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Reaching for the stars
An exploratory study to conceptualize product iconicity

By Jakob Ferenius, Maria Agustina Carbone, and Roosmarijn Morgans

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Reaching for the stars: An exploratory study to conceptualize product iconicity

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Abstract

Background/Problematization: Iconic brands are the gold standard of branding and have established a central role in the consumers' lives. Behind every iconic brand, we can find iconic products. Despite the importance of these products, iconic products are overlooked in academia. Few studies have explored the concept and there is no common definition or comprehensive framework. This is restrictive to academics and practitioners alike.

Purpose: The aim of this study is to develop a framework that maps out the drivers of product iconicity and therefore conceptualizes the subject.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This paper uses a qualitative multiple-case study methodology, allowing deep analysis into dimensions of product iconicity and evaluation of their relevance and applicability. Using template analysis, product iconicity drivers are deduced both from existing literature and induced from the case data.

Findings: The case studies confirmed the relevance of six previously suggested product iconicity drivers – high awareness, distinctiveness, aspirational vision, cultural relevance, longevity, and superior product experience – and revealed a seventh one, namely consistency. While the strength of each may vary over time, iconic products seem to embody all drivers to some extent. Based on these findings, a conceptualization of product iconicity is conceptualized in the proposed *Product Iconicity Star* framework.

Research implications/limitations: The main contribution is a comprehensive conceptualization of iconic products. Moreover, the derived framework also elaborates existing literature on product iconicity and revalidates some findings of other scholars. The main limitation of this paper is the generalizability. More research is needed to elaborate the framework and increase the external validity of the findings. Overall, the study opens up many new opportunities for further research.

Managerial implications: The *Product Iconicity Star* is an actionable framework that can be used to identify, create, manage, or activate iconic products. It might also be useful in the management and creation of iconic brands.

Originality/Value: This paper provides insight into product iconicity and the drivers that generate it. It is one of the first studies focusing on conceptualizing product iconicity, and the, to our knowledge, first to suggest a comprehensive framework.

Keywords: Iconic products, Iconic brands, Iconicity, Strategic brand management, Cultural branding

Type of paper: Research Paper

Introduction

Iconic brands are the pinnacle of branding (Hollis, 2011; Holt, 2003). Every marketer's dream is to work for, or even better, to create iconic brands such as Apple, Nike, or Coca Cola (Hollis, 2011). These are well-known brands that are popular, admired, and meaningful to consumers (Hollis, 2011), and who enjoy higher price premiums and profitability (Eisingerich, Kadwani, Manek, Raghuvanshi, Rayet, Seow & Zeloof, 2009). They have established a central role in our culture and in the lives of consumers (Holt, 2003).

Behind each of these iconic brands are iconic products; Apple has the iMac and iPhone, Nike has Air Jordans, and Coca Cola their Classic Coke. Indeed, Kapferer (2012) argues that products and services are one of the three poles that make up the living system that we refer to as a brand, and claims that products and services are what provide a name with the power of a brand. Without any products or services, there is no such thing as a brand.

For iconic brands, products and services may be even more essential. For example, Holt (2004) suggests that iconic products and services are what generates iconicity for the brand. In his view, it is through the consumption of iconic products that brands work their way into our lives and culture, gaining their iconic status. Hence, iconic products are essential components of iconic brands. Iconic brands do not just need products, they need iconic products.

Moreover, the generation of brand iconicity is not the only advantage of an iconic product. Simply having an iconic product does not necessarily mean that a brand is iconic. Iconic products can be leveraged for more than for generating brand iconicity. Like other products, they can be used to

modernize the brand, strengthen certain dimensions of its identity, opening it up to new clienteles, and much more (Kapferer, 2012). Furthermore, results from a study by John, Loken, and Joiner (1998), indicate that flagship products are more resilient to dilution by extensions compared to the overall corporate brand. Since extensions are what make brands such powerful growth-generators (Kapferer, 2012), these results emphasize the importance of strong flagship products, a role often filled by a brand's iconic products. Whether a brand aims to become iconic or not, iconic products are valuable assets.

However, even though iconic brands and iconic products are as valuable as they are, there is no consensus among academics as to the definition of either concept. While there is considerable research into iconic brands (e.g. Holt, 2004), the lack of a common definition has led some scholars, like Norris, Swayne, Taylor and Taylor (2020) and Eisingerich et al. (2009), to synthesize existing literature and build comprehensive frameworks. This has, however, not been the case for iconic products. While many authors stress the importance of iconic products (see e.g. Holt, 2004; Fionda & Moore, 2009; Hollis, 2011), few are dedicated to the subject. As of today, there is no consensus as to the definition of an iconic product, and few studies have explored the concept altogether. This constrains deeper research into the topic. Moreover, because iconic products are important brand iconicity generators, a conceptualization of iconic products would also benefit research into, and conceptualization of, iconic brands. The lack of a definition of iconic products is even more problematic for practitioners, who lack actionable frameworks. Overall, guidelines are needed to identify existing iconic products and to activate potential ones.

To resolve these issues, the aim of this study is to conceptualize product iconicity and

derive a framework that maps out its drivers. This is achieved through a thorough literature review and complemented with case studies of iconic products. Because of the fundamental differences between services and products (see e.g. Kapferer, 2012), this study is limited to iconic products.

Literature Review

Brand Iconicity

Because iconic products are often discussed in conjunction with iconic brands, and because the literature on iconic products is scarce, understanding iconic brands is central to understanding iconic products.

Although the word is often used in academia and everyday language, "iconic" is a vague term that is used in various contexts with different meanings. Hence, its definition is generally a matter of perspective (Norris et al., 2020). The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines "iconic" as "very famous or popular, especially being considered to represent particular opinions or a particular time" and Marriam-Webster (n.d.) as "widely known and acknowledged especially for distinctive excellence". This gives us some idea of how the concept might be used. Often, when mentioning iconic brands, we refer to those that are popular, admired, and meaningful to consumers (Hollis, 2011). As Hollis (2011) points out, iconic brands are often seen as the gold standard of branding. As such, many consultants provide recommendations for building iconic brands (Torelli & Stoner, 2015). However, as Torelli and Stoner (2015) point out, these recommendations tend to be difficult to implement because of their weak theoretical foundation. Torelli and Stoner denote the general ambiguity in the definition of an iconic brand as the underlying cause to this. In the end, few brands achieve iconic status

(Holt, 2003; Eisingerich et al., 2009; Hollis, 2011; Torelli & Stoner, 2015).

Although the topic of iconic brands has been explored in various studies, there is no consensus as to the definition of the concept. An influential perspective is Holt's cultural branding view (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Urde, Greyser & Balmer, 2007). Holt (2003) challenges the traditional 'mind share' model of branding; that is, conceptualizing a brand as a network of associations in the consumers' minds and a focus on building strong brand associations. Rather, to build an icon, Holt suggests that marketers should think in terms of 'culture share'. While a focus on mind share can work well for low-involvement, functional brands, he claims that this is not the case for lifestyle and identity brands. These brands create, what Holt refers to as, 'myths' – "stories people rely on to organise their understanding of themselves and the world" (p.36). Consumers use myths to express themselves and to get a firmer grasp of their identities and their roles in society (Holt, 2003).

Although advertising is most common, Holt (2003) denotes that all facets of marketing can assist in building these myths. He outlines four steps for building an iconic brand. Firstly, the brand should identify and target cultural societal tensions. Secondly, he proposes that the brand should act as a cultural activist. Thirdly, he stresses that iconic brands must be original and culture driving, rather than culture driven. Finally, he emphasizes the importance of developing trust and an authentic populist voice.

Yet, there are those that criticize Holt's view. Eisingerich et al. (2009) disagree with Holt's view that iconic brands must be culture driving. Their view is that, although it is susceptible to them, cultural tensions do not fuel a brand's iconicity. Moreover, Hollis (2011) claims that Holt's focus on high profile brands and the anecdotal nature

of his approach, makes it hard to apply for smaller and less distinguished brands. Instead, Hollis suggests a more traditional view on iconic brands where three criteria needs to be fulfilled. Firstly, they must be distinctive and recognizable. Secondly, an iconic brand must have a compelling brand experience that is founded in the brand's purpose. Finally, he claims that an iconic brand must have an admirable reason for being.

Some studies have constructed frameworks for iconic brands based on case studies and consumer surveys. Results from Eisingerich et al.'s (2009) study indicates that what consumers associate with iconicity is aligned with the actions that brands take to leverage their iconic status, speaking for the validity of this approach. Eisingerich et al. further propose a theoretical framework of five interconnected and essential elements of brand iconicity. Because each is dependent on the others, they are all essential to creating brand iconicity, and insufficient by themselves (Eisingerich et al., 2009). In line with Holt (2003) and Hollis (2011), Eisingerich et al.'s (2009) first element is that an iconic brand must be aspirational in the sense that it has a powerful vision that drives consumer engagement and brand adoption. Their second and third elements are having a compelling persona and building strong personal connections with consumers. Eisingerich et al.'s fourth element is omnipresence, in consumers' minds and in society. Finally, like Hollis (2011), they suggest that iconicity is driven by a distinct visual identity.

Norris, et al.'s (2020) survey of what consumers associate with iconicity in the distilled spirits market produces a similar framework as that of Eisingerich et al. (2009). Like them, Norris et al. identified visual identity as a central iconicity driver – the most important one according to their results. Other elements they identified were longevity, the story the brand tells, cultural relevance, status, and celebrity endorsement. Eisingerich et al. (2009) also mentioned celebrity endorsement as a tool to build personal connections, and, while not in their framework, they further point out that iconic brands have stood the test of time.

Product iconicity

Because few studies have been dedicated to iconic products, it is not surprising that there is no consensus in academia as to the definition of the concept, and it is often used interchangeably with closely related concepts, such as 'flagship products' and 'prototype products'.

Kapferer (2012) uses the terms 'flagship products' and 'prototype products' interchangeably when referring to the products that are the most representative or typical of the brand's meaning. He argues that these products must demonstrate the brand's guiding value and obsession – flagships for the brand's meaning and purpose. Similarly, John, Loken and Joiner (1998), define a flagship product as the product that consumers most closely associate with the parent brand name. They also argue that flagship products provide a platform for future line and brand extensions. When exploring flagship and iconic products in destination marketing, Soroka and Lominadze (2011) conclude that they could be used interchangeably since they are both employed for identifying destinations.

Generally, iconic products tend to have a dominant position within the brand. John, Loken and Joiner (1998) argue that iconic products have a significantly stronger link to the brand name compared to similar links for other individual products. Their research shows that consumers often have years of accumulated exposure to, and experience with, the flagship product, resulting in a well-developed set of associations that are stronger and more extreme, highly

accessible, and more resistant to change. Norris et al. (2020) conclude that the high awareness of iconic products results in a top-of-mind position. Furthermore, Fionda and Moore (2009) point out that iconic products often epitomize the brand signature or 'brand DNA', as they can assist in portraying the personality and values of the creators.

Several authors also stress the role of longevity in developing iconicity (see e.g. Norris et al. 2020; Yu & Birss, 2018; John, Loken and Joiner, 1998). Yu and Birss (2018) argues that longevity extends past simply history to include staying power. They explain that staying power is about sticking around and becoming part of consumers' lives, which is accomplished by being relevant both emotionally and rationally in past and present. They have designed the *Iconic Relevance Matrix™* (see figure 1), to guide management of iconic products over time by building relevance and strengthen the connection with their audience.
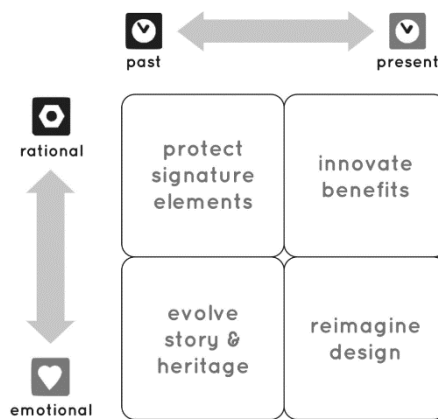

Figure 1. Yu and Birss' (2018, p.77) Iconic Relevance Matrix™.

Fionda and Moore (2009) point out that in several cases, iconic products have close connections to their heritage. Since longevity has also been identified as a central element of brand heritage (Urde, Greyser & Balmer, 2007), it is plausible that heritage brands tend to have iconic products.

According to Holt (2004), iconic products generate iconicity for the brand. In Holt's cultural branding paradigm, communications are the center of customer value. He refers to products as conduits through which customers can experience the stories the brand tells. Thus, in his view, it is through the consumption of iconic products that brands work their way into consumers' lives and culture, gaining their iconic status. Holt claims that "an effective cultural strategy creates a *storied product,* that is, a product that has distinctive branded features (mark, design, etc.) through which customers experience identity myths" (2004, p.36).

The importance of distinctiveness is also pointed out by Yu and Birss (2018), Hollis (2011) and Norris et al. (2020). They agree that iconic products need to be distinctive to be easily recognizable. Moreover, Hollis (2011) emphasizes the role of the functionality of the product in generating iconicity. He explains that symbolism and advertising are not enough to overcome a mediocre product experience. He also argues that behind most iconic brands you can find people with an aspirational vision of how the product can serve a specific need better than the existing alternatives. It is from these basic functional properties of the product that one can 'ladder up' to the softer values, thoughts and feelings that consumers link to the brand and where it's power lies in abstract associations (Holt, 2004).

Preliminary theoretical framework

Based on the literature on iconic brands and iconic products, 12 potential drivers of iconicity were identified. These are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Summary of literature review and the identified potential product iconicity drivers.

Iconicity drivers	Holt (2003; 2004)	Hollis (2011)	Norris et al. (2020)	Eisingerich et al. (2009)	John, Loken and Joiner. (1998)	Yu and Birss (2018)	Fionda and Moore (2009)
Cultural relevance	X		X	X		X	
Superior product experience		X			X	X	X
Aspirational vision	X	X	X	X		X	X
Distinctiveness		X	X			X	X
Omnipresence				X		X	
Longevity			X	X	X	X	X
Celebrity endorsement			X	X			
Compelling persona				X			
Close relationship	X			X	X		
Status			X				
Compelling story	X		X				
High awareness		X			X	X	

The 12 drivers were then reduced through three steps. Firstly, related drivers were combined; for example, we see celebrity endorsement as a tool to achieve cultural relevance. Secondly, we removed brand iconicity drivers that were determined to be less relevant for products, such as persona. Finally, to make the framework more applicable for managers, we checked that all the identified drivers were actionable. Six drivers remained in the end. Hence, iconic products are conceptualized to have:

High awareness: iconic products have high customer awareness.

Distinctiveness: iconic products have a distinct visual identity that is easily recognizable.

Aspirational vision: behind an iconic product is a strong aspirational vision that explains its reason for being. It is the core values that determine why a consumer should buy the product. Although not necessary, the vision behind the product may reflect the vision of the brand.

Cultural relevance: iconic products become embedded in culture and ride or drive cultural trends. Consumption of iconic products lets consumers express themselves and their relationship to these trends.

Superior product experience: iconic products satisfy customer needs in a unique way that is superior to competitors.

Longevity: iconic products have stood the test of time.

Although the literature emphasizes the relevance of all these dimensions, it does not say much about their relationships or whether an iconic product needs all six dimensions to become iconic, or if just a few are necessary.

Method

To generate a framework for product iconicity, a qualitative multiple-case study methodology was adopted. The qualitative approach was selected as it was deemed to be most appropriate for the exploratory requirements of the study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson & Jaspersen, 2018). The case methodology (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018) allowed for deep analysis into dimensions of product iconicity and evaluation of their relevance and applicability. It also allowed for an overview of how iconicity has been developed and activated over time.

Template analysis was used to analyse the data. As Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) write, template analysis lies in the intersection between content analysis and grounded theory, where both predetermined codes and codes that emerge during the analysis are used to make sense of the data. This approach was selected since it provided a balance between theory building and testing and elaborating existing theory, thereby giving room for both inductive and deductive reasoning (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). This allowed us to assemble and unify existing research while keeping doors open for new additions.

The six iconicity drivers that emerged from the literature review were used to develop the template and to frame (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018) the overall study. This template also steered the collection of data. Emerging drivers were then added to the framework as they were discovered in the cases. The final framework generated from the template is presented in the discussion.

The study also includes comparative design elements. Rather than focusing on a single case, multiple case studies were used to improve the validity of the final product iconicity framework. As Bryman and Bell (2011) point out, cross-case comparisons improve theory building as they present more circumstances where the theory may or may not hold. Three cases were selected as the number provided a good balance between depth and diversity in the analysis.

Cases were selected through purposive sampling (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Four criterias were used: (1) the products were perceived by the authors as intuitively 'iconic', (2) they belonged to different product categories, (3) the likelihood of quickly coming into contact with the companies was deemed high, in case interviews would be needed, and (4) the products had been around for at least four decades, allowing for analysis in changes of product design and other potential iconicity drivers that emerge over time.

Secondary data was collected for the study because it was determined to, in line with what Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) suggest, provide high enough quality data in the short timeframe during which the study was conducted.

Findings

Case 1 - Kånken by Fjällräven

Fjällräven is a Swedish, outdoor clothing and equipment company present in Europe, Asia and the US (Gram, Lindgård, Løken & Öfverdahl, 2015). The name of the company, Fjällräven, is the Swedish translation for Arctic Fox, also represented in their logo (Gram et al. 2015). It is a typical Scandinavian predator that adapts easily in the cold mountain weather (Gram et al. 2015), referring to Fjällräven's durability and functionality.

Fjällräven was founded in the small town of Örnsköldsvik in 1960 by Åke Nordin (Fjällräven, 2020a). As a child, Åke loved hiking and enjoying nature (Fjällräven, 2020a). Out of necessity for a practical backpack that would not hurt his back while trekking, at age 14 he decided to create his first backpack to solve the problem (Fjällräven, 2020a). He made a wooden frame, sewed a bag out of cotton and fastened it using leather straps (Gram et al., 2015). Ten years later, and this time with an aluminium frame, the backpack would become the first product of the brand (Gram et al. 2015). Because of its success during the 1960s and '70s, Fjällraven could expand its range with other outdoor equipment such as tents, sleeping bags, jackets and trousers (Fjällräven, 2020a). This gave Fjällräven the chance to expand geographically during the 1980s and '90s, reaching a larger consumer base outside Sweden (Fjällräven, 2020a).

Fjällräven's mission has always been, as they say, "to inspire the world to walk with nature" (Fjällräven, 2020b). Since the new millennium, this is a posture that has become stronger within Fjällräven (Fjällräven, 2020a). Today's vision for the company is to be part of the consumer's adventures in the outdoors, giving them timeless and durable equipment that is functional to their needs, while being in harmony with nature's terms (Gram et al. 2015).

In the late 1970s, Fjällräven was already known as a successful outdoor brand (Fjällräven Press Room, 2019a). In 1978, and due to a growing trend for wearing shoulder bags, 80 percent of Swedish adults and children would suffer from back trouble (Fjällräven Press Room, 2017a). To find a solution to this problem, Åke Nordin decided to design the Kånken backpack specially for school children (Fjällräven Press Room, 2017b). Here he applied his knowledge from the classic trekking backpack, to create one for daily use that would make carrying school material more comfortable (Fjällräven Press Room, 2017b). The Kånken backpack became a simple, practical product that would even be beneficial for a healthy posture (Fjällräven HK, 2020), with enough space for a pencil case and two A4 binders (Fjällräven Press Room, 2017b & 2017a).

The new Kånken backpack was a huge success, and 30,000 examples were sold in the first two years (Fjällräven Press Room, 2017b). Its timeless, durable and functional design, matching with its new logo of a curled-up Arctic fox with a glint in its eye (Fjällräven Press Room, 2019a), made the backpack recognizable from a distance and distinguished it from other competitors. Today, Kånken can be considered the backbone of Fjällräven's business (Carlund, 2019).

With time, the Kånken backpack became more than just a children's backpack. Today many wear Kånken as a style statement, and it is used by people of all ages (Fjällräven

Press Room, 2017b). For more than 40 years, the consistency of the same basic design (see figure 2), with its rectangular shape, straps and unmistakable logo (Fjällräven Press Room, 2017b), has stayed mostly the same and unaffected by temporary trends (Carlund, 2019). Today, the awareness of the Kånken is very strong among the backpack industry and in the Swedish community. Due to the years present in the market and the significance of the product within the brand, most consumers are familiar with the product.

According to Svensk Form's Opinion Committee, "Kånken has a distinct personal touch in design and a distinctive form identity" (Fjällräven Press Room, 2017b, n.p.). The Kånken backpack has become a cultural icon of Swedish style and design in the world. On a personal level, the Kånken backpack is a cultural trend that manifests in a way one's personality and principles. Through the years, Kånkens have proven the value of its promise of being timeless, functional and durable. Due to keeping this promise, the Kånken backpack is given through generations, becoming part of the consumer's personal life. Head of R&D at Fjällräven, Henrik Andersson expresses:

> Like many products that have become icons over the years, Kånken follows a rule of timelessness and simple design. So it's not surprising that you see a lot of old Kånkens that have been passed on from parents to their kids still in use today (Fjällräven Press Room, 2017b, n.p.).

The results on the iconic product drivers are summarized in table 2.

Figure 2. A Kånken product advertisement by Fjällräven Press Room (2019b)

Table 2. Evaluation of product iconicity drivers for Kånken.

Iconicity Driver	Kånken Backpack
High awareness	Very strong in the backpack sector Familiarity with the product
Distinctiveness	Rectangular shape Bright colors Strong and defined presence of the logo
Aspirational vision	First: fixing back issues among children Today: a durable, functional and timeless product
Cultural relevance	Icon of Swedish style and design in the world Style statement Sustainability and nature Passed through generations
Longevity	Since 1978
Superior product experience	In the beginning: good for posture Today: durability, functionality

Case 2 - Tripp Trapp by Stokke

Stokke is a Norwegian company that manufactures children's furniture and accessories. Stokke products are distributed worldwide under the Stokke® trademark through specialist children's stores in more than 80 countries and has its own subsidiaries in Europe, USA, Asia and Russia (Stokke, n.d.).

Stokke was founded in 1932 by Georg Stokke in Ålesund, on the west coast of Norway, as a company specializing in the design and production of high-quality furniture (Stokke, 2020c). This began a family tradition of craftsmanship and quality that has spanned three generations (Stokke, 2020c). The 1950s and '60s marked a time of expansion for Stokke as the company began to put emphasis on working with retailers both in Norway and abroad, resulting in tremendous growth (Stokke, 2020c). During this period Stokke began producing innovative furnishings for the modern living room (Stokke, 2020c). In 1972, Stokke launched its first product for children – the Stokke™ Tripp Trapp® chair, hereafter referred to as Tripp Trapp. Since then, Stokke has launched many more children's products including a crib, changing table, stroller, bath, carrier and car seat. In 2006 the company decided to focus solely on premium design products for children and the rest of the company continued as a separate entity under the name Varier Furniture (Varier Furniture, n.d.).

Stokke's vision – "In the best interest of the child" – is the cornerstone of their product innovation, development, and production (Stokke, 2020a). All their products have a common purpose: to encourage child development and to nurture family bonding (Stokke, 2020a). Visible in all their products is that the designers tried to create products that bring children closer to their parents. Stokke believes that closeness fosters connection (Stokke, 2020d). The company wants to make products that last. They strive towards sustainable solutions, use high-quality durable materials, and ensure longevity to all their products by combining grow-with-the child functionality with timeless design (Stokke, 2020a).

In 1972 Stokke formed an alliance with an ergonomist and design specialist, Peter Opsvik, who devised a new philosophy of sitting, which was based on the body's self-regulated posture (Bruce & Bessant, 2002). The Norwegian Tripp Trapp designer was inspired by his own son, Tor, who struggled to find a good sitting position at the family table. At the age of two he had grown out of his high chair, but was too small to sit on an adult chair, which resulted in him dangling his feet and struggling to reach the table (Ryan, 2005).
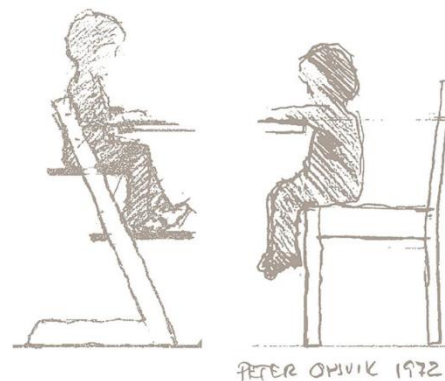

Figure 3. Peter Opsvik's first sketch of the Tripp Trapp from Stokke (2013).

Opsvik designed a chair (see figure 3) that brought the child up to the dinner table and that brought the floor up to the child, cleverly accomplished with a footplate (Stokke, 2020e). This iconic chair did something completely new; it gave children an ergonomic seat of their own, one that would grow with them (Stokke, 2020c). What made the design timeless is the thought behind it, the ability to change postures are prerequisites for comfortable sitting: the best sitting posture is, after a while, the next (Stokke, 2020e). With height and depth adjustability, the chair fits

any age and size and is still comfortable due to ergonomic support (Stokke, 2020e). The product was highly successful, contributed to the largest amount of the company's turnover and opened up overseas markets (Bruce & Bessant, 2002).

Very little changes have been made to the Tripp Trapp up to date. The chair is consistently made in Europe using traceable beech and oak wood (Stokke, 2020f). The distinctive L-shaped construction, which was protected by a patent from 1974 until 1994, remains the same (Teilmann-Lock, 2020). Once the patent expired several other high chair manufacturers tried to bring similar designs to market, but the court decided on numerous occasions that the Tripp Trapp was original work and thus deserved protection under copyright (Siegrist & Dimou, 2017).

Teilmann-Lock (2020) writes that the Tripp Trapp chair has been considered to be a very successful functionalist design, wherein function and form are indistinguishable because there are no other designerly components in the chair than those that are dictated by function. She argues that the functionality of the chair has mainly accounted for its market position and its large market shares, but the ingenuity of the chair's outline and the idiom have also contributed significantly to the branding of the Tripp Trapp high chair.

What has been added to the Tripp Trapp throughout the years are accessories for more comfort and safety, e.g. cushions in various patterns and safety straps. There has been one significant addition: the newborn set (Stokke, 2020g). This set can be attached to the chair and allows a newborn baby to safely sit at the table (Stokke, 2020g). This solution for a baby from null to six months enabled Stokke to really market the Tripp Trapp as a "chair for life" (see figure 4). Stokke has produced the Tripp Trapp in countless colours over the years. One of the newest features is the optional personalised engraving on the back of the Tripp Trapp (Stokke, 2020b).

Tripp Trapp® The chair that grows with the child™

Figure 4. A Tripp Trapp advertisement from Stokke (2020e).

Its timeless design, high quality and functionality have helped it to sell more than 12 million chairs worldwide (Stokke, 2020c). The brand has even successfully managed to trademark their product slogan *"The chair that grows with the child™"* (Siegrist & Dimou, 2017). In their marketing campaigns Stokke also often uses the phrase *"A chair for life"* emphasizing the longevity of the product.

The Tripp Trapp results are summarized in table 3.

Table 3. Evaluation of product iconicity drivers for Tripp Trapp.

Iconicity Driver	Tripp Trapp
High awareness	Highly successful product Opened up overseas markets Leading the way to more premium child products
Distinctiveness	Distinctive L-shape Function and form are indistinguishable Grow-with-the-child functionality
Aspirational vision	New (ergonomic) philosophy of sitting Bring the child to the heart of the table "In the best interest of the child"
Cultural relevance	Role of the child within the family Sustainability Ergonomics
Longevity	Since 1972 "Chair for life" "The chair that grows with the child"
Superior product experience	Craftsmanship High quality durable materials Safe yet comfortable

Case 3 - Ambassadeur Reel by Abu Garcia

Abu Garcia is a leading manufacturer of sport fishing gear with a deep Swedish heritage. Most famous for their iconic reels and fishing lures, they produce all sorts of sport fishing equipment and accessories.

Abu Garcia's full history is presented in the documentary "For Life: The Story of Abu Garcia" (Abu Garcia, 2013). As seen in the documentary, AB Urfabriken (ABU), now called Abu Garcia, was founded in 1921 by Carl August Borgström. Carl had previously worked at the Halda watch factory, which went bankrupt in 1920 due to poor bookkeeping. The old factory produced high quality, prize winning pocket watches, and taximeters. Because both equipment and several employees were transferred to ABU, the company inherited much of the competence from the old factory. Initially, ABU continued producing watches and taximeters, and they later developed the, at the time, world's smallest taximeter. ABU later started producing fishing reels as a result of WW2. No exports of taximeters and no import of taxis ment that their main revenue stream was shut off. In desperation, ABU turned to fishing reels, fishing being a hobby of the founder. Luckily, no imports of fishing reels meant a significant local demand. From there on ABU ventured further into fishing tackle, becoming the leading brand it is today. The Garcia name was added after acquiring an American company. Today, the company is a part of Pure Fishing, a leading international fishing tackle company.

Thanks to the heritage of precision watchmaking, Abu Garcia has a philosophy of manufacturing high quality, high precision, durable, and elegant fishing equipment (Abu Garcia, 2013). This vision

is manifested in their slogan "Abu Garcia: for life" (Abu Garcia, 2013).

Starting producing fishing reels in 1941, they were already renowned for their high quality precision baitcasting reels in 1952 when they introduced the first *Ambassadeur* reel – the *Record Ambassadeur 5000*, see figure 5 (Abu Garcia, 2013). The Ambassadeur's design and features are presented by Abu Garcia (2013). Firstly, the round reel was the world's first fishing reel produced of aluminium. Because it was larger than the standard reel, aluminium was used to keep the weight down. Secondly, the first series of reels were coloured a distinctive red. Thirdly, thanks to Abu Garcia's success and impact on Sweden, they also got permission from the Swedish King to adorn the reels with the King's crest, a detail that has distinguished the reels since then. The Ambassadeur was also the first Abu Garcia product that took hold internationally as well (Abu Garcia, 2013).

Figure 5. The ABU Ambassadeur 5000 from Stockholms Auktionsverk (n.d.).

At the same time as the Ambassadeur was introduced, Abu Garcia modernized much of their factory, allowing for higher production standards and mass production (Abu Garcia, 2013). Because of the need for fast assembly, the Ambassadeur reels also became easier to take apart and service compared to other brands at the time (Abu Garcia, 2013).

Abu Garcia's emphasis on quality and durability is notable in their slogan. In the words of Patrik Svensson, VP for Product Innovation:

> For life is all about products. It's all about durability. It's all about giving the angler the experience that he's expecting from Abu Garcia products. (Abu Garcia, 2013, n.p.).

Abu Garcia has been consistent with these values since their inception and they have been embodied by the Ambassadeur reels. As highlighted by Jan Sjöblom, Director of Sales and Operations:

> We have so many consumers that call us that still are fishing with their 1950s Ambassadeur reels and that it is nothing that will make them stop using Ambassadeur. It's really, for life (Abu Garcia, 2013, n.p.).

The popularity of Ambassadeurs has grown together with the Swedish interest in sport fishing, an interest partly fuelled proactively by Abu Garcia in the latter part of the 20th century (Abu Garcia, 2013). Thanks to an emphasis on the Swedish origin, visible on the product through the "Made in Sweden" and the royal crest, the product has played a big role in making sport fishing a part of the Swedish national identity. The reel has even ended up on the official Swedish postage stamps (Tjörnmark, 2018). The importance of staying true to the Swedish origin is emphasized internally by Abu Garcia:

> I think it's important that the round baitcasting reels are being made here in Sweden because it's here we have the knowledge and the technology and the heart in building round Ambassadeurs (Patrik Svensson, VP Product Innovation, in Abu Garcia, 2013, n.p.).

The Ambassadeur line persists and is still one of the most popular baitcasting reel brands in Sweden (Dogger, 2020). Since its introduction, more than 32 million Ambassadeurs have been sold in 1,500 versions, including special editions designed in cooperation with Swedish glass artists (Tjörnmark, 2018). Still produced in Svängsta, Sweden, around 90,000 round Ambassadeur reels are produced annually in approximately 170 variations (Tjörnmark, 2018). Since 1963, there have also been deluxe editions with gold coating (Abu Garcia, 2013). One of two copies made of pure gold was auctioned for 400,000 SEK in 2015, the other one is owned by the King of Sweden (Abu Garcia, 2015).

The design of the reels has been consistent throughout the years, keeping the royal crest and the iconic round design (Abu Garcia, 2013). The timelessness of the design is emphasized by the old CEO and owner Lennart Borgström that says that "[a] round reel will never be out of fashion" (Abu Garcia, 2013, n.p.). In Sweden, baitcasting reels have almost become synonymous with the Ambassadeurs, and the silhouette of the Ambassadeur is sometimes used as the icon for the baitcaster category on sport fishing retailer sites (see e.g. Söder Sportfiske, n.d.).

Table 4 summarizes the iconicity drivers of the Ambassadeur reel.

Table 4. Evaluation of product iconicity drivers for the Ambassadeur Reel.

Iconicity Driver	Ambassadeur Reel
High awareness	High awareness, almost generic
Distinctiveness	First: Red color, size and material Round design King's crest
Aspirational vision	"For life"
Cultural relevance	Fishing Swedish / National identity
Longevity	The line has been ongoing for almost 70 years
Superior product experience	Durability Precision and high casting ability Easy to service

Discussion

The cases confirmed the relevance of all the product iconicity drivers. All drivers were strong in all cases. Nevertheless, some drivers were stronger than others. For example, distinctiveness was particularly prominent in each case, and aspirational vision less strong for Kånken. Additionally, the cases showed a change in strength for different drivers over time. At launch, superior product experience and functional aspects were generally emphasized. Over time, this emphasis decreased and transitioned to cultural relevance and emotional aspects instead. This is logical since the cultural factor goes together with

time. This result was in line with the framework proposed by Yu and Birss (2018). Furthermore, the connection between the iconic product and the corporate brand was strong in each of the three cases. This was particularly the case for Tripp Trapp by Stokke, where the product brand became dominant and shaped the corporate brand completely. Finally, based on the findings, we also suggest a seventh driver of product iconicity – consistency. All three products had not just been around for long enough to become iconic; throughout that time, the visual identity, cultural relevance, and aspirational vision had also stayed the same without any major changes. While previous studies have pointed at the importance of longevity and being around long enough, none emphasized the role of consistency. If the product would have changed appearance every year or the product experience faltered, we assume that it would have been less likely that it would become, or stay, iconic.

To summarize the findings, we propose a new framework to conceptualize product iconicity – the *Product Iconicity Star* (see figure 6). While this study identifies different drivers, it does not evaluate the importance of each driver for generating product iconicity or the relationship between them. We hypothesize that the more of the drivers a product has, and the stronger they are, the more iconic a product is – the brighter the star shines. Nevertheless, further research is needed to explore this.
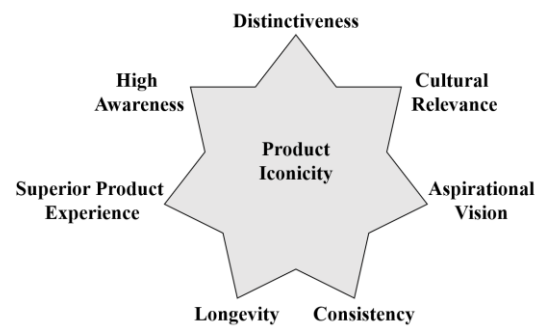

Figure 6. The Product Iconicity Star, containing the seven iconicity drivers.

Hence, it is concluded that an iconic product is one that has high customer awareness, is associated with a powerful aspirational vision, has a superior product experience, is embedded in our culture, and has a distinctive visual identity. Additionally, it must also stand the test of time and stay consistent and coherent.

The three cases also highlighted the extension potential of iconic products, whereas each product had numerous extensions. That the products have remained iconic even with all these extensions demonstrate their resistance to dilution. This is in line with John, Loken, and Joiner's (1998) results and illustrate the power of iconic products as growth generators. The relationship between extensions and iconicity would be interesting to examine further. Since each of the iconic products had so many extensions, it is possible that extensions are an iconicity driver itself. While not explored in this study, extensions might be necessary to stay culturally relevant, strengthen the aspirational vision, gain widespread awareness, and so on.

The study has various academic and managerial implications. For academics, the study has produced a general conceptualization of iconic products and mapped out different drivers of iconicity. The framework can guide further research into product iconicity. It may also be used to identify iconic products and assist in researching the strategic management of

them. Furthermore, the applicability of these drivers in the cases reinforce some of the results of other research into product iconicity, such as Norris et al. (2020), Yu and Birss (2018), and Fionda and Moore (2009). For example, Norris et al. (2020), which used many of the same drivers, express concern for the limited external validity of their results, since the study focused solely on distilled spirits. The applicability of the drivers in the cases in this study, thereby increases the external validity of some of their findings. The cases also revealed a new iconicity driver, namely consistency, that has not been stressed in existing literature. Further research is needed to evaluate the relevance and validity of this new dimension. We also encourage other scholars to examine the role of consistency for brand iconicity. While more research is needed to validate and improve the framework, managers may use the *Product Iconicity Star* to identify existing iconic products, activate latent ones, or develop new ones. It may also assist in identifying products that are losing their iconic status, and in making them shine bright again. Considering that it has been suggested that iconic products are what generates iconicity for an iconic brand, the framework might also be useful for improving conceptualizations of brand iconicity and in creating and managing iconic brands.

The study does, however, have some considerable limitations. While various product iconicity drivers were derived in the study, the relationships between them were not examined. Additionally, while distinctiveness was the most prominent driver in all of the cases, which was in line with Norris et al.'s (2020) results, the study was not constructed to evaluate if some of the dimensions were more important than others. Furthermore, cases with a long history were selectively chosen for the study to make sure that it did not exclude iconicity drivers that have been developed over longer periods of time. Subsequently, the longevity driver was not fully examined. Moreover, as can be deemed typical of case studies (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018), the external validity of the results may be limited due to the small number of cases, and more research is needed to evaluate the derived framework. Preferably, both iconic and non-iconic products should be compared to allow for a full evaluation. Finally, promotion and PR material were mainly used, particularly for the Ambassadeur case where information was scarcer. This raises some credibility concerns. In further research, primary data such as interviews and surveys would be desirable. All in all, the results of the study open numerous doors for further research and many opportunities remain for improving and evaluating the framework. We encourage other scholars to continue where we left off.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study aimed to construct a framework to conceptualize product iconicity, something that has been missing in the present literature. By combining existing theory with case study results, this study has laid some groundwork for such a conceptualization. Seemingly, there are several drivers that are relevant for generating product iconicity and whose role in doing so may change over time. Findings support the validity of many of the iconicity drivers that have been suggested by other scholars, suggest a new driver, and demonstrate that a comprehensive and actionable framework for product iconicity can be developed. While more research is needed to improve and validate the framework, it might guide further research and assist managers in generating growth and creating and managing iconic brands through the identification, creation, activation, and management of iconic products

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