Abstract
The paper seeks to provide an embryonic framework for the management and the articulation of post modernist revolutionary concepts in the practice of brand management. It considers the case of a fictional brand “Red Apple cigarettes” – a creation of Quentin Tarantino - which exists both in the virtual world and the head of consumers who emotionally empathise with it through the consumption of tangible derivative products. The paper concludes that virtual brands question the flexibility of traditional brand management practices as well as current marketing constructs.

Keywords: Marketing Theory, Post-modernism, Brand Management, Film

Track: Marketing Theory and Orientation
Post-modernism allegedly pervades marketing theory and practice much as it does everyday life in contemporary society. We consider what this may mean for marketing theory and brand managers. From the writings of Firat and his colleague (Firat, Sherry Jr et al. 1994; Firat, Dholakia et al. 1995), Brown (1995), Cova (1996) and even with aides from wikipedia the novice marketer can surmise that:

“Postmodern philosophy is generally viewed as an openness to meaning and authority from unexpected places, so that the ultimate source of authority is the "play" of the discourse itself.”

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodern_philosophy)

Post-modern concepts have found relevance in the area of segmentation, distribution (Cova 1996), consumer behaviour (Holt and Sternthal 1997), and advertising (Proctor, Proctor et al. 2002; Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2004; Morris 2005). Equally, post-modernist views challenge the traditional definitions of branding (Brown 1995). However, post-modern concepts have had limited applicability in the context of brand management. As a result there are a number of issues from maintaining brand salience amongst the target audience to the efficacy of representing the brand in a hyperreal context. The paper seeks to provide an embryonic framework for the management and the articulation of post modernist revolutionary concepts in the practice of brand management. Drawing of the work of Quentin Tarantino, we examine the use of the fictional brand Red Apple cigarettes within the representational circuit of culture (Hall 1997). Prior to introducing the case, a brief review of literature on branding in the post-modernist context is presented. Conclusions include a theoretical framework and a managerial template for post-modern brand management.

1. Post-Modernism, Marketing and “imaginary” brands

Postmodernism refutes practical conventions and overall contrasts the modernist idea that there is one single reality. As Brown explains, “Post-modernity is a depthless world of simulation, where images bear no discernable relationship to external reality and where artifice of, in the words of the postmodern rock group U2, is ‘even better than the real thing’” (Brown 1995).

Modern definitions of the brand such as the one provided by the American Marketing Association\(^1\) confines brand marketing to the managerial practice of building, managing and measuring the equity of a product or services identified by the brand (Aaker 1992; Kapferer 1995; Keller 1998). In fact, traditional perspectives see the brand as a selling device managed by the marketing team who use it as a mean of differentiation for the firm’s offering (Kotler and Keller 2006). In other words, the brand is real, it is a trademark attached to a product that is being marketed to “passive” consumers. Alternative definitions have integrated the consumers’ views of the brand: it becomes “nothing more than the sum of all the mental connections people have around it” (Brown, 1992). An analysis of brand experts’ views of the brand construct reveals that a “Brand” can be considered as a bi-polar construct whereby managers augment products or services with values and this facilitates the process by which consumers confidently recognize and appreciate these values (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1999). Managers have integrated consumers’ perspectives of branding because they believe that likelihood of repeated purchase is enhanced when consumer feedback is monitored and used to better tune to the value

\(^1\) The AMA definition of a brand is “name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors” (AMA, 1960)
constellations to consumers’ needs. Morris (2005) acknowledges such interpretive power. However, the managerial implications of a brand disconnected from the reality have not yet been fully theorised within the marketing academy: “Ceci n’est pas une brand!”. In order to explore the implications of post-modern concepts on branding theory and practice, we now investigate the case of a virtual brand, “Red Apple Cigarettes”.

2. The Simulacra of Red Apple Cigarettes

“Red Apple” cigarettes (Exhibit 1) are a fictional brand of tobacco used by Quentin Tarantino in films such as “Pulp Fiction”, “Kill Bill” and “Four Rooms”. It conveys a “cool” image as it is associated to the characters and atmosphere of Tarantino's movies. Hence, “Red Apple” displays the emotional characteristics of a genuine brand. Yet, it can not be purchased nor consumed –at least not as cigarettes-. Tarantino seeks to minimise the nature of branding and reliance other directors have on corporate sponsorship. To affirm the non-conformist nature of his movies, the director uses several other imaginary brands, Big Kahuna Burgers and the cereal brands ‘Fruit Brute’ and ‘Kaboom’. Each plays a role in creating a parallel world with different values, yet it is still a world consumers recognise.

Exhibit 2: Red Apple Cigarettes

Much as Firat argues that Las Vegas is the postmodern city the Red Apple Brand can be seen both intrinsically and extrinsically as a post modern brand as it possesses some key features expressed by Brown (1995) and Firat & Venkatesh (1993) such as hyperreal, fragmentation, paradoxal juxtaposition, pastiche and chronology.

A result of the erosion of commitment to modernity is an increasing tendency and willingness on the part of the members of society to seek the “simulated reality” rather than the existing one. The model is more real than the reality it supposedly represents – the hyper-real is already reproduced (Firat & Venkatesh 1993). “Red Apple” is a virtual brand that initially did not possess any realness. Red Apple however encapsulates the “coolness” of characters such as Butch Coolidge (Bruce Willis) and Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman) who smoke them in “Pulp Fiction”. One might argue that the brand is becoming “real” in the mind of the consumers as consumers are eager to associate themselves with the virtual brand. Consequently, the brand is “dragged into” reality through a series of derived products. Indeed, the Red Apple brand is available on T-shirt, ash-trays and posters (exhibit 2). Tangible derivative products are being created out of what was originally a simulation.

Fragmentation is another circumstance that Firat & Venkatesh (1993) induce as part of post-modern marketing. Post-modern marketing pairs with diversification and the refusal to conform to a single norm. This results in a required expansion of fragmented moments of experience and existence in a lifetime. To the post-modern observer, fragmentation provides collages of brief moments that stimulate the senses, yet rarely connect to a central, unified theme. “Red Apple” cigarettes conform to
fragmentation. In the movie “Kill Bill”, there is a scene where the bride walks past a mural size ad for “Red Apple” cigarettes. The purpose of the advertisement is not to leave the consumer with a centred idea but with an overall image, triggered by the fragmented images of the collage in the ad and their impact on the consumer’s senses.

Exhibit 2: Red Apple ashtray\(^2\) and T-Shirt\(^3\)

Paradoxical juxtapositions entail that the product acquired in the market is independent of the need for which the consumer initially sought it and the producer provided it. Kill Bill mixes the realities of a contemporary setting with cartoonist fight scenes. The timeline of Pulp Fiction is classically post modern, set five years before its release and running on a flash back basis with each sub story connected to another. Tarantino uses music in a post-modern way; choosing retro music in Reservoir Dogs and often picking obscure groups from outside the mainstream which mirrors appropriation of counter cultures noted in advertising (cf. Desmond et al 2001). Another paradox would be the need for Red Apple to be registered as a brand in order to prevent its actual use as a “real” cigarettes brand. There was in fact an attempt to register Red Apple as a cigarettes trademark on February 10th, 2004 by DAK Holdings.

Intrinsically, the pastiche is evident in the worm’s cheeky smile (exhibit 1). The fact that it is escaping the apple could mean the box contains something rotten which compounds the comedy of the packaging. The packaging as a whole, with its yellow/red colouring and soft box has a retro feel to it as characterised by Brown’s chronology.

3. Discussion

As Tarantino creates a post modern brand through film, it places an expectation, nigh onus on business and marketing professionals in particular to use the concept of postmodernism to market products. As seen in the previous section, Red Apple derived products are already for sale on the web. Though not unusual in its creation of a cult following, it still shows a demand for a simulated postmodern brand. Despite its contested and abstract nature, postmodernism is a growing phenomenon of contemporary marketing. This is juxtaposed with the observed hyper signification (Goldman and Papson 1996); audience ambivalence (O’Donohoe 2001) and reflective interpretation (Morris 2005) in advertising. Red Apple Cigarettes with their combination of tongue and cheek packaging, a retro look, and hyperrealism created a

\(^2\) http://www.amazon.com/City-Apple-Cigarettes-Ceramic-Ashtray/dp/B000HX70H6 as accessed on November 22nd

\(^3\) http://www.kaptainmyke.com/cgi-bin/shop/cpshop.cgi/tarantino/kaptainmyke_54068728 as accessed on November 22nd
postmodern brand with measurable equity and existing demand. This has both managerial and theoretical implications.

Instead of the traditional attitude of piggy backing on existing brands through brand extension, companies could be much more proactive and create fictional hyper real brands that may then become a reality following their virtual launch. A possible course of action would include concentrating on building an image through traditional and non-traditional media. The template herby proposed (figure 1) acknowledges that branding is a bi-polar construct (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1998). It further shows how managers can manipulate brand meaning while consumers emotionally empathise with the virtual brand. Virtual brand management primarily focuses only on building images and is initiated in the parallel world. Brand development may follow those steps of registering the virtual brand, place the virtual brand in movies (Balasubramanian et al 2006), create dedicated website offering the possibility for internet users to download the logo and use it in the manner that they wish, develop derived product (different from the virtual branded product) and possibly develop and launch the actual product. This leads to position the virtual brand in the mind of the consumers before the actual launch of the product.

Figure 1: The praxis of POMO Brand Management

This paper asks many questions at once and echoes previously lauded EMAC scholarship which deliberated the co-creation of advertising meaning (cf. Ritson and Elliott 1995). In line with this year’s conference theme we interrogate the flexibility of traditional notions of the brand. Are we finally seeing echoes of Baudrillard’s “The end of the History” being played out in respect to the brand? What happens to marketing theory by considering the satisfaction of virtual needs by the organisation? This is leading to research examining real consumers consuming virtual brands; how best should this be theorised; as a form of Escapism, Entertainment, E-Research and Development? This would appear similar to what happens in popular computer games such as “Civilisation”, insofar as consumers are given the chance to create their own ‘virtual’ brand. Market exchanges are now driven by the reflexive consumer- once the organisation can see what they desire then they will produce it. Perhaps this too denotes the end of the producer as we historically have taught it. Whilst theorists like
Paul Virilio have noted that the speed of technological change can alter the very the
*essence* of objects in society the marketing academy seems slow to reflect on issues
such as Red Apple. At best if we ignore this virtual development our theoretical
constructs might implode if we cannot explain to our students what is happening in
the virtual market, at worst we are left to diagnose a ‘schizophrenic marketplace’
where high street retailers sell referents to brands that don’t really exist!
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