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Emotional Branding and the Strategic Value of the Doppelgänger Brand Image

Emotional branding is widely heralded as a key to marketing success. However, little attention has been given to the risks posed by this strategy. This article argues that emotional-branding strategies are conducive to the emergence of a doppelgänger brand image, which is defined as a family of disparaging images and meanings about a brand that circulate throughout popular culture. This article's thesis is that a doppelgänger brand image can undermine the perceived authenticity of an emotional-branding story and, thus, the identity value that the brand provides to consumers. The authors discuss how the tenets of emotional branding paradoxically encourage the formation and propagation of doppelgänger brand imagery. This article develops the counterintuitive proposition that rather than merely being a threat to be managed, a doppelgänger brand image can actually benefit a brand by providing early warning signs that an emotional-branding story is beginning to lose its cultural resonance. This article demonstrates these ideas through an analysis of the doppelgänger brand image that is beginning to haunt a paragon of emotional branding—Starbucks. The authors conclude with a discussion of how marketing managers can proactively use the insights gained by analyzing a doppelgänger brand image.

Over the past decade, emotional branding has emerged as a highly influential brand management paradigm (Gobe 2001; Zaltman 2003). Emotional branding is a consumer-centric, relational, and story-driven approach to forging deep and enduring affective bonds between consumers and brands (Roberts 2004). Proponents of emotional branding proclaim that this high degree of consumer passion is seldom, if ever, cultivated through rational arguments about tangible benefits or even appeals to symbolic benefits, such as heightened self-esteem or status (Gobe 2001). Rather, these potent consumer–brand linkages typically emerge when branding strategies use narratives and tactics that demonstrate an empathetic understanding of customers' inspirations, aspirations, and life circumstances and that generate warm feelings of community among brand users (Atkin 2004; Cova and Cova 2002; Fournier 1998; Muniz and Schau 2005).

Among marketing practitioners, this relational, communal, participatory, sensory, and emotive view of consumer–brand relationships is increasingly heralded as a central pillar of market differentiation and sustainable competitive advantage (Atkin 2004; Gobe 2001; Lindstrom 2005; Roberts 2004). Similarly, consumer researchers investigating brand personalities, brand communities, and the mean-

ings that anchor strong consumer–brand relationships arrive at conclusions and recommendations that are consistent with emotional-branding tenets (Aaker 1997; Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Fournier 1998; Kozinets 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Even brand management paradigms originally premised on cognitive theories of consumer knowledge formation now incorporate many concepts and recommendations that are characteristic of the emotional-branding paradigm (Keller 2003a, b).

However, a seldom-discussed risk of emotional-branding strategies is their potential to expose firms to a particular type of cultural backlash, which we characterize as the "doppelgänger brand image"—that is, a family of disparaging images and stories about a brand that are circulated in popular culture by a loosely organized network of consumers, antibrand activists, bloggers, and opinion leaders in the news and entertainment media. Over time, these brand-focused parodies and criticisms can coalesce into a coherent set of opposing meanings that plague brands that otherwise have attained competitive success through emotional-branding strategies. In effect, a doppelgänger brand image culturally competes with the emotionally resonant meanings that a brand's management attempts to instill through its marketing activities.

From a conventional brand management standpoint, the central question about these brand parodies and social criticisms is whether they actually hurt a brand and whether a firm should take action to combat them (Earle 2002). Indeed, corporations sometimes pursue aggressive legal measures against people who create or distribute parodies of their advertisements or logos. Although this adversarial stance is understandable, we suggest that it is ultimately a

form of brand management myopia that overlooks strategically valuable cultural insights that can be gleaned from an examination of these defamatory representations of the brand.

In this article, we argue that a doppelgänger brand image functions as a diagnostic tool that can reveal latent brand image problems that could eventually blossom into a full-fledged brand image crisis. More specifically, the analysis of a doppelgänger brand image can (1) call attention to cultural contradictions that could potentially undermine the perceived authenticity of a firm's emotional-branding strategy, (2) provide early warning signs that an emotional-branding story is beginning to lose its value as an authenticating narrative for consumers' identity projects, and (3) offer insights into how an emotional-branding strategy can be reconfigured to fit better with changing cultural times and shifting consumer outlooks. We further argue that these diagnostic insights are unlikely to be generated by conventional brand management frameworks.

Our theory-building orientation follows an emerging tradition of studies that use qualitative data and culturally based insights to develop new theoretical knowledge of the symbolic and experiential dimensions of consumer–brand relationships (e.g., Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Fournier 1998; Holt 2002; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). In pursuing this agenda, we begin with a brief review of the tenets of emotional branding. We propose that this widely used marketing strategy harbors a set of unintended (and largely unrecognized) risks that predispose brands to the formation of doppelgänger brand images. Next, we show how such unintended consequences emerge in the context of Starbucks's emotional-branding strategy and analyze how these unflattering and disauthenticating meanings motivate consumer brand avoidance. We then discuss general managerial insights that can be garnered by monitoring and analyzing doppelgänger brand images and the broader strategic implications of our research.

The Tenets and Unintended Consequences of Emotional Branding

Emotional branding emerged in the late 1990s as a self-proclaimed corrective to the shortcomings of the conventional benefit-driven approach to branding (see Gobe 2001). Specifically, emotional-branding gurus challenge the benefit-driven approach's fundamental claim that brand managers must establish a clear, consistent, and distinctive benefit position in the mind of the consumer (see Aaker 1996; Ries and Trout 1981). Rather, proponents of emotional-branding argue that a benefit-driven positioning cannot provide an enduring competitive advantage, because it is readily emulated, particularly when the benefits are tied to technological and product design features. They further contend that straightforward benefit appeals are unlikely to break through the clutter of a saturated marketing environment that a plethora of brands are fighting to claim distinctive associations. In this vein, emotional-branding proponents insist that the brand meanings that inspire consumer passion and abiding loyalty are seldom, if ever, attribute-oriented benefits (e.g., Gobe 2001; Mark and Pearson 2001; Roberts 2004).

From an emotional-branding standpoint, brand strategists should focus on telling stories that inspire and captivate consumers. These stories must demonstrate a genuine understanding of consumers' lifestyles, dreams, and goals and compellingly represent how the brand can enrich their lives (Roberts 2004). As Gobe (2002, p. xxi) writes, "consumers today not only want to be romanced by the brands they choose to bring into their lives, they absolutely want to establish a multifaceted holistic relationship with that brand, and this means they expect the brand to play a positive, proactive role in their lives." Thus, the strategic objective of emotional branding is to forge strong and meaningful affective bonds with consumers and, in so doing, become part of their life stories, memories, and an important link in their social networks (Atkin 2004). Over the past few years, many well-known brands have adopted emotional-branding strategies, including Tide, Lexus, Apple, Nike, IBM, Cheerios, McDonald's, and Starbucks (Atkin 2004; Gobe 2001; Roberts 2004).

The benefits of emotional-branding strategies are increasingly being endorsed by the academic marketing community. For example, in a pioneering scholarly article on consumer–brand connections, Fournier (1998) details the ways that consumers can experience brands as relationship partners that help them accomplish personal goals and resolve dilemmas in their everyday lives. Rather than being generated through skillful marketing, Fournier contends that these relational meanings (i.e., love/passion, self-connection, commitment, trust, and intimacy) emerge only when brands become integrated into consumers' lives and identity projects. Several subsequent studies (e.g., Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Holt 2002; Kates 2004; Zaltman 2003) have supported the identity significance of emotionally based consumer–brand relationships.

The social dynamics that underlie the emotional-branding paradigm have been most fully explicated in scholarly studies of brand communities, such as the Harley Owners Group and Apple Macintosh enthusiasts (e.g., McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005; O'Guinn and Muniz 2005). In these communities, brand meanings are collectively forged among a group of consumers. These shared meanings enable consumers from diverse walks of life and different geographic locales to experience deeply satisfying feelings of community and solidarity. It is difficult to find a more striking example of "loyalty beyond reason" (Roberts 2004) than the community of Apple Newton devotees, who have religiously stuck by a brand long abandoned by its manufacturer and who go to arduous extremes to continue using this increasingly antiquated technology (Muniz and Schau 2005).

At present, the conceptual divide between emotional-branding and more traditional benefit-driven branding strategies is rapidly narrowing as emotional-branding principles are being integrated into the benefit-driven brand management paradigm. For example, Keller (2003a, p. 596) commends Zaltman's metaphor elicitation technique,

Fournier's brand relationship quality model, and ethnographic research on brand communities for highlighting "intangible aspects of brand knowledge not related to the actual physical product or service specifications per se." The pinnacle of Keller's (2003b, pp. 92–93) customer-based brand equity pyramid is "brand resonance," which refers to "the ultimate relationship and level of attachment that a consumer has with a brand."

Emotional Branding and the Contested Cocreation of Brand Meaning

The tenets of emotional branding are perfectly aligned with the postmodern view that brand meanings are not controlled by managers but rather are cocreated through ongoing interactions among their users (Cova and Cova 2002; Fournier 1998; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). In the emotional-branding literature, consumers are commonly portrayed as enthusiastic partners who engage in intimate dialogues with other brand users and brand managers to create mutually beneficial, identity-enhancing, community-building, and loyalty-sustaining meanings (Atkin 2004; Gobe 2001; Roberts 2004). The Apple Macintosh and Harley-Davidson brand communities exemplify this model of shared brand ownership. By participating in these collaborative dialogues, brand managers can gain valuable insights into product design improvements and innovations, new product development opportunities, and resonant meanings that can be leveraged in advertising campaigns (Lindstrom 2005; Roberts 2004). In addition, proponents of emotional branding argue that these passionate consumers/owners will often act as brand missionaries, promoting the brand through their own invocative, personalized brand stories (Gladwell 2000; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

Yet this process of brand-meaning cocreation harbors some infrequently discussed but consequential risks. When a brand is viewed as transgressing or abandoning its emotional-branding promises, formerly loyal customers can create a significant backlash. This pernicious consequence of passionate consumer–brand relationships is vividly illustrated by the travails of Snapple, which was brought to the brink of collapse by a widespread rebellion among its most loyal consumers—energized by the spurned former spokesman Howard Stern, who angrily rechristened the brand "Crapple"—after its new corporate owner, Quaker, attempted to mainstream the brand (Deighton 2002; Holt 2003).

In addition to estranged customers, the media can also circulate brand meanings that are maligning, worrisome, or opprobrious. For example, as Martha Stewart gained celebrity status, she also became the target of an escalating litany of scandalous exposés, unflattering media constructions, and pop culture satires, all of which generated serious brand management headaches for Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, even before the ImClone scandal (Fournier and Herman 2004). In these alternative cultural constructions, a brand may be used as fodder for humorous parody, cautionary tales about latent lifestyle dangers (e.g., McDonald's vilification in the muckraking documentary *Super Size Me*), or derisive critiques of corporate capitalism (e.g., Nike as

the poster child for sweatshop labor). These uncharitable brand meanings and images can quickly spread through multiple channels, such as the news media, entertainment media, e-mail networks, and bloggers (see Klein 1999; Lasn 1999). Consider Procter & Gamble's initial introduction of the fat substitute Olestra, which was effectively sunk by the deadly combination of sensationalized press reports about unpleasant gastrointestinal side effects and the incessant lampooning of this supposed side effect by popular comedians, such as Jay Leno (see Gladwell 2001; Kozinets 2004).

Antibrand activists constitute another vocal group of adversarial brand-meaning creators (see Kozinets and Handelman 2004). These activists, such as Adbusters (www.adbusters.com), are often well-organized entities that try to raise consumer consciousness about what they deem to be the excesses and exploitations of corporate capitalism. When these activists are successful in garnering attention for their antibrand campaigns, a brand's image can take a drastic turn. For example, in the mid-1990s, the cosmetic retailer *The Body Shop* experienced a public relations crisis

mushroomed and are now being recognized as a potentially serious brand image threat (Earle 2002; Walker 2003). Similar to a virulent virus, these alternative, often-unflattering constructions of a brand can move through popular culture with lightening speed.

After a doppelgänger brand image is successfully diffused into popular culture, it presents a competing set of meanings that have the potential to influence consumer beliefs and behavior. We suggest that a doppelgänger brand image can provoke a sense of incongruity between the intimate and inspirational tenor of an emotional-branding strategy and the profit-driven motives of its corporate sponsor. Under such conditions, the authenticity of an emotional-branding story can become suspect, and the identity value that the brand offers to consumers can become greatly reduced (Holt 2002).

The literature on the psychological and cultural dimensions of authenticity is extensive (for more comprehensive reviews, see Campbell 1987; Cross 2000; Grayson and Martinec 2004; MacCannell 1989). A recurrent conclusion of these investigations is that the symbolic divide between the authentic and the inauthentic is a cultural construction rather than an inherent property of objects or actions. Several influential scholars have also noted an enduring cultural tension between the ideal of authenticity and popular conceptions of commercialism, as evinced by conventional laments about artists who compromise their integrity by "selling out" (Lears 1994). Underlying this contrast between the authentic and the commercial is a quasi-religious belief that certain spheres of human existence should remain sacred and distinct from the profane spheres of commerce and profit seeking (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).

The significance that consumers attribute to this ephemeral ideal of authenticity has been documented in several studies (e.g., Arnould and Price 1993; Fournier 1998; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Kozinets 2001; Peñaloza 2000; Price and Arnould 1999; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Brands that successfully shroud themselves in the cloak of authenticity are able to convey desirable consumer meanings of inner directedness, lack of pretense, and genuine commitment to brand-related activities (see Lewis and Bridger 2000). In pursuit of the authenticity grail, leading brands, such Miller, Burger King, Adidas, and Coke, now routinely use stealth marketing campaigns that are designed to give their brands a more authentic persona through tactics such as the co-option of urban vernaculars and styles and the seamless integration of their brands into the worlds of art and entertainment (Frank 1997; Holt 2002).

However, these tactics are continuously monitored and widely disparaged by antibrand activists as another insidious tactic used by Machiavellian marketers. In a consumer culture marked by pervasive skepticism toward marketing and advertising practices (Walker 2003; Wipperfürth 2005), the authenticity of a brand can be extremely difficult for brand managers to secure and disconcertingly easy for antibrand activists to usurp. When activists propagate a doppelgänger brand image, they are expressing a stinging rebuke to the idea that a corporate-sponsored brand could be a sincere relationship partner or offer genuine emotional sustenance. In the following section, we highlight the emerging doppelgänger brand imagery that is currently challenging the authenticity of Starbucks's emotional-branding claims.

Attacks on Starbucks's Perceived Authenticity

Currently, few brands are riding higher than Starbucks. From its humble origins as a single coffee shop in Seattle a mere 20 years ago, Starbucks has climbed the *Fortune* 500 ladder; it has approximately 7000 stores worldwide and a projected total of 10,000 by the end of 2005 (www.starbucks.com). Starbucks's revenue has climbed annually at an average of 20% per year, and it generated more than $4 billion in gross revenue and nearly $300 million in profit during 2003 (Starbucks Corporation 2003, p. 12), though the chain's same-store sales growth began to slow during 2004 (Ouchi 2004). However, these impressive financial numbers do not fully tell the story of Starbucks's transformative role in popular culture. Starbucks has sparked a dramatic resurgence in coffee consumption in the United States and has changed the leisure practices and daily routines for a broad swath of consumers. The aesthetic look, feel, and sound of Starbucks has influenced the design of retail servicescapes in general (Postrel 2003). Thus, Starbucks has become an important cultural icon, and the "Starbucks revolution" has, in large part, created the burgeoning market for coffee shops and premium-priced gourmet coffee beans (Helliker and Leung 2002).

Given its phenomenal rise, it is no surprise that Starbucks is widely heralded as a shining exemplar of emotional branding and successful brand positioning (e.g., Gobe 2002; Keller 2000; Lewis and Bridger 2000; Roberts 2004; Schmitt 1999; Schmitt and Simonson 1996; Shields 2002). However, not everyone shares this unbridled enthusiasm for the brand. A Web search reveals a staggering number of anti-Starbucks Web sites that present extensively elaborated criticisms of its business practices, scathing diatribes, and manifold culture-jamming ploys. One particular Web posting from an antibrand activist organization in the United Kingdom illustrates the spirit of these anti-Starbucks sentiments (www2.spacehijackers.org/starbucks):

> Starbucks make us feel ill, [w]ith their carefully chosen, subtle (but not too bland) colour scheme. They try to suggest some kind of ethnic, liberal charm. Even the background music has been Starbucked: watered-down, instrumental versions of Hendrix; after all, we wouldn't want to offend. The quirky living room sofas and tables are not so quirky when you realize they are identical to the other thousands of stores, [a]nd those thousands of stores, like a plague infesting our highstreets, are a McDonald's for the new media generation.… Most of all, we dislike their verminlike spread, subsidizing new stores in order to outprice and close down local rivals, before turning entire towns and cities that horrid green, [b]landing out any local culture and diversity worldwide.

Culture jammers routinely spread anti-Starbucks meanings through cyberspace, using attention-grabbing blends of narrative, satirical images, and animation. One animated

Web parody belittles the pretentiousness of the counter talk that unfolds when a Starbucks' customer orders a drink. Behind the barista is a sign proclaiming "We proudly propagandize Star-Schmucks coffee" and listing ridiculously high prices for standard coffee shop fare. When a trendily dressed customer orders a "vente, white chocolate, mocha thingy," a foul-mouthed cartoon chipmunk (imagine Alvin crossed with Chris Rock) pops up and mercilessly ridicules Starbucks's latte-lingo pretensions and everything else about its customers and marketing tactics (www.illwillpress.com/sml.html). A more scathing viral video likens Starbucks to a Nazi-like empire, steadily and evermore aggressively pursuing world domination (www.albinoblacksheep.com/flash/sbux.php).

Through this gamut of critical parodies, anti-Starbucks activists use humor and satire to assail this brand for many perceived misdeeds, including crushing local competition, degrading the environment, exploiting third-world workers, homogenizing local cultures, and perpetuating the worst excesses of status-conscious consumerism, as evinced by the cultural-jamming takes on its iconic mermaid logo (see Figure 1). Although these brand disparagements may be statistically and factually contestable, they put meanings into cultural circulation that challenge the authenticity of Starbucks's emotional-branding promises.

Of course, most consumers are not antibrand activists. However, these culture-jamming criticisms regularly enter into mainstream cultural discourse, such as media satires of Starbucks's breakneck expansion, as exemplified by the *Onion*'s (a satirical newspaper) mock headline "New Star-

bucks Opens in Rest Room of Existing Starbucks" that has been widely circulated on the Web or the lampooning cartoon presented in Figure 2. Although more sedate in tone, these parodies nonetheless reinforce the doppelgänger image that Starbucks is little more than a profit-driven, marketing affectation and that its customers are either dupes or shameless trend followers.

Much like a conventional brand image, the ultimate meanings of a doppelgänger brand image are forged by the consumers who interpret and use them in the context of their everyday lives. In the next section, we (1) highlight the aspects of Starbucks's doppelgänger brand image that most strongly resonate with our sample of consumers and (2) analyze how these meanings are incorporated into these consumers' preferences, lifestyles, belief systems, and identities. Drawing from these qualitative insights, we then discuss how these seemingly adversarial meanings can be used in a diagnostic fashion to understand, monitor, and proactively manage an emotional-branding strategy more effectively.

## An Analysis of Starbucks's Doppelgänger Brand Image

During the course of this study, we collected data over a two-year period, using a multisite approach. Our primary data consist of tape-recorded phenomenological interviews with 36 coffee shop patrons across two locations: a large city and a quintessential "latte town" (see Brooks 2000, pp. 103–109). The interviews totaled more than 60 hours of

FIGURE 1
Culture-Jamming Starbucks's Mermaid Logo

Notes: The image in the lower left-hand corner has been altered to remove profanity.

FIGURE 2
A Popular Culture Parody of Starbucks
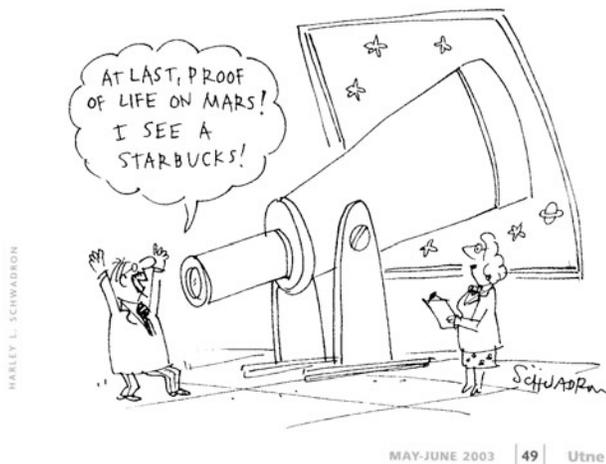
Source: From the *Utne Reader*. Reprinted with permission.

conversation, which we tape-recorded to produce 600 pages of single-spaced text. These interviews were supplemented by extensive field notes and numerous photographs from on-site observations of patrons across six different local coffee shops.

Interviews were conducted in six different coffee shops, ranging from those that were militantly anti-Starbucks and fashioned around a countercultural motif to those that exhibited a polished aesthetic much like that of Starbucks. This diversity of locales enabled us to accumulate narratives from respondents with a broad range of opinions about the Starbucks brand. Many of our participants also patronized a wide variety of coffee shops, and a few reported that they periodically frequented Starbucks. Thus, our interviews also elicited participants' perceptions and evaluations of the broader coffee shop scene in relation to Starbucks.

Participants were informed that the interviews pertained to their experiences and perceptions of coffee shops and were ensured that their identity would remain confidential. Each interview began with a set of "grand tour" questions (McCracken 1988) about participants' personal backgrounds, interests, and life goals and then focused on their experiences and perceptions of local coffee shops. Interviewers were provided with a small set of predetermined topics to cover (e.g., what participants liked and disliked about their local coffee shop, their perceptions of the coffee shop's regular customers). In keeping with depth interview protocols (e.g., McCracken 1988; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989), however, we allowed participants to guide the flow and content of the discussion to minimize the risk of interviewer-induced biases. These interviews had a conversational quality; interviewers interjected predetermined questions only when breaks in the dialogue arose. Importantly, the interviewers did not introduce the topic of Starbucks. However, in all of our 36 cases, the interviewees raised the distinction between their preferred coffee shop and contrasting doppelgänger meanings attributed to Starbucks. Further probes were then used to elucidate how these

consumers understood Starbucks and the kind of identity projected by its brand image.

We interpreted this body of qualitative data using a hermeneutic approach (Thompson 1997). In this approach, provisional understandings are formed, challenged, revised, and further developed through an iterative movement between individual transcripts and the emerging understanding of the entire set of textual data. Thus, each interview was initially treated as a separate idiographic case in which we attempted to uncover the salient meanings and identity projects (e.g., Mick and Buhl 1992) that each participant pursued. As our interpretation unfolded, we attempted to recognize thematic and narrative commonalities that emerged across the data set. Our aim was to identify the most recurrent and robust patterns of underlying cultural meanings that engendered these identified commonalities. This hermeneutic mode of interpretation is premised on the idea that a given consumer is not expressing a strictly subjective viewpoint. Instead, he or she is articulating a culturally shared system of meanings and beliefs, personalized to fit his or her specific life goals and circumstances (Thompson 1997).

Overview of Emergent Themes

> Jack: It's [Starbucks] just a huge corporation. I mean, just a gigantic corporation. They're all over the world. Thousands of outlets, and they come in, run specials, cut prices, and break other coffee shops—just drive them out of business. Because, unfortunately, there's not a lot of loyalty out there as far as consumers are concerned. They're usually going to go where they spend the least amount of money; they're going for the bargains rather than loyalty to local businesspeople.

The doppelgänger meanings plaguing the Starbucks brand are culturally grounded in a particular form of market populism that portrays large corporations as exploitive and rapacious agents whose actions run counter to the best interests of ordinary consumers and small business owners (Cohen 2003; Kelly 2001). However, the accuracy of this populist anticorporatism is widely contested. For example, the two firms most commonly accused of predatory practices, Wal-Mart and Starbucks, counter that they actually improve local economies and create greater opportunities for small businesses. In the case of Starbucks, this anticompetitive charge is particularly ironic because the so-called Starbucks revolution has corresponded to a dramatic rise in the number of locally owned coffee shops (Helliker and Leung 2002).

However, brand image is much more a matter of perceived meaning and cultural mythology (Holt 2003; Mark and Pearson 2001) than an aggregation of verified evidence. Regarding Jack's vignette, for example, there is little evidence that Starbucks, which maintains a premium market position, underprices local competitors. However, Jack's accusation is consistent with the populist idea that large corporations are modern-day robber barons that, as a matter of course, aggressively wield their clout to crush relatively powerless mom-and-pop operations.

The David versus Goliath portrayal of competition between a small, locally owned establishment and a global

chain, such as Starbucks, makes for a particularly compelling mythic formulation in which the consumer can also assume heroic qualities. Through patronage of local alternatives, these consumers construe themselves as participating in a dramatic populist struggle against corporate titans, such as Starbucks. Their heroic self-constructions are further buttressed by historically recurrent examples of corporations abusing their economic and political power and putting immediate profits over long-term societal and environmental interests, as exemplified by the well-publicized corporate accounting scandals of 2002.

Among our sample of local coffee shop patrons, the identity value of avoiding the Starbucks brand and the veneration of their preferred local alternatives hinged on two primary motifs, both of which have underlying connections to this brand's lack of perceived authenticity: (1) the cosmopolitan motif and (2) the artisan/owner motif. Through the cosmopolitan motif, local coffee shops are constructed as sites for acquiring authentically distinctive social and aesthetic experiences that are not readily available in corporate-run servicescapes and commercial settings. Through the artisan/owner motif, our participants view local coffee shops as atavistic throwbacks to a bygone era that existed before the marketplace dominance of national chains, when dedicated proprietors put their personal stamps on all facets of the business. Importantly, our data indicate that these authenticating narratives are forged through a critical comparison to Starbucks, which is summarily constructed as little more than a commercialized facsimile of a genuine coffee shop and is perceived as lacking any authentic expression of the cosmopolitan or artisan/owner motifs.

Notably, these two motifs closely mirror Starbucks's highly publicized homage to European cafés (including the attendant ideals of cultural sophistication, worldly engagement, and intellectual conversations) and its related market positioning as a comfortable communal space in which consumers can relax and socialize (Schultz 1997; Shields 2002). Our participants embrace these cosmopolitan and communal motifs as defining features of an authentic coffee shop, and they perceive Starbucks as being unable to deliver on these emotional-branding promises.

A Distinctive Cultural Experience (the Cosmopolitan Motif)

> Scott: I don't like Starbucks, because it seemed like every time I was there, the people have their laptop and then they have their *New York Times* or whatever, their espresso, and it just seems sterile. There was nothing, like here it's a little gothic and a little different. So it seemed too sterile.

Distaste for Starbucks's sterility and boring uniformity is a prominent refrain in our interviews. Our participants widely condemned Starbucks for offering a bland, prepackaged, focus-group-tested consumption experience that caters to bourgeois tastes. In diametric contrast, our participants view local coffee shops as locales for authentic expression of cultural uniqueness and alternative (i.e., noncorporate) sensibilities.

The quest for authentic cultural experiences has been discussed as a prominent motivator of global travels (MacCannell 1989) and excursions to historic sites, museums,

and reenactments (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Peñaloza 2000). In an era marked by cultural concerns over marketplace standardization, homogenization, and a growing antipathy toward generic suburban landscapes populated by cookie-cutter homes and strip malls (Oldenburg 1997; Ritzer 1998), the search for authenticity is often coupled with a desire to experience distinctive cultural worlds (Holt 1998; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). This cosmopolitan motif is prominent among our sample of local coffee shop patrons, who consistently characterized an authentic coffee shop as one that provides a spontaneous experience of local color that cannot be attained elsewhere. Importantly, these coveted cosmopolitan experiences are understood through the critical contrast to Starbucks's doppelgänger meaning of being a highly standardized, calculated, and status-conscious servicescape. Consider the following passage:

> Brian: I mean, if you just think of coffee culture, you're thinking about, you know, struggling artists. I hate to stereotype like that, but, I mean, with the local coffee places, you're going to have a little more idiosyncrasy, a little local flavor, color to the place. They might have a specialty kind of menu or something, or they might make [or] do something unique. But, say you're in San Francisco or Seattle, and you see a Starbucks; you more or less know what you're going to get when you walk in the door. This place is kind of an eclectic nature. Yeah, I just like the area. It's kind of a bohemian area of town. It's not like cookie cutter like Starbucks. You don't have to be a certain class to go there; more or less, you can be of any class really. I mean you just, what I like about it is, you never know what kind of character is going to show up here when you're having your coffee.

Through the mundane act of patronizing local coffee shops, our participants can experience themselves as rebels who are consuming against the grain of corporate-dominated mainstream conformity. Through this formulation, their experiences of authentic cultural difference and social diversity afforded by their favorite coffee shops become a resource for cultivating a sense of personal distinctiveness and defiant individuality. Conversely, their diametric contrast to Starbucks's doppelgänger meanings (i.e., corporate conformity and mass-market standardization) functions as a frame of reference that enhances these experiences of authenticity:

> Frank: Well, yeah, a place like this is unique, which I like. It very much caters to, you know, the population around here. It's very, you know, it's comforting to somebody who lives in the suburbs. It's unique, it's got its artsy sort of thing, but as opposed to Starbucks, you know, everywhere it's still the same corporate kind of cookie-cutter type of place that is more, that I don't see the same uniqueness. You know, you can come in here and get a cup of coffee, and it's going to be different than what you get in [name of another local establishment]; it's going to taste a little bit different, but you know, [in] every Starbucks, the food and drinks are pretty much the same. So, I mean, just a place like this has more personality. I wouldn't go to Starbucks. I'll go out of my way to go all the way to the East Side—for me, a drive from here is about six miles. I'd rather do that, and it's just more of a satisfying experience.

Similarly, Ellen echoes Adbusters' critique of mass consumer culture as a stultifying force (Lasn 1999) that incul-

cates preferences for standardized experiences that are familiar and comforting but ultimately inauthentic:

> Ellen: Well, I actually don't go into coffee shops that are chains, or I avoid them as much as possible. I don't do stores that are chains.
>
> Interviewer: Tell me about that.
>
> Ellen: Well, I don't want to participate in sort of the corporate spread into the world. I have the feeling that people that go to chain places have some sort of sense of their safety in doing that. Like, it's always the same no matter where they go. It actually becomes the culture.
>
> Interviewer : Can you explain that a little more?
>
> Ellen: When you go to Paris or you go someplace out in the world, the tendency is to want to find something that's home, something that you know, and if you walk down the street and find a McDonald's or a Starbucks, you know, this is your home, because these things have become so entrenched in the culture that it's not even conscious. If you go to look for restaurants, to look for places that are locally owned and run, they are not the same all over everywhere and that takes, it feels as if it takes effort. Like people, it takes effort and daring to try something that isn't the same. If you're somebody who's used to going into the same all the time, I think that's a sad comment on our culture.
>
> Interviewer: What are some of the things you think about when choosing a coffee shop?
>
> Ellen: Okay, I check out whether it's a place that has interesting people in it that look like I might want to get to know them. If it offers soy milk (laugh), that's peculiar! If it embraces variety, isn't rushed…. I think that's important too. I like being in a place where people aren't, you know, pounding a cup of coffee and zooming out somewhere. A certain kind of vitality I like as well. I look for where people are alive and active and doing something with their lives.

In this passage, Ellen forges a symbolic contrast between a standardized and mass-marketed consumer culture that caters to a risk-averse and staid clientele and the authentic experiences of local cultural charm that exist outside the sphere of corporate chains. Through her avoidance of chains, Ellen venerates her consumption preferences and lifestyle by pejoratively framing consumers as people who are trapped in the proverbial rat race and who lack time or inclination to live life to its fullest. In sharp symbolic contrast, she aligns herself with an enlightened community that leads authentic and purposeful lives, exhibiting a relaxed sense of joie de vivre and an enthusiasm for new experiences and cosmopolitan pleasures. Much like the value-laden distinction between tourists and travelers (see Mac-Cannell 1989; i.e., "Everyone else is a tourist, but I am a traveler"), a devout preference for local coffee shops and publicly expressed antipathy toward corporate chains, such as Starbucks, can be lionized as a sign of personal virtue and self-directed (rather than marketing-influenced) cosmopolitan tastes.

Beyond the personal significance of these identity-enhancing symbolic distinctions, these consumer narratives also highlight an important cultural aspect about perceptions of authenticity. Prior research has suggested that expe-riences of servicescape authenticity are steeped in a perceived fidelity to historical circumstances, cultural traditions, or the lives of famous people (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Peñaloza 2000). In the case of the American coffee shop scene, however, these cultural pillars of authenticity carry less symbolic weight. For example, Ellen's preferred coffee shop had been in operation for only three years, so it could not lay claim to some long-standing tradition. In general, local coffee shops tend to be simulations of a romanticized image of the Greenwich Village beatnik/bohemian coffeehouses (circa the 1950s) or left-bank French cafés frequented by beret-wearing, existential-spouting intellectuals. In this context, compelling claims to authenticity must be actively constructed, and the symbolic distinctions forged through Starbucks's doppelgänger brand meanings loom large in this regard. Particularly, the authenticity of local coffee shops' cultural ambiance is contingent on the idea that Starbucks's trademark servicescape is a marketing affectation designed to maximize profitability rather than an authentic, spontaneous expression of local culture:

> Anne: My image of Starbucks is pretty bad. Even though I haven't been there that many times, I think of [it] as more commercial, um, selling out in a way because you think of, like, Starbucks, they find out what people want and the atmosphere and the CDs and the merchandise, and you know, they're doing a really good job with all that, but something about that whole idea…. I just want to rebel against it. It's almost too analytical, where, you know, this place is just more "spiritual," you know, it's more that feeling; it's not as analytical. It's just more emotional or something.

Our participants' sharp distinction between authentic coffee shops and crass commercial interests reveals a glaring historical misconception. As McFall (2004) discusses, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European coffeehouses were protomarketing sites. Not only were they segmented according to different consumer interests, emphasizing poetry/literature, news, storytelling, and gossip, but they also provided an important means to distribute advertisements (with several advertising agencies actually originating from the coffeehouse trade) and commercial gathering points for auctions, sales, and business meetings. However, this historical intertwining of the commercial and the cultural does not easily align with romanticized desires for spontaneous cultural experiences that reveal the defining essence of a community. Through these invidious contrasts to Starbucks, however, local coffee shops can appear to be less driven by marketing considerations and more closely linked to their local community. In other words, our consumers' perceptions of authenticity emerge in relation to their critical constructions of Starbucks and the corporate staging of its servicescape.

An Intimate Commercial Experience (the Artisan/ Owner Motif)

> Patrick: Stammcafé is a German word for your neighborhood café, where you're a regular, and it's great because it totally says that idea, which is you have your local, local place, you know, your stammcafé, the place that you always go to, and then there are "cafés," where you just kind of go and, you know, when you're out with friends or

if you're in another part of town for a movie or things like that; so sure, why not go there, you know? But the *stammcafé*, you have a special sort of relationship.

Patrick's musings about his *stammcafé* bear a close relation to Oldenburg's (1997) concept of "third places" (i.e., public spaces that function as social gathering points and provide a proverbial home away from home, where a person can experience camaraderie and community). Oldenburg suggests that third places are characterized by a regular clientele who gather to experience a particular form of intimacy in these commercial spaces. This form of intimacy typically does not arise in the formality of the workplace, and it is more relaxing and convivial than the private intimacy of family relationships because it carries fewer interpersonal demands, responsibilities, and obligations. Importantly, the heart and soul of this commercial intimacy is the establishment's proprietor. In the ideal case, patrons believe that they are being personally enriched by their relationship to a unique character (see Oldenburg 1997; Price and Arnould 1999).

This sense of having an authentic connection to an individual proprietor is quite salient to our local coffee shop patrons. However, our interviews and observations suggest that, in general, the servicescapes of American coffee shops do not exhibit the kind of public intimacy and collectively shared conversations that Oldenburg argues are a defining cultural characteristic of third places. The social milieu of the contemporary coffee shop simply does not enjoin such spirited expressions of camaraderie and social bonding. Rather, it tends to foster more individualized experiences of a common connection to the owner/proprietor, who is viewed as the embodiment of the establishment's values and its quirky, endearing qualities.

In this sense, our participants' narratives parallel some findings from Price and Arnould's (1999) analysis of commercial friendships, particularly in regard to the role of an owner's self-revelations in generating a sense of shared intimacy. However, the range of personal information our participants desired is fairly narrow. These consumers want to know just enough about the proprietor to draw inferences about how the coffee shop reflects his or her views and values. Thus, this bounded intimacy enables customers to craft a compelling story about why their preferred coffee shop is truly different and, thus, fundamentally and irrevocably distinct from the corporate-run and standardized Starbucks:

Interviewer: What is a local coffee shop for you?

Sandra: For me, it would be a coffee shop that isn't national, something that is not a chain. Like this coffee shop, the owner is here most of the time I am here, and I just find that I really respect that, and I have had conversations with the owner before. I know that he used to be, like, in the jewelry business; he left that and opened a coffee shop. So I just find that pretty interesting that the owner frequents the place and works there and has a connection to the customer.

Interviewer: So what is it about knowing the owner or having the owner living in the area that's important to you?

Sandra: I like to support local business. I think that Starbucks, in a way, is very sterile. I mean it doesn't have much character and personality, because it is this mass-produced business, and I think that when you have a situation where there are so many, it becomes more impersonal, and the people who work there don't care as much I would guess. I would think that if it's locally owned, the owner is more involved. He or she would have more connection to the employees, and the employees would probably feel better about working for this person that you see regularly. I mean if you look at this place, it's unique. There is no other place like it in town; there is no other place in the world just like it. But if you look at Starbucks, it's pretty common. It's just not as interesting, I think.

Much like our other participants, Sandra praises local coffee shops for having a one-of-kind quality that emanates directly from the owner's personal touches and that are conspicuously absent from Starbucks's mass-marketed servicescape. Our participants tend to read considerable meaning into their experiences of local charm. They view these distinctive features of the local coffee shops as a kind of self-revelation on the part of the proprietor, who is expressing his or her own personal tastes and values. Furthermore, these various signs of uniqueness are taken as compelling signals that these proprietors are following their own muses rather than calculating what offerings would be most popular to a particular customer segment. Paradoxically, this apparent "take-it-or-leave-it" indifference to customer whims provides these establishments with a particular appeal, particularly in contrast to Starbucks, which is considered a conservative and boring servicescape designed not to offend anyone's sensibilities:

Kevin: I visited my sister in Oakland; there are three coffee shops on Piedmont Avenue. I've been to all three. One is a place called Peet's coffee; it's like a local that's gone national. Then there's the Starbucks of course, and then there's another little place that I went to that I started to frequent and just loved. It was a little left leaning, kind of different. Their coffee was high quality and stuff, but this little ma-and-pa place served ice cream; they had ice cream as part of their coffee shop—a little different. They had a Ms. Pac-Man video game there, and they also put on the walls photographs of homeless people. They pay homeless people to have Polaroid pictures taken—they would ask for permission of course—and then they gave them, like, $20 or something, and it becomes art on the wall. They weren't afraid to be nontraditional; that's what I loved. Someplace like Starbucks wouldn't dare do that.

In these consumer narratives, local coffee shop proprietors are venerated for being sincerely and deeply committed to their clientele, employees, and the neighborhood at large. In contrast, Starbucks is described as a corporate interloper that wants to reap profits through a mass-produced servicescape and that conspicuously lacks an authentic connection to the local community. Sandra's passage also reiterates the previously discussed heroic framing of the local coffee shop. The proprietor is celebrated for fighting to maintain an invaluable and distinctive community asset against the powerful forces of an impersonal corporate chain. Through this heroic interpretation, Sandra's own patronage of local coffee shops takes on a heightened moral and social significance, representing a means through which she can help ameliorate the blight of standardized corporate servicescapes.

Beyond this immediate sense of personal connection and reciprocal commitment, our participants also portray the proprietors of their favorite coffee shops as devoted artisans, who enact laudable virtues through their business activity, such as educating the palettes of their clientele (in the manner of a wine connoisseur):

Carie: I love Tina [the owner]. I think, originally, people came into [name of local establishment] for a hit of coffee and a hit of Tina. You know, she's got such great energy. I love to see Tina, and I love the coffee. I love the freshness of their coffee. You know, and I buy their beans. It was really fun when she was first getting into roasting coffee. She had a popcorn popper, like an air popper. Which is very similar to the big roaster that they use. The same technology, so she was experimenting with different beans. She'd bring over, like, little tiny Ziplock bags full of different coffees. So she'd have us try it all the time. At first, it was like a little bit, it was so intense, you're not used to drinking that fresh of a coffee, and then you sort of develop like this, it's like drinking wine. You know, you don't really appreciate, like, a really good wine at first, and then you start to appreciate it…. She is real connected to the Kaladi Brothers up in Alaska, up in Anchorage, and so it's really fun, because we were up in Anchorage, and you know, Kaladi Brothers was all over the place. Like you'd see a sign, "We serve Kaladi Brothers Coffee." It's the same awesome quality, really consistent, you know, roasting, and everything. My guess is that's her inspiration. And Kaladi Brothers, their main shop is off this road that's difficult to get to; it has no parking, and you know, so the same kind of thing as [her favorite coffee shop's location]. It's not like in the perfect shopping mall and real accessible, so.

This passage exemplifies the shared experience between a proprietor and customers that imbues local coffee shops with an undeniable sense of authenticity. In this case, Carie views herself as intimately involved in the proprietor's (Tina) efforts to perfect a time-honored craft and to cultivate greater consumer appreciation for skillfully roasted coffee. In keeping with the artisan ideal, Tina (the proprietor) has earned a further claim to authenticity through her apprenticeship at Kaladi Brothers Coffee and her choice of an out-of-the-way location for her shop, which contributes to the sense that she is not catering to the masses (a la Starbucks) but only to those who can really appreciate a great cup of coffee (and are willing to make some effort to attain it).

As Brown (2003) suggests, under certain market conditions, inconvenience—the bane of conventional marketing management thought—can actually increase customer loyalty and commitment. Through this nexus of meanings, Carie's patronage of her favorite local coffee shop facilitates an identity project that is particularly salient to consumers with higher levels of cultural capital (Holt 1998). Such consumers strive to demonstrate the distinctiveness and sophistication of their aesthetic tastes by consciously seeking out unique consumer experiences that exist off the proverbial beaten path (Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Starbucks's mass-marketed coffee and its ubiquitous convenience-oriented servicescapes provide a readily recognizable symbol of the consumer mainstream, and thus the brand serves as a symbolic foil for consumers who pursue this sense of cosmopolitan distinctiveness.

Conventional brand management theory holds that, in general, consumers avoid brands whenever negative associations, such as those dogging Starbucks, become strongly established in their minds. Through brand avoidance, consumers circumvent the risk that these stigmatized meanings will sully their public image or self-concept (see Keller 2003b). However, our research provides evidence that consumers do not just avoid doppelgänger brand meanings but rather consciously leverage these disparaging meanings in ways that reinforce an identity-affirming belief that they are more daring and discriminating than the average, mainstream consumer.

Summary

Our cultural analysis suggests that the widespread critiques (by both mass media and antibrand activists) of Starbucks as a rapacious corporate titan are reworked by consumers to create an identity-enhancing morality tale, premised on the consumption ideal of authenticity. The subtext of this authenticating narrative is the David versus Goliath myth, which imbues our participants' experiences of oppositional brand loyalty (see Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) with a particularly strong emotional charge. Our participants perceive local coffee shops as loci of authentic consumption experiences and social relationships. These two themes map onto contradictions that exist between Starbucks's emotional-branding promises and its highly public presence as a global corporate chain. Starbucks's emotional-branding strategy encourages consumers to desire a sense of intimacy and cultural distinctiveness, but paradoxically, it is not as well suited to deliver on these experiential promises as are the myriad local coffee shops that have followed in its frothy corporate wake.

In the following section, we offer some culturally grounded extrapolations beyond our interview data to specify which aspects of Starbucks's emotional-branding strategy contribute to its doppelgänger brand image and render it susceptible to the stigma of inauthenticity. Drawing from this cultural reading, we then illustrate how an analysis of a brand's doppelgänger meanings can be used (1) to diagnose emerging cultural changes that could undermine the authenticity of its emotional-branding story and (2) to gain insights into how this brand story could be altered to avoid this undesirable outcome. This kind of interpretive move is consistent with theoretical arguments that the analyses of consumer narratives gain explanatory power and enhanced managerial relevance when they are supplemented by broader considerations of their supporting social, cultural, and historical contexts (see Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Holt 2003; Thompson 1997; Zaltman 2003).

Diagnosing Starbucks's Authenticity Dilemma

Starbucks's success is widely attributed to its ability to deliver consistently the communal ambiance, conviviality, and emotional warmth of a quaint European café (Schultz 1997; Shields 2002). According to this explanation, Starbucks has attained market dominance because its carefully designed servicescape is an inviting and comfortable place

for consumers to meet, socialize, and enjoy a memorable coffee-drinking experience (Aaker 2004; Keller 2000; Roberts 2004; Schmitt 1999; Schultz 1997). The putative importance of the third-place experiences sits uneasily with tracking studies that indicate that more than 70% of Starbucks's customers are "grab-and-go" types, who are most concerned with speed of service (Moon and Quelch 2004; Stone 2004) and, thus, spend little time imbibing its quaintness and warmth.

This marketplace disparity raises the possibility that this third-place appeal is a peripheral aspect of Starbucks's identity value and emotional appeal. We also note that the disparaging portrayals of the Starbucks brand, whether expressed by our participants or by the gamut of anti-Starbucks Web sites, never question the basic premise that Starbucks is a good place to meet friends and have casual conversations. Rather, challenges to Starbucks's authenticity appear to target a deeper emotional level that cuts to the heart of the brand's identity value.

Taking a cue from Holt's (2004) thesis that brands attain iconic standing when they provide myths that consumers can use to assuage salient threats to their identities, we begin by noting that Starbucks became a cultural icon during this heyday of the mid-1990s new economy and the dot-com boom. These socioeconomic conditions gave rise to a professional class of symbolic workers who were well rewarded for their creative skills. These professionals inhabited organizations that were increasingly decentralized and that reveled in having an informal and playful corporate culture that sharply deviated from bureaucratic norms (Florida 2002).

The social commentator David Brooks (2000) cleverly christened this new professional class as the Bobos, that is, a new breed of professionals who attempted to meld the bourgeois values of hard work, career success, and material affluence with the bohemian values of creativity, expressiveness, anticonformism, and antimaterialism (for a related discussion of how Volkswagen became the automotive brand of choice among the Bobo class, see Holt 2004). Through this postmodern identity, people could be career driven and yet define themselves as anticonformists who live by an edict of creativity and self-expressiveness, and they could lead affluent, brand-conscious lifestyles while viewing themselves as committed antimaterialists.

To maintain a coherent self-identity, Bobos needed a means to assuage the many cultural conflicts posed by these juxtapositions. Thus, for members (and aspirants) of this new class, Starbucks delivered exactly the right kind of mythic story. Through its embodiment of a hip, creative, caring form of capitalism, this brand image erased any sense of cultural incompatibilities between bourgeois and bohemian value systems. Starbucks catered to these new class sensibilities in every aspect of its brand delivery, most particularly its patented decor that emulates not a European café but rather the decor of creative-class office spaces (Florida 2002; Schmitt and Simonson 1996). The symbolic message is that Starbucks is an appropriately informal, creativity conducive space in which the creative class can meld their professional and bohemian identities and directly experience material and symbolic identity validation.

Through their patronage of Starbucks, corporate bohemians can reinforce the authenticity of their delicate ideological balancing act and thus allay concerns that they are corporate clones who, in some way, may be culpable for the social and environmental problems widely attributed to corporate capitalism.

The doppelgänger brand meanings we have identified in this study provide some evidence that Starbucks's rapid (and much parodied) market expansion is beginning to undermine this brand's ability to assuage the identity conflicts facing the corporate bohemian class. In effect, Starbucks's doppelgänger brand image unravels its corporate bohemian synthesis and suggests that its bohemian image is a marketing gambit designed to mask its real identity as a corporate titan. This is a potentially severe threat to Starbucks's continued marketing success, because if it loses its aura of authenticity, it can no longer symbolically affirm the Bobo-ish identities of its core customers. In addition, more casual customers may also be more predisposed to question the brand's commitment to social responsibility and the artisan craft of coffee roasting. Such a development would likely make Starbucks vulnerable to competitors in the form of small independents, regional chains, and national competitors, such as Peet's.

The franchise of an iconic brand, such as Starbucks, is typically built around a relatively small segment of extremely loyal customers who validate the authenticity of its emotional-branding story and act as brand evangelists. Through the actions of this devoted core, the brand acquires a heightened cultural cachet that, in turn, attracts a broader segment of peripheral consumers who draw from the brand's symbolic value (Holt 2004; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002). As exemplified by the travails of brands such as Snapple and Volkswagen (circa the 1970s and 1980s), when these core customers begin to abandon an iconic brand, it precipitates a downward cultural spiral, which can erode brand equity and market share (see Holt 2004). Thus, a relatively small number of brand avoiders could be the impetus to a cultural tipping point (Gladwell 2000) that weakens Starbucks's brand franchise.

In summary, our analysis indicates that Starbucks's aggressive growth strategy, highly publicized market domination, and omnipresence no longer mesh with its appeal to a countercultural, bohemian sensibility and that this strategy may be compromising the perceived authenticity of its emotional-branding story. However, an analysis of doppelgänger brand meanings can only take brand strategists so far in deciding whether a brand's image should be reconfigured and in identifying what new cultural contradictions should be targeted in an attempt to revise its brand positioning. To accomplish this strategic task, brand strategists need to analyze thoroughly the socioeconomic and cultural conditions currently facing their core customers. For example, the conditions that characterized the "new economy" during Starbucks's rise to iconic status have been fundamentally altered by the puncturing of the dot-com bubble. The current economic climate is colored by the events of September 11 and a heightened sense of economic vulnerability that has arisen from dramatic declines in new job production and other related factors, such as corporations' out-

sourcing of the new class's "creative work" to lower-wage countries (Pink 2005). By analyzing how these insecurities are represented in popular culture (through books, magazines, films, music, blogs, and other media) and by studying how consumers understand their own lives in relation to them, insights can be gained into resonant life concerns that the Starbucks brand can credibly speak to through its emotional-branding efforts.

As a hypothetical illustration, imagine that follow-up research reveals a growing cultural tension between Americans' historically optimistic view of the future (and the corollary belief that everyone can succeed if they work hard and apply their talents) and a more pessimistic view that economic fate is controlled by forces outside of personal control (and that fate is not always kind or just). This hypothetical cultural contradiction could support a brand mythology that represents Starbucks as a pillar of stability and security in consumers' lives (thus reframing the doppelgänger meanings about Starbucks's "boring standardization" as a positive). Going further, Starbucks could assume the role of an ally or partner that helps consumers take charge of their professional lives and accomplish life goals in the face of random and arbitrary obstacles. Starbucks's professional, corporate aura (again, currently viewed as a negative) and the stimulating properties of its product could lend themselves to this reformulated emotional-branding story.

Implications for Strategic Brand Management

In general, the emotional-branding literature reads like a heroic tale in which intrepid brand managers break with orthodox branding strategies and are rewarded with intensely loyal customers, heightened profits, and a nearly impervious foundation of competitive advantage. These heroic testaments to the power of emotional branding invariably gloss over the potential risks associated with this strategy. Through a detailed examination of the case of Starbucks's emerging doppelgänger brand imagery, we have attempted to address this important issue. In this section, we take a step back from the details of this case and develop a set of initial recommendations that could help brand managers diagnosis pending threats to their emotional-branding investments.

History has shown that dominant brands routinely fall from their stellar heights and struggle to regain their former glory. Disney, McDonald's, AT&T, Levi's, Kodak, and Coca-Cola are just a few examples of market-driven brands that rather suddenly went from paragons of marketing excellence to besieged icons losing ground to competitors (Haig 2003; Holt 2002; Stewart 2002). However, the conventional brand management literature offers little concrete advice on how brand strategists can proactively diagnose the cultural vulnerabilities that could eventually erode their customer-based brand equity. Rather, brand image–related problems are attributed in general to companies failing to follow the tried-and-true principles of sound brand management, such as maintaining consistency and relevance (Keller 2000, 2003a).

Yet the diagnostic value of these normative branding principles is actually quite limited. The consistency principle instructs managers to specify their brand's essence, core personality, and primary benefit carefully and then communicate consistent messages about these essential dimensions. The relevance principle instructs managers to update continuously their brand's user/usage imagery, brand personalities, types of relationships, and promotional themes to keep a brand image fresh, energized, and contemporary (Aaker 2004; Keller 2003a). The somewhat contradictory nature of these two normative principles leaves little doubt that brand managers must undertake a very delicate balancing act. However, these principles beg the important question, How can this balance be effectively attained? To redress this gap, we propose a three-step action plan that can help marketers protect their emotional-branding investments.

Monitor Cultural Cues

First, brand managers should closely monitor popular culture for signs that their brand is beginning to develop a doppelgänger brand image. Here, the critical issue is not how many people embrace these unflattering brand meanings or if they pose an immediate threat to the brand. Indeed, a best-case scenario would be to catch these meanings during their underground phase, analogous to the way that "cool hunters" attempt to discover nascent consumer trends (Gladwell 2000). The relevant concerns at this stage are which aspects of the emotional-branding story are being subverted and what alternative symbolic brand meanings are being created. For example, our analysis of Starbucks suggests that its mass-market ubiquity has undercut an essential component of its emotional-branding story, namely, its ability to act as an authenticating symbol of hip consumerism (see Frank 1997). These cues suggest that Starbucks should consider developing a new emotional-branding story that reframes its corporate connotations in ways that function as a symbolic asset rather than as a source of inauthenticity.

The same medium that facilitates the rapid cultural diffusion of a doppelgänger brand image (i.e., the Internet) can also facilitate the task of cultural monitoring. For example, brand managers should routinely monitor consumer chat rooms, blogs, and Web-based media to gauge the cultural buzz surrounding their marketing campaigns. A more sophisticated approach would be to use systematic netnography techniques (see Kozinets 2002) to assess when an emotional-branding story is beginning to inspire parodies, critics, and other signs of a cultural backlash and to analyze the cultural content of these cultural-jamming efforts. Brand managers should be sensitive to both the frequency and level of intensity of these antibrand sentiments and the specific aspects of their emotional-branding story that are being subverted (and the adversarial meanings that result).

Identify and Track Brand Avoiders

Second, brand managers should identify and study people for whom these doppelgänger meanings resonate and motivate various kinds of brand avoidance. Blogs and antibrand

Web sites may be a useful starting point for locating these people. In addition, customer relationship management systems could be used to identify lapsed customers, who may turn out to be intentionally avoiding a brand because of its doppelgänger imagery. By studying these consumers' viewpoints (we recommend using qualitative methods, such as depth interviews, laddering, ZMET-type collage studies, or even focus groups), managers can assess which doppelgänger brand meanings are resonating with consumers and plumb the identity benefits they gain from this negative imagery.

This second step is a necessary complement to the broader monitoring of cultural cues we outlined in the first step. The ideological concerns that inspire antibrand activists to create and circulate a doppelgänger brand image (and that tend to dominate those representations) may not be that relevant to consumers or that central to their brand avoidance motivations. In the case of Starbucks, for example, antibrand activists widely accuse Starbucks of engaging in a host of predatory business practices. Although the consumers in our study made passing reference to these charges, their primary motivations for avoiding the brand ensued from their perceptions that Starbucks's commercialized servicescape lacked cultural distinctiveness and an authentic personal touch. Thus, brand management decisions based only on an analysis of cultural cues could lead managers to erroneous conclusions about the doppelgänger meanings that pose the greatest threat to their emotional-branding strategies.

Develop and Test a New Emotional-Branding Story

Third, to manage the challenges posed by the emergence of a doppelgänger brand image, we advocate a decidedly proactive approach. Specifically, we believe that brand managers should make adaptations to their emotional-branding story before it goes stale and precipitates a full-blown branding crisis. This proactive orientation carries an unnerving implication: Managers should begin modifying their emotional-branding strategy while it is still accomplishing its marketing objectives. In a dynamic and rapidly changing marketing environment, we believe that it is much better to stay ahead of the cultural curve than to fall behind it and suddenly need to play catch-up with competitors that have more resonant emotional-branding stories.

When confronted by an emotional-branding strategy that is showing blatant signs of diminished marketplace appeal, managers can easily fall into a crisis management panic mode as they grapple with declining sales and lost share. Under such conditions, they may be tempted to delegate much of the strategy-creation process to outside branding consultants in the quest for quick, magic-bullet solutions (Haig 2003). However, this crisis mode can also lead to arbitrary and abrupt shifts in an emotional-branding story that often compound the problem (Keller 2000). For example, if a brand has lost its cultural claim to authenticity, a dramatic shift in the symbolic terms of its emotional-branding strategy could easily be interpreted as further evidence that the brand has no authentic identity other than that dictated by the whims of fashionability.

Accordingly, we suggest that a successful brand image revitalization strategy must fit with prevailing cultural conditions while displaying a clear and comprehensible connection to the emotional-branding story through which the brand made its cultural mark. Because of the amount of corporate transparency now available on the Internet, emotional-branding stories that lack this kind of historical continuity are likely to be perceived as inauthentic (see Holt 2004). A cultural analysis of a doppelgänger brand image can offer valuable insights into how a resonant new emotional-branding story can be culled from the narrative threads of an existing one in a way that maintains this vital sense of historical continuity.

By engaging in the cultural monitoring and brand avoider tracking we discussed previously, brand managers (and their creative consultants) should have a wealth of insights (both cultural and individual) to develop a set of alternative emotional stories that can be tested among consumers. Although most consumers are not particularly good at generating new campaign ideas, particularly ones that tap into emerging cultural trends (see Gladwell 2005; Holt 2003; Zaltman 2003), they are quite astute at assessing the relative degree of emotional connection they experience with different story lines. Again, we recommend the use of qualitative methods, especially rich projective techniques (e.g., Z-MET; Zaltman 2003), as a means to evaluate the emotional resonance (and authenticity value) of alternative story lines. These qualitative insights could also be used to develop quantitative measures of emotional resonance and perceived authenticity (see, e.g., Grayson and Martinec 2004). Furthermore, this approach offers a means to develop a culturally based brand-shielding strategy (see Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986), designed to insulate a brand's symbolic value (e.g., its perceived authenticity) from the devaluation among core customers that can arise when a brand attains broader market appeal.

The implementation of these three steps requires a thorough understanding of a brand's history as well as the cultural meanings and identity projects most salient to its core customers. This type of knowledge is difficult to codify and emerges through a process akin to dynamic puzzle solving. In this puzzle-solving activity, brand strategists must identify a gestalt fit among the target customers' cultural worlds, the properties of the brand, and a credible emotional-branding story that links consumers to the brand. Unlike a conventional puzzle, however, the emotional-branding conundrum keeps changing, and accordingly, emotional-branding strategies must be periodically revised and transformed. In this sense, our proposed guidelines align with Dickson's (1992) competitive rationality thesis that marketing success is dependent on constant monitoring of the dynamic competitive environment and the continual generation of innovative adaptations to these changes.

Conclusions and Future Directions

In this research, we attempted to demonstrate that (1) emotional-branding strategies may unintentionally foster the cultural development of a doppelgänger brand image and (2) careful analysis of this imagery can provide insights

into latent branding problems that might not be detected by conventional branding strategy prescriptions. Although we believe that our analysis of Starbucks's emerging doppelgänger imagery provides support for our thesis, we also acknowledge that our research is limited by important boundary conditions and that these conditions represent potential research opportunities.

Our analysis suggests that consumers avoid brands when their emotional-branding promises are viewed as inauthentic and, conversely, that emotional-branding strategies succeed when they can function as an authenticating narrative for consumers' identity projects. These ideas are congruent with research indicating that consumers' most valued brands are those whose symbolic meanings play an important role in their self-conceptions (Fournier 1998; Holt 2002) and with findings that consumers can be unforgiving when trusted brands seem to violate their emotional-branding promises (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). However, a lack of perceived authenticity may not be a major stumbling block for brands that do not seek competitive advantage through emotional branding. In addition, brands that lack iconic status (i.e., market challengers or followers) may be less susceptible to attacks on their authenticity because such brands may fly under the radar of antibrand activists. Thus, further research that considers a broader spectrum of brands, consumers, and contexts is necessary to evaluate the robustness of our theory and findings.

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