

Corporate identity, images, art and sponsorship

Unit 4

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John Aitchison

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From brand images to cultural dominance

Modern brand-leader companies no longer simply manufacture, advertise and sell products. Most of their business is now not about manufacture at all but about propagating a brand. Indeed many firms don't make anything at all – “Tommy Hilfiger ... is less in the business of manufacturing clothes than he is in the business of signing his name. The company is run entirely through licensing agreements, with Hilfiger commissioning all its products from a group of other companies” (Klein, 2000, p. 24).

Klein also states (p. 21) that in the new model of brand selling capitalism “the product always takes a back seat to the real product, the brand, and the selling of the brand acquired an extra component that can only be described as spiritual. Advertising is about hawking product. Branding, in its truest and most advanced incarnations, is about corporate transcendence.” Indeed she argues these corporations seek to build the brand image in every sector of contemporary society, through sport, art and cultural sponsorships, through political and moral controversy (even moral outrage at particular adverts raises brand consciousness), and through various ways at getting the consumer to experience the brand.

Because the focus is no longer on the product but on the brand, the brand can be used to sell anything – so, for example, the Virgin brand founded by Richard Branson, originally a large record store, now sells products ranging from soft drinks to train fares and air travel and gyms; Nike, originally a maker of shoes, now sells shoes, clothing, sunglasses and a range of other goods. Because the brand now has to be capable of selling anything, it has to be an experience, a lifestyle, a collective hallucination. So, as Klein (2000, p. 22) puts it, corporations get to “the real business at hand – creating a corporate mythology powerful enough to infuse meaning into these raw objects just by signing its name.” She quotes (p. 23-24) Renzo Ross, the owner of the Diesel brand as saying “We don't sell a product, we sell a style of life. I think we have created a movement. ... The Diesel concept is everything. It's the way to live, it's the way to wear, it's the way to do something.”



Diesel “Nature - love it while it lasts”

Once this process of brand centred marketing is at full thrust, trying to become visible in every possible part of society, it no longer stops at sponsoring culture but in fact becomes culture itself. Klein (p. 30) makes the valuable point that this is perfectly logical and inevitable: “If brands are not products but ideas, attitudes, values and experiences, why can’t they be culture too?” Rifkin (2001) makes a similar point, that the global economy “is metamorphosing from commodifying goods and services to commodifying cultural experience itself.” The giant factory is changing to a giant theatre!

It is at this stage that some people begin to realise that both physical and mental space has been overwhelmed by the brands and that contemporary popular culture has been transformed into a collection of brand extensions.

Sponsorship and corporate identities

Global corporate sponsorship rose from \$7 billion in 1991 to \$37 billion in 2007 and \$66 billion in 2018.

Strategic sponsorship pays off – Samsung sponsored the 2000 Sydney Olympics and made it into the top ten of global brands.

Sponsorship was first mainly visible in sport sponsorship and (to a lesser degree) in art or culture sponsorship. In 2023 sports sponsorship worldwide exceeded \$100 billion. Original leaders in this field were cigarette and alcohol sellers. In the past South Africa cigarettes were linked to horseracing (The Rothman’s July handicap) and cricket, rugby and surfing. Alcohol is now most prominently advertised in connection with the most popular sport in South Africa, soccer, as it is in many other countries. Coca Cola has sown up the sponsorship of road running. Individual sports stars earn astronomical amounts – Ronaldo earned \$60 million endorsing Nike and Tag Heuer. Art and culture sponsorship is often done when it is thought that high income people may be influenced by it. However, such sponsorship may be fickle, a good example of which is when the Grahamstown National Drama Festival lost the Standard Bank (the bank gets more profile from sponsoring cricket).

However, sponsorship of the arts and music does not stop at that. Increasingly music itself is being seen as a brand. It was something that started in the 1960s when the band, The Monkeys was created by a record company. Nowadays “bands are increasingly being conceived – and test-marketed – as brands first: the Spice Girls, the Backstreet Boys, N’Sync, All Saints and so on.”(Klein, 2000, p. 50). Increasingly this means that not merely do the bands wear Nike Shoes and Adidas clothes but they are themselves branded products. The sense that there is a young culture or a popular music culture that might be threatened by commercialism is no longer true if this so-called culture is in fact sold out and branded from the start.

Some South African evidence

It was estimated in 2024 that the nominal values of the top ten South African brands was \$16 billion. Some evidence of the impact of brand advertising on the South African popular consciousness comes from annual “Top Brands” supplements in the *Sunday Times*. These are based upon surveys that try to identify the most popular (“most loved”) of the big advertising spend brands and the most admired companies in terms of spontaneous awareness of the brand, trust and confidence in the brand, and commitment to the brand. The surveys have been conducted since 1999 with large samples of about 3 500 people in the major cities of all the country’s nine provinces using face to face interviews.

The *Sunday Times* top ten company brands for the years 2011 to 2019 were:

2011	2012	2013	2014	2016	2017	2019
Coca Cola	Coca Cola	Coca Cola	Coca Cola	Koo	KFC	Koo
Vodacom	MTN	Standard Bank	Pick n’ Pay	Coca-Cola	Samsung	Coca Cola
SA Breweries	SAB Miller	Vodacom	Vodacom	KFC	Shoprite	WhatsApp
Pick n’ Pay	Pick n’ Pay	MTN	MTN	Shoprite	All Gold Tomato Sauce	Samsung
MTN	Unilever	Pick n’ Pay	Toyota	Lucky Star	Koo	KFC
FNB	Standard Bank	FNB	Volkswagen			Tastic
Standard Bank	Vodacom	KFC	Telkom SA			Lucky Star
ABSA	ABSA	ABSA	Unilever			All Gold
Unilever	Old Mutual	SA Breweries	SA Breweries			Shoprite
Mass stores	Distell	Unilever	Nestlé			Handy Andy

Recent surveys in Brand Finance’s brand directory listed the following top brands for South Africa and the world in 2024:

	South Africa	World
1	MTN	Apple
2	Vodacom	Microsoft
3	Standard Bank	Google
4	Nando’s	Amazon
5	First National Bank	Samsung
6	ABSA	Walmart
7	SPAR	TikTok
8	Investec	Facebook
9	Shoprite	T-mobile
10	DSTV	Industrial and Commercial Bank of China

In more recent years the brand winners have been categorised in separate fields such as Consumer, Electronic goods, Cellphones, Cars, etc. In 2023 the top “Coolest” brands for youth (ages 8 to 23) in urban and per-urban areas were:

	General	Clothing
1	Nike	Nike
2	Apple	Adidas
3	Samsung	ZARA
4	Adidas	Lacoste
5	BMW	Mr Price
6	Louis Vuitton	Redbat
7	Coca-Cola	Louis Vuitton
8	Gucci	Fabiani
9	Puma	Puma
10	Vans	Chanel

Researchers have found that customers chose brand over price (for equal quality goods) just about every time (perhaps most bizarrely in the huge growth in the branded bottled water industry).

Because of the political transformation post 1994 a lot of advertising has deliberately sponsored advertisements portraying a kind of rainbow nation multiracialism. In this way the corporate identity is allied to positive feelings about post apartheid nation building. A example of such patriotic branding is the “Proudly South African” adverts, sponsored by Old Mutual, South African Airways, Telkom, Eskom, and the government Department of Trade and Industry (see *Sunday Times Business Times*, 7 October 2001, p 8).



Education sponsorship

Sponsorship is also increasingly making inroads into public education, traditionally seen as off-limits to commercial messages. Education institutions have, of course, been made vulnerable to commercial sponsorship because of the decline of the welfare state in Europe and North America and, in South Africa, there are still enormous resources needed to make up for apartheid era backlogs. Often the sponsorship gets through the door to assist in the purchase of special facilities – the computer laboratories, information technology equipment, and sports facilities that schools have persuaded themselves they need in order to keep up to date. Klein (2000, p. 95) gives a particular striking example of this from the USA:

Perhaps the most infamous of these experiments occurred in 1998, when Coca-Cola ran a competition asking several schools to come up with a strategy for distributing Coke coupons to students. The school that devised the best promotional strategy would win \$500. Greenbriar High School in Evans, Georgia, took the contest extremely seriously, calling an official Coke Day in late March during which all students came to school in Coca-Cola T-shirts, posed for a photograph in a formation spelling Coke, attended lectures given by Coca-Cola executives and learned about all things black and bubbly in their classes, it was a little piece of branding heaven until it came to the principal's attention that in an act of hideous defiance, one Mike Cameron, a nineteen-year-old senior, had come to school wearing a T-shirt with a Pepsi logo. He was promptly suspended for the offense. "I know it sounds bad – 'Child suspended for wearing Pepsi shirt on Coke Day,'" said principal Gloria Hamilton. "It really would have been acceptable ... if it had just been in-house, but we had the regional president here and people flew in from Atlanta to do us the honour of being resource speakers. These students knew we had guests.

University sports team deals in the United States are extremely lucrative and even in South Africa commercial firms sponsor units and centres, an example of which was the Unilever Ethics Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Research sponsorship (and often accompanying secrecy clauses and censorship) is also extremely important for universities.

Advertising to defend the corporations from attack

Because of criticism of advertising and/or the corporations themselves, corporations often advertise to defend themselves or to displace criticisms of their behaviour. Sometimes these are straight adverts, sometimes they are sponsorships and sometimes they are a kind of re-branding, a re-imagining of themselves. The World Summit of Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in August 2002 saw a massive presence of transnational companies all trying to portray themselves as concerned about ecological and development issues. This re-imagining of themselves I will look at in the next unit.



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