

Valentina-Daniela N. CONSTANTIN,
Roxana-Denisa G. STOENESCU
Bucharest University of Economic Studies,
Bucharest, Romania

THE IMPACT OF ORIGIN ON CREATING A CULT BRAND: THE CASE OF APPLE

Case Study

Keywords

Origin
Country-of-origin
Cult brand
Loyalty
Brand community

JEL Classification

M31, M37

Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of a cult brand for a more accurate understanding of the extreme loyalty that consumers show towards specific brands. The article focuses on the brand Apple and it explores the elements for which it is considered a cult brand and the impact of its origin on sustaining its cult appeal. Based on the fact that many brands rely on emotional characteristics to obtain consumers' interest and attention, the country responsible for their conception is usually a warranty for quality and respect, features transferred to consumers. Through an exploratory research, based on investigation of secondary information as a data collection method, the research focuses on Apple's corporate mythology, its brand name, its geographical provenance and also the community surrounding it. The results of the study revealed that brand origin had a major role in creating the image that Apple sustained in the last decades, the conclusion reinforced the idea that on a solid foundation can be built a complex structure.

I. INTRODUCTION

The impact of brand origin is a theme frequently researched in the literature, anterior studies focused on the effect on consumers' purchase decision brand (Hu, Li, Xie & Zhou, 2008) or perception (Chrysochoidis, Krystallis & Perreas, 2007) towards a brand. Other perspective examined the effect that brand origin had on pioneering brands, described as "the first-mover advantage" (Chen & Pereira, 1999). Our study started focus on a distinct kind of brands which set a new trend on the market, pioneering brands that used innovation to create a quality-based product, known as cult brands. Usually, brands for which consumers' developed such strong feelings need to be inspirational, remarkable and relatable. There are numerous examples of cult brands that have in common that special feature that makes them unique in the eyes of consumers. Harley-Davidson is a quintessential cult brand because delivers an extraordinary experience and maintains its value promise, winning the consumer in such a way that he won't accept substitutes. Cult brands need a real voice, behave in human ways, personify human attributes. Apple's commercials named "I'm a Mac" illustrates that the brand was personified to become relatable to its customers.

The events that occur in today's society support the creation of cult brands because people return to their basic needs of security, social interaction and belonging to a group. For their consumers, cult brands are often seen as a surrogate family, so the feelings involved are not only strong, but also deep and hard to get rid of. A good example is Oprah, perhaps the strongest one-person cult brand in the world today (Ragas & Bueno, 2002). Cult brands also rely on creating communities around them, giving consumers a place to connect to each other, interact and change ideas. Linux, one of the most popular and more well-known operating systems nowadays, became powerful by involving

as many consumers as possible to try the "open-source" alternative, making them to connect, to be part of a group that refuses to "follow the herd". That makes Linux a unique cult brand, given the fact that it's not even controlled by one single company and has never spent large amounts of money on advertising.

One of the most recognizable cult brands is Apple, a trend-setter in innovation. Many companies have tried to discover and to copy the business model that makes Apple a unique brand, not being able to understand that maybe its secret relies on various factors. The brand's evolution indicates a stable corporate culture and the ability to adapt and to anticipate consumer's needs in a way hard to imitate. These are the reasons we consider Apple the best brand to examine as being a cult one, needless to list the qualities that place it in the select category of cult brands.

The understanding of cult branding also involves knowledge about the brands' history, so the part that we analyze in this study refers to the implications that origin can have on the creating process of the cult brand Apple. In order to establish the objective, we rely on an exploratory research, investigating information from secondary sources. Our contribution consists in drawing attention on the problem and trying to create a new perspective on the factors that play a significant role in creating a cult brand. We explore the connection between Apple's corporate origin and the cultic universe that surrounds the brand. The study also brings forward the consumers' perception, in order to understand their loyalty and attachment for Apple.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section of the article, we will bring to attention the concept of *cult brand*, itemizing its precursors, presenting different definitions that exist in the literature and some common characteristics, and also the notion of *brand origin*, with its definition and

particularities, in an attempt to reveal how the latter influences the former.

Cult brands – definition, characteristics, the seven laws

Although “building cults or communities surrounding brands has been a widespread marketing strategy since 1980s” (Koay & Hernández Eriksson, 2006), the expression *cult brand* was firstly mentioned in the literature at the beginning of the 20th century (Berry, 1992). As in the case of many marketing concepts, the notion appeared as a consequence of the practices used in that time period. The concept of *cult brand* was much later defined and characterized by the authors Ragas and Bueno (2002) who wrote a book on the subject based on their own desk and field research. Before stating their perspective on cult brands, it would be necessary to make a short review of the concepts that are considered to be precursors to the idea of a community having at its centre a brand.

One important notion to begin with is that of *communal consumption* which can be explained by the situation when “community members are placing special emphasis on some type of consumption - e.g. food, drink, gifts - as part of a celebration, ritual, or tradition” (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). For example, McGrath, Sherry, and Heisley (1993) studied the existence of a periodic community in a farmer’s market that united participants for creating and consuming a traditional market experience.

Authors Schouten and McAlexander (1995) introduced the concept of *subculture of consumption* - involving Harley Davidson motorcycle riders - which refers to “a distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity”. Beside these, a subculture of consumption has other characteristics, among which are: an identifiable social structure based on a hierarchy, “a unique ethos, or set of shared beliefs and values and unique jargons,

rituals, and modes of symbolic expression” (to facilitate shared meanings in consumer goods and activities) (Shouten & McAlexander, 1995; Belk and Tumbat, 2005). A similar but a more encompassing term is that of *consumption community* (Boorstin, 1973). The author who presented it argued that in such communities, Americans are more likely to feel united by consumption patterns which they have in common than by interacting on a daily basis due to living in the same geographical area (Boorstin, 1973). Strictly referring to small groups (e.g. Little League baseball), Fine (1979) used the term *idioculture* which stressed the localized nature of culture and implied also “that it need not be part of a demographically distinct subgroup, but rather that it is a particularistic development of any group in the society”. Other authors, like Kozinets (1998) focused on studying such groups which are present in the online environment, that were called *virtual communities of consumption*. They were defined as “affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities.” (Kozinets, 1999) Also, these are considered to be “more active and discerning”, “less accessible to one-on-one processes”, and to offer very valuable cultural information (Kozinets, 1999).

Another concept - which has been extensively discussed in the literature – is the one used by Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001), *brand community* that the authors describe as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand.” In addition to this, they find that brand communities show “three essential markers of community”: a shared consciousness, evidence of rituals and traditions, and a sense of obligation to the community (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). In comparison,

McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) developed a broader view of brand community, which is consistent with the theoretical foundations on which they rest their work, suggesting at the same time a shift of perspective. Specifically, they argue that it is necessary to take into account other relationships – with their branded possessions and with marketing specialists and organizations that own and manage the brand – that offer to brand community members similarity and cultural capital, which are also important to them (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002). Moreover, their perspective is that a “brand community is customer-centric, that the existence and meaningfulness of the community in here in customer experience rather than in the brand around which that experience revolves” (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002).

Considered by some specialists to be similar or an equivalent of community, the notion of *tribe* was itself studied in relationship with brand. While French authors (Cova & Cova, 2002) attempted to clarify the object of study by distinguishing between the three neighbouring concepts of *brand community*, *consumption subcultures* and *consumer tribes* or even *brand tribes*, Anglo-American analysts (e.g. Solomon, 2003) seem to accept the lack of differentiation between them (Cova & Pace, 2006). The word “tribe” refers to the re-emergence of quasi-archaic values: a local sense of identification, religiousness, syncretism, group narcissism (Cova & Cova, 2002). Tribe can be defined as a network of heterogeneous persons, in terms of gender, age, sex and income, “who share strong emotional links, a common subculture and a vision of life”, whose members “are not just consumers but also advocates”, whose behaviour is not really predictable, characterized by a “short life span and diversity” (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009). Although having the same characteristics

as an “ethnic group”, tribes are of a smaller scale, but still greater than that of a clan (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009).

Like in the case of communities of consumption, the advent of the internet determined the appearance of several studies which advanced the idea that brands can create consumer communities centered on their web sites – *virtual brand communities* (McWilliam, 2000). Furthermore, recent literature has even ventured into the relatively new territory of “brand communities for convenience products” (Cova & Pace, 2006), in contrast to the many studies addressing communities revolving around brands delivering niche or luxury products (e.g. Harley Davidson, Mercedes, Saab).

There is also significant literature related to *communities of true believers* (Hoffer, 2002). Dedicated fans of a particular sports team (Wann *et al.*, 2001), of musicians, musical groups, and celebrities (Hills, 2002) are examples of common focuses of such devotion. Very similar are fans of television series and films like *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* (Kozinets, 2001).

From subcultures of consumption to brand communities, all of them are concepts that we believe to have contributed to the idea of building stronger, closer and lasting relationships between customers and brands which led to the necessity of creating a new brand category. During the past decade brands have grown into “a mentality or way of life for their consumer following”, they are often perceived as “a reflection of which one is as a person” (Schau, Muñiz & Arnould 2009). In addition, a brand has evolved in such a way that it can unite individual consumers who may have “nothing more in common than the use of the same brand” (Acosta & Asagayam, 2010). For this reason, we introduce in this paper the notion of a *brand cult* in order to “better understand the extreme brand-focused devotion” (Belk & Tumbat, 2005).

Despite the negative connotation of the word “cult”, it was used by different

specialists in order to stress the importance of group relations and commitment, and to apply it within the context of branding (Acosta & Asagayam, 2010).

As we declared at the beginning of this section, one of the first interpretation of the term *cult brand* was the one given by co-authors Ragas and Bueno (2002), according to which such brands are “a special class of magnetic brands” which “all command super-high customer loyalty and almost evangelical customers or followers who are devoted to them”. Likewise, these “devoted followers identify with it [the brand in question] and show their commitment in various visible ways” (Ragas & Bueno, 2002). Another definition was that offered by Atkin (2004) which states that cult brands are normally innovative in their ideology, are characterized by a well-defined community that shows an “acute sense of belonging”, benefits from “exclusive devotion (that is, not shared with another brand in the same category)” and often from “voluntary advocacy on the part of its members”. Moreover, although many of these brands are not the market leaders in the industry (Koay & Hernández Eriksson, 2006), they not only greatly influence buying decisions, but also become a “crucial part of their customers’ lives” (Ragas & Bueno, 2002). The same authors, Ragas and Bueno (2002) believe the following to be examples of cult brands: Apple, Harley-Davidson, Jimmy Buffett, Linux, Oprah Winfrey, Star Trek, Vans Shoes, Volkswagen Beetle, and World Wrestling Entertainment (formerly WWF). From all of these we chose to analyze the first one because, despite the fact that bad business decisions had been made during the late 1990s, the cult has kept Apple afloat, according to the former CEO – Gil Amelio (Koay & Hernández Eriksson, 2006).

Other authors (Acosta & Asagayam, 2010) argued that brand cults represent a consequence of the evolution of brand communities, which we have described

above. They believe that “from a brand community, individuals begin to develop a strong bond through the identity initiated by a common brand, exhibiting a cult-like mentality” and that this kind of mentality “may be adapted to the way consumers behave within this next step in brand community”, which is *brand cult* (Acosta & Asagayam, 2010). While Atkin (2004) promotes the idea that cultlike devotion to brands arises from the human needs for belonging and satisfaction, these authors point another superior human need, stating that the community created around the cult brand serves as “an outlet for personal fulfillment” (Acosta & Asagayam, 2010). In addition to the particularities mentioned so far, cult brands are, to many of their followers, “living, breathing surrogate family, filled with like-minded individuals; they are a support group” that also sells products and/ or services (Ragas & Bueno, 2002).

Regarding the term *brand cult*, there are some specialists that consider it to be different from the “popular notion of a *cult brand*” in the sense that the latter has a negative connotation because it suggests that “the individual becomes unwillingly bound to and blinded by the product”; whereas, the concept brand cult describes “a strong connection with a group cognitively initiated by individuals” (Acosta & Asagayam, 2010). In contrast, authors Ragas and Bueno (2002) make a distinction between destructive and benign cults and emphasize that cult brands are included in the latter category of cults which “help fill the emotional wants and needs of their followers in a positive way”. Furthermore, such cults and their followers “enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship, with both receiving a real sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, belonging, and enlightenment” and the leaders “value the feedback” of the members (Ragas & Bueno, 2002).

Finally, in order to better understand the concept of *cult brand*, we present in the following lines some common

characteristics of these brands identified by Ragas and Bueno (2002), and Atkin (2004): (1) “brand is different, but same enough” (Koay & Hernández Eriksson, 2006) – consumers want to be a part of a group that is different which allows them to become more individual; the reasons why people join such groups are in Atkin’s opinion “the great cult paradox”; (2) cult brand investors are dissimilar to the rest – “cult brand leaders are daring and determined fighters” (Koay & Hernández Eriksson, 2006), which implies taking great risks; (3) “cult brands sell lifestyles” (Ragas & Bueno, 2002) – they make their customers smile, feel happy and “enjoy a temporary escape from life duties” (Koay & Hernández Eriksson, 2006); also, they help their followers fulfill their dreams; (4) cult brands listen (Ragas & Bueno, 2002) – not only are they willing to listen, but also to act on what its customers want; they focus their efforts on satisfying their current customers, turning received suggestions into solutions and ultimately creating brand evangelists; (5) cult brands always develop customer communities (Ragas & Bueno, 2002) – they create their own space to appreciate customer loyalty and devotion, build strong relationships by developing and supporting communities (Koay & Hernández Eriksson, 2006); Atkin (2004) emphasizes in this case the need of belonging and three reasons why consumers want to be a part of a community: survival, determination of what is real and making meaning; (6) cult brands are open and inclusive (Ragas & Bueno, 2002) – they do not discriminate, neither by age, race, creeds, nor by socioeconomic backgrounds; although they advertise that everybody is welcome to use their products and/ or services, Atkin (2004) advises to only “get the right membership”, to attract those well-socialized individuals who will engage new prospects; (7) “cult brands promote personal freedom” (Ragas & Bueno, 2002) – they encourage customers’ feelings of nonconformity and rebellion against

authority and determine the feeling of independence; “demarcating the cult from the status quo could be achieved through rituals, appearance, iconography and symbols, sacred texts, language, rules and regulations and so on” (Koay & Hernández Eriksson, 2006); (8) “cult brands demonize the other” – they battle with an archenemy “usually in face-to-face and confrontational manner” (Ragas & Bueno, 2002); they can either demonize something tangible, such as a company or a brand name, or something intangible, such as an idea, value or state of mind (Koay & Hernández Eriksson, 2006). Therefore, the role of brands has come to a major recalibration, becoming “credible sources of community and meaning” (Atkin, 2004).

The concept of brand origin – definition and particularities

Research concerning the origin of a product gained an important place in the field of consumer behavior due to globalization, which increased the opportunities to distribute products all over the world. Therefore, the provenance of products became ambiguous for consumers, who were able to choose from a large variety of products, but also experienced a multicultural phenomenon. Because of that producers became aware of the importance of creating a strong image for their products, in some cases by transferring the advantages from a country with a favourable image. Thus, consumers were approached in a familiar manner, in order to gain their trust. Ahmed, Zbib, Sikander and Farhat (2010) stated that the perception about a product’s origin is based on factors such as consumer knowledge, national loyalty, brand awareness, culture and ethnocentrism.

In order to understand the concept of origin, there are other terms that need to be explained. The first one, country of design, refers to the place where a product is actually conceived and engineered, before is finally assembled. There is also a term known as *country of parts*, meaning the

place where the materials or components were made (Insch & McBride, 2004). The first perspective of describing the concept of country image included “the picture, the reputation, the stereotype that businessmen and consumers attach to products of a specific country. This image is created by specific variables such as representative products, national characteristics, economic and political background, history and traditions” (Nagashima, 1970). Other point of view (Roth & Romeo, 1992) considers “the overall perception consumers form of products from a particular country, based on their prior perception of the country’s production and marketing strengths and weaknesses” as elements part of a country’s image. After establishing the components of a country’s image, we find necessary to define the concept of brand origin. Authors Thakor and Kohli (1996) suggest the following definition: “the place, region or country to which the brand is perceived to belong by its customers” (Guzman, A brand building literature review, p. 19).

Knowing that the equity of a brand is influenced mostly by variables of the marketing mix, resulted in consumers’ perception, little attention is given to non-marketing mix factors, as Yasin, Noor and Mohamad stated in 2007. Consumers’ perception of quality is strongly influenced by the origin of a brand, being perhaps the most important attribute. In the following sentences we focus on origin associations with the brand’s equity, as factors of major impact in developing reputation and trust for consumers. Brand equity is linked to brand’s origin due to the fact that consumers willingly pay a higher price for the same level of quality, being attracted by the provenance of the product, in this particular case. Antecedent to brand equity is considered to be *perceived brand foreignness*, which includes a set of functional and imaginary associations with foreign markets (Zhou, Yang & Hui, 2010). The perception of quality is often associated with familiarity, according to

Thakor and Lavack (2003). Consumers have developed a multicultural identity, which allows them not only to adopt some elements from other cultures and to integrate them in their behaviour, but also to be more receptive to elements of alternative identities (Zolfagharian & Sun, 2010). This perspective offers an answer to the increasing tolerance manifested by consumers in accepting foreign brands quickly, despite the unfamiliarity experienced.

Other aspect in which origin plays an important part is *brand distinctiveness*, in terms of innovation, high technology and prestige. A brand can also increase its awareness due to a certain origin, consumers having no difficulties in remembering the logo, the name of the brand. Origin has a major impact on brand loyalty, in this case familiarity being directly responsible for creating a long time relationship with customers (Yasin, Noor & Mohamad, 2007).

Brand origin can provide an increasing degree of salience for consumers, so using it as an advantage in creating a strong image for the brand should be subtle when symbolism is the foundation of that image and explicit in cases where the concept of the brand relies on certain features. Authors Thakor and Lavack stated in an article published in 2003 that consumers are more impressed by the perceived origin of a brand than by the real origin. Therefore, producers should be more concerned by the place consumers attribute to a brand and less preoccupied by the actual manufacturing location.

The social nature of brands is illustrated by the concept of *brand communities*, defined by the possibility of sharing information, changing personal opinions and being part of the same brand culture. These communities strengthen the relationship between the brand and the consumer, describing a “specialized, non-geographical bound, based on a structured set of relationships among admirers of a

brand” (Guzman, A brand building literature review, p. 19).

Despite the important role that origin plays in creating a brand, there are studies that indicate that the effect of country-of-origin decreases when we discuss about the purchase intention (Koschate-Fischer, Diamantopoulos & Oldenkotte, 2012). From that point of view results the comparison between quality perception and purchase intention, in terms of country-of-origin relevance.

All these aspects conducted to the necessity of analyzing the impact that a certain origin has on the developing process of a cult brand, which is defined by the specific characteristics mentioned above. We find not only interesting, but also relevant for the subject to examine a concrete case of a cult brand, as presented in the following section.

III. APPLE – Case study: The influence of brand origin on developing its cult nature

People are drawn together by common bonds, aspect on which cult branding is based. Creating an experience for the consumer is the first step in obtaining loyalty and engagement. There are seven golden rules of cult branding, according to Ragas and Bueno, mentioned in the book *The power of cult branding*, 2002, rules which have been explained in the second part of this paper:

1. Consumers want to be part of a group that's different.
2. Cult brand inventors show daring and determination.
3. Cult brand sell lifestyles.
4. Cult brand will make the customers as brand evangelists.
5. Cult brand always create customer communities.
6. Cult brands are inclusive.
7. Cult brands promote personal freedom and draw power from their enemies.

Our approach focuses on each statement from above and discusses it in a profound

manner. The first rule considers that in a society almost addicted to communication, consumers develop the necessity of belonging to a different group. This need brings along the feeling of uniqueness, which is strong connected with the concept of a cult brand. Apple is not only a leader innovator, but also a brand that encourages consumers to be and to think different, to stand out. This argument is sustained by the company's attitude towards hierarchy, the employees are encouraged to dress casually, to act free, in order to reduce stress and to create a good working environment. Their actions are not limited by job duties, each employee can participate in the creating process and usually everyone must agree to an idea before it's implemented (Koay & Hernández, 2006). This attitude to stand out, to be different, increases the chances to select the best direction. Apple has used the same model on consumers, fact proven to be an intelligent way of showing them they can find support in the brand's values. A cult brand relies also on the strength of its inventor. This rule is very much linked with the brand's origin, the history of Apple Computers tells us that Steve Jobs' evolution can be associated with the Heroic Adventure Myth, as Campbell stated in 1991. According to him, there are elements like *the call to adventure, the helper, the journey, a trial period, apotheosis, flight and resurrection* that form a heroic adventure. Steve Jobs, one of Apple's inventors, is characterized by these elements. Before building the Apple brand, he was a member of the Homebrew Computer Club, a place where he met Steve Wozniak, the helper. That was their call to adventure, the start of a long journey of creating a multimillion-dollar corporation. During that journey, they faced multiple trials, like the battles with IBM and Microsoft, the pressure to innovate more and more, all of that conducting to the apotheosis of becoming a legend, a strong brand and a pioneer. The flight was the departure of Steve Jobs,

leaving Apple for NeXT Computers, for a short period of time, until the CEO took back his decision and remained at the helm of Apple, fact seen as a resurrection (Belk & Tumbat, 2005).

The third statement, cult brands sell lifestyles, can be explained by the desire of people to entertain themselves, to enjoy life. Apple provides escapism to consumers, encouraging them to pursue their dreams, to have a high standard in every aspect of their lives, making them believe that if they choose the best brand in terms of quality and design, they should have the same attitude for everything. This fact is also connected to the values that the United States, as country-of-origin, passed to Apple, values such as democracy, freedom, individualism. Over the last decades United States had been associated with political freedom, stable legal environment and freedom of speech, aspects maintained even in recent years, despite economic challenges. From consumers' perspective, the country is still both highly esteemed and frequently considered for a visit. In terms of advanced technology, United States is considered a strong brand globally, especially in the computer, medical, aerospace and military technologies (Country Brand Index, 2012-2013, p. 15-17). Due to globalization, consumers adopted many lifestyle features from the Americans, so owning a product conceived in the US installed in them the feeling of being part of that culture. This way, they could have access of desired cultural elements.

Cult brands create a magnetic effect on consumers, which helps developing not only loyalty, but also in some case, affiliations similar to religion, transforming consumers in brand evangelists, making consumer to embrace their ideology and values, fact that gives the brand a more powerful meaning. Apple is considered to be the inventor of cult marketing. One of the most significant effects of that matter is represented by the

brand vocabulary, invented or at least popularized by Apple, examples like *folders*, *icons*, *mouse* or *double-click* being well recognized. The brand also instilled in consumers the feeling that together they can make the world a better place, statement reinforced by the company's activities concerning disadvantaged groups or educational programs. During these activities, they showed their allegiance to the brand by wearing inscriptions or the slogans dedicated to Apple (Wipperfürth & Grant, 2002, How cults seduce and what marketing can learn from them, p.14). From other sources (Belk & Tumbat, 2005) we learn that Apple even had a chief evangelist, who was meant to spread information and the brand's message, in order to gain consumers' loyalty. According to the meaning of the concept, we can also state that Apple's evangelists are not only members of the staff, but also loyal customers, who dedicate their time and energy to convince others of their beliefs. Apple has managed to focus on the people who are already consumers, concentrating on making them feel loved and responding to their needs.

Developing a strong relationship with the consumers determines them to seek the same values in other people. These customer communities are based on three core components, according to Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001). The first one, consciousness of kind, is described as „an intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community”, statement true in Apple's case because loyal customers share similar experiences and emotions, but in the same time they feel unique, special from non-consumers. The presence of share rituals is the second component, Apple's customers enjoy celebrating the brand by relating to the same stories regarding the brand's history. In terms of moral responsibility, the third component, customers perceive as a duty the community's task, they are loyal to its members' opinions, viewing

the community as a whole. Apple's Mac Users Groups is an independent club in which members share their admiration and love for the brand, moved by the slogan "As a Mac user, you can experience a feeling of connectedness by finding other Mac users in your community" (Lee, 2009).

Brand communities present a strong degree of commitment, a good example is the online community *ilounge.com*, dedicated to the Apple iPod. Members discuss every piece of information regarding the existing iPods and also make propositions about new design for the next generation (Fuller, Matzler & Hoppe, 2008). Author Jenny Lee (2009) considers that the Mac Users Groups share similarities with Harley Owners Groups, Harley-Davidson community of consumers, revealing that in many ways people have the same need of belonging, no matter what brand they have in mind.

Although cult brands are considered by many exclusive brands, the authors Ragas and Bueno described them as being rather inclusive, based on the argument that companies are open to include in their customer list any person who embraces the brand's values. From this perspective, the brand's origin facilitated the entrance on foreign markets by providing a certain level of quality and familiarity with other US products. The origin also helped Apple to become a global brand, in terms of notoriety and recognition. Being an inclusive brand, Apple values consumers' ideas and let them personalize the products, selling not only a tangible object, but also a dream, an aspiration. The last statement refers to personal freedom and power. Apple gives consumers the feeling of expressing freely ideas, completing the user experience at a higher level. They also maintained a unity in competing with other companies, especially in the era of dominance of Microsoft.

The brand recognition implies a variety of attitudes expected from the consumer and it's based on a minimal level of brand

awareness (Aaker, 2005). This case study examined the cult nature of Apple, by analyzing seven important statements that sustain the hypothesis. Our goal was also to explore the connection between the formation of the cult brand and its origin, element proven to have an important influence on the perception people have about the company and the brand. This perception is strong related to the country-of-origin, in this case United States of America, especially influenced by the country's prosperity, lifestyle, technological development and culture based on the concept of freedom. It is worthy to mention that it is not a coincidence that many cult brands have their origin in the United States, examples are numerous – Harley-Davidson, Apple, Oprah – a challenge in terms of research being a comparative analyze of the impact of origin on cult brands that share the same provenance.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Modern society gathers a large spectrum of elements that create a perfect environment for developing cult brands. The most significant is perhaps fragmentation, determining the increasing cases of violence, a higher divorce rate and other problems among people. Cult branding exploits the remaining human need of security, belonging and interaction with other people. On this background there is a higher competition among brands to gain consumers' loyalty and commitment. Apple is an example of maintaining an emotional bond with its customers, often functioning as a refuge for their daily problems. Our study showed that not only is Apple a cult brand, but the unique elements that place it as a number one brand have demonstrated long-term effectiveness. As a central element we have the brand's origin, the key from where history began. The company's growth and development was strongly influenced by its birth in the United States of America, in an era of prosperity and

advanced technology. The image of the country was projected directly to the brand, facilitating the positioning strategy to be implemented. From this point of view, we can conclude by stating that a good start not only smoothen the entire process of creating a strong brand, but also creates a major competitive advantage, difficult to surpass by competitors.

The limits of the study are based on the method used, which is the investigation of secondary information. This brings along problems such as incomplete information, necessary to deepen the subject on a profound level.

As for future directions in research, we learn through the study that it would be useful to analyze from a comparative perspective the impact of origin on brands created in the same country, sharing the same cultural and political values. On the other hand, research can focus on brands that are pioneers in their industry, coming from opposite cultures and examine the common benefits or disadvantages which came along.

References

- [1] Aaker, D. (2005). Managementul capitalului unui brand – Cum s valorific m numele unui brand [Managing Brand Equity – Capitalizing on the Value of a Brand Name]. Bucharest: Brandbuilders Grup.
- [2] Acosta, P. & Asagayam, R. (2010). Brand Cult: Extending the Notion of Brand Communities. *The Marketing Management Journal*, Vol. 20, Issue 1, p. 165-176.
- [3] Ahmed, Z., Zbib, I., Sikander, A. & Farhat, K. (2010). Predicting consumer behaviour based on country of origin - A case study of Lebanese consumers. *EuroMed Journal of Business*, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 37-56, 1450-2194. DOI: 10.1108/14502191011043143
- [4] Atkin, D. (2004). *The Culting of Brands: When Customers Become True Believers*. New York: Portfolio.
- [5] Belk, R. & Tumbat, G. (2005). The Cult of Macintosh. *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, Vol. 8, No. 3, p. 205–217. ISSN 1025–3866 (print)/ISSN 1477–223X (online). DOI: 10.1080/10253860500160403.
- [6] Berry, J. (1992). The Power of Cult Brands. *Adweek's Marketing Week*, Vol. 33, No. 8, p. 18-21
- [7] Boorstin, D. J. (1973). *The Americans: The democratic experience*. New York: Random House.
- [8] Chen, H.C. & Pereira, A. (1999). Product entry in international markets: the effect of country-of-origin on first-mover advantage. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, Vol. 8, No. 3, p. 218-231, 1061-0421.
- [9] Chryssochoidis, G., Krystallis, A. & Perreas, P. (2007). Ethnocentric beliefs and country-of-origin (COO) effect - Impact of country, product and product attributes on Greek consumers' evaluation of food products. *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 41 No. 11/12, p. 1518-1544, 0309-0566. DOI 10.1108/03090560710821288
- [10] Country Brand Index (2012-13). Retrieved March 14, 2014, from http://www.futurebrand.com/images/uploads/studies/cbi/CBI_2012-Final.pdf
- [11] Cova, B. & Cova, V. (2002). Tribal marketing: The tribalisation of society and its impact on the conduct of marketing. *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 36, Issue 5, p. 595-620.
- [12] Cova, B. & Pace, S. (2006). Brand community of convenience products: new forms of customer empowerment - the case "my Nutella The Community". *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 40, Issue 9, p. 1087-1105.
- [13] Fine, G.A. (1979). Small groups and culture creation: The idioculture of a little league baseball team. *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 44, No. 4, p. 733-745.
- [14] Fuller, J., Matzler, K. & Hoppe, M. (2008). Brand Community Members as a Source of Innovation, *The Journal of Product Innovation Management*, Vol. 25, p. 608-619.
- [15] Guzman, F., A Brand Building Literature Review. Retrieved March 10, 2014, from http://www.brandchannel.com/images/papers/257_a_brand_building_literature_review.pdf
- [16] Hills, M. (2002). *Fan cultures*, London: Routledge.
- [17] Hoffer, E. (2002). *The true believer: Thoughts on the nature of mass movements*. New York: Perennial Classics.
- [18] Hu, X., Li, L., Xie, C. & Zhou, J. (2008). The effects of country-of-origin on Chinese consumers' wine purchasing behaviour. *Journal of Technology Management in China*, Vol. 3, No. 3, p. 292-306, 1746-8779. DOI: 10.1108/17468770810916195
- [19] Insch, G. & McBride, J. (2004). The impact of country-of-origin cues on consumer perceptions of product quality: A binational test of the decomposed country-of-origin construct. *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 57, p. 256-265.
- [20] Koay, L. & Hernández Eriksson, I. (2006). A Pragmatic Approach to Sustaining Cult Brand – case of Apple. Master Thesis International Marketing, Mälardalen International Master Academy, School of Business, Tutor: Charlotta Edlund.
- [21] Koschate-Fischer, N., Diamantopoulos, A. & Oldenkotte, K. (2012). Are Consumers Really Willing to Pay More for a Favorable Country Image? A Study

- of Country-of-Origin Effects on Willingness to Pay. *Journal of International Marketing*, American Marketing Association, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2012, p. 19-41, ISSN 1069-0031X (print) 1547-7215 (electronic).
- [22] Kozinets, R.V. (1999). E-Tribalized Marketing?: The Strategic Implications of Virtual Communities of Consumption, *European Management Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 3, p. 252-264, 0263-2373.
- [23] Kozinets, R.V. (1998). On netnography: initial reflections on consumer research investigations of cyberspace. *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 25, p. 366-371.
- [24] Kozinets, R.V. (2001). Utopian enterprise: Articulating the meanings of Star Trek's culture of consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 28 (June), p. 67-87.
- [25] Lee, J. (2009). Why we Join – A Sociological and Psychological Analysis of Brand Communities. *The Cult Branding Company*, cultbranding.com
- [26] McAlexander, J.H., Schouten, J. W. & Koenig, H.F. (2002). Building Brand Community. *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 66, p. 38-54.
- [27] McGrath, M.A., Sherry, J.F. & Heisley, D.D. (1993). An Ethnographic Study of an Urban Periodic Marketplace: Lessons from the Midville Farmer's Market. *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 69 (Fall), p. 280-319.
- [28] McWilliam, G. (2000). Building stronger brands through online communities. *Sloan Management Review*, Spring, p. 43-54.
- [29] Muñiz, A.M. & O'Guinn, T.C. (2001). Brand Community. *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 27, No. 4, p. 412-432, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/319618>.
- [30] Nagashima, A. (1970). A comparison of Japanese and US attitudes towards foreign products. *Journal of marketing*, Vol. 34, Issue 1, p. 68-74, ISSN 0022-2429.
- [31] Ragas, M. & Bueno, B. (2002). *The Power of Cult Branding: How 9 Magnetic Brands Turned Customers into Loyal Followers*. New York: Crown Business.
- [32] Roth, M.S. & Romeo, J.B. (1992). Matching product category and country image perceptions: A framework for managing country-of-origin effects. *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3, p. 477-97.
- [33] Schau, H.J., Muñiz, A. & Arnould, E.J. (2009). How Brand Community Practices Create Value. *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 73, p. 30-51.
- [34] Schouten, J.W. & McAlexander, J.H. (1995). Subcultures of consumption: An ethnography of the new biker. *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 43-62.
- [35] Solomon, M.R. (2003). *Conquering Consumerspace, Marketing Strategies for a Branded World*. New York: Amacom.
- [36] Thakor, M. & Lavack, A. (2003). Effect of perceived brand origin on associations on consumer perceptions of quality. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, Vol. 12, No. 6, p. 394-407, ISSN 1061-0421. DOI: 10.1108/10610420310498821
- [37] Veloutsou, C. & Moutinho, L. (2009). Brand relationships through brand reputation and brand tribalism. *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 62, p. 314-322.
- [38] Wann, D.L., Melnick, M.J., Russell, G.W. & Pease, D.G. (2001). *Sport fans: The psychology and social impact of spectators*. New York: Routledge.
- [39] Wipperfurth, A. & Grant, J. (2002). How cults seduce and what marketing can learn from them. http://www.mindcontrol101.com/pdfs/How_Cults_Seducer.pdf
- [40] Yasin, N., Noor, M. & Mohamad, O. (2007). Does image of country-of-origin matter to brand equity? *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 16/1, p. 38-48, ISSN 1061-0421. DOI: 10.1108/10610420710731142.
- [41] Zhou, L., Yang, Z. & Hui, M. (2010). Non-local or local brands? A multi-level investigation into confidence in brand origin identification and its strategic implications. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, p. 202-218. DOI: 10.1007/s11747-009-0153-1.
- [42] Zolfagharian, M. & Sun, Q. (2010). Country of origin, ethnocentrism and bicultural consumers: the case of Mexican Americans. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 27/4, p. 345-357, ISSN 0736-3761. DOI: 10.1108/07363761011052387.