

Legendary Brands and Economic Value: A Semiotic Approach

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Abstract: In this paper I compare and synthesize three separate discourses on marketing communication and propose a model for symbolic added value, a quality that characterizes the most memorable brands. Kevin Lane Keller (*Strategic Brand Management*, 2013) exhaustively outlines the pragmatic steps for building, managing and measuring strong brands, but his approach overlooks the basic distinction between ordinary product brands and Legendary Brands. Laurence Vincent's book (*Legendary Brands*, 2002) is dedicated to precisely this distinction, and the author takes an interdisciplinary (but mainly anthropological) approach to proposing a model for a "brand mythology system". Although the model can be used for pragmatic purposes, its main power is to explain the success of existing Legendary Brands. But while Vincent's model treats many topics of semiotic interest, semiotic theory and methodology are presented only in a distorted fashion. Therefore, I propose that Jean-Marie Floch's (*Semiotics, Marketing and Communication*, 2001) research on the types of valorization advertising confers upon brands can be used to fill critical gaps in the other two approaches and complete my own theory. By analyzing case studies of several successful Bulgarian brands in an autoethnographic mode, I will demonstrate that strategic brand management can be enriched through reference to semiotic and anthropologic models, provided they are translated into its vocabulary and discourse and that the resulting practical guidance can be applied to mid-sized, small, and very small companies, and not just to giant companies on the scale of *Apple* and *Harley Davidson*.

Keywords: brand mythology system, valorization, semiotics, narrative, culture

Background and Methodology

After ten years of teaching Brand Management at New Bulgarian University, meeting dozens of brand managers during seminar series organized

for guest lecturers, and practicing a modest amount of brand consultancy myself, I would like to share a new working approach to brand building that combines the pragmatic value of the “classical” approach (Keller 2013) with the “romantic” distinction between legendary and product brands (Vincent 2002) and the “semiotic valorization” model (Floch 2001). Among the existing acknowledged methods of research, *autoethnography* may be the closest to what follows in this paper. Although the abovementioned brand management models for descriptive analysis are considered in some detail, the main emphasis of the paper is the *unique collateral experience* of teaching, consulting, interviewing and moderating discussions in the field of brand management, while being, at the same time, a semiotician. Hence the paper is also marked by my theoretical grounding in semiotics. My intention in adopting this experience-based approach is to present my argument in the most accessible, useful and systematic way possible, in order to better contribute to the great pragmatic potential of applied semiotics in the field of brand management. In keeping with autoethnographic standards, the adoption of a first person perspective is deliberately preferred over more conventional and objectifying modes of representation.

Classical Brand Management

What I call “the classical” model is the evolving theory of *Strategic Brand Management*, elaborated upon by Kevin Lane Keller in 1998 in the manual of the same name, revisited and republished many times since then. In this approach the key concept is “brand equity”—the ultimate goal of successful brand management. To distinguish this concept from the great variety of its uses in marketing, business and finance, Keller defines it as “customer-based brand equity” (Keller 2013: 23). In marketing semiotics this concept is known as the *added value of the brand*. Obviously the perspectives of the two fields are different, and this is one reason to examine their potential complementarity.

Keller introduces the notion of “brand resonance” (2013: 120–123) to denote the success of a brand building process. Brand resonance occurs when the added value of the brand affects the customer in the deepest manner possible. Resonance is the way the relation works; whereas, brand equity is the positive predisposition achieved in the minds of the target by the marketing activities of brand builders.

One of the manual’s core assumptions, particularly on the subject of the brand resonance model, is the “horizontal” interaction of the rational

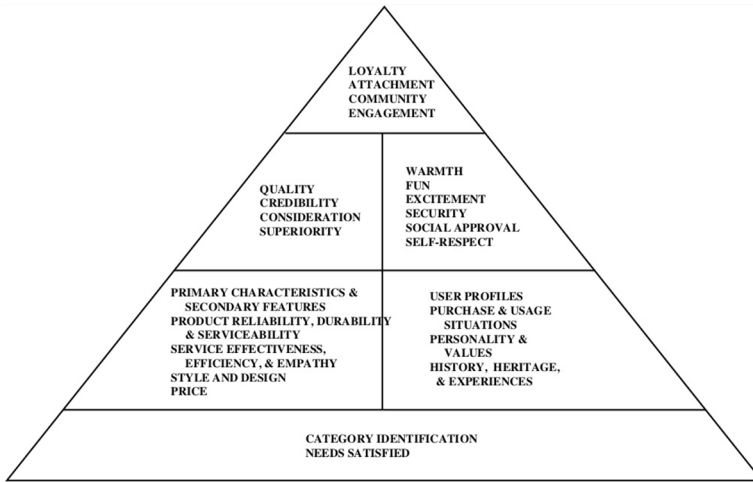


Figure 1. Sub-dimensions of Brand Building Blocks (after Keller 2013: 108)

and emotional components at all levels (see Figure 1). Thus, the performance and judgements are on one side, and the imagery and feelings are on the other. The list of sub-dimensions would be too long if we went through Keller's whole theory to locate the occurrences of such dialectics in various marketing activities. The main takeaway is that Keller places both sides of the dialectic into a pragmatic and logical frame, reducing the impact of the emotional side: "A great brand is not built by accident but is the product of carefully accomplishing—either explicitly or implicitly—a series of logically linked steps with consumers" (2013: 125). For the purposes of the manual, this likely cannot be said in a better way; but the point I would like to make is of a different order. With reference to the aforementioned experiences of meeting and listening to a number of brand stories directly related from brand founders themselves, it has become clear to me that a kind of emotional, passionate charge has always been necessary; and its implementation in marketing activities almost never results from "a series of logically linked steps".

For instance, a very important instrument in the brand building process in Keller's theory is the "brand mantra" (2013: 93–97). The very choice of the term implies that something spiritual is involved in the core of the brand's conception. The brand mantra is a short definition of the brand's unique features, which provides, among other "useful" things, an *inspiration* for employees (Keller 1999: 49; 2013: 96). However, in the given description of the pragmatic moves to create and implement

the mantra, the standard “logical steps” description prevails; and the two cases analyzed—Nike and Disney—with their respective mantras “authentic athletic performance” and “fun, family, entertainment”, are on the edge of banality.

Keller also uses spiritual and religious metaphors in his description of brand resonance’s effects on the customer: “The strongest brands will be those to which consumers become so attached and passionate that they, in effect, become evangelists or missionaries and attempt to share their beliefs and spread the word about the brand” (1999: 124–125). But we do not find an explanation of what differentiates these brands from the rest. The implicit point is that if a brand successfully implements the logical steps, the desired result will be achieved. Furthermore, Keller suggests that creating a strong symbolic added value is only suitable for brands in the luxury category and, even more specifically, in “cars, beer, liquor, cigarettes, and cosmetics” (1999: 113–115). For further reading, Keller refers to Kevin Roberts’s “lovemarks” theory, but this theory goes beyond the classical model.

The Brand Mythology System

At this point I make use of a different (and in many senses complementary) approach to the brand resonance phenomenon, which, contrary to Keller’s gradual approach, positions legendary brands in opposition to ordinary product brands. And this opposition does not imply merits in marketing, sales or excellence. Ordinary product brands can also be very successful and can perform better on objective business achievement criteria. But the added value they provide for their products is of a different nature (and not of a different degree as for Keller) than the added value of legendary brands.

The main reference here is the theory of Laurence Vincent, published in his 2002 book *Legendary Brands: Unleashing the Power of Storytelling to Create a Winning Marketing Strategy*. One of the great merits of this approach is that there is no discrimination of product/service categories, nor is the approach exclusively limited to the luxury sector. The numerous examples offered of legendary brands cover companies of different sizes, although extending this theory to small and very small companies will be this paper’s contribution.

Vincent’s brand mythology system explains with remarkable efficacy the internal mechanism of brand resonance, whereas Keller only describes it as an external effect. In Vincent we see how, in the case of legendary

brands, economic value is generated from cognitive and spiritual predispositions that are not of a utilitarian or strictly rational nature. This theory is complementary to the mainstream brand management approach because its rhetorical disposition is far more efficient in explaining a complicated phenomenon rather than giving a practical guide for it; although, some parts are dedicated to this aim.

In Figure 2 we see the main elements of the brand mythology system. They vaguely coincide with the brand resonance components in Keller's model (Figure 1), but the main emphasis here is on the process of interconnection within a complicated semiotic construct. Belonging to the brand mythology system is a question of a brand's DNA, not a result of an act of intentional corporate choice. The brand mythology system is a way of existence of those brands that have a particular impact through the added value they provide for their loyal consumers.

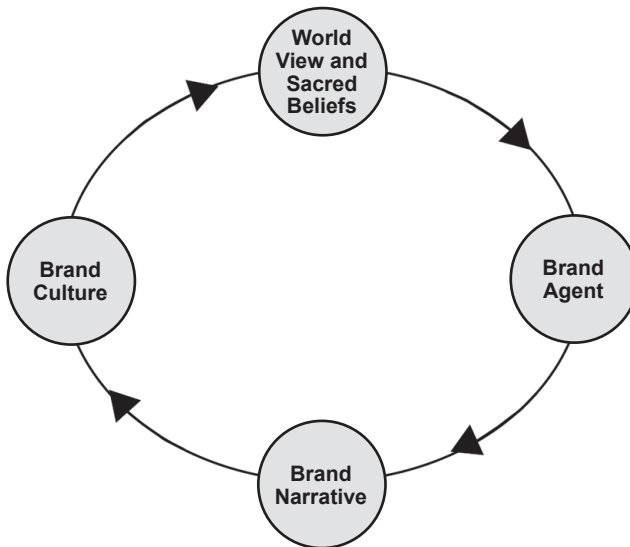


Figure 2. Brand Mythology System (after Vincent 2002: 22)

The strongest point of Vincent's theory is that "the Brand mythology acts upon the cognitive orientation centers of the brain in much the same way that religion and other deeply held philosophical beliefs do" (2002: 20). This is one of the characteristics of our secular time after the fall of grand narratives such as religion, nationhood, philosophical beliefs, local legends, sacred superstitions, etc. The same functions of our worldviews today are covered by smaller, changing narratives; and consumerism is one

of their most efficient sources. The source of meaning for those smaller narratives is the implication of a “sacred belief”. Sacred beliefs appear where the rational “cause/effect” explanation does not function; these form the structure of the myth. Love and friendship cannot be explained, but our worldviews and values are significantly affected by them. Other types of sacred beliefs concern freedom, family, love for other living species, trust in our own creativity and performance, and the necessity to change the status quo. These and many other similar themes exist in our cognitive representation of the world; and when a brand successfully presents a narrative that touches on them, we become inclined to accept such a brand as part of our identity rather than being merely a provider of products or services.

Patagonia, the American outdoor clothing brand founded by Yvon Chouinard in the early seventies, is a good example of a legendary brand. Its narrative, based on concern for nature and sustainability, and in some occasions upon anti-consumerism, is quite convincing, thanks to the figure of Chouinard himself, the brand employment policy, and the brand culture at large. *Coco Chanel* could be seen as another legendary brand, featuring strong connotations of emancipation and revolution in female fashion and a mythical founding figure. *Red Bull*, the energy drink brand, touches those who desire to live at the edge (whether or not they actually do so), exploring the unknown while honoring the power of nature. The same sacred beliefs are employed in the narrative of the mythical brand *GoPro*, producer of action cameras and provider of a platform for video sharing of their customers’ breathtaking experiences. *The Body Shop* brand explores the myth of natural beauty, providing powerful added value to their cosmetic products made only of natural ingredients. Another cosmetic brand, *Dove*, sponsored campaigns against harmful stereotypes of female beauty that cause self-esteem deficiency in a substantial number of women worldwide.

These examples differ from those in Vincent’s book, which contains hundreds more. In all cases, though, brand resonance works at the level of identity. But according to his model, sacred beliefs in themselves are not sufficient. The sacred beliefs are made meaningful for others through a narrative. Advertising campaigns, websites, sponsored events, or public appearances and live talks by a charismatic brand founder or a celebrity: these are what it takes to enact the brand narrative. In this model the element which transmits the narrative in a tangible way is called the “brand agent”. The brand agent can also be the product itself—like the mythical contours of a bottle of *Coca Cola* or the *Harley-Davidson* motorcycle;

athletes sponsored by the brand as in the case of *Nike*, *Adidas* and *Red Bull*; the most skilled customers in the case of *GoPro*; or a specific place like the point of sale for *The Body Shop* and *Disney World* (2002: 233–254).

The element that closes the brand mythology system is the brand culture. In Keller's model this is described as "community and engagement" (Figure 1). It is the tangible and socially sanctioned expression of how the sacred beliefs of the brand resonate with the identity of loyal customers. Here is the biggest difference between the legendary brand and the ordinary product brand: a type of solidarity and community is created among people sharing moral and existential values around the legendary brand compared to a community of users who simply use a given product or service formed around the ordinary product brand. This is why the first type of customers are inclined to become "evangelists or missionaries" for the brand and to stand for its values. The brand has become a part of them, a part of their interface for social interaction. Such customers often perform collective or individual rituals related to the brand, use symbols of the brand such as t-shirts, badges, caps, as well as more durable markings such as tattoos and body piercings (think of big soccer club brands or the *Star Wars* franchise).

The Semiotic Typology of Valorization

What is missing in Vincent's groundbreaking work is an adequate employment of semiotic instruments for the analysis of a given brands' narrative. There is a sub-chapter about semiotics in the book, but here semiotics is treated only as an "extended" synonym of the symbolic (2002: 196ff.).

The work of the French market researcher and semiologist Jean-Marie Floch completes our exploration in the construction of a brand's added value. Floch draws heavily on the generative semiotic school of Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917–1992), with a particular emphasis on narrative grammar. The only disadvantage of this remarkable work is that the formulation of the ideas may be too complicated for any marketing professional without special semiotic training.

The great contribution of A. J. Greimas is the establishment of a new general method of semiotic inquiry, remarkable for its rigor. This method avoids the potential fallacies of sign-oriented semiotics, building a powerful conceptual system for the formal principles of the genesis and actualization of meaning beneath the sign manifestation.¹ Thus the

¹ The major insights of Greimas become known after the publication of *Structural Semantics* in 1966, then the construction of the generative semiotic method comes with

analysis of a given cultural/consumer phenomenon achieves more intelligibility by revealing structural invariants, difficult to grasp with a mere pragmatic approach to communication. Jean-Marie Floch makes great use of the method, applying it to a field of communication where creativity and multimodality challenge any theoretic approach of systematization. Thanks to a concrete case of semiotic analysis of a successful commercial of *Citroen BX*, he constructs a theoretic model of how, through narrative, brands generate the value of a product or service in the target's perception.

The main operation of the French researcher is to transfer the model from the classical generative analysis developed for literary works, to the field of marketing communication. In every narrative, according to that model, there is a complex combination of base and instrumental narrative programs (Floch 2001: 116). Base programs transform the 'being' (*être*) of the hero, while instrumental programs support the base programs and operate on a level of 'having' (*avoir*). Floch analyzes corporate narratives in the form of advertising messages, and demonstrates how some of them narrate the role of consumption as a base narrative program and others as an instrumental program. In the first case, the advertised product or service transforms the consumer, challenges what she is and encourages her to start an unusual adventure, or to transform the world/people around her. We may think of the *Coca Cola* commercial² where an old abandoned person in a nursing home, after a sip of the drink, starts to think of everything he could have done in his life but never did. In the last shot he is gone, starting the new imagined life out in the world. Or we may consider the *Johnnie Walker* "Human" commercial,³ where the android ends his remarkable interview with the words: "I can achieve immortality by not wearing out. You can achieve immortality simply by doing one great thing. Keep walking!" which is the brand's slogan. Or the *Absolut* world of the homonymous vodka brand narrated in video and print, wherein social roles and conventional logic are distorted.

When the narrative is constructed in this way, Floch sees a utopian valorization. In such cases, the base narrative program creates *existential values* which are invested in the spectator, given that she identifies with the roles in the story. Identification with these values is strong and intense because it is based on shared sacred beliefs. But this is not the case on the

the two volumes *On Meaning* (1970) and with the masterpiece *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary* (1979). To learn more about the Greimassian paradigm in semiotics see Broden and Walsh Matthews (2017a and 2017b).

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFoEzEnwOw> (last accessed 11/9/2018).

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rb48Z2NHHzY> (last accessed 11/9/2018).

opposite side of the model where the utilitarian values are positioned. The narrative here is based on problem/needs identification, rather than the self of the interpreter. This is the classical marketing paradigm of the information function of communication, the mainstream way to create advertisements. Here we find situations of consumption where every problem finds its solution in descriptions of the benefits of the product/service, or in graphics representing exactly how it works.

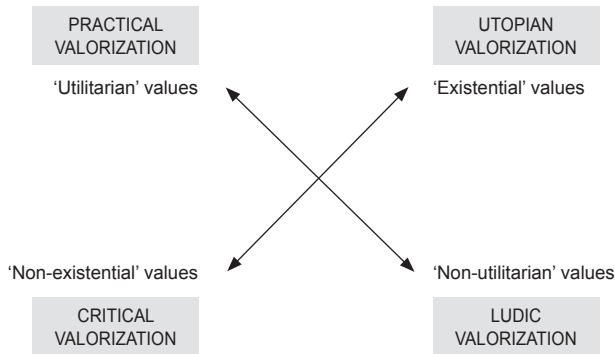


Figure 3. The Axiology of Consumption (after Floch 2001: 120)

In Floch's model, depicted in Figure 3, there are two complementary positions for valorization. The less interesting of the two, named "critical valorization", is that which derives from the negation of existential values. There, if we can speak of narrative at all, we find representations of simple information about value for money as expressed in numbers. Together with practical valorization, critical valorization is not of particular interest for the added value of brands that I am examining here. "Ludic valorization", on the other side, comes from the negation of utilitarian values. Here it is important to note that according to one aspect of the model, existential values are in opposition to the utilitarian; whereas, here it is "negation" which provides a different logical relation. The narrative represents consumption as a euphoric activity, an enjoyment of the present moment with no concern for the future and the past, an experience of luxury and refinement, or of pure enjoyment. Those values are less likely to construct a solid brand identity, based on sacred beliefs, but there are several positive examples. For instance, until recently, *BMW*, one of the most legendary car brands, deliberately built its brand mythology on the pure joy of driving, absent any practical purpose. Vincent devotes an entire chapter to the issue, entitled "The Dark Side of Brand Mythology", where provocation, indulgence, and other negative attitudes are examined

as a source of brand mythology (2002: 293–308), and there we can see a partial overlap with the concept of ludic valorization.

The semiotic typology of valorization is not only about advertising. Floch gives examples of how an object's design can be analyzed with the same model (Floch 2001: 135–137). It is not difficult to extend this approach to one of the most essential means of brand communication today, which is the website. But it can be further extended to interpret the entire mindset of a brand as utopian or ludic in general, thus conditioning other the marketing activities.

The Legendary Brand Approach in Action

Armed with the theoretical framework of these three complementary approaches, twice a month the team and I from our master's program in Brand Management met with figures of note from the Bulgarian brand-landscape for our guest lecturers' seminar series. An important discovery that emerged from these events was that *the brand mythology system, before being a result, was primarily an attitude*. Most brand managers were performing their presentations in an inspired way, independently of the size of the brand. Creating a brand as existential self-fulfillment is one thing, while starting a profit-oriented business is quite another. Those who were not inspired and performed dull presentations were the "hidden" marketing directors, rather than brand managers; and their presentations consisted of a chart-dominated narrative of raising sales and market shares.

The other important category was the brand managers "in love" with their *product*. With Keller's instruments of classical brand management, they would have remained indistinguishable from the major category we are interested in: i.e., brand managers "in love" with their *brands*. In marketing terms this is a very strong approach. It complements the marketing mix, where a passionate and convincing narrative for the product reflects positively on product innovation, on price strategies aiming at favorable price levels, on the choice of adequate distribution channels, and of course on communicative consistency. In these cases, the mantra might not be explicitly formulated, but can be easily identified as an interiorized filter for the brand manager's decisions. What deserves to be underlined is that possession of inspiration, passion, or affection appears to be a necessary element and cannot be framed in the logical steps of conventional brand management. The professional skills of this type of brand manager consist of the ability to transmit such "authentic"

attitudes towards the product with the marketing instruments from an internal audience towards the company audience, the target groups of the market, and towards strategic partners. The successful accomplishment of this brand management “philosophy” places the brand’s added value in the sphere of practical valorization.

My greatest inspiration to write this paper were those brand managers who presented the marketing activities of their brands in direct relation to their own sacred beliefs or those of their company. I will dedicate particular attention to three such brands: *Harmonica*,⁴ *Roobar*⁵ and *Walltopia*.⁶ I will also address insights from the brand manager for *Absolut* vodka Bulgaria, *Take-a-cake*,⁷ *Rosy’s Mark*⁸ and *Foodie Boulevard*.⁹ In fact, the case of *Absolut* vodka is the only one in which we were presented with a local brand manager (Vladislav Ganchev) for a global company with enough autonomy from their headquarters to give their own touch to the image of the brand, thanks to the organization of an impressive open air event. *Foodie Boulevard*, by contrast, is found at quite the other extreme: a one-woman brand, founded by a blogger who is gradually transforming her passion into a business. In other words, the legendary brand model can work at any scale of brand building.

The three cases in focus here are chosen most of all because they all started out as small, hobby-like “garage” activities and then, thanks to a particular idealistic approach to marketing, arrived at great business success. In all three cases we have a founding team composed of one person, who becomes a real visionary and generator of the sacred beliefs of the brand, and one or two skillful collaborators who provide technological and/or marketing support for the start of the enterprise. In all such cases, we find a scenario that is notably similar to the *Apple* archetype.

The company *Harmonica* was founded in 2006 by Magdalena Maleeva, the most successful Bulgarian female professional tennis player, once ranked at #4 in the world (January 1996), who is also an environmental activist. The company was co-founded by her husband, Liubomir Nokov, an expert in ecological farming, and Metodi Metodiev, an “authentic food” production expert. The fact that a global sports celebrity returns to Bulgaria for business in this case is very important because it lends

⁴ <https://harmonica.bg/en/> (last accessed 11/9/2018).

⁵ <https://www.roobar.com/> (last accessed 11/9/2018).

⁶ <https://www.walltopia.com/en/> (last accessed 11/9/2018).

⁷ <https://take-a-cake.eu/> (last accessed 11/9/2018).

⁸ <https://roseysmark.com/> (last accessed 11/9/2018).

⁹ <http://foodieboulevard.com/> (last accessed 11/9/2018).

genuine credibility to the brand. For a legendary brand, profit should never be an explicit goal; then, even when a millionaire founds a company and starts to produce genuine Bulgarian yogurt, it works. It all starts in a very small dairy farm in an ecologically clean area in the mountains.

Maleeva is an environmental activist, and was nominated in 2011 as one of the ten most influential women in Bulgaria. At the time of the company's inception there was no organic food in Bulgaria, and the dairy market was dominated by large companies with industrial methods of production. On various occasions Maleeva explains that the business started as the only way to have healthy food for her family and friends. Since then, those sacred ecological beliefs have been inscribed in the brand. *Harmonica* has never addressed her target as “customers” or “clients”; instead they have always been “adherents”, followers of the brand's ideas. Community and brand culture, each goals of the brand mythology system, were present at the beginning and have since been strengthened by the brand's development. It is not a coincidence that *Harmonica's* website states “We find inspiration and motivation in the work of people like Mr. Yvon Chouinard of *Patagonia*”, with a personal dedication from the mythical entrepreneur on the Bulgarian translation of his book *Let My People Go Surfing* (see Chouinard 2005). In a 2017 interview for the weekly newspaper *Capital*, Mr. Nokov stresses that one of the major differences between *Harmonica* and other producers of bio organic foods in Bulgaria is the company's strong focus on their brand.¹⁰ Today the company offers a portfolio of about 80 different products with a revenue for 2016 of 5.7 million Bulgarian Lev (~2.85 million Euro).¹¹

We learned these and many other facts about the present day brand management of the company in November 2016 from Marina Mihailova, the marketing manager of *Harmonica* and one of the most inspired brand ambassadors we hosted during our seminar series. The “adherents' strategy” was obviously not only for the benefit of external targets, but for the benefit of employees as well. The contact and interaction between these two groups is crucial for the credibility of the company's claims about the genuine nature of their products. To put it into the terms of Vincent's model, the company intentionally transforms their products into brand agents, with the active support of employees and partners on the level of the brand narrative. The brand does not invest in conventional advertising;

¹⁰ https://www.capital.bg/specialni_izdaniia/regal/2017/06/16/2996528_ljubomir_nokov_potrebnieto_na_bio_hrani_ne_e/ (last accessed 11/9/2018).

¹¹ https://www.capital.bg/specialni_izdaniia/regal/2017/08/19/2992565_zdravosloven-obrat/ (last accessed 11/9/2018).

rather, their major channels are their website, their Facebook page, and their organization and sponsorship of events. *Harmonica* is also present on Instagram.

The brand narrative on their website is organized into two main chapters: “Products” and “Stories”, where the stories, which are mostly about the products, are presented in real situations and invested with *existential values*. “Care for nature and care for our future” is one type of mantra in those stories. In them people from the company and their families are often employed as “models”, or there are videos of local authentic producers of natural products and ingredients.

The *Harmonica* Facebook page,¹² currently with more than 50,000 followers, is an active and well managed channel, an extension of the website and core values of the brand. There the content consists of either “humanized” product stories, the product portfolio, or funny and friendly presentations of the employees with explicit references to their commitment to the sacred beliefs of the brand. As Mihaylova shared with us, customers’ comments on the site are not restricted to the friendly and positive; indeed, plenty of critical comments are left uncensored. After the company became larger and its products started to be distributed through important supermarket chains, the main challenge for the brand was to preserve credibility and trust in its ecological claims. Most of the negative comments were geared toward doubts regarding production methods, and thus, implicitly, the whole brand mythology system. However, in most instances, brand advocates from the core target of *Harmonica* were the users fighting on behalf of the brand and giving proof of the genuineness of its products. And this is not by chance.

The two main events that the brand organizes are perfectly consistent with this brand culture. There is an annual event for families—the Straw Festival¹³—where the company’s full team is at the service of their followers. The fun-family-food-nature atmosphere involves hundreds of kids and their families in healthy activities in an open space in the countryside. The other event is a permanently open opportunity for an organized visit of the company’s major dairy farm, where all elaboration processes are open to observation. Skeptics are always invited to take the tour, and advocates have it as a strong argument in their favor.

To summarize, in the case of *Harmonica* the added value from their well-developed brand mythology system serves to preserve the brand’s

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/harmonicafoods/> (last accessed 11/9/2018).

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9u3XPrAPyY> (last accessed 11/9/2018).

credibility after its transition from a small craft and hobby like production to one of the national leaders of the organic food business.

The second focal case study in this paper is *Roobar*, a producer of organic, vegan and gluten-free desserts. Today they sell about a million raw bars a day in 50 different countries on five continents. The corporate structure behind the brand is complicated, but the brand itself was created in 2012. If we do not apply an attentive analysis making use of semiotic instruments it might well seem like this case is identical to *Harmonica*: it started as a hobby in a small bio shop, a passion for organic foods, an inspired husband and wife with brave ideas meeting a top entrepreneur; and in a few years it became a million-dollar business and one of the most remarkable Bulgarian brands. The brand mythology system, again, seems to fit perfectly.

However, we discover important differences in the whole brand building process between the core values of the two brands and in their market orientation. *Roobar* is internationally and globally oriented. Their core values and sacred beliefs are shaped with more ludic and hedonistic values compared to *Harmonica*. Furthermore, brand strategy relies much more heavily on its website, its heroes/endorsers, and on a specific character in particular.

This brand management case study was presented to our seminar series in January 2017 by the driving force of the brand mythology system and co-founder, Anita Klasanova. The brand's mythology begins with a mom trying to make the best healthy dessert for her "capricious kids", family, and friends. The always-present narrative of kids being quite demanding for a taste before giving their approval is important because on one hand it roots the brand mythology in existential values, while also introducing taste and the enjoyment of the dessert as core values, opening future communication to ludic valorization. The brand elements are ludic: from the logo with its funny eyes, to the design of the packaging, to the colorful visual identity featured in their own stores and website, as well as the inner superhero character.

The brand narrative is created by two major thematic lines which complement each other. The first line is developed mainly through two channels—the "Community" section on the website and the company's social media presence, primarily via Instagram. The unifying theme might be roughly summarized as "*Roobar* explores the world, *Roobar* discovers the most delicious fruits and nuts worldwide to make the best desserts, *Roobar* conquers the global market." The brand agent in this story line is mainly Anita Klasanova, but she is often in the company of the other

two co-founders, many employees, and, of course, her children. This storyline is constructed as a lifestyle of energetic healthy and happy people in love with their job and traveling around the world with the mission to discover and bring the best to their customers. Asked about the brand's main communication channel, Anita answered without hesitation, "Instagram", where her and *Roobar's* story subsists under the label "Food by Anita ✨ Klasanova / Food Creator. Cookie lover / Building Authentic Brands / Creator of @RooBar_raw / @kookie.cat.cookies".¹⁴ What follows is a story unfolding over a seemingly endless number of colorful pictures, where energy and enjoyment are the main connotations.

The second thematic line is, "Be a hero! Unlock your inner superhero!" Brand agents here are sponsored international celebrity endorsers, and a number of "the world's most adventurous athletes". As the brand puts it:

We have conquered five continents, survived through the hottest deserts of California to the coldest fields of Antarctica, left our steps on the world's highest peaks and hit the hardest mountain trails. We have ruled the strongest winds and tamed the heaviest waves.¹⁵

The theme is developed through the narrative of those athletes' exploits as told in their own words, with hints toward the necessity of consuming lots of energy and proper nutrition. The values from this story are then transferred towards ordinary customers with the initiative "Unlock your inner superhero!" in a way that resembles the "grand narratives" of *Nike* and *RedBull*.

The well-defined lifestyle of the first storyline, and the choice of brand endorsers of the second, outline what we can identify as the "brand culture" in our analytic approach. This brand culture is well-implemented inside the company and is spread outside it through events organized and sponsored by *Roobar*. The added value of the whole brand mythology system is reflected in perceptions of the product in the internal market (still the most significant one), giving the aura of a cool and cosmopolitan product. Anita herself made the important observation that most of the people in Bulgaria were taking for granted that *Roobars* are "imported" and in the distorted thinking of a planned-economy consumer this is a high "recognition"!

A brand skeptic may argue that the brand mythology systems described above are of marginal importance, compared to the hard instru-

¹⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/foodbyanita/> (last accessed 12/28/2018).

¹⁵ <https://www.roobar.com/superheroes> (last accessed 12/28/2018).

ments of the marketing mix like the product, its distribution and its price. They may claim that the success of the two companies in question is due to the great chance of entering the health food industry in its golden moment. I would insist that, independent of the fact that commercial success so far might not be directly related to brand development, the establishment of a strong and working brand mythology system is an invaluable asset and a long-term strategic advantage for these two companies. The brand mythology system's added value will be of particular importance when the expansion of the market stops and the players have to face fierce competition. Then the brand cultures and the brand communities, united by non-utilitarian values, will be a source of credibility and trend detection, which other market players will not be able to recover, at the expense of considerable financial investments.

The last case study focus in this paper is of a completely different nature. *Walltopia* is a Bulgarian brand and the world's leading climbing wall manufacturer, with more than 600 employees.¹⁶ *Walltopia* sells its products (more than 1,500 constructed wall types) in 50 countries on 6 continents; however, Bulgaria is one of the company's smallest markets. Independently of that, *Walltopia* is a legendary brand in Bulgaria as an *employer*. The company is perhaps the purest example of the Bulgarian (business) dream come true: it started as a small garage business in 1998, launched by two friends, and has become the world's leader in the sector in a mere 10 years. Such a story alone would guarantee substantial public interest and high credibility for the brand. But this is only the beginning of the company's brand mythology system. One of the company's founders, Mr. Ivaylo Penchev, became an active public figure thanks to the company's success and thus became a very effective brand agent. He is a prophet of the free market and anti-statism. His worldviews and sacred beliefs are a kind of economic liberalism, placing entrepreneurs on the top of the social pyramid, followed by hard-working people who are happy to work for the entrepreneurs; below these, at the bottom of the pyramid, are the dodgers (lazy people) and their historical allies—state employees.¹⁷ This might resemble a parody, but not if we consider the fact that Bulgaria's economy in its historical course has never developed a pure capitalist form. For this reason the country has always been among the poorest in Europe. For many there are ethno-cultural premises for that.

¹⁶ The meeting with the chief marketing manager of *Walltopia*, Mrs. Maria Vasileva, took place on 10 May 2017.

¹⁷ <https://dariknews.bg/novini/interviu/ivajlo-penchev-milioner-v-bylgariq-sestava-s-izmamama-ili-s-mnogo-rabota-1406633> (last accessed 11/9/2018).

The utopian valorization of the brand starts from its name: Wall + utopia. The *Walltopia* brand narrative in Bulgaria is elaborated in numerous interviews and media appearances by Mr. Penchev, and by media coverage of the growth, investments, and controversies surrounding the company's employment policies. Abroad, the company's brand narrative is constructed mainly through its website which tells a completely different story, dominated by technological innovation and excellence.

What makes the case of *Walltopia* interesting for this study is the way in which the company selects its employees and creates its own internal brand culture. In both I find a direct implementation of the founder's sacred beliefs. In one interview the company's HR manager Violeta Petrova explicitly states that in carrying out their own job interviews, the company seeks certain qualities and personality characteristics in candidates which represent the basic values of the company.¹⁸ Very often Mr. Penchev himself conducts the interviews.¹⁹ In the company's internal organization, a spirit of competition is fostered and various financial sanctions are imposed for delays and lack of work discipline. "I praise results, not the efforts", says Mr. Penchev.²⁰

Such a policy leaves no one indifferent. There are numerous detractors from *Walltopia*'s treatment of personnel. Forums on job opportunity websites, for example, are full of angry voices from people who were either fired from the company or left feeling distinctly disrespected following an interview with the company.²¹ The company also offers salaries below expectations considering its own glorious success story. The major added value of this particular brand mythology system likely consists in the motivation of people who work for the company and aspire to career growth, as well as for the selection of future personnel with a suitable mindset.

Conclusions

Branding is not rocket science. While there may well be an endless supply of books and articles on brand success stories, it seems unlikely that there will ever be a scientific description of an algorithm for the creation of a successful brand. This article takes a new direction in brand management

¹⁸ <http://www.economy.bg/humancapital/view/16660/Kak-proticha-intervju-za-rabota-v-Walltopia> (last accessed 11/9/2018).

¹⁹ <http://www.economy.bg/humancapital/view/29388/Любимият-въпрос-на-интервю-за-работа-на-Ивайло-Пенчев-Walltopia> (last accessed 11/9/2018).

²⁰ <https://dariknews.bg/novini/interviu/ivajlo-penchev-milioner-v-bylgariq-se-stava-s-izmama-ili-s-mnogo-rabota-1406633> (last accessed 11/9/2018).

²¹ <https://neverojatno.wordpress.com/2017/03/13/отворено-писмо-до-ивайло-пенчев-walltopia-от-б/> (last accessed 11/9/2018).

discourse by stressing an overlooked but important feature of the mindset of those entrepreneurs who start businesses with a degree of enthusiasm projected beyond the mere profit motive. In the frame of conventional marketing such attitudes might be a source of risk or an inadvisable miscalculation of important economic parameters. For a business venture where the entrepreneurs themselves attribute a strategic role to the brand, however, such enthusiasm might be transformed into added value at the core of brand equity—without diminishing the abovementioned risks. The brand mythology system is a powerful tool that can be used not only to analyze the success of cult brands, but, as I demonstrate, to direct marketing activities in such a way that the genuine enthusiasm and existential values of entrepreneurs with a vision can be transmitted to both the internal and external public and along the whole value chain from production to consumption.

Such observations and conclusions emerged through the course of a decade of teaching brand management courses, organizing seminars between students and the emerging brand managers of Bulgaria, and by helping a number of entrepreneurs in a consulting capacity to build appropriate brands for their respective businesses. Although only one of the theoretic models considered above comes directly from semiotics, all of the activities in play in this study have been carried out in the mindset of a professional semiotician, working on behalf of our semiotic center and the sociosemiotic laboratory it houses. The paper synthesizes my experience in focusing so many different activities and theories into a single pragmatic understanding. Although these early results may still be too tentative to transform into a new schematic model, the autoethnographic approach employed here offers critical insights for applied brand semiotics nonetheless.

A broader overarching aim in undertaking the whole endeavor (including writing this paper) is to promote a more deliberately semiotic mindset within brand management discourses: to draw attention to the capacity of semiotics to serve as a theoretical platform for a wide variety of practices centered around the brand, and to promote applied semiotics as a fruitful approach to brand research and brand building. This reorientation may become more and more important as the new economy continues to change the rules of business and as the role of brands becomes more and more strategic not only for selling products and services, but also for achieving any kind of impact on the public sphere, whether profit or nonprofit oriented.

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