

Do consumers co- create brand meaning

[Business](#), [Branding](#)



Brands today play an important role in today's society. There is possibly not a consumption decision that does not involve a brand; they are embedded in our everyday lives. Everything we consume is branded in some form or another. For the consumer they serve as a differentiator and a simplifier in purchase decisions and are recognised as offering the consumer a perceived set of benefits (Randall 1997, cited in Boyle 2007). Furthermore, brands are valuable financial assets to a company in the form of brand equity.

The most cited definition of a brand is by Kotler, " a brand is a name, term, sign, symbol or a combination of these, that identifies the maker or seller of a product". Therefore, a brand is easily definable in terms of its functional attributes and physical characteristics; however its actual meaning to the consumer is a complex concept, due to the context and dynamic nature of not only the product or service itself but also the consumer. The following paper critically assesses the argument that consumers are in fact co-creators of brand meaning.

The discussion firstly centres on the concept of brand meaning and what it actually 'means'. This is necessary in order to understand how these meanings are created, thus is central to developing an argument. Marketing strategy and communications are argued to be the creator of meaning by ascribing a desired meaning to a brand whereby consumers will be passive recipients of these messages and interpret them as intended. Therefore marketers are the meaning makers.

Another stream of literature suggests that meaning is actually created by the consumer in order to express self identity and define self-concept (Belk

1988; Escalas, Bettman 2005; Levy 1959; Elliot, Wattonauwan 1998). Thirdly meaning is argued to stem from culture and that marketers may initially create the brand meaning but actually brand meanings ultimately change and recreate culture (McCracken 1986). The above three environments from where brand meanings are created will be discussed in order to draw conclusions.

Brand Meaning Firstly a brand is not only its functional and physical characteristics such as logos, packaging, performance and so forth; they encompass a particular meaning for the consumer and according to Ligas and Cotte (1999) are consistent and identifiable. A further element of a brand is its characterisation or its personality which is the symbolic meaning of the brand, which is said to be personal to the consumer. Brand meaning is a multifaceted concept having many dimensions thus problematic to define.

The managerial literature considers brand meaning in the context of brand equity and brand building. Keller (1998) argues that the foundation of all brand equity relates to the consumers knowledge of the brand, consisting of two main components; brand awareness and brand image. This may have been acquired from many sources such as advertising, word of mouth or past experiences with the brand. Brand awareness consists of brand recall and recognition. Brand image refers to sets of associations linked to the brand that consumers hold in their memory.

This suggests that the root of all brand meaning is therefore the knowledge the consumer has of the brand. Franzen and Bouwan (2001) (cited in Perthon, Pitt, Campbell 2009) define brand meaning in the context of mental

links between brand names, images and cognitions in a consumer's memory which causes the brand to acquire meaning. How this brand meaning is created and developed is discussed in the next section. The Meaning Makers Drawing from the literature on brand meaning and creation, meaning can be derived from three sources; the marketer, the consumer and cultures.

The Marketer Initially the marketer ascribes a meaning for a brand, selects the target market and through forms of marketing communications disseminates this intended meaning into the marketplace. Meaning at this point is transferred from the marketer into the marketplace with the intention of persuading consumers to purchase the brand by creating a meaning that resonates with the target market. This firm-centric view assumes that the consumer is a passive respondent of marketing messages and interprets this as intended by the marketer.

Keller (2003) states that marketing activity creates or affects multiple dimensions of brand knowledge and these multiple dimensions influence the consumer's response to marketing activity. From this perspective the firm is the meaning maker, the sole creator as their aim is to create a specific response to marketing stimuli. This stage of brand meaning creation is said to be controlled by the marketer (Boyle 2007). They essentially control the brand image to be perceived by the consumer through careful strategic choices (Thomson 2008). For example the Volvo car is conveyed as being reliable, Abercrombie & Fitch as young, hip and American.

There are a variety of means by which a marketer attaches meanings to brands with which the consumer relates to, such as the way it is advertised

or through celebrity endorsements. The marketer draws from the external environment to search for meanings that the consumer will connect with in the hope that the brand will gain brand loyalty. Although a specific meaning is being delivered by the marketer, how it is interpreted cannot be controlled as consumers differ in their perceptions of a brand (Boyle 2007; Oakenfall 2000). The discussion now focuses on what happens to the brand meaning imbued by the marketer once it is in the marketplace.

The Consumer Firstly to understand how consumers create brand meaning it is important to understand why they create meanings to consumption objects. Consumers attach meanings to objects in order to make sense of the world and to define self concept and create self identity (Belk 1988; Escalas, Bettman 2005; Levy 1959). An individual in defining themselves must consume brands whose brand meanings are congruent with aspects of their self concept (Escalas, Bettman 2005). Therefore, brand meanings are used by consumers in their search of identity through consumption (Elliot, Wattanasuwan 1998).

Meanings of objects create some sort of emotional response which is idiosyncratic to an individual thus the intended meaning by the marketer may be changed and developed or reshaped. Fournier (1998) argues that consumers form relationships with brands as they would do with people by attaching feelings and emotions to these brands. Through an exploratory study the author identified fifteen types of relationships that consumers have with their brands, such as arranged marriages, flings and enmities.

Consumers therefore construct meanings of brands through developing a relationship with them as though they were human beings.

Consumers can be deemed as co-creating brand meaning as they are active in the creation of brand meaning through forming such relationships. This may differ or build upon the stimuli of marketing messages as the consumer may have to adapt the meaning to become more meaningful. Consumption of the brand can either verify the intended meaning sent by the marketer or it may need to be adapted to fit with the consumer's internal thoughts and feelings and their external environment at a particular time. It is argued that the individual constructs multiple meanings of brands as they have multiple selves.

This also depends on personal backgrounds, social variables, context of consumption and frames of reference (Berthon, Pitt, Campbell 2009). The consumer may have rejected the intended meaning by the marketer and created their own brand meaning to fit with their life, circumstances and self concept, so in-fact did not co-create but created; therefore they are the meaning makers. Brand meanings are not constructed solely on an individual level as we do not exist in isolation and knowledge is shared; therefore, social interaction plays an important role in brand meaning creation.

Brand meaning is a process negotiated in the marketing, individual and social environments (Ligas, Cotte 1999). Consumers as individuals construct their own meanings to a brand whether it is from marketing stimuli or consumption experiences or both and then transfers these into social settings through communication. The creation of brand meaning is,

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therefore, interaction of these elements. Followers of particular brands have shared meanings that they agree upon. They all share a passion towards this brand.

This is evident in the emergence of brand communities. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) define a brand community as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand". Harley Davison is probably the most well known of these. They share the same set of beliefs and symbolic meanings of this brand in which the brand is at the centre of their community. These consumers live their lives through these brands as the symbolic meanings resonate and help form their self beliefs and identity.

Through the community, brand meaning is created, maintained and possibly recreated in some instances as with any other piece of information (Muniz 2001). Often brand meanings in these brand communities are constantly negotiated as members must all agree on this shared meaning. Culture As brands feature in everyday life they can become embedded in the cultural system. Consumer culture is the system of cultural meanings that the market inscribes in commodities (Holt 2002). Any product can take on any meaning, it is context specific and meanings can change (McCracken 1986).

As Levy (1959) argues brands are powerful symbols that also reflect the cultural milieu in which they are embedded. Marketers ascribe a homogenous meaning to a brand but within different cultures this can be very different, dependant for instance on the different traditions and values. Global brands such as McDonalds do not have the same meanings in

different cultural contexts. For example, in China the meaning of this brand may be completely different to the meaning in the UK due to the cultural context in which it is consumed.

External forces as well as internal forces interact with the consumer and their consumption objects. The cultural environment is a rich source from where meaning can be derived and consumers use this among other factors to attach meaning to a brand. It can be argued that brand meanings intended by the marketer actually create, form and change cultures.

Starbucks has changed the way we drink coffee, many westernised societies have become a coffee culture, the Starbucks brand meaning is embedded in our cultures but it has also changed our cultures. Conclusion

Brand meaning creation is inherently complex due to the nature of brands, meanings and consumers all of which are multifaceted. It is evident that consumers do create meanings of brands on a personal level to define their self concept and create self identity and they do look for meaning from marketing messages, however, meaning is individually perceived (Holt 2002). Consumers purchase brands that are congruent with aspects of their selves but internal and external forces impact on this and also the experience of actual consumption, all of which may change these ascribed meanings by the marketing stimuli.

This indicates that consumers are not passive respondents but are involved in meaning creation. Consumers also create brand meanings through brand communities and social interaction where knowledge is shared and built upon. Brand meaning creation stems from a variety of sources and may not be a

linear process. Marketers produce a brand and search for a meaning they can ascribe to it through consumers and the cultural system. However, we do not live in a static world whereby meanings remain constant thus meanings change and evolve.

In conclusion consumers are involved in the co-creation process; however, they are one of many contributors to the creation of brand meaning and as Ligas and Cotte (1999) argued that meaning is negotiated by marketers, consumers, social interaction but culture is certainly a force in creating meaning to consumption objects. Finally, brands and their meanings are powerful influences in the world today, into how we live our lives and have such significance that our future is changed and shaped by them.