Review article

How possession can help individuals?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to consider the social and psychological roles played by possession. When consumers buy brands they are not just concerned with their functional capabilities. They are also interested in the brand's personality, which they may consider appropriate for certain situations. They look to brands to enable them to communicate something about themselves and also to understand the people around them better. The chapter focuses on consumer rather than organizational brands, reflecting the greater emphasis placed on brand personality and symbolism in consumer marketing. This does not necessarily mean they are inappropriate in business to business markets, rather that they are not as frequently employed. We open the paper by considering the added values from the images surrounding brands. We then address the symbolic role played by brands, where less emphasis is placed on what brands do for consumers and more on what they mean for consumers. Different symbolic roles for brands are identified, along with a consideration of the criteria necessary for brands to be effective communication devices. We draw on self-concept theory to explain how consumers seek brands with images that match their own self-image. A model of the way consumers select brands is presented, which shows how consumers choose brands to project images appropriate for different situations. We then examine how personal values influence brand selection and show the importance of brand personification as a means enabling consumers to judge brands easily. Different brand personalities give rise to different types of relationships and we explore these relationships. Finally, we review the way that semiotics, the scientific study of signs, can contribute to brand effectiveness.

Keywords: Functionalism, Symbolism, Self-concept, Brand value.

1. Brand functionalism

Brands succeed because they represent more than just utilitarian benefits. The physical constituents of the product or service are augmented through creative marketing to give added values that satisfy social and psychological needs. Surrounding the intrinsic physical product with an aura, or personality, gives consumers far greater confidence in using well-known brands. Evidence of this is shown by one study which investigated the role that branding played in drugs sold in retail stores. People suffering from headaches were given an analgesic. Some were given the drug in its well-known branded form, the rest had the same drug in its generic form, lacking any branding. The branded analgesic was more effective than the generic analgesic and it was calculated that just over a quarter of the pain relief was attributed to branding. What had happened was that branding had added an image of serenity around the pharmacological ingredients and, in the consumers' minds, had made the medication more effective than the unbranded tablets.

The images surrounding brands enable consumers to form a mental vision of what and who brands stand for. Specific brands are selected when the images they convey match the needs, values and lifestyles of consumers. For example, at a physical level, drinkers recognize Guinness as a rich, creamy, dark, bitter drink. The advertising has surrounded the stout with a personality which is symbolic of nourishing value and myths of power and energy. The brand represents manliness, mature experience and wit. Consequently, when drinkers are choosing between a glass of draught Guinness or Murphys, they are subconsciously making an assessment of the appropriateness of the personality of these two brands for the situation in which they will consume it, be it among colleagues at lunch or among friends in the evening.

Knowles (2001), starting from the position that branding is the social amplification of benefit, provides a further array of examples about how brands are selected because they enable consumers to make non-verbal statements about themselves. For example:

"I am a high achiever' Mercedes, Roles and Hermes"

"I am on my way to the top' BMW, Tag Heuer and Armani"

"I am an individual' Apple, Swatch and Muji"

"I am a world citizen' British Airways and Benetton"

"I care about the environment' Co-operative Bank and Body Shop"

Brands are an integral part of our society and each day we have endless encounters with brands. Just think of the first hour after waking up and consider how many brands you come across. From seeing the brands used, people are able to understand each other better and help clarify who they are. The young manager going to the office in the morning is proud to wear his Armani suit as he feels it makes a statement about his status, but in the evening with his friends he wants to make a different statement and wears his Levi jeans and Polo casual shirt. Powerful brands make strong image statements and consumers choose them not just because of their quality, but because of the images they project. A study by the advertising agency BBDO found that consumers are more likely to find differences between competing brands where emotional appeals are used, such as for beers, than between those predominately relying on rational appeals. Functional differences between brands are narrowing due to technological advances, but the emotional differences are more sustainable. Having a functional advantage, such as a particular car design, may be a competitive advantage today, but over time it becomes dated. By contrast, when associating a brand with particular values, such as being honest and dependable, these values have a greater chance of lasting as they are more personally meaningful and thus help ensure the longevity of the brand.

Particularly for conspicuously consumed brands, such as those in the beer and car market, firms can succeed by positioning their brands to satisfy consumers' emotional needs. Consumers assess the meanings of different brands and make a purchase decision according to whether the brand will say the right sort of things about them to their peer group and whether the brand reflects back into themselves the right sort of personal feeling. For example, a young man choosing between brands of suits may well consider whether the brands reflect externally that he is a trendsetter and reflect back into himself that he is confident in his distinctiveness. In other words, there is a dialogue between consumers and brands. In the main, consumers do not just base their choice on rational grounds, such as perceptions of functional capabilities, beliefs about value for money or availability. Instead, they recognize that to make sense of the social circles they move in and to add meaning to their own existence, they look at what different brands

symbolize. They question how well a particular brand might fit in with their lifestyle, whether it helps them express their personality and whether they like the brand and would feel right using it. As Mahajan and Wind (2002) note, given the proliferation of brands, appealing to the heart rather than the mind is important. A classic example of this is the way Volkswagen positioned its new Beetle with '60s retro associations. When advertising its disposable cameras, Kodak didn't make logical claims, rather it majored upon the emotional appeal of excitement. In highpriced purchases, emotional positionings can be powerful. For example, Mercedes-Benz, in its American press advertising, used analogies to great writers, sports personalities and historical events. One press advertisement showed a photo of Hemingway with the caption 'a writer' then a photo of their brand as 'a car'. Such understatements helped evoke the benefits of the brand. Brands are part of the culture of a society and as the culture changes so they need to be updated. The vodka brand Absolut, with its creative advertising majoring on its unique bottle shape, is continually reflecting changing culture. However it should be noted that brands don't just reflect culture, they are sometimes part of culture. For example, Harley Davidson bikes reflect the call for freedom and comradeship. In turn, by promoting the Harley Owners Group (HOG), members enact their values through regularly joining with like-minded Harley owners and enjoying weekends away, travelling around new parts.

2. Brands and symbolism

Acriticism often voiced is that many models of consumer behavior do not pay sufficient attention to the social meanings people perceive in different products. A lot of emphasis has historically been placed on the functional utility of products, and less consideration given to the way that some people buy products for good feelings, fun and, in the case of art and entertainment, even for fantasies. Today, however, consumer research and marketing activity is changing to reflect the fact that consumers are increasingly evaluating products not just in terms of what they can do, but also in terms of what they mean.

The subject of symbolic interactionism has evolved to explain the type of behavior whereby consumers show more interest in brands for what they say about them rather than what they do for them. As consumers interact with other members of society, they learn through the responses of other people the symbolic meanings of products and brands. Their buying, giving and consuming of brands facilitates communication between people. For example, blue jeans symbolize informality and youth. Advertising and other types of marketing communication help give symbolic meanings to brands the classic example of this being the advertising behind Levi jeans. As Elliott (1997) observes, the symbolic value of brands operates

in a cyclical process. Consumers construct and make sense of the world through interpreting brands as symbols, inferring meaning, then using these meanings to surround themselves with brands so internally they develop their self-identity.

The symbolic meaning of brands is strongly influenced by the people with whom the consumer interacts. Anew member of a social group may have formed ideas about the symbolic meaning of a brand from advertisements, but if such a person hears contrary views from their friends about the brand, they will be notably influenced by their views. To be part of a social group, the person doesn't just need to adhere to the group's attitudes and beliefs, but also to reflect these attitudes and beliefs through displaying the right sorts of brands. To facilitate understanding of the symbolic meaning of brands, design and visual representations are important in conveying meanings, especially in the service sector where no tangible product is available. For instance, the continual visual representation of First Direct financial services through black and white advertisements communicates a no-nonsense challenger.

Visual representations also have the advantage of avoiding the logical examinations to which verbal expressions are subjected and are therefore more likely to be accepted. Customers are less likely to challenge the symbolic freshness of Green Giant's vegetables than the verbal claim stating that canned vegetables are fresh.

Some brands have capitalized on the added value of symbolism that is meanings and values over and above the functional element of the product or service, as in the case, for example, Häagen-Dazs. Symbolism is sought by people in all walks of life to help them better understand their environment. Different marques of cars succeed because they enable drivers to say something about who they are. We may buy different brands of ties, such as Yves Saint Laurent as opposed to Hermes, not just for their aesthetic design, but to enhance self-esteem. Consumers perceive brands in very personal ways and attach their own values to them. Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) show that even though competing firms are striving to portray unique values for their brands, the symbolic interpretation of each brand varies by type of person. Different people ascribe different meanings to the same product. This challenges the assumption among marketers that the brand's symbolic meaning is the same among all the target market.

To cope with the numerous social roles we play in life, brands are invaluable in helping set the scene for the people we are with. As such, they help individuals join new groups more easily. New members at a golf club interpret the social information inherent in the brands owned by others and then select the right brand to communicate symbolically the right sort of message about themselves. When playing golf, smart trousers may be seen to be necessary to communicate the social role, but to play with a particular group of people it may be important to have the right brand as well. The symbolic meaning of the brand is defined by the group of people using it and varies according to the different social settings. Brands as symbols can act as efficient communication devices, enabling people to convey messages about themselves and to facilitate expressive gestures. Using the Jaguar Visacard, rather than the standard Visacard, enables the owner to say something about themselves to their friends when paying for a meal in a restaurant. Giving Black Magic chocolates for instance, says something about a sophisticated relationship between two people, while After Eight Mints imply an aspiration for a grand and gracious living style. Advertising and packaging are also crucial in reinforcing the covert message that is signified by the brand. Charles Revlon of Revlon Inc succeeded because he realized that women were not only seeking the functional aspects of cosmetics, but also the seductive charm promised by the alluring symbols with which his brands have been surrounded. The rich and exotic packaging and the lifestyle advertising supporting perfume brands are crucial in communicating their inherent messages. On a similar basis, Marlboro used the symbol of the rugged cowboy to communicate the idea of the independent, self-confident, masculine image. Consumers of this brand are not only buying it for its physical characteristics, but also as a means of saying something about themselves.

Brands are also used by people as ritual devices to help celebrate a particular occasion. For example, Moët et Chandon champagne is often served to celebrate a wedding, a birthday, or some other special event, even though there are many less expensive champagnes available. They are also effective devices for understanding other people better. The classic example of this was the slow market acceptance of Nescafé instant coffee in the USA. In interviews, American housewives said they disliked the brand because of its taste. Yet, blind product testing against the then widely-accepted drip ground coffee, showed no problems. To get to the heart of the matter, housewives were asked to describe the sort of person they thought would be using a particular shopping list. Two lists were given to the samples. Half saw the list of groceries including Nescafé instant coffee, and the other half saw the same list, but this time with Maxwell Housedrip ground coffee rather than Nescafé. The results of these interviews using the different coffee brands led respondents to infer two different personalities. The person who had the Nescafé grocery list was perceived as being lazy, while the drip ground person was often described as a 'good, thrifty housewife'. As a consequence of this research, the advertising for Nescafé was changed. The campaign featured a busy housewife who was able to devote

more attention to her family because Nescafé had freed up time for her. This change in advertising helped Nescafé successfully establish their brand of instant coffee.

Brands are also effective devices for expressing something to ourselves symbolically. For example, among final year undergraduates there is a ritual mystique associated with choosing the right clothes for job interviews and spending longer on shaving or hair grooming than normal. These activities are undertaken not only to conform to the interview situation, but also to give the person a boost to their self-confidence. In these situations, the consumer is looking for brands that will make them 'feel right'. A further example of this is in the specialist tea market, where Twinings advertised their teas using the theme 'Teas to match your mood'. The emphasis of brands here is to help consumers communicate something to themselves. So, consumers look to brands in highly conspicuous product fields as symbolic devices to communicate something about themselves or to better understand their peer groups. The symbolic interpretations of some brands are well accepted. For example, Interflora makes use of Eros in their television and press advertisements to reinforce the symbolic association between their flowers and swiftly delivered personal messages. Not only are they building on the mythological associations of Eros, but they are further reinforcing this by bringing the character to life in their commercials to reinforce associations with Interflora. Consumers also strive to understand their environment better through decoding the symbolic messages surrounding them. A client working with an architect sees things like certificates on the architect's wall, the tastefully designed office, the quality of the paper on which a report is word-processed, the binding of the report and the list of clients the architect has worked for. All of these are decoded as messages implying a successful practice. Symbols acquire their meaning in a cultural context, so the culture of the society consuming the brands needs to be appreciated to understand the encoding and decoding process. People learn the inherent meaning of different symbols and through regular contact with each other there is a consistent interpretation of them. To take a brand into a new culture may require subtle changes to ensure that the symbol acquires the right meaning in its new cultural context. For example, Red Cross becomes Red Crescent in the Middle East. If a brand is to be used as a communication device, it must meet certain criteria. It must be highly visible when being bought or being used. It must be bought by a group of people who have clearly distinguishable characteristics, which in turn facilitates recognition of a particular stereotype. For example, The Guardian newspaper reader has been stereotyped as a well-educated person, possibly working in education or local government. In the newspaper market some readers select different brands as value-expressive devices. They provide a statement about who they are,

where they are in life and what sort of person they are. Since brands can act as self-expressive devices, users prefer brands which come closest to meeting their own self-image. The concept of self-image is important in consumer branding and is reviewed in the next section.

3. Self-concept and branding

In consumer research, it is argued that consumers' personalities can be inferred from the brands they use, from their attitudes towards different brands and from the meanings brands have for them. Consumers have a perception of themselves and they make brand decisions on the basis of whether owning or using a particular brand, which has a particular image, is consistent with their own self-image. They consider whether the ownership of certain brands communicates the right sort of image about themselves. Brands are only bought if they enhance the conception that consumers have of themselves, or if they believe the brand's image to be similar to that which they have of themselves. Just as people take care choosing friends who have a similar personality to themselves, so brands, which are symbolic of particular images, are chosen with the same concern. As brands serve as expressive devices, people therefore prefer brands whose image is closest to their own self-image.

This way of looking at personality in terms of a person's selfimage can be traced back to Rogers' self-theory. Motivation researchers advanced the idea of the self-concept, which is the way people form perceptions of their own character. By being with different people, they experience different reactions to themselves and through these clues start to form a view about the kind of people they are. A person's self-concept is formed in childhood. From many social interactions, the person becomes aware of their actual self-concept, that is an idea of who they think they are. However, when they look inward and assess themselves, they may wish to change their actual self-concept to what is referred to as the ideal self-concept, that is who they think they would like to be. To aspire to the ideal self-concept, the person buys and owns brands which they believe support the desired self-image. One of the purposes of buying and using particular brands is either to maintain or to enhance the individual's self-image. By using brands as symbolic devices, people are communicating certain things about themselves. Most importantly, when they buy a particular brand and receive a positive response from their peer group, they feel that their self-image is enhanced and will be likely to buy the brand again. In effect, they are communicating that they wish to be associated with the kind of people they perceive as consuming that particular brand.

There is a considerable amount of research supporting this idea of the self-concept, based on research in product fields, such as cars, cleaning products, leisure activities, clothing, retail store loyalty, electrical appliances and home furnishing. Several

studies have looked at car buying and have shown that the image car owners have of themselves is congruent with the image of the marque of car they own. Owners of a particular car hold similar self-concepts to those they attributed to other consumers of the same car. Also, if the car purchaser's self-image is dissimilar to the image they perceive of different brands of cars, they will be unlikely to buy one of these brands.

To check whether an appreciation of self-image as an indicator of buying behaviour is as useful for conspicuously consumed brands as it is for privately consumed brands, a study was specially designed to look at car brands (conspicuous consumption) and magazine brands (private consumption). In both of these product fields, people chose brands whose images came closest to matching their own self-concepts. What this study also showed was that for less conspicuously consumed product fields actual, rather than ideal, self-image appeared to be more strongly related to brand choice.

There has been a lot of debate about which type of selfconcept (actual or ideal) is more indicative of purchase behaviour. To understand this better, a study was designed which looked at nineteen different product fields ranging from headache remedies, as privately consumed products, through to clothes, as highly conspicuously consumed products. There was a significant correlation between the purchase intention for the actual and ideal self-concept results. This indicated that both are equally good indicators of brand selection. However, the behaviour of individuals varies according to the situation they are in. The brand of lager bought for drinking alone at home in front of the television is not necessarily the same as that bought when out on a Saturday night with friends in a pub. Situational self-image – the image the person wants others to have of them in a particular situation – is an important indicator of brand choice. According to the situation, the individuals match their self-image to the social expectations of that particular group and select their brands appropriately.

Consumers anticipate and then evaluate the people they are likely to meet at a particular event, such as those going to an important dinner party. They then draw on their repertoire of self-images to select the most appropriate self-image for the situation ('I can't let my hair down on Saturday night as there are too many of my husband's colleagues there. Better be a lot more reserved, especially as his boss is hosting this party'). If the situation requires products to express the situational self-image, such as a certain type of clothing, the consumer may decide to buy new clothes. When shopping they will consider the images of different clothes and select the brand which comes closest to meeting the situational self-image they wish to project at, for instance, the dinner party.

Finally, it needs to be realized that there is an interaction between the symbolism of the brand being used and the individual's self-concept. Not only does the consumer's self-image influence the brands they select, but the brands have a symbolic value and this in turn influences the consumer's self-image.

4. Brand values and personality

As people become more integrated into a particular society, they learn about the values of that society and act in ways that conform with these values. Research has shown that values are a powerful force influencing the behaviour of people. A helpful understanding of the term values is provided by Rokeach, who defines values as a lasting belief that a particular type of behaviour, for example being honest or courageous, or state of existence, such as happiness or security, is worth striving for. Identifying the values a consumer adheres to helps in understanding their brand selection and can be used to develop brands.

A young man may work in an organization with a culture that strongly supports the idea of team working and encourages employees to think less about their own achievements and more about how they have contributed to their team's achievement. By being in daily contact with his colleagues, the young man begins to appreciate the value of being a team player, particularly when his team is set demanding goals which can only be achieved within the tight timescale by working well together. Reinforcement of this team ethos is seen by his team going out for an evening meal together at least once every three weeks.

When he is not with his colleagues but with his friends he usually drinks several glasses of his favourite brand of strong lager. However, when going out for dinner with his team from work, he only drinks a brand of low alcohol lager.

In terms of the flow chart in Figure 4.2 his desired consequences, when with his friends, is to have a good time, laughing and narrating funny stories, and on these occasions he drinks a premium lager as it 'gets him into the swing' quickly. By contrast, when with his team at one of their evening dinners he drinks a brand of low alcohol lager since he wants to be alert with his colleagues, to socialize until late in the evening and debate company activities. In essence, he considers the attributes of different brands of lager, thinks about the consequences of these different brands taking into account the situation, and selects a brand which reinforces a particular value. With his work colleagues the important value is being a responsible group member, with his friends it is fun and enjoyment. For the consumer continually to assess the extent to which each of the competing brands in a particular product field reflects their individual values would make brand selection a lengthy task. An easier approach is for them to personify brands, since by considering brands in

more human terms they are then able rapidly to recognize the values portrayed by competing brands. There is a lot of evidence showing that for powerful brands consumers have clear perceptions of the type of people they might be were they to come to life. For example, two brands of credit cards have very similar performance attributes, but where consumers perceive differences it is in their brand personalities. One of these brands might be described as 'Easy to get on with, has a sense of humour, knows lots of people, and is middle class'. By contrast the other brand could be described as 'A little bit dull, harder to find them and quite sophisticated'. The primary source is the cluster of values marketers select to define the brand. Their intention is that by then creating a personality for the brand (e.g. through short lifestyle sketches, or using a celebrity endorsement), this will act as a powerful metaphor to communicate the brand's values. The personality of the brand grows from many sources. One of the main influences on the brand's personality comes from the product or service itself. Abrand of washing powder, for example, which cleans using the aggressive nature of enzymes may be perceived to be more masculine than a brand which cleans without the use of enzymes. Another major influence is advertising and the use of celebrities in endorsements. The events sponsored by the brand owners also influence the brand's personality. For example, a genteel persona is associated with bowls sponsorship, as opposed to a gregarious personality associated with sponsoring rock concerts.

The challenge for the brand marketer is to manage all points of interaction their brand has with consumers to ensure a holistic brand personality. The importance of value as an influencer of brand choice behaviour has attracted research interest. Aparticularly insightful stream of work has resulted from Jagdish Sheth and his colleagues (1991). They argue, as Figure 4.3 indicates, that consumer choice behaviour is influenced by five consumption values. These five consumption values are:

• *Functional value*, reflecting the utility a consumer perceives from a brand's functional capability, for example the perceived engineering excellence of a BMW, or the acceleration of a Porsche.
• *Social value* representing the utility a consumer perceives through the brand being associated with a particular social group, such as Jaguar owners being perceived as achievers.
• *Emotional value* is the utility a consumer perceives from the brand's ability to arouse particular feelings, such as the statement of love when a man gives a woman a gold necklace.
• *Epistemic value* is the utility a consumer perceives when trying a new brand mainly to satisfy their curiosity, such as switching from their habitual purchase of Kellogg's Corn Flakes on one occasion to

a newly launched cereal brand just because they wondered what it might be like.
• *Conditional value* reflects the perceived utility from a brand in a specific situation. For example, eating ice cream at home may primarily be valued for functional reasons, but having an ice cream in a cinema is regarded as more of a treat and in this situation has a high conditional value.

These values make different contributions in different contexts. When out to impress his new girlfriend, a young man in a restaurant may order a particular wine based on his concerns about maximizing social, emotional and conditional values. By contrast, a few years later he may buy some wines to lay them down for future years, being primarily concerned about functional values. Understanding which values the consumer is particularly concerned about in a specific purchase context enables the brand marketer to give the brand the most appropriate set of values.

5.   Brand personality and relationship building

Appreciating consumers' values provides a basis for developing brand personalities to build stronger relationships, as we next address. When a brand has a well-defined personality, consumers interact with it and develop a relationship, just as people in life do. The nature of a relationship between two people can be inferred by observing their individual attitudes and behaviours. Likewise, as Blackston (1992) argues, the nature of a relationship between consumers and the brand can be determined through the attitudes and behaviours they display towards each other, in particular:

• how consumers perceive and react to a brand;
• how the brand behaves and reacts to the consumers.

Brand research has traditionally focused on how consumers perceive and react to a brand. By considering both aspects of the interaction, a more appropriate brand strategy can result. A hypothetical relationship between doctor and patient illustrates how the nature of the relationship can change once both perspectives are taken into account. The patient may perceive the doctor as professional, caring and capable. This would suggest a positive relationship. However, the picture changes when we consider what the patient thinks the doctor thinks of them. The patient's view is that the doctor sees them as a boring hypochondriac. It does not matter whether the doctor really regards the patient as such because the relationship depends on the patient's perception of the doctor's attitude. This private view makes the relationship difficult and unpleasant for the patient, though it may go unnoticed by the doctor. Brand owners may think that consumers have a positive relationship with the brand, but in order to be sure, they also need to ask consumers what they think the brand thinks of them.

The messages conveyed between a brand and its consumers build a two-way communication, in which consumers express their views on the brand and the brand 'responds' by stating a specific attitude towards consumers. As a result, marketers have to deal with two sets of attitudes in consumers' minds: first, they need to understand how consumers perceive the brand as the *object* of their attitudes; secondly, they need to discover the *subjective* brand, with its own set of attitudes. This dual perspective provides a more realistic insight into consumers' perceptions than the single-sided traditional analysis of consumers' views of the brand. Since the second perspective – the brand attitude – can often be the true brand discriminator, marketers need to undertake market research to unearth what consumers think the brand thinks of them.

The following case illustrates how the nature of the relationship can be better understood by including both perspectives. In a market research study about credit cards consumers were asked individually to describe brands and to assess their personalities in order to unearth the dialogue they have with them.

Their responses were examined and several brand personality clusters were found. Table 4.1 shows two personalities consumers had identified for a specific credit card.

Among those consumers seeing the brand as a respected person, the credit card acknowledged the importance of the card owner and extended its status, authority and power, thereby functioning as a status symbol. The consumers seeing the same brand as being intimidating also attributed it with status and authority, but they felt put down by the brand. Both groups of consumers had the same profiles and the same conventional brand image – but the discriminator was the brand's attitude towards them. Having this information provides a better basis for brand development.

As shown in the previous case, the relationship consumers develop with brands is not simply one of loyalty or lack of loyalty. Brands can also act as relationship partners for consumers, enabling them to resolve personal issues. The nature of these relationships is varied and Fournier (1998) has identified fifteen different types of relationship between consumers and brands:

• *Committed partnership* is a voluntary, long-term relationship, such as when someone becomes an advocate for a brand of hiking boots after years of blister-free walking.
• *Marriage of convenience*, that is a chance encounter leading to a long-term bond, such as when someone regularly uses a salad dressing after trying it at a friend's party.
• *Arranged marriage* is an imposed long-term partnership, such as when a householder uses only one brand of washing powder because it was the only brand recommended by the manufacturer of their new washing machine.
• *Casual friendship* is one of few expectations and infrequent interactions, such as when an infrequent breakfast eater rotates between cereal brands, without preferring a particular one.
• *Close friendship* relates to bonding through a sense of shared reward, such as when a teenager believes his trainers to be a comrade in his sport activities.
• *Compartmentalized friendship* is a specialized friendship dependent on a particular situation. This would be a man choosing his beer according to the group of people he is drinking with.
• *Kinship* is an involuntary union, such as when a cook feels obliged to use the same kind of flour that mother used.
• *Rebound relationship* is about a wish to replace a prior partner, for example a woman switches air freshener to avoid any sensory association with the house she used to share with her ex-husband.
• *Childhood friendship* is about the brand evoking childhood memories, such as when a man chooses a brand of orange juice because he recalls drinking it in his childhood.
• *Courtship* is a testing period before commitment, such as when woman experiments with two perfumes before committing herself to one.
• *Dependency* relates to obsessive attraction, as may be the case of a man upset when his favourite beer is out of stock.
• *Fling* is about short-term engagement, such as when a woman tries another perfume for one evening, though she feels guilty about neglecting her traditional brand.
• *Adverserial relationship* reflects bad feelings as seen by consumers refusing to buy a brand of computer they 'hate'.
• *Enslavement* is an involuntary forced relationship, such as when a pensioner is unhappy with the local bank branch but has no alternatives in the small town.
• *Secret affair* is a private risky relationship, such as when someone indulges in their favourite food, hiding it from their partner. For a good brand relationship, the following attributes are necessary:
• *Love* and *passion* Consumers must feel affection for the brand and want to have it at all costs.
• *Self-concept connection* The brand must give consumers a sense of belonging or make them feel younger.
• *Interdependence* The brand must become part of the consumer's everyday life.
• *Commitment* Consumers need to be faithful to the brand through good and bad times, as in the case of Coke and Persil.
• *Intimacy* Consumers should be very familiar with the brand and understand it well.
• *Partner quality* Consumers seek those traits in the brand, such as trustworthiness, which they would in a friend.

• *Nostalgic attachment* The brand should evoke pleasant memories because the consumer, or somebody close to them, used it in the past.

By focusing on these attributes, managers can identify strengths and weaknesses in the relationship between consumers and the brand.

However, while many proclaim their brands as relationship builders, customer comments raise doubts about whether this is really the case. Research by Fournier, Dobscha and Mick (1998) raises questions about how sincere organizations are when they seek to develop their brands as relationship builders. A not insignificant number of firms appear to have lost sight of the fact that when brands are used to build relationships, these should lead to trust and a sensation of intimacy. Relationships are about giving and getting, yet customers frequently report situations where they perceive there is an imbalance between giving and getting. For example some report that when they use a hotel several times a year, they have to disclose personal information each time and feel no benefit from giving this. Firms claim that they value customer relationships, yet their pre-occupation with their best customers sometimes irritates the next tier of customers – particularly when they can see other customers in the same situation getting extra benefits. Discretion is an issue.

There are a variety of actions firms could take to regain confidence in the relationships customers have with brands. Firstly, a relationship is about the brand knowing the consumer so well that it fits their needs perfectly. The brand's team need to cut out the features and functions that consumers do not need and which cause frustration. For example, there are some who perceive hand held TV/video controllers as over engineered. Secondly, brands could be presented in ways that don't detract from consumers' quality of life. In a time pressured society, with a vast amount of data bombarding consumers there are people who appreciate receiving less information – but the information they receive should be of high decision making quality. Thirdly, organizations should re-assess whether all consumers want an involved relationship with their brands. Giving an organization personal information implies intimacy, but if the organization makes no use of this information it needs to resist the need to ask for certain types of information. Furthermore, its not just the marketing team that ask for customer information – other departments are collecting customer information. Through a more integrated approach to customer relationship management the number of requests for information can be reduced. Enacting these points should help better bond consumers with brands.

6. The contribution of semiotics to branding

People make inferences about others from the brands they own, since some brands act as cultural signs. Semiotics is the scientific study of signs. It helps clarify how consumers learn meanings associated with products and brands. If marketers are able to identify the rules of meaning that consumers have devised to encode and decode symbolic communication, they can make better use of advertising, design and packaging. For example, gold has been enshrined in our culture as a symbol of wealth and authority and can convey meanings of luxury, love, importance, warmth and eternity. But to use this as the prime colour on a box for a cheap, mass produced plastic moulded toy car runs the risk of it being interpreted as vulgar.

Some researchers postulate that brands act as communicative sign devices at four levels. At the most basic level, the brand acts as a utilitarian sign. For example, a particular brand of washing machine may convey the meaning of reliability, effectiveness and economic performance. At the second level, a brand acts as a commercial sign conveying its value. For example, Porsche and Skoda signify the extremes in value perceptions. At the third level, the brand acts as a socio-cultural sign, associating consumers with particular groups of people. For example, having certain brands 'to keep up with the Joneses', or wearing a particular tie to signify membership of an exclusive club. At the fourth level, the brand can be decoded as a mythical sign. For example, Napoleon Brandy, Cutty Sark Whisky and the Prudential Corporation, all build on mythical associations.

Semiotics provides a better understanding of the cultural relationship between brands and consumers. Checking the communications briefs for brand advertising against the way consumers interpret the messages can result in the more effective use of brand resources. For example, British Airways once wished to increase the number of female executives using its airline. They developed an advertising campaign, targeted at women business travellers, which spoke about the ergonomics of seats. Semiotics Solutions, a UK research consultancy specializing in semiotics, undertook research to evaluate the new campaign. They found that it was not sufficiently sensitive to the fact that women are not as tall as men, and the copy was rejected by women business travelers who felt that 'talking about 6 1/2 foot women was an insult'. Semiotics can help in the design of brands, as was the case with a hypermarket in the Mammouth chain. Using group discussions, the different values consumers ascribed to hypermarkets were identified and designs developed to match these. Patterns of similarity were sought in terms of the way consumers associated different values with hypermarkets and four segments were tentatively identified from the qualitative research:

• *convenience values*, characterized by 'Find the product quickly, always enough in stock, always on the same shelf';
• *critical values*, characterized by 'My husband isn't interested in frills and friendliness. He's only bothered

about his wallet. He looks at the quality of the products, and at the prices';
• *utopian values*, expressed by comments such as 'I like being somewhere on a human scale, and not somewhere vast and overwhelming';
• *diversionary values*, such as 'I get the basic stuff out of the way first, and then I give myself a little treat, such as browsing in the book department'.
In the group discussions, consumers spoke about spatial issues, and it was inferred that:
• convenience values were associated with interchanges and avenues;
• critical values were associated with roundabouts and orientation maps;
• utopian values related to markets and public gardens;
• diversionary values encompassed covered arcades and flea markets.

Further analysis revealed that consumers expressing convenience and critical values wanted simple, continuous space. By contrast, consumers with utopian and diversionary values preferred complex, discontinuous space. Then, by considering customers in these two broad categories, the semiotic analysis led to the suggested design shown in Figure 4.4. It was anticipated that as they gained more experience shopping in the hypermarket, the two consumer groups would use separate entrances. As such, a different store design was conceived for each entrance. Most consumers would seek all four values of the hypermarket, but would be particularly drawn to the section that reflected their values. Decisions about where to locate the produce were aided by the group discussions. After the store accepted them, the designs had to be adjusted to cope with operational issues, such as ease of rapidly replenishing shelves, lighting, safety regulations, etc. However, overall, Mammouth found this approach helpful in conceiving a new design for their hypermarket.

Another good example of how semiotic analysis can help brand development is provided by Gordon and Valentine (1996) examining consumer behaviour in retail outlets. The different forms of retail outlets, such as supermarkets, corner stores, garages and off-licences not only represent different retailing operations but also convey different messages to customers. The brand's position along the continuum will depend on the triggers present in each outlet. Supermarkets, represent planned shopping and communicate a message of efficient domestic management and functionality. During their routine visits to a supermarket consumers enjoy the familiar orderliness that the same layout and product displays offer. Although this is a typical location for planned purchases impulse buying can also occur, provided promotions give people the feeling that it is right to break the codes of efficiency they are following.

Because of the strong message of order conveyed by supermarkets, consumers often attach a sense of 'disorder' to shopping in corner stores and experience these visits almost with a sense of guilt and confusion. They are suspicious of the limited choice and expensive price range common in corner stores and welcome the reassurance offered by familiar brands. Corner stores present opportunities for secondary or niche brands which people usually choose on impulse, due in part to their feelings of not needing to be an orderly shopper. In garages, two types of purchase can occur: the planned purchase of petrol, and the emergency/impulse buy of other products. Customers travelling on business seek rest and treats from the stress or fatigue of the journey, whereas customers travelling on pleasure want to indulge themselves and underline the sense of fun and holiday. The opportunity for brands in petrol stations is to match the needs of these two groups. Off-licences are the preferred location for buying alcohol as in this type of retail outlet with its calm atmosphere and the depth and breadth of range, consumers feel it is legitimate to purchase their favourite drinks without other shoppers' disapproval.

Here customers receive advice and are encouraged to experiment with a broad range of wines, spirits and beers. Their visit can be planned and they can respond to an impulse of experimentation or indulgence. The previous description of retail outlets shows that they are not only distribution channels but they also communicate specific messages to consumers. Likewise, within a store, single categories convey their particular messages to consumers in the way brands are displayed. For example, are they positioned on the shelf with almost military precision, or are they almost randomly placed on the shelf? Also, does the category sit comfortably between other categories?

Brands are chosen as a result of habit, of an impulse or of a well-thought-through choice. The challenge for brand owners is to exploit the features of each retail outlet so that the automatic purchase is reinforced and the trial buy from impulse or from browsing is encouraged. To increase the likelihood of consumers purchasing their brands, marketers need to consider:

• **Specific category areas** *within the store* dedicated solely to the category, enabling it to communicate in its own language and conveying a strong message of added value. For example, it is common to see bakeries in stores, transmitting their own signals, which are distinctly different from other categories separated from this section.
• **Active packaging** allowing brands to have a dialogue with consumers through their design and format. These elements evoke sensory associations.
• If the **relationship between packaging and advertising** is strong, consumers are reminded of the advertising message when they see the brand.
Semiotics, as Alexander (1996) showed, can be a helpful tool to identify, evaluate and exploit the

cultural myth which exists at the heart of most successful brands. A myth is a sacred, heroic story of doubtful authenticity. In marketing terms, myths are associated with powerful brands, such as Nike, Body Shop and Virgin. Myths provide a logical framework to overcome contradictions in society and successful brands capitalize on this. The myth of the 'Persil Mum' reconciles two opposites: the distance of a detached factory producing the detergent and the closeness of a loving member of the family taking care of the family needs. From this contradiction the Persil myth is about 'caring detachment'.

As Alexander argues, the stronger the oppositions, the stronger the myth and the stronger the brand positioning. The starting point for semioticians helping marketers position brands is to identify the attributes of the brand and at the same time to specify their opposites. They then take pairs of these oppositions and examine the resulting myth diagrams. For example, an attribute of a ready-prepared meal is real food and thus one opposition could be real food/junk food. Another attribute is home made and

the opposition would be home made/commercially made. The myth diagram is then constructed from these two oppositions as shown in Figure 4.6.

The opportunity for the myth explaining the brand positioning is in the two cultural contradiction boxes, that is commercially made real food and home made junk food. Often only one of these quadrants is viable – not many would contemplate home made junk food! Marks & Spencer focused on the opportunity

presented by the cultural contradiction of commercially made real food and became the legendary myth of the store selling high quality ready-prepared meals. In essence, in this approach to identifying brand positioning semioticians keep on taking pairs of oppositions, construct myth diagrams and then explore possibilities for brand positionings. To assess the positioning of a brand through an advertisement, semiotics provides helpful insights about how the brand interacts with the cultural landscape. Lawes (2002) shows that there are several tools that can help decode the brand's positioning. These are:

• *Visual signs* For example, a heart symbolising love.
• *Linguistic signs* The words and phrases used act as metaphors. For example, Golden Nuggets breakfast cereal evokes a sensation about exploration that can be rewarded.
• *Aural signs* Aspects such as tone of voice, regional accents and music contribute to a cultural message.
• *The implied communication situation* In any communication there is always an implied speaker and an implied recipient.
By failing to appreciate consumers' views about these, brand marketers may be under the wrong impression about the way consumers perceive their brand.
• *Textual structure* By looking at the way the text is constructed, further inferences can be drawn. For example is it telling a story, or implying a truthful report?

• *Information structure* Is the information presented as new v. taken-for-granted and are there features which are implied as having different degrees of importance?
• *Visual emphasis* By examining how different elements are arranged relative to each other and their relative size, implications about relationships, order and relative importance emerge.
• *Binary oppositions and contrast pairs* Inferences can be drawn from appreciating how brands are described relative to other benchmarks. For example 'low-fat'.
• *Communication codes* This seeks to understand how different communication codes are being used. For example is white associated with purity and gold with luxury?

7. Conclusions

This article has shown how brands perform a social and psychological role beyond that provided by their physical features. Consumers rely on brands to help them understand and communicate with different groups of people. The fact that consumers report greater pain relief after using a branded, rather than a generic version of the same analgesic, provides evidence of added values from brand images. Creative marketing has successfully positioned brands as effective problem solvers, with personalities that contribute to greater effectiveness. Brands have the added values of symbolism – meanings and values over and above their physical constituents. Consumers look to brands not only for what they can do, but also to help say something about themselves to their peer groups. Rolex watches are not worn just for their functional excellence, but also to say something about who the owner is. To ensure that brands are effective symbolic devices, it is crucial for marketers to communicate their capabilities to users, and their peer groups, through advertising, public relations, packaging, merchandising, etc. The symbolic aspect of brands makes them all the more attractive to consumers since they:

• enable consumers to convey messages about themselves and understand others better;

• help set social scenes and enable people to mix with each other more easily;

• act as ritual devices to celebrate specific occasions;

• provide a basis for a better understanding of the way people act;

• help consumers say something to themselves.

In effect, consumers are encoding messages to others by buying and using particular brands and are hoping that their target audience decodes the message the right way. Unfortunately, this is not always the

case. For example, two friends meeting after several years may decide to go for a drink. One may order an Orange Juice, encoded to communicate their concern about not drinking when having to drive. The second person may decode this as: 'time has dulled their sociability'. When consumers buy brands, they are making decisions about how well specific brands maintain or enhance an image they have of themselves. Just as consumers have distinct personalities, so do brands. Consumers take as much care choosing highly conspicuous brands as they do choosing their friends, since they like to be surrounded by like-minded personalities. Brands whose images match consumers' actual or ideal selfimages are likely to be bought. When friends or colleagues admire someone's newly-bought brand, that person feels pleased that the brand reinforces their self-image and will continue to use the brand. The situation in which consumers find themselves will dictate, to some extent, the type of image that they wish to project.

Through anticipating, and subsequently evaluating, the people they will meet at a particular event, consumers then seek brands to reflect the situational self-image that they wish to display. Individuals' values are a powerful determinant of their brand choice behaviour. Much has been published showing that brands whose values reflect those of target consumers stand a greater likelihood of being bought. To make these value assessments, consumers interpret brands in humanistic terms, and through the metaphor of the brand as a person are rapidly able to judge brands. Marketers are able to influence the personality of the brand through many routes, such as functional characteristics, packaging, advertising and sponsorship.

According to the type of personality clothing the brand, so there is a particular relationship between consumers and brands. Instead of just considering this from the perspective of the consumer, valuable insights about promotion strategies result from considering how brands perceive and react to consumers. A typology of relationships between brands and consumers has been reviewed and, by considering the criteria necessary for an effective relationship, the strengths and weaknesses of the consumer–brand relationship can be assessed. Semiotics, the scientific study of signs, can help brand development by assessing the cultural signs portrayed by different brands. For example, our culture brands the 07.00 train running ten minutes late as the late 07.00, carrying critical associations of inefficiency. However, in lesser developed economies, the train would be branded as the 07.10, portraying the triumph of mass transportation running against many odds in an underresourced environment. Semiotics analyses brands' communication capabilities at four different levels – utilitarian, commercial, socio-cultural and mythical. It can provide guidance about merchandising and displays. Brand advertising and design can benefit from checking communication briefs against the ways that consumers have interpreted the marketing activity as part of the social system. Furthermore, semiotics is a helpful tool analyzing the cultural myth at the heart of a brand to help develop a more powerful positioning.

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