

“Festina Lente” as a motto and “a dolphin twisted around an anchor”  
as a symbol: Brand meaning, materiality of book  
and the printing revolution (1494-1515)

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**Abstract.** This work introduces a historical perspective to investigate the socio-cultural dimension of branding processes as “sources of brand meaning” and “meaning-making practices”. The expression *Festina Lente* and the logo of the anchor with the dolphin constitute the brand of Aldus Manutius, the first modern publisher, in the Venice between 1490 and 1515: (i) his attention to design was the basis of graphic revolution of the modern book; (ii) and nourished the *studia humanitatis*, at the basis of the creation of that canon of classical education at the foundation of Western civilisation for the next five centuries. Between *historical institutionalism* and *critical marketing studies*, brand meanings processes emerge as forms of *institutional work* that contribute to the institutional dynamics of markets “as meaning based, shaped by big cultural ideas and animated by institutional agents”.

**keywords:** Aldus Manutius, printing revolution, materiality & sociology of book, brand meaning, market dynamics

## Introduction and Conceptual Background

Gutenberg’s invention of movable type printing fully manifested its revolutionary potential in Venice between 1490 and 1515, around the birth of the modern book. In a process between Italian Humanism and the Renaissance, *an exemplary type of brand culture took shape*, a process of *brand meaning* whose genesis can be recomposed. The three proposed passages (Appendix A) address as many dimensions of a phenomenon destined to leave an *imprint* on Western civilisation for five centuries. Aldus Manutius (1450[?]-1515) was the first modern publisher (Lowry 1979; Dionisotti 1995; Davies, Harris 2020): “he took the innovation [of movable type printing] and made it something different and lasting” (Davies, Harris 2020: p. 70). The famous brand imprinted in the coin presented in the exhibition catalogue (the symbol and motto of the episode [1]), appeared between 1501 and 1503 (Harris 2020), relatively late in the short period of time that brought Aldus to attention of the world of the time. The working hypothesis is that together with the package of innovations on modern book design, branding contributed to the “social and cultural role” of the consumption of books in Greek and Latin (episode [2]) and to the spread of that “classical canon” at the basis of the formation of the elites of the time (episode [3]).

The developments of the “how branding works” theme revolve around the understanding of “how branding create meaning” and on how “cultural codes, ideological discourse, consumers’ background knowledge, and rhetorical

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processes” influence branding processes (Schroeder, Salzer-Mörling 2005). In this line of studies (Bode, Kjeldgaard 2017) the relationships between concepts evolve: brands become “meaning rich tools that help people to live their lives” (Allen *et al.* 2008); the contexts of consumption processes have epistemological relevance (Askegaard, Linnet 2011); the experiential and symbolic dimension develops through the relationship with consumers (Fournier 1998; MacInnis *et al.* 2009); co-creation processes lead to forms of *market change*, so much so that the marketer is just one of the many “meaning makers” (Giesler 2008, 2012; Martin, Schouten 2014); the unit of analysis in terms of “individuals, people in groups, consumers in cultures, cultural production mechanisms” changes (Muniz, O’Guinn 2001; Cova *et al.* 2007; Diamond *et al.* 2009); the consumer is an “active contributor to brand meaning making”, to the point of considering the materiality of the brand and the branding practices (Schau *et al.* 2009; Coskuner-Balli *et al.* 2021) as constitutive of the relationships between actors in terms of *market system dynamics* (Humphreys 2010, 2010a; Ertimer, Coskuner-Balli 2015; Parmentier, Fisher 2015).

Based on the conceptual categories proposed by John Sherry (2005), this work investigates the materiality of branding processes in terms of “sources of brand meaning” (*brand image, brand essence, brandscape*: Appendix A) and of “meaning-making practices” (*cosmologize, historicize, contextualize, prophesize, tangibilize, customerize, evangelize*: Appendix B). Brand meanings processes emerge as “institutional practices” (Lawrence, Suddaby 2006) that contribute to the institutional dynamics of the market «defined as an organizational field encompassing a set of institutions and actors, governed by institutional logics, supported by institutional work, and characterized by institutional boundaries» (Dolbec, Fischer 2015: p. 1449; Humphreys 2010; Scaraboto, Fischer 2013).

## Method

The study is based on a perspective between *historical institutionalism* and the historical dimension in *critical marketing studies* (Tadajewski 2010; 2012). According to Suddaby *et al.* (2014), «over time individuals create social structures out of shared assumptions about the nature of social reality: (a) institutions are clearly to be understood as a historical process, i.e. the outcomes of past events and interpretations of those events; (b) this process is underpinned by the interactions of individuals; (c) over time, the interpretations of these actions, and the social significance attached to them, change» (p. 111).

*History of book (as interpretive context).* Belk e Sobh (2019; Askegaard, Linnet 2011) recommend an analytical approach focused on: «(i) an original phenomena-driven inquiry; (ii) combining grounded theory and abductive reasoning, and (iii) generating and comparatively analyzing alternative theoretical explanations» (p. 489). With respect to the first two points, the interpretative context of the research arises at the confluence “of three major academic disciplines – history, literacy studies and bibliography – that focus respectively upon the *book as a cultural transaction, a literary text, and a material artefact*” (Howsam 2006: p. 4). Primary and secondary materials concerns: (i) a selection of copious literatures produced by

different disciplines (book history, bibliography, Renaissance history: Febvre, Martin 1958; Eisenstein 1982; Nuovo 2013; Pettigree 2011; Walsby, Kemp 2011; Walsby, Constantinidou 2013; Suarez, Wouldhuysen 2013; Kirwan, Mullins 2015); (ii) and the enormous amount of archival material and documentary sources on Aldus' history (Dionisotti 1995; Infelise 2016; Plebani 2016; Infelise, Plebani 2015; Beltrami, Gasparotto 2016; Davies, Harris 2020).

*Sociology of texts (as research design) and materiality of book (as unit of analysis).* The third suggestion by Belk and Sobh (2019) develops by considering a book “as a work, text and object”. The concept of materiality of the book is declined starting from the “New Anglo-American bibliography” (McKenzie 1986; Tanselle 1998) and from the sociology of the text by Donald McKenzie: «[bibliography] is the only discipline which has consistently studied the composition, formal design, and transmission of texts by writers, printers, and publishers; their distribution through different communities by wholesalers, retailers, and teachers; their collection and classification by librarians; their meaning for, and their creative regeneration by, readers. However we define it, *no part of that series of human and institutional interactions is alien to bibliography as we have, traditionally, practised it*» (p. 12).

## **Evidence from Renaissance Shopping**

*What is a book?* The modern book standard imposed by Aldus emerged in a Venice that had already «invented modern publishing as a commodity industry, i.e. it took a raw material (paper), enhanced it (printing), and sold it as an expensive product (books) [...]. The process called not only for technical and design skills to make these early impressed artefacts resemble the luxury manuscripts they were supplanting, but also significant investment to keep the firm afloat while sales generated revenue, as well as access to transport systems that could move the books widely and swiftly» (Harris 2013: p. 28). Aldus was the first printer (Harris 2016): to employ the modernly-shape comma and the semi-colon; to use (widely) quotation marks, apostrophe and accented characters; to employ a paragraph indent; to print books *in-octavo* format (or made definitively the books extremely compact); to use a differently (modern)-shaped sheet; partially, to employ a modern Roman type and totally, to print in an *Italic* type; to publish a work “in multiple volumes” and a “series”; to publish a book with printed pagination and with a paged index; to print an errata slip or an instruction for the binder; to print a publisher's catalogue in the modern sense.

*Shopping in Renaissance.* The passage [2] (Appendix A) highlights why Aldus aroused so much interest among intellectuals and collectors of his time. About 130 titles were enough (few compared to competitors) for Aldus to go down in history; some editions could count on large print runs (three thousand copies), making it “the most important centre for the distribution of literature in Europe at the time” (Lowry 1979). Although technology guaranteed large volumes and rapid times, the printed book remained an expensive object and, as for Isabella d'Este, a status symbol (Welch 2005): for example, attracted by Aldus' *in-octavo* format on *vellum*

(and not on paper), Virgil and Petrarch purchased in July 1501 costed her three ducats each. In a famous episode of 1505, Isabella (among the richest women of the time, with an annual income of eight to nine thousand ducats), sent back to the sender an order of books in Latin, outraged by the request for twelve ducats that Aldus had sent her (Harris 2016; Davies, Harris 2019). The reference currency was the ducat of the Serenissima (one of the most stable of the time): a professor from Bologna had a salary of about 40 ducats a year; in Padua a renowned teacher could earn up to 150 ducats (Venice paid well for the “top scholars” it recruited); in Rome, a Vatican librarian earned 10 ducats, the price of a horse (Lowry 1979).

*The expanding market for education and the Aldus' World.* Aldus completed his studies between Rome (especially with the important Veronese humanist, Domizio Calderini) and Ferrara (Battista Guarino's program, based on the mutual dependence between ancient languages, included Greek literature and Latin authors), pupil or simple auditor in the most important academic circles of the time (Davies, Harris 2019). With the help of Pico della Mirandola, known as a student in Ferrara, in 1480 Aldus became the tutor of his nephews, the young princes of Carpi. Thanks to the esteem that the philosopher enjoyed in the academic circles of Venice and Florence, Aldus met intellectuals such as Ermolao Barbaro and Angelo Poliziano. The path and the decisions that led Aldus to move to Venice at a mature age, to transform himself from a modest grammarian and tutor to a renowned humanist, typographer and publisher (Lowry 1979; Dionisotti 1995) emerge from the evolution of the *studia humanitatis*, in the wake of evolution of Italian Humanism. Margaret L. King (2015) effectively defines the project of that movement: «a community of actors bound by their common education, an immersion in the *studia humanitatis*, or “studies of humanity”, the ancestor of our “humanities”. The changed curriculum, or the new breed of schoolmasters, forged a society of those who had undergone the experience of early Latin learning and the reading of a classical canon – a group who, thus equipped, would as advisers, courtiers, or wielders of power affect the governance of churches and states» (p. 3). In the Renaissance, this development culminated in the introduction of a fundamental phase in “moral and political” training, between “the first introduction to studies” and the “technical preparation of the university” (Garin 1957). Aldus' world is at the confluence of this cultural and social movement and the emergence of the figure of the Venetian “merchant-entrepreneur” (Nuovo 2013).

## **Findings: The Sources and the Practices of Brand Meaning**

According to Sherry (2005) the brand “is a principal repository of meaning in consumer culture, [and] branding is a holistic combination of marketers' intentions, consumers' interpretations and numerous sociocultural networks' associations” (pp. 40-41). The historical reconstruction of brand meaning processes is linked to the contribution that these processes make to *market system dynamics* (Marketing Theory 2017; Nøjgaard, Bajde 2020) as forms of *institutional work* (Lawrence, Suddaby 2006). Graheli (2016) underlines the contribution of Aldus' innovative marketing practices in “shaping” and “reflecting on” the cultural

context of this process: «The creation and dissemination of sales catalogues, the creation of book series and the development of the publishing logo led to the emergence of a truly recognisable brand, and a high socio-cultural profile. Relations with the humanist community, in the validation and approval of the philological work of the workshop, as well as in the publication of its work with illustrious and potential patrons, represented the cornerstone in the construction of the Aldo Romano publishing house. We can say that, thanks to the intuition that he gathered in this invisible network of people and ideas, Aldus began the concept of modern publishing» (p. 172).

*Sources of brand meaning.* The branding practiced by Aldus emerges from his famous prefaces, from ancient warehouse inventories, from the commercial and library catalogues of his readers and collectors, from rare sales reports and from modern research archives. In episode [1] (Appendix A), the commemorative coin of Aldus' brand is a direct expression of the *brand image*: in this case more than ever, "the mark defined the maker" (Sherry 2005). In terms of *brand essence*, the prefaces to his editions are real "textual devices" to enter into the pact with the public of his readers (episode [2]). For example: «Therefore, welcome this booklet: but not for free. Give me some money too, so that I can get you all the best Greek texts; and truly, if you give, I will give too, since without much money it is impossible for me to print» ("Ero e Leandro", 1495; Infelise, Plebani 2016: p. 29). Connecting the two dimensions, the *brandscape* emerges, for example, in a dedication of 1498 contained in a copy of his monumental edition of the writings of Poliziano. Aldus recalls the famous Greek proverb (episode [1]), indirectly explaining its role in his cultural project: «And so from the time you heard that our printing house was bringing out the scholarly work of Angelo Poliziano, a man of superb intellect and outstanding erudition, you have continuously urged me to speed up the production of the edition because you, a man of great talent yourself, are eager to read the labors of the highest talent – though you have done so with the added advice of the Greek proverb 'make haste slowly'» (Harris 2020: p. 64).

*Practices of brand meaning.* This framework of analysis of Aldus' brand (Harris 2020) juxtaposes the birth of modern book design, in the Venice of the Renaissance, with the evolution of the classical educational canon, developed starting from Italian Humanism: the phenomenon that emerges returns a possible theory on brand meaning practices (Sherry 2005: Appendix B). In this context, the need to print classical Greek texts for the first time led Aldus to create splendid editions (*tangibilize*), often the only ones available on the market, taking care of the search for the original texts, paying attention to paper, layout, character realisation (Infelise 2016; Davies, Harris 2019). Aldus did not limit himself to creating a surrogate for the manuscript book, but conceived the printed book as a product in its own right, so much so that he literally "built" a new consumer through a new "reading experience" (*customerize*). Basically, Aldus did not contribute to producing a "mass market" of the printed book (including the "paperback" format) (*contextualize*); so the diffusion of his publishing project, of his peculiar "pact with readers" in terms of branding, was founded by introducing a further dimension of the phenomenon. Aldus' brand is "anchored" to the archetype

of the humanist (*cosmologize*): the academic world and the education market of the time were the consequence of the evolution of intellectual life and the production of knowledge that, since the 12th century, in Italy more than anywhere else, were no longer the prerogative of the Church: a different “culture of the book” was at the basis of the secular intellectual and of the modern Western mentality (Witt 2010, 2012). Educator, pedagogue and publisher, Aldus nourished that “epistemic community” (*evangelize*) which in the Renaissance definitively placed the classical canon at the centre of Western educational practice (episode [3]: *prophesize*). Venice in the fifteenth century was probably the only place where these dimensions could converge in a cultural dynamic that he himself helped to shape through an innovative “socio-technical” and “economic” scenario around the invention of printing (*historicize*).

## Discussion and Conclusion

*Understanding Brand Meaning (ontology and materiality).* This work suggests that the sources of brand meaning are the product of “practices of signification”: by involving the actors in forms of *institutional work*, these practices trigger processes of *market change*. As Warde points out, “consuming is a moment in almost every practice” (2002, p. 137), so much so that Schau *et al.* (2009) stress that “consumption follows from practices, rather than vice versa, because practices dictate what is essential for the competent and meaningful engagement of social actors in a particular consumption setting” (p. 31). This interpretative perspective converges the most recent literature (Maclaran *et al.* 2009; Araujo *et al.* 2010; Bajde 2013; Canniford, Bajde 2015) which introduces the “practice-based” sociological perspective and the institutional dynamics of the markets “as meaning based, shaped by big cultural ideas and animated by institutional agents” (Nøjgaard, Bajde 2020). If the forms of *institutional work* (Lawrence, Suddaby 2006) that feed the institutional dynamics of the markets are “practices” (Schatzki 2002, 2010; Reckwitz 2002a, 2002b; Warde 2005, 2014); the brand meaning processes proposed by Sherry (2005) are special “institutional practices” linked to the sources of signification of the brand and to the performative dimension of marketing (Mason *et al.* 2015; Bode, Kjeldgaard 2017).

*Concluding remarks.* The implications that emerge are: (i) theoretical (on the performative dimension of marketing practices and materiality of the institutional dynamics of the markets); (ii) of method (the historical perspective in marketing studies and the marketing phenomena investigated as “processes”); (iii) and operational (brand meaning practices to “design” and “monitor/audit” brand management).

## References available upon request

APPENDIX (A) Sources of brand meaning (*) and...		Episodes (**):
<b>A. BRAND IMAGE</b>	«[It] is the external form and observable characteristics of the marketer's offering. This is the artifact as offered. It is the embodiment of the marketer's offering. Image is the operational meaning of the brand. It is the meaning the marketer has been able to infuse into the brand»	[1] « <i>Object no 7. Medal Portrait of Aldus Manutius</i> (Anonymous Sixteenth-Century Venetian Medal Maker. The right-handed profile of Aldus Manutius is depicted on a late fifteenth century single original print, presumably from Lombardy [...]. The "R" stands for "Romanus" since Aldus, who was born in Bassiano Laziale, proclaimed himself a Roman citizen; whereas the use of his middle name "Pius" dates back in 1503 as it was bestowed upon him by the Lord of Carpi Alberto Pio, whom he had tutored and who was one of the most generous financial backers of his publishing enterprise. Whereas the back of the medal illustrates his famous trademark (an anchor and a dolphin), bearing the motto [...] FESTINA LENTE. [...] The reason for choosing this emblem, that was destined to become renowned and nearly a symbol of publishing itself, was narrated by Erasmus of Rotterdam in one of his <i>Adagia</i> ; it was dedicated to the <i>Festina Lente</i> , so dear to Emperors Augustus and Vespasian, where the contrast between the stability of the anchor and the speed of the dolphin acquired the meaning of a quest for the right balance between opposites in the art of government, between swiftness in deeds and firmness in decision. Erasmus recalled how Aldus himself had illustrated the emblem on the back of a silver Emperor Titus coin that the publisher had received as a gift from a young Pietro Bembo. The passage appears in Aldus' edition of <i>Adagia</i> published in Venice in September 1508, after Erasmus has been a guest in Aldus' home from December 1507 to supervise the revision and printing of his masterpieces»
<b>B. BRAND ESSENCE</b>	«[It] is the meaning that arises in the customer's creative engagement with the marketer's offering. It is the internal form of the offering that must be elicited on the ground. It is the meaning that is co-created and co-produced by customers»	[2] <i>Isabella d'Este and the social uses of books</i> . Ownership of books was for her, of course, primarily a source of personal pleasure and information; but it was also, as for other members of the elite thought to a greater extent than for most women, one of the factors that helped to establish social and cultural status and to communicate it to others. In her case, this process happened in a set of interrelated ways, some of which were consequences of the nature of her collection and of the means by which she put it together, others of which were used consciously. Isabella's books were on show in apartments that were semi-private but that she left open to select visitors whose oral or written accounts could then make the collection and its setting famous. Most of the books were beautifully made. [...] Ownership of texts acquired in an economy of exchange and of gift-giving could demonstrate the ability to draw on the resources of an elite cultural community and to make careful use of intermediaries, and in turn this ownership conferred power when other members of that community desired to borrow her texts. The vellum Aldine octavos, though acquired in a market economy, reflected privileged relationships with the man who was fast establishing himself as Italy's most fashionable and scholarly printer. Isabella was able to display to members of her cultural community, and indirectly to a wider public, certain qualities: traditional virtues such as magnificence and shrewd liberality, together with a new and unique combination of cultural interests and accomplishments, fostered by her exceptional contacts with leading writers, artists and musicians. [...] In her affirmation of these attributes, Isabella's books, no less than the rest of her collection, played an integral part.»
<b>C. BRANDSCAPE</b>	«[It] is the material and symbolic environment that consumers build with marketplace products, images, and messages, that they invest with local meaning, and whose totemic significance largely shapes the adaptation consumes make to the contemporary world. As marketing and other cultural forms grow increasingly imbricated and globalized, the meaning-bank from which stakeholders draw grows larger and more variegated by the moment»	[3] <i>A Whimsy on the History of Canon</i> . On its own a body of texts is not enough to constitute a canon. The next stage consists in interpretation, i.e. reading, discussion, and commentary in order to formulate a creed. What becomes necessary is the complication of the interpretation. In other words a caste of mediators (or scholars and teachers) introduces itself in order to expound and elaborate the canon, leading quickly and inevitably to a concept of orthodoxy (and equally quickly and inevitably to a concept of heterodoxy, i.e. anybody who doesn't agree with you, whether in theology or in textual criticism). At this point we jump forward some seven or eight centuries to Venice at the height of its Renaissance magnificence. What is happening in lagoon city? [...] The city has accustomed itself to a new way of making books with a machine, imported from Germany, which has put a number of scribes out of work but is making the booksellers prosperous. [...] But now there is a new development with a man from Rome who wants to print books in classical Greek. Here we reach a key moment, possibly <i>the</i> key moment, in the history of canon, or the figure and personality of Aldus Manutius. Who was Aldus and what was the importance of being Aldus? [...] In 1495, having reached Venice some five years earlier, he published his first book, a ponderous Greek dictionary [by Constantinus Lascaris]. At the beginning of 1496 he printed [...] a Latin dialogue by a young Pietro Bembo, with a supremely uninteresting content, but with a new design of Roman type which is the grandfather of the default version of the word-shapes on our computer screens. The Greek Aristotle in five volumes also kept him busy from 1495 to 1498 [...]. Another landmark date, which appears in all histories of the book, was 1501, when Aldus launched his series of <i>enchiridia</i> . Latin, Greek, and Italian classics in pocket-size format and cursive type. Aldus was a school-teacher, or an expensive live-in private tutor in a number of aristocratic Italian establishments, especially that of the Pio family in Carpi. Education is the key to the whole Aldine experience and it is what sets him apart from all his rivals. What did Aldus do to deserve his huge place in history? Quite simply, he invented canon.
(B) ...and meaning strategy/practice (*):		Description/Definition (*):
1. Archetypal mythography	<i>Cosmologize</i>	«This is an ultimate source of meaning. [We] must learn to coax an <i>implied spider</i> - those foundational experiences all humans share and which storytellers have, from time immemorial, used as the very stuff of <b>myth-making</b> - to spin filaments that wire the brand into our way of apprehending reality»
2. Cultural biography	<i>Historicize</i>	«It is the local source of meaning in a global marketplace, a diachronic account of the brand as it evolves in concert with the forces of social life. It is a <b>life history narrative</b> . [...] The guiding principle is simply that temporal ethos affects profoundly the way a brand is interpreted»
3. Everyday ethnography	<i>Contextualize</i>	«It is the phenomenological source of brand meaning, a synchronic account of the brand as it figures in the quotidian life of the customer. [...] Here meaning arises in the course of <b>day-to-day living</b> , and it is here that the lived experience of the brand is revealed»
4. Utopian cartography	<i>Prophesize</i>	«This is an aspirational source of brand meaning, a projective account of the brand as it attempts to <b>colonize the future</b> . It is arcadian in character, and represents a fantastic ideal [...] to which the brand acts as a portal [to give consumers what they really want]»
5. Brand iconography	<i>Tangibilize</i>	«It is an immediate source of meaning. It is the affecting presence of the brand, as manifested in the totality of design dimensions that render the marketer's offering as it is. [...] The experience of the brand must be <b>palpable for the consumer</b> ; the virtual must become actual»
6. Semiotic coreography	<i>Customerize</i>	«It is an intimate source of meaning, arising from and tailored to the experience of individuals in a segment. [...] The brand must <b>resonate with authenticity</b> , with the abiding rightness of its fit with a customer's lifestyles»
7. Moral geography	<i>Evangelize</i>	«It is the tribal dimension of authority. [...] [We] must harness the <b>collaborative and consultative potential</b> of brand co-creation and -production, to facilitate the emergence of proselytes among customers, and to abet the flourishing of brand communities and sub-cultures on the ground and in the ether»

(\*) from Sherry J.F. (2005). "Brand Meaning". In *Kellogg on Branding*, pp. 40-49 (\*\*) Beltrami G., Gasparotto F. (2016). *Aldus Manutius. Renaissance in Venice*, Richardson R. (2012). "Isabella d'Este and the Social Uses of Books". *La Bibliofilia*, CXIV, pp. 293-325; Harris N. (2010). "A Whimsy on the History of Canon". *Esadotia*, n. 7, pp. 43-55.