, yet tough. Although she has lots of admirers, she is apparently indifferent to them. Miu Miu on the other hand is a joyous girl. Since their parents are in Italy, Prada has to take care of Miu Miu. One day, while dining in the Morton Steak House in Hong Kong, Prada met with her first love from high school, Polo. Polo was with his friend from France, Lacoste. Polo had just come back from the States to attend to his family business in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, Lacoste is a playboy, who was Polo's roommate in university. Prada and Polo exchange phone numbers…………..(please continue the story yourself).

4. Final remarks

The meaning (story) of a fashion brand is subject to an individual's lived experience, which is constituted socially and culturally [34]**.** With the fragmented, saturated, and liberated selves that are characteristic of the postmodern period, the interpretation of different fashion brands will depend on individuals. In that connection, Elliott [4] posited DIY meanings in the consumption of brands. The consumer's participation in this sense of the creation of fashion brands might pose as a new challenge to the fashion industry.

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