

MODERN TOTEMS AND TRIBALISM: THE WORSHIPING OF BRANDS IN ASIA

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Abstract

The present paper is going to explore what is nowadays a brand and a logo in the far Asian cultural environment, approaching it both socially and economically, from a socio-psychological and commercial point of view. Moving throughout some very physioeconomical angle and narrowing on consumer's behavior toward the brands' values, it proofs how tribes pop up around life styles and logos (Hitmann & Ward 2007; Anderson 1990). The motivation of present paper is the huge importance related to brand and modern (urban) tribalism, especially in the far Asiatic environment, observing the phenomena both like social (Bucci, Cova, Kozinets 2007; Cova 2003) and economical (Badot, Bucci, Cova 2003; Temporal 2012). The paper is analyzing Brand like a catalyzer of different perceptions of syncretized together (Hitman & Ward 2007; Scaini 2012; Fabris 2003, 2008; Conley 2009). To prove the actual importance of behavior of consumer in the Asiatic environments, the paper offers some qualitative result based on a solid limited quantitative research. Offering a theoretical approach (proofed by evidences gathered) about the activities of brands on eastern Asian markets, it states that now brands behave like totemic relics of deity (Conley 2009; Hebdige 198110), that is really the center of the new Asiatic worship replacing disrupted traditional values and replacing with new iconic symbols of social membership (Diamond 2005; Anderson 1990, Mishima 200815).

Keywords: Brand, Totem, Nomad Segments, Asia, Cultural Identity

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Introduction: State Of The Art of Tribalism, Totemism, and Brand in Asian Environment

Society is collapsing under the point of view of classical and traditional anthropological values, fast changes in action and empowering of relations (multi-ethnic, multicultural, global) are now making a flat world where information travel fast and people lose most of cultural differential aspects (both physical and metaphysical), becoming like one beehive (Beck 1999). In the lack of traditional values people tend to replace them switching to different form of metaphysical representation and group symbolic membership (Ritzer & Goodman 2004; Hitmann & Ward 2007). In fact, in the general frame, people always tried to gather around symbols that can recall values of deity (Cova, Kozinets & Shankar 2007; The structural study of myth and totemism 1967; Fabietti 1980), forms of aspiration to the divinity that replaced an original inspiration form of the spiritual level of life (Jung 1975, 1976, 2012, James 1945, Freud 1912, Lévi-Strauss 1962). As the ancestral form of representation, the totem behaves or is intended like the representation of the powerful non explicable forces ruling life of people (Bateson 1979, Elkin 1933-34, Hultkrantz 1972). Term “Totem” from algonchin “*dodèm*”, means exactly "clan" and in Ojibwa language “*makwa Nin’dodèm*” means "bear is my clan", relying on the phenomena represented by totems (The structural study of myth and totemism 1967; Fabietti 1980).

Present papers intend to explore the existing common characteristic of contemporary “totemization” of symbols, especially commercial ones, through styles brand (Hebdige 198110; Conley 2009). Now, in the loss of values and revolving the social systems, twisted around themselves by the dismissed metaphysical values (Kovacs 2001) new forms are ruling, new representations of self-identity are adopted by single persons to create a membership based on recognizable values, symbols, logos as forms of

representation of desirable values, ideas and tribes, whatever they are. The self-representation in a society is a basilar form of man socialization and gathering with similar people (Fabietti 1980; Ritzer & Goodman 2004), pushing people to find similar and rising barriers from dissimilar, creating groups that are both ethero and self-recognized (Maslow 1954; Conley 2009). The central focus point is that “the Value” itself and its physical representation, is a sort of *mythologema* (Kereny 1983) of all new urban mythologies, passed from totems and symbols, whatever religious or political or ethnical they are, to commercials and brand (Hultkranz 1972; Levy-Strauss 1962; Ritzer & Goodman 2004; Diamond 2005). Its search – whatever it is or is intended- is common between all social groups among all the ages, hitting widely among youths (Roszak 1968-69): its physical epiphany (like a glimpse of divinity) is the totem itself, the deity representation around which a group, tribe or nation gathers itself (Bateson 1979; Hultkrantz 1972). Brands behave now like totem, giving evidence that a cross or a brand marker have just a tiny, little difference, as present paper intends to prove. Totems and their visual links, behaving like social marks are some kind of *agalma* of different aestheticized values offered by brands to their fellows, replacing the intimately religious and anthropological ones. Asia and mainly far eastern cultures, have been developing a sort of its endemic tribalism during the ages, based on the same specific psychosocial structures like elsewhere, but reloaded through mostly unique characteristics: overpopulation, physical and somatic similarity, and the develop of social, religious and political forms formed the specific Asian frame (Mishima 200815; Jourdan & Wahba 2013).

Question: To What Extent Can Nomadism And Tribalism Be Seen Through The Logic Of Brandism? A New Look From Anthropology to Commercial through A Qualitative Research

It is interesting to notice how logos have become symbols of worship, how brands can catalyze people and interests of thousands, down pricing the spiritual value, replaced by a form of up priced commercialization of fake social values, now inspiring people to a higher level of life, till the point to incarnate the divine spirit and to transforming themselves into materialistic deities in the challenging cultural environment of youths, and in Asia today especially (Jourdan & Wahba 2013; AttractChina 2014; Temporal 2012). Here, where cultural anthropology and economical society clash in a shining offer of modern rites and ancient behavioral rules, such logic of the things influences now the society as well as economics, buying's and social memberships, conventions and feelings. Not only world is reloading around modern representation of the ancients representations, but the young Asian societies of youths are striving to make their way through a devalued world

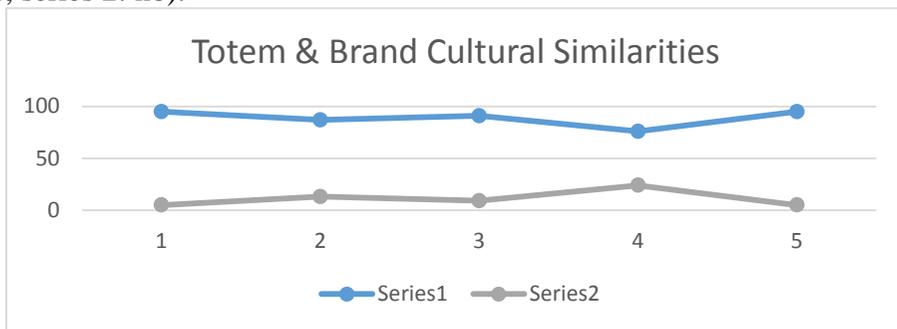
of inflated values. Brand is a new totem, assuming the aspirational forms of religion, music, style, and worship (Conley 2009). Since totems are originally the forms of representation of a specific value, spiritual more than religious and it was the place around which people regrouped to find the identity of a group, ethero and auto relieved, since totem is the central place of spiritual energy, energy of feelings, desires, hopes, eager, strongest emotions moving people and persons, recollecting and dividing them into those modern tribes looking for a meaning and for a central value, to what extent is correct to compare modern brands with them, just like nations did and moreover to compare them with brands? Are they really gathering people around materially-structured values and socio-commercial tribes? Yes. Result of the questionnaire, based on different data and studies offers evidence of it.

2.1 Qualitative Research 1: (Totem : Brand = Tribes : X ; X=group of brand worshipped people)

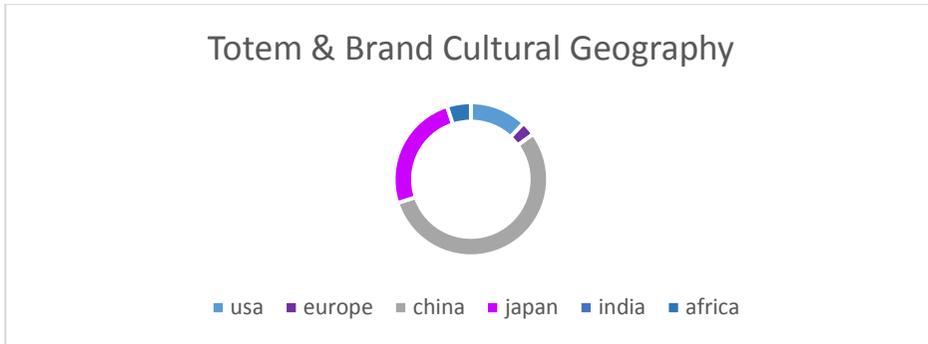
Questionnaire about totemic value of brand

1. Do you know what a totem is?
2. Is a brand a totem?
3. Does a brand gather different people with common characteristics?
4. Does the process owns to people or specific cultures, now?
5. Can u say which culture represent better a target for brandism and totemisation?

Results offered an interesting coherent and homogeneous view with percentage over the 70% in favor of Brandism like Totemic issue (series 1: yes; series 2: no).



Question number 4 is related to geographical evidences of this hypothesis, and despite the very mixed origin of the target, the answer is very linear.



Upon the questionnaire, limited by its purpose and number of questions, pretty general for the stated purpose, it is possible to define an effective equation of modern totemism:

Totem : Brand = Tribes : Segments of Brand Follower.

The previous answer and the specific geographic behavior can be easily explained upon the following figure

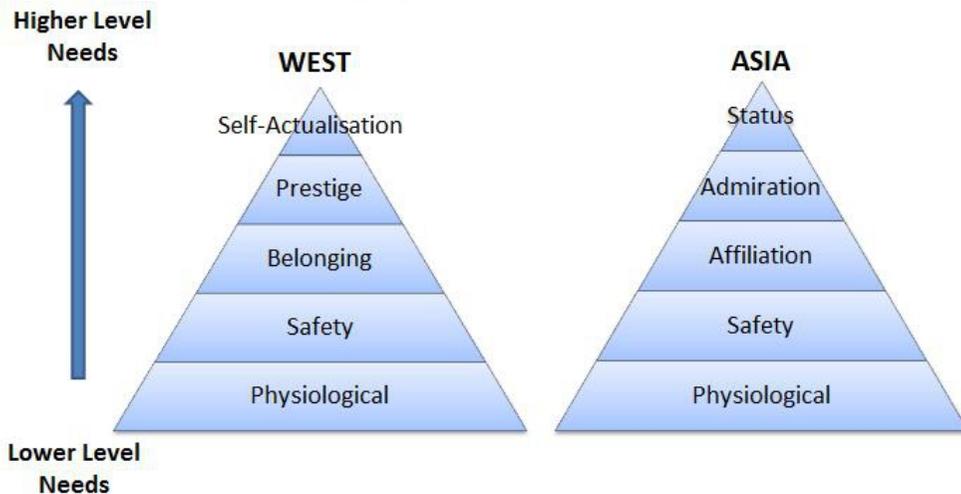


Figure 1: “Maslow in West and East”, available from <https://elitethinkegg.wordpress.com/2013/08/28/from-luxury-brands-to-asian-hierarchy-of-needs>

Hypothesis: Modern Totems Representation through Brands: Worship Replacing Traditional Values

Totem was the brand of a tribe. Their value relied on belief, worship, ability to be the magnetic center and centripetal force of a tribe. Its values was firstly recognizable from inside the groups, then from outside making both the sense of membership and then differentiation based on very arguable concepts, accordingly to scholars (Bateson 1979; Fabiotti, 1980; The structural study of myth and totemism 1967). This totemic function and scope appear like having been transferred through individual psychology

(Freud 1912; Jung 1975; Levy-Strauss 1968-69), that is barely tangent the present research, to the social psychology and associable to the complex modern system of symbols, among which there are brands, and especially fashion's ones, performing a strong attraction on people. The research proved that yes, brands have a similar use like totems, gathering people around a different set of values, and often replacing the old ones. Totemic development shows how it moves in a different way in different socio-economical environments. From one side, totemic values lead people toward membership with others and throughout faith to worship and from the other side toward (self) representation throughout unfaithfulness to traditional tribes gathered around an external –laic- representation more than a real worship. When totem's values shape down, totem is replaced by something else. It is brand.

The main difference between eastern and western way, as can be proofed on the evidence offered by Figure 1: "Maslow in West and East", is that westerns look like more addicted to outer self-representation (belonging, prestige, to an eventual self-actualization), non-trusting anymore in Brand's declared Values, but still adopting it to enter in membership with smaller groups of people that are representative of their status (self-actualization). In fact in the west there is a constant loss of loyal clients between big brands and a solid pop up of new aggressive and niche brands. It is like people are aspiring to the deity of a totem, looking up at its new form, the brand, tenting to reach it, like the artistic expression of the gothic cathedrals. Instead, in Asia, a new market, there is a stronger trust in Brand Values and those are very wide and gather a greater number of people into massive groups, in a real "Mass Effect", as can be seen above, through the process of affiliation, admiration and finally status, that generates big and recognizable urban tribes, seen also like Brand People (Brand and logo are very visible), inspired by the Brand Values and people are now acquiring or believing to acquire its power, like people did from totems. Brand is now marking people identity, more than other symbols. The full socio-economic environment (Figure number 2) shows how the positioning opposes two macro environments: physicals are outside-inside and valorial are religious-socials.

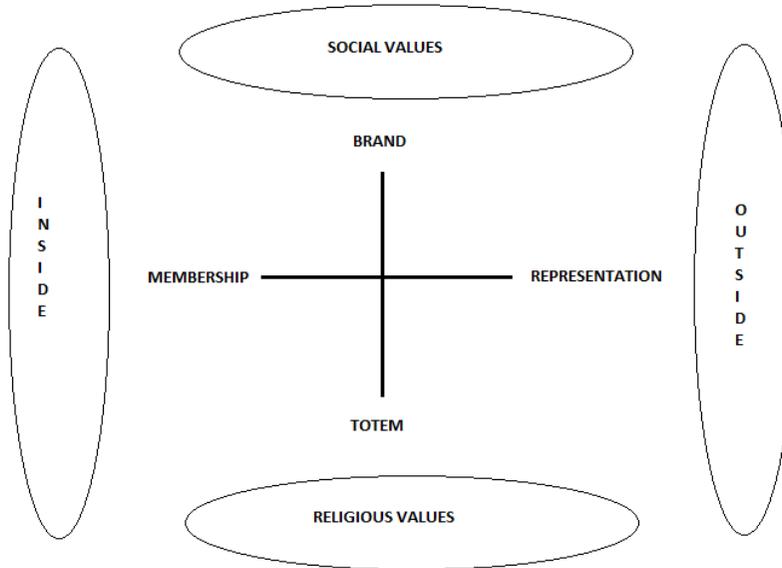


Figure 2: Positioning: Environments and Values Map

The value re-positioning leads grouping in different environments toward different directions, often opposite, accordingly with figure 3, and based on qualitative studies and accordingly with specific value pyramid as shown in figure 1:

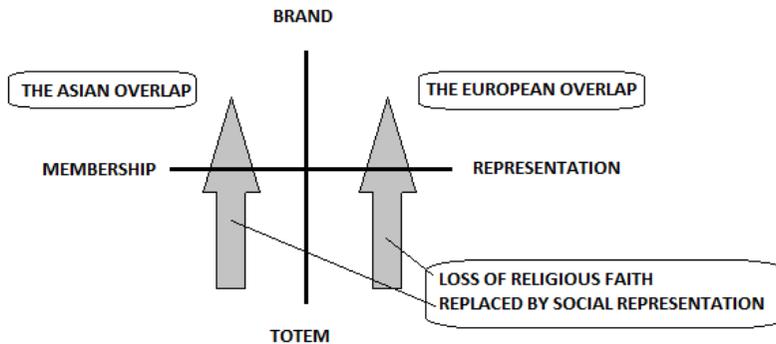


Figure 3: Overlap structure of Totem and Brand

Last original figure represents the whole dynamic re-positioning counterpoising the typical Asian development and the classic western development.

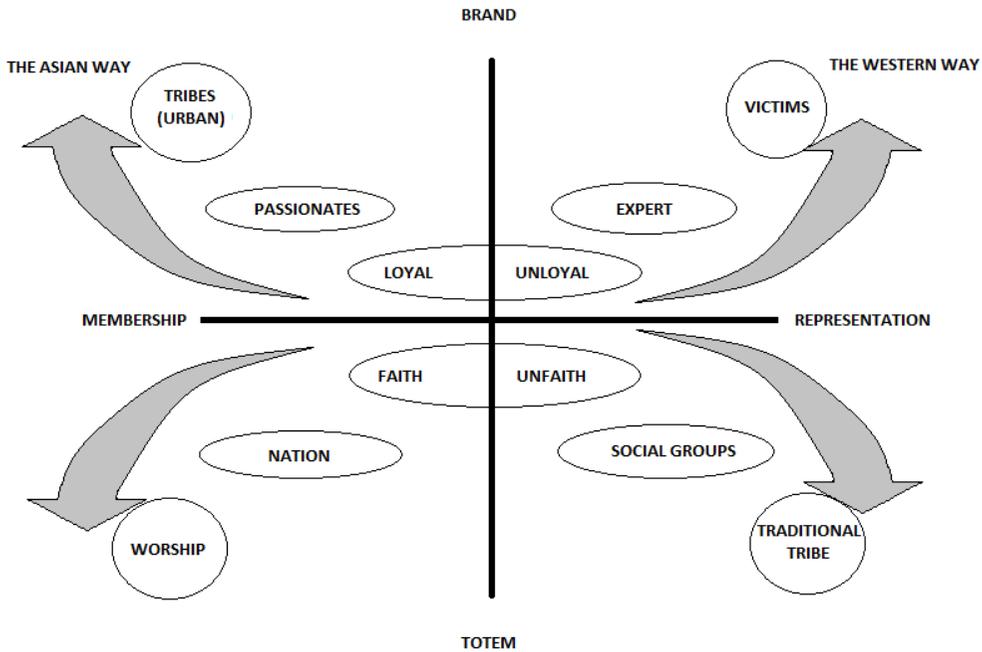


Figure 4: Evolution of Tribes & Brands in Asia and Europe

If totems' weak values are replaced and totem itself is overlapped by brand, that is proved to have the same role and social behavior, it is possible to make a direct relation like:

$$MW = f\left(\frac{-M, -B}{R, B}\right) \geq \left(\frac{-M, -T}{R, T}\right)$$

Where Modern Worship = mutual function of (relationship of Membership with Brand and Representation and Brand) superior or equal to the (relationship of Membership with Totem and Relationship with Totem)

Reason of this overlap and switch of values, is the constant down pricing of traditional values, whatever they are: anthropological, cultural, religious or political identity of a group of followers. This group is the focal point: seen like persons melting through a common symbol that can be showed to proof outside their common status or hold like a talisman inside the group itself, with a bare need of ethero recognizance. Group, known under word of "tribe, nation", has transferred to some other form of idol the power of a totem, a power – price, now- able to intercept, more than just "meet" the aspiration of the group: it is what is called aspiration to (brand) deity. Brand is actually able to do it in a more efficient and effective way than other forms of metaphysical representation: it gathers the lost inspirations of people who lost their ideals. It looks like now brands and totems require inspired values (they aspire to them, better waiting a divine inspiration). Those values are strongly visible and understandable to recreate

a kind of society that works out itself to a transversal nobility that must be still visible and recognizable from outside and appreciated and accepted from inside. People lost inspiration, and gained aspiration. Easy to be endorsed, easy to be forgotten. A tribe, in the end, now is a nomad (Pierre Nicolas 2013) and was the group of people with common auto and ethero acknowledged characteristic that stops by a shrine of values that are commercial and ideals, but not eternal. Tribes, so strongly compact around uniforms, flags, languages and common laws, have melted persons into One People (Ritzer & Goodman 2004) and are melting pop of experiences gathered around new revaluated subcultural ideals and return to nomadism looking for new experiences inspired now by totemic brands. People are now, from this angle, very fluid persons, that belong to segments or brand followers, trend followers, (life) style followers in the globalized, grobalized, glocalized and finally brandized society, to add a further evolutive step to Ritzer’s metatheory.

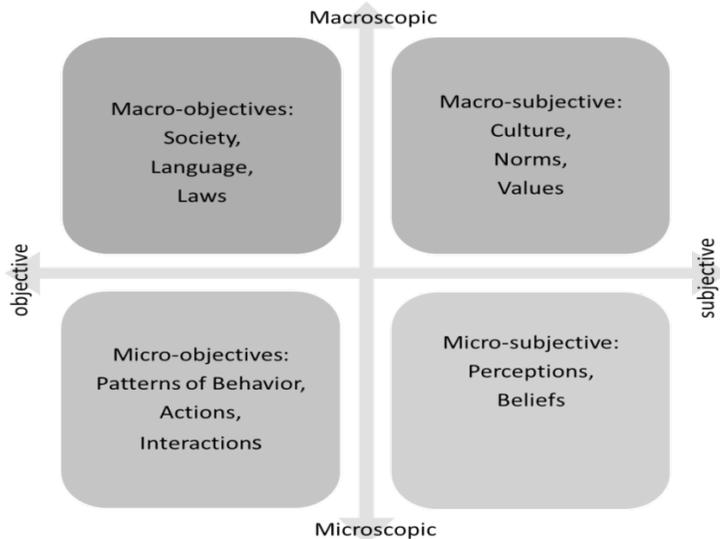


Figure 5: “Integration Theory”, adapted from Ritzer & Goodman 2004

People and tribes became eventually segments of buyers and consumers. No difference, but the means to acquire such identificative means. In Europe it is heritage. In Western it is aspirations. In Asia it is a visible state of membership. And how can a Brand, gathering aspiration, be less fluid than its followers, worshipers, its orphans of identities? Consistent with the literature, table also proofs that tribes always existed under names of people, nations, groups, bands, fellowships. They are made out of followers or adopters of languages or social representations, cultures, heraldic logos, material logos, commercial logos. Marks and Brands are on modern shields against loss of values and social representations. Logos are weapons in the

struggle for the identity. More than clothes, they dress and endorse spirits, minds, societal fears and egocentrism, as well as some indefinite and indefinable weakness. People in Asia are looking for differentiation forms from all the others (AttractChina 2014; China's addiction to luxury goods 2014; Helmore 2014), but still really ignore how a brand create differentiation, nothing dissimilar from other people. Each tries to link a brand with specific values inspired as well as aspired and then to gather with similar people. When this duality and dialogue with the modern commercial and social deity fails, tribe moves away, in the nomad style of unfaithful segments, looking for better representations of its “ego” (Fabris 2003, 2008). At the same time they are looking for a differentiation, and tenting to spot at brand like at a membership mean with the others “Elected and Inspired by the same Meaning Brand”. Brands and especially the Values that they are called to represent and forming actually the “Brand identity”, are gathering around themselves people, even different but with a common aspirational desire of “being part of something”, especially where this human values membership is lost: once a tribe, now a liquid teardrop of dew. They – totemic magical objects- are sources of higher inspiration, making brighter everything that they touch, like a shining surface. They touch like a light a dark spot, a common product, a natural material making it all precious. This preciousness is not just a matter of price, it is matter of perception of value represented by its price, identity, spiritualism identified with the magic of a logo, of a brand. Brand is now the convector of a dream, a bridge between an inspirational paradise and a chemical resource to happiness. Around brand people believe, feel, and regroup. The following qualitative research give evidence of both concepts:

1. Brand replace totems and it’s worth of a worship
2. Mystified values have a stronger weight than price, being a common representation must be coherent

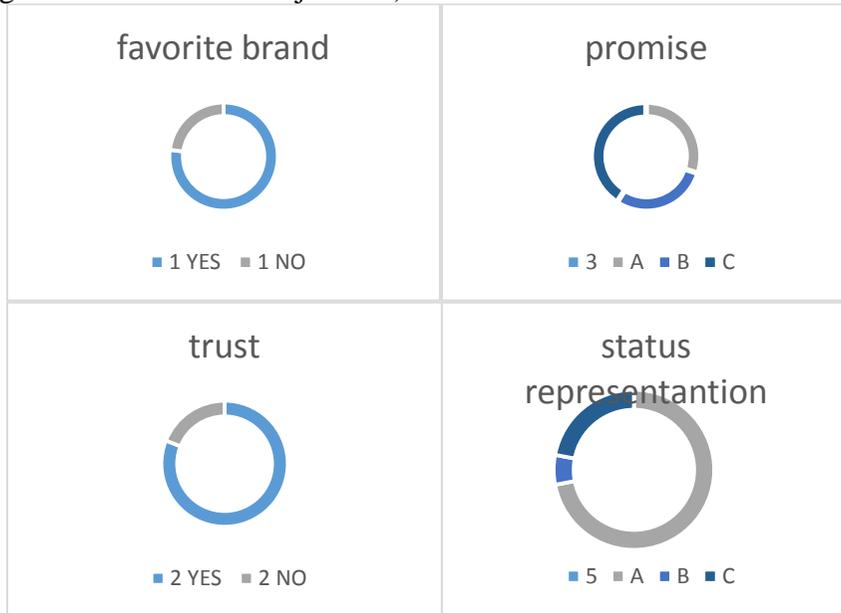
3.1 Qualitative Research 2: Worship in Brands

Questionnaire about worship in brand

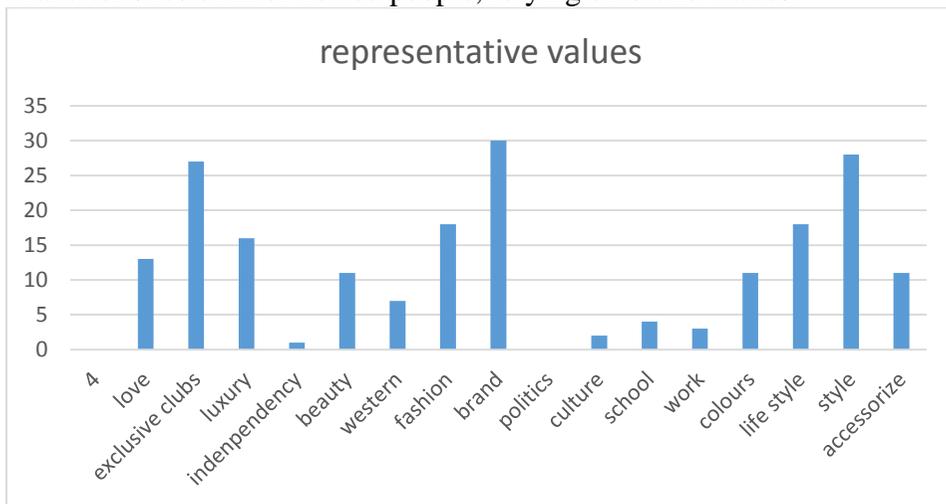
1. Do you have any favorite brand?
2. Do you trust its promises?
3. What does it promise? Quality, Differentiation, Membership of a specific group?
4. pick 2 characteristics representing the tight with your group the best
5. Can you say that your status is represented better by: a.brands of your products; b.your culture; c.your ethic, religious, political values?

Results offers a consistent result about values linked to brand: people declare not only having a favorite brand, but also trusting in a promise and they believe a brand create membership more than differentiation. Finally, people declare that own status is better represented by a brand than by

cultural identity or social associative means (micro-subjective appears like stronger than macros and objectives).



Finally, the open question, is consistent about the more representative characteristics of interviewed people, relying on brand values.



Consistently, the most picked values are:

Brand (30); Style (28); exclusive clubs (27); Life Style (18); fashion (18); luxury (16).

Findings, Conclusions and Actual Limitations

The ultimate finding is that a Brand in the far eastern Asian environment behave and is threaten like a totem for modern tribes, for people living around it, using, and self-marking with it. People regroup in tribes and upon the loss of cultural identity such tribes became nomad trying to find a specific dimension that is not really new, but simply angled, recognizable from outside to make a differentiation and from inside to assign a specific value, that is social and economical and that must coherent with an assigned price and a claimed quality of specific product's characteristic, even unique. Such aspects are very common among different cultures, but with endemic characteristics empowering the tribal totemic aspects to the culture of a nation in the specific Asian asset. In fact, in other Countries and environments, the effectiveness of flags, national idea, and languages and, in common, macro and objective aspects are still stronger than micro and subjective, relying on Ritzier works (Ritzier & Goodman 2004). This is actually a limitation, having been explored and searched the different approach in different environments only sliding in the surface. In Asian, with the crisis of original macro values that were widely and in different way imposed by society, (such a religion, nationality, language and cultural heritage), brand is inspiring a different genuine bucket of values and it works better where nationalism and a pressing feeling of worship if felt like a massive weight by people, accordingly to research. Members of unconventional tribes, especially youths in Asia today, are mainly people trying to enrich themselves and their spiritual, social and creative individuality regrouping in an anarchic way with transversal member of same macro and different former micro groups around suddenly discovered, fascinating icons of value, departing from previous generational models and acting really like people in movement. Papers showed how this is micro subjective nomadism between traditional tribes, meaning spiritual, challenging movements, from one class to another, from one state to another, from one worship to another. People getting richer, but mostly people wanting and desiring to be, for which brand inspire a sense of membership with people with who they want to share values, ideals, life standards and social models. People moving for one side to another of politics, religion, and life. Starting our analysis in Japan during the 80ies, papers ended exploring the vast panorama of emerging Asiatic tribes in China, partially recalling the steps of the western, and partially revolving and twisting themselves into new species ready to fly like brilliant fashionable butterflies: shining in color for one day before to become lights themselves. The Japanese *sakeban* and *bosozoku*, escaping tribes of youth with powerful motorbikes recalled themselves around different values due to neglecting and denial of traditional tribal values represented by emperor, politics,

nationalism, tradition (Callahan 2014; Anderson 1990). Following an iconic value like a style, like a habitude, like a color or a location became suddenly following a brand like a social representation of themselves among people ideally equal and trivially different, socially the same and psychosocially different and to be differentiated by. Yes, branding or toteming does not mean just the self-identification around a bucket of values, but the will, and the need, of being granted of membership and recognized by other people around specific values. Form this the strong, eventually devastating, power of logo mania, and then style mania, till to refuse logo if logo is too widely popular and style if no-style is more representative not of yourself but for others, from which people want to be different and differentiated (Codeluppi2002; Hebdige 198110). It is a worship of differentiation and a worship of self vs others.

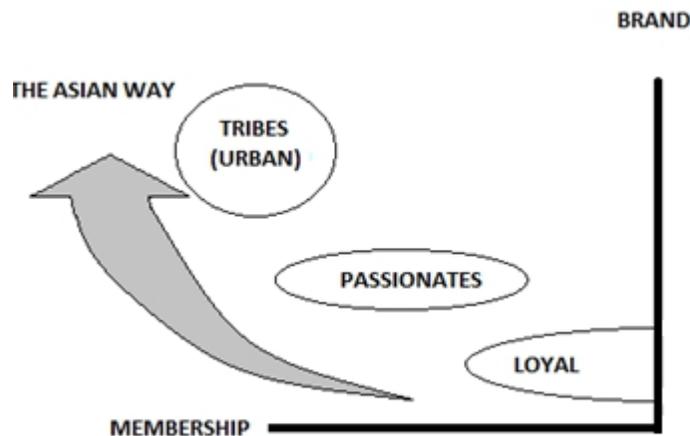


Figure 6: The Asian Way: how People Membership with Brand

Very important but yet quantitatively inconsistent data emerged from the interviews, that must be pointed like a future improvement, are that none can be really effort uniqueness, it is just a perceptive concept, and uniqueness is an anomaly of the social and cultural environment: people look for uniqueness and claim membership with other unique individuals. Persons become people: Brand (30); Style (28); exclusive clubs (27); Life Style (18); fashion (18); luxury (16) but independency only 1. In fact, even though persons want to shout “I am different”, they still need to use a common language: communication isn’t any other than put in common (*cum + muneo*). Brand must be as well a common word and communicative channel, it must be made of understandable values, must be visible, recognized, maybe envied. Brand must be able to move sentiments, recall similar aspects, because none pray alone a totem, it is still a social meaning: isn’t the word “*Chiesa*” still recalling “*Ecclesia*”, a reunion or community of people? And

people need to be socially recognized as part of a different groups. Maybe anomalous, abnormal, strange, different, bad, weird. Unique with others unique, never unique alone. Otherwise there would be no need of brand, only need of concealing yourself and hiding in a basement with low profile. Brand worship is detached for good or evil values, it relies only to horizontal qualities. There are levels and there are stages. The Asian challenge lies in numbers: big markets, big groups. High number of brands, spirit of membership to big groups, need to be seen as a part of those tribes from inside (accept me!) and outside (refuse me, I'm not for you!) in a very dynamic flux of inspirations-aspirations. In Asian environments Brand is a killer: killer of original values, where God is now a brand, maybe just a little bit less shining than any Armani. But, and it is the main hook for future improvement of present papers, what if, or better, what when the trust (and faith) in Brands fails? Will Asia replace them with un-loyalty and self-representation following the western way or will it develop its own?

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Appendix

1. Qualitative Research (results sub 2.1): Number, Profile, Origin of Interviewed

	USA	Europe	China	Japan	India	Africa	Total Valid Answers
	12	3	55	25	0	5	100
MA	8	3	41	12	0	2	
BA	4	0	4	12	0	3	
Diploma	0	0	10	1	0	0	100
M	6	0	43	6	0	1	
F	6	3	12	19	0	4	
							100
<24	2	3	6	2	0	1	
25-30	9	0	37	13	0	4	
30-40	0	0	9	4	0	0	
>40	1	0	3	6	0	0	100

2. Qualitative Research (results sub 3.1): Number, Profile, Origin of Interviewed

	USA	Europe	China	Japan	India	Africa	Total Valid Answers
	25	13	72	25	15	10	160
MA	17	3	51	12	7	3	
BA	4	9	11	12	8	7	
Diploma	4	1	10	1	0	0	160
M	11	2	42	6	2	2	
F	14	11	30	19	13	8	
							160
<24	4	5	16	2	2	2	
25-30	11	7	37	13	7	6	
30-40	9	0	12	4	5	2	
>40	1	1	7	6	1	0	160