

An Analysis of Brand Culture of Apple Inc. from Semiotics

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Abstract: In the context of the Internet era, as a tech giant, Apple has a huge and lasting influence in the hearts of consumers. While Apple is constantly introducing new technical products, it is also enriching and updating its brand value in the process of development. Nowadays, brand culture is one of the hot research topics. However, there is still a research gap in analyzing brand culture from the perspective of semiotics. Based on the semiotic theories of Pierce and Barthes and other cultural theories, this essay analyzes Apple's brand construction through a specific theoretical framework and discusses the cultural significance behind the brand. The research shows that Apple's brand can be constructed in the symbolic sense from three aspects. Moreover, Apple's long-term prosperity can be regarded as a cultural symbol, implying the symbol worship of consumers and the domination of modern technology. The article is an exploration of the application of semiotics and the symbolic meaning of the brand.

Keywords: semiotics, brand construction, Apple, cultural symbol

1. Introduction

Apple Inc. is an American multinational technology company specializing in consumer electronics, software and online services, which recently became the first publicly traded U.S. company to be valued at \$3 trillion in January 2022. Now it is the largest technology company by revenue and the world's biggest company by market capitalization. Since Apple was founded in 1976, the company has developed rapidly, especially in the past decade; it has always led the technology industry trend. The company receives criticism regarding the labor practices of its contractors, its environmental practices, and its business ethics, including anti-competitive practices and materials sourcing. Nevertheless, the company has a large following and enjoys a high level of brand loyalty. It is ranked as one of the world's most valuable brands. As an important extension of enterprise culture, brand culture not only endows brand vitality but also enhances the soft power of enterprise competition. Analyzing brand culture has certain theoretical and practical significance. On the one hand, it improves the brand theoretical system, and on the other hand, it provides directional guidance for the brand strategy of enterprises. How does Apple build its brand symbol? Why is the Apple brand so popular? From a cultural perspective, what does the long-term prosperity of Apple mean? There are various fields worth studying about Apple's brand culture.

So far, from the perspective of semiotics, there are few systematic theoretical studies on the brand culture of Apple. Based on the semiotic theories of Charles Sanders Pierce and Roland Barthes and combining views of communication, sociology, philosophy and other fields, the essay

will qualitatively analyze the symbolic connotation of Apple's brand and explore its contemporary cultural significance. The research is divided into two main sections. After the introduction, the first section will analyze Apple's brand construction from two aspects of design concept and symbol communication. In the next section, the author regards Apple as a cultural symbol and discusses people's religious worship of the brand and the domination of technology behind it. Combining theories of different disciplines, the author adopts an innovative research paradigm in the interpretation of brand culture and tries to explore the unique symbolic significance of Apple in the cultural category.

2. Brand Construction

Semiotics is the systematic study of sign processes and meaning-making. Semiosis is any activity, conduct, or process that involves signs, where a sign is defined as anything that communicates something, usually called a meaning, to the sign's interpreter. The main schools of semiotics include Swiss structuralist semiotics, French structuralist semiotics, American semiotics, and more. At the end of the 19th century, semiotics was merely a discipline to study the language. However, at present, semiotics also studies signs other than linguistic signs. Ferdinand de Saussure is the founder of modern linguistic theory. One of Saussure's key contributions to semiotics lies in what he called semiology, the concept of the bilateral sign, which consists of "the signifier" (a linguistic form, e.g. a word) and "the signified" (the meaning of the form). There is arbitrariness between "the signifier" and "the signified".

While Saussure's semiotic is dyadic, the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Pierce is triadic, being conceived as philosophical logic studied in terms of signs that are not always linguistic or artificial. Pierce interpreted the symbol as the ternary relationship between sign, object and interpretant, and he conceived of his theory in terms of philosophical logic rather than in terms of psychology, linguistics, or social studies. In Pierce's semiotic theory, a sign is something interpretable that stands in a well-defined relation to its object and its interpretant sign. An object is a subject matter of a sign and an interpretant. It can be anything discussable or thinkable, a thing, event, relationship, law, argument, and more, and it can even be fictional. An interpretant is the sign's more or less clarified meaning or ramification, a form or idea of the difference the sign's being true or undeceptive would make.

The brand is a symbol of consumption communication composed of an identification symbol system, physical products or services and added value. Similar to Pierce's semiotic theory, there are three basic elements in brand construction [1]. Name and logo, product and spirit, and customer cognition respectively correspond to "sign", "object", and "interpretant". In the following, the author will explain the process of Apple's brand construction from these three perspectives and why it reaps success.

2.1. Name and Logo

The name and logo are the most direct symbols that customers can associate with the brand. In brand communication, the initial impression of consumers on enterprises is often based on the name and logo. The name and logo need to be consistent with the product and the enterprise spirit. Many enterprises attach great importance to brand naming and logo design to give full play to its symbolic function and strive to express the corporate culture and spirit. Meanwhile, big business needs to take care of different consumer groups in various cultural backgrounds as well.

According to Steve Jobs, the company's name was inspired by his visit to an apple farm while on a fruitarian diet. Jobs thought the name "apple" was "fun, spirited and not intimidating." Furthermore, all the logos of the enterprise are designed based on its name, "Apple". Since its

founding in 1976, Apple has used four generations of logos, of which the fourth generation is the most popular, which is a monochromatic apple with a bite. The logo is famous for its concise and meaningful design. Apple is usually regarded as a symbol of wisdom, and the bite can trigger consumers' visual attention and make them desire to supplement the apple completely. From the perspective of design psychology, the reconstructed shape may not be a complete apple but may also be a shape of other shapes. Therefore, this "incomplete shape" can bring more potential meanings [2].

2.2. Product and Spirit

According to Pierce, an object is a thing that a sign represents. In brand construction, the object is equivalent to products and enterprise spirit, and they have a decisive influence on the design of symbols. In other words, symbols are designed to serve them.

Apple's products are mainly divided into two categories: electronics and services. The former includes Mac, iPad, iPhone, Apple Watch, AirPods and other accessories, and the latter includes some applications such as Apple Music and App Store and other additional functions such as iCloud and Apple Pay. Apple has a wide range of products, and all of them are technology oriented. Therefore, the characteristics of their product determine that the logo designed by Apple must be concise and general.

Besides, the high quality of products also contributes to the authority of the symbol. In terms of product design, Apple highly praises Bauhaus minimalism and applies it to every product, which has turned this style into a new design trend. Many enterprises in the world are also gradually following this trend in product design [3]. In terms of system design, the operating systems of Apple products, such as iOS and macOS, also have a considerable advantage. The smooth use experience and creative interaction design make the products unique and irreplaceable. In fact, consumers are more likely to remember those brands with high-quality products. In this field, Apple is undoubtedly one of the best brands.

The brand spirit of a company is constantly changing. Studies have shown that semiotics may be used to make or break a brand. Culture codes strongly influence whether a population likes or dislikes a brand's marketing, especially internationally. For example, the Japanese value "cuteness", politeness and gift-giving as part of their cultural code and the Chinese value harmony, wisdom and loyalty as part of it. If the company is unaware of a culture's codes, it runs the risk of failing in its marketing. Globalization has caused the development of a global consumer culture where products have similar associations, whether positive or negative, across numerous markets [4]. Nowadays, the intelligibility and rich connotation of Apple's name and logo enables the brand to be accepted by consumers of different cultural backgrounds, which involves the transformation of the brand concept. In terms of cultural concept, Apple's brand concept has gone through three stages: "rebellion", "pioneer", and "cool" [5]. The concept of "rebellion" represented by the advertisement "1984" aims at the contradiction between the anti-mainstream cultural movement and the mainstream values and establishes the brand image of Apple, which is brave to challenge the authority and rebellious. By the 1990s, the tide of anti-mainstream culture had gradually faded away, and part of the American middle class started to attach importance to traditional American cultural values again. Apple's "pioneer" concept aligns with the elites from all walks of life in the United States and advocates personal freedom and individuality, which is also the spirit of individualism and liberalism in the traditional American spirit. Compared with the above two, the concept of "cool" is more likely to conform to cultural codes in different cultural contexts because it is closer to universal values. In the Internet era, Apple is more open to the civilian world. It shapes consumer products into necessities for young people's personality expression and social interaction and takes

technological products as a part of their lifestyle. Although the name and logo of the company do not change a lot, its brand spirit has been enriched, which maintains its popularity.

2.3. Customer Cognition

Pierce once proposed the concept of the dynamic object, which aims to indicate that only in the specific context of communication can people really understand the meaning of the sign [6]. Customer cognition is a part of brand construction, which is a dynamic process and determined by the “sign” and the “object”. However, different consumers have different perceptions of Apple based on their knowledge background. Even though many consumers do not know Apple’s history and enterprise culture, they can still feel the great attraction of the brand. High-quality products, subtle design of the logo and continuous improvement of the enterprise’s spiritual construction yield success of brand construction, thus, the company’s marketing success.

3. Apple as a Cultural Symbol

The author believes that Apple’s long-term prosperity can be regarded as a cultural symbol, representing public recognition of the symbolic meaning of the brand and the domination of technology. This phenomenon could be analyzed with the semiotics theory of Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard.

3.1. Symbol Worship

Barthes is a famous French semiotician who was the first to use semiotic theory to analyze consumer society. He applies the symbol concept in linguistics to explain people’s perception of things. The reason why it can be constructed in this way is that the external expression of people’s thinking is mainly displayed through language. In other words, the impact of things on people can be explained with such a concept. Barthes believes that in the process of acquiring objects, what people really chase is the symbol attached to the thing rather than function. What they really pursue is not the object itself but the hidden meaning. The theme of communication among people has also become the comparison of symbols.

Besides, Barthes also criticized the cultural phenomenon in daily life from the perspective of semiotics. “All human things (such as food and clothing) are permeated with coding behavior, and its role is unique in human activities. The conclusion of this view is that people live in a world that cannot provide us with a “pure”, “innocent” context. This is a world of symbols rather than experience [7].” In the fashion system, Barthes researched fashion clothes and found that the operation mechanism of fashion depends on the mutual transformation between objects and symbols. At the same time, in this book, the symbolic ideology of consumption is criticized as well. Barthes pointed out that clothing expressions as signifiers are often labeled with occasions, status, status, customs, and more. In consumption, these hidden meanings control the consumption choices of the masses. In order to pursue unique symbolic meanings, consumers continuously shorten the purchase cycle, thus speeding up the replacement of fashion, which is exactly the order society that controllers hope to establish in the silent internalization of ideology [8].

Baudrillard’s theory of symbolic fetishism is deeply influenced by Barthes’ theory of semiotics. Baudrillard believes that contemporary society is no longer a production society in the sense of traditional political economy but a thorough consumer society. Only in the symbol system of goods can consumption show its real significance and meet people’s social needs [9]. In the consumer society, people’s social status is to some extent defined by the things with exchange symbols. A commodity not only represents its own use value but also represents its users’ consumption level

and social class. At the same time, consumption has become a new mode of communication. People use symbols as a medium to distinguish each other in consumption.

Apple is the technology enterprise that can best reflect how the symbol changes people's concepts. Its marketing strategy is likened to "religious" communication [10]. In advertising, Apple is more willing to emphasize a distinctive and enviable lifestyle than to show the details and specific parameters of the product. "Think Different", and "1984" are considered the most successful advertisements, conveying the ideas of rebellion and innovation. The shaping of such values contributes to the loyalty of consumers in the future. It can be said that Apple has long found that creating the symbolic significance of products is of great importance. In recent years, Apple still pays attention to the spread of symbolic value. Reviewing the slogans of the past generations of the iPhone, there are many sentences for value propaganda such as "For the Colorful", "Every side is bright", and "Everything just clicks". These slogans are designed to create a brand image that pursues perfection in front of consumers. Using Apple's products, they can also realize their pursuit of idealism. Consumers equate owning Apple's products with a fashionable and refined lifestyle in their minds and involuntarily yearn for the Apple brand and its culture. This culture is related to the elite class notions, including consumerism and vanguard spirit. Because of Apple's symbol publicity, people are inclined to integrate their class consciousness with brand consumption, which indicates their brand worship.

3.2. The Domination of Technology

It is obviously unreasonable to attribute Apple's success entirely to the symbol worship guided by the brand. As a cultural symbol, Apple's innovation in technology cannot be ignored. Behind innovation is an inevitable trend of technological domination. Heidegger believes that technology permeates every corner of social life with its development. The real world is in the process of technicalization, and technology dominates the world [11]. The prosperity of Apple is not entirely due to brand marketing but its continuous technological innovation. With the economic foundation, people always choose products with advanced technology in order to pursue higher efficiency. To some extent, humanity is under the domination of technology. However, Apple has also found a way to alleviate this power, which is the humanization of technology. From a cultural perspective, it is reflected in the consciousness level. Take iPhone, for example; from multi-touch to the dynamic island, Apple has never given up the innovation to make human-computer interaction more convenient and simple. Technological innovation is no longer limited to creating more technical goods for people to use but can lead to the value change of technology culture [12]. As mentioned earlier, Apple's repeated emphasis on the symbolic value of the brand is also intended to promote the shift of consciousness, not just to guide consumption. From the material level, Apple's electronic product represents advanced technology in this era. From the spiritual level, it symbolizes the change of technological humanization as well.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, corporate brand culture is one of the important assets. This study reexamines the symbolic value of Apple from two aspects of brand construction and cultural symbol by using the relevant theories of semiotics. The former uses Pierce's semiotic theory to build a brand symbol system and analyzes Apple's brand construction process by three modules: name and logo, product and spirit, and Customer Cognition, which respectively correspond to "sign", "object", and "interpretant" in the semiotic category. The reason for adopting this research framework is that the brand itself has the characteristics of the symbol, and there are many similarities between brand communication and symbol communication. The latter discusses the cultural significance of

Apple's long-term prosperity from two typical perspectives. First, the author explains consumers' symbolic worship of Apple's brand value through the symbolic theories of Roland Barthes and Baudrillard, who have similar views in the field of consumerist culture. Besides, the essay emphasizes the domination of technology in the current era reflected by Apple and analyzes Apple's attitude towards it, which indicates the trend of technological humanization.

This research analyzes Apple's brand symbol system from the perspective of semiotics and discusses the cultural significance of Apple. It is an attempt to interpret corporate culture from semiotics and provides a reference for the exploration of Apple's brand culture. Finally, there are two shortcomings of the research. The author does not collect quantitative data to supplement the research issues, and many views related to consumer culture in the article also need to be discussed in more depth. In the future, more detailed research can be conducted on related topics and in order to better integrate with practice, it is necessary to bring the brand into the social perspective for research. Hopefully, the article is helpful to the research of corporate culture and the application of semiotics.

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