

# Branding in the Age of Social Media by Douglas Holt

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Douglas Holt's "Branding in the Age of Social Media" argues that conventional branding models became less effective when digital networks changed how culture is produced and circulated. Earlier mass-media branding depended heavily on a limited number of television channels, newspapers, magazines, and radio stations. Large companies could purchase access to broad audiences, repeat a controlled message, and build familiarity over time. Social media appeared at first to offer brands an even more direct route to consumers, and companies invested heavily in branded content, community management, and influencer-style communication. Holt's central claim is that many of these efforts underperform because social platforms did not simply create new advertising channels. They enabled cultural communities to create and distribute their own entertainment, ideas, identities, and critiques without waiting for corporations to sponsor them.

The original review correctly identifies Holt's idea of "crowdculture" as the article's most important contribution. Crowdcultures are digitally connected groups that gather around shared interests, values, styles, political positions, or creative practices. Some are organized around familiar subcultures, while others form around emerging issues and rapidly changing conversations. These communities can generate cultural influence more quickly than traditional media institutions because members continually produce, remix, evaluate, and circulate content. Holt therefore advises brands not to compete by manufacturing endless generic entertainment. They should identify an ideological or cultural opportunity, develop a clear point of view, and participate in a community whose concerns make that position meaningful.

## Holt's Critique of Branded Content

Many companies assumed that social media would allow them to become publishers. They created videos, lifestyle articles, interactive posts, and continuous streams of branded entertainment. Holt argues that this approach misunderstands the competitive environment. A company's video does not compete only with advertisements from rival companies; it competes with comedians, musicians, gamers, activists, filmmakers, experts, and millions of ordinary creators. These cultural producers are often faster, more authentic to their communities, and less constrained by corporate approval. A brand may possess a large production budget and still attract little voluntary attention because audiences can choose content that is more relevant or entertaining.

This criticism supports the original essay's first practical point: social-media activity should be evaluated by its contribution to the business and brand strategy, not by visible engagement alone. A campaign can accumulate followers, likes, or views without improving customer understanding,

preference, trial, loyalty, or sales. At the same time, the relationship between cultural influence and immediate sales should not be oversimplified. Some branding builds associations that produce value over a longer period. The correct lesson is to define the role of social activity before measuring it. A company should know whether the objective is awareness, cultural relevance, customer acquisition, service, retention, advocacy, or learning. (Holt, 2016)

## Brand Purpose and Cultural Position

The original review's second point emphasizes developing a brand purpose and remaining consistent with it. Holt's cultural-branding approach requires more than a general statement that a company wants to improve lives. A useful cultural position addresses a tension that people already experience. It interprets the world and offers an identity or alternative. This is why generic claims about quality, innovation, or happiness are weak: almost any company can make them. Cultural branding becomes distinctive when a brand takes a position that competitors are unlikely to copy credibly. (Holt, 2004)

Consistency does not mean repeating the same advertisement forever. A brand can express one core position through different stories, platforms, and products. Red Bull, one of the examples discussed around this field of branding, connected itself with extreme performance, adventure, and the idea of exceeding ordinary limits. Old Spice renewed an aging brand through absurd humor and a playful treatment of masculinity. Their campaigns worked not simply because they posted frequently, but because the content was recognizable and connected to cultural conversations. A purpose becomes effective when the product, customer experience, internal behavior, and public communication support the same promise.

## When Authenticity Becomes a Constraint

The original essay notes an apparent exception involving Jack Daniel's and asks whether sticking to an established identity can sometimes limit a brand. This is an important qualification. A heritage story can create authenticity, but it can also become a cage if managers treat the past as a rule against adaptation. Consumers may value tradition while their occasions, media habits, and expectations change. The brand must identify which elements are essential and which are historical expressions that can evolve.

Authenticity is not exact repetition of the past. It is a credible relationship between what the brand claims, what it does, and how audiences understand its history. A company can introduce new formats or reach new communities without abandoning its identity, provided the change makes sense within the larger narrative. Conversely, using historical imagery while changing quality or business practices can make "heritage" appear artificial. The original point should therefore be refined: purpose needs continuity, but strategy requires interpretation rather than rigid preservation.

# Community Participation Rather Than Opportunism

The original review recommends participating in community building and commenting on prominent topics. That advice is useful only when participation is relevant and respectful. Brands often enter public conversations simply because a topic is trending. This practice can produce attention, but it can also appear exploitative when the company has no credible connection to the issue or when a serious social event is treated as content. Cultural participation requires more than inserting a product into a popular discussion. (Jenkins et al., 2013)

A brand should first understand the community's history, language, conflicts, and expectations. It should ask whether it can contribute resources, recognition, access, or a genuinely useful perspective. Community members should not be treated merely as distribution channels. Long-term relationships with creators and organizations are more credible than sudden campaigns built around a moment of public attention. Holt's framework is strongest when it encourages brands to learn from cultural communities rather than simply capture them.

## Crowdcultures and Digital Subcultures

The fourth point in the original essay describes crowdcultures as the essence of digital media. Holt distinguishes between subcultures that produce new ideologies and artistic worlds that create new forms of entertainment. Social platforms allow both to expand. Fitness communities, environmental movements, beauty cultures, gaming communities, political networks, and specialized creative scenes can develop their own influential figures and standards. Their members decide which contributions feel original, informed, or exploitative. (Kozinets, 2020)

For marketers, the opportunity lies in finding a cultural contradiction that the brand can address credibly. A company does not need to appeal to every digital subgroup. Broad targeting can weaken identity because the message becomes general enough to offend no one and inspire no one. A more focused cultural strategy may begin with a smaller community whose influence later spreads. The risk is that companies may reduce a complex community to a market segment. Responsible cultural branding preserves difference and avoids claiming ownership over practices created by others.

## Popular Culture and Memorable Advertising

The original essay highlights the value of popular culture, infographics, slogans, and amusing advertisements. Historical advertising phrases such as Alka-Seltzer's "I can't believe I ate the whole thing" demonstrate the power of language that enters everyday conversation. Social media accelerates this process because audiences can repeat, parody, and transform a phrase within hours. A successful advertisement may become a meme, but the brand cannot fully control how the meme is used.

Entertainment remains important, yet Holt's argument suggests that entertainment without a cultural position is easily forgotten. An amusing post may earn temporary attention but fail to build distinct meaning. The most effective creative work links humor, image, and form to the brand's larger idea. An infographic should clarify something the audience values; a joke should express a recognizable personality; and participation in popular culture should reveal the brand's point of view rather than merely imitate the current style.

## Originality and the Problem of Copying

The original review advises brands to be innovative and warns that copying another campaign can produce failure. This principle follows naturally from cultural branding. A successful cultural strategy responds to a specific contradiction at a particular moment. When competitors copy the visible style without understanding the underlying opportunity, the imitation appears late and hollow. Old Spice's surreal videos, for example, cannot be reproduced simply by using rapid editing and absurd dialogue. Their effect depended on the brand's previous identity, the cultural treatment of masculinity, the actor's performance, and the novelty of the format.

Innovation does not require complete separation from existing culture. All creative work uses shared conventions, genres, and references. The relevant distinction is between meaningful reinterpretation and superficial duplication. Brands should acknowledge influences, collaborate fairly with creators, and develop work that adds something to the conversation. Plagiarism creates legal and ethical risk, while uncredited cultural borrowing can damage trust even when it is technically lawful.

## YouTube and Creator-Led Competition

The final point in the original essay uses PewDiePie to demonstrate how an individual creator could build an audience far larger than many established corporate channels. This example supports Holt's claim that social platforms weakened the cultural advantage of large companies. A creator speaking directly to a defined community can develop recurring formats, inside jokes, and personal trust at a fraction of a traditional advertising budget. Corporate content often moves slowly through approval processes and sounds impersonal because it must satisfy many stakeholders. (Khamis et al., 2017)

Brands should not conclude that they must imitate independent creators or behave as though a corporation is a private friend. They can instead collaborate with creators whose audiences and values fit the product. Such partnerships require disclosure and creative freedom. Excessive scripting can destroy the creator's credibility, while weak oversight can expose the company to inappropriate conduct. The relationship should be evaluated through audience relevance, content quality, brand fit, and business effect rather than subscriber count alone.

## Evaluating Holt's Examples

The original review observes that Holt relies heavily on famous companies such as Coca-Cola and McDonald's. This is a reasonable criticism because global consumer brands possess resources and cultural visibility that smaller organizations do not. A local service business cannot reproduce the scale of a multinational campaign. However, the underlying method can still apply at a smaller level. A neighborhood company can identify a local concern, develop a distinctive position, work with relevant communities, and create material that contributes rather than interrupts.

The article's examples are also selective success stories. Cultural campaigns that succeed are easier to analyze than campaigns that receive no attention or produce backlash. Marketers should therefore treat the cases as illustrations, not formulas. The same strategy may fail when product quality is weak, the company's behavior contradicts its message, or the cultural opportunity has already been exhausted.

## Changes Since Holt's Article

Holt's article was published in 2016, before TikTok became a dominant global platform and before short-form video, creator commerce, and algorithmic recommendation became central to marketing. These developments strengthen much of his argument. Brands now compete within even faster cultural cycles, and creators can launch trends without traditional media. At the same time, paid distribution, platform advertising, and retail integration have become more sophisticated. Cultural relevance and performance marketing are not mutually exclusive; many companies combine distinctive creative positioning with precise measurement and commerce tools.

Algorithms also complicate the idea of one coherent crowd. People encounter personalized streams, and a campaign can become influential within one network while remaining invisible elsewhere. Marketers need social listening, qualitative interpretation, and direct community contact rather than assuming that aggregate engagement reveals cultural meaning. Platform dependence is another risk. A company that builds its entire audience on one service can lose reach when algorithms or rules change.

## Ethical Limits of Cultural Branding

Cultural branding can become manipulative when corporations adopt social causes without changing their practices. A brand may celebrate equality while maintaining discriminatory employment systems or promote sustainability while producing unnecessary waste. Audiences increasingly investigate these contradictions. The stronger the moral position in advertising, the stronger the expectation that company behavior will support it.

Children and vulnerable audiences also require protection. Cultural participation should not exploit insecurity or collect excessive personal data. Influencer relationships should be disclosed, and claims should remain truthful. The objective is not merely to enter culture efficiently but to do so without abusing trust. Holt's framework focuses on effectiveness; a complete contemporary application must add accountability.

## Practical Lessons for Marketers

The seven lessons identified in the original essay can be retained with several refinements. First, social metrics should be connected with strategic and business outcomes. Second, the brand needs a clear cultural position rather than a generic purpose. Third, community participation should be sustained and relevant, not opportunistic. Fourth, crowdcultures should be understood as active producers rather than passive segments. Fifth, entertainment should express distinctive meaning. Sixth, originality should come through informed reinterpretation and ethical collaboration. Seventh, YouTube and other creator platforms should be used according to audience behavior rather than as compulsory channels.

Before launching a campaign, a company should define the cultural tension, identify the community, test whether the brand has credibility, and examine possible harm. It should then develop creative work that the audience would choose to engage with even when advertising is avoidable. Measurement should combine reach and engagement with customer behavior, brand associations, retention, and qualitative response. Learning should continue after launch because digital culture changes through participation.

## Conclusion

"Branding in the Age of Social Media" remains valuable because Holt challenges the assumption that social platforms simply gave corporations better broadcasting tools. Digital networks empowered crowdcultures and creators to produce cultural influence independently. Brands therefore struggle when they attempt to win attention through large quantities of generic content. They perform more effectively when they develop a distinctive cultural position, engage credibly with relevant communities, and connect creative expression with the actual product and organization.

The original review correctly identifies practical lessons involving business outcomes, purpose, community, crowdcultures, popular culture, originality, and YouTube. These lessons become stronger when accompanied by caution. Communities should not be exploited, trends should not replace strategy, and brand activism must correspond with conduct. Holt does not provide a guaranteed formula; he offers a way to understand why cultural influence moved away from traditional corporate control. In the social-media environment, a brand earns relevance not by speaking most frequently but by contributing meaning that a community recognizes as worth circulating.

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