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The Fragility of Brands in the Era of Semiotic Capitalism

Abstract: In addition to infecting the great culture with the seeds of brand philosophy, the semiotic turn of capitalism would have a multitude of serious secondary consequences: the proliferation of materialistic philosophies of life, the standardization of behaviors and mentalities, the disappearance of real purchasing options, the proliferation of manipulation in public communication, the erosion of political power, the decline of research activities within companies, and the proliferation of goods with a programmed life span on the market. The main purpose of this article is to critically assess the so-called toxic consequences of the capitalism of brands. This critical examination of the consequences of branding on the world in which we live will be preceded by an ontological examination of the nature of brands precisely to ascertain whether, in principle, this type of entity can cause the considerable damage it is credited with. The thesis I argue is that brands are fragile entities, ontologically dependent on the intentionality of collectives and economically dependent on the act of buying. When buyers withdraw their trust in a brand and refuse to buy it, the brand disappears into nothingness. Therefore, if there are things that go wrong in today's society (and there are plenty of them), this cannot be attributed (exclusively) to the existence and action of brands.

Keywords: branding, capitalism, artifact, semiotic design, materialistic philosophy, consumerism, manipulation, technical obsolescence, psychological obsolescence

1. Introduction

Among left-wing theorists and critics of consumer society, the belief that brands are omnipotent and that, acting as pathogens, infect and

sicken contemporary culture and society is quite widespread. The infiltration of brands and brand philosophies into the culture of our world and the collective mind through the sponsorship of shows, the ubiquity of logos, brand extensions, the provocation of political controversies, and the generation of a specific design of brand experiences would have transformed not only the economy but society as a whole into a battleground between companies redefined as „brokers of meaning.” (Klein 2000, 20-36) This war, which would have as its first consequence the strengthening of global brands to the point of invincibility and the semiotic infection with the seeds of the brand philosophy of the great culture, would also have a multitude of secondary consequences, much more serious: the spread of a toxic materialistic philosophy, the standardization of behaviors and mentalities, the disappearance of real choices, the spread of manipulation in public communication, the erosion of political power, the reduction of research activities within companies, and the spread of goods with a planned life duration on the market. The primary objective of this article is to formulate, in the form of arguments, the potential secondary consequences of the „branding turn” in contemporary society and to critically examine them. This critical examination of the broader implications of branding on the world in which we live will be preceded by an ontological examination of the nature of brands, precisely to ascertain whether, in principle, this type of entity can cause the considerable damages it is credited with. The central argument of this theoretical investigation is that brands are fragile entities ontologically dependent on collective intentionality and economically dependent on the act of buying (which means they exist only as long as they are bought). When buyers withdraw their trust in a brand and refuse to buy it, the brand disappears. Therefore, if there are things that go wrong in contemporary society, and there are plenty of them, this state of facts cannot be attributed (exclusively) to the presence and action of brands.

2. The Variety of Artifacts

The texture of today’s world is generated not primarily by natural systems or kinds (entities that exist independently of human consciousness, interests, and actions), but by the myriad of relations of humans with the artifacts that populate the entire environment. In the post-industrial world, governments, companies, airplanes, banks, theaters, fashionable clothes, stylized cars, novels, plays, paintings, political parties, companies, electronic devices, and video games are all pieces that

make up the universe in which humans live. The history of artifacts is inextricably linked to the history of human communities. However, the rigorous examination of the ontological status of artifacts is a relatively recent philosophical concern. Initially, philosophers' inquiries focused on the ontological status of technological artifacts; subsequently, other categories of artifacts, including works of art and organizations, prompted further theoretical explorations. Notably, brands represent a recently emergent category of artifacts that has sparked significant philosophical investigations.¹

Traditional ontology recognized the existence of three distinct species of artifacts: *technical entities* (e.g., light bulbs, ships, trains, computers), *cultural entities* (e.g., novels, movies, paintings), and *institutional entities* (e.g., banks, governments, universities, etc.). (Jacquette 2002, 272) Besides being *ontologically subjective* (i.e., being born at a well-determined point in time through the creative endeavors of human minds), artifacts also share a common feature: they are *intentional entities*, and they are in various ways *about something*. They are the result of deliberate human ingenuity, with their very existence stemming from the intentionality of their creators. However, not all artifacts possess a clearly defined ontological status. Consequently, belief systems, languages, actions, software, and norms are considered artifacts, yet their classification into one of the aforementioned categories poses serious challenges. A similar situation pertains to brands. The endeavor to elucidate their ontological status can culminate in the designation of brands as a distinct category of artifacts, with an essence of its own, which defies reduction to technical, artistic, or institutional entities. These entities possess an added symbolic value, stemming from the intention of their creators to transform industrial entities into symbolic goods with notoriety, goods whose semiotic design elevates them to the rank of objects of consumer desire and fantasy.

3. Brands and their semiotic design.

In the context of cultural anthropology, brands can be considered a recent species of artifact. The distinctive quality that sets them apart from other artifacts is their exceptional *semiotic design*. Many brands are noteworthy technical (cultural or institutional) entities, but they possess a

¹ Parts 1 and 2 of this article contain ideas that I have discussed in much more detail in "The Brandworld as Ontologic Metaphor", *Argumentum*, Vol. 12 (2), Axis Academic Foundation Publishing House, Iași, 2014, pp. 141-161.

surplus that only cultural artifacts can aspire to: the richness of meanings and narrative complexity. In this regard, brands bear a striking resemblance to authentic works of art, as they also possess a profound richness of meaning. A work of art is alike a brand in that, in its essence, the work of art is never reducible to its material-sensory interface. Aestheticians, including notable figures such as Arthur C. Danto (1981), William E. Kennick (1964), and George Dickie (1974), operating from the assumption that all works of art possess an intangible core concept, posit that no exclusive perceptual criterion can be proposed for the differentiation of works of art from non-artistic objects. The advent of “indiscernible”, defined as objects that bear a striking resemblance to works of art yet are not generally regarded as such, underscores the necessity for a definition or theoretical framework to delineate art from non-art. Perception alone is insufficient because there is “something important” in the work of art that eludes direct communication and observation, even by ostensive definitions (which show the object but do not describe it and cannot give it the status of a work of art). The status of a work of art is acquired by an artifact within a complex theoretical-institutional framework, within an art world that values that artifact as a work of art, and within a world that offers us the keys to deciphering the meanings of the work of art. Somewhat similarly, the essence of a brand is its conceptual identity; despite its intangible conceptual identity, brands are often confused with the material and sensory constituents of their identity (e.g., visual or verbal identity elements).

Somewhat, brands bear a resemblance to institutions too in that, even if the essence of an institution resides in its constitutive rules (abstract, intangible entities) accepted and followed based on collective intentionality, an institution only exists to the extent that it is anchored in the concreteness of society and its works. However, it is the wealth of embedded meanings that distinguishes a brand from a mere institution. What aspects of brands make them stand out from other categories of artifacts? *Firstly*, brands emerge as the result of a deliberate and systematic process of creation and incorporation of meanings, akin to how a virus propagates. Irrespective of the nature of the entity “affected” by this phenomenon (be it a nation, metropolis, industrial creation, artistic creation, intellectual, institution of higher education, or other), it transforms into a symbolic entity through the infusion of identity and meanings known as branding. The concept (or the DNA) of a brand can establish a connection with the DNA of a physical, cultural, or institutional entity, thereby exerting an influence over its shaping by its

symbolic structure. This process ultimately leads to a transformation in the perceived identity and meanings of the entity in question. A fundamental distinction between brands and other entities does not lie in their material support but in their core concept, the type of meanings attached to them, and a series of elements comprising their sensory, perceptible identity. Therefore, branding is the operation by which any good is transformed into a symbolic good. There is no necessary relationship between the physicochemical properties of the good, its utility or rarity, and the meanings that will be intentionally attached to it. From this perspective, the branding specialist can be regarded as a *designer of meanings*.

Secondly, brands are the only entities created with the aim of functioning, at the highest parameters, as referents in professional communication campaigns. That is to say, brands are the sole entities that are subject to a fundamental constraint: the consistent and coherent communicability of a concentrated set of meanings. This is an operation necessary to increase the perceived quality and perceived popularity of the branded good. A brand with a semiotic structure that is difficult to communicate is not, in fact, a brand. While it may manifest as a technological marvel, an artistic innovation, or a reputable institution, these characteristics alone do not suffice to designate it as a brand. Therefore, the brand's meaning becomes the set of meanings that are attached to the brand name in the minds of consumers, thereby enabling the brand to exist and maintain ontological consistency.

4. Brands as a source of existential meanings

An investigation into the source of brands' ontological consistency might identify a relatively simple answer: contemporary consumers or members of a brand tribe satisfy their highest self-actualization needs by purchasing brands and maintaining complex existential relationships with brand meanings. Meanings attached to brands are not only internalized by consumers as associations of brand names but also as existential meanings, which are meaningful to them as people. The power of brands, therefore, is predicated on the notion that the experiential/existential relationship with a brand or the act of procuring and possessing a brand can satiate the most refined and elevated needs of human beings. In contemporary society, traditional sources of meaning – morality, religion, art, and philosophy – have either been forgotten or have become irrelevant. In this post-religion and post-big culture era, individuals seek

to infuse their lives with meaning by aligning with the philosophies espoused by brands. The implementation of intensive and targeted communication campaigns has led to the pervasive presence of brand meanings in the minds of contemporary individuals. After activation, these meanings become the first categories available to consumers seeking to comprehend their own lives or relationships with others. Michael Newman has argued that contemporary brands must establish connections between people through meaning, rather than through product qualities. The purchasing decisions of consumers are now based less on product functionality and more on questions such as “What is important to me?” and “What do I want from life?” (Newman 2003, 142) As a result, brands are transcending their role as mere products or tools for satisfying basic needs to become important channels of meaning for many people in today's society.

In a world characterized by the predominance of material goods, devoid of divine entities, and the concept of immortality, the acquisition of luxury brands often serves as a substitute for traditional forms of transcendence. For the contemporary consumer, transcendence no longer signifies a vertical ascent to a higher spiritual reality, but rather a horizontal immersion in the tangible world of physical objects. These objects, imbued with a rich semantic history, open a new paradigm of transcendence. The sign-object, the branded and commercialized object, becomes the center of a profane religiosity, the source and target of horizontal transcendence. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that brands can meet the more elevated needs for self-fulfillment that Maslow placed at the pinnacle of the human needs hierarchy. „We were all brought up with the notion that patient, cautious acquisition was the way to gradually build a better life. Today, consumers will often be drawn from the downwardly noble – people who may not have all the money in the world, but spend every single cent on one thing. They focus on acquiring the symbols that are critical to their tribe or themselves. They sacrifice everything to get the latest and funkiest mountain bike, travelling experience, surfboard, bottle of wine (perhaps not the latest one in this case), DVD player, yoga class, or whatever. This is where we should look if we want a glimpse of the future, not to those who excel in average spending capability.” (Ridderstråle & Nordström 2002, 141) In today's world „identity is no longer linked to production, but to consumption. You shop, therefore you are. The right to be, the right to choose and the right to consume are central to our very being.” (Ridderstråle & Nordström 2004, 52) These rights are exercised

simultaneously through the significant relationship with brands. Major events in the life of the contemporary individual are entries on a huge shopping list, a list of experiences with significant brands.

5. Brands and critiques of semiotic capitalism

In summary, critics of the semiotic economy – Naomi Klein (2000), Jonathan Crary (2013), Shoshana Zuboff (2019), Jean Zigler (2018), or Gilles Lipovetsky (2006), for example – of the economy in which design and meaning become essential to the sale of material or digital products, in which the goods marketed become signifiers of social status or personal identity, identify a series of anthropological, economic and social arguments that constitute a critique of the ubiquity of branding and mass commercial communication and, implicitly, of corporate liberalism and consumer society. Even if, at first sight, these arguments seem reasonable and well-founded, we will eventually find that they can be dismantled, countered, and even rejected.

5.1. The argument of the proliferation of materialistic attitudes. The prominence of brands and the abundance of communication around them would lead to and feed a materialistic philosophy of life, according to which every human need can be satisfied by objects - signs that can be bought. Such a philosophy would elevate consumption to the status of a fundamental gesture for a human being in search of existential authenticity, a gesture by which the individual would define his or her essence. Consequently, brands would be responsible for alienation, one-dimensionality, lack of existential discrimination (discrimination between real human needs and those invented by the brand's creators), lack of horizon, and lack of authentic meaning in contemporary human life. The most “sinister” variant of this philosophy is a fatalism of the following kind: every human action is inevitably a consumer action, any meaning attached to an individual's actions is premeditated, artificial, and bought, and the man himself has the chance to be consistent in a society of signals and hyper-communication only to the extent that he becomes a kind of brand, a bearer of fashionable meanings. Hence the imperative felt by many contemporaries to build a personal brand at the expense of authentic relationships with themselves and those around them.

5.2 The homogenization argument. Brands, as industrial mass products, are the main factor leading to massification, homogenization, uniformity, and conformity in contemporary society. The result would be

that the individual in a consumer society, the individual who builds his identity through a direct relationship with commercial brands, would end up being absorbed into a shapeless mass, into a conformist, suffocating, grey, inorganic anonymity. „Mass production creates standardized and monotonous products that offer little variety or stimulation. Functional architecture designs unattractive cities; furniture is often unglamorous; food is tasteless; television programs are boring with an excess of sameness. These are all phenomena that demonstrate the inability of the American economy to provide enough stimulating novelty; hence a «depleted structure of consumption», an increase in redundancy that leads to monotony and boredom. This is the «joyless economy», which fails to provide maximum pleasure, to increase consumer happiness.” (Lipovetsky 2006, 151)

5.3. The argument of the disappearance of options and freedom. The multitude of brands would induce the false belief that the consumer society offers us a multitude of possibilities to choose, that we can live by exercising our free will to the maximum. In fact, the possibilities of choice in a consumer society are extremely limited or illusory. Even Pope Francis emphasizes this: „this paradigm leads people to believe that they are free as long as they have the supposed freedom to consume. But those really free are the minority who wield economic and financial power.” (Pope Francis 2015, §203) Different brands in the same category offer us the same product under different packaging and brand names. What is more, seemingly different brands are owned by the same company. So the idea of choosing a brand that reflects an individual’s true aspirations and desires is largely false; whatever you choose, you are choosing pretty much the same thing, i.e. a set of products and services owned by a small group of investors. Whatever choice there is, it is available only to those who have the money to buy it. The impossibility of real choice leads some analysts to believe that the consumer society is a new kind of totalitarian society.

For example, Neal Lawson wrote in 2009: „totalitarianism, a society where alternatives are ruled out, was meant to arrive in the jackboots of the communist left or the fascist right. It now arrives with a smile on its face as it seduces us into yet another purchase. The jackboots are in this season’s colour and style. We are watched, recorded and ordered not by our political beliefs but by our shopping desires. The gulag is replaced by Gucci.” (Lawson 2009) Advertising and branding would be the tools shaping a new totalitarian society, a society that exacerbates desires and feeds the mirage of unlimited options. „Today, when the free

market is coming to an end, those in control of the system are entrenching themselves in advertising! It strengthens the bond which shackles consumers to the big combines.” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 131)

5.4. The argument of turning society into a spectacle of seduction and manipulation. Brands are immoral because, using the instruments of seduction provided by their semiotic and artistic content, they lie, manipulate, and create artificial desires and needs in consumers, leading them to buy irrelevant and useless products. This is emphasized by the Swiss sociologist Jean Ziegler: „the consumer society is based on a few simple principles: its members are customers seduced into buying, consuming, and throwing away goods in ever-increasing numbers, and into acquiring ever-new goods, even when they don’t need them.” (Ziegler 2018, 90-91) In this logic, advertising communication would find its rationale in particular in the hyperbolization of brands, in the manipulation of buyers’ perceptions, in the creation of false desires and problems that the promoted brands are supposed to solve, in the creation and legitimization of a „compulsion to consume”. In other words, brands would be sources of generalized seduction in a globalized society of the spectacle.

5.5. The argument of the diminution of political power. The emergence of brands and their seductive powers has resulted in the marginalization of governments and political power in general, thus enthroning companies and economic power as the real power in the contemporary world. Multinational companies, the kingdoms of this new power, mesmerize the crowds with the glitter of their brands, dictating and controlling the law-making process, and are escaping from any control or regulation. In essence, governments would become mere instruments in the hands of unscrupulous capitalists and global financiers, who exercise unchecked influence over all aspects of society, including the media, and are unaccountable to any authority. These individuals disregard the weak and demonstrate a lack of concern for the fate of the planet and the common good. (Ziegler 2018, 45-98) As a result, under the shiny umbrella of the brands, a predatory global oligarchy would have emerged, unrestrained by any authority, propelled solely by the impulses engendered by self-interest and avarice. The actions of this oligarchy would engender the most profound inequalities in human history.

5.6. The argument of diminishing relevance of scientific research and production activities. The advent of the brands economy has precipitated a paradigm shift in the organizational structure of companies. Research and production activities have been marginalized in

favor of marketing, branding, and advertising. A consequence of this has been the relocation of production capacity to regions offering highly competitive labor markets. This has resulted in significant job losses in developed countries, while new entrants to the workforce in less developed countries have been compelled to assume arduous yet poorly remunerated employment. Another consequence would be an increase in branding and communication budgets and a corresponding decrease in research and innovation funding. The consequence would be that markets are flooded with poor-quality products, which are sold through seduction and manipulation by branding and advertising specialists. Buyers would make their purchases seduced/terrified by the notoriety of the logos, and less by the degree of scientific creativity and innovation embedded in the goods purchased.

5.7. The planned obsolescence argument. The spectacle and glitter of the brands' world would hide the ubiquitous intention today among entrepreneurs to sell consumers finished industrial products of poor quality, products programmed in such a way that they break down as quickly as possible. In addition to this kind of technical obsolescence, proponents of this kind of argument speak of the psychological obsolescence cultivated in contemporary consumer society, which means obsolescence is systematically organized through fashion. (Latouche 2017, 53) Programmed obsolescence has not been a concept invented by contemporary marketers; rather, it is a genuine ideological program intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production. Among the early proponents of this ideology were Alfred Sloan, the owner of General Motors, and the renowned advertising expert of his era, Justus George Frederick. In contrast to Henry Ford's steadfast belief that the design of his iconic Ford T should remain unaltered and unimproved, Alfred Sloan espoused the idea of cultivating psychological obsolescence as a deliberate strategy to spur repeated purchases among consumers. Consequently, General Motors initiated a strategy of launching a new model of car annually, encouraging Americans to upgrade their vehicles every three years. (Latouche 2017, 73)

The concept of programmed obsolescence, as a deliberate economic strategy, was initially theorized by Justus George Frederick. In an article published in *Advertising and Selling* in 1928, he advanced the argument that individuals should be encouraged to purchase products not for extended periods of use, but rather to exchange them for newer models shortly after purchase. The concept of progressive obsolescence, as articulated by Justus George Frederick, signifies the tendency to

procure goods primarily for their perceived value or status, as opposed to their functional purpose. The theoretical underpinnings of this phenomenon, articulated at the dawn of the 20th century, would ultimately find their full expression in the economic landscape of the 21st century. The economic strategy of designing and marketing goods with a deliberately curtailed useful lifespan would have evolved from a mere exception to a universal principle of production.

6. The diseases of semiotic capitalism as imaginary diseases

Defenders of semiotic capitalism, and implicitly of corporate liberalism and consumer society, argue that the critics' arguments are ideologically motivated, biased, and easily dismissed.

6.1. The materialistic philosophy of consumer society is not a consequence of the existence of brands and brand communication campaigns, but brands and advertising are a consequence of an industrial society in which production, property, and profit have become a kind of holy trinity. As Erich Fromm remarked in his famous work *To have or to be?* „we live in a society that rests on private property, profit, and power as the pillars of its existence. To acquire, to own, and to make a profit are the sacred and unalienable rights of the individual in the industrial society.” (Fromm 1976, 57) More, „the norms by which society functions also mold the character of its members (social character). In an industrial society these are: the wish to acquire property, to keep it, and to increase it, i.e., to make a profit (...).” (Fromm 1976, 58) Possessing things, having property relations with technically and semiotically complex objects, having a complex self, understood as a kind of sophisticated thing in our possession, something that makes us special by giving us a unique personal identity, represent the roots of the sense of being for the individual in today's world. Brands and advertising are just tools created by and for individuals who seek stimuli for the self in objects, in depersonalized relationships, and in objectified humans. Why has the relationship with the object become privileged for the individual of the consumer society over the relationship with his fellow man or with God? In short, because the relationship with objects, being a fully controllable relationship, is more comfortable, free of existential complications and constant effort, a relationship that can be maintained through the simple act of purchase and possession. Through the act of purchase, we can own a valuable object (humans and gods cannot be owned) which, as a social symbol, gives the owner a certain social status and the satisfaction of

personal fulfillment. Possession of complex, sophisticated objects creates a sense of power and control, gives the possibility of experiencing new sensations, and gives a sense of the value of one's person. Brands do not fix existential attention on things, but by exploiting attention that is already fixed on objects, they maintain it by adding extra shine and meaning to industrial products.

6.2. People buy brands not because they want to imitate what's going on around them, but because they give them the opportunity to stand out, to stand out from the crowd (hence the role of brands in creating a distinct personal identity). Therefore, branding cannot be seen as an instrument of social standardization and homogenization as long as brands are one of the main means by which people in today's world construct an identity that distinguishes them from others. „Consumerism, in other words, would appear to be a product of consumers trying to outdo one another. It is the competitive consumption that creates the problem, not conformity. If consumers were just conformists, then they would all go out and buy exactly the same stuff, and everyone would be happy (...) In other words, it's nonconformists, not the conformists who driving consumer spending (...) Brand identity is all about product differentiation, it's about setting the product apart from others. People identify with brands because of the distinction that they confer.” (Heath & Potter 2005, 106) For brands to lose their so-called power, it would be enough for people in today's world to find other sources of distinction and personal identity than those offered by brands. After all, if there is competitive consumerism, the result cannot be an increase in the degree of homogeneity and uniformity of society or mentalities.

But at its core, competitive consumerism is not about a world dominated by brands. As early as the late 19th century Thorstein Veblen was convinced that „in order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence.” (Veblen 2007, 29) Veblen believed that the essence of the luxury class is conspicuous consumption. „The principle of conspicuous waste guides the formation of habits of thought as to what is honest and reputable in life and in commodities.” (Veblen 2007, 79) To consume, to consume for others to see, and to consume while wasting what has been consumed have always been essential mechanisms for fixing the social identity of individuals. They have nothing to do with the emergence of brands. In Veblen's terms, we could say that branding and advertising are an invention of the luxury class, which makes it possible for all other

members of a society to see what valuable goods the members of that class consume; but also an invention that makes it possible for those who do not belong to that class to believe, even for a second, that by buying a brand - something seen and desired by many people, an object with perfect semiotic design - they can be part of the luxury class. As a result, branding and advertising could be seen as instruments of ostentation.

Therefore, the so-called standardization and homogenization brought about by the „massification of consumption” is a phenomenon invented by critics of capitalism rather than a real phenomenon. The world we live in today is more like a bazaar in which tens of thousands of different kinds of goods are on display for sale, a world of diversity and heterogeneity. Anyone who believes that the economic brands available to consumers in capitalist hypermarkets are a monstrous tool for homogenization and generating conformity has never set foot in a communist grocery store. Besides, the world of brands is not just about the goods on supermarket shelves. Great universities, theaters, opera houses, and libraries are brands in the same sense that Coca-Cola is a brand. They too are fighting in a market of education, knowledge, or quality entertainment. It would be a fallacious assumption to perceive the activities of these brands as promoting massification, homogeneity, and conformity.

6.3. As demonstrated in the initial sections of this article, brands are fragile entities with a precarious ontological status; they are merely artifacts with a particular semiotic and artistic design. Like any social artifact, brands persist as long as we sustain them through our collective intentionality, and as long as we are willing to allocate them a role in our lives. Conversely, when this commitment is no longer upheld, the brand's credibility is undermined, and its popularity declines. As Wally Olins pointed out, the survival of a business dominated by marketing or branding depends on the goodwill of customers. They hold the ultimate power. If they don't like the product, service, or company behind the brand, customers can (except in legally regulated activities) normally (and often do) switch to another one. If enough of them do, the company usually disappears. (Olins 2005, 13) In the context of the present discussion, it is pertinent to consider a statistical fact that bears relevance. In the majority of developed economies, it has been observed that more than 90% of new brands do not endure for a period exceeding one year. This phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that these brands fail to gain consumer trust. It can be posited that consumers, as decision-makers, elect to discontinue the use of 90% of brands, and this decision is subsequently enacted. The observable disappearance of a significant number of brands serves as

irrefutable evidence that consumers, as arbiters, possess the capacity to determine which brands will continue to exist.

6.4. To assess advertising campaigns as activities that create false needs, that seduce and manipulate the poor ignorant consumer is implicitly to promote a kind of caricature of the modern consumer. The days when the naive consumer believed whatever he was told about a product are long gone. One only has to go to online forums dedicated to certain brands to find astonishingly accurate details that consumers share due to their experience or contact with a brand. It is impossible to convince such a consumer that an inferior brand is a premium brand or to purchase a brand due to creating a so-called false need through communication. Rainer Zittelman rightly argued in Chapter 8 of his book *In Defense of Capitalism. Debunking the Myths* (2023) that „advertising is not as omnipotent as advertising agencies and anticapitalists would have us believe – for a variety of reasons – and the image of the mindless consumer being seduced by ingenious advertisers into spending all day, buying unnecessary items, is a massive exaggeration. If anyone is being cheated, it is more often than not the companies that spend so much money on ineffective advertising and who only join in the advertising game because their competitors are doing so too. Advertising agencies are most successful at convincing their clients to spend money, not the customers of their clients.” (Zittelman 2023, 169-170)

Moreover, the depiction of advertising and brands in this manner suggests that all brand-building companies are akin to factories of lies, seeking to generate profit through deceit, manipulation, and the exploitation of all aspects of the business. Certain corporations might be regarded in this manner. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that some companies are founded on principles that prioritize enhancing people’s lives, fostering long-term relationships, and effecting positive change. Some companies genuinely prioritize the interests of the communities within their operational sphere, fostering mutually beneficial relationships with local communities and attaining a social license to operate. A company that holds such a license is not merely a recipient of a stamp of approval from the relevant authorities; it is an entity that has earned the trust of the local community, demonstrating a long-term commitment to the well-being of that community. (Black 2013)

Furthermore, the delineation between authentic human needs and false human needs – those needs that would be cultivated and exacerbated by branding and advertising – as well as the distinction between useful and useless products, which people in a consumer society are terrorized

by communication campaigns into buying, are fallacious distinctions, impossible to make. The question, therefore, remains: How can we identify authentic human needs? How can we determine which products sold in a hypermarket are useful and which are not? „Of course, capitalism creates a whole host of products that you or I would call useless and superfluous, simply because they are useless and superfluous to you and me. But capitalism is a free and democratic system in that it lets people decide for themselves what they need or don't need (with the exception of products that are banned for good reason, such as child pornography). The alternative would be a government-run, command economy in which politicians and civil servants decide what products people need or don't need.” (Zittelman 2023, 160)

6.5. The idea that the political factor and governments have diminished in influence is a fallacy, particularly in an era in which states possess the most numerous and effective tools to intervene in the economy and society. The marginalization of political power and the primacy of economic power in the global context is a mythical construct, a fabrication of critics of brand capitalism. Transnational corporations are obligated to adhere to the legal frameworks of the countries in which they operate, as well as the international economic conventions to which those countries are signatories. Consequently, the rules that govern any corporation are established within the political sphere. The phenomenon that politicians in a country frequently prioritize concessions to corporations (though not invariably for the benefit of that country), or that certain politicians even condition the undertaking of specific economic activities on personal profit, does not necessarily indicate the robustness of the economy or the viability of brands. Rather, it signifies the fragility of the political element. Toxic brands attain strength due to the susceptibility of politicians to corruption on an unprecedented scale, a phenomenon that was previously unthinkable. Conversely, the role of corporations in influencing the political agenda is not inherently problematic; indeed, it is a legitimate and significant contribution that can yield positive outcomes for various social groups. It is noteworthy that laws favoring the affluent often benefit the economically disadvantaged, as evidenced by examples such as tax cuts and deregulation. (Zittelman 2023, 102) Therefore, lobbying by companies on motions on the government's agenda or certain bills does not automatically have negative consequences in a pluralist democracy. On the contrary.

6.6. The assertion that global companies are allocating greater resources to marketing, branding, and advertising while concurrently

reducing investments in scientific research and technological innovation may be indicative of intellectual myopia, a phenomenon that can be traced to an extreme left-wing perspective, or it may be the consequence of a biased assessment of corporate activities. There are indeed companies, such as *Pampers*, *Louis Vuitton*, *Coca-Cola*, *Nike*, and *Gillette*, that have allocated significant portions of their budgets to marketing and advertising. Conversely, notable technological achievements, such as cell phones, smart TVs, autonomous vehicles, satellite internet with ubiquitous availability, AI agencies that facilitate bureaucratic, financial, and scientific research tasks, or MRI scans, are the result of private companies allocating substantial resources to scientific research and technological development. In the case of prominent corporations such as *Apple*, *Microsoft*, *Google*, *META*, *Tesla*, *OpenAI*, *Sony*, and *Samsung*, a significant portion of the profits from the sale of branded high-tech products is allocated to scientific research. This practice underscores a fundamental truth that is widely acknowledged by investors and researchers in the fields of branding and advertising: the efficacy of branding and advertising communication is not magic. These practices do not transform inferior or rudimentary products and services into technological marvels or products that end users favor. In the context of purchasing decisions, consumers have the option of selecting from brands that embody exceptional technological accomplishments. It is within this milieu that branding and advertising can exert some degree of influence, albeit often with limited efficacy when compared to other factors such as word-of-mouth recommendations, prior experience, and expert counsel. (Sutherland 2009, 14) The recommendation of a brand by friends, previous experience, and experts is not based on its visual identity or logo, but rather on its demonstrable technical performance. A company that consistently neglects scientific research and technological development risks eroding the competitive advantages of its products and services, leading to a migration of buyers toward more technologically advanced options.

6.7. The fact that there are goods that deteriorate sooner than consumers would expect or that have an extremely fragile design is sometimes upsetting and undeniable. But from here to believing in the existence of a worldwide conspiracy of programmed obsolescence, a conspiracy that would aim, on the one hand, to seduce and manipulate buyers through branding and advertising to artificially stimulate the purchase of goods and, on the other hand, to produce goods programmed to fail, is a huge distance. The rapid replacement of numerous technical

products with newer models is primarily driven by advancements in science and technology and the integration of novel technologies. This phenomenon is not rooted in a deliberate conspiracy centered on the concept of programmed obsolescence. In the current era of transparency, any deliberate effort to engineer products with a predetermined obsolescence would be swiftly exposed, disseminated through various media, and brought to the public's attention. This would inevitably result in the demise of any company that engages in such practices. „Under capitalism, it is the consumer who has the final say – and, from the point of view of a company acting rationally, the risk that consumers will punish the company for such practices is higher than any potential short-term profit that could be made.” (Zittelman 2023, 174) Despite the potential for deriving numerous exceptions from this foundational principle for contemporary market economies, the notion of a conspiracy of programmed technical obsolescence remains bizarre and unproven.

7. Conclusions

In essence, brands are merely neutral and fragile artifacts, contingent on consumer intentionality and purchases. Brand-building and promotion strategies can be employed to promote a long-term toxic energy drink as well as a university or a theater. The survival of brands is not attributable to some enigmatic power of their own, but rather to the trust that consumers and recipients of their products and services place in them. The moment a brand no longer enjoys the trust of its buyers, it returns to the nothingness from which it emerged. But trust arises and is maintained not only from the existential meanings that buyers extract from a brand's philosophical DNA, but also from the technical performance of the product hidden under the brand's semiotic veils. When the product consistently disappoints, the attached meanings and other semiotic components can no longer remedy its decline.

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