Introduction

The central question, thus becomes, what are the core or master symbols, and how do they articulate with the other symbols constituting the culture under study, integrating them into a coherent system.

J. G. Feinberg, Schneider's symbolic cultural theory: an appraisal, *Current Anthropology*

In a world where physical and digital realms increasingly intersect, the concept of the cultural landscape emerges as a dynamic and multifaceted arena where consumers, brands, and topographies intersect to create meaning and value; it is an overarching term for the liminal space between the physical and digital geographies.

Cultural landscape is a term that is used in the area of media, culture, and communication studies, but it is a term that lacks boundaries and is hard to pin down; which is not unlike the concept that it maps. Historically, cultural landscapes were linked to physical landscapes, studies in cultural heritage, and geographical concepts. As the term has gained a foothold in the humanities and evolved to areas of cultural geographies, the way we understand it must shift to accommodate these changes that now include the human aspect of spaces and how we inhabit them. This can be mapped across the digital sphere, where it plays a key role in the creation of communities in digital hubs and in developing digital suburbs.

Part of the role of brands in this space is how they put down roots here in order to become navigational beacons for consumers as they move through the space and construct their identity. Though there are parts of the cultural landscape that map over the physical landscape, much of the terrain is fluid and dynamic, and evolves as the sociopolitical and economic contexts ebb and flow within a particular area of the landscape. The dynamic movement of the cultural landscape opens up the potential for power and ownership to shift from brands to consumers and communities.

The adjustment that happens when power is moved from a brand to consumers and back again is akin to how consumers in the physical world use landmarks to navigate their spaces and move towards or away from a destination. Chapter 2 focusses on the role that brands play as landmarks which, while they do act as navigational beacons and provide pathways to the brand in the form of structural narratives, are more than the brand's physical assets. Brands in the cultural landscape are a symbol of the brand's equity and image that consumers can use as a means of closing the gap between their self-identity and self-projection. These two interrelated concepts of identity are how some consumers see themselves and how they want to be seen by others. Brands in this sense are both cultural and situational identifiers that consumers use to bring together their sense of self-alignment and identity. When brands are able to put down roots and grow as landmarks in the cultural landscape, consumers look to them to navigate the terrain.

This navigation simultaneously happens in digital spaces, which has altered how brands and consumers interact with one another and has brought about two-way communication. It has also highlighted the fact that every consumer has an individual identity and what a brand symbolises for one consumer might not be the same for another. By paying attention to consumer communities when they speak to and of brands, brands can better walk the line between knowing too much about a consumer and knowing enough that the consumer feels a connection with the brand. When brands become landmarks in the cultural landscape they are able to be utilised by both those consumers who love them and those who know of them, but choose to steer clear.

When we talk about how brands and consumers co-create meaning and value in the cultural landscape, this has to do with how capital is formed and exchanged. Chapter 3 highlights the value that combining the perspectives of economic-, consumer-, and society-focussed approaches can bring to the understanding of capital in this space. Drawing on the ideas of Foucault and Bourdieu help to define capital as a concept in the cultural landscape and trace how it shifts as contexts alter. Leveraging different forms of capital enables both consumers and brands to understand and navigate their spaces, while also showing how capital exchange sometimes follows its own route, which is directly related to, but does not determine, power dynamics in the cultural landscape. Power here is not a top-down process. It is disseminated in, and sometimes concealed by, societal norms and the changes within them.

One area where societal norms seem to be challenged is in that of gender. In Chapter 4 the focus is on gender and the role it plays for brands and consumers. The act of consumption is often considered feminine and this can alter how brands develop their structural narratives. Brands seeking to develop themselves as landmarks in the cultural landscape need to be aware that most aspects of the shared landscape are gendered and that gender is related to, but is not the same as, sex. There is an element of performance of gender that is related to the consumer's performance of self. How consumers identify within the framework of gender alters how they relate to a brand, with research finding that consumers tend to be more attracted to brands that best reflect how they see themselves and how they want to be seen. With this in mind, brands can develop their image to more closely align with gendered elements that consumers can pick up on. Doing this has pros and cons. Some consumers will see the gendered nature of a brand and avoid it, but for those consumers who feel that they more closely identify with a brand's gendered elements, they can feel that that brand is a safe space around which they can potentially develop a community.

How consumers and brands relate to gender is linked to the interplay between the power within societal norms and the socio-political and economic contexts within a particular location in the cultural landscape. The performance of gender within the cultural landscape is not dissimilar to the concept of authenticity, which is the topic of Chapter 5. Authenticity is a means of connecting one's inner and outer self, though it has an abundance of nuanced definitions. While being aware of the slipperiness of defining authenticity, we can better define this by relating authenticity to the consistency of internal and external expressions, and looking at how being authentic relates to an external referent and how well authenticity conforms to categorical norms. Grappling with authenticity is increasingly important for both brands and consumers as the changes across the cultural landscape move at pace. Alongside this we begin to see aspects of authenticity that are taken for granted. For example, in behind-the-scenes imagery and content where there is a level of intimacy and perceived authenticity between consumers and brands, and the spaces they inhabit become the norm, consumers seek something *more* authentic. As this chapter traces the movement towards the edges of authenticity it highlights the value that consumers put on the concept, while also seeking more reassurances from brands and others in the cultural landscape to both normalise the edges and bring consumers a sense of belonging.

Chapter 6 considers brand activism, which often goes hand in hand with authenticity. As more and more brands sell the same sorts of products or services at roughly the same prices, consumers are seeking ways to differentiate between them. Brand activism is a progression of corporate social responsibility that hones the concept of 'doing good' to focus in on key platforms. In the era of the public, in which we currently find ourselves, consumers expect more from their brands than for them to have an environmental impact statement; aspects that are widely considered good are often now simply expected of a brand. What consumers, led by Millennials and Gen Z, now expect is for brands to take a stand on social and political topics. Furthermore, they do not give much leeway for brands to straddle the line. This chapter hones in on what brand activism means in the current cultural landscape, its relationship to authenticity, and the pros and cons of capitalism and activism being bedfellows. It also touches on the balance that must be maintained by brands who also want to reach consumers who do not agree with their activist positions, and gives some examples on what happens when it all goes wrong and brands begin to lose a sense of ownership.

This loss of ownership and the transient movement of power are the subjects of Chapters 7 and 8. The ownership of items, content, and so on is directly linked to the ways that consumers are able to navigate their alignment of self-identity and self-projection in the cultural landscape. Every time that a consumer comes into contact with a brand – whether that is by purchasing a branded product, joining a branded community, or simply seeing another consumer associated with the brand – the perception of the brand develops further. Not only does the consumer have a role in ownership of a brand, those who work for and around a brand also have a key say in how that brand image is created and portrayed based on the employee and brand knowledge/power relationship. Ownership, then, is not simply physical possession; it is a state of mind that enables consumers to utilise the brand's structural narratives to navigate the cultural landscape. With this in mind, we can begin to split the concepts of ownership and control. As the brand puts down roots in the cultural landscape and builds a base that can begin to serve as a landmark, consumers become co-creators in that space. This can take a myriad of formats, such as consumers specifically developing community groups, helping to clear paths for the brand's narrative structures, or

highlighting the brand to other consumers. The brand no longer has complete control over their brand image and they must work with the consumers as power ebbs and flows.

Much like the streams of socio-political or economic contexts are ever changing as they move across the cultural landscape, so too do the power dynamics between the landscape, the consumers, and the brands alter. Chapter 8 digs into the ways that these power dynamics shift and the role that the exchange of capital plays as a catalyst. While consumers can become co-owners of a brand and help develop the brand's narrative structures, this can also go the other way, with consumers using their ownership of the brand and the power that amasses in brand communities to obscure the pathways leading others to the brand. This can happen in both physical and digital spaces; brands can be cut off or boosted as power shifts between them and the spaces they inhabit.

While it may be tempting to see this shift in power dynamics as a negative aspect of the relationships in the cultural landscape, this is not the case. Shifts in power can lead to positive changes for both brands and consumers. The final chapter in this book covers the application to industry in a too long; didn't read (TL;DR) format. If time is short, read this book from the back starting with Chapter 9, then read the other chapters to get in-depth considerations of each of the topics.

In addition to the main chapters of this book case studies are interspersed to highlight the ways the theoretical concepts are playing out in real time. These include Case Study 1, which considers how Virgin Atlantic and Anheuser-Busch's Bud Light engage with gendered aspects of their brand and marketing. A key element of this case study is the ways that these two brands embody authenticity, or not, and how consumers have reacted. Case Study 2 deals with a topic that skirted around the edges of the Virgin Atlantic and Bud Light advertisements: brand activism. By digging into both Kate Spade and Change Please, this case study shows how brands are able to engage with authentic activism and use partnerships to extend their reach while staying true to their values. The final case study, Case Study 3, follows the deep dive into power and its transience in the cultural landscape. With that in mind, it covers Skype, Burberry, and Old Spice and their capabilities to navigate the changes that come with shifts in power in different contexts.