

The Story behind Identities: from Corporate Discourse to Individual Recognition

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ABSTRACT

Organizations can be seen as discursive places where language practices (developing, telling and restoring stories) flourish. Individuals usually develop their identity in this space, being influenced (choosing alignment or choosing counter-identity) by meta-stories told at the organizational level through brand identity or corporate identity. This article aims at identifying the link between the micro type (individual) and macro type of identity (brand and corporate identity). In particular, our work focuses on the impact and the risk of storytelling when developing these links.

Key words: identity, brand, individual, power allusion, market, story

Imagine: A brand, an individual and that might be the very beginning of a story..... This story is about the immersion of the individual throughout the brand universe. It is about their respective ability to create links and to find a way to understand that meaning. The story suggests there is beginning, middle and end, probably, or not, as it is for the transgenerational brands. It sounds great, but there it is no doubt that, as Heilbrunn (2002a) pointed out, consumers just want all and anything.

IDENTITY AND BRANDING

From authenticity to most audacious innovations, from artefacts to hyper thematized environment, the consumer is in a quest, making senses while looking for an identity as well as entertainment. He's living consumption as a mean to experience emotions, sensations, to assert him, and to create some links.

Throughout this quest and as an engine of consumption, branding management

plays a strong role in promulgating complex brand roles and prescribing brand culture and image (Breda, 2008 ; Lewi, 2005). In that context, we situate branding within a system of representation that creates meaning within the circuit of corporate culture, image culture, and identity culture. Envisaged as a way to produce discourses, one can question the very impact upon the consumer's everyday life. Whereas interfering until the very intimacy of the consumer, brands could also develop a pseudo ideological power (Kapferer, 2002; Heilbrunn, 2002b). Goffman and Papson (1996) pointed out that ads impact directly on experience by limiting our conceptions of identity, right and wrong, and the good life.

For example, ads can influence what and how we think about masculinity and femininity, what is sexy, and what will be seen as attractive by desired others (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). As the authors point out, people are not consciously aware of being shaped by advertising while perceiving and conceiving their lives or social world, or referring to the

standards to evaluate/appreciate themselves or others (Schroeder and al., 2007).

De facto, this evolution of the brand role raises some questions that can punctuate the story between a brand and a person. Through a post-modern approach, even if the role of a brand could be to create relationships/emotional connexions with the consumer (Kapferer, 2002; Lewi, 2003), we ask for the role of the consumer in that story ... and how do employees feel with it?

To better understand the evolution of branding management and its implication in the culture consumption as a whole, it is necessary to underlie that the very occidental vision of branding management, imprinted from promethean influence, in the sense that a brand can be viewed as a sort of magic object that might create some transformations (from a natural to cultural object, from a far to a near object, from a past to a current object, etc.), and to give some kinds of power to the consumers (to go faster, omniscience, to feel secure, etc). In the theory of symbolic capital of Pierre Bourdieu, the transformation from one form of capital to another is precisely what makes it so valuable to vie for various forms of capital throughout different social fields. But at the same time the ascension through the effect culture to always attract more and more consumers is evolving, consumers are looking for emotions, and sensations... and employees are always more regarding and demanding that their employer has values that they themselves identify and feel comfortable with. They need to make sense; as such the identity of a brand is as relevant for internal branding and towards other stakeholders, as it is towards the consumers (Fog et al., 2005).

Actually, one of the roles of a brand is to build an emotional bond with the people a company communicates with, i.e. consumers and employees. We'll see that storytelling is a mean to communicate values since the goal is to build an emotional connection with the people a company communicates with. A last question then arises: where does reality begin and end?

EXCHANGE AND ITS IMPACT ON RELATION

However there is another way of seeing the story. The market generally delivers a dual vision on the report of man in his environment. This report is an exchange relationship which involves moving back and forth between men and things. According to Sartre (1951) an "acte gratuit" does not exist within the meaning *gidien* (as an act which does involve neither I nor the other). The act is always a situation. The question lies in determining the contours of this intersubjective situation between individuals and how to report on the analysis of the processes of trade.

Donation is integrated into social exchange which goes beyond the economic exchange. According to the analysis of F. Perroux, gifting is a process of economic practice as much as the exchange and coercion. Our frame of reference is not the disinterested and unselfish exchange as an ideal type such as:

- The vision of Marx and Engels (1998): "consider a man as a man and his relationship with the world as a human interaction, and you can only exchange love against love, trust against trust."
- Derrida's analysis (1991) that the absolute gift is one that excludes actors they are not aware of.

The analysis of the practices of the exchange through these processes, the exchange market or donation, skewed analysis. A description based on the process of exchange makes implicit reference to the context in which it is intelligible and is not focusing on the analysis of the actor/individual whose background is the support of the relationship.

The analysis of exchange process deprives the actor of his faculties, namely those to be the support of the exchange. This analysis by shifting focus from things to the relationship between men and things, limits its

scope. The concept of gift that "embedded" (Latouche (1993), Laville (1997), Granovetter (1985)) economics does not seem more fruitful than the analysis of the exchange market. It excludes the role of support of the actors to develop a concept based on the dual process of exchange between the actors to his environment (Delattre, 2002).

The segmentation of the individual according to its status as producer, consumer or citizen has helped reduce the scope of his substance and, in fine, his identity: "Is there still an agent when he is deprived of attributes that characterize him as a distinctive entity and as such differs him from the object?" (Perroux, 1975). The creativity of the human resource and, the very essence of collective creation, which implies recognition of man by man (Perroux, 1963) does not seem challenged in enterprises and organizations. It opens up prospects for fruitful mutations and move from a perception of the organization conceptually complied with the intelligent, where the meaning of action of the acting agent "is not only acted." This should help remove the image of "double" in a crowd of look-alikes to avoid rejecting man in a pavlovian world where conditioned reflexes would lead to socialization (Chanlat, 1990).

STORYTELLING

In this context, the story of a brand is crucial for the process that makes the consumer and the brand become closer altogether. Lewi (2005) explains the phatic role between a brand and a consumer that makes it become relational and of complicity, hence making individuals feeling unique.

"In order to retain the loyalty of your customers in today's competitive environment, you have to create an experience that is relevant and differentiates your brand from others.

The physical product no longer makes the difference. The difference lies in the story,

because the story is what drives the bond between the company and the consumer. As human beings we actively seek stories and experiences in our quest for a meaningful life."

Fog et al. (2005) highlighted the challenge to derive values through a strong brand in such a way that its story resonates throughout the company giving employees a very clear idea of what their brand values are, while demonstrating customers what promise lies at the heart of a brand. In a certain way, storytelling, as we will see later, wins a decisive foothold in the discussion on how brands could/ be shaped in the future. Thus, the story of a brand has the power to strengthen a brand both externally and internally.

Branding discourse both reflects and creates social norms/discourses. Research on branding management commonly focuses on the internal content of advertisements -what the ad claims, how it links the product to consumer expectations-, or the ad's design; however, branding also acts as a representational system that produces meaning outside the realm of the advertised product (Goldman, 1992).

The consumer's point of view is really important to understand in order to realize what is in action within that story is essential. Brand can thus be defined as a "narrative machine" as explained Heilbrunn (2003), or more recently Lewi (2005). The emotional connection between a brand and the individual is fundamental. All this, paves the way to the regain of interest to better understand the narrative schemes - insuflated by linguists - most of which are based upon telling action - action of a person within the récit or brand action upon a market segment.

We just want here to underlines with Boje's model that there is however many ways of making sense of a story as shown by the figure below:

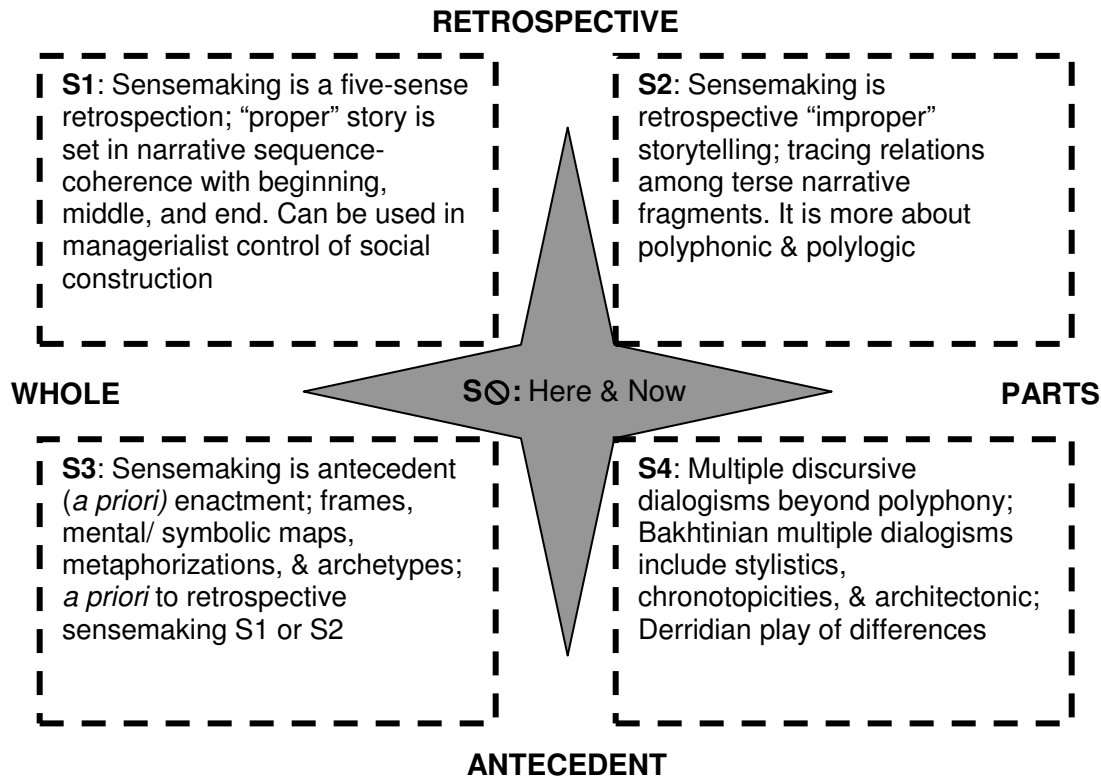


Figure I.1: Types of Story/Narrative Sensemaking (Boje 2006)

Brand tells stories : there is a kind of discursive effect created at the intersection of consumption and marketing discourses such as advertising, market segmentation, and visual communication, to balance between brand strategy and brand community.

Stories can be analyzed in different ways. Boje’s model helps us find sense ...each box of the model has its own logic. Here we just want to challenge the reader to find A sense (meaning mixing the boxes to find a coherent meaning to discourse).

IDENTITY AND CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

But to what extent will the corporate intend meet the free appropriation of meaning by the market?

In other words, branding representations influence cultural and individual conceptions of identity, and must be

understood as the result of changing social and cultural practices.

Consequently, our overarching framework, views discourses and its meaning as the result of historical contingencies. We thus are concerned with recent developments in CSR (Ocler 2006a, Ocler 2006 b), influenced in France by the NRE law establishment (New Economic Regulation), shifting patterns of corporate contributions.

Much previous research has discussed how CSR messages often influence representations of the corporate culture by developing values. One result is that CSR representations create mechanisms that simultaneously reinforce and conceal positive values towards corporate culture, that is, CSR discourses make brand identity seem transparent and natural (Gurney, Humphreys, 2006)

Recent work on issues such as the CSR and consumer behavior/perception

reveals the complex, contradictory power of identity, leaving open possibilities for change (Ocler 2006a). If the company fails, the consequences can be dramatic (loss of trust, switching, boycott,...).

Moreover the antonymic use of language that can be found when speaking about CSR reinforces the feeling of waffling (Petiot, 1994). The speech varies between a very vague description (justification of the positioning of the company vis-à-vis the concept of social responsibility) and a catalogue of actions or indicators seeking to prove its pragmatic implication. This confusion of the map then reflects on the definition of the territory (the map and territory were defined by Korzybski (1933)). It shadows the responsibilities of each actor at the time of distribution of the specific roles in the implementation of social responsibility (Ocler, 2006).

In addition, we see multiple spaces of references, correlated in the use of the first person plural. Seeking to answer plural receivers (stakeholders generally included in the company unit), the writers employ "we" in a variable way such that the identification of who is writing is sometimes difficult for the speaker. The royal "we" is used by the leader or the manager, always generating a distance, in order to develop the impact and the personnel role which they play in the implementation of social responsibility.

Furthermore, most of the CSR reports and pieces of information consigned within aim at considering the companies under their most favorable aspect. It is worth mentioning the absence of negative sentence either on the syntactic form or the subject matter. The satisfaction degree raised vis-à-vis the social responsibility indicates the will to see the social responsibility as an opportunity, making it possible to decrease the social or managerial strains. Within this framework, the organization recreates its environment, the objective first being to increase its zone of influence and appeal by developing a notoriety built on

elements selected and combined in order to reach the broadest possible audience.

If we acknowledge with Fukakawa, Balmer and Gray (2007) that CSR is clearly linked to ethics and as so "takes into account the relevance of customer and stakeholder perception", the deconstruction of CRS discourse leads us to believe that there is little congruence between corporate identity¹⁶ (what we really are) and communication (what we say we are). This shift from brand identity to corporate identity and its opposite are at the heart of this paper (as the shift from consumer identity to individual identity...) When speaking of identity, we tend to classify (brand, corporate, consumer, individual..) It's easier for us to play as if the borders were clear and not crossing... But how can we define an identity per se, without speaking of relation?

This in turn may result in influencing the interface between individual and organizational identities.

INDIVIDUAL AND CORPORATE IDENTITIES

The result may impact negatively the relation between corporations and individuals (consumers or other stakeholders) as stated by Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, (2006). These authors identify 6 boundary dynamics at the interface of identity:

- Within-identity intrusion: Proportion of one aspect of identity is perceived as too large; sense that this aspect of identity comprises too much of self (organization), yearning for less intrusion and greater segmentation of this aspect of identity;
- Within-identity distance: Proportion of one aspect of identity is perceived as insufficient, lack of a sense of connection with this aspect of identity, yearning for more integration of this aspect of identity in self (organization);

¹⁶ We shift here from brand identity to corporate identity but as we see it, brand identity is part of the corporate identity.

- Within-identity balance: Proportion of aspects of identity is perceived as optimal,
- Work-self intrusion: Overlap between individual and organization identity aspects is perceived as too great, sense of intrusion of organizational identity aspect(s), yearning for more segmentation between individual and organizational identities;
- Work-self distance: Overlap between individual and organizational identity aspects is perceived as insufficient, lack of a sense of oneness with organization; yearning for more integration of individual and organization identities;
- Work-self balance: Optimal balance between individual and organizational identities.

While deconstructing the discourse on CSR (and in turn deconstruction of part of corporate identity), we can only say that while most people would consider it to be in balance, what is left in the shadow would probably lead to a shift of position leading to a distancing. Hatch and Schultz (2002) underlines that “ an understanding of both culture and image is needed in order to encourage a balanced identity able to develop and grow along with changing conditions and the changing stream of people who associate with the organization. This requires organizational awareness that the processes of mirroring, reflecting, expressing and impressing are part of an integrated dynamic in which identity is simultaneously shaped by cultural understanding formed within organization and external images provided by stakeholders”

This pushes open the problem of power. Jenkins (1994) stated that “it is in the meeting of internal and external definitions of an organization self that identity... is created” leading us to a social game where the winner takes it all by imposing its identity to others, in our case usually through discourse. We can then remember that Bourdieu (1984) uses the term “illusion” in place of the concept of interest, i.e. the act of recognizing that social game that is important from the Latin root

“ludus” interest reflects the idea of being caught by the game, since the game is worth playing. Furthermore, for Caillé (1994) *illusio* equates to an “illusion” since, in his view, the analysis of Bourdieu still gives too much importance to the classical meaning of interest in the sense that this analysis leads to restrict the scope of disinterest “in the framework of well-educated society.” According to Caillé, we must take account of both: The interest to, and the interest for. Within the organization, the actors dealing with inter-relations, whatever the nature of their identity, then arose the question of their practices.

CONCLUSION

As a whole, we can say that people are experiencing various forms of fragmentation in their daily routine (citizen, employee, parent, friend...). If the value system, especially religious one, seems as Gauchet (2005) expressed, to be broken, people are looking for values they should adhere. Hence, the status of a brand has a great challenge to face, using symbols and visual expressions that can communicate values and personality. This very complex system -shaping brand identity- as we tried to highlight here, implies to consider the following dynamic trilogy: Corporate identity, brand identity (and not image brand), and individual identity. Dynamic as we consider them open systems that evolve, organize themselves and adapt to the environment. Telling a story is a way to make some links, to transfer some values from one level to another of these different identities. The more a company focuses on one level, the more it must keep this dynamic in mind. We still wonder to what extent telling a story really answers what individuals are looking for. At the end, individuals just want to know themselves, and understand this world... a story stringing them along with what they could or should think... making them leaving a fixed set to enter another.

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