

religion and secular consumption, a paraprimitive postmodern paradox of the first order, is at once a source of cultural stability and cultural dislocation, as ideologies contend on a global stage.<sup>27</sup>

As a totem, the brand performs the crucial social function of symbolic classification. It acts as both a beacon and a badge, a dashboard and a billboard.<sup>28</sup> Imagine the majestic Kwakiutl totem poles of the Pacific Northwest, whose carved frogs, whales, ravens, wolves, or bears embody not just the identity of the clans, but their relationship to one another. Now imagine those figures replaced by the swoosh, the helios, the mermaid, the bull's-eye or the bull, performing those identical classificatory operations. Brands assist individuals in the achievement of their own individual identity projects.

This assistance may not stop at simple brand loyalty or evangelism. Enthusiasts have literally tattooed the logos of Harley Davidson, Gibson Guitars, and Apple, among others, on their skin, effectively embodying the brand. (At least one surgeon stands accused of branding the logo of his alma mater—the University of Kentucky—on the uteruses of his unwitting patients).<sup>29</sup> Brands promote and proclaim group affiliation. These groups range from grassroots, populist brand communities that thrive in cyberspace, to autonomous subcultures of consumption that commune IRL, to marketer-sponsored user groups that interact at commercially created brandfests.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the brand comprises every action the firm undertakes, effectively encapsulating the company and presenting it to the world as a hologram. This is an especially important concern in business-to-business markets, where, to a large extent, the firm's reputation is the brand.<sup>31</sup>

The third ritual domain enacted through the brand, while related to the others, acts essentially as the replication of a template for the formation of relationships. This secular ritual has to do with kinship and the formation of alliances. It is less about the political imposition of order from the culture industries (advertising, cinema, and the like) than it is about the negotiation of harmony in the domestic sphere. To the extent that consumer-brand relations mirror the relationship between people in the social order, consumers imagine brands existing on a continuum from intimacy to estrangement, from kinship (or kinship) to enmity; brands may be consanguines, affines, friends, strangers, or adversaries.<sup>32</sup> Erosion of brand loyalty in the United States corresponds to the pattern of serial monogamy that is the dominant marital profile of the day.<sup>33</sup> The demographer-identified trend of *starter marriages*—25 percent of first marriages terminating within five years without children—portends further brand loyalty adjustments.<sup>34</sup>

## LIVED EXPERIENCE AS MEANING PLATFORM

No matter its type—parity, niche, mega, or quintessential; elite, dowager, or new peet; cult or iconic; fast-moving consumer goods or business-to-business—every brand depends for its longevity on the skillful management of customer experience.<sup>35</sup> Further, the status of *customer* must be granted to every stakeholder in the brand's franchise, whatever the provenance. And while touch points are efficient occasions of observation and intervention, prospective touch points are just as essential to the process of experience management. Remember that brands are suspended in webs of significance only partially of marketers' own making. The lived experience of customers, from which all those meanings relevant to the brand arise, provides the platform from which brand strategy can be launched. Let us prefigure discussion of pre-launch dynamics with a brief example.

Consider the recently heralded birth of the *bling* finger. For decades, DeBeers has successfully promoted a link between diamonds and romantic love, and, in particular, diamond rings and marital engagement. DeBeers spends \$200 million annually to provide consumers with both mythic appeal and economic guidance (diamonds are "forever," and the price of the ring should be equivalent to two months of the groom's salary). The company has traditionally marketed diamonds as gifts bought by men to be given to women.<sup>36</sup>

Predictably, marketing mythopoeia has become confounded with a feminist critique of patriarchy (the symbolic branding of women as chattel), with a shifting pattern of marital stability (increased divorce rate and numbers of female singletons), with geopolitical intrigues in sourcing ("war," "conflict," or "blood" diamonds), and with the gradual erosion of gendered economic inequality (more women controlling greater disposable income). Couple these changes with the rising trend in monadic giving—women buying gifts for themselves, to be given "to me, from me," as a proactive consequence of the perceived failure of their significant others to give them gifts that indicate that "he really 'gets' me" (men often being eleventh-hour order-fillers at best, and bearers of lingerie and appliances at worst).<sup>37</sup> Add a downward tick in ring-share of jewelry, and early sightings of fashionistas wearing diamonds on the ring finger of the right (that is, mythopoetically *incorrect*) hand, and DeBeers is faced with a branding opportunity.<sup>38</sup> Can the brand colonize new territory by claiming the right ring finger? Recent ads stressing female empowerment, individual autonomy, and self-worth encourage women to buy these bling rings (a folk locution lifted from fashion-forward rap culture for a