

Brand Cultures: Between Identity and Image

PhD. Oana Barbu

Faculty of Political Sciences, Philosophy and Communication Sciences
West University of Timisoara, Romania

Abstract: This paper will try to analyze the role played by branding communication in the “education” of the masses, on social responsibility and at a level of micro cultural trends. The main purpose of this paper is to analyze the formation of symbolic meaning in brand to consumer communication starting from the concepts of brand identity and brand image. We advance the hypothesis that the meaning of brand communication depends to a large extent on the “culture” developed by a mark’s symbolic functions.

Key words: brand, culture, symbolic functions, hyper-consumerism, image, identity.

1. Previous researches

More and more, authors like Jonathan E. Schroeder or Miriam Salzer Morling propose a *cultural approach of the brands* by pointing out the tendency of this field towards the cultural, sociological and theoretical research. The anthropologists, the historians and the sociologists have recently spoken about brands from a cultural perspective, by comprehending their importance at the social level and by recognizing at the same time their economical and psychological links (Bentley, 2008; Koehn, 2001; Lury, 2004).

2. Our approach

Our work is going to support the approach of branding phenomenon from a cultural perspective, analyzing it contextually and dynamically according to contemporary researches. We will approach a qualitative research method focusing on a comprehensive perspective without quantification, seeking more for an integrated approach on the branding phenomenon. Starting from Ernst Cassirer’s “symbolic forms” (1997, 1975), we propose a qualitative method analysis of “the symbolic function of an image”. We defined the symbolic functions of the organizational image according to its *iconic* components (organizational identity, desirable image, received image). From this perspective, the symbolic function of an organizational image can be comprehended in three main forms: 1) *The expressive function* that transforms an organizational identity in a “proposed image” (by using identity expressions and symbols such as logo, representative colours, values, an organizational mission and vision) – the level of *expressions*. 2) *The representational function* that transforms a “desired image” into a “received image” in a two –way action: a) Putting expressions into action (all the exterior manifestations of a brand) and b) Interpreting and filtering expressions at a public’s level (including media level) – the level of *representations*. 3) *The significant function* of an organization that creates attitudes and transforms an organization’s image into a “*motivational*” abstraction for the targeted audience, a brand, so to say. – the level of *significances*.

In this sense, the concept of “brand culture” refers to the *cultural* codes developed by the brands at a significant level (history, images, myths, art, communities, beliefs), that influence the comprehension and the value of a brand on the market, especially on the contextual-social praxis level. From this outlook, the study of this phenomenon often supposes the comprehension of regional cultures, of cultural spheres and brands implications as social active “symbolic forms”.

3. Conceptual delimitations

3.1. What are images?

Despite the existence of many diverse researches on image theory, despite imagery’s important role over time (paintings, drawings, symbolic representations, visual or textual representations etc.), the study of *image* still presents a great deal of issues regarding its definition and use. Moreover, we can acknowledge the fact that it is hard to define such a broad domain, without framing delimitations. We consider though that these demarcations not rigorously operated, thus the concept of *image* is used excessively, without having an explanation for the direction of its use. The reasons for these omissions often derive from the fact that the term “image” has several meanings used both in specialized language and in

common language. Consequently, many of these meanings intertwine inside the same speech.

And yet, an image designates not only a visual content, as a text is far from lacking iconicity or an *imagological* experience (Mitchell, 1986). It is, therefore, imperative to operate a reassessment of the critical equipment concerning the methodology applied in the study of images from the Communication Sciences' point of view. We advocate for this approach merely because, as we will try to point out, most of the corporate image campaigns are formed in the praxis of a highly symbolized cultural context that includes visual images, texts, sounds, myths, symbolic interactions of an audience. (Bratosin, 2007).

Two observations can be made regarding any attempt to take into consideration the assembly of imagery phenomena. First of all, as noticed above, there is a variety of situations in which the term "image" is used: we talk about *visual* image, but we also use the term when we describe optical illusions, maps, diagrams, dreams, hallucinations, shows, projections, literary works, patterns, memories, ideas, organizations, people, etc. The absolute diversity of this list seems to make any systematic understanding impossible to unify. Second, the mere use of the same term in different fields cannot lead us to the conclusion that it means the same thing. If we take into consideration a closer look over the fields in which the term is used, and not over a universal definition of the term, as Mitchell noted (*ibid*), we could obtain a family tree of its associated senses, and automatically of their current use.

IMAGES				
GRAPHICAL	OPTICAL	PERCEPTUAL	MENTAL	VERBAL
Visual images	Mirrors	Sensorial Data	dreams	metaphors / figures of speech
Sculptures	Projections	"categories/concepts"	memories	descriptions
Design	appearances	creative ideas/inspiration	fantasies/hallucinations	

Fig.1. Visual imagery family tree according to W.J.T. Mitchell (1995)

We strengthen in this way our position according to which imagery constructions (visual image, discourse text, imago-text) operate with symbolic forms proper to a practiced context, in such manner that they end up by building significance for a receiver. In this sense, an image does not open but it delimitates an interpretation *frame* for the observer, interpretation which is itself symbolically mediated by a context. Ernest Cassirer (1994) asserted that this concept of "symbolic forms" covers all phenomena that determine, no matter the way, the fulfilment of a meaning in a symbol and all contexts in which a *datum* is sensitive. Through this mediation the individual builds himself universes of perception and discourses. In the present paper we will define the *image* as a mean through which visual information (real or mental) is communicated, through shape, as well as through content. The image holds an entire field of iconicity (Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 1995). *The imago-text* is in this case the "evocative" text of images through representation.

3.2. Organizational identity and organizational image

We define *identity* from the perspective given by Professor Montserrat Guibemau (1997), according to which identity means *culture, language, symbols, values, traditions, lifestyles, and especially the desire to form around these a community with a specific set of properties*. Thus, identity is also a polyvalent concept; it includes from tangible elements, such as historical proofs (historical identities) or artistic trends (artistic identities), to intangible elements, such as quality or reputation. In this respect, more recent authors such as Juan Costa (2007), Eines (2007) or Akerlof, (2010) approach identity as having its roots in the lifestyles of communities strongly symbolically and socio-culturally defined. These perspectives claim the existence of even more evidence regarding lifestyles, related not only to individual decisions, but also to patterns of collective action (emergent from a certain national identity). Thus the identity-culture-image triangle is formed. If we accept the fact that an organizational identity is an assumed symbolic discursive form, we will be able to analyze the connection between it and images, in terms of iconicity, cohesion and delimitation of defined communities.

Organizational identity generally refers more to what members perceive, feel, and think about their organization/institution. It's supposed to be a "collective agreement" upon the values and distinct characteristics of the organization, starting from an internal environment. Albert and Whetten (1985) offer such a definition of the organizational identity as representing *what is essential, durable, and regarding the distinctive character of an organization*. The theoretical basis of this perspective concentrates on the theory of social identity and on the theory of auto-classification. Albert and Whetten consider the organizational identity as being a distinct form of social identity, concept analyzed in the '70s by scholars, such as Tajfel (1978), G. Vignaux or Serj Moscovici (1994). Thus the identity is defined as "the acknowledgement that the individual belongs to certain social groups, to which values and emotional significances which

he associates as a group member are added" (Tajfel, 1972:292). In other words, an individual is defined by adhering to social groups that are relevant and make sense to that individual.

Corporate identity, on the other hand, is an *exteriorization* of organizational values and beliefs to another audience that the one created by the employees; however the accent on a symbolic identity is preserved. It differs from the organizational identity, as it is conceived as a symbolic communication process with emphasis on the *visual* identity of the organization. Corporate identity has been conceptualized especially in the corporate branding studies that have pointed out the relationship between organizations and their communication context in the process of a strategic communication. (Abratt, 1989; Balmer, 1995; Olins, 2008). In this respect, the corporate identity is communicated through the representations of its valuable contents. Although both organizational and corporate communications are built on "what the organization is" (Balmer, 1995, p. 25), the strong connection of the latter with iconicity emphasizes explicitly the representation function of the corporate identity.

The organizational image is, therefore, defined as a construct through which a phenomenal representation is communicated. This representation has a meaning generator function and is significant for a targeted audience. Regarding the *organizational image*, this is often confused with corporate identity and identified only with the visual elements of an organization (logo, visual signs, the representative colours, mascots, etc.). Although the visual identity remains an important component of the corporate identity, this is without doubt only a form of symbolic representation of an organizational identity, the organizational image representing an assembly of symbolic forms through which an identity is communicated in various ways.

Taking the definition of professor Guibernau as starting point, we shall consider in the present paper that an organization's public image is an abstract construct upon an identity that serves as a recognition symbol for a target audience. We shall distinguish between: a) *the desired image* (what the organization proposes to transmit) and b) *the received image* (the filtered discursive form that is received by the audience). A *brand image* will be defined as a mean through which iconicity (Mitchell, 1995) and the significant function are communicated, through shape, action and interpreted content.

Most often, the *desirable image* is represented in accordance with the organizational identity and sent to be received by the targeted audience. We could even say that the desirable image, built by the organization/institution, is nothing else but a representation of an organizational identity. The whole set of graphic, perceptual, mental or verbal elements proposed under the form of messages or symbolic representations must be decoded at the audience level. This hermeneutics is realized through media and contextual filters. This conceptual-value mediation transforms the image "support" (banner, spot, portfolio, online campaign, website, or a team) in significant elements. They transmit representations of an identity enforced by a communication strategy that has the power to transform a desirable image into a received image.

It is interesting to underline here also that field practitioners do not step away too much from the academic theorizations of the image. They may "dilute" the ideational content by proposing a functional, practiced form of it, but use the same meaning. For example: according to Ernst Cassirer's (1972), Wunnenburger's (1998) and Bratosin's (2007), symbols are integrated parts of our existence which interfere as screens between reality and our representations. For Cassirer (1996), the father of "symbolic forms", it is not the content of mythical representations that must be explained, but "the meanings that they develop on the human consciousness and the spiritual force that it unleashes on it". In a more practical perspective, Bernstein (1986) states that in order to communicate an organizational image, not the symbol but what it represents has value for the receiver. This function of representing symbols (like the apple from "Apple") marks the importance of a visual identity for the entire corporate image.

The received image represents a filtered form of an image by contexts, supports and communication channels. Authors from the marketing field, like Bernstein (quoted by Abratt, 1989, p. 68), state that "the image is not even far what the company thinks it is, but the feelings and beliefs about it that are in the mind of the auditorium". This perspective emphasizes on the external character of image formation and the important role of the consumer to define it. And so, the organizational image becomes a global and alive "impression" held by an individual or a target-public over an organization and it is the result of the meaning created between the group and the communication of a projected image and manufactured by an organization (Alvesson, 1990, p. 376). And so, the received image of an organization approaches more and more the form of the generated *myth* under the form of representation.

3.3. Representations

An important role in the identity-image transfer at an organizational level is being accomplished by the concept of *representation*. We define representation as an assembly organized by cognitions that are relative to an object, shared by

the members of a community in relation with this object. The brand as a general term, is not only a organizational identity message transmission vector (carrying representations), but also an influence factor on structural and formal aspects of social thinking, employing social interactivity processes, influence, consensus, dissension and polemic. It contributes to the formation of a pertinent representation for the public space, along with the performative power of images and underlining the force with which the representations posit a version of reality. The concept of representation was especially developed in social psychology and in social practice studies to determine cultural expression forms, which request help from social codes to interpret the experiences of individuals in society. According to S. Moscovici (1995), at the basis of representations would stand the concept of *themata*; is defined as an assembly of primary concepts, core-ideas and deeply rooted archetypes of a collective memory. *Themata* manifests itself in common forms, strong anchored and shared inside a culture” According to the autor, it is this concept of *themata* makes possible the appearance of social *contexts* and representations.

To help us in the present argumentation, the perspective of social psychology can be strengthened by Ernst Cassirer’s researches, where the concept of “symbolical forms”. For Cassirer, representations define a holistic *gestalt* that brings together experienced contents and objectively significant entities. Representation would define only one of the symbolical form functions. Let’s detail a little this part. In the middle of Cassirer’s perspective are symbolic forms, entities that work like a psychic, intermediary domain between objects and thinking. The typical character of the symbolic form is being given by a *vector* that transforms passive “images” received through senses in something that is actively formed by the human mind. If the formation of symbols is the general type of symbolic activity, the different “symbolical forms” represent genres of it.

The power of this formation process transforms the perceptual contents in symbolic ones, which Cassirer sets at the base of our existence as human beings. For Cassirer, the symbol is a creative process, that, just like the sign that allows the foundation or abstractization of a reality, and as Stefan Bratosin underlines (2007), often the sign and symbol are used with an interchangeable meaning. The difference between sign and symbol would be the fact that the sign often *defines* something, whereas the symbol has the role of *meaning* something. Even more, the symbolic forms resemble to the definition that W. J. T Mitchell offers to the image, as *iconicity* (verbal, acoustic, visual, symbolic, mental images, myths, beliefs etc.) The symbol is an image if it can define at the same time a) a product, the material imprint of an idea or an object and b) a process through which the ration forms impressions and orders them under the form of a meaning or symbolization (Cassirer 1975 p.107, apud Bratosin, 2007, p. 57).

3.4. From Representations to Brands

Following Philip Kottler’s conception (1986), every brand can be analyzed as a name or a symbol which define or makes the difference between entities (not only at an economic level, such as products) and which distinguishes itself throughout its attributes, benefits, values, culture, personality; all these features are being regarded as positive meanings sent from one field to a targeted other. More than that, from a semiotic point of view every brand can be defined as a discursive mechanism having a meaning that is going to be transmitted to the receivers. It is the *sign-concept* characteristics of a brand that transforms it in a meaningful vector and emphasizes its immaterial aspect, its imagery and the way in which these looms involve and associate symbols.

We define “the brand philosophy” as the overall coordinates concerning the existential identity of a mark which are able to determine behaviour conducts at a social level. As a notion introduced (but not conceptualized) by the economic sciences, the brand philosophy represents a specific behaviour of a brand towards its socio-cultural content. Expressions like *brand architecture*, *brand strategy*, *brand equity*, *brand value* which belong to the brand philosophy’s glossary, point out the rational essence of the brand made up of ideas and concepts. More than that, the mission, the vision or the values communicated by a brand’s identity seeks to propose patterns of value and attitudes to its targeted public. From an organizational perspective, they act as community indicators, by grouping values and immaterial characteristics into recognizable symbol packets on different levels of trust or approval. From this point of view, brands may be seen as the symbols of the hyper-consume society.

What makes a brand different from any other kind of sign could be the extraordinary addictiveness of its meanings to a practiced context. A brand needs a public to “act” upon it! This observation brings us again closer to Cassirer’s theory in which the myth works at a social level as an “intelligence activator”, standing out through a bipolarity between “to think” and “to do” (Bratosin, 2007, p. 61). In other words, the practical quality of a brand consists in the fact that there is no meaning that should be patterned before its interaction with a target. Being tributary to a social content, the brand is bound to an endless semiotics, a perpetual readjustment of its signs to the forever changing social reality. But it is in this way, that a brand communication allows the consumer to respect social norms, to assume a social role, to assume a

status. In the same time, it helps the customer to adapt to social changes, to the evolutions and the transformations that belong to the local trends or other social manifestations working just as a practical context.

4. Analysis of the symbolic functions of an image

The power of branding process transforms the perceptual content of an organization in a symbolic one. At an organizational level, the mediation between corporative identity and brand image is being realized through symbol. This mediation appears as *action* or *activity*, always functional at a social level as a meaning creator! Any concept (like "creativity" for Apple Company) is a step in the formation of a meaningful symbol. In this sense, organizational concepts are tied, in a universal yet mobile manner, to what they produce for their public. This symbolization marks a functional relation between individuals and the real world. In our case, this boundary is marked between the identity of an organization and its public.

Starting with Cassirer's theorizations presented above (1997, 1975) we have tried to define the symbolic functions of the organizational image connecting them to an organization's immaterial components (identity, desired image, received image); the symbolic function stands out through three main qualities:

Expressive – "defining the manner in which an object or product sensibly exists". In the case of an organization, the expressive function generates the production and reproduction of its visual image and all of the characteristics of a corporative image. *Expressions* are symbolic forms through which the corporate identity is being made visible: the visual identity, the mission, the vision and the company's profile, the characteristics through which it stands out, the set of assumed values, the core target's profile etc.

Representative – the set of perceptive representations about the company, object/product, context or environment. The representative function deals with the *actions* that a company/corporation/organization/group establishes at a social level. *Representations* nominate an associated content that is not necessarily directly linked to expressions; organizational features indirectly linked to external characteristics or qualities. It is a descriptive function which exemplifies both through *interaction* and *action* at a social level: events, campaigns, social media, fan clubs, CSR campaigns, communication and PR with the public and the media.

Significant – It offers a distinct signification to these perceptions (representations) through which it differentiates them from competition and sets them in a practiced context. The Significant function includes a detachment from the main activity of the organization and the situation of the iconicity on a symbolic level. More precisely, we are dealing with all the abstract representations, comparisons, metaphors, indirect associations generated by the image of an organization (for example: Apple's products are for "creative people", the Montpellier's rugby team "represents The South-Eastern France"). The significant function is at the same time both identity-related and informative. The *significances* of a corporative image are the result of the simultaneous action of the other two functions with great accent on the reputation-notoriety couple. The communication activities that are mainly aimed towards the positive generation of significations are also the ones that transform the image of an organization/corporation/company into brand image because at this level distinctive "signs" of an identity are being built.

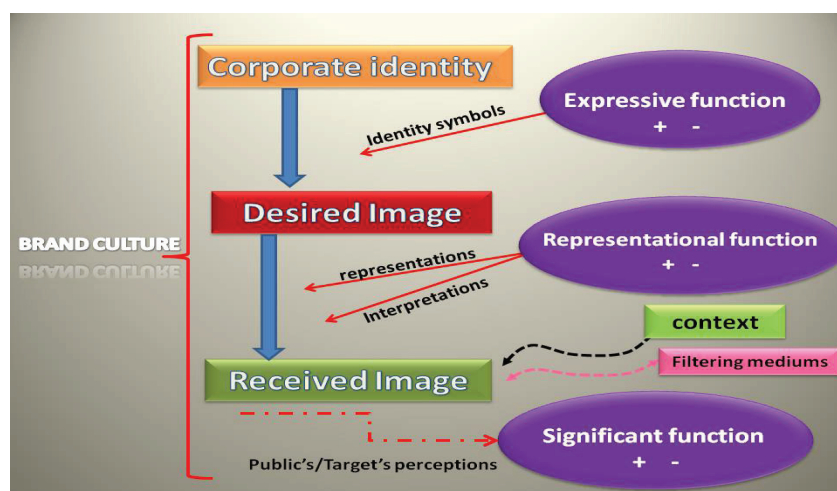


Fig.2 Symbolic functions and organizational levels

As we stated above, the expressive function of a company is being used at the assumed organizational identity level: in the mission declaration, vision and company values. Apple, for example, has as organizational mission: “to build **the best** personal computers in the world, along with OS X, iLife, iWork and **professional** software. Apple **leads** the digital music **revolution** with its iPods and iTunes online store. Apple has **reinvented** the mobile phone with its revolutionary iPhone and App Store, and is **defining the future** of mobile media and computing devices with iPad; to **support social responsibility** and to minimize the environmental impacts of our operations and products”. The underlined words in the published text on the official page may give us hints about the organization’s assumed values: quality, innovation, revolution, leadership, sustainability. The expressive function can be deduced also by analyzing its corporate identity. The visual logo (“the bitten apple”) is associated with innovation and refusal of the status quo. Expressions are highly underlined in their motivational slogan “Think different!” which has become almost a mythical symbol for the brand (Rouzé, 2010), and a driving force for the targeted public (in terms of representations).

The representational function of Apple can be deduced from the company’s communication and promoting actions. The representational function must be consistent with the company’s expressions, while “putting in action”, so to say, the expressive function. This is a very important step taking into consideration that it gives fluidity to the communicational process, but also opens ways of interpretation. On the other hand, like any other setting into action, the representational function marks versions of interpretation of the expressive function, grounded in promotional campaigns, social campaigns or CSR. Some of the most important campaigns of the Apple brand include the 1984 Super Bowl advertising spot which marks the company as being revolutionary and independent, the Think Different campaign from the 90s in which important artists participated and the year 2000, “iPod People” campaign. From the first Macintosh spot, to the 1984 Super Bowl, Apple maintained and “paid tribute” to modern visual art in many of its advertising campaigns. For example, the “Think Different” campaign was making the bond between Apple, revolution through innovation and various famous social figures including Albert Einstein, Bob Dylan, Martin Luther King jr., John Lennon, Thomas Edison, director Alfred Hitchcock, or social activist Mahatma Gandhi.

The significant function of the company is noticeable in the feedback given to these messages and in the further abstract meanings associated with the brand. It has been talked and written about a true “Apple cult”, “a Mac cult” (Kahney, 2004), a mythology of the iPod (Rouzé, 2010) and even a revolution caused at social level by their extraordinary communication strategy. *Significances* can be drawn out from: the charisma figure of Steve Jobs, the strongly symbolized messages that transformed a public into “Apple fans” communities, the “Mac people” willing to stand out from the masses, the innovative symbolized products (through the functionality-design representation), the remarkable figures associated with these products, etc. It has went so far with the signification and abstraction of the products (into brands) that today we have haircuts and tattoos with the Apple logo, statement accessories posted as visible as possible, a generalized wish of product acquisition and even strong ideological jokes like: “There were three apples on this world: Adam’s apple, Newton’s apple and Jobs’ apple”. After a study based on an interview realized by the American Marketplace entitled “The *cool* cult of Apple” (Kahney, 2004) it was noticed that the majority of the consumers felt a strong empathy in reference to the company products, an emblematic affiliation to the organization, just like “people would voluntarily enrol forever in this community”. The study puts accent on the “*cool* factor” of the company that has chosen a niche approach, aimed towards artists, film and visual art producers. By using these representations, Apple has become “the product of creative people”, and for most users, Apple is associated with creativity itself (significant function action). This aura of superiority, accompanied by the products and software applications, gives the brand an attitude of uniqueness that attracts even more significances. To own an Apple product has become a statement for social status, professional affiliation, and for an elite community. Mass-media had an important role in disseminating this myth of modern technology, positively interpreting and promoting a big part of Apple’s representations and feeding the public’s hunger to form significations (abstract representations) around products.

5. Further development of the study

We only exemplified in this paper a positive use of the symbolic forms in case of an organizational image. However, starting from expressions, this methodological analysis can be also used to underline image communication errors or propose suggestions for an image crisis. Our observations state, for example, that corporate representations are not enough in order to assure a correct transfer between a desired image and a coherent received one. The received image can be strongly influenced by the context of representations (socio-cultural contexts, competition, social level involvement, official statements etc.) but also by various filtering mediums such as: representation in media, recommendations, rumours, buzz activities, online activities etc.

This paper is just a brief sketch of *how* the symbolic functions of an image can be used to analyze an organizational brand-status and what the roots of such a methodological approach are. It also shows why we consider it necessary to re-evaluate some of the key concepts used in Communication Sciences researches and practices. A more detailed presentation of the symbolic functions of an organizational image is to be presented in a further study.

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