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Reimagining brand communication: Exploring the postmodern paradigm in marketing through a Polish jewellery brand

Nowe spojrzenie na komunikację marki. Odkrywanie postmodernistycznego
paradygmatu w marketingu poprzez polską markę jubilerską

Abstract

The article attempts to capture the axial, pressing conflicts in the field of marketing theory and practice today, taking as a reference point one of the most discussed advertising campaign of recent years in Poland of the YES brand, local jewellery manufacturer. The paper offers a socio-cultural explanation for the success of the campaign as an example of challenging modernist intuitions in marketing communication. Specifically, it explores the conditions and course of the social transformation that fuelled the emergence of an identity market for the brand and demonstrates how marketing communications aligned with identity projects of Polish consumers. In the realm of organization theory, it is argued that common theoretical and cognitive assumptions about the nature of the socio-cultural context of organizing and basic management principles, such as the assumed separation between an organization and its environment, prove to be a dysfunctional barrier to the transition to a new two-way model of communication with consumers.

Keywords

marketing communication, cultural branding, management theory, consumer research

Streszczenie

W artykule podjęto próbę uchwycenia osiowych konfliktów w obszarze teorii i praktyki marketingu, biorąc za punkt wyjścia jedną z najbardziej dyskutowanych kampanii reklamowych ostatnich lat w Polsce – marki YES, lokalnego producenta biżuterii. Artykuł proponuje społeczno-kulturowe wyjaśnienie sukcesu kampanii jako przykład podważenia modernistycznych intuicji w komunikacji marketingowej. W szczególności bada warunki i przebieg transformacji społecznej, która umożliwiła wyłonienie się tożsamościowego rynku dla marki, i pokazuje, w jaki sposób komunikacja marketingowa została dostosowana do projektów tożsamościowych polskich konsumentów. W odniesieniu do teorii organizacji artykuł przekonuje, że niektóre założenia teoretyczne i poznawcze dotyczące kontekstu działań organizacji, takich jak np. zakładane oddzielenie organizacji od jej otoczenia, stanowią dysfunkcyjną barierę w przechodzeniu do nowego, dwukierunkowego modelu komunikacji z konsumentami.

Słowa kluczowe

komunikacja marketingowa, branding kulturowy, teoria zarządzania, badania konsumenckie

JEL: M3

Introduction

Despite a decades-long tradition of interpretive, cultural studies of consumption in the CCT – Consumer Culture Theory stream (Arnould et al., 2019; Arnould & Thompson, 2005, 2018), which serves as the terminological umbrella for postmodernism in marketing (Brown, 2016), as well as a nearly 20-year tradition of established

and partially institutionalized practice of cultural branding (Holt, 2004, 2012, 2016; Holt & Cameron, 2010), the discipline, both in its mainstream theoretical propositions and, more importantly, in its practical expressions, remains trapped in the clutches of a dysfunctional modernism that serves neither organizations nor consumers. While some elements of the cultural turn in marketing (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Thompson et al.,

1989), such as hermeneutics and semiotics, have been incorporated into mainstream theory and practice (Hatch & Rubin, 2006; Bradshaw & Dholakia, 2012; Cova et al., 2013; Hatch & Rubin, 2006), this integration hasn't necessarily resulted in profound business implications. The attention of growing number of marketing theorists and managers has been focused on providing a semblance of intellectual rigor to objectivist brand equity models (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993, 2003) and enabling scientism with behavioural datasets or technologies (AI, Big Data) (Amado et al., 2018).

According to McCracken (2005), the systemic problem seems to be that modernist (information-processing) marketing continues to define itself as a discipline aimed at satisfying audiences while isolating itself from them and cutting off the possibility of participation. The weakness of so-called "feature-and-benefits" marketing has been pointed out by researchers in the XM customer experience approach (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999; Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013). The role of a bridge between these can be played by culture, a domain of collectively created meanings. But despite its importance to consumers, sociocultural context is treated as the last, and by no means the most important, step in corporate branding strategies (Hatch & Schultz, 2008; Schultz et al., 2000). Rather, it is a kind of icing on the cake of rational planning.

The shift towards linguistic analysis in the social sciences, so called "linguistic turn" (Johnson & Lakoff, 2010; Reddy, 1979; Rorty, 1992) acknowledges that human life is shaped by discourse. This turn has redirected focus on consumption as a realm of personal autonomy, freed from institutional constraints. Yet, it continually faces the attempts of marketers to assert control over consumer preferences, most often through persuasive forms of communication. Regrettably, the struggle of most brands to deliver culturally resonant content results in an inevitable loss of control over the marketing narrative. Instead, this control often shifts, at significant expense for companies, to the internet influencers who wield substantial sway in the realm of new media (Kozinets et al., 2023).

However, this conflict seems unnecessary because, despite common negative attitudes toward persuasive advertising messages (Heath & Feldwick, 2008; Schmitt, 1999), consumers do not reject markets per se, let alone brands as a source of symbolic material for their identity projects (Holt, 1997; McCracken, 1987; Mick & Buhl, 1992). They expect brands to provide them with original and culturally relevant expressions through which they can tell their stories and situate themselves in social world. Companies that have embraced the postmodern

branding paradigm have created new and highly profitable identity markets that would otherwise remain unreachable (Holt, 2002, 2004, 2016; Holt & Cameron, 2010).

This article aims to reconstruct the socio-cultural context that allowed the marketing communications of the Polish jewellery brand YES to resonate with the identity expectations of local consumers. Simultaneously, it attempts to capture the recurring main points of conflict between the paradigmatic schools that define the present state of the marketing discipline. The time that has elapsed since the launch of what is one of the most talked about campaigns in recent years (numerous industry publications and awards won by the creative agency responsible) allows to revisit the discursive process of structuring consumption in Poland. Furthermore, and rather interestingly to marketing theorists and practitioners, the time perspective allows us to see the range of practices, both good and bad, that have taken place in an attempt at transition to the new two-way marketing model. As a result, the campaign has become a catalyst for discussion on fundamental marketing issues.

Between modernism and postmodernism in marketing

Organized as a force of modern progress, marketing was founded to ensure the growth of the economic power of private companies by efficiently satisfying the needs of consumers in the era of post-war prosperity (Firat & Dholakia, 2006). Implemented by highly qualified professionals, its mission was to ensure the efficient exchange of products and services and, on the other end, to help consumers in the burden of developing their lifestyles. From the management science and practice perspective, it is a disciplined and structured field of knowledge, based on scientific methods and measurable tools that give an impression of objectivity and a sense of control over reality (Brown, 1995, 2006, 2016).

In contemporary marketing theory, the growth of brand equity depends on the construction of favourable, strong and unique cognitive associations in the minds of consumers (Keller, 1993, 2003; Ries & Trout, 1981). Creation of the advertising message itself is subordinate to persuasion in an asymmetrical relationship between producers and consumers (Petty et al., 1983; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Brands also rely on long-term positioning that, by definition, cannot take into account ever-changing socio-cultural conditions. Similarly, segmentation strategies are based on deductively derived, universalistic, and

abstract categories that are devoid of real-life meanings. Thus, marketing tools, like brand mantras (Keller, 2003) or brand DNAs (Chapman & Tulien, 2010) inherently reduce the context which, while crucial to consumer identity projects, is typically treated as noise and interference (Holt, 2005).

While modernism remains the fundamental logic of organizational reality (Bradshaw & Dholakia, 2012), some aspects of postmodernity that have begun to cross the axis of modernization, such as the proliferation of social media, are forcing organizations to quietly adapt and relinquish some modernist aspects of control. For instance, carefully crafted, top-down messages have given way to adventurous and spontaneous communication prepared by "digital natives" employed by companies, who – lacking any formal marketing training – still operate efficiently, according to the rules of new media (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

Redrawing the lines of contention between the modernist and postmodernist paradigms in marketing seems to be a perennial task, mainly because modernism is constantly being reborn in countless practical editions and many academic proposals, such as celebrated and influential work of Byron Sharp (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2016; Sharp, 2010). That is why Firat and Dholakia (2006) see their theoretical reconceptualizations in marketing, namely: (1) the shift from the concept of satisfying consumer needs to the concept of empowering consumers, and (2) the shift from operational marketing to so-called "embedded" marketing, as a fundamental challenge to prevailing business theory and practice. The modernist stage, in their view, is dominated by omniscient specialists, while the audience is relegated to the role of passive and language-blind observers. The apparent problem is the widening gap between the two groups, which deprives the audience of the opportunity to truly participate in and experience the performance being staged.

However, in the postmodern perspective, consumption is not so much a process of accumulating material goods, as it is a complex and symbolic process of "aestheticization of everyday life" (Featherstone, 1991), which necessarily involves performative participation of the consumer. This is consistent with the entire poststructuralist epistemology, in which the experience of the consumer, rather than an external and objective observation of the researcher, is crucial to cognition of human reality (Tadajewski, 2006). The emerging paradigm is based on the assumption that brands don't just provide products that "do something", but offer symbolic components that serve consumers identity projects (Mick & Buhl, 1992; Schau,

2018). The new "post-consumer" is thus not interested in being trapped in a single value proposition, let alone a single deductively derived lifestyle, but rather in exploring multiple possibilities. Therefore, in terms of actual consumer expectations, information-based model of marketing (McCracken, 2005) seems dysfunctional (Holt, 2005), because it insists that the market offer can only be a response to objectively existing, more or less fixed needs, so it must necessarily be a very limited catalogue (Firat & Dholakia, 2006; Schmitt, 1999).

Empowering consumers to speak

Implicit in the modern branding paradigm (Aaker, 1996; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Keller, 1993, 2002) is also a belief that the meaning of an object of consumption is pre-determined by the producer and therefore can only be communicated downward to the consumer, who is the object of all marketing activities (Fiske, 1999). However, the contemporary postmodern markets do not resemble the one from the conceptualizations above or, if we look more closely, the interpretations of the Frankfurt School, which described a passive, homogenized audience subject to an asymmetrical power relationship and logic of domination (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002). Rather than that, consumer culture is based on a kind of "incentive to speak", to use Foucault's intuition (Foucault, 1978; Holt, 2002). According to Holt, "the market now glorifies the most successful acts of consumer sovereignty, which go well beyond the personalization of brands to a wholesale qualitative reconstruction of what the market offers" (Holt, 2002, p. 83). Almost all of Foucault's theoretical efforts, especially his "History of Sexuality" (Foucault, 1978), were aimed at verifying the hypothesis of repressive power as a false image of social relations. Contemporary branding, in its most fruitful manifestations, does not prescribe, let alone prohibit, but instead encourages consumers to speak and opens up a wide space for self-expression.

The marketing dream of reaching a single consumer with an individually tailored offer, for instance, in the form of microtargeting (Matz et al., 2017), is destined to fail because it is quite unlikely to grasp the multiplicity of identity projects being pursued simultaneously. Marketing tirelessly seeks to assign to a single individual demographic characteristics, personality traits, social class affiliations, values, anything that allow him to be captured in the rigors of segmentation. Consumers, however, do not fit well into these segments, which attempt to capture society as in

a traffic light, to encapsulate the whole social dynamics in few deductively reduced categories and abstract values.

According to Mitchell, "there is nothing wrong with trying to be scientific about marketing; with trying to understand cause and effect", but the benefits of this way of thinking are diminishing (Mitchell, 2001, p. 60). Marketing under modernism continues to be surprised at how insignificant it is in the cultural conversations taking place in the new media landscape (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Consumers openly resist marketing techniques that seek to persuade them to adopt a proposed lifestyle. They enjoy deconstructing messages and engaging in a rivalry with producers in places that were once separate and never crossed, but are now accessible because of "hyperconvergence" (Swaminathan et al., 2020). According to Bauman, postmodern consumers are constructors and players who actively negotiate cultural dimensions, no longer merely accepting the norms imposed by the market (Bauman, 1996). They approach media owned by brands not to watch in-house produced content, but to find a discount or challenge its policies. There are many more of these tiny, acute tactics (Certeau, 1988) consumers use to strain established cause-and-effect relationships.

The ceding of the field by the traditional media oligopoly (radio, press, television) to internet media has become an excellent opportunity to establish two-way, meaningful relationships with consumers. Brands can shape communications as they see fit and post the content they produce without restriction or additional cost. Nevertheless, with few exceptions, most of the efforts made by brands have been ignored by consumers (Holt, 2004, 2012, 2016). It turns out that simply getting in front of an audience is not enough to build strong identity bonds and long-term loyalty; what matters more in this turf is the cultural relevance that drives the audience to engage with the message, whether they read it, watch it, or share it on social networks (Heath & Feldwick, 2008). That's why CTRs, or click-through rates, have become the key online performance metric. At the end of the day it occurs the king is naked, and the less credibility this factor enjoys, the more it depends on those who grew mostly in social networks, i.e. the internet influencers. The lion's share of the pie now goes to them (Kozinets et al., 2023). Unless brands immerse themselves in the culture and become cultural leaders like the most credible media icons, they left to the good or bad will of influencers.

Many organizations intuitively recognize its cultural inadequacy and seek relevance to better communicate with their customers. This phenomenon is called "coolhunt" (Gladwell, 1997;

Holt, 2004) and describes superficial attempts to join the cultural circuit. Cultural branding, the epitome of the new postmodern marketing paradigm, is different. It directs the brand's marketing communications in an attempt to lead the culture rather than imitate it, seeking unorthodox expressions based on emerging social changes.

Creating identity market

Conventional economic understanding of the market, focusing on physical products or services, contrasts sharply with a sociological and anthropological perspective. In the latter one, consumers aim for symbolic elements of identity, both individual and collective, viewing the product as a material embodiment of the narrative they seek (Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1986). Within the cultural framework, brands compete in identity myth markets rather than in product or service markets (Holt, 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010). Jewellery can be a utilitarian object with specific functions, including material ones, but above all it has multiple symbolic meanings. It can be an expression of individual or group identity (e.g. ethnicity), it can symbolize social status, denote marriage, etc. (Satpathy, 2017).

However, even researchers interested in symbolism have a problem with framing the market in socio-cultural terms. Letkiewicz, for example, writes about the market for so-called "patriotic" jewellery, popular during the Polish struggling fight for independence in the 19th century, in terms of the "dominance of emotional values over the cost of material and artistic qualities" and the predominance of "form over substance" (Letkiewicz, 2021, in: Bogacka, 2022, p. 1019), while the key to understanding these phenomena is clearly the human ability to collectively shape social meanings, rather than psychological predispositions of the mind. Thus, in the period of non-existence of independent Polish state, for some consumers jewellery became a carrier of patriotic values. Objects of consumption are clothed in meanings shaped by discourses dominant at a time in the mass culture, following national disputes on ethnicity, citizenship, femininity, masculinity, love, personal success, etc. Those discourses are culturally unique, even if they share some features with other cultures. They are also historically constructed. This means that their content can change over time according to a specific context.

For centuries, the Polish women's jewellery market could be understood and explained, culturally, in the discursive context of the

femininity myth of the "Polish Mother", the dominant domestic model of womanhood, and, secondly, in the context of the "chivalric gender contract" that shaped local relations between men and women (Walczeńska, 1999). The first discourse, supported institutionally and reproduced in countless cultural texts, pictured a woman who is wholeheartedly devoted to her family and her nation, which is struggling to survive in different periods of its history (most recently during the communist period). This myth also referred to the Virgin Mary's religious model of selfless motherhood. The impeccable ethical pattern basically excluded other heteronormative woman identities and interpretations of related social constructs, sexuality, or carnality. The scheme also limited the possibility of self-determination. According to Imbierowicz, the dominant myth of the mother in local Polish culture "has the effect of somewhat limiting a woman's subjectivity, since her behaviour is determined not so much by her inner, very personal desires, but by social expectations addressed to her, tasks resulting from her motherhood" (Imbierowicz, 2012, p. 431).

The myth was complemented by what Walczeńska calls the "Noble-Knight gender contract" (Walczeńska, 1999), which provided an interpretive framework for patriarchal relations between men and women in Poland. Constructed and reproduced over centuries, concepts of the "true, gallant man" and the "true, elegant woman" have resisted and continue to resist attempts to undermine the status quo (Walczeńska, 2005). In the Catholic version of this contract, a woman still sacrifices herself for a man fighting for a great cause. In liberal or socialist version (the latter during the communist period), this "knight"/"social activist", totally dedicated to public affairs, adores a woman hidden in his shadow, sometimes giving her a gift as compensation for her dedication.

However, the Polish jewellery market, estimated at more than half a billion euros per year, with 60 percent of it sold by three family-owned brands, Apart, Kruk, and YES (Grzeszak, 2016), is in a state of constant symbolic transformation, the latest of which is the result of socio-cultural reshuffling in the era of new feminism. The proliferation of social media and the corresponding rise of communities organized around women's rights issues have led market participants to seek new cultural expressions that allude to emerging identity tensions. For some time now, analysts of the Polish market have been observing the emergence of a segment of female customers who make their own jewellery gifts, thus breaking out of the previously dominant discursive forms, or customers who treat jewellery not as a value-preserving pretzel, but as a seasonal fashion accessory (Grzeszak, 2016).

Using social change in Poland as an identity platform for the YES brand

In order to understand the social transformation that fuelled the emergence of an identity market for the YES brand, a historical reconstruction of the Polish socio-cultural context is necessary. For decades, Polish feminism, vital aspect of the current brand's value proposition, was a marginal phenomenon. It has assumed various forms throughout history, including its emergence during the emancipation movement in early twentieth century, and its presence within socialist ideologies, but without forming a mass movement consistently. Relatively small subcultures were organized in metropolitan centres. Although they were overrepresented in the media discourse, they failed to achieve decisive impact on everyday reality of women in Poland. This distinction is crucial in understanding its potential to drive significant market shifts.

The year 2015 proved to be a turning point in the spread of the new social ideology, when power fell into hands of a conservative party. The seizure of the government meant an attempt at a new deal on inflammatory worldview issues, including the issue of reproductive rights, which in Poland remained the subject of a fragile compromise reached shortly after the transition to democratic regime in 1989 (Korolczuk et al., 2018). The overturn was swift. Already in the spring of 2016, one of the conservative Polish NGOs submitted a bill advocating a total ban on abortion, which, although not formally supported by the ruling party, received verbal support of many of its politicians, as well as from the Catholic Church. The possibility of violating the status quo triggered a massive wave of social mobilization long unseen in Poland. Highly popular social media campaigns were launched calling for opposition to the proposed changes. In this wave, a left-wing committee ("Save the Women") was registered, which submitted a civil counter-project liberalizing abortion. It was signed by more than two hundred thousand Poles. Meanwhile, the government decided to withdraw funding for in vitro fertilization programs, triggering another wave of public discontent. When the two competing abortion bills reached the Parliament in the fall (neither was ultimately adopted), mass protests began in the streets of Polish cities. In October, on the so-called Black Monday, national strike was organized in more than 150 Polish cities, during which women stayed at home and did not work. Although the parliament rejected the controversial bill, the protests did not stop there, and by the end of the month the police had recorded 410 rallies in one day alone, with more

than 400,000 participants. It is estimated that these were the largest protests since the fall of communism in Poland (Magdziarz & Santora, 2020). In the years that followed, the protests of the increasingly numerous and better organized women's movement continued, returning to the streets of Polish cities in response to various government initiatives. Demonstrations were particularly strong after the Constitutional Court's ruling in the fall of 2020, which introduced a de facto ban on abortion into legislation. After this notable event, the ruling party saw a significant drop in public support (data according to Politico.com), which it never recovered, culminating in its removal from power in the fall of 2023. The circumstances indicate that identity markets don't just appear out of nowhere; they arise when specific tensions emerge in society. These contradictions require resolution over time, and consumption becomes a way to hint at these tensions. Brands that tailor their communications accordingly can tap into these emerging markets (Holt, 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010).

"I am a woman" – cultural branding in the jewellery market

The cultural expressions of the YES brand, such as the films, print, and online advertisements within the "I am a woman" campaign (2021–2023), stand out distinctly from other brand content rooted in mass culture discourse. Numerous marketing agencies, both in Poland and internationally, provide content with exceptional artistic and technical quality, aiming to align with cultural trends. However, few manage to succeed, often due to overlooking significant social changes.

Actually, it is these transformations are the reason why orthodox, typical expressions no longer satisfy consumers' identity-related needs. According to Holt and Cameron (2010) seeking typical market expressions is always an initial step in every cultural brand strategy. Suddenly, orthodox conventions that have been in place for years or decades prove not only inadequate, but even irritating, leading to social upheaval.

This is precisely why YES campaign was bolstered by the high-profile campaign of the Polish market leader, Apart, which, only a year earlier, had presented the most conservative representation in the category, thus laying a kind of foundation for non-heteronormative cultural expressions. Three popular Polish actresses starred in a fairy-tale and over-sweetened Christmas movie (it is an industry secret that the value of sales increases at least threefold in December), in which beautiful and opulent interiors swarm and subsequent scenes are a procession of endless gifts, rings, earrings and necklaces (see Figure 1).

The exuberant campaign came at the height of a pandemic shutdown that locked consumers out of normal life for months. As with any resonant cultural text, the campaign received swift and abundant public criticism. It was led by a very popular parody of the film by Warsaw artists, which mocked and sometimes vulgarly criticized the form and content of the campaign.

Apart was rightly surprised by the film's reception and upset by the criticism. From the company's point of view, the cultural convention used in the campaign was safe; for years the strategy has proven successful not only for Apart, but also for many of its competitors in the market. In 2016, when a TV star in a similar entourage, in an atmosphere full of glitz and glamour, unwrapped Christmas jewellery gifts on the screen with her family, the promotional machine worked flawlessly, and customers were not held up to ridicule. The world-famous Polish model, Anja Rubik, proudly wore a pearl necklace in a catalogue published at the time. The market was not yet ripe for change, closed to cultural innovation and wedded to orthodox expressions. Such a situation is not unique to this market, but also characterizes other product categories. The brewery market reacted with similar insensitivity to innovative cultural expressions of work (to be imagined as a site of free expression as opposed to the mundane bureaucracy) in the positioning of the Polish Żywiec brand from 2012 and then surprisingly caught up with the public a few years later, despite essentially unchanged sociocultural assumptions (Serwanski, 2021).

Figure 1. Screenshots "I like to go back to where I was"



Source: Apart, 2020.

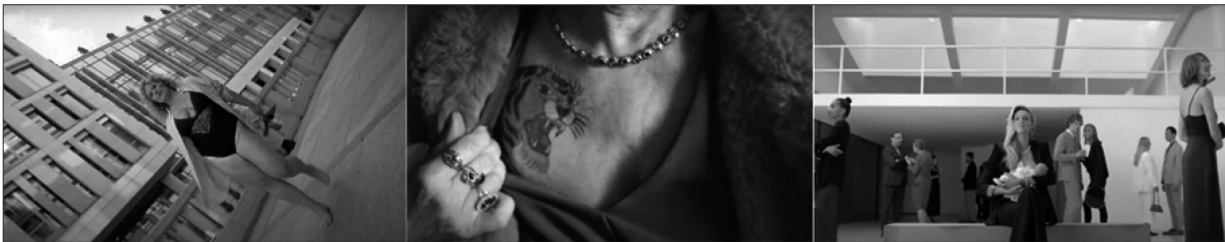
The first and most discussed part of the YES campaign is called "I am a woman". It is a portrait of heterodox expressions of femininity: a mother breastfeeding in an art gallery, a senior citizen visiting her grandchildren with a tiger tattooed on her chest, a plus-size girl walking around town in her underwear, and a couple of girls on a date in an arcade (see Figure 2). The film has become so representative of the growing feminist ideology that the airing of the spots has been halted on government-controlled television.

The second iteration of the campaign, launched less than a year later, is a vision of a distant future in which Polish women make their own decisions about their lives, including being allowed to enter into same-sex marriages and forming majority of a new government (see Figure 3). Both films represent a critical reworking of the dominant constructs of femininity sought in the context of ongoing social change, and offer symbolic components that can be used to realize desired

identity projects. The TV and online campaign was successfully complemented by podcasts on the brand's own channels, featuring conversations on gender equality with journalists, female artists and online influencers.

The most recent campaign, aligned with the postmodern branding paradigm, was conducted by the brand in November 2023 (see Figure 4). The core of this campaign is a poem called "Portrait of a Woman" by the Polish Nobel Prize winner in literature, Wisława Szymborska. The poem's ambiguity regarding the orthodox concept of femininity aligns with the brand's past messaging and expressions. In it Szymborska writes: "She sleeps with him as if she's first in line or the only one on earth/She'll bear him four children, no children, one (...)/Where's she running, isn't she exhausted/Not a bit, a little, to death, it doesn't matter. She must love him, or she's just plain stubborn. For better, for worse, for heaven's sake" (Szymborska, 1976; translated from the Polish by

Figure 2. Screenshots "I am the woman"



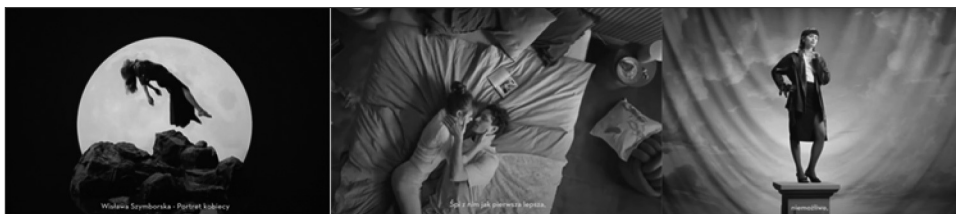
Source: YES, 2021.

Figure 3. Screenshots "I am the woman. I am the future. New campaign"



Source: YES, 2021.

Figure 4. Screenshots "Portrait of a Woman"



Source: YES, 2023a.

Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh). The brand is gaining confidence in its approach to this social construct. It's actively developing its cultural capital (Holt & Cameron, 2010), empowering it to address important consumer issues, even amidst the evolving landscape of future social changes.

Consumers' reactions to all versions of the campaign are remarkably enthusiastic. Significantly, however, the negative point of reference for the positive evaluations is the aforementioned Apart campaign, which users rightly interpreted as the epitome of the *ancien régime* (e.g. "a welcome change after last year's long commercial by the competition"; "not quite like last year's commercial by a well-known company on A., where women are empty dolls laughing at nothing") (YES, 2021).

According to representatives of 180heartbeats + Jung v Matt, the creative executors of the campaign, the brand's total sales for December 2021 (the campaign began airing in November) increased by 21% compared to the same month of previous year, while sales of the special jewellery collection supported by the campaign increased by an impressive 52%. The impact of the campaign is also confirmed by sales figures for the Valentine's Day collection, where the increase over a similar period (February 2022 vs. February 2021) was 31% (Nowakowska, 2022).

Testing organizational boundaries

The postmodern branding paradigm implies not only the provision of open symbolic resources for the construction of identity projects, but also the possibility for the consumer to be a co-creator of marketing decisions, and in some cases even a co-provider of products or services. However, modernist brand equity models (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Keller, 2003), less adequate today, draw a strict line between the one and the other through the social, political and legal institutions (Firat & Dholakia, 2006; Swaminathan et al., 2020).

In mid-2023, YES brand was forced to abruptly end the edition of its campaign promising free products to same-sex couples if a future government in Poland passed marriage equality into law (see Figure 5). The problem was not so much the utopian nature of the offer in the political context at the time, but the commercial subtext of the campaign. The offer, which smacked a mile away of an attempt to quickly discount previously acquired cultural capital, was aimed only at those who would buy wedding rings here and now. The brand issued an apology: "We will pay more attention to your voice and feedback, and we assure you that we remain, as always, allies of the LGBTQ+ community" (YES, 2023b).

Figure 5. Screenshot "#YesforLove"



Source: YES, 2023b.

The action violated the postmodern branding paradigm by instrumentalizing previously acquired authenticity. Brands must remain, at least officially, commercially indifferent, innocent since their power in the eyes of consumers derives from the cultural value they produce (Holt, 2002).

This obvious result of a flawed strategy also represents the inadequacy of the modernist belief in the separation between the interior of an organization and its environment. The emerging logic is that since we have invited consumers to form an identity with a brand, based on cultural capital, they inevitably demand a role in determining the terms of the market offer (Firat & Dholakia, 2006). Traditional marketing defines its role as satisfying consumers' needs and divides the process into gathering information about these needs and then addressing them with an appropriate offer. Launching an identity platform, instead, as has been done in previous iterations of the campaign, means involving consumers in a game that fundamentally changes the playing field. There is no longer room for the separate role of the organization, nor for the secondary and external role of the consumer, who merely reacts to the offer. Consumers expect to be involved at the beginning of the process, not after the fact. In this way, brand equity becomes shared equity.

The case vividly showcases the evolution of marketing's "deprofessionalization" in the postmodern era (Holt, 2002), transitioning from being solely the expertise of industry specialists to becoming the shared domain of all consumers. The campaign faced rejection by consumers who deemed it "unprofessional," "socially inadequate," and "inauthentic". In the era of embedded marketing, as outlined by Firat and Dolakia, "where the firm is part of the community to facilitate the efforts of consumer communities to mutually construct their desires and the products" (Firat & Dholakia, 2006), every member

of a brand's community embodies a role as its marketer. For this reason, we can expect that the transition to a new paradigm in marketing, while inevitable, will be met with resistance from professionals who guard the secrets of and access to their profession.

Discussion

YES brand incorporated feminist ideology, emancipatory identity myths, and relevant cultural codes – three pivotal components outlined in the cultural branding (Holt, 2004, 2016; Holt & Cameron, 2010), in its early 20s campaigns. To what extent the company's management used the guidelines of cultural strategy consciously (Holt & Cameron, 2010) remains to be seen; most attempts in the market are unsystematic and intuitive (Serwański, 2021), but the alignment of these elements over time demonstrates a successful effort. The productions are excellently integrated into the local and current socio-cultural context. They thrived and ultimately succeeded due to the rising influence of feminist ideology in Poland. Similar actions might not have achieved the desired impact if executed at a different time. It's reasonable to assume that the identity market surged when the government imposed an almost complete ban on abortion, which deeply shocked most women in Poland.

The strength of YES communications lies in its cultural heterodoxy, which encourages experimentation with brand content that is free of the dominant socio-cultural profile. Modern marketing tries to create a value proposition that remains relatively unchanged over time by establishing "positive, unique and lasting" (Keller, 1993, 2003) associations in consumers' minds that are resistant to contextual changes (Holt, 2005). It is supported by a nomothetic understanding of values in psychology. According to Hofstede (1980), socio-cultural forms and practices can last as long as 50 or 100 years. But societies change and argue constantly on a variety of issues and modify their identity expectations accordingly. Therefore, trying to maintain an unchanged position in the form of brand mantra, is a recipe for failure (Keller, 2003).

In postmodern consumer culture, goods are merely the raw material through which consumers express themselves. The institutionalization of marketing as an expert discourse capable of imposing meanings on consumers culture seems hopeless and results in an ever-deepening avoidance of advertising (Çelik et al., 2023; Chen

& Zhou, 2023; Heath & Feldwick, 2008; Rojas-Méndez et al., 2009). The new expectations require forms of action in which brands, using new, multifaceted communication channels, leave the field of "sense-making" (Weick, 1969) to consumers, offering them building blocks rather than ready-made solutions. Old-fashioned marketing has always tended toward a single best consumer choice (Firat & Dholakia, 2006), which by definition prevents brands from ceding any power to consumers. But, according to the emerging paradigm, markets satisfy consumer needs primarily by producing differences, so from a systemic point of view, unorthodox and diverse consumer practices seem to be the most productive (Holt, 2002).

Despite the deficiencies of modern marketing, the importance of brands has been on the rise rather than the decline over the past few decades. This is largely the result of the successful absorption of counterculture into the repertoire of some avant-garde communication realizations by advertising agencies under the sign of the "creative revolution" (Frank, 1997) (e.g. Ogilvy, DDB, Wieden+Kennedy in the US, PZL in Poland).

The parallel world of modern marketing is not the result of malice, as some critics would probably like to see, but a consequence of deeply rooted assumptions about the nature of our world. In modernist ontology, social structures are not constructed, they simply exist, and we just name them and act accordingly. In poststructuralist ontology, however, the structures are the result of negotiation and constant transformation (Berger & Luckmann, 1983). Modernist implications thus fail to take into account the fact that consumers actively interpret the text (brand communication) according to the identity project they are pursuing. By breaking down the binary opposition of producer and consumer, the postmodern paradigm abolishes the primacy of the former and shifts from customer satisfaction to customer empowerment. The consumer can now become a co-creator of the product or service.

The dominance of modernist thinking in the daily practice of marketing is primarily the result of the constant pressure for short-term sales outcomes at the expense of the potential long-term gains associated with building cultural capital. This is a time-consuming task that requires strategy adjustments that inevitably put them on a collision course with efficiency criteria. But, as seen in this case, culturally embedded (Firat & Dholakia, 2006) marketing can elevate brands to iconic positions and sales results to levels unattainable by any conventional model.

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