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**Brands: Cultural Engineers, Cultural Leeches  
or Cultural Mediators? The Exploration of the  
Relationship between Culture, Brands and  
Consumers.**

*Bakalářská práce*

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## **Anotace**

V tejto bakalárskej práci sa zameriam na skúmanie vzťahov medzi kultúrnym svetom, značkami a spotrebiteľom. Budem vychádzať z modifikovanej verzie modelu prenosu významu Granta McCrackena, v ktorom tvrdí, že pokiaľ chceme porozumieť symbolickým významom značiek, musíme najprv analyzovať proces prenosu významu z kultúrneho sveta do značky a potom prenos zo značky k jednotlivému spotrebiteľovi. Tento model som zvolila za účelom toho, aby som mohla ilustrovať tri rôzne prístupy k hodnoteniu úlohy značiek vo vzťahu ku kultúre: značky ako kultúrni inžinieri, ktorí vytvárajú a vnucujú jednotlivé významy a hodnoty na pasívnych, bezmocných spotrebiteľov, značky ako kultúrni sprostredkovatelia, ktorí poskytujú dôležitý kultúrny materiál pre kreatívnych spotrebiteľov a napokon posledný prístup, ktorý sa sústreďuje na vzťah medzi kultúrnym svetom a značkami som nazvala prístupom kultúrnych pijavíc pretože hodnotí tento vzťah ako jednoznačne parazitický z pohľadu značiek, ktoré sa priživujú na spotrebiteľovi a jeho produkcii sociálnej nadhodnoty. V priebehu práce sa pokúsím podporiť svoj názor, že vzťahy medzi kultúrou, značkami a spotrebiteľom sú podstatne komplikovanejšie ako ich vidí ktorákoľvek z vyššie uvedených teórií a že v skutočnosti sa jedná o symbiotický vzťah medzi kultúrnym svetom, reklamnými manažérmi, značkami a spotrebiteľmi.

## **Annotation**

In this bachelor thesis I will aim to explore the relationship between the cultural world, the brands and the consumer. I will do so using a modified version of Grant McCracken's model of meaning transfer which proposes that in order to understand the symbolic meanings of brands we need to examine the process of

transfer of the cultural meanings from the cultural world to the branded goods and then from the branded goods to the individual consumer. This model is used in order to illustrate three different approaches to the role of brands in culture: brands as cultural engineers creating and imposing cultural meanings and values on passive consumers, brands as cultural mediators that provide relevant cultural resources for creative customers and finally the last approach focuses on the relationship between the cultural world and brands, what I termed a cultural leeches approach considers this relationship as distinctly parasitic, the brands are feeding on the consumer agency and their production of social surplus. I will try to substantiate my view that the relationship between the brands, culture and consumers is more complex than any single of these theories can capture, that there actually exists a symbiotic relationship between the cultural world, advertisers, brands and consumers.

## **Klíčová slova**

Obchodná značka, reklama, spotreba, spotrebytel', symbolický význam, kultúra.

## **Keywords**

Brand, advertising, consumption, consumer, symbolic meaning, culture.

## **Prohlášení**

1. Prohlašuji, že jsem předkládanou práci zpracoval/a samostatně a použil/a jen uvedené prameny a literaturu.
2. Souhlasím s tím, aby práce byla zpřístupněna veřejnosti pro účely výzkumu a studia.

V Praze dne 21.05.2010

Tamara Vražďová

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## Introduction

We live a branded life: what we wear, what we eat, how we spent our leisure time, how we work, how we think of ourselves and others, how we communicate and position ourselves in social contexts. Any way you look at it, brands became an omnipresent part of our everyday lives, gradually expanding into various areas of life originally far removed from the influence of brands, such as culture, schools, media, politics, public spaces, charity and so on. Brands are the culmination of the consumer society which revolves around the idea of consuming objects and the symbolic meanings they carry, be it the traditional function of objects as demarcation of social status or other meanings that we incorporate in our projects of self-definition. While it is true that all consumption objects carry these symbolic meanings, brands became singularly focused on the formulation and communication of strong brand identities with easily identifiable associations that serve to distinguish otherwise similar consumer goods. In other words, they perfected the role of consumer objects as carriers of symbolic meanings. Indeed, while it is hardly deniable that much of the consumption is still driven by functional motives, it has been convincingly argued by theorists of consumption that the consumption has been becoming increasingly symbolic over time.

In this essay, I will focus on this symbolic aspect of brands, more specifically I will explore the process of transfer of symbolic (or cultural) meanings from the cultural world to the branded goods and then from the branded goods to the individual consumer on the basis of Grant McCracken's model of meaning transfer. This model is used in order to illustrate three different approaches to the role of brands in culture: brands as cultural engineers creating and imposing cultural meanings and values on passive consumers, brands as cultural mediators that provide relevant cultural resources for creative customers and finally the last approach focuses on the relationship between the cultural world and brands, what I termed a cultural leeches approach considers this relationship as distinctly parasitic, the brands are feeding on the consumer agency and their production of social surplus. I will try to substantiate my view that the relationship between brands, culture and consumers is more complex than any single of these theories can

capture, that there actually exists a symbiotic relationship between the cultural world, advertisers, brands and consumers. Before all of that though, I will provide a brief overview of the theories of consumption, the history of advertising and the history of brands that are crucial, in my opinion, in order to fully appreciate the full scope of the subject matter of brands and their ties to culture.



# 1. Consumption – theoretical overview

We are said to currently live in a consumer society. Consumer society, also known as consumer culture, is defined by the primacy of consumption in our lives - the objects and their advertising, selling, acquisition and consumption play a central role in all areas of our social and individual life [Gabriel and Lang, 2006]. The role and extent of consumption has been steadily rising over time, fuelled by the development of industrial capitalism as a system where commodities are produced to be traded on the market and ultimately sold to the consumers [Patterson, 2005]. While some trace the origins of consumer society to the Queen Elisabeth's court in 16<sup>th</sup> century [Patterson, 2005], its development was accelerated particularly by the mass production of the Fordist scientific management at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and then after the second world war and in the 1980s when the generation of babyboomers started the identity and lifestyle shopping. It is interesting to notice how the process of growing importance of consumption was accompanied by the simultaneous decline in the weight placed on the actual material process of production – production was demoted to secondary status as consumption came to the limelight [Patterson, 2005]. This marks the shift from industrial to so-called consumer capitalism.

In this section, I will briefly introduce the major theories of consumption. The most noticeable change in the thinking about consumption is the move from socio-economic explanations to symbolic explanations of consumption as production and consumption of signs [Patterson, 2005]. As succinctly expressed by Dunn, “the object of consumption is not so much tangible products as coded cultural meanings” [Dunn, 2008: 6]. This change of the understanding of consumption is also reflected in how consumption came to play radically different role in society and culture: consumption as a series of purchases was reconceptualized as a “characteristic socio-cultural activity of post-modern or ‘late’ capitalism [Jameson in Patterson, 2005: 32]. Consumption became intimately intertwined with culture, particularly after the second world war with the emergence of popular culture and mass consumption. We can identify four distinct approaches in the consumer studies: consumption analysed as commodity form,

consumption seen as marker of status, consumption as a pursuit of pleasure and postmodern theories of consumption.

### **1.1. Consumption as a commodity form**

While Karl Marx did not develop a distinct theory of consumption in itself, focusing mostly on the production aspect of the production-consumption relationship [Patterson, 2005], his analysis of use and exchange value, alienation and commodity fetishism provided inspiration for many theoreticians of consumptions to come. He claimed that capitalism destroyed the natural relationship between worker and his product when it forced the use and exchange value of the product apart. Marx proposed a labour based theory of value where human labour was the only source of value. Accordingly, the use value of the commodity was measured in the total number of hours of labour required for its production [Patterson, 2005]. Exchange value of the product was determined at the market and the difference between use and exchange value, termed as surplus value, reflected the exploitation of workers who are not paid in full for their labour [Patterson, 2005]. This labour theory of value lies at the heart of one of the fundamental concepts of consumption theories - commodity fetishism. It describes a situation when the commodity is mistakenly believed to have value in itself rather than derive all of its value from the human labour. The exchange value of the commodity expressed in monetary terms serves to conceal the actual source of value and the social relations behind its production: “social relations between man....assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” [Marx in Dunn, 2008: 26]. Thus, commodity becomes a ‘mysterious thing’ independent on the world of production [Dunn, 2008].

Marxism, of course, travelled a long way from the initial writings of Karl Marx and formed the backbone of an entire theoretical approach to consumption that understands capitalism as a system that in the first place produces commodity form. In capitalism, objects are transformed into a commodity form and as such come to be a “dominant structuring principle of everyday life” [Goldman in Dunn, 2008: 21]. This approach stresses the ability of commodities under capitalism to

mold and transform the social and cultural relations [Dunn, 2008]. Theorists of this approach are particularly concerned with the process of commodification – the extension of commodity form, i.e. assigning economic value, to previously non-tradable objects, ideas and other areas of life. Lukacs, for example, argued that commodity form objectifies not only socio-cultural relations but also structures consciousness, making social reality appear as objective, given and unchangeable [Dunn, 2008]. This theoretical approach, therefore, regards consumption as manipulation.

Rooted in Marxism, the Frankfurt school elaborated on the mass culture industry the way the business, advertisers and mass media channel the search for identities through commodified meanings embedded in consumer goods rather than political resistance. The preoccupation of the consumers with the illusion of choice on the market turns the attention away from the tensions in the political and social system. This theory is more closely examined in the section XXX.

## **1.2. *Consumption as status seeking***

Another major perspective on consumption is represented by Thorstein Veblen. He focused on the social aspects of consumption, seeing consumers as social beings and theorized consumption as a way of communicating and seeking social status through display of wealth [consumption reader: 221]. In other words, in the context of weakened communal ties, status came to be measured exclusively in monetary (pecuniary) terms and consumption, specifically conspicuous consumption therefore functions as a marker of social status [Dunn, 2008]. As such, material possessions are the signs of wealth and status. The upper class, termed by Veblen as ‘leisure class’, constantly seeks distinction from lower classes, while those lower down the social ladder attempt to achieve prestige and improve their status through social emulation – imitation of the consumption patterns and way of life of the upper classes. The leisure class, in turn, is forced to respond to this devaluation of status markers by constantly seeking new trends, styles and commodities in order to preserve their exclusive elite status. The leisure class thus acts as a trend setter and their shifting tastes are being copied by the others in a

neverending search for status, creating a trickle-down effect of consumption. The overall result of social emulation is an escalating level of consumption spending, which however, does not coincide with higher levels of satisfaction. Veblen proposes the theory of insatiability of desire that predicts that we are doomed to be chronically dissatisfied: each new step on the social ladder makes us want to reach higher and higher because we are forever comparing with those who have more than us [Dunn, 2008]. In reaction to the affluence of the post- world war second era, Veblen's theory of social emulation was replaced by theorists who claimed that people are trying to fit in with those they consider their peers rather than imitate higher classes [Dunn, 2008]. "Keeping up with the joneses" became the goal and conformity the result.

While Marx identified the existence of structural differences between classes and Veblen pointed out the desire of individuals to visibly display those class differences through consumption, Pierre Bourdieu drew attention to the fact that status is closely tied to cultural capital [Patterson, 2005]. Merely acquiring the objects and assimilating the lifestyles of a particular class might not be enough, the knowledge of cultural capital, the specific tastes and awareness that allow the individual to identify, understand and use the objects correctly, might be required [Featherstone, 2007]. Cultural capital becomes particularly important in the context of blurring class boundaries and identities caused by the rising affluence and constantly changing array of status goods giving rise to a complex fluid and confusing system that is difficult to read [Dunn, 2008]. In an attempt to preserve some semblance of stable status system with distinct, recognizable barriers as opposed to this new kind of social democracy, cultural capital serves to reveal and disqualify imitators who do not display the required ability to 'use' those status markers and lack so-called discriminatory judgement [Featherstone, 2007].

### **1.3. *Consumption as pleasure seeking***

The third approach in consumption theories emphasizes the aspects of pleasure and desire: consumption is conceived of as a glittering and glamorous realm of seduction governed by the new personal ethics of hedonism [Gabriel and

Lang, 2006]. In the words of Daniel Bell: “the cultural, if not moral, justification of capitalism has become hedonism, the idea of pleasure as a way of life” [Bell in Dunn, 2008: 43]. Naturally, the focus on pleasure is tightly related to the cult of individual that is integral to the consumption society. Among proponents of this approach is for example Zigmund Bauman who understood pleasure seeking in terms of social control or Christopher Lasch who claimed that consumer culture is a culture of narcissism, celebrating the cult of self-absorbed personality [Dunn, 2008].

Colin Campbell introduced a somewhat different twist in the study of hedonism when he investigated its historical and cultural origins. He traced the roots of hedonistic consumption to the era of Romanticism that celebrated the power of feeling and imagination. Campbell believed that pleasure is a product of imagination: it is not so much the direct experience of the objects that is rewarding (it might be at most satisfactory if fulfilling a need, but not pleasurable), but rather it is the imaginative and illusory sensations brought about by the act of consumption. Pleasure is understood as a quality of experience and the pursuit of pleasure is then a search for stimuli that will evoke pleasurable experiences. Campbell distinguishes between traditional hedonism based on the actual sensations and modern hedonism that relies on emotional experience (not necessarily positive as long as they are strong: interestingly, fear and anger can also lead to pleasure – e.g. horror movies). The latter one offers incomparably more opportunities for consumption-derived pleasure because it does not require the actual manipulation of the object (which is limited and intensity of the pleasure tends to decline with the number of repetitions), rather it is gained through a control over the meaning by the subject and his power of imagination. Therefore, “it is this highly rationalized form of self-illusory hedonism which characterizes modern pleasure seeking” [Campbell in Lang: 101]. Modern-day consumption is then rooted in daydreaming – a mixture of imagined pleasures of the fantasy and generally weaker pleasures of the reality, necessarily creating dissatisfaction with the reality that further fuels consumption and daydreaming. [Gabriel and Lang: 100-102]

## **1.4. Postmodern theories**

Postmodernism in consumption theories covers an extremely diverse array of theories. Particularly important for the development of postmodern approaches to consumption was the application of semiotics – “study of signs and the way they work to generate meaning” [Batey, 2008: 81]. One of the pioneers was Roland Barthes who attempted to look behind the primary signification of objects and uncover the hidden secondary meanings in order to challenge the innocence of cultural artefacts and ‘interrogate the obvious’ [Chandler]. His work was heavily inspired by the work of father of structuralism - de Saussure who distinguished the signifier – the physical carrier of the meaning from the signified – the mental representation of the signifier [Batey, 2008]. In other words, he separated the sign of the object from the material object itself. Drawing on these ideas, Barthes claimed that objects have various orders of representations, various levels of meaning – first order of representation is denotation, the literal meaning and second order of representation is connotation, the implied meaning. The ideology, or mythology (can be considered as the third order of representation) arises when the culturally conditioned myths that structure the particular society come to be associated with the object and its sign. Basically, the mythology refers to the culturally derived connotative meanings. Barthes illustrates his theory for example on Marilyn Monroe – on the second order of representation she stands for the idea of glamour, beauty, youth, sex, but moving behind these connotations to the level of ideology she can represent for example the myth of the Hollywood dream machine or the idea of femme fatale. Barthes cautioned that by buying into these cultural myths, consumers tend to forget that these are historically specific cultural constructs and consider them as natural order of things [Patterson, 2005], implicitly helping to preserve status quo. [Batey, 2008]

Jean Baudrillard is one of the more radical postmodern thinkers on consumption (even though he himself refused the label). One of the major sources of influence on Baudrillard’s theory was structuralism – he conceived of consumption as a structure, a sort of language, a discourse [Baudrillard, 1998] that justified application of semiotic analysis. He claimed that people consume signs

(images, messages) rather than objects. The commodities are therefore defined no longer by their economic or practical value, instead they are defined by what they signify. Baudrillard thus replaced Marxist concepts of use and exchange value by so-called sign value. The meaning is no longer tied to the object because it has exclusively relational quality: what the object signifies is defined in terms of difference to other objects. What this means is that the relationship between the object and the sign is completely arbitrary and the signs are floating free in a system of signifiers [Odih, 2007], randomly migrating between objects. Consequently, consumer objects lost any real meaning, they became merely temporary vehicles for semiotic meaning [Gabriel and Lang, 2006].

According to Baudrillard, there exists a system of signs that is basically a system of differences. The consumption is then driven by the social logic of differentiation: individuals consume objects in attempt to differentiate themselves, to express and communicate their individualities, but in order to do so, they need to conform to the code of the system of signs [Baudrillard, 1998]. At this point Baudrillard agrees with Veblen and considers consumption as a process of social classification and status seeking. The profusion of images and signs freed from the material objects led Baudrillard to conclude that we are living in a simulational society. The consumer society is characterized by simulations - sham objects that imitate reality and pretend to have real meaning by using abundance of signs [Baudrillard, 1998]. Baudrillard uses the term hyper-reality to describe the conditions of the world where the distinction between real and imaginary is disappearing, in his own words hyper-reality is “the generation of models of the real without origin or reality” [Baudrillard in Odih, 2007: 5].

Another distinctive feature of postmodernism is the recognition of “a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm” [Jameson in Dunn, 2008: 53]. The claim that everything is cultural represents a major shift from the modernist conceptualization of culture as a “specialized and autonomous realm of aesthetic creativity and formalization” [Dunn, 2008: 52]. Helped by the media, the postmodern world is saturated with the images, signs and meanings that are dissolving barriers between the cultural and non-cultural as well as between different styles and genres of the culture [Dunn, 2008]. These trends of

aestheticization of everyday life (penetration of culture into everyday life, including the merging of high and low culture) and cultural eclecticism (de-differentiation of culture) seem to be highly characteristic of modern consumer societies.

The concept of the aestheticization of everyday life was developed for example by Mike Featherstone, who thought of consumption in terms of excess, waste and disorder [Featherstone, 2007]. He observed that the modern world of department stores and theme parks has a lot in common with the fantastic world of carnivals and fairs. The so-called ordered disorder of modern department stores is based on the tradition of carnivalesque in its emphasis on sensory overload, spectacular imaginery and mixing and blending of styles, signs and symbols [Featherstone, 2007]. These ‘dream worlds’ as labeled by Walter Benjamin demonstrate the merging of art and everyday life, characterized by the the process of art penetrating into all aspects of life (the aesthetic criterion entering the realm of advertising, media, industrial design) and simultaneous erosion of the protected elite status of the art and artists. Defining characteristic of the aestheticization is the absolute dominance of the form over content [Bourdieu in Gabriel and Lang, 2006]: the appearance becomes all-important. This leads us back to the idea of complete separation of signs from any meaningful content: the signs are used arbitrarily, “making no attempt at signification or classification, their only point being to make a temporary impact on our consciousness” [Odih, 2007: 5].



## **2. advertising – brief history**

### **2.1. *Modern advertising***

Large-scale advertising dates back to 1870s when it emerged in the United States as a mechanism of the industrial capitalism designed to match rapidly increasing quantities of goods produced in factories with consumer demand [Odihi, 2007]. Growing productive capacities of factories were saturating the market not only with large quantities of standardized products, but the profusion of new range of products at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century dramatically improved the number and variety of products on offer [Odihi, 2007]. It was left to the advertisers to stimulate consumer demand in order to process this supply of goods: to catch the attention of consumer, inform him/her about the benefits of new commodities and persuade them that the product would improve their lives. The first phase of advertising was therefore largely educational and served to appeal to the rational consumer with arguments about the utility of the products, stressing such factors as function, price, durability, craftsmanship [Patterson, 2005]. It was so-called reason-why approach to advertising [Odihi, 2007] – why you should buy television, washing machine or vacuum cleaner. Accordingly, the advertisements usually featured large texts providing practical information and were accompanied by images of the product. Another defining feature of this first phase of advertising was its homogeneity - the advertisements were designed for a mass consumer market with no consideration of individual differences between consumers or classes of consumers [Odihi, 2007].

Gradually, however, insights from psychology penetrated this simplistic homo economicus mindframe and the advertisers discovered irrational consumer. Psychodynamic psychology of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that dominated the field at the time stressed unconscious forces that allegedly ruled our behaviour [Odihi, 2007]. People in general and consumers in particular were seen as operating on a rather primitive level, driven primarily by their hidden and repressed desires and anxieties [Odihi, 2007]. In order to tap into the consumer unconscious, advertisers played on emotions using suggestions, pictures and generally attention-gathering stimuli [Patterson, 2005]. At the same time, psychodynamics revealed and provided

another major source for advertising: the power of symbols. Advertising aesthetics of the time therefore heavily featured symbols that were supposed to evoke strong emotional responses [Patterson, 2005]. Very popular technique was positioning of the product in connection with desirable qualities such as glamour, status or wealth in order to capitalise on both, conscious and unconscious dreams, desires and fantasies [Patterson, 2005].

Understanding that consumer behaviour is to a great extent influenced by inner motivational forces contributed in 1940s to another shift in advertising theory and practice: the introduction of a prototypical consumer. As opposed to the idea of undifferentiated mass consumer market of the early marketing phase, the advertisers worked with several (stereo)types of consumers defined by some characteristic personality traits. For example, housewives were expected to be interested in convenience, health and safety of the products for her family, etc. As a result, the advertising was somewhat “personalized”. [Patterson, 2005: 203]

Generally though, what this phase of advertising was largely based on the idea of paternalistic brands offering ready made blueprints for customers who could either buy into them or not. The brands were telling the customers how they should live, with the brands at the centre of these ideal lives. In its next development phase, the advertising on the other hand strived to persuasively offer cultural resources for the customers to use selectively and creatively in their individual life projects. [Holt, 2002]

The process of personalization and fragmentation of advertising advanced even more in 1960s, when the advertisers embarked on the mission to target specific groups of consumers in order to accommodate the trend of lifestyle segmentation [Odih, 2007]. The changes were fuelled by the expansion of electronic media that replaced traditional image with sound and motion. Display of the products became all-important because it was through carefully manipulated presentation that the commodities were infused with their meanings. Odih labels this process “the production of commodity aesthetics” [Odih, 2007: 13]. Commodities essentially lost any fixed meanings in themselves as might be derived from their use value and their meanings were expropriated from the culture via symbolism used in the advertisements [Odih, 2007]. To describe this process,

Goldman coined the term “commodity-sign”: commodities became empty vessels, mere signs that could carry any and all cultural meanings [Goldman in Odih, 2007]. Yet another advance in the marketing practice enabled by the electronic media was the use of narratives or, in other words, story-telling. The products were situated in the context of everyday life: the ads starring the products were telling stories easily understandable by the consumers [Odih, 2007]. Thus, the commodities became “culturally constituted representations of everyday life” [Odih, 2007: 189]. Consumers could not only easily imagine the products in their own everyday existence, but what was crucial, they could also shop for the products that suit their own personal narratives and real or desired self-image. Products came to be seen as means of self-expression [Patterson, 2005]. This phase in the history of advertising was primarily focused on the individual and his/her own self-image. Commodities were advertised on and bought for their ability to help in the search of distinction and identity [Patterson, 2005].

## **2.2. *Post-modern advertising***

After its modernist phase defined primarily by symbolism and narratives, advertising entered into a postmodernist stage. Unlike in modernist advertising, where the meanings assigned to the commodities were anchored to the social and cultural context of their use, there is no “fixed reference of the meaning” in postmodern advertising [Odih, 2007: 189]. Signs are freely floating in the world, constantly arbitrarily aligned and realigned in order to achieve maximum commodity aesthetics that allows to capture the fleeting attention and interest of the consumer. In other words, focus on the appearance and imagery is all-important, disregarding any rules that once might have governed the employment of various resources, styles, techniques, media. Eclecticism is the new dogma [Odih, 2007]. In doing so, the borderlines between the real and the imaginary are becoming blurred, creating what Baudrillard termed “hyper-reality” as best epitomized by the phenomena of shopping malls, theme parks and multimedia advertising [Odih, 2007]. The crucial role in the postmodernist advertising is played by the media that enabled this fusion of real and imaginery to happen.

### **3. Brands – brief history**

Development of the brand was tightly connected to, yet distinct from the changes in advertising industry. Brand is a much wider concept than advertising, which constitutes only one, although major channel of brand promotion [Klein, 2005]. To briefly sum up the progression of brand throughout times, we can state along with Goodyear that brand started out as reference and ended up as icon. According to Goodyear's model of evolution of the brand, the brand progressed through these stages: unbranded goods, brand as a reference, brand as a personality and brand as an icon [Batey, 2008].

#### **3.1. *Brand as a reference***

Early brand started out simply as a way to identify the product of one manufacturer from the product of another and in some cases as a guarantee of quality [Klein, 2005]. However, it was not long before brands started taking on more complex meanings than that.

#### **3.2. *Brands as a personality***

Expansion of the brand was driven by the large-scale Fordist production of standardized products at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. In order to sell products that were, as a result of technological advances, nearly indistinguishable from products of the competitors the company had to somehow make them unique and special. Klein writes that “within a context of manufactured sameness, image based difference had to be manufactured along with the product” [Klein, 2005: 6]. Uniqueness of the product as well as its indispensability affect the elasticity of demand for the product and therefore allow the seller to set up higher mark-ups without causing significant loss of consumers to cheaper competition, therefore earning him higher profits. Thus, uniqueness adds value to the commodity. Consequently, brands served not

only as a way to physically distinguish the product from otherwise very similar products of the competitors by virtue of brand name, but branding also involved cultivating product's associations with some distinctive values – in other words, making it unique and therefore more valuable. In case of the first brands, their intent was to evoke feelings of familiarity and trust replacing the outdated interface of a shopkeeper who distributed nameless generic goods in local stores [Klein, 2005]. These early brands, therefore, often took on the image of a particular person, such as Uncle Ben, Dr. Brown or Campbell's soup.

By 1940s, awareness that brand does not simply refer to individual products, rather the corporations themselves develop brand identity that is subsequently transferred to their products, was widespread. One of the first pioneers of branding corporations rather than products was General Motors, positioning General motors as an embodiment of American family [Klein, 2005]. These early corporate brands, however, were largely centered around a particular product, such as a car, the era of corporate brands covering a wide range of products and services in diverse industry sectors did not come before 1980s. This immaterial brand identity representing the “meaning” of the brand added value to the corporation, creating often substantial intangible assets. The fact that brand name created value in quantifiable terms spurred massive investments in advertising and brand development in 1980s [Klein, 2005].

### **3.3. *Brand as an icon***

1980s witnessed the coming of power of yuppi generation that had both the interest in and resources for cultivating lifestyles and intensely pursuing self-realization [Arvidsson, 2006]. Companies catered to this search of style and distinction by nurturing strong core brand identities and introducing brand extensions in order to offer a wide range of branded products for complete lifestyles. This marked the origins of iconic brands.

Several major trends that started out at the time were crucial for the development of iconic brand – brand as we now know it. The trend of outsourcing the production was a crucial innovation that enabled companies to divest

themselves of the actual material production, close down factories, lay off people and replace them by contracting out most physical activities to outsiders, and focus all energies on building the brand image [Klein, 2005]. Outsourcing also made brand extensions possible: company originally producing and selling jeans ended up producing nothing more than the brand image while selling several lines of clothing for different segments of consumers as well as shoes, parfums, cosmetics, household products, even internet connections, all manufactured by third parties.

De-regulation of media and public institutions opened up a way for commercialization of schools, art and public spaces changing the balance between public and commercial sponsorships [Arvidsson, 2006]. Brands gradually gained much more important role in public life, opening up new sources of brand promotion: Body Shop grooming its self-image as environmentally friendly and fair trade, Nike posing as a supporter of children and young people (building basketball courts in run-down inner cities) or Hilfiger acting as a devoted cultural sponsor (sponsoring Rollingstones tour). Growth of the importance of new media forms, such as internet, satellite and VCRs and the new wave of mergers and acquisitions between different media corporations caused decline in the effectiveness of traditional advertising and led to the development of global media market and brand management that combined various forms of brand promotion, replacing the single-minded focus on traditional advertising [Arvidsson, 2006: 3-4]. Furthermore, globalization of media, best represented by BBC or MTV or Hollywood film production, was essential in the formation of global consumer culture [Arvidsson, 2006]: for example, the ideal of young trendy teen dressed in Nike shoes and Diesel jeans drinking Coke and listening to his brand new i-pod is nearly identical across countries. While in many instances the international corporations did take into account local differences in taste and circumstances, one can detect growing uniformity in the products of global companies helped by the dissemination of same images across the world by the media. Starbucks, McDonald or Body shop premises and products on offer are nearly identical regardless of its location. As summarized by a Nike executive, “the commitment is to be a global company. One management, one theme, one value, one ethic around the world” [Goldman and Papson, 1996: 4].

All of the aforementioned caused a rapid spread of brands into new, previously brand-free areas of life. The times when only manufactured products had been branded was over: branding of services, water, religions, universities, countries, politicians, celebrities and self-branding become as widespread as branding of household products, the original stronghold of brands. Brands have become virtually ubiquitous [Klein, 2005].

The branding frenzy of the 1980s was somewhat shaken up in the early 1990s. Market share of bargain stores such as WalMart or Tesco was steadily rising as the consumers allegedly became brand blind, choosing low prices over famous logos [Klein, 2005]. However, while some of the household brands indeed recorded losses to the bargain brands, other brands emerged from this brand crisis even stronger than before and established so far the strongest type of brand – lifestyle brands.

Lifestyle brands, most notorious of which are for example Nike, Apple, Microsoft, Tommy Hilfiger, Body Shop, Disney or Starbucks, did not mysteriously appear only after the brand and advertising crisis of the 90s, but the crisis helped to clearly demarcate the difference between these lifestyle brands selling concepts and lifestyles and brands that still produce and sell objects. The hallmark of the lifestyle brand is that it is entirely concept driven, selling values, attitudes, ways of life and the product itself is secondary, it is not unusual to completely omit the actual product from the advertisement. In doing so, these companies promoted branding to become their core business. Rather than manufacturing things, these companies are in the business of buying and branding things: “successful corporations must primarily produce brands, as opposed to products” [Klein, 2005: 3]. [Klein, 2005]

The most successful lifestyle brands can take it a step further on the evolution ladder and become icons. These are the mythical iconic brands because they managed to become fully embedded in the culture [Holt, 2005: 273], they became cultural symbols in their own right: Coke and Nike’s swoosh symbol are as much cultural icons as is the Statue of Liberty. These brands represent a certain idea or feeling, they become symbols of individuality or masculinity or carefree fun and relaxation [Batey, 2008].

## 4. Brands as carriers of symbolic meanings

The official definition of brand by the American Marketing Association is: “a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors“ [Philip Kotler in Batey, 2008: 3]. This is, however, a very simplistic definition, modern brand is much more than a simple reference used to identify products of particular producers. Modern brands are primarily immaterial concepts - clusters of meaning expressing emotional, aesthetic and symbolic values [brand culture: 9] that are painstakingly created, maintained and updated by companies through a variety of techniques. The brand basically exist as a number of associations, feelings, beliefs, experiences and images in the minds of consumers. This modern version of brand revolves around the idea of symbolic consumption, that is consumption for other than utilitarian reasons. The significance of goods, particularly branded goods „rests largely in their ability to carry and communicate cultural meanings“ [McCracken, 1986: 71]. The actual material objects and their physical properties are secondary to the symbolic meanings that reside in them, the object itself becomes merely a carrier of these meanings. Consumers are then ultimately buying not products, but brands and the meanings they impersonate for the consumers [Batey, 2008]. What matters is not that you own an expensive sound system, but that you own Bang&Olufsen sound system, not the mobile phone in itself, but the i-Phone, it is not the coat, but the Luis Vuitton coat that becomes the important information for you and for the others.

In order to illustrate how the cultural meanings of consumer goods are being created, we will slightly modify the influential theory developed by Grant McCracken. He proposed that cultural meaning is moving constantly between three locations in the social world: cultural world, consumer good and individual consumer. Accordingly, there are two points of transfer: first, the cultural meanings are drawn from the cultural world and embedded in the consumer good via various techniques, of which most effective are advertising and product design, and then the cultural meanings residing in the cultural goods are transferred to the consumer



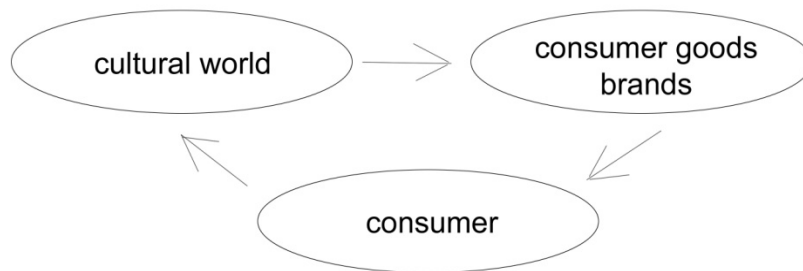
employing some of the four types of rituals: exchange, possession, grooming and divestment rituals [McCracken, 1986].

Applying McCracken's theory from consumption goods to more specific branded goods, the major implication is that in order to fully understand creation of brand meanings, one needs to understand two processes: the transfer of meaning from world/culture to brands and the appropriation of this meaning by the consumers. However, even though McCracken acknowledged the consumers an active role of participants in the process of meaning transfer in that they need to draw the symbolic properties from the goods that they use for the purposes of self-definition, it was still a fairly passive picture of a consumer who is unaware of the wider consequences of his actions: „meaningful properties of consumer goods are not always conspicuously evident to a consumer, however much they serve to inform and control his/her action“ [McCracken, 1986:78]. This theory, therefore, is not so much unlike the early theories of Frankfurt school that accused brands of cultural engineering, in that it presupposes a fairly straightforward process of meaning creation: advertisers and designers inject whatever meanings they find appropriate into the goods (admittedly with various degrees of success) which are then unconsciously acquired by the consumers exactly in the form intended by the advertisers. In reality, though, very few would deny that consumers these days act as active co-producers of meaning: they are reflexive and creative individuals who very deliberately select, juxtapose and even subvert the intended brand meanings. They effectively use brands as cultural resources to suit their own purposes. Brands, in turn, in their neverending search for new cultural material immediately latch on these new interpretations of cultural meanings and sell them prepackaged to the masses. Therefore, in a way, the brands act both as cultural leeches feeding on the consumer agency in order to sell, but they also provide the consumers with immense quantity of cultural material. It is disputable to what extent is this material original or authentic, if ever, nevertheless it is undeniable that the brands play a significant role in the process of renewal and refreshing of cultural life. It is belief of this essay that rather than condemn brands as cultural parasites, there exists a symbiotic relationship between brands and social world. This might not be directly visible in the McCracken's linear model, where the direction of influence goes from social world to brands and then to consumers, but if we add one

additional link, from the consumer to the social world we arrive at a cyclical model with constant circulations of meaning, where both brands and consumers are both parasites and producers of cultural meanings (see figure 1).

From the aforementioned, three different approaches to the role of brands in culture can be detected: brands as cultural engineers imposing cultural values, meanings and interpretations on helpless consumers, the alternative approach seeing brands as cultural mediators providing consumers with cultural resources and finally the cultural leeches theory that turns attentions to the point transfer of meanings from the cultural world to the brands, seeing it as a clearly parasitic relationship. While the culture engineering and cultural mediators approach deal with the same point of transfer and should therefore probably be analysed in comparison, I will instead first briefly outline the cultural engineering approach and then focus on the cultural leeches and cultural mediators approach, which are in my opinion more relevant. The cultural engineering approach is rather outdated and is negated by the idea of ‚savvy‘ consumer as advocated by the cultural mediator approach.

Figure 1: Modified McCracken's model of transfer of cultural meanings



## 5. Brands as cultural engineers

The rise of mass popular culture in the years following the second world war inspired a very deterministic view of culture and consumption, whereas the state, advertising and mass media were accused of working together to impose tastes, desires and (false) needs upon unsuspecting and docile consumers [Marcuse]. It was a perfect system of social control, where the consumers were seduced into the idea of the illusion of choice as represented by the abundance of deceptively different consumer products. In this view, the advertisers are “portrayed as cultural engineers, organizing how people think and feel through branded commercial products” [Holt, 2002:71]. The main proponent of this view was the Frankfurt school.

Rooted in Marxism, Frankfurt school set out to examine and criticize the expansion of commodification to culture and arts. ‘Cultural industry’ is a term coined by Horkheimer and Adorno to describe the rise of popular culture – mass marketed cultural products passively received by consumers in order to provide undemanding entertainment. Enlightenment with its stress on rationality and instrumental reason was blamed for the rise of this cultural industry that produces standardized, homogeneous and predictable cultural goods in a process not unlike the mass production of goods in factories. The products of the cultural industry are therefore characterized by a ‘formulaic structure’ achieved by repetition and imitation, the emphasis is put on technique and effect at the expense of such high culture values as creativity, originality and imagination . As such, these popular culture products are not authentic, they meet false needs that are artificially created, marketed and perpetuated by the cultural industry in order to sell products. These false needs generate what Adorno and Horkheimer term ‘pseudo-pleasure’ – pleasure based on an ‘illusory promise of satisfaction’. Herbert Marcuse further elaborated on the idea of false needs (it was him who originally distinguished true and false needs, true needs being essential to well being and survival) and claims that they are used as a mechanism of social control because they limit our aspirations and goals to the acquisition of the latest model of a car. The ideology of consumption redirects all our energies into non-threatening activity of buying

things, inducing conformity within the capitalist system and thus dampening the political action and preserving status quo. To sum up, the idea of a passive and manipulated consumer is the distinctive feature of the Frankfurt school: “the fusion of culture and entertainment creates a system of seemingly total and inescapable social control” [Dunn, 2008: 34]. [Dunn, 2008]

It is obvious that the implicit assumption of the cultural engineering model is a passive consumer who is manipulated through consumption. This line of thinking was and still is rather popular even outside of the marxist tradition, although the rhetorics might be moderated to some extent. For example, the branch of consumer research called retail psychology investigated how the consumer can be unconsciously manipulated (of course, using more benign terms in their official terminology) by scents, colours, shop outlays, etc. [Patterson, 2005]. Also, a concept of subliminal messages and advertising was very popular for a time as represented by the mass popularity of the book by Vance Packard titled *Hidden Persuaders*. On the cover of this book, several statements are symptomatic of this approach, such as “Many of us are being influenced and manipulated in the patters on our everyday lives” or “The probers aim to influence the state of our minds and channel our behaviour as citizens” or “Television conditions children to be loyal enthusiasts of a product...”. Other modern theoreticians that continue the tradition of Frankfurt school are for example George Ritzer and his exposition on the mcdonaldization of society or Stuart Ewen with his famous book *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of Consumer Culture*. Nevertheless, while the particular process spans from generation of false needs, fostering materialistic outlooks or constant dissatisfaction with one’s life and body to the abuse of consumer’s hidden fears and desires in order to influence their consiousness, it always revolves around the idea of a consumer as a helpless victim whose tastes and consumption choices are determined by outside forces beyond his control.

The major criticism of the cultural engineering theory stems from the fact that it oversimplifies how the cultural industry works and it neglects the fact that consumption takes place in cultural contexts as well as social spaces [Patterson, 2005]. Crucial objection to this hegemonic perspective is its assumption of

homogeneity – as if there was one single consistent ideology forced upon unsuspecting masses by the coordinated efforts of the culture industry. For example Thompson convincingly argued that we should think more in terms of what he terms ‘lived cultural ideology’ that “is structured by countervailing discourses, rather than being an internally consistent, monolithic narrative system” [Thompson and Haytko, 1997: 36]. Based on these countervailing cultural discourses, consumers are able to draw their own personalized meanings or so-called problematizing interpretations [Thompson and Haytko, 1997]. In other words, while ideology exerts significant influence on our understanding of the world, consumers are active individuals who negotiate these cultural narratives with their own personal experiences and use this framework to interpret the cultural meanings presented by the brand managers. Therefore, when we are conceptualizing consumption we are not dealing with a simple direct transfer of meanings from the advertisers to the consumers as the cultural engineering model would have it, rather both the advertisers and consumers are involved in the process of the negotiation of meaning influenced by various factors such as cultural frameworks, immediate social context of consumption as well as more idiosyncratic factors such as personal histories, life goals and values and beliefs.

## 6. Brands as cultural leeches

If company wants to create a successful brand, it needs to imbue the brand with socially shared meanings that can be decoded and understood by potential customers. Brand meanings, therefore, need to be rooted in common imagery, communication system, social practice – in culture. The hard-core representatives of cultural leeches perspective take this basic observation about the source of brand meanings to the extreme and claim that consumers are “victims of a predatory marketing machine that co-opted our identities, our styles and our ideas and turned them into brand food” [Klein, 2005: 81]. The picture of the all-powerful brands becomes more complex than that when we add the assumption of active creative consumers. While this assumption changes nothing about the fact that brands actually do prey on the authentic cultural spaces, their power is significantly restricted by the consumer agency.

### ***6.1. Examples of the cultural ‘vulturing’ in practice – the hard-core cultural leeches approach***

To cite just a few examples of the appropriation of culture: snowboarding (Burton) and surfing (Quiksilver) subcultures, black hip hop subculture (Hilfiger, Nike), upper class French bourgeois luxury (Louis Vuitton), understated British conservative yet trendy style (Burberry), young succesful and non-conformist professionals (Apple – Think Different), professional sports communities (Patagonia, Nike), or art and fashion social groups (Absolut, Diesel). In a majority of cases, it was the co-optation of youth culture and its styles and subcultures that became a major inspiration for brands [Klein, 2005]. In the early 1990s marketers re-discovered the youth market – while babyboomers became price sensitive and developed at least partial resistance to brands, young people became perfect targets because they were still willing to pay the mark up for brands in order to fit in [Klein, 2005]. Brands responded to this shift in target audience and raced to shape their brand identities to be “cool”, alternative, young and trendy in order to appeal

to their young consumers: “‘Am I cool?’ became the all-consuming question of every moment, echoing not only through class and locker rooms, but through the high-powered meetings and conference calls of Corporate High” [Klein, 2005: 69]. The brands sought out the seeds of new authentic trends and lifestyles emerging out in the world, such as punk, grunge, hip hop and ‘blow it up’: incorporated them in their designs and advertisements and mined them ruthlessly for their selling potential, turning them from original niche lifestyles into mass marketed and short-lived fads.

The irony is that these cultural movements usually developed as a form of resistance to the mass culture and its values and ended up feeding the very system they originally sought to undermine. Likewise, Thomas Frank in his book *The Conquest of the Cool* claimed that it was not the countercultural movement of the 1960s revolting against the corporativism and market dictate that became hegemonic, but it was the co-opted big-business version of it that became so widespread. Rather than ‘conquest of cool’ he leans towards ‘the creation of cool’ as explanation of the 1960s. Paradoxically, the search for individuation, for originality and for difference became very successfully mass-marketed. Similarly, Holt claims that “what has been termed ‘consumer resistance’ is actually a form of market-sanctioned cultural experimentation through which the market often rejuvenates itself” [Holt, 2002: 89].

Klein uses the example of young black men in the US inner city ghettos and their subculture to illustrate this process of stealing meaning and identity [Klein, 2005]. What Patterson succinctly named “white fetishisation of blackness” [Patterson, 2005: 199] describes a process where the black kids became a primary source of coolness aggressively mined by such brands as Tommy Hilfiger, Adidas, Nike. These brands first sought to establish themselves as “a ghetto thing”, as a brand favoured by this social group and then used this imagery of a hip hop brand to market to their primary targets – masses of white and asian middle class kids. Ironically, the black kids first latched onto these brands in an attempt to imitate the lifestyle of success of the white middle and higher class. This case is a perfect example of a subculture that appropriated consumer objects – specifically branded clothes and shoe wear, for its own purposes and endowed them with new meanings.

These meanings were then transferred back and accommodated by the brand. Klein therefore concludes that the brand value, in this particular case, was essentially created out of the long-lived racial segregation in the US. Similar idea was put forward by Douglas Holt, who argued that the most successful brands derive their value and appeal to the customers from the cultural contradictions relevant at a specific historic moments [Holt].

Another major source of brand symbolism other than subcultures are the political and social demands of radical elements in the society for change. The cry for racial and sexual identities and various political campaigns are often incorporated within the brand image [Klein, 2005]. There are not many who have never heard of Benetton's highly provocative political advertising campaigns against racism and discrimination, war, poverty AIDS and others. American apparel is a brand that sells its clothing on the fact that all their clothes are manufactured in the US and by the workers that are guaranteed very favourable working conditions complete with friendly working environment, medical and retirement insurance and job security [Klein, 2005]. This brand directly reacts to the outcry of public against the brands that manufacture their products in sweatshops in third world countries. Body shop is well known for its fair trade focus, environment friendly manufacture of cosmetics and advocacy of woman rights: this brand uses these political ideas and trademark shopping environment as their only marketing tool. These brands offer what we can term as 'ethical consumption' [Littler, 2008]. Klein identifies 'identity marketing' where the brands identify themselves with campaigns for sexual and racial identity. GAP and Diesel identify themselves, among others, with gay community, Nike successfully incorporated feminist standpoint with its Nike Woman campaigns. The problem is that while the companies might have incorporated all these noble ideas in their image, their reasons for doing so are questionable [Klein, 2005]. Preaching righteous claims that are in direct discrepancy with the actual practice leaves one in doubt as to the credibility of those claims: one just needs to recall Nike's scandal regarding its sweatshops in Asia or the working conditions in other companies (i.e. the minimum wage jobs with no job-security, random working hours, no employee benefits such as health insurance for part timers who come to create most of the workforce, etc.).



## **6.2. Consumer agency as both feeding and restricting brands: Adam Arvidsson and the appropriation of social common**

All of the abovementioned are typical examples of the cultural leeches reasoning. Adam Arvidsson adds an interesting twist to this argumentation because while he acknowledges that the social world is the source of brand value, he believes that brand managers are limited in what they can do with the brand. He describes the process of generation of brand meaning as a capitalization of the ability of consumers to create and communicate common social world. He argues that brand makers are in fact engaged in the process of influencing and directing the external and autonomous productive practice of social communication [Arvidsson, 2006: 7]. They do not bestow the cultural meanings upon the brands, they influence what the consumers do with and think of the brands. This is why Arvidsson is not a typical representative of the cultural leeches perspective, because rather than seeing brands as all-powerful cultural predators ruthlessly extracting symbolic meanings from cultural world, he argues that the power of brands as meaning brokers is fairly limited – after all he argues that all branding efforts put together can do nothing more than desperately try to follow the latest developments in the hopelessly complex social world that is in a constant state of flux. However, while it may be true that establishing and maintaining a successful brand is an exhausting and neverending process, brands are far from helpless and have powerful resources at their disposal. Arvidsson claims that brands provide a platform or a context within which the consumers experience the brand and use the product. According to Lury, the brand pre-structures the action and anticipates the feelings and experiences: if you buy particular branded consumer good, you will feel particular way and you will be a particular person [Lury, 2004]. Arvidsson describes the increasingly extensive techniques of brand management that extend far beyond the original focus on advertising, and which are designed to create a persuasive branded environment cutting across several media channels. The aim is to provide an all-inclusive branded experience reaching the consumers from several different angles at once: a perfect example is the concept of branded superstores where you can ‘live’ the brand in a way fully structured by the brand or so called ‘content’ brands,

such as Stars wars that come as a movie, as a video game, as a variety of everyday consumer objects such as t-shirts, back-packs and toys, etc.

So, what exactly is it that the brand appropriate from the social world? Arvidsson argues that the human communication has the ability to produce a surplus value. We can use the term of ‘ethical surplus’ introduced by Maurizio Lazzarato to describe “a social relation, a shared meaning, or a sense of belonging” that is produced autonomously in the process of social communication [Arvidsson, 2006: 10]. While the very simple action of speech can be source of this surplus sociality, it is in particular what Lazzarato calls ‘immaterial labour’ employed to produce the immaterial qualities of goods that is essential for the creation of brand meanings. The immaterial labour can be employed directly by the brands, for example if they hire what they see a typical representant of the target audience to help them design the product or the advertising campaign, but it can be also unsalaried labour of consumers, online discussion groups, subcultures, brand communities, social movements and others. An excellent example of this process of production of value by free labour are open source projects, such as Wikipedia or the notoriously famous Harley Davidson brand community that other brands can only dream of. Brands then simply turn this social surplus value into economic value when they appropriate the social knowledge and incorporate it in their brand identity and imagery. Identifying the consumer as a major participant, although unintentional and in many cases even unwilling, in the production of brand, we came a long way from the Marxist strict dichotomy between production and consumption: “the workplace can no longer be privileged as the place for the production of value” [Arvidsson, 2006: 9]. Indeed, some go as far as to claim that the ownership of brand has moved from producers to consumers [Batey, 2008]. It needs to be stressed, though, that while the social world has always been source of brand meanings, the move towards the ‘ownership’ of brands by consumers started in the 1960s with the emergence of countercultural movement and its reflexive consumer and accelerated particularly from the 1990s onwards with the explosion of decentralized methods of communication and media that allowed the brand conscious consumers more freedom from the intended brand meanings projected by the advertisers.

### **6.3. Consequence of the cultural parasitism: meaning lost?**

Regarding the issue of the incessant mining of cultural meanings, there is a major consequence that needs to be considered: by co-opting the meanings from the cultural world, the meaningfulness might get lost. This idea was again in a very reader-friendly way formulated by Klein: “the cool hunters reduce vibrant cultural ideas to the status of archeological artifacts, and drain away whatever meaning they once held for the people who lived with them” [Klein, 2005: 84]. She touches upon the problem already voiced by the postmodern writers Jean Baudrillard or Fredric Jameson when they talked about the ‘implosion of meaning’ or ‘depthlessness’. Baudrillard argued that consumption is basically a form of language, a communication: “there can be no more impoverished language than this one, laden with referents, yet empty of meaning as it is” [Baudrillard, 2005: 210]. The moment objects and signs become completely separate and the signs started their never-ending journey from brand to brand, from one advertisement to another, the actual meaning became lost and all what was left was the signification of difference: when you buy an object you consume not what it is but what it signifies and what it signifies is defined in relation to other objects [Baudrillard, 1998]. You buy Rolex and what you get is not an instrument to tell the time but a way to differentiate yourselves against those that do not own Rolex. But what is still more interesting, even though maybe less radical than Baudrillard’s demise of meaning, is that how the meaning is virtually drained from cultural symbols: Nike, originally the greek goddess representing victory nowadays stands for a shoe [Gabriel and Lang, 2006]. When a particular style produced by a subculture (style as a form of social surplus we discussed in previous section) is mass-marketed, its original meaning of resistance against majority is completely lost. We can again recall the example of the Hip Hop subculture, its distinctive style signifying a revolt against the white class that marginalized them and its values. The adoption of this style by white middle-class teenagers who simply bought mass-produced stylized articles was far removed the principles and values of the original subculture, it just became another way to be ‘cool’. The kids did not buy Hip Hop wear in order to identify themselves with the subculture or to show support for their cause, for a time it might have been an attempt to achieve a ‘tough’ guy image scorning the societal

rules, but eventually even this meaning came to be a lost in the wave of massive commercialization.

## 7. Brands as cultural mediators

We examined the relationship between the cultural world and brands in the previous section and now we will now focus on the second part of our cultural meaning transfer model – the relationship between the branded consumer goods and individual consumers. This will help us to illustrate how the brands might provide consumers with innumerable cultural resources that can be used in the process of refreshing the cultural pool. Before exploring the idea that the brands might be more than simply cultural vultures, we need to understand why the consumers seek the symbolic meanings and that they are actually active co-producers of meaning rather than gullible and passive receivers of branded messages.

### 7.1. „To have is to be“: Identity and Consumption

The importance and omnipresence of brands in our lives is due to the fact that brands now act as sources of symbolic meanings that people habitually use in order to construct their identities, social relations and shared experiences [Arvidsson, 2006]. Brands became one of the major cultural resources of the symbolism for the construction of our identities – both individual and social self [Elliot and Wattanasuwan, 1998]. In the words of a certain advertising executive: „american housewives can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy they lack – by the buying of things“ [Patterson, 2005: 36].

Many commentators argue that in the modern destabilized world characterized by dissolution of traditional loyalties, ties and communities, individual is forced to actively and consciously create his/her identity in the face of what Giddens calls „looming threat of personal meaninglessness“ [Batey, 2008: 30]. We struggle to introduce some form of meaningfulness to our lives, to make sense of who we are, to construct coherent life stories about ourselves drawing on various symbolic materials [Ricoeur in Elliot and Wattanasuwan, 1998]. The

postmodern identity is not fixed, it is a fluid process evolving over the lifetime, a permanent work in progress requiring the individual to constantly make choices that define his/her identity. And it is buying of things that has become one of the major resources that we use in our search for and construction of self. The act of choosing particular good over another necessarily involves expressing our preferences that are tightly tied to our identity [Patterson, 2005]. This, however, would only explain how we affirm and communicate already formed identities – that is by choosing specific goods and brands that are consistent with our identity. But we also form our sense of self „through the systematic appropriation of the meaningful properties of goods“ [McCracken, 1986: 80]. Belk suggested that material possessions are actually part of our extended selves: we are defined by what we own and what we do not own [Belk, 1988]. Apparently, whatever we see as ours becomes part of ourselves [Elliot and Wattanasuwan, 1998]. In other words, people consume the symbolic meanings of goods in an attempt to affirm who they think they are as well as who they would like to be. In relation to social self, it is widely accepted that consumption is crucial as a social marker, expressing group memberships, categorizing one’s position in society and providing information about others. To sum up, consumption is a way of expressing and communicating the actual and ideal self.

## **7.2. Consumers as co-producers of meaning**

### **7.2.1. Cultural theory perspective**

As early as 1950s, Sidney Levy recognized that people buy things for other than utilitarian reasons that inhere in the objects themselves and consumption became increasingly symbolic [Levy, 1959]. These early inroads into the investigation of meanings, however, completely disregarded the socio-historical contextual dimensions of meaning [Holt, 1997]. They worked with essentialist conception of meaning, whereas meanings existed independently from context and interpreters and brand managers could simply attach desired meanings to consumption objects and brands [Holt, 1997]. Obviously, this object signification

approach assumed that there was a very straightforward uncomplicated relationship object-meaning. Moreover, since the meanings were seen as inherent in the objects, it followed that „anyone who consumes the same category or brand of objects is partaking in the same meaning“ [Holt, 1997: 333]. In other words, the consumer agency involved in the interpretation of meanings was completely disregarded. It is equivalent of saying that Apple stands for coolness and every single buyer of Mac gets the computer in order to feel or to appear to others as ‚cool‘. The fact that someone might buy Mac computer because of its superior funky design or as a symbol of rejection of Windows near monopoly was not acknowledged.

A major revolution in thinking about meaning came with post-structuralist approach. It built on the structuralist central claim that the meaning is defined in terms of „systematic relations of difference“ [Holt, 1997: 328], i.e. meaning of a particular object or action only emerges in relation to other objects and actions. Post-structuralism further claimed that not only is meaning a relational quality, but meanings are to a significant extent shaped by their expression in social life, by the practice and the actions in particular contexts [Holt, 1997] (for example through ‚consumption rituals‘). The obvious implication is that meanings are over the time continually being re-interpreted in relation to other cultural objects “so the meaning of any particular object or activity is unstable and contingent since it is dependent on which meaningful linkages are made, an interpretative process that is necessarily underdetermined by the cultural objects themselves“ [Holt, 1997: 329]. To put it differently, symbolism in consumption is socially constructed, the objects in themselves hold no intrinsic meanings [Wattanasuwan, 2005].

The cultural perspective on consumption forces us to abandon the idea of a passive consumer who obediently ingests whatever meanings companies try to pack into branded products. Consumers can understand and use consumption objects and brands in various ways that are, however, significantly influenced by what the cultural theory calls ‚cultural frameworks‘ defined as „taken for granted, intersubjectively shared interpretative frameworks (e.g. metaphors, narratives, images, prototypes, and semantic structures)“ [Holt, 1997: 332]. Holt claims that „consumption objects are better understood as polysemic symbolic resources that

allow for significant variation in consumer interpretation and use“ [Holt, 1997: 334].

### **7.2.2. Personalized interpretations of meanings**

Of course, the cultural interpretative frameworks are not the only factor that affects the negotiation of brand meanings because they work primarily on the subconscious level. Branded commodities can be used not only to express one's identity in accordance with the marketers' intentions, but they can be used by knowing consumers who are aware of the branding discourse to re-interpret these meanings to suit their own needs and to articulate their own sense of identity or of difference and quite often a sense of social identity. Regarding social identities, for example subcultures, the sense of identity is often formed in terms of resistance to mainstream and expressed through the appropriation of consumer goods in new unintended ways [Patterson, 2005]. Indeed Dick Hebdige argued that subcultures are „concerned first and foremost with consumption“ [ Hebdige in Patterson, 2005: 163]. It is through the consumption objects that they define themselves against others.

Michel de Certeau came up with a concept of ‚bricolage‘ as a process through which the area of consumption can be reclaimed back by the consumers who resist against the hegemony of corporations and their brands: „In reality, a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called ‚consumption‘ and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the results of the circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its products (where would it place them?) but in the art of using those imposed on it“ [Thompson in Patterson, 2005: 157]. The idea of consumers as producers was already mentioned in the previous section, where Arvidsson argued that the consumers are producing surplus that is used by brands in increasingly active ways. The process of bricolage was a way of producing difference and innovation through appropriation of mass produced goods: „In a process of bricolage, they appropriated, re-accented, rearticulated or



trans-coded the material of mass culture to their own ends, through a range of everyday creative and symbolic practice“ [Mackay, 1997: 6]. This is then another aspect of a consumer as a co-producer of meaning – the aspect of a critical and creative individual who actively rejects the market dictate.

One way to approach the synthesis of the aforementioned two factors that allow for various personalized interpretations of branded goods – cultural framework and individual agency – is the model of Thompson and Haytko. They claimed that fashion discourses offer a plurality of interpretative position that can be achieved by negotiation of meanings between the macro level – countervailing cultural discourses and micro level – the conditions of everyday life: „consumers‘ interpretative uses of fashion discourses create emergent meanings that reflect a dialogue between their personal goals, life history, context-specific interests, and the multitude of countervailing cultural meanings associated with fashion phenomena“ [Thompson and Haytko, 1997: 16]. An example of countervailing discourses in fashion is for example the idea of fashion as a beautiful glamorous dream world versus the idea of the fashion world as an empty and superficial enterprise. In comparison to de Certeau’s analysis, Thompson and Haytko refuse existence of single consistent hegemonic ideology, arguing for the plurality of countervailing cultural discourses.

### **7.2.3. Negotiation of meaning in the process of social interaction**

There is one more important component we are missing in order to connect the idea of a creative consumer to our model and close the circle of the transfer of cultural meanings as proposed in Figure 1. So far we have looked at how the cultural world feeds the brands and how the consumers use and misuse the brands when they negotiate their personalized meanings, but we need to at least briefly mention how these idiosyncratic meanings become once again part of the culture. It can be easily noticed that while the potential number of unique interpretations of brand meanings is huge, in most cases the brand image is at least partially solidified in the market place suggesting that the consumers negotiate meanings also between

themselves in their social interactions with each other [Ligas and Cotte, 1996]. In social interaction with others it is necessary to agree on shared meanings on objects in order to enable successful communication: „the meaning added to the product has the most impact in social interaction and communication when it is identified in use and accepted by others“ [Ligas and Cotte, 1996: 612]. It is through the process of symbolic interaction that the meaning is negotiated within the context of a group and becomes more stable [Ligas and Cotte, 1996]. These negotiated meanings are then ready to re-enter the cultural world and the branding machine if they prove themselves interesting enough for the brand managers.

### **7.3. Brands as cultural mediators**

Disregarding the actual process or the extent of their influence, it is fairly obvious that consumers do act as co-producers of meaning. Acting on cultural, social and individual level, brands provide the raw material, the initial input for the consumer production of meaning. It needs to be stressed though, that the commercial sphere was reconceptualized as an autonomous space for the pursuit of sovereignty and identity only after 1960s. Until then, the actual marketing practice was not far removed from the cultural engineering model, when the paternalistic brands were offering complete identity blueprints [Holt, 2002]: as an owner of General Motor cars you bought into the identity of middle class family person with white picket fence in an American suburbia with a dog and two-and-a-half kids. After the lifestyle segmentation and search for individuation, the brands became more like cultural resources – cultural material you could pick and juxtapose with other sources to get your own unique mixture of identity and lifestyle.

This is the very basic idea behind the postmodern branding paradigm: the brands should be serving as cultural resources that are sought after by identity-hungry and demanding consumers. In order to do so, though, they need to appear authentic. Holt identified four distinct techniques that were designed to position brand as authentic and original: ironic brand, coattailing of cultural epicenters, life world emplacement and stealth branding. The technique of ironic detachment entails positioning the brand as playful reflexive persona that do not shy away

from deliberately pointing out what is considered as crude commercialism. The second technique was already mentioned in the previous part on the appropriation of the social common: brands are constantly seeking new pockets of culture to build into their brand identities. Most commonly, brands attempt to become associated with various communities, be it fashion and art societies, ethnic subcultures, professional or sport societies. If the brand managers are lucky enough and manage to precede the mass commercialization, they may even begin to be seen as cultural producers. The life world emplacement refers to the strategy to present the brand as authentic because it exists in the real life or because they have approval of the people whose opinion matters on the subject. Perfect example is nearly legendary success of Harley Davidson brand community: the way the old-times rugged bikers embrace Harley Davidson proves its authenticity. The stealth branding is a well-known technique of seeking endorsement and help of influential individuals or communities (e.g. celebrities, taste-makers, etc.). [Holt, 2002]

The question of to what extent brands can really be authentic and produce valuable cultural material is very contentious. Already, the border between what is generally considered art and culture producers such as music bands, films, even art exhibitions and brands is disappearing. Admittedly it is more likely a result of culture becoming commercialized to the extent that music bands are being created according to the branding manuals (just recall Spice Girls), but the fact is that considerable creative effort goes into the artistic aspect of branding. And the fact that brands are usually using some already existing cultural texts, such as songs, images, films, etc. does not necessarily mean that brands can produce nothing of cultural value [Holt, 2002]. It is a postmodern speciality to ostentatiously use and combine various seemingly incompatible cultural texts in a new way, to give them new meanings, subversive or contradictory interpretations. The concept of the aestheticization of life comes to mind because it refers to the processes of blending of art and non-art as well high and low culture. Nor is an unsurmountable problem that brands have commercial motives in their (pseudo)cultural production – after all, most artists hope to be commercially successful and create art with the profit in mind. I believe that the question of whether at least some brands do produce valuable cultural material and therefore act as cultural producers deserve further

enquiry, so far it is relatively unresearched and it is beyond the scope of this essay to reach any conclusions.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that in the same way the brands are feeding on the cultural material produced by the social common as described by Arvidsson, the consumers are feeding on the resources provided by the brands. Consumers are creative individuals who are constantly searching for new stimuli, new material for their personal life-projects and life-styles and most of these stimuli are mediated by the brands. The argument that much of this search for new and more exciting raw material, even the compulsion to articulate complex identities is artificially created by the commercial world does not change the fact that brands consume cultural material as well as produce (or mediate the production of) new one. If we recall our modified McCracken's model again, we can now clearly see the symbiotic relationship between the cultural world, brands and consumers. They are mutually influencing each other, plundering each other for new ideas, new stimuli, new resources and in doing so working together in the process of cultural renewal.

## Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to examine the relationship between the culture, brands and consumers. I decided to use Grant McCracken's model of transfer of cultural meanings between three locations: the cultural world, brands and the consumers, as a starting point to identify three different approaches to the question of the nature of the role played by the brands in the culture. Early on I rejected the cultural engineering theory as an approach plagued with two major shortcomings – the assumptions of passive consumer and the existence of a single hegemonic ideology. This is not to say that brands do not successfully influence the consumers and their beliefs, values, dreams and hopes, but entering the assumption of savvy consumers as co-producers of the brand meanings changes the nature of the relationship from the one of dominance of brands to the one of symbiotic flows of influence between culture, brands and consumers.

In order to more fully develop this central hypothesis of the essay, I proceeded to examine the remaining two approaches: the view claiming that brands act as cultural leeches feeding on authentic sources of culture, draining the original meanings in the process of commodification to the point of meaninglessness and the approach that acknowledged some positive part the brands may play in the culture, serving as cultural mediators by providing and enriching cultural resources for consumers. The cultural leeches theory captures part of the picture, it can be hardly denied that the brand managers do systematically appropriate any and all cultural niches to imbue their brands with new meanings in a neverending effort to capture the attention of a fickle and demanding consumer. Enriching this analysis with the assumption of active consumer, Adam Arvidsson was able to examine how consumer agency produces the surplus value that is then appropriated by the brands. It also led him to believe that the power of the brands is limited because brands can only influence, not direct the autonomous process of social interaction.

But the cultural leeches approach, even with the modifications Arvidsson suggested, still accounts only for a part of the picture. We need to analyze also the second point of transfer in McCracken's model – the transfer of meaning from the

brand to the consumer. Acknowledging that the actual brand meanings emerge as the end result of the negotiation of the meaning between the brand managers and the consumer agency, we can see how consumers consciously and unconsciously use brands and the symbolic meanings they carry as valuable resources for their self-projects as well as a way to relate to others. When this creative use of brand meanings that allows for the personalized meanings to emerge is re-negotiated yet again in the process of social communication, these new symbolic meanings enter the cultural pool to be used by the brands all over again. At this point the transfer of cultural meanings completed its circle: brands are feeding on culture in order to create brand identity rich with symbolic values, consumers are negotiating these brand meanings, in some cases creating new innovative interpretations of the symbolic properties of goods, renewing the cultural pool and providing new opportunities for the mining of meaning by the brands. This briefly summarizes the modified version of McCracken's model I proposed at the beginning of this essay. It is one of the possible ways of how to imagine the flows of meanings between the culture, the brands and the consumers.

However, by no means am I trying to suggest that these flows of meanings and influence are symmetric. Brands have immense resources at their disposal that they unashamedly employ in an attempt to sway the balance of power in their favour to get the consumers to accept the preferred interpretations of brand meanings. On the other hand, it would be equally one-sided to discard brands as cultural vultures and nothing more. They do act as cultural mediators in that they transform and enrich the culture and cultural meanings even if they do so only with the idea of profit in mind. Admittedly though, the circulations of cultural meaning sometimes proceed at a breakneck speed and the short-lived fads such as joga one season, eastern religions next season and capoeira in between tend to be rather superficial with much of the original deep-seated meanings lost. Unfortunately, there does not seem to exist win-win situation. But it is fair to at least consider both sides of the coin.

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# PROJEKT BAKALÁRSKEJ PRÁCE

1) **Předpokládaný název práce:** Reklama v živote jednotlivca – fenomén brands (značky)

2) **Námět práce zahrnující formulaci a vstupní diskusi poznávacího problému.**

Vo svojej práci sa budem zaoberať problematikou reklamy v živote jednotlivca. Reklama ako neoddeliteľný sprievodný jav konzumnej spoločnosti v priebehu svojho vývoja prenikala do jednotlivých oblastí verejného života. Počínajúc samozrejme médiami, neskôr prerástla do oblastí kultúry, vzdelávania, politiky, verejných priestorov, dobročinných aktivít, atď. Táto všadeprítomnosť a rôznorodosť reklamy má zásadný vplyv na život jednotlivca, ktorý sa s reklamou musí naučiť žiť, vysporiadať, začleniť ju do svojho života. Dôraz tejto práce preto bude kladený na úlohu reklamy v živote jednotlivca, konkrétne na jej modernú podobu: brands. Hlavným predmetom záujmu bude rola reklamy pri vytváraní identity: značky budujú filozofie, štýly, subkultúry, ktoré prostredníctvom svojich produktov ponúkajú svojim zákazníkom – symbolický význam produktov, ktorý sa stáva dôležitejší ako ich úžitková hodnota. Nemenej dôležitý je vplyv 'brands' na hodnoty, postoje a stereotypy, využívanie a zároveň vytváranie trendov a s tým súvisiace sociálne tlaky (snaha byť cool), rola reklamy v každodennom diskurze (napr. citácie, parafrázy reklamných sloganov, podpora slovných hračiek a kreativity), zdroj kultúrnej revolty a inovácie (culture jamming).

3) **Předpokládané metody zpracování.**

Spracovanie literatúry: výzkumy a teoretické texty.

4) **Předběžná struktura práce.**

- a) Reklama a vývoj reklamy: prienik reklamy do jednotlivých oblastí verejného života (cca 5 str.)
- b) Úvod do teórie konzumerizmu, dôraz na symbolický význam produktov (cca 5 str.)
- c) Analýza fenoménu brands – značky (cca 20 str.)

5) **Orientační seznam literatury.**

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