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Who are you, really? How Companies and their Cultures Create Our Identities and Create Brand Loyalty.

By Savannah Hall

- We Identify with Brands and their Cultures
 - When you think of certain brands, what emotions do they elicit? When I think of brands like Lululemon or Athleta, their names conjure up ideas of being sporty, healthy, and always put together. The thoughts associated with these brands can translate into assumptions about the characteristics of the typical consumers of these brands.
 - This **culture**, created by the marketing teams of brands like these, has a profound impact on consumer behavior. Many people, wanting to experience the **brand community** created by brands like Lululemon, will specifically seek out these brands, regardless of the price or actual performance of the products. It's simple, if you buy their clothes, you are one step closer to becoming the person touted by the brands' marketing campaigns: someone who is healthy, always put together, and wakes up every morning before the sun to do yoga. Right?
 - But, why do we feel so psychologically connected with these brands? Why do their logos evoke the feeling of belonging to this **secondary group**, the culture their brand has created?
- The Subconscious Mind and Brand Loyalty
 - There are many things that make us who we are. From our unique cultures, lifestyle choices, and personalities, there are many aspects that make someone whole. Further, our unique view of ourselves, or our **self-concept**, often plays a major role in our decisions as consumers.
 - According to Karnes (2020), in an article titled, "What is Emotional Branding and How to Use it Effectively," some of the most effective marketing strategies have been those that have been able to appeal to the consumer's **self-actualization** portion of **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**.
 - For example, Apple has been very effective in its ability to create and maintain strong brand loyalty among its consumers. The company's advertisements, touting the latest and most innovative technology, appeal to consumers' desires to have not only the most effective product for their needs, but to possess socially desirable products to remain "chic" (Karnes, 2020).
 - I have personally observed the strong emotional pull that Apple has on its customers. My family consistently defaults to Apple products over competitors. It is a widespread sentiment. Regardless of the many problems that their products have encountered over the years, such as a lawsuit against Apple over faulty batteries (Collins, 2021) resulting in a \$113 million dollar settlement, people still choose iPhones over a multitude of competitors.
 - Photo on the left features my brother, Spencer, holding his birthday gift of the newest iPhone in 2021.

- o We often identify with various brands' cultures and values subconsciously (Chierotti, 2018). According to Chierotti (2018), Harvard professor Gerald Zaltman in his book titled "How Customers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market," noted that appealing to a customer's subconscious mind and eliciting an emotional response from them to a company's marketing methods is the best way to create customers who exhibit strong brand loyalty. This in turn can increase consumers' **consumption frequency**.
- o Consumers' **emotional involvement** can be a strong determinant as to whether they will become repeat customers. Engaging with consumers emotionally can make consumers remember products for a long time after seeing advertisements, whether or not the emotion it elicited was positive or negative (Saitarli, 2019).
- o When Emotional Involvement Goes Wrong:
 - In 2021, Burger King UK launched an ad campaign on its Twitter page that attempted to point out the lack of female representation in the work force, particularly in the culinary profession (Denham, 2021). Company representatives tweeted: "Women belong in the kitchen" to grab viewers' attention and promote the company's culinary scholarship program aimed at bridging the gender divide experienced in many male-dominated kitchens (Denham, 2021). Regardless of Burger King's intentions, this tweet sparked outrage among many and created a negative emotional response to Burger King as a company (Denham, 2021). The company's intention to point out the gender imbalance in the culinary profession and its effort to bridge those gaps was overshadowed by its use of a negative stereotype surrounding women (Denham, 2021).
 - The Consequence of Failed Ad Campaigns
 - The consequence of this failed campaign? According to Tami Kim and other researchers at Harvard Business School, many women, when companies try to use campaigns that target marginalized groups of people, the campaigns are likely to "backfire" (Denham, 2021). Further, Burger King's use of a negative stereotype likely caused many women to become **antiloal consumers**, avoiding any interaction with the brand, regardless of the intended meaning or product advertised (Denham, 2021). Many people will remember this failed ad campaign and the negative emotions the campaign brought and associate them with the company. Many are unlikely to dig further and see the intent behind the initially offensive tweet, falling victim to **the emotional contagion theory**, and following the common opinion and feelings of disgust surrounding the campaign (Denham, 2021).
 - Personally, whenever I think of Burger King, one of the first things I think of is that tweet. While in the past I have not been an avid Burger King consumer, this event has made me less likely to choose it from an array of fast-food restaurant options.
- o Nostalgia and Its Positive Effects on Consumer Behavior
 - On a positive note, brands that are able to elicit feelings of **nostalgia** from consumers are likely to have repeat customers and foster positive interactions between the company and consumer. For example, in a New York Times article titled, "Why We Reach for Nostalgia in Times of Crisis" by Danielle Campoamor in 2021, the author explains why we reach for comfort items during times of crisis. When things are uncertain in our lives, we often seek out things that

remind us of when times were “simpler” and “easy,” regardless of how life actually was during that period (Campoamor, 2021). According to Campoamor (2021), these things can help serve as “transitional objects,” helping us to move from one period of our lives to the next, with the aim of reducing the emotional stress of change.

- For example, whenever I’m feeling stressed from school, work, or whatever life brings my way, I tend to turn to things that give me comfort. Old television shows from when I was younger, and times were “simpler,” allow me to relax and provide me with a sense of comforting nostalgia that helps me get through those periods of stress. Shows like *iCarly* or *Hannah Montana* are my go-to choices for comfort and that much needed dose of nostalgia when stress begins to mount. Further, when stressed, I will often purchase foods that remind me of my childhood, demonstrating how my quest for nostalgia often impacts my own consuming behavior.
 - This comfort that nostalgia can bring is a powerful marketing tool in bringing in consumers and it enables them to become emotionally involved with the products or services a company offers (Friedman, 2016). According to Friedman (2016), “nostalgia marketing” brings companies down to earth and “humanizes” them to the consumer. Companies that are able to do this effectively are able to attract and keep consumers within an **age-based micro-culture** in which all share similar values and experiences, enabling large groups to connect with their brand emotionally (Friedman, 2016).
- What does this all mean?
 - Companies and their marketing campaigns have the ability to create powerful connections with their consumers. Companies that are able to effectively employ tools like nostalgia or are able to appeal to a consumer’s **self-concept**, are much more likely to create and maintain strong brand communities and loyal customers. As we’ve seen in the example with Burger King’s failed campaign, this is a tricky avenue as the emotions of a collective group can be volatile and fall subject to the emotional contagion theory. We can all identify with an aspect of one brand or another, and a marketer’s ability to utilize this fact in marketing is crucial in creating and maintaining brand loyalty and sales revenue.

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