**CHAPTER 12**

**BRANDING AND CONSUMPTION**

1. In the 21st century our entire experience is largely branded; complex systems of meaning shape social realities and people’s identities.
   1. The history of branding
      1. Branding emerged in the second half of the 19th century as a way for companies to market their products, increasing their customer base and developing customer loyalty.
      2. Companies wanted to persuade consumers to fulfill their needs and desires through products (e.g. household cleaners), and to convince consumers of needs they had previously been unaware of (e.g. Listerine).
      3. Companies developed a brand formula that highlighted the product’s “unique selling proposition.”
   2. A brand is a constructed set of meanings that a company attaches to a product, company, or person, and may be more important to the wealth and capital of a company than the company’s economic assets.
      1. Through the *floating signifier effect*, the meanings associated with a brand may have no natural connection to the product.
      2. Companies are also branded and engage in *brand extension* to leverage the meanings and associated with the company to a variety of different products.
      3. People, especially celebrities such as Tiger Woods or Kim Kardashian, may also be branded.
      4. Brand associations may be used to elevate (or reduce) the prestige of a product or line, and to expand into markets far removed from a company’s original reason for being in business.
2. Branding and consumption shape our identity.
   1. Shopping has become a defining activity in people’s sense of self.
      1. We can argue that consumption has at least partially replaced the role of clubs and societies in our sense of identity and well-being.
      2. Corporations work to create a sense of connection between brands and consumers – they want us to enter into a relationship with a brand.
      3. *Emotional branding* connects products and consumers in an “emotionally profound way.”
   2. Consumers are active participants in the meaning creation process because brands allow for individual interpretations.
3. Marketing, “murketing,” and corporate colonization
   1. There has been a change in consumers as recipients of marketing messages.
      1. Marketing used to assume mass audiences of passive recipients.
      2. New communication technologies have led to the “click” phenomenon – audiences may choose new forms of distraction easily.
   2. In *murketing*, the distinction between programming and advertising is blurred or erased.
      1. Examples of murketing include product placement, commercial expression as cultural expression, casual conversations, fake documentaries, and cultural events designed to promote a specific brand.
      2. This type of branding campaign says little to nothing about the quality of the product.
   3. Traditional market research has been supplemented by *brand ethnography*, which is used to examine how people interact with and use products in their everyday lives.
4. Organizations, branding and the entrepreneurial self
   1. With the idea of the *sovereign consumer*, companies strive to anticipate and adapt to the consumer market.
      1. Companies frame the producer-consumer relationship as one that exists on an emotional level.
      2. The bureaucratic form is giving way to adaptive, decentralized organizational forms that are responsive to changing environments.
   2. Employees are encouraged to adopt an *entrepreneurial self*, in which work and non-work identities are increasingly interrelated.
      1. Spheres of production and consumption are blurred.
      2. The *sovereign worker* is responsible for making her or himself into a better person by adding value to the company.
      3. In branding themselves, people are being asked to focus on image over substance, and engage in a “discourse of enterprise.”
5. The ethics of branding
   1. Branding is not intrinsically unethical.
      1. An organization needs to maintain a relationship with its stakeholders by enabling them to identify with the organization in a particular way.
      2. All types of organizations (not just for-profit) engage in branding.
      3. Branding is unethical when there is a contradiction between an organization’s branding efforts and its organizational practices.
   2. There is a broader set of ethical issues related to branding and corporate colonization.
      1. Branding mediates human experience and identity construction and thus corporations play a large role in defining who we are.
      2. Branding (and consumption) has been tied to democracy, however:
         1. Branding is ultimately about making profits.
         2. The choice (and freedom) offered through consumption is only a form of pseudo-democracy, mediated and managed by corporate interests.
         3. *Consumer empowerment* is private and isolated; genuine democracy is public and involves debate.
      3. Corporations often target children, a vulnerable population, and attempt to by-pass the influence of parents.
         1. Advertising relies on providing consumers with “emotional fulfillment.” Since children have no clear sense of what emotional fulfillment means, they are especially vulnerable.
         2. Companies rely on the *nag factor*; parents are susceptible to kids’ pestering for purchasing.
         3. Advertisers exploit the psychological and emotional insecurities of children in the name of kid “empowerment.”
      4. Consumption is disempowering to the extent that it undermines our sense of ourselves as engaged citizens and makes a fetish out of our relationships to objects.