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CREATING BRAND MEANING: A REVIEW AND RESEARCH AGENDA

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Abstract

In this paper I review, from the perspective of experimental research, studies that have examined how brands acquire cultural meaning, and suggest future research directions. McCracken's (1986) model of the meaning transfer process gained influence about thirty years ago, but experimental studies of the processes it posited have been limited in their scope. The review is organized around three questions. First, what should be the dependent variables: the types of meanings that can adhere to brands? Second, what have we learned from studies on the types of

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visual, sensory, and human cues that are the sources of particular types of brand meaning -- our independent variables? Third, what do we know, and need to know, about the inferential and other processes through which consumers “take possession” of these brand meanings from these cues? The review concludes with a research agenda.

Keywords: Branding, Advertising, Attributions and Inference Making, Automatic or Unconscious Processes, Imagery and Nonverbal communication, Sensory Marketing, Personality

CREATING BRAND MEANING: A REVIEW AND RESEARCH AGENDA

There is increasing recognition today of the important role of consumer-brand relationships in consumer research (Fournier 1998; Escalas and Bettman 2003; Thomson, MacInnis and Park 2005; Batra, Bagozzi and Ahuvia 2012).¹ Consumers are most attracted to those brands that, in addition to providing needed functional benefits, also best symbolize the ‘meanings’ that help these consumers build and express their self-identity (Levy 1959; Belk 1988; Malar, Krohmer and Hoyer 2011). While there have been scores of papers on the actions that brands can take once they acquire market-relevant meanings (e.g. through brand extensions), there are fewer on how these meanings can be created for brands in the first place. In this paper I offer a perspective on research that has examined how brands acquire cultural meaning, and suggest future research directions. I will focus more on research that has used an experimental, “information processing” approach though, as will become clear very quickly, the key processes have been illuminated most clearly (but still incompletely) by researchers using “interpretive” methods.

¹ Because of space constraints, the number of references cited within this paper is a small fraction of those that deserved to be cited; I apologize to those researchers whose relevant work is not mentioned here. These space constraints also forced a reduction in the number of contributing literatures that could be discussed.

It is necessary first to clarify what we mean by “brand meaning.” A standard interpretation (e.g. Keller 2003) is to think of it as the complete network of brand associations in consumers’ minds, produced by the consumer’s interactions with the brand and communications about it (including communications not under the marketer’s control). Naturally, many of these associations concern the functions or benefits of that brand, including its quality, but also include identity-reflecting symbolic aspects, including brand personality (Aaker 1997), personal values, group and ethnic/national identity, family and national traditions, etc. (see Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price 2008). In what follows, we are concerned more with those intangible and subjective associations and meanings that are ‘non-functional’ and symbolic, even if they have their origin in physical/objective properties (e.g., a car’s metal bodywork might create a sense of style).

The Creation of Brand Meanings

A brand can acquire cultural meaning in many ways: the users typically associated with it, its employees or CEO, its product-related attributes, packaging, logos, product category associations, brand name, symbols, advertising message and style, anthropomorphization, price, distribution channel, etc. (Aaker, 1997, p. 348; Batra, Lehmann, & Singh, 1993, p. 93). Although other streams of research also help in understanding the process through which these associations get formed, McCracken’s ‘meaning transfer’ model, drawing from cultural anthropology and ethnography, is arguably the most influential.

McCracken (1986, 1989) argues that advertising (among other means) can be used to transfer a particular kind of cultural meaning from the outside world to a brand. An ad can bring together the brand and some other widely accepted symbol of a particular cultural meaning (e.g., the appropriate tone, pace, camera direction, voice-overs, etc.), and that particular kind of cultural meaning (e.g., gender, age, social class, ethnicity) then becomes a part of the brand. Later, when the consumer buys the brand, that same meaning is then transferred from the brand to the consumer, which is why the consumer purchases that brand in the first place. McCracken used this model (1989) to show how endorsers can be seen as conduits of cultural meaning transfer.

McCracken’s model of the meaning transfer process gained influence about thirty years ago, but it took almost two decades for explicit experimental tests to emerge (e.g. Batra and Homer 2004; Miller and Allen 2012). I will critique this research below; many questions in this

meaning-building domain still need to be asked. McCracken himself (1989, p.319) raised these three: (1) the need to create an instrument to determine the meanings that adhere in brands (and in the cues, such as endorsers, used to create these meanings); (2) the nature of the rhetorical and visual devices by which this meaning is transferred from the stimulus (e.g. ad) to the brand; and (3) the process by which consumers contribute to the meaning transfer process: how the consumer takes possession of these meanings. It thus seems appropriate to organize this review along these same three questions -- which can also be mapped into these conventional ones: what exactly are our dependent variables? Our independent variables? Our mediators and moderators?

1. Dependent Variables: What are the Types of Meanings that adhere to Brands?

Although McCracken himself wrote eloquently on the types and dimensions of possible brand meanings, a review of the literature shows that researchers have unfortunately conflated the broader domain of brand *meanings* with the narrower one of brand *personality*. Almost all of the research in this domain uses only the deservedly-influential brand personality measurement instrument of Aaker (1997) to measure effects and outcomes.² I show below that while the pioneering Aaker brand personality framework and scale is a very reasonable one³ if the goal is to measure the narrower construct of brand personality, we need to go beyond it when we seek to measure the broader domain of brand meanings. Indications of these additional brand meanings appear in several relevant literatures, to which I now turn.

Human Personality. The well-known “big five” human personality factors used in brand personality research often only account for about 50% of the variance in many studies of human personality traits (Almagor, Tellegen and Waller 1995, p. 301). Some researchers have claimed support for additional factors that appear potentially important to studies of brand meaning, such as “positive valence” (e.g., outstanding, impressive) and “negative valence,” (e.g., wicked, awful) (in Tellegen 1993); or the factor composed of items such as “erotic, sensual, naughty” (Almagor, Tellegen, and Waller 1995, p. 305).

² Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price (2008) use a broader list of meanings in their scale, but as I show below even their list can be extended in the ways suggested in this paper.

³ Critiques and elaborations of the Aaker (1997) framework in recent years (e.g., Geuens, Weijters and DeWulf 2009; Valette-Florence and De Barnier 2013) have concerned its applicability to specific cultures or industries; raised methodological issues; or argued that these scales include some items that are not, strictly speaking, measures of personality, but rather of broader constructs such as “brand identity” or of non-latent human-like characteristics such as age, gender and social class (Geuens et al. 2009).

Corporate Image. The extensive literature on corporate image is obviously relevant for brand meanings in an age when consumers are placing increasing weight on social responsibility and “purpose.” Thus consideration should be given to the items for social and ecological responsibility used by Fombrun and Van Riel (1993, p.136). Davies, Chun, da Silva and Roper (2004) also suggest the addition of Ruthlessness (arrogant, controlling), and Informality (easygoing), both of which seem very relevant to considerations of “employer branding.”

Cultural Meanings. Clearly, the various dimensions of cultural meaning discussed by McCracken and others (e.g., Levy 1959, 1981) need to be examined to see what additional brand meaning dimensions they might suggest. According to McCracken (1986, 1989), cultural meaning consists of cultural categories (the distinctions with which a culture divides up the world, e.g. class, gender, status, age), and cultural principles (the ideas with which the categories are created, similar to dimensions). The “male/female” category difference, for example, may imply the principles/dimensions of delicacy and strength, and the “upper/lower social class” category may imply the dimensions of refinement and vulgarity. While space limitations preclude a full review, some of McCracken’s ‘cultural meaning’ dimensions that warrant explicit measurement include that of “place” (e.g., “family country,” covering the dimensions of “relaxing,” as well as the dimensions of “mom-ness,” nurturance, nourishment, and growth); “homeyness,” implying simplicity, authenticity, naturalness, informality, security; “discriminating (non-mainstream),” cultured, “elaborative” (non-simple), refinement/vulgarity; etc. While the Aaker brand personality factor of SOPHISTICATION (Upper Class) factor contains the items upper class, glamorous, and good-looking, it is not quite the same as McCracken’s cultured/refined, which could be an important meaning discriminator for luxury or artistic goods. Additionally, since brands with meanings of ‘traditional’ can also become cool and trendy (as seen in the recent demand for ‘authentic’ and ‘retro’ brands), there might be value in treating brand meanings of ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ as separate unidimensional meanings, rather than assuming that they form opposite ends of a single bi-polar dimension.

The Values Literature. The literature on individual and social values (e.g. the typology of Schwartz et al. 2012) would also seem to be a relevant content domain from which to generate further brand meanings. While many of the types/dimensions of human values can be mapped onto standard brand personality dimensions, others are arguably missing, such as Schwartz’

SAFETY: some brands acquire meanings of safety, security, and comfort, which go well beyond the single 'secure' (reliable) item in typical brand personality assessment.

Feelings and Emotions. Brands also often have different kinds of feelings and emotions (or "quasi-emotions") linked to them, such as warmth and nurturance for Campbell Soup, security and confidence for IBM, happy feelings and fun/enjoyment for Coke, the feeling of being 'confident' and a "winner" for Nike, etc. Many of these exist in standard typologies of "affective states" (e.g. Diener, Smith and Fujita 1995, p.134; Batra and Holbrook 1990), and can clearly be meanings that brands symbolize, such as feelings of affection, love, and caring (which fit nicely with what McCracken called nurturance), or feelings of security, serenity, and contentment (which fit well with the McCracken-derived "homey-ness" factor). The affective states of passion and lust would fit well with the additional human personality factor of "erotic, sensual and naughty" that were found by Almagor et al. (1995).

Future Research. The task of future research on our "dependent variables," therefore, is to consider adding these additional types of meanings into an inventory that goes beyond the usual brand personality scales. An illustrative list, derived from the literatures just discussed and others, appears in Table 1. Survey data could be collected from consumers in which multiple brands are rated on the extent to which they signify these meanings, in a manner similar to that used by Aaker (1977), as well as ratings across individuals of the same brand. Split-sample analyses (utilizing analysis + holdout samples) could then identify the clusters of items emergent in these data, using techniques such as the SAS VARCLUS procedure. This procedure attempts to divide a set of variables into nonoverlapping clusters in such a way that each cluster can be interpreted as essentially unidimensional. Specifically, in a type of oblique component analysis related to multiple-group factor analysis, it computes the first principal component for each cluster and assigns each variable to the cluster with whose component it has the highest squared correlation. This procedure appears to correspond closely to that recommended by Cattell (1978, p.452) for a 'nonarbitrary' taxonomy-development procedure. Standard confirmatory analysis techniques can then be used to test the convergent and discriminant validity, as well as the construct reliabilities, of the dimensions of brand meaning that emerge. If they pass these tests, research needs to assess whether these 'newer' categories offer any 'added value' (vs. the usual brand personality scales) in brand preference prediction, and conduct additional tests of nomological validity.

2. Independent Variables: Sources of Particular Types of Brand Meaning

I turn now to our second question. In McCracken's phrasing, what is the nature of the rhetorical and visual devices by which these meanings are transferred from the stimulus (e.g. an ad) to a brand? More conventionally, what should be our independent variables – that create and transfer particular kinds of cultural meaning into brands?

Several independent streams of research have developed in recent years in which individual meaning-carrying stimuli have been studied experimentally to test their effects on the kinds of brand meanings in the prior section (most often, the brand personality dimensions of Aaker 1997). A non-exhaustive list⁴ of these individual (sets of) cues or stimuli would include:

- (a) *visual cues* used in advertising and packaging (Scott 1994; Pracejus, O'Guinn, and Olsen 2013), including aesthetic (Schmitt and Simonson 1997; Hagtvedt and Patrick 2008) and rhetorical styles (McQuarrie and Mick 1992; 1996); color, as used in packaging or advertising or logos (Labrecque and Milne 2012); typefaces (Grohmann 2016); logo designs (Henderson and Cote 1998; Jiang, Gorn, Galli and Chattopadhyay 2016); and packaging shape and labels (Orth and Malkewitz 2008; Van Rompay, & Pruyn 2011);
- (b) *sensory cues*, such as types of music (Zhu and Meyers-Levy 2005), and the sound (phonetic characteristics) of brand names and of speech patterns (Lowrey and Shrum 2007; Spence 2012);
- (c) *human cues*, such as types of advertising endorsers (McCracken 1989), types of props and clothing (Solomon and Greenberg 1993), and the "body language" (gestures, eye gaze, use of physical space, facial cues, etc.) used in advertising (Haley, Richardson and Baldwin 1984), some of which are used today in social media via text equivalents (Luangrath, Peck and Barger 2017).

A detailed review of all these research streams (and a complete list of citations) is simply not possible here given space constraints. Good summaries of some of these individual literatures can be found in Grohmann (2016) for typefaces; Jiang, Gorn, Galli and Chattopadhyay (2016) for logo designs; Krishna, Cian and Aydinolglu (2017) for packaging; Labrecque and Milne (2012) for color, also covered in Krishna et al. (2017); Lowrey and Shrum (2007) and Spence

⁴ See footnote 1.

(2012) for phonetic symbolism; McQuarrie and Philips (2016) and Wyer, Hung and Jiang (2008) for visual communication and rhetoric; and Meyers-Levy and Zhu (2010) for music. For coverage of additional domains such as olfactory (smell), haptic (touch), and taste cues, and additional coverage of the literature on sound, language and musical cues, see Krishna (2012). Krishna and Schwarz (2014) detail recent work in conceptual metaphor theory that underlies research on the meanings that can be created and communicated by packaging and other characteristics.

While future work in these areas would benefit from a more integrative approach (as clearly shown by Krishna 2012), research thus far has taken place in narrow silos and, as required by the experimental method, has been reductionist in nature. To illustrate typical methodologies and findings, I provide below descriptions of just two areas, the meaning-creating effects of typefaces and music. (Endorser effects are also discussed later in this paper.) I then point out important issues that these studies raise – which are then dealt with at greater length in the third, concluding section of this paper.

Typeface

Lewis and Walker (1989) provided evidence that typefaces possess connotative meanings, because their visual features (such as line, weight, orientation, and size) may be perceivedly similar to objects in the world that possess similar meanings. The thickness of a bold typeface may thus imply weightiness and deliberation, while italic type may connote thinness or being lightweight, and an oblique typeface may imply speed potency because of its visual similarity to a runner's posture. Because of such perceptual characteristics, a typeface may connote degrees of force, precision, quickness, reliability, and warmth. They also showed, by comparing reaction times for conditions in which a presented typeface and word were either consistent or inconsistent (e.g., the word "light" written in a bold typeface), that subjects do indeed preconsciously decode a typeface's semantic meaning.

Doyle and Bottomley (2004), Grohmann (2016) and Schroll, Schnurr and Grewal (2018) present useful reviews of this extensive literature (going back to 1923). Notably, Henderson, Giese and Cote (2004) found experimentally that type fonts differ in the extent to which they are perceived as pleasing (i.e., attractive), engaging (i.e., emotional, interesting), reassuring (i.e., formal, honest), and prominent (i.e., masculine, strong). More recently, Grohmann, Giese, and

Parkman (2012) link type characteristics (i.e., how natural, elaborate, harmonious, heavy, or flourish the type font looks) to consumers' perceptions of brand excitement, sophistication, ruggedness, sincerity, and competence (the five brand personality dimensions of Aaker 1997).

Music

Most TV commercials and radio ads use music. Such music can raise attention, improve recall, reduce wearout, and increase ad and brand likability and attitudes. Yet music in advertising obviously does more: it creates affect, and the associated consensual meanings with that piece of music can potentially be transferred to the advertised brand (Zhu and Meyers-Levy 2005; Meyers-Levy and Zhu 2010). Various researchers have broken down the music in ads into its component dimensions (e.g. tempo and rhythm, volume and timbre, mode and harmony), and related combinations of these to the emotional responses that get evoked. For instance, music can evoke a sad emotional state in the listener if it is in a minor mode, has slow tempo, low pitch, firm rhythm, dissonant harmony, and soft volume, while excitement-type emotions emerge when the music is in a major mode, has fast tempo, medium pitch, uneven rhythm, dissonant harmony, and loud volume. Juslin and Vasfall (2008) discuss six possible mechanisms through which such emotional responses are evoked by musical elements, such as evaluative conditioning, emotional contagion, and musical expectancy.

Clearly, analysis linking specific elements of music, to specific consumer perceptions -- a reductionist approach -- is potentially very useful. Yet, as has been most persuasively argued by Scott (1990), music in advertising also interacts with the other verbal and nonverbal elements of the ad, and becomes part of the ad's symbolic form. A brand's choice of ad music can communicate the "values" the brand stands for: "By using certain visual, verbal, and musical styles, an advertiser makes a meaningful choice from among a variety of possibilities. The viewer interprets the stylistic choices as a sign indicative of the character...of the communicator" (1990, p. 227).

Future Research. In this category of "independent variables," two directions for future research suggest themselves. The first is the need for more work in areas that have seen little, most notably an ad's use of particular non-verbal bodily and facial cues. Mehrabian (1972) concluded that only 7 percent of interpersonal communications is traceable to words while 55 percent came from facial expressions and 38 percent from the way in which people used their

voices. Research into the latter could, for instance, use the kinds of experimental methodologies employed by Ekman, Freisen and Ellsworth (1972), who studied how particular facial looks conveyed specific emotions.

The second direction could be development of integrative frameworks – what types of color, or logos, or music, or ad visual style, each communicate the same meaning, such as energy and excitement, or sophistication and refinement? I know of only two such attempts to date: Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer (2013) and Spence (2012), each of which have looked at a small set of antecedents. For example, Spence (2012, Table 1 on p.46) shows how some musically-induced affective responses can also be “matched” with the meaning/symbolism of particular sound phonemes, shapes, and colors – thus high-pitched tones; fricative consonants; music that is dissonant, staccato and fast; angular product shape; and yellow or white colors, might all communicate similar meanings. Why this is important will become clearer in the next section, where I show that meaning-giving cues work strongest when they are present in congruent configurations, and need to be studied in this collective, instead of a reductionist and individual, manner.

3. PROCESS EXPLANATIONS OF MEANING TRANSFER: AN APPRAISAL

While McCracken’s meaning transfer model makes a compelling case for the phenomenon itself, it is less clear on the precise nature of the processes that create this transfer. In his 1989 article on celebrity endorsers, McCracken writes (p.314, emphasis added) that “(advertising) elements and products must be presented in such a way that *the similarity between them suggests itself irresistibly* to the viewer.” He writes later (p.316) that “the ad must be designed to suggest the essential similarity between the celebrity and the product so that the consumer will be able to take the last step in the meaning transfer process.” This is presumed to be an active process on the part of the consumer: “consumers are constantly canvassing the object world for goods with useful meanings...(but) there is no automatic transformation of meaning nor any automatic transformation of the self. The consumer must claim the meanings...” (p.316-317).

But how exactly do consumers “claim these meanings,” if they are not stated explicitly and verbally in the ad? How exactly does a consumer infer, from this “suggested, essential

similarity,” what cultural meanings are embedded in the advertised brand? The way in which nonverbal elements of an ad communicate is necessarily through inferencing and meaning-making by the viewer. As McQuarrie and Phillips (2016, p.217) write, in discussing how pictures in ads create brand meaning, “semantic meaning is never in the picture; it has to be carried over by the viewer. Pictures don’t mean anything, in the way that well-constructed sentences composed of words always do mean something. But pictures do invite the viewer to bring semantic interpretation to bear, and each picture may be said to beckon, from over here, but not over there, so that not any meaning can be imported.” Even in cases where a certain kind of product meaning can be explicitly and verbally asserted in an ad, it may be rhetorically more advantageous to imply that meaning instead: brand beliefs formed through inferences rather than explicit claims may be especially powerful when they concern social or normative meanings.

Such nonverbal communication of desired brand meanings is, obviously, most crucial when an ad uses only visual elements, with related aspects such as colors, layout and graphic design elements, etc. From a semiotic perspective (Mick 1986), each of these elements possesses a certain kind of context-bound cultural meaning (e.g., the color red may serve as a symbol or sign of passion and romance), and the ad combines and integrates these various meanings. A key implication of this perspective is that the form or style than an ad uses to communicate its central product-related message therefore matters considerably for the meanings it communicates nonverbally (Scott 1990; 1994). Much of the experimental/IP research on visual elements of an ad (see Wyer, Hung and Jiang 2008 for coverage) has however ignored the meaning-creating effects of these stylistic elements. A notable exception is the work by McQuarrie and Mick (1992, 1996), who used experimental methods to demonstrate that the use of particular visual rhetorical figures in advertising do in fact create meanings that go beyond the literal transmission of product information to the consumer.

Such use of rigorous experiments to study meaning transfer from nonverbal stimuli is very commendable and necessary. Earlier sections of this paper have already discussed scores of other experiments that have manipulated logos, colors, musical elements, packaging shapes, etc., to study the cultural meanings they transfer to brands. However, most such studies still suffer from important limitations and leave a number of important process questions unanswered. To show this, I now examine those experimental studies which have studied McCracken’s “overall’

meaning transfer process using endorsers as the manipulated nonverbal factor (given the importance of endorsers in McCracken's own seminal papers, e.g. McCracken 1989).

Experimental Studies of Nonverbal Endorser Effects. Kirmani and Shiv (1998, Study 1), in examining the moderating effects of issue-relevant elaboration on the effects of source (endorser) congruity on brand beliefs, found that the "toughness" associations of Clint Eastwood (vs. Tom Hanks, seen as more "funny" than "tough-rugged") impacted beliefs about the toughness/durability/reliability of a watch brand more under high (than low) elaboration conditions. However it could be argued that all the brand beliefs they studied were still more about "functional" attributes than about non-functional, symbolic and cultural, brand meanings.

The first direct experimental test of the meaning transfer model of endorser effects was probably the one by Batra and Homer (2004), who investigated the extent to which an endorsement by a sophisticated (Barbara Walters) or a fun (Rosanne Barr) celebrity endorser increased the perception of the endorsed brand as more sophisticated or fun (which are clearly about brand meaning, rather than functional). They provided evidence for these effects, manipulating ads that showed one of these celebrities endorsing the brand, without explicitly describing either the celebrity or the brand on these meanings. They also found moderating effects of the product category (fun being more relevant for potato chips, and sophistication for expensive cookies); a social consumption context; and the measure of impact (on purchase intentions rather than attitudes). (I will return to these important product category moderators below.) Their studies had limitations: respondents only saw one exposure of the stimulus advertisement, and the study did not probe deeper into the nature of the "inferential belief formation" that the authors argued should be driving the effects. Both limitations have been addressed in some subsequent experimental studies.

Evaluative Conditioning Studies. Miller and Allen (2012) used a "forward" evaluative conditioning procedure, in which consumers saw a series of 80 images on a computer screen, with the first 20 being either the forward trials (brand followed by a negative-image celebrity) or randomly selected images. (The remaining images were randomly selected distracter brands and images.) For the mature and familiar brands they included, the paired brands were rated higher on negative imagery (trashy, cheap, and controversial) and consequently lower on overall quality and brand attitudes. Thus their experimental procedure used multiple exposures rather than just

one, and examined the transfer of non-evaluative meanings (i.e., not a mere transfer of affect), building on the earlier work of Kim, Allen and Kardes (1996).

But how does such non-affect meaning transfer take place, in this type of “evaluative conditioning” paradigm in which the conditioned stimulus (the brand) and unconditioned stimulus (the ad/endorser) “co-occur”? Does it require conscious awareness of the co-occurrence and pairing (“contingency awareness”), along with attentional resources? Kim et al. (1996) showed that conditioning effects on brand attitudes could involve *both* the direct and non-cognitive transfer of affect, from attractive images, *as well as* the cognitive formation of inferential beliefs about brand attributes, using descriptive visual images – but only participants who were aware of the pairing of the brand with the relevant image acquired the transferred belief (their Experiment 1). Many other researchers have also argued that evaluative conditioning occurs through deliberate propositional reasoning and requires attentional resources (Davies, El-Dereby, Zandstra and Blanchette 2012) and/or “contingency awareness” (Halbeisen, Blask, Weil and Walther 2014).

In contrast to these findings that contingency awareness is necessary, Miller and Allen (2012) concluded that their data supported the existence of processes through which semantic meaning can get transferred between co-occurring stimuli automatically, with minimal conscious processing or awareness. Other conditioning-paradigm researchers (such as Sweldens, Van Osselaer & Janiszewski 2010) also claim that such awareness, and/or attentional resources, are unnecessary. A major reason for this continuing debate on the necessity of “contingency awareness” is the difficulty in measuring it directly: if the measure used is not sensitive enough, or if it over-estimates “true” memory, accurate assessments of its role are difficult.

Going beyond these methodological issues, it is vital to remember that in the present context (of understanding how brand meaning gets created) we are not concerned with conditioning-type processes that create or transfer liking and affect, but instead create or transfer semantic, non-evaluative meaning (Miller and Allen 2012). Galli and Gorn (2011) showed that such “semantic priming” effects can be demonstrated using a methodology of “subliminal pairing” – which by definition occurs without awareness, and thus rules out conscious learning. While theirs is a powerful finding, it awaits replication. In addition, several other tasks remain for future research, discussed below.

a. A Greater Understanding of Inferential Processes

A more precise understanding of the inferential processes by which consumers infer brand claims from nonverbal ad elements – especially those that are pictorial -- is clearly needed. Most research on inferential belief-formation processes has typically examined only the effects of an ad's verbal elements on functional attribute beliefs and on overall brand attitudes. One study (Smith 1991) did find that while the way in which visual and verbal claims led to inferences was similar in some ways (both were influenced by assessments of covariation between missing and known attributes), they differed in others (visually-based inferences may be discounted more and be weaker than verbally-based ones, and pictures disproportionately influence inferences). But it did not speak to the question of the relative resource demands for semantic inference-making across nonverbal vs. verbal stimuli.

In their thorough review of the inference-making literature, Kardes, Posavac and Cronley (2004) make the point that inferences can be automatic, spontaneous, or deliberative and resource-intensive, depending on the degree to which fresh information is required (with automatic inferences not requiring any resources). In their discussion of how brands acquire associations (p.238), they argue that consumers build many of these brand meanings in a heuristic manner – inductively using specific cues (such as endorser) to infer general traits (such as social status) about the brand, using information readily available in memory, made speedily and without effort. At the same time, they also discuss the possibility of other, more effortful and deductive, “category or schema based” inferences about a brand, that need to draw on prior knowledge about the product category, the corporate brand-owner, etc. (p.249).

Their distinctions suggest that it may be productive for future research to not assume that all brand meanings are inferred in the same way. Some inferences, such as those from vibrant colors or high-tempo music, which create affectively-toned meanings such as fun, cheerfulness, energy and excitement, may draw on “hard-wired” or “embodied” associations (Meyers-Levy and Zhu 2010) and thus be transferred relatively automatically. Thus at least part of the transfer of an endorser's personality on brand meaning might work via less cognitive conditioning mechanisms, such as “spontaneous trait inference” or “mere association” (Carlston and Mae 2007; Dimofte and Yalch 2011; Bergkvist 2017).

In contrast to these minimal-cognition meaning inferences, others -- such as those made from pictorial ad cues suggesting a brand's degree of class/sophistication, or artistic lineage -- may require knowledge of cultural schemas and thus more "active interpretation" (McQuarrie & Mick 1992; Scott, 1994; Hagtvedt and Patrick 2008). Consumers may need to process them with sufficiently high 'ability' and 'motivation,' since such brand meanings are arguably 'co-constructed' by the viewer/reader through an active meaning-creation process. Such culturally-anchored meanings may thus occur through conditioning processes that do require more cognitive resources as well as contingency awareness. While this seems a plausible distinction, it is not self-evident that the application of all previously-learned cultural knowledge requires significant cognitive effort. It is possible that the application of a cultural lens to incoming stimuli may also be automatic and effortless. Future research could test these possibilities.

b. The Role of Category Schema in Associational Priming and Inference Making

As just mentioned, Kardes et al. (2004) list a type of consumer inference-making process that is "category or schema based," where consumers draw on prior knowledge about the product category to make inferences about brand meanings. The literature on priming effects also suggests that "generic" associations about a brand's product category should make those types of meanings more salient and accessible when a brand in that category is encountered, increasing their utilization when consumers need to make inferences. Levy (1986) argued that "a primary source of meaning is the product (category) itself," giving examples, within the beverage category, of how liqueurs can mean discrimination, wine snobbism, beer sociability and democracy, soup tradition, and juices virtue. Levy (1981, p. 55) also documented how specific foods are associated with specific kinds of users (e.g., lamb chops and salads with women, steaks for men). A review of such "category meanings" can be found in Batra, Lenk and Wedel (2010), who empirically estimated the personality-type meanings of entire product categories, and used them to derive measures for the strategic planning of brand extensions.

Thus if the category and consumption context make certain meanings more accessible, these meanings should be more likely to be self-generated when consumers see missing (or not explicitly stated) information in an ad. As Kardes et al (2004) mention, consumers are more likely to make a particular inference about a missing attribute when it (a) becomes more accessible in memory, and (b) is seen as highly correlated with the unknown attribute (i.e. a

correlation-based inference). Consistent with accessibility-diagnostics theory (Lynch, Marmorstein, & Weigold, 1988), these types of more-accessible and more-correlated meanings should be more likely to be inferred from a category cue.

An implication from these findings is that IP/experimental research on meaning transfer needs to carefully incorporate the moderating effects of product category and consumption context, on both the transfer of cultural meaning as well as its downstream impact on brand preference. Facilitating effects of such product category “congruency” have been found by Batra and Homer (2004), Doyle and Bottomley (2004), and others. While some authors have used a processing fluency account to explain these, an additional explanation may be the greater diagnosticity of a category-relevant brand meaning, to a decision about brand choice in that category (Lynch, Marmorstein, & Weigold 1988). For example, mothers buying baby foods, soups, and other products for their children are obviously doing so in their roles as nurturers, so the nurturance associations of Campbell Soup, Gerber and others are obviously relevant – thus more diagnostic -- to their decision-making.

c. The Role of Cue Configurations in Priming, Inferencing and Perceptual Fluency

Relying on a similar line of argument, the likelihood of particular brand meanings being inferred for a brand from an ad cue should also go up if a multiplicity of ad cues, not just a single one, coherently suggest the same brand meaning. Each piece of connotative meaning created and communicated through one single branding element (e.g. typeface or color) necessarily does not work in isolation, but only in tandem with all the other branding elements also at play (McQuarrie and Phillips 2016, p.164): inferred meaning depends on the context created by all the cues present, operating collectively. These must also, naturally, be consistent with the overall brand meaning or positioning sought for the brand. Empirical evidence for such “congruency” effects appears in several studies (see review in Grohmann 2016). Van Rompay and Pruyn (2011), using a processing fluency account, showed that that congruence between a product’s visual shape and typeface (each connoting either luxury vs. casualness, or masculinity vs. femininity) facilitates stimulus processing, thereby positively affecting the design appeal of the product and also brand credibility and value (price expectations).

An implication from these findings is that IP/experimental research on meaning transfer needs to remember the interactive effects of multiple ad cues on both the transfer of cultural

meaning as well as its downstream impact on brand preference. The study of the meaning-creating effects of ad elements is therefore not well-suited to experimental designs that are methodologically limited to just one element (such as the logo studies of Henderson et al. 2004), or even two; while this limitation is hard to overcome, it is important (McQuarrie and Phillips 2016, p.150-152).

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To summarize and conclude, the research agenda is long, for continuing experimental work on how brands acquire cultural meaning.

First, a more exhaustive set of measures is needed for the types of brand meanings that can be created. Brand meanings cover a much broader domain than brand personality, and there are several potential types of brand meanings – such as delicacy and strength, refinement and vulgarity, sensuality and security, naturalness and informality, nurturance and confidence, social responsibility and authenticity – that relevant literatures suggest as possibilities.

Second, more types of meaning-creating stimuli need to be studied, and their effects integrated more completely. We do know a lot about how meanings are inferred from individual cues such as colors, logos, music, sound, typefaces, visual rhetoric and styles, and packaging, and sensory elements such as smell, taste, and touch. But we need to know more about the meanings created by non-verbal and facial cues (such as those used in an ad) and – most importantly -- how multiple cues work together in creating congruent configurations, that greatly facilitate the acquisition and transfer of cultural meaning by brands.

Third, we need to dig deeper into the nature of the conditioning and inferencing processes involved when nonverbal cues create these brand meanings in consumers. The processes that create and transfer semantic, non-evaluative meaning are likely different from those that transfer liking and affect, and could be occurring at multiple levels, both automatic and more resource-intensive. In investigating these processes, experimental studies need to incorporate multiple cues and their interactions, and product category and consumption context moderators, to the extent feasible within the naturally-reductionist experimental paradigm.

Table 1. An Illustrative Integrative Typology of Possible Brand Meaning Items

	Brand Personality Categories
1	Down-to-earth, <i>Informal</i> , “Small Town”, <i>Relaxed</i>
2	<i>Loving</i> , <i>Caring</i> , <i>Nurturing</i> , <i>Kind</i>
3	<i>Homey</i> , <i>Secure</i> , <i>Serene</i> , <i>Content</i>
4	<i>Authentic</i> , <i>Simple</i> , <i>Natural</i> , <i>Genuine</i>
5	<i>Ethical</i> , <i>Honest</i> , <i>Trustworthy</i> , <i>Reputable</i>
6	<i>Spiritual</i> , <i>Moral</i> , <i>Religious</i> , <i>Virtuous</i>
7	<i>Innocent</i> , <i>Childlike</i> , <i>Pure</i> , <i>Wholesome</i>
8	<i>Cheerful</i> , <i>Sociable</i> , <i>Good-natured</i> , <i>Friendly</i>
9	<i>Daring</i> , <i>Adventurous</i> , <i>Pioneering</i> , <i>Rebellious</i>
10	<i>Spirited</i> , <i>Playful</i> , <i>Festive</i> , <i>Active</i>
11	<i>Assertive</i> , <i>Confident</i> , <i>Dominant</i> , <i>Forceful</i>
12	<i>Responsible</i> , <i>Reliable</i> , <i>Systematic</i> , <i>Dutiful</i>
13	<i>Imaginative</i> , <i>Questioning</i> , <i>Creative</i> , <i>Original</i>
14	<i>Sophisticated</i> , <i>Cultured</i> , <i>Refined</i> , <i>Discriminating</i>
15	<i>Intelligent</i> , <i>Clever</i> , <i>Shrewd</i> , <i>Expert</i>
16	<i>Thoughtful</i> , <i>Reflective</i> , <i>Contemplative</i> , <i>Philosophical</i>
17	<i>Glamorous</i> , <i>Upper-class</i> , <i>Classy</i> , <i>Exclusive</i>
18	<i>Feminine</i> , <i>Delicate</i> , <i>Dependent</i> , <i>Gentle</i>
19	<i>Masculine</i> , <i>Strong</i> , <i>Independent</i> , <i>Rugged</i>
20	<i>Passionate</i> , <i>Lustful</i> , <i>Sexy</i> , <i>Romantic</i>
21	<i>Anxious</i> , <i>Worried</i> , <i>Fearful</i> , <i>Insecure</i>
22	<i>Old-fashioned*</i> , <i>Contemporary</i> , <i>Traditional*</i> , <i>Modern</i>

Note 1: Items with an asterisk (*) are reverse coded.

Note 2: Italicized items are non-Aaker items. Aaker’s (1997) items are not italicized.

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