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Defining a Filipino heritage brand in the digital age

INTRODUCTION

How does an undefined yet strong heritage human brand compete in this rapidly-evolving, social-media crazed, digital-marketing driven business environment? The fiercely competitive arena of the fashion industry, where artisanal apparel tends to be so quickly commoditized by imitators and aggressive competition from top-of-mind global mass-produced brands, is where Filipina designer Patis Tesoro has been thriving and surviving as a passionate serial entrepreneur for over four decades now. Regarded as The Grand Dame of Philippine Fashion, she has done her fair share in uplifting homegrown arts and crafts by meticulously creating unique pieces of textile, clothing, home decor, and fine art, all of which have been sold worldwide.

BRANDING FROM THE MACHINE AGE TO THE DIGITAL AGE

There was a time when brands were incidental in that little thought was put into their definitions. Front-page worthy inventions were the first kinds of brands, and products sold themselves precisely because these innovations made life easier for the consumer (Klein, 2001). When competitive branding emerged in the Machine Age, it suddenly became essential for firms to differentiate their goods because, "the market was now being flooded with uniform mass-produced products that were virtually indistinguishable from one another" (Klein, 2001, p.6). This 'manufactured sameness', coined by branding guru Naomi Klein (2001), required the development of an image-association, so that the market could easily relate with the brand. Thus, a more meaningful consumer

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connection would hopefully blossom into a long-term relationship.

The rapidly changing environment propelled by the digital revolution shaped a whole new breed of consumer: One who could no longer be so easily swayed by the charms of celebrity endorsers as they themselves became celebrity bloggers or “infomediaries” (Silverman, 2011). The 21st century consumer is a hybrid of both brick and click models, and will only really believe the product truth defined by those they can actually trust: fellow consumers.

George Day’s Adaptive Marketing Capabilities (2011) discusses how firms must learn how to compete more sustainably in the very saturated and hyper-capitalist platform of the internet. The change necessary for the firm to undergo in order to achieve sustainability in the current complex business arena, is from that which merely utilizes static marketing capabilities to a firm with adaptive marketing capabilities which generate quicker response to the needs of the 21st century consumer.

In this article, I detail my process in the preliminary branding of Filipina designer and national textile guardian Patis Tesoro, who is in the maturity stage of the product life cycle, and who needs to formally define herself as human heritage brand, for the purpose of sustaining her competitive advantage as she transitions into her retirement. Patis also happens to be my 64-year old mother.

This branding scheme contemplates on her contribution to nation-building, through her dressmaking business of over 40 years. As far back as I can remember, my mom would make it a point to actively involve my brothers and I in the various activities of her dress shop. Her 20 or so employees were equipped with the vital manufacturing skills of tailoring, sewing, embroidery via machine or hand, hand painting, and beading. She also has a small pool of loyal suppliers who bring her handwoven textiles from across the archipelago, which at times are hand embellished to her specifications.

LOHAS, FILIPINISM, AND PIÑA

Patis Tesoro has always been a sustainability development advocate and practitioner. As we all know by now, sustainable development is defined by the Brundtland Commission (1987) as, *“development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”* This ideology emphasizes the conscious practice of a balanced lifestyle by our global community, by monitoring the interaction of social (which includes cultural preservation), economic, and environmental objectives. These objectives, in turn, translate to the triple bottom line of people, planet, and profit.

Monica Emrich’s ground breaking work, *The Gospel of Sustainability: Media, Market and LOHAS* (2011), defines the Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability from an insider action researcher’s perspective. What used to be called an “alternative” choice to the “mainstream,” is now a burgeoning industry which encompasses five broad market categories:

Sustainable Economy (a business-to-business category comprising sales of raw resources to manufacturers); Alternative Medicine (includes non-allopathic healing modalities and natural and herbal medicines); Healthy Lifestyles (includes natural and organic foods and products and dietary supplements); Personal Development (includes tools for the development of mind, body, and spirit such as self-help books, yoga tapes, and religious or spiritual materials and services); and Ecological Lifestyles (includes a wide range of goods considered environmental). (p.43)

By virtue alone of her landmark achievement in the revival of our national textile piña, Patis Tesoro has transformed herself into an icon of “Filipinism”. In 2005,

Lynne Milgram, a Canadian textile scholar and long-time friend of Patis', discussed this concept in her paper on piña. "Filipinism", as cited by Bankoff and Weekely (2002), was a distinct type of nationalism for Filipinos inspired by our national hero Jose Rizal. "It attempted to unite people through reference to a shared past, albeit an invented one, by employing mainstream symbols of citizenship such as the flag, national anthem, and historic myths of military conquests" (Bankoff and Weekley, 2002, p. 38). Milgram (2005) goes on to prove that piña is an emergent polysemous symbol of Filipinism as it has the power to help resolve the absence of a true national consciousness through the labor intensive production and almost fanatical promotion of Filipiniana.

FASHION INDUSTRY AND COMPETITION

Patis Tesoro competes in the apparel and non-apparel industry sector which, according to MarketLine Industry Profile (2014), includes all clothing except leather, footwear and knitted items under apparel, and non-apparel products which include technical, household, and other made-up non-clothing products. The global manufacturing market "had total revenues of \$798.2bn in 2013, representing a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 4.5% between 2009 and 2013" (p.2).

The growing market served under this industry is characterized as highly fragmented where barriers are high mainly because of entry and exit costs, and the threat of rivalry is strong (MarketLine Industry Profile, September 2014).

Patis' line of apparel and non-apparel can be further characterized as luxurious or high-end, with a focus on Filipiniana. Milgram (2005) quotes Patis in an interview given in the year 2000:

Creating Filipiniana is how I want to be known in history. I also want to say to the younger generation that they can wear Filipino-made things without having to

wear Filipiniana ... I am known for Filipiniana, but these can be translated to modern, very today, very wearable clothes (Alano, 2000, pp. 40, 41).

Fourteen years later, Patis finds herself in a saturated market of local designers who followed her lead, and consequently competed away a huge chunk of her market share. Last November 30, 2014, the country's leading newspaper, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, staged a successful fashion event called "Masters and Millenials: The Maria Clara reborn in Face-Off 2014".

In her article, Cheche Moral (2014) credited Inquirer Lifestyle editor Thelma Sioson San Juan, as the brainchild of this showcase which featured 32 of the nation's most significant fashion designers. Their distinct renditions of the Maria Clara, were brandished likewise by top master and millennial models, to generate more interest in yet another style of national dress following the popularity of reinventing the Terno. Notable among the featured masters were Lulu Tan-Gan, Auggie Cordero, Rajo Laurel, Rhett Eala, Cesar Gaupo, Oj Hofer, Randy Ortiz, Mike de la Rosa, and Cary Santiago. A possible indicator of Patis' low brand equity is the fact that she was not asked to be part of this event. Kevin Keller's CBBE or Customer Based Brand Equity Model (2013), also called the brand equity pyramid, aims to give insight to firms on how "brand positioning affects what consumers think, feel, and do and the degree to which they resonate or connect with a brand" (p.79). It aims to help brand managers establish a deep yet dynamic customer relationship management system which preserves a high level of loyalty from current and prospective customers (Keller, 2013). The CBBE presents brand building as a process of four steps with corresponding questions, as defined in Keller (2013, p.79).

1. Who are you? (brand identity)
2. What are you? (brand meaning)
3. What about you? What do I think or feel about you? (brand responses)

4. What about you and me? What kind of association and how much of a connection would I like to have with you? (brand relationships)

The Brand Equity Pyramid

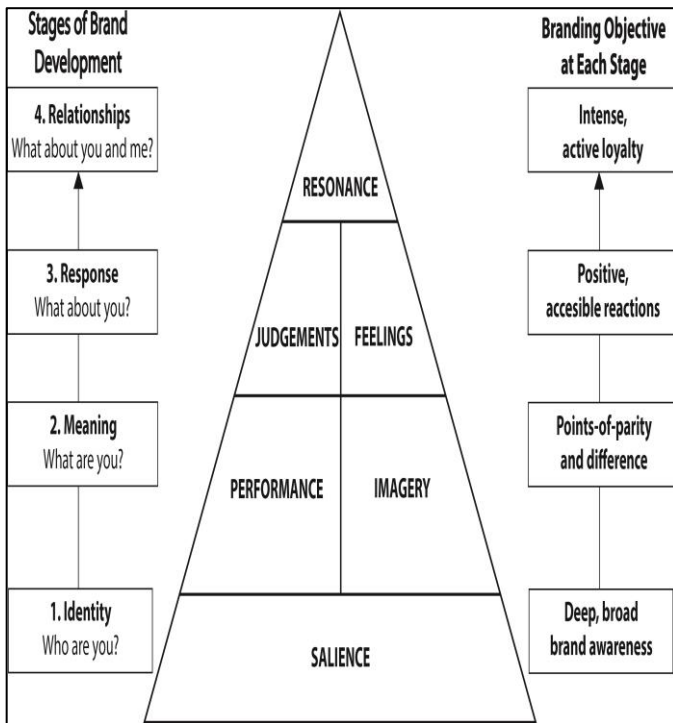


Figure 1. CBBE or Customer Based Brand Equity Model

Source : "Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity" by Kevin Lane Keller. © Pearson Education Limited 2013.

This framework is made up of six brand building blocks, the foundation of which is **brand salience**, a measure of brand awareness or “how easily and often the brand is evoked under various situations or circumstances” by the consumer (Keller, 2013, p.79). This includes an understanding of the brand’s level of top-of-mind awareness in the market, and the kinds of cues that trigger recall of the brand in a particular product category structure. In the case of Filipiniana formal wear, it is safe to say that this product line has a low frequency of use during very salient events, based

on Thelma Sioson San Juan’s observation that, “[t]oday, the socially visible Filipino woman wears Filipiniana at least once a year” (Moral, Inquirer.net, 2014).

The next step is to try to define **brand performance**, which determines the degree to which a product or service meets customers’ expectations of quality based on its functional attributes. Here, quality is defined using primary and secondary features; product reliability, durability, and serviceability; service effectiveness, efficiency and empathy; style and design; and price (Keller, 2013).

Once performance has been determined, the product’s **brand imagery** can now be developed. Keller (2013) defines brand imagery as that which “depends on the extrinsic properties of the product or service, including the ways in which the brand attempts to meet customers’ psychological or social needs” (p.85). This brand building block explores the more intangible or abstract features of the brand, which include: user profiles; purchase and usage situations; personality and values; and history, heritage and experiences.

Brand judgments is the next step in the framework, wherein “customers personal opinions about and evaluations of the brand, which consumers form from putting together all the different brand performance and imagery associations” (Keller, 2013, p. 89). Here, perceived quality is discussed in light of customer value and satisfaction, which includes brand credibility, consideration, and superiority.

Brand feelings on the other hand, specifies “customers’ emotional responses and reactions to the brand” (Keller, 2013, p.90). Feelings are generally described as positive or negative, mild or intense, in light of how the brand affects consumers’ self-concept when they interact with the product’s marketing programs or mere presence in different distribution channels.

At the top most of the brand equity pyramid is **brand resonance** or what Keller (2013) describes as “the ultimate relationship and level of identification the customer has with the brand” (p.92). Resonance discusses levels of intensity with regards to behavioural loyalty, attitudinal attachment, sense of community, and active engagement.

PATIS TESORO IS A HUMAN BRAND

Branding guru Naomi Klein (2005) discussed the equity behind so-called branded stars such as Michael Jordan, Martha Stewart, and Oprah Winfrey, “in an era where people are brands and brands are culture” (p.61), these personalities have successfully garnered millions, even billions of dollars, by creating and promoting products, services and experiences, which permeate resonant ways of life attached to their iconologies.

In an article I wrote about my September 2013 China trip with my parents, published in the fashion magazine *Sense and Style* (Poblador, December 2013-January 2014), I briefly relayed the brand history of Patis Tesoro:

Recently, my friend 13-Artist awardee Wawi Navarroza and I were chatting about my mother on Facebook, when she candidly called her a luminary. Patis Tesoro started her career at the tender age of nineteen. As a young wife, and expectant mother, she produced ready-to-wear apparel...In 1996, she transformed her brand from simple dressmaker to artisanal textile stalwart by defining her focus: the revival and sustained production of our national textile, piña. (p.41)

This proves that Patis is also a heritage human brand who exudes Filipinism as true nationalism through her extensive and prolific work with local materials and artisans, which consequently characterizes her as a heritage guardian.

PATIS TESORO AND THE CBBE

Data gathered mostly from interviews with three resource persons who are knowledgeable of Patis’ iconology, were used for this preliminary branding endeavor. Questions such as why they chose Patis as a designer/partner, which attributes of her personality and products differentiate her, and who are considered her direct substitutes/competitors, were asked. More probing questions such as what type of consumer would buy a Patis, or what it means to the consumer to own a Patis, were also put forth.

The first interview was with loyal customer Mrs. Paz Encarnacion, and was performed while she was fitting her gown for her 87th birthday bash. Mrs. Encarnacion asserts that Patis is her favourite designer because their personalities gel. Patis is an eccentric and noteworthy character, whose distinctive designs exude sophistication and luxury.

The next interview was done with Ms. Fritzie Bautista, brand manager of pioneering high-end department store Rustan’s in Makati City. Fritzie gave insight on the kind of woman who buys a Patis: “She is a self-made, focused, and driven individual who is not afraid to dress commensurate to her social stature”, she quips. The exclusive Patis Pamituan Tesoro Bohemia Filipiniana line for Rustan’s presents a flexible conciliation between traditional and non-traditional styles, which coincides with the designer’s mission to induce the acceptance of Filipiniana as casual, comfortable clothing.

The third informal interview was done with the Department of Agriculture's Philippine Fiber Industry Development Authority (Phil FIDA) Region I & II Director Dr. Edison Rinen, who stated the importance of Patis as a partner in the revival of the Philippine Cotton Industry. He mentioned her commitment to heritage conservation is unrivalled, and that she is the best brand ambassador, if there ever was one, of handmade Philippine textile.

Seen in Figure 2 is the brand definition of Patis Tesoro using Keller's Customer Based Brand Equity Model (2013). Actual modifiers and phrases from the three persons, including a quote from an additional interview over Facebook with Philippine Daily Inquirer editor Thelma Sioson-San Juan resource, were likewise integrated.

Salience or Brand Awareness

Traditional Filipino, formal wear, heirloom, handwoven textile, local, unique, one of a kind, detail oriented, work intensive, exclusive, nationalistic, piña, Philippine cotton, national heritage, high brand awareness of over 40 years in the business, exposure and acceptance in high society circles

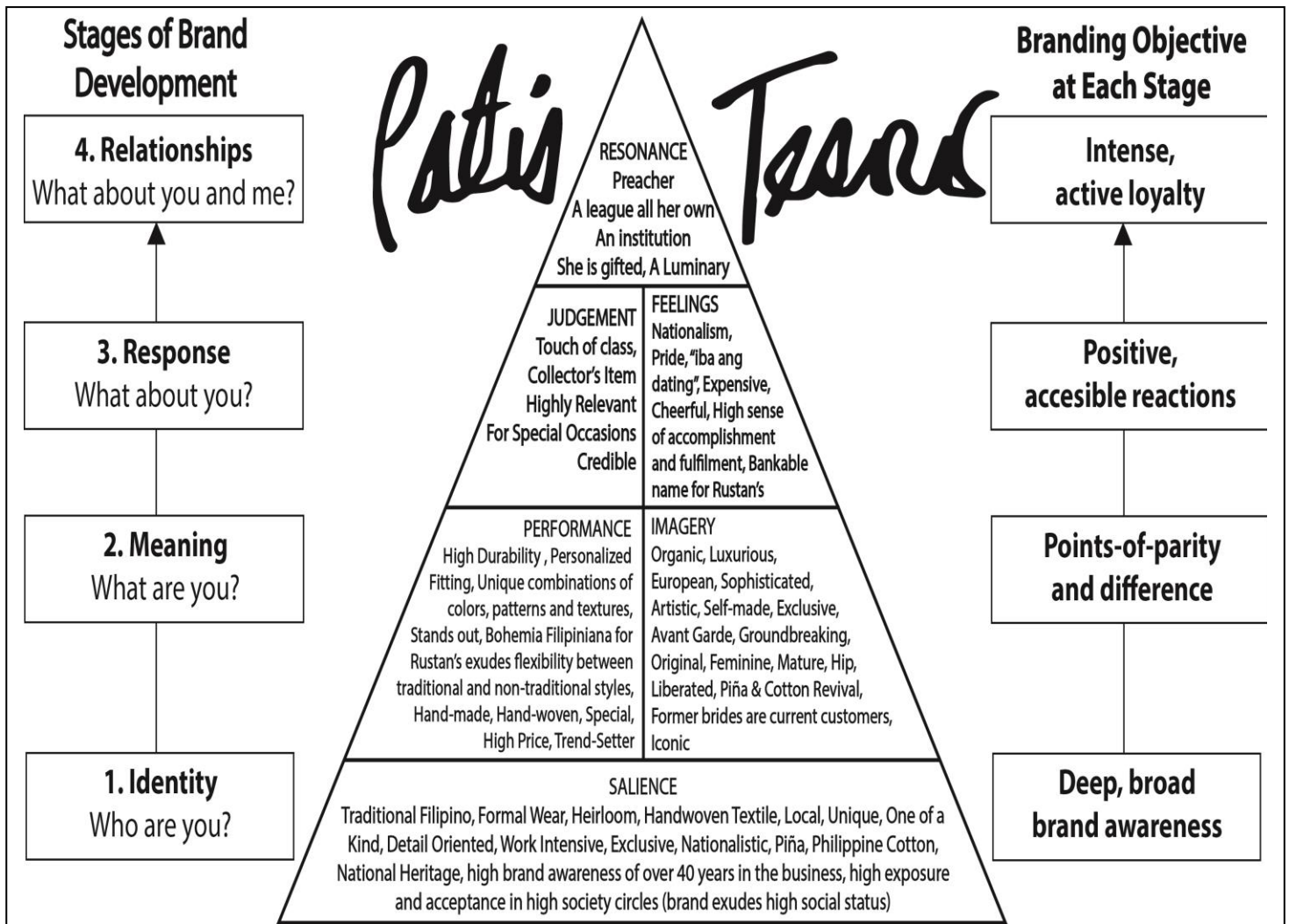


Figure 2. CBBE or Customer Based Brand Equity Model

Source : "Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity" by Kevin Lane Keller. © Pearson Education Limited 2013.

Brand Performance

Durability (see salience: heirloom), personalized fitting, unique color combinations, stands out, hand-made, hand-woven, special, high price, trend-setter, mixing and matching of patterns and colors and textures

Imagery

Organic, luxurious, european, sophisticated, artistic, self-made, exclusive, avant garde, groundbreaking, original, feminine, mature, hip, liberated, special occasions (birthdays, weddings), piña revival, former brides are current customers, Iconic, Highly-Differentiated,

Judgments

- Exceptional execution of design, touch of class, art with high future value which appreciates over time, investment, collector's item, luminary
- Established credibility through reputation, expertise in creativity, and dependability
- Brand consideration: educated, highly relevant to consumer because of memorable occasion of use, consumers prepare for these special occasions
- Superior brand according to her loyal customers because when they tried others, they were disappointed, she is gifted

Feelings

Nationalism, pride, "iba ang dating", expensive, passionate, cheerful, high social approval, originality, high sense of accomplishment and fulfilment, bankable name for Rustan's

Resonance

Since brand resonance defines the ultimate relationship and level of connection a consumer has with the brand, I believe it is best to quote a prominent media personality when asked why Patis was not included in the roster of

masters at the recently concluded Face Off 2014 fashion event of the Philippine Daily Inquirer:

"Patis Tesoro isn't just a designer - she's a league all her own. An institution not just for 3 clothes in a fashion show...that's why we didn't lump her with the designers....She deserves an exhibit/show - complete with archival collections. She does more than design clothes...not appropriate for her stature to be ranged against Millennials or even veteran designers." (Thelma Sioson San Juan, Inquirer Lifestyle Editor)

How in sync is the brand with customers? The Patis brand garners high loyalty from its customer base for special occasions comprising of former brides, and other loyal customers within current market served, price and occasion of use may be a hindrance to purchasing at higher volumes. The brand also enjoys high attitudinal attachment as respondents have expressed admiration for the luminary behind the brand.

A strong sense of community is created by the brand as The Department of Agriculture's Philippine Fiber Industry Development Authority (Phil FIDA), headed by Region I & II Director Dr. Edison Rinen, expresses the importance of Patis as a partner in the revival of the Philippine Cotton Industry: "We need a preacher who can evangelize the importance of cotton, specifically local cotton in the Philippine economy."

The only brand element which seems to be a major barrier or threat to reclaiming market share is the low active engagement of the brand. This could be because of the brand perception of being pricey associated with Patis. In September 2014, fashion editor and blogger Liza Ilarde (thefashpack.com) posted via instagram how she can't wait for a Patis jacket in Rustan's to go on sale. While the media mileage of this post may have increased brand presence, the connotation of being expensive

could have fragmented her niche market even further.

PATIS TESORO: A PHILIPPINE HERITAGE BRAND

We can now define Patis Tesoro as a human heritage brand actively engaged in the LOHAS industry, under the broad market category of sustainable economy and ecological lifestyles. The author envisions the continued success of Patis Tesoro as a strong heritage brand which showcases the unique beauty of local craftsmanship and culture, through the production of high- end Filipiniana apparel and non-apparel products, recognized worldwide. This initial branding endeavour is an indicator of my commitment to continuing my mother's legacy, while contributing to my nation's cultural integrity.

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