

Monika Hajdas
Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny we Wrocławiu

The Impact of Cultural Branding on Brand Equity – Exploratory Study

Summary

The aim of this article is to explore possible relationships between cultural branding and brand equity. The concept of cultural branding is developing in marketing literature, but there are no studies showing what are the outcomes of such actions and whether these outcomes include effects connected with brand equity. The paper is based on a single case research: Always sanitary pads and its #LikeAGirl strategy. As a result of case research, the author suggests cultural brand narration as an independent variable, and the following components of brand equity as dependent variables: brand popularity, brand relevance, brand preference, and purchase intent. Author then forms four hypotheses on relationships between those variables.

Key words: cultural branding, brand equity, case study research.

JEL codes: M30, M31, M37

Introduction

There is a growing interest among researchers concerning the use of cultural context in branding activities (Rossatolos 2013; Oswald 2012; Holt and Cameron 2010; Schroeder 2009). The main concept in brand research is brand equity (Keller 2003; Aaker 1991), but no research so far shows what are the possible relationships between using cultural context in brand strategies and brand equity outcomes.

The goals of this paper are as follows:

1. Exploring existing knowledge on relationships between cultural branding and the results of such actions.
2. Identifying and describing cultural branding in marketing practice and its results, in order to explore possible relationships between cultural branding and brand equity.
3. Proposing a theory in the form of hypotheses as an outcome of case research.

Under the conducted research, the following research methods were used: literature review based on keywords: brand equity, cultural branding, brand culture, gender branding. The total number of texts was 14, including 6 books, 8 scientific papers and one market report. The majority of the analysed texts came from 2009-2015 period.

Case study, analysing decisions: why were they made, how were they conducted and what were their results (Yin 2003). The method is based on using empirical data from one case study (single case study, one case) to create theory propositions, building hypothesis

and research models (Eisenhart 2007). A single case study as a research method is possible under one of the following conditions (Yin 2003):

- Case is critical, crucial for confirming, negating or challenging existing theory.
- Case is rare or extreme and it is very difficult or impossible to find similar cases.
- Case contributes in a meaningful and unusual way to scientific research.

This paper is based on a single case research, the Always brand of sanitary pads and its strategy #LikeAGirl. Author finds this particular case meets at least one of the conditions mentioned above. There is a gap in literature concerning the question how cultural narrations are used in brand development, and what are their outcomes in terms of brand equity; Procter&Gamble managed to achieve outstanding results for its Always brand through cultural branding expressed in the #LikeAGirl strategy. Case research can be based on various data sources, including interviews, historical data, surveys, ethnography and observations. In exploratory research qualitative data dominate (Eisenhart 2007). In the paper, following the triangulation method, the author used data from three sources: (1) The D&DA Foundation¹, (2) Marketing Society, and (3) Institute for Public Relations. Despite the lack of a representative sample, the purpose of a case research is theory development and generalisation. Case research results can be therefore generalised from the point of view of analysis (as a theoretical propositions), but not statistics (as a frequency of occurrence) (Yin 2003).

Brand equity

Brand equity is one of the central concepts in classical brand research (Keller 2003; Aaker 1991). It has been defined as a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm or to that firm's customers (Aaker 1991). High brand equity contributes to consumer satisfaction, brand loyalty, and ability of the brand to command a price premium (Aaker 1991). Keller suggests that brand equity should be enhanced over time, for example through brand reinforcement, and indicates two options for this. The first one is innovation in product design, manufacturing, and merchandising. The second option is increasing relevance in user and usage imagery (Keller 2003). Internet expansion, especially social media development, created new opportunities for brands to communicate with their target audiences and build and enhance their brand equity. Authors suggest that using social media in brand communication can impact brand equity, especially brand awareness, build favorable brand image, reveal brand personality and affect brand resonance (loyalty) (Zailskaite-Jakste, Kuvykaite 2013).

Schroeder noticed, that brand equity concept research is rooted in management and marketing disciplines, and for a long time it lacked a sociocultural perspective showing how brand building processes are affected by cultural conventions. The process of creating and

¹ The D&DA is a non-profit organization which aims to promote creativity in advertising & design sectors.

delivering brand value is strongly influenced by cultural codes (Schroeder 2009). The cultural perspective in brand research contributes to economical and managerial perspectives.

Cultural branding

In cultural perspective (in literature on marketing semiotics) the brand positioning concept is called brand narrative (Rossolatos 2013) or cultural branding (Holt, Cameron 2010). Authors suggest that the essence of cultural branding is combining a brand in a suggestive and credible way with a proper cultural idea (Holt, Cameron 2010). As culture is not static, but constantly evolving, cultural ideas may have different characters: residual (based on past issues), dominant (based on present, mainstream issues) or emergent (based on new, fresh, emerging issues) (Oswald 2012). Authors suggest that, as social structures shift, some of those shifts create a demand for new cultural expressions. These kinds of shifts are called social disruption, and they create ideological opportunities for companies and brands (Holt, Cameron 2010). One of such social shifts is connected with gender roles.

Gender roles in brand communication

Research on gender issues in branding context is approached from a few different points of view. Research shows that different types of consonants used in brand names affect brand perception as masculine or feminine (Guèvremont, Grohmann 2015), and that brand design (decisions on logo shape, typography and colors) affect brand perception as masculine or feminine, brand preference and brand equity (Lieven et al. 2015). Research also shows that masculine and feminine brands have higher brand equity and preference than gender-neutral brands, regardless of the product category (Lieven et al. 2014), but women tend to accept masculine brands more than men accept feminine brands (Robbie et al. 2012). However, to author's knowledge, no research was conducted on the subject of how brands present their points of view on different models of masculinity or femininity. How do brands comment on the changing gender models? These cultural issues are not static, they are dynamic and in many cultures there are heated debates on what does it mean to be a man (macho man? metrosexual man? lumbersexual man?) and what does it mean to be a woman. And does it pay for brands to get involved in that kind of debate?

All brands are set in a cultural context, because they carry a certain meaning coded in brand name, language, logo, and visual identity. But some companies decide to directly express their involvement in certain cultural issues, by making those issues cornerstones of their brand strategies. Some companies use cultural branding in an advanced way, by developing what authors define as cultural narrations: clear manifestations of what the brand stands for in terms of cultural change.

The research gap and research questions are as follows: despite cultural branding concept being developed in literature, there is no research on how companies build cultural narrations (based on evolution of gender roles). What are the results of such decisions?

Always #LikeAGirl – narrative description

Case research is based on Always sanitary pad brand strategy #LikeAGirl (2014-2015), initially conducted in North America, then extended to twenty other countries.

Always brand – initial situation

Sanitary pads are a low involvement product, so major brands competing in that category have followed a certain pattern in marketing communication for years: establishing functional benefits, trying to fight over product superiority, using product demos or showing extreme usage situations to provide a credible reason to believe in products' benefits. For many years, Always brand followed exactly the same path. They may have created the path, as market leaders are seen as those who create marketing conventions for the whole product category. For many years confidence was at the core of Always brand equity (Coscia). It was, however, communicated in functional way, promising women to fix a physical problem, so that they could be more confident during their period. Yet for women there was no clear connection between functional confidence provided by the product and social confidence expressed in their self-esteem. On the other hand, self-esteem was an issue they were increasingly sensitive about (Coscia). The brand needed a reinforcement treatment, using Keller's terminology, and the company opted for increasing relevance in user and usage imagery.

Culture surrounding the category

Coscia describes how the company explored confidence concept, not in functional terms, but in a wider socio-cultural context. They discovered that puberty is a time of a real confidence crisis for girls. Their self-esteem drops twice as much as boys' during puberty. Moreover, women never regain the pre-puberty level of self-esteem. Looking for the causes of such a sharp drop in confidence, the company realised that what impacts girls during puberty are the gender stereotypes. Society and mass culture educate girls and boys on gender differences, teaching them that leadership, power and strength are for men, not for women. And that boys should be raised as strong and tough (and not to be a girl). The main observation was that gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in culture, so deep as to even be a part of the language. Coscia describes that the expression 'like a girl', in fact, tends to be used, in every language, as an insult to tease somebody who is weak or over-emotional. That is why the expression "like a girl" became the inspiration for the campaign (Coscia).

It should be noted that the creative insight resonated well with broader socio-cultural trends (or social disruption, as called by Holt and Cameron), as many scholars, non-profit organizations and trend hunting agencies opt for more gender equality or suggest that Western societies move towards more feminine values (Mason et al. 2015, Kjaer 2014, United Nations

2011). Those ideas are, however, not rooted in mainstream culture, so the idea of Always brand may be seen as based on an emergent cultural trend.

Strategy execution

The company developed and executed following actions, based on identified cultural insight (D&DA, Institute for Public Relations, Coscia):

- A social experiment – organising a fake casting call, where young men and women were asked to do things „like a girl” (to run like a girl, to fight like a girl, etc.). Their actions were captured on camera, showing that both young women and young men behaved in a silly way, acting out the stereotype. However, when the prepubescent girls were given the same task – their reaction was completely different. Clearly, they had not been influenced by the stereotypes yet, so they acted normally, like themselves.
- Social media campaign based on a video showing the results of the social experiment, and encouraging women to tweet things they do #LikeAGirl.
- Creating a web page, which gave the opportunity to engage in conversation on the subject.
- PR activation through e-influencers and top media.
- A 60-seconds version of the video was aired during the 2015 Super Bowl.

The results

The strategy had impact on several brand effects categories: increase in brand popularity, relevance and emotional connection to the brand, in brand equity, in purchase intent and brand preference. The strategy also impacted cultural change and gained interest, recognition and awards among advertising industry and the nonprofit sector.

Results connected with increase in popularity of the brand were as follows (Coscia):

- 76 million views globally after 3 months (objective was 10 million);
- Most viewed video in Procter & Gamble’s history;
- No. 2 most viral video globally;
- 53% of reach amongst women 13-34 years old in the USA;
- Top of mind awareness increased by 9 pts (49% to 58%) amongst target group in the USA;
- +1,100 media placements; 4.4 billion global impressions earned in just 3 months;
- 177,000 #LikeAGirl tweets in the first 3 months, including many celebrities;
- Always Twitter followers tripled in the first 3 months;
- Always YouTube Channel subscribers grew 4,339 %;
- Engagement rate on Facebook was twice the target, at 2.25 %;
- 35,000 people commented on the #LikeAGirl program in the first three months;
- 4,500 instances of user-generated content were created in response to the call to action in first three months;
- Ranked most popular digital campaign of the Super Bowl.

Results connected with increase in relevance and an emotional connection to Always, and improvement of equity scores were as follows (Coscia):

- Always Pads Equity increased from 38.1 to 41.4 in the USA, while most competitors saw slight declines. The “makes me feel confident” attribute increased 6 points (37 to 43);
- Emotional connection amongst selected market segments in the USA increased by 3.3 points (from 38% to 41%);
- Positive sentiment for #LikeAGirl reached 96% in just 3 months (objective was 70%);
- Ad Recall was 6.5 times the US norm (47% vs. 7%), with brand linkage at 59% (in line with TV norm of 57%).

Results connected with increase in purchase intent and brand preference were as follows (Coscia):

- In the USA, claimed purchase intent increased post-campaign (from 42% to 46%) and grew +50% amongst target group (from 40% to 60%);
- Purchase intent increased up to 92% among those who viewed the video on YouTube;
- Always received a 6.93% lift in overall brand preference, 8% higher than the Consumer Packaged Goods average.

Results connected with evoking cultural change were as follows (Coscia):

- Since the launch of the campaign the expression ‘like a girl’ has been attached to positive sentiment, becoming a symbol of female empowerment around the globe.
- Almost 70% of women and 60% of men claimed that ‘Viewing the video changed my perception of the phrase ‘like a girl’.
- Two out of three men who watched the film said they’d now think twice before using the ‘like a girl’ as an insult.

Results connected with gaining industry and non-profit recognition were as follows (Coscia):

- The campaign won D&AD Pencils across eight separate categories,
- Always received a United Nation award for the impact the campaign had on female empowerment around the world.

Case research results – hypotheses for future testing

In exploratory studies, case research outcomes are hypotheses presented in the form of cause-and-effect relationships between an independent variable and depended variables (Kłeczek 2014). Based on the analysed case, the author suggests cultural brand narration as an independent variable and the following components of brand equity as dependent variables: brand popularity, brand relevance, brand preference, and purchase intent. The case research revealed other effects connected with cultural brand narration: evoking cultural change (which may be a future research topic in Corporate Social Responsibility field) and gaining industry recognition (which may be a future research topic in Public Relations / publicity field).

The author suggests following hypotheses that require testing in future research:

- H1: Cultural brand narration based on emergent cultural code relates positively to brand popularity
- H2: Cultural brand narration based on emergent cultural code relates positively to brand relevance
- H3: Cultural brand narration based on emergent cultural code relates positively to brand preference
- H4: Cultural brand narration based on emergent cultural code relates positively to purchase intent

Limitations and future research

In the analysed case, the cultural brand narration took form of an emergent cultural trend, based on changing gender roles and changing patterns of femininity. Some authors suggest that those changes result from social shifts (social disruption) that create a demand for new cultural expressions (Holt, Cameron 2010). In this context, the independent variable is a strong, emerging cultural idea. The future exploratory studies could evolve around other cultural ideas, both dominant (mainstream, popular, current) and residual (past, traditional), and could be based on other cultural issues, not only gender. It is therefore worth exploring whether cultural brand narrations give similar or different brand effects depending on the type of cultural idea (residual, dominant, emergent) used in brand strategy. The hypotheses suggested above require testing in quantitative studies.

Conclusions

Always #LikeAGirl case research contributes to existing knowledge by showing possibilities of new relationships, not researched before: between cultural brand narration and brand equity elements. The following managerial implications result from the research: managers should consider using the cultural brand narrations as such decisions may bring benefits to the company. The following social implications result from the research: given the significant role of marketing in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of both consumers and a society as a whole, the use of a cultural brand narration can bring benefits not only to companies, but it may also produce certain social effects, such as eliminating negative stereotypes and evoking required cultural change.

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Branding kulturowy i jego wpływ na kapitał marki – badanie eksploracyjne

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest eksploracja możliwych relacji między kulturą tożsamością marki a kapitałem marki. Koncepcja kulturowej tożsamości marki jest rozwijana w literaturze, brakuje jednak badań wskazujących, jakie są rezultaty takich działań i czy mają one związek z kapitałem marki. Artykuł jest oparty na studium

przypadku marki Always (podpaski) i strategii #LikeAGirl. Rezultatem badań jest sugestia narracji kulturowej marki jako zmiennej niezależnej oraz następujących elementów kapitału marki jako zmiennych zależnych: popularność marki, waga marki dla nabywcy, preferencja marki oraz intencja zakupu. Autorka formułuje cztery hipotezy dotyczące relacji pomiędzy tymi zmiennymi.

Słowa kluczowe: kulturowa tożsamość marki, kapitał marki, studium przypadku.

Kody JEL: M30, M31, M37

Культурный брендинг и его влияние на капитал бренда – разведочный анализ данных

Резюме

Цель статьи – выявить возможные соотношения между культурным тождеством бренда и капиталом бренда. Концепция культурного тождества бренда (марки) получает развитие в литературе, однако не хватает исследований, указывающих результаты таких действий и имеют ли они связь с капиталом марки. Статья основана на анализе марки Always (гигиенические прокладки) и стратегии #LikeAGirl. Результат изучения – предложение культурного освещения марки в качестве независимой переменной и следующих элементов капитала марки в качестве зависимых переменных: популярность марки, значение марки для покупателя, предпочтение марки и намерение купить. Автор формулирует четыре гипотезы, касающиеся отношений между этими переменными.

Ключевые слова: культурное тождество марки (бренда), капитал марки, изучение конкретного случая.

Коды JEL: M30, M31, M37

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Afiliacja:
dr Monika Hajdas
Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny we Wrocławiu
Wydział Nauk Ekonomicznych
Katedra Zarządzania Marketingowego
Instytut Marketingu
ul. Komandorska 118/120
53-345 Wrocław
e-mail: monika.hajdas@ue.wroc.pl