



**SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS
AND MANAGEMENT**
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PROBLEMATIZING CONSUMER AGENCY OF BRANDS
BRAND MEANING IN COMMODITIZATION AND DECOMMODITIZATION OF BRANDS

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Abstract

Title:	Problematizing Consumer Agency of Brands: Brand Meaning in Commoditization and Decommoditization of Brands
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Keywords:	brand ownership, brand meaning, knowledge, learning, commoditization, decommoditization, semiology, semiotics, associative networks
Thesis Purpose:	The purpose of this master thesis is to develop a cogent understanding of brand agency that is informed by knowledge of how consumers negotiate brand meaning. It aims at both the betterment of brand management in practical application and making a meaningful contribution to brand management literature.
Methodology:	A qualitative approach has been applied with data collection carried out through semi-structured interviews. The data is analyzed semiotically and modeled using associative brand network techniques.
Theoretical Perspective:	The theoretical discussion of this thesis is in the area of learning, consumption, sociology, semiology, and psychology.
Empirical Data:	Ten (10) semi-structured interviews provided empirical data in the form of brand and category associations related to brand knowledge structures.
Conclusion:	To a large extent, consumers are assuming ownership of the brand where meaning emerges not only from unilaterally-imposed company activities, but also from how the brand is disseminated by consumers. Brands are constructed as a result of negotiated meaning that act as devices for consumers' consumption processes.

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Thank you for showing interest in the paper. We sincerely hope to add to the critical discussion of brands and consumption.

Kind Regards,

Owen Murray
Ivan Ralchev

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Brands: The Essential Discussion	1
- Defining Brands	
- The Purpose of Brands	
1.2 Problematizing Brand Agency	2
- What Does it Mean to Own a Brand?	
- How Brand Agency is Revealed in Marketing Literature	
- Implications	
1.3 Brand Meaning	5
- How Consumers Understand the Brand	
1.4 Conceptualizing Commoditization and Decommoditization	6
- Commodities and Commoditization	
- Commoditization: An Example	
- Non-Commodities and Decommoditization	
1.5 Thesis Purpose.....	7
1.6 Research Question	9
1.7 Literature Review.....	10
1.8 Summary	11

CHAPTER 2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1 Semiology	12
- A Definition	
- Brands as a Semiological Phenomenon	
- The Semiotic Origins of 'The Brand' and Brand Meaning	
2.2 Consumption	13
- The Brand In Consumption	
- Meaning as a Part of the Consumption Decision	
2.3 Learning.....	16
2.4 Brand Meaning.....	17
- Dimensions of Brand Meaning	
- Perspectives of Brand Meaning Creation	
- Relational Origins of Brand Meaning Construction	
2.5 Commoditization and Decommoditization	19
- The Difference between Commoditization and Commodification	
- Commodities and Non-Commodities	
- The Dialectical Center	
- Commoditization and Decommoditization: A Brand Context	
- Where commoditization may be a favorable outcome	
- Problematizing Commoditization and Decommoditization	

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Semiology	24
3.2 Methodological Purpose	25
3.3 Research Design	25
3.4 Data Collection	26
- Interview Process	
3.5 Methodological Reflexivity	28
3.6 Research Orientation	30
3.7 Analytical Method	31

CHAPTER 4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Consumer Understanding of Product Categories.....	34
- Association Types	
- Category Associations	
4.2 Structure of Meaning	38
- Asymmetric Nature of Meaning Consumption	
- Sequencing of Associations	
4.3 Role of Product-Related Associations in Brand Meaning.....	40
4.4 Referent Brands	40
4.5 Aggregate Associative Networks	41
4.6 Market Structure	43
4.7 Firm Imparted Brand Meaning.....	44
4.8 Cognitive Structures: Brands and Associations.....	45
4.9 How Brands Relate to Other Brands in Cognitive Structures	45
4.10 How Consumers Negotiate Imparted Meaning.....	47
4.11 Implications for Commoditization and Decommoditization	48
4.12 Implications for Brand Meaning.....	49
4.13 Reconciling Brand Agency	49
4.14 Summary	49

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

5.1 Brand Agency	52
5.2 The Brand: Where Are We Know?	53
5.3 Theoretical Contributions	54
5.4 Practical Implications	54
5.5 Concluding Remarks	54

FIGURES

<i>Figure 1.1</i> Bayer Aspirin Advertisement Showing Effects of Commoditization	6
<i>Figure 1.2</i> Evolution of the Purpose	8

Figure 2.1 Evolution of the Brand in Consumption14
Figure 2.2 Conceptualizing the Commoditization and Decommoditization Processes ...22

Figure 3.1 Associative Network Map27
Figure 3.2 Brand Meaning Negotiation.....30

Figure 4.1 Product Category Associations at Different Node Levels37
Figure 4.2 Conceptual Network: Category Associations at Different Node Levels37
Figure 4.3 Category Referent Associations at Different Node Levels39
Figure 4.4 Aggregate Referent Brand Associations42
Figure 4.5 Consumer Perception of Market Structure45
Figure 4.6 How Brands Relate to Each Other In Consumers Associative Structures.....46
Figure 4.7 Company Imparted Meaning in Advertisements47

Figure 5.1 The Negotiated Brand Space52

BIBLIOGRAPHY

APPENDIX – A

Figures

APPENDIX – B

Tables

Introduction

1.1 Brands: The Essential Discussion

Defining Brands

The agreed upon definition of a brand largely guides brand activity. The brand is ‘a sign or set of signs certifying the origin of a product or service and differentiating it from the competition’ (Kapferer, 2008). A brand is central to all market activities performed by a company and is arguably the most visible element of a firm’s comprehensive value proposition to consumers. However, without a physical product or service, the brand cannot exist.

Brands start as being what Kapferer (2008) describes as “non-brands”. This means that consumers are unaware of the brand and therefore the brand image has yet to be established. Only in the presence of a physical product or service does the brand become real—a mix of tangible assets and intangible associations that engage consumers. The strategic significance of brands is revealed in how they are largely understood relative to their ability to leverage the brand in communicating a compelling, salient, and unique proposition.

Beyond the economic role of competitive differentiator, brands are basically heuristics retrieved from memory that help to establish category membership (Parker et al., 2009), make certain benefits salient, and mitigate the risk associated with purchase.

The Purpose of Brands

The purpose of a brand, be it a name or a symbol, is to influence consumption. A brand gains its value when it becomes a purchase criterion. A brand serves as an efficient way to communicate quality and convey bona fide economic, functional, psychological, and social benefits (Kapferer, 2008). Brands have the unparalleled ability to influence purchase behavior.

As Doyle (1992) explains, successful brands enable consumers to identify the attributes of the products that make them unique. What is more, successful brands tend to deliver consistent meaning, while deliberately enhancing it over time (Gardner et al., 1955). In this way, consumers are more likely to associate themselves with brands through the image or personality that has been conveyed by the company.

Further, brands create economies of scope through packaging, names, logos and that present consumers with much more than a simple choice. Products are no longer competing for attention based on price that would define a commodity market. With

the evolution of the experience economy, consumers are presented with commodity products cleverly masked by brands.

Brands give companies the proprietary meaning they seek to create for their product and consumers the ability to use brands in a way that defies their functional benefits. However, implicit in this understanding is the realization that brand building is the result of an exhaustive coordinated effort. A brand incorporates not only a name, symbol or logo, but also all the experiential goodwill created through interactions with the brand. With consumers actively participating in the market brands require a strong identity to succeed and strong management of that identity to guard against failure. This is done to make consumption processes easier (how consumers think about products and brands) because brands differ in terms of purchase risk and associated benefits (van Rekom et al., 2009).

Brands are considered a strategic asset because of their distinctive ability to provide a long-term competitive advantage in the face on ever smaller windows of opportunity where profit can be maximized. Consumers want to “give meaning to their consumption” (Kapferer, 2008). As such, brands are functional in their ability to add value and provide meaning. Purchasing a brand, and by default not purchasing a competitor brand, discloses a lot about the consumer. This is what gives the brand so much power. This is what the brand means.

1.2 Problematizing Brand Agency

What does it mean to own a brand?

Legal Perspective

The origins of meaning—where the associations signified by a brand are derived—can complicate brand agency. From the firm perspective, brand agency is enabled by control of the brand identity. Schultz (2005) focuses on the legal perspective of brand agency in saying that a brand belongs to the owner of the trademark (Schultz, 2005). Schultz argues that it is the marketer who is solely responsible for building and maintaining the brand. According to this view, agency is exercised by the unilateral legal control of intellectual property—the right to reproduce the logo, for example. To own the brand means to collect the financial benefits above and beyond that which would occur if the brand were absent.

Consumer Perspective

Comparatively, it can be argued that consumers exert parallel ownership of the brand based on their intellectual involvement in shaping the brand image. Management literature describes this persistent negotiation of meaning as the conflict between the company-owned brand identity and consumer-based brand image (Kapferer, 2008).

Both appear to be proprietary, but not mutually exclusive in how they derive meaning. To own a brand from a consumer perspective certainly includes tangible possession, but ownership also emerges from consumers' perceptions that actively create and disseminate meaning.

How Brand Agency is Revealed in Marketing Literature

In order to understand the importance of ownership in branding it is necessary to demarcate the concept of marketing and core brand concepts that inform the processes of commoditization and decommoditization. As brand management is the application of marketing tactics and processes, these processes mediate ownership and control of the brand. Ownership of the brand, as described above, is rationally assumed to reside with the firm that holds the legal right to reproduce the brand, but a significant allotment of management literature alludes to a situation that does not substantiate such unilateral ownership of the brand. This is most clearly demonstrated by the definition of marketing produced and updated periodically by the American Marketing Association (AMA).

The first definition of marketing published by the AMA in 1935 provides an early indication of its limited dissemination in a not-yet burgeoning consumer society. The decommoditization of products through brands has yet to occur and products are more or less bought and sold as commodities. The definition of marketing at this point is one-dimensional in the way it economizes the role of marketing. Marketing, according to this AMA definition (1935), is the "performance of business activities that direct the flow of goods and services from producers to consumers."

This early definition conceptualizes marketing as a set of activities carried out by an economic entity – the business. Subsequent revisions to this definition by the AMA omit the concept of ownership altogether or forgo this terminology because of the associated connotations, instead using the term 'organization' to reflect the scope of marketing within the firm and the emerging utility of marketing outside traditional business-to-consumer constructs.

The focal point of this definition is the described process by which goods and services flow to the end-user. The business activities that enable this flow are open to interpretation, and the focus is very much on the economic utility of marketing in a one-way exchange. This preliminary classification of marketing is useful in its identification of marketing as a *process* to accurately inform future characterizations of the strategic orientation of marketing where the question of ownership in the process is more definitively addressed.

An updated definition by the AMA further credits marketing as being a *process*, but extends this concept beyond the transitory and transactional nature of the preceding definition to the idea of exchanges. Marketing, as revised by the AMA (1984), is

described as “the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of goods, ideas, and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational goals.” This revision hints at the relational and intangible facets of exchange enabled by the process of marketing. In effect, it begins to understand marketing as a *strategic orientation* assumed by the firm. In this way, marketing is a discourse that guides organizational decisions and behavior.

Further, this definition articulates—in more specific language—the process as being one of planning and execution. However, as with the original, little development is made to this point in the area of ownership of the processes or outcomes. The definition produced in 1935 and this updated version subscribes to a similar logic: marketing is an activity imposed on consumers (“to consumers”) through the distribution of goods and services.

The definition circulated by the AMA in 2004 moves closer to the concept of value creation that has taken hold of marketing literature and more acutely describes marketing as an *ongoing process*—a journey. Marketing is described as “an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders.” The utility of marketing is conceptualized largely as an organizational function or activity that is carried out to benefit the firm and its various stakeholders and achieved through the management of customer relationships. This definition denotes marketing as being a function carried out unilaterally by the organization. Value benefits are ultimately delivered to customers as stakeholders, but the definition is apathetic to any consideration that consumers may co-create value in the marketing process.

According to the 2004 AMA definition, marketing is no longer simply about the distribution of goods and services through unilateral pricing, promotion and distribution tactics. This reflects the growing role of brands in the marketplace and the inclusion of brand management and brand building concepts in the company vernacular. It is now about delivering value in various forms. However, it again appears indifferent to the role consumers and customers play in the value creation of brands by categorizing marketing as an organizational function.

The 2007 amendment by the AMA mostly redefines the scope of marketing, describing it as “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” This adjustment continues with the concept of offering value to customers noted in the 2004 definition, but omits the purpose of marketing as being the management of customer relationships in favor of a more inclusive concept of “partners”. This revision retains the assertion that marketing refers to an imprecise and contextual set of processes for “creating, communicating, and delivering value” while

affording greater attention to the idea that marketing and brand management may not be purely organizational functions. Consumers' experiential meaning negotiation with brands may be a salient indicator of control or ownership of the brand and the processes that create, communicate, and deliver the brand's value proposition to the market. This definition is the closest yet to understanding marketing as an integrative process of value creation.

Implications

The discrepancies in definitions speak to an apparent embargo that has been placed on the marketing function. There is an overt attempt to exert complete control of the brand in management literature, likely with respect to the costs associated with developing and marketing a brand. This notion of management control is somewhat ironic given that the value ascribed to the brand on the corporate balance sheet is largely based on intangible consumer perceptions and meanings customers associate with the brand.

The issue of ownership and control does not appear to be an issue of semantics. Brands are owned by firms when considering the American Marketing Association definition, but brands are given momentum (a brand journey) by consumers' affective and cognitive processes for how the brand is received (Megehee, 2009).

A separate definition produced by the Chartered Institute of Marketing (2005), a professional UK institute, clearly delineates that marketing is a management process of "identifying, anticipating and satisfying." This points to a more philosophical argument between competing discourses—the legal, managerial control of the firm contrasted with the consumer-based emotional and experiential perspective that may suggest some level of co-production of brand meaning and, therefore, a vested interest in the processes of commoditization and decommoditization.

1.3 Brand Meaning

How Consumers Understand the Brand

Brand meaning explores how consumers locate and negotiate the implicit and explicit meaning in brands—how they engage the brand. The brand meaning is defined by Kotler (1988) as the brand image—the set of beliefs held by consumers about the brand. Brands have functional, self-expressive (Meenaghan, 1995), and emotional (Aaker, 1996) capabilities that facilitate the formation of brand image. How consumers create and negotiate meaning is through the decoding of the tangible and intangible indicators that emerge from the brand identity communications.

1.4 Conceptualizing Commoditization and Decommoditization

Commodities and Commoditization

Commodities are essentially undifferentiated products where the perceived differences between competitive offers are marginal or non-existent. When buying a commoditized product consumers are likely to be influenced only by its functionality and ability to satisfy basic needs. As such, consumption decisions are mostly related to price where the threat of direct substitutability is high. Consumers will simply choose the product at the lowest price where no tangible or abstract differences are perceived among the competitive offerings available in the category. Consumer decisions are simplistic, little market knowledge is required and unsustainable price loyalty exists (Kapferer, 2008). Consumers are not brand loyal to a simple product that is just like any other on the market.

Commoditization: An Example

In 1917, an advertisement for Bayer Aspirin (see below, figure 1.1) was circulated with a distinct purpose: prevent the commoditization of their trademark Aspirin brand of pain relief medication. The advertisement did not try to show consumers how to use the product, but rather it attempted to educate the consumers about the Aspirin brand. Facing the incoming threat of generic competitors, it became increasingly necessary for Aspirin to protect their brand trademark. The problem was that Aspirin had become a generic category descriptor. What is more, advertising the brand was only raising awareness for the entire product category. The Aspirin brand of pain reliever was being commoditized because consumers appropriated the Aspirin trademark to define any and all similar products in the category. As a result, advertisements had to focus on repositioning the brand in the market by educating consumers about the unique qualities of the brand rather than the benefits of the product. This brief example shows that there is only a fine line that separates a brand from a commodity.



Figure 1.1 Bayer Aspirin Advertisement Showing Effects of Commoditization

Non-Commodities and Decommoditization

Decommoditization is the process whereby a product is enhanced with something unique. This is what essentially adds up to be the notion of branding to differentiate the product from other available offerings. The rationale is that consumers have variable responses to brands because they carry certain meanings. Decommoditization is informed by looking at how consumers use the brand.

A differentiated product is a commoditized product that has something more to offer. This added value is achieved through aspects of the brand. It can be through how the brand is marketed in advertisements or from distinctive product packaging. Decommoditization is an understanding that products can satisfy hedonic needs in addition to providing functional benefits. Commoditized products satisfy market-defined needs that may be abstract and intangible.

Commoditized products act as a seal of quality or help in a person's image construction. In one way they are simplistic devices that help consumers, but in another way they are complex properties that are much more than a logo.

Exploring the processes of commoditization and decommoditization are pertinent to the topic of brand management because of the costs associated with controlling brands. Companies allocate significant funds annually towards building and maintaining the value of a brand or a portfolio of brands. Brands are consistently threatened by competitor actions (generic products, private labels, imitators), the proliferation of consumer-based word-of-mouth, and unanticipated actions by consumers that create a misalignment between the intended brand identity and consumer-constructed brand image. The amount of cognitive and financial effort that is put into brand maintenance is a reflection of both the vulnerability of brands and the long-term benefits that can be realized.

1.5 Thesis Purpose

Informed by the knowledge of how consumers conceptualize brand meaning, the ensuing purpose of the thesis is to problematize consumer agency of brands.

The chief objective of this thesis is to develop a cogent understanding of brand agency. This ambition is motivated by the desire to make a meaningful contribution to brand management literature by leveraging theories of learning and consumption that have developed primarily in psychology and sociology (Henderson et al., 1998). Moreover, improving the theoretical understanding of brand agency displaces some of the ephemeral qualities of a brand for the betterment of brand management in practical application.

From an understanding of brand agency, managers are afforded the ability to protect the brand's equity. This fundamental question of control is inexplicably linked to the ability to generate higher profits because of the added value of a unique, enduring, meaningful, accessible, and attractive brand. Brands are a strategic asset – they do not exist exclusively on a firm's balance sheet (Kapferer, 2008).

Brands are much more than one-dimensional objects. Understanding who controls the brand reveals a great deal about the sociological nature of brands and, through induction, helps explain elements of human consumption behavior.

The purpose of the thesis is clarified in how the issue of brand agency comes in to focus through an extensive discussion of brand meaning (see below, figure 1.2).



Figure 1.2 Evolution of the Purpose

Brands find utility and meaning in the public domain of consumption, but they have retreated to the academic discourse for conscious examination of how this meaning develops. Accordingly, the point of departure evolves from an identification of the theoretical constructs that inform the discussion of brand meaning from the initial stages through to the final fulfillment of the research purpose.

The recurring function of this thesis is to interpret the moderating role of brand meaning. Brand meaning concerns how consumers learn or acquire brand knowledge. Learning, in a marketing context, materializes from how consumers engage the brand, a signal of the way in which associations mediate the brand experience. Learning, therefore, exists as the prevailing theoretical construct that informs the data collection.

Data materializes in the form of brand associations that reveal consumers' cognitive brand structures. With this data, the processes of commoditization and decommo-ditization can be unfolded. The important milestone here is the determination of the conditions that enable these processes, as these processes are a valid way to narrate consumers' meaning and consumption practices.

In the context of learning and consumption, commoditization and decommo-ditization can be interpreted in terms of how they inform brand meaning. Meaning is but a part of the larger discussion of consumption and learning. This discussion reveals a larger picture of the conditions that inform consumers' brand meaning construction – which is to appreciate *how* and *why* they consume in the way they do.

Finally, passed through cognitive and analytical filters, the knowledge of brand meaning that is imparted on consumption enables a clearer understanding (and potential reconciliation) of brand agency. The meaningful contribution of this thesis resides in how, through knowledge of consumption and brand meaning, it informs the discussion of brand agency.

1.6 Research Question

The purpose functions at a higher level of abstraction and is problematized through the research question.

Brand meaning and commoditization unite around the discussion of brand agency. Gaining an appreciation for how brand meaning operates can be achieved through the systematic unfolding of commoditization and decommoditization processes. Decommoditization and commoditization are the means by which to achieve the aforementioned purpose.

The meaning attached to the brand based on marketing activities and accumulated brand equity appears to offer conflicting views of brand ownership. The establishment of brand meaning is an appropriate filter through which to view agency (ownership). This is enabled by a critical analysis of the commoditization and decommoditization of brand and products, respectively, as a symptom of the control of brand meaning.

The purpose of the research is to investigate decommoditization and commoditization as aspects of meaning making to understand how meaning is created and used. How meaning is resolved has implications for the topic of brand ownership.

The brand, as it exists in academic literature and operates in practical contexts, is the geographical center from which the theoretical discussion departs. Inherent in the discussion of 'the brand' is the operative role of commoditization and decommoditization.

The research purpose of this study is to evaluate how brand meaning construction comes to influence consumption behavior, where behavior is the operative determinant of commoditization and decommoditization of brands and products. Based on how consumers and brands negotiate meaning within the context of commoditization and decommoditization, there are implications for the debate over control and ownership of brands.

As a result, the research question of this study is as follows:

How do commoditization and decommoditization inform the discussion of brand meaning?

The outcome is an understanding of how brand meaning is animated through commoditization and decommoditization.

1.7 Literature Review

From a managerial perspective, brands can be considered as a corporate asset that is strictly managed and evaluated by its legal owners (Salzer-Mörling et al., 2004). Further, branding has been thought of largely as a process which enables companies to create and attach meanings to their products. The purpose of these meanings is to make the market offer distinguishable, unique in the aim of companies to build and sustain a competitive advantage over their competitors. As Chernatony et al. (2003; as cited in Askegaard et al., 2005) put it, the brand “is the result of a coherent organizational and marketing approach which uses all elements of the marketing mix”. Thus, as a sole creator of the brand, its meaning and advertising, companies have been depicted as the active participants on the market of brands and meanings—as the senders of the messages. At the same time, consumers have been categorized as passive recipients of those messages (Salzer-Mörling et al., 2004).

However, as pointed out by O'Malley (1991; as cited in Rooney, 1995), it is not only companies and brand managers that are capable of attaching and looking for meanings. According to Belk (1988), consumers use objects in order to express themselves and to develop their own identity. Holt (2002) goes one step further. He provides classification of the different types of consumer responses to corporate marketing and branding. By surrounding themselves with brands, some consumers tend to passively incorporate products' and services' values and meanings into their “extended self” (Belk, 1988). In this case, brand managers to a great extent influence consumption patterns. Thus, companies can be described as “cultural engineers” (Holt, 2002).

Post-modern consumers, however, as pointed out by Holt, try to avoid the “oppressive grid of imposed social meanings” (Holt, 2002). In that sense, corporate cultural engineering has to adapt to the new post-modern autonomous consumer approach to branded goods. Because, as pinpointed by Pitt et al. (2006; as cited in Berthon et al., 2009), brand meaning is not the sole responsibility of companies. Brand managers together with consumers take part in the process of creation of this meaning through interactions with each other. Consumers actively influence other consumers in their quest for brand knowledge. What is more, Schroeder (2005) addresses the question of

who actually owns the brand by saying that “neither managers nor consumers completely control branding processes” (Shroeder, 2005).

1.8 Summary

Viewing brands as negotiated statements of meaning and bringing the issue of ownership into focus requires stepping outside the traditional boundaries of brand strategy. Consumer perceptions of brands and market structure are equally if not more important than what Henderson et al. (1998) see as the pervasive use of a priori statements of firm brand strategy. Only from studying consumers’ perception and associations in an empirical study can the proper knowledge and understanding be gleaned.

Representations of consumers cognitive brand structures make it possible to analyze the structure of brand associations (Henderson et al., 1998). This can provide a novel perspective into understanding how consumers understand and use the brand, and the branding implications for firms.

Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Semiology

A Definition

Semiotics is 'a science which studies the life of signs within society' (Saussure, 1966; as cited in Combe et al., 2003).

From studying the relationship between a sign and its meaning, semiology explores how the process of meaning making unfolds (Tietze et al., 2003). It is based on the idea that people consciously and unconsciously communicate and derive meaning through signs and symbols (Saussure, 1966; as cited in Combe et al., 2003).

A brand is considered to be a sign or a constellation of signs. It is built by a signifier and one or many signifieds. The signifier, or the material aspect of the sign, is in the control of the brand manager. Some of the signifieds can be thought of as being imparted by the company. Others are the results of the already discussed process of consumers' reflection.

Brands as a Semiological Phenomenon

Brands are essentially a vast, complex network of signs. A sign itself is then dichotomous in how it is composed of a signifier and the signified (Combe et al., 2003). The construction of identity through meaning negotiation in consumption impacts how consumers interpret the signs and symbols communicated by brands. Therefore, the process of decommunitization can be understood and evaluated semiotically.

Consumer engagement in the market discourse proffered by the firm is an indicator of the evocative capacity of brands. Brands, as constellations of complex signs and symbols, facilitate the consumer process of systematizing and negotiating brand meaning relative to pre-existing knowledge structures, thereby enabling the processes of commoditization and decommunitization.

As functional product differences have become less distinct, the capacity of consumers to discriminate among products in the category has diminished. Likewise, but perhaps more importantly, products as objects are limited in their expressive capabilities when considering consumers often depend on the presence of other objects for identity (Mead, 1934; as cited in Pennington, 2000). Brands create induced differences that serve as largely (symbolic) signifiers of meaning. Since most consumers use similar categories of goods, brands (through the identified process of decommunitization) serve as tangible evidence of how the consumer consumption process unfolds.

The Semiotic Origins of ‘The Brand’ and Brand Meaning

The accumulation of brand knowledge—how consumers understand a brand’s meaning—is a process ostensibly fixed to the concepts of learning and understanding outside of a marketing context. Within the bounds of the marketing domain, brands are a salient indicator of how language operates to create vast repositories of meaning. What is important is how consumers recast the temporal and spatial dimensions of consumption in the process of meaning making. As a result, to properly understand how consumers construct brand meaning—and thus act upon brands in ways that enable commoditization and decommoditization—it is necessary to retrace the semiotic origins of a brand. Understanding how brands, and especially the process by which meaning is ascribed to brands, denotes the linguistic and semiotic origins of brand meaning.

Understood from a semiotic perspective, brands operate as symbolic cultural texts that are ‘read’ to discern their meaning (Tietze et al., 2003). Semiology is an approach to linguistics that views language as a science of signs and meanings. In this context, meaning making is a process motivated by the presence and use of symbols as a language of understanding. Brands, as a mechanism—a language—by which meaning is engaged and communicated, are interpretative phenomena that then moderate the discourses that circulate in the market. How language actually works—the systematic process whereby meaning is created—has immense implications in the branding and marketing domains because of the polysemic nature of language. By enabling the meaning creation through their dissemination, the importance ascribed to brands as semiological phenomena is pivotal to charting the dialectical nature of consumption that subsequently informs commoditization, decommoditization, and brand agency.

The optics through which brand meaning is understood is indifferent to the origins of brand meaning. Brand meaning is understood through an iterative, rational perspective that discards the very interdependency that exists between meaning and consumption (Clarke et al., 1998). This is critical to answer *how* consumers use (understand) the consumption process to create and repurpose brand meaning in an array of contexts. These contexts are commoditization, decommoditization, and brand agency.

2.2 Consumption

The market exists through the development of a language where brands serve as units of meaning (Pennington, 2000). Brands are a discrete source of information (meaning) because they employ signs and symbols. Brands are then experienced in the form of consumption. Consumption relates to how consumers use and understand the brand in a variety of contexts and for a myriad of purposes.

The Brand in Consumption

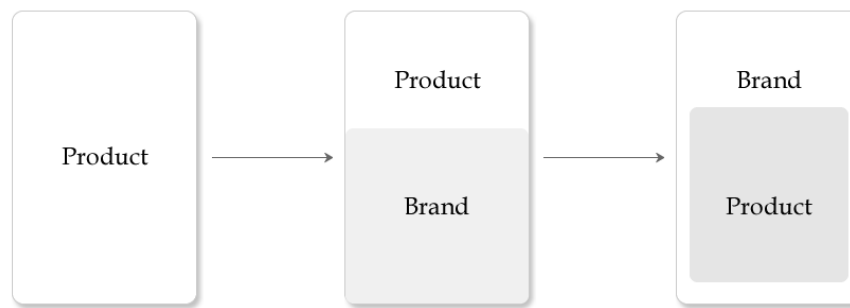


Figure 2.1 Evolution of the Brand in Consumption

A historical orientation assumes the product to be the exclusivity of the offering. The product represented the good, the good the object. With the emergence of marketing and advertising, brands started to infringe on the territory of the physical product, representing a composite offering. Presently, the brand, and all that it entails, coalesces around the product, the physical manifestation of the meaning. The brand, according to Kapferer (2008), is the communicative vehicle that 'structures and orients' the product through specific perceptual associations in the minds of consumers (Henderson et al., 1998). The product (the economic-value) is now secondary in a multi-dimensional understanding of the brand (see above figure 2.1). Hence, brand meaning is critical to understanding brand ownership.

Meaning as a Part of the Consumption Discussion

Brand meaning emerges from a broader sociological discussion of consumption—why do consumers actually consume in the way they do? Only from understanding the sociological motives that engender consumption can a cogent understanding of why consumers attach meaning to brands be gained and the commoditization and decommoditization processes unfolded.

Corrigan (1997) traces the origins of the consumption society to eighteenth century England. Mounting economic prosperity liberated consumers from the bounds of a needs-based, production economy in favor of a consumer society. The sociological implications of consuming became the new end—the answer to why people consume in the way they do. Marketing and advertising, in concert with the accompanying physical goods, emerged as the means by which to recast consumer tastes and consumption motives agent. Hence the classification of people as *consumers*, a denotation of the new way in which members of society engage the brand. This is the modern consumption-based consumer society that informs how and why consumers construct brand meaning:

Traditional consumption is quite fixed: there is a finite number of needs to be filled, and the only wants and desires anyone might have would relate quite directly to this rather narrow sphere...The traditional consumer would regard with alarm anyone who consumed outside the boundaries sanctified by tradition. Today, modern consumers consider with alarm anyone who does not want to consume more and more, who does not seem to be interested in new wants and desires (Corrigan, 1997: p. 10).

As goods take on meaning that is seemingly incomprehensible, the proliferation of wants began to grow in an asymmetric fashion. This is an early indication that goods function in a way far removed from their tangible properties. Corrigan (1997) describes the process of wanting as being distinct from any necessary or concrete expressions of consumption. Campbell (1983) classifies this as 'want satisfaction,' something that is shaped by the sociological implications of the pursuit rather than a disposition that is intrinsic to people. In this way, consumption informs and is informed by the meaning that is attached to goods and brands. Goods assume meaning more acutely fixed to their sign value rather than their use-value, a hallmark of the modern consumer and the modern consumption society:

The fixity of traditional societies meant that one could learn the actual patterns of consumption – there was quite a limited number of things that entered into the consumer consciousness, and so one could learn the proper modes of consuming relatively easily. But in modern societies a general orientation to consuming is required – what may be consumed is not fixed in number or kind, and may be undergoing rapid change. It is not so much that we desire very particular things, although of course we might sometimes, it is rather that we want to want, we desire to desire, and we want new and different things in an endless pattern of discontent (Campbell, 1983: 281; as cited in Corrigan, 1997).

Douglas and Isherwood (1979) argue that consumers use goods to construct an intelligible universe and facilitate social relationships. In other words, consumers use goods to make sense, and consume because of what it means to do so. However, in order to use goods in this way, it is incumbent upon the consumer to locate some meaning in their consumption. For consumption is an inert activity if not for the capacity to manipulate the semiotic meaning of objects:

Consumers consume not so much specific objects to accomplish specific concrete ends, but signs in general for general social ends (Corrigan, 1997).

Campbell (1987) notes that modern consumption centers on the satisfaction derived from controlling the meaning of goods, not the goods themselves. Consumption is largely fixed to the hedonic benefits of consuming and consumers have the autonomous ability to take meaning from symbols to reconcile 'want satisfaction.' This is a strong

indication of the presence of self-determination in the consumption experience. As a result, how consumers construct brand meaning is a critically important antecedent to understanding why consumers consume in the way they do.

2.3 Learning

Commoditization and decommoditization appear in marketing literature as processes that operate at the macro level. However, it is evident that these phenomena operate at a very-micro level because of the nature of meaning. Consumers are discrete in the meaning they possess because of the social context in which meaning is constructed. Meaning is dynamic because what symbols means – what brands mean – is not absolute or inevitable (Appendix A, Figure 1.1). A seminal understanding of semiology includes the realization that meaning is constructed according to socio-cultural contexts (Tietze et al., 2003) and learning occurs in scenarios that span the spectrum from micro-level to macro-level interactions.

Further, learning is a largely passive (subconscious) and experiential process (Phillips et al., 2009) according to the philosophers Plato and Locke, respectively. Plato contends that knowledge is innate – an assertion that does not follow the mechanics that define how marketing and marketers operate – but he still points to the idea that meaning is emergent as part of the learning process. Learning, according to Locke, is enabled by the mental faculties that reside in the mind that move the consumer from a state of “tabula rasa” to a cognitive structure equipped with complex, relational knowledge. According to “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding”, one of Locke’s most famous works, the complex knowledge structures that define how consumers move about and understand social spaces and complex phenomena can be understood by initially dormant mechanisms that enable meaning:

In this faculty of repeating and joining together its ideas, the mind has greater power in varying and multiplying the objects of its thoughts...It can, by its own power, put together those ideas it has, and make new complex ones (As cited in Phillips et al., 2009: p. 13).

Something, according to Locke, is present to facilitate learning – a system that disseminates signs and symbols in the form of knowledge. Simple ideas, once informed by the cognitive abilities that include rationalization and abstraction, become increasingly complex. Complex ideas that appear in the form of brand knowledge or brand meaning are traced back to simple nodes of information. Locke captures the concept as follows:

Let us suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper void of all characters, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast

store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from EXPERIENCE. In that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself (As cited in Phillips et al., 2009: p. 14).

Learning, as the process of meaning creation in the marketing domain, follows a similar trajectory. Consumers' cognitive networks of brand information mirror this process. A brand is not a brand until it is 'read' for its meaning, an understanding that emanates from the semiological principles of meaning making (Appendix A, Figure 1.1).

2.4 Brand Meaning

Keller (2001) identifies the relationship between brands and consumers as originating from a sequence of questions. Keller considers brand meaning as the result of consumers inevitably asking the question "what are you?" However, prior to this, they ask "who are you?" to decipher the brand identity. Only once then can the motives and meaning of the brand be understood. The brand responses that emerge from deciphering the brand meaning are the result of asking "what do I think or feel about you?" This invariably leads to consumers attempting to reconcile the brand relative to their own identity by asking "what about you and me?" As a result, Keller (2001) identifies that for meaning to occur, identity must first be established and a relationship cannot be started unless the brand meaning has elicited salient and appropriate responses. Brand meaning, as a result of the brand identity, must resonate with the customers own identity.

Dimensions of Brand Meaning

According to Keller (2001), brand meaning can exist along two dimensions: functional, performance-related considerations (brand performance) and abstract, imagery-related considerations (brand imagery). These are effectively brand associations that comprise the brand meaning and originate from direct customer contact or via indirect experience with the brand (through advertising or consumers-to-consumer knowledge transfer). Meaning is evaluated according to the strength, favorability, and uniqueness of brand responses (what consumers think or feel about the brand), an indicator of brand equity and brand resonance.

The identity that resides with the sender specifies the brand's meaning (Kapferer, 2008) and it is customarily thought of as the firm that legally and financially owns and manages the brand. However, consumers may have tacit ownership of the brand in their two-way negotiation of meaning transfer – as a sender of an identity and receiver of the intended brand identity. Aaker (1996) views identity as a construct that provides direction, purpose, and meaning for a person in a similar way that it directs the value

proposition of a brand (the brand identity). As a result, the consumer may also possess their own identity as an active sender of meaning that is incorporated into their sum understanding of the brand. The meaning that emanates from these often conflicting identities is rationalized in an emergent process defined in management literature as the brand image. This suggests that the creation of brand meaning incorporates both inductive and deductive methods.

Perspectives of Brand Meaning Creation

Firm Imparted Meaning

The legal owner of the brand, the firm, communicates a coherent brand message to the market in order to attempt to define the discussion of the brand's meaning. Consumers derive meaning from the messages they receive in the market relative to existing brand knowledge (Kleine et al., 1991), previous experience, and social background. However, consumers appear to negotiate this meaning with their own built-up knowledge.

While the overall aim of companies is to achieve a desired image for a certain product or brand in consumers' heads, there are different views on how the process of image creation actually occurs. Cassinger (2010) talks about transmission and cultural view of communication as a way to create image.

The transmission view identifies consumers as merely passive participants in the linear process, in which a message is sent and then received. From the transmission perspective, image is controlled by companies through various attributes. Rather than constructing it on their own, consumers are merely recipients of the image. The transmission model of communication, as argued by Czarniawska (2000; as cited in Cassinger, 2010), tries to understand information transfer rather than meaning creation. Thus, it fails to take into consideration interactions between consumers.

Consumer Constructed Meaning

As identified by Pace (2008), many product owners now have the chance to "freely and creatively redefine their relationship with products and brands."

The communication view proposed by Carey (1992; as cited in Cassinger, 2010) introduces consumers as actively involved in the creation and development of brand meaning over time. Acknowledging the consumer as being keenly involved is a recognition of the immense "cultural experience and knowledge" (Cassinger, 2010) the consumer brings to brand meaning creation.

Relational Origins of Brand Meaning Construction

Consumers appear to compartmentalize brands in a way that is incoherent and seemingly chaotic. However, these classification mechanisms enable the symbiotic

negotiation of brand meaning and in fact are semantically motivated. Consumers isolate nodes in memory, but also use other brands to understand the brand in question. These associative structures reveal how brand meaning is found relative to other brands where the question of what a brand is *not* is equally as important. Consumers use this mechanism to classify and associate brands, thereby arriving at product category classifications that may deviate from accepted norms or industry standard definitions. Understanding is therefore arrived at in part through the creation of boundaries for brands. Meaning is found in the semiotic relation (Appendix A, Figure 1.1) of nodes not only by how they are the same, but how they are different.

2.5 Commoditization and Decommoditization

The Difference between Commoditization and Commodification

Management literature has paid little attention to the semantics of the discussion that describe how brands are constructed and deconstructed relative to consumers' negotiation of meaning in the market. The processes of commoditization and commodification have been explored as congruent phenomena but, at least for the purposes of this study, it is necessary to establish some level of autonomy between the terms. The terms are ostensibly different and, as such, undeveloped.

Commodification

Commodification operates as a political socio-economic theory as part of a framework most associated with Karl Marx. The basic notion underlying commodification is that processes, institutions and objects become economized as goods and services that can be tangibly exchanged in a market structure. A commodity represents something that is assigned economic value, and commodification is the process by which the commodity acquires value. Marx spoke of commodities in the context of human relations and not in the adapted role they play between consumers and producers in the market (Corrigan, 1997). In this context, commodities previously had no economic value because they were not considered as such, but are now given economic meaning and value as goods or services for conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption (Corrigan, 1997).

Commoditization

Comparatively, commoditization has more specific application in the field of marketing and management. To *commoditize* more tactfully describes the transformative processes by which price comes to dictate the competition among market offerings. Other more differentiable attributes or associations, customarily acquired through marketing, are lost and parity is established. As a result, it holds that the process of *commoditization* must be preceded by *commodification*. Alternatively, *decommoditization* then describes the opposite of commoditization—a process by which products, because of competition and the profit motive, become differentiated in a consumer-centric market where

meaning is created via the proxy of branding. Only once meaning is created or no longer visible do goods become decommo-ditized or commoditized. In the marketing context, commoditization and decommo-ditization involve the creation or elimination of more abstract emotional meaning, but economic meaning is still retained. As a result, the concept of commoditization and decommo-ditization can be seen as emanating from the larger discussion to which commodification belongs.

Commodities and Non-commodities

Corrigan (1997) makes an important distillation of Karl Marx's sociological discussion of commodities: "they are all 'really' different manifestations of the same thing." The significance of an object—what Marx terms as an objects 'reality'—is found in its exchange-value. It is this exchange-value that makes it a commodity in the market because any two goods can be made equivalent (Corrigan, 1997).

Because [commodities] can be exchanged they are therefore equivalent, but this indiscriminating homogenization, accompanied by despairing cries of 'Is nothing sacred?', is countered by attempts to singularize them through sacralization or restricting their spheres of exchange (Kopytoff, 1986).

This is an important revelation for the utility of goods that predates the sociological perspective to consumption. In the context of consumption, and in the presence of marketing, the exchange value is displaced by what is considered to be the more important use-value or sign-value of an object or good. In this way, value is not absolute because two goods cannot be equated according to their subjective value. As a result, the sociological 'reality' of an object is precisely related to the interpretation of the sign, a further denotation of the role of semiology in consumption. In a practical context, the sociological utility of goods provides the momentum for decommo-ditization because it defines why consumers consume in the way they do.

The Dialectical Center

Whether objects originate as commodities or not is irrelevant because objects are consistently repurposed as commodities and non-commodities. Economies, or more specifically modern economies, exist in the dialectical center of commoditization and decommo-ditization. Consumers' consumption practices materialize according to how they mediate between 'rational calculation' and 'irrational impulse' (Corrigan, 1997). The former skews toward a commodity market whereas the latter more accurately describes the modern consumer economy. Consumption appears to be based on the newfound autonomy afforded consumers during this time and how merchants managed to redefine the purpose of goods.

Commodities, according to Corrigan (1997), assume entirely different characteristics once consumption is activated. As per Corrigan (1997), objects or goods cease to be commodities when they are purchased for consumption. Commodities are decommoditized on an individual level during consumption. As goods are used, they find meaning in the how and when they are consumed. For consumer products, this is the process of decommoditization. Goods become contextualized or, according to Kopytoff (1986), are given biographies of specific, singularized, and unexchangeable meaning through the transition from commoditization to decommoditization.

Corrigan (1997) uses the analogy of a family accumulating furniture to animate the transition from commoditization to decommoditization. The lives of the family, their experiences and their history, disappear into the objects they possess. The goods represent the physical manifestation of consumers' consumption motives and experiences. This is why brands take on meaning that is largely removed from the product's tangible exchange-value. Modern consumption triggers the consumer and firm-led occurrences of decommoditization.

Commoditization and Decommoditization: A Brand Context

The basic operating principle that propels decommoditization is that products and brands communicate needs. This market perspective subscribes to the theory that needs are located outside the 'homo economicus' and socially constructed by marketing and advertising (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). This contrasts with Baudrillard's (1988) assertion that the consumer is somehow "endowed with needs which "direct" him towards objects that "give" him satisfaction."

Products and brands are the agents of consumption. They are the way to more effective meaning that cannot be acquired through consumption that is motivated purely by economic-value (McCracken, 1988). This illustrates the sociological nature of consumption that motivates commoditization and decommoditization. Like consumers' complex meaning structures, products or brands are incorporated into existing consumption habits and risk being commoditized. Goods are first utilized for their 'ideal' (decommoditized) capacity, but they risk assimilation (commoditization) into the consumers' 'real' (McCracken, 1988) as new wants fuel the pursuit for continued consumption. This can produce the cyclical nature of commoditization and decommoditization (see below, figure 2.2) that appears to exist in the market.

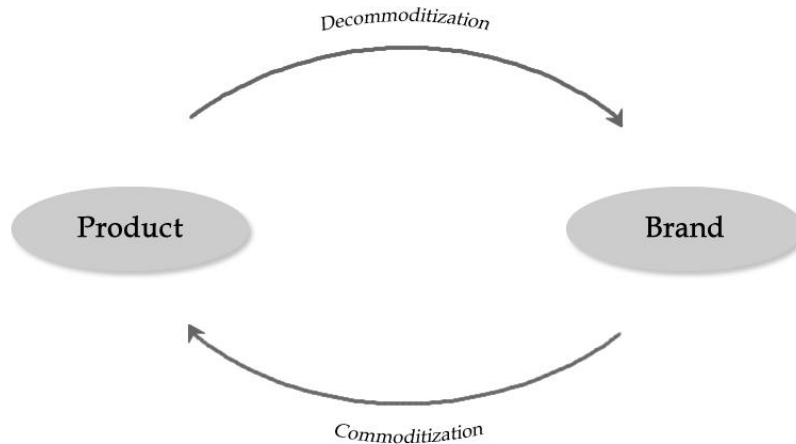


Figure 2.2 Conceptualizing the Commoditization and Decommoditization Processes

Commoditization can exist in the sense that brands are no longer differentiable in a product category, but also where brands are commoditized as a reflection of the self-image. In the latter, the brand does not lose its brand meaning, but the meaning is situational.

Where commoditization may be a favorable outcome

Given the standing definition of the consideration set, a brand that is commoditized still remains at the top of the consideration or evoked set. It is commoditized in the sense it comes to represent the entire product category. Where this is beneficial is in scenarios where the consumers is not prompted, cued, or otherwise stimulated by external marketing and the brand (and brand knowledge) must emerge autonomously from memory – the consideration set. This brand is commoditized in how it represents the entire category (and therefore may prove to be useful in a normal purchase scenario) and other brands coalesce around this brand. So long as it exists and does so in a competitively favorable position relative to those brands that exist in secondary nodes (which, on their own, may are commoditized), a positive scenario to induce purchase exists. These secondary and tertiary brands are commoditized in how they only exist as part of the evoked set because their existence is prompted by the flagship brand (the category referent). If the category referent does not exist favorably when the actual purchase decision occurs, the category referent is fully and irrevocably commoditized. If it does exist favorably, it is commoditized in a way that negates the meanings of other brands in the cognitive set. So, these other brands must be more adept at enticing the consumer to switch and commit significant cognitive effort to negotiate the brand’s meanings. Normally, however, the brand purchase decision is made in advance of this final encounter where the decision can be manipulated.

Problematizing Commoditization and Decommoditization

Inherent in decommoditization is the understanding that the symbolic elements of brands come to be the primary association. Marketers own the right to use the brands they expressly create, but in an apparent transfer of control consumers negotiate the proposed values and meanings. The research will require consumers negotiating a set of signifiers in order to identify the brand. As the brand meaning is negotiated between marketer imposed meanings (through symbols) and consumers' attitudes, values, judgments and their use of products to construct a desired identity, a network map comprised of various nodes of signifiers reveals if and how (in a semiotic analysis) consumers facilitate the process of commoditization and decommoditization.

Methodology

3.1 Semiology

Interpretation of the communication method, composed of signifying elements and various symbols, is determined independent of the sender of the message (the marketer). Therefore, brand meaning is entirely the burden of the recipient. The intent is for the meaning imparted through the language of symbols to be decoded verbatim, contingent on an understanding of a shared market language (Appendix A, Figure 1.1). So, studying the process of decommunitization requires studying the simultaneous, complex consumer deconstruction of meaning and construction of identity through brands. How companies enable decommunitization is known through the use of brands, but how consumers facilitate this transformative process is the focus of the study of meaning transfer.

Regardless of the context, humans operate in a world of signs. These signs carry certain meaning and are used to facilitate sense making and interpersonal communication. People attempt to make sense of their surroundings, be it personal possessions, language, behavior, images, sounds, a product's features, or an advertisement's imposed meaning. Through signs and their meaning people are able to connect the physical and social worlds they inhabit. It is argued that as social beings we weave and shape complex networks of meanings through which we are able to interpret and understand the world (Tietze et al., 2003). From living together with other people in close social proximity we share language, culture, ideas. All of these create a shared system of signs and symbols which can be explained as the cultural frames in which signs carry specific meaning.

Meaning appears to be *imposed* and *constructed*. What a particular sign stands for is negotiated through participation in the dynamic process of communication. At the one end there is the ideal, desired, expected, implied meaning, while at the other end this meaning is dissected, analyzed, and interpreted relative to existing knowledge and meaning structures. Thus, the sign can be scrutinized on two levels – as a *signifier* and as *a signified*. These elements refer to different levels of meaning that collectively make up the sign. The signifier represents the external part of the concept of the sign – the material aspect (Tietze et al., 2003). The meaning represented by the signifier is considered to be literal and objectively understood. Conversely, the signified is the interpreted meaning – the mental representation or image that emerges when prompted by the corresponding signifier. The signifier, or the external meaning, is rather stable because of its existence in the material world. The signified, however, is rather flexible as it exists relative to the sociological environment and individual connotations (Tietze et al., 2003).

Together, the signifier and the signified comprise the structure of the sign or the symbol and facilitate meaning making (Tietze et al., 2003). The meaning making process is argued not to be purely individual in the sense that it occurs in the frames of a society, which shares the same meaning system—language. As a consequence and depending on our previous experience, we possess a predefined set of mental images that relate to a particular signifier. Thus, one signifier may refer to many signifieds. From this point of view, the relationship between a signifier and a signified is not fixed—what a certain sign stands for by and large depends on one's predisposition to it. Further, since a sign's meaning cannot exist in isolation, it is derived through the relationship of this sign with other signs (Appendix A, Figure 1.1). This brings up the idea of meaning being relational. What is more, when communicating and trying to deliver a desired meaning, human beings are inclined to use a myriad of signs. As a consequence, it can be argued that signs cannot be studied outside of the context to which they are applied (Appendix A, Figure 1.1). Based on the assumption that something is what it is because it is not something else, the meaning of one sign can also be derived through its binary opposition to another sign.

From this perspective, meaning, be it derived or imposed, informs consumer behavior. That is to say that it shapes the way consumers choose to interact with brands because consumers often seek to form their identity through brands (Kapferer, 2008). That is why consumers look critically at the meaning possessed by brands. Based on their tacit knowledge (their learned and inherited experiences), they interpret and shape it in a way that reveals their brand affiliation motives and consumption habits.

3.2 Methodological Purpose

The aim of the research methodology is to discern how the processes of commoditization and decommoditization occur, informed by the complex nature of brands as semiotic phenomena. How consumers use brand meaning to inform their market behavior unfolds into a discussion of commoditization and decommoditization as they pertain to the issue of brand agency.

3.3 Research Design

In light of the use of commoditization and decommoditization, the research also assumes a moderate anthropological point of departure. Looking at how people behave acknowledges the central role of consumption in commoditization and decommoditization, and informs the knowledge of brand meaning construction as it forms around the issue of brand agency. Looking at how people behave (an anthropological question) helps to discern why people consume in the way they do—a question of profound sociological significance).

3.4 Data Collection

A discussion about the meaning directed by the companies would reveal how consumers feel about the messages they receive and to what extent they appreciate and comply with them.

Data collection had been carried out by means of semi-structured interviews. This approach is characterized as intertwining the flexibility of an unstructured interview and the controllable environment of a structured interview (Bryman et al., 2007). In order to gain a rather uninhibited and impartial view of how consumers understand brands and consumption, it is rather important to 'burden' them with the task of unaided recall. The interviews, however, were guided by a set of pre-formulated questions, setting the frames in which the conversation was to gain momentum.

Interview Process

The interview process employs semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B for research questions and corresponding data results). The purpose is to look at consumers' associative networks in order to gain knowledge of how consumers act upon the processes of decommoditization and commoditization in their interactions with brands.

The aim is to investigate decommoditization through the everyday interactions consumers have with brands from a certain category. This will provide significant and valuable information about how brand meaning is shared and applied. Questions will lead to answers concerning the associations in consumers' minds and their attitudes toward the product category.

Presented with the product category, respondents were asked to identify the first brand (referent brand) that they perceive to belong to that category. Then, in relation to the referent brand, respondents were asked to identify other related brands (competitor brands) that they perceive as belonging to the same product category (Appendix B, Table 1.1). At the following stage of the interview respondents were asked to identify associations that are unique to the focal brand as well as associations unique to the competitor brands. The final stage that requires probing consumers' cognitive structures for unaided brand associations involves determining associations for the entire product category (Appendix B, Table 1.4). Successive informational links related to this node then were extracted to establish the spread of activation.

This is important to potentially reveal competitor brands as being commoditized if two conditions are met. First, they are able to establish a perceptual network that links brands together to form a common product category based on some shared associations. A simplified concept of a brand association map is shown below (figure 3.1). Secondly, if the respondent identifies associations perceived to be prerequisites for all category members, but only held by the referent brand and therefore only indirectly

linked to the other brands), it may indicate the conditions for commoditization. Alternatively, the brand in the category that is top-of-mind could also be subject to commoditization if used to identify the entire category but not ultimately purchased.

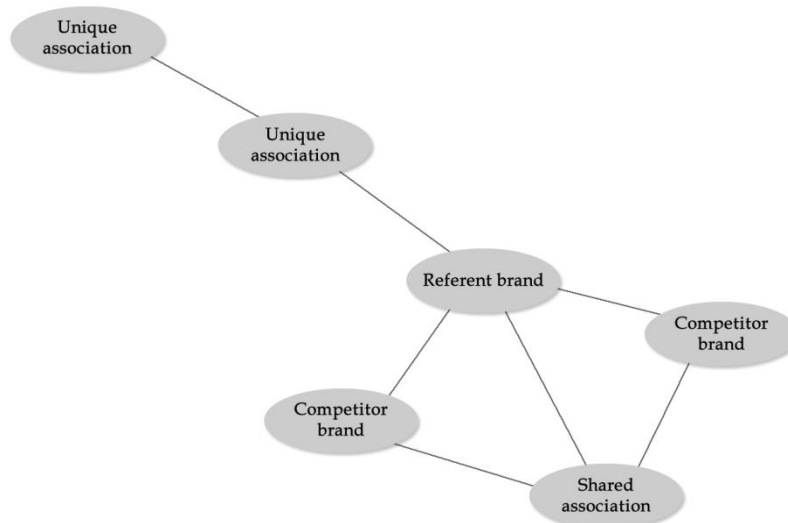


Figure 3.1 Simplified Associative Network Map

This information can then be cross-referenced to decipher shared qualities among brands and what associations co-exist more strongly than others. This provides an understanding of how the consumer perceives the market structure, an important piece of knowledge when studying how consumers process information. This information can then be compiled into a full associative matrix that can be transformed into aggregate associative networks. The data and networks that can be generated from this methodology can offer significant insight into brand meaning and commoditization and decommoditization.

There were no sample prerequisites in terms of demographics, psychographics or any other distinguishing socio-cultural variables. Ten consumers were interviewed individually in their homes to ensure comfort and confidence, and avoid any potential groupthink. Both interviewers were present for the data collection. Throughout the interviews all participants were asked the same set of questions. The purpose was to reveal the relative position of brands in cognitive memory and primary, secondary, and tertiary associations tied to these brands. For that reason consumers were not aided during the first portion of the interview with any cues. However, in order for the researchers to put down a list of associations in the form of words and phrases, follow-up questions were asked.

A subsequent interview discussion about the meaning directed by the companies is then used to uncover how consumers interpret and use the messages they receive from formal brand communications. Aided by recent advertisements (Appendix A, Figure 1.5

& 1.6) for a popular brand in the category, consumers will provide brand associations (Appendix B, Table 1.5). The fundamental purpose is to determine whether or not there is alignment between brand identity communicated by the firm and the brand image formed by the consumer. In order to understand how consumers engage the brand, part of the research must focus on top-down communication and how, if at all, it influences brand meaning creation.

One interviewer was responsible for asking the questions and, when necessary, providing the respondents with follow-up questions. The second interviewer was recording the discussion and extracting keywords and associations from the answers of the respondents. When necessary, these lists of associations were then extended with the help of recordings.

The purpose of this paper demands a process that challenges the cognitions of consumers brand consumption habits. Further, the very aim of the research design is to facilitate a rather free and unhindered discussion about something that all participants are familiar with. Thus, the product category of *soft drinks* is selected as the discussion topic in order to delve into the complex associative structures that motivate consumers' consumption habits.

3.5 Methodological Reflexivity

Acknowledging the epistemological reflexivity of the methodological approach is critical to decoding the complexities of meaning construction and problematizing the axiomatic issue of brand ownership.

Consumers' negotiation of brand meaning is a distinctly unreflexive process. The emergent nature of brand meaning is no less idiosyncratic and disjointed in its composition than any process that originates from consumers' cognitive structures would suggest.

The process of uncovering customer constructed meaning and company imposed meaning as they exist as parallel processes mirror the unconscious processes that consumers navigate in the marketplace. This reflexive research of an unreflexive process necessarily acknowledges the complexities of the research. This includes the relationship between the processes of knowledge production (learning, brand meaning), the context of the process, and the reflexive nature of the study that embellishes the need for inward reflection and careful interpretation of empirical material (Alvesson et al., 2009)

According to Phillips et al. (2009), learning emerges from meaningful association. Consumers establish "advanced organizers" that serve to anchor subsequent

knowledge. New information can be meaningfully learned by evaluating it relative to existing elements present in the cognitive structure. This meaningful set of associations and brands – the consideration set in a marketing context – effectively coalesces around the organized centers that help a consumer evaluate and organize information. This map of learning is what will enable the process of commoditization and decommoditization to be unfolded. Marketers employ this process through advertising to enable the conditions for decommoditization by attempting to establish a singular meaning. In contrast, consumers invariably learn in a way that can commoditize brands if the brands associative meaning deviates from the imparted meaning. The consumer is largely responsible for the decisions that determine which brand-related information is important and what is not.

These constructs are mediated and become tangible in consumer behavior. A reflexive approach to unfolding meaning construction isolates this in a conscious way that parallels process as it occurs organically and unconsciously in consumers' cognitive structures.

The methodological contribution is informed by the events and processes that occur in what Phillips et al. (2009) qualify as the “cognitive apparatus” – an important distinction that denotes the mechanical and operational significance of cognition when it comes to processing and compartmentalizing meaningful information. The cognitive apparatus is the decisive repository of negotiated meaning that is imposed through social channels and concurrently constructed in complex mental structures characterized both by temporal and spatial sequencing as well as arbitrary information nodes. Consumers seemingly replicate the complex geography of brands and meanings in internal memory structures using simple heuristics and elaborate mnemonic devices to process and compartmentalize meaningful information – that is to say consumers learn through navigating complex social domains and individual cognitive systems. These two spheres of information are not mutually exclusive; affective and cognitive information imparted by the company with the legal rights to a product or brand – often through the proxy of a marketing department or outside marketing firm (which further complicates the notion of ownership of a brand) – and constructed meaning sourced through arbitrary sources by the customer converge at a zone at which meaning is negotiated (see below, figure 3.2). How consumers conceptualize and negotiate the brand landscape ultimately coalesces around the issue of agency (brand ownership).

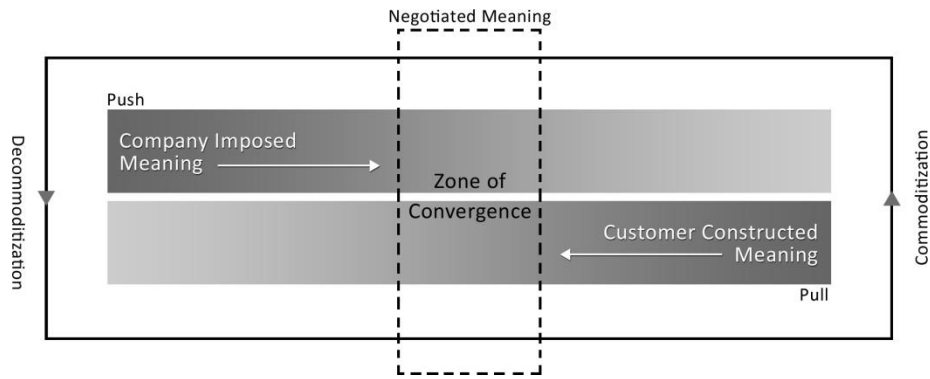


Figure 3.2 Brand Meaning Negotiation

The constructionist methodology is an attempt to reveal the associative constructs that reside in consumers cognitive structures. Individually these nodes may be void of utility, but when activated – given meaning through association – these nodes become important to consumers’ evaluative processes in the context of purchase behavior.

3.6 Research Orientation

Consumer behavior is largely experiential and socially constructed. How consumers formulate and utilize meaning in consumption points to the need to study *consumer reality* because of the tacit nature of consumer behavior (Clarke et al., 1998). It is beneficial – or perhaps necessary – to maintain inseparability and allow for consumer behavior as it exists organically to inform the discussion in a way that agrees with the research question (how do consumers understand brand meaning). It specifically targets the interaction between the homogenizing effect of mass consumption and a creative use and recontextualization of commodities locally by consumers. In the end, this leads to a research perspective that departs from a strictly rational and descriptive process to one that is mindful of the sociological and anthropological foundations of consumption behavior in marketing research (Clarke et al., 1998). This folds into an analysis founded on theoretical legitimacy and practical utility.

Consumers cannot conceptualize a product or product category in abstract or experiential terms. Instead, impressions of a product or whole category are substantiated through mostly tangible associations. As a result, in order to infer more affective arbiters of differentiation, consumers leverage associations of a known (referent) brand in the category. Meaning is rationally applied in a speculative, non-rational way to individual products in the category or across the entire spectrum of brands that occupy the category. What is more, as identified by Domzal et al. (1992), consumers know more about the category than about most of the brands that it comprises of. Thus, it can be argued that brands are built upon the category which they

represent. Meanings of brands communicated by marketers merely surround the meaning of the core of the category.

Consumers to a great extent manipulate brands based on what they know about a certain product category. So, the process of commoditization can be revealed in how consumers deconstruct brand meaning profiles. Commoditization does not necessarily mean brands no longer exist, but rather their distinctive capabilities are lost.

If consumers are asked to extrapolate a given product category and identify signifiers, it will reveal how the process of commoditization unfolds if associations appear to relate to one specific brand within the category. As a result, to research commoditization parallel research would be carried out to identify certain brand associations.

However, prior to establishing principles of commoditization and decommo-ditization as they occur in advertising, it is important to understand how consumers become literate in the market—how they think about, compartmentalize and consume products and brands (to reflect their own self-image, for example).

The object of study is merely the perceptual associations of consumers for brands in a particular product category. Since meaning is acquired and expressed through language, an answer to the research question will be looked for by means of the words that consumers use and the context in which they are applied. The assumption that people are capable of making sense of their environment (Bryman et al., 2007) and the need for rich, deep and meaningful data have exerted tremendous influence on the approach to data collection and analysis.

3.7 Analytical Method

Associative Brand Networks

Consumer associate brand networks are an effective method with which to map an array of branding phenomena, including brand parity and brand confusion (Henderson et al., 1998). Brand confusion and brand parity are symptoms of the persistent threat of commoditization of brands or the firm motivated decommo-ditization of products (commodities) that compete in the same market space.

Brand confusion is indicative of cognitive dissonance that resides in the minds of consumers. At odds with the features or merits associated with a given brand, the consumer struggles with a state of confusion. In this way consumers are unable to rationalize the brand value proposition that is comprised of certain tangible and intangible associations. This problem can occur within a brand portfolio (brand dilution), but also emerge in a firm's competitive efforts as well in the form of brand parity. Brand parity is the perceived sameness among brands in a competitive product

category, especially given the shadow cast by the other brands that exist in the mental network. This is a reflection of the consumers' cognitive indifference that may be symptomatic of the commoditization process.

The intent is an empirical study of consumer perceptions, informed by how consumers negotiate brand meaning, to understand how commoditization and decommoditization are given momentum. Ultimately, the research aim is in understanding the philosophical issue of brand ownership. Inclusive in this is where brand meaning originates and resides (to address ownership), as well as how brand meaning is acquired and demarcated. Brand meaning, according to Kotler (2002), is acknowledged through the set of associations consumers retain about a particular brand. As a result, associative networks as a method of study is a logical progression of the aim of this component of the research study.

According to Henderson et al., (1998), extant research in associate networks has devolved from psychology and, as such, has seen limited application in marketing and consumer behavior beyond a generalized level of familiarity. Associative network studies present the opportunity to unfold the processes of commoditization and decommoditization to reveal the implications for brand ownership.

Consumers store perceptual and preferential brand information in memory and the implications of such vast networks of information have important implications for brand equity, brand image, and purchase preferences (Henderson et al., 1998). Mapping these brand associations will enable semiotic analysis of the structure of the nodes in consumer memory—how they are formed and how they are utilized. Sequentially unfolding how consumers' meaning structures create or enable the conditions for commoditization and decommoditization reveal the role they play in constructing and deconstructing brands. Informed by an understanding of why brand associations are important, revealing *how* these associations are structured may have important ramifications for how the processes of commoditization and decommoditization are manifested in the market. This will be accomplished through mapping the narrations produced by the associative exercise. Ten respondents are required to facilitate this study.

Associative networks are founded on the concept of spreading activation (Collins et al., 1975) where activation of information (individual brand associations) occurs when a subject is cued by a stimulus (a brand). As consumers consciously or subconsciously develop associations to brands overtime, these associations begin to coalesce around the brand in the consumers' memory structure. When elicited, the strength of the associations is measured by the number of iterations it is away from the stimulus. Associations immediately attached to the stimulus are primarily strong in memory whereas as secondary or tertiary nodes indicate greater psychological distance from the stimulus, perhaps only being activated contingent on the recognition of other nodes.

This cognitive exercise in linear and non-linear consumer memory structures can begin to rich data about the focal brand and, by association, competitor brands within a given product category (Henderson et al., 1998).

Since consumers appear to categorize and compartmentalize information in memory, the use of associative networks allows qualitatively rich data to be understood in a way that closely resembles the consumer memory structure (Henderson et al., 1998). Associations can be features, people, places, occasions (Henderson et al., 1998), or other brands that are elicited when consumers think about, experience, or otherwise consume the brand.

Semiotic Analysis

Semiotic analysis of brand meaning is an appropriate lens through which to unfold the processes of commoditization and decommunitization. As semiology is the study of signs and symbols (Tietze et al., 2003) it follows that brands, as rich repositories for added value, cannot be divorced from a discussion of semiology. Brands engage the consumer in a process of abstract rationalization that reveals the sociological, anthropological, and psychological motivations behind brand meaning construction. Few studies have utilized associative networks to their full efficacy in marketing or consumer behavior research (Henderson et al., 1998).

Associative network research originates in psychology (Henderson et al., 1998) and it is therefore closely related to questions that inquire into the nature of behavior. In a marketing context, that is precisely the ambition of this paper.

Discussion

The formation of brands and brand image are co-produced processes whereby consumers and companies construct and also deconstruct brand profiles. Consumers may operate parallel to explicit company brand building efforts to encourage the decommodification of products, but also through cognitive, associative and affective processes that can commoditize brands.

A central part of this study is the process by which brands themselves become commoditized and devalued. In this way brands do not disappear from the market, but their constructed meaning is, in some way, lost. This can be attributed to insufficient legal protection of the brand trademark, but this study is more concerned with how consumers come to affect or commoditize brands in the same way products become branded through the process of decommodification and how these processes are reflected in advertisements.

Note: Compiled interview results are available in Appendix B.

4.1 Consumer Understanding of Product Categories

Association Types

Not being aided by any cues and looking for the words and phrases that can describe the way in which they see the brand in question, most respondents chose to start with the usage scenario in which they consume those brands and products.

Through semiotic analysis and interpreting the meaning of the words from the context in which they were used, four main types of associations were revealed. The four groups of associations were namely *attributes*, *benefits*, *attitudes* and *other related or unrelated brands* (Appendix A, Figure 1.2). The first group, the *attributes* group, consisted of those associations that described the brands and products in connection with their characteristics. The associations that were assigned to this category were further divided into two sub-groups - *non-product related* and *product related*. The former included all associations that gave details on what situations these products were consumed in. The *benefits* group comprised of associations that described the associations perceived as a result of consuming the product. To the third group, the *attitudes* were assigned those associations that, simply put, described consumers' feelings. The broadest, most often utilized association type was other brands. This includes brands related to "Coca-Cola" and "Pepsi", but also other brands only indirectly related. More specifically, consumers would associate soft drink brands with other related brands from the soft drink category, but also with brands that are indirectly

related such as *“McDonald’s”* and *“KFC”* (note: brands and associations are styled using italics and quotation marks to emphasize the connotative meanings that individuals attach to signifiers).

During the interviews consumers confirmed the idea that brands are a vast and complex network of signs. They interpreted the brands in different ways, using different words and describing different situations. The meaning that brands have for some consumers aligns with what the company conveys with time. Some of the signs and symbols that marketing efforts easily carve in one’s mind become road signs through which people are able to navigate in the brands constellation. Further, those signs and symbols are often easy to recall. One of the respondents, for instance, referred to the *“red color”* and the distinct bottle shape of the Coke brand to the *“Coca-Cola”* node. The respondent subsequently mentioned *“Christmas”* and the distinct *“commercials”* that elicited the *“happiness”* association that arguably is the result of the Coca-Cola’s visible *“Open Happiness”* marketing campaign (see Appendix A, Figure 1.5).

On the other hand, some consumers used rather generic, low-level associations when discussing *“Coca-Cola”*. They mentioned product-related associations because of their direct connection with the brand. This often appeared in the form of *“Coca-Cola”* being described as a *“refreshing drink”* that leads consumers to associate the brand with *“parties”* and *“fun”*. In some occasions consumers did support their ramble through memories and meanings with both tangible and intangible associations. Often, the associations the brand evoked were related to *“friends”*, *“family”*, *“fast food”*, and *“Christmas”*.

For example, one of the respondents described *“Coca-Cola”* according to the benefits derived from consuming the particular brand. The first association that came to mind was *“energy”*, a salient benefit ascribed to the *“Coca-Cola”* referent node that reveals how the consumer engages the brand. Then, having mentioned *“quick food”* and *“convenience”* as important elements, the respondent then interpreted *“Coca-Cola”* in a way that reveals the non-product related attributes that often emerge in brand associations related to usage scenario. The brand meaning for *“Coca-Cola”* then gravitated toward the idea of *“socializing”*. *“Coca-Cola”* is perceived to be present in important, defining usage situations.

At the same time, another consumer directed attention to the strong *“American”* association the brand was perceived to have. This consumer associated *“Coca-Cola”* with *“McDonald’s”* and *“fast food”* as well. In fact, *“McDonald’s”* was mentioned immediately after *“America”*. What is evident here is that the brand now takes on meaning far beyond the scope and control of the brand. It may enable the brand to become highly decommoditized in individual scenarios, yet it effectively means the firm relinquishes any ability to control the brand meaning.

The respondent's associations followed an easy to distinguish path. The first association in this case was related to the country of origin. The consumer here explicitly linked "Coca-Cola" with "America". The spreading activation effect (Collins et al., 1975; See section 3.7) then directed the respondent's thoughts towards "quality", "fast food", and "McDonald's". The Coca-Cola brand is, indeed, served in McDonald's restaurants, but is really happening is that the respondent's cognitive memory was informed with associations that were transferred to "Coca-Cola" via their association with "McDonald's". "Coca-Cola" was, by association, "unhealthy".

As it has already been mentioned in the previous chapters, when trying to understand a certain brand, consumers refer to other brands. In many cases, other brands help the consumer develop their associations toward the referent brand (Appendix B, Table 1.2). In this case, "McDonald's" strongly informs the associations consumers have with "Coca-Cola". For other people, however, "McDonald's" as a stand-alone set of considerations and associations stands for something different. If the respondent was to talk about something else than "America" and "McDonald's", distinctly inferior associations such as this may not have emerged. What is more, the respondent did not mention any of the Coca-Cola brand's popularly imparted associations ("happiness", for example) that other respondents mentioned and the company vigorously tries to impart. The respondent in this scenario focused on their own experience to interpret the brand. This speaks to the relativity of brands and their understanding as semiological phenomena.

Another consumer also referred to "fast food", "McDonald's", and "KFC". According to this consumer, the "McDonald's" and "KFC" brands and the "fast food" product category stand for something else entirely. In semiotics, a signifier can refer to many signifieds (Tietze et al., 2003). While in the previous case "McDonald's" provoked the idea of "inferior quality", in this case it led "friends" and "happiness" – a rather desirable outcome from Coca-Cola's (the brand's) perspective.

Category Associations

How consumers think about a product category or a brand is largely experiential and resides mostly outside of the tangible aspects of consuming a brand. In contrast to the non-product related attributes that are often employed in brand-specific knowledge structures, product related attributes are also often employed when consumers try to make sense of an entire product category (see below, figure 4.1).

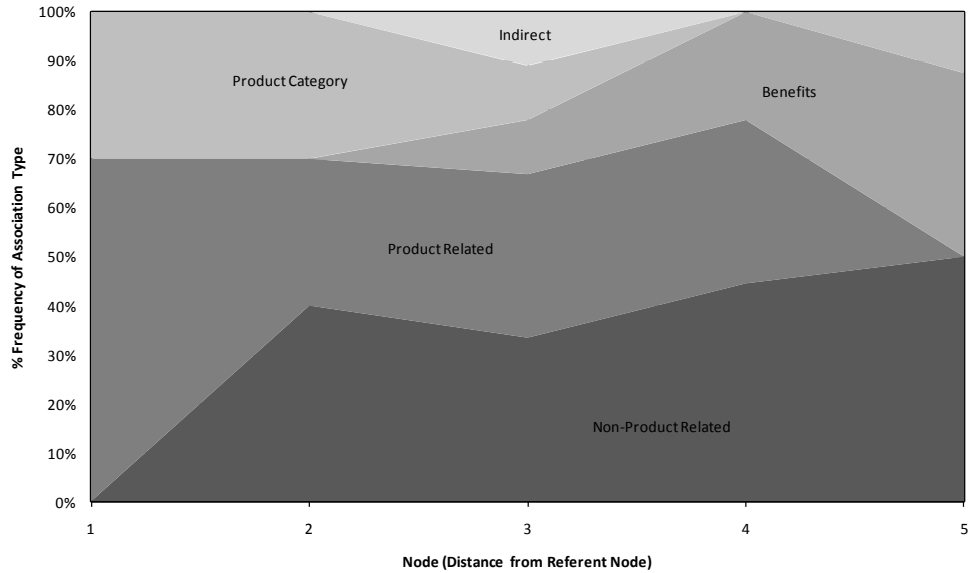


Figure 4.1 Product Category Associations at Different Node Levels

More specifically, the sequencing of the associations reveals the ambiguous nature of how consumers understand categories. The first node is generally a product related attribute, but subsequent nodes reveal no discernible pattern (see below, figure 4.2). The breadth and depth of potential associations the consumers draws upon expands exponentially the further one is removed from the referent.

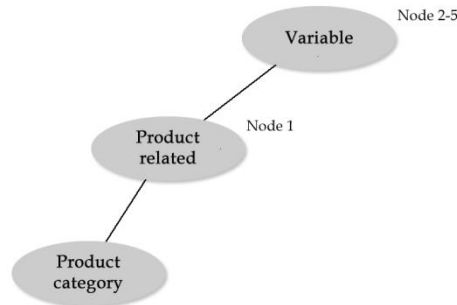


Figure 4.2 Conceptual Network: Category Associations at Different Node Levels

Consumers appear to first establish a broader definition of category membership. Membership is not determined according to brands, but rather brands appear in subsequent nodes of the associative construct if they are deemed to ultimately coincide with the attributes the consumer sees as necessary for category membership. Individual brands are not strong enough in memory to become the category referent and risk commoditization, nor are they strong enough to be meaningfully understood in a way that enables decommoditization. In this situation of meaning making there is no clear

determination of brand control. As a result, brands in this context reside firmly in the negotiated space between commoditization and decommoditization.

4.2 Structure of Meaning

Humans, elevated to the status of consumers through their participation in the market, assemble symbolic boundaries for brands during learning and consumption, but those boundaries are consistently reorganized and reconciled relative to the discourses that operate in the market. The semiotic potency of symbols changes over time as new elements are introduced, distant associations are abandoned, and existing associations are restructured accordingly. However, the polysemic quality of meaning implies that nodes are not necessarily vacated—associations may be replaced, expanded, held in binary opposition, or retained. Meaning, therefore, is constantly in a state of flux.

Consumers find utility in the connotative, interpretive meaning represented by the signifier in opposition to the literal, denotative meaning (Tietze et al., 2003). More specifically, the meaning held by brands is often understood sequentially. Meaning cannot be divorced from its context and is relational, so the importance of one node of knowledge often lies in how it relates to (enables access to) other nodes. Associations to a primary referent node draw on logic and, as the number of associations grows, the reserve from which the consumer utilizes to extricate meaning grows exponentially.

Asymmetric Nature of Meaning Consumption

Classifying meaning construction as being a simple, transparent process discounts the importance of how consumers assess marketing information. As a result, outright agency of the brand becomes seemingly impossible as the frame of reference the consumer employs grows in a non-linear fashion, asymmetric fashion. Consumers understand meaning in a way that is simultaneously inductive and deductive. Signifiers and signified elements work together to create the sign, but they are only arbitrarily related. Meaning amongst consumers is obviously not ubiquitous, but the point is that within one's own cognitive structure the same semiotic principle holds: meaning is relational and contingent (Appendix A, Figure 1.1). Consumers' meaning structures evade any semblance of structure that can be extrapolated into hard and fast rules (see below, figure 4.3). In this way, the exception to the rule is far more prevalent than the rule itself.

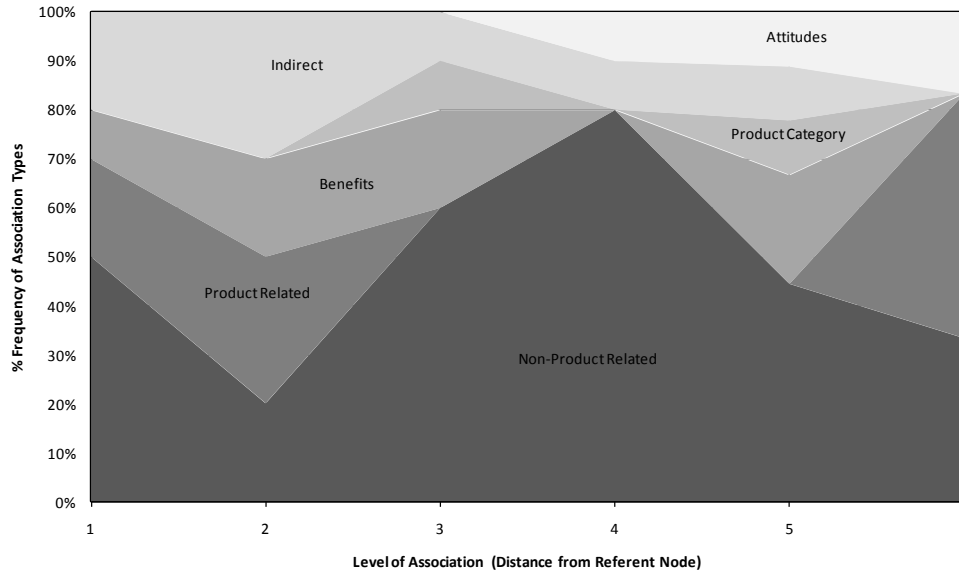


Figure 4.3 Category Referent Associations at Different Node Levels

While consumers exhibit unique meaning structures, it is plausible to seek out a pattern for the types of associations consumers utilize at various distances from the referent node. From the research, the average number of associations consumers provided for the referent brand (6) formed the basis for calculating the frequency of association types at each node level. Non-product related associations are often used by consumers to construct knowledge of the referent brand, but only in the fourth node does a particular association type appear to dominate. The inability to discern how consumers understand even the referent brand in a generalizable way reinforces the complex nature of negotiated meaning. Neither the imparted meaning of the firm nor the constructed meaning of the consumer dominates, thus reinforcing the idea that control is consistently in a state of flux.

Sequencing of Associations

An interview respondent provided the following rationale to describe how they understand *Ramlösa*, one of the brand's perceived to be in the soft drink category:

I think of community when I think of Ramlösa because it is Swedish and is a quality brand.

This reveals that consumers compile product-related associations with other brands that themselves have their own diverse associations. The term “community” has different interpretations, and the nuances that describe it in a certain way are discerned only once the consumer arrives at the node. Here, for example, “community” is likely related to some feeling of national pride that is people often invoke for their home country – the

node “community” refers the consumer to other associations or paths, even if it may be outside the immediate network of associations for “Ramlösa”. Here the node “community” is a proxy by which “Ramlösa” is associated to the country of Sweden. This is deductive reasoning. Likewise, the node “quality” is associated or revealed through the associations to “Sweden” through inductive reasoning.

Consumer meaning of brands, like any other phenomenon, is deep-seated. Meaning is dynamic and constantly evolving, but the assertion here is that the consumer expends considerable cognitive effort and must be allotted the time necessary to catch up to the company’s meaning. Even still, it is up to the consumer to choose to accept any minor shifts or radical departures in brand identity put forth by the company. This is because new brand knowledge is accepted in accordance with the principles of semiology (Appendix A, Figure 1.1) subconsciously and conditionally by consumers.

4.3 Role of Product-Related Associations in Brand Meaning

In understanding and creating distinctive spaces for brands, consumers employ packaging and other fundamental brand elements to construct meaning or simply construct the boundaries of a category. Cognitive dissonance may help understand the consumer psyche: certain products or brands are presented in a certain way, so anything that does not agree with this accepted norm may be discarded. Even as a complex organism, a particular and distinctive color scheme has a visceral impact on brand equity when it comes to guarding against commoditization of the brand. For example, research respondents identified the unique bottle silhouette and acknowledged the color “red” as being distinctly tied to “Coca-Cola”. The Coca-Cola brand effectively has utilized these images to define the boundaries of the product category and set the brand apart from like-minded brands using non-product related associations.

4.4 Referent Brands

Talking about a relatively abstract thing such as a product category is not an easy task. However, it proved to be a useful method for discovering the structure of the knowledge system one possesses. Consumers collect and retain meaningful information in the form of interconnected nodes and they way in which it surfaces in the consumer conscience follows this pattern. Consumers think about and verbalize brands and product categories according to a frame of reference. Not being given any cues aside from a product category, the respondents first reveal the brands that have the largest share of their consumer mind. From the outset consumers are defining this category according to their perceptions; as such deviations in the definition of the product category—the types of associations and the variety of brands mentioned—are not

unlikely. For example, an industry definition of “soft drinks” may be very narrow, only including carbonated beverages. However, as consumers often form meaning outside of a strictly defined market context, they ultimately define what brands relate to each other and how they are alike.

Asked to name a brand from the product category of soft drinks, most respondents mentioned “Coca-Cola” save for one respondent who identified “Pepsi” as the referent brand. Thus, “Coca-Cola” was identified as the category leader. However, both “Coca-Cola” and “Pepsi” belong to the very same sub-category of drinks.

4.5 Aggregate Associative Networks

During the interviews, consumers identified a number of brands that, according to them, belonged to the category of soft drinks (Appendix B, Table 1.1). They compiled a set of associations for the referent brand and for the competitor brands (Appendix B, Table 1.2 & 1.3). In the end, consumers provided associations that related to the whole category of soft drinks (Appendix B, Table 1.4) based on their uniquely perceived definition of the category and what category membership entails.

The results from the interviews revealed that brand meaning, defined as the set of beliefs and associations consumers have about a particular brand, is relational and contingent. With some exceptions, the associations that consumers gave did not follow the same strict order. Further, the words and phrases that described consumers’ understanding of the brands differed in their information intensity and descriptive character. In some cases, for instance, dominant associations that were connected to “Coca-Cola” were other brands such as “McDonald’s” and “KFC”. In others, consumers relied on rather tangible and generic in terms of meaning elements of a particular brand. Indeed, it is the consumer who decides what information is important to deciphering the brand meaning. Further, it is up to him to develop a structure of meanings around a particular brand. Although all of the respondents have been subject to the marketing efforts of the same companies, they employ different perspectives and rationales that come to influence their consumption practices and perceptions of brands and product categories.

Based on the classification of associations, the aggregate network map for the referent brand associations offers an interesting perspective of how consumers construct the meaning of brands:

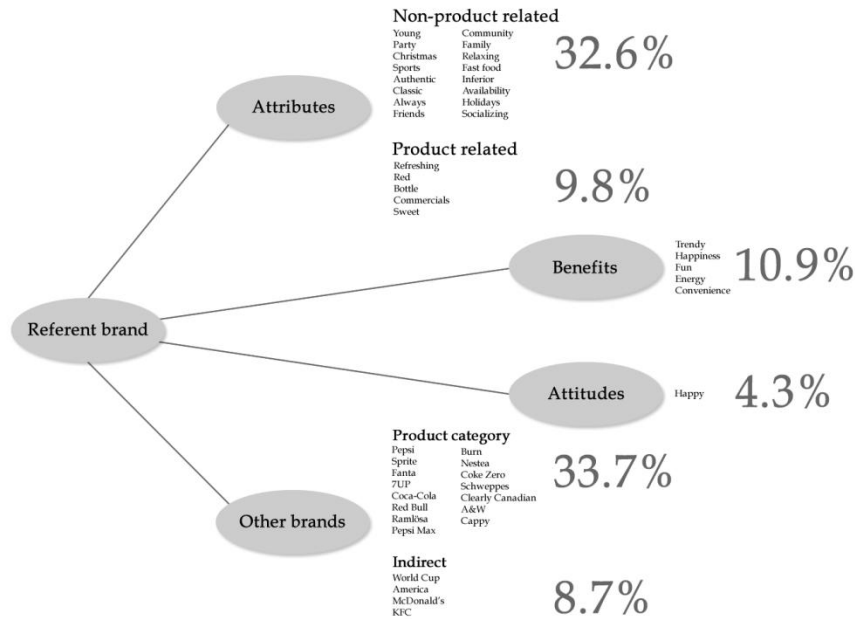


Figure 4.4 Aggregate Referent Brand Associations
 (Larger version available in Appendix A, Figure 1.2)

From this it is clear that approximately 10% of the associations that consumers use to define a brand's meaning come from functional, product-related descriptions such as "refreshing" and "sweet". Similarly, a further 10% of associations can be classified as benefit associations. These are associations related to what a consumer experiences from a certain product. A similar situation is clear with the way in which attitudes towards brands are part of the meaning making process.

Soft drinks belong to a low-involvement product category that would seemingly require nominal cognitive effort. However, stronger elements of the brand meaning are derived from more abstract associations related to other brands such as "Sprite" or "Fanta", or non-product related attributes that require intense cognitive effort. So, companies are to a great extent in control of some of the associations, but they may not be salient ones. When consumers think of a brand, a set of brands, or an entire product category, they think in great detail.

Consumers derive brand associations from a variety of sources (see above figure 4.4). As the aggregate associative network suggests, some of them come at a stage that usually precedes consumption. Some of these impressions and images, such as the unique silhouette "bottle" shape or Coca-Cola's "Christmas" campaigns and other "commercials" can be seen as strongly incorporated into consumers' cognitive structures. Through advertising efforts and sponsorships companies also build the type of associations that are illustrated by the relationship between "World Cup" and "Pepsi".

However, other associations have a rather dynamic nature. They emerge during and after consumption. Thus, associations such as *"parties"*, *"friends"*, and *"fast food"* are arguably strong and consistent associations in consumers' brand consideration sets. They are the result of their consumption practices and, as a consequence, become a strong part of their brand memory structures.

Further, brands do not exist alone—brands share market space and build brand constellations. These brand constellations, defined by Simonin et al. (1998; as cited in Jevons et al., 2005) as the "combination of two or more individual brands" considerably increase the complexity of a brand's meaning based on the large portfolio of associations available to assign to an individual brand.

As the research has identified, some consumers find it easy to correlate brands. They do it both consciously and subconsciously. As in the case of this research, two respondents talked about *"Coca-Cola"* in relation to *"McDonald's"*. One respondent further associated *"McDonald's"* with *"friends"* and *"happiness"*, while another derived the notion of *"unhealthy"* and *"inferior quality"* from the relationship between *"Coca-Cola"* and *"McDonald's"*.

Finally, Plato's "Myth of Er" (as cited in Philips et al., 2009) suggests a captivating metaphor for the learning process. Consumers indeed have the chance to learn, recall what they have learned and reflect upon it. From this perspective, consumers are able to build and sustain a rather rich consideration set. As the research also illustrates, some consumers derive meaning in a rather narrow way, while others take a far broader approach to constructing brand meaning.

4.6 Market Structure

Once consumers had identified the brands that shared the most significant part of their cognitive memory and were represented by somewhat vivid and interconnected associations, they had to assign associations to the whole category of soft drinks. While some of them used descriptive terms and once again referred to situations of consumption (usage scenarios), others aided their reasoning through related brands such as *"Coca-Cola"* and *"Pepsi"*. Those associations were then evaluated and based on the frequency with which they occurred in the discussions, their belonging to the groups of associations and their overall share in the aggregate associative network, five were chosen—namely *"friends"* and *"young"* (non-product related), *"refreshing"* (product related), *"fun"* (benefits), and *"McDonald's"* (indirect associations with other brands). Further, the four brands (the average number of brands consumers were able to relate to the product category of soft drinks) that were considered to be the closest competitors according to consumer perceptions formed the basis of the market structure.

4.7 Firm Imparted Brand Meaning

Research illustrates that firms can exert control of the brand through advertising. This is not a definitive judgment of ownership, but a clear distinction is made from the brand associations (the brand meaning) consumers hold when presented with a marketing message that originates from the firm that legally owns the brand. A clear partition exists between brand associations consumers construct and associations arrived at in the presence of advertising where firms are looking to strictly moderate the conversation.

Unaided brand associations produced by consumers are mostly formed from non-product related attributes and related brands within the same product category or indirectly related (Appendix B, Table 1.2 & 1.3). Conversely, the associations derived from the aided elicitation with advertisements were largely non-product related, highly abstract, image-laden attributes (Appendix B, Table 1.5). A preoccupation with the visual imagery of the advertisements prevents consumers from conducting a more critical analysis relative to existing knowledge structures. Consumers appear to have constricted vision when unilaterally evaluating the brand meaning message communicated by the firm through advertising. Ultimately, the pervasive problem is that the information gleaned from imposed brand messages is often not visible in consumers' long-term memory structures.

Further, how consumers understand the brand—the brand meaning—is altered under different conditions given the results of the research. The most important take away at this juncture is in fact obvious: there is no singular condition under which brand meaning is constructed. Firms cannot unilaterally impose meaning on consumers because the consumption experience exists in both private and public spheres that are far removed from the reach of the firm. Imparted meaning from the company that is materialized in advertisements is eventually incorporated into existing knowledge structures like all other information. The firm, therefore, does not unilaterally define brand meaning.

Overall, how consumers consume brands reveals a clear and persistent link to semiology. Meaning, as seen above emanates from the symbols present in the advertisements from the research study. For example, in evaluating the advertisements consumers cannot divorce themselves from the context. Likewise, unaided association produces many associations that fall under the category of generic brands. Not only do these related brands carry their own set of diverse associations, they exist in reference to the central brand node artificially. This compounds the cognitive effort that is required on the consumer to negotiate the brand's meaning. As a result, a scenario in which the association becomes discarded is much more likely in order for the consumer to avoid cognitive dissonance. This is because changes in consumer brand meaning structures occur in an incremental fashion, not *en masse*.

4.8 Cognitive Structures: Brands and Associations

How brands and associations are inexplicably linked provides a fundamental understanding of how consumers see the market—how they structure associations in the presence of an array of brands (Henderson et al., 1998). Reproducing the brands that exist in consumers' consideration sets and the qualities that co-exist in this space informs the understanding of brand meaning at a category level.

These associations are fundamental to the construct of how consumption is carried out because brand associations help consumers to process and retrieve information and they can create value for a brand if they are sufficiently commoditized (Aaker, 1996).

4.9 How Brands Relate to Other Brands in Cognitive Structures

Consumers regularly operate outside of the imposed market context. This enables them to commoditize brands (decipher and demarcate brand meaning) before they reach the market. This adjacent space of meaning negotiation impedes the ability of firms to actively prevent potential commoditization.

Consumers use brands to understand (define) other brands and clarify the market structure. Research reveals that relative to the entire product category (soft drinks), "Coca-Cola" and "Pepsi" are strongly de'commoditized. Moreover, other brands within this category are potentially subject to commoditization because the associations shared by "Coca-Cola" and "Pepsi" are perceived to be prerequisites for category membership. So, relative to any cues that prompt consumers to consume from this product category, the category that includes "Coca-Cola" and "Pepsi" is top-of-mind.

What is evident is that "Coca-Cola" and "Pepsi" are the dominant brands and associations in how consumers perceive the market structure of the soft drink product category (see below, figure 4.5). These two brands are very strongly related and many other brands or casually linked associations are made salient only through one of these brands.

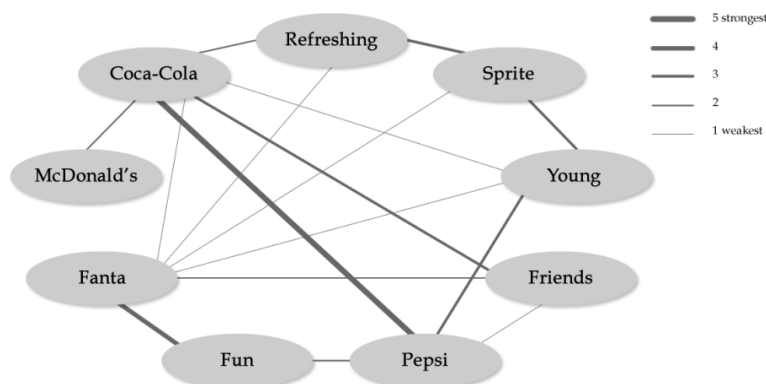


Figure 4.5 Consumer Perception of Market Structure
(Larger version available in Appendix A, Figure 1.3)

However, within the cola subsection of the product category, “Coca-Cola” and “Pepsi” are highly commoditized relative to one another because of the intensity of the relationship (see below, figure 4.6). Consumers are indifferent to the brand meaning for these brands as individual entities. The consumer is democratizing the brand over the course of their consumption in a way that greatly contrasts the competing efforts of firms to reinforce the unique profiles of their respective brands. Conclusively, commoditization and decommoditization unfold in a manner that reflects how consumers relate brands to other brands.

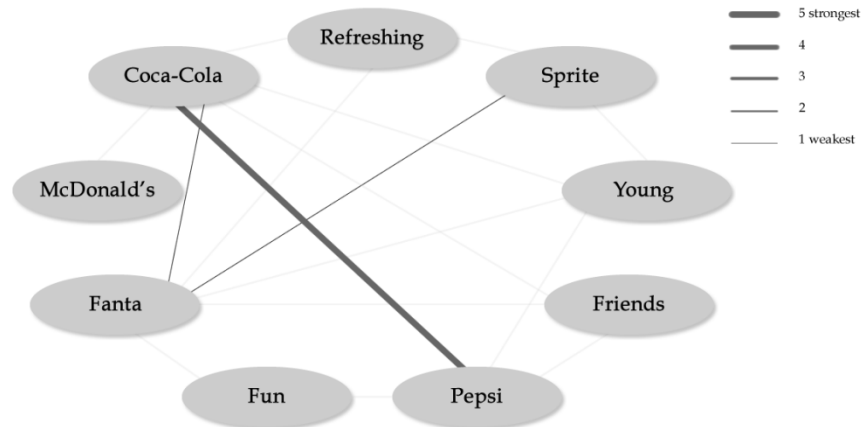


Figure 4.6 How Brands Relate to Each Other In Consumers Associative Structures
(Larger version available in Appendix A, Figure 1.4)

“Yeah, I drink Pepsi too. Pepsi... Pepsi... Daring, yeah. That’s the first thing that comes to my mind. I don’t know why. And the blue color of the label. Actually, I don’t like Pepsi that much, because to me it’s sweeter than Coca-Cola. It is not the same as Coca-Cola.... Young people drink it.”

Being a competitor brand, “Pepsi” resides in consumers’ mind both as a stand-alone brand with its own meaning and through its relation to “Coca-Cola”. The primary associations in this case—“daring” and “blue”—are arguably imparted by the company. They are signs of the brand and are easy to recognize and recall and, thus, differentiate the product from the other category products on the market. At the same time, “Pepsi” is compared with “Coca-Cola” based on its taste. By comparing the competitor brand with the referent brand at a rather functional level, the consumer to a great extent diminishes the uniqueness of “Pepsi”. The brand attractiveness and promise are lowered to a rather functional level and consumers diminish the uniqueness of the brand and commoditize it relatively to the referent brand.

4.10 How Consumers Negotiate Imparted Meaning

The second section of the interview involved the use of two advertisements from a brand belonging to the soft drink product category (see below, figure 4.7). The purpose is to see if the associations that emerge in a situation of aided elicitation differ from the associations previously mentioned in connection with the brand via unaided elicitation. Conclusions can be drawn about the extent to which the respondents use and incorporate existing brand associations while trying to understand the brand message. Revealing that meaning is constructed contrasts the narrow view that meaning communication resides solely with the firm. Meaning is ultimately negotiated in the presence of firm-imparted messages and consumer-constructed associations.



Figure 4.7 Company Imparted Meaning in Advertisements
(Larger versions available in Appendix A, Figures 1.5 & 1.6)

Being given the first advertisement, most respondents leaned towards the ideas of “community”, “happiness”, “togetherness”, and “being good”. Further, led by the signs and symbols provided by the Coca-Cola brand message in the advertisement, most consumers begin to explore brands in a broad social context clearly pursued by the brand, invoking the words “unity”, “responsibility” and “social equality”.

In certain occasions, however, respondents did not focus solely on what they were seeing in the advertisement. One of the respondents, after mentioning these associations, attempted to detach themselves from the picture. This consumer relied on their knowledge and previous experience when evaluating the message. By looking

beyond the imparted meaning, she looked for confirmation or disconfirmation of the advertisements messages relative to her existing understanding of the brand. Another respondent took a similar perspective on the issue and talked about “*cynicism*” in Coca-Cola’s branded ambition to ‘unite the world with a bottle of Coke’. Thus, the idea of “*responsibility*” and “*equality*” were examples of consumers taking meaning far beyond the ideal scope of the brand. “*Coca-Cola*” was connected with politics, the situation in the world today and the corporate role in those issues.

The second advertisement reminded some of the consumers of its affiliation with the UN Climate Change Conference that took place in Copenhagen in 2009. Thus, the associations that were put down by the researchers included “*future*”, “*environment*”, “*Earth*”, “*climate change*”, “*responsibility*”, and “*harmony*”. Further, the advertisement made them express “*hope*” for a better world and “*change*”. However, two of the respondents were once again more critical. One of them even expressed their concern that the “*emptiness*” of Copenhagen’s promise could have a rather negative impact on Coca-Cola’s brand image.

Ultimately, the associations and the ideas that were shared with the help of the advertisements show that in most cases consumers are limited in their ability to look beyond what they are being told. By focusing on the elements of an advertisement, for instance, they do not compare its meaning with their accumulated brand knowledge. Further, they do not associate it with something different than the brand itself. It follows, then, that consumers are rather captivated by the company imparted brand meaning conveyed through advertising. However, it is clear that there are circumstances in which some consumers are able to detach themselves and take a more critical view in their brand meaning construction. They can and do analyze what they see and hear through what they already know and, thus, they challenge companies’ hegemony in meaning creation. These associations that are inexplicably related to Coke if logic is employed, but the lasting effect these associations may have on brand meaning is unknown.

4.11 Implications for Commoditization and Decommoditization

To build a brand requires critical mass and the creation of sufficient awareness for many products that can be seen as preexisting commodities. How companies manage potential top-of-mind awareness is important to determining whether the brand will become symbolic of the product category or produce value innovations that keep the brand distinctive from the competition. This is especially important in low-involvement categories where the decision process is more likely to involve little cognitive effort and the purchase is made on impulse. Brands risk being hidden or diluted which negates the ability of expensive marketing budgets. Share of mind is important but not in a way

that cannibalizes the brand. This leads to a perception of brand parity where brands are effectively commoditized.

4.12 Implications for Brand Meaning

Consumers own a brand when they come to 'inhabit' the brand and the meaning it represents. At this 'moment' consumption activities are carried out as a reflection of the consumer's self image.

Consumers, then, are reflexively creating conditions for commoditization that deviate from existing conceptions of how brands operate in research literature. The brands meaning, or lack thereof, is derived from meaning that is consistently renegotiated in the market. As consumers become literate in the market they are simultaneously using brands to reflect a self-image and create knowledge structures that affect how products and brands are experienced.

4.13 Reconciling Brand Agency

Consumers appropriate brands as part of their self-image (Ewing et al., 2009; Parker, 2009) construction and use brands in ways that defy both temporal and spatial market boundaries to construct and disseminate complex market knowledge. As the company consistently makes strides to engage consumers in a certain preferred discourse through marketing activities, consumers are concurrently deconstructing the discourses proffered by the market and redefining the parameters of the conversation.

The respective commoditization and decommoditization of brands and products is an indicator of how consumers negotiate meaning and, ultimately, how brands exist (with respect to ownership and control) in the market.

4.14 Summary

Meaning is a discrete process that is revealed in the public domain of branding and marketing—a catalyst for commoditization and decommoditization. The velocity with which commoditization or decommoditization occur, if at all, is based on these cognitive structures that form consumers' brand knowledge and consumption behavior.

Agency of brands is then revealed to be both an input variable and an outcome that is omnipresent in the discussion of brand meaning. The processes of commoditization and decommoditization inform the debate of brand ownership, and reveal where the firm and the consumer appear to mediate control over the brand.

Ultimately, consumers own what brands signify—brands do not signify anything except in consumers' perception (Pennington, 2000). Understanding the dyadic composite of brands, the tangible component of the brand is irrelevant to the meaning of the brand. Value exists in the symbolic aspects of the brand and no longer in the tangible commodity (Moore, 2003). Consumers, therefore, are largely responsible for the occurrence of the commoditization and decommoditization processes.

Conclusion

The utility of brands, for both the firm and consumer, is arguably unparalleled. The increase in competition across product categories has led to very narrow competitive spaces where brands compete for consumers' share of wallet and share of mind. Companies are consistently pressured to strengthen their brand's value proposition rather than pursue commodity markets characterized by price-based competition where those that sell the greatest volume emerge profitable.

Brands, rather than simple words, have much greater interpretive value than words alone. They are richer in meaning and therefore an effective and efficient means for marketers to communicate a value proposition. Words are much more definitive in their meaning compared to composite symbols that incorporate words as merely a segment of the composite interpretive capacity of a brand.

The process by which a brand is conceptualized—the very definition of a brand—is most accurately narrated through semiotics. According to Kapferer (2008), a brand exists from when it has the power to influence. A legal perspective that denotes ownership of the brand as being possessed by the firm indicates a brand is, in part, 'a sign or set of signs'. It follows then that a brand only has the power to influence once it possesses the requisite mental associations (Kapferer, 2008). This system of associations and perceptions, through semiotically defined communication, defines the brand meaning. Communication, from the company point-of-view, helps to structure and moderate between the intense cognitive and emotional components that mediate brand knowledge. Finally, in order for brands avoid degenerescence—the name becoming a generic term—the brand should never be used as a noun. Instead, the brand's syntactic role is to modify the noun as an adjective (Kapferer, 2008).

This definition reveals the nature of a brand as being rooted in a process because it is then clear that a brand is a brand only once it acquires meaning, and a brand acquires meaning through its connection to signs and symbols. A brand then is a wholly semiotic phenomenon. A word, an action, a sound, or an image is simply void of meaning. Meaning is a malleable construct informed by the literal meaning (signifier) and the interpreted meaning (signified). Brands, wholly defined as existing when coupled with a system of meaning, only emerge over time.

The consumer represents a formidable opponent, but an equally powerful facilitator for brands. Brands are a promise that can effectively impart meaning, but they are confronted by the consumers own perceptions and learning structures when attempting to carry out the promise. The consumer and the firm ultimately converge at a

philosophical moment of truth for the brand. This is where brand meaning negotiation occurs and the pervasive issue of brand agency materializes.

5.1 Brand Agency

A brand is a dynamic entity that moves in and out of spaces of commoditization and decommoditization, ultimately inhabiting a negotiated space.

The brand originates as a semiological phenomenon absent of any market or consumption context. The imposing forces of commoditization and decommoditization regulate the brand as it becomes actuated through learning and meaning construction (see below, figure 5.1). Brand meaning, as previously indicated, is what moves the brand into the marketing and consumption domains as it is effectively given meaning through consumption. Quite simply, a brand is its learned meaning. As a differentiating sign or set of signs (an identity), a brand materializes in the market in its essential form: a coherent purchase criterion (Kapferer, 2008). Whether the brand resembles that of a commodity (perhaps acting as a category referent) or is demarcated from the competition (decommoditized as a salient set of mental associations held by the consumer) is a question of agency. Agency, then, is a product of brand meaning negotiation.

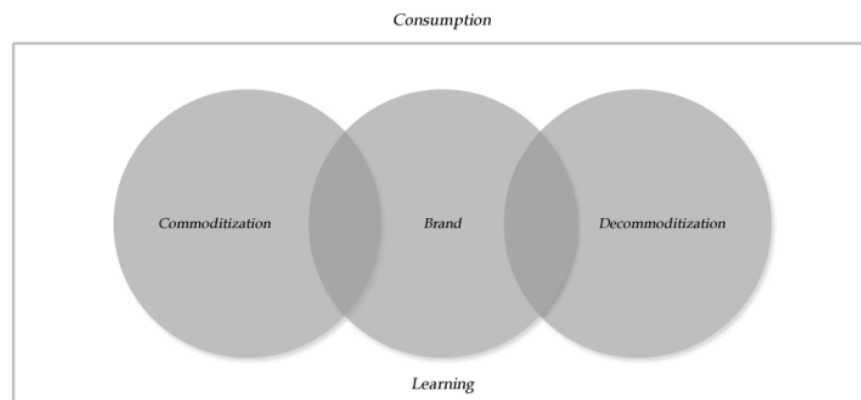


Figure 5.1 The Negotiated Brand Space

A brand is not necessarily 'owned' as jurisdiction over the brand is not absolute. Perhaps, then, agency or ownership hinder the discussion. Identifying control of the brand may be a more proper way to conclude the question of agency. Control of the brand is exerted *during* the process of consumption, but it is hardly absolute.

5.2 The Brand: Where Are We Now?

A legal perspective of agency believes a brand to be the unmistakable, unassailable property of the producer. Its existence relative to commoditization is the concern of the firm legally charged with maintaining. This financial orientation presupposes that the firm is the only party that benefits, but it does not consider where the benefits of such ownership or control are derived from. The legal right disappears when the firm relinquishes authority or commitment lapses. Essential to this perspective is that the consumer exerts no discernable control over the brand meaning. The legal right to ownership offers the easiest route by which to arrive at consensus of brand agency, but it discards much of the ephemeral qualities of a brand.

Contrasting views of brand agency mark a rather significant departure from the strategic, firm-oriented perspective that often serves as the implicit point of departure in most theoretical discussions and practical applications. Consumer-centric definitions of the brand better grasp of the importance of ownership and control because they identify where the benefits of the brand originate.

As indicated by Kapferer (2008), the financial value of the brand results from the customers consumption choices—the willingness to buy one brand over another. According to Keller (1998), a brand is a ‘set of mental associations, held by the consumer, which add to the perceived value of a product or service’. The important part here is the distinction that a brand is something possessed by the consumer and is invested with strong affective associations. If ownership is more a question of the right to intellectual property, it would appear ownership, at some point during consumption, at least temporarily transfers to the consumer.

The idea of agency and control is critically important to conceptualizing the immense scope of a brand because comes the topics of semiology, learning, and consumption. So, conscious of the negotiated nature of brand meaning and the implications for agency, we propose a revised definition of a brand:

A brand is a semiologically negotiated constellation of meaning, controlled and informed by the company and the consumer in parallel constructs, and derived from the sociological nature of consumption.

While this definition is rich in complexity, it sets in motion the realization that a discussion of brands and brand management cannot occur without considering the moderating effects of brand agency.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions

This study reflexively informs the discussions of sociology, psychology, and anthropology. Asking why people consume is a symptom of a broader discussion that ponders the origins, motivators, and mechanics of behavior. This study can help facilitate the transition of psychology and sociology into the rich contexts of marketing and brand management. This can then motivate future research that departs from a better understanding of how the brand works based on more universal understanding of human consumption behavior. In the end, a meaningful study that convenes around the topic of brand meaning and consumption can be leveraged by practitioners to understand how the brand is moderated by brand meaning in practical consumption contexts.

5.4 Practical Implications

The consequences of a brand being used by the consumer in a way entirely inconsistent with firm intentions are numerous and significant. Most importantly, a change identity is a fundamental shift that is disruptive to a firm's efforts (Aaker, 1996), especially in the presence of line or brand extensions. Aware of the consumer's ability to shape the brand, the ambition of the firm should be to create an effective and enduring identity. This improves the firm's ability to deliver a consistent brand meaning overtime that can provide what Aaker (1996) describes as the absolute ownership of an identity or an identity symbol in the market. Identity symbols such as logos makes a brand's meaning easier to understand and to link with the brand. The brand visual alone, for example, can exist in isolation from the aggregate brand identity and still be understood. This can fend off the forces of commoditization and temper the wild abandon with which consumers can dictate the brand discourse.

5.5 Concluding Remarks

To a large extent, consumers are assuming ownership of the brand where meaning emerges not only from unilaterally-imposed company activities, but also from how the brand is disseminated by consumers. Brands are constructed as a result of negotiated meaning (Ligas et al., 1999) that act as devices for consumers' consumption processes, a reflection of the consumer democratization and consumption of products and brands. As a result, the legal right and financial brand obligations of the firm do not sufficiently meet the standards for ownership or control.

In the end, agency is a question eternally burdened with temporal and spatial qualities: sometimes controlled by the customer, even if only for fleeting moments, but sometimes owned by the firm, a brand is often negotiated.

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Appendix – A

Figure 1.1: Principles of Semiology

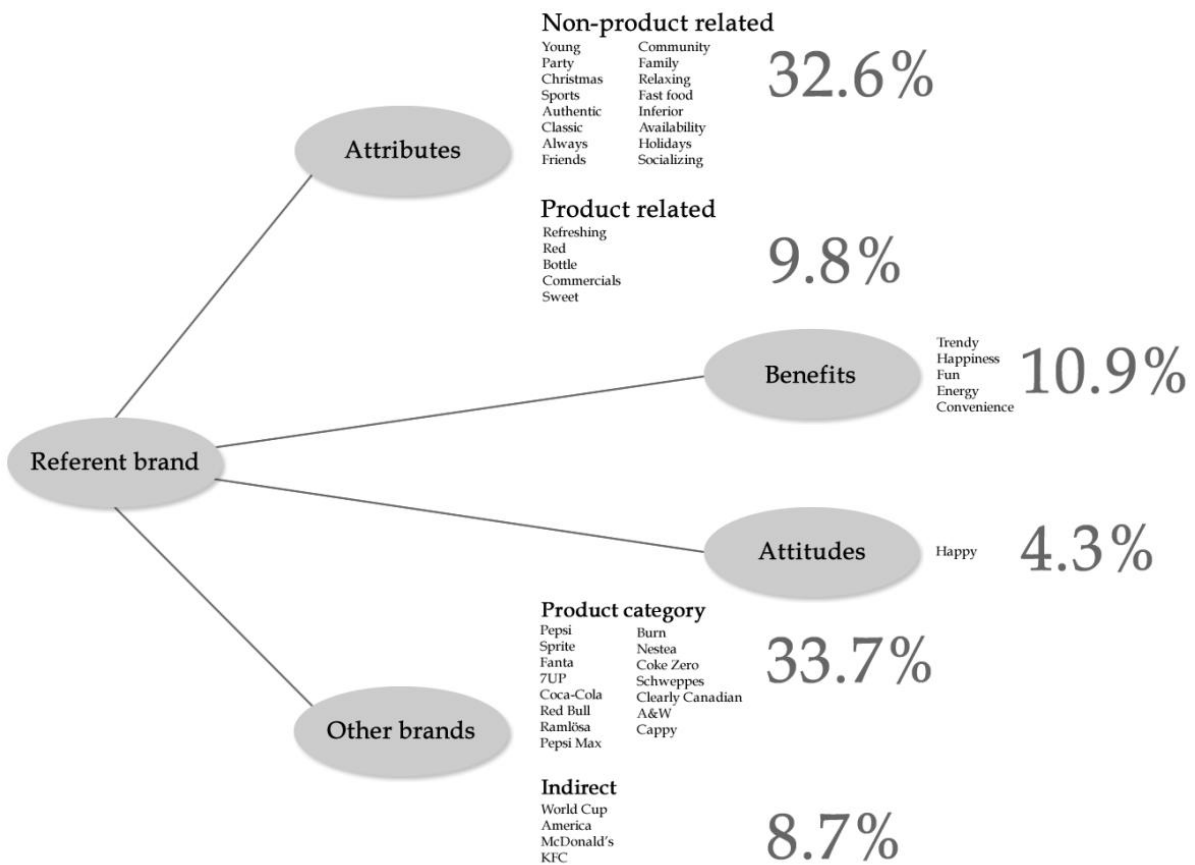
The Five Basic Principles of Semiology
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We make meaning through our shared use of symbols – including language as a symbolic sign system.• What symbols mean is not inevitable. It is based on our socio-political and cultural agreement and usage.• Meaning cannot be divorced from context• Meaning is relational. We make sense of things (objects, words, actions) in relation to other things.• We engage in these processes largely subconsciously.

Adapted from Tietze et al. (2003)

Appendix – A

Figure 1.2: Aggregate Associative Network

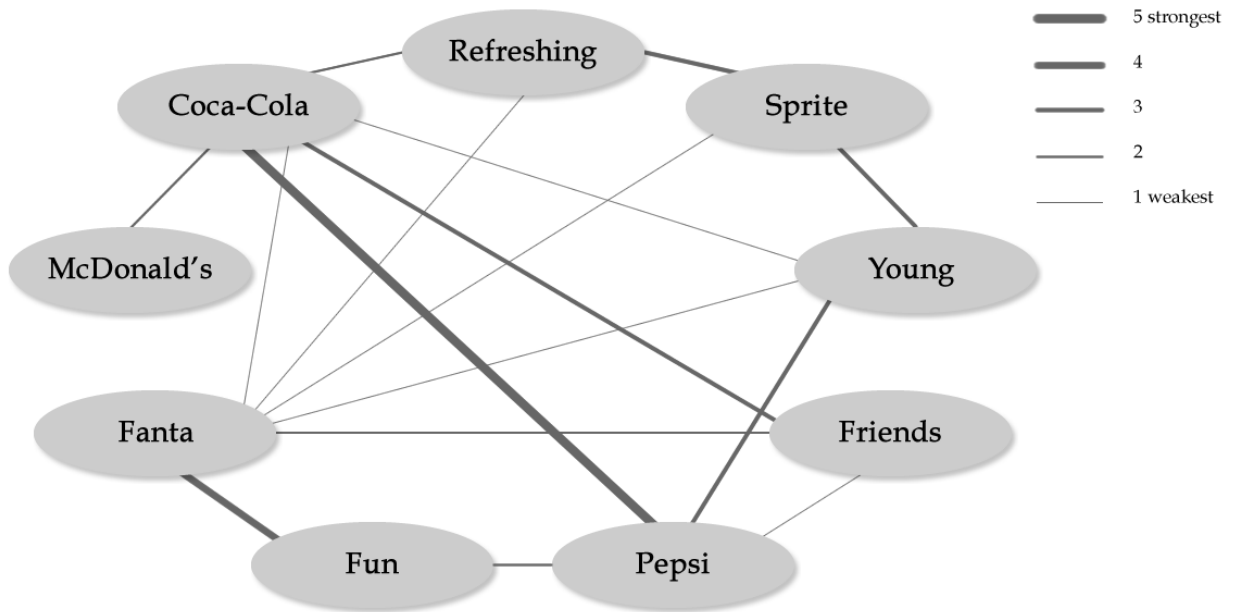
Referent brand associations categorized by type



Appendix – A

Figure 1.3: Market Structure

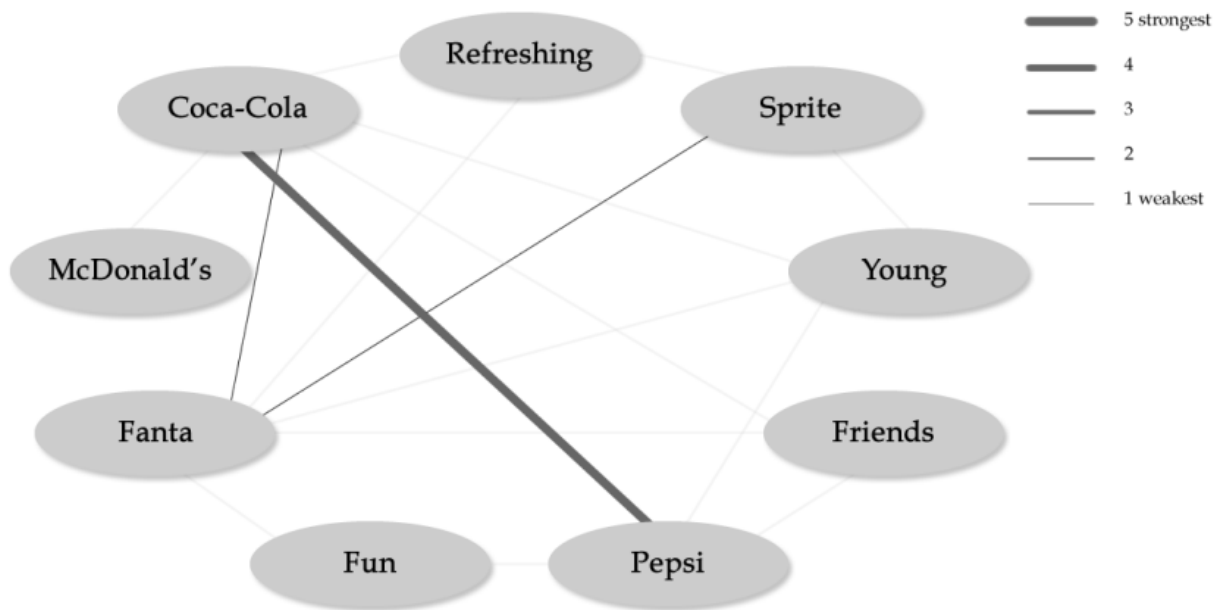
Aggregated consumer perception of market structure: Average brand consideration set and recurrent associations.



Appendix – A

Figure 1.4: How Brands Relate to Each Other

Strength of associations among identified brands perceived to belong to the soft drink product category.



Appendix – A

Figure 1.5: Coca-Cola “Toast” Print Advertisement

Advertising Agency: Wieden + Kennedy

Campaign: “Open Happiness”

Year: 2009

Source: <http://www.thecoca-colacompany.com/>



Appendix – A

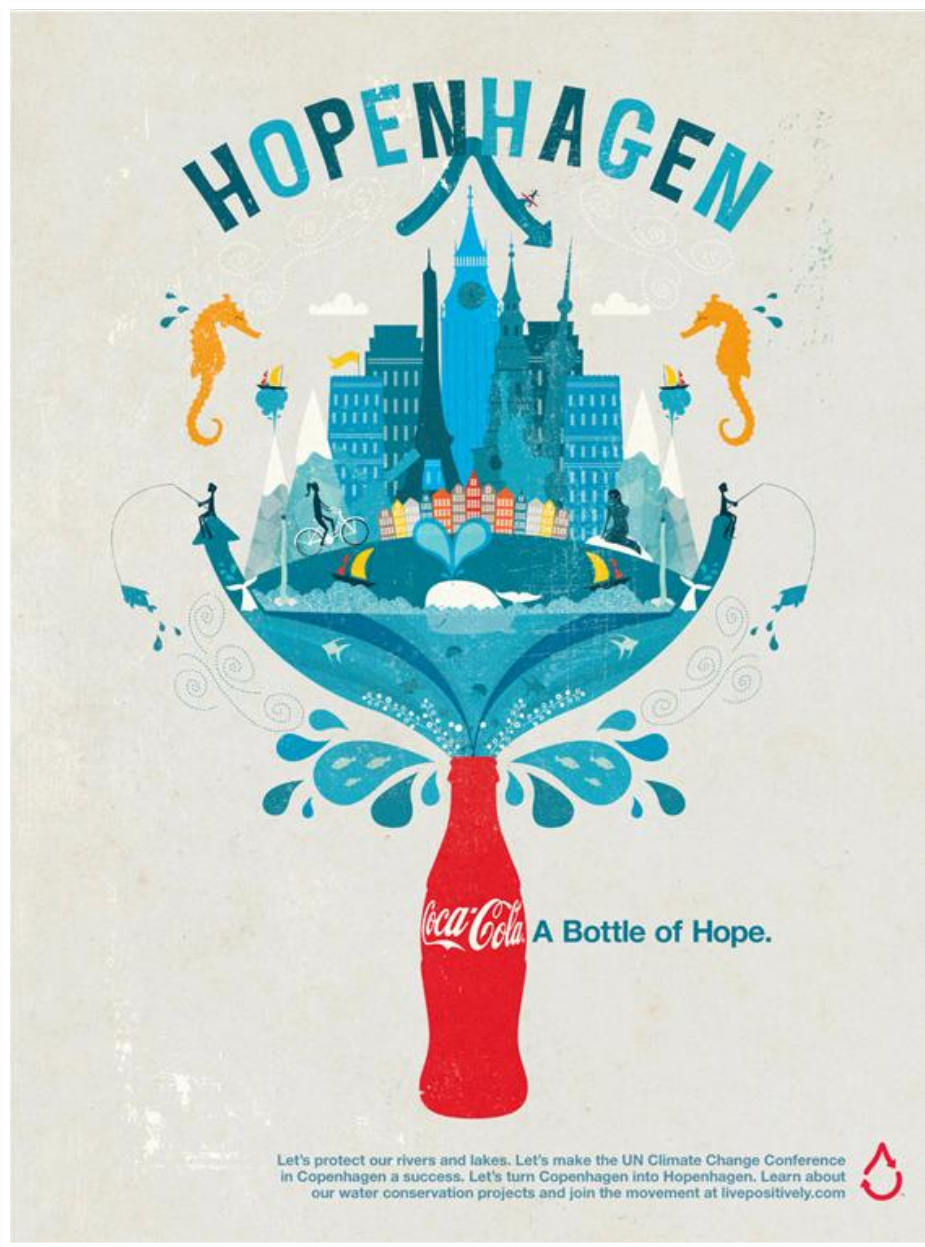
Figure 1.6: Coca-Cola “Hopenhagen” Print Advertisement

Advertising Agency: Ogilvy

Campaign: “Hopenhagen”

Year: 2009

Source: <http://www.thecoca-colacompany.com/>



Appendix – B

Table 1.1: Referent and Competitor Brands

(A) Interview Question: What is the first brand you think of that belongs to the soft drink category or the first brand that comes to mind when you think of soft drinks?

Purpose: To establish the referent node (the top-of-mind brand) that enables discussion of the entire product category.

(B) Interview Question: What *other* brands do you perceive to be related to the referent brand or belonging to the soft drink product category?

Purpose: To establish the competitive structure (consideration set) as it exists in consumers' cognitive brand network.

Respondent	(A) Referent Brand Node	(B) Competitor Brands (Presented according to order of elicitation)				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	Coca-Cola	7UP				
2	Coca-Cola	Pepsi	Sprite	Red Bull		
3	Pepsi	Coca-Cola	Fanta	Sprite	7UP	Ramlösa
4	Coca-Cola	Pepsi	Sprite	Fanta		
5	Coca-Cola	Fanta	Sprite	Burn	Pepsi	
6	Coca-Cola	Nestea	Fanta			
7	Coca-Cola	Schweppes	Clearly Canadian	A&W Root Beer		
8	Coca-Cola	Sprite	Pepsi			
9	Coca-Cola	Cappy	Nestea			
10	Coca-Cola	Fanta	Sprite	Pepsi		

Appendix – B

Table 1.2: Referent Brand Associations

(C) Interview Question: What words or phrases (based on thoughts, feelings, images, experiences) do you associate with the referent brand (A)?

Purpose: To establish the referent node brand associations to inform the discussion of brand meaning, commoditization, and decommo-ditization.

Respondent	(A) Referent Brand Node	(C) Referent Brand Associations (Presented according to order of elicitation)							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Coca-Cola	Young	Refreshing	Trendy	Party	Christmas			
2	Coca-Cola	Classic	Always	Sports	World Cup	Happiness	Red	Authentic	
3	Pepsi	World Cup	Fun	Party	Friends	Pepsi Max			
4	Coca-Cola	Party	World Cup	Community	Family	America	Red	Bottle	
5	Coca-Cola	Red	Bottle	Christmas	Party	Happy	Commercials		
6	Coca-Cola	Refreshing	Energy	Coke Zero	Relaxing	Fast food			
7	Coca-Cola	America	McDonald's	Fast food	Inferior				
8	Coca-Cola	Availability	Sweet	Always	Happy	Friends	Fast food	Holidays	Christmas
9	Coca-Cola	Fast food	McDonald's	KFC	Friends	Energy	Happy		
10	Coca-Cola	Different	Alternative	Convenience	Friends	Family	Socializing		

Appendix – B

Table 1.3: Competitor Brand Associations

(D) Interview Question: What words or phrases (based on thoughts, feelings, images, experiences) do you associate with each identified competing brand (B)?

Purpose: To establish the brand associations for competitor brands to inform the discussion of brand meaning, commoditization, and decommoditization.

Respondent	(B) Competitor Brand(s)	(D) Competitor Brand Associations (Presented according to order of elicitation)							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	7UP	Different	Alternative	Not for parties	Middle age	7UP			
2	Pepsi	Coke	Young	Innovative	Happiness	Celebrity			
	Sprite	Refreshing	Thirst	Edgy/ Exciting	Cool	Young			
	Red Bull	Energy	Extreme	Athletic	Party				
3	Coca-Cola	World Cup	Coke Zero	Coke Light	Original	Classic	Christmas	Julmust	Family
	Fanta	Fun	Flavor	Orange	Coke				
	Sprite	Refreshing	Lemon	Different	Mix				
	7UP	Sprite	Refreshing	Alternative to Coke	Transparent				
	Ramlösa	Refreshing	Pure	Flavor	Quality	Swedish	Community		
4	Pepsi	Coke	Fun	Young	Blue	Edgy	Celebrity	Football	
	Sprite	Different	Young	Clear	7UP	Refreshing			
	Fanta	Commercials	Fun	Friends	Beach	Summer	Party	Refreshing	
5	Fanta	Favorite	Bottle	Original	Beach	Fun	Commercials	Friends	
	Sprite	Commercials	Edgy	Restaurants					
	Burn	Energy	Red Bull						
	Pepsi	Love	Commercials	Coke					

Continued on next page

Appendix – B

Table 1.3: Competitor Brand Associations (Continued)

Respondent	(B) Competitor Brand(s)	(D) Competitor Brand Associations (Presented according to order of elicitation)							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
6	Nestea	Refreshing	Cold	Fun	Friends	Hot day			
	Fanta	Fun	Sweet	Parties	Young	Movies	Colorful		
7	Schweppes	Alternative							
	Clearly Canadian	Sparkling	Flavor	Sugary	Unhealthy				
	A&W	Summer	Cold	Flavor	Loyal				
8	Sprite	Young	Rebellious	Active	Sports	Alternative	Thirst quenching		
	Pepsi	Daring	Blue	Sweeter	Different than Coke	Young			
9	Cappy	Tasty	Sweet	Friends	Sunny day	Fun			
	Cold	Less sweet	Relaxing						
10	Fanta	Sprite	Family						
	Sprite	Fanta	Family						
	Pepsi	Inferior to Coke	Sweet	Different					

Appendix – B

Table 1.4: Product Category Associations

(E) Interview Question: What words or phrases do you associate with the soft drink product category and all brands you perceive to belong to the category?

Purpose: To establish the shared brand associations for all brands in the category to inform the discussion of brand meaning, commoditization, and decommoditization.

Respondent	(E) Product Category Associations						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Refreshing	Summer	Friends	Young	Trendy		
2	Refreshing	Coke	Pepsi	Classic	Young	Innovative	Relevant
3	Coke	Pepsi	Thirst	Refreshing	Fun	Friends	Party
4	Coke	Pepsi	Friends	Fun	Relax	Happiness	
5	Coke	Christmas	McDonald's	Happiness	Fun	Friends/ Family	Community
6	Sweet	Carbonated	Cold	Sugar	Coke Zero		
7	Carbonated	Nostalgia	Young	Active			
8	Sweet	Refreshing	Cold	Family	Fast Food		
9	Cold	Refreshing					
10	Refreshing	Fast Food	Sweet	Carbonated	Socializing	Fun	

Appendix – B

Table 1.5: Aided Brand Associations

(F) Interview Question: Based on the advertisements provided (Appendix A, Figure 1.5 & 1.6), what associations (words or phrases) do you associate with the brand identified in the advertisement?

Purpose: To evaluate how consumers engage the brand to establish brand meaning. When in the presence of company-imposed messages, do associations align with or differ from unaided associations consumers hold for a brand.

Respondent	(F) Aided Product Category Associations	
	“Toast” Advertisement (Appendix A, Figure 1.5)	“Hopenhagen” Advertisement (Appendix A, Figure 1.6)
1	Cosmopolitan, Peace, Community, Social	Dreams, Hope, Future, Success, Coke, Red, Bottle
2	Together, Unity, Community, Celebration, Happiness, Inspiration, Optimism	Hope, Climate, Sustainability, Responsibility, Water, Environment
3	Celebrate, World, Community, Coke, Happiness	Copenhagen, Hope, Earth, Climate, Change
4	Community, World, Friends, Celebrate	Hope, Responsibility, Copenhagen, Environment, Coca-Cola
5	Community	Hope
6	Warm, Kind Feelings, Being good, Loving, Happiness	Hope, Hopenhagen, Failure, Coca-Cola
7	Developing World, Politics	Bottle, Hope, Fantasy, Together, Better, Cynicism
8	Happy, Free, Coca-Cola	Change, Equality, Environment, Cynicism, Coca-Cola
9	Togetherness, Community, Dreams, Coca-Cola	Hope, Change, Being good, Cynicism, Coca-Cola
10	Meaningful, Togetherness, Unity, Equal, Saving the Planet, Responsible, Coke	Harmony, Nice Place, Cozy, Social, Enjoyment, Happiness, Hope