SOCIOLOGY OF BRANDING: "JUST DO IT" IN THE "NO LIMITS" WORLD

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ABSTRACT:

Brands are an important element of consumer culture. They represent communication of symbolic meanings, in which they are realised, and confirm critical aspects in social, cultural and psychological life contexts. Not only is the function of brands to explain the world of (im)material values and options and make them accessible but they also aim to reduce feelings of uncertainty with regard to multiple purchase decisions in conditions of expanding consumer options. Historically, trademarks change the traditional personified relationships of trust between local merchants and customers and generate its new impersonal form in the global environment of interactive relationships of manufacturers and consumers. The modern consumer is thus no longer a passive object of pervasive techniques and manipulative strategies used by the retailers, but also an active actor in the processes of production, innovations, product presentation and creation of the brand value. The study aims to show that brands should be communicated as open contexts, inspiring and motivating the consumers to fulfil them, make them complete, adjust and develop them in accordance with who the consumers are and who they would like to become. In the current marketing context, the trustworthiness, meaningfulness and attractiveness of these contexts is reflected via the social environment of the dominant values (individualism and hedonism) represented by advertising slogans such as "Just Do It" or "No Limits".

KEY WORDS:

brand, consumer culture, hedonism, iconic brand, identity

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Introduction

Ever-growing importance of brands and branding is one of the most significant attributes influencing the current consumer culture.[1] The branding industry represents a complex of theoretical and practical actions, the purpose of which is to give the brand a unique and unmistakable identity, to fulfil the need to perform a systematic and effective building and management of brands.[2] Such brands then may be presented, promoted and clearly perceived by consumers without the presence of a specific product or service. The logos, slogans, specific designs of colour combinations of shapes and images which can communicate a unique message to consumers, provoke imaginations, attitudes, fantasies, desires and associate them with certain products, may be defined as "brands". Therefore "trademarks" do not automatically become "brands". Nevertheless, in this context we will use "brand" as the more general term.

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1   LURY, C.: *Consumer Culture*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2011, p. 3.
2   ARVIDSSON, A.: *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture*. New York : Routledge, 2006, p. 66-95.

As the trademark is not interchangeable with the brand, similarly the brand cannot be confused with the product. According to Wang,[3] the product is what is manufactured in a factory and the brand is what is purchased by customers. The product can be anything that is showed in the store or may be exchanged, what is offered for a certain price, what provides service, performance or help with satisfying everyday needs of a practical character. In order to transform into a brand, it is essential that a product evokes credibility in minds of customers.[4] Simply put, the difference between the product and the brand is that the brand is given a credibility representing an added value; this value is usually reflected in the price of the product. In principle, there are two types of products: original product and brand, and a brand will become a product if the marketing company builds a mutual relationship and common 'story' between the product and the consumer.[5] This thesis is supported by Holt who states that the fundamental difference between products and brands is not only the identification, i.e. logo, packaging specifics or other design features, but rather the history of meanings and stories continuously put into (and ascribed to) the content of the brand by consumers themselves – the day-to-day practices that form what the brand stands for. According to Holt, a brand is always a result of a diverse "authorship" of many activities of producers, retailers and consumers.[6] Lury sees this topic similarly; brands should be understood as marketing tools first appearing at the intersection of a historically emerging set of different events and development tendencies of business practices in the half of the 19th century (including marketing, advertising, design, graphical techniques), the expansion of which can be seen in 1880s.[7]

Massive economic changes in the rapidly developing industrial countries of Europe in the area of goods production and distribution are among the main historical events of the turn of the 19th and 20th century stimulating the emergence of brands. The volume and speed of product flows increased enormously; the growing productivity of labour led to the expansion of mass production. The original local markets transformed into global markets where the principles of consumer economy, new concepts of trading and refined business strategies were applied. The most significant changes in the field of production and business attitudes were accompanied by effort to sell the largest possible volumes of goods; with fewer margins in comparison with the original selling strategies based on trading of lower volumes of products with an increasing price. However, until 1880s, the introduction of mass production and distribution of highly standardised goods to large segments of population had not been accompanied by the massive support of brands and advertising.[8] The brands and branded products emerged as media of social communication only gradually[9] and as a *mediator*,[10] they slowly entered the complex of demand and supply as an initiation force. Approximately until the half of the 19th century, the brands and branded products had appeared only sporadically in the area of small-scale production, referring to individual manufacturers and forms, but they had not yet stimulated or boosted demand of consumers, as it was common in later stages of the developed production in consumer economy. The real 'boom' of brands could be seen in the last decade of the 19th century when the investments into advertising experienced a dramatic surge.[11]

The expansion of brands and branded products is not only a marketing and business phenomenon supporting the growing sale effectiveness, making of enormous profit and other resources of future investments, but also a part of more significant changes of social and psychological attributes related to lives of consumers.

The brands have clearly disturbed the traditional relationships between customers and merchants based on simple and repeated mutual interaction, the purpose of which was to maintain and raise the interest of the customer in the chosen goods; the merchant has started to be perceived as the bearer of the trust and guarantor of the quality of products. The brands have significantly changed the role of merchants and the relationship of manufacturers and retailers suddenly has a new, often conflicting and unclear dimension.[12] The traditional customer becomes a consumer whose consumer behaviour does no longer lie within the space of merchants and salesmen, but is strongly formed and confirmed by the product commutation of company brands. The brands of different corporations not only represent a power reconstituting the relationship of the retailer and the customer, but also a dynamic communication platform of producers, retailers and consumers. This communication platform's purpose is not to define the relationship to the customer in the form of a single act 'stimulus – reaction', but to form a permanent relationship based on trust, loyalty and continuity. The most successful company brands of our times are those that are able to transform the basic relationship with consumers into deeper relationships, similar to those related to loyal friends or family ties.

Definition of the Problem and Objectives of the Study

Efforts for a more detailed and in-depth understanding of the meaning and functioning of brands in the complex environment of the ever-changing consumer culture is reflected in many sociological studies on consumption[13] or economic sociology.[14] However, the attention of researches have more systemically concentrated on concepts of brands as communication media of symbolic meanings, in which important aspects of social, cultural and psychological life circumstances are realised and confirmed; over the last years with different contexts and intensity.[15] There is no doubt that brands reinforce consumption in consumption-based societies and given their significance and extent, they enter areas where work and job positions were originally perceived as stabilising elements determining social status, way of living and character of identity.[16] At present, the active engagement in the processes of consumption represents, in different modalities of consumer approaches and purchasing decisions, a significant indicator of the individual success, prestige and recognition,[17] as well as a source of identity construction and reconstruction,[18] modelling of social roles, self-reflection and re-definition of interpersonal relationships. Due to the fact that only a minimum attention is paid to these aspects this study strives to explain them in more detail.

The aim of this article is to explain the role of brands as a significant attribute of the consumer culture and an important element of complex relationships of production and consumption, demand and supply. Our effort is to contribute to the debate regarding the brands as media of iconic meanings and symbolic messages determining the current type of consumer culture where the functional and useful value of products undergoes a progressive transformation via their immaterial representations. We will note that the brand's primary function is to build and strengthen the bonds of trust with customers based on emotionality, sensual perception, initiation of authentic projections, ideas and fantasies and provision of meaningful (even though only temporary) sources of identity and attractive lifestyle 'manuals'. We support the statement that the formation

3   WANG, J.: *Brand New China: Advertising, Media and Commercial Culture*. Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 23.
4   HELLMANN, K. U.: Sociologie značky. In ZAHRÁDKA, P. (ed.): *Spotřební kultura: Historie, teorie a výzkum*. Praha : Academia, 2014, p. 233.
5   HELLMANN, K. U.: Sociologie značky. In ZAHRÁDKA, P. (ed.): *Spotřební kultura: Historie, teorie a výzkum*. Praha : Academia, 2014, p. 234.
6   HOLT, D.: *How Brands Becomes Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*. Cambridge, MA : Harvard Business Review, 2004, p. 3.
7   LURY, C.: *Consumer Culture*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2011, p. 150.
8   HELLMANN, K. U.: Sociologie značky. In ZAHRÁDKA, P. (ed.): *Spotřební kultura: Historie, teorie a výzkum*. Praha : Academia, 2014, p. 235-236.
9   GRIES, R.: Nové trendy ve výzkumu spotřební kultury: produktová komunikace. In ZAHRÁDKA, P. (ed.): *Spotřební kultura: Historie, teorie a výzkum*. Praha : Academia, 2014, p. 292.
10   LURY, C.: *Consumer Culture*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2011, p. 137.
11   For instance, in only nine years (1892-1901) Coca-Cola increased investments in advertising from the original 11,000 dollars to 100,000 dollars; at the end of 1930s these investments amounted to almost 4 million dollars. Brands such as American Tabbaco, Kodak, Heinz, Quaker Oats, Odol, Maggi, Leibniz or Dr. Oetker began to appear. For more information, see: LIPOVETSKY, G.: *Paradoxní štěstí*. Praha : Prostor, 2007, p. 33.

12   Creating own branded products of supermarkets may serve as an example. For more information, see: LURY, C.: *Consumer Culture*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2011, p. 139.
13   KELLER, M., KELLY, A.: Throwaway History: Brand Ephemera and Consumer Culture. In *Journal of Macromarketing*, 2015, Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 397-406.
14   FOSTER, R. J.: The Work of the New Economy: Consumer, Brands, and Value Creation. In *Cultural Anthropology*, 2007, Vol. 22, No. 4, p. 707-731.
15   For more information, see: LURY, C.: *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy*. London : Routledge, 2004.
16   CHORVÁT, I.: Premeny životného štýlu – sociologické východiská a predpoklady. In *Sociológia*, 2015, Vol. 47, No. 1, p. 20.
17   HEATH, J.: Kritika konzumerismu. In ZAHRÁDKA, P. (ed.): *Spotřební kultura: Historie, teorie a výzkum*. Praha : Academia, 2014, p. 326.
18   ANDORFER, V. A., LIEBE, U.: Research on Fair Trade Consumption – A Review. In *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2012, Vol. 106, No. 4, p. 419.

of brand value is no longer a unilateral matter and result of either strategic plans of manufacturers or creative prowess of advertisers in the environment filled with passive and easily manipulated consumers. We assume that building the brand value successfully is more and more dependent on systematic monitoring and understanding of consumer practices and activities (including the extensive platform of shared opinions, ratings or experience in the digital environment of social networks and weblogs).

We will emphasise that the producers subsequently use this knowledge to create innovations and product and image enhancements; they adjust the strategies of communication campaigns and retrospectively contribute to the formation and reformation of the consumer environment. Our ambition is to show that in order to communicate a brand successfully, the creativity and originality of its manifestation alone is not enough; the abilities to react to the reality and social situation of the day-to-day life, to anticipate psychological needs of customers, their visions, wishes and ideals are needed as well. Therefore, all brands should be communicated through an open *context,* inspiring and motivating consumers to be gratified by them, made complete, adjusted and developed within the bounds of who the consumers are and who they would like to become.

In the sociological context, we would like to briefly interpret the Olympic advertising campaign "No Limits" from Atlanta 1996 as a potential illustration of how the media message concentrated in the "No Limits" slogan credibly reflects some social and psychological aspects of life and offers the social actors – customers – a media *context* of searching for (and confirming) symbolic meanings and values of everyday life in the information-saturated age of 'unlimited opportunities'.

Iconic Brands as Symbolic Sources of Identity

The key question is what principles of brand communication strategies are to be applied to gain trust of customers and win their loyalty as preconditions to build, maintain and strengthen emotional ties to the brand value.[19] Firstly, in the recent years, brand advertising campaigns have left the position of rational argumentation with regard to usefulness, i.e. functional and practical value of the communicated products.[20] In other words, advertisements presenting branded products often do not clearly emphasise their technical advantages and parameters with regard to their durability, operating life, resilience, usability, scope of effects and multitude of functions. On the contrary, in the era of late modernity, it is significant to uncover and communicate symbolic representations of products creatively and originally – via values, emotionality, visions, fantasies or fictions – above all, in the marketing practices or advertising production as such. New spheres and meanings of consumption are uncovered; they may be seen as functions constituting many elements of individual and social dimensions of life.[21] These functions also shape the meaning of creating the 'life-time project'. According to Bauman, *"a work of art or rather the artist's identity should be the product of work";* our identity partly shapes up in specific outlines, contours, shades and colours during the acts of purchasing desired brands.[22] Sociological analyses of the importance of consumption in the era of late modernity focus their attention on the increasing importance of the process of individualisation and aim to explain related acts of shopping and consumption, in which the actors seek sources of their own identity.[23] In this connection, celebrities evoking success, strength, persistence, resilience and other attractive qualities appear more frequently in advertising formats and communication strategies of different brands as a dominant feature.[24]

The principles of this identity creation are based on the fact that consumer goods in the form of purchased commodities are objects of 'de-commodification' developing the ability of social actors to treat consumer goods as intangible resources and tools of thinking and developing fiction, rituals, imagination or con-

structing models of self-concept; these are of different stability and reliability and interpretation of one's own life situation is thus manifested through varying relationships to the world. The aim of marketing communication is therefore to provide brands with such meanings and ideas that would be understandable, meaningful and attractive so much that the audience members would embrace and adopt them as their own life attitude. Branded products that are presented in the media as symbols and other abstract representations of values and ideas, do not only represent objectives and resources for potential formation of identities and lifestyles but they also become the media of meanings; through these meanings new forms of sociality responding to increasing requirements of flexibility in terms of more complex social environment can be created. In this connection, the brands represent original schemes reducing – to some extent – the opportunities and uncertainties in decision-making, mostly via expansion and exploration of consumer practices.[25] The brand and logos can do a lot for the customers – they will guide them through the winding road littered with land mines that leads to happiness.[26] To show direction on these roads, i.e. to convince consumers that this road is the safest one, the one bringing the most subjective pleasure and social prestige, is one of the fundamental functions of brands. To achieve that, the brands must win the customers' trust first. Then they become 'islands of certainty' in the disturbing world full of uncertainties.

It must be said that at present, brands also play an important role if the hierarchic and hierarchy-forming systems (in the form of different collective principles and ways of life, rules of social contact and collective norms and patterns) one can lean on and that can be used to establish what is tasteful or distasteful, elegant or vulgar, collapse.[27] If such collectively shared and respected cultural framework collapses, deregulated plurality systems, the functioning of which is no longer collective but rather individual, will appear instead. It is where certain concerns and uncertainties related to the aspects of consumerism, those that used to be spontaneous in the said hierarchic and hierarchy-forming systems, seemingly automatically, as they were subject to established social conventions and unalienable customs and traditions, arise.

An *iconic brand*,[28] represented by relatively stable (and therefore credible) images, symbols and schemes, within which the consumers re-construct the story of their own identity and where they confirm who they are or who they would like to be, is a successful brand.[29] Advertising campaigns should creatively draw from the existing beliefs and practices of social life – they need to transform them credibly and creatively, so that they would fulfil psychological needs and wishes of specific social groups.[30] The iconic brands thus help customers to express their own ideals, to live in accordance with certain values and specific lifestyles.

Therefore, a customer is not a passive object manipulated by advertisements and blindly falling prey to advertising strategies. The idea of a consumer as an irrational human being, a powerless and helpless object of the marketing industry, was originally introduced by Packard.[31] Klein continues to put forward related arguments in the modernised version of the original concept.[32] This viewpoint supports the statement that the consumers are literally *"hypnotized by advertising"* to irrationality of decision-making in shopping situations, which supports the consumer way of life.[33] Within this perspective, consumerism is seen as a collective deception *sui generis.* However, in recent years, the thesis of a passive consumer manipulated by advertising is considered naive and unlikely, mostly due to the complex reality of life in the consumer society where the elements of individualism and flexibility prevail more and more.[34] While the so-called 'ideological critique' of consum-

19   STILLERMAN, J.: *The Sociology of Consumption. A Global Approach.* Cambridge : Polity Press, 2015, p. 66.
20   LURY, C.: *Consumer Culture.* Cambridge : Polity Press, 2011, p. 141.
21   SASSATELLI, R.: Sociologie spotřeby: jednání, distinkce a identita. In ZAHRÁDKA, P. (ed.): *Spotřební kultura: Historie, teorie a výzkum.* Praha : Academia, 2014, p. 87-114.
22   BAUMAN, Z.: *Umění života.* Praha : Academia, 2010, p. 91.
23   STILLERMAN, J.: *The Sociology of Consumption. A Global Approach.* Cambridge : Polity Press, 2015, p. 55.
24   MIKULÁŠ, P., SVĚTLÍK, J.: Execution of Advertising and Celebrity Endorsement. In *Communication Today,* 2016, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 94.

25   LIPOVETSKY, G.: *Paradoxní štěstí.* Praha : Prostor, 2007, p. 52-57.
26   BAUMAN, Z.: *Umění života.* Praha : Academia, 2010, p. 20.
27   LIPOVETSKY, G.: *Paradoxní štěstí.* Praha : Prostor, 2007, p. 56.
28   LURY, C.: *Consumer Culture.* Cambridge : Polity Press, 2011, p. 149-150.
29   HOLT, D.: *How Brands Becomes Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding.* Cambridge, MA : Harvard Business Review, 2004, p. 1-13.
30   STILLERMAN, J.: *The Sociology of Consumption. A Global Approach.* Cambridge : Polity Press, 2015, p. 32.
31   For more information, see: PACKARD, V.: *The Hidden Persuaders. (With an Introduction by Mark Crispin Miller).* New York, Brooklyn : Ig Publishing, 2007.
32   For more information, see: KLEINOVÁ, N.: *Bez loga: Bez prostoru, bez volby, bez práce.* Praha : Argo, 2012.
33   KLEINOVÁ, N.: *Bez loga: Bez prostoru, bez volby, bez práce.* Praha : Argo, 2012, p. 104.
34   HEATH, J.: Kritika konzumerismu. In ZAHRÁDKA, P. (ed.): *Spotřební kultura: Historie, teorie a výzkum.* Praha : Academia, 2014, p. 325-335.

erism incorporated in the publications by Packard,[35] Adorno and Horkheiemer[36] or Kingwell[37] is put into question, the so-called 'liberal critique' of consumerism of Schor[38] or Soper[39] is gaining popularity instead. The common basis of the liberal critique is the fact that the attention is paid to the consumers as such; mostly through analyses of their life practices, social relationships, experience and self-reflections. Not renouncing numerous questions of ethical, environmental and social risks of the consumer culture and consumerism, this critique rather focuses on the argumentation effort to challenge its 'Dionysus' manifestation. It refuses to see the consumer culture as a 'dark magic' manipulating and dragging the hypnotised consumers, i.e. those that are chaotically tossed around in the play of market forces, the people irrationally and spontaneously longing for ecstatic stimulus designed by marketing rationally and produced by pragmatic business strategies. It does not view the consumers as objects of manipulation and products of the supra-individual force of the rationally functioning market pressure but rather as reflecting actors, those actively forming the discourse framework of consumption, those able to freely experience and critically interpret their own experience and reflect it to their attitudes to the surrounding world. Such consumers are able to take responsibility for the world outside and at the same time to shape the world by their actions.

Role of Consumers in Creating the Brand Value

It is important to note that the thesis of a passive consumer is, in many cases, contradicted by the advertising practice and modern marketing communication strategies, including branding. Here, it can often be seen that the consumer is an active actor in the whole course of the brand value creation, communicating with the manufacturer through products in the entire process of production and distribution. The consumer becomes a co-creator of the brand that is not communicated by advertising specialists as an item of definitive and 'complete' quality, but as an 'open space' filled with potential context, in which different practices of the consumers are fulfilled and finalised by applying fantasy, playfulness and experimentation.

According to Arvidsson, the brand value creation is highly dependent on practices of the consumers.[40] In principle, it is a highly sophisticated business and marketing strategy, which uses the consumers as voluntary, willing and often very resourceful co-creators of brands, spontaneously developing and confirming their value systems in the day-to-day practices. The involvement of the consumers as co-authors experimenting with symbolic values of brands and finalising the commonly shared stories, may, in fact, be an effective mechanism to establish a stronger and more persistent identification of the consumers with the given brand. If brands are communicated as *open contexts* within the meaning 'You may!' and not as *closed systems* of values within the meaning 'You must!',[41] they may be strongly linked with emotionality of the consumers and thus fulfil the idea of so-called *lovemarks*.[42]

The principles of brand communication following the logic 'You may', 'Try it' or 'Discover' do not *a priori* dictate, order or determine anything; on the contrary, they represent a challenge, they invite to an adventure, to discover something new. They provide an opportunity to experience self-reflection, self-rec-

ognition and spontaneous self-confirmation. There is no doubt that the currently preferred understanding of brand marketing communication mirrors the social situation of hypertrophying individualism of the late modernity, contributing to the ethos of hedonistic playfulness and reflecting the requirements of increasing flexibility and independence in both personal relationships and work practices. The consumers thus enter a communication space filled with constant movement where they are exposed to marketing seduction, fashion trends and impulses related to the latest lifestyle tendencies.[43]

The current advertising strategies associated with building the brand value usually use two different methods of how to incorporate practices and experience of the consumers as an added brand value.[44] Firstly, the practices and experience of the customers are actively used in the process of product development (and thus also influence business strategies used for sales promotion).

Ethnographic studies, field observation and functioning networks of paid informers aim to recognise specific practices and experience of the customers and ways of how they treat various products. In addition, the identification of consumption practices allows the producers to use the obtained information purposefully – in the manufacturing process, development, innovations and product upgrades – so they would better and more closely match the needs and requirements of the customers.

The concept of so-called *Cool Hunting*[45] is applied as a standard method of monitoring various non-traditional, original and alternative forms of lifestyle and self-realisation in the environment of subcultures. These active processes of intensively searching for authentic self-realisation, personal expression of non-conformity or other 'cool' motives of self-presentation should be strategically, rationally and selectively made topical and retrospectively incorporated into images of the advertising messages. Subsequently, the original ideas and meanings will transform into authentic expressions of life of subcultures through commercial products or mainstream fashion trends.

In addition to the active utilisation of knowledge and observations of specific life practices of the customers, which serve to improve the brands' image and increase the products' attractiveness, the producers and marketing specialists rely on their own ability to design and offer branded products not in the form of *"ready-made objects"*,[46] but rather as *open contexts* of different symbolic meanings where emotionality, fantasy, creativity and experience of the customers is to be applied.

Commodities can be understood as symbolic indicators, through which some of the actors reproduce cultural meanings and structuralise social space. The fact is that consumer goods in the form of purchased commodities are subsequently 'de-commodified' to serve as tools of construction of the social and psychological dimension of life. The consumers thus exert 'de-commodification' practice, deconstruct and reconstruct commodities through the non-market logic of symbolic representations to give them such social and psychological meanings that would give their actions a specific and meaningful order. The act of shopping is not entirely subject to fashion trends and market imperatives; the process of turning an authentic life philosophy into everyday reality actively is also important here.[47]

Metaphorically speaking, the products of branding may be viewed by the customers as shell constructions that they 'discover', gradually adjust and finalise in a way they live or would like to live. The value of 'home' is then formed by individual and social 'fulfilment' of different dispositions and potentials, by authentic use of its parameters, in which the qualities of human identity are reflected and confirmed and where authentic practices of day-to-day life are realised. Thus, a certain kind of *genius domicilli ("lovemark")* is developed; it is a unique, intimate and unreproducible tie to home, the value of which is not formed by external forces represented by developers, producers and construction companies. It originates from the internal authentic and repeated emotional experience of those who actively attribute specific meanings and values to their 'home'.

35   For more information, see: HEATH, J.: Kritika konzumerismu. In ZAHRÁDKA, P. (ed.): *Spotřební kultura: Historie, teorie a výzkum.* Praha : Academia, 2014, p. 325-335.
36   ADORNO, T., HORKHEIMER, M.: The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception. In SCHOR, J., HOLT, B. D. (eds.): *The Consumer Society Reader.* New York : The New Press, 2000, p. 3-19.
37   KINGWELL, M.: *Better Living: In Pursuit of Happiness from Plato to Prozac.* New York : Crown Publishing, 2000, p. 178-179.
38   SCHOR, J. B.: *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need.* New York : Basic Books, 1998, p. 65-111.
39   SOPER, K.: Beyond Consumerism: The Critique of Consumption, Democracy, and the Politics of Prosperity. In ZAHRÁDKA, P., SEDLÁKOVÁ, R. (eds.): *New Perspective on Consumer Culture and Research.* Newcastle upon Tyne : Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2012, p. 180-200.
40   ARVIDSSON, A.: Brands: A Critical Perspective. In *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 2005, Vol. 5, No. 5, p. 235-258.
41   LURY, C.: *Consumer Culture.* Cambridge : Polity Press, 2011, p. 159.
42   The idea of 'lovemarks' is a concept of brands that are not only respected by the consumers but also loved by them at the same time. As part of their marketing communication, successful brands of our times (such as Nike, Coca Cola) use the schemes of *lovemarks* and build emotional ties with the consumers based on the qualities of intimacy, sensuality, empathy or fantasies, entrenched in media--disseminated iconic stories of the brand. For more information, see: ROBERTS, K.: *Lovemarks: The Future Beyond Brands.* New York : PowerHouse Books, 2005, p. 37-49.
43   LIPOVETSKY, G.: *Hypermoderní doba. Od požitku k úzkosti.* Praha : Prostor, 2013, p. 66.
44   LURY, C.: *Consumer Culture.* Cambridge : Polity Press, 2011, p. 158-161.
45   STILLERMAN, J.: *The Sociology of Consumption. A Global Approach.* Cambridge : Polity Press, 2015, p. 61.
46   LURY, C.: *Consumer Culture.* Cambridge : Polity Press, 2011, p. 159.
47   DOUGLAS, M.: *Thought Styles: Critical Essays on Good Taste.* London : Sage, 1996, p. 86.

Advertising Campaign "No Limits" in Sociological Perspective

Let us remember that there are many reasons why today's customers must be perceived – in accordance with the liberal critique of consumerism – as reflecting actors seeking sources of identity, understanding and confirmation of their own position in social relationships through the acts of consumption. The value of brands is an important part of the 'de-commodification' practice of the consumers impacting the patterns of their consumption behaviour and decision-making. However, the brand value does not arise separately and unilaterally on the level of production, distribution and marketing communication of firms and vendors, but it is rather formed in the complex of mutual relationships of production and consumption. The most successful brands are communicated as open and 'unfinished projects' that appeal to their consumers who attribute their own meanings to the brand, share their symbolic messages and finalise social and psychological values of the outlined contexts.

Yet, the brands should be communicated by advertising professionals as *contexts* that should draw the attention of the customers and will have understandable, credible and meaningful image. At the same time, these contexts should anticipate the reality of social, cultural and psychological contexts of life, come near to the everyday life practice of the consumers, initiate lifestyle trends, spark emotionality of the consumers and last but not least correspond with the value preferences of the society, i.e. with the established ethical and aesthetic norms. These contexts are usually communicated in concentrated forms (e.g. via slogans and catch-words of advertising campaigns), the purpose of which is to credibly and understandably identify the branded products with emotionality of experiences lived in the background of the story, to reflect elements of real or dreamed lifestyle of the consumers.

Using the sociological perspective, let us try to outline the most important features of a bit older, but highly successful and inspiring advertising campaign by one of the most known American telecommunications companies that was accompanied with the universal slogan "No Limits". The campaign was publicly presented during the Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta in 1996. Using this example, we may illustrate how the marketing concept of the campaign works in practice and how it is depicted in the media. We work with a basic assumption that this campaign approached closely the reality of social situation and expectations of the customers as proposed by Fukuyama. According to Fukuyama, the current social atmosphere of hedonistic individualism is typical for its effort to *"free oneself from social rules, norms and laws that inadequately limit opportunities of people and their choices"*.[48] Fukuyama believes that there is a radical amplification of the cultural theme of freeing human beings from the shackles of undesirable rules and norms that prevent the individual to 'lift off from the face of Earth' and use all hidden and unexploited abilities to reach the horizon of the unknown opportunities. The campaign "No Limits" may serve as a symbol of this social change in conditions of the emerging information age. The universal message "No Limits" depicting the world without boundaries, i.e. the world where no limitations exist was used as the catchword of this advertising campaign.[49] The message showed the future world that the information society was necessarily stepping towards, the world where life offers unlimited and even undreamed of opportunities. The world without any annoying boundaries or undesirable limits was showed to the viewers via portrayals of muscular athletes jumping off the roofs of skyscrapers, overcoming easily the gorges of canyons, taking leaps from the edges of cliffs with utmost ease.

The message of these advertisements indicates that the telecommunications firm claims that all limiting rules and regulations that have been applicable before the emergence of the Internet should be overcome. These once insurmountable obstacles, i.e. the factors limiting the communication options also used to bind the human spirit and 'chain' human beings to life conditions, in which one's abilities that offer undreamed of opportunities cannot be fully explored. At the same time, one may not shake off the impression that the athletic bodies moving in extreme situations, without any limitations or barriers, resemble Nietzsche's concept of "übermensch" more than they represent real human beings. Only such beings can avoid and escape all shackles of the limiting rules, only "übermensch" knows no compromises and does not feel to be bound by duties and obligations. The "übermensch" laughs at such things of the past. The idea of an "übermensch" is an update to the world without boundaries, a strong refusal of all outer forces representing a dangerous potential impacting the development of one's self-identity. This process is driven by instincts of the "übermensch" oriented at self-control. The project of "übermensch" does not want to take into account the burdens of the past, the holdout to future plans, the straitjacket limiting one's own imagination. The "übermensch" aiming for self-control puts this project on the level of present moments, rather corresponding with the slogan "Just Do It" by Nike or with many other recent marketing messages that have appeared in advertising spots and teasers to different products. In TV commercials alone we can see slogans such as "Quick and Easy", "Immediate result", "Fast Pleasure", "Do Not Wait, You Can Do It", "Success Is One Touch Away" or "Without Any Effort" on daily basis. The marketing messages usually initiate active and fast actions; they refer to 'life without limits', offer life in the world of unlimited opportunities and endless adventures. On the contrary, it is hard to imagine commercial marketing messages that would motivate the consumers to restrain themselves, to be careful, to postpone decisions, to be modest and self-repressed.

The fast-running culture full of 'instant' satisfactions surely has not given birth to the "übermensch" but, nevertheless, it refers to some aspects of this older philosophical concept. The information age – outlined by Internet communication and digital means of information dissemination – has significantly contributed to the emergence of fast-running time which disrupts or rather ignores any remaining time and space limitations, similarly as the athletes defying physical laws in the "No Limits" campaign by their superhuman performances. And it is not only about breaking out of space and time limitations; this campaign and a number of other similar advertisements portray the emergence of a new era of the human spirit, whose *sine qua non* is to free human beings of all persisting bonds and shackles; the rains must be released, the cart must be unhitched and the human life must be exposed to all possibilities of unchained existence. At the same time, the world without boundaries is a place of unlimited opportunities, freeing humans from annoying restrictions bound to the external social rules, norms, obligations and laws. Being one of Nietzsche's key notions, the project of the "übermensch" is also the idea of becoming independent of the external and past things. The ideology of the digital information era promoting 'life without boundaries' also refuses any assumptions that humans would only passively observe all the things and opportunities this world offers and allows. The world without boundaries is here to act, not to waste opportunities by waiting too long, to postpone what should have been resolved by an immediate action, through options hidden in the unchained existence associated with the culture of many opportunities.

Conclusion

In the context of the consumer culture and its dynamic changes, this study contributes to the discourse related to sociology of branding. Brands are one of the key attributes of the current consumer culture. At the same time, they present an active element of its transformation where the consumers' relationships to products are not formed only by these products' useful and functional value but rather by their individually defined, socially determined and shared symbolic meanings and sign systems. Much as they fulfil their utilitarian and practical functions, today's commodities also represent symbolic indicators through which the consumers reproduce cultural meanings, structuralise social space, model their interpersonal relationships and shape their own identities. The changes of the consumer culture and shopping logic have brought a media-disseminated expansion of iconic brands promoting and confirming the meaning of the 'de-commodification' practices of the consumers. Successful iconic brands should be communicated as contexts in which the social actors' ability to treat consumer goods as intangible resources and thinking tools is developed. These tools for creat-

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48   FUKUYAMA, F.: *Velký rozvrat. Lidská přirozenost a rekonstrukce lidského řádu.* Praha : Academia, 2006, p. 25.
49   At present, we may follow the campaign of one of the largest telecommunications companies concentrating its advertising message within this simple statement: *"T-Mobile: Two lines in the USA. Two times the unlimited. Unlimited talk, text and data (The largest 4G)."* Similarly, as in the case of the older campaign "No limits", there is a clear reference to the 'life without boundaries' (remark by the author).

ing and shaping fictional stories, rituals, imagination, constructs or self-concepts of different stability and reliability aim to interpret one's own life situation through varying relationships to the surrounding world. However, it is important to note that these *contexts* are communicated as attractive, credible and meaningful objectives motivating the consumers to find and confirm who they are, how they live, what they believe in or how they would like to live. The current social atmosphere clearly supports the value of such contexts of iconic brands; hedonistic individualism, authenticity, independence, constant changes and flexibility are often concentrated into remarkably successful advertising slogans such as "No Limits" or "Just Do It".

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