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Think Different

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to analyse the brand as organizing device that structures not only the sphere of consumption but also that of production. The essay takes its point of departure in an analysis of values. It suggests that values are a correlate of evaluation devices, and that these evaluation devices constitute a semantic space that is called, for want of a better term, brand. The brand as a semantic space makes values visible, providing a platform upon which claims, calculations and categorizations compete, collide and sometimes coalesce. The essay concludes by discussing the implications of this argument for, amongst other things, the higher education sector.

MARTIN KORNBERGER

Think Different

On Studying the Brand as Organizing Deviceⁱ

What is value?

Brands are a *fait accompli*; they are much exploited, but little explored. How to rectify the imbalance? Perhaps by taking a cue from Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1979/2005, 40-41) who suggested, “Forget that commodities are good for eating, clothing, and shelter; forget their usefulness and try instead the idea that commodities are good for thinking; treat them as a non-verbal medium for the human creative faculty.” If that is true for commodities, these strange things “abounding in metaphysical subtleties

and theological niceties” (Marx 1867/1976, 163), it might also hold true for brands. Indeed, brands are objects that provoke our curiosity. They represent a mountain range of evidence in search of a theory. Where to start?

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Perhaps not straightaway with something as complex and multilayered as a university brand – but a book which, at least in the past, was not entirely unrelated to everyday university life. So imagine you want to buy a book for your next holiday. A novel. One that is enjoyable, but not trash. You enter the bookshop. Thousands upon thousands of books are piled in front of you. It gets even worse if you shop via Amazon, where your choices have grown exponentially. How to make a decision? How do you know which book is valuable?

Certainly not by comparing prices. Despite what economic theory claims, prices are not indicative of value. *Fifty Shades of Grey* costs the same as Shakespeare. If it is true that you should not judge a book by its cover, it’s definitely true that you should never judge a book by its price tag. Indeed, to determine the value of a book is a complicated process. There are three analytical intricacies that we have to take into account and that books share with the universe of knowledge, information and cultural goods, services, experiences and other singularities (Karpik 2010).

First, the value of a book is co-constituted through the reader's meaning making activities. Whether a book is fun or not, contains interesting truths, or is boring depends very much on the reader (Eco 1979). Second, the value of a book has to be understood as a plural word. A book can have cultural, scientific, aesthetic, social and a myriad of other values. Third, values can evolve and change dynamically over time. In fact, the more widely a book is read, the more valuable it might become as a cultural reference for the identity of a community, for instance. In this case, the consumption process actually increases the value(s) of a book. To complicate matters even more, the development of value(s) through consumption fluctuates over time. Nietzsche could not find a publisher for his last works, whereas three decades later his works had become the intellectual turnkey of the twentieth century. What, then, is the value of a book?

Making things valuable: Evaluation devices

The question can only be answered by dodging it. Questions never get resolved, but after a while they become uninteresting, and new problematizations take their place. We suggest the same move here. Rather than investigating the intrinsic value of a book we suggest asking through which practices, technologies and methodologies books are being made valuable in the first place. What devices and tools, which calculations and categorizations attribute value to a book? In short, the focus shifts from an inquiry into value as an essential property of an object towards regimes of evaluation which constitute values (Muniesa, 2011; see also Kornberger et al. forthcoming). Evaluation regimes are

forms of accounting for value in which values are being traced and made visible through practices of numbering, classifying, ordering etc. (Miller 2001).

Karpik (2010) offered a detailed analysis of evaluation mechanisms, which he terms judgement devices. These include rankings (e.g. the *Financial Times* journal ranking), reviews (e.g. TripAdvisor), guides (e.g. Michelin Guide), expert opinions (e.g. film critics), awards (e.g. the Oscars), crowd regimes (e.g. bestseller lists, referral function on Amazon) and others. Evaluation devices deploy symbols (stars and hats in hospitality), numbers (business school rankings), text (book reviews) or any combination of them in order to express judgement. They can be produced either by users (TripAdvisor or Facebook's "I like" button), experts (awards) or automatically through algorithms (Amazon's reference function or Google Search). These evaluation devices represent economic coordination regimes that accomplish what in traditional economics the price mechanism was meant to do; they coordinate between supply and demand. In the words of Karpik (2010, 44), they help consumers reduce their, "cognitive deficit that characterizes consumers in the market of singularities. By decreasing the ignorance associated with multidimensional singularities and removing the uncertainties that dog their trajectories in the market place, they authorize the comparisons without which consumers would be limited to random choices." The production of data for evaluation devices is by and large outsourced to the consumer. In the words of Callon et al. (2002, 201), the consumer is busily engaged in the labor of "profiling" products, "(...) consumers are just as active as the other parties involved. They participate in the process of qualifying available products. It is their ability to judge and evaluate that is mobilized to establish and classify relevant differences." Evaluation devices harness these

judgements, connect them with each other and reintroduce them as decision criteria into the consumption process. Thereby the newly emerging ontological category of the ‘click’ plays a particularly important role as the user’s click represents the missing link between acting and thinking. In a single moment, the click combines choice and execution. Who would have ever thought that a little mouse could, for better or worse, help dissolve the divide between thinking and doing, between body and mind?

The brand as semantic space of valuation

On a practice level, the much debated audit explosion consists of the proliferation of a myriad of evaluation devices that measure and monitor, classify and categorize every sphere of life. Rankings hierarchized singularities, referral systems create new typologies, reviews contextualise what tried to break away from the mainstream. We suggest that these evaluation devices constitute the space that we call, for want of a better term, the brand. The sum total of visualizations and valuation practices generate the values associated with and attached to an object. A brand is fundamentally about these values, and not price. As Lury argued (2004, 5) the brand signifies the controlled re-introduction of meaning into market exchange.

Traditionally, the price expressed in monetary terms is defined as the medium that supposedly coordinates market activities. In the universe of authors, universities and all those other singularities, the brand as valuation space functions as a medium that organizes demand and supply. Like one long shopping window, it is all a translucent

surface upon which the inside meets the outside.ⁱⁱ Perhaps we have now arrived at an, at least, temporarily, workable definition of the brand. The brand is a semantic space constituted by the relentless labor of evaluation devices that makes values visible; the brand resembles a platform upon which claims, calculation and categorizations compete, collide and sometimes coalesce. Thinking the brand in that way helps to dodge another set of troubling dualisms.

First, the brand spans both consumption and production. Usually, we think of economic processes as belonging to one or the other category; while production occurs in organizations, consumption equals using up and wasting away. The brand undermines this neat categorization: the brand is the space where consumer activities become productive. Take the example of Facebook. Arguably, its brand is its most valuable asset. In the non-mediated environment of the Internet, where everything is not more than a click away (zero switching costs), the brand provides the only signifier, the only reason to go to or come back to a site. The Facebook brand is a medium, or better, an interface that connects producers and consumers. In connecting them it changes the relationship between production and consumption practices. The actual creation of content is outsourced to users. By chatting, uploading pictures, playing games and clicking the ‘I like’ button, consumers create what is value for Facebook in the first place. The Facebook brand is the semantic space populated by what consumers value; what they praise forms the raw material for Facebook’s price, and what they hold dear is what Facebook sales dearly to advertisers (Dewey 1939).

Second, the brand as semantic space dissolves the categorical differentiation between global and local. Evaluation devices are highly localized and function at the

micro-level of everyday practice. To conduct a Google search is a routine activity that happens countless times a day all over the world; yet every click and every link that express a user preference represent feedback for the system. Once aggregated, global orders and dynamics emerge. Consequently, what is termed global and local does not reflect a categorical difference but rather a matter of resolution.

Third, in the semantic space of the brand, the social, material and technological merge. Through the brand new forms of social organization come into existence. Theories ranging from Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887; translated into English in 1957 as *Community and Society*) to Riesman's *Lonely Crowd* (1950) and Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000) have for more than a century lamented the lack of cohesion and the breakdown of traditional social organization within society. Against this tendency to stress fragmentation over integration, brands usher new forms of sociality into being. Anderson's work (1983) on imagined communities suggests that newspapers and books provided people across sometimes huge physical distances (such as in the US or Australia) with a shared experience that allowed them to imagine themselves as part of the same community. Brands engender new forms of imagined communities. Brands (think Harvard University, for instance) function as a resource for individual identity work and as a medium for collective identification projects. These new forms of social organization are inextricably linked to materialities and the technologies of evaluation devices: relating to Harvard's brand means first and foremost relating to its elite status in global rankings. Hence, calculations that result in league tables are intimately linked to identification mechanisms.

Implications: The brand as organizing device

Brands, we have claimed, are good for thinking. Indeed, they make visible surprising connections between what has been pitched as dualisms of production-consumption, local-global and social-technological. From here we can try to sketch out some further implications.

First, the brand as semantic space of evaluation challenges some taken-for-granted assumptions about market competition and firm-level strategy. As the story goes, strategy is about value creation. Now we have argued that value is not an intrinsic quality that can be packaged and owned in a neat proposition. Rather, things are made valuable through a myriad of evaluation devices. This is a dynamic, decentralized and messy process. Different, locally produced claims, calculations and categorizations about an object meet in the space of the brand where they might clash with each other. Which valuation to believe? Which ranking is correct? Whose review is more convincing? Facing this situation, competition should not be imagined as direct competition between two or more entities or objects; rather, competition shifts towards competition between judgement devices (Karpik 2010). Coping with their bounded rationalities, consumers rely on valuations to make decisions, such as (in the case of novels) bestseller lists, reviews or automatically generated referrals to similar products (on Amazon, for instance). Hence, competition moves to the semantic space where evaluation devices perform their operations. In other words, competition means attacking or defending the

semantic space of the brand in which evaluation devices bestow value(s) on some objects, and devalue others.

Second, the brand reframes the relationship between the individual and society. Rather than building on traditional categories such as profession, class or occupation, the semantic space of the brand shapes social organization through consumption practices. This happens through the notion of lifestyle. Brands form the building blocks that pattern lifestyles. Quite literally, lifestyles are about styling and designing life. In his writings on fashion, Simmel (1905/2000; 1908/2000) provided a most useful analysis of style, which he argued prescribes clear conventions and objective structures. At the same time, style allows individuals to satisfy their need for distinction and difference. Style allows an individual to identify with a certain group or movement and be part of an objectified culture. While it connects with others, style simultaneously allows one to differentiate oneself from others. Style elevates and equalises; it creates envy and approval (Kornberger 2010). Style seems to resolve the dilemma that political theorists from Hobbes to Rousseau struggled with – it unties the Gordian knot of individuality versus society: style means, paradoxically, to create differences that have homogenising effects. (The brand keeps surprising us – who thought that a mechanism as simple as style would solve such a delicate conundrum of humanity!)

Third, thinking through the brand suggests rethinking control. Because the brand is about value(s), it invites multiple interpretations. Danesi (2006) uses the example of the famed Brillo brand. As everyone acquainted with pop art knows, it is more than just a detergent; but in order to understand that “more”, the associations and valuations that have attached themselves to Brillo as a brand must be understood. How these attachments

occur is hard to predict, let alone control. Take the case of the luxury clothing UK brand Burberry, which found itself hijacked by British youths closely associated with football hooliganism. Certainly for reasons out of Burberry's control, their unwanted fan base appropriated its distinctive designs as their own trademark (see Hebdige 1979). From a semiotics perspective, this should not come as a surprise; the locus of meaning making rests on the readers, not the author. The sense-making processes of the reader (consumer) constitute, and sometimes override, the text of the author (producer). Put simply, like beauty, a brand exists in the eye of the beholder. And there it is hard to control. Hence, managing the brand turns into a strangely ambiguous endeavour (see Kornberger, forthcoming). It is the characteristic of the brand – and perhaps its most distinctive attribute – that it depends on turning internal and external audiences into active authors of its evolving narrative. The value of the brand narrative feeds on difference, movement, change and subcultures. Homogeneity and sameness would mark the end of the story. Every ad is a capitalistic investigation of the societal *id*. Indeed, the brand follows a strange logic. It feeds off the production of difference, and therefore the most heretic, deviant, critical practices – in short, all those practices which produce difference – become the most valuable resource for the brand (Holt 2002). Brands represent a system that Baudrillard (1970/2003) described as “industrial production of differences”; every little aberration, alteration, and anomaly is consumed by brand strategists in their conquest for unique and attention-catching brands. Think of lifestyle brands such as Benetton or Adidas that appropriate the fates of the poor, suppressed, convicted and underprivileged, turning them into fodder for their brands (see Frank 1997; Leland 2004). Paradoxically, in order to function for the status quo, the brand has to be subversive of

the status quo. As Askegaard (2006) eloquently states, brands are hegemonic vehicles for the production of endless diversity. Consent and conformity would equal system failure. The brand as organizing device represents a Trojan Horse inserted into the underbelly of the economy. In short, brands are organized heresy.

Conclusion: Analysing higher education brands

Like books, the intrinsic and essential values of universities are rather hard to determine. What is good research? A high citation index? Impact? Or is good teaching the most valuable activity a university can provide? If so, are students the clients or the products of teaching? What should they be taught? Finance or philosophy? And how? Ignoring these grand questions, evaluation devices are busily producing valuations: university rankings, accreditations, research assessment exercises, student feedback and countless other evaluation devices make values visible, hierarchize them, categorize them and transform them. The audit explosion around the higher education sector (and not only there) is nothing but a symptom of the inability to define what value is; and the accompanying belief that we can find out through evaluation processes.

Following that line of argument a university brand is the semantic space constituted by the sum total of claims, calculations and categorizations that have been articulated, visualized and disseminated through evaluation devices. It is in this new brand space where we might find surprising answers to questions of competition, social organization and power in the higher education sector.

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ⁱⁱ Metaphorically speaking, the brand represents the evolution of the shopping window. Being neither inside nor outside, it belongs to both the consumer and the producer. It is the translucent canvas that reflects economic realities and social relations. The shopping window and the brand are both border operations, exchange mechanisms, interfaces. Marcel Duchamp provided the blueprint for the logic of the interface. His masterpiece, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, or more colloquially known as *The Large Glass*, is a 110-by-70-inch work comprised of two glass panels in a frame (Duchamp actually referred to it as a shopping window). The top panel contains the bride, who is stripping. In the bottom panel the bachelors (represented by empty jackets and uniforms) are grinding away. While the bachelors are doomed to repeat their machine production, the bride is the engine of desire that keeps the system going. *The Large Glass* is a diagram that shows, in its most abstract form, how consumption and production work with each other mediated through the interface of the shopping window. The logic of production and the logic of consumption are combined and expressed in one piece of art, which gives us a complete picture of the brand society as an endless parade of desire and production, organized and framed by the medium of the shopping window / brand. After *The Large Glass*, Duchamp retired as an artist and focused on playing chess instead. He said that "I like living, breathing better than working." And right he was, what could he have created after the blueprint was exposed, the diagram drawn?