



WHAT DO BRANDS MEAN TO US?

A short introduction to brand research
within Consumer Culture Theory





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Abstract

■ This paper is about you and me and our brands. More specifically, it is about how we view brands, construct brand images and meanings and use them in social interactions with other people. But do brands mean anything to you? Does it matter what brand your jeans are or what brand your bag is? Have you thought about which brands are important to you and why are they important? In other words, what do they stand for in *your* mind and what is it you want to show others through your brand choices?

This paper is organized as follows: after the introduction to the organization-focused and consumer-focused views of brands and brand images, a discussion on individual consumer level brand research is given. Then, brand communities and cultural level brand phenomena are discussed. Finally, overall conclusions of the consumer-focused research traditions are provided.

1

Introduction

Within marketing, corporate and product brands and brand images have been in focus since the 1950's. Traditionally, brand management and branding are seen as company tools where the brand is, first of all, understood as being specified by the company and, secondly, used in a strategic and communicative way. To take an example, the Nokia brand stands for a company that is "the world's leading mobile phone supplier and a leading supplier of mobile and fixed telecom networks including related customer services" and their slogan is "connecting people" (Nokia 2008). The slogan is used in all communication they have on the market.

To begin with, what does the word brand mean? There are many definitions for the word brand in marketing literature, but to cite an example, the American Marketing Association defines brands as:

A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies the seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers'. The legal term for brand is trademark. A brand may identify one item, family of items, or all items of that seller. If used for a firm as a whole, the preferred term is trade name. (American Marketing Association, AMA, 2007.)

Although the definition is from a business perspective, almost everything in the contemporary world can be viewed from a branding perspective. Countries have branding programs, cities have slogans and nomenclature and regions want to be known for something special they think they are outstanding for.

Nation branding is not rare. Quite many countries have nation brand strategies and, for example, Sweden has been named as the world's leading nation brand (Kauppapolitiikka 2008). In Finland, "Brand Finland" is discussed in newspapers as a serious matter that should be handled by governmental representatives, and in fact, a national strategy for "public diplomacy and strategic communication" is already under construction (Kauppapolitiikka 2008). The Brand Finland -strategy aims at getting everyone who represents Finland, including business people, to be commit-

ted to a national brand strategy and act and communicate in accordance with that strategy.

However, not only countries develop branding strategies. In a similar way, the city of Suonenjoki wants to be known for its strawberries and companies want their product or corporate brands to represent something of special value both for consumers and the company. The corporate brand should also differentiate the company from its competitors and other entities on the market in a favorable way for the company and in a way that creates value for the consumer. Similarly, styling houses, homes and even people have become popular as can be noticed from magazines and the boom of reality TV-programs, but also from the amount of “Brand You” -books on the market.

Actually, futurist Rolf Jensen, the director of the Copenhagen Institute for Future Studies, wrote a book called “The Dream Society” (Jensen 1999) in which he forecasted that in the 21st century, imagination, imagery and storytelling will be the success factor not only for business, but also on other levels of human life. What we see today is more or less a prediction that is coming true as quite many people are interested in “branding”, that is, defining their individual profile on Internet sites like Facebook or taking part in various reality TV programs to express their identity.

All the aforementioned examples depict branding and brand strategies with the aim to influence people in a desired way so that the image of the entity, the sender, will develop as is wished by the sender. This approach is known in the business context as an organization-focused or sender-focused view of brands and branding.

As brands and branding is everywhere, it is important to understand brands and brand images not only from the company’s perspective, but also from the consumers’ perspective. The brand *image* is a consumer concept and defines how we as consumers perceive the company and its products and services.

But how do we as consumers or receivers of these branding messages construct our view of the branded entity, that is, the nation, the company or an individual? In a nutshell, instead of taking a sender-focused view by asking “how do branding activities influence the consumer?” we may take a consumer-focused view and ask “what do people do with their brands?” and “how do consumers construct their brand images?” From this perspective we can ask: “What do you think of the Nokia brand?” or “What does Nokia mean to you?” and “How do you use Nokia in social interactions with other people?”

Brand symbolism and the importance of the meaning of the brand to consumers were introduced into brand and image research already

in the 1950's by Gardner and Levy (1955) and Martineau (1958). Levy argued as early as in 1959 "people buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean" (Levy 1959, 118). Consumers do not make consumption choices solely based on the product's utilities, but also based on what kind of symbolic meanings they attach to the product. This viewpoint is now well established within marketing thinking.

In the contemporary world, we live in a symbol-rich environment and the meanings attached to any situation or object is determined by the interpretations of these symbols (Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998). Therefore, "What does Nokia symbolize to you?" It has been said that the symbolic meaning of products and brand images are used by consumers in their search of identity through consumption (Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998). This means that we build at least part of our identity through consumption by our choice of car brand, mobile phone brand, ski brand, clothing brands, etc. Consumers use brands in their identity construction processes as well as in interactions with other people to communicate who they are.

In line with these thoughts, during the last decade a new view on brands developed, focusing on how brands function, both at an individual "micro" level and at a social and cultural "macro" level. Culture influences the interpretations of brand meanings, but brands also influence cultures. For example Mc Donald's has largely influenced the eating habits in many countries (O'Guinn & Muniz 2005). This new approach towards brands and their meanings focuses on the consumer's own experiences and on how s/he builds relationships with brands and communicates these experiences and brand relationships with other people. Studies within this research stream show clearly that companies do not control brand images and brand relationships to the degree that has been, and is, supposed in the branding literature (Thompson 2004). Therefore, it is also important for companies to understand consumers' views of brands, images and identities on individual, social and cultural levels.

2

Brands on an individual, consumer level

■ How should the word brand be understood from the consumer perspective? When viewed from the consumer perspective, the brand becomes synonymous with the brand image. In other words, brands are for us consumers what we perceive them to be. It is our own interpretations of the company's messages, what other people say and what we ourselves experience that is of importance when we construct our understanding of the brand. So, for us the Nokia brand is what we perceive it to be. Therefore, our image of Nokia is for us the brand.

As brands are believed to play a vital role in the consumer's ongoing construction of identity, it is important to notice that it is the de facto brand image, the way we perceive the brand, that is of importance in the identity construction process.

Therefore, the consumer is understood as an active and creative consumer searching for identity through consumption, who uses the symbolic meanings of brand images to construct, maintain and express each of his/her multiple identities. As Ornstein expresses it: "*We are not one, we are many*" (Ornstein 1989).

Brand meanings and images operate in two directions, inwards in constructing a self-identity and outwards in constructing the social world through social symbolism. Since identity is rooted in perception (Higgins in Urde 1999), it can thus be discussed based on how we perceive ourselves when we construct and re-construct our identity. In other words, we employ consumption, not only to create and sustain the self but also to locate us in the society, and as was mentioned, it is the image we have of a brand that plays a vital role in these processes.

According to Higgins (in Urde 1999), identity consists of a private and social self, as depicted in Figure 1.

DIMENSIONS OF THE SELF					
		The past self	The true self	The normative	The ideal
The basis of the self	The private self	How did I conceive myself earlier	How I conceive myself	How I believe I ought to be	How I would like to be
	The social self	How do I believe others conceived me earlier	How I believe others conceive me	How I believe others feel I ought to be	How I believe others would like me to be
		Past times	Present time		Future

Figure 1. Dimensions of identity over time (Rindell 2007).

Higgins' original model is developed by Rindell from a time perspective. Therefore, the dimension of past times has been added to the model and the questions how "I" and "the others" have conceived me earlier becomes relevant. Based on the elements in the figure, you can analyze various brands you use or have used and consider their importance to you, and especially what they represent or have represented for you in your life. In line with this kind of thinking, Holt (2002) has argued that companies would benefit if they could, instead of offering brands as cultural blueprints, offer them as cultural resources which consumers could use as useful ingredients to produce the self they choose. Some examples of this exist when the consumer has been able to choose an individual set of product features or to design the look of the product as wished by the consumer.

The timeline in Figure 1 indicates that the images are constructed over time. In the consumer brand context, little empirical work had been conducted before Susan Fournier's (1998) seminal study on the validity of a personal relationship proposition in the consumer brand context. Fournier argues that consumers form emotional relationships with brands, which anchor their identity. Based on her study she argues that brands should be seen as an active relationship partner and that there are different types, qualities and strengths of relationships between the consumer and her image of the brand.

The temporal dimension was studied by Rindell (2007) focusing on how consumers construct their corporate brand images over time. She found that consumers' corporate images are "constructed through dynamic relational processes based on a multifaceted network of earlier images from multiple sources over time" (Rindell 2007, 162). Moreover, images are many and they may change but they change in relation to all available

sources in our environment. In practice, we may also change our view of the company based on influences from other sources than the company. For example, our friends may have a huge influence on how we perceive a specific brand and also influence us to change our views. Therefore, the image construction process is considered dynamic and relational.

The relational aspect indicates that not only are images constructed over time, but also that they are constructed based on experiences from multiple sources over time. Rindell (2007) introduced the concept “image heritage” to define the temporal dimension in the image construction process, and thereby, it consists of all these earlier images from multiple sources over time based on which we construct our images today. The interesting thing is, however, that these earlier images may be from recent or not that recent happenings and even a long time ago. Moreover, some memories are more important than others. Therefore, we may focus on a specific period of time or some specific happening based on which we construct our images in the present. For example, we may consider a café to be as it used to be because we have spent a lot of time there earlier. Although the café might change and the clientele and the interior may be different, our memories often still affect how we perceive it today as images are constructed based on what resides in our memory. Therefore, we may interpret in the present all their communication activities like advertising based on these earlier images we have. This may be an advantage for a company if our memories are positive, but it can become a burden for the company if the memories we refer to are negative. Can you think of an example where you have noticed that people don’t seem to construct their images based on recent experiences, but rather stick to older images from past experiences when constructing their images today?

In a similar way, other studies show (Braun-La Tour et al. 2007) that childhood memories influence how we perceive specific brands today. For example, we may think a car brand is good because our grandpa used to drive it. Or we may not like some specific jeans brand because we associate them to something in the past that arouses bad feelings. Therefore, due to our memory we can say that consumers have mental relationships with brands that span over time. The images we have of certain brands are constructed based on these earlier memories. Moreover, brand relationships are relational not only due to the time dimension, but also due to that these earlier experiences are from multiple sources, our environment, our friends, relatives, the company and other sources.

Brand relationships live on also after our death. Wattanasuwan explored how the living hold on to the deceased through memories of the brands the deceased once consumed. The phenomenon explored is a

paper-burning ritual performed among Chinese Thai at funerals. The ritual is to send essential things in paper format miniatures to the deceased so that he/she could continue with his/her lifestyle in the afterlife. Wattanasuwan suggests that memories of the deceased are strongly related to the brands and consumption activities of the deceased. Therefore, brands also represent our identities in the eyes of others and through brands we are able to immortalize the identities of the deceased symbolically (Wattanasuwan 2005). In other words, people's brand relationships can become symbols and reminders of their identities to others. Moreover, an intergenerational influence on consumption and brand preferences may occur and be transferred from one generation to the next within a family, especially in collectivism and extended family living arrangements (Moore & Wilkie 2005) as in the Chinese Thai families.

2.1 Brand communities

Another macro-level phenomenon is brand communities. Here a brand is the foundation of group identification (McAlexander et al. 2002) and the group members can be classified as "dedicated fans" to that specific brand. The brand community concept can work the other way around as well, as Kates has pointed out, when a subculture group adopts a brand and specifies its meaning. These kinds of phenomena have been studied, for example, among homosexuals who have developed another interpretation and meaning for certain brands than the heterosexual consumers (Kates 2004).

However, when consumers become "dedicated fans" to a certain brand to the extent that the brand usage and meaning can be characterized as "subcultures of consumption" (Schouten & McAlexander 1995) or "brand cult" (Belk & Tumbat 2005), a brand community may develop. Brand community, like Harley-Davidson motorcycles and Apple computers, can be defined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). Harley-Davidson's Harley Owners Group (HOG, Internet, visited 29.2.2008) is a classic example of a brand community, which actually is supported by the company. When a person buys a Harley-Davidson motorcycle he is encouraged to join the club, attend its meetings and to participate in various events. It has turned out that taking part in these activities increases the member's commitment to the brand. For marketers, it is of importance to understand how and why the membership is valuable for the member (Algesheimer et al. 2005).

What makes a brand community a brand community? According to O'Guinn and Muniz (2005), a brand community can be characterized through its three dimensions: Consciousness of kind, evidence of rituals and traditions, and a sense of obligation to the community and its members. Next, all these aspects will be discussed.

Consciousness of kind appears when a group of people feel a collective similarity to one another in the group, and at the same time they feel that the group differs from other groups (O'Guinn & Muniz 2005). Another classic brand community is the Citroen 2CV Club. This club appears in Finland, as well as in most European countries. What is interesting about the club is that the product is no longer available on the market but the club and the community still exists. Quite a few of the current or previous members are still, however, faithful to the brand Citroen. Although they do not have a 2CV anymore, they still drive a Citroen, albeit another model.



Figure 2. The 2CV (Helsingin Sanomat 2008).

Typically, brand community members share little beyond a shared appreciation of the brand. The members of the 2CV Club do not necessarily share much more than an appreciation of a specific Citroen model, the 2CV, although the brand also stands for shared belief that consumers like to recognize (O'Guinn & Muniz 2005). In order to fully understand and appreciate these beliefs, you have to share the same kind of thinking with the other members of the brand community.

In the 2CV example, the shared beliefs the community members share may be appreciation of the car's design and technical solutions but most of all; the members think they share a philosophy of life by owning and driving a car. The car is regarded almost as a family member and quite often the car also has a name, which appears somewhere on the car. The car is often decorated with, for example, flowers – geraniums – and curtains in the back window. Another philosophy was, or still is, as there are more than 1000 2CV cars in Finland, that driving is fun and it can take some time. Originally the car's top speed was only 56km/h, but later the motor was changed to a more powerful one so the car could do about 100km/h. Fun driving can be associated to the specific technical solutions the car has: the ragtop roof and the smooth suspension provide a sunny and smooth tour in the summer sun. According to the community members, no other car can provide the same.

The second characteristics, rituals and traditions in brand communities, serve to “reify the community and its culture” (O'Guinn & Muniz 2005, 257). Rituals and traditions in the 2CV Club are the way members greet one another when they meet in the traffic using a special hand sign. Members also arrange big meetings in different parts of Europe to which all 2CV-friends are welcomed.

In brand communities moral obligations are of importance (O'Guinn & Muniz 2005). In the 2CV club the club's history is shared with new members and stories from earlier meetings and happenings, reifying to the members what it means to belong to the club and what is expected of the members. For example, club members help each other in refurbishing and fixing the car, which can be seen as a moral obligation for community members. Extraordinary to this specific brand community is that the car, the 2CV, is not manufactured anymore and the community members drive old refurbished 2CVs. Here, the importance of a strong sense of responsibility is quite important as the community is the only source of support in keeping the cars in traffic. As O'Guinn and Muniz (2005) pointed out, the power of a brand community for brand loyalty lies much in the social relationships and communal sensibilities and forces.

In the example given above about the 2CV Club, the car stands for lifestyle and shared meanings on what a car stands for, and what is nice car design, and these thoughts are shared by a group of people who form the brand community. But the opposite also holds within an existing community, that is, how does a brand attain social fit? In other words, how are brands chosen into already existing communities? Kates (2004) conducted an ethnographic study in a non-brand-focused context in a gay men's community and argues that legitimate brand meanings may serve to "enhance and dramatize issues of interest and importance to human communities" (Kates 2004, 462). It can, however, be argued that within most communities (e.g., business students in a business school), some brands get special meanings among the students that are not necessarily known by or shared with students at another school, which is to say, members of other communities. Nevertheless, a brand community is defined by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, 412) as "non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand," whereas in the above example about business students, the community is a geographically bound community.

The meaning of the brand and degree of loyalty to the brand community has been characterized from the extreme of brand religions to looser brand community metaphors. Brand religions, characterized by Belk and Tumbat (2005), are phenomena of extreme belief in the all-encompassing role that the brand can play in the consumers' lives. They argue, based on their study on Macintosh computers, that the "Mac fans" relationship with the brand has not only become a brand religion for the users but also more generally, a cultural phenomenon.

Brands may be important to people, but Wattanasuwan (2005) pointed out that "striving to create self through symbolic consumption may also enslave us in the illusive world of consumption". On the one hand, brand loyalty at a high "religious" level may blind us from other products or services offered on the market that could, for example, provide better technological alternatives or, as can be seen in youth culture, only some brands and styles are approved whereas others are strongly rejected.

From the marketer's perspective, O'Guinn and Muniz (2005, 268) have posed the critical question "who owns the brand?" In other words, who owns the meanings and what the brand stands for, the image of the brand? What is it communicated to be? Is it the company or the community? They point out that community members act as social collectives who can have a great influence on the marketplace. This means that a brand community can have the power to influence the company's marketing decisions. For example, the Harley Davidson brand community

has interfered with the company's marketing actions when they have experienced that the actions do not follow the community's perceptions of the Harley Davidson brand. However, in this specific brand's case, the company and the community cooperates in various ways as the community also can be seen as a resource for the company in its branding efforts. In a situation like this, the brand images and meanings are continually co-created both by the community and by the marketer. O'Guinn and Muniz (2005, 269) argue, however, that "all brands convey complex meanings to others, meanings that are continually negotiated between the marketer and consumers". However, as has been mentioned, also other people and our culture influence our brand images and meanings. Grönroos (2000) points out that the image is constructed in all contact points between the marketer and the consumer, which means that also earlier contacts between the company and the consumer may become important in the image and meaning construction process for the individual consumer. The study conducted by Rindell (2007) supports this view.

In sum, Figure 3 depicts how consumers' brand images and meanings are constructed as an interplay between culture, company actions, the consumer and other important sources of information *over time*.

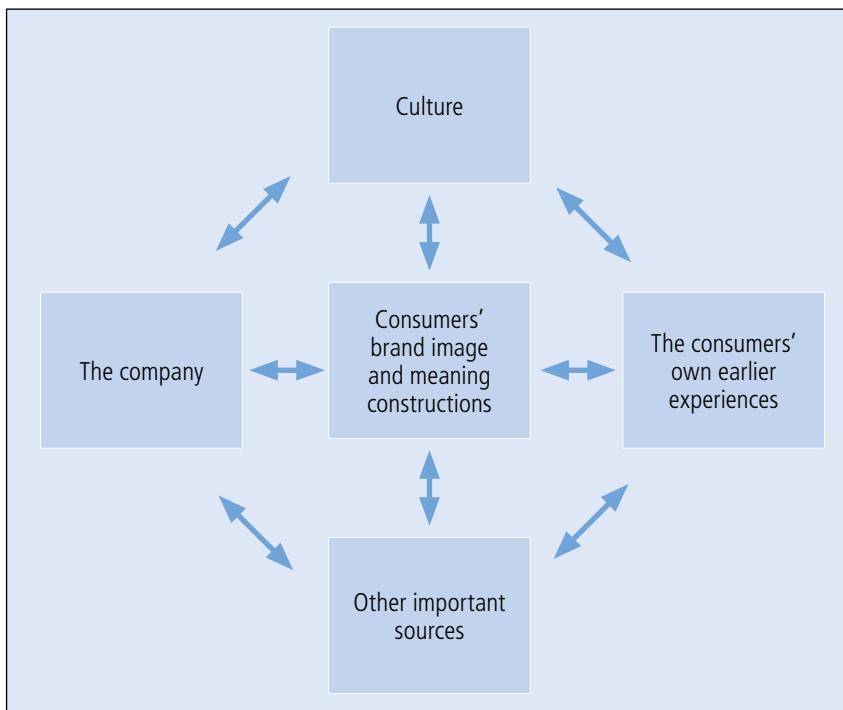


Figure 3. Interplay between sources and experiences over time in consumer constructed brand images and meanings.

2.2 Brands as citizen-artists

Cultural level brand issues refers to cultural changes due to a foothold of a certain brand and the culture this brand stands for, such as eating habits through the McDonald's hamburger chain or changes in values and beliefs through Disney World Productions films and products. Often this phenomenon is named by referring to the origin of the brand in question that has got a foothold in the marketplace and in the culture, for example, the “McDonaldization” of the culture. Therefore, we can see that culture is constantly formed and reformed by commerce as marketing is a culturally very influential phenomenon (Firat 2005).

Brands in the contemporary world are more than just cultural blueprints, they have become citizen-artists that help consumers to cultivate their identity (Holt 2003), especially in cases where the brand has a long history and can be considered as an authentic cultural resource “because they are understood as legitimate entities co-created between the marketer and the community” (Kates 2004). Holt has argued that some brands have become so powerful that they encapsulate myths that lead culture and have hence become iconic (Holt 2003). In conclusion, brand architecture from a consumer perspective range from global iconic brands to national iconic brands, global brand communities to national brand communities, and brands as citizen-artist to individual brand meanings.

3

Conclusions

Brands are here to stay, but what can we say about the role of brands in consumers' lives? The branding and image culture has been criticized frequently and from many perspectives already for half a century. Within the fine arts, Andy Warhol opened the critique and discussion on the power of brands and consumption in 1965 with his painting "The Campbell's soup can" (The Andy Warhol Museum, 2008), which became an icon in popular art. More recently, Naomi Klein has posed probably the most well known critique against the brand dominance in our societies. In her book "No Logo" (Klein 2003), the main critique is addressed towards international "success brands" like Nike, not only for striving for economic, but also social and cultural power.

Wattanasuwan's (2005) critical viewpoint towards consumption is based on the idea that the desire to create "the self" gives us an illusive momentary sense of being. To free ourselves from this vicious circle is to realize that "to be" is an illusion (Wattanasuwan 2005, 183). However, in order to understand the roles brands play in people's lives, we need to understand how they are constructed, and to what degree consumption is brand conscious or brand dependent? In other words, how much of our consumption is brand driven or even part of our identity projected? Moreover, what is the role of context and age in consumption, identity processes and brand meaning constructions? These are only to mention a few questions that need to be answered for understanding more specifically, how people "use" brands and what roles people give to brands in their consumption choices. As a final conclusion, there is a need for further research of "what people do with brands".

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