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Julien Cayla a b
a Nanyang Business School, Singapore
b Euromed Management, France

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Brand mascots as organisational totems

Julien Cayla, Nanyang Business School, Singapore and Euromed Management, France

Abstract Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork in an Indian advertising agency, this paper demonstrates that brand mascots are more than advertising glitter designed to cajole consumers. When they become the basis for the collective rallying of organisational members who converge around a tangible manifestation of their firm’s unique character, brand mascots operate as organisational totems, helping concretise and reproduce an organisation’s identity in a foreign context.

Keywords brand mascot; anthropology; organisational theory; organisational symbolism; branding

Introduction

Brand mascots reflect a deeply rooted human tendency to understand the world through anthropomorphic objects. As the attribution of human characteristics onto inanimate things, anthropomorphism is a ‘pervasive, perhaps universal, way of thinking’ that probably exists in all human cultures (Mithen & Boyer, 1996, p. 717). Evolutionary theories have described anthropomorphism as a way to understand, predict, and control the natural world (Mithen, 1996). Brand mascots are a form of anthropomorphism that similarly operate at the boundary between the world of firms and the world of consumers. Mascots function ‘as a meeting point or interface for the communication of information between “producers” and “consumers”’ (Lury, 2004, p. 50), helping smooth economic exchanges by reassuring consumers that these creatures (and their masters) are just too cute to be mistrusted.

Hence, brand mascots have played a critical role in the humanisation of modern corporations (Brown, 2010, 2011; Klein, 1999). With the rise of industrialisation, and the increasing distance – both geographic and psychological – between marketers and consumers, brand mascots comforted American consumers that modern corporations were friendly and trustworthy. Brand mascots are, in that sense, quintessentially modern because they lessened the effects of our increasing alienation from the products of labour. Tony the Tiger, the Pillsbury Doughboy, Aunt Jemima, or Betty Crocker have personified faceless corporations and smoothed the transition into new, time-saving culinary options (Marchand, 1985; Shapiro, 2004).

Marketing scholars encourage managers to endow brand characters with values and personalities that consumers can identify with (Aaker, 1991; Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011) in order to build lasting bonds of loyalty, commitment,
and brand advocacy (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). These marketing efforts have been extremely successful: consumers have been found to ascribe personality, conscience, and a soul to brands, sometimes even developing para-social relationships with them (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Fournier, 1998); Betty Crocker received 5000 fan letters every day, with American women seeking advice from a character Ernst Dicher described as the ‘externalized image of the ideal American woman’ (cited in Parkin, 2006, p. 57).

However, while we understand the way brand mascots work for consumers (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Brée & Cegarra, 1994; Connell, 2010), we know very little about the way other organisational stakeholders – such as employees and managers – relate to brand mascots (exceptions include Harquail, 2008). Pavitt (2000) notes that ‘the tendency to emphasise the relationship between identity and consumer behavior eclipses another crucial relationship – with those employed to produce the goods we consume’ (p. 175). In addition, ‘little focus has been devoted to the practices through which brand strategies are developed and implemented in organisations’ (Skålén & Hackley, 2011, p. 192).

This paper follows recent calls for more research into the inner workings of marketing (cf. Araujo, Kjellberg, & Spencer, 2008; Skålén & Hackley, 2011; Svensson, 2007; Zwick & Cayla, 2011) to research ‘the beliefs and practices of advertising and marketing professionals, particularly as these are enacted in organisational contexts’ (Cook, 2006, p. 534). By treating brand mascots as carriers of meaning for organisational members, this paper’s objective is to move beyond the analysis of branding as facilitating external commitment (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003) to study how the symbolic and affective attachments to branded forms develop within firms.

**Brand mascots in organisational contexts**

Organisations are increasingly developing resources to make sure their employees live and breathe their brand (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004), and brand mascots are clearly part of the brand credo that organisational members have to master. In an online article about brand mascots, Shalit (2000) reports her exchanges with David Altschul, a brand mascot consultant who admits that his clients can become very attached to their spokes-characters:

> Like frightened and overindulgent parents who have difficulty refusing their child anything, they are loathe to believe their tiny charges could ever be the least bit cocky, sardonic, piggish or mean-spirited . . . They’ve put their brand icon on a pedestal . . . They’re afraid to touch him. http://www.salon.com/2000/03/23/doughboy/ (accessed January 18 2013)

The quote above suggests that brand mascots are treasured organisational assets that organisational members put ‘on a pedestal’. This attachment partly comes from the fact that brand mascots often operate as symbolic proxies for a company’s values and even its competitive strategy (Harquail, 2008). For example, in early Michelin ads, Bibendum was depicted as ‘a gladiator in the Coliseum, his sandaled foot across the throat of a writhing, bleeding tire man with three tattered tire corpses littering the arena behind him’ at the time (Parloff, 2005, p. 145), reflecting Michelin’s aggressive competitive stance (Bibendum’s attitude has been much more subdued lately). Brand mascots reflect organisational histories and strategies as well as consumer preferences.
However, despite evidence that brand mascots are powerful sources of organisational meaning, marketing scholars have mostly focused on the study of brand mascots and other organisational symbols as effective forms of organisational personification working to persuade consumers (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Connell, 2010; Garretson & Niedrich, 2004). Management researchers, on the other hand, have suggested that organisational artefacts such as organisational dress, product designs, or logos are also ways that organisational members can come to grasp the central, enduring, and unique characteristics of their company in the way, for example, that Bang & Ofuslen’s designs have helped organisational stakeholders understand the firm’s identity as a design- and innovation-led company (Rafaeli & Pratt, 2006; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Yet studies of organisational symbolism are only starting to look at branding as a system of internal commitments that traverses organisational boundaries and affects a whole range of stakeholders (e.g. Schultz, Hatch, & Ciccolella, 2006). So far, we have only been able to rely on anecdotal evidence about the magic aura of mascots within firms (Shalit, 2000). This research fills the gap by providing a detailed description of a brand mascot’s importance for organisational members.

In addition, we lack an understanding of the way brand mascots live in global corporations, especially as they travel afar from a company’s headquarters and the original cultural conditions in which they were created. Indeed, brand characters like Betty Crocker, the Pillsbury Doughboy, or the Marlboro Man emerged in specific sociocultural circumstances, namely the context of North America in the 1950s. At a time of growing anxieties and profound societal changes, the Marlboro Man helped moderate fears about the loss of American masculinity (Holt & Cameron, 2010), while Betty Crocker, the Pillsbury Doughboy, and the Jolly Green Giant personified faceless corporations selling new types of packaged food like cake mixes and canned foods (Marks, 2007; Shapiro, 2004). In the UK, the Doughboy was given a British woman’s voice because many British women resented being ‘talked down by a little kid’ (Ohmann, 1996, p. 80). Yet there is very little research on the way these very American brand mascots are received and adapted to other cultural contexts. More generally, we lack research that examines how global marketing work is implemented on the ground, and how decisions taken several thousand miles away by global brand managers are experienced locally.

Furthermore, this work develops original insights into the negotiations and tensions that are central to advertising work. Much of the literature on agency–client interactions has tried to explain the disagreements and oppositions between advertising agencies and their clients (Michell, 1986, 1988; Michell & Sanders, 1995). Hotz, Ryans, and Shanklin (1982) argue that these conflicts arise because of poor communication, while Hackley (2010) emphasises that differences in vocabularies are central to their disagreements. Cronin (2004) describes advertising practice as a constant form of mediation, describing, for example, how account managers act as a go-between between their clients’ criticisms and the ad agency creatives’ artistic sensibilities. Along the same lines, Hackley and Kover (2007) emphasise how the juxtaposition of art and commerce involved in advertising work creates a great deal of friction between clients and agencies, as well as between different divisions of an agency. Kover and Goldberg (1995) detail the intense power struggles between copywriters and account managers over who ‘owns’ creative work. Miller (2003) mentions the ‘structural fault lines’ that exist between creatives and account managers who constantly struggle for relative authority (p. 80).
Kelly, Lawlor, and O’Donohoe (2005) stress that the ‘production of an advertising campaign is a socially constructed process, which is developed through the discursive interactions of a wide variety of different groups, each with their own set of ideologies and agendas’ (p. 521).

This paper builds upon this past scholarship describing advertising as a site of conflict, but focuses on organisational identity as a way to examine and understand such friction. The description of advertising work which follows is consistent with previous papers describing the differences in objectives and values between the different groups working on the development of an ad campaign (Cronin, 2004; Hackley & Kover, 2007; Miller, 2003). What is significant here is the way client–agency negotiations focusing on the brand mascot Rudy reflect different forms of organisational identification. Rudy, as I will try to demonstrate, operates as an organisational totem solidifying the fervent attachment and identification of local brand managers. In contrast, within the agency, Rudy evoked very different feelings, where he was often seen as the expression of multinational corporate control and ideology. Hence, by attending to their collaborative work on the brand mascot Rudy, this paper demonstrates how organisational identification is implicated in client–agency conflicts.

**Ethnographic fieldwork**

Advertising work is a privileged window into the organisational folklore of global corporations, if by folklore we mean the characters, practices, and objects that have distinctive symbolic importance in organisational contexts (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997; Schultz et al., 2006). Being situated in an ad agency allowed me to study the ongoing discussions and negotiations that are central to the work of tailoring advertising messages for local audiences (Miller, 1997), including discussions about the role of the brand mascot in a new cultural context, providing a particularly insightful window into the symbolic universe of a global corporation.

Grainberry allowed me extensive access to meetings, archives, internal documents, and other materials documenting the company’s adaptation to the Indian market. Consistent with Geertz’s (2001) deep hanging out approach, I tried to follow the team working on the Grainberry account at Lorton by paying frequent visits to Grainberry’s offices in the suburbs, sharing meals, having informal discussions with Grainberry executives, often hitching a ride back to town with some of Grainberry’s managers or the ad executives working on the account.¹ These shared car rides often proved to be great sources of insights into the development of campaigns for Grainberry: stuck in Mumbai’s traffic, executives would share their feelings – often their frustrations – about their work. In addition, I worked on small projects, compiling case studies on the food industry in other cultural contexts to help Grainberry and its ad agency with their work. This strategy of reciprocation helped me develop a rapport with the different executives working on the Grainberry account, and I progressively moved from holding a peripheral role to holding a role as active member (Adler & Adler, 1987).

Building this rapport allowed me to understand the areas of friction and negotiation that are central to advertising work (Dávila, 2001; Mazzarella, 2003; ¹All company and informant names were changed to pseudonyms to protect informant confidentiality.)
Miller, 1997, 2003; Moeran, 1996). Indeed, as I will explain in this paper, Rudy was a major point of contention between the ad agency and Grainberry, although these tensions usually surfaced after meetings, as ad executives discussed their work for Grainberry and compared it to other accounts. As Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) suggest, ‘ethnographic research develops an interpretation by combining observational and verbal data in a way that accommodates or accounts for variation between them’ (p. 494). The combination of participant observation and interviews played a critical role in helping me go beyond the well-rehearsed discourses about market success that brand managers and advertising executives can easily recite to establish their credentials (Mazzarella, 2003). The use of different methods of data collection in concert helped compensate for the limitations of stand-alone interviews with executives and helped explain their attitudes and behaviour towards Rudy.

Data collection focused on participant observation, long interviews, and archival data. As a participant in the activities of the agency, I examined the unfolding of two advertising campaigns for Grainberry by attending meetings and participating in the agency’s everyday activities: an ad campaign for Grainberry’s cake mixes and a campaign for Grainberry’s vermicelli. In addition, I conducted semi-structured, repeated interviews with five Grainberry executives, as well as five Lorton executives and one independent market researcher working for the company. Questions revolved around the development of Grainberry’s campaigns, the relationship between ad executives and their clients, and the everyday activities involved in producing commercials for Grainberry. I also had access to a large corpus of archival data, including market research reports, internal documents showing Grainberry’s strategy, e-mail correspondence between Lorton and Grainberry, and press clippings and television advertisements for Grainberry’s products.

While the main period of fieldwork of nine months happened in 2000 and 2001, in 2012, I conducted additional interviews with an advertising creative working at Grainberry’s new ad agency, and the account director working on the account, to discuss Grainberry’s recent ad campaigns in India and Rudy’s role within those campaigns. Together with the original fieldwork, and the archival records documenting Grainberry’s early adaptation experiences, these additional interviews provide a longitudinal analysis of Grainberry’s market adaptation work and Rudy’s role in that process.

The analytical approach taken in this paper is known as organisational symbolism (Deshpandé & Webster, 1989). More specifically, this research draws from past work in cultural anthropology that has taken symbols and symbolic practices as revealing implicit but important cultural insights (Geertz, 1973; Lévi-Strauss, 1963) to treat brand mascots as powerful organisational artefacts that animate and structure organisational life.

Findings

The brand mascot as a cultural intermediary

According to company records, Grainberry’s brand mascot Rudy was originally created in the 1960s ‘to interact with humans because it was believed that Grainberry needed to befriend the consumer before a sales proposition could be offered’ (Rudy Guidelines, 2000). Rudy was designed to appear in Grainberry’s commercials as ‘approachable, fun, cute, and humble, with a child-like character that plays the role
of teacher, helper and friend’ (Grainberry Brand Manual, 1997). Grainberry was trying to commercialise new time-saving ways of cooking, like the introduction of cake mixes, and Rudy’s endearing personality helped smooth Grainberry’s sales pitch by appearing as a reassuring and friendly companion that housewives could depend upon.

However, in the Indian context of the late 1990s, Grainberry faced a new set of challenges. Most of the products in Grainberry’s portfolio, such as cake mixes or refrigerated dough, corresponded to Western tastes and Western kitchens (see Cayla & Peñaloza, 2011, 2012). Indeed, while baking is central to the company’s identity (cf. an internal document specifying that ‘Grainberry is intricately connected to the aromas and warmth of baking’), it is not a common style of cooking in India. At the time of fieldwork, penetration of Western-style ovens in urban Indian kitchens hovered at around 5%.2

In addition, when probed, Indian customers voiced their concerns that the new kinds of food launched on the Indian market were ‘unhealthy’, ‘not fresh’ (Market Research Report, 1996), and that the time-saving aspects associated with packaged food were not appealing enough to justify their high prices. In the United States, Grainberry defined its products by phrases such as ‘eliminating dirty work’, ‘making cooking faster’, and being ‘modern and more efficient’ (Grainberry Brand Manual, 1997). In India, however, market research revealed that convenience, although attractive to Indian women, was not compelling enough to trigger consumption. Finally, because of the company’s foreign-sounding name and the products it sold, Indian women perceived Grainberry as a distant and foreign firm, an ‘NRI [Non-Resident Indian] woman; a foreigner with an alien lifestyle and upscale tastes, who has an hectic life and uses fast foods’ (Market Research Report, 1996).

Based on this research, Grainberry’s management decided to develop products that would be more adapted to the Indian context, focusing on packaged wheat flour as a strategic priority while customising the company’s cake mixes to suit local conditions. More specifically, Grainberry’s R&D designed a cake mix that could be prepared in a pressure cooker, an appliance that most urban Indian households possess.

Grainberry’s Indian managers decided to rely on Rudy to downplay the potentially alienating identity of the company as a foreign multinational trying to sell convenient packaged food. Rudy was assigned the difficult task of mediating between the cultural world of Grainberry, and that of the Indian women the company was trying to target:

With its classy modern packaging, and foreign/international name, Grainberry could potentially seem alien to Indian women and remote from their needs – yet Rudy bridges this emotional gap [as the specifically modified Indian product benefits bridge the rational gap]. Rudy is a child, and as such is a non-threatening, non-critical, and non-confrontational ‘authority.’ . . . He adds lightness both metaphorically and literally to the serious task of cooking for the

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2 An Indian food historian notes: ‘though baking enjoys a Sanskrit term, pūtāpaka, it is not a common style of Indian cooking. Ovens have been excavated at Mohenjodaro and other Indus Valley cities, but many of them are large kilns that were used to fire pottery and calcine mental ores’ (Achaya, 1998, p. 12). While the tandoor oven has been part of Punjabi cooking for centuries, it is not used to bake and it is more akin to grilling. During India’s colonial period, some bakeries emerged to cater to British palates and after the British left India in 1947, the bakeries of Bombay and other urban centres like Bangalore have continued to cater to Westernised tastes (Conlon, 1995). See also Fields (1984) for a discussion of baking and cake mixes in the Japanese context.
family. In short, he is a ‘third vector’ in the home, capable of reducing tension and adding levity [cf. lightness/fluffiness!] to life. [Brand Essence Meeting, 2000]

Hence, Rudy was cast as a sort of cultural intermediary, helping simultaneously to alleviate fears about alien methods of cooking, like baking, and to soften Grainberry’s image as a foreign multinational selling convenient packaged food, adding ‘lightness both metaphorically and literally’ to the difficult work of localising a foreign multinational.

In the first commercial for Grainberry’s cake mixes, Rudy plays the role of the baking expert, helping the Indian housewife navigate through this new way of cooking desserts. In the commercial, two children run up to their mother in the kitchen, and she asks them to leave because she has a surprise for them. The mother dances with her pressure cooker, and the kids exclaim, ‘From the pressure cooker?’ The kids wonder aloud whether their mother has made traditional Indian savoury treats made in the pressure cooker, like ‘idlis’ or ‘dhoklas’. At this point, Rudy pushes a packet of Grainberry’s Pressure Cooker Cake onto the table, saying, ‘Surprise!’ What follows is a demonstration of the process of making the cake: opening the packet; stirring the ingredients together as Rudy looks on, smiling, holding on to the bowl; steaming the cake; and serving it. Rudy turns up again to blow the steam from the cake. At this point, the kids exclaim, ‘Cooker cake!’ and they eat it with apparent delight. Rudy turns up with the package once again as the voiceover says, ‘Grainberry cooker cake: stir, steam, and surprise’, and he is given a gentle poke in the stomach, which leads him to laugh childishly.

Hence, in the first ad campaign for Grainberry’s cake mixes in the Indian market, Rudy appears to be an organisational hero who can magically boost consumers’ self-esteem, improve relations within Indian homes, and bridge the incommensurability between the world in which Grainberry’s products originated – the world of baking, convenience, and time commoditisation – and the world of Indian consumers it sought to attract; quite an undertaking for an imaginary chef.

The brand mascot as organisational totem

The great power that Grainberry’s Indian executives attributed to Rudy was striking. In internal documents, they described Rudy as ‘immensely powerful’, ‘the human heart of the brand’, ‘the source of the brand’s electricity’. Marketing executives would also regularly insist on making Rudy a prominent character in Grainberry’s television commercials. In one such meeting, Grainberry’s marketing manager, Mayali Mishra, insisted that Rudy’s prominence was vindicated by existing research on the brand mascot’s likeability: ‘You know that whatever he does increases the likeability of the ad. The more we use him, the better’ (meeting minutes, February 2001).

Rudy’s significance within Grainberry partly comes from the mascot’s ability to embody and reflect Grainberry’s identity as a caring company: ‘Rudy is inextricably linked to the very essence of the Grainberry brand’ (Grainberry Brand Manual, 1997). Hence, Rudy’s character is designed to evoke ‘warmth, humour and playfulness, innovativeness and quality’ (Rudy Guidelines, 2000), while Grainberry’s central values are described as ‘warmth: the emotional warmth of the brand as well as the physical warmth of Grainberry’s products’ (Brand essence meeting, 2000). During my interviews with Grainberry executives, they talked about their firm as
a caring organisation where senior executives nurtured other employees through regular training sessions and outings, and tried to treat customers with consideration.

Rudy also seemed to galvanise and orient strategy discussions. For example, in meetings, there were many questions about the way Rudy should relate to Indian housewives. Should Rudy sound like an authority on baking and teach Indian housewives how to bake? During one of these discussions, where Lorton and Grainberry executives were discussing what tone of voice Rudy should have, Grainberry’s marketing manager intervened:

He must behave more like the friend of the housewife. Because we really want to take a humble approach here. We should not tell her too much what to do, we want to show her that we understand her life, we help her please her family, we bring togetherness in the house. We are all about heart and soul, and Rudy is like that, too. [Mayali, Marketing Director, Grainberry] [Fieldnotes, February 2001]

In this discussion and others, Rudy operated as symbolic proxy for Grainberry’s identity as a humble, caring, and warm company that brings ‘togetherness in the house’ by facilitating the cooking and eating of popular dishes.

Given Rudy’s organisational importance, there were strict rules in place to protect his image in the marketplace. Newly minted brand managers had to study a 140-page manual of guidelines largely dedicated to protecting Rudy’s identity as the company expanded into new markets like India. For example, ‘Rudy should be shown in scenes that are natural for him and his personality. He can walk, talk, sing, dance, smile, laugh and interact with humans. He cannot do magical things like fly, float, walk through objects or appear or disappear’ (Brand Manual, 1997). And reflecting Rudy’s American origins: ‘Rudy should be portrayed in a fun contemporary, all American wholesome way, keeping in mind his sense of humor and playfulness’. With these guidelines in place, Rudy cannot ‘participate in hard-selling advertising’, since the company wants to maintain the idea of Rudy as a ‘friend and helper, not a pitchman’. And he ‘should never be joined or replaced by other characters resembling him. This has been tried and only served to raise distracting questions about his age, sex, parents, etc.’ (ibid.). Hence, Rudy cannot have a girlfriend because an ad campaign which introduced a female cartoon character triggered too many questions about Rudy’s sexuality. In an internal document, Grainberry’s management stressed that these questions ‘took focus off Rudy’s primary role of helping Mom deliver fresh-baked goodness to her family’ (Advertising Guidelines, 2000).

Overall, Rudy functioned as an organisational totem that Grainberry’s executives rallied around in order to understand and reflect on the essential qualities of their firm. In defining Rudy as an organisational totem, I refer more specifically to Lévi-Strauss’s (1963) insights about totems as objects that operate as emblematic figures helping a clan integrate and develop a distinctive identity. Similarly, Rudy appeared like a rallying, heavily protected totem representing Grainberry’s identity to different stakeholders including customers and employees. Durkheim (1915/1965) suggested that totems could operate as tangible representations of the clan, ‘the god of the clan, the totemic principle, can be nothing less than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as totem’ (p. 206). Similarly, Rudy functions as the material concretisation of Grainberry’s values of warmth, care, and companionship.

In turn, as in other contexts where organisational identities become sources of meaning and identification for organisational members (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991),
Indian managers had developed a deep and fervent attachment to the brand mascot and its magic. They were proud of working for a caring company that sought to ‘delight customers’. Rudy symbolised and reinforced these bonds by operating as a materialisation of Grainberry’s identity as a caring company. Grainberry’s headquarters in Mumbai housed replica dolls and pictures of Rudy everywhere: in the reception area, in hallways and meeting rooms, on office shelves, on many internal documents, and on almost every piece of promotional material. Rudy functioned like a prized organisational totem reproducing Grainberry’s identity in India.

The brand mascot as voodoo doll

If Grainberry’s managers revered Rudy, for advertising executives, Rudy symbolised the frustrations of working with a large multinational. The agency creatives were especially frustrated with Grainberry’s strict brand guidelines and time-consuming script approval procedures. Namrata, a creative working on the Grainberry account, described her client’s insistence that Rudy should be ‘more visible’ in a phone interview conducted in 2012:

They [Grainberry] are quite slow, they are very particular about everything; literally we analyse the commercials second by second, shot by shot. And after that, once we are finished with the script, the most irritating part is analysing the script and how much Rudy is visible.

There were significant differences though, within Lorton, in the way ad executives related to Rudy, depending on which department they belonged to. Creatives like Namrata saw Rudy as an annoyance, the diktat of a multinational company that would never do innovative advertisements in India. On the other hand, account executives who supervised the everyday activities of campaign development and tried to nurture Lorton’s relationship with its clients were keen to maintain an amicable and productive relationship with Grainberry. For account executives, working with a multinational company like Grainberry was a way to master the language and procedures of multinational brand management and to advance their careers. Hence, they were ready to carry Grainberry’s guidelines within the agency and protect Rudy. In an internal meeting at the agency, set up to discuss the new television commercial for Grainberry’s cake mixes, Tasneem, the account executive responsible for the account at Lorton, echoed her client’s concerns and suggested that Rudy should have ‘a more active role’ in the storyboards that Lorton’s creatives had designed:

Rudy should have a more active role, not only in the process but also at the time of introduction of the pack – one of the things suggested was instead of handing Mom a pair of scissors to cut open the pack, he could do a flip from the pack or bring placards carrying instructions such as stir for 3 minutes, steam for 30 minutes etc. (Meeting minutes, March 2000)

Creatives, on the other hand, were much less enthusiastic about Rudy and his magical powers.

Some of these differences were especially palpable in one of the internal meetings I attended at Lorton for a campaign launching Grainberry’s new line of vermicelli in

\[3\]Indian consumers use vermicelli to cook classic Indian dishes such as upma – a dish that is especially popular in South India – and kheer – a sweet milk-based dish.
India. Tasneem was discussing campaign ideas with Gopika, one of Lorton’s creative directors, and two junior copywriters. The conversation quickly turned to the role Rudy could play in the new television commercial:

Gopika: I am starting to feel really tired about Rudy and the kind of woman they want us to show.

Tasneem: Why are you making it so difficult?

Gopika: If these are mandates, I want to know what they are.

Tasneem: But I haven’t given you any mandates. Any ad about food would have to show food, no? If you want to say it’s a fun brand say it, I never told you you couldn’t.

Gopika: You say these are not mandatory but it becomes a format: cook, cook, cook, eat, eat, eat, pleasure, pleasure, pleasure.

Tasneem: If the essence of the brand is about family, how can you portray something else?

Gopika: This Grainberry woman, this little smile that she does, her yellow saree [Gopika is forcing a smile]. See you’re never showing women in other ways in these food ads. But in the Whirlpool ad, she is wearing trousers throughout. We have little bookends with this account. It’s the same thing with Rudy, he is really starting to annoy me. Why don’t we make him a voodoo doll [the other creatives in the room all laugh. Tasneem smiles.]

Tasneem: Come on Gopika, Grainberry is not so bad. [Fieldnotes, November 2000]

There were especially acute frustrations within the agency’s creative department that Grainberry’s commercials were not original enough because of the company’s strict mandates. Rudy faced becoming a ‘voodoo doll’ that agency creatives could use to vent their frustrations on. Between Rudy’s magical aura within Grainberry, and Rudy as a voodoo doll at Lorton, there were significant differences in the way client and agency were approaching the brand mascot.

Grainberry’s marketing manager, Mayali, herself acknowledged that Grainberry’s commercials, and food advertising in general, had to change to be noticed in the cluttered advertising landscape. In a meeting at Grainberry’s offices during which scripts were being discussed, Mayali referred to food advertising as being replete with the same characters and storylines. In the quote below, she specifically refers to a popular commercial for Procter & Gamble’s detergent, Ariel, in India, which featured a husband doing the laundry:

[Food advertising] always [has] a family with a housewife, a mother-in-law, a husband, and kids, maybe we have to come up with new characters. In the Ariel ad, they introduced the husband; they did not show the housewife. It was only a voice-over. Maybe we can introduce some new characters for this advertisement too? [Fieldnotes, December 2000]

Following the client’s directive to develop unusual scripts, the creatives worked hard to develop new stories and characters that moved beyond the typical scenario of a housewife cooking for her children. One of the new scripts Gopika presented
involved young students getting together to cook some vermicelli, remembering their mothers’ recipes in the process. The role of Rudy, in this story though, seemed to be an afterthought. Could Rudy really leave the kitchen and show up on a college campus? During the meeting, Grainberry’s product manager working on the vermicelli brand, Sanjay, raised some issues about a script representing male students when they were trying to sell to Indian housewives:

Sanjay: How does this script establish a connection with the woman we are trying to sell to? And what is the role of Rudy in the story?

Gopika: If you have a predefined format for this campaign, you need to tell me because then it becomes easy. We can just put her in a kitchen cooking vermicelli with Rudy helping her. [Fieldnotes, December 2000]

At this point, my fieldnotes highlight that the tension in the room was rising, and Gopika was clearly upset about the way Grainberry executives were responding to her scripts. Mayali tried to smooth the friction between Sanjay and Gopika by discussing Grainberry’s brand essence:

Mayali: No, no I assure you, there is no format. Maybe to establish the connection with this woman, maybe you should go back to our brand essence. Togetherness, for example, has been shown to be part of our brand essence in India but also in the world . . . And think about a more active role for Rudy; he’s been shown in the studies done in the US to always increase the likeability of an ad. [Fieldnotes, December 2000]

I left the meeting with Gopika, and we headed back to Lorton’s offices in South Mumbai. In my field notes, I wrote:

Sitting in her car on the way back from the client’s office, Gopika seems very stressed. For the first 10 minutes of the trip, she does not speak much. Then after I inquire about how she thinks the meeting went, she explodes, on the verge of tears, and I am surprised by the intensity of her emotions: ‘It’s always the same. With Grainberry, work is full of these little bookends: cook, cook, cook, eat, eat, eat and then a big “enjoy”. And of course Rudy, he has to be there throughout. I am becoming really sick to have to deal with Rudy. Already there are all these things he cannot do. Even for the woman, I mean they say they don’t have formats, but they do, because eventually, it restricts the options and the situations you can put that woman in. She still has to cook with Rudy, for the husband and for the family. How can you be creative with these formats?’ [Fieldnotes, December 2000]

One of the copywriters working on the account expressed similar, albeit less intense, frustrations with the ongoing work on the account:

Interviewer: How do you feel as a creative about these global requirements?

Jaya: I hate it. Because it doesn’t give me any freedom, any freedom at all. I can’t do anything: there has to be a happy family, Rudy, in a kitchen . . . How much can you do? (Jaya, copywriter, Lorton)
Despite this resistance from the creatives, the final vermicelli commercial gives a central role to Rudy and in the final creative brief written by Tasneem, he is described as the housewife’s ‘guide’:

Rudy, by being a guide, is the perfect tool to show the superior ability of Grainberry non-stick vermicelli to provide a hearty snack/meal. Because he is capable of reducing tension and adding levity (cf. his lightness/fluffiness!), he is able to convincingly show the homemaker that everything goes smoothly. (Final creative brief, April 2001)

Hence, following from Grainberry’s insistence that Rudy be more present, creatives developed a commercial where Rudy occupies central stage as family companion, helper, and even a custodian of Indian tradition.

In the vermicelli film, we see a little girl on a swing on a porch being fed by her grandmother. The voiceover says, ‘Nobody makes semiya like my grandmother. Her semiya never stuck together’. At this point, we see Rudy push along a packet of Grainberry semiya, announcing the ‘new Grainberry non-sticky semiya’. A woman’s hand pulls up the packet, and we cut to visuals of wheat and the semiya being cooked in water, as the voiceover tells us that it is made from pure wheat, that each strand stays separate when cooked, unlike other brands, and that it melts in your mouth. Here, we go back to the domestic scene, but now the grandmother is being fed by her grown-up granddaughter. Here, we see Rudy again, who wipes away a tear from his eyes, saying, ‘I’m so happy’. The grandmother asks whether it was she, the granddaughter, who made the semiya, and the granddaughter turns to Rudy and winks. We see Rudy, who pats the Grainberry packets, as the voiceover tells us that Grainberry is the ‘new taste of tradition’. Here, a hand pokes Rudy gently in the stomach, and he laughs childishly.

Despite Rudy’s status as a worshipped hero of Grainberry’s folklore, he has been relatively quiet on Indian television screens in the past few years. Most of the Grainberry films from 2002 to 2012 show Rudy presenting Grainberry’s products but generally having a very minor role, with almost no dialogue, in contrast to earlier ads where he played a more prominent role in introducing Grainberry products to Indian consumers. When asked about this evolution, Namrata explained that her main objective as a creative was to communicate the product’s benefits:

See, my objective with commercials is really to get the message across. And it’s fine if Rudy shows the product. But he can’t be everywhere. Yet they [Grainberry’s managers] expect him to be everywhere. They just love that character, completely. The trick is to have a balance and not to be all the time ‘Rudy, Rudy, Rudy’. I have to think twice when I am creating a commercial, where Rudy will be, because I know for sure whenever we have a meeting, the client will definitely ask me, ‘Where is Rudy?’ That’s the first question they ask. ‘What’s the communication’ is a different and almost secondary [question].

Hence, Rudy has remained a source of friction in the interactions between advertising executives and Grainberry’s staff, especially as Grainberry executives ‘expect him to be everywhere’ because ‘they just love that character’. Namrata further confessed that in the way she created commercials for Grainberry, Rudy had become more of an afterthought, a prop to be added at the end of commercials to please the client:
There are a lot of norms and things we can do or not do. But somehow there seems to be a mismatch between the films that we try to do in India, the emotional numbers, and Rudy. He can’t interact much with humans. He can’t really be emotional. He is a funny character but no one really knows what he does or what he can do. . . . What we try to do is take him from the template and then try to fix him whenever, wherever possible. And the more he does not interact, the more he does not talk, the better for us also [laughs].

What is especially striking in these discussions and negotiations between Grainberry and its advertising agency is the way Rudy drastically changed meaning as he crossed organisational boundaries, from his status as a venerated and magic totem within Grainberry to a prop that left advertising executives largely indifferent, from the enforced visibility of Rudy within Grainberry to the wishes of ad executives like Namrata that he would just disappear (cf. ‘the more he does not interact, the more he does not talk, the better for us’). Grainberry’s executives and their advertising counterparts had similar cultural backgrounds: they almost always came from the English-speaking section of the middle class in large Indian cities like Mumbai. Yet their perceptions of Rudy and his magic could not have been more different. Rudy reflects the identity and power dynamics at play in advertising production, and provides a useful frame for thinking about the way these identity dynamics structure advertising development.

**Theoretical and managerial contributions**

**Brand mascots as organisational totems**

Scenes of advertising executives getting emotional, on the verge of tears, after heated discussions on the role of a brand mascot suggest that the cute little critters are more than advertising glitter used to coax Indian consumers into buying cake mixes. An inside look into the everyday activities of advertising development reveals that brand mascots can become powerful organisational totems. By organisational totems, I refer to the affective, quasi-mystical relationship between Grainberry’s organisational members and Rudy; the rallying power of brand mascots within organisations; the ability of brand mascots to act as a symbolic resource helping organisational members define their organisation and differentiate it from others; and finally the role of brand mascots in orienting strategy.

Much of the early anthropological literature tried to explain totemism in terms of its function; for example, Malinowski’s (1927) explanation that totems play an important part in the control of nature. Yet, in a groundbreaking study, Lévi-Strauss (1963) showed that previous theories of totemism did not hold in the face of evidence collected in different contexts. Lévi-Strauss showed that totemism had to be understood as a symbolic system, where totems marked differences between clans and tribes. Lévi-Strauss was particularly influenced by the structuralist insight that meaning is produced – in language, like in other symbolic systems – through relations of difference (de Saussure, 1966). For example, Lévi-Strauss showed how totems helped perpetuate a classification and an ordering of different communities. In other words, totems had everything to do with identity and culture, and little to do with attachments to the instruments of economic survival. In Grainberry’s case,
the brand mascot, Rudy, is an efficient way to carry forward the firm’s identity as a caring food company ready to nurture Indian households. As in other contexts (Harquail, 2008), the brand mascot vehicles specific values, such as warmth and care for consumers, and cements the identity of Grainberry as a ‘caring company’.

In turn, Grainberry’s identity fuels the organisational commitment of executives ready to protect and impose Rudy during advertising discussions. Understanding the ‘Rudy guidelines’ or talking about Rudy in meetings is a way for organisational members to feel like they fit in, that they belong to the organisation, and it is also a way to demarcate their membership to Grainberry, especially as they interact with executives from other organisations such as Lorton. As a sacred totem, Rudy becomes a symbolic proxy for the firm’s identity, helping Grainberry’s employees converge around a similar understanding of their firm. Finally, Rudy also orients strategy discussions – for example when marketing executives asked, ‘What should Rudy do in this ad?’ – to think about Grainberry’s approach in the Indian market (dogmatic about baking or humble?). Brand mascots function as organisational artefacts embodying organisational identities, but they are also implicated in the work of strategising. Overall, this paper demonstrates that brand mascots, as the concretisations of a firm’s organisational identity, solidify organisational loyalties and guide strategy.

In addition, this research highlights how brand mascots can operate in a contact zone of friction and negotiation, by becoming a source of inter-organisational tension between clients and agencies. Here, this work adds to past scholarship documenting agency–client conflicts (see Hackley, 2010, for a review) to detail the role of organisational identification in these interactions. Previous research has highlighted the role of professional identities in advertising work, noting the distinctive identity work of creative professionals seeking to build their legitimacy (Hackley & Kover, 2007). In contrast, this research presents an organisational-level kind of explanation for client–agency disagreements, focusing on organisational identification as a frame of reference shaping the negotiation and development of advertising campaigns.

**Brand mascots and the symbolic universes of multinational corporations**

This research highlights how a seemingly mundane artefact like a brand mascot, because it plays such an important totemic role, can have profound effects on the organisational members of a global corporation, several thousand miles away and several decades after the mascot’s invention. While he may be cute and cuddly, Rudy seems to operate as an organisational device facilitating indoctrination and control through ritual and celebration, in the way that talking about Rudy and forcing agencies to include the mascot becomes a ritualistic, scripted form of marketing work which Grainberry employees are expected to perform. In addition, this paper demonstrates how brand mascots like Rudy help carry and reproduce a firm’s identity globally with different stakeholders.

From this perspective, the role of the brand mascot is one of identity maintenance and reproduction, through the socialisation of local employees into specific practices and objects constituting the organisation’s folklore, a sort of symbolic violence, that is, the sort of violence which is exerted upon a social agent with his or her complicity (Bourdieu, 1978/1991), in the way global branding requirements impose themselves to local MNC employees as self-evident. Here, this work’s findings converge with Van Maanen and Laurent’s (1993) arguments about MNCs when they write that:
The culture-conscious MNC systematically replicates itself wherever it goes, given its willingness to invest in such a project, by pounding away on those who work in its subsidiary units. (p. 281)

Indeed, this research has highlighted how the process of organisational replication works in practice in a global corporation, through an economy of identity-defining objects and rituals, and the indoctrination of local employees into ways of thinking and behaving that help re-constitute an MNC’s identity. These findings also extend Christensen’s (1997) insights that marketing operates as a system of ‘auto-communication’, that is, a set of self-referential communication practices through which the organisation recognises and confirms its own images, values, and assumptions. More specifically, this work highlights the dynamic and global dimension of branding work as a process of self-referential communication.

These insights should help us reframe global branding as an organisational practice related to the preservation of identity. Much of the literature on global branding has described global branding as a phenomenon driven by economies of scale. Schuiling and Kapferer (2004) argue: ‘the push toward development of international and global brands has been driven more by supply-driven considerations linked to costs than by market considerations’ (p. 99). Yet we must also recognise that global branding practices, such as the management of mascots, are also driven by various organisational dynamics, including identity concerns.

Previous research on multinational corporations has rarely examined the symbolic universes of global companies, focusing instead on economic theories of the multinational enterprise (Jones & Venkatesh, 1996). For example, global marketing decisions are often depicted as financial trade-offs where companies seek to balance the economies of scale provided by global integration with the benefits of local responsiveness (e.g. Samiee & Roth, 1992; Szymanski, Bharadwaj, & Varadarajan, 1993). In contrast, this research has described the rich organisational folklore of a global corporation like Grainberry, and the way this folklore is reproduced and diffused globally, adding to the emerging stream of research on the highly ideological and symbolic inner workings of global corporations (Applbaum, 2000, 2004, 2011).

Future research

Following earlier calls for more research at the intersection of organisational theory and marketing (Deshpandé & Webster, 1989), we need to examine branding objects and practices as sources of meaning for organisational members as well as other stakeholders. Recent research has highlighted how branding artefacts such as logos and product designs can help constitute an organisation’s identity (Brunninge, 2007; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Yet we have rarely examined how branding decisions are lived internally, and how employees respond to major branding changes, for example British Airways’ decision to downplay its British heritage in its brand communications, such as the design on the tail of its aircrafts (Balmer, Stuart, & Greyser, 2009). We need more research investigating how brands, as sources of organisational identification, affect a wide range of marketing processes. For example, drawing from past work on organisational identification (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), future research could examine how employees react to negative, hostile feedback about their brand, and how their reactions in turn affect
organisational behaviour. More broadly, we need more empirical work attending to the performative nature of branded forms (see Lury, 2004) and the effects of such performativity on the shaping of markets.

In addition, we need more research that critically examines recent scholarship on internal branding (Celsi & Gilly, 2010). Large swathes of the marketing literature encourage intense training and indoctrination to transform employees into ‘brand champions’ (Morhart, Herzog, & Tomczak, 2009). Yet we rarely examine the wide-ranging consequences of these efforts. At the individual level, law scholars have argued that identity-based brand management leads employees to over-invest in their company’s stock, despite conventional advice against doing so (Crain, 2010). At the organisational level, management scholars emphasise that the potential costs of strong cultures include the risk of organisational inertia, orientation to the past and ‘iron cages of subjectivity’ (Kärrman & Alvesson, 2004; Welch & Welch, 2006), that is, a homogeneity of perspective that potentially limits the ability of firms to adapt to new market environments. While there is a growing body of work critically analysing branding as a form of meta-discourse (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004), we need more empirical work taking an inside, critical view on the organisational dimension of branding work and the wide-ranging effects of global brand management.

References


**About the author**

**Julien Cayla** is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Nanyang Business School in Singapore, and a Visiting Professor at Euromed Management, Marseille, France.

**Corresponding author:** Julien Cayla, Assistant Professor of Marketing, Division of Marketing & International Business, College of Business (Nanyang Business School) Nanyang Technological University

E JCayla@ntu.edu.sg