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Brands and Their Meaning Makers

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INTRODUCTION

Just 25 years have passed since the publication of seminal works on the strategic power of the brand, yet, in this short time, branding has attained noted disciplinary status. Although only a handful of branding books were available a mere 15 years ago, and branding textbooks had yet been written, those interested in branding today can consult hundreds of books and articles, attend numerous conferences dedicated to building and leveraging brand assets, and hire a range of consultancies dedicated to specialized branding concerns. In the marketing academy, branding issues dominate the list of research priorities (Marketing Science Institute 2002, 2004), with particular attention to managerially directed topics including brand equity measurement, brand accountability, brand leverage and architecture, and internal branding. As recognition of the strategic value of branding has increased, the scope of application of branding insights has expanded in kind. Branding has extended beyond consumer goods and services to include business-to-business domains (Webster Jr. & Keller, 2004), countries (van Ham, 2001), and people (Schroeder, 2005a). Inside the firm, Chief Branding Officers have emerged, granting marketing a coveted boardroom voice (Davis & Dunn, 2002). With intangible assets now accounting, on average, for 75% of the value that investors place in firms (Knowles, 2003), we have entered what may be called the Golden Age of Brands.

Consumer psychologists have made significant contributions in shaping an interpretation of brands (e.g., Keller, 2003; Keller & Lehmann, 2005). Branding topics have been featured in a significant number of award-winning articles published in the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, and *Journal of Marketing Research* by consumer researchers: strategic brand management (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986), brand knowledge (Keller, 1993), brand processing cues (Van Osselaer & Alba, 2000), and brand equity measurement (Ailawadi, Neslin, & Lehmann, 2003; Dillon et al., 2001) are exemplars. Moreover, these contributions have carried over to the practice of

brand management. It is probably safe to say that no area of study in consumer psychology is more intertwined with management practice than branding.

But we are now also seeing indications that our understanding of brand is incomplete and sometimes even misaligned with revealed realities of the brand as experienced in today's consumer, corporate, and cultural worlds. By all counts, we are living in a different branding world than that operating in the heyday of mass marketing when the discipline was founded. As Stephen Brown (2006) notes, we have evolved to an intensely commercial world where TV shows feature stories about marketing and consumer psychology, stand-up comics perform skits about shopping routines and brand strategies, and mainstream magazines deconstruct retail redesigns and the persuasive intent of new advertising campaigns. Technology has intervened with capabilities for customization, addressability, and interactivity to create brand marketing opportunities and complexities never before imagined. In part enabled by these technologies, the marketplace has radically shifted its power base to consumers, where co-optation of brands is the norm. Marketing has also undergone a revolution wherein the paradigms of advertising and entertainment are increasingly merged, and mechanisms like coolhunting, buzz, and blogs are replacing mass media advertising as potent tools for building brands. Brands themselves have evolved to a new cultural platform where they serve not just as simplifying heuristics or risk reduction mechanisms for individual decision makers, but as sociopolitical ideology statements (O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2004). This same fusion of forces led Keller and Lehmann (2005) to conclude recently that "brand equity is increasingly built by activities outside the company's direct control" (p. 27).

Our branding theories need to probe the operation and implications of this new marketplace reality. As Keller (2003) concluded in his review: "The challenge and opportunity for consumer research...is fully appreciating the broad scope and complexity involved" (p. 599). Holt's (2005) critique is more pointed: "Psychological theories of branding have an Achilles heel they can no longer ignore." Lacking a proactive approach for accommodating this scope and complexity, where once consumer psychologists led the discussion of what brands mean to consumers, we now are in danger of falling behind.

If a brand is first and foremost a repository of meanings for consumers to use in living their own lives (Fournier, 1998; McCracken, 1986), then today's challenge is to understand more deeply the multiple sources and dynamic nature of that meaning. The goal for this chapter is to bring more of the complexity of the co-created experience of brands into our theories and research. In the sections below, we discuss three meaning makers that need to be considered for a full understanding of brands. The first two of these—cultures and consumers—are underrepresented in mainstream branding research. The third brand author is the familiar one: corporations that market brands. But even here our research fails in its accommodation of the new marketing models being leveraged to build strong brands. Our intent is to raise issues that will foster new theorizing to guide scholars in supplementing prevailing conceptions of branding and brands.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, we review briefly the dominant conception of branding in consumer psychology. We then provide an overview of an alternative paradigm that is often associated with interpretivist research. This alternative paradigm features the assumption that brands are repositories for meaning, and that brand meaning is effectively co-created by numerous and sometimes competing sources. After reviewing the relevant literatures on cultures and consumers as brand meaning co-creators, and discussing related implications for branding research, we then consider how trends in contemporary marketing practice also present new challenges for consumer psychologists with respect to our brand theories and research. The chapter concludes with a discussion of opportunities suggested by a synthesis of the traditional and alternative branding views.

THE RECEIVED VIEW

Over the past two decades a particular view of branding has coalesced. Core tenets and assumptions of this dominant perspective, as manifest in major U.S. journal articles, branding textbooks, and business books (cf. Aaker, 1991; 1996; Keller, 1993; 2003; Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986) can readily be articulated. These tenets are important and foundational as they have explicitly and implicitly shaped the course of mainstream brand theory and research.

The received view on branding is squarely grounded in the disciplines of psychology and information economics, and draws heavily upon the information processing theories of consumer behavior that were popular during the field's formative stages (Anderson, 1983). Within this frame, the brand holds ontological status expressly as a cognitive construal: the brand exists *in the mind of the consumer* (Ries & Trout, 2001) as a *knowledge structure* of brand-relevant *information* (Keller, 2003). The brand's semantic memory network contains a set of nodes of various levels of abstraction and links of varying strength, including: brand and product attributes and benefits; brand beliefs, judgments, attitudes, and perceptions; feelings and emotions; sensory images, and personal experiences connecting the consumer to the brand (Keller, 1993; 2003). Brand knowledge, retrieved through spreading activation (Loftus & Loftus, 1976), serves as a risk-reducing heuristic for the consumer: strong brands reduce ego risks, risks of making poor decisions, risks of wasting time (Maheswaran, Mackie, & Chaiken, 1992). Brand knowledge is assumed shared by all members of the target audience such that there exists one collectively held meaning for the brand.

Within both the information-economics and consumer psychology perspectives, managers are granted direction over brand image creation such that the shared knowledge that comes to reside in consumers' minds is the *intended* meaning for the brand. Brand positioning theory helps the manager select specific associations for emphasis in the knowledge web. The brand's associative web is assumed to be decompositional such that individual brand associations like perceived quality or connection to a particular celebrity endorser can be fruitfully highlighted and stressed. Positioning platforms are framed in the context of competitive product entries; uniqueness of a given brand association versus competition—the brand's points of difference—is cherished over all else (Aaker & Shansby, 1982; Keller, 1993; 2003; Keller, Sternthal, & Tybout, 2002; Ries & Trout, 2001). Tenets of simplicity, congruity, consistency, and coherence are encouraged when articulating the unique selling proposition (Reeves, 1961) or mantra (Keller, 1993; Keller, Sternthal, et al., 2002) for the brand. A preference exists for single-minded benefits or values assumed to remain stable and constant over time (Aaker, 1996).

The added value with which a brand is endowed—i.e., its brand equity—is then a direct result of these and other past marketing activities (Keller, 2001; Park et al., 1986). Successful implementation of the marketing program is gauged using metrics relevant to the psychological paradigm, most of which provide dimensions for distinguishing the strength and favorability of brand knowledge: brand awareness (strength of the brand trace in memory), brand beliefs (strength of a particular brand-attribute trace), accessibility and dominance of chosen attribute associations (salience of a particular attribute), clarity of brand perceptions (congruity among or shared content across brand associations), and the favorability and resistance of brand attitudes (valence and strength of attribute-based summary judgments of the brand) (Farquhar, Han, Herr, & Ijiri, 1992; Keller, 1993). A simple logic links brand knowledge selection to brand strength creation and, ultimately, to the capture of financial value in the brand (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003; Keller & Lehmann, 2005). The brand, as a company-owned and controlled asset, is thus built and leveraged for the creation and capture of incremental value to shareholders.

While the information-based conception of the brand, with its attendant focus on the creation and judicious management of brand equity, has been fruitfully applied in theory and research, it nonetheless represents only one perspective on the nature of brands and the process of branding. The distinction between *information* and *meaning* sheds light here (McCracken, 2005). Information concerns the disintegration and reduction of the complex into small, manageable bits, as per associative models that focus on decomposed, isolated, and product-centric attributes. Meaning, on the other hand, concerns the assembly of small bites into larger, more complex, and more abstract wholes; to derive meaning is to make larger sense out of many smaller units. An interesting paradox presents itself: in the search for meaning, context is everything; in the search for information, context is noise. Information and meaning thus work at cross purposes, such that a quest to maximize an information-based view will by definition compromise the quest for meaning. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues forcefully for the primacy of meaning over information in theory construction: “Explanation does not consist in the reduction of the complex to the simple. Rather it consists in a substitution of a complexity more intelligible for one which is less. Seek complexity and order it” (Geertz, 1973).

Knowledge-based conceptions of brand obscure the distinction between information and meaning: “brand associations are the information nodes linked to the brand node in memory and contain the meaning of the brand for consumers” (Keller, 1993, p. 3). Still, the conception of brand as information, and of brand managers as brand knowledge managers, dominates current thought (e.g., Keller, 2003; Keller & Lehmann, 2005). A concrete alternative is to focus not on the management of brand information by brand managers, but on the processes of brand meaning making that take place in the consumption world. This change in focus can provide many new directions for addressing the complexity that is part of today’s branding landscape.

BRAND MEANING MAKING: AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

A meaning-based view of branding is not new. Versions have been circulating in what is sometimes referred to as postmodern or interpretivist consumer research for many years, beginning with Belk’s (1988) foundational article on possessions and the extended self and Hirschman and Holbrook’s (1982) essay on symbolic consumer experiences. While consumer researchers working in the alternative paradigm operated with a plurality of theoretical and methodological approaches, these researchers converged on several foundational axioms and insights concerning consumer behavior and, accordingly, guiding tenets for brand-related consumer research. The paradigm shift at play favored attention to the under-explored and powerful experiential and symbolic aspects of consumption: the meanings that people value in real life. Consumer products were re-cast from simplifying informational vehicles to meaning-rich tools for personal and social identity construction. Consumers were re-conceptualized as active meaning makers rather than passive recipients of marketing products and communications. Founding interpretivists emphasized the need for consumer researchers to go beyond the study of individual consumers to consideration of consumers operating in cultures and social collectives. They embraced complexity, fragmentation, plurality, mutability, and the heterogeneous distribution of meanings in the marketplace. They favored tools, methods, and theoretical frameworks from anthropology, sociology, literature, history, gender and culture studies: sources capable of providing the complex socio-cultural contexts that were now considered critical in the assignment of meaning to consumption acts. Arnould and Thompson (2005) provide an extensive review of the knowledge produced through the stream of research they label as Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), much of which is relevant here.

Most early studies in this tradition were conducted in the broad context of products, not brands, as motivated by concerns about the ideology of materialism central to contemporary America at the time. Extensions to the branded world were soon revealed as legitimate and natural, and a thriving research tradition was spawned. Extended theoretical treatments of “cultural branding” are now beginning to appear (Holt, 2004; McCracken, 2005; Schroeder & Salzer-Mörling, 2006) such that the tenets of an alternative branding paradigm can be put forth.

At the heart of this emergent perspective on branding is the concept of co-creation. Co-creation has its roots in hermeneutic philosophy, which was applied in much early interpretivist research (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994). A foundational idea in hermeneutic philosophy is the hermeneutic circle, which, in the social science literature, concerns a general model for the process by which meaning is derived and understanding formed. This model contends that a person’s understanding of a concept reflects broader (shared) cultural viewpoints, as interpreted through the lens of the individual’s (unique) life experiences. Put differently, each person is the author of his/her own understandings, with the texts of these personal meanings written in culturally given terms (Gergen, 1990).

Refinements to this basic framework were introduced by McCracken (1986) in his model for the movement of meanings into consumer goods (see Figure 31.1). Culture is represented as the original source and location of the general categories of meanings from which brands ultimately draw. These categories represent fundamental coordinates of meanings: the basic distinctions that a culture uses to divide up and make sense of the phenomenal world. A central assumption of McCracken’s model, and the anthropological theories that inform it (e.g., Douglas & Isherwood, 1978), is that shared understandings develop within a particular cultural meaning-making group concerning the major categories through which meaning is ascribed.

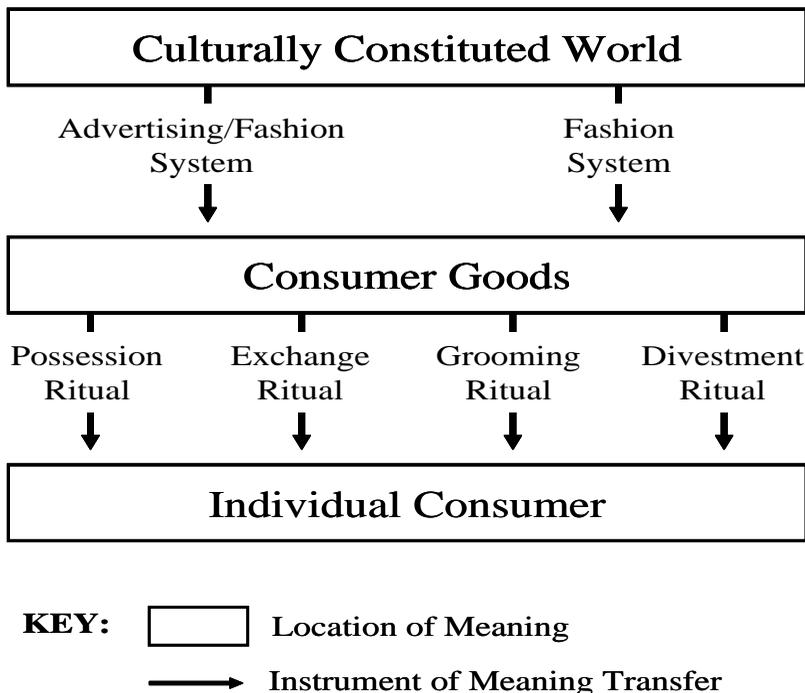


Figure 31.1 McCracken’s model of meaning transfer. Source: McCracken 1986.

McCracken's model expressly considered the mechanisms through which shared cultural meanings were captured for and transferred to the product or brand. Two primary meaning making institutions or delivery mechanisms were offered. The first was the firm, whose marketing departments and creative directors create and capture brand meanings through the 4Ps (e.g., design of the product aesthetic, distribution, promotion, and price) and other marketing communications devices (e.g., public relations, product placements, sponsorships, endorsements). The second mechanism for the movement of meaning into the product/ brand lay outside the firm's control and concerned broad cultural production systems such as the mass media, the movie industry, writers and journalists, design agents in the fashion system, social critics, trend-setting opinion leaders, rebellious members of fringe social groups, and general historical events. Thus we obtain two brand authors within the cultural system of meaning co-creation: (1) the firm and (2) the broader cultural production systems that create, clarify, and sort these meanings over time. Subsequent research (Kozinets, 2001; Solomon, 1988a; Thompson & Haytko, 1997) reiterates the power and influence of these brand meaning makers.

McCracken's (1986) model specified a second system of meaning transfer whereby the culturally shared meanings resident in products and brands moved into the life of the consumer. *Consumer co-creation* concerned the adaptation of culturally shared meanings to the person's unique circumstance for purposes of individual communication and categorization. Reader response theory in the literature studies discipline emphasized a similar principle: the meanings derived from a given text depend upon the circumstances of the individual charged with making sense of that text (Mick & Buhl, 1992; Scott, 1994). A poignant example of the processes through which consumers adapted brand meanings to their individual life circumstances concerned product customization rituals through which people redefined consumption goods to make them uniquely their own (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

McCracken's model thus implied that the brand in essence possessed two distinct meanings. First was the shared meaning created through marketing systems and cultural traditions; second was the more personalized meaning constructed by the individual. Richins' (1994) concept of public (shared cultural) versus private (individual) meanings for possessions is also of relevance here. Exploratory research has suggested that the proportion of brand meaning that is widely shared may be as low as 50% (Hirschman 1981), with higher percentages contingent upon the interpreter's membership in a refined meaning-making community (Belk, Meyer, & Bahn, 1982; Belk, 1978). Elliott (1994) found that brands meant different things to different people, with shared meanings differing between genders and age groups; Holt (1998) revealed significant meaning distinctions across social capital (class) groups. The observation that localized interpretations of a brand varied greatly across social contexts and categories was also supported by Thompson and Haytko (1997). Still, the individual's reading of the brand was considered to be "bounded" (Hirschman, 1998). Although consumers exhibited a wide range of consumption meanings and practices, these were structured by general cultural and institutional forces such as the individual's own socio-demographic situation, and the articulations of sub-cultural members involved with the brand (Kozinets, 2001).

That consumers could interpret products differently, add localized meanings to them, and sometimes even redirect them from their original intentions derived from the postmodern realization that "products are only arbitrarily linked to their original functions and thus are infinitely open to diversion through the ordinary experiences of everyday life" (Cova, 1996, p. 18). In this sense, the product and brand meaning space was presented as "contestable terrain that consumers rework(ed) in terms of their localized knowledge and value systems" (Thompson & Haytko, 1997, p. 38). Culture provided meaning making *resources* for the consumer to use in definition and orientation, not a *blueprint* for the same (Holt, 2002).

Others have expanded upon McCracken's model by recognizing the reciprocating effects that consumer co-creation could have on the cultural meanings of products and brands (Fournier, 1998; Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2001; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). While McCracken's model emphasized a one-directional flow of meanings from the culturally constituted product or brand to the consumer, these researchers emphasized that the interpretive activities of individual consumers could actually affect, shape, and reshape the cultural meanings of products and brands. Through social discourse, consumers reconfigured sponsored advertising messages for brands (Ritson & Elliott, 1999). Consumers even twisted brand meanings, diverting them in unintended directions and resignifying them in surprising ways (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Shove and Pantzar (2005) note that what looks from the outside like the diffusion of a particular innovation is actually a sequential process of creative re-invention on the part of thousands of ordinary people involved in the meaning-making activity across time. This research stream supported a consumer-centric (vs. culture-driven) model for brand meaning making (Thompson & Haytko, 1997) and an expanded definition of the consumer as meaning maker that included this adaptation, manipulation, and revision of culturally shared meanings. Wipperfurth (2005), an advocate for the emergent paradigm, echoes this same conception: consumer co-creation happens when individuals enhance the original brand idea by creating new meanings, uses, or rituals for the brand/product and then translate that message to the mainstream. Through consumer co-creation, the individual becomes not only the author of his/her unique understandings, but also, through extension, a partial author of the brand.

Consumer co-creation figures prominently in contemporary marketing theory, where co-production has been offered as the cornerstone of a new dominant logic for marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Drawing from a services-marketing orientation (Gummesson, 1995), Vargo and Lusch emphasize the consumer's continuous and dynamic role in the use, maintenance, repair, and adaptation of products/services to his/her unique needs, usage situations, and behaviors. Vargo and Lusch call for proactive customer involvement in the design, production, marketing, and consumption of products and services, and a marketing function dedicated to doing things in interaction with consumers to create and capture more value from these collaborative roles. While different in its application and intention, co-creation as co-production calls for the same reconceptualization of the consumer that those in the interpretivist tradition support: namely, from consumer as operand resource (whereby consumers are acted upon to create transactions via marketing resources) to the consumer as operant resource (wherein the consumer is an active participant in relational exchanges and marketing co-productions). Participation also stands as a cornerstone of postmodern marketing theory (Brown, 2004; Cova, 1996; Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004). Within each of these theoretical paradigms, the concept of the participatory consumer rejects the notion of a static and constant brand in favor of one that is actively and dynamically renegotiated across both individuals and time.

Table 31.1 summarizes core tenets and axioms of the received versus emergent paradigms. In the alternative view, brands are conceived as socio-cultural creations shared in the marketplace, not psychological entities that exist solely in consumers' minds (O'Guinn & Muniz Jr., 2005). Ontologically, the emergent view accepts brands as dynamic, co-created entities, and brand meaning as neither inherent in the product nor constant across individuals, but rather derived from the "contexts" in which the brand "resides." As such, brands present themselves not as static, pre-formulated management construals—ideally guided with consistency tenets in mind—but as dynamic and actively co-created entities that evolve with consumers and cultures in kind. Multivocality in the brand voice is embraced and accepted in the emergent paradigm as consumers variously adapt and refine meanings as they fit brands into their lives.

Table 31.1 Central Tenets of the Received View vs. the Emergent Branding Paradigm

	Received View	Emergent Paradigm
Brands	Informational vehicles that support choice processes; Risk reduction tools and simplifying heuristics	Meaning rich tools that help people live their lives
Guiding Metaphor	Information	Meaning
Role of context in research	Context is noise	Context is everything
Central constructs of interest	Knowledge-based cognitions and attitudes	Experiential and symbolic aspects of consumption
Focal research domain	Purchase	Consumption
Guiding tenets	Simplification and control	Co-creation and complexity
Marketer's role	Owner and creator of brand assets	One of several brand meaning makers
Brand positioning assumptions	Consistency, constancy, simplicity	Complexity, mutability
Primary units of analysis	Individual consumers	Individuals, people in groups, consumers in cultures, cultural production mechanisms
Consumer's role	Passive recipient of marketer information	Active contributor to brand meaning making
Consumer's central activity	Realizing functional and emotional benefits	Meaning making

In this alternative paradigm the marketer stands as only one of many significant meaning makers, with consumers and broader cultural production systems playing notable and sometimes primary roles. Importantly, these are the sources and processes of brand meaning making that are generally overlooked by consumer psychologists in their models for managing brand equity. It is understandable that scholars trained in experimental design and theory falsification would not develop a natural appreciation for sociological and cultural matters such as these, but there can be no doubt that these disciplines are essential for developing a deep understanding of brands as symbolic creatures. In the sections to follow, we review academic literature and case histories pertinent to each of our three brand meaning makers. These are presented in order of their relative omission in classic theories of the brand: cultures, consumers, and the firm.

CULTURE AS A BRAND MEANING MAKER

Culture is one of the two ...most complicated words in the English language.

Raymond Williams, 1983, p. 87

Williams doesn't tell us what the second most complicated word is, but brand may well be a contender.

Stephen Brown, 2006, p. 50

As Stephen Brown's (2006) recent essay emphasizes, "brand" and "culture" are both illusive terms, made even more complicated when one attempts to comprehend them together. Still, this section

of our chapter aspires toward this rather grandiose goal: to make culture as it pertains to branding a bit more accessible and actionable for consumer psychologists. Our coverage of the question concerning what it means, exactly, when we say that “brands live in cultures” (Holt, 2004) is by necessity a selective treatment. For tractability, we also make artificial distinctions between what some would classify as “cultural forces” and what we later discuss as “consumer collaborators acting in groups.” Indeed, in the natural setting, it may be ineffective to draw boundaries between cultures and consumers and companies in their co-creation activities for the brand. Qualifiers aside, we first reflect on some marketplace examples implicating the cultural context of the brand, to illuminate the “what” and “so what” of culture.

Harley-Davidson—a brand icon that stands unequivocally for rebellion, machismo, freedom, and America—provides a well-known case supporting our argument for culture as a dominant meaning maker for a brand. Culture’s role in the making of Harley’s meanings is perhaps most evident in the brand’s status as the motorcycle of choice for the notorious Hell’s Angels. These meaning makers did not constitute a target market for Harley-Davidson: in fact, there was a time when corporate strategies discouraged the attraction of this group. And yet, this community infused the brand with outlaw associations that derived from decades of highly visible brand consumption within the worlds of drugs, murder, and other illegal activities—associations that were more crude and real and authentic than anything corporate advertising could ever provide. Harley’s outlaw meanings can be traced to an earlier cultural event, in what is now known as the 1957 Hollister riots. A pictorial essay in *Life* magazine revealed this shocking story of a band of drunken motorcyclists that rolled into an upstanding rural California town one weekend and literally took it over. The riot became the fodder for the cult film classic *The Wild One*, starring Hollywood’s embodiment of raw masculinity, Marlon Brando. A notable scene from the film crystallizes the brand meaning making implications. Brando is drinking in the local bar; an innocent woman from the town circles him, fascinated by his presence. She reads Brando’s jacket colors and asks: “Bay City Motorcycle Group Rebels...what are you rebelling against?” Brando’s infamous response: “What’ve you got?” Through the ensuing decade, producers furthered the motorcycle-rebellion connection in countless movies concerning the dark underground, and through casting with quintessential rebels like James Dean.

As culture shifted and the counter-revolutionary 1960s took hold, Hollywood contributed a second round of meaning making through films like *The Escape* and *Easy Rider*. These iconic films added freedom and adventure to the rebellion base: freedom *from* the controlling “system” and freedom *to* pursue personal experiences and pleasures, however illegal these might be.

In 1985, culture intervened a third time to contribute core meanings for the brand as Harley-Davidson became the victim of a hostile takeover by the AMF Corporation. Here, culture provided the context in which to interpret this historical event. Harley had been taken over by a Japanese firm at a time when the press was peppered with confrontational stories of lazy Americans versus the inherently more efficient Japanese, and promises of the rise of Japan as the new world economic power. When Harley insiders leveraged a successful buy-back of their firm, even Richard Nixon celebrated the rescue of America’s sole remaining motorcycle manufacturer from the clutches of “the enemy.” More than any advertising campaign, these historical events and cultural circumstances defined the essence of the Harley-Davidson brand.

The \$1.4 billion branding debacle involving Snapple offers another example of the ways that cultural meaning production systems define and ultimately govern the brand. In this case, management opted for a branding solution that unfortunately excised the brand from the cultural meaning making systems that give it life. Almost immediately upon acquisition of Snapple, Quaker jettisoned Howard Stern, Rush Limbaugh, and Long Island’s own Wendy as uncontrollable, risky,

irreconcilable spokespersons for the brand. Snapple's grassroots meaning-making partners in neighborhood Mom-and-Pop cold channels were exchanged for large format warm channel collaborators like Shaws that were capable of delivering growth for the brand. Quirky flavor variety was compromised as management sought more manageable expansion paths. Clearly, these marketing changes granted a "rationalized distribution network" for Snapple that made sense in the context of Quaker's successful acquisition of the Gatorade brand. But the strategy literally gutted the cultural meaning making mechanisms that had fueled Snapple's distinctive strength and value. Quaker management walked away from the brand's so-called secondary associations (Keller, 2005) and in the process negated the essence of their brand.

The Martha Stewart story similarly reinforces the power of cultural production mechanisms in dictating the fate of a brand (Fournier & Herman, 2005). After going public with Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia (MSLO) in 1999, the Stewart brand and person were propelled to a celebrity status that few brands can claim. "Martha Stewart" evolved to the more intimate "Martha," putting the person on par with other single-name celebrities like Madonna. An explosion of Martha Stewart copycats, made-for-TV movies, and unauthorized biographies further validated Stewart's iconic status. Parodies raged through email and chat rooms and received sanctioned commentary by respected gatekeepers on *60 Minutes*, CBS's *Sunday Morning* show, and *Saturday Night Live*. Stewart appeared in the public eye not simply as how-to presenter for MSLO but also as judge of the Miss America Beauty Pageant, host on public radio's *Car Talk*, and even trivia master on the *Jeopardy* game-show.

The meteoric rise of the Martha Stewart brand came to an abrupt halt in 2002 when Stewart was accused of illegal stock trading in her personal investment portfolio. An arduous 3 years in the media spotlight took their toll: advertising pages went down 55% in the flagship magazine, television shows were cancelled, staff in the television production unit was cut 65%, MSLO's Internet division was shut down. MSLO brand value declined 75% in the wake of the scandal that left Stewart convicted on four charges and sentenced to 6 months imprisonment and 6 months' house arrest.

Many contend that Stewart's conviction was as much an indictment against her gender and class as it was a judgment of legal rights or wrongs. It is difficult to argue that Stewart was not judged at least in part on the basis of the fundamental cultural categories defining her brand: a rich white woman made a mistake and that mistake landed her in jail. But "culture" damned Stewart in yet another way. This argument recognizes that the meanings of a celebrity are culturally constituted, and include in American society a ravenous appetite for the dark side, and sheer enjoyment in the predictable scandals that take celebrities at least temporarily out of play. Indeed, Stewart's attainment of celebrity brought with it the entry of a powerful player in the cultural brand meaning making game. These were the pundits who traded independently on Martha's currency: journalists and bloggers and biographers and television news critics whose job it was to dig up dirt on Martha, expose her weaknesses, and catch her in lies; in short, to find and sensationalize "breaks" in the managed image of the celebrity for profitable gain.

Stewart and MSLO never fully reckoned with these antagonistic meaning makers who transacted over the Martha Stewart brand equity for their own gain. They were ignored and sometimes publicly derided: "I don't have time for this C-R-A-P," Stewart said in a television interview on the subject of Oppenheimer's biography (*Larry King Live*, Sept 15, 2005). Attempts to quiet "uncontrolled" voices through political clout were even leveraged at times, as, for example, with attempts to halt publication of Byron's biography and a Harvard Business School case study of this nascent person-brand (Fournier et al., 2001). MSLO failed to realize that their brand meaning making pro-

cess was socially negotiated—not only among creators and supporters, but also among those who profited from a critical view of the brand.

These diverse examples illustrate two important themes concerning cultures as brand meaning makers. First, per McCracken's (1986), is the overarching notion of culture as the original font from which all brand meanings flow. Second is the subject of cultural arbiters in the process of meaning making. Research relevant to these two themes is reviewed below.

CULTURE AS THE FOUNDATIONAL SOURCE OF BRAND MEANINGS

The case examples above reinforce a central premise in McCracken's (1986) original meaning making model (Figure 31.1): that culture stands as the original source and location of the general categories of meanings from which brands ultimately must draw. These categories provide the basic distinctions that a culture uses to divide up and make sense of the phenomenal world; they represent fundamental coordinates of meanings used to interpret the brand. Per McCracken (2005), central meaning categories about which shared understandings develop include gender meanings (Stewart and the roles of wife or mother), lifestyle meanings (Stewart's WASPY Connecticut style), age and cohort meanings (Snapple's Generation X), occupation meanings (Stewart's homemaking), class and status meanings (Stewart's aspiring upper class), decade meanings (Snapple and "the alternative 80s"), time and place meanings (Stewart's leisure vs. work time), value meanings (Harley's rebellion), and fad/fashion/trend meanings (the casual Pottery Barn taste expressions that supplant Martha Stewart today). Research by Thompson and Haytko (1997) and others (Brioschi, 2006; Elliott, 1994; Kozinets, 2001; Solomon, 1983) consistently reinforces the parameter-setting role of cultural codes in the process of brand meaning making. As Vince McMahon learned in his attempts to escape the exegesis of authentic sport (football) and spectacle (WWF wrestling), these cultural codes are robust and fundamental: they can not be conveniently discarded or willfully ignored.

Consumer Culture Theory research illuminates the context effects that determine interpretations of the cultural meanings claimed by a brand. The existence of distinct meaning-making communities defined along age, gender, and social class lines has been consistently validated (Belk, Meyer, & Bahn, 1982; Belk, 1978; Elliott, 1994; Holt, 1998; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Recent research illuminates history as a basic yet underrepresented cultural code that constrains how brands produce meaning (Askegaard, 2006; Heilbrunn, 2006; Schultz & Hatch, 2006). Indeed, per the culturally constituted character of meaning, certain associations can be positive one day and negative the next as the broader cultural, political, legal, and market contexts change. The Martha Stewart case provides clear illustration of this meaning principle in action (Fournier & Herman, 2005). Stewart's perfectionism and controlling character, for example, were foundational strengths in the initial creation of the branded product portfolios, but a weakness when interpreted in light of the ImClone affair. In the context of the courtroom, Stewart's high style and cultured tastes were also translated into inferences that turned against her: "Martha may be above us all, but she is not above the law," jurors would later explain (Toobin, 2004, p. 65). While MSLO found that particular person meanings could perhaps for a time be sheltered (e.g., early charges against Stewart for recipe stealing), the cultural moments that made those hidden meanings relevant (i.e., the ImClone charges) were inevitable and strong.

Much has been written about the nature of the contemporary cultural landscape and the meanings that centrally define its contextual character for consumers today. Critiques by CCT researchers highlight themes of rebelliousness (Holt, 2004) and a hyper-savvy concerning marketing and

consumer psychology that yields a tone of deep cynicism and informed skepticism (Brown, 2001; 2004; 2006). As expressed by Brown (2006), consumers “are cognizant that the customer is always right. They are aware that satisfaction and loyalty are the drivers of competitive strategy. They are fluent in Brandsperanto, Malltalk, Productpatter. They aren’t as much Generation X, Y, or Z as Generation[®]” (p. 53). Brown (2001) further suggests that today’s consumers have grown weary of marketers attending to their every desire; rather, they yearn for exclusivity, intrigue, and are always willing to be simply entertained.

Holt (2004) brought new energy to the theme of culture as a source of brand meanings by shifting from questions about cultural *content* and *context* to the *process* question of how exactly cultures create brands (see Figure 31.2). Holt’s theory states that contradictions arise as an individual’s experiences clash with the dominant cultural ideology, its moral imperatives, and the general vision to which the nation aspires, and that these contradictions make people feel anxious and isolated from the shared vision. These tensions then fuel a demand for myths that can “repair the culture when and where it is in particular need of mending” (Holt, 2003b, p. 48). Iconic brands step in to these culturally created myth markets to deliver those meanings that can assuage the feelings of isolation and distance of conflicted consumers. Thus, times of cultural anxiety and crisis provide windows of opportunity capable of birthing iconic brands.

Holt’s theory is inspiring in that it offers a causal model whereby strong brands can be created out of cultural symbolism. His branding model also accommodates the dynamism that defines culture at its core, and touts change as a necessary brand condition, not a temptation destabilizing the brand. Per Holt, cultural contradictions are historically situated, and brands must be reincarnated as the cultural ideology ruptures, and veins of anxieties mutate in response. Holt offers a theory

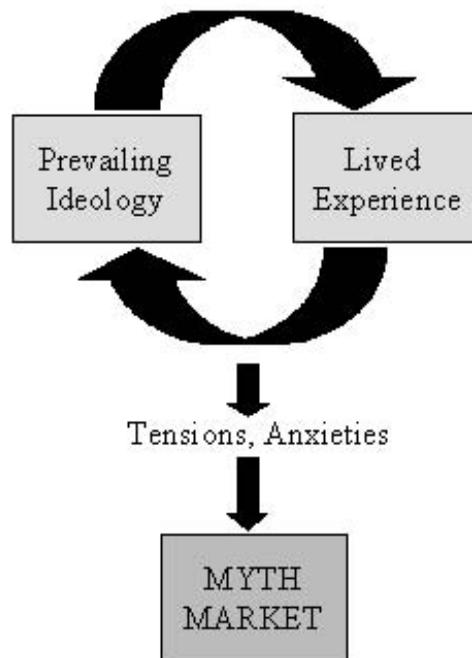


Figure 31.2 Holt’s model for the creation of brand icons. Source: Holt 2004.

of the brand as an evolving story: a compelling dialogic device whereby iconic brands circulate as narratives encapsulating powerful myths defining the cultural world.

Dove's much-talked about Campaign for Real Beauty provides a contemporary case in support of Holt's thesis (Branch & Ball, 2005). Academic research on the psychology and sociology of beauty, as validated through Dove's worldwide consumer survey research, exposed intense anxieties and dysfunctionalities experienced by women as they compared themselves to the prevailing beauty ideology supported by fashion gatekeepers. While the dominant vision to which consumers were encouraged to aspire concerned perfection, youthfulness, and stereotypical "classic" looks, consumers' collective experiences stressed imperfection and individuality—a beauty that came in "many shapes and sizes" and a range of demographically defined forms. Building on this insight into veins of isolation and anxiety, Unilever adopted the ambitious mission of making more women feel beautiful by broadening the definition of beauty: something that, surprisingly, none in the industry had attempted before. As evidenced by extended discussion on *Oprah* and *Ellen*, unsolicited parodies on *Conan*, and literally thousands of pages of text on body size and age discrimination discussion forums, Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty has inarguably created social discourse around a resonant cultural issue. In the true spirit of the intention of cultural branding theory, the brand was not simply *on* the cultural agenda: the brand captured meanings that *comprised* the cultural agenda, thereby constituting fodder with which to build an iconic brand.

An interesting stream of research within the purview of cultural branding theory examines the flip side of the question concerning how cultures create brands. Indeed, Holt's theory (2004) suggests a mechanism through which brands not only mirror and mimic cultures, but also lead them by offering charismatic new visions of the world. Thompson and Haytko (1997) first offered evidence of the reciprocating effects between brands and cultures whereby localized changes in brand meanings inspired more widespread social changes that circled back to change the culture at play. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) provides evidence of the role of contemporary consumer movements that explicitly seek to transform consumer culture. Thompson and Arsel (2004) present the extreme form of this argument through their critical demonstration of the ways in which pro- and anti-Starbucks discourse can structure the entire competitive landscape by shaping people's ideas about the category and its operative values. Askegaard (2006) supports a similar thesis in his argument for the brand as a referent in a global ideoscape: a motivating idea that fundamentally reshapes the way consumers and producers view the world of goods. These studies collectively reinforce the central premise that brands can serve as a locus of meaningful social discourse, thereby shifting the level of inspired brand analysis from the psychological to the cultural plane.

CULTURAL PRODUCTION MECHANISMS THAT MAKE MEANINGS FOR THE BRAND

The brand examples used to open this section illuminate a second principle from McCracken's original (1986) process model. In the cases of Harley, Snapple, and Martha, brand meaning was significantly influenced by broad cultural production systems outside the firm's control, including media pundits, journalists, social critics, Hollywood producers, information gatekeepers and more. In fact, the cultural production systems that created, clarified, and sorted meanings for these brands arguably swamped the marketer-controlled messages receiving corporate funding and support.

Several researchers have attempted to broaden and deepen McCracken's specification of the cultural intermediaries (Featherstone, 1991) involved in making meanings for brands. Thompson and Haytko (1997) expand beyond McCracken's "fashion system" to identify an underdetermined force of "other cultural discourses" (e.g., folk theories on prevailing gender ideologies, or race/class

relations) that contribute disparate meanings to the brand. Kozinets (2001) provides an expanded model of “media-based articulations in a mass media culture of consumption” such as that for the Star Trek brand. Kozinets highlights the contributions of certain cultural producers (e.g., Gene Roddenberry in the case of Star Trek) as offering encodings of a preferred reading for the brand, including canons whereby an object, image or ideology is declared as being officially part of the branded lexicon or not.

Using the Martha Stewart case as a point of departure, Fournier and Herman (2005) offer a process framework for person-brand meaning making that attempts a more comprehensive treatment of the cultural sources of brand co-creation that exist outside the formal structures of the firm. Their case analysis highlights meanings relevant to the dark side of Stewart’s existence that become embedded in the cultural record: lawsuits filed by neighbors; altercations with limousine drivers and gardeners; anecdotal tales concerning explosive outbursts in the office or local marketplace; tales of exploitation at work; internal family feuds—all documented in unauthorized biographies, court records, spectacular television events, and chat registered at Internet sites like AmIAnnoying.com. The role of media pundits as cultural intermediaries that proved significant in the rise, fall, and resurgence of the Martha Stewart brand is also showcased in the research, as is the indirect but important meaning making roles played by the brand’s business partners (e.g., Donald Trump’s *Apprentice* and K-Mart). The issue of partner collaborations in brand meaning making is also considered in research by Bergvall (2006).

The discussion of the postmodern branding paradigm provided by Holt (2002) reminds us why marketer attention to uncultivated cultural sources of brand meaning making is critical to the stature of the brand. To succeed, marketers must grab authority and authenticity from the systems that can legitimately deliver this quality to a brand, and, as history has revealed, this no longer features the commercially driven systems of marketing. Holt identified several contemporary marketing techniques that have become quite popular toward this end, three of which explicitly strive to leverage cultural meaning production mechanisms. The first of these is what Holt calls coat-tailing on cultural epicenters. Through coat-tailing, the brand becomes part of a social movement or emergent meaning-making sub-culture such that it stands as a vested community member rather than a marketer who opportunistically appropriates authentic meanings for the brand (e.g., Red Bull’s early sponsorship of the snowboard culture). A second tactic is lifeworld emplacement whereby street credentials are developed for the brand. Examples include Snapple’s use of truck dispatcher Wendy as a primary spokesperson for their brand, or the signing of non-professional models for the Dove Real Beauty campaign. Last is stealth branding, wherein the brand shuns direct marketer communications in favor of the allegiance of tastemakers who use their influence to impart cultural capital credentials on the brand (e.g., James Dean and Dennis Hopper on a Harley).

BUILDING ON THE MOMENTUM: RESEARCH DIRECTIONS FOR CULTURAL MEANING MAKING

Research on cultural branding is in its nascent stages with much foundational work to be done. Clearly needed is a culturally sensitive coding scheme to catalogue the meanings claimed by a brand. Schemes in the received view are firm- and product-centric, and emphasize such meaning categories as product attributes, brand benefits, use occasions, and perhaps the emotions or values emanating from these (Aaker, 1991; Keller & Lehmann, 2005). McCracken’s (2005) meaning categories offer a compelling alternative for codifying brand meanings along cultural lines. Zaltman’s ZMET (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995) provides another option wherein brand concepts are coded in terms of eight deeply seated metaphors believed to structure cultural interpretations of experi-

ence and thought, including power, balance, and journey (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The ambitious project of codifying the iconography and symbolism contained in the cultural and brand meaning spaces can also prove instrumental to theory advancement. Valid methodologies that can elicit and structure this meaning space are critical and sorely needed: Englis and Solomon (2000) and Roedder-John, Loken, Kyeong-Heui, and Monga (2005) provide promising quantitative options toward this end. Meaning-based segmentation tools are also needed that derive not from the bottom-up perspective of objective brand attributes or benefits, but rather the top-down perspective of resonant socio-cultural meaning categories that add value more generally in people's lives.

While much has been written about the character of the contemporary cultural landscape as pertains to marketing and brands, these ideas have not yet figured prominently in our theories of the brand. Context in general is something that our branding theories and methods do not accommodate. Granted, it is accepted practice to provide context through specification of the brand's competitive set, or perhaps the advertising-program environment. But the contexts that give brands their meaning more often than not lie outside these manager-controlled domains and within the broader socio-cultural world. The meaning of Coke, for example, derived less from its taste profile versus the competition than from its historical time/place context: Coke's status as America's beverage during World War II; emplacements in the popular 1950s television show *The Eddie Fisher Hour*; the brand's starring role in the bucolic 1950s paintings of Norman Rockwell. A particular branding message interpreted in the context of today's marketing-savvy consumer will have a different effect than it might at another time. Indeed, the entire interpretive plane for marketing shifts when consumers' ingoing assumptions, frames, and attributions are shaped by cynicism, beliefs in customer superiority, and an insiders' knowledge of marketing operations and techniques. These interpretive frames clearly need to be accommodated in our research as something more than error variance or moderators of effects. Friestad and Wright's Persuasion Knowledge Model (1994) and their construal of cultural folk knowledge (1995) hold untapped promise in exploring these context effects in branding research.

Many particulars concerning marketers' operations within the contemporary cultural branding context also deserve research attention. Brown (2006) identifies three new branding twists popular in the current era of the marketing savvy-consumer: irony as a marketing voice (e.g., Sprite's Image is Nothing image, Death brand cigarettes, Aquafina's promise that there is no promise), anti-brand branding (e.g., Uniglo's claim "you are not what you wear!"), and the faux forthright format (e.g., Ronseal's "It does exactly what it says on the tin"). What drives the use and effectiveness of these branding formats? How are these provocative and ambiguous messages received? Per Brown (2006), are these messages flagrantly crude and naive, or the opposite? In the end, are attempts at "no marketing" interpreted as savvy marketing after all? Dedicated process models for Holt's culturally attuned branding strategies have also yet to be developed, and their effectiveness as contemporary brand building tools remains unexplored.

A general call for research on uncontrolled non-marketer meaning production systems can also be made. While CCT research consistently reinforces the significance of cultural brand meaning makers, and marketing practice reveals their use and support, considered treatment of particular mechanisms within the cultural production system is rarely attempted in the discipline. Meaning making groups involved in the production of celebrity remain unexplored in this era of entertainment marketing: media pundits who trade on celebrity value for profitable gain, informational gatekeepers at major news and entertainment agencies, the thriving worlds of sensationalist expose reports. Our lack of advance may reflect structural boundaries and biases operating within the marketing discipline. PR has long stood as the poor step child within the marketing mix family; media relations have been classified as the purview of those in communications fields. But these

demarcations prove artificial (Jansson, 2002) if not intolerable in specifying a culturally driven production system for the brand.

Different research methodologies and skill sets will also be required in order to Braille cultures for their branding insights. Holt (2004) observes that true brand knowledge “comes from a cultural historian’s understanding of ideology as it waxes and wanes, a sociologist’s charting of the topography of contradictions the ideology produces, and a literary critic’s expedition into the culture that engages these contradictions” (p. 49). Brand managers as possible authors of compelling stories have much to learn from the journalists, novelists, script writers, and cultural critics familiar with the optics of the narrative lens. As brand managers become trend managers—identifying and then capitalizing on cultural tensions and breaks—academicians may find more inspiration from industries such as movie making, music and fashion than the packaged goods and durables forums that have historically informed theories of the brand.

As our theories shift to the context of cultural meaning making, so too will our branding metrics need to respond in kind. While evaluations of attribute strength and dominance were useful in advancing associative network models, indicators of the socio-cultural qualities of claimed brand meanings will be needed to illuminate cultural theories of the brand. Measures of the authenticity of brand meanings (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), for example, could prove useful, as would indicators of the culturally resonant quality of claimed meanings for the brand (Fournier, Solomon, & Englis, 2007; McQuarrie & Mick, 1999). What constructs can we offer beyond credibility, expertise, and trustworthiness to help us understand the effectiveness of celebrities who acculturate the brand (McCracken, 1989)? The investigation of celebrity-infused brand meaning is long overdue.

CONSUMERS AS CO-CREATORS OF BRAND MEANING

It’s not what you do. It’s what they do with what you do.

John Grant, *The New Marketing Manifesto*

Our section on consumers as brand-meaning collaborators is again motivated by real world examples that capture the ways in which the meaning making activities of consumers and consumer collectives have determined the success or failure of the brand.

The story of Red Bull, pioneer of the now-thriving energy drinks category, presents a case of consumers adding so-called “unintended meanings” that not only established but propelled the status of the brand (see Kumar, Linguri, & Tavassoli, 2004; Wipperfurth, 2003). Pre-launch marketing research for this vitamin-enriched, caffeinated beverage could not have been more damning. The color of the drink was unappetizing; the sticky mouth feel and taste were deemed disgusting; the price point, at eight times that for Coke, was considered unjustifiable. The overall product concept—to increase physical endurance, improve concentration and reaction speed, and to improve vigilance and stimulate the metabolism” (Kumar, Linguri, & Tavassoli, 2004, p. 2)—was rated as irrelevant. The verdict by the market research firm was clear: “no other new product has ever failed this convincingly” (Wipperfurth, 2003). Red Bull’s novel ingredient taurine also guaranteed a lengthy and risky product approval process, further discouraging launch. But founder Mateschitz was committed to the entrepreneurial venture for other reasons, and began the arduous process of attaining approval for Red Bull’s ingredients and sale. It took 5 years to gain permission for product export from Germany; France and Denmark refused approval in light of potential health concerns. But, during the long wait period, consumer meaning making took off. Speculation circulated as to why the drink was illegal. It was rumored that taurine was made from bull’s testicles, a known aphrodisiac. The brand developed street names: liquid cocaine, speed-in-a-can, liquid Viagra. Sev-

eral deaths were rumored to be linked to product consumption. Munich became a thriving black market for the banned product. When Red Bull was finally granted approval in Germany, mothers boycotted the brand to have it banned again. Young Austrian clubbers began bringing Red Bull to the all-night raves that emerged on the cultural scene at that time, further adding cache to the brand's counter-cultural epicenter. The brand really took off when it became a mixer of choice for Snowboarders in Austrian ski resorts, where bartenders came up with the notorious *Stoli Bully* combination. Young adults could not get enough of the legendary cocktail rumored to have the power of Ecstasy with the kick of a pot of coffee.

This consumer-generated meaning making activity lent the brand an evolved in-market positioning as the ultimate edgy and dangerous anti-brand. Red Bull's marketing team was quick to recognize this consumer voice and engaged a host of stealth marketing campaigns to cultivate the revealed brand mythology. The company Web site fed content to the thriving rumor mill. The company leveraged the power of consumers as co-creators, and used them explicitly to build the brand. University students were hired as grassroots brand supporters; parties for product distribution received corporate funds. By 2003, the brand that was dubbed a hands-down market failure stood as one of Europe's top five brands; it now also dominates the energy drink category worldwide (Dolan, 2005).

The 1985 New Coke disaster provides a textbook example of the consumer-based realities of the brand (Fournier, 2002). In what is variously referred to as the Chernobyl of beverages and the Edsel of the marketing world, Coca-Cola management removed the company's flagship brand from store shelves and replaced it with what \$4 million worth of consumer testing identified as a "newer, better tasting Coke." New Coke provided a sensible marketing resolution to an increasingly threatening competitive game. The Pepsi Challenge was storming across the country, demonstrating through on-camera taste tests what Coca-Cola management was later surprised to learn: people preferred the taste of Pepsi. But the research and its interpretation by management denied the contextual reality of consumers' relationships with the brand. Taste did not drive loyalty, the brand did, and the company's taste tests were all conducted blind. Vehement disapprovals of New Coke voiced in focus groups by loyal consumers were dismissed by management as a failure of qualitative methods to provide generalizable results. Customer calls placed in the aftermath of the product decision, and the media coverage of grassroots rebellion groups, were not recognized by management as "data." Eventually, the company gave in to consumer pressure and returned Old Coke to store shelves. Perhaps more vividly than any other, the New Coke case illustrated that consumers co-owned the brand, and exposed the fallacy of marketing decisions that ignored this collaborative fact.

The business press is replete with examples of the powerful ways in which consumers can augment, modify, and otherwise contribute to the process of brand meaning making. Brown (2004) observes that conscripting the consumer is one of the most striking marketing trends of recent years, often replacing paid corporate communications in light of the assumed benefits of credibility and authenticity that are obtained. In the discussion below, we review three consumer research streams aligned with the theme of consumers as brand co-creators: (1) individual consumers' uses of brands in identity management projects; (2) consumer collectives as brand meaning makers; and (3) consumers as contrary meaning makers for the brand.

INDIVIDUAL CONSUMERS' USE OF BRANDS IN IDENTITY MANAGEMENT TASKS

Research on individuals' uses of product and brand symbolism in identity management tasks has a long and respected tradition both within and outside the field of consumer psychology (see, for example, classic social science studies by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), Douglas

and Isherwood (1978), and Sahlins (1972). Interestingly, this perspective on the symbolic self-completion functions of consumer goods harkened back to early branding theory, where these same arguments for the primacy of symbolic consumption were presented in published management works (Gardner & Levy, 1955; Levy, 1959).

Perhaps most well-known in the consumer behavior discipline is Belk's (1988) foundational article on possessions and their roles in defining an individual's sense of self. Belk's essay presented a compelling and comprehensive presentation of interdisciplinary evidence supporting the basic contention that individuals systematically appropriate possession meanings for purposes of self-definition. Belk's essay argued strongly for the consumer as active meaning creator. He provided a framework for understanding the many different ways in which consumers used their possessions not only to reflect but also to actively craft, shape, and maintain alternate views of the self across the lifespan. Belk's argument was compelling and provocative, and served to inspire significant critique (e.g., Cohen, 1989) and research.

Over the course of the next several years, researchers developed a deep appreciation of the many and varied ways in which consumers used the cultural meanings resident in products and brands to define and orient the individual. Consumers were shown to construct narratives of identity (Hill & Stamey, 1990; Holt, 2002) and fulfill goal-driven identity projects through brands (Fournier, 1998; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). They created multiple self-representations in cyberspace (Schau & Gilly, 2003). They became brand reconstruction artists who used their nonconformist acts of consumption to express individuated identities that set them apart (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Through these and other studies, consumers were shown to work and transform the meanings embedded in products and brands so as to fashion a coherent albeit fragmented and diversified sense of self (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Elliott & Davies, 2006; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Kozinets, 2001; Penalzoza, 2000). The view of brands as cultural resources—useful components for the creation and management of the self concept—and of consumers as active identity makers who worked with marketer-generated materials to forge their identities became firmly established in the interpretivist tradition.

Much research on the self-brand identity connection pursued alternate definitions of the fragmented and multifaceted self. Solomon (1983), using symbolic interactionist theory (Mead, 1934), focused on the self as a role player in society, with a separate "me" for each assumed social role. Solomon's extensions (Solomon, 1988b; 1988c) expanded beyond consumers' use of individual products and brands as expressions of identity to the collective meanings of coherent bundles of brands and products assembled to express social roles. Empirical evidence revealed co-occurrence of products and brands in the inventories of select prototypical and socially defined roles such as yuppies (e.g., Rolex, Heinekin, Perrier, Barclay, BMW, *Esquire*, Brooks Brothers, and AMEX) and supported consensus across consumers regarding these role-based brand constellation gestalts. Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) also tested the degree to which individuals might use product and brand collectives to express desired role-based identities. They confirmed that MBA students who were insecure about future job prospects would adopt more of the consumption patterns of a stereotypical business person, thus actively engaging consumption constellations thought to bolster desired conceptions of the self.

Another interesting stream of research featured the undesired self: one of an individual's many possible selves that stood in opposition to the ideal self, essentially constituting the self the person lives in fear of becoming (Ogilvie, 1987). This research built upon Bourdieu's observation that tastes "are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56), and proposed that the consumer was defined as much by what s/he decided *not* to consume as they were by posi-

tively reinforcing consumption choices. Kleine, Kleine, and Allen (1995) explored possessions that were accepted or rejected as “me” or “not me.” Wilk (1997) demonstrated that consumers had less difficulty articulating their dislikes than they did their desires, and were readily able to articulate negative consumption stereotypes associated with brand cues. Englis and Solomon (1995) and Freitas et al. (1997) showed that consumers eschewed the purchase and display of select products and brands because of a desire to distance themselves from particular associations. Hogg and Banister (2001) demonstrated negative self-incongruity; that is, the comparison between a negative product-image perception and a positive self-image belief, which resulted in avoidance purchase motivations. Thompson and Arsel (2004) revealed the power of distaste for a given brand to structure not just personal brand preferences but entire markets and competitive landscapes.

Elliot and Davies (2006) drew upon Featherstone’s (1991) concept of the performing self: a consumption-centric self that places emphasis on appearance and the management of impressions. This ethnographic inquiry revealed a never-ending sequence of consumption-enabled in-between selves poised in transition from “who I am” to “who I want to become.” The research emphasized that the self is never fixed nor coherent, and that what is observed as an actualized self is merely “one moment in time in a dynamic process of always becoming” (p. 263). The enactment of possible selves through consumption was also proposed in Goulding, Shankar, and Elliot’s (2002) study of the working-week versus the rave-weekend selves.

Meaning making dynamics at the household level of identity-definition have also received research attention. Chang (2005) conducted a 16-month ethnographic investigation of so-called invisible brands that blend inconspicuously into the household environment. She suggests that the locus of meaning for such brands is not tied to individual identity but instead to a social identity process wherein the brand and the habits and patterns that surround it serve as a vital part of the household meaning-making system. Chang emphasized that consumers often purchased brands that were verbally judged as “not me” when those brands fit the larger context and logic of the household and the purchaser’s role within that social system. This research reinforced that individual consumers do not always thoughtfully negotiate the assimilation of brands into their lives, nor are they always engaged in the negotiation of meanings toward self-identity refinement ends. Rather, consumers sometimes allowed their tacitly known household habits and systems to take over in the assignment of meaning to a brand.

Fournier (1998) took the self-brand connection argument to another plane in her phenomenological study of consumers and their brands. Fournier demonstrated that consumers formed relationships with brands when they considered the meanings of the brand as being useful in helping the person to live his/her life. In this interpretation, realized brand meanings were not inherent in the product, nor were they necessarily the meanings that had been reinforced and popularized through the firm’s advertising and marketing campaigns. Rather, the brand’s meanings were created by the individual as the brand intersected with important identity themes and life projects. Hence, one consumer might imbue a brand with “best in the category” associations to bolster a marginality versus significance tension in her life while another might invest a brand with the meanings of a significant other that once consumed the brand. In line with Consumer Culture Theory, Fournier argued that the active meaning creation processes stimulated by filtering the brand through the lens of the individual’s identity projects created brand multivocality: the manifestation of different meanings for different persons for the same brand. A person’s brand portfolio was highlighted as mutable and dynamic, with brands coming in and out as the person evolved and sought new (re)defining expressive meanings in response.

Others have followed in the tradition of exploring consumer-brand connections by accepting consumers and brands as active members of a relationship dyad. Fournier, Avery, and Wojnicki

(2004) examined longitudinal ethnographic and critical incident data to build on Fournier's (1998) insight that the reciprocating behaviors of consumers and brands resulted in different types or categories of relationships. These researchers showed how different rules and norms of behavior evolved over time through the signal-response mechanism of consumer and brand behaviors. The analysis revealed how the various rules at play in a given consumer-brand relationship cohered into a particular relationship template over time, with certain norms emerging as centrally defining. The partnership template, for example, was created by consumer and brand actions that were consistently true to a belief in mutual helping and sacrifice, accommodation, and optimistic investments in an imagined mutual future; the adversary template was grounded in prioritization of the self over the other, and expectations for inherent conflicts in interests and engagements. These alternative templates structured behavior by guiding future consumer actions and sense-making activities. Aggrawal (2004) focused on two dominant relationship templates in human psychology—communal and exchange—and demonstrated how these different framings differentially affected consumer relationship responses. This same process dynamic of a behaviorally driven relationship template was implicated in the findings of Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004). Collectively, this line of research shows how consumer (and brand) actions help define the relationship, as interpreted within the blueprints offered by the culture at large.

CONSUMER COLLECTIVES AS BRAND MEANING COLLABORATORS

A second stream of research in the identity-making tradition extended beyond the traditional marketing view of consumers as individuals to recognize that consumers exist in webs of interpersonal interconnections and manifest themselves at least partly in groups (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2005). Variouly labeled as sub-cultures of consumption (Kates, 2002; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), consumption microcultures (Thompson & Troester, 2002), cultures of consumption (Kozinets, 2001), tribes (Cova, 1997) and brand communities (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001), these micro-social consumption collectives comprise a network of heterogeneous persons linked by shared emotion and experience around a brand (Cova & Cova, 2002).

Studies in this tradition built on Boorstin's (1973) contention that one of the key ways of defining and expressing group membership in contemporary society was through shared consumption symbols that helped identify an individual's group membership and thereby express the social self. Per the pioneering work of Maffesoli (1996), consumption-based communities were thought to emerge when individuals attempted to assert a sense of local identity over what was perceived as the facelessness of globalization, as they sought to establish social connections in an era of radical individualism and isolation, or when they simply needed to fill the void of the contemporary empty self (Cova & Cova, 2002; Cushman, 1990; Goulding, Shankar, & Elliott, 2002). Cova and Cova (2002) described the movement to consumption collectives this way: "people who have finally managed to liberate themselves from social constraints are embarking on a reverse movement to recompose their social universes" (p. 596). In the contemporary consumption-based society, these restructurings were defined around the brands providing rich fodder for image (re)construction: that is, "Product symbolism creates a universe for the tribe" (Ostergaard & Jantzen, 2000). Branded products provided what Cova (1997) referred to as "linking value": the facilitation of the co-presence of individuals with common lifestyle interests. In this sense, products in branded communities offered consumers instrumental value versus terminal value-in-use, whether through temporary or more enduring connections.

Schouten and McAlexander (1995) introduced the concept of the consumption sub-culture to the consumer behavior discipline with their ethnographic research on Harley-Davidson rider

groups. They emphasized the socio-cultural quality of this distinctive societal subgroup that self-selects based on a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity. Social mechanisms identified at the heart of the sub-culture included: a shared ethos or set of brand-relevant values; a unique language system; signs and symbols as badges of membership; rituals; and mythic stories and heroes. The structure of the subculture was also identified as fundamental. Within the subculture, there existed an informal hierarchical social structure that reflected the status of group members within the collective. This was authenticated within the group through expressions of personal commitment and across groups per cultural capital claimed through acquired knowledge, skills, experiences, and social connections (see also Clay, 2003). A hard core group served as arbiters of core brand meanings while distinct subgroups allowed multiple interpretations of the ethos of the brand.

Subsequent empirical research (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002) demonstrated that identification with a branded sub-culture produced tangible benefits to marketers, including brand loyalty, price elasticity, word of mouth recommendation, and incremental dollars spent. Community attachment was also related to negative consequences such as normative community pressures, and, ultimately, reactance and resistance, especially for large collectives versus small.

Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) followed with the broader concept of brand community, a form of social community defined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structural set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (p. 412). Brand communities were identified as possessing three defining characteristics: (1) a consciousness of kind and sense of belonging to an in-group through shared product consumption; (2) rituals and traditions that reify the community and brand culture and help it to stay vital over time; and (3) publicly enacted morality and a shared (soft) sense of duty and obligation to other community members. Additional aspects of brand communities with a particular marketplace flavor included: oppositional brand loyalties (Aron & Muñiz, 2002); marketplace legitimacy, as reflected in whether the brand is "real" and the brand community members "legitimate" (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2005); and desired marginality whereby community members tried to maintain cache as a core element of brand meaning by keeping community membership restricted and small.

A more temporary and unstable form of social grouping formed around shared identification with the brand was offered by Cova and Cova (2002) in the metaphor of the tribe. Like communities, neo-tribes thrived on shared experience and brand passion, but they were characterized by a "volatility of belonging" which meant that homogeneity of behavior and formal rules were eschewed. The temporary, time- or event-bound consumption community was also the subject of research by Goulding, Shankar, and Elliott (2002) on weekend rave cultures, McAlexander et al.'s Jeep brandfests (2002), Arnould and Price's extraordinary experience communities (1993), and McGrath, Sherry, and Heisley's (1991) periodic farmer's market communities. The notion of the hypercommunity was offered in Kozinets' (2002) study of the week-long anti-market Burning Man project to capture the notion of a temporary and short-lived but intensely well-organized and caring community form.

Research by Kozinets on the Star Trek culture of consumption (2001) and the Burning Man project (2002) has helped refine distinctions among sub-cultures and brand communities. Kozinets (2002) emphasized that communities form in response to an exploitative ethos that weakens social ties and dampens self-expressive practices. Thus a reconceptualization of the community of consumption was offered: as "re-gatherings of the collective force required to resist the atomizing and self-expression-crushing capabilities of large corporations...a banding together to assert agency and even ownership of the brand" (p. 33). In contrast with contemporary researchers who celebrate

the non-geographically bound qualities of online or brand communities, Kozinets calls for the reinsertion of place into the community equation, noting that the time and space bound nature of select consumption collectives relates to primal conceptions of local communities of social actors who lived together.

Kozinets research on Star Trek also helped clarify the consumption collective's function as a meaning maker, and emphasized that these activities are still situated within a broader system of meaning making wherein the interplay of the community, individuals within the community, and the wider cultural production system was engaged. This research also reinforced how individuals within the culture acted as independent meaning makers ascribing divergent meanings to the brand in order to arrive at a personally appropriate definition of Star Trek consumption. These findings suggested further refinement of the community concept to exclude the assumed requirement for a commonly shared identity through the brand.

Moving beyond the collective as co-creator of brand meaning, Muñiz and Schau (2005) explored the case where the collective actually *became* the marketer, who through its actions, guides and sustains the brand over time. This research concerned the abandoned Apple Newton community, which, unlike the corporate-sponsored Harley-Davidson community, was supported exclusively through the grassroots efforts of involved consumers. Supernatural, religious, and magical motifs characterized members' community narratives, investing the brand with powerful meanings and perpetuating these through reinforcing rituals. The power of folklore, mythology and rumor in brand community maintenance was also stressed. This work reinforced the theory of the brand-as-narrative, wherein the brand was defined by the stories that took hold as the brand circulated through culture and consumption groups (Brown, 2003; Holt, 2004).

Recent community research has concerned specific mechanisms through which communities are formed and sustained. A vibrant research stream has developed around the concept of authenticity: the quest for the real, genuine, and irreplaceable that pioneering community researchers placed at the heart of brand community development, operation, and preservation (see also Elliott & Davies, 2006). Grayson and Martinec (2004) explored the concept of authenticity by drawing on semiotic theory. They suggest that authenticity can be explained: (1) in terms of the object's indexicality or its factual and spatio-temporal link with history; and (2) its iconic value in physically resembling or reproducing something that is authentic, as per the brand's essence. Work-in-progress by Leigh, Peters, and Shelton (2005) on the MGB brand community offers a three-pronged concept of authenticity when brand communities are operative that goes beyond the objective (i.e., verifiable product qualifications and originality) to involve constructive (i.e., subjective community-defined renegotiations concerning the definitions of the original or classic) and existential (i.e., activity-based experience in which the person feels they are in touch with the real world and their real self) facets. Recent research by Rose and Wood (2005) on reality television demonstrates how viewers can cope with and accept fantasy and simulation—obvious elements of inauthenticity and blatant violations of the genuine—through successful negotiation of the paradoxes presented in situations, characters, and production venues. This research reinforced authenticity as a co-production, an active discourse, an engaged and interactive process of viewer interpretation within the postmodern milieu. This insight parallels the work of Arnould and Price (2000), who argued that authenticity was created through the recital of authenticating acts revealing the true self and authoritative performances aimed at inventing or refashioning cultural traditions.

Recent community research also concerns the development of contingency theories that circumscribe community manifestations and qualify community forms. Cova and Cova (2002) offered a categorization scheme for the various roles that community members could adopt including: mere members, participants at select informal gatherings, practitioners who have quasi-daily involve-

ment in tribal activities, and a large group of sympathizers or fellow travelers who are only virtually integrated into the tribe. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2005) specified the qualities of the brand that can facilitate community formation: distinctive brand meanings, a challenge that gives the community a reason to persevere, and the capacity for transformative consumption experiences. Research by Muñiz and Schau (2005) also offered qualifications for the types of products that legitimately foster community, suggesting that brands capable of providing transcendent magical or religious experiences foster community ties.

CONSUMERS AS CONTRARY BRAND MEANING MAKERS

As stressed in this section's introduction, consumer meaning making is an unruly process in which brands are sometimes refashioned in unanticipated and undesirable ways. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) were the first to expose the micro processes and practices through which postmodern consumers attempted to (re)gain control over marketer-dominated brands. Holt (2002) elaborated on consumers as unruly "bricoleurs" who never accepted marketer dictates and used brands for self-creation rather than allowing brands unequivocally to define them. Thompson and Haytko (1997) demonstrated the many specific ways in which clever consumers cobbled together, juxtaposed, and combined countervailing meanings in the fashion domain to create unique, personal meanings that often ran against the grain of existing social categories.

Research on the coffee culture by Thompson and Arsel (2004) provided evidence of consumer collectives hijacking particular brand meanings and expressions, as for example, with satires of the Starbucks logo (e.g., the addition of nipples to the brand icon) and plays on the Starbucks name (e.g., Frankenbucks, per the firm's use of genetically modified dairy products). The practice of "culture jamming" the signal of the broadcast marketing message—countering and otherwise undermining the continuous flow of marketing messages—has become especially prevalent (Lasn, 1999). Jamming activities aimed against advertising and the capitalist structure that supports it have been studied in the context of the quarterly magazine *Adbusters* (Rumbo, 2002), its sponsoring organization, *The Media Foundation* (Handelman, 1999), and *The Front for the Liberation from Advertising* (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Handelman (1999) provides numerous examples of the ways in which resistance against marketing is enacted, including changing ad copy and creating parodies of actual advertising campaigns (e.g., the Camel Joe Cool campaign becomes Joe Chemo), publishing content directly opposing and critiquing select and general marketing actions (e.g., *Adbusters* magazine), the production of so-called "un-commercials" (i.e., professionally produced 30-second ads touting anti-marketing ideology) and the generation of grassroots activities like the day-after-Thanksgiving "Buy Nothing Day."

Extensive research has shown that consumers' freedom to create new product and brand meanings through their own experiences is often levied for collective and individual resistance to and rebellion against the imposed meanings of marketers (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 2002; Klein, 1999; Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Thompson, 2004; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006). Boycotts, especially of global brands, have received specific attention (Friedman, 1999; Garrett, 1987; Miller & Sturdivant, 1977). Brand community has been interpreted in terms of creative resistance whereby "consumers break down marketers' dominance by seeking out social spaces in which they produce their own cultures" (Holt, 2002, p. 72). Frank (1997) provides a detailed analysis of the use of brands in revolution. Arnould and Thompson (2005) provide a detailed review of CCT research on the practice of ideological reproduction and resistance in marketing. Vibrant debate rages concerning whether consumers can truly escape the

hand of the market through their attempts to take control of the meanings of consumption and brands (Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2002).

Enter O'Guinn and Muniz's (2004) conception of the polit-brand, wherein a community of users is at once centered on shared brand consumption *and* the furthering of a political goal. Unlike groups that fight perceived market dominance through boycotts or manipulation and avoidance of major branded products, these communities rebel through the community-sanctioned *consumption* of brands. Muniz and O'Guinn (2005) highlight the blurring of lines between brands and politics in the consumption of Ben & Jerry's, MAC, and SweatX clothes. Brand politics stands as the explicit agenda for BlackSpot sneakers, which positions itself squarely as the anti-brand brand.

Research on the resistance efforts of consumers has led some to argue that the entire domain of branded consumption is shifting to the political realm. The focus of "post postmodern" resistant consumers, it is argued, has turned from brand meanings and images to the morals and ethics of the organization behind the brand: its performance as a community stakeholder and civic institution and the social implications of its use (Holt, 2002). In this politically construed paradigm, emphasis shifts from surface-level brand image terms to a deeper integration between the actions of the company as manifest in the revealed values of the brand. Practitioner Marc Gobe (2002) embraces this shifting paradigm in his book, *Citizen Brand*.

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF CONSUMER CO-CREATION FOR BRANDING RESEARCH

As the review above attests, consumer co-creation has a rich and robust history within the consumer research field. Although it might be said that the elemental groundwork for the constructive use of brands in symbolic self completion tasks has been well laid, many interesting questions remain. Does there exist a consumer self: what is its nature and purpose, and how does this shape consumer relationships and responses? When does the political self supersede the personal self in identity expressions through brands? Is there a social patterning for brand-centric identity engagements? Does symbolic self completion activity spawn from crisis-induced triggers analogous to those Holt (2004) identifies for anxious cultures at large? How is self identity renegotiated in the face of transgressions and repositionings that present a new face for the brand (Avery, 2006)?

If there is a bias and therefore a gap in consumer identity-making research, it is a bias among consumer/social psychologists in favor of the micro processes of individuals and against explorations of consumers in collectives and groups. As O'Guinn and Muniz (2005) note, while norms and other social phenomena may be specified as moderating variables in our branding models, this is not the same thing as studying social brand behavior in the social context that gives it life. As the exception, we have developed a robust understanding of the functioning of brand communities and other related consumption collectives. Still, conceptual inconsistencies plague recent studies conducted under the "community" umbrella (Muñiz, O'Guinn, & Schau, 2006), and the social context of community remains under-defined (Luedicke & Giesler, 2006). Research is sorely needed on the fragmentation and sociological patterning of community groups over time, and the brand meaning arbitration that occurs within core and emergent (fringe) community subgroups. Moreover, community studies generally concern rather atypical and highly specialized consumer groups whose lifestyles are highly structured through brand interactions. Recent explorations of more time-bound or haphazard brand and marketplace communities are promising in their attempts to broaden the applicability of the community concept beyond the high cultural capital community pinnacle or core. Contingency theories that explore the dynamics of a range of community member types—from interlopers that receive benefits solely through community artifacts, to members-in-name-only, to the one-event-per-year "Plug and Players" who dip in and out of

communities at will—hold great promise. Metrics for qualifying brand community participation are also needed, including operationalizations of core concepts such as social and cultural capital, distinctiveness and cohesiveness, group marginality, and the legitimacy or authenticity of consumers and the brand meanings that they claim.

Brand research is clearly called for in one natural domain wherein the influence of consumers as co-creators of brand meaning can only become more pronounced. This involves the increasingly popular Weblog or blog. Blogs are proliferating as a meaning-making venue, with 90,000 new blogs added to an estimated 9 million base every day (Baker & Green, 2005). Blogs that register complaints, reveal stories of victimization or unfair treatment, share “insider secrets” that derail company practices, or solicit participation in anti-brand campaigns, are thriving. The power of blogs as a meaning making mechanism is startling: within a two-week timeframe, for instance, the clamor on Weblogs felled CBS anchor Dan Rather and threatened the entire media establishment in his wake. Buzzphone.com provides downloadable versions of consumers’ rants and tirades, further extending the reach of the blog space.

Two *Business Week* reporters offer this vision of where things go from here: “In a world chock-full of citizen publishers, we mainstream types control an ever-smaller chunk of human knowledge. Some of us will work to draw in more of what the bloggers know, vetting it, editing it, and packaging it into our closed productions. But here’s betting that we also forge ahead in the open world. The measure of success in that world is not a finished product. The winners will be those who host the very best conversations” (Baker & Green, 2005, p. 64). The translation for brand meaning making is self evident: winning firms will be those that learn to embrace co-creation, with the pre-eminent goal of promoting open and honest conversations about their brands. This is unfamiliar territory for most brand managers trained in the received view.

Blogs do offer the type of authenticity which Holt (2002) argues today’s consumers hunger for: information and opinion perceived as “invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent values” (p. 83). Yet such consumer co-creation presents a dilemma in contemporary branding: while it can bring a brand to life by providing vibrancy within the fabric of daily living (e.g., Red Bull), so too can the forces of consumer co-creation damage the brand through diversions that take meanings off course (e.g., Martha Stewart) or destroy it (e.g., Dan Rather). The parameters and dynamics of this delicate balancing act have yet to receive attention under the lens of brand research. Metrics that qualify and measure the risks that consumer co-creation inherently entails are sorely needed; Fournier and Herman (2005) provide promising ideas toward this end.

THE COMPANY AS BRAND MEANING MAKER

Brands are like muscles: Exercise them, stretch them, and keep them moving and they’ll have a longer, healthier life. Let them be couch potatoes and they’ll atrophy.

Sergio Zyman, *The End of Advertising As We Know It*, p. 61

Next, we turn to the “brand author” that is implicit in most consumer research: the companies that create and market brands. This has been an area where the work of consumer psychologists has significantly framed and influenced management practice and thought. The typical consumer psychology study on branding starts with assumptions about a brand’s meaning (typically labeled brand equity) and then assesses things like how that meaning is altered via central or peripheral

processing of ad messages and brand cues, or how new brand concepts fit with or extend the established equity of the brand. Earlier we referred to this as research following the received view, where the tenets and assumptions based in the field's information processing tradition play themselves out in service of the marketer's agenda for the brand.

But in today's marketplace we find sophisticated practitioners nearly in a scramble mode in search of new ideas and means to build their brands. It has become fashionable to contend that the old brand building model is broken and that a new one may now be emerging (Cappo, 2003; Gross, 2005; Heyer, 2003; Kiley, 2005; Neff & Sanders, 2004; Zyman, 2002). The result has been that media and methods that were once marginalized are now becoming commonplace (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2005). If one follows the money, it is clear that brand marketers are moving resources to new tools at unprecedented rates (Atkinson & Klaassen, 2005; Oser, 2005). What this means to academic researchers interested in brand is that our domain of inquiry is expanding rapidly. The critical question to consider is: are our theories and methods expanding to match the dynamic environment we are trying to comprehend? To develop a point of view regarding this question, we prime the pump with exemplars of what brand building actually looks like in the contemporary marketing age.

Full-Cycle Consumer Psychology

Any consumer psychologist intrigued by the possible meaning of brands should watch a NASCAR race, at least on television. (If you are already a NASCAR fan, skip this paragraph.) You are likely to be reminded of Robert Cialdini's day at Ohio Stadium which led him to declare to himself: "Cialdini, I think you're studying the *wrong* thing" (Cialdini, 1980, p. 22). While NASCAR is all about the drivers and the race, every race is also a colossal celebration of brands. There are the cars themselves, carrying the logos large and small of something like 800 NASCAR sponsors. TV announcers keep you informed throughout via the Old Spice Lap Leaders update and the Visa Race Break. We are told that Home Depot is the Official Home Improvement Warehouse of NASCAR and UPS is The Official Delivery Service of NASCAR. At commercial breaks there's the ever-present beer ads with Budweiser and Miller shouting at each other, and we rejoin the race following the Budweiser or Miller Lite car around the track. None of this should come as any surprise, because NASCAR openly and aggressively bills itself as the best marketing opportunity in sports (O'Keefe, Schlosser, Burke, & Mero, 2005). Yet something important seems to be going on here regarding the meaning of brands, and as consumer psychologists we should be embarrassed by our inability to explain what it is. Perhaps that's a little harsh, but the point is there is a richness and texture of branding activity in the marketplace that is understudied by consumer psychologists working in their labs.

If one is intrigued by the prospect of "full-cycle" consumer psychology (à la Cialdini, 1980), then there is much happening in the natural world of brand building to spark new constructs, theories and research methods. To paraphrase the classic line from Kurt Lewin: there is nothing so practical as a good theory, and there is nothing so stimulating of good theory as dynamic developments in one's natural domain (cf. Petty & Cacioppo, 1996). A few particularly important areas for such stimulation are considered below.

The Design Imperative

Some might contend that the hottest of the "hot topics" in the real world of brand building is *Design* (Neff, 2005; Nussbaum, Berner, & Brady, 2005; Reingold, 2005). Brands like Apple, BMW,

Target, Altoids, Starbucks, and L'Oreal certainly make design a primary element in their business strategies. However, what we now also see are champions of functional performance like Procter & Gamble and Whirlpool advocating the pre-eminence of design (Salter, 2005). At P&G, brands like Olay, Pampers, and Tampax have utilized new designs to create emotional connections with consumers (Neff, 2005). To formalize its commitment, P&G recently hired over 500 designers to staff its cross functional brand teams.

The design field is obviously many different things, drawing on disciplines such as ergonomics, human factors, engineering, industrial design, and marketing (Cagan & Vogel, 2002; Vogel, Cagan, & Boatwright, 2005). Designers provide beauty and enhance functionality. Often, they also create visual cues and identity systems in an effort to communicate desired meaning about brands. Design can be thought of as the outcome, but also can be represented as a systemic process for generating innovative outcomes, as championed by the highly regarded design firm IDEO (Brown, 2005; Kelley & Littman, 2001). When we consider all the things that design represents, it is hard to write it off as a fad or hot topic. Indeed, it is likely that any field interested in brands and how they acquire meaning will become increasingly irrelevant without a serious commitment to understanding design (cf. Schroeder, 2005b).

In the practical world of design one can point to many outcomes that could serve to inspire new directions in consumer research. For example, in the creation of visual identity systems, designers must anticipate multiple generations of brand extensions and provide a solution that is flexible enough so that extensions will have the symbolism and iconography that links them to the base brand, but at the same time signify that the extension is something innovative and new. The academic literature on brand extensions has overlooked the role of design cues in facilitating or inhibiting the viability of an extension. "Good identity systems" are intended to moderate fit issues and cannot be separated from the more abstract discussion now popular in our literature regarding brand architecture (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; DeFanti & Goodman, 2005). Our prolific literature on brand extensions (see Keller & Lehmann, 2005, for an overview) will remain an abstract, academic discussion without consideration of design's pivotal role in communicating and demarcating important meanings of the brand.

Another excellent opportunity for consumer psychologists is raised by what is a re-occurring theme among design practitioners. It merits emphasis that design is not simply a matter of maximizing aesthetic appeal at a single moment in time. Good design can also provide performance benefits that reinforce the value of the brand each and every time it is used, as in the OXO GoodGrips product line (Cagan & Vogel, 2002). Good design can yield re-occurring benefits through consistent pleasure in use (e.g., Bloch, 1995; Schmitt, 1999), especially in what Arnould and Thompson (2005) refer to as the management of servicescapes. It is this persistent benefit from good design that apparently accounts for the common observation that through design, one is able to foster meaningful emotional attachments to brands (Gobe, 2001; Reingold, 2005). To date, the connection between compelling design and emotional attachment to brands has been largely ignored (cf. Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005).

Although the consumer psychology literature featuring design issues has been remarkably scant thus far (cf. Hoegg & Alba, chapter 29, this volume; Keller & Lehmann, 2005) some recent studies (Bloch, Brunel, & Arnold, 2003; Page & Herr, 2002; Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998; Warlop, Ratneshwar, & van Osselaer, 2005) suggest important questions that the field could entertain if we wanted to get serious about design. In particular, Page and Herr (2002) model the interplay between aesthetic cues and product function in consumers' affective and cognitive judgments about brands. They show that simple product liking is most heavily influenced by aesthetic cues, in a process reminiscent of Zajonc's (1980) classic thesis about the automaticity of preference formation. Additionally,

Page and Herr show that quality judgments about brands are formed through a more effortful process that appears to combine information about design elements and functionality. In their 2003 article, Bloch, Brunel, and Arnold developed and validated an individual difference measure tapping design sensibility (the Centrality of Visual Product Aesthetics, CVPA) and showed that for consumers high in CVPA, product design is weighted more heavily in purchase intentions, and is important in more product categories than for low CVPA consumers. Given consumer psychologists' longstanding interest in questions concerning the interplay of affect and cognition and form versus function, Page and Herr open the door to many important questions, and measurement advances like the CVPA scale will benefit future empirical work.

More investigation is warranted on the issue of how aesthetic cues exploited by designers influence individuals' reactions to a brand. Research-in-progress investigates the link between design characteristics and brand personality perception (Brunel, 2003), and perceptions of novelty in product design elements as they relate to overall product evaluations (Brunel & Swain, 2005). Following Page and Herr (2002), it is reasonable to pursue this agenda where affective and cognitive judgments are treated as distinct entities. Other interesting questions are easily surfaced. For instance, when will a design-driven direct affect transfer process overwhelm more effortful (and cognitive) brand assessment? Are aesthetic cues best conceived as simple affect generators, or should they be treated as meaning makers that prompt inferences about the brand? If so, then when? Is it possible, as per the suggestion of Hoegg and Alba (chapter 29, this volume), that compelling design may even bias cognitive processing to yield sub-optimal decisions? Much like extant literature on the influence of visual elements in advertising (cf. McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005), our understanding of the "persuasiveness" of design elements in shaping all manner of product perceptions is lacking.

In acknowledging limitations, Page and Herr (2002) noted that their research concerned subjects' first impressions of a hypothetical new product. This is perhaps the most common limitation across branding studies: we study momentary responses to novel stimuli based on perfunctory assessments in a lab. It is hard to know from these instances whether we end up over- or underestimating the impact of design. If emotional attachments develop from repeated experiences with well-known brands, we will need more longitudinal studies with real brands in real consumption settings to better judge the impact of design.

Media Fragmentation and the Practice of Integrated Brand Promotion

If practice can ever be a valid point of reference for our theory building, then there can be little doubt that in the world of practice, integrated brand building is well established as a means by which sophisticated marketers attempt to shape and sharpen the meaning of their brands (Cappo, 2003; Keller & Lehmann, 2005; O'Guinn, Allen, & Semenik, 2006; Wellinghoff, 2003). For example, to introduce its new Blue card, American Express employed a diverse mix, starting with Blue-labeled water bottles given away at health clubs and Blue ads printed on millions of popcorn bags. They sponsored a Sheryl Crow concert in Central Park and transformed L.A.'s House of Blues jazz club into the "House of Blue," with performances by Elvis Costello, Stevie Wonder, and Counting Crows. Print ads and TV were also used to promote Blue, but following industry trends, spending in traditional media was cut over 50% compared to previous AmEx product launches. Making diverse components such as these work together in synergistic support of the brand is commonplace in today's world of practice.

By contrast, the lack of diversity and the univocal nature of studies by consumer researchers are disconcerting. One of the few "multi-media" studies in our literature used a TV ad in combination with the audio track from that ad to simulate radio (Edell & Keller, 1999). The authors concluded

that coordinated TV and radio campaigns warrant consideration. Other published research on the virtues of integration indicates a possible synergy between TV and print (Naik & Raman, 2003). As a field, we have little to offer on the question of integrated brand promotion. Deighton (1995) extends our challenge by noting that sophisticated practitioners not only manage the synergy between media vehicles, but also coordinate messages targeted at multiple audiences (e.g., retail buyers vs. end users), and predetermine messaging to carry consumers through multiple stages in their relationship with a brand. Our research does not consider these and other levels on which integrated marketing programs are designed.

In this age of unbridled message clutter and increasing media fragmentation, “synergistic” and “integrated” continue to be the magic words for brand builders. However, there is belief in the power of integration with very little in the way of research that guides us with respect to how and why. Perhaps we will make more headway against integration issues if we acknowledge that marketers don’t merely wish to communicate select messages: they spend huge sums of money on ads, events, signage, racecars, Web sites, product placements, and popcorn bags in order to build brands. Without an explicit focus on brand building, there will be very little integration. The challenge is to appropriately accommodate the complexity raised by the practice of brand builders in our academic research concerning the meaning of brands.

This is another area where research opportunities abound. First and foremost, consumer psychologists are challenged to put theories on the table that can help justify the perceived value of integration. Do multiple media generate the most value when they simply serve to reinforce a common message, or does real synergy emerge when different media carry distinct messages to allow consumers to accommodate their own desired meaning for a brand (cf. Keller & Lehmann, 2005)? And if stories are appropriate “constructs” for thinking about how consumers create and carry brand meaning (Holt, 2003a; Zaltman, 2003), then what media and messages prove most potent in shaping these holistic stories? Then of course there is the classic question of the meaning embedded in the medium *per se*. If the medium is the message, how do we think about the virtues of the implicit endorsement from a Sheryl Crow concert, versus explicit claims made in a print ad for a new credit card? At an even more basic level, we really don’t know how communications and the products or services they support may interact to yield meaningful outcomes. For example, Apple’s “Think Different” campaign was initially a disappointment (Gobe, 2001). But then along came the iMac and with this innovative and well designed product, the “Think Different” campaign worked synergistically to yield a remarkable turnaround for a struggling Apple (cf. O’Guinn, Allen, & Semenik, 2006). Synergy across many fronts has become the gospel for brand builders. If as consumer psychologists we want to contribute to an understanding of how brands acquire and maintain meaning, we will have to prioritize and learn how to investigate synergy in its many manifestations.

The New Persuasion

In the new form of persuasion commonly referred to as branded entertainment, we find celebrity and pop culture becoming totally intertwined with the meaning of brands. Branded entertainment entails embedding one’s brand or brand icons as part of any entertainment property (e.g., a sporting event, TV show, theme park, short film, movie or videogame) in an effort to impress and connect with your consumer in a unique and compelling way (O’Guinn, Allen, & Semenik, 2006). Practitioners are increasing their investment in this form of brand building (Graser, Halliday, & Neff, 2005), yet it cannot be accommodated by the received view on branding, or mainstream theories of persuasion. For example, in his version of the “new marketing model” speech (Heyer, 2003),

Coca Cola's then Chief Operating Officer maintained that "The right associations with the right movies, artists, video games and events illustrates, enhances and accelerates the contemporization of core brand values. But that is no longer enough." In Heyer's view, the new persuasion entails alliances between Hollywood, Madison Avenue ad agencies, and brand marketers to deliver unique experiences to consumers. Product performance claims are absent in this new persuasion. Persuasion here is better conceived as co-creation where the meanings between brands and entertainment properties are intertwined.

We naturally use familiar theoretical frameworks in our first attempts to understand new forms of persuasion, as in research on product placements (Russell, 2002). But, for example, an elegant theoretical framework like the Elaboration Likelihood Model was never conceived with this kind of "persuasive activity" as its domain of application. In the domain of branded entertainment, everything must be considered a peripheral cue; there is no central processing of concrete message arguments or claims. The solitary ad processor assumed by the ELM is no longer relevant either, as consumers create and share their branded stories in co-authorship of the brand. Attitude change is not necessarily the point of all this, but rather some form of meaning transfer (à la McCracken, 1986). However, suggesting that meaning simply moves freely by association from any entity (e.g., a celebrity) to any brand (e.g., Keller, 2003) is not a coherent theoretical explanation. With messages and claims no longer a point of emphasis, we are challenged to reconsider the fundamental question of what it means to be persuaded.

If in branded entertainment we find celebrity and pop culture intertwined with brand meaning, we must also circle back to elemental questions concerning the meaning and process of celebrity as pertains to brands. We are not sure what celebrity is, how it develops, or how it operates to confer value upon a brand (cf. Fournier & Herman, 2005; McCracken, 1989). One thing is certain: notions of credibility, expertise, and trustworthiness (cf. Baker & Churchill Jr., 1977; Sternthal, Dholaria, & Leavitt, 1978) typically levied against the phenomenon are incomplete. Celebrities serve as vivid and provocative summary vessels of cultural meaning; their meaning making lives are much broader and more vibrant than their isolated applications to the brand. Here again the challenge to consumer psychologists is to bring new theory to the table that begins to address a new form of persuasion that is increasingly common.

Bottom-Up Branding—Managing the Buzz

The odd phrase "word of mouth" has been part of marketing vernacular for decades (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), but it has never engendered the "buzz" that "buzz marketing" is receiving currently (Kahn & Wind, 2005). Perhaps this new buzz about an old idea can be partially attributed to Malcolm Gladwell and his best seller, *The Tipping Point* (2000), wherein the case is made that "mavens" and "connectors" are critically important in fostering social epidemics. To be sure, word-of-mouth advocacy is a more robust phenomenon when there exists a medium like the Internet that allows one to spread the word to thousands of one's close, personal friends with the simple click of a mouse. But not to be overlooked in the buzz about word of mouth is the proactive role that marketers now are playing. Sophisticated marketers are seeking not just to manage but also manufacturer buzz, especially on the Internet, and at an accelerating rate at that (Kahn & Wind, 2005; Neff, 2003; Steinberg, 2005).

These new word-of-mouth programs take many forms. One high profile exemplar has been a unit within Procter & Gamble branded as Tremor. P&G has assembled a panel of 250,000 teens with a special emphasis on signing up connectors/opinion leaders. These teens, 75% of whom are female, are then asked to spread the word about new products or product concepts that P&G sends their way. P&G asserts that panelists are not paid cash to make recommendations, but are rewarded

with product samples and the enticement of being the “first to know” about new products and fashions. The dollars P&G invests in Tremor are miniscule compared to their investments in conventional media, but still they have generated much fanfare. In a perfect illustration of the uncontrollable nature of today’s branding world, not all the fanfare has been flattering. Recent allegations that Tremor and other buzz marketing firms are acting to deceive consumers (Horovitz, 2005; Rodgers, 2005) reveal the dilemma inherent with these tactics.

Another related development is the emergence of “corporate blogs,” once considered an oxymoron. Marketers are now moving proactively to harness the power of blogs for brand building. GM Vice Chairman Bob Lutz launched his own *FastLane Blog* to broker customer suggestions; Netflix streams information to respected blogger Mike Kaltschnee, who passes it on to movie fans. The contentious practice of paying bloggers for product support is also on the rise. Upstart Marqui paid 20 bloggers \$800 a month to promote its Web marketing services; Republicans and Democrats sponsored three bloggers in recent election campaigns. Fake blogs (called flogs) are also emerging. McDonalds launched a fake blog to accompany its SuperBowl ad about a French fry shaped like Abe Lincoln; Captain Morgan created a fake blog to taut its rum drinks. Consumer research involving this unique meaning making venue is sorely needed if we are to maintain a leadership voice regarding the new dynamics of brand building.

As firms move to push the envelope on managing and sometimes concocting word of mouth, important questions about risks versus rewards are surfaced. Sony Ericsson’s launch of their combination cell phone and digital camera stands as a notable case in point (see Brown, 2004). The \$5 million campaign employed actors who pretended to be tourists at national landmark sites. Sony’s fake tourists asked bystanders to take their pictures using their new Sony camera phones, and were quick to share relevant product information. The actors remained silent on their connection to the manufacturer unless explicitly queried. The campaign generated much word-of-mouth among potential consumers and was deemed a success by the firm. But it also caused outrage, generating attention from Ralph Nader’s Commercial Alert. What are the effects of these “fabricated” co-creation strategies? Do they yield coveted authenticity for the brand? Are the benefits lasting or more fleeting and temporal? Importantly, what are the risks associated with the rewards, per effects on brand meaning, strength, and beyond? As firms scramble to harness the benefits of so-called buzz marketing, they are coming to realize the risks involved. Again, the robust natural phenomenon in play here presents tantalizing research opportunities for consumer psychologists.

Conclusions Concerning Companies as Co-Creators

To be clear, our argument is not that consumer psychologists should be doing more to serve the interests of sophisticated brand builders. But if we are to understand consumer-brand behavior, we must be able to account for the activities of brand builders in the theories we are testing. Per Cialdini (1980), “theory speaks only to the existence of the effects it predicts; it does not speak to the ecological importance of those effects” (p. 24). So, for example, while in theory a distinction between central and peripheral processing is important when studying persuasion, in today’s marketplace the distinction may largely be irrelevant. There is reason to believe that our existing array of theories is behind the times for the study of branding and brands.

NEW DIRECTIONS

Given our review of today’s brand building environment, it is sobering to consider an analysis like that of McQuarrie’s (1998) concerning academic research on brand building, which for the most part has concerned advertising tests in lab experiments. McQuarrie conducted a content analysis

of all advertising experiments published from 1942 to 1997 in the premier marketing journals. Over 400 experiments were coded for the presence of six reality factors: (1) was choice behavior accounted for, (2) were ads embedded in programming content, (3) were ad effects measured after a delay, (4) were competitive messages present, (5) was there repeated exposure to the messaging, and (6) did the ads promote familiar (versus fictitious) brands? Columns 1 and 2 in Table 31.2 summarize McQuarrie's results just for the *Journal of Consumer Research*; column 3 extends McQuarrie's analysis by including qualifying experiments from *Journal of Consumer Psychology* over the last 10 years. Conclusions from this analysis are straightforward: advertising experiments are common in consumer psychology; representing natural ad processing conditions in the lab has never been a high priority for consumer psychologists; and if anything, the trend is in the direction of less, not more, reality in the lab. McQuarrie refers to this trend as a growing detachment between advertising researchers and the goals of the advertiser. Our contention is that there exists a growing detachment between the research conducted by consumer psychologists and the goals of the brand builder as well. Certainly the complexity and dynamism of today's brand building environment, versus the simplicity and constancy of today's advertising experiment, appears as a contradiction; the realities of co-creation contrast starkly with the tenets of control that guide experimental design. As expressed in Cialdini's trapper metaphor (1980), "our finely-tuned traps allow us to capture phenomena without regard for their importance in the course of naturally occurring human behavior" (p. 23). There can be no doubt that we are proficient at laying finely-tuned traps. Conversely, applying the concept of representation (Shimp, 1994) and assessments of domain specificity (McQuarrie, 2004) remain low on the priority list.

Of course, the counterargument is long established (Berkowitz & Donnerstein, 1982; Calder, Phillips, & Tybout, 1981). Experiments are all about theory testing and it is our theories that allow us to generalize across domains of practitioner activity. We could never hope to capture the realities of the natural setting in our lab studies, nor should we even try. Let's keep working the current arsenal of theories to harness reliable generalizations.

But one has to wonder if testing and re-testing theories conceived at a different time and under simpler conditions is the right direction for the field. Even if ecological validity and mundane realism is not the right answer for consumer psychologists, we must push back and ask: what natural phenomenon did the theoretician have in mind when conceiving its constructs and axioms? It is likely for many of our theories that the original phenomenon did not include the complexities and qualities of today's brand building environment. Or as Peter Wright (2002) might contend, the marketplace metacognitions of consumers need to be considered, and our theories need to accommodate the dynamic nature of the phenomena we are trying to explain. To stay relevant as a field on the topic of brand, we will need new theory that accommodates and embraces a new level of complexity in the marketplace.

Beyond Brand Attitude

At the workbench level there are important implications to consider. Most centrally, we will likely need to reconsider our favorite dependent variable: brand attitude. Surely there is no more popular variable in consumer psychology, and for good reason. As Cohen (1990) observed, brand attitude was a logical focal point for researchers in search of "an intervening variable that would convincingly 'sum up' all the personal and marketplace influences at work and that would stand in direct line to behavior" (p. 153). This is a lot to ask of any single construct at any point in time, but in today's marketplace, maintaining attitude as a primary focal point in our theorizing may truly be insufficient. Consumer psychologists are thus challenged by the task of conceiving new constructs

Table 31.2 Reality Factors Common to Ad Experiments in JCR and JCP

	JCR 1974–1989 (<i>n</i> =83)	JCR 1990–1997 (<i>n</i> =95)	JCP 1995–2005 (<i>n</i> =65)
Reality Factor (% of experiments)			
Choice	21%	12%	9%
Embedded exposure	19%	13%	6%
Measured after a delay	7%	4%	0%
Competitive message present	29%	26%	5%
Repeated exposure	26%	19%	8%
Familiar brand	41%	22%	43%
Number of factors addressed per study (% of experiments)			
Zero	29%	38%	37%
One	31%	38%	55%
Two	24%	15%	8%
Three	5%	10%	0%
Four	5%	0	0%
Five	6%	0	0%
Six	0%	0	0%
Average number of factors addressed (per experiment)	1.43	0.96	0.71

that accommodate the complexities of brand meaning and its making. There is no reason why the field cannot embrace this challenge.

One can legitimately argue that the brand-attitude construct is in need of fundamental reengineering in light of the observed branding “facts” we have reviewed. Brown (2006) argues persuasively that ambiguity and enigma are central to the magical aura that surrounds legendary brands. Holt (2004) identifies the creation and resolution of acute tensions as pivotal in the birth of the iconic brand. Muniz and Schau (2005) and others (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993) highlight the magical motifs and mystery and transcendence that enable loyalties and lasting brand community. These constructs—ambiguity, tension, mystery, transcendence—collectively characterize the conceptual domain not of an evaluative judgment, but of the narrative or story. Indeed, narrative is a frame that has many proponents in the interpretive branding paradigm (e.g., Holt, 2003b; Salzer-Morling & Strannegard, 2004; Zaltman, 2003). Within the frame of the story, the ambiguous, the equivocal, and the conflicted stand not as signals for the demise of the brand but rather, as necessary permissions for the involvement and individuated interpretations of text that create and enhance brand value. Conceiving brands as evolving texts or unfinished stories also accommodates the need for open brand meaning systems suggested in this review. Moreover, a reorientation from brand-as-attitude to brand-as-story can accommodate observed realities of brand multivocality, and our guiding tenet concerning multiple authorship for brands. Perhaps the single most important insight

emanating from this review concerns the polymorphic nature of the brand: not only can brands mean dramatically different things to different people, they can mean multiple things to the same persons over contexts and time. One should expect this to be particularly true for mature brands (cf. Machieit, Allen, & Madden, 1993) that have acquired deep meanings for consumers through multiple interfaces. Implications for measurement are fairly straightforward: evaluating brands as narratives suggests promise not in simple evaluative judgments about the brand but in such constructs as ambiguity, resonance, and authenticity, which we have discussed throughout.

If attitude change no longer serves as a focal point for our branding research, then what process mechanism will fill the void? The obvious answer to this question is the process that we now can only vaguely refer to as “meaning transfer.” Cultural theorists have argued for years that brands borrow important meanings from well defined cultural categories, such as celebrities, pop culture icons, and the contexts wherein brands are encountered. Can such meaning transfer be conceived as a spontaneous inference process per Kandes (see chapter 6, this volume), or do we need new process models to handle this phenomenon? In either case, there is no reason that consumer psychologists cannot contribute to our understanding of brand meaning and its making. Many interesting questions can be motivated here, including issues like the identification of contexts that facilitate or inhibit meaning transfer; brands that most benefit from meaning transfer; and consumer characteristics that govern receptivity to brand meaning making overall.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As is true with all paradigmatic framings, both the associative network conception of brand and the meaning making view present certain limitations for our understanding of brands. As McCracken (2005) reminds us: “every theory trades certain kinds of knowledge at the expense of other kinds of knowledge; every piece of knowledge comes at the cost of a certain kind of blindness” (p. 169). We have not yet fully contemplated the implications of the streams of research reviewed above for the associative network conception of brand; the tenets of co-creation have yet to be fully rationalized with the dominant, received view. Keller recently echoed these same observations when he noted: “...there are multiple dimensions of brand knowledge as well as multiple potential sources or means to create that brand knowledge. It is essential that this multidimensionality be fully addressed in developing consumer behavior theory to explain branding phenomena. A potential danger with consumer research into branding is to adopt too narrow a perspective...The challenge and opportunity is fully appreciating the broad scope and complexity involved” (Keller, 2003, pp. 565, 596, 599).

By all counts we are living in a different branding world. Co-creation, collaboration, complexity, ambiguity, dynamism, loss of control, multivocality: such are the tenets of the new marketing world to which our brand theories must be held responsible. We have argued that on its own, the dominant branding paradigm cannot contend with the realities of this new branding world. The emerging branding paradigm embraces these tenets, and holds promise for realigning theory with today’s marketplace. Consumer research has always aspired toward interdisciplinary status (e.g., Anderson, 1986), though this goal is seldom realized. In our studies of brands, there is an opportunity to fulfill this aspiration.

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