

## **Decoding Brand Ambassadors and Their Cultural Universes**

### **Overview**

If the history of branding teaches us anything, it is that branding activities in the main have become much less focused on product attributes and much more focused on cultivating links between products and people. The most powerful brands nowadays are those that successfully create shared experiences and emotions, and that generate feelings of commonality and community (Arvidsson 2005). Brands can therefore no longer be considered mere guarantees of quality (as they were in the eighteenth century) but should be viewed as key components of how we build and define our relationships and fashion our very selves (Banet-Weiser 2012). It is this growing connection between *brands and persons* that students are required to think critically about here.

For this assignment, groups of students are required to choose a brand that employs a well-known “brand ambassador”. Students are asked to think about the rationale for this strategy and about what precisely is *transferred* to a brand when it employs a brand ambassador. Central to the assignment is that students analyze the union of brand and brand ambassador as representative of a particular “cultural universe”; their task is to critically analyze (or “decode”) this cultural universe and build a detailed impression of it for their classmates. For example, students are asked to consider if the cultural universe is inclusive or exclusive and in what ways; in doing so, they are asked to think about issues of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability. The assignment also requires that students apply some of the semiotic concepts they have been introduced to in class. For example, what does the brand ambassador’s image ‘connote’ in terms of wider associations (innocence, exuberance, sexiness, etc.)? Are there particular ‘codes’ of masculinity or femininity, of national identity, of historical periods etc. at work in the brand’s advertising? ‘Paradigmatically’, why is the choice of brand ambassador significant i.e. *who else* might have been considered a possible substitute and why? In short, this assignment asks students to think critically (and semiotically) about the cultural universes that brands compel us to be part of.

The assignment may be more successful towards the middle of an undergraduate degree programme when students have already taken foundational modules in media and communications theory and have begun the analysis of media artifacts. As will be explained, the assignment requires that groups of students prepare and deliver an oral presentation in seminars. Ideally, seminar presentations will begin mid-semester so that all presentations are completed before the final week of term. This way, students will benefit from having witnessed the presentations of their peers and will be able to identify differences and commonalities across the various presentations.

### **Rationale**

This assignment builds on classroom discussions about the history of brands and branding activities, and about advertising as a ‘currency of signs’ (Williamson 1978). Williamson famously argued that the first function of advertising is to differentiate a product from others in the same category by making use of signs that are *already known* to consumers. In this

assignment, students are asked to think critically about this process and about how brands draw from preexisting systems of meaning. For example, Arvidsson (2005) suggests that brands often try to insert themselves into attractive “cultural universes” that are recognizable to consumers. He suggests, for example, that Absolute Vodka successfully inserted itself into the American urban gay scene, while Nike and Reebok invoked “ghetto” culture in their advertising. In a similar vein, Cova and Cova (2002: 595) argue that contemporary consumers are ‘less interested in the objects of consumption than in the social links and identities that come with them.’ In other words, Cova and Cova suggest that rather than use value being all important, it is a brand’s *linking value* (to other people, groups etc.) that primarily appeals to consumers.

What these authors collectively highlight is that branding is ultimately an attempt to capture and *transfer* meanings from culturally constituted worlds to products (McCracken 1986). Students will be aware that one method of doing so is through sponsorship, which extends downwards from huge global events like the Olympics and the World Cup to buying an ad in the program for a high school musical or purchasing an outfield sign for a local minor league baseball team. Regardless of size, sponsorships create brand awareness and help forge links with particular communities. However, in recent years marketers have made increasing use of “brand ambassadors” as another vital tool for forging relationships with consumers. Students will be aware that brand ambassadors are celebrities who are widely recognized and admired and who usually have well-developed fan bases. Whether it’s Katy Perry for Covergirl, or Nicole Kidman for Omega, or David Beckham for Pepsi, the important point is that brand ambassadors are *already known* to consumers and therefore offer marketers a “short-cut” in the meaning transfer process: in contrast to anonymous models, they help to ‘deliver meanings of extra subtlety, depth, and power’ (McCracken 1989: 315).

The rationale for this assignment is to empower students to actively deconstruct contemporary branding practices and thereby better understand the historical developments discussed in class. More precisely, the assignment will help students to understand the use of brand ambassadors as a natural evolution in corporate attempts to build more emotionally proximate relationships with consumers. Furthermore, the assignment enables students to *apply* some of the concepts and ideas introduced in class to the marketing materials they encounter in their everyday lives. In summary, the assignment encourages students to: 1) use their imaginations critically; 2) analyze the transfer of meanings between brands, brand ambassadors and wider systems of signs, and; 3) reflect on the privileging of certain bodies and persons in the cultural universes that brands and brand ambassadors represent.

## Timeline

This assignment requires that groups of students prepare and eventually deliver an oral presentation to their class. Ideally, student presentations will take place in seminars attached to lectures, so that instructors can use lecture time to introduce course material and describe academic studies and explain theoretical concepts. Given that students are asked to incorporate into their presentations concepts introduced in class (e.g. ‘codes’, ‘connotations’, ‘paradigms’ etc.), it is anticipated that presentations will begin mid-semester (Weeks 5 or 6) and run till the end of the semester. The following chart provides a basic roadmap for this assignment:

**Lectures Weeks 1-4:**

Module introduction and overview; key terms and concepts for assignment introduced (see terms and concepts list in Teaching Materials below).

*Lectures on other topics continue until the end of the semester.*

**Seminars Weeks 1-4:** Assignment explained; students divided into groups and given date for presentation (from Week 5 onwards)

**Seminars Weeks 5-12:** Student groups deliver oral presentations. No more than two groups present in a single hour-long class to ensure ample time for questions and discussion.

**Lesson Plan**

This assignment is *critical* insofar as it asks students to reflect on the wider significance of brands and brand ambassadors, but it is also *creative* in the first instance because it requires that students try to imagine themselves as brand managers and in so doing construct a rationale for why a given brand ambassador was chosen. In other words, students are required to “reverse engineer” the use of a well-known celebrity in a brand’s marketing and then later reflect on the implications of this more broadly, especially in respect of wider social ideals and aspirations.

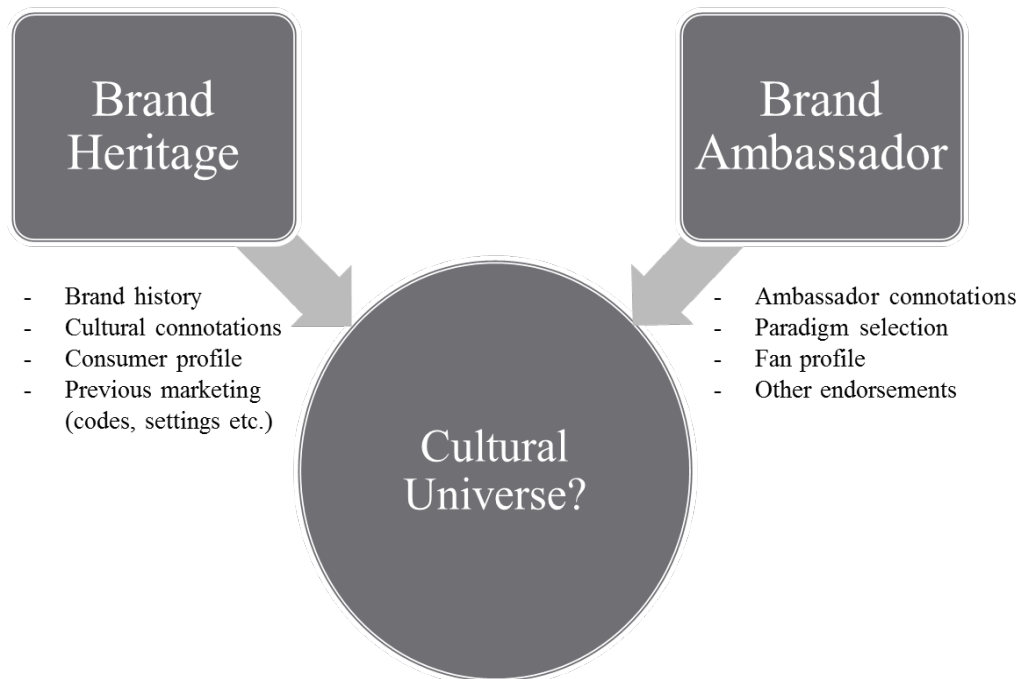
Students are asked to think about the brand and brand ambassador separately, and then about the union of brand and brand ambassador as representative of a particular “cultural universe”. In addition to incorporating concepts introduced in class, the assignment also requires that students compile illustrative materials to be used as part of their oral presentation (e.g. sample advertising, photographs, video footage, testimonials, press releases, interviews etc.). When all of the groups have completed their presentations, classroom discussion should focus on common traits and characteristics across the various brand ambassadors chosen and commonalities across the cultural universes described. Groups are also required to write a 1,000 word follow-up paper, to be delivered to the instructor in hard copy form within one week of the presentation. The follow-up paper should be written by the *entire* group.

This assignment can be used as the sole piece of assessment for a module or in conjunction with other forms of assessment (e.g. exam, essay etc.). If seminars are not attached to the module – or if instructors are not able to give up such a substantial chunk of class time to oral presentations – then the assignment can be modified accordingly. For example, instead of an oral presentation groups might be asked to submit a visual archive to a shared learning resource (e.g. Moodle), or alternatively, students might be asked to complete a reflective journal as part of their independent learning time (to be submitted at the end of term).

## Lesson Directions

For this assignment, groups of three students are required to prepare and deliver a fifteen minute oral presentation. After students are initially assigned to groups, and groups have been given a date for their presentation, each group must choose a brand and brand ambassador and begin the process of assembling marketing/biographical/celebrity materials and analyzing the relationships between these, as well as their wider significance. Group findings and analysis should be presented to the class in the form of an oral presentation, which in each case should be followed by a class discussion. Groups are encouraged to use presentational aids (e.g. PowerPoint, acetates, short videos clips etc.) and it is imperative that all members of the group participate.

Each group should design and deliver a presentation with three interrelated parts, with each of the three members of the group delivering one (five minute) part. The first part of the presentation should examine the brand in question, its history and wider connotations and some past marketing activities. The second part of the presentation should examine the celebrity brand ambassador, their physical characteristics and cultural significance and fan base – and should consider what other celebrities *might* have been chosen in their stead (paradigm choice). The final part of the presentation should move from the specifics of the brand and brand ambassador to reflect on the wider cultural universes depicted. Concluding the presentation this way – by “locating” brands and brand ambassadors in terms of wider meanings and categories – can tell us much about common ideals and aspirations in the societies in which we live. Groups should use the diagram below as a guide when preparing the three interrelated parts of the presentation.



Groups must also submit a 1,000 word follow-up written paper, the purpose of which is to summarize the research process and critically reflect upon the content of the presentation and its actual delivery. Each individual member of the group should prepare 250 words on their

respective part and then collectively the group should meet to reflect on the research process from start to finish and on how the presentation went on the day. One member of the group should take responsibility for gathering copies of all illustrative materials/presentational aids; one member should take responsibility for transcribing the group's reflections at the last (post presentation) meeting, and finally; the remaining member of the group should take responsibility for gathering together all of the visual and written components and for submitting the final report to the instructor.

Reports should include: 1) a cover sheet; 2) a discussion of the research process and how the decision about what/how to present was arrived at; 3) a description of the marketing/biographical/celebrity materials chosen; 4) a summary of the analysis, which incorporates theoretical concepts discussed in class; 5) an analysis of how the presentation went – high points, low points (problems, difficult questions, etc.) – and; 6) a list of sources used.

### Teaching Materials

Teaching materials for this assignment include: (i) a list of key terms and concepts (see diagram); (ii) an assignment handout (see below), and (iii) an assignment evaluation form (for instructors only).

Key Terms and Concepts
<b>Branding:</b> Process of creating a relationship between a company's product and emotional perception of customer
<b>Codes:</b> A set of conventions or a framework within which signs are meaningful
<b>Commodity Fetishism:</b> Assigning meanings to goods that they do not possess (mistaking an object for a social relation)
<b>Connotation:</b> Non-literal meanings of signs which rely on a reader's cultural knowledge
<b>Cultural Universe:</b> Symbolic composite of people, place and lifestyle, including core values and markers of success
<b>Currency of signs:</b> Trade in images and concepts that allows for the transfer of value between – or equation of – two things
<b>Paradigm:</b> A given sign creates meaning by virtue of its relationship to other signs which <i>might have</i> occupied the same slot (i.e. <i>substitution</i> )
<b>Syntagm:</b> Signs create meaning by their relationships to the signs <i>before or after</i> them (i.e. by their <i>order</i> )

### **Assignment Handout**

**Assignment:** Group Presentation & Follow-up Paper

**Point value:** Points total

**Due date:** All papers due on same posted date

#### **Purpose:**

In asking you to *initially* imagine yourselves as brand managers, this assignment encourages you to think about why certain persons are chosen as brand ambassadors and how the process of “meaning transfer” between a brand and brand ambassador actually works

More broadly, this assignment encourages you to think critically about the ideals and aspirations that brands and their ambassadors represent, and to reflect on the *kinds of persons* that appear to be privileged in these cultural universes

Finally, this assignment asks you to apply some of the concepts we have learned in class in your analyses of familiar brands

#### **Description:**

You will deliver your analysis to the class in an oral presentation of 15 minutes in length. The presentation format should conform to general university guidelines. Groups are also required to write a 1,000 word follow-up paper to be delivered to the instructor within one week of the presentation. The paper should conform to general academic standards and should include a list of sources, a discussion of the research process and key findings, and a reflection on how the presentation itself went (positives and negatives).

**Assignment Evaluation Form**

**Group names:**

**Date:**

**Oral presentation skills:** 5 4 3 2 1

(Eye contact, pace, volume, levels of engagement, timing)

Comments:

**Organization:** 5 4 3 2 1

(Structure, transitions, turn taking, introduction and conclusion)

Comments:

**Content:** 5 4 3 2 1

(Originality and creativity, coherence, use of visual aids, arguments and ideas presented, issues raised)

Comments:

**Demonstration of reading/research:** 5 4 3 2 1

Comments:

**Group effort** 5 4 3 2 1

Comments:

**Theoretical content incorporated:** 5 4 3 2 1

Comments:

**General/additional comments:**

**Total score:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **Bibliography**

### **Background Readings**

Arvidsson, A. (2006) *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture*. New York: Routledge. [Chapters 1-3]

Barthes, R. (1972) *Mythologies*. London: Paladin.

Ewen, S. (1976) *Captains of Consciousness*. New York: McGraw-Hill. [Part 3]

Fox, S. (1997) *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and its Creators*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press. [Chapters 7 and 8]

Goldman, R. (1992) *Reading Ads Socially*. London: Routledge. [Chapters 2 and 7]

Jhally, S. (1990) *The Codes of Advertising*. London: Routledge. [Chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5]

Klein, N. (1999) *No Logo*. Canada: Random House. [Chapters 1-3, 12 and Afterword]

Williamson, J. (1978) *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*. London: Marion Boyars. [Chapter 1]

### **Supplemental Readings**

Boulton, C. (2013). The ghosts of Mad Men: Race and gender inequality inside American advertising agencies, in McAllister, M.P. and West, E. (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Advertising and Promotional Culture*, New York: Routledge.

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Muniz, A.M. and O'Guinn, T.C. (2001) 'Brand Community', *Journal of Consumer Research* 27(4): 412-432.

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Banet-Weiser, S. (2012) *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*.



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Cova, B. and Cova, V. (2002) 'Tribal Marketing: The Tribalisation of Society and its impact on the conduct of Marketing', *European Journal of Marketing* 36 (5/6): 595-620.

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McCracken, G. (1989) 'Who Is the Celebrity Endorser? Cultural Foundations of the Endorsement Process', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(3): 310-321.

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**Neil O'Boyle** is a Lecturer in the School of Communications at Dublin City University, where he is also Chair of the BA in Communications Programme. Dr. O'Boyle worked for some years in the advertising industry and received his Ph.D. from Trinity College in 2008. His doctoral dissertation examined cultural identity and social practices in the Irish advertising industry and was subsequently published as a book titled *New Vocabularies, Old Ideas: Culture, Irishness and the Advertising Industry* (published by Peter Lang). Dr. O'Boyle's research interests include advertising and branding, communication theory, and migration and integration. He has published in a wide range of academic journals, including *Communication Education*, *Cultural Sociology*, *Journalism Practice*, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, *The Journal of International Migration and Integration*, *Sociological Research Online*, *International Studies in the Sociology of Education* and *Irish Communications Review*.