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What makes brands achieve iconic status?

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What Makes Brands Achieve Iconic Status?

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Abstract

We propose that brands do not achieve iconic status by chance. This article focuses on how brands manage iconic status effectively. Drawing on an exploratory study of iconic brands, we identify a brand's ability to inspire consumers and connect with them on a personal level as well as its visual identity and presence in consumers' mind as critical elements of brand status. Consumers' perceptions of a sample of brands were investigated through in-depth interviews, followed by the examination of these brands' activities through case-study analyses. The alignment between brand strategies and the relevant features highlighted by consumers was then assessed. A comprehensive framework for achieving iconicity is presented and discussed.

Icons are perceived as representative symbols of entities worthy of admiration or respect. While icons such as Marilyn Monroe, Harry Potter, and the Rolling Stones are admired by individuals and considered a unique and integral part of the cultural makeup, consumers view many brands as commonplace and indistinguishable (Harvest Communications LLC, 2002). Firms continue to invest significant amounts of resources in communication and advertising strategies, yet few company brands achieve iconic status.

Corporations endeavour to achieve strong brands as a powerful tool affording competitive advantage over competitors. However, iconic brands are different from those which are simply large and popular. Iconic brands go beyond mere size or superficial popularity. They stand the test of time. Holt (2004) argues that all strong brands must offer a functional benefit and an emotional connection with the customer, but on top of this we suggest that iconic status is achieved when such brands have become entrenched in popular culture. As such, we define an iconic brand as one that is easily recognisable and is embedded within our culture and in our consciousness. Only a handful of company brands manage to capture people's imagination much in the same way as the above cultural icons, transcending to iconic status.

Today's consumer is bombarded with brand imagery, surrounded by a barrage of marketing messages (Luo, 2007). Brands are facing challenging times, in a consumer climate characterised by price sensitivity, brand indifference, and the risk of financial failure looming over both customer and company. The current financial crisis marked the end of numerous well-known brands, such as Lehman Brothers and Pontiac. In contrast, the ability of an iconic brand to rise above this 'commoditized market place' enables that brand to create greater value to customers, enjoy higher price premiums, and enhanced profitability. Thus firms stand to gain substantial competitive advantage if they begin to understand and actively manage the drivers involved in creating an icon. By investigating the factors that

have helped to establish brands such as Apple, Coca-Cola, Nike, and Microsoft as icons, this research investigates how iconicity can be achieved.

Whilst there may be literature that suggests which brands are viewed as iconic, and the benefits that such brands enjoy, there is no substantial body of research that provides a consensus about how iconicity arises, from both the perspective of consumers and the brands themselves. Rather, the current literature predominantly focuses on how brands can enhance their equity and value, without explicitly focusing on iconicity (see Holt (2004) for notable exception). Holt (2004) explains that iconic brands address acute contradictions in society, and that by tapping into and soothing a collective desire or anxiety they are able to develop a status that transcends functional benefits. However, Holt's (2004) theories mainly focus on the cultural aspects related to iconicity.

It has also been argued that brands evolve through a hierarchy of stature, gravitas, an emotional connection, a customisable experience, a rewarding relationship and empowering evangelism (Leibig 2005). However, research that provides a comprehensive solution which today's brands can invest in to develop these attributes is still missing. For any brand, consumers are pivotal to their success, especially if a brand wishes to attain that iconic status. We believe it is the brand's consumers that are the most valuable source for providing insight in today's turbulent marketplace as to how brands become iconic. However, as yet there is no definitive literature which takes this into account. This study aimed to investigate consumer views regarding iconic brands and the alignment between these companies' strategies and the features highlighted by consumers.

Methods

We employed multiple qualitative research techniques to enhance existing ideas about brand iconicity and generate new theoretical concepts to guide future branding strategies. The study design has its foundations in the *social constructionist* paradigm whereby a pre-

existing reality was not yet assumed, to appreciate the different meanings and constructions that people attribute to their experiences (Easterby-Smith et al, 2008). The *interpretative* 'Grounded Theory' approach was employed using qualitative methods to balance a creative and analytical stance whilst researching, allowing for the induction of novel theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The methodology followed a three phased approach, with each stage utilising a different research technique (Figure 1).

Stage 1: Preliminary survey

The first stage involved asking 70 consumers to name five 'iconic' brands to limit the wide variety of brands that consumers may consider as 'iconic' to a choice few for closer analysis. The authors' definition of 'iconic' was supplied if participants required further clarification. Convenience sampling determined the chosen age group of participants (21-30 years old), and an equal number of males and females were approached. The top four brands from a total of 99 brands were identified through simple quantitative analysis, and these were: Coca-Cola, Apple, Nike and Microsoft.

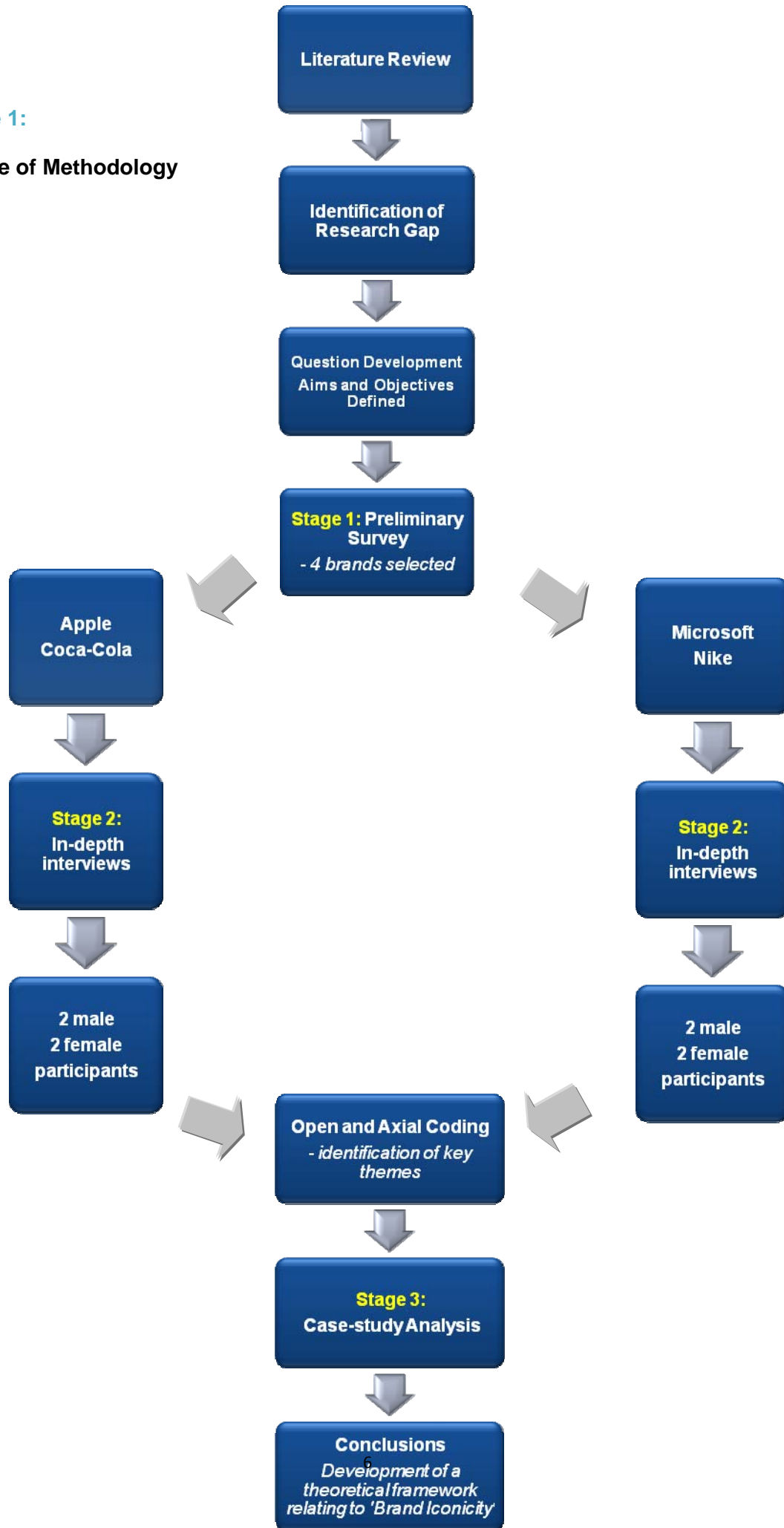
The four selected brands are from different industries – beverages, computer hardware, sporting goods and computer software – enabling the formulation of inter-industry comparisons and strengthening evidence in support of new theories relating to the factors for 'iconicity'.

Stage 2: In-Depth Interviews

Face-to-face depth interviews were subsequently conducted with four males and four females, aged 21-30. Each participant was randomly allocated a pair of brands (either Apple and Coca-Cola or Microsoft and Nike) and questioned by the same pair of interviewers using a semi-structured template. The full questioning format can be viewed in **Appendix 1**.

Figure 1:

Outline of Methodology



Open and axial coding of the verbal qualitative data was performed and the three most common themes relating to each brand across all four interviews were selected (Table 1) and used for case-study analysis, within each pairing.

Table 1:

APPLE:	COCA-COLA:	MICROSOFT:	NIKE:
Product	Logo	First Mover	Logo
CEO	Advertising	Monopoly / Default Option	Sports Endorsements
Communities and Networks	Omnipresence	Reliability / Product Functionality	Nostalgia

Stage 3: Case-Study Analysis

Secondary data for the four publicly-listed consumer brands was collected from different sources including company and industry reports. We collected information for the themes highlighted above for both brands in each pairing to ensure findings remained impartial and reliable. This enabled complex inter-relationships within single units of analysis (the different brands) to be explored and the development of theory (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Results and analysis were recorded as a report on each pair of cases (Apple and Coca-Cola, and Nike and Microsoft), allowing for cross-case analysis. Conclusions were formulated through comparison of all four brands and integration with the results from the primary data (i.e. consumer viewpoints from the in-depth interviews). These were largely conceptual and have been presented in the form of a theoretical framework that outlines the features necessary to achieving iconicity.

Managing Iconic Status

Analysis of both the primary and secondary data (case-study analysis of the four brands) demonstrated that alignment exists between what consumers believe contributes to a

brand's iconicity, and the actions firms actively engage in to leverage the iconic status of their brand.

For example, advertising was perceived by interviewees to be a key contributor towards Coca-Cola's iconic status. Findings from the case-study analysis confirmed that the brand does invest heavily in creating targeted, personal and memorable advertising campaigns, aimed at driving purchasing behaviour and brand attachment. Thus, one may conclude that the prestigious label of iconicity is by no means accidental, but rather an attribute that brands can actively create through investment in certain activities.

It may be argued that today's iconic brands, including those studied, may have unwittingly engaged in these efforts in isolation, and have merely been rewarded with iconic status as a fortunate side-effect. However, this serves to emphasise the relative novelty of 'iconicity' as a social phenomenon in brand management circles, explaining the lack of current, definitive literature outlining the principles and techniques that brands may adopt to achieve iconic status.

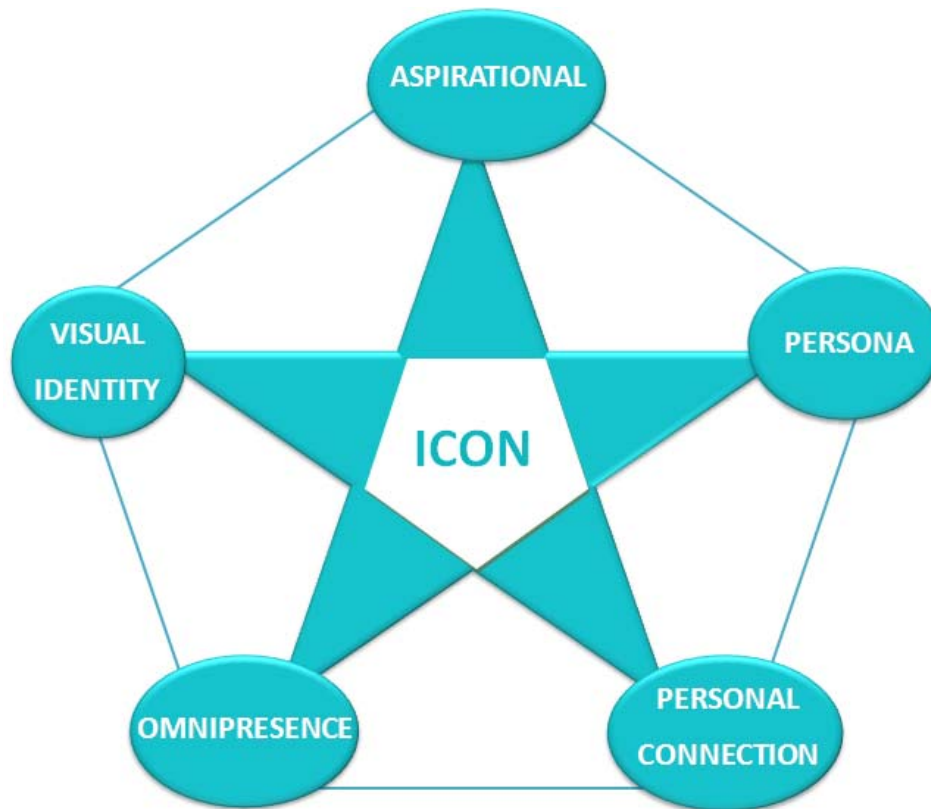
We propose that the notion of 'iconic brands' will only grow and develop as a phenomenon with time. As the case-studies demonstrated, there are specific features that truly define an iconic brand. It is apparent that in the pursuit of iconicity, brands must consciously adopt these features, integrating them within their business strategies. As a result, we propose a theoretical framework outlining the key features and corresponding activities that are necessary for the attainment of iconic status.

The APPOV Iconicity Framework:

We identify five key characteristics that define iconic status and the methods that firms can employ to cultivate each quality: (1) a brand's ability to inspire consumers, (2) brand persona, (3) a brand's personal relevance to consumers, (4) brand presence in consumers' mind, and (5) visual identity. It should be noted that all five factors are inter-linked and necessary, and thus in isolation are insufficient in realizing iconic status. Furthermore,

different companies may adopt different methods in fulfilling each criterion, and may even use a combination of methods (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The APPOV Iconicity Framework



ASPIRATIONAL – Iconic brands inspire consumers to go beyond simple purchase of the product and achieve a certain level of success, ambition or emotional fulfilment.

PERSONA – Iconic brands must become more than a corporation or product; they must become a friend. Iconic brands must have a fictional or non-fictional character that embodies the philosophy of that brand, removing the corporate image and replacing it with a personal one.

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS – Iconic brands must influence consumers on an individual level and create strong, meaningful bonds with them.

OMNIPRESENCE – Iconic brands maintain an everyday presence in consumers' minds and society. Iconic brands are readily recognised.

VISUAL IDENTITY – Iconic brands must be identifiable; logos, signature design elements, signature shapes and colours specifically associated with the brand.

Aspirational:

Translated to an iconic brand, 'aspirational' refers to those brands that inspire consumers to go beyond the mere purchase of their product, encouraging them to achieve something more. Iconic brands must motivate consumers to internalise the core values and ideologies of the brand, to the extent that consumers begin to live by the 'brand's philosophy'. It is therefore clear that this 'self-enrichment' brand attachment, as outlined by Park et al (2008), is imperative to realising iconicity, irrespective of the other constructs of attachment that a brand may promote.

Brands can use advertising in order to convey their key messages, principles and creed. This helps to craft emotional attachments, encouraging consumers to adopt a greater essence of the brand beyond just the benefits of the product itself. The use of 'iconic' slogans is also relevant in forging these emotional connections, providing an instant shortcut or heuristic to the brand, whilst simultaneously summarising what it represents (Roberts, 2008). Nike's 'Just Do it' slogan is an apt demonstration of a powerful slogan used to great effect in all of their advertising channels. By incorporation into advertisements featuring sports personalities that are revered and idolised, this simple yet emphatic slogan inspires consumers; it motivates them to participate in sports, embark on new endeavours and strive to realise their full potential. These three simple words sum up the essence and philosophy of Nike in a unique way that it is instantly associated with the brand, irrespective of the presence of the company name and logo.

Apple and Microsoft similarly instil confidence and inspire consumers to go beyond their existing capacity to embrace technology. Microsoft does this by promoting the reliable, dependable and easy-to-use nature of their products, making technology appear safe. Their mission 'to enable people and businesses around the world to realise their full potential' (Microsoft, 2008a) is a philosophy that is habitually conveyed through the advertising and functionality of their products. As one consumer stated: '*It's reliable...you know you will be*

able to use it. And you know everyone across the board can use it. It's just...it's like riding a bike...if I can do it...you can do it'. In essence, Microsoft cultivates both 'enabling the self' and 'enriching the self' types of brand attachment.

Interviewees emphasised the functionality and reliability of Microsoft's products, embodying the phrase 'No one ever got fired for buying Microsoft' (Randall, 2000). This admiration resulted from Microsoft's ability to deliver at a time when there was considerable anxiety about sharing information across computers (Lacobucci & Calder, 2002). Through enforcing a single standard, familiarity and trust was instrumental in creating the brand's reliable image of today. Microsoft's continual investments in improved security, network protection and recently proposed environment of trust, have also helped (Naraine & Musich, 2008). The devotion that Microsoft's products enjoys, is reflected in its domination of the



worldwide OS market; in 2002, Windows OS was being used by 55.1% of servers and 93.8% of client computers (Rohde, 2003). The company also sells the majority of the world's productivity software, and has a significant web presence (Miller, 2001). Microsoft today commands a 90%

share of the OS market (Lohr, 2008), has a brand value of \$59 billion, positioned third in Interbrand's 2008 Best Global Brands list, and a company market valuation of \$176 billion (Financial Times, May 2009).

Conversely, Apple encourages consumers to adopt its technology through a very different message. As one consumer put it, '*It's completely different...It's fun and really cool.*' Apple stands for creativity, reinvention, uniqueness, and style that fuelled the company's success. Today Apple's market capitalisation exceeds that of Dell and Hewlett-Packard combined (BusinessWeek 2009). Through its stylish, pioneering and innovative products, Apple has changed the way in which individuals use computers and listen to music, through

conveying an idea of creativity and pleasure that anyone can enjoy when using technology; customers are inspired to express themselves through the use of technology. This is made explicit through their transformational advertisements that focus on peripheral elements of colour, music, emotion and graphics, all embodying the image of the brand. Thus, in addition to the 'aesthetically driven brand-attachment' that is a key feature of Apple's popular products the brand is simultaneously endorsing 'self-enrichment' and 'self-idealisation'.

Apple's transformational advertisements create a unique image helping the brand to stand out, with distinctive campaigns, including Mac PCs, the iPod and iPhone (Moren, 2007). Each campaign has individual objectives, yet all embody the same style and brand images. The brand's history of memorable advertising campaigns began with the legendary '1984' advertisement. Introducing the new Macintosh PC, it is viewed as 'the single biggest splash in advertising history' (Malone, 1999; as cited by Stein, 2002).

The Apple iPod adverts have perhaps been the brand's most memorable and successful to date. The iPod campaigns focus on transformational elements of style and image (Moren, 2007), as opposed to product functionality; similar to the advertising approaches used by Coca-Cola. The most famous iPod advertisements feature silhouettes dancing to music against brightly coloured backgrounds, with the white of the iPod emphatically standing out. They portray the product as 'fun' and 'hip' and immediately form a connection with consumers; 'The stark images of the iPod dancers have really burned themselves into your brain' (Hoag Levins of AdAge.com cited by Moren, 2007).



Dancing Silhouettes from the iPod Adverts

(taken from www.worldofapple.com)

Persona:

Iconic brands must become more than a corporation; they must become a friend. They often have a fictional or non-fictional character that embodies the philosophy of that brand, removing the corporate image and replacing it with a personal one. This can be an individual person or a group of people.

The ability of consumers to identify with a tangible character associated with the brand is pivotal to the achievement of iconic status. As Fournier (2009) explains, 'in today's turbulent world, people are hungry for a sense of connection', and the adoption of a specific persona embodying the values of the brand, be it fictional or non-fictional, can facilitate the creation of an intimate relationship with the consumer. The adoption of a specific character serves as a focal point of connection for consumers, which then leads them to experience a sense of connection with the brand itself.

The importance of establishing an association with a specific character for iconic brands is particularly pertinent in today's society, where mounting resentment of the faceless corporation has led to an increased affinity for brands that can foster more intimate relations. Thus, the creation of a persona may provide the authenticity eagerly sought by consumers. For example, whilst Apple has grown to establish itself as a dominant force in the industry, the prominence of Steve Jobs and his ability to personify the values of the company has ignited a devout following, and enabled Apple consumers to fulfil their need for a sense of personal connection; Jobs is the personal face of Apple with which consumers can relate. Jobs has been listed as the most powerful person in business (Fortune Magazine, 2007) and his presence has been key to Apple's success.

Steve Jobs is seen as an inspiring figure which has significantly shaped Apple's past and present, and there are fears for the company's future should he depart (Applepeels, 2006). Jobs' influence in Apple cannot be underestimated and is one which cannot be separated from Apple's success:

'Apple is Steve Jobs and Steve Jobs is Apple'

– *Charles R Wolf, analyst at Needham & Company (Nocera, 2008)*

When Steve Jobs announced to the world he was ill, he did so by writing a letter addressed to the 'Apple Community' (Apple Inc., 2009). The letter (shown in Figure 3) epitomises how the company views its customers. Rather than addressing it to the 'Share owner' or the generic 'Customer', Jobs avoided the use of corporate rhetoric and kept the tone personal and suggestive of intimacy, as if addressing a friend. This enhances the persona of the brand that Jobs stands for, with this intimacy extending to the formation of an affiliation for the brand, even noted by interviewees. Interviewees identified that their affection for Apple was in part driven by the sense of kinship they feel as one of its customers; the brand has cultivated an 'Apple Community'. Cultivating a prominent CEO in consumers' minds is therefore one effective mechanism for creating a persona necessary for iconicity.

Another potent mechanism is the adoption of a fictional character, such as Coca-Cola's Santa Claus which has become synonymous with their advertising. The use of Santa Claus and the Polar Bears as fictional personas to represent the Coca-Cola brand provides friendly faces for consumers to equate the brand to, softening the impersonal perception of a large corporation.

For Coca-Cola, creative marketing is a core competency of the brand, intrinsic to their DNA (Datamonitor, 2007). The 'emotional connections' that the brand forges with consumers through their advertising is 'core to the success of the entire Coca-Cola system' (The Coca-Cola Company, 2008a). Throughout its advertising history, Coca-Cola has introduced a host of defining campaigns and slogans that convey the core values and messages of the company; hope, optimism, enjoyment and love. These help foster emotional attachments with the brand, providing a means of 'enriching the self' (Park et al, 2008). Thus, as consumers internalise the core ideologies of the brand conveyed through Coca-Cola's

advertising, the brand becomes embedded in their consciousness, building brand value and loyalty. And thus the fictional personas of Santa Claus and the Polar Bears are fundamental to this.

Figure 3:



The brand has used television, print, radio and internet techniques to advertise. Their advertising budget has grown from \$1 billion in 1993 to \$2.6 billion in 2006 (The Coca-Cola Company, 2008b), as they aim to further strengthen the brand and its emotional connections

with consumers. As Cioletti (2009) argues, with 'American icons like Coke...there is a built-in comfort vibe, an embrace... like turning to a lifelong friend for a hug'.

With the departure of CEO Bill Gates, Microsoft has instead adopted a collection of 'everyday' users as the face of the company, along with celebrities such as Eva Longoria and Jerry Seinfeld in recent advertising campaigns, as personas which serve to represent the brand and encourage intimate relationships with consumers. Nike uses a group of individuals to represent its brand; celebrity endorsement, such as that of Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan, has long been established as integral to Nike's strategy, sustaining its image of high-level performance and creating cross-cultural icons for sports fans to identify with. And it was the brand's endorsement deal with basketball player Michael Jordan, that sparked a marketing transition in the 1980s, and that is viewed as key to the brand's success and development of its identity. Advertising campaigns combined images of Jordan with Nike shoes to enhance the value of the Nike logo (Goldman & Papsen, 1998) and to portray Nike shoes as status symbols for young sports fans (Gonzalez, n.d.).

Raising the prominence of a tangible persona or the creation of a fictional character personifying the core values of the brand is thus of paramount importance to the attainment of iconicity.

Personal connections:

Iconic brands forge personal, meaningful connections with their consumers. There are several techniques that companies can employ to cultivate such exclusive relationships whilst retaining their mass appeal. For instance, evoking feelings of nostalgia, a sentimental longing for the past, either through a brand's advertising, relationship marketing or products, enables consumers to form personal associations with a brand. In today's fast-moving and uncertain world, customers look to a simpler, more certain past, focusing on a different place and moment in time (Ford, 2005).

Figure 4: Coca-Cola Advertising Campaigns

(images taken from *The Coca-Cola Company*)



5a. 'Santa Claus'

1931 – Present:

Today the image of Santa-Claus is synonymous with Coca-Cola and Christmas. Haddon Sundblom's created image of Santa-Claus, first appeared in 1931, and his many versions have since been used in advertisements for magazines, billboards and store displays, and form the basis of the popular Christmas television advertisements still used to date. These advertisements aimed to reinforce the 1922 Coca-Cola slogan *'Thirst knows no season'* as the company first sought to also market 'Coke' as a 'winter' beverage (Foust, 2006). The 'Coca-Cola Santa' has a powerful, enduring quality that continues today, and that transcends generations, evoking nostalgic childhood associations in consumers worldwide (The Coca-Cola Company, 2008a).



5b. 'Always Coca-Cola' Campaign

1993:

This diverse campaign represented a huge change in the advertising of Coca-Cola. It included more than 27 television advertisements designed for different global audiences. The most famous was 'Northern Lights', which first introduced the infamous Coca-Cola Polar Bears. The Polar Bears were innocent and fun-loving characters, signifying a sense of togetherness that Coca-Cola wanted to evoke amongst families and friends as they shared a bottle of Coke.

This trend for reconnecting with the past allows brands to manipulate the power of ‘earlier times’ to engage with both new and existing markets (Ford, 2005). For example, Coca-Cola consistently uses advertising to exploit feelings of nostalgia and ‘foster a sense of reassurance’ (Cioletti, 2009). This is most notably seen with their Christmas advertisements and recent ‘Open Happiness’ campaign.

Nostalgia is a route that Nike has consistently used to market some of its most popular products. In the 1980s, after a failed move into the casual shoe market, Nike made a conscious decision to be more marketing orientated and focus on creating emotional

connections with consumers, rather than solely on their products. Nike’s strategy to provoke nostalgia centred on using a powerful combination of celebrity sports-star endorsements,



together with frequent re-launches of much-loved classic products. Both strategies were effective at conjuring the deep-seated emotions relating to the past, that Nike wanted to induce to forge personal

Nike ‘Cortez’ Shoe

(taken from www.highsnobiety.com)

connections with their consumers. A key example was the company’s celebration of the 20 years of Michael Jordan’s career, with the release of ‘Air Jordan XX’s’ and the revival of the famous ‘wingspan’ advertisement incorporating the theme of the new trainer (NikeBiz, 2005a). Since then, similar tactics have been used to celebrate the lives of other athletes such as Lance Armstrong, with the release of the 10//2 collection (NikeBiz, 2005b), and by periodically launching special edition vintage products, such as the 2007 reintroduction of the ‘Cortez’ shoe (the first to feature the ‘swoosh’ and Nike logo).

A further strategy to facilitate the creation of personal connections with consumers is the use of celebrities in advertising campaigns, which has long been a feature of iconic brands, granting them ‘instant brand acceptance’ (Patel, 2009). Consumers form emotional attachments with icons of popular culture that they admire, enabling the brand to capitalise on this very same connection through their advertising and products. For example,

Microsoft's 2006 'Where do you want to go today?' advertising campaign sought to form aspirational connections with consumers, encouraging them to embrace technology.

Microsoft's more recent 'I'm a PC' advertisements, aimed to criticise Apple's elitist image, showing that PC users, including celebrities, come from many different walks of life (Hesseldahl, 2009) helping to build personal relationships with consumers.

Ford (2005), argues that the 'need for personal touch and transportation is also resulting in more and more people forming collectives, tribes, and communities'; and iconic brands are those that create communities as a means of maintaining personal ties with consumers. Coca-Cola adopts a 'togetherness' theme throughout their advertisements, with emotive slogans such as 'Let's enjoy the Coke side of life' and 'I would like to buy the world a Coke'. In addition, active efforts to foster communities and engage customers can be seen on their website through promotional activities and forums (Eisingerich and Kretschmer, 2008).

In a similar vein, Apple has established a community around the brand by providing their consumers with a personal experience at their stores; a key example of relationship service marketing. Each store offers tutorials, a concierge service, the advice of Apple 'Geniuses' and a repair service at the 'Genius Bar'. This customised shopping experience facilitates the personal connections that in turn can assist firms in the journey towards achieving iconicity. Apple's iconicity transcends a community to a 'cult-status', whereby the immense loyalty of their fans has fashioned an 'Apple religion' (Belk and Tumbat, 2002; Lindstrom, 2005; 2008a).

Through associations with global and current events (sporting, entertainment and goodwill causes), brands can further cultivate personal connections with consumers in their bid to achieve iconic status. Nike has implemented this strategy effectively by sponsoring both global and local sporting events; for example, in



(taken from:
www.shapingamericasyouth.org)

2002 they hosted 13 three-a-side football tournaments in different worldwide locations (Beard, 2002), and in 2005, it launched the NikeGO program aiming to involve 30,000 preschool children in the U.S., in a range of sporting activities (NikeBiz, 2005c). Similarly, Microsoft's mission emphasises corporate social responsibility, and they actively invest in philanthropic causes. This is aptly illustrated by the company's launch of the 'Unlimited Potential' initiative in 2007, which was designed to 'deliver the benefits of relevant, accessible and affordable software to the 5 billion people who today have no access to technology' (Microsoft, 2008b). We suggest that it is important for brands to 'harness their ample resources to benefit society in a credible and self-less way' (Holt, 2004), if they wish to achieve iconic status.

Omnipresence:

Omnipresence refers to the ability of brands to be readily present, seemingly everywhere, through their simultaneous infiltration of global markets, cultures and consumers' consciousness. Omnipresence can be achieved in numerous ways. We believe that key to the foundation of omnipresence and thus iconicity is for a brand to have universal appeal cutting across different cultures. This emphasises the difference between those brands that are simply leaders or that have a high brand value, and those that enjoy iconic status. All four brand studied are global brands, operating in and distributing their products in countries across the world; Coke is 'the No.1 sparkling beverage in the world for decades as a result of the great taste', and Coca-Cola's drinks are enjoyed by consumers around the world 1.6 billion times a day (The Coca-Cola Company, 2008c). Its products are found in remote villages to up-market supermarkets, highlighting the ever-lasting presence of the brand. This is embodied by the 1920s '*Around the Corner from Everywhere*' Coca-Cola slogan. Consumers today view Coca-Cola as omnipresent, both in terms of their day-to-day lives and global presence.

As the world's largest soft-drinks company, Coca-Cola has become ubiquitous through its strategic advertising and marketing, vast distribution networks, its strong focus on the marketing tool of product placement as a means of subconsciously infiltrating the lives of consumers, through the brand's sponsorship of popular events such as the Olympic Games, its occupancy of prominent outdoor spaces, such as New York's Times Square, and its affiliation with well-known and universal bodies such as the UN. Coca-Cola ensures its constant presence in consumers' lives, and more recently the brand has employed novel methods in its strategy to maintain this everyday reach. For example, as of 2009, Coca-Cola will be sponsoring trial shopping centre recycling zones across the UK (McCabe, 2009). With such an infiltration of society, consumers are unable to escape the brand, with the company itself claiming that they are able to 'reach billions of consumers on a daily basis' (The Coca-Cola Company, 2008d).

Many consumers associate Microsoft with the sudden expansion of the PC market due to its early market dominance, and hence often falsely perceive it to have been the industry's first mover. The company has, however, been able to obtain considerable majority in many software markets. Software programmes such as MS Office have now become the gold standard, despite the first word processing software being produced by WordStar in 1999. Microsoft is also the market leader for web browsers with Internet Explorer, but again this was achieved only after displacing Mosaic, the true pioneers of this market in 1992 (Shrivathsan, 2006). Thus, it can be said that Microsoft tends to pursue fast-follower innovation in the 'growth stage' of the industry cycle, as opposed to that of pioneering innovation in the 'era of ferment' (Anderson & Tushman, 1990).

Global awareness made possible through traditional advertising is effective in leveraging the brand on a universal scale. The use of simple, transformational and replicable advertisements helps to convey the brand's message while simultaneously forming personal connections with consumers world-wide. Apple's 'Mac vs. PC' advertising campaign, has been successful in contributing to the brand's omnipresence. The adaptability of the

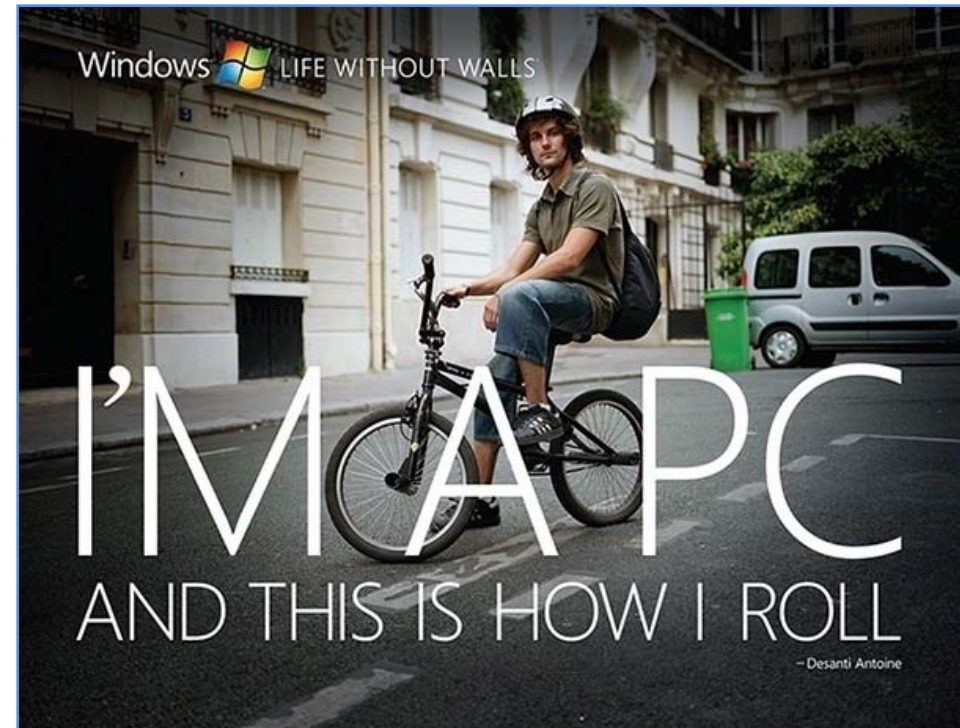
advertisements to employ regional comedians according to the target 'audience', enable Apple to convey the same values and form the same connections with consumers, independent of their home country. In addition, a firm may cultivate omnipresence through the use of multiple advertising channels, from billboards, television campaigns, internet marketing, and importantly product placement. The more places in which a brand is 'seen', the easier it is for a brand to become instilled in the minds of consumers, and within culture. In such instances, one can see why a brand's visual identity is also essential to creating iconicity.

Product placement provides a pervasive way of maintaining an everyday presence in consumers' minds, creating a subconscious attachment between the consumer and brand and thus enhancing iconicity. Product placement, as discussed by Law and Braun (2000), offers a means of realism for the consumer, who perceive the integrated use of the product or brand in television programmes and films as more natural (and thus having higher value) than products explicitly advertised, and is thus viewed as more effective at creating brand-attachment. Nike continues their association with sports personalities through product placement deals with video game companies such as Electronic Arts (EA) and their appearance in games such as 'NBA 2K6' (Brown, 2006). In addition, Coca-Cola's \$35 million association with American Idol not only provides the brand with network time, but the essence of the brand is seen running throughout the show (Lindstrom, 2008b).

Unlike Coca-Cola, Apple has been reported as not paying for any product placement (Goo, 2006). Nonetheless, the brand has been prolific in its product placement, appearing in successful television programmes and films. When product placement has not been premeditated on Apple's part, it demonstrates that the brand has ingrained itself into society such that producers will include its products to add authenticity to their own entertainment offerings. For example, writers of 'The Office', the award-winning NBC show, had the protagonist hand out an iPod when the storyline demanded that the character give a 'cool' gift.



A still from Apple's 'Mac vs. PC' advertisements in the U.S. starring comedian Justin Long



A still from Microsoft's 'I'm a PC' advertisements. The adverts depict people of all ages and from many different walks of life using PC's and were introduced in retaliation to Apple's marketing campaign

Goo (2006) asserts that this kind of free publicity is exactly what Apple 'has come to expect from Hollywood'. However, Apple has had a long history of deliberate product placement and was one of the first technology firms to employ staff to ensure the prominent display of Mac products in popular television programmes and films (Tim Bajarin, Creative Strategy; as cited by Goo, 2006). In fact the company surpasses Coca-Cola in terms of product placement in No. 1 films since 2001 (Brandchannel, 2009). Omnipresence can also be achieved through high-profile event sponsorship. Nike and Coca-Cola both practise this strategy, evidenced by their sponsorship of the Olympic Games; an event with truly international appeal.

Visual identity:

Iconic brands actively create visual representations of themselves, developing a unique identity which consumers associate with the brand.

'Defining an iconic brand is like defining art—you know it when you see it'

- Nigel Hollis (2007)

A visual identity is vital in embedding the brand in consumers' minds, with visual symbols serving as powerful cues that are instantly recognisable, immediately communicating the ideas behind the brand. The cultivation of a visual identity enhances the firm's ability to gain omnipresence, as images not only transcend cultures and thus language barriers, but are also more easily exhibited to signify a company's presence. This identity can be developed through several mechanisms, namely logos, visual elements including colours and shapes, signature design aspects of defining products and advertising.

Logos are vital to brand identity (Armstrong, 2008), and we believe brand logos to be one of the most identifiable features of iconicity. It is therefore something which brands aspiring for iconicity should incorporate into their strategies. For example, Nike clearly possesses a powerful visual identity through its aesthetically pleasing and instantly recognisable 'swoosh' logo, as one interviewee put it 'You think Nike, you think Tick'.

The Nike 'Swoosh' is one of the most identifiable icons of modern culture, even surpassing the recognisability of religious symbols; a survey conducted by the UK's National Consumer Council found that more children recognise the 'Swoosh' than Jesus Christ on the cross (Plimmer, 2006). The logo's global appeal arises from its aesthetic appeal and corresponding psychological associations. Its fast-fluid nature is indicative of the superior physical form that athletes strive for (Goldman & Papson, 1998), and it is also claimed to portray the wing of the Greek goddess of Victory (Nike, n.d.); an inspiration to the athletes and warriors of old (Logoblog, n.d.).

The logo was commissioned in 1971, by then CEO Phil Knight, to a university student, Carolyn Davidson, for only \$35, with the simple objective for it to be highly visible and capable of depicting speed (Goldman & Papson, 1998). The Nike logo's omnipresence has helped embed the brand in consumers' consciousnesses, and Nike began to appreciate this in the mid-1990s, depicted by the evolution of their advertisement campaigns. Both the shoe and word 'Nike', that once featured prominently in brand advertisements, are virtually non-existent today; the power of the logo alone sufficient (Goldman & Papson, 1998).



The Evolution of Nike's Logo
(taken from www.logoblog.org)

The logo today is crucial to the aesthetically-driven brand-attachment that consumers form with Nike products, and as consumers internalise the values and associations of the logo, it is even commonly seen as a tattoo, especially amongst the company's employees (Bernstein Research, 2001).

The Coca-Cola logo has also become an instantly identifiable image, recognised by 94% of humanity (Mueller, 2009). It has remained faithful to its beginnings, using the same distinctive script and colours of the original design. The name itself has been attributed to Frank M Robinson, the partner and bookkeeper of the original founder, who claimed 'the two Cs would look well in advertising' (The Coca-Cola Company, 2008a). Combined with the Spencerian script, which was the principal form of formal handwriting in 19th Century America, the text is unique to Coca-Cola. Furthermore, the red and white colours of the logo maintain an air of simplicity, which embody the strong and timeless corporate identity of Coca-Cola. The logo and other intangibles are integral to the success of the brand, constituting to a brand value of \$67.7 billion (Baxter, 2009).

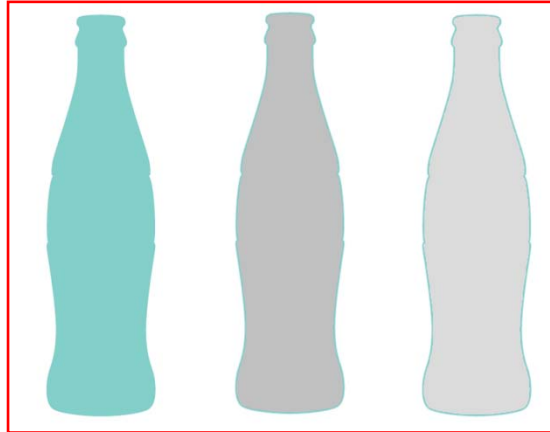


The Coca Cola Logo

(taken from The Coca-Cola Company)

Iconic brands can also develop a consistent set of visual elements including colours and shapes, such that when consumers view combinations of these elements they instantly associate them with the brand. With a carefully managed collection of specific components that are persistently used, the consumer is able to form connections with these combinations, entrenching the brand and its image in the consumer's mind.

As discussed by Acevedo (2008), Coca-Cola's signature colours of red and white, distinctive contour bottle shape, and defining logo script are characteristic of this iconic brand. When consumers see anything written in the same Spencerian script and a red and white colour combination, they automatically associate it with Coca-Cola.



Silhouettes of the Coca-Cola Contour Bottles

Similarly, Microsoft uses its colour combination of red, green, yellow, and blue as a common thread through their product offerings and advertisements. This consistent colour palette adopted by Microsoft makes it easier for consumers to identify with the brand.



A Collection of Microsoft Logos

Iconic brands can also establish key design features to be used in all products. The ability to associate themselves with distinct design elements assists in the attainment of iconicity as

consumers build connections with those specific features. For example, Apple has become synonymous with the wheel of their products, shiny white surfaces and a smooth interface with no visible buttons. When these features were then translated into the character of EVE in Disney Pixar's Wall-E, the essence of Apple ran through the film without the name of the brand ever being mentioned; a powerful pervasive means of ingraining the brand in the consumer's mind. The authors argue that this is perhaps a more powerful strategy than simple product placement in embedding the brand in the consumer's consciousness.



(taken from www.dustinsdesign.com)

I'm a Mac.

'EVE exudes Apple sensibilities. Her skin is the same shiny white plastic of a MacBook. Her egg-shaped body is smooth and curvy. She has no visible buttons; indicator lights glow on her chest under her skin. Her arms lock seamlessly into the indentations on the side of her body'

- David Zeiler (2008)

In addition, with regards to Apple, the simplicity of its name and logo has enabled the symbol to be recognised easily, often without the company name being explicitly displayed. The current logo – a simple image of an apple with a bite taken out of it – was first created in

1976 by Rob Janoff. The 'bitten apple' silhouette has been used for over 30 years, only being updated in terms of colour whilst the shape of the logo has remained the same, providing the company with a sense of continuity, building upon the logo's widespread recognition.



The Evolution of Apple's Logo

(taken from the Victoria School of Business and Technology Inc.)

Changing the colours of the apple icon coincided with changes of the image of Apple. The 'rainbow apple' (used from 1976 to 2002) was chosen by Jobs, who felt that the multi-coloured symbol would convey a sense of humanity needed for the technological products that Apple produced (Robard, 2009). The monochromatic logo was also used widely from 1998 which coincided with the development of the new iMac. This established a new era of the Apple logo and the company, as the plain and simple image complemented the sleek and design-oriented Apple products. Furthermore, the turn of the 21st Century led to the 'aluminium apple' and the current 'white apple', which corresponds with the colour schemes of a futuristic and individualistic Apple, enhancing the iconic image that is prevalent on all Apple products and packaging, and that has become synonymous with the company's name.

Discussion

The current body of literature is limited in its provision of explicit guidance for managers on how their brands can become iconic. Perhaps the most definitive work is that of Holt's (2004) on the principles of cultural branding strategy in achieving iconicity, whereby it is those

brands that address cultural trends that become iconic. However, the APPOV framework presented here adopts a different approach whereby iconicity is not solely related to culture. This framework views iconic brands as developing independently of cultural tensions in society; cultural changes are not the fuel for iconicity but something that iconic brands should be amenable to. Moreover, whereas Holt (2004) suggests that iconicity cannot be achieved using traditional branding strategies, we suggest that whilst a new attitude and perspective is undoubtedly needed, the APPOV framework shows that the achievement of iconicity is still possible through the novel use of conventional branding strategies, applied effectively to create synergy and thus iconicity. Strategic fit between these activities so that they are complementary and reinforcing, leading to optimisation of effort, will serve to enhance the sustainability and differentiation of iconic brands within the market place.

Previous observation highlights that brands evolve through a hierarchy of stature, gravitas, an emotional connection, a customisable experience, a rewarding relationship and empowering evangelism to achieve iconicity, but did not provide a comprehensive solution, failing to demonstrate how brands can consciously make efforts to develop these qualities (Leibig 2005). In contrast, the proposed framework explicitly outlines the branding techniques and strategies that a company may adopt within each of the five components in achieving iconicity. In addition, whilst the APPOV framework may allude to some of the features highlighted by Leibig, it specifically adds by identifying the need for visual identity, omnipresence, and a persona that go beyond the standard, unambiguously outlining the manner in which iconic brands can embed themselves in culture and consciousness.

Current literature also differentiates between branding strategies according to involvement theory; emotional relationship marketing strategies are used for low-involvement products, with informational marketing used for high-involvement products. However, the APPOV framework does not deem these differences as significant to iconicity; it states that emotional and personal connections cultivated through relationship marketing techniques are essential for both low and high-involvement products. Iconic brands are not

compartmentalised into low and high-involvement products; it is considered irrelevant whether the product is classed as a durable or fast-moving consumer good.

Managerial Implications

Iconicity is important in brand management. An iconic status allows brands to enjoy endless devotion from their consumers. It generates increased profits and shareholder returns, as well as enhancing intangible brand value by fostering emotional connections. Iconicity provides a sustainable and non-replicable competitive advantage. In this way, iconic brands manage to consistently rise above the assembly of ordinary brands.

The APPOV framework presented in this article may act as a comparative guide for brands that seek to emulate the prestige that iconic brands enjoy. Its applicability will be especially pertinent for those firms that are today's market leaders, but that still lag behind their counterparts that have already transcended into the realm of iconicity. One such notable example would be that of Pepsi Co. which is a market leader with 31.3% of the U.S. cola market (Euromonitor International, cited by The New York Times, 2007), and yet does not command the same level of attachment as the iconic brand of Coca-Cola.

It is important to note that as brands embark on the journey towards iconicity, they must be prepared to manage and fulfil the increased expectations that consumers hold them to. These go beyond the demand for a standard level of product functionality. Consumers may believe iconic brands have a 'special duty' to harness their ample resources to benefit society in a credible and self-less way such as through goodwill causes (Holt et al, 2004).

The APPOV framework presents for the first time concise guidance concerning the combination of features and activities deemed necessary to propel existing brand leaders above and beyond their current standing, to achieve iconic status. Thus, it can be seen that this framework, derived from consumer interviews and extensive case study research, is

unique in its ability to build on the limited body of current literature, to explicitly offer a comprehensive toolkit to guide firms in their aspirations of achieving brand iconicity.

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