

Article type : Research Dialogue

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Author Manuscript

How Brands Acquire Cultural Meaning: Introduction

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As consumer researchers, we focus a lot on brands. What is “brand meaning” and what is cultural about brand meaning? Our dialogue centers around this question, while also bringing attention to alternate methodological perspectives. Consumer research has two prominent paradigmatic silos – the experimental approach and the interpretive approach, and has made little room for discussive connectors – the research, as also the researchers, typically use one or the other paradigm, with few exceptions. Relatedly, we have not had a forum where we have the chance to read and compare how a question would be approached with the two alternate paradigms. In this dialogue, such was the goal: to look at the topic of “how brands acquire cultural meaning”, through the lens of consumer psychology and the lens of consumer culture theory, with the hope that such a dialogue could elucidate the niceties and also the limitations of both perspectives, and bring some insight to which approach should be favored for understanding a specific issue. Another point of note is that while JCP dialogues started in 2004 (with a target article by Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, and Sheldon), this is the first dialogue with a target article

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as [doi: 10.1002/jcpy.1120](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1120)

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discussing research that uses an interpretive approach. My wish is that more interpretive dialogues follow.

With a comparative goal, unlike other dialogues, we have two target articles and two commentaries, all authored by people who have contributed many research insights to the meaning of brands. The first target article is authored by Fournier and Alvarez (FA) and favors an interpretive approach; the second is penned by Batra and favors an experimental approach. These are followed by two commentaries which compare and contrast the two target articles, with one commentary written by a team that generally use experiments in their own research – MacInnis, Torelli, and Park, and the other by researchers that primarily use an interpretive approach – Price and Coulter.

Batra focuses on what brand meanings are, whereas FA highlight the cultural aspects of brand meanings. As FA and Batra both indicate, cultural models are relatively stable cognitive networks of domain specific structures (or cultural schemas) such as values, beliefs and implicit theories, that are shared by a social group, and are manifested in myths, metaphors, ideologies, rituals and ingrained habits; brands and products obtain meaning within these cultural networks. Importantly, brand meaning within this cultural context is not an individualistic perception of brand symbolism, but a culturally shared comprehension of the abstract brand image.

While attending to the question of how brands acquire cultural meaning, FA structure their arguments around four core concepts from consumer psychology: brand association, product category association, social identity and self-identity. As an example, while looking at brand associations embedded within a cultural model, FA discuss how Corona beer's success is due to the authentic embeddedness of its "partying" association within the highly resonant Mexican spring break myth – so that the mythical narrative brings the Corona brand to life. Their article also highlights which meaning-rich brand-relevant experiences are less likely to be studied using experimental tools, for instance, the complex processes by which brands gain and lose legitimacy and power.

Batra, in his target article focuses on non-functional and symbolic meanings of brands, using McCracken's "meaning transfer" model (McCracken 1986), whereby every aspect of the "marketing" of the brand (e.g., the voice used by the model in the advertisement for the brand –, the clothes worn by the model, the setting, etc.) becomes associated with the brand, and part of the brand meaning. Batra emphasizes how experimental tests of McCracken's model lagged the

(theoretical) model itself, and laments that experimental tests have focused on a narrow meaning of “brand”, namely “brand personality” (Aaker 1997). He looks at various dependent (e.g., feelings and emotions linked to brands) and independent variables (e.g., logo designs) concerning brand meaning that have been studied experimentally, and suggests many more that have not been studied (e.g., non-verbal cues for independent variables). In the style of recent research in consumer psychology, Batra also discusses the process that creates brand meaning.

MacInnis, Torelli, and Park’s commentary lends structure to the superset of the two target articles. They organize their commentary around five overarching questions and show how the two articles approach these five questions – what FA and Batra address and what they do not, and what is still left to be studied by future researchers. The other commentary, by Price and Coulter, extends the arguments of FA and Batra by discussing assemblage theory and how cultural models are assembled into brands (centering on Batra’s article) and how brands are assembled into our cultural lives (centering on FA’s article).

One observation I make is that many instruments used by one paradigm seem to be crossing boundaries into other paradigms (Peracchio, Luce and McGill 2014), even if serendipitously, and are synergistic in their use. For example, Fournier and Alvarez give many illustrations of metaphors as giving meaning to brands – metaphors being used by them as one of the core interpretive instruments that facilitate meaning making by directing consumer attention in culturally-structured ways. One such illustration is about the association of Pirelli tires with grip and power, through the culturally rich metaphor of a fist made up of tires. However, much experimental research in the last two decades has also studied conceptual metaphors (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 2008), often with a view to seeing if such an association implicitly exists in the first place. The experimental research on conceptual metaphors would thus use experiments to test for the conceptual metaphorical association between grip and control, where the abstract notion control is presumably scaffolded on the concrete notion of a fist-grip which is learned by humans in their more formative years (Krishna and Schwarz 2014).

As the dialogue writers stress, brands are never fully stable, but are dynamic entities -- brand meaning changes as humans and cultures adapt and change. Given the current environment of greater globalization and cultural interplay and adaptation, the cultural meaning of brands is ever more important.

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