



Cultural Mediations Between Branding and Lifestyles: A Case Study Based Model for the Articulation of Cultural Strategies and Urban Tribes

Nelson Pinheiro Gomes¹(✉) and William Afonso Cantú^{1,2}

¹ CEAUL, Centro de Estudos Anglísticos da Universidade de Lisboa, Faculdade de Letras, Alameda da Universidade, Lisbon, Portugal

nelsonpinheiro@campus.ul.pt

² IPAM, Instituto Português de Administração e Marketing, Quinta do Bom Nome, Estr. da Correia 54, Lisbon, Portugal

Abstract. This paper aims to cross concepts and analytical approaches in culture, strategy and urban tribes to provide a process that can diagnose brand communication pieces and larger campaigns within a specific cultural landscape or larger contexts. With a mix of qualitative methods, this articulated critical approach allows for the understanding of branding and strategic communication objects. Within a scope of cultural analysis, it is possible to activate a textual reading that highlights both visible and invisible webs of meaning. These impact the way we read brand texts and can be made to inspire urban tribes and activate identification mechanisms that inhibit collective mindsets. This cultural diagnosis process of brand objects can generate important strategic insights for brand communication and management.

Keywords: Cultural analysis · Strategy · Branding · Urban Tribes · Cool

1 Introduction

This research aims to contribute to the conceptual-methodological debate between approaches that cross strategy and cultural analysis in terms of a strategic cultural analysis and management. We highlight the proposals of Cultural Branding [1], Cultural Strategy [2] and Tribal Marketing [3] to see possible contributions of the latest to the first two.

This is a diagnosis process and model to generate strategic guidelines. We start the model with a review and mapping of methods, like semiotics, to understand the analyzed cultural objects and their contexts. This is followed by an articulation with social groups and the shared tribal link and bonds that objects may enclosure and manifest. This model enables a solid diagnosis of brand communication and allows us to understand (i) the construction and signs of brand cultural expressions and their possible associations with urban tribes and (ii) deconstruct the applied cultural formula. With this, we gain strategic

insights and generate better future solutions. To test the analytical component of our model, we will apply it to a case study. Namely, an Instagram object of Nintendo Switch, in an in-depth hermeneutical analysis of the mix between brand DNA and lifestyles DNA.

2 Strategic Cultural Analysis for Brand Communication

In 2019, Gomes articulated conceptual and methodological approaches of cultural branding and strategy with that of tribal marketing. This suggested that applied cultural analysis at the strategic level is gaining attention. We can see this mainly through the works of Douglas Holt, Douglas Cameron, Bernard Cova and Véronique Cova [1–3]. These contextualized the proposal for a strategic management of culture with said approaches. The proposed methodological roadmap can be applied in the development of communication strategies and brand management, considering their relationship with the various audiences and an attention to emerging changes in collective mentalities [4]. We take this research as a starting point for our literary review and discussion. Here, cultural analysis practices - from a critical perspective to field work or semiotic based hermeneutical readings - take the form of an instrument that unveils sociocultural dimensions, dynamics and shared meanings capable of generating strategic insights. The context for this work starts with cultural branding [1] and strategy [2] and is followed by tribal marketing [3].

In 2004, Holt was already looking into cultural branding and the importance of looking at culture as a source. The objective of this perspective is to create iconic brands. According to Holt, “they have distinctive and favorable associations, they generate buzz, and they have core consumers with deep emotional attachments” [1, p.35] but these are to be understood as the result of successful mythmaking [1]. This way, we harness myth to “commercial purposes” [5, p. 101]. “Customers buy the product to experience these stories” [1, p. 36], so the main objective is to connect with narratives and meanings, an identification process that is promoted by communication instruments. For this, the author underlines the importance of having the right cultural expression: “the particular cultural contents of the brand’s myth and the particular expression of these contents in the communication. [...] detail the brand’s stakes in the transformation of culture and society and the particular cultural expressions the brand uses to achieve these transformations” [1, p. 36–37].

In terms of cultural strategies, Holt and Cameron underline the concept of cultural innovation as “a brand that delivers an innovative cultural expression” [2, p. 173]. The authors largely elaborate on this idea, suggesting that cultural innovations have the right ideology (a concept) expressed via cultural codes (a composition of elements that allow a correct interpretation of meanings) that build a myth, which is built upon source materials (subcultures, media myths and brand assets) that delve outside a mainstream view [2]. There is a link between this idea of cultural innovation and emerging socio-cultural trends. As the authors underline, “the engine of cultural innovation is historical change in society that is significant enough to destabilize the category’s cultural orthodoxy, creating latent demand for new cultural expressions” [2, p. 185]. Schroeder adds, “brands are not only mediators of cultural meaning; they themselves have become ideological referents that shape cultural rituals, economic activities and social norms” [6, p. 1523]. As representations of change, these expressions act as signals of socio-cultural movements and trends. Thus, cultural innovations can also be understood as a creative/cool

signal, the translation of socio-cultural changes and ideas emerging in the construction and dissemination of certain objects (artifacts, practices, and representations). Cultural innovations, resulting from an innovative cultural expression, are narratives and objects that reveal disruptions and changes in socio-cultural orthodoxy [2], an understanding close to the concept of “cool” [7–9]. To build cultural innovations and a cultural strategy, Holt and Cameron underline six steps: “Map the Category’s Cultural Orthodoxy”; “Identify the Social disruption that can Dislodge the Orthodoxy”; “Unearth the Ideological Opportunity”; “Cull Appropriate Source Material”; “Apply Cultural Tactics”; “Craft the Cultural Strategy” [2, p. 196–199]. In our diagnosis process, it is important to consider the cultural orthodoxy and mainly the social disruption, the change. This will give us an insight into the socio-cultural context and the nature of the emerging elements. Also, understanding the source material will give us an insight into the used cultural codes, the construction of the cultural innovation (via a cultural formula), and how the elements were articulated to construct a narrative. We use a mainly hermeneutical approach because, as O’Reilly states, “given the symbolic dimensions of culture, and given that branding is a symbolic enterprise, a discursive-analytical treatment of branding as discursive practice would open to way to a critical appraisal of the relationships between business and culture” [10, p. 585].

Taking the highlighted role of identities and subcultures, and adding to this conceptual-methodological roadmap, it is also important to consider the role of tribal marketing. Again, we follow the review and articulation already established by Gomes [4]. The perspective of Torelli [11] that an iconic brand symbolizes an abstract image that can be valued by a subculture opens this discussion. But we underline the concept of tribe as a gathering of a heterogeneous group of people connected by a strong link, a shared passion/interest [3]. Or, as Canniford suggests, a group based on emotions that have a diffused structure, “who, through the features of a hybrid, affectual, performative and changeable tribal network, enter into productive, democratic and symbiotic dialogue with market offerings. In so doing, they foster and nurture linking value” [12, p.70]. In this sense, our analytical process must identify elements that may call out for urban tribes. The cultural expression construction can take place in articulation with the tribes or with tribes in mind, to generate identification processes and facilitate connections. Tribes can be an active agent in the construction of objects, including communication.

3 Analytical Model and Methodological Process

This analytical process is built upon a model that allows us to define socio-cultural signals as cool [8] phenomena and as cultural innovations [2]. Its objective is to understand the hidden cultural formula. It encompasses (i) the analytical perspective of cool signals proposed by Rohde [7] and Dragt [13] in the description and decoding of cool characteristics and trends associations; (ii) semiotics and ethnographic practices to understand cultural objects and contexts as well as social groupings; followed by (iii) an understanding of the shared tribal links [3] and bonds that objects enclosure and manifest. This work highlights the diagnosis case of brand communication. Registration and analysis should follow the described process:

1. *Title, the illustrative visual element and source(s) for additional information.* Following the scheme of Rohde [7] and Dragt [13], after presenting a title, the analyst should add a visual element that illustrates the signal along with sources and links that provide additional information and the date of the analysis.
2. *Description of the main signal characteristics and context.* Again, following the scheme of Rohde [7], the analyst must highlight the main characteristics of the signal, its visible elements, physical and functional attributes, creation date, production and display contexts, among others that can give a clear description of the object. In a communication piece it may also be relevant to highlight participants.
3. *Connotative and denotative analysis, with the possible identification of myth(s).* In terms of cultural branding [1], it is important to be on the lookout for myths. For this specific exercise, we follow the analytical procedure of Barthes [14, 15] and Volli [16]. We start with a denotative reading (the more descriptive, immediate and almost dictionary like meanings) of the signs (considering the signifier and the signified), followed by a connotative reading (further associations) [14, 16, 17]. After this, we unveil the possible myth that inhabits the narrative. As Barthes states, “it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system” [15, p. 113]. Myths provide a more complex reading and a wider network of association on top of the first reading, which only becomes a new signifier. There is a parallel between this conception of myth and the advertising sign proposed by Volli, as a process of mythical construction where there is a direct connection between the (denotative) sign and the brand/product [16].
4. *Interviews, inquiries and focus groups on the object.* Only when pertinent, the analyst may choose to conduct interviews, inquiries or focus groups regarding the brand/product and the reception of the communication object.
5. *Cool DNA analysis.* The analyst must go through the characteristics of cool, like Rohde [7] suggests, to define the signal/object as cool or not. The Trends and Culture Management Lab proposes a definition of cool, having followed an extensive literary research of the concept [8], as something “relevant”, “viral”, “current”, “irreverent”, “instigating”, and with a proposal of “discontinuity” [8].
6. *Articulations with urban lifestyles and tribes.* Following our literary research on the topics [3], this specific exercise entails identifying if the narrative calls out to one or more tribes by (i) identifying elements that may address identities and shared passion/interests and (ii) finding the links between these elements.
7. *Definition of the formula and cultural innovation based on emerging mindsets.* The analyst defines if there is a cultural innovation by identifying the change in the cultural orthodoxy that the object addresses and the proposed solution [2]. We review the cultural codes [2] of this object, and we take into consideration the cultural formula, the way in which the advert was constructed and the elements present in the composition. We follow here the revision made by Gomes [18] of the Marlboro case study developed by Holt and Cameron [2]: we cannot just copy and paste cultural elements in communication pieces, “it is necessary to generate the right context (characters, scripts, dialogues, music, among others) capable of managing and articulating cultural codes [...] and give rise to cultural expressions that meet the expectations and emerging mindsets of consumers” [18, p. 63]. So, the focus is on the formula presentation and articulation of cultural elements.

8. *Strategic Insights*. Based on the results of the former exercises (from 1 to 7), the analyst tries to understand (i) the creative germ(s) behind the object that may be translated to others, (ii) the main strategic topic and (iii) the major socio-cultural changes being addressed.
9. *Articulation with identify[]ed socio-cultural trends*. The final exercise, based mainly on the results of exercises 5, 7 and 8, is to associate the signal/object with an already identified socio-cultural trend(s) from the analyst's chosen trend map/bank.

4 Case Study: Nintendo Switch, Mario Kart Live

1. "Mario Kart Live: the veil between the physical and the digital". Visual Element (video) in www.instagram.com/p/CF2U1wdDTu5, and additional information in mklive.nintendo.com. The analysis took place on the 31st December 2020.
2. The object is a promotional trailer video for the "Mario Kart Live", a game for the Nintendo Switch console. Following the former Mario Kart(s), this game provides a physical kart (with Mario or Luigi) equipped with a camera and cardboard gates that can be placed in one or more divisions of a person's home. When we play the game on Nintendo Switch, the physical car reacts to our commands and the race starts in the physical space and the console. The game generates other characters, and the physical space is transformed in the screen adding visual elements of the game.
3. From a car to house elements (sofa, table, closets), plants, cardboard objects, and game elements like bananas, shells, bullets, among symbolic characters, all compose a list of signs that provide denotative readings. As a whole, the connotative reading is one where Mario related elements mix with our personal physical reality: "Mario Kart/World can be anywhere, including your living room; Mario world is your world".
4. Following other games that blend the physical and the digital world, this is another cool signal that shatters that division of realities. Also, considering the current context of pandemic and social confinement, it provides means to transform our home into a new space adding to (i) the important ways in which we are transforming our relationship with our personal spaces and (ii) the way we define home and its dynamics.
5. There is a connection to gamers, although it is not exclusive and can enroll new players in family/friends' dynamics and Nintendo lovers in general. It highlights a Super Mario symbolic world, elements we recognize (images and sounds) from the former games, and it appeals to a competitive spirit, among other gaming elements.
6. The trailer is created to have a descriptive and explanatory nature. Narrative takes place at two levels enacted simultaneously: (i) it explains how to set the game in the space and console and how play it - a simple how to assemble and do it; (ii) also, the trailer takes you to the Mario Kart symbolic world, starting with Super Mario to take you further into race sets and their elements, among other characters. In general, the formula is assembled by mixing the physical and game elements so that we see the transformation of our home into a new world filled with the characters/elements of Mario Kart in an increasingly immersive story.

7. Strategic Insights. Considering the increasing time we spend in the digital world, there is much to do in terms of articulating the physical reality with the digital one. It is more than providing augmented reality, it is about changing spaces, functionalities and adding experiences taking the familiar spaces to new places: create realities!
8. Considering the Trend Map of the Trends and Culture Management Lab [19], an academic and scientific project, we can associate this signal mainly to the “Anchored Narratives” and “Lifestyle Redesign” macro trends.

5 Final Considerations

The proposed model articulates concepts, practices and perspectives from cultural analysis, cultural branding and strategy, and tribal marketing into an approach of strategic cultural analysis and management. The model has a mainly hermeneutical process that calls to semiotics readings and also the reading of creative/cool signals that comes from Trend Studies. It allows us to go deep into the meanings of a signal, in this case a strategic communication object, to understand its cultural context and to generate strategic insights. It can be applied as a diagnosis tool in the final stage of approval of a communication piece; or it can be a benchmark exercise for new objects.

References

1. Holt, D.: *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston (2004)
2. Holt, D., Cameron, D.: *Cultural Strategy - Using Innovative Ideologies to Build Breakthrough Brands*. Oxford Press, Oxford (2010)
3. Cova, B., Cova, V.: Tribal Marketing: The tribalization of society and its impact on the conduct of marketing. *Eur. J. Mark.* **36**(5/6), 595–620 (2002)
4. Gomes, N.: Gestão da Cultura: estratégia e articulações no âmbito do branding e das tribos urbanas. *e-revista Logo.* **8**(2), 25–47 (2019)
5. Cayla, J., Arnould, E.: a cultural approach to branding in the global marketplace. *J. Int. Mark.* **16**(4), 86–112 (2008)
6. Schroeder, J.: Corporate branding in perspective: a typology. *Eur. J. Mark.* **51**(9/10), 1522–1529 (2017)
7. Rohde, C.: *Serious Trendwatching*. Fontys University of Applied Sciences and Science of the Time, Tilburg (2011)
8. Trends and Culture Management Lab: A natureza do Cool, um desafio académico. <https://creativecultures.letras.ulisboa.pt/index.php/gtc/>
9. Gomes, N., Cohen, S., Flores, A.: Estudos de Tendências: Contributo para uma abordagem de análise e gestão da cultura. *Moda Palavra.* **11**(22), 50–81 (2018)
10. O’Reilly, D.: Cultural Brands/Branding Culture. *J. Mark. Manag.* **21**, 573–588 (2005)
11. Torelli, C.J.: *Globalization, Culture, and Branding: How to Leverage Cultural Equity for Building Iconic Brands in the Era of Globalization*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York (2013)
12. Canniford, R.: A typology of consumption communities. *Res. Consum. Behavior.* **13**, 57–75 (2011)
13. Dragt, E.: *How to Research Trends: workbook*. BIS Publishers, Amsterdam (2018)
14. Barthes, R.: *Elements of Semiology*. Hill and Wand, New York (1986)
15. Barthes, R.: *Mythologies*. Noonday, New York (1991)

16. Volli, U.: *Semiótica da publicidade: a criação do texto publicitário*. Edições 70, Lisboa (2003)
17. Oswald, L.: *Marketing Semiotics: Signs, Strategies and Brand Value*. Oxford University Press, Oxford (2012)
18. Gomes, N.: A análise cultural e o estudo de tendências na comunicação e gestão de marcas: Estudo de caso publicitário em contexto semiótico. *International J. Mark. Commun. New Media*. (7), 56–79 (2020)
19. Trends and Culture Management Lab: *Tendências Socioculturais - Um Mapa de Macro e Micro Tendências* (2020). <http://creativecultures.lettras.ulisboa.pt/index.php/gtc-reports/>