

ALIGNED DISRUPTION

The quest for a differentiated proposition
through cultural understanding

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"Nothing is so powerful as an insight into human nature, what compulsions drive a man, what instincts dominate his action, even though his language so often camouflages what really motivates him. For if you know these things about a man you can touch him at the core of his being."

-Bill Bernbach

Almost all of us, at varying points in our career, have come across the tyranny of the 'OR'. Hardworking advertising OR award winning advertising. Image led advertising OR proposition led advertising. Competitively differentiated communication OR culturally aligned communication.

This paper proposes a new paradigm of strategic planning thought. A paradigm that is not a slave to the 'OR', but gets liberated by the 'AND'. A paradigm that understands that in an increasingly complex world, there is no room for sacrifice. One that recognizes the need for both competitive disruption AND cultural alignment.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, various brand practitioners like Jean-Marie Dru and Jack Trout have been near fanatical on a brand's need to differentiate itself from its competitive set. There has also been an equally compelling alternate view about a brand's success being a function of its ability to resonate with popular culture and consequently with its target audiences.

The rift between the two ideas further widens when one analyses the historical advent of both streams of thought.

'Differentiationists', as we have named them, have traditionally looked inwards to seek out a product ingredient, design, manufacturing process, functional or emotional attribute that could be

leveraged as a hook to create a story of newness and disruption for the brand. Their argument is simple: without some difference that your brand can stand for, the brand really has no raison d'être and hence no reason why a consumer should prefer it to others. A brief study of the history of marketing sheds light on the evolution of this sort of thinking. From the pre-sold products era of the industrial revolution to the sales and eventually the marketing era of exploding competition and imploding differences in technology, for a product to stand out and shout 'pick me up' to the passive super market shopper, there simply needed to be a compelling and differentiating reason-the USP.

As credible USPs became more and more difficult to come by and societies world over began

to experience seismic demographic and attitudinal shifts, an alternate view on brand thought began to develop. With the rise of the youth-culture market in the 1990s, a market previously eclipsed by baby boomers, in much of the developed world, the very structure of industrial society underwent a massive inversion, from 'product oriented' to 'societal oriented' advertising.

This view holds that if the purpose of the brand is to create preference for the product, it needn't rely on product attributes or even the category discourse to do so. Brands can simply align with, or even lead popular culture to attract its target audience. Globalization further enhanced the scope of this idea as massive and hitherto successful MNCs were beginning to realize that emulating their brand model 'as is' in countries abroad was not necessarily the divine route to global success. Many brands hence sought to define culture rather than commodities.

However, this line of thinking does have its detractors. Clients, for one, are not always comfortable on letting the product take the backseat as brands and communication reflect

culture. There is also a developing line of thought that the more one reflects culture, higher is the risk of failure as a brand can be perceived to be too similar to other brands, across categories, that are trying to leverage the same components of culture.

To cut a long story short, clients would love to disrupt categories in a way that they know would sit well with their target audience and brand strategists would like to align brands to popular culture in a way that would be different from existing category codes.

This is precisely the *raison d'être* of this paper. This paper encapsulates an attempt to first define existing popular culture, with a particular demographic audience as an example, and then to break up the dominant codes of various product categories as elements of this culture.

This then makes it possible to position brands differently from the category on these cultural aspects, hence making the elusive and almost paradoxical goal of 'aligned-disruption' a possibility. 'Aligned Disruption' need no longer be an oxymoron!

METHODOLOGY



The pursuit of aligned disruption can be divided into four parts: two that lead to alignment with the culture and two that then help the brand manager disrupt category codes within the culture.

The first is to decode the dominant codes of the culture under question. This would mean understanding consumer cultures by individually

understanding the various strands that stem from and also contribute to the core values of that culture.

Once these core values and their manifestations are understood, one needs to dissect competitive communication to understand how various brands align themselves to different codes of the audience's popular culture.

This sort of an inquisition will lead to a complete understanding of usage of dominant cultural codes for various product categories.

Then to disrupt category conventions, the brand custodian can leverage the relatively lesser utilized components of popular culture within the category, that tie in best with the brand's proposition.

The Process of Aligned Disruption

1. *Understand the culture of the specific consumer constituency and the dominant codes within the culture*
2. *Analyze competitive brand positions to gauge the specific cultural code that they leverage*
3. *Assimilate cultural codes of all brands in the category to arrive at the category discourse*
4. *Apply this knowledge to create a disruptive brand proposition by utilizing lesser used but equally compelling cultural codes within the category*



CASE STUDY: THE CONSUMER CONSTITUENCY OF THE YOUNG INDIAN MALE

The young Indian male is, today, the center of attention of Indian marketing circles. Almost all business magazines regularly print features on this audience. The annual MTV India youth study is probably the only publication that can give Harry Potter a run for its money, amongst the Indian marketing community. Most consumer goods majors are spending huge proportions of their research budgets on trying to decipher the psyche of this animal.

All of this attention is because the young male is under maximum impact of the peculiar inflexion point that Indian society faces today. And this point of inflexion has arisen in Indian society essentially due to two key factors.

Firstly a climate of economic liberalization has resulted in rising disposable incomes, which really means more money to spend on more things. Indian sociologists have labelled this as the phenomenon of 'post liberalization consumerism'. Couple this

with the fact that the youth are nearly 30% of the Indian population and one recognizes why this sub-culture has emerged as the most critical contingent of marketing opportunity.

Secondly, an explosion of media choices has led to an information overload on desirability of products and brands. High media consumption by the youth indicates a potential to target them through advertising. "Indian society ... has been transformed by the Internet and cable television - forces that young people are best equipped to exploit. The youth are already having an enormous impact: on the economy, on companies hoping to sell them products..." (Business Week, Oct 2002).

However, before one markets to the young Indian male, one needs to understand his desires. The concept of 'Aligned Disruption' proposes that differentiated desires could be tapped into, provided one finds a fit between 'brand' culture and 'their' culture.

DECODING HIS CULTURAL CODES THROUGH ADVERTISING

Interestingly, advertising media is a social barometer of changing trends and cultural codes. Hence, what better to crystallize the culture of this new species - the evolved young male consumer, than one of the very initiators of its evolution: Advertising!

Norman Douglas said in 1917, "You can tell the ideals of a nation by its advertisements". It is widely believed that advertising and society are involved in a never-ending spiral of cause and effect. Advertising not only mirrors society but also tends to initiate it in many ways. Advertising has developed into a dominant discourse in our society - a discourse, which today, shapes our culture just as profoundly as religion and schooling did in previous eras. This is even truer of young people because they are at their most impressionable at this age.

In practice, media offers us perspectives or selected views on our world. They represent this world to us by constructing images and behaviors for lots of different groups within our own society. Advertising has the power, through selection and reinforcement, to give us very influential portrayals of a whole range of situations and ideas. We make sense of these

representations in different ways according to the values and assumptions we carry around in our own heads.



So representation is not just about the way the world is presented to us but also about how we engage with media texts in order to interpret and assimilate such portrayals. This concept of representation is, therefore, just as much about audience interpretation as it is about the portrayals that are offered to us by the media.

Hence, understanding how the youth is depicted in advertising will help us know the specific discourses that the young Indian male consumer is subconsciously buying into. It tells us what values and lifestyles are "given" to him by the advertiser and which of these he internalizes into his lifestyle.

The clinching argument in favour of advertising is that it is also the face of the brand for the consumer. While it portrays consumer culture in all its facets, it unravels the hard facts of competitive communication, and displays brands in reference to others in their

CHOOSING CATEGORIES AND BRANDS TO EVALUATE

Subsequent to the decision of examining the young Indian male through the advertising targeted at him, the effort was to include product categories for whom young men constitute an important audience segment. Thus along with the self-evident categories such as apparel and motorcycles, we also decided to take into account inclusive categories such as soft drinks and snack foods, which while not solely

category. Thus, what better media text than advertising to delve into to decode dominant category advertising codes and brand propositions within the context of consumer culture.

targeting the young male, do aim to appeal to his sensibilities. Therefore, the categories that we studied were soft drinks, snack foods, deodorants and perfumes, apparel, watches, media, alcohol, two wheelers and mobile phones. Hence, popular youth brands such as Axe, Pepsi, Nokia, Allen Solly apparel, Kingfisher beer, MTV and Hero Honda were a part of the short-list.



THE PROCESS OF EVALUATION ITSELF

All communication released in print or television for all the four hundred short-listed brands was analyzed. This really meant analyzing nearly twenty-six hundred different pieces of communication. This extensive analysis was essential to make the study a thorough and comprehensive mirror to the male

youth culture. The commercials were individually deconstructed to pick up cues that would help decipher the underlying drivers motivating the audience. Each piece of communication was broken into individual components i.e. the language used in the advertisements, the settings / ambience used in the commercial, the relationships depicted, the emotive payoff, the tonality, the background score,

the tagline used by the brand, the depiction of the protagonists and those around him and how the brand is shown to fit into the user's life.

The deconstruction was not intended to make statements on the existing advertising content targeted at the young Indian male but more to peek into his 'branded' world and understand his motivations and attitudes as a consumer.

To this effect, there was a need for some conceptual model that could help consolidate all

these individual deconstructions. The requirement was to construct or borrow from a model that would move 'outside-in', from the various cues, symbols and depictions in the communication to the dominant rituals that exist for the target audience and finally narrow in on that 'core value' which would explain to us what this consumer essentially stands for. In other words, this model would help reach that one fundamental driving value that would explain the mindset and consequently the behaviour patterns of the young Indian male.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE FINDINGS

One such model was the Geert Hofstede's Onion model of understanding human societies and cultures. The Hofstede Culture Onion model asserts that human culture is much like an onion. To arrive at what lies at the core, one must peel off the layers on the outside. Therefore though the culture's core may not be apparent at first, through careful scrutiny of its various visible elements, one can successfully decipher what its underlying pervasive driver is. Thus Hofstede implies that from a study of the apparent symbols of the culture, the values of its idols and its dominant rituals, one can comprehend the core value that gives the

culture its distinct identity and strongly influences the behaviour of its proponents.

A similar outside-in method of analysis of the communication would help arrive at the core value, which is central to male youth culture in India. The various advertising cues were clubbed in such a way so that a cluster of cues would have one coherent manifestation. These manifestations were then clubbed on the basis of similarity so as to shed light on the motivations compelling today's young man. These drivers were then studied to understand the essence of male youth culture.



THE KEY FINDINGS

Eight distinct facets of the young Indian male culture were decoded from the communication analysis.

SUCCESS ORIENTATION

Mirroring the increasing shift in Indian society from an intellect based caste system to a progressively materialistic society, courting and flaunting success at an early age came across as a vital appeal in many advertisements targeted at the young male. The meaning of success in their lives is changing. Less inhibited, they now expect more in a shorter time and are more focused in its pursuit. Success is now layered with their natural spunk and energy. This new meaning has strong materialistic associations, with many (especially luxury) brands positioned as rewards for one's success or genius. The young man is now looking for badge value in his purchases and an affirmation of having arrived in life.

SEEK DISTINCTIVENESS

Many youth products are positioned as being accessible only to a particular kind of individual. The underlying appeal being, the need for the youth to be trendsetters for their peers. Hence, in most such advertisements, the protagonist is portrayed as a confident and charismatic person, with the use of the product making everyone envy and often emulate him.

MY OWN WAY

An important youth driver is the need to do one's own thing. Apt for an increasingly individualistic audience, the youth seem to revel in situations where they can do just what they feel like and only because they want to do it. Hence the protagonist often finds himself breaking away from the routine and not doing blindly, that what is expected from him, to pursue that what he himself desires. Conversely, in many advertisements people are, mostly in an irreverent tone, mocked for following set norms while the protagonist revels in his individuality.

BUILDING BRIDGES

The gist of this driver is 'negotiating with tradition'. There is a strong duality in the Indian youth's lifestyle. His strong roots provide him with enduring traditions and values, even as day by day he is reacting to and absorbing foreign influences. He is now the face of a changing India, an India ready to take on and succeed, against and with, the best in the world. In the communication context, this driver is depicted in terms of modernizing Indian traditions and 'Indianising' western concepts. Hence the MTV spoofs on Sholay, a cult Indian movie, find just as much acceptance as the Channel [V] 'Gheun tak' (colloquial Indian for 'Take this') spoofs on Michael Jackson. In the family context, the implication of this trend is the portrayal of parents as friends and the near-complete absence of rebellion from family, as a theme.

LETTING ONE'S HAIR DOWN

An integral part of youth culture all over the world is purely having fun. In India, the manifestations of fun vary from breaking monotony to living one's life to the fullest to enjoying just the ordinary moments in one's life. Many brands are trying to fulfill this need for heightened experiences, almost educated escapism, of this highly assertive consumer segment by promising them fun moments that are out of the ordinary.

ESSENTIALLY MALE

While the hype around the metrosexual male makes the macho tough guy seem archaic, one of the facets of the communication discourse interestingly pointed out that talk of the demise of the macho guy might be slightly premature. Many marketers continue to use blatant messages of raw power and machismo to strike a chord with this audience. While brawn does play a huge part in such depictions, machismo is also taking on the form of moral uprighteousness and not wavering from what one knows is the right path, standing up for one's beliefs and protecting the weak.

TESTOSTERONE DRIVEN

The attentions of the fairer sex will always be an important hook to cut ice with this audience. Across cultures, many brands have professed to

make users irresistible to the opposite sex and laughed all the way to the bank. In India, this strand of culture also manifests in the need for the male to be seen as the knight in shining armour rescuing the damsel in distress. Though mostly, the protagonist is depicted as the irresistible guy whom women can just not stay away from.

HEIGHTENED EXPERIENCES

The final aspect of youth culture that we uncovered in advertising was the exaggeration of the ordinary. Mostly the brand promise is highlighted in a quirky, larger than life manner or aspects of daily Indian life are exaggerated in a humorous manner.



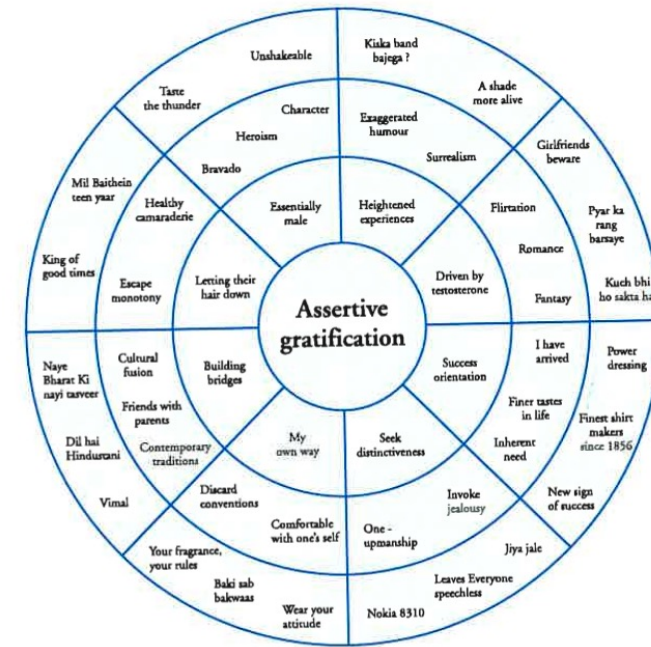
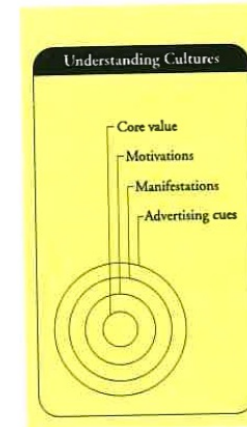
THE CORE VALUE OF THE YOUNG INDIAN MALE

The above eight drivers can be condensed into a core value which is consistent to all of them. This value is essentially the gist of the young male consumer's state of mind. This is the essence of what he stands for and is his approach to life as depicted by the communication that he consumes. This essence is that of 'Assertive Gratification'.

Just what does 'Assertive Gratification' imply? The young male has come a long way since the days

of traditional Indian 'Brahminical Restraint'. He is now throwing caution to the winds; any guilt associated with conspicuous consumption is a thing of the past. The young male consumer's world is changing in scope. He has increasingly become 'I' centric with a focus on 'his' needs, 'his' dreams and 'his' desires.

Overt consumerism is in. It is cool to have brand logos shouting from everything you own, apparel to footwear to college bags. However while this guy is willing to spend more, he is also now looking for



increasingly bigger bang for the buck. It is all about the excitement and thrill that the brand experience can generate. This guy is sure about what he wants and if you want to sell to him, you'd better be too. The brands that he uses say all about him and he is looking to be seduced by each brand experience.

his motorcycle better be 'definitely male'* or at least profess to 'fly' him to his destination in 'first class'*. This guy is dictating to the market just exactly what he wants from the products that he uses and any marketer who does manage to provide him that is amply rewarded for his effort.

Thus, he just doesn't want to ride a motorcycle because it is fuel-efficient; along with fuel efficiency,

*Tag lines for Bajaj Pulsar and Yamaha Enticer motorcycles, respectively.

PUTTING ALIGNED DISRUPTION TO WORK

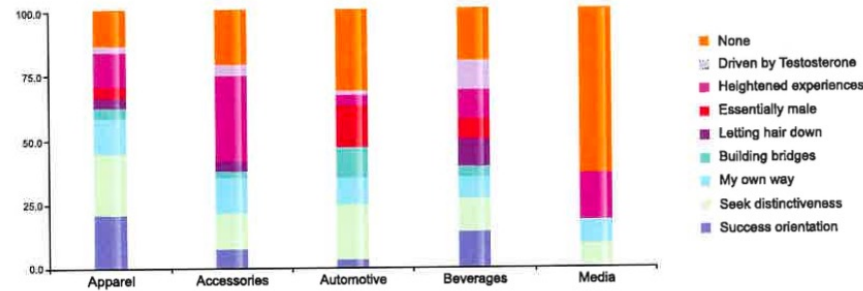
The next step towards culturally sensitive differentiation is to tie in this bird's eye-view of male youth culture with current brand positioning strategies. In this step, one understands what components of popular culture are being leveraged most by current brands (within any given category), and what aspects of culture are relatively ignored and hence could be better utilized.

Hence if one were to launch a brand in a saturated category, it would be wise to know what component(s) of consumer culture most brands in

the category currently align with and consequently which are the empty, but culturally consistent, spaces that they could use to be perceived as distinct.

Also this model allows one to learn from successful cultural alignment strategies in other product categories and hence, aligns the disruption within one's own category to sit well with the target audience.

The following graph illustrates the skew in usage of the cultural drivers across a few sample categories.



For example, if one were to launch a new brand in the men's apparel market, it is interesting to note that most brands in this category stress either on

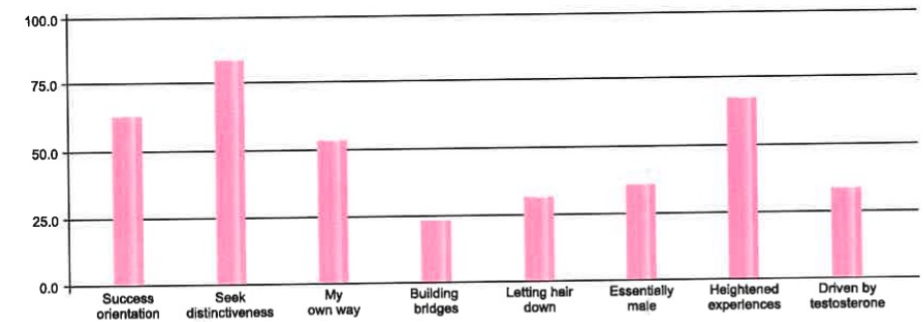
seeking distinctiveness or on success associations with the brand. Hence the opportunity to create a disruption in the category by using appeals such as

that of masculinity, which has worked well with the same audience for beverages, as in the case of hard liquor brands.

The essential thought behind this model is that marketers should not be wholly obsessed with situations within their product categories, and must keep a keen eye on trends that are changing and

evolving their target audiences. This model gives the sort of appeals various brands (across categories) rely on to make leeway with the consumer and hence the types of appeals that the audience is most inundated with.

The following graph depicts the proportion of brands that position themselves on the various drivers.



Hence distinctiveness, heightened experiences and success are the foremost poles marketers rely on, to connect with the young Indian male today. For example, if one chose to position their brand on success orientation, this model predicts that (across all given appeals) success is one of the most frequently relied upon to

strike a chord with the young Indian male. Hence, if one seeks to be truly distinctive as a youth brand, one would probably look for poles other than success to position their brand. A brand custodian would do well to look at youth brands that have succeeded by leveraging the other cultural cues and learn from them.

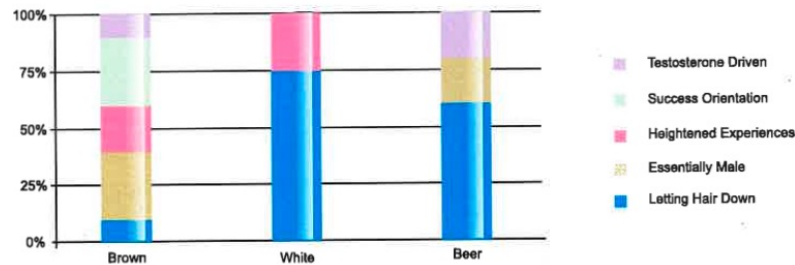
EXAMPLE # 1: UNDERTAKING A POSITIONING EXERCISE FOR A WHISKY BRAND

White liquors such as Vodka and Rum, with the entry of international brands such as Smirnoff and Bacardi are increasingly finding a niche and even taking away market share from brown liquor brands, especially amongst younger audiences. It then becomes important for whisky brands, wanting to protect their turf from the white alcohol brands, to understand the reason for their success.

When one uses this model to understand category codes for white liquor, beer and brown liquor it was found that the predominant theme in advertising of both white liquor and beer brands is 'letting one's hair down'. These brands seem to

hit the right spot with the younger audiences who are now increasingly aggressive in their pursuit of the good life.

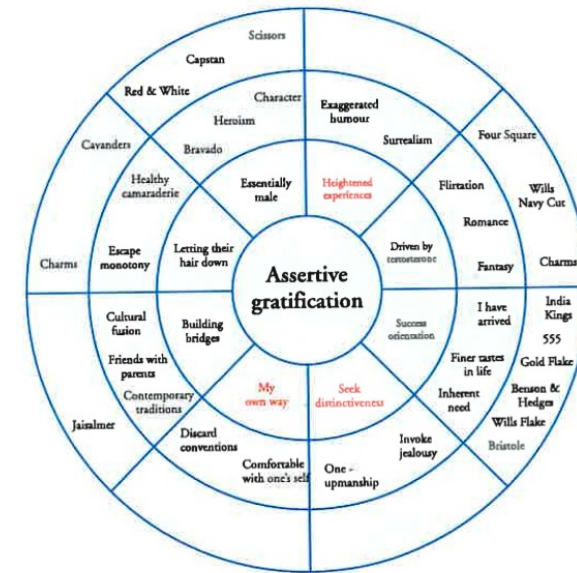
Hence, while whisky brands were obsessed with masculinity and success connotations of their product, the audiences were turning to white liquor or beer for fun and recreation. In such a scenario it would make sense for a whisky brand to protect its turf by marrying the strengths of its product form with the trend of consumption of alcohol for greater enjoyment of life. Hence a brand could position itself as a masculine and fun brand for success in the marketplace, a positioning that has not yet been tried out in the Indian market.



EXAMPLE # 2: IMPACTING NEW BRAND DEVELOPMENT - CREATING A NEW BRAND OF CIGARETTES

This is an illustration of the use of this model for new brand development for a cigarette marketer - Godfrey Phillips India (a subsidiary of Philip Morris in India). By placing various

cigarette brands on the culture onion model, one can make out at a glance, the various culturally aligned positions vacant for a new brand in a highly crowded market.



Cultural drivers such as success orientation, essentially male and testosterone driven are often repeated in this category. Many brands portray the choice of cigarette as a sign of having arrived and also

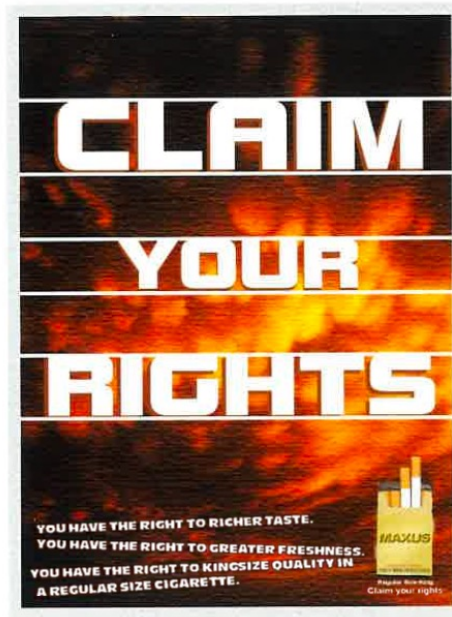
of one's fine tastes in life. The other common positioning planks are those of the bravado, heroism and enhanced desirability by the fairer sex.

The disruption opportunity for a new cigarette brand would come from the hitherto unused (for the category) drivers of distinctiveness, heightened experience or doing things one's own way and hence, breaking away from the conventional.

One such concept was on the route of doing one's own thing and the consequent manifestation

of breaking away from the convention, which is an integral part of male youth culture.

This resulted in a path-breaking concept for a new brand code named 'Maxus' giving it a completely different proposition from other cigarette brands in the market and yet, fit very well with the sensibilities of its target audience.



EXAMPLE # 3: CHOOSING A BRAND AMBASSADOR

Cultural drivers are often manifested in famous personalities who form an integral part of popular culture. Therefore, many celebrities embody these drivers of popular culture.

Once a decision has been made to layer a brand with certain aspect of popular culture, then the choice of its endorser would hinge on which celebrity embodies that manifestation of culture the most.

For example, a famous Indian actor, Amitabh Bachchan is seen as a point of convergence of two generations, loved by his generation and respected by its successors. Hence he is a true embodiment of the cultural code of 'Building Bridges'. Therefore for brands looking to straddle a combination of heritage and modernity, Amitabh Bachchan would be an ideal choice as endorser.

CONCLUSION: TRUE MAGIC HAPPENS WHEN OPPOSITES ATTRACT

The concept of 'Aligned Disruption' illustrates the possibility of creating meaningful disruptions by understanding the impact of popular culture on category discourses.

It creates a new way of strategic planning - one that stems from understanding the driving values and cultural codes of the audience under question and thereafter applying this knowledge to enquire into category behaviour to create meaningful disruption.

This knowledge can be put to use for creating propositions for existing brands, seeking new brand

opportunities or even something as executional as deciding on the celebrity ambassador for a brand.

The process of aligned disruption marries two divergent yet essential strands of brand building thought. This paper seeks to demonstrate a method to create competitively disruptive propositions from something that touches the lives of consumers in every aspect - their culture.

No more does the brand strategist have to give into the tyranny of alignment OR disruption. He is now empowered to create the harmony of the AND.