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HOW MOLESKINE BECAME A CULTURAL ICON: THE JOURNEY OF A BRAND FOR CONTEMPORARY NOMADS

Purpose of the paper and literature addressed
In today's marketplace, the success that brands like Nike, Harley-Davidson, Apple, or Vans gained, does not merely depend upon their ability to innovate more than their competitors do. Rather, these brands are strong because they were and are able to forge a deep connection with the culture or the sub-culture of their consumers, allowing them to nurture their identity project or that of the community(ies) they belong to (Holt and Douglas 2010). In other words, these brands compete for culture share: they leverage on cultural resources, tell stories about their brands by enacting a process of co-authorship with their consumers, achieve a cultural standing and, eventually, gain market success (McCracken 1986; Holt 2004). Cultural brands thus, go far beyond the function of identifying a producer and its products, but are imbued with symbolic meanings that mediate market exchanges and consumers’ behavior within the marketplace (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Arvidsson 2006; Manning 2010). Scholars have devoted particular attention to how brands acquire this cultural status, a process that is often called brand iconization (Klein, 2000; Arvidsson 2001; Holt 2004; Manning and Uplisashvili, 2007; Kravets and Orge 2010; Holt and Cameron 2010). It is argued that brands can be conceptualized as repositories of some cultural myths, ideals, and values cherished by a given community, thereby helping to sustain and reinforce a sense of belonging, unity and continuity of the members’ community and of the community itself (Varman and Belk 2009; Kravets and Orge 2010). Iconic brands like other popular cultural products such as art, movies, music, television, and popular characters such as famous singers or influential politics (Holt, 2004), create stories through powerful myth that people will identify with in their everyday lives, and use these myths as the backbone of their cultural branding strategy.

Cultural branding consists in a theoretical and practical approach to branding rooted in studies adopting a cultural paradigm to consumption (McC racken, 1986, Holt, 2004; Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Heding et al., 2008), largely different from conventional branding model, e.g. mind-sharing, emotional or viral branding (Holt, 2004).

According to Holt, iconic brands are bearer of a powerful cultural myth that generates identification by a part of the society - usually a subculture - that is in open opposition to a dominant cultural orthodoxy. The existence of this cultural orthodoxy generates a profound anxiety in certain social strata that push them to “ghettoize” themselves in opposition to the dominant paradigm. Thus, iconic brands are able to amplify the “rebels’ voice” offering them a myth to identify with (Holt 2004; Thompson & Humphreys 2014). They become active members of the community and convey the cherished ideology into their brand narratives, and into their advertising strategy (Holt, 2004)

However, much of the literature on iconic brands is mostly in relation to identity politics as brands become involved in the ritual consolidation or destruction of socio-cultural systems (see Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Holt 2004). In addition,
studies to date are largely focused on American brands and on the American culture (Holt 2004), while little attention has been posed to other cultural contexts in which consumers’ and marketers’ behavior within the marketplace were found to be largely different (e.g. Cova 2005), with few exception, e.g. Arvidsson 2001; Kravets and Orge 2010. As a result, findings and managerial implications drawn make sense as long as they are interpreted in relation to the local cultural context from which they stemmed from, and in the specific dialectic opposition that iconic brands evoke in relation to the specific cultural orthodoxy. Examples are the myth of the American frontier typically evoked by brands like Jack Daniel’s (Holt 2006). The “liveliness” of Soviet brands that was found to be tightly connected to the existence of international hostility against the communist ethos of the Russian capitalism (Kravets and Orge 2010). The importance that the Vespa scooter had as the symbol of an antagonistic cultural movement that took place from the beginning of the 60s to the end of the 70s in Italy. In this research, we assume a different stance and investigate how a brand achieved the icon status although it does not embody an antagonistic ideology or an anticapitalistic ethos, it is not enclaved in a specific local context, and it does not make use of advertising: Moleskine. Born in 1997, Moleskine “is an inclusive and premium journey brand that enables everyday life on the move, by providing an ecosystem of carefully designed products and services. Moleskine inspires mindful travel, foster ideas and triggers exploration, filling our path with thoughts” (Interbrand 2014). Globally known for the legendary paper made black covered notebook used by artists of the past, e.g. Van Gogh, Picasso, Hemingway, Chatwin, etc. the brand now identifies a family of products for creative professions such as notebooks, planners, sketchbook, bags, cases for digital devices, book lights, and backpacks.

**Methodology**

To verify if the brand Moleskine can be framed as an iconic brand we used the framework proposed by Holt (2004). This framework, provides both a practical guidelines for managers who strive to create iconic brand, and a reflexive schema researchers can use to understand if a brand satisfies the requirements needed to be considered an icon or not. These requirements are: (1) The existence of an anxiety caused by a deep cultural change that the brand can mitigate by providing a myth to believe in. (2) The existence of a cultural gap, a tension, between the proposed myth and the dominant ideology or cultural orthodoxy of the time. (3) The brand’s ability to create an original expressive culture throughout a unique visual expression. (4) The brand’s literacy, i.e. the brand’s ability to deeply understand the culture or the sub-culture of the social group to which it is targeted. (5) The brand’s fidelity, i.e. the brand consistency with its core values over the time. In order to investigate these aspects, we used the “brand genealogy” method, provided by Holt (2004), consisting in an interpretative bottom-up approach that starts from the analysis of some micro-level aspects (such as brand narratives or advertising strategies) and attempts to provide a macro-level interpretation of brand’s iconization.

We used the Holt’s (2004) brand genealogy method consisting in three levels of analysis. First, the analysis of the communication strategy deployed by the brand over
time. Second, the analysis of social discourses and of other related mass culture products over time. Third, the socioeconomic tracking of the major shifts in the global society.

The interpretive research was conducted by making extensive use and interpretation of secondary data provided by the company, such as communication briefing, segmentation, target, and positioning statements, brand’s scorecard, etc. alongside other sources (both brand and non-brand related) which allowed to consider the brand and its development within its socio-cultural context. We thus applied a methodology consisting in what Holt (2002; 2004) himself calls the “extended case method”. Derived from anthropological studies, the “extended case” is a discovery-oriented method that aims at unravelling and achieving a thorough understanding of the cultural contradictions of a given time that offer a fertile ground for the emergence and establishment of subcultures (including but not limiting to subculture of consumption).

**Preliminary research findings**

The research led to the following preliminary results. First, we show that Moleskine is eligible to be called an iconic brand as it can be framed within the Holt’s (2004) framework. Moleskine became an icon by embracing and partially mediating the widespread anxiety in between the end of the 90’s and the beginning of the 21st century (a period that signed the passage from modernity to liquid modernity, see Bauman, 2000). Moleskine was able to develop an iconic brand pursuing a retro-branding strategy to respond to consumers’ quest for nostalgic experiences (see Brown et al. 2003), by sharply combining the myth of the journey and of mythic travelers such as Bruce Chatwin and Jack Kerouac, with the contemporary meanings of the travel experience (now commodified, see Leed 2000), and the contemporary emergence of the “creative class” (Florida, 2002).

They identified a target that was not previously exploited: contemporary nomads. Born at the very end of the 20th century, contemporary nomadism boomed during the first decades of the 21st century becoming a non-country specific global phenomenon (Abbas 2001; Bardhi et al. 2012) emerged also as a cultural response to political chaos and to recovery a cultural identity gone lost (Abbas, 2001). Contemporary nomadism has been enabled by contingent factors such as the reduced costs of air travel, and the massive emergence of new ICT systems (Urry, 2002; Dagnino 2013) that made travelling an ambition not necessarily of few people (Leed, 2000).

Contemporary nomads represent an elite of traveling professionals, creatives, and skilled workers, that emerged with the development of the global economy and with the concomitant dismantling of the social equilibrium that characterized the modern economy (Bauman 2000). They frequently travel internationally, avoid nostalgia and rather than being disenchanted for the negative aspects caused from the condition of postmodernity, they adopt a strategy of adaptation, including the dismissal of the moral-social obligation of remaining rooted in a given place (Bardhi et al. 2012; Featherstone 1995; Firat & Venkatesh 1995). Although neo-nomads refuse the social approval and consumerism, they do not deny the fundamentals capitalism and competition that they merge with the concept of cooperation and community
Contemporary nomads should not be compared to other groups of travelers expressing some forms of subversive counterculture (D’Andrea 2006; D’Andrea and Gray 2013), that are generally assumed to be the non-orthodox group of consumers to which iconic brands are primarily targeted. They do not wish to break the system; rather ride the system and take best of it. As Dagnino (1996) put forward, “they feel at home in New York as in Bombay, they are “uprooted” but they have family, they switch from sushi to tandoori chicken as easily as they switch from the “Washington Post” to “Le Monde”. They speak more than one foreign language, use the most advanced technology, and are generally freelancers. We speak about individuals who have rare cross-cultural skills that don’t have problems to establish relationship in Paris or in Tokyo, with a local finance tycoon or with a computer hacker [...] They have fast and flexible thinking, they have the only creed of cosmopolitanism. Great experts of sudden metamorphosis, they are able to adapt in each context keeping intact their identity” (Dagnino 1996, p.8).

Differently from previous studies, we show how a brand was able to acquire the iconic status without investing in advertising. We identified instead the achievement of such a status in other marketing leverages including price, distribution, and non-conventional promotional techniques.

The brand show literacy as it understands social anxiety and provides a myth in which a part of society can identify itself, i.e. the postmodern interpretation of the journey. And also show fidelity as it intercepts the technological shift from analogic to digital technologies while remaining anchored to the core values cherished by contemporary nomads. We use fidelity as the main driver of the brands’ extension beyond paper-made notebooks, including other products that complete the kit of the contemporary nomad, such as tablet and notebooks cases, backpacks, reading lamps, and smartphone apps.

Contribution

This research contributes to the specific field of studies on brand’s iconization. It adds elements of novelty to studies conducted by Holt and others as it show how Moleskine became an icon without using advertising but leveraging on other promotional tools and on other elements of the marketing mix. In addition, it focuses on a specific case of brand that became an icon without committing itself to subversive antagonistic, or anticapitalistic social discourse typically held by subcultures of consumption. Rather, it is cherished by a specific target of consumers, i.e. contemporary nomads, that evolved from a small niche in the early 90’s to a global niche to date, with the emergence of the intertwined and partly overlapping group of the creative class (Florida 2002), that instead of rejecting the condition of postmodernity, wave it becoming active members, both mean and cause of the present social transition. Besides the specific case of Moleskine we suggest contemporary nomads as a fruitful target that also other companies can exploit as long as their offering and their brand narratives are aligned to the cultural background and expectations of this group of consumers.

References


