Modern marketing in disguise: creating value connections between companies and consumers
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Chapter 4  Diesel: Not that stupid

4-1  Introduction

One of the latest (2010) campaigns of the apparel brand Diesel invites people to ‘Be Stupid’. A few of the phrases found in the advertisements of this campaign read like this: “Stupid is trial and error, mostly error” or “Stupid might fail, smart doesn’t even try”. In a video the company produced and published on the internet the Be Stupid philosophy is presented.\(^{71}\) The philosophy briefly entails that one’s own ideas should be pursued even if, or better mostly when, the environment considers them as stupid. Commenting on the campaign the founder and owner of the company Renzo Rosso refers to his personal experience in an interview, stating that if he would have acted according to what most consider being smart, he would never have started the company in the first place.\(^{72}\) The core message of the company, as well as the name of the parent holding (and business unit) therefore boasts: Only The Brave.

In the eyes of the founder being stupid means being brave in exploring new venues. In business this translates in frequent innovations, initiatives aimed at exploring new stylistic market and business venues. Now if this is true, a glance at the more than thirty year old history of the company should show instances where company designers introduced quite daring collections or where there was a lot of controversy around the campaigns. It would also imply that the company should be geared towards reacting to unexpected consumer initiatives. In chapter two I defined this approach as ‘interactive market research and co-evolution’.

After having looked at the history of the company in terms of innovations in the value proposition and in marketing, I have to conclude that Diesel is more on the left side of the HyPo dimension than expected, which means that marketing has been and is of paramount importance to manipulate consumer perceptions of the innovativeness of the product.\(^{73}\) In the terms of Diesel itself I have to conclude that company executives are much smarter - less stupid - than they would like to be.\(^{74}\) The company managed to keep a very consistent image

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\(^{71}\) See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4h8uOUCoE (July 2011)


\(^{73}\) Some consumers even drive kilometers to get hold of the newest Diesel collection. See appendix 3, year 2008.

\(^{74}\) As one comment on the company weblog presenting the above mentioned video aptly states: “esta campaña me parece pensada por gente inteligente, para qu sus consumidores estúpidos, piensen q son cool...PATETIC” which means that this campaign seems thought of by smart people, to make their stupid consumers think they are cool. (Yaeru Duckwen Jul 24, http://www.diesel.com/be-stupid).
throughout the years, which is probably also the reason why it is more on the left side of our HyPo dimension.

In the next section 4-2 I will give a brief introduction of the company’s development to show how branding created the premises for a premium priced product. Our questions concern manipulation of consumer perceptions and behavior, and to manipulate an object it is necessary to define it. To clarify this I will first show how company executives struggled between the need for a strict and clear definition and knowledge of the target market on the one hand and the intention to portray an image of catering to individual, different preferences on the other (section 4-3). The tension between control and ‘laissez faire’ marketing becomes evident here. The next question is whether Diesel was really as innovative as its image likes to portray. If that turns out not to be case, marketing may have influenced to a large extent the perceptions consumers have of the company’s products. To determine this I look at the company’s themes and compare them to market trends in section 4-4, to conclude that the themes and collections never deviate much from either the previous ones or the extant trends. All the main collections (two a year) are related to themes which are quite evident in the campaigns aimed at introducing them. This information from the company sources is confronted with comments about the brand by consumers and journalists reported in newspapers in the Netherlands; a concise overview of the findings is presented in the appendixes to this chapter.75 Once we have clarified the role branding has had in creating the perception of the company’s image, the question is how Diesel manages to control the perception of the brand. To determine that we first need to look at how the brand attempts to define the value connection it want to establish with consumers. In section 4-5 I will show how the brand defines its values. I came up with a pyramid-shaped overview of different levels of interaction, where the higher tiers are more stable than the lower ones in terms of pace of change. Also, the higher tiers always inform the lower ones. Subsequently I turn to describing marketing activities to show exactly how the company seeks to communicate with consumers. One of the keywords here is to Tease. In section 4-6 I will explain this by looking at how the company deals with digital technology. In 4-7 the value proposition and marketing activities are evaluated according to the indicators developed in chapters 2 and 3. Finally in section 4-8 I am going to corroborate the presumption that Diesel has been manipulating consumer perceptions and behavior more than what one would expect, by answering the

75 Following, the numbers in brackets refer to data to be obtained on request.
questions 1) what kinds of values were involved in the creation of the image of the brand (the smart vs smile question) and 2) to what extent is the company looking for consumer input, as well as to what extent do consumers contribute to the image of the brand. I will conclude also on how this company managed to keep a ‘cool’ image to-date.

4-2 From Diesel Planet to Diesel Island

The company Diesel S.p.A., producer of denim jeans, has been praised by many not only for the quality of its products, but also for having created a whole world, often referred to by company executives as the Diesel Planet (Cillo and Lanza 2000: 130). Inhabitants of this world (or citizens, as a later version of the Planet, Diesel Island even issues passports) must be brave, sexy, rebellious, irreverent, and ironic. But what does a pair of good quality trousers have to do with worlds, planets, islands, and the like?

It all started officially in 1978 when founder Renzo Rosso decided to work at creating new finishes for denim trousers, which would give these a, for that time, unconventional look. In the area of Moldena, in the productive and rich north-east of Italy, Mr. Rosso was working in an apparel factory that was one of the several small and medium-sized companies in a typical Italian export-oriented industrial textile district. Cross-fertilisation and ‘economies of proximity’ helped Renzo Rosso start his own company thriving on the skills and knowledge of the district. In the late 80s the company started expanding into other product categories and markets and eventually became one of the leading apparel companies in the world. Notoriety of the brand was, however, not only due to the product, arguably best quality jeans, but especially to the worldwide advertisement campaigns that started in 1991 as a result of the intention to become an international brand. According to the founder the name Diesel was inspired by the oil crisis of the late 1970s, but also awakens associations with workwear, toughness, durability, and endurance. Most of all it was not an Italian name.

Quite soon the brand started sending out messages that had nothing to do with the quality of its products but rather with informing people on how to deal with themselves and the world around them resulting in a successful life. In this respect it was innovative, as most brands

76 MICRO & MACRO MARKETING / a. IX, n. 1, aprile 2000
77 Brand values from the Diesel Benelux corporate presentation and interviews.
where still thriving on the ‘cowboy’ associations people had with denim and all things American (e.g. the Marlboro man). Figure 4-1 below shows a booklet that says buying Diesel products is actually the first step to achieve success, and it also shows the international aim of the company, the focus on denim, allegiance with women emancipation and the workwear positioning:

![Image](https://example.com/image)

**Picture 4-1: 'How-to Guides For Successful Living', shot by Jorgen Loof, S/S 1992**

During the 90s the prestige of branding has risen for many companies. Brands are no longer only identifiers of a product or a of company’s reputation, but acquire meaning: buying Diesel would mean adhering to this planet and its system of values. At the same time Renzo Rosso recognises that he must cater to a need for self-expression, and in that way justifies the increasingly wide array of finishes, models, and product-categories sold. In his words: “That’s also why the collection is so big: you have very elaborate and complicated pieces, down to relatively simple t-shirts, but all of them intrinsically Diesel. *We expect people to adapt our clothes to their own identity.*” (Italics added)[4].

Through the years the brand kept on being successful by translating this concept of shared individualism into contemporary terms. Nowadays there may not be much hope to improve our planet, nor to live successfully in the existing one, so the only possibility to live a successful life is to escape to an Island and create a new world from scratch. Fortunately Diesel again gives us a means to achieve that: the Diesel Island.

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Picture 4-2: S/S Campaign 2011

Of course Diesel is not the only socially engaged company producing and selling good quality denim and other products (under license, from glasses to watches, helmets and recently even cars, the new version of the Fiat Cinquecento), but it was quite successful compared to other brands that thrived in the 80’s, and still is. So what else did it do?

4-3 A Diesel mindset

In the previous section I have shown how Diesel started its international campaigns with advertisements touching upon issues that had little to do with the products’ quality, but more with its wearers’ quality of life. Sometimes campaigns are aimed at ‘educating’ consumers that denim can be ‘wearable art’ ([4] p.61). Campaigns aimed at stimulating demand for a specific product category must be: “different from the brand’s main advertising, but every bit as imaginative”([4] p. 142). But are Diesel’s prospected consumers young people that want to be educated? Or are they curious adults looking for alternative explanations?

The former Benelux marketing manager of the company comments that Diesel is about a mindset, in his words New York and Amsterdam are literally nearer to each other than, say, Amsterdam and Maastricht. Here he voices ideas of the founder of the company who refers to his prospective clients by saying that: “Diesel people can be 15 or 50, elegant or scruffy. They are multi ethnic and multi-skilled, the one thing they have in common is a sense of liberty” [4].This comment tells us that the company does discriminate amongst users on the basis of non-demographic, or geographic, criteria. So let’s see what these criteria are and take a look at how the company deals with defining its consumers for marketing purposes.
To us a sense of liberty seems a rather generic criterion to define a target market, but it tells us that the brand does not want to communicate that it has a very specific prospected target market. This attitude is confirmed by at least two instances: the ‘individual market research’ campaign, which makes fun of the idea of market research altogether (see figure 4-3), and the anxious reaction of the Dutch headquarters when they found out that one of my students had posted an online survey in which the company name appeared. Apparently Diesel does not need any of this because as the founder says “to us, our visitors are intellectuals who know what they are looking for. We always keep that in mind”.

![Image of Diesel's global Individual market research](http://vimeo.com/5440143)

**Picture 4-3: Diesel's global Individual market research**

The company at the same time seems in need of defining its customer profile, if anything because ‘designers need to know exactly who the client is they are designing for’ (art17) and preferably these customers are clones of Renzo Rosso and other employees sharing the Diesel DNA. As the owner says: “we are the first consumers of what we do, so we are sure that they understand us” [4]. When deciding if and how to deal with brand extensions – e.g. umbrellas – the product manager must ask her/himself: “is the Diesel person likely to use an umbrella?”. The Italian brand director seems less strict when he simply divides the world in two categories: those who are conservative and those who are *curious* [art. 21]. The reader may hazard a guess to which group Diesel consumers *must* belong.

Back to individual expression. Renzo Rosso likes to state: “We don’t treat consumers like some formless mass who blindly follow the same dress code” but at the same time he notices

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81 Check the short movie were we took these pictures from on http://vimeo.com/5440143
that “in many ways the world is made up not of nations but of tribes, everywhere you go there are groups of people who are inspired by the same sorts of music, movies and clothes. No matter what language they speak, they consume the same thing”. So he does recognise more mindsets, the question is: does he want to address all of these tribes or does he want to create a Diesel one (sharing the Diesel DNA)?

The columns in table 4-1 show how the company segmented the market with respect to trade relations in 2009. The shops are examples of the direct and indirect retail channels in the Netherlands and Belgium. The rows relate to different concepts, whereas the columns refer to items for which the demand is more or less predictable (the ‘safe’ part is what other apparel companies refer to as never-out-of-stock).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contempory</th>
<th>Quality Casual</th>
<th>Young Mainstream</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amsterdam:</strong> Store PCHoef, <strong>Antwerp:</strong> Store Nationale str, <strong>Brussels:</strong> Store Rue Dansaert</td>
<td><strong>Amsterdam:</strong> Store Heiligeweg, <strong>Antwerp:</strong> Store Meir, <strong>Brussels:</strong> Store Nieuwstraat, <strong>Francis Poertn</strong></td>
<td><strong>Amsterdam:</strong> Tip de Brain, <strong>Antwerp:</strong> Spoilt, <strong>Brussels:</strong> People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amsterdam:</strong> Jefferson hotel, <strong>Antwerp:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Amsterdam:</strong> Bignor, <strong>Antwerp:</strong> Denim Kitchen, <strong>Brooklyn:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Amsterdam:</strong> Men@Work, <strong>Antwerp:</strong> Originals, <strong>Brussels:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brussels:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Brussels:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Brussels:</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4-3: Diesel’s retail segmentation model for the Benelux.

In 2010 the company’s strategy is revised to expand the row on the right, i.e. the young mainstream collections. Within the company a need is felt to reconnect with the younger generation (also clear from interviews with the Dutch general manager) and mostly with the feminine part of it, hence the appointment of a woman as the new executive officer of Diesel. In the company’s corporate presentation slides of 2010 we find that ideal consumers should be “the 16-22 year olds: the hyperaware generation true our Diesel values and spirit”, or “the young and cool and the alternative fashion seekers”. Now younger consumers are the target of the company again. And they are ‘hyperaware’ and always in search of the newest trends. Addressing them might present some difficulty though since “we have never tried to read their minds or follow short-term trends, we’ve just made things that we enjoy, and that we think they might enjoy too. And they’ve responded to our honesty” [4]. So I am left somewhat confused as to what the target market should be according to Diesel.
What I can conclude is that company officials are struggling between a need to define a profile of ideal Diesel consumers to cater to and the aim to portray the image of an independent, original brand. One reason for our confusion could be that the company likes to be on the edge between exploring new trends and at the same time exploiting existing ones. Identifying extant trends is of paramount importance, and the company is quite famous for that (see box 4-1). As a matter of fact “one of our talents here at Diesel is to be able to predict a trend a year or sometimes even two years in advance. Let the rest catch up if they can. Innovation is the best key to fighting imitation”. 82 (RR in [4] p.7). But has the company really been that innovative throughout the years? Was it trend-setting, following, or struggling in between?

Box 4-1: Diesel’s explorative trait

Having full ownership of the brand since 1985, and hence managerial freedom, Renzo Rosso was able to experiment by hiring young designers out of school, and sending them around the world with an unlimited budget in order to develop what would mostly appeal to themselves. In a country like Italy were the culture is characterized by high levels of power distance and were age is the main indicator of skill (after family affiliation), this was quite controversial and contributed to creating an image of a company that is unusual, creative, ‘out of the box’ among the young scene in Europe (Cillo and Lanza 2000: 181). This is still an important argument for the founder of the company: in a recent interview (see footnote 14) commenting on the international character of the brand he attributes the success of the company, among others, to the four trips designers yearly make around the world.

4-4 Timing is of the essence

At Diesel it seems to be a mantra to be innovative. In our interviews as well as in secondary sources that tap into company officials’ opinions, innovation in both internal and external bound processes and in products is very often mentioned (also in Cillo and Lanza 2000: 138). The story that Renzo Rosso likes to repeat in interviews, even recently, 83 is one of how he

82 I wonder if that works though, Renzo Rosso has recently formally accused two Chinese entrepreneurs in Prato, Italy, of copying four jeans models. Apparently this was getting out of control (“I cinesi mi copiano” La Nazione, February the 3rd 2011).
started innovating against all odds (hence the already mentioned ‘be stupid’ campaign), referring to the use of new finishing techniques for the denim product, which gave the jeans a rugged, raw image. When it comes to style and design though, innovation seems not to go against the odds really; on the contrary I even discern some reticence. To find this I looked at the themes of the campaigns and related collections through the years (company values) as well as comments of consumers and journalists (market values) and reported the findings concisely in figure 4-4. Mostly I took these from the book the company issued for its 30th birthday, but also from websites dedicated to advertisements. In addition to using my own judgment for the analysis of the collections and advertisements, I have presented them during fashion marketing classes and used the input from students and experts like fashion teachers and trendwatchers. I have also asked store employees and consulted newspaper archives. The values associated with the campaigns are reported in chronological order, as much as possible. The most significant comments are reported in the appendixes to this chapter.

**Company values**

![Diagram showing company values](image)

**Market values**

Figure 4-3: Timing is of the essence.

A few observations from this analysis can be made:

- There seems to be some alternation between ‘anti’ themes like rebellion, dark/dirty, suspicion/mystery, and ‘positive’ messaging like preppy, gender emancipation, individual hedonism, escape.
- The terms used by journalists and consumers to describe the collection show some consistency in time like: attention to personal rather than social concerns (or social issues in as much as these lead to personal concern). Proximal, individual rather than social and ideal values.
- The values as mentioned by journalists and users do not fundamentally differ from those intended by the company (at least, the comments we found are voicing the values expressed by the company).

In relation to the first point it is interesting to note that every once in a while the brand tends to ‘reconnect’ with the ‘hyperaware generation’. This was the case for instance around the year 2000 when the military, as well as dark/dirty themes were picked up by the alternative youth, and considered ‘real uniforms’. The question is to what extent this youth was alternative. Some subcultures were indeed rebellious and had their designers, or brands, speak for them, like for instance the punk movement and designer Vivian Westwood. Diesel looks for elements from these subcultures but abandons them if the association becomes too strong, or else takes established and less controversial elements from them to become mainstream.

The black-gold collection of 2008 had ‘suspicion’ as its main theme, but was mostly perceived ‘confusing’ by fashion students and consumers. As a result in 2010 this collection was brought under a separate business unit and developed into a separate line, as the older younger, more varied and colourful image was reintroduced. So it seems that Diesel regularly tries to depart from the playful/counourful image to voice some of youth’s preoccupations (the military trend was a.o. a result of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars), but is always coming back to its original, more playful image to reconnect with the ‘hyperaware’ younger consumers. According to Cillo and Lanza (2000: 131) until the 80s the aim at Diesel was mainly to develop and increasingly add new finishes and items to the collections, also because too much reliance on the denim product would be too risky given the uncertain future of the category at that moment. It was also the time of uniforms (in the words of Diesel’s brand manager, ibid : 132) and Diesel provided these. Only in the 90s did Diesel establish their own creative team and started working at the creation of the ‘Diesel Planet’ (ibid : 132).

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84 At the time I did the project with the students the collection was just introduced. Confusion was the reaction of consumers in shops in Belgium as well as in the Netherlands.
Where I have concluded that there is some circularity in the themes and values addressed through the years, others take a more linear view on the development of the brand. Gill Fort (2005) sketches three main eras the brand went through: 1st Greasy rockabilly (1978-1993), 2nd quirky urban fashionistas (1993-2000) and 3rd conscious hedonism (2000-2005), so the brand evolved from being a rebellious teenager, to a preppy university student, and finally to a more sophisticated and professional grown up. An overview of the characteristics of these periods is given in table 4-2 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reason for being</td>
<td>Dress the tough guys and their smoking girls</td>
<td>Make people feel different and provocative</td>
<td>Help people carry a more pleasant existence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Proposition</td>
<td>Stylish jeans and workwear with a used worn-out look</td>
<td>Affordable fashionable urban street wear</td>
<td>Fun, imaginative and colorful fashion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td>Worn-out style</td>
<td>Finky and experimental hand urban style</td>
<td>Stimulating happy clothing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persona</td>
<td>Tough, wild, adventurous, living on the edge</td>
<td>Provocative, pontifical, sarcastic, reenacting a rebel</td>
<td>Will, culture aware, conscious, iconoclastic, value</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associations</td>
<td>Rebels, lice chicks, cigarettes, bikers, rockabilly, etc, dinners, gas stations, some leather</td>
<td>Political issues, social conventions, religion, sexuality, fashion itself</td>
<td>Youth, vitality, happiness, hedonism, sex, worrisomeness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of authority</td>
<td>Jeans and workwear</td>
<td>Jeans, clothing, shoes, fragrances</td>
<td>Jeans, clothing, watches, sunglasses, shirts, bags, fragrances, hotels, fashion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>Tough guys wannabes</td>
<td>Intelligent urban fashionistas</td>
<td>Hedonistic hipsters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Pat that gives advice to be tough and braves</td>
<td>Uncommonness provider to make your life more exciting</td>
<td>Ego and mood booster</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4-4: Brand era analysis 1978-2005 (Gill Fort 2005).

According to Renzo Rosso the brand is only now (2011) mature enough to enter a new phase. The newly appointed (may 2010) chief executive Daniela Riccardi voices his thoughts when she claims the brand is just naturally evolving. Interestingly she comes from the fast moving consumer goods sector, which means that, in the mind of the founder, Diesel starts being more akin to, say Procter & Gamble (the previous employer of the new CEO). There brand management differs from a luxury apparel company in terms of, for instance, exposure or customer loyalty. Strategically the new aim is to professionalise the company further, to reconsolidate the brand as it intends to expand further into Asia (and to double revenues by 2015). Expansion is also to be achieved by entering into more product categories through cross-sector collaborations, like those with Fiat and Ducati.86 Stylistically the new strategy involves – again – becoming more ‘female’, and according to interviews with consumers and store employees this is to be found in the collections as well.

86 *Frau Am Steuer*, Textielwirtschaft 8_2011 p. 22-25
Monitoring the younger, ‘hyperaware’ generation is important to re-infuse the brand with fresh blood when the perception is getting too far from the market’s main trends. But is Diesel only about branding? What about product design?

Asking teachers and fashion knowledgeable people about this, leaves us with the feeling that Diesel’s brand and products are growing apart. The collections do not vary that much through the years; innovation is mainly in new finishes for the denim, but the collection, for instance, always comprises a jacket and a scarf and translates masculine garments (overalls or motorbike-like jackets) into feminine fits. If you want to judge for yourself, I have looked at what was presented in the stores in the fall of 2001, 2005, 2007 as well as at the catwalk prêt-à-porter collection of 2011 (which was not available yet in the source database) and reproduced it in picture 5-4.

2001-2005
Now imagine doing a ‘blind-test’: have a general look at the pictures above, then randomly take out two pictures: could you tell what year they are from? Even if I watched the collections for both women and men and just randomly took the first pictures that showed up on the website (and by doing so I am not looking for differences), I do not see much innovation in terms of style and design. But an experienced denim connoisseur will certainly find differentiation in some details.

The style is quite recognisable throughout the years. That the brand is not very controversial in its design is also confirmed by a small search on the internet aimed at identifying Diesel fan groups. It showed us how discussions are always about price or technical issues, rather than about style. A few exceptions are comments on the advertisement themes, i.e. some moralistic discussion in the USA about the company’s advertisements of the 90s, like those portraying marines engaged in loving intimacies. Diesel’s loyal clients may tend to choose what they recognise, which is safer, but like to think they are innovative. This last effect is not so much due to the innovativeness of Diesel’s products, but rather due to the social relevance and the timing of the themes and campaigns. As Miles Davis liked to say: ‘It’s not so much which note you play but where you put it.’

4-5 The branding pyramid

In interviews with company executives, but also in secondary sources, some terms are mentioned repeatedly like DNA, street credibility, local relevance. The DNA indicates something that is stable, immanent, a core. Street credibility is what every marketer wants to achieve, and local relevance one of the ways to achieve that. Of course local marketing managers (in the Benelux supported by two ‘presence’ marketing executives, at least by 2009) like to put emphasis on the local actions they have proposed, and which were allegedly successful, at least in terms of media exposure. How can the brand be locally relevant and still appeal to a global, border-transcending mindset? Besides the brand’s DNA some brand values are clearly stated as well, which must inform marketing activities, and a global brand manager is responsible for the translation of these into local markets. When I did a marketing research project of the company’s Benelux division with students, this project had to get approval from the manager,\(^{87}\) which shows that even this small-scale project was discussed with headquarters, indicating a tendency for top-down control.

Brand values are strictly informing global and campaigns. In figure 4-2 I have drawn the relation between the DNA, the values, the global campaigns, and the local initiatives in the shape of a pyramid. This not only conveys the impression that our classification is strong and durable, but intends to show that in the lower tiers there is more variation in places and time. Descending the pyramid the frequency of change increases and the higher tiers always inform what happens in the lower ones.

\(^{87}\) To our surprise he announced he was coming to the Netherlands to discuss it with us, postponing the meeting twice, and finally cancelling it due to imminent changes in the organization.
The more we go down in the pyramid, the more the marketing actions and related values should be relevant for very specific groups, or micro-cultures. Let’s look at the tiers separately:

**Tier 1: Core values**

The core of the company’s identity is what company executives refer to as the DNA. Arguably this DNA cannot be defined because like the marketing manager says: “if you try to analyse it, you realise you are actually getting detached from the new” [2]. The DNA is mentioned mostly in relation to management issues; so for instance new employees are selected on the basis of sharing this DNA, just like brand ambassadors. According to the founder this core can however be described as: “The luxury of Dirt” or “The haute couture of casual”[4].
The DNA being, albeit intuitively, univocal in its interpretation, binary juxtapositions like luxury-dirt, haute couture-casual, but also fake-real and serious-fun, characterise most of the external communication. The concepts ‘dirty luxury’ and ‘haute couture of casual’ are quite clearly translated in the collections. If you look back at figure 4-4 these themes are recurrent, in various meanings, both in the description of the collections as in the consumers’ reactions. The juxtaposition fake-real should refer to marketing, given the garments are real. Double edgedness refers to the ‘tone-of-voice’ of the company’s external communication, and is mother to that intertextual parody that makes the advertisements so strong.

**Tier 2: Brand values**

There is little variation in the reports I have read concerning the values of the brand. From our interviews, as well as from the corporate communications materials, the following values are recurrent:

- **Braveness** is a value that accompanies Diesel from its inception. We remind you that the mother company is also called ‘Only the Brave’ (see logo aside). According to the founder it is brave to rip-off a denim and sell it for a higher price, as Renzo Rosso did e.g. in New York in 1991, when he decided to take the risk of unsold goods to convince retailers to display the items. Brave is allegedly also how Diesel dared showing denim at the New York fashion week, being derided first and loved for it afterwards: “now they are expecting us to be there” [2]. We have seen before that innovation at Diesel was never radical, however, so maybe we should consider the milder acception of the word.  

- **Sexyness**, or sensuality is an element present throughout all the external communication of Diesel. Sexual images are intended to seduce, therefore: sex as seduction. Sex also serves to shock or to touch on social issues like emancipation, like with the campaigns that explicitly portray intimacies between gay people. The 2010 Spring/Summer campaign theme is an example of how campaigns are informed by these values, its name being ‘Sex Sells’ (- ‘but unfortunately we only sell jeans’).

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88 The Latin etymology of the term (Pravus) does not imply radical controversy but rather deformation.
• Rebellion implies doing things that run counter to what conventional wisdom would expect you to do. In the beginning of the 90s this was translated into creating jeans that ‘your parents would not wear’, just like wearing long hair in the late 60s. Looking at figure 4-1 we see that themes like dark, or provocative and alternative youth do share semantic ground with the term rebellion. This value is important because it allows the brand to reconnect with the youth who, almost by definition, bring inherited values up for discussion.

• Irony permeates all external communication, from seasonal campaigns to local promotional initiatives. One feature of irony is that in order to ‘get the joke’ one must understand the intentions in between the lines of a textual or visual message. In the campaigns the brand generates irony by contrasting mainstream, ‘serious’ images with unreal, or unexpected contexts. As one case description aptly reports “Serious themes seemed to be lurking everywhere in the adverts but were undercut by a final admission that it was all just a joke.”. The observer must connect the dots, and to have done that reinforces a feeling of amusement (or else, jokes aren’t funny once you explain them). In a way, Diesel has done with its advertising what Warhol has done with consumer culture: giving it an ironic twist and turning it into a new art form. It has always made fun of conventional, humorless fashion advertising: fashion as serious fun.

So the values that are stated are not that discriminating, since they leave room for ambiguity: one’s worst intentions could always be misinterpreted. They allow for a departure from the safe but not too much, for daring but never re-inventing. At the same time though, these values are very much defined, as well as defining external communications.

Tier3: Seasonal themes

The seasonal global campaigns of Diesel are well known in the advertisingworld for being ‘cutting edge’. They have earned various prizes and some several times, like the prestigious Cannes Lions Grand Prix. To establish an international image, a choice was made of international advertising agencies, from a.o. Stockholm, Amsterdam, Paris and London. In 1991 the Swedish company Paradiset was hired to formulate the first worldwide campaign.

89 INSEAD Diesel Case Study 2006
This campaign became: ‘for successful living’ and was inspired by a tendency of the time to tackle societal and political issues in order to get a new kind of attention (for an apparel producer). A number of international campaigns with denominations like: Staying Young Forever, Sponsoring Emotions or Global Warming ready followed suit. And more recently: Sex Sells and Be Stupid. Double-edgedness and irony again permeate all external communications (as the former Benelux managing director liked to say: “All you see of Diesel has a double edge”). This means that these campaigns never overtly offend, but touch on societal issues in a subtle way; they have what semiologists call a parody-approach (Brandao, V.C. 2003).  

This becomes evident by looking at the more controversial and infamous advertisements of the Italian apparel company Benetton. We could characterize the difference by the fact that Diesel is not judging but questioning, which is what intertextual parody is all about. In picture 4-5 on the left side you can see a Benetton campaign which portrays activist David Kirby dying of AIDS surrounded by his family. This photograph won the 1991 World Press Photo Award, and was published in LIFE magazine. On the right side the Diesel’s V-J day campaign of 1994 is portrayed, which also dealt with gay emancipation.

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**Picture 4-5: Apparel producers start dealing with gay emancipation. Left the Pieta’ campaign of Benetton in 1991, right, one of the most controversial (according to the amount of comments) Diesel campaigns, the V-J day campaign of 1994.**

Another example of the two companies’ different approaches is the way they dealt with the ‘African’ issue (cfr picture 4-6). Diesel introduced the ‘Daily Africa’ campaign in 2001,

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91 Ibid 10:41.: “a publicidade da Diesel faz uso da paródia como elemento de construção do discurso publicitário ao mesmo tempo em que o questiona. Porque questionar é o valor maior de reconhecimento desta marca no mercado. A comunicação publicitária da Diesel é um item de consumo, assim como cada um de seus produtos. Tem uma forte intenção lúdica que se adequa à proposta da marca. Mas o recurso crítico é também uma estratégia de criação de identidade com um público cativo. Vale lembrar que o texto da paródia Diesel só é possível ao reconhecer o texto parodiado; a linguagem publicitária como um todo. Essa relação de dependência é a base da paródia.” This is evident in for instance the creation of the personage of Donald Diesel, a parody of Mc Donalds and therefore of the big American corporation.

92 http://www.fark.com/comments/6265448/69569815#c69569815 July 2011

93 Still another infamous example, among many more, in this respect was the FCUK (-fashion) campaign of the British company French Connection in 1988.
always showing newspaper articles in the ads that would treat Europe or the USA as underdeveloped, and portraying African people who seem not too much concerned with European issues, but rather with themselves. In the Benetton advertisement intertextuality is clearly present as well (the observer needs to connect the dots to get the message) but the content is definitely not as ironic.

**Picture 4-6: How Diesel and Benetton dealt with ‘African issues’**

Hopefully it has become clear that the inter-textual parody generating double-edgedness and irony differentiate Diesel from other (especially apparel) brands that use social and political issues in order to acquire meaning and street-credibility (and sell a pair of trousers). The question remains: By building on irony and intertextual parody, was Diesel also discriminating amongst consumers? Maybe to some extent it was. Diesel anticipated a consumers’ tendency to deviate from the mainstream and state their alleged ‘own’ style through brands, as opposed to sub-cultures resisting the mainstream by rejecting brands and branding all together. On the other hand the only heated discussions I have found about the brand on the internet are those that deal with gay emancipation, where the gay community has taken the ads (not the brand!) to flag their opinions in 1994 and even today. Gender emancipation always played an important role in the company’s external communications, and consumers praise the feminine cuts of products that are man-meant in first instance (allowing girls to wear what their boyfriend would wear, being sexy at the same time). Diesel, however, adheres to a form of mild emancipation, if possible. An indicative comment in this respect is that of a female consumer stating that Diesel “is more a wet men’s dream than a support of women emancipation”. Several campaigns generated controversial reactions, but

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95 See e.g. [http://www.inrepair.net/2007/05/28/diesels-gay-sailor-advertisement/](http://www.inrepair.net/2007/05/28/diesels-gay-sailor-advertisement/) July 2011
more so in the USA than in Europe or elsewhere. Given the brand’s notoriety outside the USA, I think that it says more about the USA (where you probably find controversial discussions on just about everything) than about the advertisements in question.

Diesel was giving the impression to discriminate, but actually does not want to do so. In the words of Renzo Rosso: “Our ironic tone sometimes initially shocks consumers. We often present what appear to be outrageously inappropriate messages—confusing references to such things as racial, sexual stereotypes, materialism, drug abuse, religious intolerance and political extremism. The viewer needs to think a bit in order to understand what our intention really is. But once they have taken the time, the viewer of a Diesel ad usually picks up on a hidden order behind the work, a meaning that is less an insensitive, subjective statement and more a balanced observation of the realities of the world we share.” (Ted Polhelmus, Diesel World Wide Wear 1998: 44).

Tier 4: Local initiatives

When I interviewed Diesel’s former marketing and chief executive managers for the Benelux, one local action had been particularly successful, and the interviewees were indeed particularly proud of it. This consisted of offering a shower as well as new underwear to festival-goers, on the occasion of a Dutch alternative music event. I think here lays one of the strengths of Diesel’s marketing approach: by letting local marketing managers provide their own input96 with regards to the means and content of marketing communications, two goals are reached. One is achieving commitment from local managers and the other the brand acquires local relevance. One of the ways to achieve this is to have shop managers collect furniture from local vintage outlets. Localisation of retail happens in other ways as well: the shop on the Heiligeweg in Amsterdam has red lights to remind people, mainly tourists, of the infamous red light district of the city. With the intention of ‘educating’ consumers that Denim jeans are actually works of art, the Diesel Denim Gallery was introduced in 2000 when local artists97 were invited to show their own original works.98

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96 i.e. the marketing budget and destination is agreed upon ad-hoc, and not ex-ante.
97 Most famously the artist Sprouse for the shop in Union Square in Manhattan, New York.
My own visits to Diesel shops in the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Germany and England were not that exiting, however, as they revealed quite a lot of uniformity. Materials are always wood, leather and metal, colours brown, light gray and white. Modern straight lines are always combined with ‘vintage’ elements like baroque lamps or other elements which are almost always worthy of mentioning in architect’s web logs and style magazines though.

**Picture 4-7: Diesel Denim Gallery in Aoyama, Tokyo**

- Diesel Denim Gallery in Aoyama, Tokyo

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But even if the stores do not differ a lot, the perception of the brand still differs across countries. This tells us that some national cultural determinants might have an impact on the brand’s image. Without the pretension of covering this question exhaustively we have asked students from Ukraine and Sweden, next to Dutch ones, to do a small research on the internet to find out about discussions of the brand in their home countries. The results are reported in their original slides reproduced in picture 4-9.99

99 With many thanks to Alisa Kaminska, Josephine Wettegren and Lisenka Milerski.
Picture 4-9: National differences amongst consumers.

So even if the overall online activity regarding the brand is mostly informative (prices, quality) we can still discern some differences amongst what students perceive as being Diesel consumers in the various countries. More mainstream and playful in the Netherlands, mitigated by an apparent lower internet activity; more adult in Sweden, maybe reflecting the somewhat more conservative nature of the country (often exemplified by the term Lagom), and more aspirational and seducing in Ukraine, where brands serve that function (signaling conspicuous consumption and shapes) notably more than in western countries. So, I think the differences found by the students among Diesel ‘tribes’ in these countries can also be justified in terms of predominant national traits.

But can we still make distinctions between national cultures? Not according to Diesel. As we have already mentioned, Renzo Rosso’s opinion in this matter is that: “…in many ways the world is made up not of nations but of tribes, everywhere you go there are groups of people who are inspired by the same sorts of music, movies and clothes. No matter what language they speak, they consume the same thing” [4]. Did you note any double-edgedness in there? To me it could mean two things: Are national boundaries being substituted for more
fragmented aesthetic boundaries? You might also argue in favour of an increasing homogenisation of tastes and preferences. In both cases the ‘same thing’ could be a pair of branded jeans. The pictures below show the first consumers, showing up at the store in occasion of the brand’s 30th anniversary, who were getting a pair of special edition trousers for 30 Euros (already at 0500h am on the Heiligeweg in Amsterdam! I came a bit later…). This might have been a ‘neo-tribe’, but the question remains if the glue that unites this neo-tribe consists of Diesel’s brand values or of the possibility to get a pair of limited edition branded trousers at a small price.

The company executive admitted to not understanding exactly how this fit happens in the Diesel planet.” The website reads that members never get a message that doesn’t have some kind of benefit for them. Each message should have a different, surprising and impactful design. Messages are adapted per country and about 150 messages are developed per season. Members also get exclusive access to events, collection items, and collectibles. The card also allows “easy shopping through the internet”. However, if we look at the website we see that it is actually a plain loyalty card, allowing users to collect ‘style miles’ to get access to discounts. When I asked the Benelux marketing manager about the rationale behind this card, he answered with some perplexity. The company executive admitted to not understanding exactly how this fits in the company’s

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**Picture 4-10: Consumers in a queue (Bejing) or amassed (Amsterdam) early in the morning to get hold of Diesel’s Dirty Thirty edition jeans**

Another example of how Diesel excludes consumers is the introduction of the loyalty-membership card. In 2008-09 (depending on geographic location) the Diesel ‘Cult Card’ was introduced. According to Diesel’s cult card website and anniversary book “over half a million fanatics have joined the cult card through the website or through the store. Each member gets about seven messages per season sent with ‘irregular regularity’. These fans want to know everything about the brand, and get to know what happens in the Diesel planet.” The website reads that members never get a message that doesn’t have some kind of benefit for them. Each message should have a different, surprising and impactful design. Messages are adapted per country and about 150 messages are developed per season. Members also get exclusive access to events, collection items, and collectibles. The card also allows “easy shopping through the internet”. However, if we look at the website we see that it is actually a plain loyalty card, allowing users to collect ‘style miles’ to get access to discounts. When I asked the Benelux marketing manager about the rationale behind this card, he answered with some perplexity. The company executive admitted to not understanding exactly how this fits in the company’s
overall strategy. He is probably not the only one, given that by July 2011 only 34 people had enrolled as members of the Diesel cult-card owners Facebook club. Very exclusive indeed.

4-6 Wanna play?
Digital technology makes interactivity with large amounts of people cost-efficient through the internet. Diesel understood that the internet would be the medium to contribute to constructing the innovative, young, and experimental side of the brand’s image. It is therefore that Diesel has been using the internet in innovative ways as soon as it realized the potential of it. The websites about Diesel are always created by the company itself, at least, we found no consumer-generated content. The company uses this medium to tantalise users, creating interactive playgrounds where others just present themselves through their websites.

The company apparently achieved the goal of gaining exposure and adding values to its brand through online campaigns, as they did not go unnoticed: three Grand Prix Cyber Lion awards\(^\text{101}\) were awarded to just one of Diesel’s interactive viral campaigns, created by agency FarFar in Sweden. This campaign shows how Diesel understood the potential of this medium. In the year 2000, when internet-based marketing was still to be explored by most marketers, Diesel carefully prepared to launch the career of a fake celebrity, building a global advertising campaign around the sponsorship of an unknown Polish singer, complete with CD release, tabloid hype, and fan club. Her name: Joanna Zychowicz. "I don't think most people know she's not real," says former Diesel advertising manager Stefano Caputo. "When you create a character, it exists."\(^\text{102}\) Instead of a real person having an avatar on the internet, a real internet person had avatars in reality.

\(^{101}\) In the context of a leading advertisement and creativity festival in Cannes, see also http://www.canneslions.com/

\(^{102}\) “I don't know that much; we just signed her this morning,” said marketing director Beppe Ciaraldi, who seemed bothered by questions about the mysterious artist.” http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0BDW/is_5_41/ai_59650843/ in a article from 2000. July 2011.
Another example of the tantalising nature of the company’s internet activities is the WOWZA or Heidies campaign of 2006. In the spring of that year the introduction of the new lingerie collection was supported by a viral on the video sharing website YouTube where a Diesel employee had been hijacked, together with the new collection, by two models (the Heidies) wearing the underwear. The models would supposedly keep the employee hijacked until Diesel would agree to book them. In the meantime visitors of the site could have their name appear in the viral and ask the models to ‘do something’. In 2006 ‘viral’ campaigns were a fad, but Diesel managed to add credibility to its viral and to differentiate it from other brands by having users engage with the models, also playing with the concept of a reality show that became very popular at the time.
Interaction is allowed, but the playground the company creates on the internet is not allowing for new or original consumer input. Other campaigns use the internet as the medium to engage with consumers, however in doing so consumers always (to my knowledge) responded to calls made by the company as opposed to the other way around. Allegedly several people, for instance, responded to the actions suggested by the ‘save yourself’ campaign of 2001, like drinking urine to stay young (see picture 4-13). However given the double edgedness that also characterised the previously mentioned campaigns, it is questionable whether that was really the case or if Diesel spread these allegations to reinforce the impact of the campaign.

From 2001 onward young creatives are engaged through competitions: the Diesel Award for designers, the Diesel Wall Design Competition for figurative artists, and the Diesel U-Music Award for musicians/bands. The winner of the first one, which was organised together with the International Talent Support agency in Italy, received $50,000 and an internship within the company’s design department. The second competition was more popular and described as: “Diesel Wall is an international art contest that aims to bring intriguing /inspiring/ insightful/ inciting contemporary ideas to giant urban canvases in city centers

Picture 4-12: Diesel’s ‘Heidies’ campaign.

Picture 4-13: the ‘Save Yourself’ campaign
around the world”(company website). The winner of this competition was allowed to show his or her work on a wall at the US headquarters of Diesel on 7th avenue in New York.

The third competition was an international award for musicians or bands without a producer. The U-Music website, which is also an information portal, allowed participants to send in their work to be judged by local panels of experts as well as by listeners. Besides publicity the winner received a year of support in terms of recordings and shows. Music CD’s were distributed through the shops, the videos featured on the U-Music website.

Other occasions in which consumers are engaged in marketing activities are the creation and spreading of party-events, or the involvement of regular customers who seem to share some genes of the brand’s DNA (as stated in interviews with Benelux personnel) as ‘brand ambassadors’.

So far we have relied upon a definition of a medium that spans from a website to a competition. This is a rather broad definition of a medium, however, and the involvement that these kinds of new media generate is more due to the nature of these media than to the intentions of the company. As Mc Luhan confirms in this respect (1964: 7) “In terms of the ways in which the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves, it mattered not in the least whether it turned out cornflakes or Cadillacs”.

4-7 Un-stuck in the middle
In section 4-1 I have shown how Diesel has been one of the first jeans companies to depart from the, let’s say, Marlboro-Man image traditionally related to jeans, by introducing more feminine items into the collections for instance. Even if in the beginning references to the United States of America are quite obvious (see picture 4-1), later the values implied in the company’s proposition are often reflecting a more European, introvert, critical stance (see e.g. picture 4-6). Whatever the reference continent, we have also seen that Diesel created an innovative image by exploring what the trends would be in the near future and giving these a double-edged, or humorous twist. In terms of the values implied in the value proposition this means that symbolic and cultural values have been very important for the brand to differentiate itself from other brands that, at the time, would not create an entire planet, but mostly just a denim clothing item. We have also seen that for Diesel the quality of the product

is very important, but what does this quality imply? Mostly new finishes, and related finishing techniques. Arguably Diesel jeans are durable and fit properly, but new finishes are mostly aimed at giving the product symbolic meaning. The holes in the fabric that the brand introduced\(^\text{105}\) where not improving its functional properties by allowing fresh air or something similar, but represented an act of rebellion.

In section 4-4 (figure 4-1) I have shown that the perceived values of Diesel never depart fundamentally from what the company intended to convey. So we could say that the identity-image gap is small, i.e. the brand is and has been quite successful at controlling the image, i.e. at keeping it consistent over time and place.

![Table 4-3: The Glue Value of brands.]

But what about the Glue Value of the Diesel brand? Looking at table 4-3 we could conclude that sometimes it ‘moves’ towards III and IV, but always tends to come back to II. The lower tier of the value pyramid is not informing higher ones, as local initiatives are vehicles to communicate pre-defined values in a credible way.

From tier 2 in the pyramid figure in 4-2 we can discern what Diesel’s values are that should also define its image. Literally it seems like the company is telling consumers that by buying the products they would be automatically transferred to HyPo IV. However in doing so the image of the brand is more akin to HyPo II. Here we must make a distinction between themes and values. The themes addressed always reflect the current ‘zeitgeist’ but it is the way the

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\(^\text{105}\) Although it was not the first to do so, some of you might recall the dressing code of the iconic, for the 80’s, movie Flashdance.
company deals with these themes that should reflect, or else convey the brand’s values. So looking at the means and tone of communication one concludes HyPo II, i.e. distinction from the masses. Diesel is a messenger, bringing relevant issues in an entertaining and somewhat arrogant manner. The interesting nuance here is that Diesel created a community of people who claim to be different in a very similar way.

Now, let’s turn to marketing as a valuation process, i.e. at how these value-associations with the brand came about. More specifically I want to see what role, which input is ascribable to the company and to consumers in the valuation process.

In the appendixes to this chapter I have included a brief description of Diesel’s marketing activities. For every activity and for the three indicators, I have rated the degree of input from the company (number in the left column under the indicator) and the degree of input by consumers (right column) by ascribing these to one of our 5 HyPo categories described in chapter 3. For an extended description of the rating criteria and method please see appendixes 3 and 4 to this chapter.

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**Table 4-5: Calculation of Diesel’s marketing activities.**

*Adding Values*

If we look at the medians for the values indicator, we come to a HyPo class II for the company valuation, and HyPo class II for the consumer’s valuation as well. Again the general denomination of HyPo class II is manipulation of behaviour. This is quite what we expected, we have seen, for instance, that the Diesel collections and retail outlets seem less innovative
after all than what is generally assumed. We have also seen that Diesel manages to create its innovative image mostly by anticipating, albeit slightly, extant trends (timing is of the essence), and that the perception of the values (e.g. the campaign themes) by consumers is never fundamentally departing from what the company wants to convey. Paradoxes allow for incorporating new trends. This means that the juxtaposition of apparently contradictory terms like ‘fake-real’ or ‘dirty-luxury’ allows for the incorporation of contemporary trends, but always give these a ‘Diesel-twist’. Diesel creates an exclusive zona-franca where one can express one’s concerns safely. We have seen that the company management tries to retain quite a lot of control over the kinds of marketing activities and values. If we look at the values on tier two of our values pyramid we also understand that these values are very explicitly referring to ‘basic instincts’ i.e. survival and reproduction, whereas: in a way irony is a means to conserve one’s status in the face of al lot of preoccupying events (e.g. global warming, or hunger in Africa), braveness is reflecting the need to create and find new solutions, and sexual references are obviously giving the brand peacock feathers. Indeed I have found no instance of consumer activities aimed at changing the value proposition of Diesel. On the contrary, as one comment in a newspaper eloquently reads: “young people have the tendency to change the meaning of brands, but not with Diesel. They rather drive a tank empty to grab their new items.” (reported in the appendix).

Activation

The median\(^{106}\) of the numbers representing the valuation of the company input leads to a rating of 2 (HyPo class II), the median of the right side of the columns leads to a median of 3 (HyPo class III). If we look at the definition of the HyPo II class of activities, we find that these do not only imply manipulation of perceptions, but also of behaviour. Looking at the categories of the indicator as I have defined it in chapter 2, the following description actually fits the activities of Diesel best: *Engagement consists of the explicit creation of a playground where the boundaries between commercial and private fade.* The word playground does indeed also show up several times in the company’s communications. The result from our ratings show that the roles in the game are quite skewed. In the examples presented in this chapter it is the company that sets the rules, even when these rules are embodied by two supposedly independent (it was a hijack…) models, or by, indeed, a fake celebrity.

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\(^{106}\) The median is the value that divides the distribution in two equal classes. See appendix 3 for the calculations.
Peer Activity

Here the median for company input equals IV, which means the company has been trying hard to address or create communities around the brand. In section 4-3 I ended up confused about the question whether Diesel is trying to univocally define a consumer group or profile, or not. Now, this confusion maybe due to the fact that it is one thing to define the market for the purpose of creating and presenting collections (in relation to the value proposition), but it is another thing to define groups of customers or communities, with whom to build a relationship. The valuation of II+ for consumer communal activity means that consumers are spending some time discussing the brand, but never really form some kind of ‘Diesel tribe’. We have seen in section 4-5 that grouping activity around the brand is, more often than not, the result of explicit monetary rewards like access to celebrities (for the parties), a pair of jeans, or discounts (‘style-miles’).

Concluding on the value proposition of Diesel, the brand allows consumers to stand out of the crowd more than to belong to one, to be brave, hence the positioning in HyPo II. This does not imply that the glue value is low, again, I have qualified, not quantified the Value Proposition.

In shaping the image the role of the company is more prominent than that of consumers. Consumers are systematically engaged by the company, but the richness of the company’s message does not allow a lot of original input: Diesel allows consumers to play but sets the rules of the game.

4-8 Conclusion

Is Diesel a mass market company (as e.g. Cillo and Verona (2008) state) or has it been systematically approaching (or developing) a niche market for premium denim trousers? Indeed it has been doing both. It is as well a mass-oriented, youth culture design company (as Ted Polhemus 1998:48 defines it) as a premium new luxury fashion company. It looks like the value proposition in terms of product – collections – and the presentation – retail – has been alternating between two extremes, one more colourful, explicit and young, the other more existentialist, inquisitive, dark. Despite Diesel’s ‘staying young forever’ campaign, by 2010 the youth of the 80s inevitably grew older and the company found itself catering to more generations at the same time. Loyal customers grew older, and the creation of a separate
business unit in 2011\textsuperscript{107} shows brand managers are aware of this. This latest development, which as mentioned in paragraph 4-4, goes together, among others, with the appointment of a CEO for the fast moving consumer goods sector, shows that one of the major preoccupations of the brand, particularly when aiming at expansion, is consistency of image. For Diesel this meant, and means, acting mostly on the ‘moderate left’ side of our HyPo dimension, i.e. manipulating consumer perceptions in the hope to influence consumer behaviour.

The main arguments to support this conclusion are:

1) The perception of the brand (the Diesel planet) has influenced the perception of the product characteristics to a large extent.
2) The values implied in the brand’s image are symbolic, but mostly aspirational, helping consumer to convey status rather than belonging.
3) The marketing activity of the company is aimed at teasing, e.g. through playfulness or explicit rewarding.

This last point is of particular interest because of the tactics used to tease. Diesel uses ‘half-empty concepts’ (Jacobs 2010) by which the meaning of the brand is carefully framed in the consumers’ minds. How?

- By defining denim jeans as a vehicle for a positive message, the brand manages to maintain an exclusive image while at the same time increasing its turnover by catering to broader audiences. Denim is the core product, but the characterisation can be applied to every item sold. Diesel is a messenger.
- Double-edgedness characterises all external communications. The brand’s values, albeit very strictly defined, are always amenable to interpretation and personalization to some extent. However, these are mostly interpreted by local marketing managers and international marketing agencies, under strict supervision.
- Anticipate, but not too much, that is the brave part. But brave in its most conservative acception: the brand is surfing on micro-trends but exiting in time as well. There are no instances of co-evolution with the marketplace, but rather anticipation and exploitation.

\textsuperscript{107} To include so called new-luxury brands Diesel has been producing for, and then acquired among others Maison Martin Margiela, DSquared2, Viktor and Rolf, … next to their own collection and later separate brand Black-Gold.
As a result of the first two points the brand can show involvement with societal issues acquiring ‘street credibility’ but can at the same time evoke positive feelings and associations, in stead of guilty ones (like e.g. Benetton has done). The third point is what gives the brand an innovative image, better described maybe as an up-to-date image. That is more akin to looking for safety than to being brave. For most people this seems to be enough. Without intending to offend anyone, but only to make my point clear one could say that loyal consumers or fans of the brand are not so much smart people in need to be more stupid (as the latest campaign advocates), but maybe rather the other way around (that is, a.o. a key feature of humor).

Concerning the relationship between the HyPo nature of marketing activities and the resulting glue value of the value proposition, we can therefore draw two main conclusions:

1) Play or playfulness is the postmodern way to manipulate consumers’ or people’s perceptions and behavior. However, the question here is what play exactly means, i.e. if consumers subvert the rules of the game (which Diesel carefully avoids) is there still manipulation?

2) Diesel consumers share a brave attitude, individual choice is celebrated, but surprisingly most individuals choose the same. Can we talk about a Diesel neo-tribe in this case? Maybe we have to make a distinction between a ‘real’ neo-tribe and an imagined one, the difference being that in the second case gathering is not a required condition.

I would like to define this as a kind of ‘pax romana’ or ‘zona franca’ marketing: allowing consumers to keep their own institutions, offering improvements (playgrounds…) but still imposing rules and values. Paving the ground for collecting duties without instigating revolt.