Towards a Conceptual Framework for Defining Iconic Brands: A Critical Review of Studies

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Abstract

Significant academic and managerial interest in brand-consumer relationship has occasioned increasing quantity of literature on the concept. Holt (2004) made a landmark contribution with his conceptualisation of iconic brands, which are arguably aspirational brands. Albeit his works have dominated the discourse on iconic brands, there seem to be more focus on the role of brand owners in defining iconic brands, thus neglecting the place of consumers' lived experience in the discourse. Recent developments suggest the need for a widening of the conceptual domain to account for the role of consumers' lived experience in the definition of brands. Consequently, the purpose of this article is to explore the extant literature on the concept of iconic brands in a bid to situate the argument for the inclusion of consumers' lived experience. The aforementioned exploration addresses the cultural branding model, consumption and the symbolic project of the self, and customer dominant logic. Ultimately, a conceptual model was proposed that highlights the need to investigate the lived experience of consumers. The critical contribution of the article lies in its systematic development of the conceptual domain of iconic brands and the potential this development has for guiding knowledge development including the discussion of an agenda for future research that illustrates its managerial relevance.

Keywords: iconic brands, culture, consumers.

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1. Introduction

Brands feature a great deal in our everyday existence and have become key participants in contemporary culture. They infiltrate all circles of human endeavour: traditional, commercial, societal, entertainment and so on. Consequently, the ubiquity of brands has necessitated their growing evaluation (Lelis, 2021). For instance, brands have been conceptualised using the following features: symbolic, psychological and functional (Coelho, Bairrada, de Matos Coelho, 2020).

The symbolic aspect of brands is indicative of an identity, which underlines such brands in the minds of the consumers, in the same way that a name serves to identify an individual. Coca Cola seemed to leverage the symbolic component by aligning its brand to the individual names of consumers in the 'Share a Coke with' campaign. Notably, the symbolic feature of brands is implicated in the process of consumption (Coutinho, de Mesquita, de Muylder, 2018) and the formation of brand communities. This interrelationship is illustrated by the brand cult of the Harley Davidson brand community.

Arguably, the psychological component makes up majority of the extant research on brands, which spans the attitudinal perspective of consumer behaviour. This perspective conceptualises brands as short forms that facilitates top of mind awareness (Sultan et al., 2019) during the process of purchase decision. Additionally, the psychological facet typifies the frequently theorised constructs: brand personality, brand image, brand identity, brand equity and brand relationships that produce the interplay in the brand-consumer relationship. Brand personality, for instance, highlights the human traits exhibited by brands, which in turn endears consumers who find the aforementioned traits relatable (Yang, Lee, 2019).

The functional component of a brand delineates the elements in a brand that facilitates differentiation (such as logo, colour, name), and the positive peculiarities that engender competitive advantage (Panda et al., 2019). In addition, this perspective highlights the legal status of brands as identifiers considering that registered trademarks serve to secure ownership and prevent imitation. However, the value of the legal asset of brands is significantly dependent on the ability of an organization to keep them from infringement. Notably, brands guarantee the performance of product for instance the presence of the 'intel inside' sticker (on a computer system) assures the buyer that system is equipped with cutting-edge machinery.

Despite the growing interest in brands, several scholars suggest that branding requires theoretical improvement (Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2018) that facilitates more understanding (Gupta et al., 2020) through the employment

of different outlooks aimed at explaining brands in relation to consumers' experience instead of the intent of brand owners.

Nevertheless, the connotation of brands transcends the basic ideas of the communication process. It is common for people to consider brands in terms of human characteristics (Delgado-Ballester, Palazón, Peláez, 2020). Aaker (1997) implicates consumers' perception of brand, celebrity endorsers, and the entire marketing communication as influences of the ubiquity and personality traits of brands.

Additionally, various marketing scholars allude to the capacity of brands to facilitate social meaning and assimilation (Batra, 2019). In this capacity, brands stimulate social diversity or incorporation. For instance, the brand communities of Harley Davidson and Apple illustrate social incorporation. Consequently, consumers seek brands that engender remarkable shared experiences.

Through the creation of myth and participation in our culture, iconic brands transcend the general endearing of human characteristics (Holt, 2004). Arguably, they hold great significance considering that they function as, and possess the features of a cultural icon. Furthermore, owing to their brand strength, iconic brands such as Ventolin endure (Cova, 2022). Holt (2003) also argues that comprehension of the nature of iconic brands would require that we transcend the mind of the consumer into the realm of culture and society: the world in which iconic brands provide value.

Iconic brands have been known to offer identity values and myths to consumers through mass media in a bid to deal with communal affairs (Chun, Le, 2012). These brands also employ instances of consumption: service delivery, public relations, packaging, product design, retail milieu and advertising to create this myth (Holt, 2004). These myths are stories people trust to systemise their comprehension of themselves and the world. With the precise identity myth coupled with the emotional connection, iconic brands develop in consumers a strong emotional attachment (LaTour, LaTour, Zinkhan, 2010).

Arguably, previous studies have focused on the role of brand owners and creatives in the construction of the iconicity of brands (see Holt 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006; Chun, Le, 2012; Rego et al., 2021; Cova, 2022). Schembri (2021) argues that iconic brands are popular and are highly distinguishable cultural symbols that consumers connect with and that brands further new ideologies in the society, drawing their strength from cultural myth and stories (cultural branding). However, these arguments create some problems since it is difficult to discuss brands without reference to the influence of consumers. Furthermore, I argue for the co-creation of the construct, 'brand' by brand owners (including the creatives that produce the brand's marketing communication) and the consumers (particularly referencing their lived experience of brands). Similarly, Bulmer (2011) argues that the notion of iconic

brands seems to be more intricate than what has been conceived in the cultural branding discourse thereby suggesting other social processes (associated with consumers' lived experiences of brands) that may be responsible for brand iconicity.

In his definition of consumer experience, Alloza (2008) implicates consumer perception (that stems from their personal contact with brands and the interaction with brands' marketing communication), consumers' brand narratives, their deliberate search for brands etc. among the essential components of the experience. Similarly, Zehir, Sahin, Kitapçi (2011) include the components of consumer perception in their conceptualisation of consumer experience. They further argue that brand-associated stimuli trigger consumer experiences (packaging, marketing communication, etc.).

Arguably, the iconicity of brands relies significantly on the lived experience of consumers- how they view themselves and their environment. However, the discourse on brand iconicity (cultural branding) has focused on the influence iconic brands on consumers. It will be interesting to study brand iconicity from the perspective of the consumer- how they perceive iconic brands and their characteristics. Arguably, influences and contexts, which have not been explored in extant literature, seem to play a key role in driving brand iconicity.

Indeed, Holt's (2004) seminal work on iconic brands embodies a small segment of the whole narrative of iconic brands and does not account fully for the consumers' experiences of the iconicity of brands. There is a need for more research that studies iconic brands' definition and evolution from the consumer perspective, as this has been less studied.

Consequently, this study will explore extant literature on the concept of iconic brands, while seeking to explain the loop that lie therein. Furthermore, I propose a conceptual model that will illustrate the argument for inclusion of consumers' lived experience in the discourse.

This study will contribute to the existing consumer culture and marketing communications literature with respect to the relationship between consumers and brands particularly iconic brands. Indeed, this study is useful to students seeking to understand the discourse regarding iconic brands. In addition, the study is aimed at providing much needed conceptual and theoretical backings to explain the consumer perception of brand iconicity. Ultimately, this study has the potential to provide insights for brand owners who seek newer ways of leveraging interaction between brands and consumers.

2.   Literature review

2.1 Concept of iconic brands

As earlier mentioned, Douglas Holt played a significant role in conceiving the cultural perspective of brands. Following a detailed illustration in his seminal work: 'How Brands becomes Icons', he anchored the popular cultural model, which will be considered later in this section. Furthermore, several scholars have also alluded to the cultural perspective of iconic brands. For instance, Muñiz, Hope (2005) argue that iconic brands, as well as, cult objects significantly shape the lives of consumers, and the ensuing community connects people across cultures. These connections are reflective of social ties within communities. In this sense, consumers share the same enthusiasm for the brand, including feeling of spiritual and religious excitement, fervor, zeal and adoration together with a quasi-addiction to the object (Pimentel, Reynolds, 2004).

Arguably, although brands possess the capacity to elicit abstract meaning, only a few brands are able to distinguish themselves and become cultural icons. Arguably, Coca-Cola has attained the status of a cultural icon albeit the similarities in the brand essence of Coca-Cola and Pepsi (such as youthfulness and fun). Torelli, Stoner (2015) buttress the aforementioned instance citing the Interbrand rankings of the best global brands. Sorenson defines a cultural icon as "a commercialized, yet sacralised visual, aural or textual representation anchored in a specific temporal/historical and spatial/geographical context, broadly recognized by its recipients as having iconic status for a group of human agents within one or several discursive fields/communities" (2015: 6).

Furthermore, iconic brands exemplify significantly the influence of brands on social and cultural life, thus playing a definitive ideological role in society (Holt, 2006). Notable instances of iconic brands include Lego (Antorini, Muñiz, Askildsen, 2012) and Starbucks (Thompson, Rindfleisch, Arsel, 2006). These brands progressively create value and facilitate consumers' enactment of the comprehension of their environment (Ganassali, Matysiewicz, 2020). In addition, consumers, having an increasing need to represent their cultural identity, are likely to appraise brands since they are known to symbolise beliefs, ideas and values of a cultural group (Torelli, Rodas, Lahoud, 2017).

Holt (2004) argues that the characteristic feature of iconic brands is mythmaking, which are creatively crafted expressions that aid consumers in making meaning of their lives and easing tensions. This argument finds some support in Holt's argument: "People use iconic brand symbolism to firm up their identities and to enact the basic status and affiliation processes that are the bread-and-butter functions of all symbols" (2006: 357).

Consequently, iconic brands possess significant brand value since they are ideological symbols that are shared among a group of people. Arguably, these brands feature in the everyday lives of customers helping them to experience ideologies, thus easing anxieties resulting from acute social change. Leveraging the incidences of social tension in the society, iconic brands locate cultural sweet spots. This is indicative of Snapple, an iconic American Juice brand (Holt 2004). The ubiquity and cultural aspects of brands, as well as their consideration as symbols in consumer cultures, are important components of contemporary branding (Pineda, Sanz-Marcos, Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020).

These brands provide creative modes of cultural expression by presenting persuasive myth, which can aid a people- habitually a nation (Bulmer, 2011) in settling issues in their lives. Holt, Cameron (2010) allude to the strength of iconic brands implicating symbolic and ideological value as influences. This allusion is similar to a previous argument by Holt (2003) that privileges symbolism over performance in the consideration of iconic brands. However, their arguments do not give significant relevance to performance, which is also as important as symbolism in value creation for iconic brands. Iconic brands like St. Louis sugar have persisted with little marketing communications.

In popular culture, brands seem to act as storytellers (much like films, novels, etc.), possessing cultural meanings which is employed in a bid to facilitate the collective identity projects of consumers. In that sense, the brand is a vessel of meaning and myth making, successful only if it resonates with the collective identity projects of consumers. In recent times, adverts of the Hero beer brand have identified with the Igbo culture, generating narratives that resonate with the audience. Witkowski (2016) argues that the creation of narratives about brand founders is a feature of iconic brands. For instance, the name of the company, Dangote Industries Limited is very indicative of the founder, Aliko Dangote.

The major proponents of the cultural perspective argue for the influence of iconic brands in the creation of value via the active participation in conventional culture. This argument tends to give significant control to the brand owner and creatives considering that a brand manager, who is able to comprehend the most compelling cultural messages, can produce the suitable text for the brand. In this sense, the brand gains competitive power by providing the consumer with the appropriate web of associations and the most powerful myths of its time.

Notably, Heding, Knudtzen, Bjerre (2009) argue that brands are shaped by influences beyond the direct control of the brand manager. Arguably, these factors could include intergenerational influences and consumers' lived experiences. In addition, Holt (2004) alludes to brands being authors but, in the end, he privileges the myth making of creatives over the other influences. His

model depicts the consumers as being influenced by adverts (this is similar to the theory of Powerful Effects of the Media, which bestows on the Media the ultimate capacity to influence the audience). The downside of the assertions is that it paints the picture of consumers who are influenced by, and rely solely on the marketing communications of brand owners. Furthermore, two theories are relevant in highlighting the loop in the extant discourse on iconic brands: Consumption and the Symbolic Project of Self (CSPS), and Cultural Branding Model. These will be discussed below.

2.2 Consumption and the symbolic project of the self (CSPS)

Elliott, Wattanasuwan (1998) propounded the model for CSPS. It belongs to postmodern era of Consumer Culture Theory (CTT) (Arnould, Thompson, 2005). CTT denotes a variety of theoretical standpoints focus on the dynamic associations between consumer behaviour, cultural connotations and marketplace. It does not claim to be an all-inclusive and integrated theory (Arnould, Thompson, 2005).

Central to CSPS is the postmodern ideology that product functionality is not the only influencer of a consumer's choice of product, but also symbolic connotations. CSPS explains that these symbolic connotations are responsible for the construction of the consumer's self and social symbolisms both inwardly and outwardly respectively.

Relying on theories from sociology, CSPS theorises brands as symbolic means used in the construction of identities. These brands facilitate incessant consumers' identity construction projects through the mediated experience of brands (Elliott, Wattanasuwan, 1998). CSPS has gained popularity over the years since it has influenced the studies carried out by several scholars (Nguyen, Özçaglar-Toulouse, Kjeldgaard, 2018; Tangsupwattana, Liu, 2018; Islam et al., 2019; Assimos et al., 2019).

The recognition of the cohesive influence of brand narratives and accompanying consumption experiences account for the relevance of CSPS in explaining the relationship that exists between iconic brands and consumers. Notably, CSPS emphasises the role of brands in definition of consumers' identity. However, there is little consideration for the role consumers in definition of iconic brands. This paper proposes the role of consumers' lived.

2.3 Cultural branding model (CBM)

This model was propounded by Holt (2004). He argues that the CBM has a set of axioms upon which iconic brands are built. The axioms of the CBM differ from those of conventional branding models such as the mindshare model (which dominated since the 1970's), emotional branding model

(propounded in the 1990's) and viral branding model (whose popularity grew with rise of the internet). A major advantage of the CBM over the other branding models is that iconic brands, which adhere to the CBM, spin identity and cultural myths that create a characteristic and positive connection with consumers (Holt, 2004). He relied on his academic training and socio-cultural analysis in a bid to explain the workings of cultural branding. He conducted a systematic historical research on six American iconic brands. His study showed that all six brands followed a set of tacit principles- the cultural branding model. All seven axioms indicate the influence of iconic brands on consumers, and the society at large through the provisioning of identity values (axiom 1 and 4), performance of identity myths, (axiom 2), experiential and thought leadership (axiom 3 and 5), and masterful marketing communication (axiom 6 and 7). Furthermore, CBM has been influential in various studies (Holt 2012, 2016; Scarpaci, Coupey, Reed, 2018; Gao et al., 2020; Qyll, 2020; Nguyen, Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2021)

Arguably, the relevance of CBM stems from its innovativeness in relation to the other conventional branding models. It is not exhaustive of the elements associated with the iconicity of the brand since it views brand iconicity from the standpoint of brand management (Bulmer, 2011). Consequently, CBM defines the brand owners as the exclusive authors of brand iconicity. However, several scholars suggest that other influences play a role in the definition of brand iconicity thus calling for more studies to theorise this standpoint (MacInnis, Torelli, Park, 2019; Briciu, Briciu, 2020; Chen et al., 2021; Thomson, Coates, 2021). This paper seeks to propose a model to highlight the role of consumers' lived experience in the definition of iconic brands. Furthermore, to set the tone for my proposed model, I explored the Customer Dominant Logic (CDL) as indicated in the next section.

2.4 Customer dominant logic

Customer Dominant Logic (CDL) grew out of the need for firms to resolve perennial marketing challenges for instance, how to define offerings that customers are willing and able to purchase. Scholars like Strandvik, Holmlund, Edvardsson (2012) have argued that answers to the question of brand offerings will require a better comprehension of customers and their idiosyncratic logic. Broadly speaking, this means that companies should focus more on how to feature in the lives of customers rather than the concerns for ways to include the customers in their corporate enterprise. Indeed, the assertion of CDL exposes the weakness of the earlier conceptions of iconic brands as conceived by the CSPS and CBM. As mentioned earlier, CSPS and CBM emphasizes the role of brand owners in the definition of iconic brands. They indicate that

consumers are dependent on marketing communications to create their identity with little reference to the possible influence of consumers on the identity of iconic brands.

Additionally, the conception of marketing in the CDL is peculiar, since it views marketing as a basis for enterprise (Strandvik, Holmlund, Grönroos, 2014) instead of the popular notion of marketing as an ordinary function within a company. Interestingly, CDL has been employed in various empirical studies, in the context of brand relationships (Strandvik, Heinonen, 2013) customer activities (Mickelsson, 2013; Zinelabidine et al., 2018), banking (Arantola-Hattab, 2013; Medberg, Heinonen, 2014), consumer communities (Rihova et al., 2018), experiential value co-creation (Fan, Hsu, Lin, 2020) Islamic studies (Rafiki, Nasution, Rossanty, 2021). According to Heinonen, Strandvik (2015), the CDL has five essential pivots. Four pivots highlight the salience of consumers' idiosyncratic logic (including actions, reactions, practices, preference, ecosystems and decisions) in marketing communications and how they influence the identity of iconic brands. Here, marketing, which seeks to understand the consumer logic, is implicated as foundational entity in business. One of the pivots describes value as that which is formed and not created, thus indicating that value (which is associated with the identity of the brand) is formed in use separately for consumers and providers (or any other stakeholder involved).

2.5 Consumer experience, prosumption and brand value

In light of the preceding discourse, a consideration of the concepts consumer experience, prosumption and brand value buttresses the contrast among the CSPS, CBM and CDL. As earlier mentioned consumer experience encompasses the activities that underpin consumers' engagements with the brands' touch points, and empowers consumers to create brand value (value-in-use). Brand value can be described as the outcome of benefits that consumers crave in a brand (Vargo, Lusch, 2016). According to Vargo, Lusch (2012), two forms of value can be attributed to a brand. The first refers to intrinsic value (for instance, a camcorder is used for making video recordings). In this sense, 'brand' and 'value' are synonymous. The second form is extrinsic, and indicative of value-in-use. For instance, baking soda serves the purpose of baking, as the name implies. However, consumers have discovered other uses (like stain removal). Arguably, brand iconicity is the zenith of a superior and perennial brand value, thus consumers have the capacity to define iconic brands leveraging their lived experiences. Although the initial consumer experience, which is also brand value, is triggered by the brand owners (a notion supported by CSPS and CBM), the experience is dynamic and lends itself to the influence
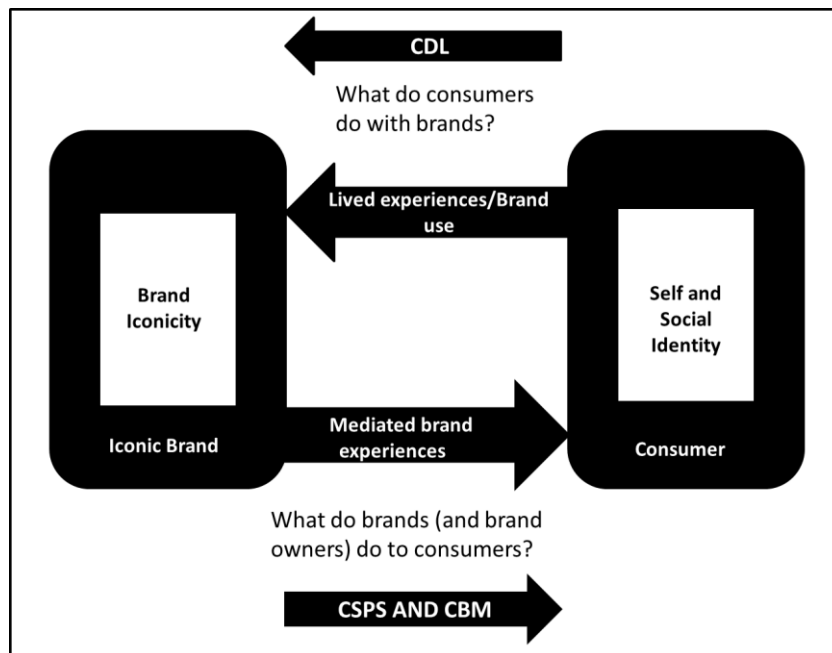
of consumers, for brand value co-creation or value-in-use (a perspective held by CDL). In this sense, the value created upon consumer experience may differ from the intent of the brand owners.

Furthermore, value-in-use significantly illustrates the features of prosumption, which combines the acts of consumption and coproduction by consumers (Shah et al., 2020; Klein et al., 2022). Interestingly, the concept prosumption features in the context of digitalization (Ritzer, Jurgenson, 2010); consumer activities (Rayna, Striukova, 2021) and marketing (Seran, Izvercian, 2014; Dusi, 2018).

2.6 Conceptual model for the definition of iconic brands

Figure 1 below is an original conceptual model for the definition of iconic brands. It stemmed from my analysis of the CSPS, CBM and CDL models geared towards illustrating the interplay of consumers and brand owners in the definition of brand iconicity.

FIGURE 1. *Proposed Conceptual Model for the Definition of Iconic Brands*

From Author's own.

My analysis revealed the void in the postulations CSPS and CBM that emphasized the role of iconic brands in performing identity values for consumers, thereby influencing their identities. This perspective is highlighted in the original conceptual model with the question, what do brands (and brand owners) do to consumers? Anecdotally, many of the conversations in brand literature bother on the influence of brands on consumers, and scholars have extensively reported this notion of iconic brands. With the conceptual model, I am making a call for the exploration of the role of consumers' lived experience in the definition of iconic brands. I ground this call on the perspective of the CDL model, which contends that consumer idiosyncrasies are the imperative factor to consider in the marketing communication. I have captured this perspective with the question, what do consumers do with brands? However, I believe that both perspectives are important in the discourse. Although, the conversations have been skewed to the first perspective, there is a need to focus on brand iconicity from the viewpoint of the consumer.

2.7 Implications for the definition of iconic brands

Instead of a focus on iconic brands by the CBM and CSPS, CDL privileges the focus on the consumers' idiosyncratic logic calling for a total immersion of the firms in the lives of the consumer. The lives of consumers also refer to the lived experiences that include: actions, reactions, consumption rituals etc. In addition, CDL also suggests that the customers' issues ought to drive managerial thinking at all levels. Beyond collective customer behaviours and cultures, CDL also promotes a comprehension of idiosyncratic logics. In addition, the CDL suggests that producers be aware of their secondary role in customers' lives. It is imperative that a comprehension of the customer logic should drive the activities of producers rather than a focus solely on the role of brand owners in the process of brand definition.

Arguably, a thorough study of the lived experience of consumers should reveal some influences in the brand-consumer relationship. Notably, several influences exist in the consumers' lives that have the potential of defining iconic brands, and these should be explored. Intergenerational influences and family consumption heritage feature among the factors that can define iconic brands. This situation is depicted by Olsen's (1993) seminal study. She discovered that certain branded products were transferred among some generations more than others were.

Furthermore, it is possible for a brand to assume a use value different from that intended by the producer. Arguably, this use value is inherently associated with the identity of an iconic brand. For instance, products like Coca Cola and baking soda have been used for purposes different from the primary intention

of the brand owners. The original use for the product is synonymous with that which the producer offers for sale. However, it is imperative that firms seek the perspective of the customers, who are capable of generating a selective use for the product. In any event, understanding the perception of consumers is not an easy task for companies. Arguably, these perceptions stem from lived experiences, which inform the consumer decisions. The aforementioned discourse buttress the argument that value is formed, and stems from use. This use value defines brands, and is formed in a different manner for consumers as well as producers.

3. Conclusion and suggestions for future research

The review of extant literature regarding iconic brands suggests the existence of a void considering that there was more focus on the role of brand owners and creatives in defining iconic brands. Notably, a comparatively small area focusses on the definition of iconic brands through consumers' lived experience. The CSPS and CBM feature among the popular propositions that placed emphasis on the role of brand owners in definition of brand iconicity. However, CDL suggest a focus on consumer logic. In response to the call for theoretical improvement, I argue for a possible trajectory of discourse that illustrates the role of consumers' lived experience in the definition of iconic brands. Consequently, I proposed a conceptual model to highlight my argument.

This study contributes to explaining the discourse of brand iconicity by reviewing extant literature on CSPS, CBM and CDL with particular focus on the conceptual and empirical contexts. Compared to previous research, this study highlights a broader scope of brand iconicity and suggests a conceptual model for defining brand iconicity.

This study is limited to conceptual and empirical review aimed at underscoring the definition of brand iconicity, hence further research is needed to explore intercultural studies. Although, Holt's contribution to the discourse is relatively novel and significant, it is however limited in scope and focusses on American brands and context. Consequently, the model that emanates from Holt's studies is influenced by the American culture. Notably, some scholars have explored iconic brands in other contexts such as Russia (Kraverts, Örge, 2010), China and India (Heinberg, Ozkaya, Taube, 2017) etc. Indeed, iconic brands do not operate in isolation; they are affected by cultural and sociopolitical factors. The complex global situation occasioned by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with the attendant sanctions issued by the West, further buttresses this point. The dire circumstances have prompted nations and iconic

brands to take a precise position on the issue. For instance, brands such as Macdonald's, Apple, Ikea, Zara among others have abandoned the Russian market in a move to register their displeasure concerning the invasion. These departures are quite emblematic considering that brands like Macdonald's have built a relationship, with the Russian consumers, spanning over three decades. Indeed, an exploration of iconic brands in other socio-cultural contexts will provide meaningful contributions.

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