

Foreword

by *Rachel Sanderson**

Just a century ago, Henry Ford, the American industrialist and business magnate, best known as the founder Ford Motor Company, declared: “Any customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants so long as it’s black”. Ford’s snappy comeback, recalled in his official biography, became one of the most enduring brand taglines. It also underlined how one of the world’s richest men held all the power, and consumers of his product had none. How times have changed, especially in our past decade of whiplash fast technological upheaval that’s made the consumer king. Today even Ferrari, that most elite of car brands, owned by the Agnelli car dynasty, must indulge its clients’ whims to thrive. All its customers get to tailor their car to their personal taste. For its entry level buyers, that can mean choosing details like its seat trim. For the select few, Ferrari builds a one-of-a-kind vehicle in collaboration with the buyer. Meanwhile, the brand famed for its prancing horse insignia several times daily entertains a universe of 31 million followers on Instagram keen for connection with the world of the flame red Italian race car.

Another heir to Henry Ford, one of today’s richest men, Bernard Arnault of the world’s biggest luxury goods group, LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, has created a universe of luxury brands, arguably with a connection to consumers without equal. His lieutenant Pietro Becari went so far as to tell the Financial Times in 2024 that “there is no household in the world” that has not been touched by the conglomerates brands, sold in a multiplicity of ways: through product, Instagram and

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YouTube video about designers, sponsored shows in art galleries, fashion shows on catwalks and movie production, traditional book publishing and lifestyle stores where you can buy a couture Dior gown for upwards of 100,000 euros or a hot chocolate for 15 euros, to name just some of them.

Stefania Saviolo provides these and many other examples in her lucid analysis of brand and connection. It is one of the hot button topics of our age. Saviolo, through rich argument and case studies drawn from her several decades of expertise and investigation of brands, provides insight into the past and a guide to how to survive our new AI era. Opportunities include exploiting experiences over products, making the most of the breadth of today's target audience, which stretches from the very young to the silver generation of consumers over fifty years old. There's, of course, the rapid pace of technological change, and advent of our AI era. Saviolo provides insight too into the inevitable potential pitfalls in the AI age: digital exclusion, and, the greater "black swan" risk to brands, consumer fatigue.

One of those huge opportunities for brands is that media, the "tribe", in today's parlance, where I've been resident for the past 25 years, has been fractured beyond recognition. When I started as a graduate trainee at the news agency Reuters in 2001, senior editors were still divided on the merits of putting bylines on the top of stories. Too much personalisation, it was argued, would detract from the message of the story. That argument now seems quaint in a world where personal branding is all, for people and firms, from cradle to grave. In the world of the traditional media, only the Economist, where I've written on luxury goods and family capitalism, adheres to the no byline policy – and nowadays that's also become a branding tool in itself, a way of differentiating from an overwhelmingly crowded field. Today, traditional media groups are dwarfed by brands of all kinds telling their own stories or getting content creators to tell it for them. Makers of soap detergents to influencers like Kim Kardashian, are battling to tell their story and make a connection. There's no one exempt. US President Donald Trump created his own Truth Media and Technology Group to amplify his connection with followers, and help get himself elected back to the White House. Speak to job hunting graduates, and they will tell you about having to

build their brand on LinkedIn, starting from when they are at school, in the hope of making a connection with potential employers, and their picky human resources departments. The era of AI promises to ratchet up this branding noise beyond anything we have ever known. Getting the message right can win big. Saviolo quotes Amy Pascal, co-chair of Sony Pictures who says: “Brands should think of themselves not as storytellers but as story builders. We plant seeds of content and let our community build on it.” It’s advice worth taking from the company behind the multi-billion-dollar grossing Spider Man universe.

Still, threats lie here too. Saviolo notes digital exclusion will become an increasingly vital issue, which may well require state and private intervention to reach those left behind. Beyond that, consumer fatigue amidst digital overload, as Saviolo lucidly illustrates, is the existential risk. “This overload can result in decision fatigue, reduced engagement, and diminished brand loyalty if brands fail to provide a compelling reason for consumers to connect with them,” Saviolo writes.

As a reporter, this hinterland of digital exclusion and exhaustion where connection is either not enough or too much is fertile territory for investigation. There’s a whiff of dystopia here, as there is in reports by New York Times reporter Kate Murphy who has written about how Botox, and other cosmetic surgery procedures which have surged since consumers interactions moved increasingly online, are affecting human connection in real life. That’s because, some medical practitioners argue, cosmetic alteration restricts the human face’s ability to mimic, which is the starting block of human connection. If human connections become harder to maintain, will brand universes step into that breach, can they? Maybe. Saviolo notes: “None of us exists in isolation. We are all part of a community, whether big or small. In this context, consumption is a social phenomenon where goods serve as instruments of self-recognition and building connections”.

What’s certain is brand connection to consumers has become multiple, various and more vital than ever. In this maelstrom, perhaps, for some consumer tribe, Henry Ford’s promise to consumers of “any colour as long as its black” could even become a renewed calling card for connection.